

KELLY RIMMER

truths
I never
told you

 hachette
AUSTRALIA

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For the women who carry infants in their arms
as they battle illness in their minds.

PROLOGUE

Grace

September 14, 1957

I am alone in a crowded family these days, and that's the worst feeling I've ever experienced. Until these past few years, I had no idea that loneliness is worse than sadness. I've come to realize that's because loneliness, by its very definition, cannot be shared.

Tonight there are four other souls in this house, but I am unreachably far from any of them, even as I'm far too close to guarantee their safety. Patrick said he'd be home by nine tonight, and I clung on to that promise all day.

He'll be home at nine, I tell myself. You won't do anything crazy if Patrick is here, so just hold on until nine.

I should have known better than to rely on that man by now. It's 11:55 p.m., and I have no idea where he is.

Beth will be wanting a feed soon and I'm just so tired, I'm already

bracing myself—as if the sound of her cry will be the thing that undoes me, instead of something I should be used to after four children. I feel the fear of that cry in my very bones—a kind of whole-body tension I can't quite make sense of. When was the last time I had more than a few hours' sleep? Twenty-four hours a day I am fixated on the terror that I will snap and hurt someone: Tim, Ruth, Jeremy, Beth...or myself. I am a threat to my children's safety, but at the same time, their only protection from that very same threat.

I have learned a hard lesson these past few years; the more difficult life is, the louder your feelings become. On an ordinary day, I trust facts more than feelings, but when the world feels like it's ending, it's hard to distinguish where my thoughts are even coming from. Is this fear grounded in reality, or is my mind playing tricks on me again? There's no way for me to be sure. Even the line between imagination and reality has worn down and it's now too thin to delineate.

Sometimes I think I will walk away before something bad happens, as if removing myself from the equation would keep them all safe. But then Tim will skin his knee and come running to me, as if a simple hug could take all the world's pain away. Or Jeremy will plant one of those sloppy kisses on my cheek, and I am reminded that for better or worse, I am his world. Ruth will slip my handbag over her shoulder as she follows me around the house, trying to walk in my footsteps, because to her, I seem like someone worth imitating. Or Beth will look up at me with that gummy grin when I try to feed her, and my heart contracts with a love that really does know no bounds.

Those moments remind me that everything changes, and that this cloud has come and gone twice now, so if I just hang on, it will pass again. I don't feel hope yet, but I should know hope, because I've walked this path before and even when the mountains and valleys seemed insurmountable, I survived them.

I'm constantly trying to talk myself around to calm, and sometimes, for brief and beautiful moments, I do. But the hard, cold truth is that every time the night comes, it seems blacker than it did before.

Tonight I'm teetering on the edge of something horrific.

Tonight the sound of my baby's cry might just be the thing that breaks me altogether.

I'm scared of so many things these days, but most of all now, I fear myself.

ONE

Beth

1996

“What’s the place...you know...where is the place? What... today? No? It’s now. The place.”

Dad babbles an endless stream of words that don’t quite make sense as I push his wheelchair through his front door. My brother Tim and I exchange a glance behind his back and then we share a resigned sigh. Our father’s speech sounds coherent enough if you don’t listen too closely—the rhythms of it are still right and his tone is clear, it’s the words themselves he can’t quite grasp these days, and the more upset he gets, the less sense he makes. The fact that he’s all-but speaking gibberish today actually makes a lot of sense, but it’s still all kinds of heartbreaking.

The grandfather clock in the kitchen has just chimed 5 p.m. I’m officially late to pick my son up from my mother-in-law’s house, and Dad was supposed to be at the nursing home two hours ago. We were determined to give him the dignity to

leave his house on his own terms, and this morning Dad made it very clear that he wanted to be left alone in his room to pack for the move.

Tim and I promised one another we'd be patient, and for four and a half hours, we *were* patient. He pottered around the backyard doing overdue yardwork—weeding the chaos around the bases of the conifers, scooping up the pinecones, reshaping the hedge that's run completely amok. Dad's house is in Bellevue, east of Seattle. Over the last little while he's been too ill to tend his own yard and we've confirmed my long-held suspicion that nature would entirely swallow up the manicured gardens in this region within just a few months if humans disappeared. While Tim tried to wrangle some order back to the gardens outside, I vigorously mopped the polished floors, vacuumed the carpet in the bedrooms and sorted the fresh food in Dad's fridge to distribute among my siblings.

But every time I stuck my head through Dad's bedroom door, I found him sitting on his bed beside his mostly empty suitcase. At first, he was calm and seemed to be thoughtfully processing the change that was coming. He wears this quiet, childlike smile a lot of the time now, and for the first few hours, that smile was firmly fixed on his face, even as he looked around, even as he sat in silence. As the hours passed, though, the suitcase remained empty, save for a hat and two pairs of socks.

"I can't...where is the..." He started looking around his room, searching desperately for something he couldn't name, let alone find. He kept lifting his right hand into the air, clenched in a fist. We couldn't figure out what he wanted, Dad couldn't figure out how to tell us and the more he tried, the more out of breath he became until he was gasping for air between each confused, tortured word. The innocent smile faded from his face and his distress gradually turned to something close to panic. Tim helped him back into his wheelchair and pushed him to the living room, sitting him right in front of the television, playing

one of his beloved black-and-white movies on the VCR to distract him. I stayed in the bedroom, sobbing quietly as I finished the packing my father obviously just couldn't manage.

This morning Dad understood that he was moving to the nursing home, and although he'd made it clear he didn't *want* to go, he seemed to understand that he had to. This afternoon he's just lost, and I can't bear much more of this. I'm starting to rush Dad, because I've finally accepted that we need to get this over and done with. I guess after a day of getting nowhere, I'm ready to resort to the "rip the Band-Aid off" approach to admitting him to hospice care. I push his wheelchair quickly away from the door, down the ramp my sister, Ruth, built over the concrete stairs, down to the path that cuts across the grass on the front yard.

"Lock the wall," Dad says, throwing the words over his shoulder to Tim. In the past few weeks, I've found myself arguing with Dad, trying to correct him when he mixes his words up like this. Tim's told me not to bother—Dad can't help it, and correcting him won't actually fix the problem. My brother is definitely much better at communicating with Dad than I am. He calls back very gently,

"I'm locking the door. Don't worry."

"Sorry about that," Dad says, suddenly sounding every bit as weary as I feel.

"It's okay, Dad," Tim calls as he jogs down the path to catch up to us.

"No work today, Timmy?" *Tim* hasn't been *Timmy* for at least twenty years, except at family functions when our brother, Jeremy, wants to rile him up. Forty-two and forty-one respectively and with several graduate degrees between them, my brothers still revert to adolescent banter whenever they're in the same room. Today, I can only wish Dad was teasing Tim playfully the way Jeremy does when *he* slips back into that old nickname.

"I have the day off today," Tim says quietly.

“Are we going to the...that thing...” Dad’s brows knit. He searches for the right word, waving his hand around vaguely in the air in front of him, then his shoulders slump as he sighs heavily. “Are we going to the green place?”

“The golf course? No, Dad. Not today. We’re going to the nursing home, remember?”

We only realized Dad had dementia earlier this year, and at times like this, I’m horrified all over again that it took us so long to figure it out. He had a heart attack four years ago, and in the aftermath, was diagnosed with heart failure. His deterioration has been steady despite medication and cardiac rehab, and with the changes in his physical health have come significant changes in his personality and, we thought, cognitive function. He’d been losing words the whole time, but his mind seemed intact otherwise. And who doesn’t search for a word every now and again? What exactly *is* the tipping point between “not as sharp as you used to be” and “neurologically deficient”?

Tim’s an orthopedic surgeon, and given his years of extensive medical training he could probably answer that question in excruciating detail, but his eyes are suspiciously shiny right now as we walk Dad to the car, so I don’t ask.

Dad sighs heavily and turns his attention back to me. He’s on permanent oxygen supplementation now, the cannula forever nestled in his nostrils. Sometimes I forget it’s there, and then when I look at his face, I’m startled all over again by the visual reminders that it’s really happening—Dad is really dying. The evidence is undeniable now...the cannula, the swelling around his face, the sickly gray-white tone in his skin.

“Where’s Noah?” he asks me.

“He’s at Chiara’s house.” My mother-in-law worships my son—her third grandchild, first grandson. Today, when I dropped Noah off, she barely looked at him—instead she threw her arms around me and hugged me for so long that eventually, I had to disentangle myself to make a hasty exit. I like Chiara

and we have a great relationship. It just turns out that I *really* don't like her feeling sorry for me, and that hug today was a strangely awkward experience.

"Visit him?" Dad says, immediately perking up.

"Another day, Dad. Soon," I promise. Between my siblings and our spouses, at least one of us will visit Dad every day from now on. My sister, Ruth, pinned a roster for the first two weeks of visits to the fridge in Dad's house, but for some reason, she's left me off it. Ruth has a lot on her plate so the mistake is understandable. I noticed it a few days ago. I just keep forgetting to call her to sort it out.

I help him from his wheelchair into the car, but just as I move to shut the door, he reaches up to hold it open. He pauses, frowning as he concentrates. I scan his face—those beautiful blue eyes, lined with sadness, lips tugged down. Tim helped Dad shave this morning and his cheeks are smooth. I'm suddenly besieged by a memory, of snuggling close to Dad for a hug after I'd fallen on this very path rushing out to meet the school bus one morning. I'd skinned my knee pretty bad, and Dad had waved the bus driver away, promising me he'd make it all better then drive me to school himself. I remember his cheeks were rough that day with stubble, but his arms around me were warm, and his gentle kiss against my forehead gifted me instant courage to deal with the blood that was trickling down my leg.

That moment feels like a million years ago. I just wish there was some way I could return the favor, to make him feel as safe as he made me feel so many times over the past four decades. But hugs can't make this better. Nothing can change the reality that our time with Dad is coming to an end.

"Come on, Dad—" Tim starts to say, but Dad shakes his head fiercely and he looks right at me as he says,

"Beth."

"Yes, Dad?"

His entire expression shifts in an instant—from determina-

tion to a sudden, crippling sadness. His gaze is pleading and his eyes fill with tears as he whispers,

“Sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I do,” he insists, and his gaze grows frustrated, presumably at my blank look. “I...the mistake and of course I didn’t. Because I’m sorry and she’s gone.”

What strikes me first is simply how much I miss Dad being able to speak easily. His speech has been getting worse and worse over the past few months; most days now, it’s just fragments of language that are, at best, related to whatever he’s trying to express.

“Dad...” I’m trying to figure out what to say, but I can’t, and Tim and I just stare at him in confusion for a moment as he tries to explain himself.

“I, when Gracie...alone. Remember? What’s it called? When...and *she* came and I tried...” There are tears in his eyes again, and he looks from me to Tim desperately, as if we can help him somehow.

“That’s enough now, Dad,” Tim says firmly, then he adds more gently, “You’re okay. Just relax.”

Dad’s language issues stem from a form of frontotemporal atrophy called semantic dementia. His memories are intact, but his language skills have been devastated. Tim sighs heavily and runs his hand over his salt-and-pepper beard, and I belatedly notice how weary my brother looks. For the first time all day, he seems to be struggling more than I am.

This situation is awful and it’s been hard on all of us, but I know Tim, and it’s not the stress of a sick parent that’s giving him anxiety. Tim’s habitual overresponsibility is slowly driving him crazy this week. Despite being the one to miraculously win Dad a place in the hospice ward of an amazing new nursing home on Mercer Island, he’s still been trying to find some last-minute solution that would enable us to decline the placement anyway.

“We’re doing the right thing,” I assure him softly. We’ve been using a combination of at-home nursing care three or four days a week, supplemented with a rostered system of sleepovers for me and Tim and our siblings Ruth and Jeremy on the other days. This has mostly worked for the past seven months, but it was never going to be a long-term solution, especially now that Dad is well into the “end stage” of the heart failure process.

Tim’s apartment is a forty-minute drive from here, in downtown Seattle close to his hospital. It’s a lovely home, but it’s on the twentieth floor of a high-rise tower—not at all a suitable place for Dad to live out his final days. Plus, Tim works insane hours, and his wife, Alicia, isn’t exactly a nurturing soul. And Ruth has three children of her own *and* runs the family construction business. Jeremy is an earth sciences professor and when he’s not teaching, he’s traveling. Right now he’s in Indonesia, reading seismic waves or something, and I know he’s supposed to spend the second semester of next year teaching in Japan.

My husband, Hunter, and I probably were the only family members who could have cared for Dad given I’m at home full-time at the moment anyway. We already live nearby, too, so we could have just moved into Dad’s house, or Dad could have moved in with us—either home is plenty large enough to accommodate us all. When Jeremy casually tried to hint at an arrangement like this, I just told him I was going back to work soon. That’s a lie, but it was a necessary one. I’ve quietly extended my maternity leave by another six months, but I have no idea if or when I’ll go back to my position as a child psychologist at a community center. I do know for sure that I simply cannot take on Dad’s care full-time...especially knowing what’s coming.

“I wish there was a way we could keep him at home,” Tim says, for what feels like the one millionth time. “Maybe I should have looked into moving here...”

I step closer to him and slide my arm around his waist, then rest my head on his shoulder.

“Come on, Tim. Be realistic. The commute would have killed you.” The commute or his wife. For the past seven months, Tim has been here with Dad at least one night a week—usually on his only day off, sometimes making the journey straight from a night shift. Alicia came with him a few times, then suddenly stopped helping out. As far as I can tell, she’s very busy being a “media personality.” Given she hasn’t had an acting or modeling gig for at least a decade, “media personality” seems to mean she spends her mornings at the gym and her afternoons with her socialite friends, hoping she’ll make it into the frame of a paparazzi photo so she can complain about her lack of privacy.

It’s fair to say I was never Alicia’s biggest fan, but her decision to sit on the sidelines while the rest of us struggled with Dad’s care is not something I’ll forgive anytime soon. Jeremy is newly single, but even his ex-girlfriend, Fleur, made an effort to help out a few times. And my husband, Hunter, and Ruth’s husband, Ellis, have gone out of their way to help, too. Hell, even Hunter’s parents, Chiara and Wallace, have taken their share of turns with Dad, especially after Noah’s birth when I just couldn’t get myself here.

It’s been a team effort: Team Walsh Family and Friends—minus Alicia. And yes, I suppose it’s possible I’m a little bitter about that.

“Are you okay?” Tim asks me suddenly. I grimace and nod toward Dad.

“I’ve been better.”

“I don’t actually mean about what’s happening with Dad. I mean...in general.” He says the words so carefully, it’s like he’s tiptoeing his way through a minefield. I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Do you realize you’re deflecting?”

“Do you realize *you’re* deflecting?” he fires back. We stare at each other, then at the same time, both break and reluctantly smile. “Look, everyone is busy, and we’re all a bit overwhelmed

at the moment. But I just need to make sure you know I'm here if you want to talk."

"I'm fine," I assure him.

"I can't tell what's going on with you, Beth. Sometimes I worry that you don't realize how little time he has left. Other times I worry that you're all *too* aware of that and maybe...not really coping with it?"

"There's a lot happening," I say, then I glance at my watch. "We really need to go."

Tim sighs, then gives me a quick hug before he walks around to slip into the driver's seat. I look back at the house one last time, aware that after today, it's no longer *Dad's house*, but *Dad's old house*.

Until this year when his speech started fading, Dad had a saying—*everything changes*. For as long as I can remember, those words have been my father's default response to pretty much everything that happened in our lives. He used the words so much when I was a kid that it felt like a corny, meaningless catchphrase—but there was no denying that my dad genuinely believed in the sentiment. *Everything changes* was his consolation when things were rough. It was his reminder to stay humble when things were good.

And now, as I sit in the back of the car and the house gradually shrinks in the rearview mirror, those words cycle through my brain on a loop—a simple but unavoidable truth.

The years have been rough and they've been kind and they've been long and they've been short...but everything changes, and the best and brightest era of our family's life has drawn to a close.

Grace
October 4, 1957

My baby girl turns one today. For some people, a milestone like this is bittersweet. After all, a first birthday marks the shift from helpless infant to inquisitive toddler, and inquisitive toddler leads to precocious preschooler and so on and so forth until that helpless newborn is a fully fledged adult who must leave the nest. A first birthday marks proof positive that the innocent days of parenting a child are a finite resource.

I don't grieve the end of the babyhood era. I won't miss the milky scent of her forehead, or the intensity of her gaze on my face as I feed her in the small hours. I won't be one of those mothers who laments the passing of time or coos about being broody, dreaming of going back and beginning all over again. No, I celebrate the closing of this chapter because if history repeats itself, it means that my life will soon improve again. For the sake of my marriage and my sanity, this day really couldn't have come soon enough.

We didn't have the money for a gift, which I feel so sad about. I'm sure for my first birthday my parents lavished me with toys I would have been too young to understand or appreciate, but my daughter's childhood circumstances are very different. She's growing up in a modest house in a modest neighborhood. She shares a room with her sister because although they constantly wake each other up, there are only three bedrooms, so in a family of six, everyone has to share.

I grew up in a house so large my sister and I never had to be in the same room unless we wanted to. This baby is growing up in public housing where just scraping by is the norm, and when she makes friends, many of them will be used to birthdays where a cake is about the extent of the expense spared. I grew up in a place where fathers were bankers

and lawyers and politicians, and mothers outsourced the cleaning and cake baking so they could spend their days at the salon. My mother was busy with her charity work and herself, and while she was very formal at times, I can't ever remember doubting her love for me. She was steady and dependable in both mood and temperament, strong and capable as a mother and a woman. She wore the titles of wife and mother as a crown, not as an oppressive yoke over her shoulders.

If I could change anything about the life I'm providing my daughter, it wouldn't be gifts on her birthday or a nicer house in a better street. No, if I could change just one thing about our circumstances, I'd choose to change the mother in her scenario. I'm grateful for all of my childhood comforts, but I'm most grateful for the steadfast dependability I saw in my mother, and I just cannot offer that kind of certainty to my children. They deserve a better mother than the one God or fate or providence bestowed upon them, but I am selfish enough that I've prayed not to change for them, but for the courage to walk away. Motherhood has left me feeling both helpless and worn, and I am trapped here by my fears and failures. Like the skin on my stomach after all of these pregnancies so close together, I feel as if I've been stretched far too thin to ever go back to the way I was meant to be.

It feels hopeless. I feel hopeless. But feelings, even loud feelings, lie sometimes, and I know that all too well after the past three years. Beth is one now, and history has proven that a first birthday in this family means the beginning of the end of the seemingly endless chaos in my mind and my soul. I've held on this long—by the skin of my teeth this time, perhaps, but I have managed to hold on and when the misery breaks, I'll be proud of myself for that.

Just a little while longer and I should start to feel human again. Warm emotion will gradually seep back into my soul and color will come back into my world. Silent tears will give way to genuine smiles. Sobs will

give way to laughter. Fear will give way to hope. Rage will give way to calm. The urge to lash out and hurt will once again become a compulsion to love. If I can dam up the chaos...if I can hold back the storm...if I can just keep my grip on this life for a little while longer, the sun will come out from behind the clouds and life can begin again.

Happy birthday, my darling Beth.

May this year be the year life really begins for all of us.