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*Return Policy*

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*Bottled up my hope, before it got spread too thin  
I threw it in the ocean and then I jumped right in  
All my heroes disappeared just like déjà vu  
But I am a strong swimmer and I swam right into you.*

**Jonatha Brooke**, *Steady Pull*

\* \* \*

*Your memory is a monster; you forget — it doesn't.  
It simply files things away. It keeps things for you,  
or hides things from you — and summons them  
to your recall with a will of its own. You think you  
have a memory; but it has you!*

**John Irving**, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

\* \* \*

*Love stinks! Yeah, yeah ...*

**J. Geils Band**, *Love Stinks*

## Willy

Once a year, my senile aunt tries to kill me.

Her name is Mavis and she's really my great-aunt, my grandmother's sister. And although she may not be trying to murder me, it darn near works every September. These days Mavis remembers very little besides names and birthdays, so every year for the last six years, she's sent me the same card: on the outside, the words "Happy 30th Birthday," and on the inside, "Embrace the Zero."

I cannot begin to express the terror this simple act of kindness evokes in me.

At fourteen years of age, someone had to die for me to live. I felt guilty before my surgery and have felt that way every day since. Several days after they opened my chest, removed my diseased heart, and installed its donated replacement, I overheard a conversation between the surgeon and my mom. My mom was terrified the new heart wouldn't take. "Not to worry, Ms. Finneran," the surgeon said, "William's procedure went swimmingly well. If we're lucky, we just added another decade and a half to his life."

I often picture the ticking in my chest as an old-fashioned alarm clock, wrapped in pink pumping flesh and set for some unknown hour in the not too distant future. According to the Internet, the average life expectancy of transplant survivors is eleven very short years. I was never very good at math, but I believe my surgeon's estimate puts my expiration date at about age thirty.

Yesterday I turned twenty-nine.

I spent the better part of a decade trying to figure out who to blame. Was it God for knitting together such a weak heart in my mother's womb? My mother for smoking through two out of three trimesters? My father for driving my mother to the nasty habit in the first place?

The donor for not eating more vegetables and shunning elevators and Twinkies? At some point I decided to blame them all equally, then abandoned my accusing ways altogether. Instead I turned my attention to my list, officially titled: “Things to Do before I Die.” It’s not a bad list. It just needs one more item: “Stop wallowing and actually do something about the list before you die.”

When I can’t bear to look at Aunt Mavis’s card any longer, I push back from the kitchen table, causing frothy espresso to lip over the edge of my World’s Worst Teacher mug, which now appears to be shedding dirty tears in mourning.

I enter my bedroom and rummage through my underwear drawer till I find my grandfather’s lockbox. Then I dump this year’s card inside with the rest of Aunt Mavis’s identical birthday wishes.

Before I close the lid I catch a glimpse of my first novel. It’s a shiny library copy of *The Handyman*, the first in my series of detective novels about Ralph I. Handy (my unlucky one-eyed, one-handed repairman-cum-sleuth). The cover reveals the sleeve of a tan overcoat emerging from the shadows, a revolver protruding like a vacuum cleaner attachment from where the hand is supposed to be.

I’ve scrawled my to-do list on the dedication page, in pencil under the words: “For Walter, my brother, mentor, and friend. I miss you now more than I ever thought I could.” My brother had few talents — namely, finding trouble, accidentally breaking the hearts of gorgeous women, and stoking the unshakable devotion of his kid brother. Legend has it that by the time he was four, my parents swore off ever having another child. I appeared in my first (and only) ultrasound eight years later. By then my parents were ready to retire from the child-rearing business altogether.

I remember the day I came up with my list. I was just young enough and dumb enough to think that the act of jotting down a few goals would somehow magically produce the internal fortitude necessary to accomplish them. I study it now, mentally crossing off the few items I’ve managed to do already (buying my grandparents’ house, writing

my “serious” novel, riding in a helicopter) and scoffing at the rest. One item, scratched out and rewritten numerous times, makes me groan aloud. “Fall in love . . . for real this time.”

Then it dawns on me. What good is a list when I have no real intention of following through? It’s like a giant Post-It note reminder of my most glaring inadequacies.

I snap the book shut, grab my stack of birthday cards, carry them all to the kitchen, and toss them in the sink. I should have done this years ago. I root around in the junk drawer, finding every candle that Lucy left behind but not a single match. Then I remember my grandfather’s pipe rack. They’re lined up, bowls down, like prehistoric golf clubs, each one eliciting its own quiet memory. I pause to inhale the aroma of wet tobacco, then snatch my grandfather’s favorite flip-top lighter and hurry back to the kitchen, wondering if this is a purging or a sacrifice. I hold the copy of my novel aloft, then flick the lighter open. I spin the flint wheel once, twice, then it ignites. My thumb goes numb as I touch the flame to the edge of the dangling book cover and wait.

Nothing.

Yellow tendrils flirt with the edge but refuse to catch. I let the pages flutter, hoping the resulting breeze will fan the flame. Then my thumb starts to burn and I have to let go of the lighter.

I stare at the book, stupidly, wondering if it’s been treated with some secret flame retardant to prevent libraries from burning down. I gather up my stack of birthday cards and flick the lighter into action again, holding the edge of Mavis’s death notice to the flame.

It catches. I alternate my gaze between the growing flame and my demented fun house grin reflected in the belly of my teakettle.

That’s when the smoke detector goes off. A shrill, piercing chirp that literally stops my heart. I drop the lighter and the burning card, then grip the edge of the sink with both hands. I’m not typically one for omens, but I decide now to do something *else* about my list.

\* \* \*

It took the better part of an hour — and a dozen hands of solitaire — for the turbulent pounding in my chest to subside. The only casualties of my botched arson attempt appear to be one blistered fingertip and a relentless tingling sensation along the length of my scar.

I place the nine of spades on the ten of diamonds, then resume turning cards over and ignore the sound of my telephone ringing. After a long beep, I hear the habitual throat clearing of my literary agent. His voice sounds like a drowsy Muppet, his bored monotone more despairing than normal, if that's even possible.

“William ...” (Sigh.) “We need to talk ...” (Elongated nasal breathing.) “Soon ...” (Bigger sigh.) “And in person ... so please call me.” (Medium sigh, but with feeling.) “I have news.”

The word *news* is bloated with meaning, conjuring the image of a grim-faced soap opera doctor — *I'm sorry, Mr. Finneran. We did everything we could ...*

I asked him once if he was getting enough sleep. He simply said, “The world ... is too giddy for my tastes.”

“And you think your gloomy outlook is somehow going to stem that particular epidemic?”

“I'm no hero, Willy. I'm just doing my part.”

Despite Stan's perpetual grogginess, he's a real animal when it comes to business dealings. This proved invaluable when my books were actually selling. But I haven't heard from Stan in months, not since the last puny royalty check arrived. He didn't even bother with a Christmas card this year.

I take another sip of espresso — a vile beverage — and place a red jack on a black queen. When I draw the ace of hearts, it's as if Lucy is staring right back at me. Years ago I took the *real* aces out of my deck and replaced them with the following:

An index card with Doug's cell number on it — *Clubs*, because we used to play nightclubs.

A photograph of Lucy celebrating our first anniversary — *Hearts*, for obvious reasons.

A severely cropped greeting card I found tucked between the pages of Song of Solomon in Lucy's Bible — *Spades*, for digging graves.

The receipt for Lucy's espresso machine — *Diamonds*, still not sure why.

Lucy's been gone almost five years now, and what I hate more than the loneliness is the fact that I've lost her scent. I used to stand in our closet and sniff the sleeves of her shirts and the necklines of her best dresses. But it's her skin I miss most — the sight of it, the warm touch, and especially the smell.

One night I got the bright idea to stuff Lucy's favorite pj's with sweaters and balled-up sheets. I just knew I couldn't suffer another night of waking up at two in the morning and weeping at the sight of the empty spot beside me. She didn't own any wigs so I resorted to a volleyball and a new mop I found in the garage. It didn't have to be perfect, just passable, since Lucy always slept with her head under a pillow. I washed the mop with Lucy's shampoo, then doused it with perfume and lotion and tucked it between the covers. With the lights on, my handiwork resembled a Lucy scarecrow. I still woke up at two a.m., but the only difference was my screaming in fright before the sobbing started up.

I've gone thirty seconds without a play when my homemade ace of spades appears. I place it in the first foundations position and pause to study it. The card was from a guy named Alvin. On the outside it said, *Thinking of you*. Folded inside was a printed version of a back-and-forth email with conflicting versions of what transpired between Alvin and my wife. He used words like *bliss* and *affair* and *love*. She called it an "emotional hiccup" that could have led to a "physical disaster" that should be "filed under *Things Best Forgotten*." This last bit should make me feel better, but it doesn't. Every time I read it I feel my borrowed heart nudge sideways a fraction of an inch, like when a stranger squeezes into the seat next to you on the subway.

The phone rings. I ignore it and perform an illegal search for a black three. A few moments later the answering machine clicks on in the bedroom. I crane one ear toward the familiar voice. It's Alistair "the Dean" Langstrom, my boss, and he doesn't sound pleased. He rarely does though. My latest infraction, it seems, was my homogeneous approach to grading students. I do have a vague memory of giving my entire freshman comp class A-minuses.

Three grimacing swallows later, I rinse my cup and change my shoes for a trip to Wal-Mart to pick up more espresso mix. That's when Doug shows up, letting himself in with the key I keep hidden in plain view on my front porch. He's a big man, not fat so much as thick, bulging like a pincushion. His chubby cheeks and enormous hands make him look like a giant toddler. Once inside, he tosses a giant stack of mail in the middle of my cards and croons, "Avon calling!"

"I thought you saved that prissy burlesque routine for the dean, who, by the way, may have just fired me."

"Hah. Not on my watch." Doug plants his fists on his thick hips like an effeminate superhero; a move his wife finds adorable, yet strikes mortal fear in our boss.

When Dean Langstrom inherited the current Edwards University English Department he was more than a little dismayed to find a hack genre writer (me) and an outspoken born-again homosexual (Doug) on his otherwise esteemed staff. Blatantly ousting either of us would only trigger Doug's unbridled social activism. He once staged a sit-in to protest the Girl Scouts preying on the obese and elderly when hawking their chocolate devil wafers.

So with cries of discrimination only a breath away, Langstrom employs alternating strategies of either shaming me or bullying me into resigning. He scrutinizes my work, talks down to me, and peppers me with trivial questions about obscure literary figures at faculty meetings.

Doug, however, is tenured, both as a professor and friend. The only thing he loves more than his wife is Jesus. He claims to have under-

gone a period of sexual *disorientation* in college, which ended on a blind date with Maggie, another sojourner of nebulous sexuality. They made a pact, more spiritual than carnal, and the result was a modern day arranged marriage, complete with the first of their two-point-six kids on the way.

“So,” I say. “How’s Maggie?”

“Fat and grumpy and more beautiful than ever. At least the morning sickness is behind us.” Doug refers to his wife’s pregnancy in plural possessive, owning inasmuch as possible his share of the pain and suffering. I have to admit, he does an admirable job. In fact, their love is so complete and endearing and sickeningly idyllic, it depresses everyone in its soupy green wake.

“Won’t the arrival of your bouncing baby boy tip Langstrom off to your rampant straightness?”

“Nah, it’ll confound him more. But enough chit-chat. Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

“I don’t know. I’m busy.”

“Should I check the tub?”

I look up, blinking. The last time he dropped in on me I was filling the bathtub with all things Lucy, not just clothes and perfumes and shampoos, but also her hair dryer, laptop, and espresso maker—all plugged in through a network of extension cords. He assumed, of course, I was preparing a place to die. I’m too scared to ponder what I was *really* doing.

“What’s this?” he says, pointing to the stacks of paper opposite my array of playing cards.

“Oh, that. Just some schoolwork.”

Doug walks to the end of the table for a closer look. I resist the urge to crawl under my chair. He squints at the stacks, angling his big head for closer inspection. His eyes alternate between a stack of mail and a pile of assigned short fiction I was supposed to grade and return to my fall semester students. In a fit of frustration I guess I reversed the process.

“You gave your electric bill a C-minus?”

“Well, look at it. The sentence variety is atrocious. What few verbs that appear are either passive or soulless. And I find the omniscient voice condescending, intrusive, and blatantly authoritative.”

“No argument here.” Doug studies the stack of papers I was grading, a grim look clouding his face. “But do you think it’s a good idea to write personal checks to your students?”

“Compare the prose, Doug. You tell me who’s more deserving.”

“Look, I’m not here to hold your hand or interrupt your wallowing. I need a favor.”

We both know I owe him dozens. So I do the mature thing and ignore him, sorting my new mail into piles: junk mail, bills, and personal correspondence. The stack of bills is smaller than the junk mail, but much more daunting.

“I’m not taking your sister out.”

“Fair enough.”

“Or Maggie’s sister.”

“She’ll be devastated.”

“Or any pathetic souls from your church.”

“You do realize you’re wearing pajamas and a pair of galoshes?”

“Shut up.”

“What is it this time, Will? Lucy? Your secondhand ticker? Writer’s block?”

I don’t know what it is exactly. My birthday? Missing Lucy? This nasty espresso coating my tongue?

Finally I say, “I thought you needed a favor.”

“What I need is a guitar player for Saturday night.”

Doug is a remarkable writer who wants desperately to be a real musician. I’m an alleged guitar prodigy bent on becoming a better writer. It’s these kind of odd intersections that define our friendship. I avoid conflict at all costs where Doug goes looking for it. I found Jesus early, then lost him whereas Doug found him late and makes sure everybody knows about it.

"I don't know," I say. "Jazz?"

"Class reunion."

I groan, but it's mostly for show.

"Come on, Will. You need this."

He's probably right. For the first time in a long time, the thought of acting as a human jukebox to slobbering drunks actually appeals to me.

"I swear we'll play some tunes you actually like. We can squeeze in some Miles and Monk and Coltrane, maybe some Springsteen and Radiohead covers. And our patented Steely Dan medley."

"Will Bernie the Bass Player be there?"

"Yeah, but don't sweat it. He doesn't hate you anymore."

"How do you know?"

"I checked."

"I don't know, Doug."

"Absolutely nothing in E-flat. I'll see to it personally."

"I can't believe I'm —"

"Excellent. Rehearsal's tomorrow night at eight. Dinner's at six, if you think you can muster a shower between now and then."

When Doug leaves, I stare at Lucy's espresso machine, finger my scar through my pajama top, and wonder whatever happened to my toothbrush.

## Ozena

Sometimes, if I squint just right, Reggie doesn't look so bad. Especially when the fluorescent tubes in his office turn dark and flicker. Still not what you would call handsome, or at least not what *I* would call handsome. But the combination of my slitted gaze and the poor visibility make his acne scars dissipate, give his lazy hairline hope, and almost make the wattle of flab under his chin look like a pink ascot.

Almost.

I'm midway through wondering whether you could buy special

contact lenses to maintain this effect, when Reggie grips the wide end of his striped necktie to corral a violent sneeze. He revolves a half turn to acknowledge the chorus of *bless yous* and *gesundheits* from the cubbled underlings in his charge. That's when he catches me, peering cross-eyed over my coffee mug (strategically positioned to block his potbelly and wide, girlish hips). He holds up one finger, signaling he'll be with me in a minute.

I glance at the clock on my computer — 9:53 — exactly seven long minutes till my scheduled smoke break. I don't actually smoke, but Javatek, Inc.'s antiquated employee handbook mandates that management allow two fifteen-minute breaks per day for any and all workers afflicted with the nicotine habit. So I've been carrying the same war-torn pack of Virginia Slims for a little over two years now, strictly for emergencies such as this one. The handbook says nothing about the mandatory lighting and/or puffing of said cigarettes.

Reggie finally breaks away from his unreciprocated flirting with Sheila (the only other single girl in our department) and heads my way. He clearly prefers her to me. Or at least he should. She's younger and prettier and just ditzy enough not to pose a threat to Reggie's tenuous authority. I try to be grateful for my consolation prize status — second choice is still a *choice*, after all — but I'm more concerned with the bank of green lights on my multiline telephone, dark and idle.

I mutter a nominal prayer of forgiveness as I slip my hand into my purse, grope around for my cell phone, then thumb the digits of my direct line at work. Timing is critical as I calibrate my boss's footfalls with the pressing of the Send button. I release my grip on my cell just as Reggie's tasseled loafer squishes into my personal berber (not quite gray or tan, but rather some queasy mix of the two) and my office phone shrills to life.

After mouthing a quick *Sorry* to Reggie, I turn in my chair and say, "Thank you for calling Javatek. This is Ozena. How may I assist you?"

I realize this little ploy flirts with dishonesty. But my strategy is as simple as it is brilliant. The only thing more crucial to Reggie than

finding a suitable mate is his commitment to excellent customer service. I do admire his principles; I just wish he would floss more. But instead of wandering off to let me deal with my pretend customer, he just stands there waiting. I hadn't planned for this contingency—and I'm not that good an actress. Instead of waddling off, Reggie stays put, casting a long shadow on my computer monitor. As I sit and listen to the bloated silence in my headset, Reggie creeps forward and squats to admire the glossy four-by-sixes tacked to my carpeted walls. He grunts approvingly at my pretend husband, three imaginary children, and one make believe basset hound. I refer to them as the Grinning Whiteheads. The pictures were the result of an alphabetical mix-up at the 24-hour photomat. I got the wrong snapshots. So this exceedingly photogenic family ended up with thirty-six exposures of my son's graphic artistry (shot after shot of enflamed poison ivy inching its way up from my ankles and over my knees) and I got this great fake family to keep me sane from nine to five. Of course, Reggie has access to my personnel file and knows full well that I'm legally divorced (although I doubt the words *willful desertion*, *abandonment*, or *quite possibly dead* are in there) and live with my son, Lloyd Jr.

When I can't think of anything to say to my pretend caller, I hang up.

"So," Reggie says, "have you given any more thought to my suggestion?"

Since company policy strictly forbids fraternizing between employees, going so far as to insinuate that superiors pursuing subordinates is tantamount to sexual harassment, Reggie must stop short of technically asking me out. But he can, and often does, *suggest* that we get together after hours to discuss creative methods to improve the processes and morale of the customer service department.

"Yes, and I couldn't agree more, Mr. Limpkin." I realize I actually *could* agree more, but I don't bring it up. "We really should limit personal phone calls to authorized break times."

"Not *that* suggestion." Poor Reggie has no clue what licking his

chapped lips does to a girl's heart. "My idea about getting together later for, you know, a business dinner."

"Oh, that ..."

"I have a couple of things I need to discuss with you."

"Well, as much as I'd love to, I don't think I could get a sitter on such short notice."

"We could order in? The three of us?"

"Sorry, I forgot. We're getting fumigated tonight."

Reggie is terrified of insects, a fact I discovered the day I found him perched on all fours atop a break room table, tossing peanut M&M's at a platoon of spiders carting off a mostly dead cockroach. And lest anyone think I'm lying about the fumigation thing, my kid brother is an exterminator and lives in my building.

"Again?"

"I know, I know. But those spider larvae are just the darndest things."

This is not technically a falsehood either, as I really do believe, that of all the darn things in this world, that spider larvae *are* the darndest, if in fact there is any such thing as spider larvae. I make a mental sticky note to explore Wikipedia between putting Lloyd Jr. to bed and begging Eugene for an emergency house call.

"Well you can't possibly stay there during fumigation. So why don't we have Javatek treat us all to dinner? You, me, and Lloyd?" I'm not sure why it bothers me so much to hear my boss use my son's name. "What do you say?"

I open my mouth, prepared to utter whatever lame excuse my brain offers up. But I'm interrupted by the blessed sound of my phone ringing. I shrug helplessly at Reggie and turn back to my computer monitor.

"Thank you for calling Javatek. This is Ozena, how may I assist you?"

The man's voice cracks when he says, "I have one of your machines that won't die."