

Late Bloom

The Springer Spaniel stood in the middle of an empty residential street, a leash trailing behind it on the asphalt. Cate wondered if she was imagining things. But the dog was real, as real as the figure lying nearby in the strip of grass between the sidewalk and the road, hands on her chest, looking like every corpse in every coffin that Cate had ever seen. An older woman—or a body.

Cate's feet felt light in her running shoes. She itched to run the other way. If she didn't get close to the woman, she wouldn't have to deal with the possibility of her being dead. But there were no front doors cracking open, no blinds on the rise, no cars turning into driveways. Cate and the dog were the only things moving.

Cate pressed herself forward along the sidewalk until she was close enough to see that the woman's eyes were shut. The lower half of her face, nostrils to chin, looked wet and red, like a surgical site. Inside the canvas jacket, the woman's chest appeared still. Cate pictured a coffin rising up around the woman, a satin pillow thrust under her gray head.

"I was hoping someone would come along," said the woman.

Blood rushed to Cate's face. "Are you okay? Should I call an ambulance?"

The woman shook her head. "If you'd give me your arm, we could walk. My house is two blocks."

Cate took the dog's leather leash, then offered the woman her elbow. That's what you did, right? *Let them take your elbow?*

When the woman stood, fresh blood gushed from her nose. She yanked paper napkins from her pocket and put them to her face. Cate averted her eyes, focusing instead on a crack in

the asphalt. She was halfway to puking much of the time now anyway, with or without a nearby wound.

They began to lumber along, Cate in her running shoes, the woman in Keen sandals with socks. After a few clumsy steps together, the woman stopped. “I’m dizzy,” she said, folding back down to the grass. They’d gone only a few feet.

Cate looked around anxiously. She was the right person for some things. Developing a user manual for a new tablet device. Stripping a wallpapered surface. But this particular role? The *helper*?

Just that morning, Cate’s new husband, Stephen, and mother (at the kitchen table, over Belgian waffles Stephen forked off the iron, one by one) had laughed themselves into snorts, swapping stories about Cate’s inability to nurture. “When I had a fever last year, she dropped a box of stale saltines beside me and headed for the guest room,” declared Stephen.

“You shoulda seen how many pets she killed off as a kid,” her mother, who was visiting from Minnesota, chimed in. She ticked them off on her fingers, bits of waffle flying from her mouth. “Gerbil, hermit crab, betta, goldfish. We called it a day with a cactus. They don’t need shit.”

Cate knelt beside the prostrate woman, feet tucked under her, and tried to think of what came next. She petted the dog’s thick coat. The neighborhood remained stubbornly silent. Why wasn’t anyone around?

“Is someone waiting for you at home?” Cate asked tentatively.

The woman shook her head. Her nails were light pink and hard like seashells—a gel manicure, Cate thought. They seemed out of keeping with the woman’s Keen sandals and worn canvas jacket.

A Prius glided down the residential street toward them. Cate looked up. *Finally*. The young driver held a hand to his forehead like a visor. “She fell?”

Cate nodded.

“What happened?”

Cate shrugged. The woman didn’t reply.

“Did you call an ambulance?”

“She doesn’t want one.”

He frowned. “When there’s a fall, it’s important to get checked out.”

You had to admire the guy’s certainty, Cate thought. “He’s right,” Cate said. “We should call.” Just saying it, she felt better. A step had been taken. She was doing something to help.

Because of a lingering winter, every flower had bloomed at once that spring—crocuses with dogwoods, Lenten roses with tulips. Canary-yellow daffodils filled the newly mulched, kidney-shaped bed to Cate’s left, beside one of the free papers that were hurtled onto county lawns every Thursday.

Cate glanced at her phone, then realized she had no idea when they’d called 911 or when the guy had left to drive the dog home. (It had taken three attempts—involving coaxing, luring, and even outright, indelicate shoving—to get the dog into the car’s back seat.) Shouldn’t ambulances come faster than this? And should she accompany the woman to the hospital? Did her call of duty extend past this road, this scene?

“Do you have somewhere to be?” the woman asked. The question startled Cate. Up until now, she’d asked the questions.

Cate shook her head. The appointment was tomorrow. Today was just for work, and there was no rush on that. Her mother was probably soaking in their tub, reading one of the mysteries she'd gotten out of their local library the day before. And Stephen was surely at the lab by now. She and Stephen were both forty-three, late to a first marriage.

The woman lifted the napkins off her face. Cate made herself look this time. She might not be a stellar nurse, but she could at least be a mirror. "Your face is better," she said. "The blood on your chin is dry now, and your nose stopped bleeding."

"Good," the woman said.

In the distance, a lawn mower went silent.

"What kind of work do you do?" the woman asked.

"Technical writing. Freelance."

"Newspaper articles?"

"Nothing that exciting. More like instruction manuals. *Getting to Know Your New Android Device*, that sort of thing." Cate shifted from kneeling to sitting, bending her legs out from the side. "They're a nice alternative to sleeping pills, my boyf...—husband—says. No side effects, but the same result."

The woman laughed.

"What's your name?" Cate asked.

The woman's eyes filled. "Judy."

"I'm Cate."

"My daughter started out as a writer, but now she's a lawyer. There was a party for her last night, actually—she made partner, and then she made me get the fancy nails." She fluttered her hand, as if the nails were something apart from her, something that didn't belong.

“We should call her,” Cate said. That’s what she should have asked earlier—not whether there was someone at home, but whether there was someone they should call. Cate used Judy’s phone to press the digits Judy dictated. Then she passed the phone to Judy.

As Judy reached her daughter, the Prius glided back toward them. The guy placed Judy’s house keys beside her, on the grass. “I put the dog in the sunroom,” he said. “He seemed fine.”

“They’re getting my daughter out of some mandatory training session,” Judy explained, phone held to her ear. “She *hates* training sessions. So at least this is good for something.”

Cate laughed. Now they’d both made a joke.

The ambulance wailed down the street and puffed to a stop a couple of feet away. Two middle-aged paramedics, a man and a woman, climbed down from their seats and stood on the ground with wide, solid, almost military stances. Cate was still in the grass, kneeling five inches away from Judy.

Diesel fumes swirled from the undercarriage of the hot vehicle, coating everything from the daffodils to Judy and Cate themselves. The exhaust was hot charcoal dust, metal filings, particulate bellows from a furnace. Cate wanted to stand, to lift herself above the level of the fumes. But she still belonged to Judy for now. If Judy was stuck with the heavy, wrong-tasting air, so was Cate.

The paramedics helped Judy to a seated position, and the man held a steadying hand to her shoulder. The back of Judy’s gray hair was flattened, just like the grass where Judy’s head and shoulders had lain.

Cate stood, brushing green blades off the knees of her yoga pants. She looked in the guy's direction, cocking her head as if to say, "Are we done?"

The guy nodded back.

Cate touched Judy on the shoulder. "You okay to go alone?"

"I am," said Judy. "My daughter will meet me there. But thank you."

Cate watched for Judy's eyes to betray her. If Cate saw tears, she'd climb into the ambulance as well. But Judy returned her gaze steadily, as clear-eyed as anyone.

Cate set off down the sidewalk. Her knees hurt from being bent for so many minutes. And she already, somehow, missed Judy. The tie between them wasn't tangled like the black swirl of earbud cords in her pocket. It wasn't about to snap like a rubber band when she got to a certain distance. It was wide and thick and bowed out softly, like stretched taffy.

About ten feet away, Cate turned and blew Judy a kiss—a gesture she couldn't remember ever making before. And from the grass, Judy blew one back.

Cate found her mother sprawled across the loveseat, a paperback in hand.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," her mother sputtered. "What'd you do, run a marathon?"

"It just took a while," Cate said.

Heading upstairs, she imagined what her mother would say if she'd told her the story—what bad luck the woman had, getting *this one* for a nurse.

The ambulance might be pulling into the emergency room by now. Judy's daughter might even be arriving at the hospital too. Cate hoped Judy was okay—that whatever felled her was something easily corrected, a forgotten meal or a medication dosage that needed refining.

Cate reached into the bottom-left edge of her underwear drawer, where she kept rarely used things—a bustier, a slip that reached past the knees. Inside an old cosmetic bag, wrapped in paper towels, she found the three white plastic sticks. The double pink lines were fainter now—a week old, but still unmistakable. Who even knew, at age forty-three, that you could get pregnant by accident?

Each of the test lines had seemed to float up out of the deep, like bodies from a shipwreck. Not healthy babies, deformed ones. Babies whose faces looked melted, babies with half-finished hearts. The likely offspring of an *elderly primigravida*. Red flag on the file. She knew the term from friends who'd had children late, friends whose baby showers she'd attended, smiling politely.

Cate was the girl who couldn't keep living things alive. Not exactly stellar parent material. Her file's second flag would be *Kills her charges*. Why even tell Stephen? They'd agreed before marrying—they'd be a wonderful aunt and uncle to his siblings' kids. But they wouldn't seek out parenthood. Stephen loved kids, but he said he didn't need one of his own. Their lives were busy, as full as lives needed to be. Her friends, even those with kids, agreed.

She left her running clothes on the tile floor and stepped into the shower. A quick glance in the mirror confirmed that her belly, from the outside, looked no different.

When she got out, there was a voicemail from the clinic, confirming the next day's appointment.

That night, Stephen sat on the edge of the bed, unwinding the octopus arm of the CPAP machine he'd recently started using for sleep apnea. In the guest room down the hall, her mother played

Law & Order reruns at high volume. “It’s the freaking guy with the freaking red shirt!” she yelled.

“Sorry about the teasing this morning,” Stephen said. “I was kidding, mostly, but your mom really went for it. I didn’t know about all the pets.”

“Every time I’m back in Minnesota and see the five-and-dime where we would get them, I tense up.”

“You got pets at a drugstore?”

“It had a back corner with flickering fluorescent bulbs, some cages and aquariums. It always stank like mildew. You could barely see the fish through the glass.”

“Those pets were probably sick when you got them.”

Cate’s gerbil had always had a raspy way of breathing, and one fish had had a white growth that spread. “They were always on clearance.”

“*Clearance?* Jesus, hon. Those pets didn’t need tending—they needed resurrecting!”

They slid into bed, pressed their hips together. As Stephen affixed the CPAP mask, she watched the ceiling fan spiral. Her breasts were hard and achy now, inflated rock balloons. That, more than the lateness of her period, was what first sent her to the drugstore for a test. It was something she’d never felt before.

Stephen shifted the mask on his face and resettled his body. She was still getting used to the machine herself. It enforced a kind of rhythmic breathing that reminded her of the way intubated people on TV shows breathed, as anxious loved ones sat at their bedsides.

Was Judy still at the hospital now? Or was she back at home, her daughter sleeping on a sofa downstairs, to be sure everything was okay? It might have been nice if she’d asked for Judy’s number, to follow up later, but she hadn’t wanted to intrude.

The next morning, Cate slipped out of the house while Stephen was showering and her mother was sleeping off a Law-and-Order marathon. “Working at Cullington’s. Call if you need me,” she penciled onto a memo pad.

Cullington’s sat in a strip of boutiques and restaurants not more than a mile from home, but she drove there. She’d need the car later, for the appointment. She chose one of the tables that didn’t totter—a table by the tall display windows—and opened her laptop. Outside her left eye, cars slid into and out of spaces. People got out, threw purses onto shoulders, slammed doors, beeped locks. The barista left a double macchiato on her table, then asked if she wanted to sample their new scones. She shook her head as nausea crested, then dipped again. If she didn’t do something soon, she’d be puking into trash cans.

The initial counseling appointment was at eleven o’clock just a few miles south. Nothing would happen, but options would be discussed. Seventy-two hours later, they could take action. Up until yesterday, she’d operated under the assumption that what was in her wasn’t staying. It couldn’t. The phrase was “cut out for it.” Either you were or you weren’t.

She was sipping a cold final sip of espresso when she saw her—that crown of thick gray, yesterday’s matted-down hair now reshaped by a brush. The canvas jacket. The Keens. Judy: upright, smiling. A younger woman walked beside her, a paper grocery bag in her arms.

Cate remembered how yesterday, sitting with Judy by the ambulance, smelling the diesel fumes, she had actually wondered, for a shifting second, if the air was good for the baby. And when she’d done that, she’d pictured not a melting-faced baby, not a baby that arrived damaged, but a healthy baby you’d want to keep well. A baby who didn’t float up from a shipwreck.

She let the clock slide past eleven. Then it slid further, past eleven fifteen. Maybe this was not the day. Maybe there wouldn't be a day at all. Cate's feet felt light in her running shoes. She itched to run the other way.