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Missing Photos

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Missing Photos

The nurse taking his blood pressure reminds Bailey of his teacher from the eighth grade, the one with wide hips.

“What did you do?” she asks as he moves the straw out from between his lips. It seems like she cares.

“It was a stroke,” he says, adding quickly, “but I think I’m gonna be okay.” Bailey smiles, but with little sincerity. He wants to show the nurse he is stronger than age, so he pulls out his wallet and a photo of a smiling woman. “This is my wife,” he proclaims, “isn’t she beautiful? She’s always been the best looking woman. Don’t you think she’s beautiful? We married in the heart of spring. Isn’t she beautiful?”

When he looks around the doctor’s office, he imagines flowers blooming in every direction, the white dress blinding. He wishes his wife would have bought the red dress, forget the customs. She is red, not white. She is infinite passion. He remembers the suit was too tight, his gut crushed. He can’t breathe, but she is beautiful with her stomach swollen. He loves her. His daughter comes out in a red gush. How can something so small mean so much? The world nestled within his arms.

He watches the nurse as she writes down notes and thinks he must be missing something.

“Let’s wait for the doctor,” the nurse says. She smiles because she is sorry for him.

Bailey coughs into the autumn air. His daughter is quiet, stiff against his shoulder until she finally whispers, a nursing home will be good for you, for us, we love you. She holds his hand, will not let go or look away. When he is settled into his new room they visit. Someone gives him pictures and reminds

him of the names: Georgie, Sharon, Beth, that was your wife, you remember your wife, don't you? Look at your daughter, they are so much alike.

He remembers his daughter's hand slipping away, cold like the end of summer, the first day of fall. She dressed in all white and he never wanted her to change. While they took their wedding portraits, Bailey thought he would suffocate. Daddy, she told him, you'll always be number one. The grandkids came out looking like pink worms. He wants to love them.

Someone is asking him, Bailey, Bailey, what did you do?

He notices the grandkids burying coins into the cushions, like bugs building a nest. Their eyes are big and curious. They look infinite beside him. The photos pass from hand to hand. Look at all the things you did. They smile with gaps of gum, the little worms.

When they leave, Bailey notices the pictures are all smiling faces. Where are the frowns? He wants to know what happened to the frowns. He walks down the hall, but the doors all look the same. Come watch TV, the nurse says. She is pulling him to the couch.

Where did my daughter go, he wonders. Where is my home? Take me home to the red house. The old truck. There was a willow. Bailey remembers the red paint chipping year after year. His red was chipping.

What did I do? What did I do?

it is cold outside the window. it is winter. they find veins for needles and there are smiling faces. the needle is shining. when he falls, it is like glass on pavement. he is shattered. sorry, he tells the nurse when she lifts him from the floor. i'm so sorry. sorry. she is smiling. it hurts to see her smile. people smile when they say goodbye. he is rolling in his dreams. he slips out of bed like a snowflake. he feels weightless.

Bailey? someone asks. Bailey tell us, what did you do? look at your daughter and your wife, they look so alike, don't you remember? and Bailey remembers playing ball. he is a champion of the eighth grade. he is in detention with spit balls on the ceiling. he says they will last forever. he is infinite. Bailey what did you do? he is smiling.

the nurse takes his hand, his pulse between her fingers. his daughter is holding the pictures to his face. that's Georgie, I know you remember Georgie, he had the red pickup truck. you took turns driving it, remember?

Bailey is driving home, the windows are rolled down. he can breathe infinity into his lungs. he doesn't see the deer until there is red blood and he asks himself what did I do, what did I do. the worms are at his feet and he is telling them about his adventures. their eyes widen; they are excited and

scared. on the first floor Bailey is flirting with the receptionist. she is smiling, very polite, but sees the ring on his finger. do you know which room is yours? he wants the one that is red.

the sun is sinking. Bailey watches the sun. he waits for it to rise. there is someone knocking on the door, but he is dreaming of red clay. like when he went west. the grand canyon is infinite, he can not find the end. he decides there is no end. someone is shaking him. he opens his eyes. he is alone.

Bailey, Bailey. the nurse says his name. Daddy, do you remember? Bailey, what did you do?

he is walking down the corridor. his room is shining. they want him to watch TV, but he keeps walking. the sunset is red. he must reach the red. he is tired of falling in his dreams, but he won't wake up. what did you do? he asks the photos. they pat him on the back, he is champion. the ball is round. he holds it over his head. he is shining with victory in his hands. he is infinite.

where are the frowns? damnit, he can't find the frowns—he remembers

in the summer there were doctors doing nothing his wife beeps into infinity there is a coffin and people dressed in black there are tears and a red pickup truck the sun is too hot the air is too dry he can not breathe he is suffocating there is nothing left the sunset is covered in gray clouds he is weighed down what did you do to get that one someone asks she was a great woman there is nothing left Bailey watches a plane fly overhead will it drop he wishes it would fall on his home it is empty things are missing there is nothing here but smiling photos Bailey asks them what did you do he falls asleep when he awakes he tells the nurse

was just a stroke going to be okay married in the heart of spring Bailey is still but infinite he watches the smiling faces the canyon was red always wanted the red to envelop him suffocate him the photos shift in and out of vision the frowns are missing he is missing smiling something missing