

BEFORE:

WHEN I OPENED THE DOOR TO OUR HOUSE, I could hear Becky moving around in the kitchen, talking on the phone while a faint whistle came from a teapot on the stove. By the sound of her voice, subtly firm but still hoarse from being sick, I knew she was speaking to Emily, our LLP eldest daughter.

I shrugged out of my jacket and hung it on a hook in the mudroom, nauseous with dread and still feeling shaky. I sat down on the bench for a minute to think things through until I felt a little steadier and more in control. But as much as I might have wanted, I couldn't sit there forever, so I got to my feet and headed for the kitchen. Once there, I stopped in the doorway.

Barefoot and still in her robe, Becky stood in front of an open cupboard, the phone cradled on her shoulder as she took down a cup and saucer. For that single moment, everything seemed so routine. So undisturbed. A tableau of normalcy. I wanted to stretch it out, make it last. Everything about our lives together was about to change in ways I could not predict.

Becky must have sensed me standing there because she instantly turned around and held up her finger, signaling she'd be off the phone in a moment. The dark circles beneath her usually vibrant, blue-green eyes betrayed how sick she had been for the past few days with a virus probably caught from our babysitting one of our grandsons. The laugh lines around her mouth were joined by different lines, etched into her skin from months spent caring for her dying mother who, with just weeks left to live, raged at being robbed of a life she seemed to have only come to enjoy toward the end. I could also tell by the set of Becky's chin that she was apprehensive about what might come next. I knew I was the cause of that. But she still managed a smile. The smile felt like the biggest gut punch of them all.

She didn't deserve this. I didn't, either, but I was the one in the eye of the storm. She was the innocent bystander who risked getting swept out to sea.

"Your Dad just walked in, so I'll ask him and call you back in a few minutes," she said, searching my face as she spoke into the phone. "Emily, I said I will call you back." She ended the call and put the phone on the counter.

"You're up," I said.

"I'm up."

I crossed the kitchen and hugged her briefly, as was our routine whenever I was gone. Becky took a step back, still searching my face. She looked like she was about to speak when the water in the teapot suddenly escalated to a boil and emitted an ear-splitting whistle. She immediately took the pot off the burner.

"How are you feeling?" My voice sounded thin and raspy.

"Better." And then, more forcibly, "Much better. Do you want a cup of tea?"

I shook my head and went to the sink for a glass of water instead.

I could feel her still watching me as she put a tea infuser in the cup and poured in the boiling water, filling the air with the smoky scent of Lapsang Souchong. "When I woke up, you were already gone," she said after a few moments had passed.

"You're exhausted. You need to sleep."

She watched me over the rim of her cup as she took a sip. "Was it busy at the urologist's office?"

"Always." I took a long drink of water and poured the remainder in the sink.

"You were gone a long time."

I filled the glass with water again, this time wiping it out with a soapy sponge. "I had to stop at the cancer center to make appointments and I decided to take the long way home up 55th to Valmont Road. It's rural and so Eastern Colorado; I've always loved that little drive."

"What appointments?"

I held the glass up to the light, rinsed it out again and then put it in the drainer to dry.

It was so quiet in the kitchen that I could hear the clock on the wall tick away the seconds when Becky's phone rang with the distinctive ringtone she has for Emily.

Emily lives with bipolar disorder, early onset, started when she was maybe 10 or 11. It's incurable but treatable and, for the past 30 years, Becky has always been there. Always willing to answer her call, whether it's a casual chat or a full-blown crisis. On Emily's bad days, it's almost been a full-time job.

The phone continued to ring and we let it, although we both knew what would happen next. Sighing and pushing a lock of her silvery-gray hair off her forehead, Becky picked it up to answer.

Emily and Bruce, her husband of ten years, were getting a divorce. Before Becky could even say hello, I heard Emily sobbing, her emotions out of control.

With her hand on her hip, Becky then turned away and walked to the other side of the kitchen as if hoping the distance of a few feet would shield me from hearing the frantic anxiety on the other end of the phone.

Unable to simply sit and wait, I walked into the living room and stood at the wall of windows that look out upon the deck, the untamed fields below and the mountains to the west.

It was my favorite view from the house. I couldn't count how many times I had stood in that very spot at that window and been reassured by the permanence of those peaks, especially Longs Peak, which stood above all the others to a height of more than fourteen thousand feet. 14,259 to be exact.

Becky often sat on the back deck, reading her latest novel or biography. The deck was her refuge, her quiet place. Lately, she's had company—a full-grown red-tailed hawk who's claimed a perch not six feet from her chair. Red-tails are solitary by nature, so his presence, so close and so frequent, feels like a gift. There he was again this morning, perched stoically on the railing at the top of the stairs that lead down to the fields. Nearly two feet tall, regal and still.

He's become a kind of sentinel—a satisfying, silent constant in our lives. In Cherokee symbolism, the redtail is a bringer of vision and purpose, often arriving when important decisions or life shifts are near. And when he turns and fixes those reddish-brown eyes, I felt something stir. That gaze has a depth—ancient, knowing, almost primal. I wondered what he knows that I don't.

Just then, the feeling of dread returned, bringing with it an undeniable awareness that all of this was so suddenly and terrifyingly fragile.

I heard Becky end the call and walk back into the kitchen, where she was wiping down counters that were already spotless.

“Bruce is coming over tomorrow to pick up his things from the garage,” she said, “and Emily’s just freaking out about seeing him again. I have a meeting scheduled with Mom’s hospice team. Can you go to Emily’s? Help Bruce get his stuff out of there?”

I took out my phone and scrolled through the calendar. “And of course, it can’t be any other day,” I grumbled in a failed attempt at humor. Becky just looked back at me, stone-faced. My day was packed with Zoom calls, but mostly internal. “I can work it out,” I said.

While she texted Emily, I found myself wandering into the dining room. So many holidays had been spent at that table as our family grew. But one seat always stood out to me more than the others. It was the place where Bob, Becky’s father, always sat at the table in his wheelchair as he slowly died of the same disease I now had.

AFTER:

I came in from the garage, hung my jacket on the hook in the mudroom, and sat down on the bench, thinking of what not to say. My body still hadn’t recovered from the morning, the waiting room, the conversations with my urologist that now hung like an echo inside my skull. I felt displaced from myself, and simultaneously, alone in some unfamiliar place.

I sat on that bench longer than I should have. I stared at the floor tiles, my mind as blank and impassable as I tried to think up words to give. How to start. How to tell my wife, without her hearing at once the ghostly echoes of her father. He had died of this thing I now had. The electric teakettle was beeping. Becky was still getting over a nasty virus. I heard her voice before I saw her. I’ve heard that voice in every possible tone over the course of our decades together. She spoke low and measured. I knew immediately she was on the phone with Emily. At thirty-eight, Emily, our bipolar daughter, was in the middle of getting a divorce from her husband of seventeen years.

Eventually, I stood and walked into the kitchen.

Becky was barefoot. Fresh out of the shower, her robe pulled tight at the waist, and her hair still damp at the ends. She was reaching for a cup from the open cupboard, her phone

balanced against her shoulder. It was all so ordinary that I wanted to stop time. The light on the counter, the smell of toast, the kettle beeping. How many of our mornings looked just like this?

When she sensed me in the doorway, she turned and held up a finger. “Just a minute,” she said into the phone. “Emily, I’ll call you back in a few minutes. Your dad just got home.”

Her eyes found mine. Even from across the room, I could see how tired she was. The skin beneath her eyes had a bruised grayness. Weeks of caring for her dying mother, then this flu. So many nights without decent sleep. And still, she smiled. That smile. God, it undid me.

She ended the call and set the phone on the counter.

“You’re up,” I said.

“I’m up.”

I crossed the room and hugged her. I was careful not to let myself need more. She turned her head from me as was her way when she was sick. The kettle kept beeping. She turned away and hit the off switch.

“How are you feeling?” My voice came out hoarse.

“Better,” she said. Then, after a pause, “Much better. Do you want a cup of tea?”

I shook my head. “Just water.”

She filled a cup with her favorite tea, Lapsang Souchong. I could smell it from where I stood. I filled a glass at the sink and drank half of it. My hand trembled as I set it down.

She blew on her tea. “Was it busy at the urologist’s office?”

“Always.”

“You were gone a long time.”

I rinsed the glass and started washing it, though it was already clean. “I stopped at the cancer center to make some appointments. Then I took the long way home, up 55th to Valmont.”

“What appointments?”

The sound of the clock filled the silence between us.

Then her phone rang. It was the ring she’d set for Emily. She looked at it and sighed. And then she brushed a strand of silvery hair from her forehead and picked up.

“Yes, Emily,” she said softly.

Even from across the room, I could hear it. The sobbing. The panic. The desperation that rushed through the line. Emily unraveling. Again. Becky turned slightly away, moving to the far side of the kitchen, as if distance could shield me from hearing.

I walked into the living room. The air was still and heavy. I stood at the window and looked out toward the deck and the plains. Beyond the rolling grass, the foothills tapered upwards into the high peaks of the Rockies. And Longs Peak stood above them all, solid and unmoved—an icon to those who lived along the Front Range. I had always found comfort in it—the permanence of rock.

The red-tailed hawk was perched on the railing of the deck again. He’d become part of our lives. A solitary sentinel who appeared with uncanny regularity. Sometimes, standing so still, he looked like a wood carving. Other times, he turned his head and fixed his eyes on the house, where Becky and I moved around. There was a knowing in that gaze, primeval and unsentimental.

Becky’s voice drifted to me from the kitchen. It was soft, consoling. That was her voice when Emily’s world was falling apart. I could hear the exhaustion. A mother’s endurance stretched to its last fiber.

When the call finally ended, I went back to the kitchen. She was wiping an already spotless counter. “Bruce is going by tomorrow to pick up his things from the garage,” she said.

“Emily’s freaked about seeing him. I’ve got the hospice team meeting for Mom. “Can you go over there? Help Bruce get his stuff?”

Becky’s mom, Betty, had had a full life with her second husband in Phoenix. Tennis, dancing, and poolside cocktails by late afternoon. When Bill died, she had not wanted to come to Boulder. She’d made that clear. But she was ninety, and we could take care of her.

Even with all of us here, she never really settled. The tennis courts and dance floors stayed alive in her mind. You could see it in her face sometimes, the way she looked out the window. She directed her anger at Becky. Sometimes with precision, sometimes scattershot, but daily in either case.

I pulled out my phone. “Of course. And it can’t be any other day?”

Her look told me it couldn’t.

I scrolled through my calendar anyway. There was a wall of Zoom meetings that already felt absurd. “I’ll make it work,” I said.

She nodded, texting Emily.

I wandered into the dining room. The table stood like a relic, scarred and sturdy, surrounded by chairs that had held every version of our family: Christmases, birthdays, the ordinary meals in between. My eyes went to one chair in particular. The one where Becky’s father, Bob, used to sit, confined to his wheelchair in those last months.

Becky’s parents had come to stay with us often, at first intermittently and then with increasing duration, until the distinction between visiting us and living with us thinned and disappeared. Their presence accumulated in the house in quiet ways, and as the years passed, especially during the long period of Bob’s decline, they were with us almost continuously, the rhythms of illness folding into our lives without boundary.

It hadn't always been that way. Bob had been a minister, Betty a minister's wife. For most of their lives, they had been not only independent but also paragons of their community's idealized family structure.

I could still see him there, his face pale and gaunt, his breathing labored. The disease had taken him piece by piece. The same one that now grew within me.