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Buried

SALLY STARES INTO a hole dug deep into the earth, holding a fistful of dirt.

She looks at her hand holding the dirt. She knows her hand is real, she knows the cold of the dirt against her palm is real. Yet it all feels made-up. Sally can't remember why she's holding dirt. She looks at the hole, so deep. *Six feet under.*

It comes back. Sally is standing over her mother's grave. On the bottom is no coffin. Her mother wanted a green burial, apparently. They talked about it when they were young, her mom and her dad. He honored it.

Sally's brain works to bring her back, to remind herself what's happening. That is my mother down there, she thinks, wrapped in a shroud laced with mushrooms that will do the work of decomposing her. You can make out the shape of a figure inside the shroud, she thinks, but it's not creepy. It's quiet, like watching a cat sleeping.

Sally's thoughts remain a muddy swirl. She plots out points to find a line, a horizon, to understand what this is and who she is in it. She thinks, most basically, I am an alive person standing over the grave of a dead person. The dead person was a mother, my

mother. Sally's mind holds this biological fact: down there is the body I came from that is now being returned to the elements. In her thoughts, she continues to dig into what is true of the figure in the hole. Until a week ago, inside the body that is my mother, lived Mom. Mom is what I called the unresponsive institutionalized person I visited for years, Sally thinks, and once, long, long ago, inside the body of my mother, and inside Mom, lived Mommy. Mommy was the person I had for six years, someone remembered in split-second flashes so faint I often wonder if I made them up. Mommy dancing with me on the grass, making me food, touching my head and lullabying as the wind howled outside like a giant wolf.

Sally closes her eyes. The instant she does, she hears it in her head. She didn't try to remember it because she can't remember it. It just appears. Instantly, it fills her. The sound of Mommy's voice.

My Sally.

Then, a different voice. Both at the same time:

Sally. A lulling voice, in her head. "*Sally—*" A voice holding back irritation, in the world.

And like that, Sally is back. She feels the wind and smells the pine trees of Maine, she hears Jivani, her stepmom, saying her name a second time. "*Sally—*"

She turns. There is almost no one here. Sally's mother's only living relatives are her and Dad, who stands with Jivani. Dad looks older these days. When the gray first appeared, it hung out at his temples for a long time. Now that he's fifty, it's spread all over his jet-black hair. His eyes are puffy. He drinks. Not like an alcoholic, but like he needs to. When Sally was living at home and became aware of it, she would watch the new bottles drained quickly, replaced, drained. Sally tries hard to like him. He holds Jivani's hand.

Originally, Jivani was Joyce Clodfelter, a pale, white girl with pin-straight hair from Schuylkill Haven, Pennsylvania. Years

before she and Dad met, she had a bad break, a life crisis, that led, so her story goes, to a transformative exploration, yoga, meditation, plant medicine retreats, and a legal name change. Now she organizes ritzy events and hobnobs with rich people as the head fundraiser for Lincoln Center. The dress she wears today seems too festive. Eight months pregnant, her belly is showcased by the stretchy material. Other than her belly, her body is perfect. Once, she was a professional dancer. It's not always so noticeable, but now that Sally sees her and Dad side by side, their twelve-year age difference glares like a neon-yellow highlighter. Other than them, there's two of the nurses from the home who cared for Sally's mother for years.

Jivani does her smile that looks like glass, her eyes wide. She flicks her hand, indicating that Sally should toss the dirt into the grave already. Dad looks at Sally, a nice enough look.

She turns back to the shrouded figure in the hole.

She throws the fistful of dirt.

It sprinkles, a tiny brown shower, lands on the black biodegradable mushroom shroud.

It barely does anything toward covering the body.

It's just symbolic, Sally knows.

They tried to hide it behind a stand of trees, but Sally sees the yellow body of the excavator machine with the long neck and the huge claw hand that will do the real work of filling the hole once they're gone, burying her mother's body under thousands of pounds of dirt so the earth can get to digesting her.