

A silhouette of a person riding a horse on a beach at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright glow and long shadows. The sky is filled with many birds in flight. The water is calm, and the beach is visible in the foreground.

FUNERALS FOR HORSES

BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CATHERINE RYAN HYDE

FUNERALS FOR HORSES

BY CATHERINE RYAN HYDE

Ella Ginsberg's brother Simon seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. His clothing, shoes, and watch were found abandoned near a freight line track in Central California. His jockey shorts and wallet were never found. The police have no clue, and Simon's wife Sarah had no warning that any trouble was brewing.

Ella, the member of the family with the most severe mental health issues, takes off on foot across much of California and Arizona, thinking she can find Simon using nothing but her knowledge of the way he might think. Her search leads her to the Navajo Nation in Arizona, where she is helped and befriended by three Native Americans and an aged paint horse named Yozzie.

Chapters of her travels in the present are interspersed with chapters of her past with Simon, who raised her, and who is still the most important person in her shaky world. Only maybe it's not as unstable as it looks from the outside. Maybe inside Ella a core of unexpected strength is emerging. Maybe Ella is even stronger than the brother who held their lives together for so long.

Publishers Weekly said, "Equine funerals help frame this brutally lyrical first novel, a tale of sibling loyalty, madness, pain and redemption. In this restrained but compelling narrative, Hyde movingly conveys the toll of years of emotional damage."



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"Brutally lyrical.... In this restrained but compelling narrative, Hyde movingly conveys the toll years of emotional damage."

—Publishers Weekly

"A rich blend of metaphors and genuine characters that will touch the hearts of readers. Highly recommended for all collections."

—Library Journal

"[A] true work of art.... Enchanting."

—The San Francisco Chronicle

"Brilliantly wrought, finely plotted.... Every scene is sketched with beautiful brevity.... Every visit takes your breath away."

—Small Press

"Haunting."

—The Washington Post Book World

Author's Note:

Funerals for Horses was my first published novel. Not the first I wrote. Just the first to be published. The first novel I ever wrote was Walter's Purple Heart. And, at a big writer's conference, I managed to catch the eye of a real agent, who asked me to send Walter for her consideration.

Four weeks later (which in this business beats lightning to the ground) she got back to me with a yes. A yes! She took on Walter! My struggles were over! My life as an author could start in earnest.

As I'm fond of saying about this quirky business, "What could possibly go wrong?"

I went on to send her three more novels. This one, another called Swimming Upside Down that remains in the drawer, and Pay It Forward. She never liked another one enough to take it on. Including Pay It Forward.

Meanwhile I was contacted by a much newer, much hungrier young agent, who hoped I was seeking representation. She'd read one of my short stories in a literary magazine, and wrote to me through the magazine's editor. She asked if I had an unrepresented novel.

I had not yet written Pay It Forward when she contacted me. But I did have an unrepresented novel: Funerals for Horses. I'd submitted it to the agent I already had, to no avail. Technically that meant I could go elsewhere with it. What it meant in the real world remained to be seen.

For a while—and with full disclosure on both ends—I had two agents. One new, hungry one who had never sold anybody's first fiction. One well established one who sold lots of fiction for lots of money, none of it mine. And who had accepted only one of my novels. Out of what would eventually be four.

When my well-established agent didn't like anything about Pay It Forward and wanted me to take it apart and put it back together (I never did—I showed her essentially the same version you can read today) I asked her frankly if she was still enthusiastic about representing Walter. She said, "Well. It has been an awful lot of places." I asked her to send both home to me.

I gave them to my new, hungry agent, who sold my first five books and got me three movie deals, one of which actually made it to the screen.

Granted, we started small.

One day she told me that the editor of tiny startup publisher Russian Hill Press would be calling me. He loved Funerals for Horses, and wanted to publish it the following spring. This was August of 1996, so spring of 1997 was mighty fast. Thing is, he wanted a change. And it was a big change. And he felt it was a deal-breaker. That's why he was calling me. If I would agree to this huge change, I would be a published author at last. I would break through. If not, we were back to the proverbial drawing board.

I waited nervously for his call. And waited. And waited. And nibbled my fingernails dangerously low.

When he finally called, and told me the change, my heart fell. It was a change I would never make. He wanted me to change my ending... so that there would be no ending. So that people would follow the story to see what would happen... and nothing ever would. At that point, I would have done almost anything for a published book. *Almost* anything. But not *literally* anything. Because I would not have done that.

I was all ready to hang up and get back to that aforementioned drawing board. But we kept talking. He explained why he wanted the change. Because, the way the manuscript stood, the tension dropped off beyond a certain point. Which was probably a valid observation, but...

We talked some more. And, as we talked, I began to come up with alternative suggestions. Right there in that conversation, I thought of a way to solve his problem, yet still preserve—even improve—the ending.

He invited me to write it that way.

I did.

It came out the following spring.

I learned a valuable lesson from that editorial experience, and it's served me well in just about every dealing I've had with editors since. If they say there's a problem, they're probably right. Believe them. If they say they know exactly how to fix said problem, they're probably wrong. Don't believe them. Most editors are not authors, and the ones who *are* authors are still not the author of the book in question. Great editors point out what needs rewriting and why, and let the author fix it in keeping with the original creative style.

But then, I'm an author. Editors are entitled to disagree.

Waiting for your first novel to show up in the world is a stressful bit of business. At least, it was for me. My greatest fear was not so much that everyone would hate it. I think that was second on the list. It was that no one would notice—that my tiny novel from its tiny startup press would make not the tiniest ripple in the vast literary world.

But the reviewers noticed it, and they were kind. Glowingly kind.

Good reviews are a great help moving forward, and my two critically successful Russian House of Press titles helped me jump the gap to a major New York publishing house.

Well... that and a big Hollywood film. It's a tough business.

As the title suggests, *Funerals for Horses* may be a darker read than my more recent novels might lead you to expect. It also wins the prize for the most adult material in any of my novels. I say this neither with pride nor shame, but to put it in perspective alongside my other works. Many of my novels are suitable for young teens. This is not one of them.

When the novel first came out, I ran into a lot of people in the supermarket who wanted to know if things were... better. For me. You know. Mental-health-wise. I took it as a compliment (albeit a ve-

odd one). I guess I made Ella's madness feel real. But it was not from personal experience, except to this extent: I took what I feel, what I think many of us feel, and turned up the volume until I got Ella.

Ella is the "identified patient" in her family. Most dysfunctional families have one. There tends to be one family member who acts out, though perhaps they are acting out what the whole family is feeling. But it's easy to pretend that's not the case. By identifying this person as sick, everyone else can feel well. So that's Ella. She's the one everybody worries about.

Except I had an experience in my life that caused me to wonder if the identified patient might not be saner than everybody else. Because maybe, just maybe, this person has a head start on sanity. Because Ella knew what was wrong, all along. And Simon's job was to be fine. To hold the line and be fine. To keep maintaining—hell, to keep *proving*—that everything was fine. Until he couldn't anymore. Which seemed to me to give Ella the advantage. Because you can't even begin to heal until it strikes you that something needs healing.

So I guess the theme of this novel is, "Look for strength in unexpected places." Not only might you find it there, but it might be more beautiful and more hopeful than strength found anywhere else.

Here's to strength and healing.

Hope you enjoy,

Catherine

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THE GOD OF GROWING UP

My brother Simon was forty-two years old. I pray he still is. I shame and cajole his family into believing with me, but their wicks have burned down, their flames left to flicker, like the light they pretend to leave on in the window for Simon, like their own dwindling lives.

He has been gone two months and four days.

I pray that somehow, somewhere, in presence or absence of pain and fear, he will turn forty-three tomorrow. But it's hard to reconcile myself to prayer.

As a young girl I decided, in light of prevailing evidence, that a child does not fall under god's jurisdiction until age eighteen. No one taught me this theory. It was my own carefully researched conclusion. After all, one can't vote, or fight a war, until that age, and to assume god washes his hands of our affairs until then settled a number of otherwise troubling questions.

In need of a sort of interim god, I adopted Simon, and forgot or similarly refused to switch over until long past eighteen, until age thirty-six, until the calls came. First from Sarah, his wife, asking if I'd seen him, as he does tend to take off on short notice to visit me. Then the call three days later. They'd found his clothes, all of them. His suit, complete with checkbook, vest, shoes, tie, the whole nine yards. All strewn around a wooded area just below a freight line track in Central California. His jockey shorts and wallet were never found.

Until then I held my life together carefully, if not seamlessly, maintaining a greater degree of sanity than seems my birthright. This is my brother Simon's doing, and none of my own.

Now, who knows?

Now even Raphael seems concerned about me, and, as Raphael is preparing to die of AIDS, as are all my lovers, his concern troubles me.

If not for other reasons, the deal is that I am to be concerned about him—them—and I dislike role reversals even more than other types of change. It forms a basis of excuse for me to shut Raphael out of my life, if a bit gradually, though we all knew I would when the sickness set in. I never promised them otherwise. I never pretend.

I stay awake until midnight. Now it is Simon's birthday. Now I have held still too long.

I write a note to my employer, who refused me a leave of absence, though not in so many words. He recited a speech suggesting that a hallmark of maturity is the strength to function in crisis.

I had listened carefully, then continued as if I hadn't heard, a purposeful validation of his assumptions about me. I am not as unstable as people tend to think, but I allow them their margin for error because it allows me mine.

Now I write seven notes, one to each of my lovers, to use a loosely applicable term. I have never had what one might call a run-of-the-mill sexual encounter with any one of them, due to the exposure to the virus. But sex is what you make it, and we have always made do. To assume sex must take place within touching distance seems, to me, limited thinking.

I slip the notes into envelopes and label each with a name. Raphael. David. Mark. Carey. E

Jonathan. Jamey.

Raphael will find them first, I've no doubt, and he might be surprised. Each knows he is not the only one, but perhaps not that he is one of seven. Not that it matters now. This is not promiscuity on my part, not at its roots; more that so few women will make concessions to the HIV-positive male than I am forced to do far more than my share.

Raphael will come by in the morning, I think, and I will be gone. Now that he wears blotches on his forearms, and the rasp clings from his last bout with PCC pneumonia, he diligently insinuates himself into my life. It is a breach of agreement, albeit a silent agreement, and I suppose he feels he must force me to draw his line. He will not bow out with grace as others have done in the past. He will continue to knock, wearing his splotches offset against black jeans and shirt, dark circles, dark hazel beard, dark hair falling into his eyes. Even debilitated, Raphael maintains a Bohemian grace, an old handsomeness.

His visits will continue until I refuse him or until I am gone, which is to say, there will be one more visit, to no avail. No, I am not hardhearted. I will miss Raphael. More than any of them.

Reverently, I dismantle the shrine-like arrangement of my brother Simon's photos, a forty-year-old blond child in a business suit.

I picture Raphael watching over my shoulder. If he were here, he'd say, a healthy move, Ella.

I would not tell him I only disturbed the photos because I'll need them with me on the road, both for solace and as exhibit A.

As I pack, he would say, you'll never find him.

I would scream at him for that. I would forbid him to ever say I cannot find Simon. I hear the screaming in my head. It sounds like my sister DeeDee, telling me I must never again suggest that Andy is not a real horse. Her hands locked around my throat when she screamed this in real life. I still miss DeeDee.

I am glad Raphael is not here.

In the morning I stick the notes on my door with push pins, a different color for each sweet, doomed man, whichever color I feel suits him best.

I clean out my bank accounts on the way out of town.

THEN:

I was born with the caul. According to Grandma Ginsberg, this signified great things. But it proved disappointment. Yes, I was the smartest child in all of my classes, the most morbidly mature that any of my teachers had seen, save my sister DeeDee. Yes, I was spiritually advanced, but in my family that was nothing special.

I owe any additional senses, I believe, not to the caul but to the genes of my father, Gabriel Ginsberg, a man with an intimidating I.Q.

We only lived together as a family until I was four, but I hold vivid early memories. Mostly I remember my mother rousing us out of bed in the middle of the night, bundling us in blankets and packing us down to the police station to post my father's bail. This same scene played out on at least a half dozen separate occasions.

He always looked contrite, though still in good humor. He would try to kiss my mother on the cheek, but she would pull away.

She adored the man, needed him, and always assured the police she would keep him on a tight leash. This was the only time their roles shifted, the only time he needed her, which I now suspect is why she never shortened his leash.

At the trials my mother pleaded with the judge not to jail him, claiming the family would starve. Despite the recurring nature of his offenses, the judge would always let him off with a fine, though a higher fine each time, and threaten prison the next time my father appeared before his bench.

I know all this because, although Simon was in school, my mother would pack DeeDee and me to court for lack of a babysitter. Grandma Ginsberg claimed failing health, especially in the wake of one of my father's arrests. I overheard her tell my mother that it didn't matter anyway, because we were entirely too young to understand a term like indecent exposure. She didn't realize that children fixate on such words, awaiting definition.

I'd sit enthralled on the car ride home, loving the back of my father's head. The thinning hair on top created a wild effect that no amount of Brylcreem could tame. It seemed to match the rest of the man: big, rangy, loosely strung and indistinct.

Until my father left, he took us every Sunday to visit Grandma Ginsberg, the one who put such stock in my caul.

She always watched Picka Polka on Sundays. I was keenly aware of missing Deputy Dawg, but she had no authority to change channels.

Grandma Ginsberg pinched cheeks.

If there is something good I can say for the woman, and no doubt I am scratching, it's that she loved her family. Still, it was a draining, disturbing sort of love, a leeching of our life force. I tried to stand away as much as possible, which prompted the often-repeated invitation to shame, "You don't

love your old grandma.”

Once, my father chastised me in the car on the way home because he said I didn't act like I wanted to be there. I didn't want to be there. Nobody had warned me that I was supposed to act.

When my father left home, Grandma Ginsberg went down and never got up. She broke her hip within twenty-four hours of the news. My mother bundled us into the car and met the ambulance at City General, where I listened to Grandma's keening shrieks of pain and her self-aggrandizement, and stared at her translucent gray face in wide-eyed silence.

She came to our house to recover, but apparently recovery was not in her plans. She refused a wheelchair, walker, crutches. She refused to sit up again. She refused even to lift her huge uncooperative body onto her own bedpan, forcing my mother to lift her, to feed her, to administer her pills, to listen to her kvetching, to jump out of sleep to calm her unreasonable fears.

This my mother would do for the kin of a man who abandoned her. Much as I loathed Grandma Ginsberg, I used to openly hope for her longevity, assuming that my mother would die without the constant, unyielding torment.

Grandma Ginsberg lived in a dank, smelly back bedroom which children avoided as if by precognition, even neighbor children who didn't know her. Later, after the sports sections began stacking up, we never invited neighbor children anyway.

When my father left, my mother began to pull the sports section out of the evening paper before bundling the leftovers for the Boy Scout paper drive. Nobody dared ask why until almost two years later, when the papers had been assigned their own closet, then spilled beyond it.

Simon had the guts, not me. Brave, honest Simon, twelve years old to my six, asked if he could throw them away.

“Certainly not,” she said. “Your father will be home any day now, and the first thing he'll want is dinner and his sports section.”

She swirled out of the room as if in a hurry, leaving me alone with my brother Simon, who twisted a finger around near his head as a comment on her mental acuity. I was shocked and impressed. How can a child admit a parent is unstable? To me it seemed equivalent to suggesting that the ground won't hold us up, or gravity won't stick us down to it. But Simon worked off a different set of laws. Simon stepped on cracks. Simon was never afraid to see.

I often thought it was Simon, not me, who should have been born with the caul.

In these early years, when I still assumed god placed us somewhere on his long agenda, I wondered if he had simply forgotten it when Simon was born, then sent it along with me as an afterthought, thinking it would at least arrive into the right family. Most say god never makes mistakes, but I was a reasonable child, able to accept that even as his powers outnumber ours, so many of his list of responsibilities and details grow geometrically beyond our scope. I would cut him some slack. But to assume the role of chosen one, in a family with my brother Simon—no, that I could

never do.

Simon was the hero. Not just my hero. *The* hero, period. He couldn't have held his job any more decisively if he'd been born with the word tattooed on his forehead.

Now my sister DeeDee, she was the actress.

DeeDee's life fell apart the day Grandma Ginsberg called her a whore and a thief.

Mind you, this was nothing special.

Pushing into the depths of that back bedroom, you could be her loving grandchild, a wild Indian headhunter, or her whoring bastard ex-husband. Or perhaps the day would yield some new hallucination. Simon always smiled and took it philosophically. I had long since stopped going in.

DeeDee stormed into the kitchen, where Simon and I sat at the table brushing sand paintings with salt we'd emptied from the shaker, her face red and hot with indignation, tears sliding through her toughest guard.

Simon grabbed her in a bear hug, and motioned me to come quickly, and we sandwiched her between us until the hitching of her sobs replaced trembling rage. I felt the trembling, the hitch, and wondered why I couldn't feel pain and rage, as I appeared to be a sentient human, with nerve endings and everything.

DeeDee," he said, "you know she always does this. Remember when she called me goyim and slammed my hand in the door? That was way back when she was herself."

"I just can't stand it," DeeDee said, barely audible. "One grand-mother who hates me, fine—but not two for two."

He took her by the hand and we led her into my mother's room, where Mom lay half-sleeping though it was after four. Simon explained that Grandma Ginsberg had called DeeDee a whore and a thief. He knew and I knew that she did these things regularly, but for DeeDee's sake, I assumed, he filed an official report.

Our mother raised her head.

"Simon, did you get ground beef for dinner? Run to the store right now, dear."

"Mom," he repeated, "DeeDee is very upset."

"Make him grind it right in front of you. Don't get what's already ground. God only knows what they put into that."

Blood rose into DeeDee's face again. "You don't listen, you crazy old lady," she screamed to me close to my left eardrum.

"And hurry back from the store, dear—I'll get up and start dinner."

But she didn't move.

As Simon sprinted to the market clutching the dollar bill he had pulled from the grocery fund, DeeDee opened each of the kitchen cabinets, stood on a step stool, and hooked her arm behind every stack of dishes and glasses, pulling them out into gravity, and their appointment with the linoleum.

When our mother appeared to start dinner, her slippered feet skidded around in the debris. I closed my eyes and pictured a beach scattered with a thousand clam shells, or a wind chime tinkling on the porch.

But a minute later, as she stood staring into the empty cabinets, the shards crunching under her weight, I imagined the sound my shattering teeth might make if I ever clenched them as hard as I really wanted.

After a few minutes' surveillance, and after Simon had returned, puffing from exertion, she turned back to him and asked if he'd remembered paper plates.

DeeDee would have screamed if in Simon's place. I would have grouched that she'd requested such a thing. Simon simply pulled another dollar from the fund and took off running as my mother dropped the ground beef into an overheated pan with a startling sizzle.

No one thought about paper cups, and we had to take occasional trips from the table to the sink to drink water from the faucet. We walked carefully to avoid slipping in the shifting sea of glass and china fragments.

Three days later I came home from school to find a box full of the stuff at the curb. I felt a great relief, knowing that my mother had noticed, even acknowledged, a situation requiring attention. The pleasure faded as my brother Simon pushed through the kitchen door with the second box. As I hurried up my coat, he put the broom and dustpan away without comment.

"Simon, we don't have two grandmothers, do we?"

"Of course," he said. "Everybody has two grandmothers."

I knew there had been such a thing as a Grandma Sterling, but owing to the fact that I'd never seen her, I pictured her dead.

I asked why Grandma Sterling was never around, though it seemed like asking for trouble. When Grandma Ginsberg went away, I'd be smart enough not to inquire after her.

"Her choice," he said with a shrug, and then he whispered, "I don't think she likes us."

And what was my role in all of this? I had none. They'd all been taken. My job was not to exist at all. Though too much alive to play it to perfection, I feel I performed a fairly adept imitation.

EDGE OF THE EARTH

On the drive to Sacramento, I question myself in an endless, hamster-wheel pattern as to whether Sarah thinks of herself as my brother's widow. Of course, I will not ask. Because if she does, I could no longer be kind to Sarah, and above all I need to be kind.

I arrive at the house late, too late, really. I can see I've awakened her. Her hair, fine and blond like his, flies in many directions, most leading across her face. Her fair skin seems lined and doughy like, the way his did upon waking. With my dark, Semitic looks, I'm sure an outsider would guess me as the wife, her as the sister. I suppose I'd switch with her if the world would allow.

She's glad to see me.

"Ella," she says. "Baby."

She's never called me baby before, but she's sleepy, a sort of inexpensive truth serum. And we are bound by a common love, a stronger bond now, as it extends to a common loss.

She throws her arms around me and I leech her warmth. It's not fair, really. It's a trick I learned from Grandma Ginsberg, to draw strength from an embrace without returning any. But I know Sarah will be warm in her house while I'm away, walking off the edge of a flat earth. I must assume she won't begrudge me.

She pulls me inside, where I tell her I want a complete lesson on where Simon's clothes were found.

Of course, I could have gotten that much by phone, but I need so much more. I need a piece of him to take along.

Then, I say, I will take a good night's sleep and proceed. But I do not take a good night's sleep.

I lie awake all night, on Simon's side of the bed, because there is only the one bedroom, thinking that I am no substitute for him, and have no right to be here. The moon is nearly full, and a streak of light slides through his bedroom window, falling across the picture. Across Simon's soft, full cheeks, the fold of extra flesh under his chin, his sandy blond hair, which falls onto his forehead. He is a Tom Sawyer of a businessman. His mustache curls around at the corners of his smile. It is a twelve-year-old's smile. It always was. When he was seven, when he was forty.

The only thing my family ever did right was to breed that smile.

The moon shows it all.

Thank god the moon is on my side. I'll need a piece of that, a piece of Sarah, all of myself and a piece of Simon. Even then, this may be the hardest thing I've ever done.

In the morning I am running on my generator.

Unlike some people, I function beautifully on no sleep, but a sort of auxiliary power kicks in, different from the natural one. It feels sharp-edged and cold. It tends to make people avoid me, even those who would be inclined to spend time around me to begin with.

Sarah does not avoid me.

She makes me a pot of coffee and a bacon omelet, and cries as she watches me eat.

She holds me at the door, as if she's on to me and knows what I need. She slips me more war

strength than I would think she could spare.

I walk across the street to my old pickup, like a hike across flat terrain to the edge of the earth.

THEN:

If the drums had worked, I might still have a sister. The drums did not work. It was a piece of clever thinking on DeeDee's part, though. I will grant her that. By now, with Simon fifteen, DeeDee eleven, me nine, the age I accepted god's noninvolvement policy, my mother responded to almost nothing. Only one thing could rouse her out of bed: Grandma Ginsberg's heated complaints. Who would have thought such a thing could have a purpose?

DeeDee traded her bike for a set of drums, and, as a courtesy to the family, played them only in the garage. This broken-down structure, far too stacked and littered with yellowing sports sections, housed the car, faced out onto the back yard, six feet from Grandma Ginsberg's window.

DeeDee never took lessons on the drums; she just pounded. Grandma Ginsberg screamed until her old throat faltered and her voice cracked into a hoarse whisper.

My mother did not get up.

Finally I asked Simon, who knew everything, why my mother would respond to nonsense from the old lady while ignoring a real problem.

"But that's just it," he said. "Don't you see?"

I wasn't sure I did, but I hated to appear ignorant in front of my brother.

In a few months the drums stood silent in the corner of the garage, near the spot where DeeDee took to setting fires. They were only little fires at first, but I sensed a personal game of chicken involved, as if she challenged herself to set a blaze which would tease the borderline of control.

When the big one came, Simon said it just got away from her by mistake. I'm sure he knew better, but he liked to think the best about people if they met him halfway.

The big one came at night, with DeeDee running through our room to Simon's room, yelling fire at the top of her lungs, as though this was news, her face blackened with smoke.

As my bare feet hit the cold boards of the bedroom floor, the room lit up like a night thunderstorm, only with lightning that stayed. I ran to the window to watch the flames engulf the garage roof. I heard Grandma Ginsberg come apart. DeeDee climbed under my bed as Simon grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Call the fire department," he said.

I wished at that moment that I was Simon. Then I wouldn't have to ask a stupid question.

"Uh. What's their number again?"

"Just dial the operator. Tell her you need the fire department."

His blue eyes bored into me, full of fear, but a fear that wouldn't slow him down or trip him up.

As I told the fire department our address, I watched the trees rain, and the windows streak and flow with water. I ran outside to find Simon hosing down the roof.

Then it all happened at once, all the light, all the sound. The sirens blended with the popping

wood, the cracking roof supports. The red flashing lights blended with the eerie flicker of the engulfed structure. Fire hoses overpowered Simon's little garden hose.

The neighborhood watched in robes and bare feet.

A fireman cornered my brother Simon. "Where are your parents, son?"

"My father's gone," I heard him say.

"Where's your mother?"

Simon only shrugged in that spooky glow. "I dunno. Sleeping, I guess."

That's when it occurred to me that Grandma Ginsberg had fallen silent.

My mother was carried out of the house, against her will by the look of it. Simon informed the chief that DeeDee could be found under a bed.

The fire was quickly contained, though with no garage left to speak of; except for the scorched roof, the house sustained no real damage.

Grandma Ginsberg was carried out on a stretcher, her face covered with a sheet, already dead, would learn later, of a heart attack.

I knew I would have my work cut out for me, wondering whether I needed to feel bad or not.

My mother stumbled back into the house on the all-clear signal, and fell asleep again, as Simon explained to the remaining firefighters that Grandma Ginsberg might have to be handled like a person with no relatives. Only Simon could explain a thing like that and cause grown men to nod their understanding.

Simon called Uncle Manny in the morning, and next thing we knew, our father was home, making all the arrangements.

Our mother did not attend the funeral. I felt sure her days were numbered now, or simply negated so that even if they did drag on, they would go for nothing.

Our father asked Simon to say a few words to the bereaved.

"Just stand right up there, son, and say a few things you remember about your grandmother."

Simon did a lovely job, I thought.

He told the story of Grandma Ginsberg chasing DeeDee and him around the apartment, back to her mobile days, shaking her finger at them, saying "You dasn't do that" repeatedly over the laughter. He never explained their transgression, only the way they laughed at her later for her use of the word "dasn't," a word they could swear didn't exist in the English language.

Then he told the story of the slamming door. The day he saw baby DeeDee go into Grandma Ginsberg's bedroom and climb on the bed, and how he figured he could do it if she could. But the next time when he tried, she called him goyim and held his hand in the bedroom door and slammed it on his hand to teach him better than to try such a thing again.

And then later he knew why, he explained, because he overheard her talking to our father, complaining that the Simon boy looked just like his shiksa wife.

As he explained this last little bit, Simon's voice faded as our father ushered him off the podium away from the microphone.

Poor Simon. Poor brave, honest Simon. Everybody acted like he had a disease. He meant no harm, of course. Nobody had warned him that he was supposed to act.

DeeDee brought Andy, her stuffed horse, to the funeral, and to the shiva. She grabbed little handfuls of matzo strips or a piece of gefilte fish from the buffet, then hid under the coffee table pretending to feed Andy.

If anyone had noticed, they might have found it odd behavior for a girl of eleven, but we were all three mercifully invisible, even our voices drowned in the moans and sobs.

I sat on the rug beside the coffee table, as though she'd let me be close to her. I reached out to pet Andy, but she slapped my hand away.

He was a small horse, six or seven inches long, stiff legs inside his blue and green cover to stand up by himself. Andy had a windup key in his belly, which my sister now cranked obsessively, causing him to roll his head around on a geared neck and play "Brahms' Lullaby."

Thinking I was being kind, I told DeeDee that when she grew up, she might be able to own a real horse.

She flew out from under the table at me, like ghosts from a Halloween house, threw me and pinned me and seized my throat in her adrenaline-powered grasp.

"Don't ever say Andy isn't a real horse. Ever. Promise."

I would have, if I could, if she had let go of my throat, or if Uncle Manny hadn't disrupted the moment by pulling her off to the other side of the room.

He sat with DeeDee on his lap, one huge arm around her waist, restraining her as she wailed and thrashed. He must have thought she was on her way back to attack me, but I knew better. I retrieved Andy from under the coffee table, and carried him, as reverently as I knew she would, back to his rightful owner. She sat still then.

It was the best apology I could make, because words would not have come close.

DeeDee didn't speak to me for a week. But she didn't speak to anyone else either, so I didn't talk about it too hard. Besides, she ended her silence in my presence, in our room just before sleep.

"If anything happens to me," she whispered, "I want you and Simon to give Andy a proper burial. With a funeral service and everything."

I wondered if we were to sit shiva for Andy, but I wasn't sure what I could say to her and what I couldn't.

"But Andy wouldn't be dead. Would he?"

"Of course he would. Without me? Absolutely he would. What would he be without me? Not without me, the only thing left for Andy is a decent burial."

I made my sister DeeDee a solemn promise.

When I woke the next day she was gone, to school I assumed, and Andy was a lump under the edge of my pillow.

Mom didn't notice when DeeDee forgot to come home. Simon said she ran away, but he knew better, I think. He liked to think the best.

I told him about Andy, about the promise, and we found a flashlight and set out around bedtime, following a careful grid on the three-acre woodlot behind our house until we found her.

I was glad I couldn't see Simon's face as we stood beneath that tree, flashlight drooped in his hand, listening to the sickening creak of rope on tree limb as the breeze blew through.

I asked my brother Simon if we call the fire department for something like this.

DO NOT CROSS

I locate my approximate goal by landmark. The sun glares into my unblinking eyes, and I pull my hat brim down to shield them. I probably should think I'm standing someplace beautiful.

The hill slopes away beneath my feet, the grass winter green, the sky a perfect cloudless blue contrast. Everywhere I look I see trees. I have never been fond of trees. Well, not never, but not for a long time.

Now I see a small brown rabbit. He stares at me. I stare back. I take a step toward him, thinking he will run. He holds his ground, staring. He turns, lopes a few rabbit steps away, and looks over his shoulder at me.

I walk the other way.

It's the hawk that turns me back again, away from the direction I think I should travel.

He spreads his great patterned wings and glides from tree to tree, and I trot along, afraid, always, that life will happen too fast and I will be left behind.

I catch my foot and go sprawling.

I scrape my chin on a rock, and as it bleeds onto my shirt, I notice it's a strip of wood that snagged me. Not a natural strip, as one might expect out here, but a carefully cut and milled piece of narrow lumber, sticking straight up out of the ground.

I stand, wipe my chin on my shoulder and stamp the grass down all around my find.

I walk a pattern, rolling out in ever-widening circles until I find another. I clear the grass aside and discover a knot of plastic tape still attached, as if the remainder had been carelessly torn away, with a little tail flapping in the breeze.

The tail contains bits of faded words: DO NOT CROSS

Within minutes I've paced off the four corners of the site. The fourth stick also contains a strip of police tape. It says: LINE DO NOT CROSS

I remember the first time I ever saw my brother Simon cry. We stood under a scrub oak tree, something like the one above me now, holding the little board box Simon had made for Andy. We were affording Andy his promised proper burial, the day after the police tape disappeared from around that tree.

"How do you cry, Simon?"

I was so in awe of him, the things he could do that seemed like foreign currency to me. Show me your strength. Bench press seventy pounds. Cry.

"I don't know," he said, wiping his eyes and nose on his sleeve. "You just do."

I bend now to touch the sun-bleached scrap of tape, afraid to walk into the rectangle of my brother's misfortune.

How do you cry, Ella? You just do. But my stomach is tight, my head tingly, my eyes dry, and I just don't.

I step inside, to the center of the area, now clean of my brother's clothes, long since entered in

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