

A doctor had diagnosed her with late-stage breast cancer and given her four months to live. Annie had asked if he meant “live.” He’d said no. She was twenty-three years old.

She and her boyfriend were lying on a slanted shingled roof, faces to the crescent moon.

“You don’t feel like you’re kind of robbing your parents of something by not telling them?”

Evan asked.

“Yeah,” Annie said. “I’m robbing them of a thousand memories of me in slowly dying a hospital bed, and a hundred-and-eighty nights of praying and crying and asking friends for help and worrying and watching crappy TV shows at three a.m. because they can’t sleep. Shoot, my mom already hounds my dad for watching too many cop-and-lawyer shows in bed. Imagine all the bad one-liners and murder-solving there’d be then—you know, after the police arrest my mom for beating my dad to death with a bed post after he turned on one of those shows for the thousandth time.”

“So by not telling them about the cancer, you’re also saving your dad’s life, and you’re saving your mom from life in prison.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re a saint.”

“Mother Theresa don’t got nothin on me.”

A smile tiptoed onto his face and then lost its balance and fell. She said there was an inverse relationship between the amount of life you have left and how seriously you take it.

Although he caught the moments of desperation, of panic, of somber awe, of watching the sky like it was not just a refuge for birds and clouds but a curtain that would soon rise to reveal...
“Something,” she kept saying. “There has to be something, right?”

He always said yes.

Six months later she was lying in a hospital bed. They were watching an old comedy, and one of her favorite scenes came on, and her eyes glistened. He’d been holding a bag of Sour Patch Kids, and now rattled them around, then held them out under her chin.

She slid her wet eyes to the corners of their sockets and stared at him. “Are you fucking kidding me?” she asked. “Most candy, I’m all for, but you place *that* repugnant stuff in front of me and ask, in total seriousness, would I like one.”

He jostled the bag. “One isn’t gonna kill you.”

She rarely tried new foods, always sure she would hate them. But she pinched out a strawberry piece, chewed it, then spit it across the room.

“Uck,” she said. “I think I would’ve enjoyed eating an actual kid more than that.”

“Doubtful. He’d be less sugary.”

“I could’ve gone my whole life—my whole entire life—without trying one of those things, and now that isn’t possible. Way to go, ruiner of streaks.”

“I do what I can,” he shrugged.

She wiped a hand down the side of her face. She looked sick, and he didn’t like noticing it; he tried to picture her as vibrant. It took a lot of her energy to even talk.

“I...” She then trailed off, because they both knew, from the blanketed quality of her voice and the thousands of other indicators, but mostly the sad and forgiving blue eyes, the eyes that told him everything he’d ever done was okay by her, and would always be okay, that it was time.

Her mouth opened, and her throat opened, and her eyes opened so wide they seemed to be letting something leave through them.

The heartrate monitor freefell into a flat drone. A small swarm of medical professionals swept in and pushed him out into the hallway of the checkered linoleum floor and the shrieking florescent lights and the women in scrubs twisting their ways through the maze of white walls and automatic doors and comforting generic pastel paintings.

He went down to the maternity ward, to see if he could recognize her in the irises in a newborn child. Annie had talked of reincarnation.

But a nurse gave Evan a polite yet wary smile, shook her short curls of black hair and told him she's sorry, only family allowed. He nodded and turned, then walked around the giant fountain in the middle of the foyer, out into the summer night that was colder than it should have been.

He slumped into his car and turned on his engine and blinked at the orange dashboard lights. Like that sunrise they'd seen in California, when they had gone on a road trip to San Diego, in a van borrowed from his mom, and stopped one night at a beach.

They'd removed the back seats and tossed them in the sand, then lain down on the floor, with the rear door propped open, so they could watch constellations moving slower than any glowing legend should. They'd talked about what happens after everything.

"It's about past lives," she said. "Everybody has past lives. So they'll take away this one of mine, and give me another one."

"Not sure that's how it works."

"No one's sure how it works."

"But you are."

"Not at all. I'm willing to take a shot though."

She had never been religious, and all her talk of it, and all his talk of it, had been hypothetical. Until this. Until he'd found himself trapped in the dusty darkness of a dim-lit church, for eons at a mass, with her once-faithless head filled with visions of Seraphim. Until he found himself at Buddhist temples, kneeling on soft black cushions, with everyone instructed to turn their backs to the center of the room and stare at the wall, and her staring at the wall as if it were a doorway, and him hoping she saw a doorway.

"I think you're just insanely high right now," he'd said, in the back of the van. "Like, literally insanely high. So high that you've become insane."

"Say what you want." She swept a hand through the starlit air. "I'll come back as a princess, and you'll come back as a moose, and then who'll be laughing."

"Where you gonna be princess?" he asked.

"Bhutan."

"And where'm I gonna be a moose?"

"Woods."

He took a plastic bag from beside him, and held it up. "We're discussing all this while having swallowed the kind of mushrooms you don't find at Whole Foods."

"My point is no less valid." She put her thumb to his forehead. "I hereby decree you Sir Moose. You will be allowed to graze near my castle, and all hunters will be forbidden upon punishment of death from hunting you. Or calling you Bullwinkle. Heaven help their little souls if they call you Bullwinkle."

A seagull flew in and landed near the rear bumper.

"OH SHIT," he shouted, kicking at it. The bird thrust out its wings and held them up, posed like a drunk guy before a fight, becoming larger and more menacing to evoke more doubt.

Evan had a phobia of birds. When he annoyed Annie, she threatened to tape his eyelids open and play a certain Alfred Hitchcock film.

He scurried into the recesses of the van and pressed his back flat against the driver's seat, keeping one foot up and poised to kick at the bird again. Annie gently jabbed at it with her bare toes. The seagull nipped at her foot. She squealed and folded her knee into her chest. The bird snatched a cracker that had fallen out of an open box, and then flew out.

Evan felt the flurry of anxiety in his chest slow down, and his jaw muscles unclench. He dipped his head back.

“What if I reincarnate as a bird?” Annie asked.

“Don't you dare,” he had said, his eyes closed. “Don't you fucking dare.”

And then he'd opened his eyes and saw an orange smudge on the horizon, a sunrise, the night opening for light.

Evan drove out of the hospital and headed home, where he drew an infinity loop on a piece of paper and the word *Please*. He then went to the window and saw a pickup truck roll by. It had a sticker of moose antlers on its rear windshield.

Evan cried so hard he made no sound. He felt as if all the love Annie had woven into the fabric of himself was being ripped out stitch by stitch.

A few years passed. He went to bars and concerts with friends and felt her presence at each place, lingering inside neon lights and curled inside soundwaves. Over time that feeling of elegant haunting lessened, and he met a girl named Sarah at a friend's birthday party, while sitting on beanbag chairs in front of a bookshelf.

They began dating. She took him to an aviary to try conquering his fear of birds. He took one step in and looked up and fled with his arms over his head. She chased him back to the car, apologizing and saying she was trying exposure therapy.

“Exposure therapy?” he asked. “That means you get exposed to a little bit at a time. Like someone with a fear of heights stands on a stepladder. What you did? You just placed that guy with a fear of heights on a goddamn satellite.”

The exposure therapy worked in the long run, though, although he inwardly shivered whenever birds got too close.

Evan and Sarah got married a year later. They soon had a baby, Madeline Rita Goldwaith, and she was healthy and cute and unfairly adorable. At six years old, Madeline gained an interest animals, all types, and began pouting and pleading for a pet. So on her seventh birthday, Evan and Sarah took her to a local pet store. A red macaw was sitting on a peg near the counter and greeting customers.

“Look!” Madeline said, pulling her mom by the edge of her coat. “Look, look., look!”

“I see, hun, but Dad probably won’t approve of that.”

Madeline whirled and looked at Evan, her large blue eyes infused with such limitless innocence and sad hope that they would make Satan put down the pitchfork.

“I don’t think so,” Evan said softly, who had grown immune to those eyes (or he was colder than Satan, one or the other). “How about the puppies? You haven’t even looked at the puppies.”

“Everybody has a puppy. Robby Kavanagh has a puppy, and Caitlin and Lucey-Luce have a puppy, and Farah Isbell has a puppy, and—”

“You got a lot of dogs in your particular circle of friends.”

“They’re not *all* my friends,” Madeline said. She walked to the bird and peered up at it.
“Caitlin’s a wannabe.”

The macaw squawked, “Hello.”

“See? She likes me.”

Sarah motioned for him to join her halfway down an aisle, out of earshot. He whispered urgently, and she tilted her head, letting her black hair puddle on one shoulder, and smiled with a patience last seen only in Buddha. Evan went down all the reasons why he’d never bring the bird home, and then Sarah’s warm smile didn’t change, and he knew it was hopeless.

He gave an obligatory smile to Sarah and Madeline, sneered at the bird, and then frowned at his wallet as he took it out of his pocket.

A few minutes later the parrot was inside a cage on the cashier’s counter. Evan swiped his card. The cashier continued assembling some “beginner items.” Madeline was grinning at the bird.

“This parrot say anything interesting?” Evan asked.

“Just the clichés,” the cashier said. “Hard to get people to buy a parrot that says things they don’t want it saying. It mighta picked up some new words the other day. Some little middle schooler came in here, still decked out in his baseball uniform, and damned if that kid didn’t spend ten straight minutes yelling at it.” He gestured toward the back of the store. “Mom and sister over there, looking at chinchillas, totally oblivious. Kid just kept yelling at the bird.”

Evan’s jaw hung loose. “Why?”

“Oh that’s the good part,” the cashier said, his mustache twitching. “He had this hitting streak going, and he just lost it to a team with that had a parrot as the mascot. Guess he wanted to scream at the other team, couldn’t do that, so he screamed at the next best thing.” The cashier shrugged. “Still a good bird, though. Big fan of saltines.”

“Is it a big fan of saltines laced with cyanide?” Evan asked.

Sarah shot him a mirthless smile, then looked at the cashier. “He has a thing about birds.”

They brought the parrot home and placed it in the living room, in a large cage, on a round wooden table. They all tried to get it to talk, but it scooted away from them. They tried teaching it each other's names, but it just sat on its peg and stared at the floor.

Madeline said he looks sad, and Evan agreed. They decided they'd let it adjust to its new home and left it alone.

Evan put Madeline to bed after cake and her honorary extra hour of TV for turning seven years old, and then went into the master bedroom. He walked out an hour later, wearing plaid boxers and a white T-shirt, ambled into the kitchen, opened a cupboard, and took out a small yellow bag of Sour Patch Kids.

The bag rustled in his hand. He went into the living room and flicked on the TV. His eyes switched to the parrot every three or four seconds. He hadn't been able to sleep because he'd imagined the parrot streaking through the house, dive-bombing into his daughter's room and gouging out her eyes and raking her throat.

Evan landed on a buddy-cop movie. His eyelids gained an irresistible weight. The only reliable measure to keep him up at night anymore, now that he'd given up caffeine, was candy.

He tore open the bag. The parrot skittered around its cage, spread its wings out and bobbed its head.

Evan's eyelids flung wide. He watched the parrot as he opened the bag a little more. It cocked its head, and it squawked.

It hadn't made a sound since they'd gotten in the house. It did everything in a docile and slow fashion. The only word he could attach to its behavior was "mournful." It took a few bites of its food and then just stood on its peg, cleaned its feathers, or stared at the wall. Sometimes it made eye contact, but it otherwise remained as emotionally distant as a parrot could.

He assumed it was longing for its post at the pet store, or to be out of its cage, but he got the distinct impression that, should he open the cage, it wouldn't move.

It was watching him. It was absolutely watching him. And it was, in a manner of speaking, freaking him the fuck out. He feigned nonchalance so the parrot wouldn't know he was frightened, and slouched on the sofa, then reached into the bag and pinched out a strawberry-red piece.

“RUINER OF STREAKS,” the parrot bellowed.

Every molecule of Evan paused. Thin hairs on his shins stood at alert. He remembered the hospital...

“I could've gone my whole life—my whole entire life—without trying one of those things, and now that isn't possible. Way to go, ruiner of streaks.”

Even moved his eyes, only his eyes, to the bird, then slid his hand into the bag. Shadows around the bird seemed to thicken and darken, rearrange, slide away, so its feathers' riotous colors glowed brighter in the night. They were the same color as the candy.

“RUINER OF STREAKS.”

His pupils were now trying to focus through tears. “Annie?” he asked.

“Evan, what is that bird—” Sarah started. She was standing at the doorway in navy pinstripe pajamas. “Honey?” Her voice was wary and concerned. “You're not supposed to feed parrots candy.”

“She'll spit it out.”

“It's a 'he'.”

“Watch.”

The parrot seized the candy and gobbled it down.

Evan stared at it and said, “Maybe Annie's taste buds changed.”

Sarah tilted her head. “Why’re you even...” A nascent smile formed, all tight and disturbed.

“Did you say ‘Annie?’”

He inched toward the cage and held out the bag. The parrot reached its black beak through the bars and dipped into the package, ruffled around, ate another piece.

“EVAN. RUINER OF STREAKS,” it screamed.

Evan gestured at it, his eyebrows halfway to his hairline as he looked at Sarah.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Sarah said. “That kid in the little league uniform talked to the parrot about losing his hitting streak, and we all said our names earlier.”

“RUINER OF STREAKS. SARAH.”

“It’s Annie,” Evan said.

“You want it to be her.”

“It *is* her.”

“*You need it to be her,*” Sarah said, and then her voice pinched. “*You need it to be her.*”

Madeline came out and asked what’s wrong. Sarah said nothing’s wrong.

Evan spent the whole night staring at the parrot. He took it back to the store in the morning, but the cashier had a no-refund policy and refused to take it back. So Evan drove downtown, with the bird slumped in its cage, the metal rattling against the car door as they ran over rough roads.

“Evan,” the bird said softly. “Sarah.”

“I know,” he said, and put a fist over his mouth at a stop light and bent forward and crushed a cry between his teeth and sat upright again. Breathed out. “Why didn’t you just become a princess?”

The bird looked out the window.

He pulled into the parking lot of the aviary and went inside and spoke with someone, who had him speak with someone else, who in turn had him speak with someone else.

The director of the aviary said they don't allow wild or sick birds. Evan said the parrot is neither of those things, that it grew up in a pet store, that it had its requisite vaccinations. She went on listing reasons they couldn't do this, until she saw in his own eyes the kind of plea he saw in his daughter's eyes.

"We have been known to make exceptions," she said, and talked to him for a while longer, and then led him out of the room and down a hall and opened a door.

Evan walked into the rainforest exhibit. There was sinister fluttering and tweeting all around him. The canopy shattered daylight into shards. The floor was fragments of shadow and light.

Evan knelt on one knee. The parrot was rummaging through its plumage with its beak. He reached in and for the first and last time of his life, he stroked a bird's little head. And then he opened the cage.

The parrot leapt off its peg and hopped out and launched into the canopy.

"You sure she'll be okay?" Evan asked, still watching the point where the bird had disappeared.

"You said it's a male," the director said.

"Yeah, sorry."

The director tilted her head a few degrees and looked him with dubious brown eyes, as though she were seeing every word he wasn't saying hovering just at the edge of his lips. "It's rare to take in a domesticated bird. We'll keep an eye on her, especially in the first couple weeks. She may have to be isolated should other birds get too aggressive or she doesn't respond well to her new habitat. There are a lot of problems with transplanting a bird from one location to another."

Evan nodded and walked out and put the cage down in the hall.

“You’re free to come back and see her whenever you’d like,” the director said.

Evan flashed a rueful smile as he walked away. “Maybe,” he said, the same way a father tells his kid “maybe” they’ll get ice cream on the way home, so everyone knows it’ll never happen. “I have a phobia about birds.”

“But you just—”

“She wasn’t a bird.”