

The
Beautiful
Lost

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Point

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My dad was very protective of me. Especially when it came to boys. I'd never even been on a date. He'd been that way since my mother left—when I was thirteen, prime time for me to start really liking boys. He didn't mind my going to dances or the movies with groups, but he kept saying he didn't want me getting hurt.

After I got depressed, forget it. His overprotectiveness went into high gear. Then it became about stability. I might crash at any moment. I wasn't emotionally equipped to handle a boyfriend. If someone wanted to come to the house for snacks while he and Astrid were home, that would be fine. Get this: Astrid said we—this imaginary boy and I—could have those little cocktail hot dogs impaled on frilly-ended toothpicks along with Bugles and her famous cream cheese clam dip, the recipe direct from some supermarket magazine.

I would sooner stick a frilly-ended toothpick in my eye than have Billy come over and sit in the living room while my dad and Astrid sat there summing him up and passing plates of gross snacks.

It was seventy-two-going-on-seventy-three months since my mother had left and eleven and three-quarters months since my father had remarried. I wanted things the way they'd been when it had been just the three of us, pre-Astrid. Cocktail franks had played no part in our lives. My mother was real, deep, and couldn't be bothered making recipes from the Food Network.

Now she wrote me every two weeks, sometimes more often, on cream vellum stationery sealed with red wax.

I'd just gotten a letter from her. She'd sent a picture of herself outside her cabin, on the banks of one of the only fjords in North America. She looked exactly as I remembered her the last time I saw her: just like me, but twenty-five years older, with straw-colored hair, a slightly long nose, and eyes that crinkled when she smiled. Our need for braces was undisputed—we each had two crooked bottom teeth and a space between our front teeth. I'd gotten braces the week before she left and pulled them off myself a month later.

I didn't want my smile to change, to be different from hers.

I loved her letters, and she always said how much she missed me. Everything should have been fine. There were no major triggers in my life. So why was I going off the deep end now? I'd been seeing Dr. Bouley faithfully, once a week. I took my antidepressant every morning, never missed a dose. But I was crashing.

Astrid was still on the telephone. Her voice was nasal and grating; it bothered me all the time, even when it wasn't talking about me to my father.

“Andrew, just look at the calendar if you need to be convinced. Do you think the timing is an accident? Hello, one-year anniversary, sweetheart.”

Silence while she listened.

“Yes, you've got it,” she said, continuing her rant. “She wanted to spoil it for us, she couldn't help herself, and now, well, it doesn't take Freud to tell us she can't stand the fact of our anniversary.”

More silence; my dad must have been talking.

“Yes,” Astrid said, lowering her voice. “Talking to Gillian, I heard her. Yes, out loud. Come home now. I’ll call Bouley and get things started.”

She might as well have said she was calling the men in the white coats. Trust me, there was no way I was going back to the Turner Institute. Never, ever again. Ever.

I knew Astrid would be guarding the stairs, so I locked my bedroom door from the inside, grabbed my duffel, opened my bedroom window, and climbed out onto the roof. My mother had shown me the way when I was seven.

She and I would sit here at night—it didn’t matter the season, winter, spring, summer, or fall—and she’d teach me celestial navigation. She let me hold the sextant she’d had since grad school.

“We’re the Whale Mavens and Construction Crew,” she said. “And my fellow whale maven had better learn how to patch a leaky boat and how to steer by the stars. Show me Polaris.”

I pointed at the North Star, and she gave me a long, strong hug that made me feel like I’d gotten straight As, discovered a new constellation, and shown her a rare whale.

“Identification is good, but navigation is hard. Here’s how you hold the sextant,” she said, positioning my hands on the delicate instrument, made of brass, with a handle and wheels and a long scope. She showed me how to rock it, how to bring a sky object down to the horizon. During the day we did it

with the sun, and I thought of what an amazing mom I had: She could tame the sun.

When she had been out at sea on the *Knorr*, her favorite research vessel, she'd learned how to navigate by the stars at night, shoot sun lines at noon, and determine the ship's position at sea.

I couldn't think about that now. A white pine grew close to the house, thick with long needles and smelling of pitch, and I took a leap and landed in the middle branches. I scrambled down the trunk, my hands sticky with pine tar, and slunk around the corner of the house. Reaching into the pocket of my jeans, I found nothing.

That's when I realized: I'd left the car key upstairs, on the bureau next to the binoculars.