No One You Know

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Extract

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One

When I found him at last, I had long ago given up the search. It was late at night, and I was dining alone in a small café in Diriomo, Nicaragua. It was a place I had come to cherish during my annual visits to the village, the kind of establishment where one could order a plate of beans and a cup of coffee any time of the day or night.

I had spent the evening wandering the dark, empty streets. July days in Diriomo were scorching; come nightfall, the buildings seemed to radiate heat, so that the air possessed a baked, dusty scent. Eventually I came to the familiar intersection. Going left would lead to my hotel, with its hard bed and uncooperative ceiling fan. Straight ahead was a baseball diamond where I had once seen a local kid beat a rat to death with an old wooden bat. To the

right was a wide road giving way to a crooked alleyway, at the end of which the café beckoned.

Some time past midnight, I stood on the doorstep, ringing the little copper bell. Maria appeared, dressed in a long blue skirt, white blouse, and no shoes, looking as though she'd been expecting me.

"Did I wake you?"

"No," she said. "Welcome."

It was a ritual greeting between us. I had no way of knowing whether Maria was actually asleep on those nights, or whether she was sitting patiently in her kitchen, waiting for customers.

"What are you serving tonight?" I asked. This was also ritual, for we both knew that the menu never changed, no matter the time or season.

"Nacatamal," she said. *"Está usted sola?"*

"*Sí, señora,* I am alone." My answer, like the menu, had remained unaltered for years. And yet she asked it, each time, with a kind of naked hope, as if she believed that one day my luck might change.

The café was empty and dark, somehow cool despite the heat outside. She pointed to a small table where a candle burned in a jar. I thanked her and sat down. I could hear her preparing coffee in the kitchen, which was separated from the dining area by a narrow doorway in which hung a curtain of red fabric. I watched the patterns made by the candlelight on the far wall. The images seemed too lovely and symmetrical to be random—a bird, a sailboat, a star, followed by a series of rectangular bars of light. It was a feeling I often had in that town, and one of the reasons I kept returning when my work as a coffee buyer brought me to Nicaragua—a feeling that even the simplest natural acts were somehow ordered, as if some unnamed discipline reigned over both the animate and inanimate. I rarely felt this way at home in San Fran-

cisco. It was no wonder the locals referred to Diriomo as *pueblo brujo*—bewitched village.

Maria had just set my plate on the table when the bell clanged outside. Together we looked toward the door, as if something miraculous might materialize. In all the times I had taken a midnight meal among the porcelain dolls and carnivorous plants in Maria's café, I'd rarely met another customer.

Maria went to the door and opened it a crack. For a moment my table was flooded with moonlight.

"Buenas noches, Maria," a man's voice said.

"Buenas noches."

The door closed, plunging the room once again into near darkness.

The man passed by my table. His face was turned away, but in the pale light from the kitchen I observed that he carried himself in the way very tall men often do, shoulders slumped in a sort of apology for taking up so much space. He wore a baseball cap pulled low on the forehead. A hardback book was tucked under one arm. He went to a table in the corner, the one farthest from my own. When he sat down, his back to me, the wooden chair creaked so violently I thought it might break.

Maria took a match out of her apron pocket, struck it against the wall, and dipped the flame into a crimson jar on the man's table. Only after she had retreated into the kitchen to fetch his coffee did he turn around and glance at me from beneath the brim of his hat. In the flickering red candlelight only his slightly jutting chin was visible, the rest of his face receding into shadows.

"Hello," I said.

"Good evening."

"You're American," I said, surprised. Foreigners were scarce in

Diriomo. Encountering a fellow American at this particular café in the middle of the night was utterly strange.

"I am," he said.

He gave a polite wave of the hand before leaning over the table and peering into his book. He held the candle above the page, and I considered warning him it was bad for his eyes to read in the darkness. He seemed like the kind of man who needed to be told these things, the kind of man who ought to have someone taking care of him. Soon Maria brought him coffee. Something about the way he lifted his cup, the way he turned the pages of his book, even the way he tilted his head toward Maria in silent thanks when she brought him a napkin and a bowl of sugar cubes, struck me as familiar. I watched him closely, wondering if the feeling that I knew him was simply an illusion brought about by my having been traveling alone for too long. The longer I sat there, however, the more I became convinced that it was not the vague familiarity of one countryman to another, but something more personal.

While he drank his coffee and read his book, seemingly oblivious to me, I tried to recall the context in which I might have known him. I sensed, more than knew, that it had been a long time ago, and that there had been some degree of intimacy between us; this sensation of intimacy coupled with my inability to remember was completely unsettling. The thought crossed my mind that I might have slept with him. There had been a period following my sister's death when I slept with many men. This was a long time ago, though, so long that now it almost seemed like a different life.

Maria brought my food. I waited for the steaming plantain leaves to cool before peeling them away, picking up the *nacatamal,* and biting in. Back home, I had tried several times to replicate Maria's combination of pork, rice, potatoes, mint leaves, raisins, and spices, but it never came out right. When I tried to tease the

recipe out of her, she just laughed and pretended not to understand my request.

"You should try these," I said to the man between bites.

"Oh, I know Maria's *nacatamal*," he said, glancing my way once again. "Delicious, but I already ate."

What could he be doing here so late at night, I wondered, if he had already had his supper? In Diriomo, men did not sit alone in cafés reading books, even American men. A few minutes later, when I took my wallet out to pay, he closed his book and stared at the cover for a few seconds, as if to gather courage, before standing and walking over to my table. Maria watched us shamelessly from the doorway of the kitchen. The red curtain was pulled aside, filling the room with soft light. For a moment it occurred to me that perhaps Maria had set this whole thing up for my benefit, perhaps she was trying to pull off a bit of matchmaking.

The man removed his baseball cap and held it in both hands. His shaggy hair grazed the low ceiling, gathering static. "Pardon me," he said. Now I could see his face completely—the large dark eyes and wide mouth, the high cheekbones and prominent chin, covered with stubble—and I knew at once who he was.

I had not seen him in eighteen years. There had been a period of several months in college when I thought of him constantly. I had watched for his name in the paper, had performed drive-bys of his ground-floor flat in Russian Hill, had taken lunch at a certain small Italian restaurant in North Beach that he frequented, despite the fact that the menu stretched my student budget beyond its limits. At that time I suspected that if I shadowed him without ceasing I could begin to understand something—maybe not the thing he had done, but the mechanism by which he had been able to do it. That mechanism, I was certain, was a psychological abnormality; some moral tuning fork that was present in others was absent in him.

Then, one afternoon in August of 1991, he vanished. That day I walked into the restaurant in North Beach at half past noon, as I had been doing every week for three months. Immediately my eyes went to a table in the corner, above which hung a miniature oil painting of the Cathedral Duomo of Milan. It was where he always sat, a table that seemed to be reserved specifically for him. He always arrived on Monday at a quarter past noon, and after sitting down would place a notebook on the table to the right of his bread plate. He rarely bothered to glance up at his surroundings as he scribbled furiously in the notebook with a mechanical pencil. He would pause only to order spaghetti with prawns in marinara sauce, which he ate quickly, followed by an espresso, which he drank slowly. The whole time, he worked, scribbling with his right hand and eating with his left. But that day in August, he wasn't there. Immediately I sensed something had changed. I dipped my bread in olive oil and waited. By the time the waiter brought my salad, I knew he wasn't coming. At one-fifteen I called in sick to the University of San Francisco library, where I held a work-study position, and took the bus to Russian Hill. There was a *For Rent* sign in front of his flat, and the shutters were open. Through the large windows I could see the place was stripped clean, all of the furniture gone. It occurred to me that I might never see him again.

Two



"A story has no beginning or end," my sophomore English professor used to say. "Arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead." It was a motto that Andrew Thorpe managed to work into every session of class, no matter what book we were discussing. One could almost anticipate the moment he was going to say it, as the statement was always preceded by a lengthy pause, a lifting of his eyebrows, a quick intake of breath.

I would choose a Wednesday in December 1989. Again and again, poring over the details, I would choose that day, and it would become the touchstone from which all other events unfurled, the moment by which I judged the two parts of my life: the years with Lila, and those without her.

On that morning I was in the kitchen, listening to Jimmy Cliff on the radio and waiting for the coffee to brew. Our parents had already left for work. Lila came downstairs, dressed in a ruffled black blouse, green corduroy skirt, and Converse high-tops. Her eyes were red, and I was startled to realize she'd been crying. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen Lila cry.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just been a stressful week." She gave a little wave of her hand as if to dismiss the whole thing outright. She was wearing a ring I'd never seen before, a delicate gold band with a small black stone.

"Dance with me," I said, attempting to cheer her up. I grabbed her hand and tried to twirl her around, but she pulled away.

The coffeemaker beeped. I turned down the radio and poured her a cup. "Is this about him?" I asked.

"About who?"

"It is, isn't it? Come on. Talk to me."

She was looking out the kitchen window, at a small limb that had fallen onto our deck the previous week during a rainstorm. Only later, as I replayed the events of those days, would it seem strange that none of us had bothered to remove the fallen limb from the deck.

"How long has that been there?" Lila asked.

"A while."

"We should take care of it."

"We should."

But neither of us made a move toward the kitchen door.

"Tell me his name," I said finally. "I know guys on the basketball team. I'll have his face rearranged." I was only half joking.

Lila didn't respond; it was as if she hadn't heard me at all. I had learned long before not to be offended by her silences. Once, when I accused her of ignoring me, she had explained, "It's like I'm wandering through a house, and I happen to step into another room, and the door shuts behind me. I get involved in what's going on in that room, and everything else sort of vanishes."

I reached across the counter and touched her hand to summon her back. "Nice ring. Is it opal?"

She slid her hand into her pocket. "It's just a trinket."

"Where did you get it?"

She shrugged. "I don't remember."

Lila never bought jewelry for herself. The ring must have been a gift from *him,* whoever he was. The very thought of a romantic entanglement was new to Lila. She hadn't had more than half a dozen dates in high school and college combined. Throughout those years, my mother was fond of saying that boys didn't know how to appreciate a girl of such exceptional intelligence, but I suspected my mother had it all wrong. Boys were interested in Lila; she simply had no use for them. During my freshman year of high school, when Lila was a senior, I'd seen the way guys looked at her. I was the one they talked to, the one they invited to parties and asked on dates, the fun and freewheeling sister who could be counted on to organize group outings and play elaborate pranks on the teachers, but Lila was far from invisible. With her long dark hair, her general aloofness, her weird sense of humor, her passion for math, she was, I imagined, intimidating to boys in a way I would never be. When she walked down the hallway, alone and deep in thought, clad in the eccentric clothes she made on my mom's old Singer sewing machine, she must have seemed completely inapproachable. Although boys didn't talk to her, it was clear to me that they *saw* her. I was well-liked, but Lila had mystery.

Even after she had graduated from UC Berkeley and started the Ph.D. program in pure mathematics at Stanford, Lila was perfectly content living in her old bedroom, eating dinner with the family most nights, watching rented movies with Mom and Dad on weekends while I was out with my friends. Lately, though, she had begun going out several evenings each week, coming home after midnight with a smile on her face. When I tried to get her to tell me who she was with, she would say, "Just a friend."

Our mother, like me, was thrilled at the prospect of Lila dating. "I don't want her to go through life lonely," she had said more than

once, although I suspected that Lila wasn't entirely capable of feeling loneliness in the way most people did. There was so much going on inside her head, she never craved the company of friends. Although we could pass hours talking quietly in the dark, I knew that she was just as content to be alone, pencil in hand, working through some complicated math problem. I thought that, for other girls, having a sister was like standing in front of a milky pane of glass in which your own past and personality were reflected back to you with interesting variations. But aside from our physical resemblance, Lila and I were so different that, had we not been born into the same family, I doubted we would have been friends.

Lila finished her coffee, took an apple from a bowl on the counter, grabbed her backpack, and said, "Tell Mom I'll be home late tonight."

"How late?"

"Late."

"Whoever he is," I said, "don't go too easy on him. You can't let him think he's running the show."

I saw the beginning of a smile on her face. "Is that a rule?"

"A cardinal rule."

I followed her to the foyer and took her black peacoat down from the peg beside the stairwell. As I was helping her into it, she said, an afterthought, "Any chance I could have the car today?" We'd been sharing a blue Toyota ever since I got my license three years earlier. It was Lila who wrote out our schedule every month, and on that month, she'd given me Wednesdays.

"I would, but I get off work at the library at four and I have a dentist's appointment across town at four-thirty. I'd never make it on the bus."

"It's not important," she said.

Before she walked out the door, I gave her our traditional half salute. For two seconds, maybe three, I heard the familiar sounds

of the outside world infiltrating our quiet house—a car passing, a kid riding a skateboard down the steep sidewalk, a snatch of music from an open window across the street. Then the front door clicked softly behind her, and she was gone. In the months to follow, when I recalled that moment, I would suspect that the clicking sound I'd heard wasn't the door, but something in my own mind, some barely audible psychic signal. I would tell myself that if only I had listened, if only I had paid attention, I could have somehow changed the story.

That night, I passed Lila's message on to our parents, and we all went to bed as usual. The next morning, when I came downstairs, my mother stood at the kitchen counter eating cereal and perusing a legal brief, while my father sat at the table with his newspaper and buttered toast. "Go wake your sister, Ellie," my mother said. "I can't believe she's not up. She has a nine-o'clock class."

I went upstairs and knocked on her door, but she didn't answer. I opened the door and saw that her bed was undisturbed, the white pillow shams and coverlet pristine. The small bathroom we shared was attached to my room, and Lila always listened to KLIV while getting ready in the morning. There was no way she could have showered and dressed without my hearing her.

I went downstairs. My mother was rinsing her cereal bowl in the sink. "She's not here," I said. "It looks like she didn't come home last night."

My mother turned to face me, her hands still wet. "What?"

My father looked up from his paper, startled. "She didn't call?"

"Did she tell you where she was going last night?" my mother asked.

"No. She was upset yesterday morning, but she wouldn't say why."

"This person she's been seeing," my mother said to me. "Do you know who he is?"

"She won't tell me anything."

I went up to her room and retrieved her schedule from the bulletin board above her desk. We called the office of the *Stanford Journal of Mathematics,* where she worked part-time. She hadn't been at her five-o'clock meeting the night before. "Weird," the editor said. "It's the first meeting she's missed in two years." Next, we called a guy named Steve who led a seven p.m. study group Lila was in; she had also missed the study group.

At that point, my father called the police and filed a missing person report. An officer came to our house and asked for a photograph of Lila, which he slid into a plastic sleeve. After he left, we went into the living room and waited for the phone to ring. That was Thursday. For two days there was no trace of her. It was as if my sister had walked to the Greyhound station, bought a ticket to Somewhere Else, and vanished.

On Saturday of that week Lila's backpack was found in a Dumpster in Healdsburg. It still contained her wallet, her house keys, and her books. The only thing missing was a perfect-bound notebook, about an inch thick, with a blue plaid cover. I knew the notebook would have been in her backpack when she left home because she never went anywhere without it. It wasn't a journal in the traditional sense. Instead of words, it contained numbers, page after page of formulae. For me, trying to read one of her calculations was akin to saying an ordinary word as fast as possible a dozen times in a row; the numbers and letters, taken separately, each looked familiar, but grouped together so densely they seemed mysterious, like some alien code that only a savant could crack. While I immersed myself in indie music and Eastern European novels, Lila filled her time with equations and algorithms, long sequences of letters and numerals stretching across and down the graph-paper pages.

"What's all this?" I had asked her once, sitting on her bed and flipping through the notebook. I read aloud from a dog-eared

page. "Every even integer greater than two can be expressed as the sum of two primes."

She was trying on a new dress. My mother was always buying Lila fashionable clothes, trying to spiff up her quirky, homemade wardrobe. Out of kindness Lila would try them on, model them for our parents, and make some positive comment before hanging the clothes up in her closet, where they would remain untouched until I co-opted them for myself.

"Only one of the most famous math problems of all time, Goldbach's conjecture," Lila said. "Mathematicians have been trying to prove it since 1742."

"Let me guess. My brilliant sister is going to be the one to solve it."

"You don't solve a conjecture, you prove it."

"What's the difference?"

"Math 101," she said, cramming her feet into the pumps our mother had purchased to go with the dress. "A conjecture is a mathematical statement that appears *likely* to be true, but hasn't been formally *proven* to be true. Once there's proof, it becomes a theorem. While it's a conjecture, you can use it to try to construct other mathematical proofs, but anything you come up with using a conjecture is only a conjecture. Get it?" Lila turned her back to me so I could zip her up.

"Thanks for being the family genius," I said. "Takes the pressure off me."

Lila kicked off the shoes and plopped down on the bed. "When I do prove it, I can only take credit for being half a genius. I have a partner. It's a pact—we're going to solve it together, even if it takes us the next thirty years."

"A partner, huh? Who is it?"

"Just this guy I know."

"If it's going to take thirty years, you might as well marry him."

"His wife might object."

"Does she know that her husband is mathematically betrothed to you?"

Lila adjusted a bra strap and tugged at the neck of the dress. "She's an artist. I doubt she's ever even heard of Goldbach's conjecture."

When the news of the backpack reached us, we went to Mass. Even my father, whose only concession to religion my entire life had been to step through the wide church doors once a year on Easter Sunday, agreed to go. Together, we lit a candle for Lila. While my mother prayed aloud, I prayed, too, something I hadn't done since I was a child. I didn't exactly believe, but if there was a chance God was listening, I wanted to do everything right.

On Monday, two days after Lila's backpack was found, a hiker in Armstrong Woods, near the Russian River town of Guerneville, left the trail and stumbled over a body partially covered by leaves. There was no hiking gear, no identification. It was four o'clock in the afternoon when my parents left for Guerneville, about seventy-five miles north of the city. I stood before the large front windows of our house and watched their dark gray Volvo pull out of the garage below. Thursday had been trash day, and in the chaos following Lila's disappearance none of us had thought to retrieve the cans. The car stopped in the driveway, and my father got out and rolled the empty bins into the garage. Then he climbed in the car again, and I heard the hum of the garage door closing. Through the windshield I could see my parents, but only from the shoulders down. My mother's navy skirt rose just above her knees. Her purse rested in her lap. In the space between the two front seats, she and my father held hands. As the car slowly backed into the street, I felt a sense of panic.

I sat at the kitchen table and waited, staring at the clock. At 5:43,

the phone rang. It was my father. He was using the phone at the morgue, and the connection was poor. Muzak played in the background, the Beach Boys' "Little Surfer Girl." I strained to make out my father's words, and made him repeat himself twice. "It was a positive ID." Even when I was certain of the words themselves, it was a struggle to comprehend their meaning. "Her necklace is missing," he added, more as a question than a statement, and I thought of the thin gold chain she always wore, with a tiny topaz stone suspended in a delicate gold pendant. The necklace had been a gift from me for her eighteenth birthday, purchased with three months' worth of babysitting money. My father went on. "The coroner listed the cause of death as blunt trauma to the head."

At that moment I didn't stop to question the strange evenness of his voice, or the fact that he would deliver such horrifying news by phone while I was home alone. In hindsight I would realize he had been out of his mind with shock and grief; he could not be expected at that moment to make rational decisions. As I hung up the phone I was thinking about the car. If I had given it to Lila on Wednesday, as she requested, how might the chain of events have been altered? If I hadn't been thinking of my dentist appointment, might Lila still be alive?

Once, in trying to explain to me the strange concept of imaginary numbers, Lila had quoted Leibniz, who called the imaginary number "an amphibian between being and non-being." After my sister's death, I sometimes felt as if I were trapped in such a state. All my life I had been Lila's little sister. Then, without warning, I was an only child. My parents, to their credit, did their best to maintain our sense of family, to replicate the harmony we had shared before Lila's death. In a world where "dysfunctional" was the common language of domesticity, we had considered ourselves lucky to be a happy family. But no matter how well-adjusted a family may be, no

matter how hard its individual members try to move on, grief is not a thing that can simply be managed. The shape of our family had changed.

Almost immediately, I would come to see the world in terms of before and after. In my memories of before, there was a certain lightness of feeling, an intensity of color, the comfortable chaos of family life. After was a different story. After consisted of weight: the weight of guilt and that of grief. The shutters were closed, the house was quiet. At night, my mother kept to her garden, clawing at the dirt by the light of electric torches, tearing up weeds and planting bulbs. Past midnight I would hear her come in through the back door, drop her trowel and gardening shears in the big metal bucket in the garage. There would be a few moments of silence, followed by the rush of water through pipes, the sound of the washing machine shuddering to life. Then her footsteps up the interior stairs from the garage to the main level of the house, and the rat-a-tat-tat of the shower in the porcelain tub. Meanwhile, my father sat in the Stickley chair in their bedroom, reading, a glass of water on the table beside him. It was not a comfortable chair; before, he had always read in the recliner in the living room, his hand curled around a wineglass, Bob Dylan or Johnny Cash playing softly on the stereo. After, there was no wine, no music.

Some years after Lila's death, at a garage sale on Collingwood, I reached into a cardboard box and pulled out an old hardback copy of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. The jacket had been torn and taped back together, and the pages were warped and swollen. A sticker on the cover declared *25 cents*. It was a warm Saturday morning in September, the whole weekend stretching before me. I had nowhere to go, and the sun felt good on my bare arms, so I turned to the first page. "A story has

no beginning or end," it began, "arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead." It was Andrew Thorpe's old motto, there in black and white.

I scanned the line with my eyes twice, three times, to make sure I had read it right. Then I placed a quarter on the table, tucked the book under my arm, and began walking. It had happened before, I imagined it would happen again: just when I thought I had managed to outdistance the past, to put Lila's story behind me, some unexpected thing would surface, bringing it all back. It could happen anywhere, anytime: a glimpse of someone who looked like her, a mention in the news of some significant mathematical discovery, a snippet of a certain song on the radio, a review of one of Andrew Thorpe's books.

It should not have surprised me that the man who had made a career out of Lila's story would have appropriated the novelist's words as his own. What disappointed me was my own gullibility, my willingness to believe a thing I had been told without examining it for flaws, never stopping to question the source.

Every story is an invention, subject to the whims of the author. For the audience on the other side of the page, the words march forward with a certain inevitability—as if the story could exist one way only, the way in which it is written. But there is never just one way to tell a story. Someone has chosen the beginning and end. Someone has chosen who will emerge as the hero or heroine, and who will play the villain. Each choice is made at the expense of an infinite number of variations. Who is to say which version of the story is true?