

## MORE

I met Shannon and Pak the day after Mrs. Norbu told me about the job. “I have two friends,” she said. “You want work?” I talked to my teacher and he agreed. He spoke about the practice of cleaning, the art of keeping things in order and how the rituals of this job could teach me *peace*. At first I thought he meant *peace*, but then I understood. “Move slower,” he said. “Take time,” he repeated. “Think of it as prayer.”

Shannon and Pak came to the restaurant after my shift was over. We sat outside on the patio over pineapple smoothies, one of the last true days of summer. They seemed quiet. Nervous. Shy. They rarely made eye contact. “This is quite a job,” Shannon warned. “We’re hoping you’ll get us in order.”

Pak said nothing until the end. “I have your husband’s records.” There were only three. But this was a good thing. Better to have that part of it done right at the start.

As Shannon left the restaurant she smiled, “You’re older now.” I nodded. It was true. I’ve stopped smoking. My weight is normal. I eat three meals a day. I meditate. I pray. I do yoga. I hike. I don’t have a car and I ride my bike or the bus everywhere I go. But I don’t go anywhere. I go to work. I come back to my room. I study with my teacher. I do my chores around the grounds. I write letters to my daughter that I send and don’t expect her to open. She is fifteen.

It’s simple. I was married to a man who wrote great songs. My songs were pretty good. We had nothing and then we had everything and then we had a baby. He killed himself. I got the money. I had some problems. I lost the money. Our daughter won’t speak to me. And that’s how the story goes.

Now, our daughter lives with his mother. She has enough. More than enough. She will always have more than enough. My share is gone. I live, now, in one room in Bloomington, Indiana. The Dalai Lama’s brother started

a religious community here and I waitress at his wife's restaurant. But there were more hours to fill, so the Dalai Lama's sister-in-law got me a job as a housekeeper for Shannon and Pak.

Second marriages for both, Shannon and Pak live in a suburban cul-de-sac on the north side of town. From the outside, it looks like the rest of the neighborhood. Two stories, brick, attached garage. A maintenance crew keeps the grass and the shrubbery looking uniform. Their neighbor is an assistant coach for the basketball team. Across the street is a professor in the Physics Department. On the other side is a gay couple that both teach in the School of Music.

Later, I found out that Pak didn't know the whole story. Didn't know what happened after my husband died. They'd looked me up. Images and words. Shannon stood behind him, looking at the screen, pointing, "There." Picture after picture of me. In *Rolling Stone* with my baby on my hip. Heavy eyeliner and slip strap off my shoulder, torn tights, and our girl in my arms looking plump and whole. Album covers and tour shots. Shannon told Pak the story. And then, later, she told me about the telling. Now I clean their toilets. But that's not the real work.

Twenty-seven jars of spaghetti sauce.

Fourteen plastic squeeze bottles of ketchup.

Eighteen tubes of tomato paste.

Fifty-eight cans of soup.

Twenty boxes of Ritz crackers.

Thirty-six cans of tuna.

Seven microwaves, un-opened, sealed in boxes, stacked in the entryway. Another five microwaves, in identical boxes, stacked in the closet meant for coats.

Years of supermarket tabloid magazines and towers of unread newspapers stacked, creating a maze as soon as you enter the front door.

Drawers full of coupons, receipts, and magazine clippings mostly about the lives of large families on television reality shows.

Thousands of Bic pens.

My job was the downstairs. An entry way filled with decades old moving boxes and empty plastic containers and brown paper grocery bags filled with black plastic trash bags. A living room used mainly for storage, stacks of things to be vacuumed around, books piled high with titles like *Store It: How to Get Organized in One Month* and *Keep it Simple: A Guide for Living*. A formal dining room I never saw another human enter, with a table piled high with more magazines and bags filled with makeup and children's clothes bearing tags, still on hangers.

A kitchen, breakfast room, and pantry overflowing; dirty dishes stacked in the sink, beside the sink, on both islands. But the pans were always the same, always bearing the remnants of dried SpaghettiOs. The same stacked bowls with the grey and green scum of milk and that last lost marshmallow of Lucky Charms.

Then, the family room, sunken, something to be looked at through an opening above the kitchen sink. Each corner filled with the bright colors and high-pitched bleat of baby toys, either hard plastic or soft plush. But any sound was accidental against the constant murrrrrrrr, hummmm, rrrrrrrrr of cartoons. Japanese, Pixar, or Pooh. And there was Kai, Shannon and Pak's toddler, and his babysitter, Sierra, an eighteen-year-old nursing student at a community college just outside the limits of the University campus. Sierra, who had watched Kai since he came home from the hospital. Sierra on the couch, Kai on the floor, always sitting somewhere in the light of the moving noise.

Finally, a room beside the garage filled with a washer and dryer (seemingly the only items in the house left un-stacked), more boxes of unopened mail, more bags of free hotel shampoos, more empty plastic containers with lids that fit tight, waiting to be filled, waiting for the day of organization. And two dog crates, one big for Sampson and one small for Lucky, each holding a watery-eyed dog. And the filthiest half-bath you've ever seen.

The first few times I went, I thought they crated their dogs so I could work. To keep a Newfoundland puppy and an aging corgi from underfoot while I mopped and vacuumed and sorted, but then I realized, no one was doing anything for me. *Anything* was my job. I began to open their crates, their little cages, every time I arrived. I took them on walks, sometimes taking Kai with me in his stroller. (Sierra didn't mind. She always had homework. And there was no one else to ask but her. Shannon was upstairs.) And so we walked the neighborhood. Big dog, little dog. Me, and, sometimes, an almost two-year-old.

"Downstairs but not upstairs," Shannon told me that first day, as she sat halfway on the carpeted stairs, neither up nor down, just a middle step. Eyes barely open, mouth hardly moving. "I'll leave you a list on the counter in there," she said, her head bent slightly in the direction of the kitchen. "But mostly you'll just do the same stuff." Scrubbing, dusting, cleaning; and as if that thought among all the other thoughts was too much to think, she sighed, still unsmiling. A monotone. "You need to get us organized."

Shannon's notes were never on a scrap, always a full sheet of paper even though she only ever wrote a word.

-Microwave. (SpaghettiO mess from the night before.) or

-Trash. (Too many pizza boxes. Too many plastic ramen cups. Dirty diapers overflowing.) or

-Laundry. (Towels. Kai's pajamas. Their pajamas.)

Always the downstairs, never the upstairs. I vacuumed that top step, but I never stood on it. And I never saw Shannon downstairs. The note, I found sometimes on the kitchen counter (so I know Shannon could cross that bottom step), but mostly the note was on the middle step when I arrived. Shannon or a note, either or, neither nor. Sitting there waiting for me, as if I was the only person who ever truly arrived.

I never saw Pak. He was upstairs. I know he did something on computers. At least that was what Shannon said. Maybe Sierra saw them. She was there all day. I only stayed a few hours at a time. Two days a week.

Sometime that first month, it happened. I heard about it at the restaurant. I was still working all of my normal shifts as well as at Shannon and Pak's. Mrs. Norbu always had the television on above the bar in the afternoon, after the lunch rush. She'd sit and drink an iced tea and smoke one of her long Virginia Slims and she would help me cash out with CNN above us. But that day, it was all local news. A girl was lost. Or taken. She was a cyclist in this town of cyclists. She'd been out for her morning ride and never came home. She was only nineteen, a local girl. An Education major at the University. She volunteered at a place that taught children in wheelchairs all different kinds of sports. She lived at home.

I looked up at the screen and saw her house. I knew that house. It was two doors away from Shannon and Pak's. I rode my own bike past it each time I arrived and left their home. I knew that house. I knew that road.

And there it was, on the screen above me, a broad yellow ribbon around the big tree in her yard, her parents crying, her father holding on tight, so tight, to her mother, talking into a microphone. He held up a picture of his lost daughter. The same picture on the front of his shirt. The same picture on a flier attached to the stop sign. Of his daughter, young, smiling, brown bobbed hair, holding her racing bike, dressed in cycling shorts and a bright purple jersey, her fuchsia helmet in one hand.

"They'll talk to her boyfriend," Mrs. Norbu said. "They always do."

But it wasn't her boyfriend, or her father, or her mother, or any sibling or friend. As the weeks began to play out, all of the people Shannon and Mrs. Norbu and the other servers at the restaurant and all of my customers suspected—having watched too many episodes of *Law and Order*—were ruled out. It was a stranger, the police said. No one believed them. A stranger in a blue van took her, the police repeated. Somehow someone took this young girl who rode so fast on two thin wheels. So fast on roads she knew as well as herself. On roads she probably dreamed herself on at night. Took her. One morning, a Tuesday. Just took her.

Everyone seemed to know her. Sierra had taken a ballet class with her when they were both little girls. “I didn’t remember her exactly,” Sierra said. “But my mom remembered. She even found a picture of the two of us.”

Shannon was a mess. Her tiny tired eyes, her doughy cheeks ashen. She sat on the stairs as I dusted, telling me everything she knew, everything she’d heard and seen on television. “We’re changing the locks,” Shannon said. She’d never given me a key.

This town of aging hippies and constant youth, this town that grew every fall and matriculated every spring, it didn’t stop cycling. No. The air was just getting crisp. It was September. You could find a red leaf on nearly every still-green tree. The sky was too blue. No one stopped riding. In fact, more began to ride. As if to prove to that stranger who had come amongst them that you can’t take us all.

Her name was Jill. She’d been taken. Shannon wondered aloud to me who would be next.

I began to have nightmares, but I still rode the old bike I got from the local Goodwill every time I went to Shannon and Pak’s. It was a beautiful ride. Just hilly enough for joy. But like everyone else in town, I looked for her. For Jill. Around each curve, behind a tree, down a gully. In that September Technicolor world—all blue blue, green green, red red, yellow yellow—I searched for bobbed brown hair and a bright purple jersey and a fuchsia helmet and pale skin. I watched the ground more. I saw more pennies. I never picked them up. There was very little trash, hardly any litter, because troops of people went through every inch of the town and the outskirts, on foot and on bike, with dogs on leashes, looking.

I looked for vans everywhere. Blue vans, white vans, green vans. I didn’t trust the police enough to trust their sense of color. And then, while I was riding to Shannon and Pak’s, I saw a blue van up the road. I held on tight to my bike. I didn’t have a cell phone in my backpack. No, my backpack held my water bottle, a sweater, a coin purse and some wrapped leftovers—two momo—little Tibetan dumplings from the restaurant. I had no way to call.

Around me were houses with no one in the yards. No one I could shout to. I had no idea about coordinates or tracking, no specifics on location. Should I stop and move a little off the side of the road, closer to the houses yet near enough to read the license plate? Could I even remember that string of letters and numbers? In the old days, I took paper or pen everywhere I went. Now I went everywhere without anything.

The blue van went past me. It was a carpet cleaning service. Even still, I stared, watching for Jill, for anything that might look like it belonged to her. Any item left behind.

“In here,” I called. I tapped the pedal on the vacuum to turn it off, and checked the railing of the second floor, the place where she sometimes leaned. I’d heard her. I was sure of it. “Shannon?”

She opened the door upstairs, looking more exhausted than usual. She stared down over the railing, leaning in her spot. She was wearing flannel pants and a long blue knit shirt. These were her pajamas. A kind of uniform. It was one in the afternoon.

She said nothing. I’d heard nothing. But since she was there, I said it—

“I thought I’d get started organizing.” I’d been cleaning around the stacks, just throwing out what was obviously trash. “I thought I’d start on the kitchen.” Shannon said nothing. Her face blank. I kept going. “Could we maybe talk about what you’d like to keep?” How should I do this job? Would she donate anything? Where would she donate? How would I get the things to the donation site? Would Shannon take them? Would Sierra?

“How would you like me to do this?” I asked. I was still holding on to the vacuum. Shannon was still leaning on the railing.

“Oh, don’t just toss stuff,” she didn’t seem angry, but she also didn’t sound sleepy anymore.

“I won’t,” I said. “But how would you like for me to begin? I mean—”

How could I ask this without judgment? How do you ask someone where to put their fifteen boxes of unopened flatirons? What about all the food? The pantry was overflowing with no order, no reason. No one cooked. It was a house of heating up. Ingredients unnecessary. A home for unused spices.

“Just organize it,” Shannon said, turning back to the door she’d come from. Her bedroom?

My teacher told me there was a Tibetan term for nirvana. He thought it would interest me. Nyang-de, he said. He spelled it out for me. He translated it. It meant beyond sorrow, beyond the afflictions of the mind, a state of freedom from suffering and the causes of suffering. He told me that only in emptiness could we be pure.

I tried to imagine emptiness. I closed my eyes and thought of Jill.

A horrible thing to admit: I worried that I would know her face, Jill’s face, better than I knew my daughter’s. Jill’s face was everywhere. The posters up throughout the town on anything that stood. Huge billboards, leaflets. Her face on the local news, on the screen above me, every time I cashed out at the restaurant. Her face on the side of all the local buses.

And, yes, I prayed for her. For her parents. But it took me weeks to pray for the stranger who took her. To pray that he—of course it was a he, just as the taken are nearly always she—that he might see, might find within himself, that something might change. I prayed that she was safe. I prayed that she would be found. I prayed for a miracle, not for emptiness.

I only have one picture left of my daughter. She and her grandmother have the rest. And the one I have isn’t even a recent photo. In the picture, my daughter is three. She is sitting across from where I sat—in a restaurant, a diner. I think it was in Portland. She’s eating fries and she has ketchup all over her chin. She’s smiling this enormous grin. I remember taking it. I do. I remember everything about that moment.

The Buddhist scriptures state that there are four types of nirvana. Natural nirvana, which is emptiness; a nirvana with residue; a nirvana without residue; and, finally, a non-abiding nirvana. I'm, of course, interested in the residue. My teacher described it as being the physical components that the individual aggregates as a result of previous karma. A karmic collection. Lees, a deposit, leftovers, scum, the sediment, the dregs. After all the debts are paid, the substance that remains. And multiplies. Residue.

I stocked the shelves at the house like a grocery store. One jar in front of another. *Prego. Prego. Prego.* Reading expiration dates to see what jar should face first. Trying to be intuitive with placement. Deciding if tomato paste should sit next to sauce or soup.

I discussed my work with my teacher. He thought I needed to research more. I went to the library across the street from the restaurant. I found that Robert Browning was the first to write “less is more” in his poem *Andrea del Sarto*. That was 1855. Of course my teacher reminded me that this concept predated Browning or Mies van der Rohe’s conquest of it; that it belonged to Buddhists, to the worlds of Asian art and Zen religious practices. Modernism. Maximalism. Minimalism. One jar after another.

It wasn’t just that the house was full. It’s that the house was so full and only two houses separated it from the house missing Jill, the one with yellow ribbons girding each tree. And these houses looked alike, at least from the outside.

My teacher and I often spoke about Noise. He wondered if a person who has abandoned their gift—a maker of sounds, rhymes, a writer of songs—recovered by giving other gifts made silently. He liked to talk about music. Asking questions, not about my husband or about the destruction of our lives together, never about my daughter, but about what it felt like to make

the sounds. We never talked about how I perceived Shannon's exhaustion or Pak's invisibility. We talked, instead, about the sounds of my work. We talked about Noise. We talked about Silence.

Kai doesn't talk. He should and he doesn't. When he came on walks with me, I would sing quietly to him. I sang only for Kai and Sampson and Lucky. I repeated nursery rhymes over and over to them, created dialogues that lasted entire walks: Look at the leaves, Kai. Over there are a flock of birds, flying. Look, see the V. Canadian geese. Wouldn't Sampson and Lucky love to chase those geese? The geese go honk, honk, honk.

I filled the silence. But I never sang about Jack and Jill. I only sang about spiders and wheels on buses and Little Boys Blue.

I walked through the door, the week of Halloween, and Sierra wasn't sitting in her usual spot in the family room. Kai was upstairs, I could hear him. He was crying. There was no note for me. As I stood at the bottom of the stairs, Shannon walked to the landing, holding Kai. He was holding his blanket and an orange stuffed Tigger.

"Sierra's sick," Shannon said.

"If you need me to help out, I'd be glad to." Kai was smiling at me. Waving.

Shannon didn't look at me. She looked at the door behind me, her face flushed. I wondered if perhaps she was also unwell. Something wasn't right.

"That's okay," Shannon said. "I called Lara down the street."

Lara's home-schooled. She's fourteen. Lara only ever comes to the house when Pak's two children from his previous marriage visit. Every other Saturday. I knew this from Sierra. I was never there on Saturdays. Sierra was there every day.

I still didn't get it.

"I can take him on a walk until she gets here?" I asked, my hat and sweater and gloves still on.

“No,” Shannon answered. It came out hard. That one word. N-o.

“I don’t mind,” I said, still not thinking.

“I don’t need you taking him on walks.”

And then, she turned and walked back into her room. Whatever room it was.

*Lara’s nice.* At least that was what Sierra said. *Sweet*, that was how Sierra described her. *Ridiculously sweet.* At least Lara talked all the time, or so Sierra said. *The girl never shuts up.* That would be good for Kai.

That day, I moved faster. Louder. I vacuumed more and didn’t dust. I wanted out of their house. Away from their things. Away from them.

Even after all those hours with my teacher, I still thought it—I still thought:

I can clean their toilets. Organize their spice racks. Take their dogs out. Clean up shit and piss and dried blood and filth. But never, ever, care for their child.

That day, I made another list, an inventory of everything that was still stacked. The maze of magazines and newspapers Shannon wouldn’t let me touch. The boxes I could not move. I made a list of everything in the pantry that was out of place. I made a list of all the dishes and empty glass bottles and opened cans and plastic spoons that were left out on the counter. I made a list of dirty wipes and diapers overflowing onto the bathroom floor. I made a list of hats and mittens and socks and shoes thrown on the floor when someone could have simply walked two steps—even baby steps—and put them in the closet. I made a list of everything that someone else thought should wait, could wait. For me.

I made plans: to cross that top step. I could say, “Shannon, I was just looking for you.” I could confront her or just peer into her room. I knew that I would either see neatness, or chaos, or something else. Something in between. I knew she had collections. Mostly about baby names and large

families. I'd found lists of names and at least seventeen *Dictionaries of First Names*. She was interested in Mormon mothers and in-vitro fertilization and names beginning with the letter R. Ralston. Ramon. Ramsay. Ranan. Rance. Rander. I knew this because I'd gone through piles of notes in her handwriting, entire drawers stuffed with magazine clippings.

I planned my response: Sure, I hired nannies for my daughter. Mostly sweet gay guys. Artists, who worked with clay right alongside her. Who taught her about mixing colors. Who would paint and use glitter on everything. Who would sew with her. Making things, always making things. They were wonderful. I liked them.

I fantasized telling Shannon: A child should be raised making things, eating things that are grown and cooked, with dancing and music and lots and lots of reading and talking and noticing. And no more days of videos.

I repeated it in my mind. Whispered it to myself. *Making. Grown. Cooked. Dancing. Reading. Talking.*

I could yell up those stairs: Our daughter NEVER had television! Movies-Only-Occasionally!

But I would be lying. One whole year of our daughter's life, we watched *The Wizard of Oz* daily. Sometimes twice a day. There were nights I wasn't there. Months of nights. But someone was. Someone safe. Someone responsible. That is what I wanted to tell Shannon. But I didn't. I wanted to tell Shannon that mostly, that sometimes, I was a good mother. But I didn't say a word.

I did my work quicker than usual and I left.

That week, I went with a group of them that searched daily for Jill. My group was mostly elementary school teachers and university students. They talked about Jill as we walked. They knew her. They talked about how funny she was. *Was? Is?* No one knew what tense to use. Our group—all volunteers—was asked to search the park down the road from Shannon and Pak's neighborhood. We looked under monkey bars and jungle gyms.

Beneath rows of swing sets. The trees had all turned, from uniform green to something else, above us. *What if I'm the one who finds her*, I thought. It would be news. It didn't matter. Someone needed to find her.

The next time, Shannon was waiting for me on the stairs. Just a few steps above where she usually sat.

"Did you hear?" she asked before I'd even shut the door. "She's dead!"

"They found her?" I thought about that ravine. The park. Those trees. That field. Those monkey bars. Jill.

"No," Shannon said. "Not her." And then, "You haven't heard?"

Why would I hear? Shannon, why would I hear? And then, I heard nothing. I just repeated in my head: Please don't let it be my daughter. Please don't let it be my girl. Not her.

Then Shannon said something I couldn't understand. I just knew it wasn't my daughter's name. It was nothing that was her. Not my daughter. And, not Jill.

"That pop singer? You know, the one who wears the bird cage. She always lets her fans know where she is. It's linked you see."

Shannon held her little screen up to me. I still didn't understand.

"Here," Shannon took it back—stretched her fingers out across the screen—moving images, magnifying them. She held it up again, to face me. I saw light, almost white hair and black-rimmed eyes. It could have once been me.

Now I understood. Shannon thought I should know this woman. She thought I should know more about this woman than I knew about Shannon or Pak or Sierra or Kai or Jill.

"See," Shannon moved her fingers. "Exact coordinates."

I didn't want to hear anymore.

"It was a fan!" I watched as Shannon's lips moved faster than I'd ever seen them move before. She almost smiled. "He wanted their names to always be linked. Forever. And the crazy thing is they will be. Always."

I could feel her about to ask it: Did you ever have fans like that?

I made myself pull off my sweater, take off my hat and gloves. I was sweating.

*-Stand still in your boots. You can take them off in a minute. Just stand still.*

I opened the closet door slightly to set my backpack inside. Shannon was still talking. She was waiting to ask the question. She was building, her voice rising in intensity.

I left the closet door ajar, daydreaming: And here is your closet (hands motioning) now clean, the floor empty, the wooden hangers waiting for the coats of friends. The plastic boxes, sitting on the lowest shelf, each labeled *Gloves, Hats, Scarves*. Everything for your use.

I could hear Lucky whining. Somehow he must have heard me, smelled me. Poor Lucky.

Shannon kept sitting there. Kept watching me. Kept talking with her voice—her whine.

“It’s sad,” I said. I had to say something.

Shannon nodded and looked down at her screen.

“What is this world coming to?” she asked, her head tilted, her eyes looking now at my feet. At my boots. Work boots. Unfashionable. We all wear them in the winter. Even my teacher. I wore them to search for Jill. I was just about to take them off. About to step in sock feet towards my work, when Shannon looked at me, full on, at my face, at my eyes. “It all started when you came.”

There was no sound. No noise. Nothing. I gave her nothing. No response. *I can leave*, I thought. I can walk away, leave my backpack, leave everything behind, and she can either sit there on the stairway or go back upstairs to look at bigger screens.

I went. My boots on carpet. Step after step they’d never taken before.

Sierra and Kai were on the family room couch watching Japanese cartoons. I no longer heard their noise. Kai eating goldfish crackers and holding his pillow. Sierra with her anatomy book open on her lap. Neither said hi. Maybe they didn't see me. Didn't hear me.

Lucky and Sampson still in their cages. "Come on guys," I said, opening each cage and walked out the back door, the leashes already in my hand.

A week later, there was a note on the kitchen counter. The counter no longer gleaming and empty, the way I always left it. It was full again, waiting for me. Not one, but two sheets of paper this time. Admit it: I hoped the paper held an apology.

But no one noticed I'd gone. No one noticed when I came back with the dogs an hour later. No one noticed when I left with my backpack, leaving all of my work undone.

The paper on the counter didn't hold a rebuke or an apology. One page had been torn from a magazine. It had two pictures, of biscotti cooling on a baking rack and another of little bags with nametags. The other sheet was the note waiting for me, in Shannon's handwriting, it read: Can you make these for our neighbors?

The most she'd ever written me.

I did all of my work and then began. The kitchen counter long and gleaming once again.

Shannon had purchased (or had Sierra purchase) all the ingredients. The dough was easy. A bowl of repeats: orange peel and orange juice, almonds and the extract of almonds. All I had to do was stir and put it, in one large slab, to bake on a sheet in the oven. The next part was what made it biscotti, what made it complete. I cut it, one piece after another, knife at the diagonal, and put each part of the whole back onto the sheet and let it bake some more. More heat. More time. Twice baked cake.

It felt good to follow a recipe. One thing after another.

They cooled while I dusted the living room and then I packaged them up. The little bags and boxes and papers and tags I had discovered as I made my way through the downstairs, as I organized, now had use. I labeled the bags, tried to make them look like the picture on the page Shannon had laid out for me. Sierra and Kai came into the kitchen to watch, to eat biscotti and drink milk. I put Kai's hand down on the little brown bags and traced the outline. I wrote: *Biscotti for our Neighbors, From Shannon, Pak, and Kai*. Sierra took a picture with her phone of all the little bags stacked together.

Then, I left the bags of biscotti at every door in the neighborhood, a string attached to each bag, helping, holding every bag up, hanging on each doorknob, waiting for someone to come home. Waiting for that person to see something just for them.

I left one on the door at Jill's house. Would they even eat them? If someone took your daughter, could you ever eat again? I shouldn't ask that question. I wanted to knock on their door, to ask them how they kept living not knowing where their child was. I wanted to tell them what my teacher told me about breathing, about letting go of everything you don't need. But I wasn't sure I even believed it. I didn't knock. I didn't knock on any of the doors. I just left the little bags of cookies hanging on cold doorknobs.

The yellow ribbons were still on most of the trees, but they were now worn and frayed. Some blown by the wind, dirty, nearly grey, filling the storm drains at the base of the road. I always avoided the yellow ribbons in my dialogue with Kai and Lucky and Sampson.

That night, I told my teacher about the bags of twice-baked cookies. "You should have brought me some," he smiled. And then he frowned, shaking his head. "Those were not your gifts," he said. "You think they were?" I made them, I answered. I made every part of them. He smiled. "No," he said. "They were not your gift to give."

It was the middle of the day, a Wednesday. “They found her,” Shannon yelled over the vacuum. She was standing behind me in the living room. It made me jump; her voice, the fact that she was standing there with me.

“They found her! She’s fine!” Shannon yelled.

I pressed the pedal for silence.

“They found Jill,” she said. Her voice unsteady. We stood there across from one another, the space between us small. Shannon, short in her socks. For a minute, I thought she was going to hug me. Or maybe I was about to hug her. “She just ran away.”

“She ran away?” I repeated. I used to run away. I’d never considered Jill running away. Why would you run away from a nice boyfriend and parents who loved you and a job teaching children in wheelchairs to play sports? Why would you run away from a neighborhood like this one? From a house with a family room and trees in your yard that you climbed when you were small.

“She fell in love with someone she met on Facebook,” Shannon said. “She was in Louisville the whole time.”

“Louisville?” I didn’t move away from Shannon but I reached for the vacuum. I touched it, gripping the handle again, but didn’t turn it on. Maybe I just wanted something to hold.

“She wanted a new life, I guess,” Shannon said. Shannon wasn’t looking at me. She was looking at the floor. Maybe she was looking at the freshly made grooves in the carpeting, the trail the vacuum left behind. And then she turned and walked back towards the stairs. I heard a door open on the second floor and a creak, a footstep. Pak must have risen from his chair.

“But it’s been months,” I said, letting go of the vacuum, following her. Shannon turned around when she got to her step and sat down.

“I know,” she said. “She fell in love. She just took her bicycle with her. Nothing else.”

“She’s fine?” I asked. Shannon nodded. We were now almost the same height as I stood beneath the step where Shannon sat.

“But how will her parents and the boy here ever forgive her?” Shannon asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But maybe they can.”

Sometimes they can.

Sometimes girls aren’t taken. Sometimes they run away. Sometimes miracles happen. Sometimes people forgive. Sometimes the gift is just to stay. Sometimes it is a house. Sometimes it is emptiness or chaos or order or more or less or residue or something in between. Sometimes.