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Jill Christman

I am your mother, Eva. I am thirty-seven years old, not a young mother, not by any stretch. I will be very, very old, or even long gone, when you are in your thirties, or forties. . . . I want to tell you where to find me. Say Lila Lila Lila three times, say it deep in my ear, or if I am not here, say it in a shell, and one way or another, I will make my way back to you, one way or another I will hear.

— *Lauren Slater, Love Works Like This*

In my twenties, many years before my daughter was born, I had a question: in a crazy, dangerous world where wars are fought and children are neglected and starving, in a world where six-year-olds are raped and dogs are abandoned in paper bags on highways, in a world where young women want so desperately to be thin they stick their fingers down their throats to purge all that is wrong and bad—in a world like this, *can I really have a baby?*

This was a complicated question.

Now the answer is flesh, down in the yard playing in the sandbox with her grandmother, my mother, a woman who has made a lot of mistakes, yes, but who always loved me. I can hear her now through the open window chattering with my eighteen-month-old daughter about shovels and trains and the tweeting of birds. She loved me and now she loves my baby and my baby

loves her.

There's a twenty-five-pound girl sitting in the yard measuring sand and counting rocks because I carried her in my body, gave birth to her, and held her close to my breast until she learned to take a few steps away from me, and then a few more, and ahead of us is this whole life that she is going to have separate and apart from me.

Down in the yard, this life is already happening. So now I have a new question, don't I?

Now what?

Now that she is here and she is no longer a baby who needs to be imagined, but herself, Ella, a kid who likes apple juice in a box and the model train circling above the frozen food section of our grocery store, a kid who counts to eleven and loves the alphabet song, but can only remember *A-B-C, P, T-U-V*, and *Z*. That's today. Tomorrow will be different. Up until two days ago, she took a nap at noon, easily, and now, no nap. No. She's onto something new, and her father and I are scrabbling to keep up.

How will we keep her safe and still allow her to live a good life? How do we teach her about the value of love with our actions and then try to explain what constitutes a "bad touch," even from someone we know? Maybe someone we've asked her to hug? Don't we want our babies to live in a circle of affection?

What about the thrill of adventure and the richness of new experiences? On a boat, I think of drowning. On a horse, I replay the story of my friend's child who was dragged to death by the hired pony at his sixth birthday party.

What about daycare and school and birthday parties? Ella has a life-threatening reaction to milk—if she consumes any dairy her throat swells and she cannot breathe. Having witnessed this, how do I turn my eyes away from her mouth and every morsel that goes into it? How do I let her hold hands in circle with a kid fresh from a bag of cheesy snacks? I cannot. And I must. Already, I am getting better: when she was a newborn, before I really even knew her, I wanted to watch each breath move in and out of her tiny body. As parents, we can harbor fairly reasonable fears about everything from grapes and hot dogs (choking) to toilets and mop buckets (drowning)—and this is before we move beyond the relative safety of our particular domestic situation and into the world of drunks driving fast cars and pedophiles waiting at bus stops.

I am afraid and I am ashamed. My daughter drinks clean water; plays in

a safe, fenced yard; and receives regular medical care. The real war we are waging hasn't come to the streets of our town. Here, there are no suicide bombers or child soldiers. How do parents in, say, the West Bank send their children out to school? I'm sure some don't, and the rest, knowing they must, knowing that life demands living no matter the circumstances, must feel as though they are helping to tie shoes on their own hearts, just cut from their bleeding bodies. Run, heart, run.

How do they do it? I do not know.

Ella has grown bored with the sandbox and she and my mother are now circling the yard, stopping to smell flowers. "Go away, bee!" I hear Ella shout. "Go away!" I stand to take a look and from two stories up I cannot see any bees. My mother takes Ella's hand and assures her she is fine. The bee is an ant. She is safe.

Now what? This is not just one question.



I am fearful. I know this about myself.

When Ella was a scrap of a human in her stroller, I remember being on a walk together when an old woman seemed to aim her car at us. The car was moving slowly and I knew we were never in any real danger. I could have outrun that car and kept us both safe, but all I had to do was turn the stroller up onto a lawn. My evasive action snapped the woman out of her daze: *Baby*, she must have been thinking, *Baby*. And just as my driver's ed teacher always warned, when you fixate on something, a person or an accident, you steer towards it. That's just what happens, and so the woman was coming at us, thinking about the Baby, probably thinking how she mustn't, mustn't *hit* the Baby, and when she saw the Baby's mother scamper onto the lawn, she swerved away, all the way across the street and into the other lane, one hand fluttering in the air like a broken bird. We were in the path of her car for only a few moments, but they played out in slow motion, and there was plenty of time for my mother-brain to rehearse: I would have flung Ella out of danger with a burst of strength. I would die for her. Of course I would. But my brain didn't stop there. I worked it out further into the future: a neighbor would find the unharmed baby, make sure she got home to her father, who would need to remarry posthaste so that my baby would not be a motherless child.

This is the way my brain works in a few seconds. Imagine the grim scenarios I can construct given the luxury of a whole day. For the most part, I've

wriggled free of my worst crazies, exorcised the most hideous of demons, but this one insidious trick of the brain remains: I fear the death of those I love to a pathological degree. No one knows why this is exactly, and each of my six former therapists resigned themselves to leaving this protective mechanism in place since I'm able to function "normally."

Perhaps the fear took root in the sexual abuse of my childhood—not an obvious connection, but once, having diagnosed me with posttraumatic stress disorder, a therapist made that link. I have other symptoms of PTSD, more benign. For example, if you love me, you learn quickly that it's not fun or funny to hide in a broom closet and jump out to surprise me. First, I will scream a scream that will singe your hair, and then, I will crumple to the floor in a pile of frayed nerve endings and sob. Sudden, loud noises take their toll. The Fourth of July sends me under the bed with the dog. So that's a possibility, but I can't remember how far this fear goes back.

When did I start being afraid of everyone I love dying?



When I was twenty, my fiancé was driving home from work one night in a white Chrysler minivan with his coworkers from Virgin Lightships in Tillamook, Oregon, when their van was broadsided by a tow truck going highway speed. It seems that the driver of Colin's van failed to obey the stop sign, failed to yield in any way, and drove into the path of the truck without a flicker of a brake light.

Here again, there are more questions than answers. Aren't there always when someone we love dies?

Why didn't the driver brake? Was he checking traffic in the wrong direction because he was British? But then, on a two-lane highway, wouldn't it be necessary to look both ways? Were the brakes faulty in some way the investigators missed? Did he smash down the pedal and get only mush? Or maybe the truck startled him and in his urgency he missed the pedal? Or, the worst, was he playing chicken with the tow truck? With a vanload of twenty-something young men as his audience, did he think he could make it to the other side before the truck got to them? Did bravado outweigh caution? If he had made it, if the tow truck driver had laid on his horn and glared at the stupid boys in the white van as it flashed away into the darkness, if Colin had turned his head on his neck, one arm thrown casually over the back of the bench seat, to look back, and say, "Man, you idiot, that was a close one,"

maybe even in an admiring way, and then turned back to the front, laughed with his three friends, that would have been that: a moment forgotten, never mentioned, nothing.

But that's not what happened. The other thing of an infinite number of options happened. Colin's head was crushed. They wouldn't even let me see him. The driver and the man sitting shotgun both died. There was one survivor, another young man, this one from Michigan but also engaged to be married. He was sitting next to Colin and he lived. Sometimes I think about this man and his wife. I wonder if their lives took a path resembling the one they'd envisioned before that night. I doubt it.

I know this is not revelatory. I know this is how accidents happen: suddenly, randomly, crushingly. In the slow months after Colin died, my heart took in this knowledge like a sea change. I could love a breathing someone, and then, like that, he could be gone.



Even writing this catches my breath. I have to concentrate to keep my heart pumping in my chest. My baby is safe. By now she's trundled into the house trailing her Grammy. She's eating Cheerios, nobody's known choking hazard, drinking some juice, double-strapped into her booster chair, watching *Sesame Street*. To counteract any bad thoughts, the possible power of my own imagination, I perform a mental exercise the mother of my river-running boyfriend taught to me: I picture my baby in a golden bubble. She is munching happily, tapping her foot to the music. The bubble protects her through the power of visualization, and even when I'm not in the room, I help to keep her safe.



I was not a protected child—loved, and loved dearly, but not protected. My mother trusted us to take care of ourselves, and it should be said that she didn't have a lot of choice in the matter. My mother left my father when I was two, driving north from Miami in a van and ending up on the coast of Massachusetts with two kids, a lot of love, and no money. As my mother rightly points out, the climate was different back then. There was not so much fear. My mother exposed us to the world and let us learn. We were the last house before a nature preserve on a little island, and thus I know the pleasure of

being a child left alone to wander through sand dunes. I gathered wheaty beach grasses into bouquets and toasted them in the sun, I dug out a spot for myself in the warm sand near a pungent bayberry bush and read *The Black Stallion* straight through in one glorious afternoon, I poked branches into the sticky nests hanging from the trees and pulled them back dangling with fuzzy caterpillars like a prize.

But we know the problem with this picture. The world is a dangerous place, and an unsupervised child is an at-risk child. My mother has no reason to feel bad: her two kids are grown, employed, artistic, happy, and happily married, each to partners they actually love, each with children they really love—all in all, we're pretty all right. My mother, working mostly alone, did not fail us.

That needs to be said—and then it needs to be repeated that my brother and I were often and largely unprotected. Between the ages of six and twelve, I was molested by a neighbor. My mother never knew. Between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, I inflicted abuses upon myself: relentless bulimia, blackout drinking, cutting, risky sex. She never knew. Again, I want to defend her: I never told her, right? I did everything I could to appear normal. I was not a difficult child or even a defiant teenager. I wanted to be good, and good enough. I wanted her to love me. I was the teenage girl who would break a mother's heart, but I didn't want my mother's heart to break, and so I was another teenager as well, the one my mother chose to see.

In the end, I turned out all right. Maybe better than all right.



And now I'm a mother with a daughter of my own.

I can read parenting manuals until Dr. Spock rises from the dead and becomes a born-again proponent of the family bed and I won't find what I'm looking for in those pages. As ever, the questions are complicated and varied.

Does good parenting make a good kid? What constitutes good parenting? Just the right balance of protection and freedom? What's a good kid? One who complies with our wishes? Does her chores and gets good grades and smiles easily when we ask it of her? What if that same kid is crawling out the casement windows at night, drinking and drugging and sexing it up? What if her parents never even know and in her adulthood all that irons out? What if that good baby turned bad kid turns again and becomes a quality citizen who gets dutifully in her car each morning, stops at the drive-thru espresso

joint for a coffee, pays her mortgage and the monthly payment on that car, participates in all that our capitalist society has to offer? Is that what we're hoping for? Or is a good kid the one who knows her way around a serious set of choices? A kid who rebels once in a while because she has a stable sense of self and knows what she wants and needs from this world? And do good kids always become good adults, and what exactly is a good adult? What's our goal here? Happiness? Social conscience? Kindness? *Breath?*



After Colin's death, it took me awhile to rediscover fear. I remember a feeling of great and mournful recklessness.

I tempted fate.

And so one afternoon about four months after the accident, I found myself at the mouth of a cave with two companions: Colin's brother and a woman whose brother had also died violently in the last year. We were a ragged and wounded team, and we were traveling through Central America together. The cave was in central Guatemala and our guide was a ten-year-old boy who wouldn't go into the cave, no. He waited in the dark mouth, sitting on a rock, and holding the bag with our sandwiches.

Here's a thing about me fifteen years later: I would *never* go into this cave now. I don't remember that we hesitated, even when our guide stopped at the mouth, sat on that rock, gestured into the wet blackness and shook his head no, no, not me: *muy peligroso*.

Starting out, we had three flashlights between us, but happily, we heeded the advice of the German back at the *finca* and melted candles here and there to the cliff walls as we headed in. This place was scary. Bats everywhere—hanging shadows, diving specters. Guatemala is one of those countries *vampire* bats still call home. I don't remember caring. And this: at one point the channel got so narrow that the cave ceiling came down to meet the water—did I mention that most of our mile-long journey was done waist-deep in a moving river? A *cave* river? We had to swim *under* the water. Holy. But I don't remember feeling afraid. Now, even thinking about how I plunged my head, my whole self, into the flooded, mysterious darkness cognizant of the possibility that I would find rock, and not air, on the other side . . . well, I am sickened. Before going under, I do think we hesitated—clearly, this was folly—but the German (was it the German again?) had told us about this low point in the cave. He had told us it would open up again on the other side. We had known

the German for one day. We dove under.

Moving into this cave in my memory is like moving into memory itself, and at the point where the last of our three flashlights sputtered and expired, I want to say we were at a place where we would have been forced to turn back anyway. I want to say that we were standing at the top of an underground waterfall, but I can't conjure a clear vision, and wouldn't such a natural wonder burn its image on my brain? Or perhaps my brain was too clouded by grief. I do remember the journey back because I felt a shiver of fear and I welcomed the unfamiliar prickle. I didn't want to die in this watery cave and I was glad.

We three were in blackness, and returning to the mouth of the cave meant feeling our way along the sharp edges of the walls and hoping we hadn't missed any branching channels, hoping the flickering light from our next melting candle would scatter off the swooping walls, a sparkle, a glint, but enough to lead us back to the cautious boy holding our sandwiches. Stupid Americans.

The return hike to the *finca* took us through a banana grove with drooping leaves large enough to make a hammock for a baby. I remember feeling good to be out in the light again after so much darkness and only a sputtering of light.

That night I got sick, the most wrenching sickness of the whole journey, and this was strange because we were at a ranch run by North Americans and there had been much talk about the safe and delicious food.

The place was poison. I spent the night on my knees in the grass outside our bunkhouse, feeling far, far away from home, and yes, wanting my mother. I wanted my mother to hold my hair and rub my back. I wanted ginger ale and saltines. I wanted to go home. For some reason—the moon?—the dark was incomplete that night, or maybe, by now, the day was dawning. By my spot in the grass, a large iguana stood on top of a ragged fence post letting his tail drape dramatically down toward the too green grass. He rotated his eyes with a tick-tick of full vision. Googly eyes. This guy could look anywhere he wanted, but he trained both eyeballs on me.

I was on my back in the dankly warm grass, sharing my resting place with God knows what in this false fairy tale of tropical foliage jacked up by modern fertilizers. That morning, before the journey to the cave, I'd been chased by two giant parrots, ripping rainbows of birds, screaming down from the tree tops and skimming my ponytail with their wingtips. "I was jogging," I told the iguana, delirious with fever and puking. "I bet you know them. Around here,

probably nobody runs unless they're running *from* something, huh?" I was in Dr. Doolittle land, stuck in the glossy illustrations at the center of the book, talking in full, dawning color to an enormous green lizard on a brown post in a green, green world. He seemed to understand. His world was changing too.

"I want to go home," I told him.



If this were fiction, perhaps I could present that day and night in Guatemala as the apex of my fearlessness, wading into that bat-hung cave, lying in the grass with my large lizard friend—shouldn't I have been afraid of *him?*—but this is not fiction and certainly there were other moments of both recklessness and jolting caution to litter the narrative path winding toward the paralyzing fear of new motherhood.

Fifteen years ago I walked into a cave and surprised myself by being happy to return to the sun. Telling the story of the river cave, I want the light to sparkle at the top of the metaphor. I want to pronounce loudly that I will not raise my daughter to live inside my fear for her. That sounds wonderful, but I have no idea what such a proclamation would mean in actual practice. When I think of Ella going so far from home, plunging her head into the murky wet, all those bats, my god, my heart clenches, but what if she *wants* to go into a dark, subtropical cave, real or metaphorical? I do not know. Instead, perhaps, I can find evidence here for a choice to be made—the choice to set up a family camp at the mouth of the cave with the boy holding the sandwiches, the choice to live in the light together.

Would that work? Or do I have to be the boy with the sandwiches? Do I wait on the rock in the light gripping the rolled top of the brown paper bag in my sweating hands and waiting for Ella to come back and eat with me?



After Colin died, and before my trip, I had moved back home and my mother kept me alive—she fed and sheltered and loved me. In the beginning, when I was physically incapacitated by grief, she even bathed me. A couple of months later, I realized I had to leave. The same meticulous mother-care that had sustained me was starting to disable me. I didn't need to live for myself because she was doing it for me.

My mother tells me that taking me to the airport and watching me get

on a plane to San Jose, Costa Rica, was one of the hardest things she has ever done. She remembers following me as far as she could—past check-in, through security, all the way to the mouth of the gangway. How fragile I must have looked to her, a twenty-year-old daughter, numb and glassy-eyed with grief, reeling from the world's turning, made small again by this new knowledge of death. How much like her baby tottering toward the edge of the stairs, a cliff. She tells me now that she wanted to hold onto me. She wanted to go with me.

But she said nothing. Instead, she helped me hoist my backpack onto my bent shoulders and checked the straps on the rolled sleeping sheet she'd sewn to protect me from dirty beds. Then she let me go. She cradled her leather pocketbook and watched me stumble down the gangway. I turned at the bottom and blew her a kiss. *Bye Mom bye.*



During a time when I didn't have the capacity to carry my own fear, my mother loved me enough not to give me hers to hold instead. Three months later I came back to her with a story about a river cave and a talking iguana. Fifteen more years and I'm back again. This time I've brought Ella, another chance, and I'm ready to tell the story of the cave again.

The bats! My god, the bats were everywhere.