Red Ink

JULIE MAYHEW

This is the recipe.

Take five pounds of hulled whole wheat. Hold it in your arms. Feel that it weighs nothing compared to the load that lies heavy on your heart. Wash the wheat; let your tears join in. Strike a match, strike up faith, light the gas. Watch the wheat bubble and boil. See steam rising like hope. Take the pot from the heat and pour the wheat through a sieve. Lay the grain on a sheet overnight to dry. Rest your head on your own sheets. Dream of a flower dying, shedding its seeds, allowing another flower to grow.

In the morning, on the day of remembrance, put the wheat in a bowl with walnuts, almonds, and parsley. Add a message of devotion, a wish for the future, your gratitude to God. Sprinkle in cinnamon, not guilt. Throw in sesame seeds; throw away your fear. Turn out your mixture and create a mound—a monument to love. Brown some flour and sift. Add a layer of sugar. Press flat. Finally, crush the skin of a pomegranate with the remains of your fury, and spread the seeds with love, in the shape of a cross.

Maria did not dream of a flower dying. The night before her mother's funeral, she did not sleep at all. She pressed one of Mama's cardigans close to her face, letting it transport her

back to a farm where cistus shrubs turn the air bittersweet. She listened to Melon's snuffling breaths, envying the way her daughter remained untouched by grief. She thought of the day ahead, the day she would return her mother to the earth. She was not ready to let her go.

Auntie Eleni had outlined the ceremony and recommended a plot. She had also pressed into Maria's hands the pamphlet containing the recipe for the traditional *kollyva*—the boiled wheat.

"But I can't cook," said Maria, scanning the recipe. "I can't do it."

"You will find it within yourself," Eleni insisted.

And so she had.

Part One

17 DAYS SINCE

"You okay in there?"

I locked myself in the bathroom two hours ago.

"Yeah." One syllable is all he can have; otherwise he'll think we're friends.

"You're very quiet."

"I'm fine." Two syllables. He should think himself lucky.

My name is Melon Fouraki. Let's get that out of the way, straight off. Some kids get their parents' jewelry or record collections as hand-me-downs. Mum gave me this name. It is one of her memories—she was brought up on a melon farm in Crete. I'd rather she'd given me her old CDs. She also gave me Paul. Living with him is like wearing clothes made of sandpaper. Every move I make, I'm on edge. He watches so much, it hurts.

The bathroom is the only place to get away. I can hear him fidgeting on the hall landing outside, pretending not to be there. I can hear him creaking the floorboards. He's listening through the door for the sound of a fifteen-year-old trying to slit her wrists. I am not going to slit my wrists. Paul is a social worker, so he thinks everyone my age runs away from their foster home, sleeps on the streets, turns to crime, gets taken back into care, and then tries to kill

themselves. He can't get his head around the fact that I am well balanced. They worked with each other, Paul and my mum, only they ended up shagging. He would say they were partners. "Partners." Idiot. He thinks they were proper boyfriend and girlfriend, but he's deluding himself. Mum only hooked up with him because she thought it would freak out the rest of Social Services if the Greek woman and the black man got it on. It's not as if they were living together or anything. Now Paul has moved in to look after me. How ironic. How tragic.

My mum is dead. Seventeen days ago it happened. Paul thinks I need sympathy and care and time and asking every five minutes how I am. I don't. Just because your mum is dead, that doesn't define you or anything. I am my own person.

Paul is still outside the door. I can't concentrate on writing in my book with him there.

"You'll turn into a prune if you stay in much longer." He is trying to sound casual and funny, as if me being locked in the bathroom is the most hilarious thing in the world and not a total crisis. He is picturing me collapsed in a bath of pink water, a razor on the edge of the tub, my eyes rolled back in their sockets. I'm not even in the bath. I just ran the water so Paul would hear and not question what I'm doing.

"Yes. All right," I yell back. Three syllables. Dammit.

I double-check the bathroom lock, make sure I fastened it, just in case Paul wigs out and decides to burst in on some kind of rescue mission. Mum fitted that hook-and-eye lock. That's why it's wonky and why the screws haven't

been pushed in all the way. If you lean on the door, it opens up a crack, like our front door with the chain on. If Mum was ever outside the bathroom wanting to know what I was doing, she would shoulder the door and stick her nose through the gap. Paul won't do this, not unless he gets a real panic on. As far as he's concerned, I'm naked in here, and he's a middle-aged social worker who's dead cautious about doing anything that might seem suspicious.

I was at Chick's house when the police came knocking. Chick's real name is Kathleen, but everyone calls her Chick because she's little and scrawny and kind of sweet at the same time. No one calls her Kathleen to her face, except for grown-ups. Kathleen's a geek's name. Mum was always moaning that I spent far too much time at Chick's. She never liked Chick's mum, Mrs. Lacey. She thought she acted all superior just because she has a part-time job making up the names for wall paint. You know, Pistachio Dream, Cerise Sunset, Arsehole Brown, that kind of thing. Mum said it was a pointless job, but I thought it was kind of cool to be paid to do something so, well, pointless. Anyway, I was at Chick's house when the police came looking for me, and I wonder whether Mum subconsciously did it on purpose, chose to get knocked over that evening just so she could prove her case about me spending too much time around Mrs. Lacey. That's the sort of thing she would do.

Once when we were in Crete visiting Granbabas, one August when it was so hot you couldn't breathe without cracking a full-on sweat, she made me sit with her in the ATM lobby of a bank in Hania, just because it had amazing

air-conditioning. We looked like such losers, sitting in those beach chairs we'd brought with us, the kind that make your knees touch your chin when you sit down. The locals came and went, swiping into the lobby with their ATM cards, getting their money, giving us weird looks, wondering if we were the bank manager's crazy relatives keeping an eye on things for him. Mum sat with her legs stretched out, her head tipped back, like she was sunbathing indoors. She kept sighing these big, long God-it's-so-hot sighs even though it got quite chilly in there after about half an hour. I would have given anything for a pushy bank clerk to have moved us on, but it was Sunday. No staff. We stayed there for three hours. Mum fell asleep, though because she'd kept her sunglasses on, I never noticed her eyes were shut.

Paul still won't shift from the door. "Well, I wouldn't mind a bath later, so . . ."

"So?"

"So, don't use up all the hot water, please, Melon."

He's still there, waiting. I get up from the floor, kneel over the bath, and swish my arm in the water. I hope the noise will prove that I'm still breathing and all my main arteries are intact. I listen for Paul's feet on the landing. There is a creak or two, a pause. He's thinking about saying something else; I can feel it. Nothing. Then the *crunch*, *crunch*, *crunch* of the loose boards under the stair carpet. He's gone. At last. I sit on the mat with my back up against the bath. The side of the bath is carpeted. Old mauve shag pile. The bathroom set is green, and there is a lime-scale stain from the bath taps down to the plughole, like tea running down the side of a mug. Mrs. Lacey's bathroom is beige with a sandstone mosaic.

Now that Paul has gone, I can write things down. That's why I'm in here. I don't want Paul to see what I am doing. He will think that it's a "positive step." He will think it shows I'm "coming to terms with everything." He will think I am close to embracing him in a big old do-gooding hug. Basically, he wants me to cry. I do not want to cry. I don't need to cry. "It hasn't hit you yet," he'll say. And I'll make some joke like, "No, maybe not, but it's definitely hit Mum, though, hasn't it?" Ha-ha-ha-ha. And he'll make a face and look like he is trying not to blub. This is mean of me, I know, but I just want to be left alone. If Paul can't understand that, he'll have to face the consequences. If only Mum had waited one more year, I'd have been sixteen and allowed to look after myself.

I can hear the scrape of a saucepan bottom against the stove burner coming from the kitchen downstairs. Paul is a noisy cook. A show-off. He has been cooking all evening, in between his panic attacks outside the bathroom door. He is always cooking for me. He thinks he's filling the gap left by Mum, but she never used to cook much. Frozen stuff, pasta sauces, lots of things on toast, that's what I'm used to. Tonight it is homemade soup. I don't want to have these meals with Paul. He tricks me into them. He'll ask, all casual, "Do you like soup?" (or risotto or bolognese or whatever), and I can hardly say no; otherwise, I'll never get to eat that particular food in front of him again. So I go, "Yes," and he goes, "Good, because that's what we're having for dinner tonight," and that's it. I'm stuck with it.

"Ten minutes until dinner, Melon." He always gives me these countdowns. We did this book in English a while back

about what the world would be like after a nuclear war, so I've given some thought to what I might do if we got a real ten-minute warning. I wouldn't eat soup.

I push my sleeve up and put my arm underwater to pull out the bath plug. The water has gone cold. I ran hot water so that the boiler would make the right chugging noises for a proper bath. I am excellent at pretending. I even put in some of Mum's bubble bath to make the right smell. It reminded me of her getting ready to go out somewhere. There was this one time, she went to the Social Services Christmas Ball with Paul (which did not sound like the biggest night of fun on earth), and we had a massive argument just before she left the house. We didn't speak for a week. Or rather, I didn't speak to Mum for a week. She was useless at holding grudges. I am an expert.

I rake a wet hand through my hair to make it look like I've been in the bath. I can't get used to my hair being short. I grab for the ponytail at the back sometimes and forget that it's gone. I admit the haircut might have been a mistake. The fuss it caused was great, but the haircut itself sucks. The front section gets frizzy if I sit in a steamy room, and I get this fluffy halo around my face. Mind you, that used to happen even when my hair was long. Nothing stops it. Chick got her hair permed once—she actually chose to have curly hair—which I thought was total madness. I have big Greek curls. I have a big nose, big thighs, a big backside, and big boobs. The boobs are an especially great thing to have when your name is Melon. Mum always said she was the real Greek but I was the one with the "Greek woman's body." This is a polite way of

saying I'm a bit fat. I'm not fat—I know that really. I'm not like Freya Nightingale, who believes she's an elephant and always goes to the bathroom to puke after lunch. I just take up more room in this world. Mum was skinny all over, except in the right places. Real boobs that looked fake. She was a dinky person who looked like she would fit in your pocket. I look like I would split the seams.

I might look Greek, but I don't feel it. It's a costume I can't take off. Mum took me to Crete every year, but the threads that joined me to that place have been snipped, or they were never there in the first place. Mum tried to fix her threads loads of times, but I don't think she succeeded. The family didn't forgive her, not really. She never got that into her head. Now there's hardly any family left to visit. It's because of the curse. All the Fourakis family dies young.

My dad still lives there, though—Mum said. I've never actually met the man. She never delivered a living, breathing dad to me. I have a name; that's all. According to The Story, his name is Christos Drakakis. I say it to myself sometimes, test it out. *My dad is Christos Drakakis, and my name is Melon Drakaki. How do you do?* Except I hope I wouldn't have been called Melon if Christos had stuck around. He would have stopped Mum from being so stupid, and I would have been given a proper name with a saint's day, just like every other good Greek girl. I would have been named Sophia or Alexandra, something normal like that.

"Five minutes, Melon."

There are five minutes until the nuclear holocaust: What do I do? Find the epicenter and run toward it. I don't want

to survive with all the destruction and deformity and radiation sickness.

The stink of soup hits me when I step out of the bathroom. Cooking smells have a set path through this house—up the stairs, a swirl in one corner of the landing, and then on to collect in my bedroom. It must be the way the drafts work in this place. Mum's room never gets rid of that woody vanilla smell.

I go downstairs, stepping around Kojak, who has taken to sleeping in the middle of the staircase. He hasn't been the same since Mum died; he's gone mute. Before, he would be meowing around my ankles and following me into the kitchen. Now he stays put—a big gray ball with one eye on the front door, as if he's expecting Mum to walk in any minute.

I stop on the stairs and lift him up into a hug, but he freaks out. He bends his spine backward and twists out of my grip. He can't scamper upstairs fast enough. His claws pop and splutter against the stair carpet. He doesn't want attention from me. He goes to Mum's room.

Kojak's really old now. Maybe the heartache of it all will finish him off.

In the kitchen, Paul is listening to Jazz FM and wearing Mum's apron with the big purple flowers. Paul likes elevator music and doesn't seem to care about looking like a girl.

"Sweet potato and pea," he says, turning from the stove to look me up and down. He's checking for wrist cuts or signs of an overdose, no doubt. "Sit down."

He has set two places at the kitchen table, opposite each other. I sit down at one of the four chairs that doesn't have

a place set. I don't want to eat with Paul *and* have to look at his face. Paul comes over with a full bowl of soup. He doesn't react to my choice of seat, just slides a place mat over to me and sets down the bowl. The smell is strong, spicy. He has put a dollop of something white on top that looks like bird poo. Paul ladles himself a bowl, adds the bird poo, and then comes to sit down. There is a basket of bread with dead-fly olives running through the middle.

"Nice?" he asks. Paul is always fishing for compliments.

"Not tried yet."

I reach for the bread, start tearing strips off and putting them in my mouth one by one, chewing thoughtfully, trying to delay the tasting of the soup. He'll have to wait for the next ice age before I tell him he's a great cook.

"You know, Melon, you don't have to lock yourself in the bathroom."

I look down at the steam rising off my soup, watch the edges of the bird poo spread.

"You can have your own space."

I reach for more bread, tear off a crust.

"What were you doing in there, anyway?"

"Mind your own business."

He shuts up, starts shoveling soup into his mouth, three big mouthfuls straight after one another, like he hasn't eaten all week. Only after the third mouthful does he go, "Ooh, hot." Idiot.

I put my spoon into the soup. I can't really put it off any longer. I can feel him watching me while I blow on it, then slurp. My skin aches from all the watching I get. He waits for a comment. I continue spooning. He nods, smiles.

He has taken my continued eating as a compliment, which it is not. I'm so angry I could tip the steaming lot all over his head. But I'm also bloody hungry.

"How was the session on Tuesday? You still haven't told me how it went."

This is the fifth time he has asked me this. I am counting.

"Was it helpful?"

"S'okay."

"Did you talk about the argument?"

This is a new one.

"What argument?" The lingering smell of the bath bubbles kicks me back to the night of the Christmas Ball again, the argument we had that night.

"Did you talk about the argument you had with your mum?"

"Which one?" I keep eating to prove I don't care what he knows.

"The one just before she died."

Hot soup clags up my throat. I turn cold.

"I just thought that it may be troubling you and that it would help to talk to someone about it."

"How do you know about that?" I say. I don't look at him. I keep my voice level so he understands that it's definitely not an issue.

"We used to talk, you know," he says. "Your mum and me."

15 DAYS SINCE

I don't talk about the argument at the session. Why would I? That's not what the session is about.

I was expecting an old man, gray, in a suit. Leather furniture. A desk. A couch for me to lie on. I get none of this. I get Amanda. Everything about her is nice. Which is unfair because I really want to hate her. I get a plastic chair in an upstairs room with white walls and a sandy-colored carpet. I suppose it's all meant to be calming. I just want to scream.

Amanda sits on the only other piece of furniture in the room, another plastic chair, smooths down the sides of her hair (a pointless thing to do; she is as frizzy as me), then switches on her very best sympathetic voice.

"Hello . . . Melon."

There is a pause between the greeting and the name. I am used to that pause. Amanda pulls her face into an exclamation mark and double-checks her notes.

"I think Social Services has misspelled . . ."

"No, it's Melon."

"Oh." She hides behind her folder.

"My mum named me Melon."

There. I cross my arms as an end to it.

Mum.

Amanda stiffens at the word, like an actor who's been given the wrong line and is forced to jump ahead in the script. I stare at her, working my chewing gum, realizing this is what it feels like to be cocky.

"Melon. Gosh! How lovely!"

My chewing gum squeaks on my teeth.

"I'm Amanda." She thrusts her name badge at me and holds it there, on the end of its lanyard, waiting for me to say something. What can I say about her "Amanda-ness"?

I nod.

"And I've got here as your surname, Fu . . . Fu . . ."

"Fouraki."

"Is that . . . ?"

"Greek? Yes."

"How lovely!"

I wince.

"So!"

Amanda draws in a big, meaningful breath to begin, then stops. Her faces changes, as if she's just remembered something awful. Has she left the iron on back at home, the gas burner blazing? No. It's tissues. She's forgotten tissues. She gets up and grabs a box from the windowsill. Then there's a horrible moment where she can't decide where to put them because there's no table and it seems a bit weird to put them on the floor. After faffing around for a bit, she decides to plonk the box on my lap. I want to die. If I don't sob like a baby now, I'll be in for it. So I do this little laugh.

Amanda cocks her head at me, switches the concerned face back on.

"So, how are you feeling today?"

"All right."

"Your social worker explained why you've come to see me?"

"Poppy, yeah."

"Poppy?"

"I mean, Barbara."

"You called her Poppy."

"That's what she calls herself. Barbara Popplewell. Poppy for short."

Amanda looks all sorts of confused. "Oh, I see. Lovely." But she's thinking it's unprofessional, Barbara using another name—I can tell.

"Because it's been"—Amanda goes back to her notes—"just over two weeks now." She doesn't add a "since" and finish the sentence. Am I supposed to do it for her, like some twisted version of *Family Feud*? *We asked 100 people the question, "It's been just over two weeks since what?" Our survey says the most popular answer iiiiis . . . "Your mother got whacked by a bus and was turned into asphalt."* Round of applause. The set of matching suitcases is yours.

"Yeah," I say. "Fifteen days. Not that I'm counting or anything."

Amanda tilts her head again, sends me a silent *poor you*. I ignore it, look out the window behind her. In the distance, two school teams are playing soccer in fluttering bibs. Small cries and a faint whistle come through the glass.

"So what feelings have come up for you since then?"

The correct answer here I presume is sad, lost, suicidal, fetch me a noose. Something along those lines. *Our survey says the most popular emotion in the wake of your mother's death iiiiis . . .*

"I'm a bit pissed off."

"Mmm, mmm." Amanda is nodding like crazy. In TV dramas when the counselor does this, the other person finds they can't help but keep on talking. Before they know it, they've confessed everything. I don't want to spill my guts, not here in this old house that was probably, long ago, someone's stately home. It seems wrong that a building like this is where the sad and the mad hang out. I am in the wrong place.

"Mmm, mmm." Amanda is still a nodding dog.

What feelings are coming up for you? I can't think of anything to say. Should I literally do what the question asks, stick two fingers down my throat and vomit up the strange, dark monster that has made its home inside of me? We could interrogate this creature instead.

Amanda keeps at it. "And what do you think is making you feel, as you say, 'pissed off'?"

You, I want to say, and Paul and Chick and Mrs. Lacey and everyone else who can't get over the fact that my mum is dead and it's no big deal. I don't say this. I raise my eyebrows.

"Sorry, that was a . . . I mean, obviously we know what's making you 'pissed off.' Obviously we both know that." Amanda drops behind her hair to think up some new questions. "I mean, I just want you to explain a bit more about why it's that particular feeling for you. Let's look at

where these feelings are coming from within you. How are they making you behave?"

I go back to watching the school soccer game.

When I was thirteen, our whole class had individual sessions with a community school nurse in the medical room at the back of the sports center. Everyone lined up alongside the building and waited their turn for what our teachers were calling a "Year Nine Health Check." We'd all expected some routine head-lice examination, but rumors came down the line as each person came out. We were going to have to talk about our problems—even the boys, and boys, as everyone knows, don't have problems, apart from the fact they're boys, of course. The school nurse had decided she was going to weed out the drinkers, the druggies, the vomiters and the starvers, the arm slicers, and the sluts. Each of us girls was questioned to cringing point on all areas of "female troubles." Elaine Wilkie was not thrilled to be told she could get a yeast infection if she kept on wearing those thick tights of hers every day.

But that session was different from this. The school nurse hadn't been very good at prodding. She'd tried to get me to talk about something private; I'd squirmed and she'd backed off. I felt embarrassed that I didn't have anything sleazy to keep hidden. Not like Kayleigh Barnes. She'd been trading blow jobs for weed with her brother's friends since Year Seven.

In comparison to the school nurse, Amanda's heavy-duty compassion is like drowning in jam.

"That's it, really," I say. "I just feel pissed off."

"Can you explain exactly how that feels for you?"

"I just feel pissed off."

"Why is it *that* particular feeling that is coming up for you?"

"Don't know. Just is."

"Okay, well, let's, um, let's break it down, Melon."

Why do adults always use your name when it isn't necessary? There is no one else in the room. Of course she is talking to me. They do it all the time, adults, name-check each other. They do it to prove they haven't gone senile yet, to show that they still have enough of their brain left to remind someone what their name is. It's pathetic. It just sounds patronizing.

"I'm not really upset enough for you, am I?"

Amanda looks taken aback, and I'm just about to notch up a point for myself when I notice the spark in her eye. I've been tricked into saying something she wants to hear—I can sense it.

"I mean," I jump in, "I mean, I feel, I feel . . . But I'm just . . . I think people think that . . ."

Amanda's frantic nodding returns, as if what I'm saying makes absolute grammatical sense.

"I mean"—I raise my voice, try to stop Amanda's head from coming loose—"*you* think I should be more upset."

"How do *you* think you should be behaving?" Amanda shoots back, triumphant.

Ten points to the counselor.

Exasperation is fizzing on my tongue. Amanda reminds me of Mum: that self-satisfied face. I feel like I'm listening to *her* again, talking about the troubled kids at her job, boasting about her work as if it's curing cancer or something.

"Giving them easy ways out? No—this is not my job," Mum would go, lecturing me, as if I had started the discussion, as if I cared. "No. I find ways for teenagers to make the sensible decisions."

"What if I said, 'Fuck it. I'm going to keep selling drugs on the street; it keeps me in nice sneakers'?" I'd say back.

"Well, what I am asking you is this: How else can you make this 'sneaker money'? How else can you do it and not go to jail?"

"And what if I said, 'But this is simple'?"

"I would say, 'Now is the time! Now! Now is the time to rewrite your history. You plan to do this all of your life?'"

"'Yeah, why the fuck not? Got a problem with that?'"

"Melon, do not say this f-word."

"That's what it's like on the streets, Mum."

And so on it went.

Amanda waits for an answer, wearing her last successful piece of strategy like a blue ribbon. I go back a couple of moves.

"You think I should be crying."

"There are no 'shoulds,' Melon, just 'is.'"

"Right."

"The idea of us getting together is so we can work through the issues that are troubling you at this moment in time."

"Right."

"So we only have half an hour today for an initial assessment, but I think I should perhaps book you in for some more regular sessions with me."

I want to run out of the room.

"Or one of our other therapists here?"

I can't look at her.

"And you could try writing it all down. Your teachers tell me you're a really bright girl."

I wonder if my teachers would have said that if Mum hadn't died.

"Putting it down on paper is one way of getting it out." Amanda has slipped on her best kindergarten voice. "The tears you talk about are just another way of releasing the grief."

I try to torture Amanda with a weighted silence. Then I say, "What would I write?"

"Whatever you want."

There is that spark in Amanda's eyes again. She is going to ask me what I feel like writing.

"What do you feel like writing?"

"Dunno. What would you write?"

"That's irrelevant. We all experience grief differently. This is about you and what you feel."

I roll my eyes, look at the carpet, grip the edge of my seat. I have an urge to hit Amanda in the face, hard, to stop all this stupid talk, to make her understand. How will writing some kind of school essay get rid of the brick lodged in my ribs? I concentrate on holding on to the chair, reining myself in, stopping it from all coming out. Amanda doesn't get it. The something inside of me isn't grief, isn't loneliness, isn't anything that Amanda can stick a label onto. I snap.

"It's all right for you, dishing out the advice." The voice I'm using doesn't sound like mine. It's vicious. "You're not the one with the dead mum, are you?"

I wait for Amanda to pounce on my words, but she is still and calm. She closes her eyes, blinking away what I just said. She's not going to retaliate. She smiles a painful smile.

"No," she says, rising above it all. "You're right."

Amanda has a dead mum.

Amanda has a dead mum.

She looks beaten, soft at the edges, like another human being all of a sudden. My grip on the chair loosens. I shrink back. I feel something like guilt creeping up inside. I want to say sorry, but the word won't come out.

"Right," I say instead. I start nodding. "I'll do that. I'll write it down."

THE STORY

1

On an island far, far from here, where the sea is woven from strings of sapphire blue and where the sunshine throbs like a heartbeat, there once was a farm.

At first glance it was like any other small piece of land on the Akrotiri Peninsula. There was a tiny stone cottage, its uneven walls washed white. There was a tidy yard with a wire fence, where a goat held court to an army of chickens. And beyond the cistus bushes that oozed their lemon scent into the breezy air were endless slopes of turned, brown earth—soil given over to the growing of fruit. But this was no ordinary farm—it was a magical place. Here was where five-year-old Maria Fouraki fell in love for the very first time.

Maria's *babas* worked hard for his crop. Bow-backed, a crucifix of sweat across his shoulders, he deposited seeds in carefully tilled holes. Babas was a large, round man, and the years of toiling in the relentless sun were written dark on his skin and silver in his hair.

"Just a week is all it takes," Babas explained to his daughter, his only child—a precious gift. *"Agapoula mou,"* he called her,

"peristeraki mou." My little love, my little dove. "Just a week," Babas told Maria, "and the growing will begin."

Maria listened, her brown eyes wide, to Babas's stories of germination and natural selection. *Only the strongest seed will survive*. She could not look away from the dark soil at her feet. She wanted the miracle to happen that minute. Babas, meanwhile, tilted his face to the sky, checking for subtle hints of the weather to come.

"If God be good and the summer fine, we shall soon have a new family of watermelons right here."

During the days that followed, Maria thought of nothing but the seeds. Why could she not see them growing?

"Be patient," said Babas. "It's all going on under the surface."

Maria imagined that the seeds were sleeping. Maria's mama would watch from the kitchen window as her daughter went to each of the hills of earth in turn, put her cheek to the soil, and whispered, "Wake up, wake up," in a voice no seed could refuse. When the strongest seedlings eventually burst free of their muddy blankets, Maria believed her soft words had made it happen. The melons would be her babies, and she must look after them.

The vines started creeping, spreading, and Maria helped Babas check each morning for darkling beetles, melon aphids, and yellow-striped armyworms. After a rainfall she would prune away overhanging leaves to make sure no mildew set in. She ran down the gullies between the crops, continuing her bright words of encouragement. She placed small hands on the rounding balls of green melon flesh, feeling the warmth that they had soaked up from the insistent

Greek sun. She imagined the fruits breathing, in and out, in and out. She tenderly instructed them to grow, to take up more space in this world.

One morning Maria was helping Mama feed the chickens when she heard a curious noise. She looked up to see Babas working his way along the highest slope, reaching under the melon plants and creating a sound.

Thud, thud.

The noise echoed around the yard. Maria felt her heart join in.

Thud, thud.

She raced up the hill to where Babas was down on his knees in the soil. "What's wrong?" she panted.

"Listen carefully, *agapoula mou*." He knocked soundly on the skin of one of the green fruits that rested, bloated, on the soil.

Maria creased her forehead, the same way Babas did and the way his *babas* had done before that. A pinched "w" of skin—the Fourakis look of concern.

"That sound," said Babas with a smile. "You hear? That is just right."

"Just right?"

"Ta karpouzia ine etima," announced Babas, expecting Maria to share in his delight. "The watermelons, they're ready."

"Ready for what?" Maria asked, her tiny hands clasped together as if in prayer.

The melons were piled in a perfect pyramid on the back of Babas's truck with no net or tarpaulin to hold them in place. Babas drove away at a snail's pace and would maintain that

steady crawl all the way to Hania. Maria trailed the truck to the first junction, her eyes prickling with tears. She whispered more words of encouragement, this time urging one of her green children to topple from the truck. But Babas had done this journey many times before and was wise to the bumps in the road. The melons did not listen to Maria. The impossible structure of fruit stayed strong.

Maria stood on that dusty path and watched the truck disappear. She felt the ground fall away from her perfect summer. She was only five years old, but already, here it was, her first lesson in how to love and lose—a toughening-up for the future. A horrible something took hold of Maria's heart and gave it a painful twist. Her only thought: *How will I love anything more than I loved those melons?*

7 DAYS SINCE

"Car's here, Melon," Paul is yelling from downstairs.

I go into Mum's room, close the door behind me, and open up her Victorian relic of a wardrobe. Inside, the clothes are jammed together so tightly that none of them can breathe. A few dead cardigans lie on the bottom of the wardrobe, strangled by belts and shoelaces.

I'm looking for the burgundy dress.

Anything with a zipper wouldn't fit me. The burgundy dress is stretchy. It'll cling to the wrong bits, and my underwear seams will show, but I don't need to look sexy. I need to look like the grieving daughter. Everything in my closet makes me look too happy or too sad (both meanings of the word *sad*). I just want to wear my denim skirt and a T-shirt. Mum wouldn't have cared less, but today is all about Paul and what his bloody social worker friends think.

I take the dress off the hanger. It smells of those green plastic balls that keep the moths from eating your sweaters. After a bit of Impulse spray, it'll be fine.

I pull off my black sweater and drop my skirt to the floor. I put the dress on over my head, wriggle the thing into place. I thought the arms would be too small, but they go all the way to my wrists just fine. I tug the seams into

the right places, then shut the wardrobe so I can see myself in the mirror on the door. Something squeezes my throat. It's like seeing a ghost. I look over my shoulder, expecting someone else to be there. There's Mum's empty bed, pillows made neat by Paul.

I go back to the reflection. There are differences—the way the dress stretches more than it ever had to over Mum's chest, the way my arms look like party balloons, the way my belly creates a little mound—but still . . .

Mum's stomach was the only thing about her body that was flawed. It was chopping-board flat, but she had these stretch marks, little silver lines worming their way around her belly button. It looked like a road map—Piccadilly Circus. There was a straight red line drawn underneath it all, just above where her skimpy pants stopped. These lines and scar never went brown like the rest of her skin, even after a whole day's sunbathing in Crete. I pointed them out once when we were on Tersanas Beach, and she waved me away as if I were a stupid fly.

"Oh, I am not caring about those," she'd said. Then she'd slowly rolled herself over. The local boys on the patch of sand next to us had watched, drooling, as if my mum were a supermarket rotisserie chicken. They were closer to my age than hers.

Mum propped herself up on her elbows and added, "Actually, I am liking them, the lines. They remind me that I give birth to you." She had smiled—pleased with that. She could never be like everyone else and have at least one little hang-up.

The more I look in the mirror, the more I see our

differences and the less I see that first thing—that ghost. It's gone. I've scared it off.

"Car's here, Melon," Paul yells again.

I heard him the first time. I know he's twitching by the front door, desperate for nothing to go wrong, as if us being five minutes late would be a bigger disaster than Mum dying in the first place.

Before I go, I find the bottle of vanilla perfume on Mum's yard-sale dressing table and give myself a good squirting. I leave my sweater and skirt on the floor. Mum was never one to stress about mess.

Paul is waiting downstairs in the hallway in a black suit. His mum, Irene, is flapping around him like an overweight butterfly. They've been crying. They have matching gluey streaks on powder-brown cheeks. Irene fixes Paul's tie and picks imaginary fluff off his jacket. Her dress is all vibrant reds and golds and purples. It's in-your-face cheerful. She's a giant weeping Red Admiral butterfly in a house of gloom. Irene is staying at the house when we go so she can sort out the food for afterward. It feels totally wrong that everyone will be chewing on Jamaican chicken drumsticks and lumps of fried plantain after a big "Greek" funeral. Paul said it's what Mum would have wanted. I said it was slap-dash. He argued that it would be "multicultural," so I reminded him what he had originally said—that the whole thing had to be Greek. "Make your mind up," I told him. That got him running back to his reference books. If it had been up to Mum, there would be more of an after-show party—a laser light show, drag queens in G-strings, that kind of thing.

I'm halfway down the stairs, stepping carefully over Kojak, when I realize Paul is staring at me with this stricken face.

"What?" I go.

He is looking me up and down in horror, as if I've come downstairs smeared in mud rather than dressed all smart.

"I bought that dress for your mum," he croaks.

"Did you?" I go. I give Kojak a rub behind the ears—he must be feeling it even worse today. I do the rest of the stairs and then unhook my coat off the end of the banister. I need to get my bag from the living room. "She still in there?"

Paul's Adam's apple is doing a dance. "They've carried her into the car."

"Good."

I go into the living room. Everything is like it was, except the air seems different. Museum air. The coffin has gone. There is a bowl of apple, quince, and pomegranate on the coffee table. Paul has done loads of research on all the right Greek rituals—found some really weird ones, dragged out from the Dark Ages. He was talking about putting a coin under Mum's tongue to pay Charon, the miser who will ferry her body across the river Styx. Loopy stuff. People who exaggerate their Irish roots are called Plastic Paddies, I heard once. Paul has become a Plastic Zorba. Just like Mum.

The one thing I know he is doing right is the *kollyva*. I got his mum, Irene, to make this massive dish of boiled wheat for the wake. Sounds gross, but it's what you're

supposed to do. I know this because Mum talked about it in The Story. Paul thought I'd gotten it wrong, that you only make *kollyva* for the days when you remember the dead, not funerals—but I set him straight on that one. Irene put almonds and icing on top of the wheat. I told her it had to be decorated with a cross too, made out of pomegranate seeds.

Back in the hallway, Paul is holding the front door open, taking big breaths. The hand that's not on the door is trembling. I can't look at that hand. Something about it makes me feel sick.

"Let's go, then." Paul is pretending to be cheerful and efficient. I don't want to join in with this jolly chitchat, so I'm glad when Irene steps between us. She won't let me escape without giving her a hug. It's like being wrapped in a blanket.

"You be brave, now."

I'm almost disappointed when she lets me go, this woman I hardly know.

Once we're in the car, Paul pulls himself together.

"You're wearing your mum's perfume. That's nice," he goes.

He puts his hand on top of mine, gives it a pat. I go rigid. He moves his hand away.

"Bit strong, though," I say. "Gets in your throat."

I pull up the neck of the dress and give it a sniff. Paul looks away, starts craning his head around the driver's shoulder to check that the car carrying Mum is still there. I don't know where he thinks it's going to go—speeding

off to do the pickup for some bank robbers? We crawl along the main street so passersby can have a good chance to see who's been unlucky. I try not to look at the car ahead. The cheesy wreaths spelling out MUM in pink carnations were Paul's idea. So was the big, flowery Greek flag. The little dove in white roses was my choice.

"I wish you'd had a look at her, spent some time with her, Melon."

I do a shudder to show him what I think about that. I drive my hands between my knees, look out the car window. It seems a shame it's not raining. Funerals should be rainy.

"She looked very peaceful. Very beautiful."

"Done her nice, had they?"

Cara Moran's mum works in a funeral parlor. Cara is always telling gory stories about how dead people's insides fall out if you don't block up all their holes. She says her mum sticks cotton balls in people's cheeks and makes them look like a chipmunk storing nuts before she gives them a makeover; otherwise, their faces sink in. She says you have to use special blush and lipstick to cover up all the blue skin. I'm pissed off with Paul that he let someone like Cara's mum loose on Mum and then stuck her in the living room for general display. Paul said it's the Greek way. I said it was twisted.

In Mum's will it said she wanted a Greek funeral. I think she meant a funeral in actual Greece, not a theme-park one over here. I'm so relieved Paul didn't figure that one out. We'd be sticking her coffin on easyJet now if he had. She also said she wanted her ashes scattered on the melon farm in Crete, which has caused Paul a massive headache

because the Greek Orthodox church won't let you get cremated. Shows how much Mum knew about it all. She probably just wrote that in her will to sound romantic. Or to play a joke on us.

So Paul has had to freestyle. The Orthodox churches won't have us, so we're using an English one instead and doing all the Greek stuff around the edges. The church he's chosen is huge, which is a massive waste. There'll only be me, Paul, and a couple of social workers rattling around inside. The Greek bunch isn't coming over to say their good-byes. Surprise, surprise.

It's ridiculous that we are doing it in a church at all. Mum was never really into God. She never went to church when she was alive. I was brought up godless, which means no one is looking over me and keeping me safe. I think of the want ad I'll have to put in the newspaper when I'm older and need some spiritual guidance:

WANTED: GOD

TO FILL THE HOLE LEFT BY DISINTERESTED MOTHER

I wonder where Mum's gone now. Heaven? Hell? A never-ending boat trip on the river Styx?

It takes no time to get to the church. The car was a waste too. We could have walked. The chauffeur holds the door open for me. I'm so embarrassed. The church towers over us, ready to swallow us up. Me and Paul walk up the path side by side. I have this horrible premonition of him giving me away at my wedding.

"Hello, Melon."

It's Mrs. Lacey. Mrs. Lacey is here. Why is Mrs. Lacey here?

Paul moves off to shake hands with some social worker friend by the church door.

There is only one reason Mrs. Lacey would come—Chick! Chick has pulled herself together! Chick has come to support me!

Mrs. Lacey takes hold of my elbow with a sympathetic crab claw.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," she says, like a robot, as if the last week never happened.

"Thanks," I say. Then, because she's caught me by surprise, I go, "You too."

Weirdly, she nods.

"I mean, it's okay," I correct myself. "It's not your fault."

She gives me that stare, the one that says she's locking her explosives away in a fireproof box.

"Kathleen is very sorry too."

"Is she?" I ask. I scan the churchyard over Mrs. Lacey's shoulder. "Where is Chick?"

"Ice-skating practice." She says this like Chick is doing missionary work in the Congo.

"Oh. Right. Nice."

"She's very stressed, finding it very difficult. She's practicing for the Autumn Ice Show auditions. She could be a wood nymph."

"That's really . . ." What? I can't find the words. I can imagine Chick as a wood nymph, those spidery legs.

"Yes, yes." Mrs. Lacey nods, her mind lost on Chick's current ordeal.

"Well, I'd better go in," I say. "Get a good seat."

"Yes, you'd better," Mrs. Lacey says, stern for no reason.

Paul beckons me over and we walk into the church, into its big stone insides.

And it is full.

Every seat is taken. Every pew is packed, black shoulder to black shoulder.

The place hums with the sound of people talking under their breath, but when I walk in, it hushes. Apart from Mum, I guess I'm the star attraction. I walk down the aisle, and it's like walking into the rib cage of a massive whale. Everyone turns and looks at me as I pass. I stare at all these unfamiliar faces one by one, and I think, *What are you all doing here?*

Afterward, at the reception, right in the middle of our living room, among all those social workers and neighbors and kids that Mum has helped out over the years, Mum's friend Poppy, who she used to work with, decided to do this speech.

"Maria used to tell me this story about when she was growing up in Crete," she went, "and . . ." Then she broke down in tears and couldn't continue.

It was the funniest thing. Like, funny ha-ha and funny weird all at the same time.

Poppy had started sobbing because she'd spotted a pottery ashtray on our mantelpiece, some wonky yellow-

and-red thing that Mum had made in an evening class. It wasn't anything important—Mum's interest in pottery making had fizzled out ages ago, and she was never any good at it. But Poppy went over to the mantelpiece and grabbed this thing like it was one of the Elgin Marbles and started wailing even harder, clutching the hideous thing to her chest. The hairpins and whatnot that Mum had been stashing inside of it fell all over the carpet. I was nearly pissing myself from laughing.

Then Poppy went, "Maria used to talk about this piece of thread," and suddenly I didn't feel like laughing anymore. "The piece of thread that connects her heart to mine." Poppy had ditched whatever Crete story Mum had spun for her and moved on to something else. My story . . .

"She said that when something happened to me . . ." Poppy started to hold it together now, but I just wished she would stop. "When I felt something tugging at my heart," Poppy went on, "Maria said she felt it too."

I couldn't believe it. Mum had used the same line on someone else—Poppy—just some woman from work.

Poppy got full of it then. She was loving the moment. "'I know, Maria, babe,' I told her, 'I feel it too.'"

When Mum had last talked to me about the piece of thread, I told her that it was a load of rubbish. I told her she never had any kind of clue what I was going through, that she never understood.

"Oh, don't you believe it," she'd gone. This angry little "w" of skin was creased into her forehead. "I know, I feel it. I have this piece of thread." She'd plucked angrily at the

fabric of her T-shirt, at her heart. Her accent went strong. Her face looked in pain. I still didn't understand what she meant, though. I couldn't feel what she felt. It was only when Poppy did that speech at the reception that I experienced it for the first time—the thread, the tug.

Red Ink

Julie Mayhew

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