

SECOND CHANCE

SYDNEY LONG

The ad promised a humane, bloodless resuscitation. Andy had been justifiably disconcerted by the great hulking machines. *They look they run on blood*, Joy had said with the syrupy diction of a tranquilized tongue. He saw the biohazard labels, streamed across the laboratory like decorations for some twisted celebration, and allowed suspicion into his weary heart. He demanded to have his questions answered.

A lab technician had explained something about subatomic vibrations and chemical decomposition, his recondite speech adorned with staccato pauses in which he would put his fingers to his mouth as if forgetting how to speak. Andy had regretted having ever asked. Joy had knotted her hands together and cried.

After the brief tour, they were escorted into their conference room and told their dead daughter would be joining them in a few minutes.

The room was sequestered in a private corner of the facility, its sun-drenched interior an uncomfortably intimate mimicry of their first apartment. There had been an additional fee for the hologram, and what he had believed to be a wise purchase now caused spiders to skitter down his spine. Joy couldn't

perceive the familiar surroundings anyway. Her brain was a splinter preserved in an amber of vicodin, a still body shrouded in muslin sheets and quietly suffocated. The accident had blasted the scaffoldings from her mind and now her hazy, haphazard thoughts spilled from her mouth like stars across a bruised sky.

"Make sure you pay the doctor," she said. Neither of them saw a doctor. Joy's prescription had been issued after a half-hour session with a therapist who was visibly disquieted by Joy's ramblings; his vein-mapped hand had clenched around a pen and taken on a tremble. Andy did not blame him.

"Okay," Andy replied sagely.

The couple sat together for a moment, haunted by the apparitions of their former selves. Their first apartment had been built to be remembered fondly: its nooks and intricacies collected the dust of memory, and its kitschy idiosyncrasies had swallowed moments of their tangled lives and now dutifully regurgitated them as the time came for reminiscing. Andy could see himself in the apartment with vivid clarity. There was no envy for his past self, as this strange man cloaked in the down of youth would have to relive this and several other days, and he would live ad infinitum, always projecting this awkward moment of evaluation onto the self that had come before him.

"Lucy." Joy's voice was the death-whisper of fallen leaves scraping against concrete.

Andy looked across their old dining table, his gaze soft with

pity. The sedative was waning. "Joy, don't worry about Lucy. They're making her right now."

Joy stared through him, eyes buttered with cataracts, her face a steamy mirror. "Lucy drowned."

She had entered the world swimming. Embalmed in amniotic jelly, she had quitted her mother's womb and swam to the world's shimmering surface. Then she had resuscitated herself with a hearty heave of her tiny chest, an art so noble that it could only be practiced once.

He sometimes contemplated whether she had returned to the womb in her death throes. Had the mechanical churn of cycling legs become the quiver of her mother's pulse? Had the cadent macramé of sunlight beneath her become the beacon of her blooming heart? Why hadn't she recovered that primal instinct and rocketed to the surface as she had six years before?

Why didn't she swim?

"No."

Joy blinked. She had once been peppermint-pretty, but this too had been strangled from her visage, and in its place, a crust of vacancy ossified. Never would he have imagined such a fate for his beautiful wife, especially not now in the summer of their lives. They used to discuss their future selves in

the deep-space darkness of their first bedroom, presaging what middle class trappings would ensnare them and how they would extricate themselves. How alien that young man in the apartment seemed. How ignorant he was to the deep, dark well of suffering. "Lucy drowned," she said again.

"Joy, we're getting Lucy back for a little bit. Remember? They can give her to us for an hour. We can have her for an hour." The concept sounded slightly horrific once vocalized.

"Why?" The question was spoken with childish petulance.

Andy threaded his hand through his hair, the twinkles of grief-gray shimmering like winter sun. He exhaled fiercely. "She'll only last an hour, Joy. Then her chemical makeup will start to denature, and she'll be dead again. We have to make this hour counts."

Joy, who had been a biology laureate in grad school, was visibly baffled by his scientific vernacular. Once upon a time, she would have corrected him and reviewed the principles of homeostasis and neural equilibrium in a voice curdled slightly with condescension. The big wheels at LexCorp had attempted to recruit her for this very program, but Joy was a moral stalwart and had waxed philosophical about the value of life for nearly a week after the proposal. Her zeal had fatigued him, but now he missed it. He felt almost as if he had lost her as well.

"Why? She's gone."

"Because we miss her."

"She drowned, though," Joy insisted. Her cloudy expression was suddenly illuminated with a cresting sun of comprehension. It was as if her mental haze had simply been the night of her grief, and this moment was the dawn that would

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"Depth" by Jay Verduga

break it. "We couldn't bring her back."

A rill of anger rippled through him. "Joy, what the hell are you saying?"

"She's dead, Andy."

"I know! I know! But don't you think I hate her being dead? I want her back, Joy! I want to hold her again... You live your whole life thinking that there'll always be time to make up for your inadequacy. You push her out of your lap because one day you'll walk her down the aisle, and that'll be enough. You live under the impression that there'll always be something better."

Joy blinked again. A tear tumbled down the slope of her cheek.

Andy braced his forehead against his tremulous hands and tried to breathe against the fists of his lungs. It was easy, he realized. It was horribly easy to drown.

"I used to yell at her for the way she cried at everything. I made her feel humiliated. I have to apologize, Joy..."

"We can't apologize for everything, Andy."

His ribs were blasted apart by a long-caged sob.

"I have to."

"Andy, if you see her again, you'll never get over it. You'll keep bringing her back, over and over. You have to move on. You have to learn to swim."

He paused, turning his wife's words over in his head until they carouselled. With every rotation, he became more and more terrified; his countenance collapsed, and his world went febrile. To hold his dead daughter! To stroke her watery face!

Andy fell against the table, clutching at his head and began to scream. "Keep her away! Don't bring her in here! I can't! I can't! Please, God, I can't!"

The door creaked open.)

