THE STUFF THAT NEVER HAPPENED

[one]

2005

I started crying at Crisenti's yesterday, over by the frozen foods. This was not cinematic, attractive weeping either; it was full-frontal, nose-running, eyes-streaming near-blubbering. I had to pull my cart over to the side of the meat case while I searched through the lint in my coat pocket for a tissue.

I could not begin to tell you why this happened now, except to say that it's February in New Hampshire, which if you ask me might be reason enough to break down. It's been six months since Nicky went off to college and Sophie got married, and somehow on an ordinary Monday afternoon at the supermarket, it all caught up with me. I'd made it through Christmas all right, and the first anniversary of my mother's death, and then through the season's first eighteen snowstorms–and suddenly I was crying about all of it: how life is never going to be the same as it was when the children were home, and how Grant has never forgiven me for stuff that happened twenty-six years ago, and how I have somehow gotten to be almost fifty years old and all I have to show for it is a bunch of picture books.

Picture books! That makes them sound dignified, like art perhaps. But I'm talking board books–the kind with animals dressed up like people. Pigs in dresses! An aardvark who wears plaid scarves! I've just finished illustrating a book about a mama squirrel trying to get her babies to go to bed. And you know the weird part, the thing that Grant would never believe? I love this mother squirrel. I love the fact that I painted her wearing a yellow workout suit and that when she was nestled on her little couch reading to her babies, she looked radiantly happy in a very non-rodent way.

Remembering that, I had to put my hand over my mouth so the sobs wouldn't escape.

"Mrs. McKay?" said the boy behind the meat counter. Not a boy–he's a man, really. He was one of Sophie's friends. He had been at our house dozens of times over the years, one of the hordes of young people who were always there playing basketball in the driveway, skating on the pond, eating dinner, even sleeping over. He had the lead in the school play the year Sophie was a sophomore. Brad, that's his name. Brad Simeon.

And because young people should not have to see the older generation falling apart and guess what's in store for themselves, I straightened myself up out of the collapsed-crazy-lady position.

He smiled, wanted to know if I was okay. Perhaps the pork chops weren't to my satisfaction?

I looked down at the package of two thin, gray pork chops I was holding in my hand and actually laughed. Do they see a lot of that in grocery stores–people breaking down in tears of disappointment over the meat products? I said they were just fine, perfectly wonderful, and then he asked how Sophie was getting along, and regaining my footing, I launched automatically into

my proud motherly spiel: Oh, she's just fine! Married, yes, and living in New York, and pregnant now, actually. Did he know? Yes, I'm going to be a grandmother. Why, thank you–no, I don't feel old enough to be a grandmother, but in our family, we reproduce young, ha-ha.

And Nicky?

Mother spiel number two: Oh, so happy at the university! Doing winter hiking just now, and yes, still playing hockey–can barely get that boy to open a book, he's so busy with the other things (I don't say we suspect girls, drinking, and drugs) but he'll learn. Just hope he doesn't get kicked out before he figures out he's there to get an education! I gave a good imitation of my whattaya-gonna-do laugh.

Just then, thank goodness, Brad's boss called him back to the ground beef machine, and he shrugged and smiled and slipped back into that little brightly lit, glassed-in room they have for the meat guys. "Tell Professor McKay hello," he said as he left, but by then he was turned the other way, so when my eyes filled up with tears again, he didn't have to see.

So I tell my therapist about it, pork chops and all. (Therapists like to be notified of any public breakdowns, you know.) Ava Reiss is her name. I've been seeing her for just over a year, ever since my mother died, and we sit together once a week examining all the mundane and not-so-mundane incidents of my life, like two ladies sorting through mismatched socks. I am always just about to tell her that I'm not coming anymore, that this isn't really working, but then I keep on.

"You cried in the grocery store?" she says. "And what were you feeling?"

"Well, for starters, it was embarrassing."

"No, I mean why did you start crying then, do you think? What did the pork chops represent?" She is about forty-five and has straight brown hair, and she wears cashmere sweaters and long skirts with tights that always match her sweaters. I think that says something about her personality. You have to be a very conscientious shopper to get sweaters and tights that match, don't you think? Once I told her that it makes me uncomfortable that she won't ever let herself laugh at any of my jokes, and she said that I use humor to deflect real feelings, and I said, "So? What do you suggest I use?" which she didn't appreciate.

"The pork chops . . . the pork chops, I think, represented, ah . . . dinner?" I say, and she purses her lips as though I'm deflecting again, so I explain that dinner is a topic fraught with complicated feelings for me. Dinner, you see, was the time I always loved the best. We were the family in the neighborhood with the house where all the kids congregated. Every community has a house like that; who knows how it happens, how kids discover they can go there and have a social center, and maybe a second home, but they just do. For years that was our place. I felt so privileged, so honored to be there orchestrating it. I loved the noise and the music and even all the complications. We had–actually, we have–a long oak dining room table, scarred and beat-up but beautiful because of those scars, and it was always heaped up with homework and art projects and science labs, costume-making projects, wonderful jumbles of clutter and chaos . . .

and I'd be there in the middle of it all, listening to the kids talking and gossiping and teasing each other while I worked on my book illustrations and cooked, and then I'd push everything aside and bring out a pot of chili or big platters of eggplant Parmesan, blue bowls of chicken soup, spaghetti, pots of my spicy beef stew, homemade bread and rolls. There was something bustling and safe about the big kitchen, the light and the noise, the table and the laughter.

I try to explain to her how this–being the neighborhood house–had been new to me, like nothing I'd experienced growing up. I was born and raised in Southern California, in endless acres of a subdivision consisting of stucco four-bedroom houses, all built just yesterday and all with sliding glass doors and swimming pools and kids drag racing down the streets and never congregating anywhere. This whole small-town New Hampshire quaintness was something I thought existed only in the movies. But Grant grew up here, in the very house we now live in, playing hockey, sledding, and skiing, and for him, this is just what normal means: a mom and a dad, two kids, a clapboard house, ice skates hanging in the mudroom, a woodstove, rocking chairs on the porch.

Meant. What normal meant. We are now finished with that phase of normal, and, if he has anything to say about it, I fully expect we are going to turn into his parents any day now. Now we're the older couple who lives in the old McKay house–the farmhouse with the curvy road, the apple orchard, the pond, the barn and the gate that never closes right because the hinge is perpetually and heartrendingly broken, a symbol of all that never will be fixed.

Everything is different now, I say to Ava Reiss. I don't recognize my life anymore. We sit there in the silence of her office, listening to the sleet clicking against the gray windowpane.

"Look, I know what you're thinking," I tell her. "You think I'm just feeling sorry for myself, when that's not it at all. I read the women's magazines. I know that people who are about to turn fifty can do anything they want to do. Apparently women today are supposed to stop menstruating and use all that extra time we no longer need for changing tampons to go and cure cancer or something. Grant says I now have time to do my art, like I should just stop doing children's books and, I don't know, start doing Picassos or something. Like he thinks this is something I've just been waiting to get around to but couldn't because I had to cook dinner every night."

She taps her pen against a pad of paper she has on her lap. "You know, Annabelle, people sometimes use this time to reconnect with their husbands. After all, isn't he actually going through the same experience you are?"

And bingo, there we are: staring right smack at the problem. It's not the stupid pork chops, it's not the stupid book illustrations; it's that I'm lonely. Grant–my so-called partner and fellow survivor of the parenting years–is not going through the same thing at all, or at least you'd never know it. He has taken this time to throw himself into writing a book, and by "throw himself," I mean that he has no time for me or for anything else. He's living and breathing the history of a factory from the turn of the last century. I think if you took an MRI of my husband's brain right now, all you would see would be factory ledgers and chapter headings and pages and pages of footnotes having to do with the wording on picket signs.

I wake in the mornings to hear him already typing away in his study, and then he stays up until the middle of the night reading over his day's work and grimacing while he clears his throat and makes little dissatisfied grunting noises. You'd think it was physically painful for him to read his own sentences.

Even dinner, once the time of connection and togetherness and–okay, I'm trying not to use the word communion here, but I see I have to–even dinner has lost its sense of communion and has gone silent and cold. There we are, looking like refugees, huddled over our plates, wordlessly picking at our food. It's not surprising that the thought of dinner would make a person weep over the pork chops in the grocery store. I've had to take to playing Miles Davis CDs just to keep the sound of our silverware from clinking me into a full-blown depression.

Last night, after I'd timed the silence at twelve whole minutes, I said to him, "So, do you have any memory at all of our previous life? You know, raising children and all that?"

He swam up from Factory World, blinking like somebody returning from very far away, and looked at me in surprise. He reached for a roll and said drily, "I remember that one of them–a girl, right?–had a name that started with an S, is that correct?" He furrowed his brow and cleared his throat. "And wait. Wasn't there also a boy?"

I was so pleased to see something of his old sense of humor that I smiled. "Why, yes," I said. "The girl is Sophie, and the boy is Nick. He used to sit right where you're sitting. Often spilled his milk. Quite often, actually."

"Ohhh, yes. And what's become of them, do you suppose?" he said, and we had a decent, even playful conversation for a couple of minutes, during which I pretended to remind him that Sophie is now twenty-three and got married last summer in our backyard ("Remember the pretty lanterns?") and that Nicky is a freshman at the University of New Hampshire, off spilling his milk in a college cafeteria now, surrounded by jocks of every description and possibly lots of admiring girls, too.

"And Sophie is going to have a baby in the spring!" I said, and he actually laughed and said, "No kidding! But how is that possible, when she's still a baby herself?"

"I know." I really was caught up in the playacting then, and I added, perhaps unwisely: "But–well, and this is a little bit sad–she's living alone in New York just now." It's true: Whit, her husband, is in Brazil working on a documentary film he'd signed up to do before she got pregnant–something they had been planning to do together. When the pregnancy was confirmed it was too late for him to back out, and so he went ahead, with her permission.

From the way Grant's face flushed, I knew right away this had been a mistake, taking the conversation back down this road, with all its dangerous twists and turns. It occurred to me that maybe I had done it on purpose, to get at least some reaction from him. He said, "What brain chip has to be missing for that idiot not to know that when your wife is carrying a child you don't take off across the world?"

So I said my usual thing, which is that Sophie and Whit will be fine, and he'll be back in time for the birth, and that it's all none of our business.

But by then he was finished with his dinner, and I could see the curtain coming down in his eyes. He'd said his allotted number of words for the whole month, probably, and so he went mute again, pecked me on the cheek with his skinny, dry lips, and headed back upstairs to wrestle with chapter four. I cleaned up the kitchen, turned off the lights, and then went up to my study in the attic, where I sat down at the computer and messaged with both kids, hearing about Sophie's nausea and backache and about Nicky's excited plan to hike in the snow next weekend.

"Are you being careful?" I typed to him, and he responded with a smiley face. Like that's supposed to be an answer.

When I joined Grant a couple of hours later with our tea, he was still pecking away and humming. He stopped for a moment and sighed, and then he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes before reaching up to accept the china cup I was holding out.

"How's it coming?" I said, and he shrugged and read me the last paragraph, something about the speech the foreman made during the strike of 1908.
"It's good," I said.

"No, it isn't. It doesn't sing."

"It's the history of labor relations, honey. That wouldn't sing even if you goosed it with a stick."

"I have goosed it with sticks."

"Well, there you go. It won't sing." I started giving him a shoulder massage, which he tolerated silently, still squinting at the page. "How does this feel?" I said. "Is this where the knot is?"

He was silent.

"No, I feel it now. It's more over here, isn't it? This is where your neck gets so tight when you're writing." I kneaded with my thumbs until he moaned, tilted his head back a little, and closed his eyes.

"You know what I just realized?" I said. "I figured out the thing I really miss about not having the children here."

"Mmmmph."

"When you have kids around, you have to do things that you maybe don't want to do, but they turn out to be fun. Like sledding. Nobody goes sledding unless they have a kid with them. But that's stupid. We could go sledding ourselves. You know that? We're not so old, and we have the sleds. Some weekend afternoon, we should take some time off from all this . . . stuff, and just go outside and sled down the hill a few times. Like we used to do."

“Sledding? Are you kidding me?” This, from the man who would drag us outside during even the coldest winter days to make sure we got the maximum potential out of every snowfall.

“Yeah. Wouldn’t it be fun?”

“Why don’t you just go sledding by yourself?”

I kneaded the neck muscle a bit harder than necessary. “Now there’s a depressing thought. Sledding alone. It’s worse than bowling alone, and a guy wrote a book about how pathetic that is.”

He pulled away with a grimace. “Annabelle, perhaps you haven’t really noticed, but I have a book to write. Do you not see these stacks of papers and this calendar up here with the pages flipping past? I’m hardly a person who’s looking for other things to do right now. And I have to get back to it, if you don’t mind.”

“No, of course I don’t mind. It’s just that I think we need to have fun sometimes, too.”

“This is the new fun,” he said. He snorted and returned to his typing—he uses the hunt-and-peck method, which causes him to look slightly alarmed as he writes, as though he suspects the letters might have moved since he last looked—and I stood there next to him, sipping my tea and watching our reflection in the window. It was one of those picturesque scenes, with snow clumped charmingly along the panes like in a movie about winter, and we seemed so gleaming there in the safe, yellow lamplight of his study, standing together like in a portrait, as if we were just slightly better than ourselves, safe and peaceful. Well—except that Grant was scowling, and his shoulders were holding his anger like a tensed coil, and you couldn’t quite see the big hole in my heart.