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It was mid-June and dusk. Fireflies sparked over the darkening lawn, and the cicadas wrapped the house with their high thrum. Inside, the air was still and close. Lucy was still, too, propped up on her pillow and surrounded by the two piles of stuffed animals she called her guardians. Claire sat next to her on the edge of the bed. She had finished reading, and the two of them sat quietly, sloughing off the day's knot of heat. Through the open window drifted the animated rise and fall of a dinner conversation, the susurrus of sprinklers, their sputtering off, a sharp silence. Here was a reprieve from activity. Here was the quiet center of life, the moment when Claire could enjoy simply being, the simple being of her daughter. One breath, and another, they gave themselves over to the evening's embrace.

Lucy lay down in this cool pause, her freshly-washed hair dampening the pillow. Claire leaned over her daughter, kissed her cool curve of cheek, loving the freshly cracked newness of her daughter bathed, her deep, sweet breath.

The moth was resting on the wall behind Lucy's bed, and Claire swatted it quickly, with the book she held lightly in hand. She swatted without thinking of its somber brown wings, its paper-light being. She swatted innocently. Impulsively, even. In a blink, it vanished behind an expanse of white headboard. Lucy sat up. Her voice rang out.

"What are you doing? What was that? Was that a bug?"

Lucy's mind was like fly-paper, her day one long question: *How do cars work? How do they make cars? How do they make lightbulbsdollroads? Where do moms come from? Who was your mom? How do bugs eat? How do they make rockets? Mom? MOM!* She clamored and tumbled through the house, all day long her voice ringing out wanting this, considering that...her desires glinting like so many party-colored beads on a string. Her eyes were bright, flitting things and her hair so honey-golden, that Claire, whose beauty had always been more somber and dark, often looked at her daughter in perfect

bewilderment. Her daughter was pure life. Even her little friends seemed to know this and swarmed around her when they played. Lucy remained at their humming center, drawing life into her like nectar.

“No,” Claire answered her. “It was a moth.”

“Is it dead?” Lucy asked.

“No,” Claire lied.

Then, “What are moths?”

“They’re like butterflies.”

“Do they sting?”

“No, they’re very gentle.”

Lucy knew that her tumbling questions, each more digressive than the last, granted her a reprieve from sleep. She dug and she pondered, and then she wondered, could she keep a moth in her bug locker? “Forever?” She looked at her mother with a sly grin.

“Well, no,” Claire said. She could keep it for a time, then she would have to let it go. Lucy frowned and looked askance, tallying something that was, for the moment, beyond both of them.

“Do moths die?” she asked, and something shadowy fluttered between them.

Lucy knew death was something that happened to her bugs, the ones she hunted by day: the aphids that infested her mother’s rose buds, the pill bugs she rescued from the damp undersides of rocks, the spiders she coaxed from the corners of the fence, and even, the solitary, startling grasshopper, that she stumbled upon in their oasis of green lawn. Once she had seen an injured butterfly, set upon by bees, and had watched in paralyzed horror as its tissue-paper wings were shred mercilessly, until her mother gently cupped her shoulders and turned her away. But live bugs she trapped with abandon, keeping them in the transparent, drum-shaped container she had received for her birthday. The container’s top was a magnifying glass, and she spent hours constructing habitats of rocks and flower petals and miniature twigs. She fed them grass and watched as they crept deliciously up and down the clear plastic walls. One moment they were moving, delightful, creepy, crawly things. They were her friends. And then something transpired—too much sun, too little air or food, too much shaking of the specimen jar—and they were puzzlingly still. She accepted this final stillness as a final fact. Death was a fate, a matter of course. It didn’t mean anything.

So Claire answered her daughter simply. “Yes,” she said. “Moths die.” She imagined her directness (and even in so speaking, she admired herself) would reinforce her daughter’s burgeoning respect for living creatures, cultivate her gentleness, bolster her infant stewardship of the environment.

“But why?” Lucy pressed, “Why do moths die?”

Lucy drilled insistently for facts, believing that her mother held in her core boundless reserve of knowledge that could be extracted, question by hard question. Now fully awake, breathing rapidly, she faced Claire. Her own small being was tuned wholly to the

question of the moth's.

"Well," Claire spoke deliberately, "because all living things die."

She paused and saw her daughter's small (but now how formidable) mind rush away from her, a spool unraveling—and in another breath the question rang out:

"Do people die?"

Claire felt in her stomach something cold and hard, like marble. In perfect stillness she reckoned whether perfect silence might preserve, as if in amber, her daughter's innocence, vanishing now as swiftly as the evening's light.

To lie was her great, her singular desire. To lie was what her husband would have done. She was primed to lie, she would have lied, swiftly and easily, that sweet luminous lie of motherhood. She would have kept her child child-like. But already Lucy knew.

"Yes," Claire said.

"How?" Lucy wanted to know. "How do people die?"

"In lots of different ways," Claire said. "Sometimes, they just get very old or very sick." She said this, but she imagined cancer and massive coronaries, war, gas, shark attacks, pills, hanging, vehicular crashes and capsized vessels, car bombs and other terrorist events, mysterious, stealthy diseases, shotguns, and it was all death, and sorrow, and then more death.

Lucy considered. "What doesn't die?"

There was nothing. There were people. People died. People died, and animals. There was nothing else. Not the world, not books or art, not houses or cars, or computers or dinner plates. There were no toys, nor scraps of paper. There were trees, and Lucy's goldfish. They died, too. Orchids, maybe these survived in a way. But that was not what her daughter meant. In the wake of the question, there were people, and people died. So struck was Claire by the fact and fear of mortality, that in that moment, when everything fell away, what was left, what shocked her, was God. "God," she said cautiously. "God doesn't die."

"Why not? Why doesn't God die?"

"Because," Claire breathed, "He lives forever and always," the phrase slipping from her as easily as a child's catechism, much like the childhood wish it was. But for a moment, infinite presence shored up infinite loss. For a moment, there was the idea of it, and it seemed only fair that the universe would provide her this balance. For another moment, this satisfied her daughter. Then Lucy looked away. Her brow furrowed.

"Will I die?"

Claire plummeted, her mind plunged into blankness. This was the opposite of fear, an abyss so bottomless and wordless, that even the walls of the room seemed to rise like sheer black cliffs, impossible to scale. Now the room was nearly dark, and Claire was at the bottom of grief—no, she had found the antithesis of grief, for even grief had presence. Claire knew that from this quarry she would never get out.

Claire took in the fading of her daughter's face, so open and sweet, the pale, ghostly

figure of her nightgown, her great and fragile beauty, the even greater love she had visited upon her. She fathomed the span of Lucy's life, from birth to death, whatever that would mean for her, and Claire knew beyond doubt that the great sorrow of her life was that, yes, someday, her daughter would die. She saw, too, how Lucy waited for her answer, sitting stiffly among those false guardians, her own great fear struggling against her even greater desire to know.

"In a very, very, very long time," she said, and in this way, postponed, for both of them, the imagination as well as the fact of her death.

"Where will I go when I die?"

"I don't know," she said. And then, "To be with Jesus and the angels," she answered, setting aside--how easily!--her own long struggle with faith, the necessary skepticism she had carried since adolescence. Faith now seemed a necessary, difficult thing, something brittle and beautiful, a cocoon, twitching and ready to split.

But Lucy's mouth trembled and her eyes filled with tears. Choking, a little, a question burst from her, "Will *you* be there?"

This was the fear she could fathom. In that intimate, dark moment she had taken death's full measure. Lucy's head wobbled like a baby bird's, and the tears cascaded. She hunched in the dark, sobbing, her animals spilling off the bed, and Claire's lie rose, so that before she drowned in her own flooding sorrow, "Yes," she lied. Ardently, easily she promised that she would always take care of her, though she knew so many things, anything, really, could prevent this. She promised, even though she knew that she would fail her, that she had already failed her. Lucy would grow up. She would hate Claire, or not. She would leave her. She would come back and love her, or hate her, and leave her again. Claire would die. Lucy would die. They would not (it was not likely) die together. It was only now that they were joined, but this—this cool, delicious pause—would not last. Lucy might not know death, but against her truer fathoming, Claire would protect her at all cost.

What else was in heaven? Lucy wanted to know. God and the angels, she answered. And what were the angels' names?

Claire named as many as she could, saints and angels both, as if listing them could exorcise the sadness that threatened to consume her: "Mary and Michael and Gabriel," she invoked. "And Joan. And Andrew and Elizabeth and Catherine and Patrick. Raphael. Uriel." She paused. "That's all I can remember. But there are lots."

Lucy enjoyed these names in the way that all young children like to name and particularize their world, as if words alone could conjure reality. The naming satisfied her, and after a brief silence she spoke again.

"Will Finley... will Finley...when was Finley not here?"

Finley was her brother, her darling.

"When you were two he wasn't here."

"How did he get here?"

And so, in that easy way she had of moving, always moving on to the next thing, deeper into her life, and deeper into what might be known and unknown, the conversation turned

again. Lucy had once more found a place of light. They talked some more, and then she slept. Claire stayed by her daughter's side for some time, and when the darkness had risen fully, she lay down beside her, the night gathering both of them in its chrysalis.

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