

Most men in my family make widows of their wives and orphans of their children. I am the exception. My only child, Kate, was struck and killed by a car riding her bicycle home from the beach one afternoon in September, a year ago. She was thirteen. My wife, Susan, and I separated soon afterward.

I was walking in the woods when Kate died. I asked her the day before if she wanted to pack a lunch and go to Enon River to hike around and feed the birds and maybe rent a canoe. The birds were tame and ate seed from people's hands. From the first time I'd taken her she'd been enchanted with the chickadees and titmice and nuthatches that pecked seeds from her palm, and when she was younger she'd treated feeding the birds as if they depended on it.

Kate said going to the sanctuary sounded great, but she and her friend, Carrie Lewis, had made plans to go to the beach, and could she go if she was super careful.

"Especially around the lake and the shore road," I said.

"*Especially* there, Dad," she said.

I remembered riding my rattly old bike to the beach with my friends when I was a kid. We wore cutoff shorts and draped threadbare bath towels around our necks. We never wore shirts or shoes. We would have laughed at the idea of bike helmets. I don't remember locking our bikes when we got to the beach, although we must have. I told Kate, all right, she could go, and she told me she loved me and kissed me on the ear.

Kate died on a Saturday afternoon. The date was September 4th, two days before she began ninth grade. I spent the day wandering the sanctuary without any plans. I thought about Kate spending so much time at the beach over the summer, working on her tan, suddenly conscious of her looks

as she'd never been before. The milkweed in the sanctuary had begun to yellow and the golden rod silver. The edges of the green grass were about to dry to straw. Silver and purple rain clouds rolled low across the sky and piled into towering massifs. Wind pushed ahead of the rain, eddying over the meadow, lifting dragonflies from the high grass. Bumblebees worked on the fading wildflowers.

Chickadees wove around one another, back and forth between the bushes along the path. I hadn't brought any seed to feed them. I remembered telling Kate about the first time I'd fed the birds from my hand, when I'd been in seventh or eighth grade, with my grandfather. We didn't have seed because he'd forgotten about the birds. When he remembered, he and I stood still on the path, with our hands out, and the birds came to us anyway. The episode had happened so long ago, and I'd told it to Kate so many times, since she'd been a little kid, that I thought it might fun to try it again, just so I could tell her and bring up the story about my grandfather. (Kate said once, "I never met Gramps, but you talk about him so much I feel like he's somebody I know.") It was getting late and I still had to run to the market to buy food for dinner. Carrie's coming home with Kate, I thought, if they're both not too tired from being in the sun and the bike ride. I decided to buy salmon and asparagus and a lemon and potato salad, and the corn Kate asked me to get. I figured that if she was hot and tired, she'd want something light. Susan'll like that, too, I thought. I'll get a carton of lemonade, pink if they have it. Kate always says it tastes sweeter, less tart than the yellow kind, although I could never taste the difference.

I had almost reached the end of the boardwalk, at the boundary of the marsh, where the path took up again through the trees and led back to the meadow, where by then swallows would be lacing through the sky, feeding. Although I felt like I didn't have the time, because I didn't want Kate to have to wait too long to eat, I stopped and stood still and held out my empty hand,

like I had twenty-nine years earlier, fifteen years before Kate was born, six years before I brought her there. It suddenly seemed lovely, the thought of standing there, coaxing even a single bird, if only for a fluttering instant, just so I could go home and cook dinner and when Kate came out to the picnic table, just out of the shower, her hair still wet, maybe even staggering a little to be silly, groaning and saying something like, Argh, I'm so *tired*, I could say, "Hey, I tried to feed the birds without any seed, like that first time with Gramps, and it worked!" In the two or three minutes I allowed myself, one bird approached my hand and pulled up short and rolled off back into the bushes when it saw I had no seed. I decided that that was close enough and hurried back toward the car, glad at the prospect of making Kate a good meal that would comfort her after a long day.

I came out of the woods and hiked up the path alongside the meadow, which was studded with a grid of numbered birdhouses where swallows nested every year. The sun blazed behind the towering thunderheads and backlit their silhouettes. The sky above the clouds was a bright, whitish yellow. The birdhouses and goldenrod and milkweed were suffused in granular, golden, pollinated light and the swallows spiraled through it, catching insects on the wing. I reached the gravel parking lot and smiled at a woman urging her young son the last few yards to their car. He looked about three or four years old. He tottered and whimpered. The woman stopped pleading and picked him up and murmured something soothing to him and squeezed him to her and kissed his cheek and carried him. I walked across the lot to my station wagon and when I reached it I dug into my pockets for my keys. I saw my cell phone on the passenger seat.

Stupid - lucky no one took it, I thought, but then laughed at the image of a mild, pale birdwatcher in a sun hat and khakis smashing out a window with his walking stick and making off with the phone.

Lightning forked into the meadow and thunder blasted over the field and parking lot. The little boy and his mother shrieked. Rain poured out of the sky as if from a toppled cistern.

I unlocked the door and ducked into the car. The rain sounded like buckets of nails being dropped onto the roof. The backs of my legs felt tight, as they always did after hiking. The screen on the cell phone showed there was a voicemail from Susan. I dialed for the message and wedged the phone between my ear and shoulder so I could unscrew the bottle of spring water I'd left in the car. The water had warmed in the heat so it tasted stale and slightly impure. The phone sounded the sequence of tones for the voicemail number. I screwed the cap back on the water bottle and tossed it onto the passenger seat.

"Blech," I said, irritated, and took the phone in my hand. I put the car into reverse and turned around to back out of the parking space. Susan's voice came over the phone. It was hard for me to hear what she was saying over the noise the rain made as it hit the car.

"Charlie, Kate was killed. She was on her bike, near the lake, and a car hit her and killed her, Charlie." Susan's voice broke. A car honked its horn behind me and a woman yelled. My car was moving backwards. I stomped the brake. A woman out in the rain, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, still wearing sunglasses for some reason and expensive training sneakers pounded on my window.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Are you *crazy*?" she yelled at me. "You nearly ran that mother and her kid over!" Susan's voice started speaking again, telling me to get home, she was there with two police officers. The woman in the rain looked ferocious, water soaking her hair and her clothes and streaming down her face. I felt as if I'd been struck on the head and could not shake my brain back into place.

The woman pounded on the window again. I looked at her and even as I understood what Susan's voice was telling me on the phone, even as I was already thinking, "No, no, no, this can't be true," I thought, "Aren't *you* determined to get your pound of flesh."

The woman stomped her foot in the muddy gravel, yanked her glasses off, pointed her finger at me and yelled, "Roll down your goddamned *window!*" and spit away the rainwater running over her mouth. I cranked the window down and looked her in the eye. Rain poured through the window into the car, spattering the steering wheel and dashboard, drenching me. The woman must have seen something in my face, because she did not launch into the tirade she clearly intended. I held up the phone, allowing the rain to pelt it, as if it might be an adequate explanation.

"My daughter," I said. "This – that's my wife saying my daughter just died."

The woman frowned and her face went slack and she slapped at the car door. She slicked her hair back and pointed her forefinger at me and dropped it.

"Oh, God," she said, "You'd better not be - Oh, God. Go; *go*."

I have remembered many times the sight of that woman in the rearview mirror, standing in the rain and looking at me, clearly unsure whether she'd been duped or I had told her the truth. That was the first thing I remember seeing and thinking, I had a daughter and she died.

CREDIT LINE:

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