

## The Girl for Me

It seems disloyal after all these years, but I've got to start buying different mascara. The Lancôme one I've always used wears so nice and soft—heavy makeup makes a woman my age look like a harri-dan—but it isn't waterproof, and I've been crying all spring.

When Catherine first disappeared in March, everything was still frozen, but within a week the spring melt began. Rivers of slush ran down the edges of every street and the police came again and again, tracking dirty slush into my foyer. They doubted that an adult, a grown woman with a job and a husband, could be taken—as if such violence were kiddie stuff, or showed a lack of willpower. They kept asking questions about any unhappiness with Grey, an affair, secrets I can't imagine my daughter would keep from me. Or him. I can't imagine any of it. And so, helpless, clueless, I wept and wept.

After four weeks, the police don't feel the need to visit anymore. Like with a bad boyfriend, I call them if I think of anything new to tell them or just to check in, but they never call me. Things are changing, the world is stuttering forward, and these constant tears have to stop.

I can cry at night, alone in my big bed full of pillows—perhaps I always will. But I've got to be stronger during the day. It will be a relief, maybe even a blessing, as Seva would say, to be back at work, thinking and talking and making people's lives slightly easier by helping them with their banking. I want to spend the day with people who have never had the person they love most snatched away from a parking lot; I want to pretend to be one of them.

I've been such a reliable employee for so many years that Janie has been generous about my leave of absence, even coming by for tea with some of the other girls from the branch. Not that anyone knows what to say, but they've come over the past three Friday afternoons, bearing pumpkin loaves and coconut brownies, little bits of news from work, and encouraging smiles. If Catherine had died, if she'd had a straightforward car accident on an icy night or a fall while hiking in the mountains, there would have been some discussion of God, I'm sure—all of that “everything happens for a reason” nonsense, but it would have filled in the silences. I'm not religious, and Seva and Leanne know that, but it's what they rely on in bad times, and I rely on them. We've all been working at the same branch since the strip mall opened.

Even if it had been a more uncomfortable thing, a drug overdose or driving under the influence—and we have certainly had our share of such tragic idiocies around here—there are things you can say. About forgiveness, about moving on, about appreciating the time we had. About never doubting the value of memories.

But Catherine's disappearance is nothing but doubt. No one knows who would do her harm, but equally no one knows why she would run off. Both options are impossible, and there is no third. There is nothing to say, no question left to ask. I read the poetry Catherine likes—the book she got on the sofa, and another by the same poet that I got

from the library. The poems are about plates of pasta, cats in the dark, vegetable gardens—nothing to do with me, but they are something that she loved. And they are something to think about other than the empty space where my daughter used to be. No one wants to talk about that, but my colleagues aren't that interested in poetry either. So on this, the fourth Friday since my daughter disappeared, I ask the ladies about mascara.

"Really, I'll be glad to be back at the branch. But I'm worried about the . . . weepy moments." What I'm thinking of are the tides of tears that come over me without warning, wordless and hot, but we middle-aged ladies are masters of understatement.

Janie taps down her teacup. "I'm sure you can be excused from your wicket a moment if you need it. Any of us would be happy to cover for you; I completely understand."

She doesn't understand, of course, and I can't explain how I feel without taking her son's phone and throwing it in the lake so that every time she has a question or suggestion for him, or just misses the sound of his voice, there's no way for her to get in touch. And even then, she could find another way—email, Facebook, his friends—to be certain he was fine and then not worry. There is no real way to explain at all.

"But no one can cover for me long enough for me to completely reapply my face. I need some new mascara that can withstand . . . everything. And still look professional. Any suggestions?"

Seva nods. "There's lots of nice mascara at Shoppers these days. These ones that make the curl for you, ones that spread the lashes apart, all kinds of colours . . ."

"I just want plain black. What I've always worn, but waterproof. Nothing trashy-looking. Buying makeup at the drugstore seems like something teenagers do because they don't know any better."

“No, no. There’s a much better selection than they used to have. They’re not even that expensive. You can experiment with a few and find what you like best.”

“I don’t want anything like the garish stuff Catherine bought when she was in high school.”

Leanne pats my hand at the sound of Catherine’s name, and they all open their pale round eyes, waiting for me to say more. I feel like I should resist, but it’s magical to talk about her. It’s all I want to do.

“Catherine was never a rebel, but she did like her little treats—blue eyeliner and glitter lipgloss and all that. This was when she was, oh, fifteen, I guess. She had just started waitressing. She’d come home at night with sore feet, almost limping. I could have told her those cheap Keds did nothing to support her arches, cushion her feet, but she wouldn’t have heard it. Tiny tennis shoes were what girls wore that summer, and she loved them. That was back when she’d say, ‘It’s not like I even really care about shoes,’ which meant, somehow, that those shoes were cool. What they did to her feet was irrelevant. The work was hard, but then she had her own money to spend, to waste. She loved that. She loved those silly lipglosses, those awful shoes.”

The girls are nodding, smiling, but with backs and foreheads tensed. I’ve spoken longer than I should have in the give-and-take of normal conversation, but they love Catherine too. She is the sweet girl they met when she stopped by the bank, occasionally my “date” for the holiday party, always on hand if I hosted a dinner here. They love her, but not the boiling, endless way I do. Which is why I stop the stories there, put the teapot on the tray, and promise to meet Seva at the Shoppers on Sunday, letting our little get-together peter out.

I wait until they’re gone and I’m at the sink washing dishes before I let myself follow my thoughts as far as they’ll go. It’s dangerous to think of Catherine too much, especially when I’m alone. If Grey were here,

we'd pick one little topic and go over every detail—how she could never be bothered to blow-dry her thick, heavy hair, how even at the end of the day when she took down her ponytail there would still be a trace of damp. Or that woman poet she liked so much—or maybe she didn't like her, but she was reading her books over and over in the weeks before . . . before. She was like that, so much energy, you didn't always know what she loved and what she just felt strongly about. We can talk and talk about Catherine, Grey and I, and almost always manage to stop before one of us breaks down. We can do that because we both love her equally, if such a thing is possible.

Alone, I worry I'll go too far, think too much, and then not be able to get up off the floor. But remembering my beautiful girl is devastatingly tempting. Oh, my Catherine. So interesting. So lovely to think about. Her strange theories of how the world works. The rare moments when she wouldn't do the expected, "normal" thing. Her refusal to get a student loan, so horrified of debt that she took only the courses she could pay for in cash, which was why her degree was stretching out into its seventh year. Her contempt for her friends who competed in figure-skating competitions. Her childhood terror at the idea of French immersion.

She was only four when the neighbourhood school mailed me a flyer about French immersion classes—it seemed a wonderful opportunity to me. One night on the back porch as we played shadow puppets I told her that next year, when she went to school, she would get to learn French. In fact, I had the bunny shadow say it, hopping up and down the crumbling brick of our back wall. I even improvised a French accent, told her she would love French, *mais oui*.

But Catherine unclasped her hands from making the goose shape and squawked angrily, "No, I will not. I will not learn French."

I was baffled—still so inexperienced as a mother even after four years. Though Wayne had never contributed much in the way of parenting, he

had left only six months earlier and I was feeling especially unmoored. I tried to explain the benefits of learning a new language, something different and exciting, something I myself would have loved to have done. And Catherine in her pink-and-white overalls just plopped right down on her bottom and wailed. I can still picture her hot wet face, sobbing that she would never “say that stuff,” that she only wanted to say “true words.” I never found out where she got the impression that French was a scary language or even where she learned that French *was* a language.

Years later, she laughed at the story and claimed not to remember her tantrum. When I pressed, she said, “Iria’s a pretty small place, Mom, and I’d never been anywhere. I probably thought I’d have to move away to learn another language.” She was giggling—I hope I laughed too, although I can’t remember that part. The memory of Cat is clear, though—I recall her grinning pink-lipstick mouth as clearly as I recall her childish panic. My memories come into clearer focus every day—I suppose it’s the longing that makes me conjure her so strongly.

They would have let me say all this and more, Seva, Leanne, Janie—they would have listened all afternoon and been glad to. But so much has been taken from me, I have to keep some memories for myself.



LashBlast does not sound like the sort of cosmetic a woman in her fifties—a public face at a major bank branch—ought to be using. But it is only \$9 and Seva squeezes my arm encouragingly, so I buy it.

Afterwards, I insist on walking home alone through the rain. I have had more physical contact with Seva in the past four weeks than during the whole seventeen years we’ve known each other—not just arm squeezes and hand pats but full-bodied hugs and tearfully wet kisses on the cheek too. Same with most of the girls from work, actually, not to

mention cousins, neighbours . . . No one knows what to say, so they try to *do* instead. If they're not caressing and consoling me, they're keeping my freezer full of chocolate-chip muffins and tortellini soup just when I have fewer guests to feed than ever before. I always thaw someone else's muffins when I know a friend is coming over with yet more food. I feed them as they feed me, so at least they feel welcomed and appreciated, and I can make some room in the freezer for the new things. I've rarely been hungry since Cat's disappearance, but even when I was eating normally, what would a single woman do with an entire lasagna?

Tomorrow, I go back to the bank. I feel I should call Grey and tell him I won't be home, even though we don't usually get together until Wednesdays. I want him to know where to find me, just in case there's news. But I think he was scheduled to be back at work soon too—I can't remember if that was this week or next. Maybe I should finally get a cellphone. Maybe I should leave poor Grey alone. We live the same days, I imagine—days filled with tea and muffins, and brief quiet visits with friends who have nothing to say. Watching game shows and heartbreaking news reports where they don't mention her. Losing concentration on the second paragraph of a book. I know he hears from the police more than I do—either because they think of him as being closer to her than me, or they think of him as a suspect, he's not sure which. But if there was anything new to report, I know he would call me. Every moment he doesn't, I know there is nothing new to say. So I don't call either.

Today, I will clean the entire apartment and then go downstairs with the battery-powered handheld vacuum cleaner and do the car. It's terrifying to admit it, but I have done this most days since she's been gone. Clean has always meant *clear* to me, meant I could see clearly and get the more important things done.

Catherine, when she lived with me, was messier: jeans on the rug crushed down into the figure eight she stepped out of the night before.

Cereal bowls by the bed with a crust of milk hardening. I was never a judgmental parent, never pushy unless there was an urgent need. I tore up those French immersion forms and Cat did terrifically well in regular English school. I didn't question her decisions, and that made her feel she could talk to me, at least about some things. There was a lot I could never forgive my own mother for, even for the things I knew later were meant to help. She told me on my wedding day that if I married Wayne I would regret it. I did and I did, but who was she to tell me? So I shut up about Catherine's choices unless she was about to step into traffic, and for that I was rewarded with her walking through my door again and again with all her stories already on her lips.

Wayne hated how, even as a toddler, Cat would come to me and not to him with a picture she'd painted, feathers found in the grass, a cookie. "She's the girl for you, all right," I remember him growling.

Once she moved out to be with Grey, somewhere around her twenty-first birthday, and I moved into my new apartment, Catherine rarely called first, just appeared at my door, or already in my living room. She found a tree that grew out back, thick and heavy, which she liked to climb up to reach my second-storey windows. She said she didn't want to disturb me by buzzing the intercom—she came at odd hours and if I was asleep or out she would just leave again. I offered to give her a key, but she didn't seem interested and I never got around to it. Though she would never admit it, I knew she wanted to climb the tree for the sake of it. I don't know everything about my daughter, but I know that much.

Whenever she came with Grey, they entered through the front door. Grey isn't much of an athlete. I like that fellow, the way he edges as close to her as possible on the couch, on the street, on the bus, smiling into her hair. I've not lacked for gentlemen since Wayne, but no one has ever been captivated by me like that. Not romantically, anyway. For the

first few years of her life, Catherine often wept if I walked out of the room. She must have stopped doing that around the time she went off to kindergarten, but I just can't remember when. As much as I remember, there's so much more I forget.

My first day back at work is busy because a computer update for the entire branch doesn't go well. Programs keep freezing or giving error messages or crashing. I have to reassure any number of harried clients that their funds are safe, that these are only interface problems. Leanne and Seva keep brushing past me, placing a hand on my forearm or on my shoulder, a platter of tea biscuits in the staff room at 2 p.m. They ask, "How are you?" over and over, but it seems like there is no right answer. I just shake my head and say, "Getting through, getting through."

My eyelashes feel heavy and sticky with my new mascara, but otherwise I am light as air. I thought I would feel naked here with the public teeming in, but I am the person in charge, behind the desk, the one who knows the most about what is happening and what to do next. A few regulars murmur, "Oh, Sue, I *heard*," but I only have to nod somberly once and point out the new mortgage promo before the conversation is over. When I go to the ladies, the mirror over the sink shows a smooth, serene face. Even my lashes look feathery and soft. This day of calm professionalism is such a change from sobbing weakly in my bathrobe and staring at her Facebook page. I never understood Facebook and still don't, but there are so many lovely pictures of her there. I should have taken more pictures.

And yet when my shift is over—the day shift, the most coveted one—and the after-work crowd is bustling in and the younger tellers who work the 12–8 are steeling themselves, I go into the back to get my coat and bag, and I start to shake.

I am alone. I have been so attended to all day, so carefully watched by the girls, but now that I am by myself, my shoulders and back and thighs and stomach tremble under the weight of all those minutes I did not think of my beautiful daughter.

Did I really spend the day answering questions about service fees, bounced cheques, online errors? Did I really smile warmly and say that I completely understood how difficult it was when a woman wearing a silk scarf with cherries on it could not access her loan statement for twenty minutes? Even though my Catherine was taken from a parking lot after a long day of work, taken so quickly and violently she let her beloved yellow Kate Spade purse fall into a puddle and stay there? *Taken*—I finally let myself think the word I didn't want to imagine. But really I've been circling it since the moment I knew she was gone. There is no other option, no solution to the mystery that makes sense other than a crime, a captor. Catherine was taken.

I lean over the table in the staff room, brace my hands on it. I can't get my breathing right. I have not seen my daughter in four weeks and three days and yet somehow I didn't think of her for hours because some people needed American dollar transfers, overdraft protection, postdated bill payments.

I have no idea how long I stay like that—not that long, maybe, since no one else comes in. I want to see Grey, even though it isn't the right night. He's probably always known what I have just admitted to myself, that she would never have left him—*us*—voluntarily. She was so honest that if she'd fallen out of love, she would have just said so. I don't need to tell Grey any of this. I'll just go sit beside him and talk about whatever he wants, knowing that we are grieving the same grief.

Back in the washroom, I unzip my makeup case as I walk toward the mirror, prepared to touch up at least my eyes, maybe redo my concealer. I need to look more or less chipper in order for the girls to let

me leave on my own. Otherwise I will be in for another night of spaghetti with someone's husband and kids. But in the mirror, my cool face is still altogether intact—fluttering dark eyelashes and clear bright eyes. I could fool even myself.

