

FRACTURES

a short story by

Lane J. Stewart

2nd Place, The Writers' Workshop 2009 Meet The Author's Contest

Our last surgery patient of the day was a nine-year-old boy who had been hit by a car. His right leg and shoulder were shattered. Grady Amos, my partner, said I didn't have to operate with him—my eleven-year-old son had been killed that way two years before—but I insisted on scrubbing. We put the kid back together with rods and screws, and I felt like I was, in some way, paying homage to Ryan.

I was exhausted driving home, and when I opened the kitchen door it bothered me not to hear the slow, reassuring beep of the burglar alarm.

"Katie?" I dropped my keys on the counter and hurried to the den.

"Hey, Daddy." She rolled over and put an arm around my ankle without taking her eyes off the television screen, where young adults exchanged quips about sexual habits and job interview techniques. She was ten. It was six-thirty. I picked up the clicker.

"It doesn't work since you fixed it." Katie submerged her feet in the deep fur under Buster's chin. Buster was eight, a Golden Retriever, a saint of a dog who loved my daughter enough to let her paint his toenails with varying shades of polish. He had worn rhinestone tiaras and feather boas for Katie, and silk scarves and angora sweaters. Once he toured the block dressed as a belly dancer, trotting beside Katie's bike, his tail a plume above the turquoise costume. She was his girl. That was that. Now he sniffed his way up her socks and licked her legs.

I pressed the power button on the clicker, and the thing came apart in my hand; batteries and plastic pieces fell on the rug.

"Cheap junk," Katie said.

"Put together in some foreign country by five-year-olds making two cents an hour!" I said and turned off the TV. Katie picked up clicker debris.

"Mom says this thing lacks the human element—"

"—necessary to make me pay attention long enough to fix it. Yeah, yeah, I know. Why wasn't the alarm on, honey?" I dropped a kiss into her wild curls and watched her yawn and stretch. Her arms and legs made her seem always windblown, airborne.

"Mom had to call the alarm people. They're coming tomorrow." She wound her arms around my neck when I sat on the sofa. "We're going to have to take your tools away. *Tu comprendes?*"

"*Si*. What time will Mom be home?" I loosened my tie and kicked off my shoes.

"Who knows?" She raised feathery eyebrows and sighed, puffs of air scented with fruit-flavored candy. "They're up to eight miles twice a day."

“When’s the marathon?”

“Oh, Daddy, you never know when anything is. Two weeks.” She rubbed my cheek with her fingers.

“She’s going to do great,” I said.

“Yep.” Katie nodded. “Uh oh. Forgot the mail. Come on, Buster.” Sock-footed, she slid across the kitchen floor, her movements ice-skater smooth. Buster scabbled and jumped.

“Watch the street,” I said.

“You always say that.”

I forced myself to my feet and went into the great room so I could see them through the wall of glass. The pines and magnolias were green, as always. The other trees were baring their limbs for winter. Gold gingko leaves glinted in the near dark. Katie kicked at them; Buster followed and yipped. I imagined that all the men in Katie’s life would trail gratefully behind her like Buster, happy for the smallest bit of attention, and that one day she would simply turn to one of them and say, “Okay, you’re it.”

Looking out the window-wall always made me think of the Seagram building. I had seen it during a high school trip to New York City. Its unbroken height of extruded bronze mullions and dark, gleaming, amber-tinted glass captured my attention blocks away. I decided then, in my bulletproof, fantasizing youth, that I would be an architect and that Mies van der Rohe would one day build my home. I wasn’t, and he didn’t, of course.

Later, on a romp through Europe between college graduation and the beginning of my first year of medical school, I discovered the million-square-foot Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, with its exterior escalators enclosed in transparent tubes that ran down the sides like arteries. The mammoth structure’s high-tech steel bones and tendons and ligaments were revealed to all. It was a building with no secrets. I knew then I would become an orthopedic surgeon.

I went into private practice eight years ago, and Sarah and I built this modern house of dark-stained wood, vaulted ceilings with exposed beams, skylights, and a greenhouse roof over the sunroom. The neighbors, in their Georgian bricks and clapboard saltboxes, didn’t like it. They prayed nightly for the hardwoods to grow. We planted them among the pines.

“Daddy, doesn’t everybody know by now?” Katie piled the mail on the coffee table. On top was an envelope addressed to Ryan Main. The logo of his favorite baseball camp was in the upper left-hand corner. I tore through his name.

“Camps have lists, and nobody bothers to check,” I said.

“I don’t like seeing his name on something new. Sometimes I just want to forget. Is that bad?”

“No, honey, it’s human.” I did it every day. Operating was an escape from remembering that my son was hit by an eighteen-wheeler roaring illegally down the narrow streets of our neighborhood, as out of place as an aircraft carrier in a creek.

Outside I heard sounds of my wife’s arrival, her running mates dropping her off. A car door opened and closed, and Sarah’s laughter floated in. Katie looked at me and grinned. I winked at her. We went into the kitchen, expectant, but when Sarah opened the door, “Shower,” was all she said. She wrinkled her nose and tugged at her perspiration-soaked shirt and shorts as

she passed through to go upstairs.

Sarah was out of the shower, wrapped in a towel. She limped into the walk-in closet in our bedroom. I was holding two plastic bags filled with ice. “Here, sweetheart. Let’s ice those shin splints for a few minutes.”

“Oh, Ben—”

“Hey, if you want to make it through that marathon you’re going to have to pace yourself.” I sat on the rug outside the closet and patted the floor.

She sighed and sat down, legs extended in front of her, and leaned against the closet door. “They don’t hurt much.” Lately she’d begun to avoid my eyes, fixed her gaze on my right ear lobe instead.

I put the ice bags in place. “At least it’s not your hamstrings,” I said.

I first saw her from behind, at a party when I was in medical school, and fell in love with her hamstrings. She was tall, five feet ten, and her gastrocnemius muscles were outstanding. The backs of her knees held the promise of nice patellas, and in my haste to move to the front of her someone slammed into my shoulder, and I sloshed Purple Jesus—bathtub-mixed grape juice and grain alcohol—all over her. Her date, one of my med school fraternity brothers, licked it off her knees. She patted his head and said, “Nice boy, that’s enough.” I wanted to trade places with him, feel my tongue against her skin.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, and she slowly looked up and surprised me with hazel eyes. I’d been expecting blue. She had a slightly crooked nose, and one of her front teeth overlapped the other. Instead of offending my sense of symmetry and order, those imperfections intrigued me.

Later that summer we started dating. At a cocktail party I once caught our reflections in a mirror. Sarah was straight and sleek in a short black dress with bare legs and black high-heeled sandals. She looked like an exquisite exclamation point. Her shoulder blades were flat, not wings, and her skeleton was perfectly aligned. At six feet six and scrawny, I was the question mark beside her. Stoop-shouldered already, with a head of thinning steel wool.

It was rare, in those days, for me to have a Saturday off. On one of them we went water skiing, and she fell hard. I insisted on x-rays. I didn’t really think anything was broken, but I was titillated by the thought of seeing inside her. A radiology resident, a buddy of mine, was on call when we got to the hospital. It was a slow night for him, so he and I put Sarah on the table, donned lead aprons, and took a lot of pictures. Her ball-and-socket joints were superb, especially the way the femurs fit tightly into the deep sockets of her hip bones. We marveled at the way those hipbones curved forward to join the pubic symphysis at the front.

I proposed that night.

Later, when I was an orthopedic resident, I kept x-rays of her in my office. Her skeleton, in its perfection and density, became the standard for me. I compared all my female patients to her. She came one day with a photograph of us for my desk, telling me she’d just as soon people saw her outsides, too.

“I’m in serious trouble if I ever get osteoporosis, right?” she laughed. “You’ll find a little nurse with bones of steel.”

I also fell in love with her brain. She had an amazing mind. She spoke four languages—picked them up easily and went at them with mathematical ferocity. She gave up a high-paying, globetrotting job as a translator to marry me. She said she loved my scientific probing. I certainly appreciated her lingual abilities.

“*Ubi ignis est?*” she whispered one night when we were in bed and I was especially ravenous. When she touched me I became the man I felt she dreamed of—a courageous, handsome, mighty healer. She made me better than I was.

“Why is the sky blue, Ben Main?” she asked once, tracing the outline of my mouth.

“It isn’t really blue,” I answered, capturing one of her fingertips with my teeth. “It’s the Tyndall effect, has to do with our retinal cones. Molecules in the air scatter blue light from the sun more than they scatter red light—”

“Mmm,” she said, and kissed me to shut me up.

I drove her crazy both times she was pregnant, constantly palpating her abdomen, pressing it with my stethoscope. She would often read a book while I examined her, occasionally looking over the top at me as if I were a four-year-old, her belly my playground. If I lingered too long she would tell me to pack up my little doctor kit and leave her alone.

Ah, that excellent pelvis. During delivery the symphysis pubis, the masterfully designed cartilaginous union, stretched as it was meant to do, to permit my son—and, three years later, my daughter—to enter the world.

“That’s enough,” Sarah said, breaking into my reverie.

“Huh?”

“Enough ice.” She removed the melting bags and stood, letting the towel fall to the floor. The sight of her body, trim and fit, continued to stir me. I reached, tried to catch her ankle as she headed into the closet to dress.

“Want to get back in the shower for a few minutes?” I said. She ignored me and stepped into her panties, fastened a bra.

“What’s this?” I asked. There was a wooden box on the closet floor, near her running shoes. It was a handsome box, about one by two feet, with painted dogs on the top and sides. One of them looked like Buster.

“Careful!” Sarah said, taking it out of my hands.

“Sorry. Did I uncover a Christmas present?”

“No. It’s not a secret or anything.” She pushed it to the back of a shelf and buried it under sweaters.

“It’s pretty. Why don’t you put it downstairs where people can see it?” I changed into jeans and an old flannel shirt.

She hung up my slacks and put my shoes on the rack. “Katie would probably break it.”

“No she wouldn’t. She’d love it. Buster’s on the top.” I reached for it, to have another look. Sarah stopped my hand.

“I bought it for Ryan a while ago. I—”

I pulled her into me. She was shaking.

“I think I overdid it today,” she said.

“Dry your hair and hop in the bed, okay? I’ll help Katie with her homework and send her up for a kiss in a little while.”

She looked relieved and ducked back into the closet as I went downstairs.

Morning light leaked through the blinds into our bedroom—diffuse, sweatshirt gray. I stretched and tossed back the covers. The mattress moved, and I felt Sarah shift toward me. She ran her fingers just inside the elastic of my boxer shorts. I locked the bedroom door. She pulled off her nightshirt.

“Look at me, please,” I whispered, wanting to take her with me. “Open your eyes.”
But she kept her eyes shut.

Afterward she said, “Where do you go in your mind to forget?”

Her eyes were the color of wet sand. They filled with tears.

I don’t forget. I compartmentalize, reframe things, try not to be distracted by the big picture. The way I got through medical school, I guess. Focusing on small, manageable pieces. When I used to get frustrated by joints I couldn’t repair I thought they were part of the learning curve. I don’t know.

Ryan rocketed through my mind all the time, but I didn’t say that. The day he died was a constant picture, large in my brain, as if frozen on a drive-in movie screen. The way he looked when I walked into the emergency room of the hospital where I spent, still spend, most of my waking hours. Grady came and got me. I was making rounds. I thought he meant Ryan had broken something, for the umpteenth time.

“Is it your turn or mine?” I asked.

“It’s worse this time,” Grady said. He clasped my elbow and didn’t let go until we got there and he told me what happened.

Ryan’s head was perfect. The skateboarding helmet had done its job, had split in two to protect my son’s skull. Great endorsement, I thought. Somebody call the company. He had green paint in his hair, residue from a friend’s birthday party a few days before. His face was turned away from me, a sheet covered him from the chin down, and I thought, He’s sleeping. They’re wrong. That’s what Ryan looks like when he sleeps, the back of his ears curl that way, toward his head, almost touching at the top, then dip and curve into the skin above his jawbone. That crazy cowlick at the nape of his neck. Barbers will curse it as he grows up.

His face was unscratched. I leaned to kiss him and breathed in the smell of red clay and tangy sweat, and watermelon-flavored bubble gum. I smiled, ready to rub my afternoon prickly face against his cheek. “Aw, come on, Dad,” he would say. “Shave!”

The rest of his body was a jumble. When I yanked off the sheet I realized Sarah was in the room.

“Get some fluids going!” I yelled at the nurses. I didn’t remember that. Grady told me later. He said I ordered them to get the transplant team, some freshly harvested organs, as Sarah tried to gather him up. “Let’s go! We can do this!” I said.

The next thing I remembered was Sarah sitting next to me, her pink shift smeared with blood. She was talking about cremation. “We don’t want people looking at him, shaking their heads. We don’t want to remember our outdoor boy in a coffin. He hates the dark, Ben! And

confined places. You know how he loves the beach and the sun. Please?”

The morning of the funeral we found Ryan’s skateboard by the front door. The neighborhood kids had signed it, as they’d signed all his casts over the years. They’d put together a ragged arrangement of fall flowers and leaves and jammed them in a mayonnaise jar.

The service comforted me. I’m not sure why. At the cemetery I tried to think we were tucking Ryan into a safe place. Survival is random and temporary, after all.

I asked Sarah to have another child.

“Forty is too old,” she said.

“We could harvest some of your eggs and pay a surrogate.” In my worst moments I thought of drugging her, doing the procedure myself. I thought of a particular nurse who always made passes at me; the chance that she’d want to bear our child. Maybe she wasn’t making passes. I realized I could have frozen tissue from Ryan’s body.

Of course I lost Sarah, too. The skin of her face lay differently across her bones. When she heard any eighteen-wheeler, it became the wail of the truck that hit Ryan. His skateboard was flipped over, she told me, wheels still spinning, when she got there.

She and I barely made it through Ryan’s tribute. His school named a garden for him, and we had to endure a videotape that encompassed all his years at Stratton Elementary School.

“My name’s Ryan,” he said, in third grade.

“How did you break your wrist, Ryan?” the teacher asked.

“Learning a trick on my skateboard.” His grin had holes, lost teeth, and there was a dirt smudge across one cheek.

“Let me see if I understand,” the teacher said. “You were on the skateboard, then you jumped over a piece of wood or something?”

He gave a solemn nod, a faraway look in his eyes, the surfer who’s just missed the right wave. “I thought I was going to land on it, but I missed.” He shrugged and held up his cast.

“See her yet, Daddy?” Katie stood on the hood of the car and leaned against me, her elbows resting on my shoulders. Her some-kind-of-berry spray perfume burned my nose and made my eyes itch. We were about thirty yards from the finish line, which was the entrance to a park.

“Want to look?” I gave her the binoculars. Sarah had told us not to come to the marathon, but we disobeyed. It was sponsored by an ecological organization and was considered a good warm-up for some of the serious marathons. Two thousand runners were participating, and the crowd looked to be at least that large.

“There she is!” Katie pointed. “In her pink outfit!” I saw her hobbling, pony tail limp. The second she saw the finish line she straightened, forced her legs across it, and fell against other runners to the ground. A volunteer gave her a sport drink.

“Mama!” Katie threw herself at her mother, and Sarah held her.

“I told you not to come.”

“We don’t listen so good sometimes.” I knelt down to kiss her cheek.

“I’m nasty.” Sarah made a fanning motion with her hand, and Katie pinched her nose.

“Mama, look at your muscles jumping.”

“Let’s stretch you out, sweetheart, you’re starting to cramp.” I pushed on the balls of Sarah’s feet. Katie helped.

“Not many runners here have their own medical team,” she said.

“I think you should run forever,” Katie said.

The runner’s high lasted for several days, and so did the intermittent muscle cramps. The three of us ate popcorn and watched movies at night, and when Sarah’s legs cramped, Katie and I pounced on her.

A couple of nights after the marathon, Sarah put Katie to bed, locked our door, and pulled me against her. “Why do muscles cramp, Dr. Main?” She kissed my neck and moved her hands across my chest.

“Overuse,” I said, nibbling her ear. “Oxygen deprivation, buildup of lactic acid.” I licked her shoulder, thinking of her humerus, snug in the socket of her gorgeous shoulder blade. “Electrolyte and fluid loss.”

“I adore you,” she whispered, looking into my eyes. “Make love to me.”

Grady and Caroline Amos and their kids were at our house for a cookout. Grady was my best friend, all through college and medical school. His wife was dark, petite, and sassy; his twin sons David and Sam were gangly fourteen-year-olds with huge feet and great manners. His eleven-year-old daughter Lisa was artistic and one step ahead of Katie.

I checked the steaks on the grill and looked up. Katie and Lisa, dressed in Halloween costumes, waved at me from Ryan’s bedroom window. As I watched, they ducked beneath the sill, then stood up with masks on. I smiled at them and aimed my water gun at a vigorous flame. The girls tapped on the window, pulled up their masks, and tried to tell me something. I cupped a hand behind my ear and motioned for them to open the window. When they did the burglar alarm shrieked.

“Close it!” I yelled, remembering too late that the alarm people had found a short in a couple of the window sensors.

Sarah raced across the patio, saw the open window, and dropped her wine glass. It shattered at my feet.

“What are they doing in Ryan’s room?” she cried above the noise.

I ran past her and punched in the code on the pad just inside the kitchen door. A few seconds later the phone rang, and I gave them our password.

“They say that one’s expired,” I said to Sarah. “I need the new one.”

“How could you let them play in Ryan’s room?” Sarah brushed past me, her hands filled with pieces of glass.

“What the hell’s the new password?”

She dropped the shards into the trash and jerked open the junk drawer. The word was taped to the bottom, underneath boxes of birthday candles, matches, markers, an extension cord, and Buster’s old puppy collar.

I said, “Marathon,” clicked off the phone, and threw it on the counter. “Look at that!” I

pointed at the Amos boys, playing basketball in the driveway. “They didn’t miss a shot when the goddamn alarm went off! What do we have the—”

“Why did you let the girls play in Ryan’s room, Ben?” Sarah glared at my right ear lobe. “They’re moving his things around.”

“It’s not a shrine!”

Something sparkled on her cheek as she turned away from me. “Wait a minute.” I stopped her. “You have glass on your face.” I tried to remove the small pieces, but my hand shook.

“Hey, let a real doctor take care of that.” Grady moved me out of the way and tilted Sarah’s face toward the light above the kitchen sink. He blotted her cheek with a damp paper towel, then checked her hands and washed them carefully.

Caroline hurried in with the rest of the broken glass. Grady made her wash her hands, too. “I’ll go get the girls and let them help set the tables, okay?” she said.

Sarah leaned against the counter and nodded. She had not been able to part with anything of Ryan’s at first, and Katie and I had not been allowed to disturb even the baseball cards left on his desk. His furniture was beat-up boy stuff, maple, typical. Bunk beds, a desk, a chair, a chest of drawers. He carved his initials into each piece, put stickers on every surface, posters on the walls, glow-in-the-dark stars all over the ceiling, spelling his name—the Ryan galaxy, he liked to say.

There were always balled-up, dirty socks under his bed, wads of chewed gum stuck to the side of the garbage can. Sarah left them where they were for a year. Gradually, we packed up some things and gave them away. Sarah called Good Will about six months ago to pick up Ryan’s furniture, then chased the truck down the street and made the men put everything back.

“Paper storm!” Lisa yelled, as a cold gust of wind swept paper napkins and cups from the wrought iron patio tables into the air. She and Katie laughed and ran around the back yard, plucking napkins from low-hanging branches, cups from the shrubbery.

We moved everything inside to the long glass slab balanced on iron columns, which was our dining room table. Sarah’s eyes darted constantly, and she didn’t touch her food. Without explanation, she hurried to the kitchen. Minutes passed and she didn’t return, so I excused myself to see what she was doing.

She had opened the refrigerator and several cabinets and put containers of various condiments and food items on the counter in a straight line. “See?” she held up a jar of mustard, to which she had affixed a label. On it she had written *moutard*, *mostaza*, and *senape*. “Can you trust the weather channel, Ben? I promise I’ll watch it next time before I plan something outside, okay? I don’t want to make any more mistakes. If I label everything in the kitchen I won’t make mistakes in here. I’ll write the names of what’s inside in every language I know. That will help Katie learn, too, don’t you think?”

I felt my face redden, and I wanted to shake her, make her return to me. “We have company. You can do this later.”

She didn’t look at me. “I don’t think there’s a Latin word for mustard, is there? I mean, I don’t remember Marcus and—oh, what was that other guy’s name in my textbook—anyway, I don’t remember them stopping for a hot dog with mustard on the way to the Forum, do you?”

I snatched the pen out of her hand. “What in the hell is wrong with you?”

She blinked at me, frowned, and ran upstairs.

I went back to the dining room, and as I took the salad bowl around the table offering seconds, she hurried through the kitchen in running tights and jacket and ran outside. The refrigerator door stood wide open.

Grady and I paced at the end of the driveway, waiting for Sarah. Caroline was cleaning up the kitchen—I couldn't stop her—and keeping an eye on the girls. I had insisted everyone finish eating, said Sarah needed to get in a little run, but Katie blew my cover.

"Daddy," she said, "she's been acting weird all week."

After a half hour of stop-and-start talk and awkward silence David and Sam decided to go find her.

"Take this," I said, giving them a small flashlight from the junk drawer.

"Fifteen minutes," Grady said. "If you're not back in fifteen, Ben and I are coming in the car." Sam grinned. "We'll find her."

"We're good at chasing women, Dr. Main," David clapped a hand on my shoulder. I tried a smile. "Thanks, guys."

It took them thirteen minutes. We saw the silver glitter of the reflective strips on their shoes before we heard their feet beating the asphalt. Sarah was in the middle; the boys struggled to match her strides.

"Man!" Sam huffed. "You're in awesome shape, Mrs. Main."

Grady put an arm around her. "It's pretty late to be running, honey. We were getting worried."

It was cold. A sliver of a moon hung in the sky. Clouds obscured most of the stars. Sarah refused to go inside, so Grady and I took her around to the patio. David and Sam got soft drinks from the kitchen and resumed their basketball game in the bright floodlit circle of the driveway, out of earshot. Ashes still dropped into the container under the grill. I opened the top to warm my hands, but the coals were out.

"Everybody okay?" Caroline called from the house.

Grady and I waved yes.

Sarah put one foot, then the other on the deck railing and stretched her legs. As we watched, her face crumpled, and she sat on her heels and cried. Her speech was almost unintelligible.

"I've tried so hard." She clenched her fists and pressed them into her cheeks. "I've prayed, I've run, I've screamed into my pillow, in the closet, in the shower, but the pain won't go away. It follows me. When I run, it catches me and trips me." Grady moved toward her, but she motioned him back and stood up. I was wooden, offered no comfort. She looked like a teenager in the moonlight. The forlorn look, like a young girl who's been stood up by an oafish boyfriend, not a woman struggling to accept the death of her son.

She walked back and forth, hands in the pockets of her jacket. "I've been sober. No drugs to ease it. I've talked to counselors, my friends, Ryan's friends, Buster. Everybody said get through the first year. We did that. What about the second year, the third year, the rest of

my life?

“It’s like a fever that won’t go away. I’m so tired. It’s like these bats fly at me—great black things with wings catching in my hair, flapping against me until I can’t take it any more. I am now ‘that poor woman whose son was killed by a truck.’ I don’t want to be pitied all my life.”

Grady took her hands, guided her to a chair, and sat beside her. She kept talking. “Blinking is such an enormous effort. Breathing, swallowing. I read about grief all the time. It’s this sneaky, insidious thing. It’s like cancer—it seeps in and takes over. I can’t stop it. I’m not much good to anybody any more. Sometimes I think Katie would be better off without me. “I...couldn’t protect him. He liked to take chances. That’s not a horrible trait, is it? But he was eleven. I should have been able to keep him safe. Do I have posttraumatic stress disorder? I read that if you have that, the hippocampus can shrink seven to eight percent. What part of the brain is the hippocampus?”

I listened to her ramble on and on like a patient in the E.R.

“I even went to this mystic, this healer who said she could get in touch with Ryan. And she told me—she told me he doesn’t blame me. I held her hand and made her say it over and over. I tried to believe her. You’re doctors, for God’s sake! Fix me! Do something, Grady!”

Grady pulled her against him. “Baby, in time—”

She shrugged him away and locked gazes with me. “This is the day Ryan died, the exact day, two years ago. You didn’t even remember.” She moved close to the grill and sat on the flagstones. For a long time she stared at the ash catcher under the grill, then she stuck her finger in the black and gray pile and stirred.

Grady said, “Listen, Sarah, I don’t know what the answer is, but Caroline and I will do whatever we can to help.”

She continued to stir the ashes.

“He was safe when he was inside me,” she said. “That was the only safe time. He walked so early, climbed everything. We found him on top of the refrigerator once. He would jump down the stairs, thinking he could fly. Remember that, Grady? You fixed his leg that time, didn’t you?”

Grady laughed. “Absolutely.”

Sarah scooped up a handful of ashes and let them sift through her fingers. “I used to think: What am I going to do with this boy, the way he flies in the air and throws himself at ocean waves and streets and yards and breaks bones. I couldn’t bury him.”

Grady looked at me.

“He’s here, you know,” she said. “in the house.”

“No.” I finally spoke. “We had a funeral and buried his ashes.”

“No we didn’t.” Her voice rose on the first syllable of *didn’t* in a singsong way, with a childish inflection Katie might use.

“Sure we did. Grady was there, and Caroline,” I insisted.

“It was a beautiful service,” Grady said.

“We buried three pounds of sand, not Ryan.”

“What the hell—” I stumbled to her, fell in front of her, lifted her chin, but she wouldn’t look at me.

“I took sand and plastic bags and made the switch. Then I stayed with that stupid urn every second until they put it in the ground.”

I removed my hand.

“He’s in the closet upstairs.” She poked holes in the ash pile with her index finger.

“Ryan doesn’t live here. He’s gone. His things are here, in his room, but he died.”

“Not the closet in his room. Our closet. In the box on the shelf. The box with dogs on it.”

A sick feeling stole over me.

“I wasn’t going to let them put my boy, my beautiful, healthy outdoor boy under the earth. Are you nuts?” Her voice rose, and her eyebrows crinkled into sideways question marks. “I wasn’t going to let them put him where he couldn’t breathe.”

Grady rubbed her back and looked at me.

“He’s in there, not at the cemetery.” She stirred the ashes.

I took the stairs two, three at a time, vaguely heard Caroline tell Katie and Lisa not to follow me. I shoved clothes off the shelf, didn’t see the box. I threw belts and pocketbooks everywhere, looked behind stacks of out-of-season clothes, and knocked the box off the shelf. I don’t know how I caught it in the air. My hands shook. I put it on the floor and exclaimed, “Thank you!” when I saw the velvet-covered tray. It was a man’s jewelry box, a present for someone. But the weight of it signified something. Carefully I lifted the tray, and there, in dim closet light were the gray remains of my son. They contained pearly bits of bone and the incinerated pins from his wrist surgery.

I moved in slow motion, as if under water, to the window overlooking the patio and back yard. I regarded my wife and imagined Ryan’s soul spinning unconsecrated through the universe.

“If I can just get him inside me again he’ll be okay,” Sarah was saying when I returned to the patio. Grady and I watched as she took ashes from the grill, put them in her mouth, and tried to swallow. “I need water. Ben, bring me water.”

Grady looked at me and made a hypodermic needle motion. “Where’s your bag?”

“Trunk of my car.” I tossed him my keys.

“Jesus, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ll tell Caroline to clear all the kids out of here.”

“Water, Ben.” She choked when I sat beside her and held her wrists. Something loosened in me, and I rubbed my cheek against hers. Her tongue and lips and face were streaked with soot, black and gray.

“Honey, that’s enough.”

Grady and I took her clothes off upstairs. I got in the shower with her, washed her hair, her face, held her mouth open under the warm stream of water, to rinse out the ashes. They swirled dark around our feet, then disappeared.

“Ben, do I still have great bones?”

“The greatest.” I ran the washrag over her body—smooth skin, firm muscles covered her broken heart and fractured brain.

“Grady, you’re looking at my bottom,” she said a few minutes later, when he swabbed her hip with alcohol and injected the sedative.

“This will help you sleep, babe.” He smoothed the sheet over her. “You have a fantastic bottom, by the way.”

He left us alone for a while, and I stretched out beside Sarah. Asleep, she began to look normal. Her face lost its torture when the muscles returned to their rightful positions. I ran my finger along the lovely line of her jaw.

We had to do something about Ryan’s ashes. I thought if Sarah could let Ryan go, she would come back to Katie and me. The minister from our church met us at the airport, just Sarah and me. He said a prayer with us on the tarmac, blessed our son, before we got into the small plane I had chartered. It was a Cessna 172, a four-seater, white, with red and blue markings, red interior. It had the smell of close quarters. I put the small canvas bag on the floor between my feet. I sat in front, with the pilot; Sarah sat behind me.

The pilot’s name was Zach Pepper, and he looked young. He wore a long-sleeved denim shirt and a tie with a river running down the length of it. A pilot should have a firm, dry handshake, and he did.

“This is Cessna seven two six zero golf, runway one seven, ready for departure southeast for Sapelo Island.”

The tower responded: “Roger, Cessna seven two six zero golf. Altitude two niner eight six. Wind is at five knots.”

I watched him hold the yoke and touch the instrument panel as he ran through his basic callouts. I approved of his hands. They were large and clean with close-cut nails.

“Flaps up. Trim is set. Power is set. Engine gauges look good. Air speed’s alive.”

“You’re clear for takeoff, departing one seven.”

“That’s a roger.”

We were in the air, and I never felt the wheels leave the ground. “Nice takeoff,” I said.

“Thank you, sir.” He smiled and looked at me with eyes that seemed to pierce distance. “I’m going to take it up to about a thousand feet, then I’ll bring it down when we get closer and see how low we can get. Good visibility. Lot of daylight. Hardly any wind.”

He told us the flight would take about an hour. It was early afternoon, the middle of November, and the sky was pale, faded denim, with occasional scudding white clouds. The horizon curved and blurred. We flew across the broken plateau of the Piedmont Upland part of the state. Broad ridges and narrow valleys spread beneath us. Jets passed high above, from larger airports, going greater distances.

“He was eleven.” I hadn’t meant to say anything.

“Sir?”

“Our son. He was eleven when he was killed.” I heard Sarah muffle a sob and reached behind me and took her cold hand.

Zach Pepper shifted in his seat. “That’s something no parent should have to face.” Sunlight beamed through the window behind him and poured across his left shoulder and down

his tie. I suddenly saw brush marks in the river and the froth of the rapids. It looked hand painted.

“Yeah.”

“What was he like?”

I squeezed Sarah’s hand. “My wife says he hurled himself at life. I guess he did. He always wanted to go faster and higher. If we lived in California he’d have been a surfer.”

“An extreme kid,” the pilot said.

“Extreme?”

“That’s a compliment. A risk-taker, on the edge.”

“And in the emergency room. He broke something every few months, and my partner and I were always patching him up.”

“What kind of doctor are you?”

“Orthopedic surgeon.”

“That’s pretty extreme.”

“You know the feeling. You focus so hard that everything else falls away, nothing exists but you and the patient—or the plane.”

“I was an extreme kid. I can’t get through a metal detector at any airport. Got a plate in my head and screws and rods in my wrists and legs from motorcycle accidents, surfing, you name it. Extreme sports.”

“Ryan said he wanted to be a pilot.”

We flew in silence for a while, and the hills below flattened into lowlands. I watched the vegetation change. Sarah clung to my hand.

“Sapelo Island, straight ahead,” the pilot said. The Atlantic lay below, calm, opaque, dark green and blue with patches of brown.

Sarah leaned forward. “Ryan went on a school camping trip here. He said he loved the wild beach and the no hotels.”

“I can drop down to a hundred feet and slow to sixty knots, easy, whenever you’re ready.”

I took my hand from Sarah’s, unzipped the canvas bag, and pulled out a brown paper sack. I felt the weight of my son’s ashes and froze. “I don’t know if I can do this,” I said.

Zach Pepper popped his window open. It was hinged at the top and slanted out at the bottom. “Your window doesn’t open, sir. I’ll do it.”

I held the bag and remembered the warm pressure of Ryan as a baby. “I don’t know—” I looked at Sarah.

She nodded.

“Can you hold the controls for a minute, sir?” the pilot said.

I gripped the yoke and watched as he emptied the bag out the window. It slipped from his hands. An act of mercy. A small gray cloud blew back inside the cabin. The ghost of our son. I cupped my hand, tried to grab him, made a fist, tried to keep him.

Zach Pepper took the yoke again, and I opened my hand. A slight smudge lay across my palm, paler than the ashes the priest crosses on your forehead.

Sarah exhaled and leaned her head against the back of her seat. “I’m going to close my eyes for a few minutes.”

I touched her knee and felt the hard outline of her perfect patella through the thin wool of her slacks.

###