# THE POSSIBLE WORLD

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With gratitude to all the doctors and nurses and patients
who taught me what I know of medicine
*and*
In loving memory of my parents, Jacquie and Paul,
who taught me everything else

The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON, *NATURE*

CHAPTER ONE

# Ben

My mom has three freckles, light brown and almost perfectly square, two on her right cheek and one on her nose. She has an up-and-down line between her eyebrows that gets deeper sometimes. Like now, when the car has parked and she's gotten out, and I still haven't moved.

"We're here," she says, opening the back door. "Hop out."

I put my thumb on the seat belt button beside my booster seat. Nobody else in my class still uses a booster seat. In two months, when I turn seven, I can use just the seat belt. If I grow.

"How long will it be?" I ask.

She looks at her phone.

"I'll come back for you at seven. So, four hours."

"What are you going to do?" My thumb still on the button.

She purses her lips in a thinking way. "I will go out dancing. I will put on an electric-blue gown that goes all the way down to my toes, and silver high-heeled slippers."

"No you won't." She doesn't *have* a dress or shoes like that.

"No I won't," she agrees, smiling. "I will probably do some grocery shopping and clean the kitchen." She puts a hand on the top of the car door. "Or do you want me to stay?"

I sneak a look at the house beyond her.

"Why does it have to be so many people?" I ask.

"It's not so many. Four is not so many."

Her phone burrs from her pocket; she takes it out and looks at the screen, then puts it to her ear and turns away, talking. She pushes the car door almost closed and leaves her hand on it, like I might jump out.

How she looks: she has yellow hair that comes down to her chin, eyebrows darker than her hair and brown eyes, a black speck in the right one the shape of a bird with only one wing. One tooth is slightly forward from the others in her mouth, just a little bit, and her smile goes up more on the left than the right. There's a white line under her chin from a roller-skating accident back when she was a little girl. Two holes in her earlobes where the earrings go, usually the little pearls, but sometimes dangly ones; none today.

How she sounds: her voice brisk in the mornings, telling me to *get a move on,* softer in the evenings, and when she laughs I think of a brown velvet ribbon falling through the air. The nonsense song she sings to me when my tummy aches: *lavender blue dilly dilly, lavender green*. I told her once that lavender's a kind of purple, and purple can't be blue or green; she paused and then said, *But the song's still good* with a question in it. Yes, the song is still good just the way it is. Other things she says: *I love you more than pizza, or Bingo, or caterpillars.* Last week she asked me, *Do you really have a stomachache?* while I lay with my head on her soft lap, ear down. *You're having a lot of stomachaches. Shhh, I'm listening to your tummy,* I said. *Sometimes my stomach hurts when I'm worried about something,* she said. *Are you worried about something? Sing some more,* I said, and she did.

The way she smells. In the morning like hand cream and shampoo. She brings a different smell home with her from the hospital. I said something about it once and now she washes her hands and changes her clothes right after work. Until her next shower, though, there's always still a trace of that chemical smell.

How she feels—when I go to her room after a nightmare she lifts the covers and it's warm and she puts her arm over me, across my chest, and it's warm and solid and she pulls me against her and I can feel that warmth spreading through me and the bad dream melts away. *I love you more than bunny rabbits and Jell-O. More than Gorgonzola and crayons.* Her long fingers, their smooth unpolished curves of fingernail.

*Before* is sliding away. I barely remember it. The tall woman with the water-blue eyes, like a mother but not my mother, I know there was a time I saw every detail about her in my mind, but now I see her only in flickers: standing in a kitchen paring the skin from an apple into a looping red curl, or kneeling in the dark spring dirt. I feel the wet on my knees too, and the grainy earth, but as soon as that comes it's gone again. She lives there now in that warm slice of time before I sleep, and even that is getting smaller, closing like a door.

"Buddy, you're so serious," Mom says, putting her finger on my nose. She's off the phone now. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm memorizing you," I say, and that warm brown ribbon unspools and falls around me. I close my eyes and breathe deep to pull the noise in with my ears.

"You are so funny." She bends down a little bit and looks me in the eyes. "Honey, there's no law that says you have to go."

"I want to go." Kyle is my best friend and I got him the toy he wants most and I can't wait to see him open it. But I don't know how it will be with the other boys there.

She knows what I need to hear. She puts her hands on the top of the open window and rests her chin there, so she sounds like she's chewing when she speaks. "You'll go inside," she says. "Maybe Kyle will open the door or maybe his mother."

"And Scooter."

"Uh-huh. Scooter will bark at first, and then he'll see it's you and he'll wag his whole butt."

Kyle's dog with the flat face, whose mouth doesn't ever close all the way, his pink tongue with brown spots on it always showing, moving when he breathes. Scooter's kind of gross. But it is funny how he wags his butt because he doesn't have a real tail.

"You'll take your shoes off in the hall. Remember, they have those wood floors. You'll line your shoes up with the other shoes."

Now I can see the wood floor in my mind, long and shiny. Scooter's toenails *clack clack* on it, and when he runs to the back door to greet Kyle's dad he sometimes can't stop and slides right past into the laundry room.

"Then you'll pet Scooter." He'll slobber on me and I'll need to wash my hands; it'll be okay, though, there's a little bathroom on the first floor that Kyle's mom calls the powder room. "Then you'll probably play some games."

"Kyle has PlayStation." I can see the basement room where the games are, the blue bouncy sofa and the Lego corner where Kyle and his dad are working on a castle. They've been building it for months and it's taller than me.

"Then you'll have cake. I don't know what kind," she says before I can ask. "Maybe chocolate. You'll sing 'Happy Birthday' and he'll blow out the candles, and then he'll open his presents and there may be some time to play with them before the movie."

"What movie?"

"I don't know."

I weigh this—the maybe-chocolate and the unidentified movie.

"Then you'll come?" I ask. "Right after the movie?"

"Right after."

"Okay." Now I can see it, the afternoon ahead into the evening, and finally the *want to go* defeats the dread. I push the belt release button with my thumb and the bands across my chest and tummy suck back into the holder. Mom straightens herself up and swings the car door open.

"I can stay for a while," she says, taking the wrapped box from the back of the car.

"No." No one else's mother will be there. I'm the smallest kid in my class, the youngest by more than a year. The only one with training wheels, maybe the only one who's never been to a sleepover. I can't be the one whose mom stays with him during a birthday party.

I hold her hand until we get to the front walk and then slip it out, just in case someone is watching from the window. When we're on the doorstep, she gives me the present to hold.

"Ben!" cries Kyle's mom when she opens the door. She's holding a coffee cup with a big yellow smile on it. "It's great to see you."

"Thank you for inviting me," I say. Kyle's mom raises her eyebrows, makes a nodding smile at my mother.

"I bet I know what this is." Kyle's mom takes the present from me with her free hand. "The boys are downstairs in the playroom. We'll be having pizza and cake in a little while."

"Where's Scooter?" I ask.

"He's on a doggy playdate," says Kyle's mom. "He gets a bit too enthusiastic around pizza."

"You okay, buddy?" Mom asks. She puts a hand under my chin; my heart pulses once, twice, against her fingertips where they touch my neck. I nod.

"Go on downstairs. I'll let you know when the pizza comes," says Kyle's mom.

My mom drops her hand. She looks at me hard and I nod again; she smiles and follows Kyle's mom toward the kitchen.

I rip the Velcro straps on my shoes and line them up in the hall next to the others. I am careful not to slip on the wood floors. It's easier when I get to the living room; there's a carpet with a tasselly fringe. The door to the basement is around the corner.

"What a little gentleman you're raising, Karen," I hear Kyle's

mom telling my mom as I open the basement door and the music of the PlayStation game swells out. "Can you stay for coffee?" I step down onto the first step and pull the door closed behind me.

WE HAVE TO take turns. There are four of us, but only two can play at one time. I get pretty far on my turns; I'm good at shooting things. In between it's fun to watch Kyle play; it's his game so he knows all the tricks.

"I'm going again," says Charlie when he's finally Game Over. That's not fair, he's had a long turn with Kyle while Elliot and I watched. Charlie keeps the controller and presses the buttons to start a new game.

"It's my turn," says Elliot. Charlie pretends not to hear him.

"Who's playing with me?" says Charlie. He's one of the biggest kids in class. Some kids say he already did third grade at another school, and when he came to our school they made him repeat. So he should be fourth grade and I should be second grade, but we're both in third. He and Kyle are on the same soccer team.

"It's my turn," Elliot repeats. I really can't believe he says this. Neither can Charlie; he turns his head slowly, like a robot. "It goes Kyle, then you, then me, then Ben."

"Lemme go. You can go next," says Charlie.

"It's my turn," repeats Elliot, and I want to tell him to shut up. Charlie hands the controller over, but I know that's not the end of it.

Kyle offers me his controller, but I shake my head; he shrugs and presses Start.

So it's Elliot and Kyle jumping through the Dragon Kingdom while Charlie and I watch. Charlie's next to me on the sofa. He's the kind of person who does something mean and then says, *What, you can't take a joke?* when the other person is crying.

"That's the doorbell," I say. Are more boys coming?

"Probably the pizza," says Kyle, jump-punching the serpent

that killed me on my last turn. There's heavy walking on the floor above. "Elliot, get that power-up right in front of you."

"Pizza!" says Charlie. "I'm starving."

"No green peppers, right?" says Elliot, collecting a trio of stars on the screen, boosting his health bar. "I'm allergic."

"I don't know," says Kyle. "My mom ordered."

"Smelliot's allergic," says Charlie in a whiny singsong.

"I get hives," says Elliot. "I swell up."

"Like your face swells up?" says Charlie. "Or what?"

I can see that Charlie is hoping there will be green peppers. A part of me almost hopes so too. I've never seen someone swell up before. I'm allergic to cats, but when I get around them I don't swell up, I itch and sneeze.

"Everywhere," says Elliot. "No green peppers or pecans," he tells Kyle. "My mom must have told your mom."

"Pay attention," orders Kyle. They're at a tricky part.

"Who puts pecans on pizza?" says Charlie.

"Not on pizza," says Elliot. "Just any pecans. In anything."

"She usually gets pepperoni," says Kyle. "Jump now, *jump*!"

"Smell-i-ot," says Charlie. "Smelliot can't eat pee-cans. What else can't Smelliot eat?"

And just like that we're on the edge of something. I can feel it, Elliot can feel it. Kyle, who's concentrating on the game, is unaware.

"Just green peppers," says Elliot. His voice is blank, like he's making a wall with it, trying to stop what's coming. His avatar takes one hit, then another. He flails, runs into a wall, tries to jump away from it, but his lifeline is pulsing red. "Ben, it's your turn next."

"I have to go to the bathroom," I say.

"Use the one upstairs," says Kyle. He's still trying to shoot them out of the dead-end Elliot has brought them to. "The one down here has spiders."

The word is electric. He has to know what will happen next. Or maybe kids like Kyle, kids everyone likes, don't have to see what

is obvious to kids like me and Elliot. We can see what's coming: Charlie sitting on one of us, dangling a spider *Open up* while pinching nostrils shut. Chest burning, mouth finally gasping open. I can almost feel the spider legs tapping my tongue.

"But it's your turn." Elliot is almost pleading; he's looking at me instead of the screen. Kyle yelps disappointment at the dying whine of Game Over.

"You can take my turn," I tell him, pushing away the shame. I shouldn't leave Elliot to risk the spiders on his own. "I really have to go."

I am quickly up the stairs, safe at the top. Behind me, I hear a thud and an *oof*—Elliot hitting the floor. I hesitate for a moment, but then turn the doorknob, step through, and shut the door behind me. I cross the hallway into the powder room and close that door too. I didn't actually have to pee before I went in, but suddenly I find I do. I turn on the fan and run the water in the sink. I'm careful, but I miss just a little bit, and I tear off some toilet paper to wipe up the drops from the floor. It's the end of the roll, though, and when I pull the remnant off and the cardboard is naked, I've got only half a square in my hand. I open the cabinet under the sink, where Mom keeps the toilet paper at home, and there it is, a soft white pyramid. I'm not careful enough reaching into the cabinet: I jostle things and a plastic bottle tumbles out onto the floor and rolls away from me, spilling a thin line of oil.

I retrieve the bottle, find the cap and screw it on, put it back into the cabinet. Then I crouch and try to wipe up the floor with toilet paper, but the oil spreads into a big shiny patch. It's obvious that I spilled. Steps go by outside the door; is someone about to knock? My heart is going fast.

I wind off lots of toilet paper, wet it in the still-running tap, pump *one one thousand, two one thousand* hand soap on, use the clump of it like a sponge to wash the floor. Too many bubbles; a bigger mess. I use several wet-tissue-clump sponges with no soap, and then some dry ones. When everything is finally back to the

way it was, more than half the toilet paper roll is gone. I rub my hands under the water for two alphabet songs and sniff them to see if the oil is gone, but I can't tell. Hand soap and two more alphabet songs, and then I dry them on one of the hanging towels, using the part that's behind, next to the wall, so the wet doesn't show. I turn off the tap and the overhead fan and take one last look at the floor. I can still see the shiny place, but maybe no one else will notice.

Doors are always risky—you can never tell what's on the other side. I use both hands to turn the doorknob and open the door just a bit, then a bit more, then finally take a breath and push so it swings wide open. Half expecting to see Charlie looming in the gap: *you've been in there forever.* Laughing, *Eww you smell like a lady,* maybe all the boys laughing, even Kyle, who's never laughed at me before. But the hallway's empty.

I was in there a long time, long enough for Kyle's mom to have called everyone up for pizza, but the basement door is still closed and there's no sound from the kitchen. I should go tell Kyle's mom that Elliot can't eat green peppers. She probably knows that, though. I could tell her instead that I'm hungry, so she'll call the boys to come upstairs and eat, move us all to the next thing on the list of pizza and cake and presents and movie.

There aren't any lights on in the hallway and it's gotten dark. I make my way by feel, one hand on the wall, toward the living room; the kitchen's on the other side of that. When I step onto the fringey living room carpet it squelches. Uh-oh, Scooter probably peed and now it's on my sock. It's a whole lot of pee—my sock's all warm and wet—and I step back and lift my foot to peel the sock off. Something in my brain knows that it's not pee; there's something flashing *Warning* in my head, but I've already got the alarm there from Charlie and Smelliot and the long, panicked bathroom cleanup, so I take another step onto the carpet, holding my sock in one hand. Almost to the kitchen. Why aren't there any lights on? There's a smell of coffee, and a metal taste in my mouth, and

a weird distant noise I can't identify, like a faraway siren. Suddenly I hear another sound, very nearby, that some place deep inside me recognizes—a short gurgle that makes the hairs on my neck stand up.

Instantly I'm dropped onto my belly and scrambling backward, stopping only when my feet hit a wall and I can't go farther. I'm under a table, eyes wide open. The blackness in front of me shifts and I realize that what I thought was just more darkness is a standing person, and the person is turning. Toward me? I can't see details, just shapes. I stare as hard as possible; I hold my breath. My heartbeat shakes my body and I try to press myself into the floor. There's a voice in my head keeping me still, saying, *Bark on the tree, buddy, you're bark on the tree.*

A motion-detector light comes on suddenly outside the upper windows, making slanted boxes of light across the room, and in one of them I can see Kyle's mom lying kind of sideways. She's mostly on her stomach with her hair across her face, and the smile from her coffee cup is on a broken piece beside her. She lifts her head a little and looks at me, hair stuck down across her face so that only one eye is showing. She swallows and coughs and blackness rushes out of her neck.

There's another sound right above my head and I look up, into the face of a man who's bending over me, his face glowing in a stripe of light from the window.

"You're not gonna say anything, right? You're gonna shut the fuck up?"

I am nodding like a puppet, like a woodpecker, so fast and automatic *yes-yes-yes*.

"Thank me," he says. "You need to thank me for saving you."

My jaw feels frozen. I open my mouth but nothing comes out.

The outside light goes off, leaving the room even darker. Is he gone? I stare hard into the black, not moving.

After a long time, or after no time at all, everything goes white and there's a *shhhhh* in my ears like the ocean and far away someone is screaming.

CHAPTER TWO

# Lucy

Patients lie. every doctor knows it. They lie innocently, or out of embarrassment; they lie to get something they want, or to avoid something they fear. Good lies and bad lies, meaningless lies. There must be a limited number of lies in the world, because I hear the same ones over and over again.

*I only had two beers.*

*My car got broken into and my Vicodin (codeine/Demerol/Percocet) was stolen.*

*I was just walking down the street, minding my own business, and some dude came up and stabbed me.*

Some Dude really gets around. He steals the pills, he stabs and shoots, he sails through red lights and stop signs and smacks into law-abiding cars. Sometimes he blooms cohorts: he is Two Dudes, or even Three.

I don't care about the lies or the dudes; I don't need or want the whole truth anymore. I want to know only the part that matters, that will guide me to discover what needs to be found and fixed.

In Trauma 2, an ambulance team is transferring a patient to the stretcher.

"Thirty-five-year-old restrained passenger, car versus tree." One of the paramedics reads from his run sheet as the other snaps the

belts back across the now-empty ambulance gurney. "Prolonged extrication, some delta MS but awake and talking, vitals good." Delta MS means altered mental status, anything from confused to somnolent to psychotic. "Driver's on the way."

"Hello, Doctor?" from the woman on the stretcher.

"I'm your nurse," Dennis tells her cheerfully. "Doctor's right behind me."

Scrabbling fresh gloves from the box on the wall, glancing at the EMS note for a name. "Hello, Crystal. I'm Dr. Cole. Does anything hurt?"

She tries to shake her head but the hard collar around her neck prevents that. "Where are my shoes?"

"Probably still in the car. Take a couple of deep breaths for me, okay?" Hooking the stethoscope into my ears, I press it against her clothing, then lift it to let the tech's trauma shears scissor by. The clothes fall away and the patient lies briefly naked, a length of pale gooseflesh, before the tech flicks a hospital gown open over her.

"Any medical problems?" I ask. Lungs clear, abdomen normal to palpation. "Do you take any medicines every day?"

"Um, thyroid." Crystal lets the tech lift her hand and guide it through one of the armholes in the gown. "Where are my shoes?" She puts her other hand through the other hole.

"She's been asking that the whole ride here," says one of the paramedics as they trundle the gurney out of the trauma room. "It was *all* about the shoes."

"What's the last thing you remember before being here?" I ask Crystal.

Furrowed brow, pause. "Today is what?" I have to think for a moment myself.

"Saturday."

I look at Dennis, who nods.

"Okay, breakfast," says Crystal. "I made chocolate-chip pancakes."

A concussion can wipe out everything for a variable period before the trauma, leaving retrograde amnesia—a blank space in recent memory that patients sometimes fixate on trying to fill up. They may say the same thing again and again. *Did you let the dog out, I'm late for work, my birthday's tomorrow, please help me.*

"Let's roll her."

The tech puts firm hands on either side of the head to keep it in-line, the nurse takes hold of her hip and shoulder, and they pull her—*one, two, three*—up onto her right side, with her back to me.

"No pain here? Or here?" I ask, pressing my fingers down the spine, pushing hard against each vertebra in turn, pausing briefly to hear each no.

"Where are my shoes?" says Crystal as they roll her back down.

There's a ruckus outside the room, the doors sliding open at the end of Trauma Alley, the voices of paramedics and the overhead call for *surgical team to Trauma 3*.

"Tell me if anything hurts," I say, rocking the pelvis and moving down the extremities. Bending the joints, checking the pulses. Intact, intact, intact. Scraping my thumb up each sole, watching the big toe point on each side. Normal. So just a concussion then, no other injury. Lucky: from the noises next door, the driver isn't doing so well.

"Do you have any allergies?" I ask Crystal.

"Not that I know of," she says. Strange how precise most patients are about that—as if allergies are stalking them, and it's just a matter of time before one leaps out from behind the bushes and reveals itself. A fleeting pucker at her brow and she adds, "I was wearing my purple dress."

"That's right." The dress lying in pieces on the floor is purple.

She shivers, an involuntary ripple that knocks her teeth together. Dennis looks up from his charting, gets a blanket from the warmer, and tucks it around her.

"Oh, thank you," Crystal croons. "Thank you so much."

The X-ray tech approaches with the orange metal-jacketed plate in her hands. "Trauma series plus a head CT," she sings out, like she's leading a call-and-response prayer. "Okay, this plate will be cooold, I'm sorry," she tells the patient.

"Where are my shoes?" The question is whispered now, urgent.

"Oh my God," says Dennis, under his breath. "Enough with the shoes."

*X ray*—the call to evacuate the room. Everyone goes into the hall, the tech dragging the thumb control on a long, curly cord. She presses it and there's a dull click from the mechanism; then she and Dennis dart back in to place the next X-ray plate.

Trauma 3 is not doing well; that's clear from the doorway. Bad sign number one: the entire trauma team is in there, from chief resident (long white coat), through junior resident and intern (scrubs, no white coat), down to medical student (short blindingly white coat). Bad sign number two: the sound of the vent, chuffing breaths down the ridged plastic ventilator tube that snakes through the air and disappears into the cluster of personnel around the stretcher. The worst sign of all: the Level One rapid-infuser has been rolled out of the corner of the room, and it's running blood. That's a Hail Mary right there.

"I've got the passenger next door," I tell Kim, the documenting nurse. "How is he?"

"His GCS was five when he came in," says Kim, looking up at the monitor above the stretcher, then down again to copy numbers onto the chart. "His pressure's dropping."

Tame words to contain such disaster. The Glasgow Coma Scale boils brain function down to eye opening plus verbal response plus limb movement, and predicts prognosis after head trauma. A normal GCS is fifteen, meaning alert and responsive, opening eyes spontaneously, following commands. You get a point in each category even if you do nothing: a doorknob has a GCS of three. But GCS is a luxury for this patient at this moment, an unneces-

sary frill: *pressure dropping* in the setting of blunt trauma means imminent death.

"We need to take him," says the surgical chief resident, striding to the foot of the stretcher. A *crack* as he steps on the brake there, releasing it. "We need to take him *now*." He puts a hand on each stretcher siderail and begins to pull.

The cluster of white coats breaks apart as the stretcher rolls toward the door. Hands jerk monitor leads from the patient's chest; more hands snap open the Level One and pull out the bag of blood inside, hold it up high in a two-fisted squeeze. An instant piercing shriek of alarm from the ventilator as the connection is detached, and then other hands are there with the Ambu bag, puffing manual breaths down the endotracheal tube. I get a glimpse of a purpled bleeding face, the eyes swollen to slits, as the stretcher goes by. It accelerates down the hall toward the OR elevator in a tense, tight company, a nurse running alongside and fumbling for the elevator key hanging around her neck.

Trauma 3 is now empty, its floor littered with the detritus of rescue: wads of bloody gauze, wrappings from the central line kit, the Foley kit, the endotracheal tube, the nasogastric tube, the IV bags. The monitor whines from the wall, leads drooping down, all of its lines flat. The ventilator still screams from the corner. I walk over to punch all the power buttons off.

"They musta been going a hundred," says a voice behind me. I turn to see one of the paramedics. He takes a cell phone from his front shirt pocket. "I got pictures."

"Jesus," I say as his index finger pushes the images by. For all the ER trauma I've managed during my residency, I haven't seen too many accident scenes. My EMS ride-alongs required back in internship were three years ago, and most of those were nontrauma runs. Dizzy old people, chest pain, asthma attacks.

"Took twenty minutes to get his door open," he says. I can see why: the vehicle in the pictures is impossibly compacted.

"Passenger's okay."

"She was belted. He wasn't." He lowers his voice. "And look at this." Pushing his fingers apart on the phone screen and homing in on an area behind the car. "No skid marks."

That meant the driver hadn't stepped on the brakes before the crash; he wasn't trying to stop. March in Rhode Island swings between stolid midwinter and the earliest fringe of spring; the recent thaw means that the ground in the image, between tired filthy fragments of snow, is soft enough to have taken tire marks.

"He could have been unconscious," I say, looking at the clean twin impressions, unblurred by skid. "Maybe he passed out before the crash."

"Nope." He swipes to the next photo. "See?"

It's hard to tell what he's showing me. The car isn't even in this picture.

"*Turn* marks," he says, and then I see them. Curved gouges in the ground. "Like you get when you make doughnuts on a lawn?" He traces an eight in the air with his index finger. "The road went straight, but the car turned. About fifty yards from the tree." He sees that I'm getting it. "So he stepped on the accelerator until they were going a hundred miles an hour, then he cut the wheel hard. Aiming for that tree." His voice is thick with disgust. "Unbelted, trying to die. With his fucking wife in the passenger seat."

"She doesn't remember anything. Although I don't know how long that will last." Postconcussion amnesia will usually lift after days or weeks, but sometimes blank patches remain forever, the events right around the trauma never completely restored. "Maybe it's best if those memories don't ever come back."

"Wouldn't you want to know if your husband tried to kill you?" He clicks the phone off and drops it back into his pocket.

Would I? There are a few things my husband did that I wish I didn't know.

"Lucy, I need you in room 19." Grace, the charge nurse, comes

up to us. She adds, seeing my expression, "No, it's not that." Nineteen is one of the pelvic rooms, the one usually used for rape cases.

"Thank God," I say, wishing my relief were purely compassionate. Rape kits once begun have to continue until they are finished, to preserve the chain of evidence. Forty minutes of evidence collection can totally torpedo a shift.

"Don't speak so soon," says Grace. She offers me a chart. "It's a kid."

"Okay," thinking *so?* The nurses, most of whom are mothers, can get weepy about kids. Childlessness has its benefits for an ER doc. Not something I can say to the people who are forever telling me, *You'll never know what love is until you have a child*. I want to tell them: *Okay, got it, I'll never know.*

"Brought in from the scene of a multiple homicide, needs a medical eval before he goes to Psych."

"Psych? Is he the perp?"

"Perp?" says Grace. "Somebody's watching too much cable. No. He's a child, maybe five or six. It's not clear what he saw, or if he saw anything. He's not talking. We don't even have his name."

"Is he injured?" Looking over the front sheet of the chart I see there's no triage note, just vitals and in the name field, Johnny Doe.

"We didn't find anything. We've already taken pictures for evidence. If you clear him, we can send him up to the floor and Psych can see him there. Social Work's on the way."

Outside room 19, two male detectives are sitting in chairs on either side of the closed door, one a tired, tweed-suited sixty, and the other a tall, pink-faced blond who cannot be as young as he looks.

"Dr. Cole's gonna see him," Grace tells them.

"Psych?" says the older detective, perking up.

"ER," I say, and he slumps disappointedly back into his chair. "I'm going to medically clear him so he can go upstairs. You can talk to him there."

"I'm gonna need coffee," says the cop. He scrubs a hand over

his face. "Listen, get his name if you can. We don't know if he lived at the house, or if he was one of the party guests." I raise my eyebrows at *party* and he adds heavily, "There was a birthday cake in the dining room."

"Any more vics on the way?" I ask.

The younger detective, who's been leaning forward with elbows on his thighs, staring down at his shoes, lifts his head.

"He was the only one alive," he says. The horror of the scene is stamped onto his face. The older cop rolls his eyes and turns away. Probably thinking what I am thinking, some version of yes, this is awful, but seriously, dude, reconsider your life choices; there are a lot of bodies ahead of you.

"We need to find next of kin ASAP," says the older detective. "I don't want the family getting the news from Twitter. Seriously, get his name and I'll bring you Dunkin's your next shift." In New England, Dunkin' Donuts is king. Distances are measured, and driving directions given, by the pink and orange stores.

"I'll try." I tuck the chart under my arm and go through the door.

He's small, even if he's only five or six, and looks even smaller here. Room 19 is the largest room in the Department. It has space for a pelvic table and ultrasound machine, for counselors and chaperones, for a counter with a sink, cabinets above and drawers below to hold a stock of rape kits, plus its own private adjoining bathroom. Grace has dimmed the overhead light and turned on the one in the bathroom. The boy is lying back against the pillow, and at first I think he's asleep, but as I close the door he turns his head toward me. I roll a stool over. Patients relax and give a better history if the doctor is seated, rather than looming over them or seeming poised to flee.

"Hi. I'm Lucy." It feels good to sit down; the popping sounds my spine makes as I do are somewhat alarming. Is this normal for thirty-three?

The boy doesn't react; it's as if I haven't spoken. His pupils are so large that his eyes look like dull black buttons; his dark hair is

spiked up on half of his head and slicked down on the other. What weird hairstyles little boys have now. Immediately I chide myself for the thought; maybe after a few years of parenting I too would be driving through McDonald's for dinner and fauxhawking my kid along with the rest of them. I'll never know.

"Does anything hurt?" I ask. He blinks but says nothing. So much for history. "I'm just going to check you over, okay?" as I unloop the stethoscope from around my neck and stand up.

He doesn't resist as I listen to his heart, and when I put my hand on his shoulder he leans forward without being told, to let me listen to his lungs. I run the circular glow of my penlight over his back. A small healing bruise there, green already so maybe five days old, not an unexpected finding for a typically active boy; otherwise nothing.

"I had a dog when I was your age," I say, putting a hand on his shoulder while ratcheting the back of the table down to lay him flat. "I'm going to check your tummy, okay?"

His lack of response is as good as consent. Small children are not polite; they'll tell you they hate you if they feel it. They'll kick you, bite you, whatever it takes to make you and your hurty nasty self go away. Which makes their occasional expressions of trust so moving: a small hand put out to take mine on the way to X ray, or both toddler arms, one dragging an IV, upraised in the universal signal for *pick me up*.

I lift his shirt. His narrow chest has a short scabbed scratch on it, nothing worrisome, nothing fresh. "My dog was the color of straw," I say. "Do you know what straw is? Like in a barn, what the horses eat." Or is that hay? No matter, keep things going, a river of story can break up a shy-child logjam. "His coat was really fluffy." When I palpate his abdomen (soft, normal), he doesn't squirm or giggle, even at the end, when I try to make it ticklish. "Unless he was dirty. He was dirty a lot of the time." No change in the boy's expression, but are his eyes focusing on me now? "He loved to

swim—in the creek, in a lake, in a swimming pool—but he hated baths. Isn't that silly?"

When I pull back the sheet to look at his legs and feet I am stopped for a moment. His feet are washed in brown, up to the ankles on both sides, and up one calf and thigh to his buttocks, where the side of his little-boy underwear is dark and stiff. The sour-penny smell of blood is unmistakable.

I've presumed *taken from the scene of a homicide* meant he'd been found in a house where a domestic dispute had ended in gunshots—that he'd been hiding in his bedroom or ensconced terrified in a closet. Not close enough to the action to be soaked in blood. So much blood—what must the scene have been like? A twinge of guilt at my judgment of the young cop outside. I drop the sheet again and stand, glove up from the box on the counter, then examine the feet more carefully. No cuts or abrasions there, nor any on his legs. I run a gloved finger under his waistband and pull the fabric away. No signs of injury under the crusted cotton.

He opens his mouth to my *say ahhh*; I train the penlight beam briefly onto his pink tongue and the arch of his palate, then move it upward, over his face. As I've begun to suspect, the spikes in his hair aren't a hairstyle. His hair is molded with coagulated blood, pushed up on one side and lacquered down against the skull on the other. He must have been lying in a pool of blood. I push my gloved fingers over his scalp, chasing them with the light beam, seeking a gap or a clot that might signify a laceration. Nothing: this is not his blood. I strip the blood-smeared gloves off, hold them drooping inside-out in one hand, and go to the drawer under the counter that holds the evidence bags. Where is Social Work? He shouldn't have been left alone in here.

"What was his name?" The whisper from behind me sets the hair up along my arms.

"Whose name?"

"Your dog."

"His name was Moses." Very casual. I keep my back to him, drop the inside-out gloves into the bag and seal it, sign the label, put the bag into my pocket, and turn around. "I called him Moze. My best friend called him Gross."

"Was he fat?"

I take the chart from the counter and reseat myself on the rolling stool. "Fat? No. She called him Gross because he was stinky." Success; the tiniest smile.

"Gross means fat in French."

"So it does." What little kid knows French nowadays? I'd loved studying it, but often I wish I'd learned Spanish in school instead—my ER Spanish barely meets my needs. "*Tu as un chien?*"

*"Un chat."*

"Lucky. I always wanted a cat. Does he have stripes?"

"He's orange."

"Orange cats are the best."

He gives me a long, estimating look. I hear my idiotic words. *Orange cats are the best.* Really? I'm so tired; I left my house sixteen hours ago.

"Do I need a shot?" he asks.

"Nope. No shots today." I hold up my empty hands, the open chart balanced on my knees. "I just want to ask you a couple of things. First, what's your name?" I uncap my pen, poise it over the name field. He says nothing. So much for matter-of-fact. I try an appeal to fairness, which can be a strong instinct in kids: "You know *my* name. I even told you the name of my dog." Nothing.

Sigh. With an adult you'd just ask, they'd just answer. They might lie, but they'd say something. With children, obstacles rise up unexpectedly; you have to presume that even kids old enough to talk might not say one word.

"Should I guess?" Not even a blink. "Is it . . . Geronimo? Nostradamus? SpongeBob?" He just stares, not a trace of humor in his expression. "All right, I give up. What is it?"

He presses his lips together so that the skin around them goes white and shakes his head, hard. It's such exaggerated obstinacy that it would be comical if the situation were different.

"You don't know your own name?" A direct challenge, maybe difficult for a little boy to resist.

Not this boy.

"Hm," I say. "What am I going to do? I don't know what to call you." And wait. A child strong on empathy might want to solve the problem for me.

He's staring down at his hand, where it's flat on the stretcher.

"If I tell you," he says, pleating the fabric of the sheet between two fingers, "you might send me back." Pleat, unpleat.

"Back where?"

He looks up, stricken.

"I don't know," he says with an edge of panic.

I put the chart on the counter behind me and scoot the wheeled stool close to the bed.

"We just want to get you home," I tell him, looking him right in the eyes. "We need your name to get you home."

His eyes move over my face as if reading a message there.

"Leo," he whispers finally.

"Great!" I scoot back, retrieve the chart and pen from the counter. "Leo what?"

But that's all he'll say. I wait him out for minutes this time, leaning my back against the counter, my legs extended and toes braced against the bottom of the pelvic table, arms crossed. The silence stretches out between us until my head suddenly jerks down and then up and I realize that I've fallen asleep. He's asleep too, his little spiky head against the pillow and his mouth slightly open. I get up as quietly as possible and go out into the corridor.

"Well, I got a first name," I tell the detectives. "Leo."

"We can work with that," says the older cop. "Thanks." He takes his phone out, taps on the screen, and a minute later, with-

out preamble, "Check the class roster for a Leo. Try second and fourth too."

"We know what school the kids went to," explains the younger detective, accepting the bag of bloody gloves from me. He takes the pen I offer and signs the label below my name. He looks a little less dazed now. "We're guessing third grade, from the number of candles on the cake."

I begin documenting the physical exam, backslash backslash backslash on the template.

"He's pretty scared," I say. Scribbling a small X on the child-shaped outline for the old bruise, another for the small scab, shading the dried blood. So much blood. "Do you think he saw anything?" *Anything*: a limp stand-in, but he knows what I mean.

"I hope so," he says. "But I also hope not."

His words have the fervent quality of a prayer: may this child be quickly returned to the tight embrace of his worried, living mother; may this terrible day become a bad memory shrinking smaller over the years as he grows up.

"Look again," the older cop barks into the phone. "Leo. It's three fucking letters." I know that impatience, that harshness. He doesn't have the luxury of sorrow right now, he can't indulge in dewy eyes or prayer; this boy is depending on him. He can't make the dead children alive again, but he can locate this one child's family and get him back home. I hear his voice as if it is my own, and I recognize: he's doing what he can do.

I sign the chart and give it to Grace, who has come back down the hall. "He needs a serious scrubdown," I tell her. "He's medically clear, though."

"I'll send him up," she says.

BACK IN TRAUMA 2, Crystal's cervical collar is off and the back of the stretcher has been raised. Her eyes are closed.

I put a hand on her forearm and she opens her eyes, pupils springing tight under the overhead light. Tiny cubes of windshield glass sparkle from the dark mass of her hair. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay," she says. A throwaway answer to a throwaway question.

"Your husband's in surgery."

"He's not dead?" Her voice is sharp with surprise.

"He has internal bleeding. They're doing what they can."

Is it my place to tell her what the paramedic deduced? If the husband dies, would Crystal want her memories of him clouded by the knowledge that he tried to kill them both? If he lives, she'll eventually find out. Does she need to know right now?

"You may not get your memory back for a while," I tell her. "You may never get it all back."

I could say, *I know what it's like to have the rug pulled out from under you*. But do I? Divorce—even infidelity and divorce—are relatively bland horrors. *My husband cheated on me* is anybody's story. Murder-suicide is on a whole other level. But it's all loss, isn't it? Loss and betrayal.

"Is everyone okay in the other car?"

"There wasn't another car," I say. "Your car hit a tree."

To my surprise, she bursts into tears.

"Oh thank God," she says on a ragged exhale. "Thank God."

And somehow I know that there isn't any need to tell her about the paramedic's photographs or about what her husband had tried to do. She'd been part of it. She had dressed up in her purple dress and best shoes; she was ready. The driver had been drunk as hell, but Crystal's blood alcohol was zero; her urine tox screen was negative. She'd faced the act clearheaded. Does that count as courage?

Then I remember: chocolate-chip pancakes this morning.

"Who's got your kids?" I ask.

"My mother."

She really begins to weep now, in long, tearing sobs. I know she wants comfort, but the doctor who could have comforted her is

on a distant shore now, on the other side of the six-year-old with his spiky bloody hair and his Jesus feet, who'd possibly watched his whole family die.

"Someone will take you upstairs to the surgical waiting room." I can hear the change in my own voice; it's brisker, less kind. "We'll get you a phone so you can call your mom."

I dial down the overhead light, pull the curtain closed, and leave the room.

It'll be an eighteen-hour shift by the time I get to sleep, but I've done longer before without feeling this spent. Age isn't the culprit. The culprit is the *why*. I didn't sign up for the why. I specialized in emergency medicine to deal with the *what,* and the *how,* and the *how do I fix it*. I'll sic Psych on poor Crystal and Child Protective Services on her kids; I'll leave Leo to Social Services and pedi-Psych and the cops. Let them cope with the why. I've had enough of it for today.

PATIENTS ASK DOCTORS, *How's he doing?* Meaning, *Is he going to die?* They say, *What did the tests show?* Meaning, *Am I going to die?* They say, *I don't remember,* meaning, *I can't live with what I know.*

And doctors tell patients, *Just a little pinch*. Meaning, *This is going to hurt like hell*. They say, *It won't take too long*. Meaning, *You'll be waiting for hours*. They say, *She didn't suffer.* Meaning, *I know that's what you need to hear.*

People say to each other, *Tell me the truth*.

Which can mean anything.