

You Wake Up
Your House Is Empty
Your Family Has Disappeared..

**NO
TIME FOR
GOODBYE**

A
THRILLER

LINWOOD BARCLAY

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[May 1983](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

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This is for my wife, Neetha

When Cynthia woke up, it was so quiet in the house she thought it must be Saturday.

If only.

If there'd ever been a day that she needed to be a Saturday, to be anything but a school day, this was it. Her stomach was still doing the occasional somersault, her head was full of cement, and it took some effort to keep it from falling forward or onto her shoulders.

Jesus, what the hell was that in the wastepaper basket next to the bed? She couldn't even remember throwing up in the night, but if you were looking for evidence, there it was.

She had to deal with this first, before her parents came in. Cynthia got to her feet, wobbled a moment, grabbed the small plastic container with one hand and opened her bedroom door a crack with the other. There was no one in the hall, so she slipped past the open doors of her brother's and parents' bedrooms and into the bathroom, closing the door and locking it behind her.

She emptied the bucket into the toilet, rinsed it in the tub, took a bleary-eyed look at herself in the mirror. So, this is how a fourteen-year-old girl looks when she gets hammered. Not a pretty sight. She could barely remember what Vince had given her to try the night before, stuff he'd snuck out of her house. A couple of cans of Bud, some vodka, gin, an already opened bottle of red wine. She'd promised to bring some of her dad's rum, but had chickened out in the end.

Something was niggling at her. Something about the bedrooms.

She splashed cold water on her face, dried off with a towel. Cynthia took a deep breath, tried to put herself together, in case her mother was waiting for her on the other side of the door.

She wasn't.

Cynthia headed back to her room, feeling the broadloom under her toes. Along the way, she glanced into her brother Todd's room, then her parents'. The beds were made. Her mother didn't usually get around to making them until later in the morning—Todd never made his own, and their mother let him get away with it—but here they were, looking as though they'd never been slept in.

Cynthia felt a wave of panic. Was she already late for school? Just how late was it?

She could see Todd's clock on his bedside table from where she stood. Just ten before eight. Nearly half an hour before she usually left for her first class.

The house was still.

She could usually hear her parents down in the kitchen about this time. Even if they weren't speaking to each other, which was often the case, there'd be the faint sounds of the fridge opening and closing, a spatula scraping against a frying pan, the muffled rattling of dishes in the sink. Sometimes her father usually, leafing through the pages of the morning newspaper, grunting about something in the news that irritated him.

Weird.

She went into her room, the walls plastered with posters of KISS and other soul-destroying performers that gave her parents fits, and closed the door. Pull it together, she told herself. Show up for breakfast like nothing ever happened. Pretend there wasn't a screaming match the night before. Act like her father hadn't dragged her out of her much older boyfriend's car and taken her home.

She glanced at her ninth-grade math text sitting atop her open notebook on her desk. She'd only managed half the questions before she'd gone out the night before, deluded herself into thinking that if she got up early enough she could finish them in the morning.

Yeah, that was gonna happen.

Todd was usually banging around this time of the morning. In and out of the bathroom, putting Led Zeppelin on his stereo, shouting downstairs to his mother asking where his pants were, burping and waiting until he was at Cynthia's door to rip one off.

She couldn't remember him saying anything about going in to school early, but why would he tell her anyway? They didn't often walk together. She was a geeky ninth grader to him, although she was giving it her best shot to get into as much bad stuff as he was. Wait'll she told him about getting really drunk for the first time. No, wait, he'd just rat her out later when he was in the doghouse himself and needed to score points.

Okay, so maybe Todd had to go to school early, but where were her mother and father?

Her dad, maybe he'd left on another business trip before the sun even came up. He was always heading off somewhere, you could never keep track. Too bad he hadn't been away the night before.

And her mother, maybe she'd driven Todd to school or something.

She got dressed. Jeans, a sweater. Put on her makeup. Enough not to look like shit, but not too much that her mother started making cracks about her going to "tramp tryouts."

When she got to the kitchen, she just stood there.

No cereal boxes out, no juice, no coffee in the coffeemaker. No plates out, no bread in the toaster, no mugs. No bowl with a trace of milk and soggy Rice Krispies in the sink. The kitchen looked exactly as it had after her mother had cleaned up from dinner the night before.

Cynthia glanced about for a note. Her mom was big about leaving notes when she had to go out. Even when she was angry. A long enough note to say, "On your own today," or "Make yourself some

eggs, have to drive Todd,” or just “Back later.” If she was really angry, instead of signing off with “Love, Mom,” she’d write “L, Mom.”

There was no note.

Cynthia worked up the nerve to shout, “Mom?” Her own voice suddenly sounded strange to her. Maybe because there was something in it she didn’t want to recognize.

When her mother didn’t answer, she called out again. “Dad?” Again, nothing.

This, she surmised, must be her punishment. She’d pissed off her parents, disappointed them, and now they were going to act like she didn’t exist. Silent treatment, on a nuclear scale.

Okay, she could deal with that. It beat a huge confrontation first thing in the morning.

Cynthia didn’t feel she could keep down any breakfast, so she grabbed the schoolbooks she needed and headed out the door.

The *Journal Courier*, rolled up with a rubber band like a log, lay on the front step.

Cynthia kicked it out of her way, not really thinking about it, and strode down the empty driveway—her father’s Dodge and mother’s Ford Escort were both gone—in the direction of Milford South High School. Maybe, if she could find her brother, she’d learn just what was going on, just how much trouble she might actually be in.

Plenty, she figured.

She’d missed curfew, an early one of eight o’clock. It was a school night, first of all, and there’d been that call earlier in the evening from Mrs. Asphodel about how if she didn’t hand in her English assignments, she wasn’t going to pass. She told her parents she was going to Pam’s house to do homework, that Pam was going to help her get caught up on her English stuff, even though it was stupid and a total waste of time, and her parents said okay, but you still have to be home by eight. Come on, she said, she’d barely have time to get one assignment done, and did they want her to fail? Was that what they wanted?

Eight, her father said. No later. Well, screw that, she thought. She’d be home when she got home.

When Cynthia wasn’t home by eight-fifteen, her mother phoned Pam’s house, got Pam’s mother said, “Hi, it’s Patricia Bigge? Cynthia’s mom? Could I talk to Cynthia, please?” And Pam’s mother said, “Huh?” Not only was Cynthia not there, but Pam wasn’t even home.

That was when Cynthia’s father grabbed the faded fedora hat he never went anywhere without, got in his Dodge, and started driving around the neighborhood, looking for her. He suspected she might be with that Vince Fleming boy, the seventeen-year-old from the eleventh grade, the one who had his license, who drove around in a rusted red 1970 Mustang. Clayton and Patricia Bigge didn’t much care for him. Tough kid, troubled family, bad influence. Cynthia had heard her parents talking one night about Vince’s father, that he was some bad guy or something, but she figured it was just bullshit.

It was just a fluke that her dad spotted the car at the far end of the parking lot of the Connecticut

Post Mall, out on the Post Road, not far from the theaters. The Mustang was backed up to the curb, and her father parked in front, blocking it in. She knew it was him instantly when she saw the fedora.

“Shit,” said Cynthia. Good thing he hadn’t shown up two minutes earlier, when they’d been making out, or when Vince was showing her his new switchblade—Jesus, you pressed this little button, and zap! Six inches of steel suddenly appeared—Vince holding it in his lap, moving it around and grinning, like maybe it was something else. Cynthia had tried holding it, had sliced the air in front of her and giggled.

“Easy,” Vince had said cautiously. “You can do a lot of damage with one of these.”

Clayton Bigge marched right over to the passenger door, yanked it open. It creaked on its rusty hinges.

“Hey, pal, watch it!” Vince said, no knife in hand now, but a beer bottle, almost as bad.

“Don’t ‘hey pal’ me,” her father said, taking her by the arm and ushering her back into his own car. “Christ almighty, you reek,” he told her.

She wished she could have died right then.

She wouldn’t look at him or say anything, not even when he started going on about how she was becoming nothing but trouble, that if she didn’t get her head screwed on right she’d be a fuckup for the whole life, that he didn’t know what he’d done wrong, he just wanted her to grow up and be happy and blah blah blah, and Jesus even when he was pissed off he still drove like he was taking his driver’s test, never exceeding the speed limit, always using his turn signal, the guy was unbelievable.

When they pulled into the driveway, she was out of the car before he had it in park, throwing open the door, striding in, trying not to weave, her mother standing there, not looking mad so much as worried, saying, “Cynthia! Where were—”

She steamrolled past her, went up to her room. From downstairs, her father shouted, “You come down here! We got things to discuss!”

“I wish you were dead!” she screamed, and slammed her door.

That much came back to her as she walked to school. The rest of the evening was still a bit fuzzy.

She remembered sitting down on her bed, feeling woozy. Too tired to feel embarrassed. She decided to lie down, figuring she could sleep it off by the morning, a good ten hours away.

A lot could happen before morning.

At one point, drifting in and out of sleep, she thought she heard someone at her door. Like someone was hesitating just outside it.

Then, later, she thought she heard it again.

Did she get up to see who it was? Did she even try to get out of bed? She couldn’t remember.

And now she was almost to school.

The thing was, she felt remorseful. She'd broken nearly every household rule in a single night. Starting with the lie about going to Pam's. Pam was her best friend, she was over to the house all the time, slept over every other weekend. Cynthia's mother liked her, maybe even trusted her, Cynthia thought. Bringing Pam's name into it, Cynthia thought somehow that would buy her some time, that Patricia Bigge wouldn't be so quick to phone Pam's mother. So much for that plan.

If only her crimes ended there. She'd broken curfew. Gone parking with a boy. A *seventeen-year-old* boy. A boy they say broke school windows the year before, took a joyride in a neighbor's car.

Her parents, they weren't all bad. Most of the time. Especially her mom. Her dad, shit, even he wasn't too bad, when he was home.

Maybe Todd did get a lift to school. If he did have practice, and he was pressed for time, her mom might have given him one, then decided to go grocery shopping after. Or to the Howard Johnson's for a coffee. She did that once in a while.

First-period History was a write-off. Second-period Math was even worse. She couldn't focus, her head still hurt. "How did you do on those questions, Cynthia?" the math teacher asked. She didn't even look at him.

Just before lunch, she saw Pam, who said, "Jesus, if you're going to tell your mom you're at my house, you wanna fucking let me know? Then maybe I could tell my mom *something*."

"Sorry," Cynthia said. "Did she have a fit?"

"When I came in," Pam said.

At lunch, Cynthia slipped out of the cafeteria, went to the school pay phone, dialed home. She'd tell her mother she was sorry. Really, really sorry. And then she'd ask to come home, say she felt sick. Her mother would look after her. She couldn't stay mad at her if she was sick. She'd make soup.

Cynthia gave up after fifteen rings, then thought maybe she'd dialed wrong. Tried again, no answer. She had no work number for her dad. He was on the road so much of the time, you had to wait for him to check in from wherever he was staying.

She was hanging out in front of the school with some friends when Vince Fleming drove by in his Mustang. "Sorry about all that shit last night," he said. "Jeez, your dad's a prize."

"Yeah, well," Cynthia said.

"So what happened after you went home?" Vince asked. There was something in the way he asked like he already knew. Cynthia shrugged and shook her head, didn't want to talk about it.

Vince asked, "Where's your brother today?"

Cynthia said, "What?"

“He home sick?” Vince Fleming asked.

Nobody’d seen Todd at school. Vince said he was going to ask him, quiet like, how much trouble Cynthia was in, whether she was grounded, because he was hoping she wanted to get together Friday night or Saturday, his friend Kyle was getting him some beer, they could go up to that spot, the one on the hill, maybe sit in the car awhile, look at stars, right?

Cynthia ran home. Didn’t ask Vince for a ride, even though he was right there. Didn’t check in at the school office to tell them she was skipping off early. Ran the whole way, thinking, as she pumped her legs, *Please let her car be there, Please let her car be there.*

But when she rounded the corner from Pumpkin Delight Road to Hickory, and her two-story house came into view, the yellow Escort, her mother’s car, was not there. But she shouted out her mother’s name anyway when she got inside with what little breath she had left. Then her brother’s.

She started to tremble, then willed herself to stop.

It made no sense. No matter how angry her parents might be at her, they wouldn’t do this, would they? Just leave? Take off without telling her? And take Todd with them?

Cynthia felt stupid doing it, but rang the bell at the Jamison house next door. There was probably a simple explanation for all this, something she forgot, a dental appointment, something, and all she had to do was knock on the second her mother would turn in to the driveway. Cynthia would feel like a total idiot, but that would be okay.

She started blathering when Mrs. Jamison opened the door. That when she woke up no one was home and then she went to school and Todd never showed up and her mom still wasn’t—

Mrs. Jamison said whoa, everything’s okay, your mother’s probably out doing some shopping. Mr. Jamison walked Cynthia back home, glanced down at the newspaper that still had not been taken in. Together they looked upstairs and down and in the garage again and out in the backyard.

“That sure is odd,” Mrs. Jamison said. She didn’t quite know what to think, so, somewhat reluctantly, she called the Milford police.

They sent around an officer, who didn’t seem all that concerned, at first. But soon there were more officers and more cars, and by evening, there were cops all over the place. Cynthia heard them putting out descriptions of her parents’ two cars, calling Milford Hospital. Police were going up and down the street, knocking on doors, asking questions.

“You’re sure they never mentioned anything about going anyplace?” asked a man who said he was a detective and didn’t wear a uniform like all the other police. Named Findley, or Finlay.

Did he think she’d forget something like that? That she’d suddenly go, “Oh yeah, now I remember. They went to visit my mom’s sister, Aunt Tess!”

“You see,” the detective said, “it doesn’t look like your mom and dad and brother packed to go away or anything. Their clothes are still here, there are suitcases in the basement.”

There were a lot of questions. When did she last see her parents? When had she gone to bed? ~~Who was this boy she was with? She tried to tell the detective everything, even admitted she and her~~ parents had had a fight, although she'd left out how bad it was, that she'd gotten drunk, told them she wished they were dead.

This detective seemed nice enough, but he wasn't asking the questions Cynthia was wondering. Why would her mom and dad and brother just disappear? Where would they go? Why wouldn't they take her with them?

Suddenly, in a frenzy, she began to tear the kitchen apart. Lifting up and tossing placemats, moving the toaster, looking under the chairs, peering down into the crack between the stove and the wall, tears streaming down her face.

"What is it, sweetheart?" the detective asked. "What are you doing?"

"Where's the note?" Cynthia asked, her eyes pleading. "There has to be a note. My mom never goes away without leaving a note."

Cynthia stood out front of the two-story house on Hickory. It wasn't as though she was seeing her childhood home for the first time in nearly twenty-five years. She still lived in Milford. She'd drive by here once in a while. She showed me the house once before we got married, a quick drive-by. "There it is," she said, and kept on going. She rarely stopped. And if she did, she didn't get out. She never stood on the sidewalk and stared at the place.

And it had certainly been a very long time since she'd stepped through that front door.

She was rooted to the sidewalk, seemingly unable to take even one step toward the place. I wanted to go to her side, walk her to the door. It was only a thirty-foot driveway, but it stretched a quarter century into the past. I was guessing, to Cynthia, it must have been like looking through the wrong end of some binoculars. You could walk all day and never get there.

But I stayed where I was, on the other side of the street, looking at her back, at her short red hair. I had my orders.

Cynthia stood there, as though waiting for permission to approach. And then it came.

"Okay, Mrs. Archer? Start walking toward the house. Not too fast. Kind of hesitant, you know, like it's the first time you've gone inside since you were fourteen years old."

Cynthia glanced over her shoulder at a woman in jeans and sneakers, her ponytail pulled down and through the opening at the back of her ball cap. She was one of three assistant producers. "This is the first time," Cynthia said.

"Yeah yeah, don't look at me," Ponytail Girl said. "Just look at the house and start walking up the drive, thinking back to that time, twenty-five years ago, when it all happened, okay?"

Cynthia glanced across the street at me, made a face, and I smiled back weakly, a kind of mutual *what-are-you-gonna-do?* And so she started up the driveway, slowly. If the camera hadn't been on, how would this have approached? With this mixture of deliberation and apprehension? Probably. But now it felt false, forced.

But as she mounted the steps to the door, reached out with her hand, I could just make out the trembling. An honest emotion, which meant, I guessed, that the camera would fail to catch it.

She had her hand on the knob, turned it, was about to push the door open, when Ponytail Girl shouted, "Okay! Good! Just hold it there!" Then, to her cameraman, "Okay, let's set up inside, get her coming in."

“You’re fucking kidding me,” I said, loud enough for the crew—a half dozen or so, plus Paula Malloy, she of the gleaming teeth and Donna Karan suits, who was doing all the on-camera stuff and voiceovers—to hear.

Paula herself came over to see me.

“Mr. Archer,” she said, reaching out with both hands and touching me just below my shoulders, Malloy trademark, “is everything okay?”

“How can you do that to her?” I said. “My wife’s walking in there for the first time since her family fucking vanished, and you basically yell ‘Cut’?”

“Terry,” she said, insinuating herself closer to me. “May I call you Terry?”

I said nothing.

“Terry, I’m sorry, we have to get the camera in position, and we want the look on Cynthia’s face when she comes into the house after all these years, we want that to be genuine. We want this to be honest. I think that’s what both of you want as well.”

That was a good one. That a reporter from the TV news/entertainment show *Deadline*—which, when it wasn’t revisiting bizarre unsolved crimes from years past, was chasing after the latest drinking-and-driving celebrity, or hunting down a pop star who’d failed to buckle her toddler into a seat belt—would play the honesty card.

“Sure,” I said tiredly, thinking of the bigger picture here, that maybe after all these years, some TV exposure might finally provide Cynthia with some answers. “Sure, whatever.”

Paula showed some perfect teeth and went briskly back across the street, her high heels clicking along the pavement.

I’d been doing my best to stay out of the way since Cynthia and I’d arrived here. I’d arranged to get the day off from school. My principal and longtime friend, Rolly Carruthers, knew how important it was to Cynthia to do this show, and he’d arranged a substitute teacher to take my English and creative writing classes. Cynthia had taken the day off from Pamela’s, the dress shop where she worked. We’d dropped off our eight-year-old daughter, Grace, at school along the way. Grace would have been intrigued, watching a film crew do its thing, but her introduction to TV production was not going to be a segment on her own mother’s personal tragedy.

The people who lived in the house now, a retired couple who’d moved down here from Hartford a decade ago to be close to their boat in the Milford harbor, had been paid off by the producers to clear out for the day so they could have the run of the place. Then the crew had gone about removing distracting knickknacks and personal photos from the walls, trying to make the house look, if not the way it looked when Cynthia lived there, at least as generic as possible.

Before the owners took off for a day of sailing, they’d said a few things on the front lawn for the cameras.

Husband: “It’s hard to imagine, what might have happened here, in this house, back then. You

wonder, were they all cut up into bits in the basement or something?”

Wife: “Sometimes, I think I hear voices, you know? Like the ghosts of them are still walking around the house. I’ll be sitting at the kitchen table, and I get this chill, like maybe the mother or the father, or the boy, has walked past.”

Husband: “We didn’t even know, when we bought the house, what had happened here. Someone else had got it from the girl, and they sold it to someone else, and then we bought it from them, but when I found what happened here, I read up on it at the Milford library, and you have to wonder, how come she was spared? Huh? It seems a bit odd, don’t you think?”

Cynthia, watching this from around the corner of one of the show’s trucks, shouted, “Excuse me! What’s that supposed to mean?”

One of the crew whirled around, said, “Shush,” but Cynthia would have none of it. “Don’t you fucking shush me,” she said. To the husband, she called out, “What are you implying?”

The man looked over, startled. He must have had no idea that the person he was talking about was actually present. The ponytail producer took Cynthia by the elbow and ushered her gently, but firmly around the back of the truck.

“What kind of horseshit is that?” Cynthia asked. “What’s he trying to say? That I had something to do with my family’s disappearance? I’ve put up with that shit for so—”

“Don’t worry about him,” the producer said.

“You said the whole point of doing this was to help me,” Cynthia said. “To help me find out what happened to them. That’s the only reason I agreed to do this. Are you going to run that? What he said? What are people going to think when they hear him saying that?”

“Don’t worry about it,” the producer assured her. “We’re not going to use that.”

They must have been scared Cynthia was going to walk at that point, before they had even a minute of her on film, so there were plenty of reassurances, cajoling, promises that once this piece went on TV, for sure someone who knew something would see it. Happened all the time, they said. They’d closed cold cases for the cops all over the country, they said.

Once they had again persuaded Cynthia that their intentions were honorable, and the old farts who lived in the house had been whisked away, the show went on.

I followed two cameramen into the house, then got out of the way as they positioned themselves to catch Cynthia’s expressions of apprehension and déjà vu from different angles. I figured that once this was on TV, there’d be lots of fast editing, maybe they’d turn the image all grainy, dig around in the bag of tricks to bring more drama to an event that TV producers in decades past would have found plenty dramatic on its own.

They led Cynthia upstairs to her old bedroom. She looked numb. They wanted footage of her walking into it, but Cynthia had to do it twice. The first time, the cameraman was waiting inside her bedroom, the door closed, to get a shot of Cynthia entering the room, ever so tentatively. Then the

did it again, this time from the hall, the camera looking over her shoulder as she went into the room. When it aired, you could see they'd used some fish-eye lens or something to make the scene spookier. Like maybe we were going to find Jason in a goalie mask hiding behind the door.

Paula Malloy, who'd started out as a weather girl, got her makeup retouched and her blond hair repouffed. Then she and Cynthia had those little microphone packs attached to the backs of their skirts, the wires run up and under their blouses and clipped just below their collars. Paula let her shoulder rub up against Cynthia's, like they were old friends reminiscing, reluctantly, about the bad times instead of the good.

As they came into the kitchen, cameras rolling, Paula asked, "What must you have been thinking?" Cynthia appeared to be walking through a dream. "You hadn't heard a sound in the house so far, your brother's not upstairs, you come down here into the kitchen and there's no sign of life at all."

"I didn't know what was happening," Cynthia said quietly. "I thought everyone had left early. That my dad was gone to work, that my mother must have taken my brother to school. I thought they must be mad at me, for misbehaving the night before."

"You were a difficult teen?" Paula asked.

"I had...my moments. I'd been out the night before, with a boy my parents didn't approve of, I had something to drink. But I wasn't like some kids. I mean, I loved my parents, and I think"—her voice breaking a bit here—"they loved me."

"We read in the police reports from the time, from the statements that you'd made, that you'd had an argument with your parents."

"Yes," Cynthia said. "About not being home when I promised, lying to them. I said some awful things."

"Like what?"

"Oh," Cynthia hesitated, "you know. Kids can say pretty hateful things to their parents that they don't really mean."

"And where do you think they are, today, two and a half decades later?"

Cynthia shook her head sadly. "It's all I ask myself. There's not a day goes by I don't wonder."

"If you could say something to them, right now, here on *Deadline*, if somehow they are still alive, what would it be?"

Cynthia, nonplussed, looked somewhat hopelessly out the kitchen window.

"Look into the camera there," Paula Malloy said, putting her hand around Cynthia's shoulder. I walked off to the side, and it was all I could do not to step into the frame and peel Paula's artificial face off. "Just ask them what you've been waiting all these years to ask them."

Cynthia, her eyes shiny, did as she was told, looked to the camera, and managed, at first, to say

nothing more than “Why?”

Paula allowed for a dramatic pause, then asked, “Why what, Cynthia?”

“Why,” she repeated, trying to compose herself, “did you have to leave me? If you’re able to, you’re alive, why haven’t you gotten in touch? Why couldn’t you have left just a simple note? Why couldn’t you have at least said goodbye?”

I could feel the electricity among the crew, the producers. No one was breathing. I knew what they were thinking. This was their money shot. This was going to be fucking awesome TV. I hated them for exploiting Cynthia’s misery, for milking her suffering for entertainment purposes. Because that was what this was, ultimately. Entertainment. But I held my tongue, because I knew Cynthia probably understood all this, too, that they were taking advantage of her, that she was just another story to them, a way to fill up another half-hour show. She was willing to be exploited if it meant someone watching would step forward with the key to unlock her past.

At the show’s request, Cynthia had brought with her two dented cardboard shoeboxes of memories. Newspaper clippings, faded Polaroid photos, class pictures, report cards, all the bits and pieces that she’d managed to take from her house before she moved from it and went to live with her aunt, her mother’s sister, a woman named Tess Berman.

They had Cynthia sit at the kitchen table, the boxes open in front of her, taking out one memory and then another, laying them out as if starting to begin a jigsaw puzzle, looking for all the pieces with straight edges, trying to assemble the border, then work toward the middle.

But there were no border pieces in Cynthia’s shoeboxes. No way to work toward the center. Instead of having a thousand pieces to a single puzzle, it was like she had a single piece from a thousand different puzzles.

“This is us,” she said, showing off a Polaroid, “on a camping trip we took up in Vermont.” The camera zoomed in on a disheveled-looking Todd and Cynthia standing on either side of their mother, tent in the background. Cynthia looked about five, her brother seven, their faces smudged with earth, their mother smiling proudly, her hair wrapped in a red-and-white-checked kerchief.

“I don’t have any pictures of my father,” she said mournfully. “He always took the pictures of the rest of us, so now I just have to remember how he looked. And I still see him, standing tall, always with his hat, that fedora, that little hint of a mustache. A handsome man. Todd took after him.”

She reached for a yellowed piece of newsprint. “Here’s a clipping,” Cynthia said, unfolding it gingerly, “from some things I found in my father’s drawer, what little was there.” The camera moved in again, scanned the square of newspaper. It was a faded, grainy black-and-white picture of a school basketball team. A dozen boys faced the camera, some smiling, some making stupid faces. “Dad must have saved it because Todd was in it, when he was littler, although they left his name out of the caption. He was proud of us, Dad was. He told us all the time. He liked to joke that we were the best family that he’d ever had.”

They interviewed my principal, Rolly Carruthers.

“It’s a mystery,” he said. “I knew Clayton Bigge. We went fishing together a couple of times. He was a good man. I can’t imagine what happened to them. Maybe there was some kind of Manson family, you know, heading across country, and Cynthia’s family, they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

They interviewed Aunt Tess.

“I lost a sister, a brother-in-law, a nephew,” she said. “But Cynthia, her loss was so much greater. She managed to beat the odds, to still turn out to be a great kid, a great person.”

And while the producers kept their promise and didn’t air the comments of the man who now lived in Cynthia’s house, they got someone else to say something almost as sinister.

Cynthia was stunned, when the segment aired a couple of weeks later, to see the detective who had questioned her in her house after her neighbor Mrs. Jamison called the police. He was retired now, living in Arizona. At the bottom of the screen it said, “Retired detective Bartholomew Finlay.” He had led the initial investigation and finally moved it off his desk after a year because he wasn’t getting anywhere. The producers got a crew from one of their affiliates out in Phoenix to get some comments from him as he sat outside a gleaming Airstream trailer.

“The thing that always nagged at me was, why’d she survive? Assuming, of course, that the rest of the family was dead. Because I just never bought into the theory that a family would up and leave a kid behind. I could see kicking a kid out of the house who was difficult, that kind of thing happens all the time. But to go to the trouble to disappear just to be rid of one of your children? It didn’t make any sense. Which had to mean some sort of foul play. Which always brought me back to the original question. Why did she survive? There aren’t that many possibilities.”

“What do you mean by that?” The voice of Paula Malloy, although the camera never wandered from Detective Finlay. Malloy’s questions had been edited in later because she hadn’t been sent to Arizona to interview this guy.

“Figure it out,” Detective Finlay said.

“What do you mean, figure it out?” Malloy’s voice asked.

“That’s all I’ll say.”

When she saw that, Cynthia was furious. “Jesus, this again!” she shouted at the television. “That sort of a bitch is implying I had something to do with it. I’ve heard these whispers for years. And then Paula fucking Malloy said they weren’t going to run anything like that!”

But I had managed to calm her down, because the segment had been, on balance, pretty positive. The parts where Cynthia was onscreen, walking through the house, telling Paula what had happened that day, she’d come across as sincere and believable. “If there’s someone who knows something, I assured her, “they’re not going to be influenced by what some boneheaded retired cop says. In fact, what he said, that might make it even more likely someone would step forward to contradict him.”

And so the program ran, but it was up against the season finale of some reality show featuring

bunch of overweight aspiring rock stars who had to live under the same roof and compete to see who could shed the most pounds and win a recording contract. Cynthia waited by the phone the moment the show finished, figuring someone would see it, someone who knew something, and call the station immediately. The producers would be in touch before the sun came up the next day, the mystery solved. Finally, she'd know the truth.

But there were no calls, other than one from a woman who said her own family had been abducted by aliens, and a man who theorized that Cynthia's folks had stepped through a tear in the fabric of time, and were either on the run from dinosaurs, or having their minds erased in some *Matrix*-like future.

No credible tips came in.

Evidently no one who knew anything saw the show. Or if they did, they weren't talking.

For the first week, Cynthia called the *Deadline* producers every day. They were nice enough, said that if they heard anything, they'd be in touch. The second week, Cynthia held off to every other day, but now the producers were getting short with her, said there was no point calling, they'd had no responses, and that if anything did come up they'd be in touch.

They were on to other stories. Cynthia quickly became old news.

Grace's eyes were pleading, but her tone was stern.

"Dad," she said. "I'm. Eight. Years. Old." Where had she learned this? I wondered. This technique of breaking down sentences into individual words for dramatic effect. As if I needed to ask. There was more than enough drama to go around in this household.

"Yes," I said to my daughter. "I'm aware."

Her Cheerios were getting soggy and she hadn't touched her orange juice. "The kids make fun of me," she said.

I took a sip of my coffee. I'd only just poured it but it was already verging on cold. The coffeemaker was on the fritz. I decided I would pick up a cup at the Dunkin' Donuts on the way to school.

"Who makes fun of you?" I asked.

"Everybody," Grace said.

"Everybody," I repeated. "What did they do? Did they call an assembly? Did the principal stand up there and tell everyone to make fun of you?"

"Now *you're* making fun of me."

Okay, that was true. "I'm sorry. I'm just trying to get an idea how widespread this problem is. I'm guessing it's not *everybody*. It just *feels* like everybody. And even if it's only a few, I understand that can still be pretty embarrassing."

"It *is*."

"Is it your friends?"

"Yeah. They say Mom treats me like I'm a baby."

"Your mom's just being careful," I said. "She loves you very much."

"I know. But I'm *eight*."

"Your mom just wants to know that you get to school safely, that's all."

Grace sighed and bowed her head defeatedly, a lock of her brown hair dropping in front of her brown eyes. ~~She used her spoon to move some Cheerios around in the milk. "But she doesn't have~~ walk me to school. Nobody's mom walks them to school unless they're in kindergarten."

We'd been through this before, and I'd tried talking to Cynthia, suggested as gently as possible that maybe it was time for Grace to fly solo now that she was in third grade. There were plenty of other kids to walk with, it wasn't as though she'd be walking all by herself.

"Why can't you walk me instead?" Grace asked, and there was a bit of a glint in her eye.

The rare times when I had walked Grace to school, I'd fallen behind the better part of a block. As far as anyone knew, I was just out for a stroll, not actually keeping an eye on Grace, making sure she got there safely. And we never breathed a word of it to Cynthia. My wife took me at my word, that I walked with Grace, right alongside her, all the way to Fairmont Elementary School, and stood on the sidewalk until I'd seen her go inside.

"I can't," I said. "I have to be at my school by eight. If I walk you to school before I go, you have to hang around outside for an hour. Your mom doesn't start work till ten, so it's not a problem for her. Once in a while, when I get a first period spare, I can walk you."

In fact, Cynthia had arranged her hours at Pamela's so that she'd be around each morning to make sure Grace was off to school safely. It had never been Cynthia's dream to work at a women's clothing store owned by her best friend from high school, but it allowed her to work part-time, which meant she could be home by the time school let out. In a concession to Grace, she didn't wait for her at the school door, but down the street. Cynthia could see the school from there, and it didn't take her long to spot our often-pigtailed daughter in the crowd. She had tried persuading Grace to wave, so that she could pick her out even sooner, but Grace had been stubborn about complying.

The problem came when some teacher asked the class to stay after the bell had rung. Maybe it was mass detention, or some last-minute homework instructions. Grace would sit there, panicking, not because Cynthia would be worrying, but because it might mean her mom, worried by the delay, would come into the school and hunt her down.

"Also, my telescope's broken," Grace said.

"What do you mean, it's broken?"

"The thingies that hold the telescope part to the standy part are loose. I sort of fixed it, but it probably get loose again."

"I'll have a look at it."

"I have to keep a lookout for killer asteroids," Grace said. "I'm not going to be able to see them because my telescope is broken."

"Okay. I said I'll look at it."

"Do you know that if an asteroid hit the Earth it would be like a million nuclear bombs going off?"

“I don’t think it’s that many,” I said. “But I take your point, that it would be a bad thing.”

“When I have nightmares about an asteroid hitting the Earth, I can make them go away if I’ve checked before I go to bed to make sure there isn’t any coming.”

I nodded. The thing was, we hadn’t exactly bought her the most expensive telescope. It was a bottom-of-the-line item. It wasn’t just that you didn’t want to spend a fortune on something you weren’t sure your child was going to stay interested in; we simply don’t have a lot of money to throw around.

“What about Mom?” Grace asked.

“What about her?”

“Does she have to walk with me?”

“I’ll talk to her,” I said.

“Talk to who?” Cynthia said, walking into the kitchen.

Cynthia looked good this morning. Beautiful, in fact. She was a striking woman, and I never tired of her green eyes, high cheekbones, fiery red hair. Not long like when I first met her, but no less dramatic. People think she must work out, but I think it’s anxiety that’s helped her keep her figure. She burns off calories worrying. She doesn’t jog, doesn’t belong to a gym. Not that we could afford gym membership anyway.

Like I’ve mentioned, I’m a high school English teacher, and Cynthia works in retail—even though she has a family studies degree and worked for a while doing social work—so we’re not exactly rolling in dough. We have this house, big enough for the three of us, in a modest neighborhood that’s only a few blocks from where Cynthia grew up. You might have thought Cynthia would have wanted to put some distance between herself and that house, but I think she wanted to stay in the neighborhood, just in case someone came back and wanted to get in touch.

Our cars are both ten years old, our vacations low key. We borrow my uncle’s cabin up near Montpelier for a week every summer, and three years ago, when Grace was five, we took a trip to Walt Disney World, staying outside the park in a cheap motel in Orlando where you could hear, at two in the morning, some guy in the next room telling his girl to be careful, to ease up on the teeth.

But we have, I believe, a pretty good life, and we are, more or less, happy. Most days.

The nights, sometimes, can be hard.

“Grace’s teacher,” I said.

“What do you want to talk to Grace’s teacher for?” Cynthia asked.

“I was just saying, when it’s one of those parent-teacher nights, I should go in and talk to her, Mrs. Enders,” I said. “Last time, you went in, I had a parent-teacher thing at my school the same night. It always seems to happen that way.”

“She’s very nice,” Cynthia said. “I think she’s a lot nicer than your teacher last year, what’s-her-name, Mrs. Phelps. I thought she was a bit mean.”

“I hated her,” Grace concurred. “She made us stand on one leg for hours when we were bad.”

“I have to go,” I said, taking another sip of cold coffee. “Cyn, I think we need a new coffeemaker.”

“I’ll look at some,” Cynthia said.

As I got up from the table Grace looked at me despairingly. I knew what she wanted from me. *Talk to her. Please talk to her.*

“Terry, you seen the spare key?” Cynthia asked.

“Hmm?” I said.

She pointed to the empty hook on the wall just inside the kitchen door that opened onto our small backyard. “Where’s the spare?” It was the one we used if we were taking a walk, maybe a stroll down to the Sound, and didn’t want to take a ring loaded with car remotes and workplace keys.

“I don’t know. Grace, you got the key?” Grace did not yet have her own house key. She hardly needed it, with Cynthia around to take her to and from school. She shook her head, glared at me.

I shrugged. “Maybe it’s me. I might have left it next to the bed.” I sidled up next to Cynthia and smelled her hair as I walked past. “See me off?” I said.

She followed me to the front door. “Something going on?” she asked. “Is Grace okay? She seemed a kind of quiet this morning.”

I grimaced, shook my head. “It’s, you know. She’s eight years old, Cyn.”

She moved back a bit, bristling. “She complains about me to you?”

“She just needs to feel a bit more independent.”

“That’s what that was about. She wants you to talk to me, not her teacher.”

I smiled tiredly. “She says the other kids are making fun of her.”

“She’ll get over it.”

I wanted to say something, but felt we’d had this discussion so many times, there weren’t any new points to make.

So Cynthia filled the silence. “You know there are bad people out there. The world is full of them.”

“I know, Cyn, I know.” I tried to keep the frustration, and the tiredness, out of my voice. “But how long are you going to walk her? Till she’s twelve? Fifteen? You going to walk her to high school?”

“I’ll deal with that when it comes,” she said. She paused. “I saw that car again.”

The car. There was always a car.

Cynthia could see in my face that I didn’t believe there was anything to this. “You think I’m crazy,” she said.

“I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“I’ve seen it two times. A brown car.”

“What kind of car?”

“I don’t know. An average car. With tinted windows. When it drives past me and Grace, it slows down a bit.”

“Has it stopped? Has the driver said anything to you?”

“No.”

“Did you get a license plate?”

“No. The first time, I didn’t think anything of it. The second time, I was too flustered.”

“Cyn, it’s probably just somebody who lives in the neighborhood. People have to slow down. It’s a school zone up there. Remember that one day, the cops set up a speed trap? Getting people to stop speeding through there, that time of day.”

Cynthia looked away from me, folded her arms in front of her. “You’re not out there every day like I am. You don’t know.”

“What I do know,” I said, “is that you aren’t doing Grace any favors if you don’t let her start defending for herself.”

“Oh, so you think, if some man tries to drag her into that car, that she’s going to be able to defend herself. An eight-year-old girl.”

“How did we get from some brown car driving by to a man trying to drag her away?”

“You’ve never taken these things as seriously as I do.” She waited a beat. “And I suppose that’s understandable, for you.”

I puffed out my cheeks, blew out some air. “Okay, look, we’re not going to solve this now,” I said. “I have to get going.”

“Sure,” Cynthia said, still not looking at me. “I think I’m going to call them.”

I hesitated. “Call who?”

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