

## TAKING FLIGHT

"Daddy, is mommy coming home?" Samantha interrupted the story, just as green eggs and ham were being offered by that insistent Sam-I-Am. Mack took a deep breath before answering the question. Her tiny face staring up at him, pleading.

Samantha's rumpled pajamas and hair revealed his ineptitude as a father, he feared. Bedtime was the worst time of day. Tucking her in at night meant being asked questions he had no answers for. He closed green eggs and ham on his finger.

"Mommy is going to be back one day. I'm not sure when Sugar Pie, but I know she misses you right now. I know she's thinking of you."

"How?" Samantha laid her head back on the pillow.

"How, what?" he lamely answered.

"How do you know, Daddy?" her brow furrowed making her look a bit like an old lady, wise beyond her years. There was always concern on her tiny brow at bedtime. When she should be enjoying her bedtime story, she worried instead.

"Well, I know how much she loves you and your brother. Her being away is not because of you, okay? It's because..." he was at a loss for words. His throat tightened. He didn't like lying, and saying it out loud felt false even though Mack knew for a fact Samantha's mother loved her. But it was a truth easily lost in her absence. *How could she just leave without a word? If she really loved them how could she do that...?*

"Daddy? Cause why?"

"Yeah, sweetie...I'm just trying to think," Mack sighed louder than he meant to.

"Don't think so hard," she shook her head and her curls gathered over her eyes. She held out her arms for a hug, and he gave her a big hug and kissed her soft cheek, not sure who was comforting who.

"Let's get back to our story," he said.

Dr. Seuss proved to be a convenient distraction. Finally, Samantha's eyes were getting heavy and Mack only had to read it twice.

"Goodnight, Sugar Pie. Daddy will see you in the morning. Captain Crunch or waffles?" Mack whispered while he disentangled himself gently from Samantha. He placed *Green Eggs and Ham* on Samantha's night stand by her stuffed bunny and small, ceramic piggy bank.

"Waffle," Samantha mumbled with her eyes closed. She finally nodded off peacefully.

Mack tiptoed out of the room leaving the night-light on just in case Samantha woke up scared. It was happening more often lately and interrupting his sleep. He knew instinctively though that her restlessness had everything to do with her mother's absence. He could hear her little voice going through his mind "Leave the light on, Daddy. Just in case..." *Just in case mommy comes back. Just in case the monster comes...just in case...*

Her baby brother, Caden was long asleep. At only three years of age, he had less to worry about. He cried less for mommy these days. Sam? She was a different story.

*Too bad they don't make an instruction manual for fathers abandoned by their wives.*

He held out hope of Patti coming back however false that might be. He couldn't let that go. He wouldn't let that go for Samantha either. Taking away her hope by truth telling would be like watching a baby bird fall from the nest. It was hard enough recalling the clingy, crying of both children when they realized mommy was gone. Caden was constantly crying to be carried and sat on Mack's lap at every opportunity. It was like Mack wasn't a separate being anymore but conjoined with his youngest child as one. Is this how mothers felt *all the time*?

He imagined Patti walking through the front door. He could hear her say "Sorry, Micki, I just needed a break. I don't know what got into me. Please forgive me."

Using his nickname, she would brush her blonde hair out of her eyes and he would likely forgive her. Maybe it was wrong to imagine the unimaginable.

His friends were telling him it was wrong to hold out hope. *What if she never came back? How would he explain that to Samantha, had he thought of that?*

He thought of it every single day, but he had no answers.

The guys at work just looked at him funny if he mentioned her name. She was unmentionable like a dirty secret or a terrifying disease. But here at home, Mommy was very much a part of the conversation.

When Mack was certain both the kids were fast asleep, he went downstairs to the kitchen to make the lunches and get organized for the next morning. He recently figured out his life was made easier if he prepared everything the night before. Patti had made it always *seem* easy and Mack hadn't given it much thought, truth be told.

After making the lunches and placing them in the refrigerator, Mack blew stale air out of his lungs, bowing his head into his hands for momentary and self-indulgent pity. He'd been having quite a few pity parties lately. Keeping up with the kids, taking them to daycare, picking Samantha up at school had him missing valuable time at the office and on the sites. He had to make up for it in the evenings when they were asleep because as understanding as the partners had been, he still had to make his deadlines. Just like any respectable architecture firm, performance and client satisfaction were highest priority.

*Damn it, Patti. Why? What the hell did I do to you that you had to up and leave?*

Cleaning off the dirty dishes from the kitchen table, Mack made room for his files and completed some much neglected paper work. He reached for a beer and turned on the television for company. Later, he woke up to the late news. *This was becoming a habit*, Mack thought absently as he picked himself up and hiked the stairs to his bedroom. A lonely and dark feeling came over him every time he entered the bedroom, as though Patti's quarter year absence became as shocking as the day she departed. Maybe he should start sleeping in the spare bedroom, anything to avoid this hollow feeling. The empty bed was the complete and utter reminder that he had been left. He was the un-chosen, the un-picked. Rejected. *What was worse, being left at the altar or being left at the homestead? The latter*, he decided. Being left at the homestead, with two children to raise was the epitome of abandonment.

He collapsed into bed forgetting to brush his teeth again. With two other sets of teeth to brush, sometimes he forgot his own.

#

He awoke to a bright, sliver of light that peeked in through the bedroom curtains making shadows on the wall. Hearing breathing next to him, he turned to see Samantha beside him bright eyed and ready to start the day. "Daddy?" she whispered. "Are you awake?"

He wiped the sleep from his eyes and gave Samantha a sleepy smile. A moment later he heard Caden's whimpers from down the hall.

"Let's go get your brother," Mack growled and cleared his throat.

They padded down the hall together. Samantha burst into Caden's room ahead of Mack, with a big smile for her brother. Caden grinned and held his arms out to be picked up. Samantha tried to lift him but Mack reminded her, she was too little to carry her brother around. Mack guessed it was Samantha's way of filling in for an absent mother.

And so it was the same each day; potty, breakfast, struggling into clothes, brushing teeth and fixing hair (the red hair band daddy, not the pink one!), and getting into the car seat, followed by picking them up, having a snack, and making dinner. And then it was a repetition in reverse each night; struggling out of clothing and into the bath, into pajamas, blowing noses, *Green Eggs and Ham* followed by hugs and kisses. Then they would start all over again in the morning. Over and over again until Mack lost track of the date and even the day of the week but then if anyone asked, he knew exactly how many days Patti had been gone. One-hundred-twenty days this Tuesday.

He was running like a broken down '67 Chevy, exhaust pipe rattling, brakes whining. Running on empty, he wasn't sure how much longer he could do it. Mack should have paid closer attention maybe then he would be better at this.

He hadn't realized just how exhausting it was being a full-time, stay at home mom. It wasn't for the faint of heart. *Dear, Patti. I understand now.* The laundry and the meals were never ending. He had to learn to cook more than just spaghetti and garlic bread, his specialty. And Caden! He was a handful. Just the other day he got a hold of Samantha's crayons and drew

'art' on the wall, while Mack was busy making dinner. He had such a proud smile on his tiny face when Mack caught him, that he didn't have the heart to get angry.

Mack was bewildered that his children didn't seem to mind a broken down Chevy for a father. Nonetheless, he lived from day to day with an improved appreciation for what Patti did, and what all mothers do.

Speaking of mothers, his mother and sister offered to come and help at different times, which Mack took them up on. However, when Patti's mother, Ellen, offered to fly out from Boston he was too proud to accept help or maybe it was something closer to shame.

Mack called Ellen a day or two after Patti left without notice. That was a difficult phone call. About two weeks had passed when Patti called Ellen to briefly tell her she was safe. Ellen called Mack immediately to let him know and of course, the relief in simply knowing Patti was alive allowed Mack to function as a father and at work. Sadly though, Ellen had little information and no answers for Mack's questions. She told Mack she had called the Pinecreek police station as well, to inform them of Patti's safety. That file was now officially closed, thank God.

Truth was Mack didn't really want to repeat the discussion of Patti's abandonment with Ellen again. Mack feared she would blame him and at this stage, he couldn't argue with her. In the meantime, they had an agreement. If either one heard from Patti again, they were to immediately tell the other. Lately it had been quiet on Ellen's end, and so Mack presumed Patti had remained silent. Regardless of his own guilt he would eventually have to let Grandma come and visit with Samantha and Caden.

In the early days of Patti's absence, she was considered a missing person. This alone was enough to send Mack into a tailspin. His wife was missing! That only happened in the movies. It didn't take long though for Mack to uncover the absence of Patti's suitcase and some of her jewelry. He was bewildered but certain that Patti had left willingly. Still, the Pinecreek Police Department considered her "missing" regardless. They explained to Mack that until her whereabouts was known, they would keep a missing person file open. An overly large officer (who Mack tried desperately not to be intimidated by) with a grey moustache came to interview Mack and search the house. It was a gentle search but Mack felt insecure, invaded

and somehow responsible, or at least suspect. It didn't take long however for the police to be satisfied that she had gone away willingly. At the time Mack wasn't sure what was more painful; a deliberate departure or an unlawful one.

In those first few weeks of Patti's disappearance, he spent hours on his cell phone calling any and all of Patti's friends. Absolutely no one had heard or seen her the very day she left. It was hard to believe, but she apparently had not divulged any secrets to her friends. Mack wondered then, if she had any true friends. She was not a closed person at all but she had a tendency to isolate herself and Mack noticed this in hindsight. *If only I had seen. If only I had known and understood you, Patti.*

Still, in spite of the apparent ignorance or lack of information, Mack continued to implore these women in hopes of shedding light on Patti's decision to leave. He believed someone knew her secrets and it became of utter importance to him to find out what Patti had been hiding. He had long conversations with Chelsea's mom, but she had little to offer Mack that he didn't already know. So then, who of these women saw Patti everyday dropping Samantha off and then picking her up at the end of the school day? Which one of these ladies invited Patti over for coffee after the morning bell rang, and the children were safely in their classrooms? And what did they talk about over mismatched mugs of homemade coffee? *What did Patti say to them?* It would seem Patti's secrets would remain elusive no matter how determined Mack was to unravel the truth.

After that phone call from Ellen, Mack had given up his fruitless, fact finding mission. He stopped asking questions. Instead, he decided to look within. He searched their archive of photos, calling up every memory of Patti. Images of Patti holding Samantha as a new born baby. Later, images of Patti reaching for Samantha who was escaping her charge while she held a tiny Caden in her arms. Images of the four of them, a young family like any other, and Patti in her domestic role—there must be some clues.

But no matter how mysterious her abandonment, now knowing she was safe, Mack held out hope for Patti's return. He told himself Patti would be back before the kids' next birthday.

Last year, for Samantha's fifth birthday, Patti baked a princess-themed cake with pink icing. Samantha asked especially for it because "Chelsea had one, mommy!" Patti blew up every

single balloon, stuffed the goody bags, and wrapped Samantha's presents. Mack came home late from work to find her on the couch, sipping a glass of wine. Her eyes had grown vacant. She must have been exhausted and not just *that* day, Mack realized now. He hadn't seen it for what it was: A sign, a red flag, a warning. How could he have known it would be the last birthday the kids would share with their mother?

Remembering back, long before Patti and Mack were married, they laughed all the time. They confessed their darkest secrets. Mack wasn't one to open up easily but Patti's trust and confidence in him were contagious. He began to believe in himself again, and after enduring the wrath of his father that was not the easiest thing to do.

They used to lie on the grass by the creek in the hot sun. That first summer they were young lovers, their bodies damp with desire but their skin warm to the touch. A fever so hot Mack hadn't realized it could possibly burn out and break. Patti's cheeks would turn pink after he kissed her. He remembered the sweetness of that. The pure innocence they once were. Even the following years, when they went to different colleges, they remained loyal and devoted to one another. She had loved him intensely as she grew from girl to woman. But that was before time took their love and wore it out with the weight of responsibility. Their love became less obvious with each year of marriage but Mack still felt it ever so faintly, a gentle touch as quiet as a wave lapping at the lakeshore. Toward the end he had to consciously think of Patti with love, when his head was full of other obligations. It was a stark contrast from how they began their romance. *Why didn't you tell me, Patti? When did you stop talking to me?*

It dawned on him with regret, that he had been too busy for Patti. He suspected he relied on her too easily without seeing the price he might pay. He was blind. That's what love made us, blind.

This year, Caden's birthday came and went. Samantha's birthday came and went. A spattering of cake, presents, a few friends to celebrate with, and candles to blow out. It couldn't fill the empty seat at the table though. But no matter how bad it got, Mack was focused on providing for the kids, whether it was their birthday or just another regular day. Although he still prayed for Patti's return, he was beginning to lose faith. Some prayers go unanswered, after all.

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Every Saturday Mack's mother would come to babysit so he could play hockey, even when Mack didn't feel up to it. His mother would push him out the door. It never failed to make him feel ten years old again.

Mack's hockey buddies although he loved them all, their looks told him what he wasn't ready to hear. Patti wasn't coming back. In spite of their bold conclusion, Mack had learned to heed their advice with a grain of salt. After all, they were good old boys who believed there wasn't a problem in the world that couldn't be solved with one more beer or getting laid, or telling your wife off. It was this kind of advice they gave no matter the circumstances. It was also the kind of advice that would land a man in more trouble than he was already in. *Try telling your wife off more and see where that gets you*, Mack thought with a bitter laugh.

In spite of their generic advice, his hockey buddies were the companionship Mack needed. After hockey, they went to Rocky's Grill for beer. This was Mack's night out and Sasha, his favorite waitress would share a drink after her shift was over. At least there was small comfort in another woman. So, perhaps there was some truth to solving one's problems by getting laid in the short-term, Mack thought ruefully.

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It was a Monday in early spring. It had been unusually mild, confusing the buds on the trees. Mack and the kids were piling out of the van, scuttling up the sidewalk to the front door. Patti had painted it red the first year they lived there. Mack reached into the mailbox and that's when he was hit with it. Patti's missive. He spotted it immediately. The blue envelope and Patti's handwriting on the front, stood out amongst the abundance of official envelopes and flyers. Mack turned it over immediately, looking for an answer to the mystery of Patti's whereabouts, but there was no return address.

"What's that daddy?" Samantha asked. She must have seen the anxiety on his face. Children don't miss a beat, Mack thought.

"It's just junk mail, honey," Mack unlocked the red door juggling the bundle of mail, his briefcase and Caden's blanket. They all tumbled inside.



“Wash your hands please, Sammy. And can you help your brother—” Mack shouted above the giggles and the general ruckus of arriving home after a day in school.

Mack placed the envelope in a kitchen cabinet away from prying eyes and small hands. He would have to wait and read it later after the kids were in bed. It might kill him, but he would wait.

“Let’s get you two a snack,” Mack picked up Caden to put him in his booster seat at the table and he smiled in happy anticipation of milk and cookies. Samantha sat herself at the table like a big girl, the blue envelope already forgotten.

Later that evening, after he put the kids to bed, Mack opened the letter. His stomach did a small flip when he unfolded the paper. This is what he’d been waiting months for; an answer, an explanation.

It was carefully thought out and lacked a certain personal, raw Patti that he remembered. She “regretted many things” she said, “but couldn’t come back”. She wanted what was “best for the children right now and that’s you, Mack” she wrote. She was “undergoing rehab for alcohol and pill addiction” she confessed. Her familiar handwriting, as familiar as her voice, renewed Mack’s grief unexpectedly.

“...I beg you to understand, Mack. I’m a broken person. I don’t have any idea when I will be put back together in the way you knew me....in the way I hope you’ll remember me...”

Mack wiped his eyes after he folded up the letter.

So there it was. Blame the booze. With no idea where she lived and no return address, Mack realized this might be the last he heard from her. He was angry. She was still holding the cards. No email address, no way to contact her. It was a fresh abandonment.

*What about the goddamn kids, Patti?* He wanted to scream at her, shake some sense into her. Fuck.

She hadn’t even asked him for any money. He didn’t know whether to be insulted or relieved about this. Maybe he wanted her to need him still. He would give her money for her rehab if she would only ask. Damn her. Mack’s impotence left him in a fever pitch of anger. He crumpled up the letter and threw it into the kitchen sink along with his tea mug, breaking it to pieces. This only remotely satisfied him. He reached into the refrigerator and grasped at the

carton of eggs. Roughly putting it on the counter, he opened it and grabbed a handful. He flung open the back door off the kitchen and stepped outside. The cool, night air did little to sober his emotional state. He began throwing one egg at a time, as hard as he could. Each one smashed and splattered against the back fence, making a satisfyingly, soggy mess.

“Fuck,” he said to the night sky. The stars were only beginning to appear. Mack sat down on the back step and dropped his head. He stared stupidly at his bare feet. After a long sulk and a few silent tears, Mack picked himself up. He went back in the house, locked the door and fetched the crumpled letter out of the sink. He carefully collected the broken pieces of his mug. The shards were sharp and of various shapes and sizes. Mack could glue it back together and use it as a personal trophy or a symbol. *We’re broken too, and we’re being glued back together in a different way. We break.*

He would soon have to think about how to move on and if and when a divorce would be the right thing to do. For now though, Mack would have to accept her absence not just on a day to day basis, which is what he had learned to do, but indefinitely. But in spite of his anger, he couldn’t help but wonder; was he wrong to think that Patti may still be back for Samantha and Caden one day? This hope had nothing to do with him anymore. It was all about the kids.

Mack smoothed out Patti’s crumpled letter. Even if she *had* provided her return address, he was sure there were no words he could write to make her return. That ship had sailed. The question was, what did he tell their children, not just today but years from now? He took the letter to his room and stashed it in his top drawer.

He had two phone calls to make; one to his sister, to ask her to come babysit and one call to Ellen, to apprise her of the news from Patti. Then he was going to Rocky’s Grill because on-line support groups for single fathers could only do so much to ease his pain.

#

Mack, Samantha and Caden began going to the local coffee shop every Sunday. The fireplace and hot chocolate warmed them while the noisy din of the other patrons gave Mack undefined company. It was easier being among strangers than close friends and family. They didn’t ask questions about Patti.

This routine gave Mack and the children a tradition all their own. It became their place for a treat as Sam put it “Daddy, is it time to go to ‘our place’ for hot chocolate?”

As winter had turned to spring they continued their tradition, and Mack began recognizing the same faces. Sometimes, Mack said hello and made small talk with other parents. It provided a connection to new people who weren’t part of their past trauma. At *their place* they were just another father, daughter and son.

Mack had noticed a beautiful brunette at *their place*. The first time he saw her, she had come in from the cold with her blue jacket zipped up to her chin. Her cheeks and lips a delicate, rosy pink from the cold. She unzipped her coat and flipped her hair out from under her collar. No ring. Mack was immediately taken with her natural beauty and warm smile she shared with the barista (and sometimes he caught her smiling at Samantha and Caden). With each return to *their place*, Mack was aware of his secret desire to catch a glimpse of this mystery lady. Yet, he had not been so lucky as to see her recently. Sometimes if you put out to the universe what or who you want, they’ll appear. *That’s what the self-help books would have you believe*, Mack pondered.

#

As spring came into full bloom so were the activities at Samantha’s school. Sports Day, field trips and parent-teacher reviews were all condensed into the last four weeks of the school year. Caden had grown a whole inch and was getting heavier to pick up. He was making his own friends at his daycare. Mack had signed him up for pre-school that would begin in the fall. Samantha’s anticipation for summer holidays had been buzzing around her with demands for sleep-over’s at Chelsea’s and picnics at the lake. Mack was barely keeping pace between all the father duties and his work site obligations. Nonetheless, he was learning to balance his two roles and considering hiring a nanny to help during the summer, and possibly on a more permanent basis.

It was almost a full year since she left. Everyday life; it was a thing they did without Patti.

As the last school-bell rang marking the official start of summer, Mack stood with all the other parents and kids outside the front door of the school. He quietly observed these wives

and mothers standing alongside him in the hot, June sun. Every once in a while one would scold her small child, another would laugh softly while yet another chatted about her summer plans. They looked and behaved as normal mothers and wives but didn't Patti also behave normally on the surface? Mack couldn't help but wonder, how many of these women were dying inside and how many would leave their families for a better life, or to kick an addiction?

These women, Mack had learned, were Patti's comrades in motherhood. They shared a secret understanding about the irony of it all. *Was there any way to truly know whether someone was content and happy as a mother?*

Just as he was lost in thought, Mack could have sworn he saw Patti outside the gymnasium door. When he took a second look there was no one there, only a tree swaying in the summer wind. His periphery vision tricked him like that sometimes. It was only his imagination, and the remains of hope brushing up against his cortex. Just like he used to fantasize that she walked through their red, front door again and asked his forgiveness.

"Daddy," Samantha patted Mack's arm, bringing him back to the moment, "can we go for ice cream with Chelsea and her brother? Pleaaaase?" Please was *pleath*, and ice cream was *ithcream*. Ever since the Tooth Fairy came, Samantha's tongue stuck in the gap where her two front teeth used to be. It added ironic comedy to everything she said, no matter how serious, excited or sad.

"Sure, honey," Mack chuckled and mussed her curls, while Caden wrapped his arm around Mack's leg. He couldn't think of a good reason not to. With a wave to some of the parents and an agreement to meet at the ice cream parlor, Mack piled Samantha and Caden into the back seat. And so their summer began with melting strawberry ice cream and a gap-toothed smile.

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After arranging all the logistics, Mack, Samantha and Caden found a normal rhythm for their summer break. Mack was able to work while his mother came over during the days. On weekends, they went to the spray park, and sometimes they just stayed home and Samantha had Chelsea come over to play. Mack took the last week off in July, so he could have some quality time with the kids and fulfill those promises of picnics at the lake. The nanny would begin in late August. There were other nannies that could have started sooner but Nanny Mo

was the number one choice. Samantha and Caden both took an immediate liking to her out of all the nannies they met at the informal interviews Mack had set up in their living room.

As the days danced on, Mack accepted Patti's absence with more ease. In the dusty corner of his mind he forgave Patti a smidge and wished the best for her in her recovery and beyond. He was able to think of what happened to them in less angry terms. He imagined, based on her letter, she was lonely, not carefree and happy. This helped ease his anger and generate more sympathy. After all, why begrudge her the independence to live with her own misery? If she wanted it that way, then Mack wasn't going to interfere. He only hoped she was getting the help she needed.

It occurred to him, she may never be satisfied with herself and maybe that was her punishment.

The children asked less about her. Sadly, she was living in their memory, not their reality. It made Mack ache a little but then what could he expect of the children? They had to move forward at childhood speed, which is break-neck. They had no choice but to live and love their father while the memory of their mother inevitably faded away like a child's drawing, yellowing over time.

#

On a hot day at the end of July, the sun was at its peak, radiating full heat. Mack and the kids were in the backyard kicking a soccer ball around. When he chased the ball to the back of the yard, Mack noted the stuck-on, egg splatter. He smiled and shook his head. He'd have to hose that off before it became impossible to remove. On second thought, maybe he would just leave it be.

Later they went to the coffee shop. They sat in the shade under an umbrella outside at *their place*. Caden and Samantha had their lemonade and cupcakes. Mack had his iced coffee, something he never would have imagined could taste so good.

There she was.

The mystery lady he had seen last winter. Today she wore a sleeveless, floral dress that hung just above her knees. It was slightly faded and Mack imagined it to be of the softest cotton. Her hair fell below her shoulders in a messy wave, framing her lightly tanned, bare face.

She wore leather sandals and her red, painted toenails peeked out, Mack noticed. He couldn't say her age.

She briefly made eye contact with Mack, sending an unexpected surge of heat to his cheeks. He had a hunch that *she* was the reason he was there. He felt the empty space where he stored his grief shrink. It all shifted in a split second. An involuntary smile lit his face. She smiled back and just then Samantha spilled her lemonade, splashing the woman's sandals and spraying her pretty toes.

Mack laughed to cover up the awkward moment while he should have been apologizing. The woman's gaze with Mack was broken as she startled and looked at Samantha and smiled.

"Oopsy," Samantha's eyes widened in her tiny face as she got up and took her crumpled paper napkin, bent down and patted the woman's toes dry. The woman laughed and knelt down.

"Thank you," she smiled at Samantha.

"Is that better?" Sam asked with a curious, toothless smile, her tongue peeking out. Is was *ith*.

"Yes, I think I'll be just fine. Thank you," the woman's face radiated sunshine. Mack thought he would fall to the ground and sit right there beside Samantha, at the woman's feet.

"Who *are* you?" Samantha asked the mystery lady, beating Mack to the punch.

"My name is Gillian, what's yours?" the mystery lady crinkled her eyes when she smiled and held her hand out for Samantha.

"Samantha," Sam giggled. She shyly added, "My daddy calls me Sam." She stood up, brushed her curls away from her face, "Daddy, this is Gillian." Sam showed the mystery woman to her daddy like a new, beloved doll and sounded out her name like Gilly-Ann.

Mack stood up on cue and introduced himself and little Caden, apologizing for her sticky toes and the spilled lemonade. Gillian stood to greet Mack and shake his hand. The crevasse in Mack's heart closed a tiny bit.

Every Sunday Mack, Samantha and Caden continued their tradition. They went over to the coffee shop and sometimes saw Gillian. Samantha would ask her to sit with them, and she would without hesitation. Mack had made a deal with himself that the next time he saw her, he

would ask her out. He would make sure he didn't lose the next opportunity to get Gillian into his life.

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The sunlight crept into his room early in the late-summer morning, and danced on Mack's heart, coaxing him awake. Before opening his eyes, he silently sent out a prayer to the universe, for two women. One prayer went to Gillian, to win her heart. The second woman was the mother of his children. Mack secretly thanked Patti for teaching him what *not* to do next time he married. *Next time he married*. Just the thought renewed Mack's spirit and gave him hope. Now, his hope was not dependent on whether Patti returned. Instead, hope and his heart were taking flight and soaring up for a new beginning.

"Daddy, are you awake?" Samantha asked, with her face so close to Mack's her blue eyes appeared crossed. Mack was startled out of his reverie. He quietly chuckled at her sweet expression.

"Yes, baby, daddy's awake."

"What are we going to do today?" Samantha climbed onto the bed and snuggled Mack. Mack noticed her two front teeth had made an appearance. *When had that happened?*

"Hmm. Not sure yet. How about we start with breakfast?"

"Okay," Samantha sounded resigned. She sighed and stared up at the ceiling. "Daddy, is mommy coming back?"

The birds chirped enthusiastically outside the open window. The warmth in the room indicated the heat of the sun had already arrived in spite of the early morning hour.

"Daddy?" Samantha turned to look her daddy in the eye. Her curls around her chubby cheeks made it even harder for Mack to answer.

"Sam, I don't think for a long while. I'm sorry to say that, Sugar Pie'," Mack touched her cheek gently. "But I know this: Your mom loves you and she will find us when she's ready. I just don't know when that will be," Mack felt helpless. He could only base this explanation on Patti's letter.

Samantha simply put her pinky in the corner of her mouth thoughtfully. In spite of getting on with their childhoods, this would remain an ongoing discussion, kind of like the birds and the bees, Mack realized.

Patti was a conversation he would try to tackle with more honesty.

“But daddy, what about Gilly Ann? Can we find her?” Samantha sat up and looked genuinely curious.

Mack was pleasantly surprised at his daughter’s quick change of topic. It made him feel optimistic. “Since when do you read my mind, young lady?” Mack laughed and Samantha giggled so loud she woke Caden up.

“Dad-dy!” Caden sing-songed from down the hall.

“Coming, Caden!” Samantha, as always, answered her little brother.

And so, they began a new day. The world kept turning and the sun kept rising. Mack believed his prayers would be answered. At the same time, he understood his children would eventually require a lot more than simple conjectures to resolve the mystery of their mother. At least for now, they could find happiness in small moments of life...like breakfast.

Now it was time for waffles and maple syrup and later, if they were lucky, they would find Gilly Ann.

-excerpt from *Hearts Unbroken-Short Stories*, by Lisa Thomson

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