

“Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

“No. I don’t know.”

We were sitting on a blanket in the park listening to a free concert sponsored by a local alternative rock station. Mac and Wendy had gone on a beer run and Maggie had taken the opportunity to ask me the question that had been on her mind since Wednesday when the news of my mother’s death had arrived. It was now Friday evening and my father and I were booked on an early morning flight to Boston for the funeral the next day. That made it three days that I’d been avoiding this conversation, and now I saw Mac and Wendy coming with a pitcher and four plastic cups to save me from having it now.

I had been worried that my reaction to the news about Marianne was not severe enough. I had insisted on going back to work on Thursday. Mac and I had gone to the pub Thursday night. He had understood my unspoken desire to pretend nothing had happened, and we’d traded stories about work, talked about our respective girlfriend troubles. I’d kicked off work early to go to the concert, but other than that it was business as usual.

My mother and I had not been close. She and my father divorced when I was three, and he’d won sole custody when I was twelve after she left me alone in her Wilmington, Delaware, apartment for two days. She’d had a manic episode and disappeared for a week before they found her after a traffic stop in New Jersey. I was the one who’d called the police to report her missing. I didn’t see her for ten years after that. I thought for a long time she was punishing my father, refusing to come to Seattle to see me, but it could just as easily have been her disease that kept her away, her alternating mania and depression.

In the ten years that have passed since the events described in this account, I’ve made my peace with my mother’s ghost. But while the events were unfolding, and certainly during the years leading up to her death and my investigation into its circumstances, I had a hard time understanding how she could remain so remote, so separate from me. Even now—especially now that I have two children of my own—I can’t rationalize how she could stay away. She was a prolific writer, a literary renaissance woman, publishing novels and short stories and essays and poetry. If she could do that, why couldn’t she swallow her pride and cross the Mississippi and the Rockies for a visit every year or two?

Marianne was never famous outside literary circles, never had an Oprah appearance, but she had one *New York Times* bestseller and had several stories anthologized in various fiction collections. She even wrote about me, once, in a personal essay in which she revealed, rather bluntly, that she hadn’t seen me, at the time, in over seven years. She didn’t justify it, didn’t blame anyone other than herself. It’s just the way it was, she wrote. This was in *Harper’s*. There was some minor outrage in the letters section.

I reminded myself of all of this to try to make myself feel better about not feeling worse, but it didn’t help.

Mac and Wendy sat down and passed cups around and poured beer for everyone, a summertime ale we looked forward to every spring. It was early this year, appearing at the end of April instead of May.

“If we drink this with enough gratitude and enthusiasm, I think we can ward off the rain,” Mac was saying. So far, we had been blessed with clear skies for the concert, but in the west, rain threatened. In Seattle, rain always threatened. We ignored it. Even if a shower started, we would stoically enjoy the concert, and the band, which was local, would stoically play on.

Wendy wore her dark hair in a pixie cut. Her eyes were full of concern, had been since I told her about Marianne. She was dressed optimistically in jeans and a white linen spaghetti-

strapped top, and I realized, belatedly, that she must be cold and that I should have offered her my fleece an hour ago. Mac, my best friend since we roomed together at UW, wore a pair of brown work pants and a long-sleeve t-shirt. He had already given his own fleece to Wendy. He wore a full, reddish beard. His eyes narrowed in my direction, trying to read what was going on in my head. Wendy's long light brown hair blew across her face in a sudden breeze. Her ample body swam in Mac's jacket. She wore no makeup.

The cloud line advanced steadily toward us as the sun set.

"Is this normal?" I said. They all just looked at me. I looked back.

"I mean am I handling this right?" I took a sip of my beer and barely tasted it.

"What's normal, dude?" Mac asked.

"Everybody reacts differently," said Wendy. There *is* no 'normal.' You can't choose how you feel."

"If it's any consolation, bro, you haven't exactly been your usual self. I'm guessing wine sales in the state of Washington are probably off fifty percent the last two days."

We all smiled at that. Maggie didn't say anything. She just looked worried. But I felt strangely relieved.

I finally started to really pay attention to the show. The band was called The Maytrees, and, though I'd never heard their music before, I became engrossed in it. They weren't just playing straight through their songs the way they'd be heard on their album, that much I could tell. There were embellishments and some freeform jamming. The singer was a woman with pink-streaked spiked hair, and, corny as it sounds, her voice sounded to me like how an angel's would sound, not church choir-like or inspirational or whatever, but sometimes sweet and melodic and sometimes big and full of rage. It was the voice of a being who could call down fire and brimstone.

The clouds finally reached us and a light rain started. As predicted, much of the crowd stayed put, and the band continued playing ("We're not leaving," said the band's front woman. "Unless we get electrocuted.") We stayed for the whole set and then went to the bar.

I'd come downstairs Wednesday morning to make coffee. I set about with the preparations—boiling water in the kettle, emptying the spent grounds from the press, hitting the button on the mill—and I smelled cigarette smoke. Through the mullioned glass of our patio door I saw a blonde woman in a black sweat suit sitting on the brick step. She was wearing headphones and staring at the ivy-covered fence that divided our flagstone patio from the neighbor's yard—or, rather, she was staring in the direction of the fence, hugging her knees to her chest. The apparently forgotten cigarette had an inch of ash sagging from the lit end that would drop off at the slightest movement. The water kettle dinged and I went to pour the hot water into the press.

When I opened the back door, my aunt Laura jumped and put her left hand to her chest and looked up at me with a relieved expression on her face. She closed her eyes and plucked the buds from her ears and said, "Hi Nate." Then she looked at the stub of her cigarette apologetically and knocked the ember off the end before standing and coming inside.

"Dad's not up yet," I said.

"You should go up and get him," Laura said.

"What's wrong?"

"Something's happened."

Laura sat down at the kitchen table and I walked out the kitchen door and around the corner through the living room to the stairs. I took them two at a time and made no attempt to be quiet as I walked down the hallway to Quentin's bedroom. His door was open and I stepped inside and said, "Dad."

He rolled over and grimaced.

"Dad."

"What's the matter? What time is it?"

"About seven. Laura's here."

"Laura? Laura who?"

"Laura. Mom's sister."

"What happened?"

"I don't know yet."

I went back down the creaking stairs into the kitchen. Laura had plunged the pot of coffee and poured three mugs. Quentin came down in a pair of flannel trousers and a t-shirt and picked up one of the cups of coffee. Laura stood and they hugged hello.

"Hi," she said into his ear, holding him tightly. They released each other and Laura said, "You guys should sit down, I think."

We sat and waited. Laura looked tired. Darkness under her eyes. She was in her mid-forties but wasn't showing any signs of age. She must have driven all night to get here from Los Angeles. She stood a few feet from the table, staring into her mug, holding it with both hands. I sat with my elbows on the table. Quentin sat facing her, one hand on his knee, the other holding the handle of his cup. Laura began to pace in little aimless circles in the kitchen.

"Marianne's dead," she said. Then she looked up at us, making eye contact with both of us in turn.

Quentin said, "What happened?"

"They don't really know yet?" She made the statement a question, as if she couldn't believe it had happened at all. She was about to break down. Quentin got up and took her by the shoulders and guided her to his chair.

"Mom called last night," she said, getting control of herself. "They found her in a motel room in Toledo. Along with another body. That's all she would say. Dad flew out to Toledo this morning."

I looked up at Quentin. He was leaning up against the counter, no emotion in his face.

"What should we do?" he asked her.

"Just wait I guess."

We moved out into the living room and sat on the Stickley sofas. No one spoke. I couldn't process the information. It seemed real and unreal at the same time. The hardest part was the lack of detail. I couldn't put it together in my head. I couldn't picture the scene. Nor did I want to. Maybe there was a mechanism built into the brain that prevented it. The mind is good at repressing potentially damaging trains of thought.

Not that news of this sort was completely unexpected. My mother was bipolar, on and off her medication, in and out of therapy, in and out of psychiatric wards. I always knew we might someday get the call that she had committed suicide, locked in some lonely torment, but the other body seemed to negate that. We drank our coffee and waited for a phone call.

I was grateful I'd spent the night at my father's house. Maggie and I had had dinner with Quentin the night before. Maggie left early because she had work in the morning. Quentin had already opened another bottle of wine, and I stayed and drank it with him. There had been more

than a few nights like that since I moved out to go to college, and Quentin kept my old bed made up. It was officially known as the guest room, but I was his most frequent guest. All my adolescent adornments had been removed and disposed of, but it was still my room, my bed, with all the old memories that went along with it.

A headache threatened at the base of my skull and in my jaw. I'd woken feeling disconnected and slightly off balance, a warning to any seasoned drinker that his blood sugar was off and that a crushing headache waited in the wings. I got up from the couch and went into the kitchen to fry some eggs and make some toast. Quentin had some orange juice, so I poured three glasses. I resisted the urge to take aspirin for the looming headache. After a night of drinking, the liver is overtaxed, and drugs just tax it further. The best medicine, presuming nausea hasn't come to the after-party, as well, is food. Preferably with a decent fat and simple-carbohydrate content. And besides, cooking helped pass the time.

I brought everything out to the living room. My father and Laura were whispering to each other from adjacent couches, but they ceased their conversation when I came in. Laura ate only a piece of toast with jam.

Food loosened our tongues a little bit. Quentin said, "Laura was just telling me about your mother's most recent literary exploits."

"All I know is what I hear from Josephine," (my grandmother) "and the details are sketchy, like always. She's been in Ann Arbor for the last I don't know how many years, maybe the longest she's ever stayed put anywhere, at the University of Michigan, part of some residency thing. They did a story about it in the *Times*. Apparently it's rather 'unconventional.'" She put quotes around the last word with her voice, slowing it down and enunciating each syllable.

Quentin said, "Marianne involved in something unconventional. Why doesn't that surprise me?"

And then the conversation fell flat. We weren't ready to reminisce, yet.

Quentin and I both called into work to say we weren't coming in. We worked for the same company. The Pacific Wine Company is one of the largest wine producers in Washington State. My father had been with them since the Seventies, when they bought his winery in Walla Walla, Washington: Quentin Hill Vineyards, which has become one of their most prestigious labels. He was vice-president in charge of customer relations (i.e., marketing). I worked at the visitor's center outside Seattle, guiding tourists through a handful of tasting portions. It was not a challenging job. It was part of Quentin's effort to educate me in all the different aspects of the wine business, but I was quickly losing patience. I have a master's in enology from UC Davis, and I felt I was wasting it. I was glad I didn't have to go in.

After the phone calls, I made another pot of coffee and Quentin and Laura adjourned to the den and turned on CNN to pass the time. I went upstairs to the third floor to retrieve my laptop from my room and brought it back down to the den to sit with them. It seemed better to not be alone.

I found the *Times* article after a quick search. It was by Motoko Rich, and it was two years old. "Mysterious Graffiti Offers Simple Message: READ." A street art campaign enjoining people to read more literature had been appearing on posters and in stenciled graffiti all over American college campuses, according to the article. The effort had apparently started in Ann Arbor, though University of Michigan administrators denied official endorsement of any such movement. "We do not have control over our students' actions, nor do we condone the

defacement of private or public property. If this effort truly did begin here in Ann Arbor, the initiators are acting on their own, without Michigan's encouragement," said a university spokeswoman. She went on to say, "We have launched our own investigation into the defacement of university property."

The art ranged from stenciled images of William Shakespeare bearing the caption, "Read," to the same simple mandate—often in all capitals—in magic marker on bathroom walls. Other examples included posters printed with quotations from classic works of literature. In Providence, Rhode Island, on the campus of Brown University, someone had started a stickering campaign with the familiar Shepard Fairey image of Andre the Giant. In the place of Fairey's caption—"OBEY"—was, again, "READ."

The art had been appearing for years, gradually building momentum until it was almost ubiquitous. The article's conclusion that it had grown out of the University of Michigan's School of Art and Design was based on the discovery by an enthusiast of a downloadable stencil of William Shakespeare that matched the image used in the graffiti on a website on the university's servers. The website had subsequently been taken down but could still be found, the article said, via the Internet Archive, though the original file could not be downloaded.

Marianne wasn't mentioned until near the end of the piece. "Speculation rages among students on campus about who is responsible for the graffiti, though many believe the source to be a fledgling writers-in-residence program known as The Poetry and Fiction in the Digital Age Initiative. Among the program's fellows is the usually publicity shy Marianne Granger." The article concludes by saying the program has been trying to establish an imprint within the University of Michigan Press but that progress has been almost non-existent.

A little after two o'clock we heard the musical chime of Laura's cell phone in the kitchen. She got up and went to answer. She walked back to the doorway to the den with the phone at her ear. She listened with a perplexed expression then put her hand to her mouth.

"OK. Love you too." She clicked off. "That was my dad. He said the detectives have finished with the scene. They're saying it looks like a murder-suicide. Annie was shot." She sat down on the floor in the doorway, and she cried. Quentin rushed over to her, picked her up, and held her.

When she calmed down she told us the rest. Marianne had been shot three times in the chest. The other body had been shot once in the head. The gun was still in his hand. The shooter's name was Nicholas Fineman. Nicholas Fineman had also been mentioned in the *Times* article. He was in charge of the residency program at the University of Michigan.