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WITHOUT JENNY

MARK GUNTHER



Praise for
Without Jenny

Without Jenny is a heartbreaking journey of love and loss, of mourning and memory, of faith and doubt. Mark Gunther offers his readers a meditation on strength, courage and the healing power of family.”

—RABBI NAOMI LEVY, author of *Einstein and the Rabbi*

Without Jenny tells the story of Joy, who must find some way to remake a life and a sense of meaning in the wake of her young daughter’s death. Anyone who has ever experienced a devastating loss will recognize the wisdom and honesty of this novel. Gunther vividly dramatizes how grief grants a horrible exceptional status that isolates us from others *and* makes us long to retreat from the petty concerns of the living. He also movingly depicts the loving embrace of family and friends, even when it can’t be felt by the grieving person, and the courage it takes simply to go on surviving. There are no palliative proverbs here—no reassurance that suffering strengthens us, no sense that time heals all wounds. Yet we witness Joy fight valiantly with and for her husband and surviving child to be a family again, without Jenny but with the memory of her. This novel draws us intimately close to the mysteries of imperfect love and of human resilience.”

—CATHERINE BRADY, winner of the Flannery O’Connor Award
for Short Fiction

“A fatal tragedy can rip a family apart. *Without Jenny* immerses the reader in the unbearable pain and sorrow of child loss, yet love and compassion guide this family through the darkness to a place of hope, faith and healing. An absorbing read, *Without Jenny* shares the experience of all bereaved parents and can help inform the people who support them.”

—JANET ROBERTS, editor, *Grief Digest* magazine

“*Without Jenny* is the page-turning story of a family who lose their ten-year-old in a tragic accident, and as such, it is a novel about grief. Grief is revealed in all its chaotic manifestations with realistic, unsentimental detail. First we see the family reel in shock and then we see them begin to navigate a no-man’s land littered with landmines. Everything is now called into question.

“If we have ever grieved, this is our story, and we watch with sober clarity as the family constricts painfully from four into three. We watch, and our compassion is aroused not simply for the characters in this story, but for ourselves as well, struggling not to feel and also struggling to feel. Where do the dead go, this story asks, and Joy hears the voice of her dead daughter speaking inside of her.

“So the dead may live on in those who have loved them, and yet, can love ever really be stronger than death? Most marriages fail with the death of a child, each spouse endlessly reflecting the loss back at the other. What is the calculus, the magic formula that can make everything add up once again? The answer this breathtaking novel offers is going to surprise you.”

—SHERRIL JAFFE, author of *You Are Not alone and Other Stories*.

“If there is nothing as whole as a broken heart, then Gunther’s novel about the broken-heartedness that emerges for all who grieve offers readers a window into a paradox—how can so much luminosity emerge from such deep darkness? Protagonist Joy is our *psychopomp*, daring to guide us through the valley of death’s dark abode, encountering so many layers of experiences in this mourning process—rabbi, synagogue, home and more, so as to emerge more whole and open to the holy within this devastating moment. Gunther’s debut novel is part *Kaddish*, part *Cuckoo’s Nest*—something every seeker yearning for the presence of the empty fullness of reality must read and reflect upon. Joy is the key to the wholeness that might emerge for every one of us broken human beings.”

—**RABBI AUBREY L. GLAZER, PH.D.**, Director of *Panui*; Research Fellow at *Katz Center for Advanced Jewish Studies*

Without Jenny
by Mark Gunther

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Lyrics in Chapter 11 from “Both Sides Now” by Joni Mitchell

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WITHOUT JENNY

MARK GUNTHER



VIRGINIA BEACH
CAPE CHARLES

FOR ALL WHO GRIEVE

1.

MOMENTS LIKE THIS, Joy thought, *were dangerously close to perfect.*

Cozy inside her windbreaker, body wet and hot with the sweat of her workout, Joy rode her bike back across the Golden Gate Bridge, the early morning postcard view of San Francisco spread out before her. Black bay water slowly turned blue as bright swords of light sliced open a featureless gray sky, highlighting serrated blocks of pastel houses climbing the hill.

Ignoring her thighs' objections, she maintained an aggressive cadence against eight thousand miles of stiff Pacific wind. Dropping away from the bridge, Joy tilted her bike into the hard-right turn at the bottom of the hill, stood on the pedals, and pushed toward home. Joggers and dog walkers were randomly scattered on the shoreline pathway. Joy cut sharply right and stayed on the road, spinning quickly down the false flat, bouncing over the crummy pavement at the Mason Street warehouses. The day loomed—work and two school meetings and taking Jenny downtown and making dinner and putting Jake to bed. *I'll have to work tonight*, she thought. *Maybe not too late if Danny can get home early.*

She unlocked the basement door and pushed it open with the bike's

front wheel. The basement was a riot of bikes and bike equipment, rusty garden tools and half-used bags of fertilizer, no-longer-needed-but-not-yet-discarded baby equipment and clothing, boxes of old college textbooks still waiting to be sold back to the bookstore, pieces of lumber emplaced for some theoretical future use, and dirty laundry piled high on the washer and dryer against the back wall. *I really need some furniture*, Joy thought. She balanced her gloves, helmet, and jacket on top of a pile of similar items already overwhelming a too-small bin, put on her cleat covers, took her water bottle, and went up to the kitchen to report in.

“Mommy!” Jake grabbed her leg. She dropped her arm to pat his head and her hand reached his shoulder. *Six years old. So tall already*, she thought. *My sweet boy*. She sat on a stool and reached down for her shoes.

“I wanna do it!” he said. Joy stuck out her feet. Jake found the clicklock on her cycling shoe fascinating. When he figured it out he had to show his dad and his sister and all of his dolls and everyone who came to their house for the next two weeks exactly how it worked. He still liked to do it, so Joy wore her shoes upstairs instead of leaving them in the basement where they belonged. *He wants to be with me*, she thought, *on the bike. This is as close as he can come*.

Jake took her shoes off and unzipped the ankle-high closures on her legwarmers. She peeled them off, revealing tanned, muscular legs in thigh-baring cycling shorts. Jake headed out of the kitchen to leave shoes and warmers at the top of the basement stairs.

“Nice legs,” Danny said.

“You always say that.”

“It’s always true.”

Danny stood on the other side of the island counter, silhouetted by the morning sun, a halo surrounding his close-cropped curly black hair, arms and shoulders thrown into strong relief. He was making sandwiches and serving breakfast. The counter was strewn with bags of bread and cheese, bottles of mustard and milk, boxes of cereal and

cookies, a half-opened melon, two dirty white coffee cups and various pieces of newspaper. Danny's loosened tie was bunching up above the "I only look like a lawyer" apron Jenny had picked out for his last birthday. He had been a lawyer once, but was much happier now that he ran his own business.

Jenny sat on a stool next to Joy, still in her pajamas. Her head was in her hands, elbows on the counter, stubby fingers entwined in her curly back hair. Jenny looked worried, making Joy want to comfort, engage, direct, reassure, and snap her out of it. *Calm down*, Joy told herself, *she's fine, but something is up*. Joy waited for it, remembering how she had played for her own mother's sympathy.

"I don't want to go to school today, Mom."

"How come?"

"I don't feel good."

"Are you sick?" Joy put her hand on Jenny's forehead. "You don't have a temperature."

"No. It just feels like I should stay home today." Jenny focused her eyes on the comics page in front of her. Joy gently moved her hand to her daughter's shoulder.

"Did something happen?" Joy asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," Jenny said.

"Give me a clue?"

"Janie."

Ah, Joy thought. *Janie can be kind of bossy*. But normally she and Jenny were good friends. She wrapped a companionable arm around her daughter.

"Do you remember, I'm picking you up and we're going downtown? You need some boots."

Jenny brightened. "Girls day out!"

"If you go to school. Why don't you go get dressed?"

Jenny went upstairs.

"What do you think is up?" Danny said.

"Who knows? She's ten. It'll probably be forgotten by the end of

the day.” Joy got chips from the cabinet behind her, apples from the fruit bowl, and went to wrap the sandwiches.

“I’ll get that,” Danny said. “Have your coffee!”

It was one of his mornings with the kids, dressing, feeding, and transporting them before heading off to his Sausalito office.

“I’m here, I’ll help. Good marital politics,” Joy said.

“I’ll put a point for you on the scorecard.”

“I wish,” she said. “I have to redeem it tonight already.”

He grimaced. “I have a dinner.”

She grimaced. “Well, try to keep it short, please.”

It was one of their standard arguments. “Even though you bring in more money these days,” she had said, “and my work is more flexible, it can’t always be about you.”

“Absolutely,” he had agreed, but she still was the one who stepped up when he scheduled dinner meetings she only found out about at the last minute.

Jake came back into the kitchen and let Joy lift him onto his stool at the counter. His light brown hair brushed the top of his collar. He was growing it out. “Like Thor,” he said. His hair was thin enough that the tangles weren’t too bad. Jenny, on the other hand, would have dreadlocks if they weren’t careful. Danny set Jake’s toast in front of him. Joy poured herself coffee. Danny finished packing the lunches. He took off the apron and left it on the counter—*for me to put away later*, Joy thought. Jenny returned and sat next to Jake.

“Do you want jam, Jakey?” she asked him.

“I’ll do it!” Jake said, but Jenny was already spreading the jam. She held the toast out to him. Jake grabbed it from her and shoved the whole thing into his mouth, bugging his eyes out. Joy and Jenny both said, “Yuck, Jake!”

Jenny shouted, “Jinx!”

Joy presented her arm to Jenny, who socked it lightly.

“Chew that up, Jake,” Joy said in her best mother voice. “And don’t do it again; you could choke.”

Jenny bent down to tie her shoes; her socks showed through the holes along the seams.

“Jenny, those shoes are falling apart.”

“I’m keeping these shoes, Mom.” Jenny had painstakingly decorated her sneakers with little curlicues and paisleys and infinite box doodles in blue, brown, and black. They were beautiful, but completely broken down. *My mom never would have let it get that far*, Joy thought, but her argument with Jenny had been going on for weeks. *I have to make her replace them today.*

From behind Jenny’s back Danny made a wide theatrical gesture and blew Joy a kiss. She remembered that very hot day in Berkeley at a 10K race in Tilden Park when the obviously Jewish guy in her start group could barely stop gazing at her hip-hugging spandex running briefs and midriff-baring singlet. He had blushed when she caught his eye, looking away, but after the start he found a way to get next to her. They had found a lot to talk about, when they had breath to spare. She was twenty-two and graduating, he was twenty-four and heading to law school at Berkeley. They had both grown up Jewish in San Francisco, gone to Lowell and to Cal, shared some of the same teachers, knew some of the same families. He had kept eyeing her body, kind of sideways, as if he wasn’t really doing it, but he was, and she knew it, and she felt even warmer than the run and like maybe something important was happening. By the time they got to the finish they were so deep in conversation he didn’t look at her body at all. She accepted a ride down the hill with him and they had coffee for hours on Telegraph Avenue. Now they had been married fourteen years.

“Time to go, children,” Danny announced.

Jenny wiped Jake’s mouth, cleared his plate, picked up his lunch, and stuffed it in his backpack. She helped Jake into his jacket and held out the pack. He thrust an arm through a strap and it settled on his shoulder. Jenny had the same jacket and the same backpack, something she had insisted on when they went back-to-school shopping in the summer. Jake had been incredibly happy about that.

Joy bent down and kissed her son.

“Mommy,” he said, “can I come with you and Jenny today?”

Joy felt Jenny’s eyes boring into the back of her head. Joy had promised her. “No, I’m sorry, honey, Jenny and I need to do girl stuff today. You need to stay in after school.”

Jake looked at Jenny. “Will you say hi to me when you come?”

“Okay, but it’ll be fast. Daddy will pick you up later, okay?”

He just wants more time with me. I’ll make it up to him, she thought, when Jenny gets older, but now I’m just the imperfect mom I am, I guess. Joy wrapped Jake up in a goodbye hug. Jenny joined in, wrapping her arms around her mom and her brother.

“Jenny, wait your turn,” Danny said.

Joy slung her other arm around Jenny. “It’s okay, Danny, I have two arms.”

Danny shook his head and turned away. He had told Joy more than once that Jenny was too jealous of any attention Jake received and that he should have more alone time with his mom. Joy didn’t think Jenny was jealous, just that she was full of love and had to share it. Danny thought that was a recipe for difficulty later in Jenny’s life, but Joy defended her daughter. She leaned against the doorway watching the circus make its way down the stairs and into Danny’s Camry, then cleaned up the kitchen and went up to shower and change.

Crisp wool pants, a simple silk blouse, light gold chain. Dressing for the office made working at home much more palatable. Her only concession to home was bare feet, but shoes were in place at the foot of the stairs. Passing through the kitchen, she refilled her coffee cup and went to work. Her office had been added to the back of the house when they redid the kitchen, a year before Jacob was born. The décor was diplomas and family photos. A glass wall with a sliding door looked south into the yard, where natural light would touch the classic antique drafting desk she had found up in Amador City. Joy had painted the long wall in a durable, washable paint to allow the kids to write on it when they were with her while she was working. It currently held Jake’s

drawings of silly dinosaurs and the set design Jenny had done for her fantasy tap dance play of “Beauty and the Beast.” Joy’s workstation with its two monitors occupied the opposite wall.

On the drafting desk were sketches of three versions of a poster she was designing for Rachel, a new client who taught yoga at the gym. The stretched sweeping lines suggested the figure of a woman in *anjaneyasana*, lunge pose, against a blue and brown background hinting of earth and air. Joy knew the one she liked the best, but popped Rachel an email to set a time to review them together.

Joy had a new job to start this morning, a package design plan for an East Bay chocolate company. She started at the table with some quick sketching, then switched to the computer, scanning the sketches, trying out ideas, seeing how they would work on different shapes of packages, printing the better ones and sticking them to the corkboard above the desk. Soon it was 1:30. The time counter showed she’d be able to charge three and a half hours. *A good morning’s work. Time for mothering!*

* * *

Jenny climbed into the car gripping her cell phone, immersed in a game. She dropped her backpack on the floor and buckled her seatbelt. Her phone chirped the end of her game.

“How was your day, sweetheart?” Joy asked.

“Fine. I had a math test. I got an eighty-five; we graded them in class.”

“Did you see Janie?”

“Yes. She apologized.”

“That’s good.” Joy remembered her teenage years of hormones and heartbreak, and for a moment wished she could save Jenny from all of that. They stopped at a traffic light. Joy looked over at her daughter and saw a woman, curly black hair cascading around her shoulders, her eyes alive; thoughtful, vital. *So fast*, Joy thought. *So fast.*

“I’m thirsty, Mom.”

“We’ll be downtown in ten minutes, honey. Can you wait?”

“If I have to.” A large sigh and small cough accompanied the exclamation.

Down the street Joy saw the apartment building with the tall scaffolding that had been up for months. There was a place to park in the construction zone, empty of cars and trucks at this time of the afternoon. *Good parking karma*, she thought. A liquor store was across the street. She pulled her car to the curb; the scaffold came right to the edge of the sidewalk and blocked Jenny’s door.

“You’re in luck, Jenny. Let’s go.”

“I can’t get my door open.” She waved her phone at her mother. “Can I keep playing?”

Joy usually wouldn’t leave her alone on the street, but it would only take a minute. Jenny was hardly a child anymore, and she knew about being safe in the big city.

“Okay. Just keep the car door locked.”

She opened the door and the wind ripped it from her hand. She forced it closed and ran across the street and into the store. *I really should have made her wait for the water*, she thought. *I spoil her. But she’ll have a long time to take care of herself. I like doing things for her. And there was that parking space.*

Suddenly there was a tremendous noise, an echoing, crashing, terrifying sound. The door of the store blew open and banged against the ATM machine; dust billowed in the suddenly stabbing sunlight. Joy ran to the door, and through the billowing dust and the sound of her own screaming saw a giant pile of wood and steel and tile where her car had been parked.

Oh god; oh no Jenny; oh Jenny oh Jenny, and her feet were taking her across the street and she grabbed a piece of wood that was sticking out and it didn’t move and the next one she yanked didn’t move either and the steel scraped her arm and she tried to crawl inside the pile to where she thought the car was and she threw off the hand that was pulling her away.

“Jenny, I’m coming! My daughter is under there! Help me. Help me get this off!” The dust made her cough. The blare of sirens approached as she fell against the pile, grabbing at anything, but two strong arms encircled hers and pulled her away.

“Ma’am, ma’am, get away from there.”

A police officer. A woman.

“No, no, help me! My daughter is under there I have to get her! I have to get her!”

“Ma’am, we can’t do anything right now. Help is coming.”

Joy twisted and pushed, but the arms held her like iron. She ground her feet into the pavement but was lifted into the air and carried away.

Jenny must be dead; she has to be dead; she can’t be dead; maybe the car protected her, but how can anyone be alive under there? The officer sat with Joy in the back of a police car.

“I can’t sit here I have to get to her!” She tried to get out of the car but the hand was implacable.

“Help is coming. What’s your daughter’s name, ma’am?”

“Jenny. Jenny Rosenberg. Danny. I have to call my husband.”

Joy fumbled with her phone and pushed the speed dial button showing Danny’s picture. He picked up.

“Danny, Danny oh my god Danny! Jenny, Jenny, she’s in the car and it’s buried and she might be dead. Oh god Danny.”

“Where’s Jake? Where’s Jake?” Danny screamed.

She remembered Jake. “At school. Go get him, go get him, take him home.”

“No, I’m coming. I’ll help. I’m coming.”

“No, no don’t! Don’t bring Jake here. I’ll see you at home. I have to go!”

But there was nowhere to go. The air was too thick to breathe. She dropped her phone on the seat and grabbed the door handle, but the hands restrained her. Outside the car a big machine and some men were working on the pile.

“I have to get out! I have to help!”

“No, ma’am, it’s too dangerous. Let the men work.”

O’Reilly, her badge read. She started asking Joy questions about her name and address and where she was going and what she was doing and why the car was there and had she seen or heard anything at all. Joy must have been answering because she heard the scratching of the officer’s pencil, but the horrible crashing echoed over and over in her ears and everything else was in slow motion and happening outside her body. *This is the end of my life*, she thought.

She watched the backhoe extend its shovel and two men took a chain that drooped below the bucket and slid it under a collapsed section of the scaffolding. As it slowly lifted away, the debris pile shifted.

Joy screamed. Bile rose in her throat and she threw up out the window.

The men moved another section and she saw a huge piece of wood sticking straight up into the air. The ambulance crew crawled over the pile and they disappeared behind it and then soon, too soon—Joy knew it was too soon—they reappeared and climbed back out and walked slowly away.

“What are they doing? Why aren’t they helping her? Oh my god they can’t help her!”

O’Reilly wrapped her arms around Joy as she sobbed and screamed and just thought over and over, *Jenny’s dead, Jenny’s dead*. A paramedic came over to the car with Jenny’s backpack and phone; Joy took them.

“Can I go say goodbye to her?” she asked. “Please?”

O’Reilly exchanged a glance with the EMT.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Rosenberg,” O’Reilly said. “Let me take you home.”

* * *

“Is this my house?” Joy wanted to know.

“Yes, ma’am,” said O’Reilly. “Let’s go inside.”

She offered Joy her hand; when Joy didn’t move she reached down under her arm and lifted her out of the patrol car. O’Reilly kept hold as

Joy moved woodenly up the stairs. She fumbled for her keys; O'Reilly took them and opened the door.

Joy didn't want to touch anything, in this house where Jenny lived.

O'Reilly led her into the hall, past the stairs, past the wall covered with family pictures, into the living room. She sat with Joy on the couch under the window. A car door slammed.

Joy's body rose up and her feet took her to the hall and when the front door opened she threw herself at him. "Ah Danny, Danny. Oh my god. Jenny Jenny!" She wrapped her arms and legs around him and squeezed with all of her athlete's strength.

"What's wrong, Mommy, Mommy, what's wrong, why are you all dirty?" Jake was crying and pulling at her leg. Joy fell to her knees and held her son, sheltering him for one last second.

"Oh Jake," she said. "There's been a terrible accident. Jenny isn't coming home."

"Where is she?"

Danny fell to the floor with them and they huddled in the hallway, by the open door.

"She died, honey," Joy said. "She died."

"Can I ever see her again?"

"No, Jakey," said Danny. "We can't. No one can."

Jake's face crumpled.

"Ma'am. Folks." O'Reilly's voice cut through the moaning. "I'll need to be going, and you've got some visitors. I'm so, so sorry for your loss."

Joy's friend Carly was running up the walk, mouth open, face tear-streaked. Joy's father Hiram had left his car sitting in the middle of the street with its door open and he was close behind Carly. Joy screamed again, and they were wailing and huddling. Joy held on to Jake like she could actually protect him, and Danny had both of them wrapped in his arms. Carly's body pressed into hers and Hiram got in behind Jake with one arm around Danny and one around Carly. They all cried and moaned and screamed until things quieted enough for Carly to take

them into the living room. She vanished and reappeared a few times and soon there were pillows and blankets and tea and cut-up fruit and cheese and chips and crackers in bowls with salsa and hummus, and meanwhile Hiram took Danny's keys and Carly's keys and moved all the cars around for legal parking. And Joy told Jake and Danny how it had happened.

* * *

Later that night, after Danny's parents, Jerry and Elaine, arrived from Calistoga, the doorbell rang. Hiram went to answer it and returned with a round-shouldered, clean-shaven man with a slight paunch and a kind depth in his eyes. He had a small *kippah*, skullcap, bobby-pinned to his hair.

"Rabbi Abravanel," Hiram said.

Rabbi said, "I'm so, so sorry."

Joy had only seen him from a distance before, from their seats at the back of the sanctuary on the High Holidays. "What do we do now?" she asked.

"I can help you," he said. "What do you want?"

Joy looked at Danny.

"I don't want to cremate her," he said.

Joy didn't like the idea of having an urn on the mantle or going to visit a set of ashes in a columbarium either.

"Okay," she said. "Okay."

Rabbi asked if they had cemetery plots, and when he found out they didn't he telephoned the cemetery and left a message to expect Joy and Danny tomorrow. He said it was likely the coroner would release the body to the mortuary in the morning, and they would have to go there to buy a casket and plan the funeral. He said the funeral should be on Wednesday, "because we Jews always bury our dead promptly,"

and with no embalming. The body belonged to the earth after the spirit was gone. He talked about the order of Jewish grieving practice: Seven days to be shattered, thirty days to be broken, a year to accommodate, and a day every year for Judaism to remember your dead. He talked about what they would have to do on each day and what kind of help they should have.

“It will be very, very hard for you,” Rabbi said. “But the *shul*, the synagogue, is here to help, however we can.”

Rabbi got his phone out again and left some more messages. He left, then, and eventually Hiram went home and Jerry and Elaine went to a hotel, but Carly insisted on sleeping on the couch. “Anything you need,” she said. “Wake me up.”

Joy and Danny and Jake went upstairs and lay down together in their clothes on Joy and Danny’s bed. No teeth got brushed. No stories got read.

After Jake fell asleep, Danny wanted Joy to tell him every little detail. He made her describe exactly what happened, what she had seen and heard, what everyone had said. Where was the pile? What was she wearing? Did she see any of the car at all? Who helped her?

“I’m going there tomorrow,” he said. “I will not leave you on that street alone.”

But she always would be.

* * *

In the morning, Joy, Danny, and Jake still were heaped on the bed. Joy couldn’t feel anything at all. Danny made her take off her dusty clothes and take a shower. Carly had made coffee and put out breakfast. Jake was eating cereal, and Joy thought it was good for him to do that.

“I called your mother,” Hiram told Joy. “She got a flight and should be here tonight.” He and Rose had been divorced for twenty years.

“I should have called her,” Joy said.

“No, she’s okay,” Hiram said. “Ready to go?”

Carly stayed with Jake. Joy made her promise that she wouldn't take him anywhere except into the backyard, but only if he wanted to.

Joy and Danny sat together in the back seat as Hiram drove to the cemetery. They shopped for a gravesite and found the spot they liked. The director offered a "pre-need" discount and they bought six sites for the price of five because now they knew that you never know. Deeds were issued. Joy had never thought about a gravesite as owned property. Danny asked if there were property taxes and assessments, but the director said gravesites were exempt.

Then they met Rabbi at the mortuary. He had told them the night before to bring an outfit to bury Jenny in, and they both thought of the new dress they had bought for her tap dance recital. Which was weird, because real-life Jenny preferred big T-shirts and leggings and hardly ever wore girly dresses. Danny wanted Jenny to wear his Bar Mitzvah prayer shawl, and Joy agreed. She had put the dress on a hanger with the *tallis* draped over it and put it in an old suit bag from Macy's. In a separate bag were some panties and socks and old black leather shoes. Not her tap shoes. Joy wanted to keep those, and Danny agreed.

Mothers used to do this themselves, wash and dress their dead children for burial. Now someone else does it.

Rabbi had gently suggested Joy not view the body until the mortuary finished the preparations. *The repairs. Maybe it's better to remember her alive than dead.* But right now she couldn't remember anything.

They picked a plain, unadorned pine casket, sanded smooth, with gently knurled edges and a triple beveled top. Rabbi left them to go sit with the body and pray, relieving the man from the *chevra kadisha*, the volunteer burial society, keeping the Jewish custom of constant prayer and vigilance between death and burial so her spirit wouldn't get hijacked by a *golem* or become a *dybbuk*, or whatever else could happen to an uninhabited, untended body before it was buried.

Joy and Danny sat at the walnut conference table in the mortuary's quiet upstairs room. Together, they selected the appropriate mortuary

services. She watched Danny approve the estimate and sign the credit card receipt; an unexpected chunk of frequent flier miles accrued. Joy accepted a little velvet bag holding the jewelry Jenny had been wearing and things from her pockets; she opened it and onto the table trickled her rings, earrings, necklace, some change, a hard candy, and two gum wrappers. She also was given a one-gallon Ziploc bag with Jenny's hand-decorated sneakers; the air had been sucked out of the bag and the shoes were grotesque. The man at the table with them said the rest of her clothes, unfortunately, were "unable to be preserved." *At least my daughter died wearing her favorite shoes.*

When they got home, Danny's brother Joey, his wife Leah and their eight-year-old daughter Sarah had arrived from L.A., and they did more crying and screaming, and soon after that Joy's childhood best friend Lizzie came in from Seattle with eleven-year-old Amanda, Joy's goddaughter, and they did even more crying and screaming. When Joy wasn't crying and screaming she was rooted in the doorway of the minimart with the crashing sound and stabbing light and billowing dust.

Later in the day, Rabbi came by the house to sit with the family and lead them in a discussion of Jenny's life, to help him compose a eulogy. You can't know someone's life until it's over, he said.

Her life is over. Mine, too.

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