

A New Beginning

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Miranda sorts through her closet with her face squeezed hard, somewhere between a pout and a frown. Mostly, she's upset with herself. She really wants to be either really, really cool and aloof and big-deal-who-cares, or else totally angry about the uproar, but all she can manage is to be ticked off. Ticked off about having to dress up, ticked off about not being able to be cool and aloof, ticked off about caring.

Dress! Who wears dresses anymore? If he thinks sixteen-year-old girls wear dresses, he's been a lot farther away than anybody ever told her. That might explain why he never wrote. No, it can't. Nothing can. The blue one. She'll wear the blue one, and she strips off the pale red one, drops it in the pile. Not pink. Pale red. Not pink. No way she'd even think about wearing pink, not for him. Not for anybody, but totally not for him.

She drops the blue dress down over her head, but it barely even pauses before she steps out of it. The blue dress joins the pale red one in the rapidly growing pile on the floor, and she stands staring into the closet, her whole face clenched so hard it hurts.

Maybe he'd like pink. She holds the pink dress up again, looking in the mirror.

Looking in the mirror, Peter turns sideways. There's a bit too much Peter hanging over the waistband of the slacks, and he shakes his head in disgust. This is why he wears the jeans he does, big baggy things that'd count as sagging on anybody else, lots of pockets to disguise his shape. This pair's almost as bad as the first pair, and he sits down, pulls them off carefully, one leg at a time. Carefully, with swift and practiced moves, he fidgets the cuffs together perfectly, slides the hanger down them, drapes them neatly. When they're perfect, they rejoin their brothers on the closet rod. The third pair, the third pair out of the three pairs he owns that aren't the big baggy jeans, are the best fit, the least constricting, the least ridiculous. Well, he'll have to wear something, it's too late to commit suicide, and he turns to his shirts. A little easier going here; he always wears big baggy tee shirts, but he at least has a white dress shirt that fits him ok. He has to wear it for orchestra, for things that Dr Emerson says aren't formal enough to merit the tux. He thinks, for a moment, about trying to hang it down over the waistband of the chinos, but discards the thought before his hands can even pause in the tucking.

He could've worn the jeans, actually. Mom told Miranda to wear a dress, and no one thought she was kidding, but then, Mom's opinions on proper dress are nothing new. Girls wear dresses, in the absence of a "compelling reason" not to. Not that Miranda pays much attention. Telling her to wear a dress didn't mean he had to dress up, but somehow, he feels the need.

Carrying his horn and stand, he goes downstairs.

Katie dresses slowly. When he called yesterday, after the shock, after the long silent sitting in her room, the first thing she did was go to the mall. She didn't even tell Peter and Miranda, not until today. Her first stop was Victoria's Secret, and now, stepping from the shower, slowly slowly drying and powdering and oiling, everything she puts on is brand-new. Brand-new for him, from the skin out. Each line of elastic snugged carefully perfect, each fold tucked down just right, every smoothness spread slowly flat, each patch of lace fingered smooth. She stopped at the salon on the way home, for her first-ever bikini wax, and she let them talk her into doing her legs, too.

She remembers her wedding night. Their wedding night. She'd made him wait, and he'd seemed willing. She hadn't let him touch her until that night, and she'd spent almost two hours just like this, stroking and tucking and smoothing till everything was perfect for him. That night was a beginning, and tonight will be another. A new beginning, only now she knows how to be what he needs.

In the living room, Peter spends a few minutes getting the French horn and music stand to look like he practices in here all the time, like he just got up; like he heard a car outside, set down the horn, and stood up to see what was up. Miranda watches, pacing, wearing the pink dress she calls pale red and never wears. He doesn't like

that dress, doesn't like the way it makes him want to watch her knees. He turns away, leafing through the music on the stand, wondering what piece he should have just gotten up from to go check the street. Seven years ago, her knees were always skinned and scratched. Skinned and scratched like his were, the last time he remembers seeing his father.

Even then, he was chubby. Even at eleven, maybe especially at eleven. He'd a whole lot rather be in his room with the recorder he'd gotten in third grade, or the old metal clarinet his uncle'd given him a year or so later, pretending he took music lessons like the boy next door, but he'd had to go out in the back yard and "throw a few" with his father.

Even now, he's not sure why. They'd done it in the past, but he thought he'd been given up on. He knew he was a disappointment, but he really wasn't sure what he could have done differently. He just wasn't that boy, wasn't that son you could take out in the back yard and "throw a few" with. His father'd left him alone for months, and then suddenly, there he was again, juggling the big stiff mitt, trying to fend off the ball his father threw. The third or fourth time he fell down and cried, his father'd gone inside. He didn't come home from work the next day, and some deeply hidden, sneaking part of himself still won't believe that he wasn't directly responsible.

Horn and stand as good as they're going to get, he begins to pace, working opposite to Miranda. She goes north, he goes south. She goes south, he goes north.

"Seven years," he says. She just nods, distracted. He wonders how well she remembers. She'd have been what? nine?

Mom comes in, looking soft and dreamy and ten years younger. Last week, there was a tea-and-cookie thing after the last concert of the year, and there was this new kid, a trombonist. He's standing there by Peter and Jackson and some other guys, and he looks up and goes "Wow!" and everybody looks around. "Is that someone's sister? Man, I'd like to—" and Jackson's smothering the new kid. "Dude, that's my mom," Peter says, calmly. "She's like, thirty-five," putting another cookie in his mouth. She's always looked younger than she is, but right now she looks like she's not even twenty yet. And happy, she looks happier than he can remember seeing her for a long time.

"Where's your school picture, Peter? Why is that there?" pointing at the chess club plaque he hung up an hour ago, where his stupid-looking senior picture was. "He's not going to care about that, Peter. Put the picture back. Miranda, are you wearing nylons? You're not wearing nylons. I told you to wear nylons. Get yourself up there and put some on. Peter, hang the picture back up." Well, happy but anxious.

"Mom, it's a picture of *me*. Just the way I look, right now. He doesn't need to see a picture of me, when he can see me. Remember how he used to say I spent too much time inside? I needed to go and play with the other boys? I'm proud of that plaque, Mom. I want him to see it," and something in the way he says that, something firm and tall, makes her relent. She turns to Miranda, ready to stand her ground on nylons, at least, but Miranda's already headed upstairs.

She can't find any nylons, and she calls down to her mother, offering to make the sacrifice and wear jeans after all, but Mom says look in the linen closet, so she does, and there's half a dozen new pairs in there. Drat. There's a mirror in the closet door, and she pivots a bit in front of it. Pink. Definitely pink, and she goes into her room. Sliding the the nylons on, hating the icky way they cockle-burr onto her fingers, she studies the ribbons and medals on the wall. Not a bad idea, Peter. Make a stand. This is me. Like it or lump it. Ribbons and medals from cross-country, a couple of trophies from fast-pitch. The cross-country things would have to be hung up, but the trophies are actually a little cheap looking. There's so much pulse and heartbeat tied up in every one, so many tears, so much of her life, that she's never noticed that, and doesn't much care now, but there's a school picture of her that she can take down, on the wall in the living room. Why take a chance on having him think the trophies are cheesy? Her best medal in hand, she opens the door. Third in the state, last fall.

Heading for the stairs, she feels a draft in an awkward place, and she has to stop to pull her skirt out of the back of her nylons. *This* is why I wear jeans, Mom.

Mom's gone somewhere by the time Miranda comes back. He watches her come down the stairs, wearing a green dress, longer and fuller than the pink one. This one makes her look like a little girl, all puffy sleeves and a big bow in the back. "You going to a tea party?" and that came out a lot meaner-sounding than he meant it to, but she just grunts at him. All he really meant was the pink one made her look like the girls at school, but he doesn't think he can tell her that. He turns to the window, watches the stop sign for a while. It's just standing there, being a stop sign, waving a little in the breeze.

Tea party. Her father's knees were up by his ears, sitting in her tiny wooden chair in the back yard. The cup looked like the toy it was, plucked between his thumb and finger like that. When she holds it, it looks real. When she holds it, it *is* real. The cup, the tea, the cakes, the other guests, all are real, but she doesn't think he gets it. She thinks he sees a plastic toy, and Kool-Aid, and lemon sandwich cookies, and a bunch of dolls and stuffies. He'd never come to one of her tea parties, back when she still did all this, and then today, he came and asked her if she wanted to. Even for her, the magic's almost gone now, and she's sure he isn't getting it. When he goes inside, she puts the tea cup down and hugs her knees, skirt flapping.

He didn't come home from work the next day. She still wonders if it was her tea party that was the last thing he couldn't stand.

She takes the picture down and puts it on the piano. It has one of those things that fold out, and it stands there looking like it's supposed to be there, like maybe there's some connection between her and the piano. Ha! Fat chance! That shiny black demon hates her with a passion matched only by her hatred for it. She's hanging the medal up where the picture was when Peter gently rolls a few chords from the old piano. All he has to do is look at it, and it starts to sing for him. Yeah, but he can't run. Or play first base.

"Oh, Miranda! Not you, too!" Mom's back. "You know how he feels, honey. He's going to see that medal and he'll think. . . oh, who cares? That *is* you, isn't it?" and she sighs a deep sigh. That *is* Miranda, and the chess club thing *is* Peter, and if he's coming back, he'll just have to get used to it. She can be what he needs, she can be all he needs, and the need he felt for his kids to be some old standard will just have to die. They are what they are, and he'll love them just as much as he did before. He did, he did love them. He just didn't know how to show it. Now he will, with her being what he needs.

She checks her watch, checks the clock on the living room wall, goes into the kitchen and checks the microwave clock. They're all traitors. They all say he's twenty minutes late, and there's no way he'd be late to this. She'd check the clock on the DVD, but they never did get it reset after the last big winter storm. The book was gone, and who can figure out a DVD player with no book? She straightens Peter's plaque a little, slides her finger down behind the medal's ribbon for no reason at all, hitches the sheet music on the piano a sixteenth of an inch left, turns the page on Peter's stand. She doesn't even notice when he comes along behind her and turns it back.

Check the clock again. All right, check them *all* again. They're still all wrong.

They all three drift in and out of the living room, never leaving it completely empty, like they're taking turns on sentry duty. If it's your turn on sentry duty, you can pace, you can fidget, you can put your fingers on the edge of the window frame and do calf lifts, but you have to check on the stop sign out front every few seconds, just to be sure it's still there, still being a stop sign, still alone out there.

Four hours late, a pickup pulls up outside, and they all troop out the door, all thinking they look over-eager, none of them wanting to be last one out.

For just a second, Peter thinks they were wrong, this isn't the right truck at all, because a total stranger emerges. But then he recognizes the sweat-stained John Deere hat, and then the bony hands, and then the stranger isn't a stranger at all, it's his father.

"Hey, Sport!" his father says too loudly, "Good to see you! Know you anywhere, Tiger! Chip off the old block!" and he laughs a forced-sounding guffaw. Yep, definitely the right man. He squats back a little, tries to shadow-box with Peter, but Peter still doesn't know how to respond to that, and he stops. He raps his knuckles a little on Peter's pudgy belly, saying "Oughta lose a few pounds, there, though, Sport! Lookin' a little pudgy!"

“Princess!” holding his arms out to Miranda to be rushed into, but she just looks down at her feet. “It’s good to see you, too, Baby! Still cute as bug, after all these years!” but the moment’s too awkward, too stiff, and he moves on, to the woman he was married to for twelve years.

“Di- Katie! Long, long time!” he says in lieu of a greeting, watching her eyes. What is that he’s seeing there, in her eyes?

“Hey! Presents! I have presents!” and he’s turning back to the truck, digging in a big bag, turning back. “Didn’t bother with gift-wrapping!” he says, like they couldn’t see that.

“Hey, hey, Sport! Hunh?” holding out a football like it means something else, his head on one side, that huge grin glowing. “How ‘bout that, hunh?” and every syllable says “Be excited! This is cool!” but it really isn’t. Peter takes the football awkwardly in both hands, and he’d tuck it under his arm like they do on TV, drop down into that stance, put his knuckles on the ground, call out some numbers and dodge slickly past his father, dance that jiggy toe-dance in the end zone, if only he could. He holds the ball awkwardly in both hands, smiling and nodding, the old helpless tears sliding down his mind, way in the back. *Come inside, Dad*, he says, way in the back. *Come inside and hear me play.*

“Princess! I saw this, and it made me think of Daddy’s little girl, right away. I saw it, and it just called out your name, right there in the store!” his hands making a megaphone, being a toy calling out. It’s a soft plastic pony a foot high, glittery pink with a rainbow mane so long it would sweep the ground, if it was real. She thinks it’s really stupid, and she wants to drop down on her knees and play on the gravelly front walk, so he’ll know how much she loves it. She wants to show him her medal in the living room. She wants to show him the cheesy trophies and all the medals she ran so hard to get, so hard she threw up. She wants to throw her arms around him and cry, and tell him she’s sorry, she’ll never do it again, please please please come back, but she doesn’t know what she did.

“D- Katie, this is for you. I still remember,” he says, like he’s holding back some deep emotion. He hands her a gift-pack of the perfume she wore in high school, the perfume she quit wearing in the first year they were married. He never did remember that, and she takes it from him now with the same old frustration she used to take it from him with every birthday, every anniversary, every Christmas. She hasn’t worn this stuff for years, but she’d wear it now, she’d slosh it all over if it meant he’d follow her up to her room and unwrap the gift she wrapped for him so slowly, so perfectly. She’s opening her mouth to say something about going inside, when he speaks again.

“Well. . .” he says slowly, like this is something he’d rather not say, “Well. . .” shuffling his toe a little, looking down. “I, uh, yeah. I really don’t have any time, right now. There’s, uh, someone waiting, actually. Met her last night. She’s at the motel now, so, uh. . . Hey, though! Good to see you all! Real good! We gotta do this again, ok?” and then he’s gone.

“Seven years,” Peter says, when the sound of his truck is gone completely, watching his mother watch the stop sign at the end of the street. “Seven years,” he says, shrugging one shoulder at Miranda as he starts up the stairs. “I hereby declare him dead,” and he’d throw the football clear over the house if he thought he could, but he drops it in the porch swing on the way by, whistling a few bars of Beethoven, his fingers already working the keys of the French horn that waits for him in the living room.