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For Jeannie

By Kai Harris

For Jeannie

On an otherwise typical day, Jeannie altered course by making plans in her head instead of the usual cursive sprawled on the backs of her hands. The playdate with two girls staggered in age—four and seven, hers three and six—was scheduled for 2:30 PM at the big park by the river. By 3:30 PM they'd return home, and by 4:15 PM her daughters would be drowned in the clean, white tub on the second floor of the big house. It had the makings of a perfect day, for Jeannie.

She wasn't a bad mom, truly. Only tired, and less excited than before. Once, she was fun. She played keyboard in a band that gigged at dive bars, and sometimes, when she was perfectly drunk—drunk enough to sing with abandon but not enough to forget the words—she dove into crowds of adoring fans who chanted various mispronunciations of her name. Her hair had been auburn, then black, then platinum, then pink, then auburn again in the end. When she married her bandmate, Kevin, it wasn't for all the reasons girls usually married, which made her proud. She was already happy, already successful and well-liked and whole. Kevin wasn't a cliché, for Jeannie. Not a half to a whole, or a best friend. No, Jeannie married Kevin simply because on a magical day of music, laughter, and late-night greasy hash and eggs, he'd asked. It was the magic that made the answer yes, which she'd whispered emphatically in his ear, two times, as he twirled her around the tiny loft that was his but became hers too, over time, with the collection of multicolored pillows, one for each country she'd visited, an echo of her careful chaos.

They lived in that loft together for three years before buying the big house on the cul-de-sac, with the sloped red roof and the uneven bushes in front. It was in that house that they became pregnant with Adeline, then Rosie. The first pregnancy, for Jeannie, was a mistake, making the second insanity, the repetition of an action that she knew, inevitably, would yield the same sour result. When Adeline was born, the sun was the brightest it'd ever been, a pale, soft yellow that glowed through the edges of her reminiscence. But each day since it grew dimmer and duller, so that by the time Rosie was born, all Jeannie saw were drizzling, gray clouds.

Kevin still saw the sun, though, when he'd hum in the mornings and flip chocolate chip pancakes high in the air. He made the girls giggle when he scraped his stubbly beard against their cheeks before bed, then they'd lay still in his arms for a book that he'd recite in voices higher and faster and stronger than his own. Usually, though, he was gone. He hadn't had to quit the band when Jeannie did, because for him, nothing had changed.

For Jeannie, nothing was the same. Days and months and years flew by that felt strangely like fiction yet hardened her to jagged stone. If she smiled, pretended,

it was because someone was watching. But not lately. Now, when Rosie asked for a piggyback ride she'd say no, simply because the pain in her back and neck and legs and fingers and ears drove daggers into her futile, feigned efforts. Before, she'd carry Rosie on her back and Adeline in her arms and race around the house until they'd all collapse in heaps of laughter. But lately, there was only pain and gray. For Jeannie, the girls had become nothing more than a reminder of all that she'd given away. That awful sentiment, which surprised and quickly consumed her, was the first secret she'd kept from Kevin. The bathtub was the second, a riddle she'd repeated in her head endlessly to avoid telling her husband, telling her therapist, telling anyone, in the six days since she'd decided.

After the playdate, which lasted too long in a warm, counterfeit sun, Jeannie and Adeline and Rosie marched home. The park was not far from the big house with the sloped red roof. Rosie rode in a little red wagon that Adeline tugged with two hands. They stopped twice: once, when Adeline found a flower and picked it for Jeannie to display in her auburn curls, then again when Rosie begged to stop and get out and walk on her own. Each of her tiny, clumsy steps reminded Jeannie of all the wrong steps on this perfect, perfect path.

Once they were home, 4:07 PM, Jeannie took the girls upstairs. She ran warm water in the tub; Rosie would complain if it was too hot, Adeline would complain if it was too cold. It took three minutes to run the water, another three to undress their wiggling bodies. *Two more minutes.* She would start with Adeline because she would be the most difficult, her personality a delicate mixture of Jeannie's inflexible resolve and Kevin's interminable trust. When Jeannie forced Adeline's face beneath the surface of the bath water, they would lock eyes, and for a moment, Adeline would still believe, without a doubt, in her mother's love. *One more minute.* Rosie would giggle, unknowing and unsure—Jeannie would have to be fast enough, faster than Rosie's little brain and little fear—until her lungs too filled with warm liquid, and she would be choked and writhing and wrapped around the big sister who she would follow always, anywhere.

As Jeannie lowered their frail, breathing bodies into the water, 4:15 PM, she peeked out the window at the sprawling oak in the front yard. The tree Adeline loved to climb, the tree that inspired Rosie's very first word, *leaf*, pushed through pursed lips. She wondered what would happen if she climbed her daughters' tree instead, balancing carefully on its long limbs, then flying down, down, into the sunshine below.