

I'M FINE
AND
NEITHER
ARE YOU

Camille Pagán

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PUBLISHING

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For the women in my life—especially Pam K. Sullivan

ONE

Mistakes were made. The first wasn't even something I did; it was only a germ of an idea, fleeting but infectious. I had just sat on the toilet and was mulling over the day's to-dos and why-didn't-Is when a single thought shot past all the rest:

I want out.

Maybe it was the photo I had seen on my phone moments earlier. One of my college friends was on vacation yet again, and had posted a shot of the vast Caribbean horizon beyond her sandy, pedicured toes. A novel was on her lap, closed to highlight the cover (and, presumably, her sculpted thighs). The caption noted that a cabana boy had fetched the cocktail she was holding in her free hand.

I glanced down at my own legs, which were not so much toned as two-toned. I had recently read that making it through mothering alive required putting on your own oxygen mask before assisting others. Alas—I had failed to make the connection between survival and sunscreen.

But my sudden desire to be somewhere else was probably less envy and more the result of my second child screaming through the half-inch gap where the bathroom door failed to meet the frame. “Mommy! Mom! Maaahhhmaaay!”

“Miles, can I not have one whole minute of peace?” The answer to this wasted breath of a question would remain no for another twelve years and two months—not that I was counting. “Go attempt to wake your father up.”

The knob twisted. Then the door flung open and there stood my son, tight fists resting on his narrow hips. His face was contorted with a mix of lingering rage and the fresh pleasure of ratting out his older sister. “Stevie called me Rurpleforeskin!” he announced.

Still perched on the toilet, I turned and tucked my chin to my shoulder to stifle a laugh. When I had composed myself, I looked over at him. “Well, that’s a silly thing to say. What do I always tell you about how to respond to someone who’s mean to you?”

He smiled angelically. “Punch them in the tenders?”

“Sweetheart, if you do that and tell people I told you to, you’re going to end up living with Cookie.”

His face immediately crumpled and he began to cry. It was true that my mother-in-law, Riya, who preferred to be identified as a baked good rather than a grandmother, smothered my children to the point of terror when she bothered to see them. Still—Miles’ tears were a reminder of the microscopic line between being six and having borderline personality disorder.

“Oh, sweetie, come on. Just ignore Stevie,” I said, as though the four hundredth time I uttered this advice would be the one that finally stuck. “Go pour yourself a bowl of cereal.”

“I want waffles,” he said, sniffing. His cheeks, which bore the high color of indignation, were streaked with glossy tear trails. I would have pulled him to me and hugged him, but I hadn’t wiped yet.

Instead, Miles stalked off, leaving the door wide open. It was just far enough away that I couldn’t close it myself, so I quickly reached beside me. My fingers landed on a cardboard roll where paper should have been. The basket beside the toilet was empty.

I needed someone to trek to the dungeon, as my children referred to our basement, and retrieve toilet paper.

“Miles!” I called. “Come back!”

Radio silence.

I decided to try my daughter instead. “Stevie! . . . Stevie?”

Still no response. I was ready to revert to yodeling empty threats into the hallway when Sanjay appeared. He wrinkled his nose. “What died?”

Romance, I thought. But instead of saying this, I reached behind me and flushed, which sent toilet water spraying everywhere. Who needed a bidet when you had decades-old plumbing? “Good morning to you, too. Can you please get me some toilet paper?”

Sanjay shook his head, which had yet to produce a single gray hair. At thirty-nine, his stomach was still as flat as the day we met sixteen years earlier. His bronze skin was nearly as unlined as it had been then, too. Only the dark half-moons beneath his eyes hinted at a string of midlife disappointments. “We ran out yesterday.”

I stared at him. “And you just decided to tell me that now?”

“I told you we were low last week, Penelope,” he said, and since he was using my full name, I knew he was officially annoyed. “Remember?”

I did not.

“I didn’t have a chance to remind you again last night, because you were passed out by nine,” he added.

Yes, yes, I was, because I had been up at two the night before to change Miles’ pee-soaked sheets. And the night before that, I had stared at the ceiling for nearly an hour, wondering if whatever material had been used to make it look as though we were sleeping a few feet beneath the moon would give us mesothelioma. A popcorn ceiling, our Realtor had called it when we bought the house. Sanjay had purchased a mask and spraying solution and a special scraping tool, and stood on a ladder with his neck bent backward for eight minutes before giving up. I had found the number of a guy—a wall guy, as opposed to the roof guy or

the lawn guy or, for the sake of parity, the painter gal. Four years later, Sanjay still swore he was going to call him; on principle, I refused to do so myself. Every once in a while, I awoke to find a chunk of plaster at the end of the bed.

Sanjay disappeared. I was about to unleash a string of expletives (under my breath, lest the children hear) when he reappeared and tossed a package of baby wipes at me. “Use these,” he said as the wipes whizzed past me and hit the shower curtain.

I reached over to grab them, flashing Sanjay in the process. I recognized that my doing so was at odds with our having marital relations anytime soon. But he had seen me in the middle of giving birth, and we had still managed to conceive a second child. So.

“Not flushable,” I pointed out.

“But more sanitary than toilet paper,” he said. “That’s research proven.”

Sanjay Laghari Kar, patron saint of useless trivia. “Thanks,” I said.

He shrugged. Then he dropped his clothes in a pile and stepped into the shower.

I glowered at the shower curtain before looking down at my phone, which was at my feet. I had seventeen minutes to make lunches for the kids to take to camp, get dressed and ready, and run out the door . . . *Forever*; I thought for a brief, shameful second before banishing the idea from my mind.

I had planned to rinse off quickly, but now I would either have to accept that Sanjay would be in there until I left, or deal with the attitude he copped when I suggested he leave a bit of water in Lake Michigan.

I ran back to the bedroom and yanked a dress over my head. I had just pulled a muscle in my shoulder trying to zip it up when Sanjay, humming and wrapped in a towel, walked into the bedroom.

“How do I look?” I asked. I had a meeting with my supervisor, Yolanda, at nine, and it was either this dress or my bank-teller pantsuit.

He sat on the bed and glanced up at me. “You look great,” he said, but I was pretty sure his eyes hadn’t risen higher than my knees.

I sighed. My closest friend, Jenny, called Sanjay Thing 3. If it had been anyone other than her, I would have been offended. Of course, anyone else wouldn’t have known that I sometimes felt my husband was, in fact, my third and arguably least affectionate child. Now I called him Thing 3, too—though only to Jenny.

Anyway, her husband, Matt, wasn’t perfect. Since I had mostly grown up without a mother and had been raised by a father who spent more time at work than at home, I would never have been able to handle Matt’s being on the road all the time. But Jenny said she loved him so much she was willing to put up with it, even if she did occasionally feel neglected. That was one of the best things about having a friend you shared everything with: It gave you a bird’s-eye view of another person’s life. Which in turn reminded you that the bad you had was your choice, and better than the alternative.

In truth, I sometimes wondered about the better part. There was plenty about Jenny’s marriage that was covetable, including but not limited to the fact that she did not have to rush to work every morning, because Matt made oodles of cash. Jenny did, too—her “little website” had become a juggernaut—but she didn’t have to. And though she had never said as much, I was pretty sure she didn’t feel like the walls of her large and tastefully decorated home were closing in on her, or that Cecily, her one ridiculously well-behaved child, was trying to strangle all whimsy from her life. Jenny did not look across the table at Matt (who never masticated chicken nuggets with an open mouth as he scrolled his phone) and wonder what had happened to the clever, cultured man she had married.

Because she did not serve chicken nuggets for dinner.

(They had sex all the time.)

I didn’t really want out, I reassured myself as I dashed to the kitchen to finish the lunches. My childhood had been such that I knew how

fortunate I was to be a part of a nuclear family and own a home in a good school district in one of the least generic parts of the Midwest—even if I did sometimes long for the bucolic, childless existence Sanjay and I had once enjoyed in Brooklyn. I recognized the windfall of two healthy, mostly manageable offspring. Our neighbor Lorrie, who let herself into our house more often than I cared to acknowledge (“Just saying hi!” she would announce as I wet myself from the shock of discovering I was not alone and in fact someone who I had once mistaken for a friend was lounging on my sofa), was a single parent. I understood how hard this was—my father had become one himself after my mother decided she wasn’t cut out for family life.

But my father knew I could be trusted to hold down the fort when he was working and my little brother, Nick, needed to be fed, bandaged, or otherwise tended to. Whereas Lorrie only had young Olive, who seemed perfectly average until you realized her supertight hug was the first step of an orchestrated plan to disembowel you with her teeth. As such, I made a conscious effort not to complain to Lorrie about Miles and Stevie cage-fighting in the netted trampoline in our backyard, nor to mutter to her about Sanjay’s fervent belief that plucking wrinkled clothes from the dryer to wear was the same thing as “doing the laundry.”

Still, I was well aware that the semicharmed life I led was one part luck to three parts effort. I had left Brooklyn and traded a beloved but barely paying editing job for a more lucrative position in development at a major Midwestern university—the same institution where Sanjay had spent nearly a year in medical school before admitting that he really didn’t want to be a doctor (never mind that I had pointed this out back when he began an expensive premed preparatory program years earlier).

When it became evident that we could not move back to New York with two children without selling an organ on the black market, I had researched the best neighborhoods and schools in our college town. I had located the only house we could afford in our desired district, and

now spent 29 percent of my post-tax paycheck covering the mortgage. (Sanjay had finally started getting paid for a few of the music reviews and articles he wrote, though I had pushed him to bolster our anemic savings account with that cash instead of putting it toward the house.)

Those decisions had paid off. Stevie was getting the reading intervention she needed. She and Miles had a yard that was not made of concrete. Our life was not so expensive that Sanjay's being mostly unemployed had left us destitute. And I had met Jenny, which had made my suburban, child-centered existence infinitely more tolerable.

I loved my husband. I loved my kids. I mostly liked my life.

But I was so damn tired.

And maybe that was why on that June morning—as Sanjay lounged in his towel and checked his phone while I ran around like I was on uppers, curling my eyelashes while shoving vegetable straws into lunch boxes and zipping backpacks for two sloths in human clothing—I allowed myself a tiny, terrible indulgence.

Which was to admit that in that moment, I actually did want out.

TWO

Sanjay and I met sixteen years earlier at *Hudson*, a now-defunct glossy magazine that envisioned itself as the love child of *Harper's* and *Vanity Fair*. I had been working as a junior editor for nearly a year when he was hired as an assistant to the music editor. The attraction had been instant—I could still recall the electricity that shot through me when our eyes locked as we were being introduced, and the flutter that stayed in my stomach long after he sauntered away, all long limbs and quiet confidence.

Within months we were a couple. We had seemed so perfect for each other that I remember wondering why we hadn't come together even sooner. We both aspired to be writers—me, children's books; him, music journalism—and wished to one day have families happier than the ones we had grown up with. We talked for hours before lapsing into the most comfortable silence, and traveled well together. Any arguments we had were swiftly resolved in bed.

But after two years of dating, I abruptly decided I wasn't ready to settle down—which really meant “I'm only twenty-five and I'm scared of how serious this is.” I knew the minute I broke up with him that I shouldn't have, but the wheel was in motion and I did not allow myself to consider that I might have made a mistake. We were too young to

choose life partners—and besides, he probably would have broken up with me eventually. Wasn't it smarter to preempt him and deal with the loss on my own terms?

That was the story I told myself for several years. At first, I proved just how not ready I was to settle down by dating a succession of jerks. Then I entered a semiserious relationship with a stoner who loved me even more than weed and wanted to know why I refused to say those three words to him. I finally told him it was because I didn't, and spent the following year solo. It was then that I realized that living without Sanjay was far worse than living with the fear he might leave me. I'd made a terrible mistake—possibly the biggest of my life. But it was too late.

He had left *Hudson* several months before we broke up, and through our friends I learned he was still working as a research assistant for a historian at Columbia and dabbling in writing on the side. He had moved from Harlem to Greenpoint, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, and had a serious girlfriend—a woman of Indian descent I bet he loved, even if our friends were too nice to tell me as much.

Then one rainy September evening we bumped into each other outside his favorite bookstore in the East Village. I would call it a coincidence, but it was really the consequence of me indulging myself by walking past his old haunts, as I occasionally did on my way home from work or when I should have been doing something productive. I didn't really think I would see Sanjay—not on a random Friday night. Yet just as I was approaching the shop, he emerged from it.

I remember thinking my eyes were playing tricks on me. How could the tall man in dark jeans and a corduroy blazer possibly be Sanjay? Surely this was another handsome if awfully thin Indian guy. Had I conjured him up? Maybe I would duck behind my umbrella and scurry past so I wouldn't look like the stalker I sort of was.

Then he called out to me: “Penny.”

Our eyes met and I gave him a self-conscious smile.

“Hey,” we said at the same time. Then we both laughed.

He was holding a book wrapped in a paper bag in one hand, and he gestured with it. I folded my umbrella and joined him under the bookstore awning, which was sending water cascading down in front of us. We watched it for a while before speaking.

“How have you been?” he said.

“I’ve missed you,” I confessed.

“I’ve missed you, too.” Though he was sheepish, I thought I saw something else in his eyes. After three years, he probably didn’t love me anymore. Yet as I stared deeper into the black pools of his pupils, I allowed myself to consider that maybe he did.

“Do you want to get out of here? Go get a cup of tea, or whatever you’d like?” I said, and I meant it. This was nothing if not love at second sight. When I saw him striding out of the bookstore, I understood my life would never be the same—if only he would take me wherever he was going.

He did not respond for several seconds, and my heart gave a little lurch as I prepared to hear him say no.

“Yes,” he said.

We were engaged two months later and married within the year. I had never been one for weddings, and the three hundred people Sanjay’s parents invited to our reception put me off of them for good. But we emerged from the experience as blissful newlyweds. Finding and furnishing an apartment; hosting dinner parties and our first Thanksgiving dinner; traveling to new places, whether it was a Puerto Rican restaurant in the Bronx that purported to have the best *empanadillas* in New York, or to Mumbai to be feted by his father’s family—it was all an adventure with Sanjay at my side. And though that giddy pace slowed when his premed classes began to eat up his nights and weekends, it remained a heady time, brimming with possibility and promise.

I had never wanted out back then.



I was thinking about this on my way to work as the driver behind me began honking like a maniac. As my eyes refocused, I realized I had drifted a teensy bit out of my lane. But it wasn't as though I had swerved to the other side of the road while texting and driving. And at least I had not been fantasizing about making not-so-sweet love to a stranger, as I sometimes did during my commute or while I pretended to watch Stevie clod-hop her way through ballet practice.

The driver who had been tailing me skidded into the next lane and flashed me the finger. Always eager to demonstrate my black belt in passive aggression, I gave him my best pageant wave and zipped past him.

The drive from my house to the development office at the far end of the medical campus was just three miles, but it took twelve to twenty excruciating minutes to get there depending on what time I left and how many roads were closed. Sanjay was constantly telling me to bike—it would be faster and good for me, he argued. He was probably right, but I was afraid of navigating traffic on two wheels and did not want to give my husband an opportunity to sleep with other women after I was flattened by a truck.

I'm grateful to have a job, I reminded myself as I began a claustrophobic spiral through the employee parking garage. Even at 8:32 in the morning, the only spots left were for electric cars. I pulled my gas-guzzler into one of them and scribbled a note on a piece of paper explaining that I had circled the whole garage to no avail and had to get to a nine o'clock meeting.

I am grateful to have transportation, I thought as part of the windshield wiper came flying off when I lifted it to tuck the note beneath it. I sighed, picked the rubber strip up off the pavement, and tossed it on the hood so I could deal with it . . . *Tomorrow!* I thought, recalling the Frog and Toad book I'd read to Miles and Stevie the night before. *I will do it tomorrow!*

As a child, I had loved the way books transported me into another world. As an adult, that magic had not worn off, and Frog and Toad remained my favorite children's book characters. Jenny adored them, too, and no surprise—she was so clearly Frog to my Toad. Reminding myself I was thankful for the very things that were irritating me was a move stolen straight from her website, Sweet Things.

Just the week before, she had posted about how she was anxious for Matt to get home from his latest business trip. She had paired the post with funny pictures of her staring at herself in the mirror, cursing the fact that she spent her teens coated in baby oil instead of sunscreen. She was prone to these kinds of corrosive thoughts when she was alone too long, she said.

It was only after she reminded herself she was grateful for Matt's position at a small venture capital firm—which kept him on the road for at least half the month—that she had immediately realized that all of her best ideas were the result of, as she had written, “the mental space that comes from being by yourself for stretches of time.”

I wouldn't know. Since Sanjay worked from home (and lately he *was* working more, I had to admit), the only alone time I had was in the car. Yet the point stood: gratitude was at least mildly effective. And on a day like this one, I needed to remind myself that there was a good reason a sane person would pull herself out of bed at the crack of dawn, spend all of her waking hours tending to the needs of other people, and then do it again and again and again.

It was a labor of love. Or something like that.



“Morning, Penny.”

I hadn't yet turned my computer on when Russ came barging into my office. It was a luxury having an entire windowless, shoebox-sized office to myself. Especially since it was rumored that soon we would all

be working side by side at long tables so we could collaborate—or however the university would fictionalize the latest cost-reduction initiative.

As long as I had a door, however, I expected Russ to knock before throwing it open.

“I didn’t mean to spook you,” he said, sitting on the edge of my desk.

I glanced pointedly at the chair across from my own. “Who said I’m spooked?”

“Baby keep you up last night?” he said, looking down at me. I would never understand how a man who spent hours on his pecs each week could so blatantly fail to address his nose hair situation. Russ was the co-director of medical development—a title that had been created just for him after he protested when I was promoted to the same position first. However, he was sharp as a scythe and had taught me a lot about the art of closing a difficult “give,” as we referred to charitable donations made to the university’s hospital and medical school. As such, I tolerated more of his antics than I probably should have.

“He’s *six*, Russell. So no, he did not,” I said, as though my champion sleeper of an infant had not evolved into an elementary-aged insomniac with a chronic bedwetting problem. Sanjay felt this was the result of my coddling Miles; he said I had created a reward system in which our child was given attention and affection in exchange for destroying any semblance of REM sleep I might have otherwise enjoyed. I didn’t know what else to do—I couldn’t lock him in his room and insist he roll around on wet sheets until morning. And Sanjay was such a heavy sleeper that by the time he was conscious enough to be of any use, I was already wide awake and finished with putting Miles back to bed.

Russ regarded me skeptically. “You just look tired.”

I leaned back in my chair to escape the cloud of his coffee breath. “You know when you say that you’re basically telling someone they look awful, right?”

“You don’t look awful. Just like you could use a night or two in a hotel room away from your kids.”

I was not about to point out how inappropriate this comment could come across. “I’m swamped, and you and I already have a meeting on the books today. What’s up?”

Russ clapped his hands, and I had to force myself not to wince—long-term sleep deprivation had made me skittish. “George Blatner just called. He’s in town and wants to swing by tomorrow morning, which means we’re going to need a proposal polished and ready before then. Medical initiatives, potential impact, supersad patient story—the whole nine. I’d write it, but I’m closing with the Rosenbaums this afternoon. And you know Adrian can’t handle it,” he said, referring to our staff writer, who took days to draft a single page.

“I’m on it,” I said, because that’s what I always said when there was work to be done.

Russ grinned. “Pediatric cancer’s a goldmine—I’m willing to bet Blatner will drop close to a mil. You’re welcome.”

“Russell?”

He looked at me expectantly. “Yeah?”

“Please shut the door on the way out.”

This meant I had even less time to get through the day’s work than I had budgeted for, and just a few minutes to prepare for my nine o’clock meeting with my boss, Yolanda. Yet I still pulled my phone out of my bag and texted Jenny.

Please end it for me

Jenny usually wrote back right away, even if I texted late at night. But nearly an hour passed before I heard from her.

No can do, my love

Pretty please? There's a free latte or three in your future if you do

They don't serve coffee in heaven

Your point

Then I added, Russ dropped another unexpected project on my desk.

Another hour passed before she wrote back.

You could quit

It was such an un-Jenny-like thing to say that I actually checked to make sure I was looking at the right chain of messages. Yes—the text was from her.

Everyone had an off day, I reminded myself. Then I wrote:

I wish

To which she responded, Don't wish. If you're not happy, make a change.

Now *that* sounded more like Jenny, who spouted inspirational quotes the way some people recited Bible verses. Still, I couldn't say I agreed. Change was a privilege reserved for people whose families didn't rely on them for food, shelter, and health insurance. I thought she'd know that by now.

I stared at my phone screen, which was lit with a photo of Stevie and Miles frolicking on the beach during our last family vacation two years earlier, wondering how to respond. Jenny meant well, I reminded myself, so I texted her a heart symbol and set the phone beside my keyboard so I could continue chiseling through my workload.

But rather than working, I imagined myself in front of the ocean. Only this time I didn't fantasize about being alone. Instead I was with Stevie, Miles, and Sanjay. And in this fantasy, my children were building a sandcastle together instead of competing to see who could tear the other's limbs off first; and my husband, who was happy and fulfilled—or perhaps just gainfully employed—was gazing at me from his beach towel the way I often caught Matt looking at Jenny.

Which is to say with a look of love I had not seen in quite some time.

THREE

Sanjay called just before five, minutes after I had finally started writing the proposal I would be presenting the next morning. There would be no time to edit it, but just as well; I would be spared one of my supervisor's infamous revisions in which nouns were forced into verbitude. In Yolanda's world, you were expected to logic a problem, then inbox her the answer.

"Hey," I answered. "What's up?"

"Just reminding you that you're picking the kids up from camp today."

"Crap."

"You forgot."

I could barely remember my middle name half the time, let alone events he failed to put on our family calendar. "I did," I confessed. "Is there any way you can do it?"

"I have a jam." As a teen, Sanjay had dreamed of being the Indian Stevie Ray Vaughan—hence our daughter's name—and had recently joined a local garage band in what I assumed was a last-ditch attempt to recapture his youth before turning forty. "Remember?"

I was tempted to make a crack about how I was too busy keeping our family afloat to stay on top of his leisure activities. But then I

glanced at the three lines I had just typed in an otherwise blank word processing document. If I left work at five and actually paused for dinner and to tuck in the kids, I would be up until at least eleven trying to wrap up the proposal. I could ask Russ for help, but he was probably already out golfing. If memory served, he was playing the back nine with Yolanda. How was it that everyone else managed to find free time?

I was nearly ready to curse with frustration when I remembered that Cecily was in camp with Miles and Stevie this week. Jenny would be happy to pick up the kids for me. “I’ll handle it. Have fun with your band,” I said to Sanjay, and though I had not meant this to come out as bitter as it sounded, I hung up without saying so.

I called Jenny from my office line. When she didn’t pick up, I sent her a follow-up text and returned to the proposal. By 5:15 I still had not heard from her, which meant I should have left at least seven minutes earlier in order to make it to the kids’ summer camp before they began charging me a dollar per child for each minute I was late.

I emailed the document I had been working on to myself, grabbed my purse, and speed-walked out of the office, praying no one would see me. The official end to our workday was five o’clock, and the department liked to flaunt this so-called perk when recruiting new hires. But ever since I was promoted, my coworkers gave me the side-eye if I was spotted leaving before the night janitor arrived. This frequently made me wonder just how much I really needed a fancy title and an extra eight thousand dollars a year. (On the latter count, the unfortunate answer was *a lot*.)

Russ did not seem to be subject to the same scrutiny. Maybe it was because he was a man. Or maybe because he waltzed through life expecting that things would go his way—and they mostly did. I sometimes wished I had it in me to emulate him and loudly announce I was going to a VERY IMPORTANT MEETING every time I left the building.

I made it to the parking lot without a single questioning glance and had just begun contemplating which route would get me to the kids’

camp fastest when I realized my car was no longer where I had left it that morning.

Was there another area designated for electric cars? Maybe stress had short-circuited my mental compass. But as I looked beyond the concrete wall, the glowing sign for the buffalo wings bar where my colleagues insisted celebrating every birthday and business deal was blinking back at me—exactly as it had been that morning.

“This cannot be happening,” I said aloud. I knew talking to myself made me look crazy, yet I usually did it anyway, which suggested that I should be more concerned about my mental health than how my muttering looked to other people.

“What can’t be happening?” Russ came sauntering out of the elevator, swinging his keys on his finger. He stopped abruptly and cocked his head. “Uh-oh. What’s wrong, Penny?”

I will not cry, I told myself. *I will not cry. I will not . . .* I felt a single tear escape the corner of my eye, which I quickly wiped away. “Aren’t you supposed to be golfing?”

“I got held up in a meeting,” he said. “So, what happened to you?”

“My car is missing,” I said.

“Well, can you Uber?” Russ grinned at me. “You *do* know what Uber is, don’t you?”

“It’s not a good time for jokes, Russell. I’m late to get my kids, my car has been . . .” Now that my aging hatchback was no longer occupying the parking space, I could see the sign on the wall that clearly stated nonelectric vehicles would be towed at the owner’s expense. “Impounded, and—” I had to stop because I was about to blurt out all sorts of vulnerable things to a man who probably ate baby bunnies for breakfast.

Then I had an idea. Granted, it was a terrible idea, but I was low on options and out of time. “Russell, can you drive me somewhere?”

From his expression, you’d think I just asked him to whisk me off to Wyoming. “I’m already late.”

“I know, but this is really important. I have to pick my kids up from camp, and I don’t have time to wait for an Uber. If I don’t pick them up before six, I’ll have to deal with a whole mess of paperwork and fees, and I’ll be even further behind on the Blatner proposal. There’s even a chance I won’t finish it before he arrives tomorrow.”

Now Russ was regarding me like I was leaning over the wall, threatening to splatter myself on the sidewalk in front of a bunch of people dining on dollar hot wings. I suppose I did sound a little frantic. “Okay,” he said, making no effort to hide his reluctance. “Tell me where you need to be.”

Asking Russ for a favor struck me as the epitome of stupidity. It was also the best decision I’d made all day. “It’s about twenty minutes away,” I said. I pulled my phone from my bag and sent up a last-ditch prayer that Jenny had called me back.

She had not.

“We’ll be there in ten,” said Russ, pointing a key fob at his recently waxed black sedan. The car beeped. “What’s the address?”

I gave it to him and, with equal parts reluctance and relief, sank into the buttery leather passenger seat. A glance behind me confirmed that his backseat was so small, it had not been intended to accommodate any living thing, let alone two small children. It didn’t matter. When I got to camp I would call Sanjay again, or maybe Jenny would be there. In that moment, all I needed to do was get to my kids.

“No GPS?” I said as Russ zipped down one side street only to turn abruptly onto another. I wanted to tell him to be careful—of my myriad worries, a child darting out in front of the car was one of the most pervasive and potent—but I bit my tongue and pushed my foot into an imaginary brake on the floor mat.

“I’m a townie, remember?” said Russ. He had been raised in town and had purposefully never left. “You practically are, too, at this point. You should know your shortcuts.”

Was I practically a townie? Stevie would be eight in the fall, which meant we had lived here for . . . seven years. Through the car window,

one Craftsman bungalow blurred into the next, and the next. Had it really been so long? In theory, I saw no problem with our having resided in the Midwest for nearly the same amount of time we had lived in New York. But in reality, it was not just that every year here felt like an erosion of the person I had been prior to having children—though there was certainly that. It was that I was not sure what all of those years represented. Was this it? Was this the goal, the reason, the sum total of two decades of adult decisions?

“Here we are,” said Russ as he pulled up in front of the brick community center where the kids were attending the summer camp Sanjay’s mother had subsidized so he could spend less time on what she deemed the womanly art of tending to one’s children. “Nine and a half minutes. You’re welcome.”

“Thanks. I owe you,” I said, hoisting myself out of the deep seat.

“You’ll make it up to me,” called Russ, but I was already running through a double door. The clock hanging in the lobby revealed that I had arrived with one minute to spare, which almost excused Russ from saddling me with the Blatner proposal.

The victory was short-lived. “You’re *late!*” said Miles as he barreled toward me. I gasped as his forehead slammed into my stomach.

“Where were you?” said Stevie in a whiny baby voice from beneath the table where she was . . . hiding? Foraging for leftover lunch crumbs? It was anyone’s guess.

“I’m not late,” I said to my ungrateful spawn once I had regained the wind Miles had just knocked out of me. “I’m on time. And I was at work.” *The same as every other day, except today I left early to get you because your father is busy living his best life.*

I was about to direct them to the hurricane of clothes and food storage containers they had scattered under their cubbies when I realized that there was a little girl sniffing on a beanbag in the corner—and this girl happened to be Cecily.

“Cess?” I called. “Where’s your mom, sweetie?”

Her big blue eyes were brimming with tears. She sniffed. “I don’t know.”

“Aww, honey, it’s okay,” I said, kneeling beside her. I put my hand on her back.

“No touching, please,” called the camp counselor, whose name started with a *B*—Brittany, maybe, or Becca—from across the room.

“She’s my best friend’s daughter,” I said.

“I’m sorry, but it’s against Knowledge Arena’s policy. Only parents and counselors are allowed to have direct contact with the campers.”

I was pretty sure I was first on Cecily’s emergency forms, which made me the next closest thing to her parents, but arguing with the counselor wasn’t going to help. Besides, Jenny would swoop in any second and save Cecily as well as me and my children, who still needed a ride home.

“No touching,” I said, holding my hands palms up like a crime suspect. I winked at Cecily, who managed a small smile. “How about Stevie, Miles, and I hang out here with you until your mama shows up?” I asked, and she nodded.

We sat on the rug and read one book, and then another, and even after a third there still was no sign of Jenny. I called her again, but she didn’t answer. Then I texted Sanjay to say that we needed a ride and to call me immediately.

Twenty dollars in late fees later, neither the camp nor I had been able to reach Jenny or Matt. He was home this week, so he was probably in the middle of a meeting or a conference call.

But where was *she*? Had she forgotten? That had happened once a few months earlier, but unlike me, she generally did not need to be reminded about things like picking up her children. Had she been felled by *E. coli*, or gotten in a car accident, or stopped to rescue a random person from something terrible? Only the last scenario was actually feasible—I could already imagine a self-deprecating post about how

she had been walking through her neighborhood and happened upon an elderly woman who had fallen and couldn't get up.

I had just stood to look outside when the door opened. "See?!" I said triumphantly to the kids, who were rooting through my bag for snacks; even Cecily was peering into it with the wild eyes of a woman in the middle of a weeklong juice fast.

But it was just Russ. His tie was missing and the top of his shirt was unbuttoned, and for a second I wondered if he had returned from the golf course. "Everything okay?" he asked. "I've been waiting for you."

I stared at him, as incredulous as I was grateful. "You've been waiting? For me?"

"And your kids," he said. He did a double take. "There are *three* of them?"

"No, Russell. That's my best friend's daughter." I glanced back at the counselor, who was sighing heavily and repeatedly looking at the clock. "I should be listed on Cecily's emergency forms. Can I sign her out?"

"Let me confirm," she said.

She returned with her approval, and I refrained from making a remark about whether I was allowed to make contact with Cecily while taking her home. Then I texted Jenny to update her and hustled the children out of the building.

"Now what?" said Russ, looking in bewilderment as Stevie, Miles, and Cecily ran around the parking lot.

"Now I call my husband for the seventeenth time," I said.

Sanjay, who was probably blowing out his eardrums beside an amplifier in his friend Christina's garage, did not pick up. Nor did Jenny respond to my text. I was starting to feel shaky, and while I wanted to believe this was the result of my having three cups of coffee for lunch and the fact that the past hour had been a complete catastrophe, the truth was that a different sort of dread had come over me.

Motherhood had primed me to anticipate unlikely worst-case scenarios, and I tried to reassure myself that my internal disaster sensor was

on overdrive, as per usual. But this feeling wasn't like when you realized your house had been quiet for thirty seconds too long only to find your beloved son practicing his penmanship in permanent marker on your beige sofa cushions.

It was something else entirely—something dark and unnamable.

Russ stared at me, and I was too rattled to look away. “Okay, Penny,” he said, his pale-green eyes still locked with my own. “I know you're going to say no because we don't have five-point safety bubbles, or whatever it is you're supposed to trap the rug rats in, but how about we pile them into my backseat and I take you to wherever you need to be?”

I did not allow myself to think twice. “Yes. Thank you.”

We got the kids into Russ' car and explained that, yes, they really did need car seats, but every so often rules had to be broken for a good cause. Miles began to cry, as he was known to do after missing an hourly feeding. “I don't want to die,” he wailed. “I don't want to—”

“No one's going to die,” interjected Russ. “I'm the best driver in this whole damn town.”

“Really?” said Miles, instantly calmed.

“Mommy, that man said *damn*,” said Stevie, who had once detonated an f-bomb in the middle of her school's pan-denominational holiday play. (The boy beside her had stomped on her foot, and her mommy and daddy used that word when *they* were in pain, she explained when Sanjay and I were called in for a family meeting with her principal.) Now she pretended to be the morality police whenever adults were present.

“That man's name is Russ,” I said over my shoulder, “and he's nice enough to drive us to Auntie Jenny's, so zip it.”

“Russell,” corrected Russ, who had begun going by his full name around the same time he had decided we should share a title.

“Sorry,” I said, checking my phone again. “Russell.”

When we arrived at the Sweets', Jenny's white SUV was in the driveway. She must have just gotten home, I told myself, because I had been swimming in desperation long enough that any shape in the distance was now a lifeboat.

"You sure you don't want me to wait?" Russ asked as I helped the kids out of his car.

"No, you've done enough," I said, even though I was ever so slightly tempted to finally introduce Jenny to the coworker I had been complaining about. "Thank you."

"Awfully swank place," he said as he took in Jenny's midcentury ranch. With its floor-to-ceiling windows and sloping, manicured lawn, it looked like the kind of house you'd expect to see in *Architectural Digest*. Jenny and Matt had bought it for a song at the bottom of the market, and from what I had gathered spent hundreds of thousands transforming it into their "forever home" (as opposed to the FEMA trailer they must have thought our bungalow was, I sometimes thought when they said this).

"Yes, it is."

"Even Yolanda's house isn't this nice." He kept staring straight ahead. "Don't you wonder sometimes?"

"About working in development?"

He shrugged, and I understood that he meant that, but also everything.

"Yes," I admitted. "All the time."

No one had answered the door, and the kids, who had run up the stairs, were banging on the windows on either side of the door. "That's my cue," I told him. "Thanks again for saving the day."

"Don't mention it."

"Stop pounding on the glass, you guys," I told the kids as I joined them at the front door. I pressed the doorbell once, and then a second time. I was still jittery, but my mind was already leaping ahead. If Sanjay didn't call me back sometime soon, hopefully Matt or Jenny could drive

us home; otherwise I would end up dragging the kids on the mile-long walk. Of course, I still had to find out where my car had been towed and pay what was sure to be an exorbitant fine in order to retake possession of it. But that would have to wait until the following afternoon, because I needed to spend the entire rest of the evening working on the Blatner proposal, then wake at dawn, at which point I would spackle over my exhaustion with concealer and caffeinate myself into—well, if not a charismatic state, then a competent one—

The whir of a car engine cut through my thoughts. I turned to see Matt pulling up in the driveway.

“Penny?” he said as he came striding toward me. Jenny’s husband was movie-star handsome, with a thick head of salt-and-pepper hair, hazel eyes, and a zero-to-sixty smile that seemed more like a flash of generosity than a facial expression.

“Am I ever glad to see you,” I said. “Have you talked to Jenny? I’ve been trying to reach her for hours now.”

“No . . .” He looked at me curiously, then over at his daughter, who was attempting to work Miles’ curls into a tiny ponytail. “So, you *weren’t* supposed to pick Cess up?”

Cecily lifted her head at the sound of her name. “Hi, Daddy.”

“Hey, Pumpkin,” he said.

I shook my head. “Jenny didn’t show. The school called you, and so did I. I thought maybe you had surprised her with a trip to Paris.”

Rather than the reassuring laugh I had been aiming for, his eyes glinted with concern. Then he opened the front door and waved us in.

The kids trailed behind me like ducklings, then decamped to the kitchen. As I watched Cecily retrieve snacks from the cupboard, I had a momentary flashback to childhood—scraping the remains of a tub of margarine onto stale, crumbled crackers and placing them in my brother Nick’s hands because there were no clean plates or napkins to use. Cecily had probably never tasted margarine. She certainly knew nothing of the insatiable hunger of being motherless. And yet she was so

careful—opening each pack of gummies and handing it to my children before doing the same for herself—that I had the uncanny sense of having rewound and watched some secret footage of my past.

I sat on one of the stools at the marble island separating the kitchen from the rest of the first floor as the kids wandered into the living room.

Miles and Cecily were on the rug, where he was pretending to be some sort of animal to her sadistic zookeeper. Stevie retrieved a book from a bookshelf and sprawled on one of the Sweets' sofas, which almost made up for everything else that had happened that day. I had been reading to her since she was a baby, waiting anxiously for a sign that she understood the magic that happened when you could interpret the scribbles on a page. But it wasn't until she started seeing a reading specialist the year before that she began picking up books without me pushing her to do so.

"Jen?" Matt called out in the distance just as Sanjay's name lit up my phone.

"Aww, you thought of little old me?" I said to my husband when I picked up.

"Want to tell me why I have thirty-two missed calls from you?"

Cecily had mounted Miles' back, and with a vaguely Russian accent was commanding him to buck like a bronco. "Want to tell me why you didn't check your voicemail?" I asked Sanjay.

"No one checks voicemail, Pen." *Duh*, I heard him add mentally. "So?"

"So, my car got towed."

He cursed. "That's going to cost a fortune, you know."

It took everything in me not to point out that I would be the one paying for it, and that in fact I had already spent the past hour paying for it. "Can you please come get us? We're at the Sweets'."

He sighed just loud enough for me to hear. "Okay."

Behind me, Miles was whinnying. "We're excited to see you, too," I said.

"Please don't give me a hard time. I'm doing what you want without complaining."

Technically this was true, and it was the exact thing I was always asking him to do. What I had not said—and felt he should have understood—was that I did not just want compliance; I also wanted a hint of enthusiasm. Though by that point, even his not sighing would have been something to celebrate. This was on the tip of my tongue when Matt appeared in my peripheral vision.

“I need to go,” I told Sanjay.

“Traffic is probably nuts right now. It’ll take me at least ten minutes to get there.”

“No problem. Thanks.”

The Sweets’ stairs were large, gleaming slats of hardwood hung on a stainless-steel frame. The gap between each step was wide enough that a small child could easily slip through them; they were “lovely and lethal,” Jenny had said apologetically one of the first times I had come over. She and Matt planned to fix it before they had a second child, she told me, but years had passed since then.

Matt was at the foot of the stairs. The expression on his face instantly reminded me of the blank stare Miles wore when he was sleepwalking and was seconds from mistaking a corner in my bedroom for a urinal.

“Are you okay?” I asked. Stupidly—it was clear he was not.

“No.” He was holding his phone out toward me. I could hear that someone on the other end was speaking, though I could not decipher what they were saying.

The fine hairs on the nape of my neck were still standing at attention. “What is it?”

“It’s . . . Jenny.”

Stop there, I thought. Don’t let your beautiful mouth utter another word. Let’s have one more minute where life is what I believe it to be and everything is fine. And yet I said, “What about her?”

Matt’s eyes were on me, but he was still looking right through me. “I think she’s dead.”

FOUR

But I didn't have *time* for Jenny to die.

It was a terrible thought—the selfish, overly rational sort that surfaces before you've allowed yourself to admit everything has changed and trivial matters like space and time no longer matter. It was still what first popped into my head as I ran toward Matt.

He stood there, frozen, then handed me the phone and sat down on the last step. I glanced at him before stepping around him.

Upstairs, the hallway looked the same as it ever did: crisp gray walls decorated with a variety of framed candid and professionally shot photos; the wide, gleaming mahogany floor and its Persian runner, which probably cost twice as much as our monthly mortgage payment. No blood anywhere, let alone signs of chaos, I noted, though my heart was still galloping in my chest: *dead-dead, dead-dead, dead-dead*.

I lifted the phone to my head and heard a voice say, "Sir? Sir, are you there?"

To my left, the spare bedroom was empty. Just beyond it, Cecily's room was empty, too. "This is Penelope Ruiz-Kar," I said quietly into the receiver. "I'm . . ."

I'm looking for my friend, who may or may not be alive.

“Can you confirm your location?” asked the woman who had answered what I assumed must have been Matt’s 911 call.

I rattled off the Sweets’ address.

“Ma’am, are you in a safe place?” asked the woman.

Was I? “I think so.”

“Does there appear to be an intruder in the house?”

This possibility had not occurred to me. If there were, Matt would have been behaving differently . . . wouldn’t he? “I don’t know. I’m pretty sure there isn’t.”

“Ma’am, I’m going to have to advise that you take yourself and anyone else in the home outside while you wait for the police and emergency personnel to arrive.”

“Okay,” I said as I walked into Jenny’s bedroom.

The room was supposed to feel like a sanctuary, at least in its current iteration—Jenny had redecorated it twice since she and Matt had moved in, each time for a feature for her website. In this latest round, she had the walls painted a delicate gray, and the heavy velvet drapes had been replaced with pale cotton curtains and Roman blinds. Her king-size bed was a sea of white linens, and there were plants everywhere—tall fiddle-leaf figs in ceramic pots on the floor, air plants in delicate glass bubbles hanging in front of the windows, orchids in matte-glazed planters on the dressers. Jenny said Matt told her he felt like he fell asleep in the rainforest every night. I had never been clear whether this was a good thing.

At any rate, Jenny was not on the bed, or anywhere else in the room. I braced myself as I opened the door to their master bath, but she was not in their claw-foot tub, or in the spacious shower stall.

The woman on the phone was still speaking, but I was no longer listening. *Her office*, I thought at once.

I found Jenny sitting—sprawled, really—in the cream-colored armchair in the corner of the room. With her arms gracefully outstretched, legs straight and bare feet resting just so, she looked like a dancer. The

chair was beside a window, and the last of the day's sun cast a strange light over her face, which was—

The phone slipped from my hand and hit the rug with a thud.

Her face was all wrong. Though they were closed, her eyes appeared to be looking in opposite directions. But her mouth, which was not the usual bright pink but so pale it nearly blended into the rest of her skin, was gaping open—too wide, I thought, much too wide. There was a dribble of something—food, or maybe vomit—on her bottom lip. For all her fretting about sun damage, she had already tanned to a golden brown in mid-June, but now her limbs looked like pale putty.

Worse, her chest wasn't moving. And when I put my hand over her mouth, I couldn't detect even the thinnest stream of air.

But she didn't *look* dead, I thought ridiculously—I'd never actually seen a dead person outside of a funeral home. If she was dead, her eyes would be wide open . . . wouldn't they? She had to be napping. Passed out, maybe.

"Jenny," I said softly, like I was trying to gently wake her. "Jenny!" I said, this time loudly. By the time I took her by the shoulders to shake her leaden body, I had realized that Matt was right. She was not alive.

Which meant she was right in front of me . . . but not there. Not there at all.

A terrible, strangled sound escaped me, and I touched Jenny again—poked her, really—in the stomach. I don't know why I did it, and thank God no one was there to see me prodding her. Maybe I just needed to be sure that I had not been mistaken. My fingers were met with the thinnest layer of soft flesh over a plane of muscle. Had she really grown so slim? *I need to take her out for a burger*, I thought. Then I reached for her hand, which was no longer a hand at all but rather a cold and lifeless thing, and realized there would be no burgers in her future.

But how stupid was I? What if Jenny had only been dead a few seconds? Or had suffered a heart attack or stroke and was still just the tiniest bit alive? (Was there such a thing as a little alive? Obviously

seven years of working for the medical school had given me no real insight into matters of life and death.) I needed to try to resuscitate her. Immediately.

I had gone through CPR training right before I had Stevie, but like so many other things stored in my mind, motherhood had overwritten that file. Did I pinch her nose and put my mouth to hers? Press her chest . . . yes, but at the same time I was breathing into her mouth?

“Ma’am?”

I jumped straight up in the air. A police officer was behind me, and a man and two women were wheeling in a stretcher through the door. It took me a second to realize that they were emergency medical technicians or paramedics.

“We’re going to need you to leave the room,” the officer said.

“Going,” I mumbled, slinking to the door, like I was somehow responsible for Jenny’s condition.

In the hallway, Matt was walking toward me. His face was etched with a distant sort of pain; it looked almost as though he were watching this unfold from somewhere far away. I immediately recognized the feeling, even as I told myself to stay present—if not for Matt, then for Cecily.

“Don’t go in,” I told him.

His eyes welled with tears. “Then I’m right.”

“I don’t know, but don’t go in there.”

“She’s dead,” he whispered.

I stared at him. Yes, I was pretty sure she was dead. But . . . maybe the emergency responders had an antidote to bring her back to life. Maybe we would all wake up any minute now and realize this was a terrible dream. Or—well, I didn’t know what, but something other than this.

Then I saw another set of policemen marching up the stairs, each with a hand on his holster, and reality came rushing back at me.

Matt must have felt that way, too, because he suddenly said, “I might throw up. Can you find Cecily and keep her away from this?” He didn’t wait for my response as he ran toward the bathroom.

I could keep an eye on Cecily.

But who would be there for me?



As I descended the stairs, I found myself thinking back to how Jenny and I became friends—a story that began even before we met. The night before Sanjay and I left Brooklyn, our closest friends threw us a farewell dinner at our favorite restaurant. Stevie was six months old and at that point a wonderful child, the kind that tricked you into thinking that you had this parenting thing figured out. I bounced her on my knee as small plates were passed and wineglasses were refreshed again and again. At one point my friend Alex smiled at me with bright-red lips and said in her odd Wisconsin-by-way-of-West-New-Guinea accent, “Don’t worry, darling. You’ll be back.”

“Of course we will,” I said, though I knew nothing of the sort. “If all goes as planned, maybe even as soon as four years from now for Sanjay’s residency.”

We three Ruiz-Kars were headed West—not even halfway across the country, though at the time even New Jersey seemed like Timbuktu. But our course was already set. After years of preparation, Sanjay had been accepted into the ninth-highest-ranked medical school in the country, where he planned to become a neurologist or nephrologist or maybe even a psychiatrist like his father.

To say I had reservations about this plan, however glittering, was a vast understatement. Sanjay and I had known each other for almost a decade and had been together for seven of those years. All that time he had been a seed—ripe with potential but drifting unsown on the wind. How could a man who spent hours watching documentaries about Jimi

Hendrix and reading Charlie Parker and Chet Baker biographies believe that yet more schooling would magically transform him into a person who was passionate about physiology? Why couldn't he accept who he was and find something useful and well paying to do with his real interests, which were music and the arts and—well, not medicine? Didn't he see that there was a reason he had gone to work at a cultural magazine instead of attending med school after graduating from college?

And yet. Being a doctor was what his parents wanted for him. *Expected* of him. Moreover, his fulfilling this plan would provide a good, stable life for the family he and I had just started. While I harbored no fantasies about being a doctor's wife, I did not loathe the idea of being able to go to the grocery store and buy what I wanted without thinking about how much it would cost, nor the possibility of taking vacations with Sanjay and Stevie without running up credit card debt that would take years to pay off, if we ever did at all. Maybe later down the line, I thought, I could even take a whole year off just to write children's books.

Even so, my short-term worries far outweighed any hopes or fears about how the rest of our lives would unfold. As I looked around the table at Alex, Harue, Jon, and Malcolm—people we had known for almost a decade, four of the six of us having met at *Hudson*—I felt an aching, preemptive loss.

Alex and Malcolm had been with me in the *Hudson* break room on 9/11, glued to the television with horror as we learned our city was under attack. Despite her vocal distaste for children, Alex had held my hand as I caterwauled my way through Stevie's birth. And when Sanjay and I broke up, Harue had been the first to tell me I was a fool to leave him—a tragedy of sorts that she had retold as a comedy when toasting us at our wedding.

"You'll be back," said Harue. She drained her wine, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, having had so much to drink that manners were a distant memory. She added, "You'll be back, because you'll miss us too much, and you'll run out of things to do there."

Harue was right, I thought miserably as I drove past the forests and fields of Pennsylvania, through the flat expanse of Ohio, and north to the Michigan college town that was to be our home. We were making a terrible mistake.

That first year I quickly discovered she was wrong on one count: a dearth of things to do would never again be a problem. My husband disappeared into his coursework, I started a new job, and Stevie became mobile, revealing that the first year of parenting was not the hardest, after all. Then one December morning I threw up into my wastebasket at work and realized—with a horror that still fills me with shame—that I had gotten pregnant during the sole occasion Sanjay and I had slept together that fall.

I *was* lonely, though. Cripplingly so, and the email chain I kept up with Alex and Harue did little to ease the feeling that I had been marooned on a landlocked Midwestern island. I had taken a midlevel fundraising position in the university's medical development department, and to my surprise I liked the work well enough—if only because I was good at it. But most of my coworkers were younger than me and childless, and those who were the same age or older were bachelors or men who behaved as though their children were hobbies. Even before I was pregnant with Miles, no one seemed to understand why I really—*no, really*—couldn't grab a cocktail after work or join the development association's golf league. As I would quickly come to realize, having a child—and then another—was a professional liability for a person like me, which is to say a woman.

I tried going to moms' groups on the weekends, but I always felt awkward and out of place. When a brute of a toddler in the music-with-mommy class repeatedly played the role of Little Bunny Foo Foo to Stevie's field mouse while his mother cheered his innate leadership skills, I decided I would have to get comfortable with going it alone.

Then I met Jenny.

It was a Saturday, or maybe a Sunday. I had recently had Miles and was still oozing from too many places, but I had used up my maternity leave, which meant Sanjay had already dropped out of medical school and I was adjusting to life as a working mother of two. (This consisted of overparenting at night and on the weekends, and thinking self-defeating thoughts while huddled over a breast pump in a bathroom stall scrolling through photos of my children's life without me several times a day during the workweek.) I was pushing Miles, who was screaming his head off, in his stroller through a nearby park. I had just wheeled past a play structure when I came upon a woman with a baby in a sling, bouncing from one foot to the other with the kind of energy I had not had since before Stevie was born.

Of course, this woman was Jenny and her baby was Cecily. For whatever reason, I paused in front of them.

"Sounds like your little man's not too happy," said Jenny with a warm smile.

I shook my head. "Nope. He's been like this for weeks. I've tried everything short of an exorcism."

"What about probiotics?" said Jenny. She looked down at Cecily, who was the sort of pretty, peaceful infant that triggered ovulation in unwitting women. "That worked wonders for Cecily's colic."

"I haven't tried that yet."

"Get the drops—it's practically a miracle cure. Your first?" she asked, nodding in Miles' direction.

"Second." I pointed at my waist. "Hence my two spare tires."

"Don't say that. You look fantastic."

"For someone who's six months pregnant," I said.

She laughed. Her laugh was throaty and bright; it was easy to imagine her cast as the ingénue in a romantic comedy. "Cecily's my first."

She was awfully chic for a new mother, I thought, taking in her caftan-style dress, long sweater coat, and highlighted hair, which was artfully piled on top of her head. Even more than her clothes, though,

she seemed like a parenting pro. But she probably had a mom who had shown her what to do. Nick was four when my mother left; I was six. I'd been winging the mothering thing ever since.

"How old is your daughter?"

"Three months," she said. "This little peanut won't let her mama sleep more than two hours at a time."

"Miles is four months," I said.

The corners of her mouth shot halfway across her cheeks as she grinned. "Practically twins!" She stuck out her hand, which I shook, not without noting that the paint on her nails was worn but most definitely the work of a salon professional. "By the way, I'm Jenny Sweet."

"Penelope Ruiz-Kar," I said. "But you can call me Penny."

"Jenny and Penny," she said, still smiling. "We should be friends."

And so we were. Almost as soon as Jenny came into my life, things took a turn for the better. There is something about seeing someone like you thrive that helps you to do the same. It was true that even then, Jenny and Matt were financially comfortable in a way that Sanjay and I were not. They were, well, polished—whereas Sanjay wore T-shirts and track pants most of the time, and though I tried to make an effort, I inevitably found a Cheerio stuck to the back of my pants hours after I had sat on it.

Yet Jenny, like me, was a mother in her early thirties. While I longed to return to New York, she pined for San Francisco; she and Matt had uprooted after he took a position with a financial firm run by a former business school classmate. Though she stayed home with Cecily, hiring a sitter only when absolutely necessary, she had recently started a website—though back then it was just a blog, sans sponsors and professional-looking photos—and worked constantly.

As for my loneliness, Jenny quickly put an end to that. She seemed to know everyone, even though she and Matt had moved to our town six short months before we had, and she was eager to connect me. Here was a hairdresser who knew how to turn the frizz on my head into a

sleek chestnut bob; there was a yoga teacher who could fix my postpartum back problems. She also introduced me to Sonia and Jael, who were also relatively new mothers, and soon the four of us had a standing brunch date on Sundays.

“You have a crush on this woman,” remarked Sanjay as I applied tinted balm in front of the mirror one Sunday morning in preparation for brunch, which had become the highlight of my week.

“Isn’t that how all friendships begin?” I asked before pressing my lips together to even out the color. “With some degree of platonic infatuation?” What I did not say to him was that it was not so much infatuation as deep relief at having a friend in the thick of it with me—and who seemed to hold the answer to my heart’s hidden question: how to be a good mother.

Sanjay looked at me quizzically for a moment. “I don’t know,” he finally said. “But you seem good lately. Happier.”

Happier wasn’t what he really meant. At peace, maybe, or at least accepting of my lot in life.

A few days after dropping out of medical school, Sanjay had surprised me by offering to become a stay-at-home dad. He would write during the kids’ naps or whenever he could find an opportunity, he explained. If all went well, by the time Miles was ready for preschool, Sanjay would have figured out the next step of his life.

I readily agreed. I didn’t really want to hire a stranger to watch my children or drop my months-old baby off at a daycare center for all of the hours he would be awake. More important, Sanjay was offering to be the father my own father had never been. Why *wouldn’t* I give my family this incredible gift? My job paid enough that we could just make it work in the short term.

But after a few months, it began to sink in that for all the perks of our arrangement, it did not reduce my parenting load one bit. Sanjay was just as exhausted as I was at the end of the day—so how could I blame him for not having done the dishes or scheduled Miles’ next

pediatrician appointment? And if Stevie still wanted me to make her breakfast and help her get dressed and tell her stories until my voice was hoarse, could I fault her? I *was* gone most of the time she was awake.

One morning I was trying to pry Stevie off my leg so I could make it to work on time when it struck me: as wife, mother, breadwinner, and chief of operations chez Ruiz-Kar, I had become the fulcrum of my family's health and wealth.

And frankly, that was kind of terrifying.

But having a friend who understood that made it easier to keep marching forward—day after day after day.



The children. What was I supposed to do with the children?

Sanjay was in the foyer, clad in athletic shorts and a Cornell T-shirt he'd owned since attending there as an undergrad. "Where are they?" I whispered when I reached him.

He jerked his head back, indicating that the kids were elsewhere in the house. "Pen, what is happening?" He looked up the stairs. "The police . . . the ambulance . . ."

I couldn't bring myself to say it. I just stood there waiting for something to change.

"Cecily is upset," said Sanjay. I knew he wasn't directing this comment at me, and yet it made me feel guilty. "She saw them come in, obviously, and she's hiding in the bathroom. The kids are in there with her."

I put a hand on the wall to steady myself. The house was air-conditioned to the point of refrigeration, and the drywall was cold to the touch. "Does she know . . ."

"Know what?" Now Sanjay sounded irritated. "What the hell is going on?"

"Matt thinks . . . I just saw . . ."

His eyes bulged, commanding me to finish.

“Jenny.” I had to push the words out. “She’s dead.”

He let out a low curse. “Did you see her?”

I thought of Jenny’s tongue, prostrate across her bottom teeth. No wonder Matt had run off—I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t vomit right then and there. “Yes.”

“Aneurism,” Sanjay said, more to himself than to me. “Or a heart attack. But she’s so healthy. Genes. You just never know.”

“Stop, please,” I said. Matt had asked me to take care of Cecily. I needed to focus—which meant that by extension, so did Sanjay. “Can you take the kids home?”

“And *leave* you here?”

“I can’t go. What if she needs me?” I was sure Sanjay thought I was talking about Cecily, but in truth I meant Jenny.

But she didn’t need me. She couldn’t—not anymore.

Another paramedic had just entered the house with a police officer. Now they were in the foyer, asking me to move aside so they could get through.

“I don’t understand,” said Sanjay, though he was gently pulling me toward the living room.

“There’s nothing to understand,” I said. “Right now I just need you to go into the bathroom.” I could hear myself talking—I sounded like a flight attendant cheerfully reading safety instructions that would keep absolutely no one safe in the event of an actual crash. “Go in there and entertain the kids until I knock on the door and tell you it’s okay to come out.”

He looked at me, almost like he was waiting to see if I was kidding. Then he jogged off.

Less than a minute later, Matt appeared at the top of the stairs. He stepped aside as one of the first medics who had entered the house walked past him.

“Where is my friend?” I said to the medic.

She didn't look at me.

"Excuse me!" I said loudly. "Why are you leaving?"

Now she turned my way. "I'm not leaving," she said evenly. "Our team will be on hand until the medical examiner arrives and the police are done conducting their investigation."

My stomach dropped at the phrase *medical examiner*. "Are they doing CPR on her?"

"Yes, ma'am. We do everything we can in cases like these."

Cases like what? I wanted to say, but I couldn't make my mouth form the words.

"If you'll excuse me, I have to get something from the ambulance," the medic said, and let herself out the front door.

Matt had descended the stairs and was staring past me blankly. I reminded myself that he was in shock. People acted in all kinds of strange ways in situations like this. At least, some people did. Others understood they had to keep it together for the sake of everyone else.

"I can stay here if you'd like. For Cecily . . . or whatever you need," I said. Jenny and Matt had no family nearby; hers was in Utah and California, and his was on the East Coast.

"Can you take Cecily home with you?" he said. "As soon as possible. Go out the back door and have Sanjay pull around the back alley. I don't think she should see any of this."

"Of course," I said.

He was still looking out the door. "She'll hate me one day."

He was definitely in shock.

"What? No," I said. "She could never hate you."

"She will. I could have prevented this."

Now he was just talking crazy. "Jenny—" Is? Was? I wasn't sure what to say. "She's healthy as a horse. This was some freak thing, maybe something genetic. A heart attack, or an aneurism," I said, repeating what Sanjay had said. "I'm so sorry this happened, but you absolutely cannot blame yourself right now."

Camille Pagán

Matt sighed and met my gaze. The whites of his eyes were now flooded red. He no longer resembled a movie star. No—now he looked like an ordinary man at the tail end of a several-day bender. “Oh, Penelope,” he said. “Jenny had serious problems. And I let her keep pretending everything was fine.”

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