

HER DECADE

by Barry Lyga

May 20, 1991

Rain coming down. Fat drops exploding on my windshield, making brief modern art, killed by the staccato wiper blades.

Rain. Insistent tattoo on the roof of the car, on the windshield. Can't even see the damn rain, for all the darkness out there. Car's engine idles, big cat purring in the night.

Eighteen. I'm eighteen today.

Wiper blades. Wish-click. Wish-click.

And then the sky's alive with lightning. Fast-flash burst of electricity and the rain's a million silver slivers on the night and I see the tree in front of me no more than ten or so yards wow I would've hit that thing when I swerved if I hadn't hit the brakes in

Darkness again. Wish-click. Slam of thunder.

Big burst of lightning now, lighting up the entire sky like an atom bomb. My eyes scream at the white-hot blaze of sky, the explosion of brightness. In that quick wash of light, I see the other car.

Which *didn't* miss the tree.

Wish-click. Wish-click. Wish.

May 20, 1992

My first year at college is over and I've returned home the conquering hero, with a solid 4.0 in my prospective major, economics. Final exams were a breeze. In Econ 110b, I walked out of the room after only half the time had passed, my blue book filled with analysis and equations. The Teaching Assistant who took the book smiled at me sympathetically, thinking I was quitting early. When I got the test back a week later, I had a 93%. I wish I could have seen the look on her face when she graded it.

Today is my nineteenth birthday, and when I wake up in my own bed, in the bedroom that's been mine since I was a baby, it seems no different from any of the others.

Dad knocks on the door. I can tell it's him because he always knocks the same way—two short knocks that leave you expecting a third that never comes.

“You up in there, sleepy head?”

“Yeah.”

Dad opens the door and comes in. He's a big guy, my dad — big in stature, big in importance. Before I was even born, he made his first fortune by renovating the downtown waterfront, then promptly took that money and moved all the way out to Brookdale. He wouldn't even let me into the city until I was 16. "Don't believe what the mayor and the commercials tell you, son," he would say. "It's dangerous down there. I spent too much time there to think otherwise."

"You ready for the big day, champ?"

"Sure am." Birthdays are a big deal to my dad. Last year, it was the keys to the car that I later ran off the road. This year, who knows? I've been eyeing one of the new PowerMacs. They've got a built-in FPU and they can scream at close to 100 MHz. I've been using an LCII since high school, and I just can't stand it anymore.

Dad sits on the edge of my bed and pats my knee through the covers. "You just do this, then come right home and we'll head out, okay? No reason to let this ruin the day."

I'd almost forgotten. I was thinking of my birthday when I woke up. I can't believe I forgot.

Last year, I had a little accident on my birthday. A woman named Susan Marchetti died, and because I was technically drunk at the time and because the jury found that I caused the accident, I was convicted of driving while intoxicated and involuntary manslaughter.

But even though I was picturing prison and rapes in the shower, I lucked out. The judge sentenced me to—get this—visit Marchetti’s grave on the anniversary of her death for ten years.

This is how it’s supposed to work: A cop will come to the house at noon to pick me up. He’ll take me to the cemetery, where he’ll make sure that I spend “a reasonable amount of time” at the grave. Doing what, I have no idea. Mom says I should wear my suit.

“Okay,” I tell him. “In and out.”

Mom gives me a bouquet of flowers to leave at the grave. It doesn't change anything, but it makes her happy to give them to me, so I take them.

At 12:00 on the dot, a county police car pulls up outside the house. Dad, standing in the foyer, frowns as he looks out the window. “Ingrates,” he mumbles.

He looks over at me, then back out the window as the car door opens and a pair of blue-covered legs swings out the driver’s side.

“Ingrates. All the contributions I make to the goddamn DA’s campaign and the judges’—”

What I *don’t* want is a scene when the cop knocks on the door. “Chill, Dad. This is fine. What’s the big deal? I’m not in jail, right?”

He smiles at me, giving me the big, proud smile he's given me ever since I can remember. "When you get back, we'll all go to Fitzwilly's for dinner, okay?"

"Deal."

And then there's a knock at the door, and I open it and look up into mirrored sunglasses. "Hi."

"Are you ready?" Just like on TV—no emotion.

"Like I have a choice?" I mean it as a little joke, but the cop's mouth, set in a hard line, doesn't move. That's cool. Neutral. Objective. I understand.

"Let's go," I tell him, and then we're off. He lets me ride in the front seat, which is good, because sitting in the back would just be too much.

We drive through Brookdale, past the First National Bank that still has the old sign outside reading "Brookdale Bank" from before Dad arranged the buyout. Past the old school that's been condemned. We turn up Marwood Road and then onto Church Drive, where you can find the only Catholic church in town. The cemetery's around back; my friends and I used to cut through it back in high school when we were out late at night and trying to get home before curfew.

The cop (Officer Heller, says the little nameplate pinned to his left breast) pulls the car up to the entrance. There are a few other cars there, and as soon as I get out, I see why.

"Whoa. Wait a minute."

Heller, getting out on his side, looks over at me. “Something wrong?”

Goddamn *right* something’s wrong! Looking into the cemetery, I see the Marchettis, clustered around one of the graves. I recognize the parents and the older brother from the trial, and it looks like there’s three or four others, as well, maybe friends or extended family. The bouquet of flowers Mom gave me starts to shake, only it’s not the flowers, not really—it’s my hand.

“Look!” I point it out for him. “*They’re* all here! I can’t just go over there—”

“The judge says—”

“Can’t we come back later? Tonight, maybe?”

Heller adjusts his gunbelt and steps around the car. “My shift ends in two hours. We have to do this now.” He reaches out, as if to take my arm. “Do I have to *make* you do this?”

“No.”

So I follow him under the archway that leads into the cemetery and up the little path wending up the hill that leads to Susan Marchetti’s grave. About ten yards out, he stops and parks himself under a tree, gesturing for me to keep going. I just want to run like hell, but Heller’s back there and I wouldn’t get very far.

Before I can get any closer or even say something, Marchetti’s older brother turns around and sees me. He lets out a breath and shakes his head just the

slightest bit. I want to say something—anything—but he’s already turning back, nudging his father, then bending over to whisper something in his ear.

Almost as one, the Marchettis turn to look at me. The mother—already crying—wails louder and leans against her husband. Everyone steps back and aside a little as I approach, almost like I was...dangerous.

I watch the ground as I walk over, then stand in front of the grave, stoop, and add my bouquet of flowers to the ones already piled there. There weren’t all that many, actually, and my bouquet is bigger and more expensive than the others. I straighten up and stand there, all too aware of the Marchettis standing behind me, staring knives into my back.

The headstone is simple and plain. Nothing fancy. Just plain old granite, carved with the words “SUSAN ANN MARCHETTI” and the dates “1972-1991.” Below it all is the phrase “TAKEN TOO SOON.”

The silence is fucking killing me. The backs of my calves start to tremble. I want to run or jump over the damn headstone. I mean, Christ, they’re all standing. Right. Behind me! Right behind me! Jesus, one of them could have a gun or a knife, they could just jump me and kill me before anyone could move! God! Right behind me! I can’t believe it. They’re all staring at me. I can actually *feel* their eyes on me. And I can hear the mother sobbing and some whispering from I don’t know who, but I can’t make out the words and *goddamn* it! How long has it been? How long am I

supposed to stand here? “A reasonable amount of time” the judge said. How long is *that*? An hour? Oh, God, if I have to stand here for an hour, I’m gonna die. I’m just gonna have a heart attack and drop dead right here. Christ, how long has it been? My hands are clasped in front of me. Is there anyway I can look at my watch without letting them know? I don’t want them to see me looking at my watch. I just want to see how long it’s been. I mean, I figure fifteen minutes ought to be “a reasonable amount of time,” right?

“I can’t believe you came.”

Marchetti’s father. I think. It sounds like his voice from the trial. He’s a plumber or an electrician or something like that. Now what? Do I turn around? Do I have to talk to him?

“Figured you’d’ve appealed or gotten out of it or paid someone to come here for you.”

Shit. “I live up to my responsibilities,” I say.

And then Heller shouts “Mr. Marchetti!” which makes me turn around just in time to see Marchetti coming at me, his face red and blustery, tears streaming down his face, his hands (big hands, God, a construction worker maybe?) reaching out for my throat and he grabs me with those big hands, pushing me back and choking me at the same time, and all I can think is that he’s gonna make us fall against the tombstone and probably knock it over and they’ll blame me for that, too.

“Fucker! Your fucking responsibilities! Fucking respons—”

Heller’s there, then, saying “Mr. Marchetti, you gotta calm down, get off him, you gotta stop this” and grabbing Marchetti under the arms to pull him off me.

Now I’m down on one knee and my suit pants are dirty and filthy and my collar’s askew. I rub my throat as Heller wrestles Marchetti back towards his family. The mother and one of the family friends gets into the act, trying to calm Marchetti. Heller releases him and steps away, but keeps a wary eye on the man, who’s still blustering and breathing hard like some huge bull.

“Mr. Marchetti, don’t make me run you in,” says Heller while I’m standing, brushing off, straightening my tie. “Don’t do this to yourself.” The whole time, he stands protectively between the Marchettis and me.

Once Mr. Marchetti seems a little more manageable (he’s a big guy, but he looks small leaning against his son and his wife, crying), Heller takes me by the elbow and starts to walk me down the pathway back to the car. I want to say something, to thank him, but the words—*all* words—stick in my throat the whole way home. I just sit there in the car, shaking, ready to puke. My adrenaline’s racing and when I walk through the door, my mother’s eyes widen, and my father, who hasn’t yet looked up from the paper to see me, says “That didn’t take long. Ready for some dinner?”

And I just say “No” and slam the door once I’m in my room.

May 20, 1993

After what happened last year, I almost didn't bring flowers this time. But Mom told me that it was a nice thing to do, and I figured that I could at least take the high road. Besides, this time Heller will keep an eye on Marchetti's father, I'm sure.

Heller picks me up at the same time as last year and soon we're heading up the road. All I can think about is the nightmare I had last night. The nightmare where Marchetti's father brought a gun this year. Hid it under his coat and shot me in the back before Heller could move or even speak.

Onto Marwood Road again, up onto Church Drive, pulling over at the cemetery gate. Same cars as last year. I'm a year older and nothing's changed. Nothing.

I got the PowerMac I wanted last year. It's great, too. But when my dad asked me what I wanted for my birthday this year, all I could think about was this moment. Pulling up to the gate, seeing those goddamned cars, and knowing that *they're* waiting for me.

My stomach starts churning and I get that diarrhea feeling in my guts. I want to run for the nearest toilet.

But Heller's out of the car now, so I have to follow suit. We trudge up the hill again and Heller stations himself under the same tree. I have to admit I'd feel better with him closer, but I guess he knows what he's doing.

I hit the peak of the hill and I see them, clustered around the headstone. How often do they come here? Why the hell do they have to come here *today*? I hate how they seem to sense my presence, how they turn almost as one.

And then they step away from the grave. Like they don't want to be near me, even if it means moving away from their daughter.

I keep my eyes to the ground as I approach. I just can't handle looking at them, especially after what happened last year. We never even went out to dinner last year. I couldn't eat for two days.

I put the flowers on the grave, along with theirs. Like last year, Mom went all out.

So I stand again and wait again. Just like last year, I can feel the knives going into my back. I see Marchetti's father in my dream again, pulling out a revolver, cocking back the hammer, pulling the trigger and

"You piece of shit."

It's almost as bad as being shot. My shoulders jerk and I want to piss in my pants.

"You goddamn piece of shit," he says.

“Lou...” A female voice, pleading. Momma Marchetti. “Lou, don’t do this at Susan’s grave.”

I’m not going to turn around. No matter what. Instead, I close my eyes and just stand my ground. I’m just going to ignore him. Take the high road. Be a bigger man.

“You killed my daughter and you bring her flowers? What kind of an animal are you? Who the hell do you think you are? You think you can *buy* your way out of this? You think your money means jack shit here?

“Talk to me, you punk! I want to hear what you have to say for yourself. Not the line of bullshit you handed the judge. Tell me you didn’t care what happened to my daughter. You didn’t care about nothing but getting drunk and cruising around in the car Daddy bought you. They shoulda locked you up forever. You’re worse than a psycho. You don’t even have a sickness; you just don’t care. You don’t care about anything.”

That’s not true. I care about things. I care about people. It was an accident. It was a damn accident. I want to turn around. I want to tell him.

“I woulda thrown the switch myself. I woulda put the needle in your arm, whatever. You can’t buy your way out of this. You can’t buy my daughter back!”

He’s rambling. It sounds like he’s crying. His son and his wife are trying to calm him down.

“You can’t bring her back! You shoulda died instead! I wish you’d broke your neck! I wish you’d gotten paralyzed and had to lie in a bed for the rest of your life! Let your fucking father have to wipe your ass for the rest of your life but he’d probably just hire someone to do it—”

That’s it. I spin around. “Shut up about my parents!”

Lou lunges, but his son holds him back.

“Don’t do it, Pop.”

I’m shaking so hard I can hardly see for the vibration of the scene in front of me. My hands clench and unclench spastically. If he comes near me, I’ll kill him. I’ll kick his damn ass.

“I’m doing what I’m supposed to do!” I tell him. “Just let me do it.”

“You shoulda died! You shoulda died!” Crying. Can barely understand him. Blubbering the words. The world’s shaking around me.

And that’s when Heller steps in between us. He checks me over his shoulder, then steps up to Marchetti and says something. Marchetti backs away and Heller turns to me.

“We’ve been here long enough.” He jerks his head towards the car. “Let’s go.”

I’m on an adrenaline high the rest of the day. The whole damn world vibrates and hums. Dad tries to talk to me, but I can’t even hear him. All I can think about is

Marchetti, my fists clenched. Us squaring off in the cemetery. It's insane. Just insane.

For dinner, we go out to Fitzwilly's and I manage to fork down a single bite of my favorite planked salmon before I surprise everyone—including myself—by throwing up right at the table. Right at the fucking table. Vomit all over my plate.

My birthday's ruined. They ruined my birthday.

May 20, 1994

Fuckin' twenty-one now. Don't fuckin' care what they fuckin' think. Fuckin' Heller, too, give me a fuckin' look like that when he picks me up. *Fuck* him!

Just a few beers, is all. Me and some buddies, celebrated my birthday early. Don't I deserve to celebrate my fucking birthday? One fucking mistake, and my fucking birthday turns to shit! What kind of fucking justice is that?

Go to her grave. Her goddamn grave. Yeah, I'm fucked up. Whatever. Her fucking mother whispers something to someone about smelling liquor on me, and I want to say, "Fuck you, bitch! I can hear you!" but I don't.

Fuck them. Goddamn it. My fucking birthday *sucks*. Get straight fucking A's in school. Fucking Dean's list. Do they care? Do any of them care?

Opened my presents this morning. New trenchcoat. New stereo for the car. Don't even care any more. Whole time I was opening them, I was thinking of this moment. Standing at her fucking grave.

And then Jim and Jer come over. "Have some brews—you're legal."

Just what I need. Fucking A. Just chill me out a little.

Why am I crying? Goddamn it. Can't even see the gravestone, which is a good thing. Can they tell I'm drunk? Crying because my life is shit. Forget about it all year. Push it back. Don't let myself think about it until the day it happens, man, but that's no good because it always crops up when I least expect it. Can't stand Finals because school's ending and once school's out it's only a week, only a week, man, and then I have to come here, have to get into Heller's car and come here and they stand there and watch me and hate me and no one cares what this is doing to me even my parents don't understand Mom just gives me fucking flowers like that changes anything Christ.

Can't stand it. Can't stand it.

"No respect."

Don't know which one of them said it. Don't care. I feel queasy and the ground's spinning so I lean against the headstone for support and someone shouts and grabs me and then there's all these hands grabbing at me and someone saying "Get off of him" but who the fuck cares because I'm passing

May 20, 1995

Okay. This year's going to be different. No acting stupid like last time. No attitude. Just suck it down, deal with it. Be mature.

Graduation is in a week and a half. Right now, all of my friends are in Myrtle or Lauderdale or Cancun, living it up, getting drunk, getting laid. Checking names off on those bunny lists.

I'm twenty-two today, still legal, but not drunk.

No, not me. And when my friends asked what I was doing for Senior Week, when they asked if I wanted to chip in on a condo on the beach and rent a van and cruise down, I told them I wasn't interested. I told them I would just go home. I didn't say why, no matter how much they asked. I just let them think I was a loser.

No reason for them to know, right? I mean, school ends in the middle of May, so there's never been a reason for them to know what I have to do what I come home for the summer.

Another year, another birthday. Big deal. Got a new suit and a new briefcase for my new job. Yippee. Got a knock on the door and Heller in his shades and his inscrutable look, waiting again.

Got to stand here again, on my birthday again, thinking of my friends and how they get to celebrate the hard work of the past four years. They get to party and move on. Me? I get to stand here. I get another year wasted.

Top of my class. Job waiting for me at a firm in Philadelphia. Doesn't matter, does it? Because no matter what I accomplish, I'm still standing here at her grave. And I'll be here again in 365 days.

May 20, 1996

My lawyer said that given the nature of the sentence, I would never be able to get out of it on an appeal, but he *did* finally ask the judge if I had to go to the grave at any particular time on the day in question.

The judge, bless his heart, didn't care.

Which is why I'm standing at Susan Marchetti's grave at 11:00pm, alone in the dark and the silence of the night.

May 20, 1997

Heller's standing under the tree in the moonlight, waiting for me. I don't mind being here at night. My friends and I, we used to cut through this cemetery on the way home sometimes, when we'd been out late and had to get home quickly.

Those were good days. Me and Jimmy and Jerry and Dan. I remember one time we all managed to sneak into the Thrifty Mart out on Route 30. It was still

under construction, but some of the stock had arrived early, so there were crates of six-packs stacked in the framework, covered by nothing more than plastic tarps. We took one of the six-packs and kicked back in the moonlight, sitting on some cinder blocks and drinking those illicit beers.

A Rent-A-Cop with a flashlight that shone like the sun caught us red-handed. Embarrassing as hell, really. My father smoothed things over with the people who owned the Thrifty Mart.

Don't misunderstand. It was wrong—flat-out wrong. But not evil. It was childhood mischief, but I still get a little twinge when I walk into a Thrifty Mart, even now, even though I've got money in my pocket.

May 20, 1998

The thing is, there's no reason for anyone to know. This is the third year in a row I've had to take this day off of work in order to come here. I told them last year that this was my grandmother's birthday and that we always made a big deal of it since she and I had the same birthday. I told them I always had to go home.

If only they knew. What would they think?

May 20, 1999

Three weeks ago, I sat Sara down and I said to her "Honey, if we're going to get married, there's something you need to know. Something about me."

And I told her. I held her hands in mine the whole time because somewhere deep down I was afraid that she would jump up and run away. I told her everything. I told her about Marchetti and about why I never celebrate my birthday and about ten years of hell that would soon come to an end.

In the end, I was reduced to a crying, blubbering mass, and she just held me and whispered to me that she loved me, and that together everything would be all right.

And she's right. I'm getting closer and closer to the end of this. In six months, I'll be married. Sara offered to come with me to Susan Marchetti's grave, but I don't want her to see this. I don't want her to see this sick little birthday present I get every damn year.

She stays at my parents' house, which is where I spend the night when I come into town for my annual punishment. I climb into Heller's car yet again.

I've always meant to *say* something to Heller, but I just never got the chance. I think he understands, though. He must realize how difficult this is for me every year. I always want to try to tell him how much I appreciate the help he's given me, but when I get into that car, my brain just freezes up and my stomach starts churning and the last thing I want to do is talk to anyone.

Funny. He hasn't changed at all over the years.

May 20, 2000

This is it. The penultimate year. I can't believe I made it this far.

I haven't worn a suit here since I stopped coming during the day, when the Marchettis might be here. So tonight I'm just decked out in jeans and a Polo shirt. It's cool for May, a little breeze... The trees at the cemetery will be swaying, I know.

And I'm sitting next to Heller in the front seat of his cruiser. This time I'll say something to him. I mean, there's only one more year and then this is all done and over with. Unreal. It seems like I've spent my life doing this.

And I have, really. The best years of my life, at least.

Heller pulls up at the gate and shuts off the engine. I open my door and start to get out, and that's when I realize that he's not joining me. He's pulling a metal clipboard out from behind his seat.

"I have some paperwork to catch up on," he says, without looking up at me.

So much for a man-to-man talk on the path up to the grave.

I nod and close the cruiser door, then take the trek up the path for the next-to-last time in my life.

At the top of the hill, I make a beeline for the grave. I've walked this in my nightmares.

I don't even get a chance to take up my position when someone behind me says, "Hello."

I turn to look into the eyes of Lou Marchetti.

My worst nightmare come true. Here, 365 days away from it all being over, he's got me alone. At night. He could kill me with a knife or with his bare hands and I would be dead for at least half an hour before Heller came looking to see what was wrong.

"I'll—" I start, "I'll—"

"You'll shut up," he says. "You'll listen."

He shakes his head and takes a deep breath. "I always wondered what I would do in this situation, you know? Man, I used to tell everyone 'Give me a minute alone with that sonofabitch. Just a minute's all I need.'

"And here I got you, right? The guy who killed my little girl."

"Mister—"

"Shut up! You killed my daughter! You understand that?"

God, of course I understand, I want to tell him. I've spent nine years doing nothing *but* understanding.

He sighs and suddenly my boogeyman is just a human being. He doesn't look angry or hateful any more. Just tired. Just really tired.

"My daughter. She wasn't going to college out-of-state like you. She was going to nursing school, though. She wanted to help people. She just wanted to help.

“Christ, I was proud of her. And she was coming home from a late night at the hospital when you ran her off the road and killed her.”

When he says it, I see it. And damn it, no matter how many times I remember that night, I can’t remember her car coming the other way, the way it must have been. I can’t remember her swerving. I can’t remember seeing her at all until that awful moment when the flash of the lightning and the angry roar of the thunder made me suddenly sober and I saw her car crumpled against the tree. I was just too damn drunk.

“I don’t care,” he goes on, “what the judge says about you paying a debt or learning a lesson. I don’t care about you goin’ off to college and landing a good job and making money. Because I know the truth. You’re a liar and a coward and a drunk driver. You’re a vicious little punk-ass murderer.

“And no matter what you ever do, don’t ever think you got it good. Because as long as I’m alive, there’s one person who knows the truth about you.”

I lick my lips. “Look, you have every right to be angry at me. I’ve really been trying, though. Trying to make, I don't know, to make amends—”

“Amends...” He says it without inflection. “You can’t even tell me her middle name, I bet. Nine times you stood at her grave and you can’t even tell me her middle name.”

And, God help me, he's right. Because this is where I'm supposed to make the connection with him. This is where I'm supposed to blurt out her middle name and prove that I'm not a bad guy.

But I can't. Because I can't remember her middle name. Her damn middle name.

He just looks at me, like he knew I'd fail this particular test. So maybe this is when the knife comes out, or maybe it's a gun, and he figures no jury in the world would convict him of killing the guy who killed his daughter.

He walks away, leaving me standing my ground, trembling, whether from fear or anger or impotence I cannot say.

Before walking down the path, I steal a look at the headstone. Ann. Her middle name was Ann.

Back at the car, Heller's silent as I get in. He starts up the engine and pulls away before I've got my seatbelt fastened. I'm still shaking.

"I, uh, I wish you'd come up this year," I manage to say after a minute or so.

"Oh?" Heller doesn't look over at me.

"Uh, yeah. Her, well, her father, you know, Mr. Marchetti? He was there. Tonight. Waiting for me."

Nothing from Heller. Keeping his eyes on the road.

“I mean, I thought he was gonna kill me. I thought... God, I don’t even know how he knew I’d be there then. He just showed up out of nowhere. I mean, I wish you’d been there. I was really scared.”

Pulling into my parents’ development, Heller glances in my direction at last. “Good.”

What did he say?

“Because,” he continues, “you should have been scared. You should have been scared shitless.”

“You know something? If that had been *my* daughter, I would have put a bullet in your brain years ago. You should get down on your knees every day and thank God that Lou Marchetti’s a good man. He could have killed you tonight. You’re lucky.”

He pulls into the driveway and finally turns to look at me. “Now get out of my car. You’re stinking it up.”

I fumble at the latch and finally get it open. Tears in my eyes. Not Heller. He was on *my* side. He was supposed to be on *my* side!

The police car pulls away in the dark, leaving me on the front lawn, crying, shaking. The hell with them. The hell with them all.

May 20, 2001

This is it. Last year. It's over. Over.

A car pulls up at Mom and Dad's. A young deputy I've never seen waits for me behind the wheel.

"Where's Heller?" I ask.

"Heller?"

"Yeah. Heller. Used to be a deputy."

"Oh. Steve Heller. Yeah, he retired almost a year ago. Almost forgot about good ol' Steve." With a chuckle, he puts the car into gear and we're off.

Good ol' Steve. Good ol' Steve.

He drops me off at the cemetery and comes up the path with me. No surprises this year. No Marchetti. Nothing. Just me and this new deputy and a few minutes standing over the grave.

And that's it. It's over. All done. Ten years of my life. A decade, given up for her.

Done.

May 20, 2002

Last month, Sara broached the topic for the first time, cautiously, the way doctors give news that's only *partly* good.

"What," she asked me, "would you like to do for your birthday?"

And I couldn't answer. Ten years of trying to forget my birthday. Years of not celebrating because there was always that grotesque pain, too. I used to like a particular restaurant, I know. I used to like...

But I can't even remember anymore. I would have to call my parents and find out what kind of cake I like for my birthday, and what are the old rituals and traditions that brought me so much pleasure as a child? What do I want to do on my birthday?

I don't know, I told her. I don't even know what my birthday is or should be anymore. I don't know. I've spent so long just suppressing that time, making a little zone of dead days around that date, so that I could live my life as normally as possible.

But last night, I couldn't sleep. Work was going fine, the baby was healthy—I don't know what was bugging me. Just jitters, I guess. Ten years of this night being the calm before the storm—it's tough to shake. Somewhere in my brain, I'm still anticipating the grave.

I walked the house while Sara and Meredith slept. A storm had just kicked up, and the patter of rain on the roof was calming. I walked past my diploma, hanging on the wall, past my commendation from my firm, past the photos of me shaking hands with the mayor, the city council, the town police chief. A hundred miles from Brookdale and the knowledge of what happened there eleven years ago.

I went into Meredith's room. A lightning flash from the window lit the room for a moment, throwing the mobile, the crib, and the toys into relief. I looked down into the crib at my daughter. Her hands were balled into tight little fists as she slept, and her blanket was wound around her leg just a little too tightly.

Moving slowly and quietly, so as not to waken her, I reached into the crib and straightened the blanket, tugging and adjusting it. With a sleepy coo, she moved the liberated leg into a more comfortable position. I felt tears welling in my eyes. Sara teases me sometimes, says that I'm more maternal than she is. I can't help it. When I look at Meredith, I feel like my chest is too small for my heart.

Outside, the rain and the wind lashed a tree branch against the window, back and forth.

Wish-click. Wish-click. Wish-click. Wish.

And I don't know what I'm doing here today, a hundred miles from my home. I don't know why I'm turning up Marwood and then down onto Church.

And I sure as hell don't know why I'm parking the car in the parking lot, walking up the path to her grave. To Susan Ann Marchetti's grave. But I'm doing it anyway.

Maybe because it's the only thing I know how to do on my birthday.

Her father is there, kneeling at the grave, holding something small in his hands. I can see his lips moving from here, and I stop, caught between my own need to approach and the desire to respect his privacy. But he must hear me or somehow sense me because he looks up.

For a moment, neither of says anything. Then, he says, “What... What are you *doing* here?”

I walk over to him and stand over him for just a moment before crouching down to see him at eye-level.

“You don’t have to be here...” he says, confused.

“But I do. I really do. I finally get it, Mr. Marchetti. After all these years. I was wrong. From the moment I got behind the wheel that night, until a few hours ago, I was dead wrong.

“I know what I did. It isn’t that I killed her. That was bad enough. But I killed *her*.” His eyes widen. “I killed your *daughter*. She was a person, not my sin.”

And then I kneel, kneel next to him. “Look, I’ll go if you want me to go. I respect your need to be with her on this day. But I’ll come back later because I need it, too. I need to get down on my knees and make this as right as it can be. I know that I can’t ever expect your forgiveness, but I need to spend as much time as it takes begging Susan for hers. Because what I did was *wrong*, Mr. Marchetti. And there’s no excuse for it. And you shouldn’t have to be living without your daughter.

I'm sorry that you are. It's my fault, totally and completely, and I accept complete responsibility."

And that's when I see what's in his hand. A picture.

"Is that her?" I ask, and I realize that the last time I'd seen a picture of her, it had mine next to it, and a headline above calling me a killer. "Can I see?"

Silently, he opens his hands, and I see her, for the first time in years. Of course, she's perfect. How could she be anything but?

It's a night of doing crazy things, so I go one further. I dig into my pocket and flip open my wallet, showing him the picture of Meredith. His eyes cloud for a moment, then widen as he realizes what I'm showing him.

"Her name is Meredith, and if she went away," I tell him, "everything inside me would die and dry up and blow away. And I never knew it was possible to feel that way. I never knew *I* could make someone feel that way."

He looks down at the ground for a moment, and when he looks up again, his eyes are tear-filled. "She... *She* would forgive you. That's the kind of person she was. She would have forgiven you."

"I'm glad. I don't deserve it, but I'm glad. She wanted to be a nurse, right? You told me that and I remembered it. She wanted..." I trail off, then take a deep breath. I risk it—I take his hand in my own. He jerks as though shocked, but

doesn't pull away, and here we are, her father and her killer, the man who brought her life and the man who took it away, kneeling at her grave.

“Tell me about her. Tell me everything. She's alive as long as you tell it, Mr. Marchetti, even to someone like me. Let me do whatever I can to ease your pain. Let it out. These past ten years, God, I was so selfish. The judge was wrong—I didn't learn anything, not until it was all over. So I'm here again, as long as you need me, as long as it takes, as many years as it takes. These past ten years, they were all about me. These *next* ten years... These next ten years—let them be *her* decade.”

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