

if I should
LOSE YOU
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CAMILLE

ONE

Patient care: stethoscope whispers, the lubdub of footsteps, huddles of family. And dead minds with beating hearts connecting to live minds with failing hearts.

It all begins with something like a car accident – one’s attention unfocussed on the stretch of road ahead, dwelling instead on something that seemed important at the time but which, in hindsight, is not worth giving a life away for. It is usually the passenger – a woman perhaps who had been telling her husband to concentrate on the traffic, to stop being reckless because you never knew what might suddenly appear on the road in front – who comes my way. The husband might have a broken arm, cut face and bruised leg and he feels so guilty about killing his wife that he’ll give anything to make up for it. And give he does. Corneas, kidneys, liver, lungs, heart, skin; jigsaw pieces that fit into one body as easily as any other.

Today it’s a twenty-year-old woman, Lisa, who fell and cracked her head like Humpty Dumpty while she was rock-climbing. Lisa’s mother, Mrs Green, is dipping a fine brush into a pot of ink and tattooing the back of her daughter’s hand with a series of gentle and connected curves that look like

cells magnified under the lens of a microscope. The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. 'It's beautiful.'

Mrs Green continues to draw. 'It's permanent ink. It won't come off.'

'Why?'

'You're taking the heart and lungs and eyes that I gave her. So I'm giving her this. Something that can't be taken.'

'The people who receive your daughter's organs know how precious they are.'

She stops painting, lays Lisa's hand on the bed and says, 'Maybe you believe that. Maybe you have to because otherwise you couldn't do what you do. Or maybe you're just saying what you're supposed to say. But what does Lisa get out of it? Nothing. She gives her heart to a stranger who gets out of bed and gets on with their life. Imagine giving away your husband and knowing you'll never get anything back. Is anyone that selfless?'

I nod. '*You* are. And the person who is lucky enough to receive the gift of your daughter's heart won't just get on with their life. They, and their family, will wake up every day and thank you both for being selfless. It's okay to have doubts about what's happening. It's part of the grieving.'

I stop then but my mind doesn't; it's always assessing what I've said, studying the person I'm talking to. It's always trying to think ahead to where the tipping point might be, that invisible point where I have offered either too much or not enough comfort and support and the family change their

mind and send their son's or their daughter's or their wife's organs into the crematorium, thus wasting the pieces of them that are still alive.

I pick up Lisa's hand and place it back in her mother's. 'It's nearly time to take her to theatre for the retrieval. Is there anything else you'd like to do with her before that? I can help you to take handprints ...'

Mrs Green cuts in. 'I want to give her a bath.'

Locks of hair, handprints, painted toenails, a change of clothes: these are the usual requests. A bath is not. But a bath it will be. Because a mother is about to watch her daughter be wheeled away to an operating theatre. Her daughter still looks alive. She won't when she comes back.

At the hospital gift shop, I find some soap that smells of flowers rather than disinfectant. I find some clean face washers and a tub of warm water and I take it to Lisa Green's bedside.

Mrs Green looks from her daughter to the props I have assembled and I can see her mind grappling with how something as simple as a bath has now become so difficult – there are tubes and machines and a broken body to navigate.

I pull back the sheets that shroud her daughter. I squeeze some soap into the tub of water and wet the face washer. 'It'll be easier if we start with her feet,' I suggest, knowing that, of all pieces of the body, the feet, being the furthest from the face and the head, are the most depersonalised. There are no tubes to contend with either.

I rub the washer over the top of Lisa's foot, through her toes, around her heel. Mrs Green takes the other washer and copies my actions.

We do not talk as we wash, as our hands and our cloths stroke the scar on Lisa's knee from a childhood accident on a bike perhaps, the line on her thigh where the skin changes from tan to white, the circle of freckles on the back of her right hand. Then her body is clean and there is just her face left to wash. A face that ten minutes ago seemed masked by tape and hidden beneath tubes that snake from mouth to machine. But in the act of washing, those things have receded.

I put the soap down. 'I'll leave you to wash her face.'

'Thank you.' Mrs Green smiles at me and I smile back.

As soon as I open the door at home I hear two voices calling out 'Mama!' Addie runs to me on legs that look like two threads dropping from her hips to the floor. Rosie waddles behind like a plump duck and I think, as I always do, how much Addie, at three years old, looks like Rosie's twin. It is not just because they both have reddish blonde hair and blue eyes; it is because Addie is almost the same size as her eighteen-month-old sister. In fact, they weigh the same; Addie is taller but this is negated by the layer of fat that should sit between her bones and her skin, but doesn't.

'Hi babies.' I bend down and they cuddle against me, one on each side, tucked in close. I kiss their cheeks. 'What did you do today?'

'I painted a flower for you,' says Addie and on hearing

the word paint, Rosie points to the kitchen and runs off, looking back to make sure I'm following her, to show me her work of art.

'It's beautiful,' I say as I look at one piece of paper that is covered with bold slashes of paint in every colour, converging in the centre to a muddy blob of brown, and another paper featuring a lopsided chain of pink semicircles propped up by a green stem.

'Hi Julie.' I smile at the girls' nanny, who is putting away smocks and brushes.

'Hi Camille,' Julie says. 'I've made some chicken and salad for their dinner. Everyone's been good today – nice big sleeps, no problems.'

'Great.' I pick up the paintings and turn back to the girls. 'Let's put these on the whiteboard.'

'Mine first,' shouts Addie, galloping into the playroom.

'Zee-zee!' shrieks Rosie, using her baby-babble version of her name, not wanting to always come second at everything.

I hang both pictures at the same time to avoid the fight that will otherwise occur, pay Julie, go to the toilet with my two shadows – one of whom passes me the toilet paper, the other of whom helps me with my knickers – get changed and then Rosie begins to say, 'Yum-yum-yum.'

'Let's get some dinner, shall we?' and I pick up Rosie and hold Addie's hand as we make our way back to the kitchen and find the food Julie has made. It is all chopped up and set out on plates and I send Julie a text to say thank you, blessing the fact that for two days a week, I do not have to cook.

‘Is Daddy coming home?’ Addie asks.

‘No love, he’ll be late tonight.’

I try to remember if Paul has a dinner or a meeting but can’t and it doesn’t matter anyway because the outcome is the same for me. Work from seven in the morning until five in the evening, home in time to feed the girls their dinner and give Addie her vitamins, to bathe them, read to them and put them to bed. Then do a load of washing, fold the clothes from the last night’s load, tidy the kitchen and try to stay awake while I catch up on reading from work. At some stage Paul will come home, reheat his dinner in the microwave and eat while watching CNN. He will put his plate on the kitchen bench, not in the dishwasher, and then he will come upstairs, say, *Hello, how was your day?* before getting back in his car and driving to the pool to swim one kilometre. When he returns, I will be asleep and he will creep into bed beside me, husband and wife, alone together for the first time all day, too tired to care. In the morning I will wake first and stare at him, wondering when I stopped loving my husband.

After the children are in bed and before I get to the pile of newsletters I need to read, my phone rings. It is Sarah, an old friend from uni days.

‘How’s things?’ she asks and I reply, typically, ‘Good. You?’

‘Busy. Like always. How’s Addie?’

‘She’s good. Still not putting on much weight. But she hasn’t been in hospital for a few months.’

‘That’s good, Camille.’ Then there is the inevitable pause

that comes, as it always does in conversations like these, as she tries to work out how to segue gently from the subject of a sick child to something more ordinary.

In the end, she plunges straight in to the subject of her call. 'I'm planning a new exhibition at the gallery.'

'What's it going to be?'

'That depends.'

'On what?' I laugh. 'Is it a mystery I'm supposed to solve?'

Sarah laughs too. 'No. It depends on you.' Then she begins to talk fast, like the Sarah I know, almost intimidating in her eloquence, but also passionate, about art. 'I want to present an exhibition of your father's sculptures. All of the ones influenced by or connected in some way to your mother. I've already started speaking to collectors of his work and they'll loan me the pieces I need. You have the rest.'

I begin to speak but she cuts me off. 'I haven't finished yet. Here's the part I need to talk you into.' She pauses.

'Okay, I'm listening.'

'Actually there are two things I might have to talk you into.'

I can't help but shake my head even though I know Sarah can't see me. 'My mind is flashing back to all the different things you've convinced me to do over the years ... like setting out blankets in the MCA covered with our work and trying to convince the curators that hosting a guerilla-visual-arts cum garage-sale installation was a worthy thing to do.'

Sarah laughs again. 'I'd forgotten about that. But keep thinking along those lines because what I'm about to ask you is nowhere near as bad as that.'

‘I feel so much better.’

‘I also want to show Jack Darcy’s paintings of your mother at the same exhibition. And I want you to curate it.’

All the obvious objections tumble from my mouth. ‘Sare, I haven’t done anything remotely artistic in years. Not since uni. I’d be a terrible curator. I’ve been a nurse for too long. My art history degree is, well ... history.’

‘Camille, you’re the perfect person to curate the exhibition. As well as being Dan and Alix’s daughter, your eye for how pieces of art should be connected together is better than mine. You can tell the stories behind the pieces. The stories about Alix and Dan. It’s a brilliant idea. At least admit that.’

‘It is.’ I sigh. ‘I won’t be able to tell Jack Darcy’s stories though.’

‘You will. In some way.’

There are so many more objections. Things I should say. *I’m busy at work. What about Addie? I barely have time to live the life I have now, let alone add something else to it.* But then there’s the thought of re-examining Dan’s sculptures, my father’s sculptures, art that I see every day in his studio, the hall of my house, the living room. Of imagining them in an exhibition space, removed from domesticity, placed beside or opposite one of Jack Darcy’s paintings. Paintings I have never seen. Paintings I am aware of in the same way I am aware that I haven’t had sex with my husband for several months. An unacknowledged fact, better left that way. Because there is safety in the silence of let’s-pretend, a safety that allows us to go on living with a minimum of fuss. But there is boredom

too. And right now I realise how bored I am with the way domesticity has taken over my life and that this is the first time since having children that I'm excited by something beyond them.

So I say yes.

And then Sarah says, 'By the way, Jack Darcy's agreed to it only on the condition that you meet with him first.'

After I put down the phone I step outside the house, to the studio, my father's studio, and sit at his old work table for a few minutes before going to bed. On top of the table is a photograph of Alix, my mother, a woman painted and sculpted by two men. A muse, then. A Dora Maar. An Edie Sedgwick. Someone shaped from plaster, someone teased to life with a brush. Someone made for others to look upon. And, like all good muses, she was tragic too. One dead husband. Then an unexpected chance to love again before she was dead too.

I have some of the sculptures of Alix. But it is the photograph that captures me now. In it, my mother's hair is majestic; Elizabethan red, it flames down her back. Her features are strong; individually they might be considered ugly, but combined they are striking, like a cocktail you stumble upon in a faraway city and then is never mixed in quite the same way again.

She wears her signature black pencil skirt as well as stockings, black heels – such high heels, she was never afraid of her height – and a blouse of emerald silk with a bow tied at her collar and slightly capped sleeves. A century ago and

she would not look out of place, just as she does not look out of place now. A timeless beauty, I once heard someone say and they were right, although the way they meant it was throwaway, clichéd, whereas the way I mean it is that she is always present.

I turn the photograph facedown on to the table so I can no longer see her. But I can still feel – not her – but her absence. It is a tricky thing, this absence. It is somehow tangible, like the photograph, yet I also know that it is not real because neither past nor absence can ever be handled.

Since I was two years old, lack is all I have had of Alix, beside some scant facts: a car, a woman on the road, a tragic accident. All else unspoken.

After Addie was born, and then Rosie, I began to think that the scant facts about my mother were not enough. I worry over them at night, trying to tease the truth out of them, the *what really happened?* But every time I try to recast her out of the remnants of what I was told a long time ago, then this absence, the one thing I have held on to for so long, becomes slipperier. It is no longer a simple loss, something that can be easily explained and understood. It shifts with each question I ask – how can I miss someone I don't know; do I miss *her* or do I miss having a mother; who was she, this infamous Alix; and lastly, did she care for me the way she cared for my father or was death a relief to her rather than a calamity?

Questions that I do not want answered. Questions that I do not want left unanswered.