

Remembering

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I

Blue. He remembers blue. A blue so deep, so dark, so blue, you can smell it in the back of your throat like swallowing a crayon, like the crayon shavings under your nails from peeling the paper back.

Strawberry. That clean cool first-lover smell of strawberries. The scrape of her nails, the swift kitten of her hair on his arm, the slick pearl taste of her teeth.

He remembers the taste of the palm of her hand, the warm drift of her hair in his face, the gentle tug of her teeth on his lip, both hands greedy on the back of his neck, combed into his hair.

The silken swell of her rising breasts, the taper of her back in the palms of his hands, the untracked dunes of her hipbones, the flat uncharted sea of her stomach.

Amber. He remembers Amber as he wakes. He's dreamed of Amber again, dreamed of her still, dreamed of her forever. He sits on the muddled bed, sits in the darkened room, shuffles into his slippers, into his past, into that timeless dream he knew her in so long ago. He peels back the layers of paper, baring the raw blue core of the old dreams.

She was everything he'd ever wanted from a girl, everything he'd ever even dreamed they could be, from his earliest preteen dreams. She thought her name silly; he thought it mysterious, steeped in time, holding all the frozen relics of the unknown. She thought her dark eyebrows ugly; he thought them perfect counterpoint for her icy hair. She thought her hands too big and ugly; he thought them perfect embodiments of grace.

In the stark bichromatic perfection of hindsight, she is plainer than in the Kodachrome of dream, but he loved her then and he loves her now, standing in his slippers at the window, his fingertips pressed to the slick cool glass. The moon blurs across the sky, a time machine dragging him forward into that black and silver past.

Black and silver. Black and white. Right and wrong; Amber and Dana. Dana was everything he'd ever thought wrong about girls. Tall and lean and alive, her perfect eyes, her perfect breasts, watching him, luring him. Everything he'd ever thought wrong.

He met Amber in the first week at the new school, perhaps the first day. He ran into her, actually, rounding a corner in the musty booming echoes of the old building, head down in the schedule in his hand, puzzling the details from it, prizing out the clues. He rounds the corner and bumps into a girl, the girl, the one in his dreams for so long. Her long hair an icy blond, her eyes the blue of dreams, the blue of life, her eyebrows darker, beetled down in frustration perhaps, but her mouth is grinning, the wide mouth of his dreams, the lips he's kissed so many times. He's never seen her. He's new here.

He watches her lips quirk as he says "Oh! Sorry! Wasn't watching where I was going," and she points him on, on to the room he's seeking and on through his life, moving away down the hall. At the corner, she looks back, looks a deep electric shock into his still-hooked eyes. He's never seen her. He's known her forever.

Not there, she haunts his morning classes, watching him from the corners of his eyes. He can't see her straight on. He smells her scent in the breeze of his mind, feels the flow of her hair on his face. He can taste her perfect lips, the salt of her straining neck, as he writes out answers to useless chalky questions.

He sees her in the lunchroom, goes to her half-filled table.

"May I sit here?" he asks them, asks her, asks only her. She nods, and though the others may have answered also, he can't hear them in his memory. He can't remember the words of that first time, can't remember any of the questions or answers, the dreams stated, the revelations made and discovered. He remembers laughter. He remembers her eyes flashing and flicking in the cold white light, the gleam on her icy blond hair, the long slipping slope of his helpless plunge.

He remembers watching her breasts move, watching her shoulders move, her hips scoot her forward as she

makes some deep-held point, her hands flying like moths. The others may not have been there at all. The memories may be tangled, now, may be braided together with other times. There were so many other times.

She's in all his afternoon classes, and by the time they get to the first, they're together. They walk together, sit together, move to the buses together. He touches her hands the very first time there at the buses, taking her fingers in his for one eternal instant, taking her eyes in his, breathing her warm scent and telling her he'll see her tomorrow.

Touching her the first time. So many first times. The first time he kissed her, the first time he touched her breast, the first time he moved his hand to her buttons, his eyes on hers, his thoughts on hers. So many first times. So many more times.

The weeks rolled by in a long perfection of time, just time together, simple time passing as they lived their perfect moments. He'd start thoughts and she'd finish them. She'd move her hand a certain way, and he'd be the rest of the movement. They're one voice in two minds, one curve drawn with two pens. They are perfection itself, the perfection of timing, the perfection of movement, the perfection of being.

Chestnuts, fallen. Park benches where they cuddled in the fall cold. The laughter and snowballs of winter. The green of crocuses, the pulsing rebirth of spring, he remembers all these things as blue, the deep blue of belief, the blue of her eyes. The blue of love.

Dana. Amber's best friend Dana. Dana watched him from the first, the flickers of her ember eyes telling him things he didn't get. When Amber missed three days to a bad cold in late spring, Dana talked to him, comforted him, kept him company in the interminable lunch times. She flashed those eyes at him, heaved her breasts, finally made one certain move one time too many. She tapped the spin of some ancient flywheel deep inside herself, threw him on that potter's wheel, worked the clay of his mind into a flat and shallow vessel, a vessel incapable of thought, incapable of logic.

When Amber came back to school, he was gone. He was there, but he was gone, melted into the puddle of Dana. Dana was everything he'd ever thought wrong about girls. Mean and shallow-minded, vindictive. She'd hated Amber for years. When she laughed that last time and walked away from him, two days later, Amber was gone, melted into a puddle of hatred she never came back from.

His hands to the window of his lonely bedroom, his fingers wrinkled, his eyes faded, his thin body shivering in flannel pajamas, he remembers blue and strawberries and icy blond hair.

He remembers Amber as he drifts toward that welcome sleep.

II

The drawer won't actually slam, of course, it's far too discreet for that, but she bets that's harder than it's been banged shut in all its hundred-plus years, and the carpet's too soft to let her heels sound their anvil chorus as she marches to the table, but two glass paperweights and a fifth of single-malt fire a nice angry salvo when she dumps this last armload down by the box. They'll hear her, all right, all those sniggering losers out there with their keyboards up their butts! She'll see to it they at least hear her! She's spent the best years of her life trying to control the emotions of others, and look where it got her! Fifty-nine! Fifty-*nine* and the snow globe from Paris sails nicely through the frosted glass and into a sudden shivering silence. Oh, they'll hear her! They'll yammer about this day for years. They'll probably get a body-guard to escort the next one out, after today. The crystal whale almost goes through the big window over the street, but the lawyer in her screams something about liability, and then it almost follows the Eiffel Tower into the outer office, but she hears his voice in her mind's ear, and then she'll smash it down on the table, but a smaller, softer voice somewhere whispers something, and she sets it gently into the box, instead.

Fifty-nine. Not even sixty, not even the sixty-five they'd all expected of her, much less the seventy-five or eighty she'd planned on. Fifty-nine! Fifty-nine years old, twenty-seven years at Lehman, Lehman, Hammaraskold, and this

is how they repay her! Damage control, they called it. Fair enough, that lawyer part murmurs, fair enough. She'd said the same thing when they'd dumped Albertson last year, even though she'd known it was all so her boss could move up. Best way up the ladder, she's found. Help your boss move up. And drop your panties for him, go to your knees for him. Whatever.

But now she's not even moving, not slamming things any more, not stomping, and her fingers soothe the crystal whale like she'd make it sing, a wine glass whispering in a quiet room, a sad wind sighing in a stony desert somewhere.

A deep breath like she'll sigh herself, and catch it hard at the last moment, force it out like anger from her core, and she and her boxful of years stomp one last time out through the silence.

She saw him, actually, just a couple months ago. Crossing a street toward his car, and the shaking in his hand was probably just the struggle to sort keys one-handed. The look of age was probably just the affectation of the hat and the old-fashioned haircut. He wore a brown over-coat against the fall chill, and she was so stricken by his age that she'd done the math. Sixty, he'd be. That's not old. Why's he look so old?

Driving one-handed, she cuddles the whale in her lap, like it matters to her. When he gave it to her, she'd known his time was up. Never take a gift from a boy, she'd decided. Well, not really. Take the gift, take the next half-dozen, but begin to plan his downfall as your hand reaches out toward that first one. The whale means nothing to her, and she'll put it back in the box so she can drive, but she tucks it safely back into her lap, fitting her hand along the curve of its breaching back.

That first time, the time at the swimming hole by the river. You swing out on this big rope swing, dropping from the top of the arc, and if you tie your swimsuit top just that perfect bit too loose, it slides off as you go under, and floats away toward where he stands on the bank. "Don't worry!" he calls to her, wading out. "I'll bring it out to you!" embarrassed and blushing, but nowhere near as flustered as he is when he gets there, and she hands him her cut-offs, grinning with a practiced coyness.

Then, on the riverbank, in the tall sweet grass, that sweet release again, like nothing she can ever do for herself. She tries, and it's okay, but this. . . this is what it's all about, right here. This is why she's sought out all those boys, ever since she was thirteen. "This is my first time, so go slow, ok?" she whispers to them in a little shivery silver voice. "No, no, it doesn't hurt!" she tells them, squinching the skin by the corners of her eyes, baring her teeth a tiny bit, biting the edge of her lip, blinking hard. "It's fine, it's just that it's so- big!" Works every time.

That's the trick that got her all her jewelry and a good part of her clothing, all through school. It got her that summer clerk spot under old Judge Robard, and the internship with Evans and Evans the following summer. It got her this job, for that matter. And it got her fired.

It probably wouldn't have shattered if she had slammed it down on the table. It would have been best to chuck it through that big plate-glass window after all, and somewhere in her mind, she storms back into the office, just so she can, just so she can see the looks on all their faces. Somewhere in her mind, she circles the blocks back around to the building and slams it through from the outside, but all she does is drive one-handed, her hand snugged down along the whale's back, tears on her face and clouds in her mind.

When he gave it to her, it was clear he'd saved for months. It was clear there'd be no more for quite a while, too, so she started planning. Dana. Sweet, naïve, subservient Dana. She'd give him to Dana, and kill that old bird with the same stone.

In first grade, they'd walked to school together, she and Dana. If she got mad at someone at school, she'd slap Dana's back just barely too hard to be play, over and over and over all the way home. She'd make Dana walk three steps behind her, telling her it was to give her a chance to think about her tone of voice. In the giggling, running girl games at recess, she'd volunteer Dana for all the bad parts in the playing. If they played school, Dana was the dunce. If they played house, Dana got stood in the corner.

But by their junior year, Dana's dog-like patience was getting annoying, and she wound her up with hints about

how Tyson was getting restless, she was getting worried, he was looking at Dana like he maybe saw greener grass on the other side of that fence. You're my best friend, Dana! I've known you forever! What can I do, how can I keep him? Then she skipped school for three days, and when she came back, neither of them was ever going to bug her again.

The fifth of single-malt from her desk helps her through a long slow evening, sudden fits of anger threaded on a string of melancholy, and when it's gone, she snatches it up to smash it through the window, but she stops, her fingertips pressed to the cold cold glass, to watch the moon slide down between the city towers.

III

All six kids together in the house again, and every time she thinks that, it makes her cry again. No sound, just two big tears that come and quiver on her eyelids like they'll fall, but then they subside again. All six kids in the house together, the living ends of six long strands through time and space, leading away to those distant points where they each began. Those strands lead through Iraq, through Afghanistan, through car wrecks and tornados and one smoky, spark-riddled, sliding emergency landing in a 747, but they all come together here, and she'll cry this time, she'll drop those two tears this time, but they subside again.

It always happens this way. Every time she can get them all together again, every time she can gather up those strands and knit them together one more time, she ends up on the couch in the living room surrounded by her photo albums. The kids are all off in the yard, or in the TV room, or playing the Xbox. Well, kids. Evelyn, the youngest of the bunch, is twenty-one already, treated by her brothers as just one more boy. She was the one in the 747.

They'll come and look at the albums with her, at first, paging backward through time, but then the time gets too far back, the pictures too old, and one by one, they're gone. She keeps turning pages, keeps slipping further and further back as the evening wears on, fighting down her two old friends every time she hears a blur of laughter from another room.

Here's the wreckage of their last tornado, the one that decided them. The house looks like so much splintered wood, and the old Chevy's parked in the elm like it belongs there. Look how young Dan looks, his arm around her waist, his hair wind-blown. "We'll rebuild!" he'd laughed the first time. "It's not too bad," he said the second time. The third time in nine years, he'd said, was too much.

Here's that big picnic, the last time they got all their friends together. Two years out of school, and everybody's already moving on. Jobs, and college, and careers. Her barely-started family was her career, the only career she'd ever wanted, and the two tears appear again, but they're gone before she can threaten them with her clutched kleenex. Look how young she looks there. She sits up a little straighter, lifts her breasts a little higher. Dan still says she's sexy, but she's begun to doubt his sanity.

Look, here's a clipping from the small-town paper, vicariously celebrating, local-girl-makes-it-big. Summer clerk's position for Judge Robard, all the way in New York City, two hours drive. Amber smiles grimly from a blurry head-shot, gilded letters unreadable on frosted glass behind her. They hadn't talked at all since their junior year, but when her mother sent this to her, she couldn't bring herself to throw it away. They hadn't talked since. . .

And look, here he is. Her one picture of him, cut from the yearbook. She'd had others, she'd taken dozens, but they all had Amber in them, and they didn't survive the upheaval of her late teens. The doubts, the darkness and depression, the long grim evenings with the razor blade from Dad's garage held ready, but never used. And then she'd used it finally, used it to slice up all the pictures she'd ever taken of Amber, all the pictures she'd ever taken of Tyson, the one long letter she'd written him and never sent. Used it to slice herself away from all that past. From that small pile of shredded regrets, she finally could go on, and the blade had never called her name again.

Here's Amber again, though. Her mother sent her this, too. Two little girls, dressed up for their first day of

second grade. What's that look in little Amber's eyes? What's in Dana's? She thought for years that Amber was her best friend, and then Tyson shook that all up. Three days. Three days she'll never forget, although she never thinks of them. She thought he was the one. That last night, before Amber came back to school and he disappeared into that eddy of bewildered longing, she remembers that night even now. She wouldn't let him do it right, she made him use his hand, but in her view, that shuddering gasping violet haze is when she lost her virginity. She has no doubt now, he was wrong for her, but only because Dan was better.

The evening's gone dark and cool now, and she stands with her hands against the glass of the window, watching the moon. Remembering.