

Suzie Marten was ten years old when she died.

She lived to dance. Spinning herself sick in search of rhythm, pirouetting until her toes hurt in the ballet shoes her father bought. They were a perfect fit—and let's not forget the pink ribbon laces. She scuffed and broke the soles of those shoes with a knife spirited from the kitchen drawer, just don't tell Mum. Yes, Suzie adored them with the pure love only children can muster, or sustain, for inanimate things. And she was wearing them the day she came unsewn.

November 12th, 1995.

To Suzie, Sunday mornings were the final love-hate pit stop between freedom and being a 'big girl'. Suzie despised school and feared her raven-faced teacher, a man who sometimes got so mad he threw things. She imagined he spent his Sundays alone, watching the clock, eager for Monday to roll around so he could overturn yet another desk. He did this to her best friend. Books and pencils crashed to the floor, an eraser bouncing up to clip one boy's ear. Suzie sat beside her humiliated friend at recess and draped an arm over his shoulder—a brave move considering his sex, because as any ten-year-old girl knows, where there be boys, there be a whole lot of germs.

"It's okay," she whispered in his ear. "I saw on the telly that teachers can't hurt kids. We can sue if we want. He's such a dirty shit."

They looked at each other, shocked. *Dirty shit.*

"Suzie Marten, you can't say that. If they hear you, they'll send a letter home to your ma and she'll wash your mouth out with soap. I saw that on the telly, too."

"Na-uh she won't. My ma's too tired for that. Always in bed. Besides, she says words like that. She works the dogwatch at the hospital—whatever that means. She gets home from work when everyone else is getting up. I don't know what the dog has to do with it. I once saw this boring black-and-white movie about a vampire who only ever came out at night. He could turn into a bat and flew 'round eating people, and during the day he slept in a box. Did'ja ever see that one?"

Suzie once teased her mother's mouth open with a spoon while she slept to see if she had fangs. Donna Marten bolted awake, grabbed her daughter by the wrist and pulled her under the sheets. They laughed and had Fruit Loops for dinner.

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On the morning of the ninth, Donna fell into bed after a ten-hour shift. Knees ached, the stink of disinfectant and cigarettes sweating from her pores, too tired to shower. Suzie pulled the blankets up to her mother's chin.

"Mum," Suzie said, voice drawn out and meek.

"What is it, honey? I'm dead on my feet."

"Well."

"Come on, out with it. I'm two ticks from dreaming."

"Well, I was just wondering. How come on television mums don't get old? How come Julia Roberts never gets wrinkles or anything, but you're starting to look like an old lady? A bit of an old rag."

Mother stared into daughter's innocent eyes.

Innocent, Donna reminded herself. *Innocent. Forgive her, for she knows not what she says.*

It was an expression her own mother had been fond of using, and often. Donna never really understood its meaning—its weight—until that moment, there in her bedroom with her daughter by her side. For the last time.

"Count yourself lucky I love you, Suzie," she said, wishing her little girl were old enough to start lying like everyone else. Despite this, they kissed each other bye-bye and all was forgiven, as it should be. Donna watched her daughter pull the door shut, taking with her the smell of Strawberry Shortcake, of pre-teen sweat.

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Suzie passed a cabinet of her gymnastics trophies in the hallway, glass planes shaking as she bounced along. Her reflection twittered from one family photo to another. Leaping into the kitchen in her socks, she slid to the refrigerator; it was covered in drawings and magnets, school reports, and shopping receipts.

Alone at last.

Her father was away on another one of his business trips. Where he went she didn't quite know, but she was always glad to see him go because he never came back empty-handed. Once he brought a packet of windup crayons home—and the good kind, unlike those her friends owned, crayons that had to be tossed if twisted too far.

Another time, the ballet shoes.

Watched *Sailor Moon* over cereal. Pulled her hair into a ponytail. Brushed her teeth, bristles frayed as the wheat stalks on her uncle's farm after a storm. Suzie didn't see much of her extended family anymore, not with her father always traveling and her mother sleeping day after day.

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Donna Marten would find dried toothpaste splashes on the bathroom mirror a week later. She licked them off and fell to the floor, mouth tasting of mint and the briny tang of tears.

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Suzie put on her headphones even though the padding itched her ears, and slipped into a pink leotard and tutu. Thumbed PLAY on the Walkman so music filled her ears. She went into the yard, front door clapping shut behind her.

Meanwhile, within the house, a mechanic hum escaped the freezer. The grandfather clock ticked away. Gentle draughts tickled the wind chimes near the window until they laughed. Through it all Donna Marten snored.

The little girl danced to *Mister Boombastic* (“say me fan-tas-tic!”) on the front lawn. In her opinion, she lived on the most boring street in all of James Bridge, maybe even all of Australia: a rarely traveled stretch of road on the outskirts of town. They had no neighbors, but should a car come along she liked the idea of being seen. This was why she danced, and why she danced so well. She didn't twirl and fall for herself, but for everything. There was simply nothing else to do.

Autumn was hot that year, her house surrounded by matchstick grass. The valley hissed when the wind blew through the dead trees, a desperate, lonely sound.

Suzie spun and curtsied, laughing. *I could do this all day. And I just might, too. Go on, try to stop me.*

Dirty shit. Dirty shit!

She loved watching her shadow on the lawn, the way it was a part of her, except for those times when she leapt into the air and they separated. These moments, which seemed so much longer than they were, left her floating and sad. The kind of sad not even *Mister Boombastic* (“say me fan-tas-tic!”) could mend.

I wish I could fly forever, only I'd miss my shadow. I really would.

That would be a little like losing a friend.

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Four hours after falling asleep, panic reached into the dark and ripped Donna from her bed. Her stomach knotted, brow flecked with sweat. It hadn't been the screeching tires or muted gunshot that woke her—fatigue muted both. It was that her mind fled her body and the flesh had no choice but to follow.

She threw the door open and ran from room to room. Nothing.

“Suzie!” Voice feral and unrecognizable. Something burned within her chest, fueling dread. The house was empty.

Donna stumbled outside, squinting against sunlight. Pain thudded in her head and shot down her spine. Suzie wasn't in the backyard. As she rounded the house and neared the front gate, heat waves coming off the brick wall to her right. She fumbled with the latch. Next to her were the trashcans, their stench reaching out to make her feel ill. The latch opened and the gate swung wide—a sharp cry of metal grinding metal.

Donna ran onto the front lawn and stopped.

Her daughter's shattered Walkman near the gutter, ribbons of gray tape fluttering in the wind. Suzie Marten was strewn in pieces across the road.

Crows fluttered over intestines, disturbing the stillness. One hopped onto the little girl's head, spread its bloodied wings and squawked. It lowered its beak and ate the tongue cooking against the tar.

A pink ballet shoe. The foot still inside.

Donna screamed. Breath ran short as her nostrils filled with the stink; a putrid mix of chemicals and sugarcane, shit and salt. She would never forget it.

Darkness fluttered over Donna's vision as she ran to her child, lashing at the birds. They twirled and cawed, sprinkling blood drops over her face. "Get away from my baby!" she screamed, arms thrashing. But the beaks returned to meat, to gorge.

Delicate, soft stabbing sounds.

Another crow settled on Donna's shoulder and its feathers brushed her cheek. Her world emptied. She clambered over gravel. *This isn't happening. It can't be. I'm dreaming—that's it! I'm still sleeping, my baby isn't torn to pieces.* Donna giggled. Parents weren't equipped to see these sights; to smell such insane, bitter scents.

She fought the birds again, kicked, punched. Donna didn't comprehend what she was doing until she held one of the animals in her hand. Its scream mingled with her own, formed a single high-pitched mewl that echoed across the fields. She let it drop, wings broken.

Donna fell to her knees and attempted to scoop up as much of her daughter as she could. Arms swept wide in manic, possessive hugs, pulling the larger chunks closer. Tears slipped down her face. She gave in and settled on the largest intact fragment: Suzie's head, neck, collarbone, and left arm, which held on by a thinly stretched tendon and little more. Only the birds were hungry and selfish and wouldn't let their bounty escape without a fight. They swooped, black-on-black eyes both empty and cold.

The chunk of Suzie was only a quarter of her corpse, but it felt heavier than her daughter had ever been intact. She turned her back to the crows, deflecting swoops and scratches. The weight in her arms lessened and something slapped against her shins, something warm and wet.

Donna was a nurse and assisted doctors in surgery. What she saw now was unlike anything she had ever seen at work. It was small and childlike.

A child's healthy heart with many years of beating left to do.

Donna collapsed amid a flurry of dark wings, dark shadows