

Tick

I lost it. The picture, I mean.

I was carrying too many things, like always. You know how it is: you're rushing, you have this list in your head that's ticking, do this do this do this, like some omnipresent metronome driving you to get it all done. Take the coffee cup to the sink, grab the papers you stacked on the counter last night, slip that small cheque from the insurance company into your purse and pluck out your car keys. Slide sideways into your coat. There's satisfaction in such fluid motion, in having mastered efficiency. It's all those years of training, getting your kid to school and yourself to work on time, both of you clutching full lunch bags and dressed decently, too. Remembering gymnastics on Tuesday and swimming on Friday and catching the occasional drop-in yoga session for yourself, as if it really could help to centre a head as hectic as yours. And always, always keeping an ear out for the slightest snuffle, the sound of something coming apart.

I had it all together — the keys in my right hand, purse over my arm and everything else cradled against my chest — all necessary, all of it on that ticking list. But then I realized I hadn't put on my gloves, and I had to set everything down on the tippy table by the front door. Too small, that table; I knew it was impractical even as I bought it; still, I love its fine bones and bevelled edges and I've had it too long now to give up on it.

I was pulling on the second glove when my purse swung out and knocked those papers to the floor, scattering them. Oh fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. There's nothing worse than carelessness for stealing time.

I know I still had the picture then. It had flown out of the book I'd tucked it inside and I remember seeing the eyes, thinking they were watching me with reproach for that torrent of curses, for getting so carried away. Settle down, she would say. She'd roll those eyes and deadpan Don't get into one of your frenzies now.

With my gloves on, I couldn't finesse the picture back between those tight, safe pages so I just nestled it in among the bank statements, capped that stack with the thick envelope I had to mail. Book on the bottom: last stop.

Once I'd placed it all securely in the passenger seat of the car, my purse on top to keep things from sliding to the floor, I cleared the snow and ice off the windows — all of them, and thoroughly. A lot of people don't, like they don't quite understand how full visibility is a crucial part of safe driving. It cost me another few minutes, of course, and I knew I should go straight to the bank, but still I headed for the post office. Lately, I can't seem to flex; I just do things in the precise order I've planned them, even if it means I'll be five minutes late for every appointment from now until the end of time.

At the post office, I only took in my purse and the envelope stuffed full of signed papers — a nine-by-thirteen craft envelope, easy to locate in the pile. I didn't actually see the photo then, but I had a sense of it there; it had a different kind of presence than the non-glossy, black and white papers.

It cost nearly eighteen dollars to Priority Post the envelope back to the insurance company's head office. The woman behind the counter watched me while I considered that. She was my age but prettier, less frazzled, and she looked at me for long enough that I began to wish I was still the kind of woman who flicked on some eyeliner and blush before leaving the house. Finally, she suggested a much slower service; for less than four bucks, the package could meander across the

country. I didn't bother to explain how interminable seven business days could be; I just shook my head and handed her my Visa.

I probably would still have been on time for my appointment at the bank if I hadn't hit two red lights in a row. At the first, I put on some lipstick in the rear view mirror. At the second — just barely red when I got to it, and a long light with plenty of turning lane variations to go through before it greened up for me — I muttered Come on, come on, come on, come on like it was my calming mantra. Eventually I ran out of patience, switched over to a much louder Fuck, come on already, *fuck!* I banged the heels of hands against the steering wheel for added emphasis. Not so calming, but much more satisfying.

Late and harried by the time I arrived at the bank, I scooped up the pile from the passenger seat with one arm while opening my door. I'm sure that's how I lost it. I should have walked around, picked up the papers carefully. Just a four by six photo, easy for it to slip away unnoticed.

I didn't even realize it was missing until I was sitting across from the loan officer, explaining that I wouldn't need much and not for long, not with the settlement expected in full before year's end. Just a line of credit to tide me over, now that my short term disability payments had ended and my savings were almost gone. It doesn't take long to burn through a single mom's savings, not even one who'd always made a half-decent wage working for the government.

I was searching through the papers while I told him all that, while I explained why going back to work right now was out of the question — impossible, really, with the way my days are filled. This was the point where I thought the picture might come in handy, bolster my case. He needed to see why I would be too distracted.

But the picture was just gone.

I excused myself, rushed through the bank and outdoors, my head sweeping side to side while I retraced my path along the building to the parking lot, all the way back to the car, sick thinking that I might find it ruined with wet salty slop. I was looking for her eyes, but then I realized

she could have landed face down, so I had to look again — this time for nothing but a rectangle of white, a blank field with her on the other side of it.

It wasn't in the parking lot or in the car so I fanned out further but all I saw were soggy cigarette butts dotting the snow. I knew I had to get back. Precious minutes of loan officer time were being lost, too.

I'd planned to use the photo to hold his attention. I knew it was unfair, and I knew I would say — like I've said to every single person I've shown it to — See, you can't tell. Look at her, looking straight at the camera. She's so definite. No trace of a bruise or any blood, just that glossy brown hair, thick and wavy like mine, hiding the lump she never mentioned. She's not smiling but see, she's not glazed over, either. She's always had a face like that, ever since she was a baby: a wise, calm face that makes you instantly think of words like *unflappable*.

It's a nice picture of her, of Kelsey, leaning on our black Mazda next to a buckled ridge of metal running down the passenger door. The front corner of the car is crumpled: tire collapsed, lights broken and blind, bumper hanging off like it had been attached by rubber bands and white glue, though of course it had taken one hell of a hit. If the loan officer seemed interested (and people usually do) I might go on to say You can see some of the debris there by her feet, and the light dusting of snow in the background. But look how the back of the car is absolutely unscathed.

Or I might just talk about her raspberry red coat — wool and cashmere, beautifully tailored. A splurge, that coat, but when she pulled it off the hanger at the store and tried it on, I had to give in and buy it. It seemed like a rite of passage, the first real womanly, sophisticated coat she'd ever reached for. Buttons, not a zipper.

A few years back, she shouted at me Will I ever get to grow up? After that, I did try to stop myself from treating her like she should stay a kid forever.

It turned out the loans officer didn't need the picture to be convinced. When I came back from my failed search, he was looking at his computer, one of my statements in front of him, nodding. He said It all looks good, and he filled out forms and I was careful to conceal my surprise

at how easy it was. I signed where he told me to and thanked him, but not profusely. I'm trying to get out of the habit of being too effusive. Or too anything, really.

I placed all my papers back on the passenger seat and went through them again, then I ran my hands down into all the crevices of my new car — bought in a hurry and nothing at all like the last — thinking maybe she was just hiding there. I even lifted the floor mat, though how that picture could have slipped underneath I don't know.

I knew it didn't matter. There are other pictures of the crunched car, taken at the scene because I had the presence of mind — surprising! — to think right then about insurance. We'd been on our way to try on another milestone garment: the graduation dress Kelsey was almost sure she wanted. I wasn't even rushing. It wasn't even the day I deserved to have an accident. It was someone else in a hurry, and he backed straight out of his driveway, straight and fast into her side of the car. He hadn't taken the time to sweep the snow, unexpected for April, off his rear windshield. Kelsey had to climb over the gearshift to get out my door.

She had her camera along so I could take her picture in that dress. She thought it would help her make the final decision. It's old, not a digital camera, but there's a one-hour photo in the mall. We planned to look at shoes while we waited.

The picture that's lost now was the only one I took that day with Kelsey in it, the only one with that perspective on the damage. Never mind. The insurance company and the lawyers have all the pictures they need. The one-hour clerk — a nice young woman, about the same age as Kelsey — even offered to put the images on a CD so I could email them right away, or blow them up, or whatever I needed to do. I thanked her for that suggestion and then, though I didn't mean to, I mentioned offhand the importance of seat belts and airbags and extra caution at intersections. I should have stopped there but — you have to remember, it was all so fresh, just a week since the accident — but then I was holding up the print of Kelsey, and I was telling that young woman, Her head hit the side window.

Her head hit the side window. The airbag might have cushioned her, but I'd turned it off. It was an older car, and the option for smaller passengers — like the very short co-worker I'd driven home earlier that week — was to turn the key in a special slot to Off. When you had a full-sized passenger, you were supposed to turn the airbag back On. There was a light on the dash to remind you, if you remembered to notice it.

The list in my head that day didn't include Turn airbag back on. Faulty list, faulty head.

You can't tell from looking at the picture that Kelsey's brain was swelling right up inside her skull. And that's just how looking at her was, too; you couldn't tell, not unless you knew what to look for. The police were there in minutes, and when they saw everyone was okay — the two of us and the other driver, so apologetic — they didn't bother with ambulances. We gave our statements, helped push our broken car a few feet closer to the curb, and the younger constable flagged us down a taxi. Everyone was very polite.

And Kelsey didn't complain, not once, but that's like her. She just laid her head on my shoulder in the cab. I should have thought something right then, but we were both shook up and it didn't seem that unusual. At home she went straight to her room but you know eighteen year olds, that's what they do; they practically live in their rooms. Slumped over on the bed, still wearing her raspberry coat and fast asleep when I went by twenty minutes later. Tired out from all the excitement, I thought, or maybe the disappointment of not getting her dress. Tomorrow, I'd promised her in the cab. The dress will still be there tomorrow.

I didn't think anything was wrong until I tried to wake her up for supper.

I feel for that young photo clerk, and everyone else I've shown the picture to since, and maybe it's best that it's gone now. I'm ready to stop telling that story and start a new one anyway. I'm waiting for the story of how Kelsey recovers, shakes off this drug-induced coma they're keeping her in. A few times already, the doctors have tried to bring her out but her brain started to swell and they had to push her back under. It's just not time yet, I guess.

They used to make predictions; now, they say they don't know how long, or what to expect.

In the meantime, though you wouldn't think it, there's a surprising amount to do. There's all that paperwork and arrangements to make, and there's remembering to eat in between my morning visit to wash her face and the longer visit that stretches from afternoon until well after dark. I think maybe she can hear me but I don't have that much to tell her anymore, and she's always hated when I just ramble on. Visitors are pretty rare — it's hard, I know, for people to find enough hours — so every night now, I read to her. Yesterday, we were halfway through *Little Women*, but then I remembered what happens, how sad it gets. It's too young for Kelsey anyway. This morning I took a new book from her shelf, one from that time-travel series she's been reading, and I know she'll like it better.

When she was first in the hospital, I went and bought the dress she wanted. I was afraid it would be gone if I waited. Even though she's missed her graduation, plus a whole summer and fall, it's still hanging on the wraparound curtain rod close to her head. It's covered with drycleaner's plastic so it doesn't get dusty or absorb too much hospital smell, but I want it to be the first thing Kelsey sees when she opens her eyes, so she knows she hasn't been gone too long.

An induced coma is not like a real one, I think. It's just a dusting of coma, so light you can still make out the shape of her underneath. When the time's right, I imagine they'll just sweep that coma off and she'll open her eyes and be right there, looking calm and definite, like nothing was ever lost.

word count: 2651