

Lewis Buzbee / HAIRPIN

In that long still moment after the crash, I knew that Halley was already dead and that Ella wasn't, and I was filled with rage that Halley would leave us. Ella was unconscious but breathing. It would turn out that Halley wasn't officially dead yet, she would survive three days of intensive care in a Greek hospital where the staff's English was so perfect they could describe every detail of her condition to me. Waiting for help to arrive on that hairpin curve, I knew Halley was gone, that the envelope of time that was my wife had already been sealed. I did not speak any words aloud in our overturned rental, the silence there was too immense. Instead I seethed, cursing Halley for leaving us alone, for allowing me to be the driver and the one who'd killed her and almost killed Ella, for those long years of empty afternoons Ella and I would have to face together. I hated Halley then and don't know that I'll ever forgive myself.

What little I remember of the crash and the moments before it doesn't really matter. Banking into the hairpin turn, downshifted and whirring, there was suddenly another car in our path, a blue car coming right at us and the knowledge that the crash was going to be bad. I've been told we flipped at least once. We bellied up against the stone guardrail. The Aegean, the bright hole of the sun, the blue car flipped over the guardrail and tumbled into the sea, the driver dead. The doctors and police tried to tell me about the driver, he was old, but I didn't hear much.

Ella and I both had broken legs, simple fractures, and Ella had a deep gash below her shoulder blade, and for days we were both bruised and shocky from the impact. We shared a room and that was good, she's only nine. Ella woke me up in that room a few hours after our arrival, whispering dad, dad, daddy. I crawled back to the world, remembered the crash, turned to Ella and whispered it's okay, chuckie, it's all going to be okay, your mom's fine, we're here.

She turned from me, smiled at the ceiling, and fell into an improbable sleep. The bruise on the side of her face glowed against the mint green of her blankets, and I stared at her for as long as I could that morning, trying to remember the colors in that room as if it were crucial that I did. I thought I should call someone, probably Halley's sister, but fell asleep.

Our doctor was a big man with hairy hands and knuckles. He came in twice a day, winked somberly at me when he crossed the room to Ella's bed, then he'd sit with her for several minutes, talking to her with his back to me. He'd inevitably pat her arm. The only phrase I ever decoded from their conversations was during his first visit. Ella had risen on her elbows and was staring at him. Superbly, he'd said, absolutely superbly.

When he was done talking with Ella, he'd come to my bedside and give me a stern look before he spoke. Well, he'd say, we better get you down there so you can cheer up that lovely wife of yours. Verbatim, every single time. Two orderlies would wheel me down the hall, the doctor walking alongside and looking directly ahead, telling me about Halley's prospects, serious but possible, going over details of friends and relatives they'd contacted. At the end of each trip, he'd say be strong now for Ella, then he'd look at me once and go off on his rounds.

I thought I should talk to Halley during these visits, but found we no longer needed words. It wasn't that I knew she was already dead that kept me from speaking, rather the sense that our lives had become too concrete for words. She was a ghastly version of herself, to be sure, blue, nearly transparent, still she was Halley. After these visits, I would be transported back to the room where Ella was waiting, and the orderlies would push my bed close to Ella's and I would tell her that her mom was going to be fine and so were we. When she asked me why her mother was in another room I told her there were complications and that seemed good enough. The orderlies would separate our beds and Ella and I knew it was time for sleeping.

Halley died near one in the afternoon, quietly they told me. It seemed an odd hour of the day for a quiet death, so many buses and cars outside. I knew something violent must have moved through

her. I saw Halley's body one last time, then the orderlies took me to Ella and left us alone. I told her your mother's dead, Ella, she died peacefully. I know, she said, I know, I know, it's going to be okay. She was smiling. She stared at me, her hand on mine, then after a moment, she turned from me to the green wall, twisting her shattered leg, and finally cried. I put my hand around her as far as I could reach. I tried to explain to her why I had lied about her mother's condition, and she told me she knew, she understood everything.

We spent the next two weeks in that same room in the hospital, tended by Halley's sister. We've been back home for three weeks now and most of the hoopla is over and things are quieting down. Halley is not buried but scattered from an urn at Ocean Beach, quite illegally Ella and I would like to believe. The friends and relatives have been through and are getting back to their lives. The casseroles are nearly gone, the counters piled with clean Tupperware that will have to get returned. Ella and I are glad to be alone, we're exhausted from the sympathy.

It was the end of August when we flew back from Greece, a season of wet day-fog in San Francisco. Our flat was warm and dark and it was hard for us to get out. At first we both walked with sleek polished steel canes, and we were told to take it easy, we were still brittle after all. Between pods of visitors, we made ourselves take short walks, once around the block, forays into the park, out in the cold long enough to need to go back inside, but yesterday Indian summer came, warm and too bright, and we know we have to get out more, see what comes next.

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I keep expecting to see Halley on the street, not her exactly but someone who looks exactly like her. I've been preparing for this moment since we left Greece. San Francisco is full of women who look like Halley, at least from a distance. Hiply dressed, thin to the point of wiry, hard to pin down the age, twenties to forties. Halley was thirty-seven, dark glasses, mop of curly hair pulled tight in a bun. You might never guess she was a mom. I look for these women

now and keep looking, hoping to be shocked or hopeful or bereft. Turns out no one looks like her any longer.

I'll tell you the trouble with the dead, my friend Kenny said one evening last week. Ella had a ton of homework or so she said but was really, I suspect, leaving me alone with Kenny because she thought I needed it. She impressed us both with the knowledge that fourth grade homework was heartbreakingly difficult, a bear she called it, and literally skipped down the hall to her room while Kenny and I settled into the quiet of the evening, sipping bourbon as was our habit when we were together. Kenny is a poet, a very good one, which you might imagine without knowing if you spent an evening with him. He sits quietly, watches and listens, sips his drink, he always has a drink, then he speaks in a near stutter, his words colliding. The halting breathiness of his voice makes me want to weep the way Charlie Parker makes Kenny want to weep. I usually do most of the talking, some blather or other, but not this night, I had spoken too many words since bringing Ella home.

The trouble with the dead, Sam, he said, they aren't dead, the dead just won't die.

No, Kenny, I told him after two sips of his bourbon, the trouble with the dead is that they are dead, forever, gone, no mäs.

What could he say? I held the trump: my grief.

We spent the evening talking about Halley's clothes. She was a fashion designer, loved clothes, but she never took that world too seriously. I've always suspected Kenny had some sort of crush on Halley, a feeling I've found deepened since his divorce a few years back. Listening to Kenny talk about Halley's style, especially the amount of detail he maintained around a pink and black fur coat that passed through her life for about six months and the way he described that coat with his hands, I knew for sure he had been in love with her. Loved her, does. A good thing.

Much later that same evening, Ella came out of her room and begged Kenny to put her to bed. I was asleep on my own bed before they had finished their storybooks. I was ashamed of what I'd said to Kenny that night, how I'd flatly denied a central vein in his poetry, and how it was impossible for him to argue his truth. I fell asleep because I couldn't bear to face him, but I had to tell him what I

absolutely knew. The dead are gone. Even in a town where she was so common, I was unable to find Halley. No ghosts, no specters, no shades. Simply removed, absent.

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Ella sleeps a lot. The minute she gets home from school she naps through the bright afternoon and into the long river of evening. She sleeps on the red couch in the front room with the traffic outside and seems as small as a toddler she sleeps so well. I have to wake her up for dinner, some dish I've heated. While she sleeps I work in the spare room that is my office. I work at home, architecture, these days a pretty light in-box, and each I day hurry through some project certain that this afternoon I'm going to take my daughter out into the sun but she's so tired. Around four or so I get up from the desk and go into the kitchen and do the dishes, then sit at the island to do the crossword and drink a glass of wine, only once in a while going into the living room to watch Ella sleep. I have to say she looks great these days, even sleeping, healthy and rested and flush, and her hair is shiny. She sleeps burrowed in the crease between the seat and the cushion, in sweatpants that were her mother's and that she only wears for these naps. To watch her breathe while she sleeps makes me feel that she is safe and doing the best she can for herself.

We eat dinner and talk, mostly about her mom. We talk all the time about it, no, about her, about Halley, and we're always interrupting each other with, remember the time. We talk a lot about Halley when I pick up Ella at school and we walk home together, the light of these afternoons perfectly burnished and stretched for such talks. Remember the time, we start.

Sometimes Ella tells me that she doesn't want to talk about it, just had a bit too much, she says, can we get back to that later, and on the weekends we'll watch a movie or we'll read together, the windows opened and the offshore breeze pushing in, the one season we get these warm winds, and we won't talk about her mother at all, and it's a relief for both of us, we know. Ella's right, there's only so much, but still I think we're doing pretty well, and we even talk

about that. They, however, tell me she's not doing well in school, and I don't know what to say to that.

Kate Shamblin calls, she's not even Ella's teacher, a concerned parent, mother of Pablo, a boy Ella has invited to her parties. We've known them the way one knows people in this town, everybody only three or four years in, few real connections yet, passing through. Halley and me, we're old timers, ten years. Ella, lucky girl, was born here. Appears Kate and Mrs. Jouthas, Ella's teacher, have been talking and they both agree that Ella is much too quiet. They mean well.

Sam, Kate says on the phone, sounding as if she's about to make the apology of the century. Sam, I know it must be hard and to be honest with you I'd rather not butt in but Ella's being so quiet these days, don't you think. It's not good for Ella, Kate and Mrs. Jouthas and a few interested others have suggested, for Ella to be that quiet. She should be talking it out, processing, progressing up the steps of grief. When they ask Ella how she's feeling about her mother, Ella shrugs and says she doesn't know then says she guesses she's sad. When they ask Ella if she misses her mother she says yes of course and gets, well, a little snippy. Almost everyone believes that Ella's holding in too much, maybe she needs some help. Kate was wondering if the four of us couldn't get together, her me Ella and Pablo, maybe take a walk. Maybe Ella would open up to her.

Ella doesn't like to walk, she likes to do things and she's furious with me for agreeing. She can smell a rat a million miles off and knows she's being set up, sniffs pity in the air. We make a deal and she relents, apparently I'm going to buy her something. I don't know why I've agreed to this walk in the first place, I have a very short leash these days, and being out of doors for more than an hour makes me a bit crazy. I said yes to forestall any further butting in. Ella and I wait for the weekend with a slightly pleasurable sense of dread. Saturday morning the heat is already fierce when Kate and Pablo show up at our door and pry us outside.

Kate is an attractive woman, but she has odd gold streaks in her hair, and she dresses, Halley always said so, as if she were still trying to please her father. A thought half crosses my mind that Kate is

here for me rather than Ella, but this is such an unseemly thought it goes nowhere. On our stoop Kate gives Ella a hug that's much too big and long. Pablo is standing on the sidewalk, his face bored beyond repair, his feet endlessly at work. He's a sweet kid and he's as gracious as he can be greeting Ella and trying to strike up something of a conversation. They talk about school and race out in front of us. A short skinny kid, he has to look up at Ella when they're talking as if she had all the answers he'd ever need. We shoot into the park toward the playground.

She's adorable, Kate whispers to me, it's so sad for her. Yes, Kate, it is, so sad. Which is the only and most obvious answer and I'm bored with speaking it, and even Kate can tell I'm bored with it when I try to fake it, but she smiles anyway and we go on talking, only I'm wondering rather perversely if this woman would be as concerned as she seems if Ella weren't as adorable as she is.

Kate speaks at some length in earnest tones of Ella and her silence, and I agree that it's troubling but I want them all to know that we do talk, she does, and we're taking it as best we can. Remember, I tell her, we were in the accident, too, our bodies in the same car, a certain recuperating from physical damage alone. By this time we've reached the carousel park, and Kate and I are sitting on a bench under a great Modesto ash, while Ella and Pablo look for something to do. It's beastly hot, the hottest day yet, close to a hundred I'd say, and the air has decided to be as still as it can, we'd call it earthquake weather but out here we're a bit superstitious of that turn of phrase. It seems like nothing is moving though it's Saturday and the fair size crowd is giving it their best shot. Ella and Pablo are sitting on swings, their feet firmly planted in the sand, and they're miserable, suffering the assumption that because they are children they must play out in the sun.

Pablo is turned away, Ella is facing us. She leans way back in the swing, as if she might at any moment tumble off, and she's smiling at Pablo and laughing at what he says, she's flirting. I can't help but smile at this, then Ella catches me out and her face falls quickly grim, closed, and she pivots on the swing, her back to me now, the chains tangled, and I'm nearly undone.

Sam, Kate says, have you thought of getting help, asking for help, seeking help. Yes, of course, I tell Kate, and it will come, look, help is coming, but be patient with Ella, she does know what she's doing, but let's change the subject. I tell Kate all about me, how much I miss Halley, how hard it can be to simply walk down the hall some days, and I'm lucky I have Ella because she gives me someone to care for, the imperative of her, and how that, too, turns out to be painful because there's so much of Halley in her, but this is bearable. I don't really tell her anything at all about Halley. I keep going.

Finally, I can no longer watch the kids suffer, Kate, I say, let's get them out of here, get some ice cream, it's just down the street, we could all use some cooling down. At the ice cream shop, Pablo and Kate do astute imitations of their teachers, and never go over the top, like they might have last year, or six months ago. They're growing up, it's plain, and Kate and I take our quiet satisfactions in watching them. Ella pulls a pitiful frown, nearly canine, a perfect shot of Mr. Crappuchettes, yes, his real name, a school counselor she's rather fond of, and I burst out laughing, and everyone else is laughing, and I say, Kate, see, look, we're laughing.

Ella slugs me in the arm real quick, unseen, as we're cleaning up our plates and mugs, and we lock eyes for a minute. Yeah sure, I nod back, we can end this now, and I say, Pablo, shall we escort the ladies to your car, and we do, and Kate and I make promises to keep in touch, and they drive off into the hot, bright day.

Back at home, Ella heads straight to the couch, too hot to change into mom's sweats, and drops off immediately, so I go back to the office where it's too hot to do any real work, and stare out the window and find myself still a little furious with Kate. I know I'm being both defensive and self-righteous but I can't help myself, besides, it'll pass. Ella and I have at least five more hours of daylight, and while I love to gaze on the ragged back gardens of our block, after a while I'm roasting and think maybe I'll nap with Ella in the front room in the shadowed half of the flat. She's not asleep after all, she's sitting in the window bench watching the cars and trees outside and keeping a close eye on the sidewalk below her. I stop at

the far end of the dining room, I can see her from here, and watch her for a bit, she's quiet and without any expression other than concentration. I know what she's doing, I think, I think she's building a city inside of herself, a new city on the foundations of a lost city, and there are some doors in this city which she will not open, but she's putting them there and knows who lives in those houses, and the inhabitants are mostly memories of her mother. It's a big city, big enough for now, but hilly and curvy, and she's even putting in some dark alleys she knows well enough to stay away from, but she's also put in lots of sunny plazas and ornate houses with cobblestone courtyards, and there are many festivals in the evenings of this city she's building.

The light in the flat reminds me of a day when Ella was about two, a gray oasis of shade. I think Halley was gone, out of town on business, she did that a lot for a while, and Ella and I almost always had a great time, went lots of new places. This particular afternoon, though, I had let Ella get the best of me, and before you knew it, I was all het up and grouchy, and she wasn't going to stop standing on the couch, that was clear, and so I made it worse, and for the first time ever sent her to her room where she was to spend an hour alone, and even at the time I felt like a bully. To top it off, a gorgeous day. I called it quits after three-quarters of an hour, and knocked on her bedroom door, where she was playing with her animals in a most civilized fashion, which made me feel more guilty. Let's go someplace new, I said, and she jumped up as if nothing had happened, and I took her to Castle Toys, a store in a neighborhood we hadn't visited before. The day got saved, and the light then was just like the light today.

Want to go to Castle, was all I had to say, and Ella really did smile, still looking outside, then turned and said, sighing, not Castle again, just like her mother used to every time the two of us lit out together.

I find it hard to know if the store has changed much, Ella and I have come here so often since the first time, but it seems about the same, small and cramped, filled with bins and set-ups and boxes, and very dark and empty this Saturday, cool, nearly chill. It has always been our tradition to come here to play with the trains, wooden sets

from Finland that only Castle seems to sell. They've got a great, huge mountain and village set up in the back. Today Ella goes right to the trains and begins to string the cars, and makes me tell her the story of why we first came here, this is a tradition, too, and I have to tell her about the time her mother wasn't there and I got mad at Ella but we got over it and had a great day anyway.

We get a little carried away, keep crashing our trains together, running off the rails right into the middle of the little village, all clamor and havoc, knocking over fences and trees and signs, and running into shops and homes, and I know we should be more quiet, but there's no one else here, and besides, we really are enjoying ourselves.

