

REMAINS

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I am going to have to start at the other end by telling you this: Betsy is dead. Dead at twenty-nine, more than twice the age she was when you saw her last, a sly thirteen-year-old nabbing her Grateful Dead bear tessellation off the wall in your math class, an apparition spirited back from Illinois, where she moved, where she was supposed to stay.

When she dies, she leaves children behind: first, the son she bore at eighteen to her Spanish-surnamed Marine-recruit husband; Gabriel, an archangel rising from the womb of the girl you remember as a weed-smoke-drenched demon, yellow Vivarin pills in the place of teeth, Gabriel, a son born to Betsy when she was barely out of high school, a son she brought back to coastal Carolina, a fate you never would have foreseen, but then again there was that call you never could have foreseen, your senior year of college, back at your parents' house for an unexpected three-day weekend, a call from Betsy, "Do you know who this is?"

The sharp fear as you mis-answered and she smirked, "You really don't know?" forgetting the old adolescent feeling that you were about to be punished when you'd hear her voice on the answering machine, the shaming prickle of sweat as you hustled your parents out of the room, muffled the speaker with your thumb; she filled up the tape with directions not to talk to anybody about what she was doing—*I don't want to have to send someone to take care of you*—waiting for it to end so you

could press delete, erase her, wait for her, again. And now the numbing knowledge that she had your phone number after a decade, a new state, a new life; you stumbled to the front porch steps, out of earshot, the shock almost incomprehensible as Betsy drawled at you like an old friend: she was in a town forty miles away, waterskiing with her parents and her four-year-old son—yeah, she's married—and Gabriel was sarcastic and mean, just like her, she reported.

She was always sarcastic and mean, but you used to be sarcastic and mean together, salting the neighbor girl's front yard at midnight, building the Iron Curtain to block out MinerD at the lunch table, I Wish I Was In Indiana scrawled on your notebooks, Bañana and Kiwi, two exotics making fun of your stupid Southern town, temporary. Somehow it shifted, someone moved in, somehow you lost her to something more interesting, somewhere you were never invited to follow, sometimes she still needed you, somewhat.

In that last phone call, she casually disavowed the year as a phase everyone grows through, right, drugs and rebellion, just a typical pre-teen, but her denunciation was too late—her "phase" fazed you like an atomic bomb, annihilating your trust and your childhood as you stumbled through the nuclear haze of her choices, her edicts, a radioactive half-life that silently pulsed in your nerves, waiting, waiting. She renounced it all at twenty-two, "It's kind of hard to do that stuff when you're a Christian," so dry in her delivery you expected her to snigger and take it back, but she died before you could take her back; after seven years of trawling the internet, always trying to find her before she could find you again, you found her obituary, the only truth that remains: she died in a way you'll never know, "a brief illness," ambiguous and non-committal.

When she is twenty-nine, she leaves Gabriel behind to his stepfather—yeah, she remarried—and his three-year-old half-brother, whose name you didn't catch. Her final last name, Fox, the conclusion to her fable because in the years that followed that last phone call she outfoxed you, completing a college degree in special education—SPECIAL EDUCATION, after the way she would cup her hand and side-slap it against her shoulder while narrowing her eyes at you, "Duh, bitch,"—as well as a law degree. Betsy, not you, turns out to be the ultimate narc.

Betsy is dead, and she leaves behind an ex-husband and a husband,

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two sons, and you. She leaves you behind as she slips into the abyss, leaves you with the old uneasiness that fed your unwillingness to forgive her even when she stretched a guileless hand across the years. Betsy is dead and you continue to live, even as you wait for her to return from the place she is supposed to stay.