

one

January 8–12, 2003

It happened like this: Henry's footsteps on the old wooden floorboards. The toilet flushing. More footsteps, perhaps on the stairs. Silence. Then the thud.

I was working downstairs in my office on a bitterly cold Wednesday afternoon. My work space was an enclosed sunporch off our living room, the small-paned windows on three sides framing a view of the snowy hills across the road. Wrapped in a shawl, wearing fuzzy socks on my chilled feet, I continued studying the project on my computer screen. At forty-three, I had been a graphic designer for nearly twenty years, a freelancer, specializing in cover designs for book publishers. Today's project was a novel about hard-luck cowboys, due yesterday, as always. I stopped fiddling with type design possibilities as I glanced at the computer clock—in an hour I would have to make a dash out to the car to pick up our six-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Liza, just before school let out at 3:10. Henry had been sick in bed all morning. There would be the freezing cold wait and the daily social milling with the other mothers on the school playground, then the quick drive home to finish my work. I'd wear my new sheepskin coat today and feel guilty about its expense on a warmer day. On second thought, the distressed sans serif type worked better with the moody image of a cowboy leaning against a split-rail fence.

Suddenly my brain rewound sharply.

It wasn't a package dropped outside by the UPS guy.

My office phone rang. Instinctively, I answered. The photographer on the line asked me how I liked the images he had e-mailed.

It wasn't the cats knocking groceries off the kitchen counter.

"I can't talk now—something bad is happening." I ended the call abruptly.

The rooms were silent as I ran up the stairs, calling for Henry. Two of our four cats skittered out of my way, their nails clawing the wooden treads. The bedroom was empty. I raced back down the stairs.

I found Henry on his back, spread-eagled on the kitchen floor, his head a few inches from the oven broiler. He was still breathing. His body was silhouetted against the sea blue of the painted floorboards. I imagined a police chalk drawing of the outline of the victim at a crime scene. I was overcome with the feeling that I was in the scene and watching a scene on television—an opening sequence of an episode of *Six Feet Under*, our favorite show that year. Usually some minor character dies in the first five minutes. Henry inhaled with a shallow breath; small dribbles of saliva on his curved lips, the skin

on his face now sallow and ashen. He exhaled with a feeble sigh. His eyes flickered half open. I spoke to him to let him know that I was there with him, but for once in our life together he could not speak back.

A long, elastic minute stretched out and snapped: *Is this when people call 911? Or is Henry going to sit up and tell me to stop fussing, like he did yesterday after he passed out? This must be the same thing. He came in after taking out the garbage and fell down flat on the floor. The doctor said all the tests were normal—*

I called 911. I sat down on the floor next to him, stroking his forehead, watching him breathe. A hissing sound, as spittle pulsed between his lips.

I wish I had a notepad and pencil. Henry would want me to take notes. The EMS guys will come. They'll check him out. He'll be fine. He'll be telling people about his near death at our next dinner party. "The report of my death was an exaggeration" is what he'll say. Everyone will laugh, and I'll feel pathetic for having worried so much. I'm happy to feel pathetic if everything will just please, please turn out okay.

I called 911 again, just to be sure. I called Emily, who lived five minutes away and was usually home at two in the afternoon. Anna was more reliable—I knew she wouldn't freak out, no matter what happened today—but she lived twelve minutes away. Then I called Matthew, Henry's best friend, who lived with his wife in a nearby town.

Every minute will make a difference. The EMS guys will come; they will bring oxygen tanks, defibrillators, and IV bags. All will be well. Emily will help me find a babysitter for Liza, then she will go with me to the hospital, and we'll get there and Henry will be awake, smiling and joking as usual.

I sat back down next to him on the blue floor, stroking the familiar wrinkles, the scar over one eyelid, the small mole at the crest of one cheek.

Inhale. Exhale. A blue gauze curtain passed over him. His skin turned to wax.

"Breathe!" I screamed at him. "Start breathing now!" I pounded him on the chest. He wasn't listening to me. I placed my mouth on his and blew my breath into him; the blue briefly faded into rose like a watercolor wash. But the flush faded back to blue. He was still. The man who for sixteen years had loved me, driven me crazy, fought with me, fed me, made love with me, made a baby with me, exhaled one last breath, the air I had blown into his lungs.

I looked up, distracted by the sound of the sliding porch door, followed by a blast of cold air. The EMS guys had arrived with a gurney and gear and gently hustled me out of the kitchen. Emily followed right after them.

You'll know it's bad when they take you to the little waiting room. Emily held my left arm. Her face was pale, her lips still rosy from the cold, her dark bobbed hair peeking from under a familiar blue cloche hat. Matthew sat on my right. Matthew was tall, built like a tree. The sad-eyed young doctor told us it was a pulmonary

embolism. A blood clot, formed in the leg, had moved upward and lodged in the lung, causing cardiac arrest. They had tried everything they could to revive him. But.

Everything moved in slow motion as I processed his words. This couldn't be right. He was only forty-four. Whenever we'd watched *Six Feet Under* together, the main characters had made it safely to the next episode. I slid off my chair to the floor and screamed.

"You can lie next to him if you want," Emily said. She was calm, amazingly, looking at Henry's lifeless body on the gurney. "Go ahead, it won't bother me at all."

I climbed up onto the narrow gurney and lay down next to him. He would have wanted me to note every detail for him—the way his chest was still warm, while his arms were already stiff and cold and his fingers were curled and blue. He had a bruise on the left side of his face. It was comforting to rest there with my arm around him, touching him in a familiar way, relieved still to have a companion, even a quiet one.

He had beautiful feet, elegantly articulated toes, like the feet on a Greek statue. I peeled back his shirt to look at the distinctive scar on his chest. A bit of cornhusk had punctured his skin while he was working on a farm as a teenager. The healing wound had formed an inch-long raised keloid that I loved to touch in the dark. I touched the large dark mole on his left shoulder. I felt the scar over his right eye, received when he was a child in a hotel in Honolulu (designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Henry always added when telling the story), when a window had fallen suddenly out of its molding as he passed under it with his family. All his scars and moles, so well known to me, like stepping-stones marking the way home through a dark wood.

Two nurses came in. "You should go home now and get some rest," one said. She put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed me gently.

Emily took my arm, and we walked down the fluorescent-lit corridors and stepped out into the twilight, inky blue with low-hanging clouds. A flock of black birds rushed up into the sky, their wings moving in unison, a tragic banner.

"I feel like I've been hit by a truck," Henry had joked two weeks before he died. We were on our Christmas vacation, visiting Henry's college friend and his family on Bainbridge Island, off the coast of Seattle. During the short daylight hours under the continuous gray blanket of northwest cloud cover, the kids played and drank hot chocolate, while we adults planned meals, decorated the holiday tree, and prepared for the arrival of Santa Claus. Henry, who loved all parties but disliked Christmas, watched from the couch.

His quip was familiar to me. When he was sixteen, he had taken a spin on a friend's new motorcycle straight into an oncoming white pickup truck as he came around a tight curve. He loved telling this story, with a new embellishment every time.

"I'm lying there bleeding, with my right leg broken in seven places, the guy is weeping

and begging me not to die. I had to calm the guy down so he'd go get help from the neighbor." Henry's leg had been repaired, but he always had some pain and swallowed daily doses of Advil. He predicted that he would need a knee replacement by the time he was fifty, a wheelchair at sixty.

Jokes aside, I worried as I watched Henry—dozing, reading a magazine, tapping away on his laptop, dozing some more. During these vacation days, he had barely gotten off the couch. When I asked him about how he was feeling, he said that he was just tired from all the traveling of the last year, that he couldn't wait to get home, to begin writing his book.

The subject of his book was *umami*, a Japanese word that translates as "perfection," usually as it relates to food. *Umami* also translates as "the fifth taste," best described for Westerners as "savory." The other tastes are sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. *Umami* is the feeling of mouthwatering deliciousness during, and complete satiety after, a good meal. *Umami* is the taste of protein, caressed by fat—the pleasurable viscous taste of a meat stew, a rich sauce, or a morsel of creamy cheese. There is *umami* in a piece of sun-ripened fruit, or a glass of complex wine. More crassly, Big Food corporations hire food scientists to add chemically enhanced *umami* to otherwise tasteless food—Big Macs, snack chips, and those frozen dinners in your freezer. *Umami* is also the taste of the demonized flavor-enhancer monosodium glutamate (MSG), favored by Chinese restaurants.

But Henry's mission was to hunt down the real thing. He had gravitated to the West Coast, where the freshness of food, produce particularly, embodied the idea of perfection more than did the off-season shipments of unripe tomatoes and mealy peaches typically available on the East Coast. Under contract from a publisher, with half his advance paid, he traveled up and down the coast during 2002, sampling farm-ripened fruit, exotic varieties of seafood and seaweed, and regional wines.

He spent most of the year back and forth, making at least eight trips out West, some as long as three weeks. He ate meals at food temples such as The French Laundry in the Napa Valley and The Herb Farm in Woodinville, Washington. He tasted freshly harvested oysters and wild mushrooms in Oregon. He visited wine producers and experts up and down the coast. He wrote me a long e-mail about the now rare Marshall strawberries he tasted at one of the small family-owned farms in the San Juan Islands of Washington State on a trip with David Karp, a well-known fruit expert.

Henry returned from his trips with jars of Meyer lemon preserve, homemade salsas, and a nifty gadget called a Brix refractometer, which measures the sugar content of fruit. The produce manager of our local grocery store was impressed as Henry jabbed his pocketknife into nectarines and oranges to release juice for testing. FedEx surprised us with another treasure—a box of organic peaches from Frog Hollow Farm in Brentwood, California. Each drenching bite sent my salivary glands into almost painful overdrive.

Liza and I had joined him once during this long travel year, in May. We stayed at the Sooke Harbour House, a hotel-restaurant on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Liza,

who already showed signs of having inherited the culinary gene, loved the seafood and the special tour of the kitchen. She and I spent our days enjoying walks and outdoor play while Henry and the proprietor went deep-sea diving for underwater creatures. They returned one afternoon with a story of a nearly exhausted oxygen tank, a large octopus, and several purple-hinged rock scallops. The octopus and scallops ended up as soup ingredients later that evening. The intense and complex perfume of the broth, like nothing I had ever tasted, was the essence of *umami*.

Liza, not quite six years old, finished that meal and announced her career goal of opening her own hotel-restaurant. Her hotel would have yoga classes for me and room service for her cats.

December 31. We had returned home from our Christmas vacation on Bainbridge Island. Henry stood in the center of our kitchen, chewing his right pointer fingernail while he considered the last preparations for our annual New Year's Eve party.

His rounded belly wrapped in a stained apron, Henry picked up a wine goblet and took a generous swig, reinforcement for the task ahead, then gnawed the nails of his left hand. Sometimes when we were driving up the highway toward the dreary miles of strip malls, Henry would roll down the window and spit out the bits of skin and nail he had torn off with his teeth, like stray bones in a piece of fish. With similar energy, he joyfully crunched the cartilage of chicken bones and stripped his steak ribs down to bare white, displaying his sharp canine teeth with the gusto of a ravenous dog.

Henry set the wineglass down on the table and fretted over the crust on the roasted leg of lamb resting on a platter, peeling off and eating a morsel to satisfy himself that his guests would be pleased. He walked to the refrigerator and took out a platter with a side of home-cured salmon. His slicing knife flashed, and his greasy fingers offered me the thin slice of the gravlax, coral and translucent like amber. The fish slid down my throat. It was delicious. It would be even better eaten on toast with capers and chopped red onions, when our guests arrived in an hour. He sliced another piece and popped it into my mouth.

Henry had fed me our wedding cake thirteen years earlier with this same careless and childlike enthusiasm—pressing a big wad of chocolate cake into my widened mouth. I was startled and embarrassed at the time. But his irreverence was a secret promise that we would create together an unconventional and passionate life. He licked the remains of the cake from his fingers and flashed me one of his wide Cheshire Cat grins. He looked so devastating in his midnight blue vintage tuxedo, his dark skin, almond eyes, and curly hair set off by a crisp white shirt. As he seized me by the waist, and whispered in my ear how much he loved me, I creamed the lacy panties I had bought for the occasion.

After replacing the salmon in the refrigerator, Henry took out a small plastic container

of veal stock saved from a prior cooking adventure—many bones, many hours. He emptied the contents into a small pot, coaxing a sauce from the veal stock, the drippings from the roasting pan, and port wine.

I watched him work and tried to clean up the mess. Wrapped in a white apron, sponge and paper towels in hand, I mopped up the stray grains of rice, turkey giblets, and vegetable parings that had rained down from the counter onto the blue-painted wood floor. I had chosen a color that would reveal everything in sharp contrast—not hide or camouflage. Now I could see bits of salmon in the cracks between the narrow floorboards, I just couldn't get them out.

As I brushed by him, attacking the mess, his face grimaced. "Get out of my way, goddammit, can't you see I'm busy here?"

Despite the togetherness we presented at our New Year's Eve parties, Henry and I could barely get through a week without yelling at each other. In our early days, we'd argued about politics, but now we fought the domestic battles of child rearing and housekeeping. Once, during one of our more heated battles, he threw volume one of *The Oxford English Dictionary* at me. It missed, but I still felt wounded by the weight of a book with so many words I didn't know, words I hadn't been able to summon up as a clever retort to his insult. Later he had apologized, as he did now, quickly and tenderly.

I rushed to the cellar to hunt down the plastic champagne glasses. Although alcohol inspired carelessness in our guests that made me fear for our beautiful Venetian glass champagne flutes, Henry always insisted on releasing them from their glass case for the early birds. Delighted by their flamboyance, Henry liked showing them off to guests, even if there was a risk of breakage, while I treasured them as objects and would rather have saved them for more intimate gatherings. They were a wedding gift from a generous friend, too expensive to replace. Returning upstairs with the plastic glasses, I placed them and the paper plates, napkins, and cutlery on one side of the dining room table, soon to be heaped with a mighty spread. A large cooler waited with ice and several dozen chilling oysters, ready to be shucked. I didn't dare ask Henry what those oysters had cost. Urging restraint seemed pointless. When he took my debit card to go food shopping for our dinner parties, I made a point of barely glancing at the receipts. Living with Henry meant embracing the necessity of a \$150-an-ounce white truffle.

When I reentered the kitchen, he smiled and offered me a taste of his potion. The sauce was velvety and impenetrable, the tastes of dinners past mingled with the present drippings and port, a bay leaf sailing on the surface of the dark liquid. I gazed around at the mess in the kitchen—my mopping and tidying had done nothing to calm the hurricane.

"What does it need?" he asked.

"Nothing." I watched him stir with tenderness. For him a sauce was such a serious business. Too bad he hadn't become a professional chef, with a staff of minions to admire him and clean up after him.

He fussed some more, stirring and tasting. "I think it needs more salt."

“It’s excellent,” I said. “Perfect. Really.” But I suspected that his sauce just needed a larger, more appreciative audience.

Liza galloped down the stairs, looking for her friends. At six and a half, her face had the look of children from another time and place, with an eclectic combination of traits from the available gene pool—Henry’s Asian-Anglo background and my mishmash of Eastern European Jewry. She had inherited Henry’s olive skin, and the bowed lips that reminded me of a pink rosebud. Dark honey-colored hair fell in perfect corkscrew ringlets to her shoulders, framing large almond-shaped eyes the color of seawater cupped in gray granite. She had my firm chin and my square-tipped fingers, purposeful and charming in diminutive size, especially when painted with robin’s egg blue nail polish, as they were that evening.

Our first guests arrived, bringing an icy blast of snow and the musty scent of dead leaves from the wintry backyard. They carried cold bottles of champagne, and the bakers of the group brought homemade Swedish chocolate cookies and almond torte.

Emily and her husband, Justin, arrived early. I could always rely on Emily to provide a bit of bohemian glamour, a taste of the urban life I had left behind. I had sought her out after spotting her with her family at a local restaurant. The cute haircut, the red lips, the cloche hat. *That woman, she could be my friend.* Like many women in our town, she wasn’t working and spent the time while our kids were in school on her personal writing and artwork. My life was all about deadlines, but since I was a freelancer we talked daily about books and art, often while I worked at my computer. In the afternoons after school, I often took Liza to her house. Her younger daughter Zoe had become one of Liza’s good friends. While the kids played, Emily and I continued our talks over cups of tea. She could be the most exuberant fun, and a breath of fresh air in my otherwise quiet life, but sometimes, in contrast to her confident-looking appearance, she was as fragile as a needy child. Now her party persona—an all-smiles starlet on the red carpet—was on full view as she burst into the kitchen to admire the preparations.

“My God! Look at this feast!”

Henry put an arm around her shoulder, embraced her affectionately, and kissed her rosy cheek with enthusiasm.

“You are the *best*, Henry, the absolute *best!*” She received the wedding champagne glass Henry offered in her honor, giggling and flushing happily as bubbles drifted upward in her fluted glass.

Anna, a more recent friend, her husband, John, and son, Leo, stomped into the hallway. Leo kicked off his snowy boots and dashed upstairs, happy to charm the girls.

Lively, with bright blue eyes and long, curly, unnaturally dyed red hair (a “correction” is what she called her color choice), Anna dressed like a real New York girl. I was surprised when she told me that she had grown up in Ohio. She had left Ohio

immediately after college graduation and headed to New York, where she worked at Betsey Johnson's retail shop in SoHo and partied at night in the East Village. Looking at her bright red hair, I could believe anything she told me about her wild days in the 1980s.

After we were introduced through a colleague, our friendship developed as we struggled to shed our lingering pregnancy weight. We signed up for a brutal calisthenics class at a local health club. Jumping jacks, push-ups, jogging in place. Every class was like a bad day in high school gym class, but we each lost five pounds. The deep muscle pain after each class was a true bonding experience. After eight weeks of boot camp, we decided we deserved something more soothing.

We became devoted yoginis over the next two years. I looked forward to our weekly outings. She drove down from her house, honking her horn in front of my driveway. In the car we had time to commiserate about work, fret about our kids' education, and listen to our favorite Lucinda Williams CD.

We appreciated each other's pragmatism. We both worked as graphic designers. We even shared an assistant. We mothered our same-age kids. She grumbled if I was late for our exercise outings. I was annoyed if she forgot about lunch plans. We understood each other. We were busy, our lives slotted into half-hour segments. There was nothing extra, no padding, no time to waste.

Our small group of younger, unmarried, and childless friends included Tomas and his housemate, Nick, my assistant. Tomas seemed restrained, holding a beer in his lanky hand. I smiled at him in a friendly way as I rushed around playing hostess. The party was alive at last, people in motion, mingling, talking, laughing. Tomas smiled at me as I moved toward the living room to change the music.

We'd become friends over the course of a few years, growing closer after we took a trip with him; his then girlfriend, Lindsay; and a group of friends to Costa Rica the prior winter. Tomas had lived in our attic for two months while he renovated his new house in the town north of ours. He was a very good-looking young man, over six feet tall with sandy brown hair. He changed his hairstyle frequently, so I was not surprised by his periodic transformations. Sometimes he cropped his hair short, like a boy from the 1950s; a few weeks later he might be sporting a short beard and "I've just returned from three weeks in the wilderness" shaggy curls; or he might try bangs that brought to mind an early sixties pop star or a monk about to take holy orders. His personality showed those extremes—by night he was happy to throw back a few beers with friends, but by day he worked on large figurative sculptures alone in a studio up the hill behind his house.

Tomas had made a good addition to our household. Henry liked cooking for an extra, very appreciative male pal, and I often found them together in the kitchen, drinking a beer, deep in conversation. When I entered, I became an intruder. Talk stopped, and I always left quickly with the feeling of having interrupted a confidential moment. Tomas

had well-known girlfriend problems, the subject of small-town gossip. He was at our house the night his girlfriend broke up with him on the phone. He came into our bedroom, sat down on the bed, and cried. We, the long-married couple, were quietly supportive and comforting.

Liza loved riding up the stairs high on Tomas's shoulders and wrestling with him on the living room rug. She giggled when he tickled her. He listened generously to the stories she told about her school day—who was mean, who got in trouble, who she played with at recess. She loved drawing pictures with him at our kitchen table.

And having an outsider around kept Henry and me from squabbling.

While I was folding laundry one evening, Tomas looked at me in a strange way, and said I was beautiful. I thanked him—while my stomach turned somersaults—and kept folding laundry. Most of my life was spent at home, working and mothering. I felt invisible to other men, especially young, handsome men.

Once his new house had plumbing and electricity, Tomas moved out of our attic. I was surprised how much I missed his company. The next time I folded laundry I smiled, remembering his compliment, happy for the safety of his absence.

Henry envied Tomas's new bachelor life. One evening, as we cleaned up the kitchen, he remarked, "How would you feel if I moved in with Tomas and just visited you and Liza on weekends? Then it would be more like you were my girlfriend."

I looked up from the sink of dirty pots and pans and forced a laugh to show him I knew he wasn't serious. "No, I wouldn't really like that."

"And you should have an affair with Tomas," he continued, clearly enjoying this game. "Don't you think he's attractive? I wouldn't mind at all."

"Tomas is very good looking, but right now I'm married to you. Why do you even say things like that to me?"

Henry never gave up. He was like a cheerful dog, playing with a bone. "Would you mind if I went out on a date with his hot new Mafia Princess girlfriend?"

"You definitely don't get to go out on a date with the Mafia Princess."

I scrubbed at a dirty saucepot with extra effort. Sometimes Henry really was just maddening, though there was always something exhilarating about his willingness to push the limits.

Back in full New Year's Eve party hostess mode, I brushed by Tomas again on my way back to the kitchen to find more plastic cups. He took a swig of his beer and smiled shyly again. Tomas and I were similar—we both preferred solitude and quiet and were perhaps a bit out of our element at this large gathering.

Cathy, her husband, Steve, and their daughter, Amy, arrived with some of their friends from church. Steve was tall and handsome in an American, square-jawed way. Wineglass in hand, he took up his prearranged position as oyster server. A crowd gathered immediately around him, and he beamed from the center of his small theater

in the round. Amy bolted upstairs to find Liza.

My friendship with Cathy was the common result of exurban parenthood. You move to a new place with your not-quite-two-year-old. After the Tuesday run up to the shopping center to buy cleaning spray, laundry detergent, and diapers in bulk, you head to the local playground. Your kid sees another kid the same age. They bond while building sand castles and riding on the seesaw. You check out the parents. Maybe they aren't exactly the people you would choose for friends, but they seem responsible, educated, not ax murderers. Though different in personality, Cathy and Henry were both writers and had seemed to bond quickly over their work.

Until this past summer, Cathy and I had been inside each other's houses almost every day. We picked up each other's kids from school. We provided each other with emergency child care. We took each other's kids for sleepovers. The four of us ate meals together. Our houses were almost interchangeable. I had spent many hours with the mother of my child's best friend, but in reality, I knew very little about her.

Cathy and Steve were a bit old-fashioned in their parenting, and their politics were more conservative than mine. Though she could at times take on the role of beer-drinking party girl, Cathy had grown up in a wealthy New York suburb. Cathy and Steve insisted on proper table manners that I found excessive for finicky three- and four-year-olds, who were still learning to wield a fork (I was more interested in my daughter actually eating food). At Christmastime I smiled at the propriety of the outfits Cathy's mother sent for Amy to wear—stiff, formal dresses with plaid taffeta skirts, patent leather Mary Janes—uncomfortable clothing I would never have presented to Liza but similar to outfits I wore in the 1960s.

Henry frequently made caustic remarks about Cathy's appearance, which seemed unkind to me. Petite, an inch or so taller than I, she had dark hair, small light eyes, pale skin. She was slim and fit from daily race-walking, an enviable victory over postpregnancy flab. Henry said that she was haglike and gaunt from overexercise. I envied her wiry legs.

The women of my circle of friends were undecided about her, and I found myself lobbying on her behalf. "She's shy," I'd say, when people complained about her manner. One-on-one we shared engaging conversation about books and films we loved, but she was withdrawn at parties, tucked in a corner holding a beer, looking ill at ease, waiting for the alcohol to melt her chilliness. And after a beer or two, she was unpredictable.

The year before, Cathy had arrived at our party and, while shedding her coat, announced quietly, "I'm going to get shitfaced." She made good on her promise, downing beer after beer for the remainder of the evening, laughing too loudly. She spent the first hour of 2002 vomiting violently in the bathroom while our daughters slept entwined on the living room rug.

I sincerely hoped that we would not witness a repeat performance this year. Her appearance suggested the opposite. She was dressed in a simply cut, knee-length purple dress with a high, round collar, black pumps, and stockings. She looked ready for

a Sunday church service.

I wondered if the recent trend of weekly church attendance was more of a plea for social acceptance than a genuine attempt to connect to a higher power. Henry told me about a car trip with the girls during which Amy cheerfully sang “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” complete with too-cute hand gestures. An agnostic girl of vaguely Jewish upbringing, I had sung that song too, at my Episcopalian summer camp.

I wanted to raise Liza differently. Cathy and Steve often invited Liza to attend Sunday services with them. But our daughter was turning out to be a skeptic just like her parents. If you couldn’t see, smell, or hear Him, then how could God exist? And why was God a He anyway?

Henry told me abruptly in June that he no longer wanted to spend time with Cathy and Steve. “She is narrow-minded and the most conventional person I know,” he announced. I was surprised—but relieved—and didn’t press him further.

But in September, on the school playground, Cathy started crying, upset that we had pulled away. Amy missed seeing Liza for playdates, she said. I didn’t miss spending time with Cathy, but it seemed unkind to cut her off in such a brutal way, unkind still to hurt her daughter. I arranged a playdate for the girls, and as the holiday season drew near, I urged Henry to invite Cathy to our annual party. I secretly hoped that Liza would make other friends.

The New Year’s Eve banquet continued noisily. Henry, ever the eager host, roamed through the rooms, carrying champagne bottles, refilling glasses. At last he seemed to be reviving his bon vivant self.

One family had brought a telescope. While Henry entertained our guests, I escaped for a peaceful moment outside with father and stargazing son to peer through the lens at the full moon. The son eagerly explained to me that there was an unusual alignment of the moon and planets. It was a clear night, the lunar craters brilliant in the cold air.

After the midnight toasting, parents gathered up their children. While I helped them search for hats, gloves, and snow boots, we made vague plans for the last vacation days before school began again and declared the party a complete success.

The energetic promise of New Year’s Eve was short-lived. Over the next few days, Henry slumped into lethargy, slept frequently, and began to complain of breathing problems, possibly related to his asthma. His inhaler, though, didn’t help. He told me he had scheduled a doctor’s appointment. I was surprised—I usually had to force him to see a doctor.

January 6. With my workload light and Liza back at school, Henry encouraged me to take a break with him that afternoon. We wandered upstairs to make love. I had always loved the light in our bedroom. The walls were painted a gentle mushroom gray. Low

winter light filtered through the layer of dust on the windows onto the rumpled sheets and the carved headboard, a family heirloom. As we moved into our bed, the moment felt tender, calm, and familiar. I knew when I would come; I could count down the final seconds before liftoff in my head. We lay quietly in bed.

“You are a beautiful woman and I love you very much,” Henry told me. Lying next to him, my head buzzing, I believed him.

The next morning was Tuesday, January 7, garbage day. As I prepared Liza’s Cream of Wheat, Henry’s boots crunched in the snow and gravel outside, and the garbage cans scraped along the asphalt driveway. He reappeared on the back porch and struggled with the sliding door with an effort that seemed odd. He lurched into the house, hunched over, took a few stumbling steps, and fell forward flat onto the wooden floor.

He came to as I reached him. Ignoring his protests, I hustled Henry and Liza to the car. I dropped Liza off at school and drove straight to the doctor’s office, earlier than his scheduled appointment. His EKG and blood pressure were normal. His doctor arranged an appointment with a cardiologist for the following Monday, six days away.

I wanted the appointment to be sooner.

“Oh, Julie, stop fussing,” Henry said, brushing off my concern. I tried not to worry. But worrying is in my nature.

The shock of the morning kicked Henry into action. He spent the evening cleaning out his office while I read a work manuscript in bed. By midnight he’d set three bags of trash outside his office door alongside filing boxes filled with neatly organized papers. He looked tired but satisfied. “Tomorrow, I will be ready to begin my book,” he said, with a weary grin.

I recalled this exhaustion as Emily drove me home from the hospital, leaving Henry behind on the gurney. Matthew, who had been close to Henry’s family for twenty-five years, and my friend for sixteen, decided it would be best to tell the news to Henry’s family in person. He offered to drive up that evening and left straight from the hospital. I feared my own task ahead. Liza was still at a friend’s house, completely unaware of what had happened that afternoon.

It was now dark. Anna had arrived at my house. I had called her from the car on the way to the hospital, but she had heard the news from the bookkeeper we shared, whose son was, coincidentally, one of the paramedics who came to our house.

Irena, a close friend from Brooklyn, my parents, brother, and sister-in-law had driven up from the city. A small group of local friends who had heard the news had come over as well. Anna and Irena greeted me at the door. I was grateful that Irena had managed to extract herself so quickly from her busy city office. Her normally exuberant dark curls were tamed in a hair tie without her trademark feather accents. A head taller than I, she

had always been sisterly with me, and I suddenly realized how badly I needed someone who would tell me that everything would be all right. Irena walked me over to one of the couches, where I collapsed. Everyone had gathered on the other couch and the chairs in front of the fireplace, creating an odd preparty atmosphere. Even with my sheepskin coat on, I was shivering. I grabbed a blanket from the back of the sofa and draped it over my shaking legs.

Just after 8:00 p.m., Liza returned home from the playdate Emily had hastily arranged that afternoon, when we still hoped that everything would turn out okay. Liza looked around, smiling awkwardly, looking for Henry, wondering why her grandparents and so many others were visiting. It was a party, she thought. But where was the food? Where were the other kids? She joined me on the couch, hopping onto my lap.

“Mama, why are you still wearing your coat?” The room was quiet; everyone waited.

“Lizzie, do you remember how Daddy wasn’t feeling well—how he fell down in the hall the other day? Well, he fell again today, in the afternoon, while you were at school. I called an ambulance right away and they took him to the hospital—the doctors tried to do everything they could to save him. But he died.”

Liza listened to me—a few seconds of complete silence—then she wept while I held her in my arms. She cried for a long time, deep, brokenhearted sobbing. I was too drained to cry.

When she stopped crying, Liza sat quietly on my lap for several minutes and looked around at the adults, many of whom were quietly weeping. I could see her thinking, her eyes scanning the room—now she understood why everyone was in our house.

With a sudden sense of purpose, Liza jumped off my lap and walked to the shelf where we kept the ashes of Chester, our dear dead cat. She took down the small metal box, opened it, and walked around the room showing everyone the ashes.

“Chester, our tabby kitty, was very sick. We got up one day and he was just lying on the porch and he wouldn’t eat or drink or get up, so we had to take him to the doctor right away, but the doctor told us that Chester was too sick to live. So he said he would have to give him a shot to make him sleep forever, but it wouldn’t hurt him at all.”

Chester’s death a year earlier had served a most poetic and instructive purpose.

Irena stayed overnight. We slept next to each other like schoolgirls.

Matthew, Anna, Emily, and Tomas appeared early the following morning to make arrangements for a memorial. I lay in bed while Irena and the others busied themselves in Henry’s office, across the hall from our bedroom. I heard distressing sounds, bursts of heated conversation and a woman’s muffled scream. I got to my feet and stumbled into the office. Something was wrong. Anna led me back to my bed and quietly tucked me in. I was grateful to lie down again.

Later, I heard Cathy’s voice calling for Matthew as she climbed up the stairs. She

disappeared behind Henry's office door. More muffled voices, but I could not understand the words. Henry's door opened again. I sat up in bed and looked into the hallway. Cathy rushed quickly down the stairs. *Why didn't she stop in to see me?* I lay down again, drifting in and out, my first widowed day dreamlike, foggy, unreal.

We arrived early at the funeral home for the viewing so that Liza could spend time alone with Henry. She boldly walked up to the open coffin, positioned for adult view on a platform.

"Mama, can I have a tall chair?"

We found a high stool.

"Mama, look, you can't move his fingers. Daddy's lips are chapped. Can we put some stuff on his lips?" I rummaged in my bag and found a tube of lip balm, which Liza applied with care. Cathy's daughter, Amy, came over, and we found another tall stool for her. The two girls sat near each other and talked and gestured at Henry. The ease of their friendship comforted me as I watched from across the room, greeting guests. Henry's family arrived and sat quiet and stunned in the seats near the front. Townspeople arrived, some just acquaintances, many complete strangers. Henry's high school friends came together in a pack to greet me. One of Henry's former girlfriends sadly shook my hand.

I glanced over, searching for Liza near the coffin. I saw Cathy in her place. She was weeping hysterically, her head and arms draped over Henry's lifeless torso. Steve stood next to her, stoic, uncomfortable. When she lifted her head, her face was red and wet with tears. Not even I, the widow, had allowed myself such public emotion. A woman from our wider circle of acquaintances, her face set with concern, walked over quickly to speak with Steve while Cathy wept on. Finally, Steve gently drew Cathy away from the coffin. The awkward moment passed. I watched with relief as everyone returned to handshaking and quiet conversation.

I lay in bed the morning after the wake, my mind still soft and dreaming, in a tangle of sweaty sheets, light filtering through the dusty windows, obscuring the mountains and fog-draped river. Henry was dead; I was a widow. Irena lay sleeping next to me, her steady breath a small comfort. But soon she would have to go back to the city and I would be left here with Liza. Henry was gone.

A cloud gathered above my body, vaporous fingers extending and reaching around my torso and into my secret internal spaces. My mouth was pried open tenderly but insistently. He was invisible but present, an essence that seemed to hold me firmly on the bed. I allowed him to wash over me, enter me, enfold me.

He wanted something from me—to tell me something important, to be with my body.

But he had no body; maybe he didn't understand that yet. Irena stirred and opened her eyes. Now my arms were reaching up to hold him.

"Are you okay? What's happening?" Irena murmured.

"It's Henry, he's here."

Why was Henry here? What did he want to tell me? He needed a body, but he was floating now without one. I felt anguished for him that he didn't understand what had happened to his body, that I couldn't speak to him and explain. Suddenly, I was floating too.

My body felt light and airy in the bed while he visited me each morning after that first time, the intensity of the visits gradually softening. I floated through my days. People spoke to me, and I realized I wasn't really present. I floated in the icy wind, wishing I could pass into his world, though I was unwilling to leave my child. I was in some in-between place, a dreamlike landscape where the horizon line vanished in a whiteout snowstorm.

The memorial service took place on January 12. I stood before an overflowing crowd at the lectern of a local church that had kindly offered their space for the ceremony.

"Henry was the love of my life," I told the crowd, "but also a completely impossible person." Nervous laughter. I had assumed the audience would be intimate with Henry's love of excess, his trademark lack of restraint. Surely some of the hundreds of friends, family, and local acquaintances packing this local church knew what I meant. Henry never liked to do anything small. Everything—from his romantic marriage proposal to his dinner party menus—was executed in grand gestures. A reserved twenty-seven-year-old when I met him, I had been drawn to that exuberance and to his forceful love. I had never before received such unabashed love from any man, and I'd welcomed it eagerly.

Snapshots came to mind: our meeting sixteen years earlier at a winter party; a day during our first spring together when he positioned me under a blooming cherry tree to take a photo; Henry cooking one of many amazing dinners for me on the humble stove in our apartment; Henry handing me a ruby ring over a warmly lit restaurant table where we celebrated our third wedding anniversary; a meal in a Paris restaurant where I tasted blinis for the first time; Henry sighing over the delights of a rabbit stew he prepared on a trip to Italy and the afternoon siestas we enjoyed on the warm afternoons in that Tuscan farmhouse we'd rented with friends. More images: Henry squeezing my hand as I pushed Liza into the fluorescent glare of the hospital delivery room; Henry and I as we walked through Prospect Park with our new baby. And recent images: Henry outdoing himself with a three-course lunch for ten women in honor of my fortieth birthday—grilled figs wrapped in pancetta, fresh pea soup with truffle oil, braised quails with pomegranate sauce. One of Liza's birthday parties, as twenty families and their children

gathered around our swimming pool while Henry, in his favorite apron, presiding over the grill, beamed proudly. Henry throwing Liza and other delighted children into the water and swimming after them, as happy as a golden retriever playing with a litter of eager, squealing puppies. Yet another image as Henry showed Liza how to stir a sauce at the stove.

He had often been childlike in his pursuits, so eager to try anything new. In our best times together, I had felt loved and cherished with a similar enthusiasm. As I stood at the lectern, I saw clearly what he had brought to me, a naturally cautious and quiet person: a room full of hundreds of people whom he had delighted, who cared about him, and me. I thanked all the guests for coming and returned to my seat between Liza and Irena, passing the lectern to other speakers, who read poems and letters, and other tributes to their deep love for Henry. Person after person spoke about his loyal friendship, his insatiable curiosity about life, and his devotion to Liza and me. I held Liza's hand tightly.

Now composed in a dark knee-length dress, Cathy read a familiar Dylan Thomas poem in a restrained voice, her face tired and pale. No more coffin for her to weep over. Henry's body had already been cremated.

A rosy-cheeked man, his head topped with a cloud of blazing red curls, walked up to the lectern. It took me a moment to place him as a salesman at the local wine shop Henry frequented. In a voice choked with genuine grief, he spoke about their long afternoon conversations, Henry's impeccable taste, his wicked sense of humor. He read a poem he had written the morning before. I was startled to realize that Henry had a real relationship with this man, someone almost unknown to me. He had never sat at our dinner table or come to our parties. I had never exchanged more than a few words of polite greeting on the rare occasions when I ran into the shop to buy a bottle of wine. How could Henry have had such a meaningful, ongoing friendship with this near stranger, a friendship strong enough to inspire this heartfelt attempt at poetry?

There would not be four hundred, or even one hundred people at my funeral, I thought to myself, gazing over the crowd. Henry's gift was making everyone feel special—with a joke, a story, a dish of food. I recalled the ecstasy on people's faces when he served them a beautifully arranged plate. He had won me over that way, even with a humble dish of pasta, presented as if I were royalty. This memorial ceremony was a farewell not only to Henry but to the me who had shared his life of culinary and intellectual adventure, one that had been frequently exhausting but also thrilling.

I returned with Liza to a house filled with bouquets of pink carnations, white lilies, and dip-dyed daisies housed in plain glass vases. A far cry from the extravagant arrangements Henry used to bring home for Valentine's Day or after our worst arguments. After the carnations wilted, I washed out the vases and stowed them beneath the china cabinet in the dining room, a part of the house I was quite sure would never be used again.