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If I loved you, I would tell you this

Fiction

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If I Loved You, I Would Tell You This

Stories

ROBIN BLACK

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New York

Contents

The Guide

At seventeen, Jack Snyder's daughter is slender-faced and long of limb and still able to startle her father with her seeming certainty about everything she thinks. They're driving along roads he doesn't yet know, on their way to meet her first seeing-eye dog, and she is wearing polka-dotted sunglasses, a long jean skirt, and a shirt with the words: "If you can read this T-shirt, maybe YOU can tell ME what it says." A kid from her school ordered them, in the dozens, and Lila bought three in different shades. "You're sure they aren't identical?" she questioned her mother at the time. "I don't want my teachers thinking I never change my clothes."

"Believe me, Lila," Ann Snyder said. "I don't want your teachers thinking you never change your clothes either."

As Jack scans the road for signs, Lila is proclaiming to him in those certain tones of hers that if it weren't for being quite so blind and having to have one, she'd definitely never get a dog. Never. Never ever. And her father is trying

to follow her, trying to respond appropriately; but thoughts of Miranda Hamilton compete with the girl's words. Miranda Hamilton unbuttoning her jeans the night before, sliding them down her thighs, stepping panty-clad from the denim pooled at her feet. Miranda Hamilton unbuttoning his suit pants, leaving them bound around his legs until he kicked them off. Miranda's cropped blond hair fading into soft, colorless down along the back of her neck. Miranda laughing as she filled her mouth with bourbon from Jack's glass and held the fluid there, smiling while it drizzled from her lips until he kissed her and swallowed it himself. Miranda whispering to Jack, her mouth still whiskey damp, just to lie back, lie still, while she moved her hips in something close to perfect circles over him. Just lie still. Just lie still. Just lie still.

"Really, Dad, they're so obsequious," Lila says, and Jack has to remind himself what they're talking about. Guide dogs. They're talking about guide dogs. "The whole alpha-male pack-mentality thing. Cats don't give a shit about anyone, right?" Her father swerves around a pothole, and senses her sway beside him, unprepared. It's an early-spring day and they are into the long weeks between the damage done by ice and snow and the repair work to come.

"That's certainly their reputation," Jack says. "Cats are undomesticatable. Too wild."

"I find that infinitely more appealing."

Jack nods silently, an assent he knows his daughter cannot see.

"Maybe I could have the first ever seeing-eye cat." Lila crosses her arms. "Some real haughty feline with attitude."

"You mean like you?"

But his daughter shakes her head. "No." She turns her face toward the breeze of the open window, lifting her sunglasses. "No," she repeats. "I'd want a guide cat who really doesn't give a flying fuck." She draws an audible breath through her nose. "Manure?"

"We're in farm country now." He says it quietly, as he looks around outside. Rolling hills of tilled soil settle dark brown against the clear blue sky. Occasional red barns dot the land, appealing in their melancholic disrepair. The scenery is picture-postcard beautiful, but he keeps that to himself. For now, anyway. Later in the day, maybe after dinner, he'll call Miranda. And he'll tell her all about how lovely the landscape looked; and then maybe he'll tell her once again how painful these moments of unshared beauty can be. Standing in the farthest reaches of his backyard, he'll hold his cell phone close against his mouth so he won't have to shout and he'll close his eyes as he describes to her again how solitary he so often feels with his sightless daughter by his side. How among all the things for which he might feel guilt, there's always this one mountainous inequity: that he can see and Lila cannot.

"Is it pretty?" Lila asks.

"We're out in the sticks. It's okay." He pictures Miranda pacing her kitchen, phone in hand, running an exasperated hand through her hair. *This isn't your strength, Jack. You have to learn to let go.*

"Yeah, I figured as much." Lila turns her head his way. "Are there cows?"

"A little way back there were. Black Angus, I think. Big and dark."

"Sounds nice, Dad." But Jack only murmurs a neutral

sound, and Lila turns away, facing forward again. "The thing is," she says, "I just can't imagine raising a dog and then giving it away. Even if I don't much like dogs, it still sounds like an elaborate form of masochism."

"It's a . . ." But Jack can't find the word he wants, and he's pretty sure he's just missed their turn. "Dammit, I think we're lost. No, wait, this must be right. It's a good deed," he says. "It's something these guide dog people want to do. He's your dog and they know that from day one. So they don't get attached."

"Yeah, right, Dad. Do you really believe that? That you can just tell yourself not to get attached? You don't seem so thrilled about me going to college. Why didn't you just tell yourself not to get attached?"

"Very funny." But she's right, of course. Who is he to assume anyone can tell themselves what to feel? He's always been unable to tell his heart a goddamned thing. "Very clever, Lila," he says. "But it's the system. It's how this guide dog business works. And since we benefit from the system for once, I'm not going to argue with it. Here we go. Sharp turn left . . ." He gives her the warning and at the edge of his vision sees her brace herself for the curve, hands gripping her seat. "Hang on, babe. This looks bumpy. Dirt road."

"I think I can handle it. Bumps in the road are my special-i-ty." Lila has her head turned to the open window again, holding the door, her thick dark curls flying in the breeze. "Maybe there's something wrong with me," she says, "but I actually like the smell of manure."

"No." Her father draws in a deep breath of the sour, full air, savoring the simple fact that they're smelling the same

thing—a relief from all the sights they never share. "I agree with you, baby. It's a strangely pleasing smell."

"And, by the way, so is skunk."

"Absolutely," he agrees, remembering the pungent, oddly twisting scent of Miranda's sweating skin. "Absolutely," he tells his daughter. "So is skunk."

Lila was six, playing in the garage of a neighboring family the Snyders didn't really know, when an aerosol can of orange spray paint blew up in her face; and for a long time after that, many years, Jack was stuck on that one simple fact—on the tenuous, fleeting nature of the acquaintanceship. Almost as though the same accident, with the same result, in the home of a close friend would have somehow made more sense. But none of it made any sense, of course. He knew that. You could turn the thing around, replay it endless times—and you would. You would. And you would. And you would. But none of it made any sense at all. There you are one fine October day, living your life pretty much as you had planned, your lawyer's shingle hanging up, white and shiny, outside your solo practice downtown; tranquilly married to your wife of eight years, whom you've managed still to love, though so many of your friends have clearly, even openly, tired of theirs; doting on your six-year-old daughter whom you adore, with the not so secret sense that she's a little prettier, a little smarter, and a lot more special than other people's kids; enjoying your smug, self-congratulatory thoughts about the way fatherhood refocuses priorities. Long gone are the days when you were known as a bit of a skirt chaser, back in the single years; the

days when anything held the same appeal as tossing a ball in the backyard with your kid. And then a fucked-up aerosol can of orange paint blows up in your daughter's face. In the garage of a boy she doesn't really know.

The first few weeks flew by in waiting rooms filled with cold cups of coffee and shifts of relatives taking turns. Bits and pieces of news were conveyed by strangers who came to him fresh from delving into his child's face. Some good: the eyes wouldn't have to come out. There were deep cuts on her jaw, but they would fade over time. She had been knocked unconscious by something that had fallen off the wall—a wheelbarrow, Jack eventually found out. And this was excellent news too, the doctors said. This would limit Lila's memory of what they called "the event."

But then in the center of it all, whatever salvage might be found among the wreckage, there was the conversation, the now-inevitable talk Jack began having with his daughter, six years old and emerging so untidily from all the anesthesia, all the painkillers, emerging so he could tell her, not once but many times, that she would never see again. Six years old, he would think as he spoke the words. She doesn't understand forever. She can't imagine what "never again" really means. And of course a part of him didn't want her to, as he sat on the edge of her hospital bed, touching her continually so she'd never feel alone in the dark, caressing her constantly—for himself as much as her. So neither of them would feel alone. While Ann stood just outside the doorway, listening as though she were eavesdropping, retreating even then into the fears that would engulf her as if less frightening than real life turned out to be. And Jack repeated the truth to his girl—because

that's what the psychologists had cautioned him to do. Never lie. Never lose her trust. But have the conversation again, again and again, until the child understands, as no six-year-old should have to do, exactly what forever really means.

"This is it," he says, pulling into a long, rutted drive.

"Nice place?"

Looking up at the small ranch house, set on stilts, Jack frowns at the empty flowerpots that line the porch rail. An old bicycle leans against the front window. "Not really," he says. "Not somewhere I'd want to live, anyway, though someone else might find it quaint, I suppose." He should be used to being her eyes. He shouldn't even notice doing it by this time. But in the car, as he peers at this nondescript house, he can feel himself resisting her questions, as he does more and more when there's a matter of taste involved. Is he handsome? Are the flowers pretty? Nice place? Does she understand how often these are matters of opinion and not of fact? Realize how likely it is that if she could judge these things for herself they might disagree? Does she ever guess how very injured and myopic a filter he has become?

"It's a small place," he says. "It's reddish and a little run-down."

A tall woman steps out onto the porch and waves what looks like a powerful arm. Jack waves back, out his window.

"Come on," he says to Lila. "It's showtime. Look's like she's here."

"Giddy-up," she responds, lowering her glasses again. "As long as we made the trip, let's do this thing."

When he told Miranda how much he hated the idea of Lila getting a guide dog, she accused him of balking at letting Lila grow up. She said he was resisting the idea of her transferring her needs and her dependencies onto someone else—even a dog. "Same old, same old, Jack," she said. "You are way too attached." Jack was visiting the café where she worked, catching her at odd moments between her customers. "You're so identified with her. It would be good for you both if Lila could lean on someone else."

But at home that night over dinner he tried not to think about that, dismissed it as psychobabble, only said something vague about feeling unsure, not having a gut sense that this was the right move to make. Introducing such a huge change into their lives. About it being a long-term commitment—a phrase that caused Ann to stare pointedly his way. *Exactly what would you know about keeping commitments, Jack?* Lila claimed to hate what she called "the whole geeky blind-girl thing with the dog who snarls at everyone but me." And Ann eventually confessed to having her own concerns, to a recent fear of large dogs, which caused Jack to throw his own exasperated look at her: *Exactly what is it that you aren't afraid of, Ann?*

In the home of a blind child, it turned out, a marriage could easily enough dissolve in unwitnessed pantomime. Ann and he could be giving each other the finger through every meal, for all Lila knew. And at times, they had come pretty close.

"It isn't the most important consideration, I understand," Ann said in her quiet, steady tones, so suffused with

control that the effort itself was like a second, twining voice. "I probably shouldn't have brought it up."

"Poor Mommy." Lila reached across the kitchen table to pat her hand, and Ann moved it for her to find. "Who said parenthood wasn't hard?"

The college counselor at school was adamant, though, and ultimately persuasive. "It's the best way to do college," she said. "It's the best way to do adulthood, in fact," she added, reaching to pet the heavyset creature lying beside her feet on the gray carpet, as Jack watched Ann shift in her chair, away from the dog. "You don't want her living with her parents for her whole life," she stated—startling Jack—as though that were clearly true.

She handed Ann a card with two agency names, and Ann then passed it on to Jack, a move he recognized all too well. Everything from phoning for take-out to planning vacations to calling in someone to see if their lacy-leafed maples should be sprayed—all these were increasingly his to do, as his wife retreated ever more steadily into her phobic state.

"Would you like to compare coping mechanisms?" she'd asked him once, when he let fly his rapidly growing anger at her rapidly shrinking world. "Yours versus mine? What's her name, again? Amanda? Miranda? Would you like to have this conversation? Or should we just keep trying to help each other stumble through for a few more years? For Lila's good?"

Stumble. It was the obvious answer. They would stumble through, of course.

Jack picked one agency over the other by no more scientific means than the fact that the first one's phone was busy; and the agency whose phone wasn't busy put him onto Bess

Edwards. "She has her own methods, but they work," the agency man said. "She's a dog woman through and through." Jack repeated the phrase to Lila just to hear her laugh and describe what she thought a through-and-through dog-woman must be like.

"Hairy, of course, and always licking herself between the legs."

But on the phone Bess Edwards sounded only sensible and experienced. "I've done this four other times," she said and told him it would take her another three months to have the dog—a nine-month-old Lab named Wally—ready to meet them. Then it would take an unknown number of sessions for her to train Lila. Saturday morning visits to her home, about an hour away. "I do this my way," she said. "It isn't orthodox, but it's worked so far."

Meanwhile, Jack should mail her a few of his daughter's socks, preferably worn, and tell her just a little about the home. Are there stairs? Is there a yard? Traffic noises? Other pets? Other children? She reeled off the questions and he shot the answers back.

"Are you a single parent?"

Jack felt himself hesitate. "No, there's a mother too." The phrase sounded ridiculous. "I have a wife," he said.

"I will need some money for his food." She named a sum that sounded low.

"What about your services? We must have to pay you for this."

"No," she answered, after a noticeable pause. "This is just something I do. I couldn't possibly take money for helping the blind." And Jack flinched a little at the phrase: *the blind.* The words conjured images of ragged, sorrowful men wear-

ing worn and filthy sacks. The blind leading the blind—in the Snyder household they'd made every version of joke possible from that line. Jack had never laughed. Even at the ones he himself had made. The blind leading the blind—to certain doom. In the momentary quiet, he waited for Bess Edwards to go on, to volunteer some connection, tell him that a relative of hers had been sightless, tell him a story about why this was something she would do.

"I guess I believe we all need to be involved in acts that make us feel a little decent," she said instead. "Don't you?"

"Well," he said, after yet another pause. "It certainly is a noble goal."

"Bess Edwards," she calls out now, as, arm in arm, Jack and Lila approach her rickety porch. She's a little older than he is, he sees. The other side of forty-five. Somewhere in there. "Call me Bess. You must be Jack." He nods, with a little smile, as he guides Lila up the two painted steps. At the top, Bess gives him a gripping two-handed handshake and Jack notices her dark blue eyes, vibrant against the brownish, lined skin that looks as though she's never passed a moment in the shade. A healthy-looking woman, discounting all the warnings about the sun. Strong and fit. A single long, black braid hangs slung over her shoulder. "And this must be . . ."

"I'm Lila." Jack watches as his daughter extends her slim arm into the exact proper spot and Bess Edwards grasps it. "I'm the blind one," Lila says, her eyebrows arched just above the black screens of her glasses, all loveliness and charm, using her company manners—much like her home

manners only without even the small trace of vulnerability Jack could occasionally detect. She lifts her chin, Grace Kelly at her aristocratic best, and in the clear, natural light, Jack can still just make out the silvery skin along her neck where the cuts had been.

"I'm glad you told me that." Bess Edwards's tone is more humorous than he'd expected. Unfair of him maybe, but he hadn't counted on a woman who put doing something decent on her list of daily deeds to participate in Lila's kind of jokes. "I wouldn't have wanted to be mistakenly training your father on the dog." She throws him a conspiring, bemused kind of look. "Why don't you both come in and sit down. I'll go get Wally ready."

While she holds the screen door open, Jack places one hand lightly on Lila's back. "Step inside . . . one small step up . . . okay, about four steps to the couch." Passing Bess, he feels their bodies brush and mumbles an "Excuse me," to which she offers no reply.

"Dog," Lila whispers, barely audible, two steps in. "I smell dog."

"You smell your dog," Jack corrects, as the faint odor hits him too. "Get used to it."

"Poor Mom. She'll die."

"She won't die." Jack can hear his own impatience. "She'll just have to deal with it."

"Have to deal with what?" As he turns he sees Bess standing just inside the door as the screen creaks shut, her arms folded at her waist.

"My wife is allergic to dogs," he lies, orienting Lila to the couch and watching as she sits. "But if it's a problem, she'll just take some medicine."

"I've had families deal with that before," Bess says. "It's pretty unpleasant, but it's manageable. I've even heard of people allergic to their own guides." As she speaks, she steps farther into the room.

"It's why she's not here," Jack adds, sitting in the shabby armchair beside the couch, trying to banish images of Ann and what she might be doing at this moment. Staring out their front window, alert for intruders. Examining and re-examining the cans in their pantry for signs of swelling or suspicious dents. Or quite possibly still just lying in bed by the phone, anxious, immobile, and alone.

"Hmmm." Bess shifts her eyes to Lila on the couch, her legs crossed at her ankles, the sunglasses still down. "Well, she probably should come out here sometime," she says. "Just to meet Wally, before moving-in day."

"That shouldn't be a problem." As he shrugs the subject away, Jack sees Lila's mouth tense. "Lila heads out to college year after next. The dog won't be living in the house for very long, anyway."

"I'll be right back," Bess says. "Just let me get him harnessed up and all."

She walks past Jack and through the room. There's something about the sway of her hips as she steps away, the braid swinging over her shoulder, falling straight down her back, something unexpectedly sexy. He glances over to Lila—almost as if to be sure she hasn't seen him checking Bess out. Her lips are still curving down, the lower one sticking out in an unmistakable pout.

"What's the problem?" he asks. "You look upset."

"I feel bad about lying. About Mom."

"You didn't lie. I did."

"You know what I mean." She shifts back a little on the couch, still looking troubled. "You could have just said she's scared of dogs. There's nothing so weird about that." She fills her cheeks with air and puffs it out—a mannerism of hers that predates the accident, a thread connecting her, connecting him, to those days. "A lot of people are. It isn't like it's some shameful thing." And then a moment later: "Really, Dad, is it? Is it something we have to cover up?"

Is it? Or is it just his own weariness with Ann's concerns? "No, I suppose it isn't. You're probably right."

"Now what do you tell Mom? That she has to come here and pretend to be allergic to dogs? And pretend not to be scared? How's she supposed to do that?"

"I don't know, Lila. Maybe she won't come here."

"She will come, though. She will if I need her to."

"Okay, then she will. We'll handle it when it happens."

Jack watches Lila's face fall back into thought.

"What if the dog doesn't like me?" she asks, uncrossing, recrossing her legs. "I'm not exactly an animal person."

"If you'd seen our hostess, you wouldn't worry." He hears his own nervous release of a laugh. "I can't imagine the creature who won't do exactly what she says. And that's including you."

"Really? What's she look like? Is she pretty?"

Jack stares over toward the door through which Bess has disappeared. Yeah, she's pretty. Not girlish pretty like Miranda, with her small tight body and mischievous eyes, but attractive, without a doubt.

"Oh, I don't know," he says. "I wasn't really looking for that. She's tall, I suppose. She has a long braid, black hair.

And she's kind of muscled up. She doesn't look like she puts up with a lot of crap."

Lila frowns a little at that and lifts the sunglasses, rubbing her eyes. In the background Jack can hear a dog bark. He sees her flinch slightly at the sound. "My master's voice," she says. She turns her head so he sees her now in profile, and sitting there on Bess's worn couch, she looks a lot like Ann. A lot like Ann did when they were young. The same pale complexion and angular face. The same strong, straight back. Even her half-closed eyes remind him of how Ann always seemed to keep herself a little hidden, a little obscured, back when her need to have Jack guide her through the world felt emboldening to him still, made him feel big and strong. Back before it became a burden. A long, long time ago.

He stands up, begins to move through the room. He steps across Bess Edwards's faded carpet, past her upright piano. It could almost have been another man's life, he thinks. Though of course it wasn't. As recently as last night, after the trick with the bourbon, and after he'd followed Miranda's instructions, just lie still, just lie still, just lie still, after she was done tracing those heavenly halos with her hips and they'd fallen into two separate bodies once again, he found himself thinking, as he did from time to time, about that boy whose family they didn't really know. The one who'd told his daughter to shake the can of paint as hard as she could. Beside him, Miranda was blowing long, narrow streams of smoke from the one daily cigarette she'd allow herself, and Jack was telling her he couldn't even remember the kid's name. Not Tommy. Not Billy. But

something like that. Something plain and seemingly harmless. Something common and deceptively benign.

"You'd think it would be burned into me, that name," he said. "But it's gone."

Rolling onto his side, he pulled Miranda's patchwork comforter up around his naked waist, and he told her for the first time about the day the boy's parents came by the house, only that once, leaving enormous, bright flowers and a long, rambling letter on the porch. A letter in which they wrote about the wheelbarrow that had been hanging on the wall, and about how they wished that there was anything they could do. How they wished they knew the Snyders better, and wished that the Snyders knew them well, knew what decent people they were, so the Snyders could understand how terrible they felt. And how terrible the boy felt too—whatever his name—how terrible they all felt that this had happened in their home. Because pain that is shared, their letter said, can be pain that is lessened. They knew that was true.

He'd found it tucked among the flowers and thrown it in the trash, after reading it just once.

"Did you ever talk to them, Jack?" Miranda asked.

"No." And he didn't go into any more than that. But he could remember how when they had come to the front door they rang and rang and rang, seeing the lights on, seeing a car in the drive, and he didn't answer the bell. Because they were upstairs together, he and Ann, making love to one another with all their might, still thinking they might be on the same side, still thinking that the other story might be theirs. The one in which pain that is shared is pain that is lessened, just like the boy's parents said it was.

"No," he said to Miranda. "I never did speak to them. I never saw the point."

As she stubbed out her cigarette and rolled onto her elbows, close enough that he could feel a little of her heat shift to him, he reached over and drew a gentle line up and down her bare, pale back. "I was never a big enough guy to let them off the hook, I guess."

"Even the kid?" she asked. "He had to be carrying a shitload of guilt. You had to have felt sorry for the kid."

Jack didn't respond, aware of his fingertips, rough against her smooth skin.

"I guess it isn't your strength."

"What?" Jack looked her way, his hand stopping, then resuming its long trail. "What isn't my strength?"

But she only shook her head, a silent no, a partial shrug, and lowered her face onto the pillow so he could keep his fingers moving easily all the way down her back, up to the base of her neck again, just to where he could feel the silky, downy hairs. Up and down. Down and up. A straight line over the knobs of her spine.

"So tell me then, Miranda, what is my strength?"

But by then she had fallen asleep. For a few moments, he watched her breathe, studied her unconcerned rest. Then he rose to dress and stepped quietly out her door, the question still hovering, unanswered, in the air.

Jack hears his daughter sigh, a theatrical, gusty sound, and turns to see her feeling at the face of her watch. "What's your hurry?" he asks. She's perched on the edge of the couch, bouncing impatiently.

"It just seems like a long wait," she says. "How complicated is it to get a dog ready?"

"You should know by now, Li. Everything turns out to be more complicated than you think."

"Tell me about it, Dad."

"I'm sure she'll be ready for you soon," he says. But her face stays tense.

Jack looks away. A picture of Bess smiles down from the mantelpiece. Bess kneeling beside a big, dark dog. He walks over and picks it up. She's wearing the same grin she gave him on the porch, over Lila's head, a grin that looks as though she's in on something fun. As if she'd be ready to manage whatever came her way. An easy, open face. Maybe the face of someone who does something just to feel decent from time to time.

"Okay, Lila." If Bess notices Jack holding her picture, she gives no sign; and he puts it where it was. "Wally's all ready, out back. Why don't you come with me." She turns Jack's way as she walks toward Lila with an arm ready for her. "Jack, if you like, you can come out to the back porch. I'm going to take them pretty far out, where I have a path. I don't want him meeting you the first few minutes, but you can watch. Just give us a little time. There's some coffee in the kitchen. If you don't mind rummaging, feel free to find a cup. Kitchen's a mess, but milk's just where'd you'd expect, in the fridge. I'm not sure about the sugar, but it's there somewhere."

"Sounds good. I'll poke around."

Lila turns in her father's direction and he smiles, certain that he'll see her smile too, that odd exchange of expressions they so often have, that she never sees. He stands silently, waiting for the grin, waiting for the flash of humor

and the line he knows will come. The joke she has to make. He can almost supply it for her, knowing her nervous patter so well. Something about being leader of the pack. Something about being top dog, maybe. Something to which he can reply, "Very funny, Lila. Now go get to work." But instead he sees her mouth relax into a child's tentative lips.

"See you in a little bit, Dad," she says, and turns away.

Bess's kitchen is small and cluttered, a far cry from the scrubbed hygienic laboratory Ann inhabits, and nothing like the near empty, seemingly unused room in which Miranda grabs bottles of liquor and microwaves frozen food for them after sex. Among Bess's things it takes him longer than he can believe to find the coffeemaker, which is full, as promised, but hidden behind bags of white and whole wheat flour, loaves of bread and mason jars of who knows what. He opens and inspects three cabinets before locating a mug. The one he chooses advertises a local folk art museum—one of the many places he's told himself he ought to see but hasn't managed to yet. Because he can't take Lila; there'd be no point. And he's promised Ann not to be seen in public with Miranda, to show her that much respect, anyway. "Just don't make a spectacle out of us. And please don't let my daughter know. That isn't asking too much, is it, Jack?"

No. No, it wasn't asking too much. He's been very careful to do as Ann asked. Lila knew nothing, he was sure, and Miranda has only seen Lila once, a few months earlier, back

in the fall. Jack picked her up at the café after work and on an impulse, his impulse, they drove across town to Lila's school, just in time to watch the kids boarding the late bus for home.

"That's her," he said, pointing out his lanky daughter, curls pulled back into a messy knot. She was walking arm in arm with her best friend, Gabrielle. The blind leading the blind—personified. He was grateful to Miranda for not making the joke. "That's my Lila," he said. "The tall, pretty one in the red T-shirt."

And for some moments Miranda looked silently toward the girls. "But they're wearing the same shirt," she finally said. "In different colors."

Jack saw that she was right. Sure they were. They often were. "Yeah." He nodded and he started up the car. "On any given school day . . . One kid made a fortune selling them."

"What does it say?"

He told her.

"Funny," she said, as he pulled out into traffic.

"Yeah, funny," he repeated, some seconds later. "I guess it is."

Jack fills the art museum coffee cup, though he doesn't really want the coffee. He steps out the screen door onto a small wooden porch.

Behind the house is an open field, and twenty yards or so away there's a dirt track where Bess and Lila stand, close together. At first Jack can't see the dog, but as the two figures step apart, he finds him there. His broad, tawny back is bound by the harness, no ordinary leash, even from that

distance, but the unmistakable constraints of a guide dog at work. The stiff lead is in Lila's hand and Lila looks suddenly blinder to Jack than she has for years, as though something about the image has been completed, the last piece of a puzzle snapped into place. From two dozen yards away, his daughter is visibly blind. For all the world to see. And for a moment, he stands still, snagged on the paradox of being glad that at least she can't see herself like this.

"Jesus," he says, out loud. "Jesus Christ."

Eleven years. It's been eleven years. You have to let go, Jack, Miranda would say. You have to let her go. He sits onto the steps, slowly, his hand behind him as if to be certain the wooden surface will be there, as though he is the one who must feel, to be sure. And then, without noticing, he begins sipping at the coffee he didn't want—but there's a chill in the air and the warmth feels welcome after all. Holding the cup close to his face, he watches through the rising steam. Then he reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls his glasses out, the ones he has always needed for distances but didn't wear for years and years after the accident, not until Miranda gave him holy hell for the notion that walking around in a blur would somehow help his child.

Lila begins to move, very slowly, the dog many steps ahead. Then Bess joins her, says something, and Lila stops, starts again, pulling the animal closer to her side this time. She walks another ten feet on the track, then stops. Then pulls him close, again. Every once in a while, Bess Edwards pats the dog. And after she does that a couple of times, Jack sees Lila begin to do the same thing. He watches as his daughter's face moves very close to the dog's and her hands

run over his ears and nose. Her lips are moving; her head is tilted to the side. Bess Edwards take a step away from them. Soon she looks up at him and waves. Lila just keeps talking to, touching the dog.

Wally. The animal's name is Wally.

"Jack!" Bess calls out and he can almost feel himself materialize as Lila's head swivels, seeking him.

"I'm over here. I'm over here." Jack raises his arms overhead and waves as if toward his daughter, who waves back, in the right direction—more or less. "Looking good, Lila," he calls. "I like your new friend."

"Wally?" Her voice cuts through the air, banishes his invisibility, calling him back to her again. "I'm not so sure about the name," she says. "I think he's more of a Hubert, myself."

"Get to work!" Jack has his hands cupped as a bullhorn around his mouth. "You still have a lot to learn."

"Are you kidding? This is a breeze."

When Lila turns away, Jack settles back onto the step. He watches the scene, and tries to take it in. This is the creature who is to become his daughter's eyes from now on. Jack's replacement in a way, he understands. Just like Miranda said.

The dog barks, as though in response to Jack's thoughts, a deep, confident bark. This is who she must trust completely now—even when others turn out to let her down. Wally. The companion she'll have for years and years. Because her guidance counselor talked them into it. Because Ann handed him the card. Because the other phone was busy. And because Bess Edwards is a woman who thinks that we should all do something decent now and then.

"It's the best way to do adulthood," the counselor said about her own guide.

It probably is, Jack thinks. It probably would be for anyone. He looks at his watch. Just past ten. Miranda should be rolling out of bed now, sleeping late the one luxury she cares about. He thinks again about their conversation, about the way the question of his strengths was left hanging in the air.

"I can't remember his name," he said to her.

More lies.

The kid's name had been Oliver. Oliver Franklin. A skinny little boy with dark blond hair and eyes that filled with tears all too fast, that October afternoon. A little boy who cried much too easily when Jack stepped into the child's yard and found him—caught him—tossing a ball up into the air. Playing, alone. Playing with a ball. Throwing it up into the sky, and knowing how to catch it as it fell. Knowing where to put his perfect little hands and catch the falling sphere. Every goddamned time. "It might have been Bob," he said as they lay side by side. "Except I don't think it was. It was something like that, though. Something simple and harmless-seeming like that."

He'd been light as nothing, and Jack had just picked him up in his arms. Just the work of a moment, lifting him and carrying him behind the hedge. Away from any adults watching them. Away from the sight of the child's house, where the mother must have stood, fixing dinner, or maybe sat, resting for a moment in front of the TV. Away from the garage, where it had happened. Away from the wheelbarrow. The can of paint.

Shake it harder, Lila. Shake it harder.

"Is that what you said to her?" he asked, as he himself shook the boy, digging his fingers into the child's skinny frame. "Is that what you told my daughter to do?"

But his young eyes had filled up all too soon, great rivers of distorting, falling tears, his little shoulders convulsing in noisy sobs.

"Yes," he told Jack, his head flopping in a violent nod, from chest to back, chest to back. "Yes, I did. I did. I told her to. I did."

And that was that.

And there hadn't been any good from that. No good at all. There hadn't been a single moment of satisfaction to be felt. But before he took his hands off the boy, Jack had thrown him to the ground. "Little fucker," he said, as if that might somehow help. And then he walked away. Left the kid lying there. He walked past the house. Past the garage. Down the street. All of that. All of that for nothing.

Because when he got home, Lila still couldn't see.

Bess touches Lila's shoulder and they exchange a few words; then Bess begins to walk toward him. Jack shifts toward the rusted rail, making room for her.

"Lila's doing great," she says once she's close enough for a normal tone of voice. "She talks a good game, your daughter, but she's a good listener too." As she sits in the space beside him, a clean soapy smell drifts his way, and he notices a slight haze of freckles across her cheeks and nose. "She's a nice kid," Bess says. "She asked me how I was going to feel letting Wally go, asked me how I keep from getting too attached. Not every kid thinks in those terms."

"I was wondering that myself. How do you?" Jack is half watching her, half watching his daughter on the field.

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I don't." As she speaks she smooths tiny wrinkles from her jeans. Her hands are broad. A silver ring glistens on her index finger. "I miss the dogs pretty badly when they go. Then, eventually, I get another and start all over. And that helps, I suppose."

"Did you tell Lila that?"

"I told her something like that." Her hands settle on her knees. "With a little less emphasis on the sad part. I don't want her feeling bad." Jack doesn't know what to say, but then Bess picks up again. "She tells me you and her mother are having a hard time thinking about her taking off for school on her own next year. That's understandable. She's quite a girl."

"Oh, I don't know. I think all parents probably—"

"She told me something else, too." She's turned away a little from him now, so Jack can't see her eyes. "She told me you weren't entirely truthful about your wife."

"Huh." He looks out toward Lila, kneeling now in her denim skirt, patting the dog along his flank. "Huh," he says again. "She told you that, did she?"

"You'd be amazed how many people are terrified of dogs." Bess is smiling a little at him again, but he can't quite smile back. "I deal with it all the time, Jack."

"I don't . . ." He can't come up with very much more. "I guess that's right. I guess a lot of people are."

"Your daughter's exact phrase was 'I don't know why my dad was so bizarre about this. As if it were leprosy or something.' "

Jack smiles at Bess's imitation, in spite of himself. Pitch-

perfect. He looks down toward his shoes. "That sounds like my girl," he says. "And I'm sorry about the bluff. I don't know why I did that. Really, in all honesty I can't imagine why."

And he can't. There is no real why. Just a further symptom of how messy everything's become. Ann's fears: a symptom. His habitual lies: another symptom.

Bess shrugs. "It doesn't matter, Jack. I'm not pegging you as some kind of criminal because you covered something up." She smooths the fabric along her legs again. All the little wrinkles. All the little disturbances. "It probably just felt private to you, which is fine. But I do need to be a little clinical about all this. Something like a doctor, I suppose." She turns to face him. "I really need to understand Lila's home life—really understand it. If your wife has a dog phobia, even if it's just a minor problem, we'll deal with that. I just have to know about it." He notices her small, off-white teeth that have never been fixed, a little crooked, a little buck. "We can work around just about anything—I just have to know the truth about what I'm sending Wally into. Wally, and Lila too. They have to trust each other. Which really means that we have to, right?"

As he nods, Jack's chest rises and falls in a sigh. He's probably already broken some aspect of Bess Edwards's personal code of decency, he understands. She's trying to be kind, but for a moment, sitting there, he's oppressed by his sense of the bad impression he must already have made. He looks out to Lila, still kneeling in the dirt, her feet sticking out from her long denim skirt, her face right up against the dog's. Never lie to her. Never lose her trust. Maybe that would be an easier mandate for an animal to follow.

"Listen, Bess," he begins. "Lila doesn't know everything." Jack closes then opens his eyes. "There's a lot more to our home life than her mother's fear of dogs." He leans over and picks up a small stick. "My wife and I are separating, after Lila goes away to school. It's all been decided. I'm planning on moving out."

As the words come out, something else occurs to him. This woman whom he barely knows is the first person he's been honest with about this. Other than Ann. Even Miranda doesn't know how concrete these plans are. "We haven't said anything to her yet." Jack shakes his head. "We've had to give our daughter an awful lot of bad news in her life. I guess I just haven't been able to face doing this. Pretty cowardly, right?" Bess's eyes give no reaction he can read, and for just a second, he thinks of adding something more. Something about how Ann has told him he's the one who has to tell Lila, because he's the one who first gave up on them. Because he's the guy who wants out. The guy who can't keep himself from seeking something resembling pleasure somewhere else. That all he can think of when he imagines breaking this news to his daughter is that other terrible conversation. The one he had with her when she was six. The one in which it felt as though with every word, he personally, Jack Snyder, was robbing his own child of any hope. Bess's eyes are so open to him and so kind, he can easily imagine trying to explain it all to her. Trying to defend his decision to leave. To betray. To run away. Going into the petty, the hurtful, the heavy drag down into failure that has brought their marriage to this end. He can feel this desire to confess and then plead his own case swell like a powerful wind gusting somewhere deep inside his chest.

But he stops himself. Closes himself tight against the urge, and for a time, Bess gives no response at all. Just looks away a little from his gaze, and gradually it becomes the kind of moment when the sounds that were there all along are audible, anew. Cars passing by on the distant road. Birds calling out to one another; birds calling back. A plane overhead.

"Actually, Jack," Bess says finally, looking down, "Lila already told me that too."

And with just a quick hand to his shoulder, she stands and walks away.

The first few months of Lila's life, she hollered as if indignant at having been born, maybe as if she saw the injury to come. He so envied Ann back then, the way she could slip her breast into the baby's mouth, the way Lila would settle, the way Ann could know who she was to her. For all those miraculous months, that was what injustice seemed to be, his wife having that, when he did not.

Out on the path now, Lila and Wally are walking around and around and around. There's a moment every time when it looks as though they're heading toward him, but then they stay with the curve, Lila's arm straightened by the unaccustomed pull of the lead. It takes Jack a while to realize she must have lost track anyway, that she can't know where the circle starts or ends, when a full rotation is complete, can't know whether she's facing him or facing away.

He takes his glasses off so that out among the distant blur of green, Lila and Wally are just another distant blur.

Staring at them, at nothing, he can remember how much

it felt like exile those first few months, how he seemed to be invisible to her all that year, how this new, keen, devastating love seemed to bring nothing so much as isolation. And how that changed one night when Lila was crying out, not crying, but yelling for help, for comfort. Maybe it was a tooth, maybe a terrible dream. Ann was either sleeping or pretending to be, so he went in. He found his daughter standing up, just a shape in the nightlight dusk, all her weight thrown against the rail, hollering into the night. He held his arm out, next to hers, and with his other hand he moved her grip so she was latched onto him. He remembers now exactly how she looked as his eyes adjusted to the dark and her little face emerged, curious, trusting, beautiful, as though she were a candle burning through the night.

Just hang on, Lila, he told her then, and she smiled at him, she seemed to understand. Just don't let go.

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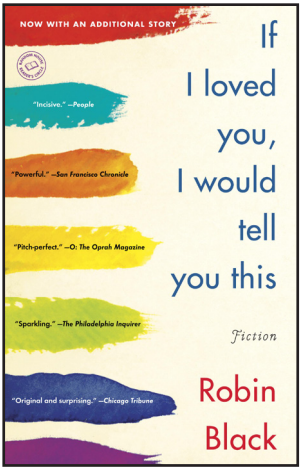

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