

Five Things by Corie Ralston

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1. I forgive you

My stepsister Jody arrives as her father is lowered into the earth. She's late, as usual.

"You missed the service," I whisper.

"My plane was delayed," she says, more than a whisper. Faces turn toward us. "No one offered to pick me up at the airport."

She's only been in England for two years, but she's managed to acquire a clipped accent. For some reason, that makes me angrier than anything else.

"Your own father's funeral," I say.

She turns away.

Now everyone is looking at us. Everyone except Mom, who stares into the hole in the earth like it might suck her in, too.

The grass has been recently mowed, smells like a happy summer day. Except it isn't. I wish it would rain. It doesn't seem fair that someone should be buried on day when the sky is a giant blue glass bowl and bees drone lazily over clover.

My stepfather married my mother when I was thirteen and Jody was fourteen. I didn't like Ted. I didn't care how hard he tried or how much Mom wanted me to call him 'Dad'. Before him, Mom and I used to have lunch together every Friday. Before him, Mom and I used to watch movies together on the weekends. Just the two of us. Then she met Ted, and suddenly there were strangers living in my house and my mom never took me out to lunch again on Fridays.

Now, Mom stares slump-shouldered into that dark hole in the ground, and I wonder how she'll survive this. This is not what I would have wished for. I'm not looking for those Friday lunches anymore.

"I didn't want to be late," Jody says, and I remember our argument.

She didn't want Mom and Ted to marry any more than I did. She didn't want to move into a stranger's house. She wouldn't have wished for any of this, either.

And just like that, all the anger leaves me.

"He died too soon," I say, and Jody nods in agreement.

2. Please Forgive Me

Dirt hits wood. Mom cries and cries and my three aunts surround her, holding her.

"Let's go talk to Mom," Jody says.

The group parts to let us through. Mom clings to me and whispers, "He loved you more than his own daughter."

I glance at Jody and catch something in her face, a bending of some kind, like branches under snow, yielding under a relentless burden. She walks away from us.

"She has to go and create a commotion at her own father's funeral," Mom says. "Typical."

When Ted and Jody first moved in I wouldn't speak to either of them. I read alone in my room, I studied at the library as long as possible after school. Jody stayed up late, played her music too loud, slammed doors. My mom always said Jody never wanted to be part of the family, how she said ugly things to Ted. She didn't do well in school. She left for England the day after she graduated.

I was the good kid, the one who did the dishes without being asked, who kept my music down. I never acted out for Ted's attention. I never told him I loved him or that I hated him. I barely acknowledged his existence. And I was the one he loved more.

Now I realize: it's easy being the good kid when someone else is playing the bad kid and you don't have to worry about being loved.

3. Thank You

Back at the house we sip a warm brandy concoction that Ted's brother has made. Mom disappears with her sisters upstairs. The house starts to fill up with friends and relatives. I can barely focus well enough to say hello to them.

Jody lifts an old album from its dusty home on a high bookshelf. She sits on the familiar brown sofa and I sit beside her, relieved to have an excuse not to talk for a while.

We look at pictures of the family in Ted's nineteen-seventies cornflower blue rambler. He loved that car. When I was sixteen I managed to sideswipe a fire hydrant, leaving a long rusty

red streak down the side of the car. Jody ran it into a bush once. Ted never said anything about the scratches and dents we put on that car. Mom made him sell it, finally, for a minivan.

"I ran out of gas once," I say. "Right after I got my license. Three miles outside of town. Ted rode his bicycle over with a gas can."

I remember that night well: My stepfather arrived on his bicycle, gas can in the basket. It was freezing cold, dark clouds hanging low, and his cheeks and nose were bright red from the wind. He didn't say, "How could you be so stupid?" He didn't say, "I hope you've learned your lesson." He didn't say anything. He just filled the car up and put the bicycle in the trunk.

"He let me drive home," I say.

"That's the kind of thing he would do." Jody's accent is gone. I look at her. She wipes her eyes, and the accent returns. "He was a good man, wasn't he?"

Later, after Jody left and I was in college, I would go over sometimes when mom was off on her own, the women's society group, or her book club. Me and my stepfather would putter around in the garden. He showed me how to plant vegetables from seedlings, how to press the tiny pressed dirt rectangles into the ground. He never talked much. Sometimes I told him about my job and he just listened. I remember when I told him about the promotion I didn't get, half expecting him to say something non-committal. Instead he said, "Those bastards." That was the only time I ever heard him swear.

And then before I quite realize it, I am crying.

Jody puts her arm around me. I remember that for the last two years she has emailed me every month, checked in on me, made an effort to stay in contact in her own quiet way. All through Ted's illness she called home every few days. She is more like her father than I ever realized.

4. I love you

Ted's brother Gerry is talking loudly, and I look up to see his bright red nose, his bloodshot eyes. He is trying to pick up a woman I barely recognize, a friend of Mom's. She shies away from him, bangs her calf on the coffee table in front of us, and then sits down abruptly right on the table. The woman throws her drink into Gerry's face and stalks away.

Gerry just blinks, brandy dripping off his nose.

I try to hold it in, but the laugh comes up from somewhere deep inside and it won't be contained. I laugh, and then Jody starts to laugh, and then suddenly everyone is laughing. And I realize: Ted would have laughed, too.

He would have laughed at the sheer silliness of the situation, at his brother's incompetent pass. And suddenly Jody and I are young again, laughing together. One summer Ted built a tree house in the front yard for us, and we used to lie up there on our stomachs and watch people walking below. We pretended to be spies. We made up stories about Martian invasions, we shared notes on the boys at school. At the kitchen table we didn't speak to each other, but in the tree house we were friends.

And then we are old again, laughing together. And I think: Maybe her accent is because she wants to belong to a place. Maybe she wishes her father had stood up for her just once. Maybe we can be friends inside this house.

5. Goodbye

The commotion has brought Mom back downstairs, and the laughing quiets down to a respectful murmur. Mom sits on the couch between us, holds the photo album.

"That old thing," she says, looking at the pictures of the rambler. She looks so completely lost, and I lean into her, thinking she might just fall over without warning.

In the rare times that Ted left town on business, Mom would call me five times in one evening to ask how to get on the internet, to find out where Ted stored the spare light bulbs. It wasn't that she couldn't figure those things out herself. She needed to know someone was there for her, that someone was looking out for her. And what will she do now? She has lost her anchor, is drifting in uncharted territory.

"I can stay for a while," Jody says to Mom. "If you'd like."

"That's all right," Mom says. She wipes her eyes. "Your sister is here."

I don't have to look at Jody to know she has that expression again, that falling look. And I realize: if Jody leaves now she will not come back.

"I'd like it if you stayed," I say. "I have a spare room."

Jody doesn't look at me, but she nods.

When Jody walks off to put her luggage in my car, my mother says, "She won't stay long. She never liked us, you know."

I feel I am also drifting into uncharted territory. I no longer know how to evaluate my mother's words. I realize that there are many things I didn't see as a child in my family, didn't understand. There are things I will probably never understand. But there is one truth I can hang on to: Jody and I will always be sisters. We will always share a past, and we will always

know each other in ways that friends do not.

I go outside to help Jody with her luggage. The poplar trees out front have grown up, spread canopies across the older streets. I used to shinny up those trunks; now they are bigger around than me. I think how things can get big so quickly. Trees widen and buckle sidewalks, children grow up and move away, angry words become reasons and rifts. But the world does not stop changing. Children can come back. Wounds do heal.

"I read something," Jody says as we walk to the car together. "There are five things you need to say to someone before they die."

"What are they?"

"I forgive you. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you. Goodbye."

"Goodbye is a little redundant, don't you think?"

She smiles at me, though she is crying. "I didn't get to say any of those things to Dad."

I didn't either. "I'm sorry," I say.

"But endings are also beginnings," she says. "Aren't they?"

"Yes," I say. "Sometimes they are."

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