

Immortality

Andrew would find out about the baby eventually, Craig says. He says it was stupid, we'd been stupid. Then he hangs up the phone.

Craig Johanson was my first love, head-over-heels at fifteen. Now he's a doctor in a lab outside Rome. Our last talk was months ago, in the first trimester, but I imagine our conversations every day, little things I'd point out to him, stories I'd share. I miss him. Andrew has never heard of him.

"She has your eyes, Camille. She looks just like you," Andrew whispers into my sweaty, tear-streaked face as a nurse places Isabella into my arms. She's a perfect, healthy baby. Perfectly healthy.

"She's ours." I whisper back, clutching both of them to me. "Can you believe it?"

Andrew and Isabella get along splendidly. She screams at night, I try to nurse her, I sing, I pace, but she doesn't quiet until Andrew is walking her up and down the hallway. He murmurs to her, things I cannot hear from bed. He is home on a generous three-month paternity leave; I am off for another month until I return to the office part-time. She and I are bonding, but so are she and he – what will happen when I'm gone for three five-hour days a week? Will she forget me? Will she love him more? Does she already?

I have circles under my eyes, real circles, dark half-moons that look like I've applied them with eyeshadow. Andrew has worn sweatpants three days in a row. I am strapping Isabella into her stroller, determined to go for a walk and see a bit of the outside world, when the phone rings. I let Andrew answer it and step out the door.

"That was my mom." He says when I return. "She wants to know if we'd like her to stay with Isabella next Friday night. We could go to Chicago, get a hotel."

I try to read his face, see if he wants to, but he bends over to pick up the baby and then turns his back to me. Would I like his mom to stay? My feelings are hitting me one after another, a succession of blows. Judgment: Does his mom think we don't have things under control here? Relief: We could both sleep through the night, in a freshly-made bed in a dark, quiet room. Fear: She will see Isabella, and she will know, or suspect.

I put my arms around Andrew's waist from behind him, rest my face against his shoulder blade. "What do you think?"

"Well, it would be expensive." Okay. Then he twists around and looks at me, and I see the pleading in his eyes. "It's up to you."

"Call your mom back. We can afford a hotel for one little night." We will sleep the whole time. No – we'll get dinner out, then go back to our room, put on pajamas, watch a violent movie and drink beer, and fall asleep whenever. In a movie we'd have wild sex. In reality, I suspect we will both be too exhausted to think of it. We are going to sleep, and then sleep. And then sleep. We won't get out till the maid is banging on the door the next afternoon.

The evening begins much like I planned, except with a lot more calls to Andrew's mom. Prior to this, I haven't been away from Isabella for more than an hour or two.

"Call her again." I say to Andrew after dinner. "Make sure she knows that there are clean blankets in the dryer."

Andrew rolls his eyes, but calls. He calls again, fifteen minutes later, in the hotel lobby. I suddenly can't remember if I pumped enough milk, and I'm panicking, ready to jump into the car and go.

"How many bottles are in the fridge, Mom? Can you check?" I imagine his mother sighing, rolling her eyes like Andrew. A moment later he nods at me, all is well, and the tension in my chest releases. They begin to chat about something else, and Andrew wanders away for a moment. I pick up a magazine sitting on the front desk, *Conde Nast Traveler*, and flip through. There are ads for tours in the back. *La Bella Italia*, one says, in showy cursive letters. Come see the most beautiful country on Earth. I bite my lip.

"How are you?" The email began. It wasn't even a real email, it was facebook, that tool of the devil. He'd found me on there somehow. "How have your last sixteen years been? I bet you're doing something amazing." Craig. His profile photo showed that he was still cute, still gorgeous, really.

"Is managing a call center amazing? I am sure to get some sort of 'biggest success' award at our twentieth." I wrote back, making fun of myself before he could, not that he would. "But I'm happy. I like my coworkers. And I still take photos sometimes." Did I mention Andrew in that first email? I can't remember.

"I'm so glad you're still taking pictures. I still have all those rolls you took of my parents' dogs. If you're doing photography, you need to come visit me – I live outside of Rome, in the most incredible little village. I still have absolutely no artistic ability to speak of, and even I know it's breath-taking."

Was it really an invitation? I wasn't sure. Regardless, it was fun to talk to an old friend. I did tell Andrew that, that I was talking to old high school friends on facebook. He was happy for me. He'd found his old swimming coach on there, he said, and they were going to meet up next time he visited his parents – a good guy, Andrew said. How nice.

"Don't tempt me." I wrote back. "I haven't had a vacation since forever ago."

"Seriously. Bring friends or your husband or your parents – I always liked them. You have a free place to stay. I'm doing some cutting-edge genetic studies and they pay me well. The view from my house is going to stun you, and that's me being modest."

Invite my husband? Well, then it was innocent. I was relieved. I didn't invite Andrew, as he was just starting to teach at a new elementary school and couldn't very well take off work, but I felt safer going, knowing that I *could* have invited him.

Andrew is off the phone. I shut the magazine. He puts his arm around me as we walk to the elevator, and I lean against him. I try to ignore the sick feeling in my stomach.

"Andrew," I say, "are you afraid to grow old?"

"Not really. I'm healthy, my folks are healthy, three of my grandparents are still alive and pretty healthy. I'll get to sit on a porch and watch Isabella's kids run around the yard." He squeezes my shoulders.

"I guess it's not old age I mean, but... death. Oblivion." We are both die-hard agnostics, very committed to our belief that we'll never know what happens. We've had variations on this conversation before, and I keep coming back to it, a dog chewing on the same old bone. "Aren't you afraid of oblivion? Or the possibility of it?"

"Sometimes, I suppose."

"I mean, this may be it. We're all unique, and this may be our only time on Earth." I am tightening up inside, wanting desperately for him to know what I mean, for so many reasons. "Dust to dust. In one hundred years or so, everyone alive now will be dead."

"Camille." He faces me as the elevator slows to a stop and the doors open. For a moment I can hear it, what I want, hear him tell me he understands precisely. He grabs my forearms. "We are alive

now. Please. Honey. I want to relax. Isabella is safe at home, and we are here. We can talk about this another time. Right now, let's be happy." He kisses me on the forehead, then steps out of the elevator. I follow him, sick.

The flight was awful, long and turbulent. I slept in Craig's guest room for half of the next day. That night, Craig and I sat in his yard on a blanket, with bottles of Fanta and a bag of potato chips. The evening had held onto the day's warmth. I lay on my back to stare at the stars, and sighed.

"We're so small, lost in all this mess on Earth, on just one tiny planet." It just slipped out; maybe it was the jet lag. A part of me worried that he'd think I sounded stupid, but a wiser part of me knew that he wouldn't.

He lay next to me, propped up on one elbow. "I feel that way sometimes, too, when I look at the sky."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Do you feel that way now?"

"No. Right now I feel like we're the only people in this whole place, and it's fantastic." He held out his bottle to me. "Cheers."

"Cheers."

"I'm so glad you actually came. I always tell people to visit, and they never do."

"I'm a sucker for free room and board, I guess." I laughed.

"You can come back any time, too. If I'm busy with work, you can borrow my scooter and do some sight-seeing by yourself. Or bring Andrew next time." I was trying to decide if Craig was mentioning Andrew an unusual amount, or if I was just paranoid.

Andrew would certainly not be mentioning Craig, as he thought I was by myself, pursuing my photography and searching for inner peace. I *was* doing those things, just not alone. I wasn't sure why I lied. I didn't know it was only the first of so many lies.

"Tell me about your job." I said, and relaxed as I listened to his voice explain about DNA and Dolly the sheep and a bunch of things I couldn't understand but enjoyed hearing about, nonetheless.

"I have a surprise for you." Andrew says as he swipes the key card in front of our hotel room. We are staying downtown, in a room that gives us a view of Lake Michigan and part of Navy Pier. The room was way beyond our budget, but Andrew's mom gave us some of her frequent flyer miles. I don't deserve such a mother-in-law.

"Oh yeah? What's the surprise?"

He opens his duffle bag and pulls out a wrapped box with a green ribbon on it. I slide off the ribbon and open the box. Two dark chocolate, caramel and sea salt candy bars, the sort of five-dollar high-end chocolate I love but haven't been able to justify buying for a long time. I try to forget the abortive conversation in the elevator and rouse the correct enthusiasm. When I can't, I fake it.

"You're wonderful!" I kiss him. "I don't care that I'm full from dinner. Let's eat one right now."

I went back to Italy two more times. On the second trip, Craig took a week off work and we drove to Milan. He bought me a beige silk scarf with little red roses embroidered on it. The weather was hot, so I tied it in my hair. I took a million pictures; none of them featured Craig, not even from a distance. I was trying not to be stupid.

We talked the whole time. I told him more about my ongoing existential angst, and he seemed to get it. He told me about his work as if he thought I'd understand, and sometimes I sort of did.

One evening at dinner, he reached over, grabbed my hand and squeezed it tightly. "Thank you."

"For what?" Before this we'd barely touched. We exchanged looks, glances, and our hands

occasionally grazed each others' shoulders, but that was it. I was trying. But I didn't pull my hand away.

"For listening to me. I feel like I must bore you, going on about my work all the time."

"No, of course not! It's not like you're managing a bank or something – what you're doing is important." An ex-girlfriend, I imagined, perhaps an Italian, snapping at him for talking too much. I was understanding, I could listen, I cared. I was much better than this imaginary Italian who had hurt him.

"I just don't get to talk to many people about what I do."

"Why not?" I asked, already knowing the answer. Other women may have found it tedious, but I could go for hours just listening to the rhythm of his speech.

"Because it wouldn't be a good idea. If people around here knew too much..."

Whoa, I was on the wrong track. "What do you mean?"

"The Italian government... the work my lab does is important, but there are so many hoops you have to jump through here to do research, so many impossible little steps, that a lot of labs aren't strictly following the rules... aren't strictly... legal." He released my hand and trained his eyes on the table, pinched his mouth shut.

"There's a lot of red tape, or whatever?" I spoke slowly.

"Yeah." He looked relieved, for some reason.

"Well, okay. I don't know how it works in Italy. I mean, I know you're a good person and wouldn't do anything unethical, so don't worry about me judging you."

He looked even more relieved, though he said, "I didn't think you would judge me. I'm just glad I can talk to someone without worrying they're going to report me to some bureaucrat friend or try to bribe me."

So that was why he liked talking to me, because I lived far away and had no chance to ruin him. That was all. But then he grabbed my hand again, and smiled, and I felt better.

Was I always in love with him, every minute of every day since I'd met him at fifteen? I don't know.

I have Andrew's mom hold up the phone to Isabella so I can coo at her and tell her we'll be home tomorrow. After that, we try to watch *The Dark Knight* but I fall asleep when we're less than halfway through it.

Andrew shakes me awake in the morning. "Who's Craig?"

I don't open my eyes. My heart starts pounding. How can he-? How did he-? "What?" I say, my voice foggy with sleep, feigning confusion.

"You called me Craig when I tried to wake you up a couple minutes ago."

"No I didn't." I sit up slowly, scratching the back of my head, yawning. "Did I say 'Greg'? Like my brother?"

"Maybe..."

"I was dreaming... we were at my mom's house again, but adults..." I yawn again and flop back onto my pillow, surprised by how easily I lie and how easily Andrew accepts it.

The drive home is nice. We get coffees for the road (decaf for me, of course, lest Isabella get caffeinated breast milk), and Andrew puts on the classical station, his favorite. He tells me about Chopin and Rachmaninoff, and I look out the window at the passing buildings, sipping my coffee. The night away is over. I did it.

We stop at IKEA. Andrew wants to pick up some shelving unit he's been talking about for months. I make him check this with his mother, make sure all is well with Isabella, then relax. I'd like

to buy some new frames, anyway.

“What makes people have babies, do you think?” I am holding a long, stuffed snake in violent green, one of hundreds resting in a bin in the children's section.

Andrew examines the snake as though it may answer hold the answer to my question. “Have to propagate the species, I guess. And because they're cute, when they aren't screaming.” He smiles and tosses the snake into our cart.

“But I mean... why do we feel that need to propagate? Where does that come from?”

“Isn't it Darwinism? If a species *didn't* feel that way, they wouldn't be here.”

“Yeah, I guess. Maybe what I mean is more, on an individual level, why do we feel it? Or – *how* do we feel it? How does that need... manifest?”

He considers my question as we stroll away from baby stuff, towards kitchenware. “I've known I wanted kids since I was seventeen, when my cousin had his first baby. I thought about all the things I'd like to do with a kid, take them to Bulls' games, teach them to ride a bike, all that, and it felt right. How did you know?”

“It was when I thought about – about death.” I am beginning to sweat under my arms.

“About death?” I can tell he doesn't like this. There go Camille, being ghoulish again.

“Well – about how my grandparents died, but my father remembers them and has their genes, so he sort of continues on for them. It's not perfect, he's not identical to his dad, or to his mom, but it's... something.”

“Oh,” and now I can tell he's happy that I'm not being too morbid, “I see. Carrying on one's legacy.”

“Yeah, sort of. Something like that.” An approximation of immortality, is what I want to say. As close as we can get. I don't say it, though. I'm afraid he'll think I sound crazy or selfish. I'm not, though. I'm just scared.

Each evening, Craig sent me another email. “When are you going to send me those pictures you took of Milan? There's an empty frame waiting on my wall for the one you think will look best.”

And each morning, I sent one back. “How are your neighbors? Is that old woman still bothering you about the noise from your scooter? Tell her I'm going to fly back to Italy and kick her ass if she doesn't knock it off.”

“My house misses you. It hasn't said so, but I can tell because it's being so quiet.”

“I got moved to a different floor at work – I have an office with a door and a window, as fits a supervisor of my rank and status, haha.”

“Do you have your own phone line in your office?”

And that's how *that* began. From the day I got that email, until the end of things, every weekday I took lunch in my office. Craig called me, and we talked for a full hour. Weekends felt years long.

The days after our getaway are uneventful. I get the feeling that Andrew is mad at me, but when I ask him, he assures me he's not. Maybe I'm just feeling guilty.

It's Isabella's one month birthday. I wake up, and I know immediately. I can't go back to work. I call my boss before I even tell Andrew.

“I can't yet.” I say, and then, to my horror, I start to cry. “She's so little.”

My boss sighs. She's a woman in her fifties, and we generally get along. “I understand how you're feeling. But we need you back here. It's been one drama after another since you left. Are you quitting?”

“No.” I hiccup.

“What if you just came in for an hour tomorrow, to talk it over in person? Maybe we can find something that will make us both happy.”

I sniffle. “Okay.”

“I have some time after lunch. Why don't you come then? And feel free to bring Isabella – everyone is dying to meet her.”

“I'll watch her, Camille, don't worry about it.”

Is he distracted? Or angry with me? His eyes are focused at some distant point out the window, avoiding mine. He pats Isabella on the back, and she spits up on the towel draped over his shoulder.

“I can bring her with me. Everyone at the office wants to see her.”

“Camille, it's *fine*. Take some time to yourself. Go take photos downtown or get a cup of coffee when you're done. Enjoy the free time.” His words are nice, but I fear his tone. Is something different? I can't tell.

I expected him to be angry when I told him I wasn't sure about the work schedule we'd originally planned. If I don't go back to work, or go back for even fewer hours, there will be a significant drop in our income. But he doesn't seem mad – maybe slightly annoyed, but really, just distant.

“Well, alright. Thank you.” I kiss both him and Isabella on the cheek. “I'm going to go get dressed.”

I had been thinking it for weeks before I had the nerve to mention it to Craig. I think I only did it because of what he said first.

“Dinnertime is my favorite time of day.” He said when he called. “Next time you see me, I may be a fat guy, with my gut hanging over my pants.”

“Haha.” I said. Craig was thin as a rail, too thin, really. “Why do you like dinner so much?”

“Because I get to eat with you.” Of course. The time difference. I blush, glad he can't see me.

“Do you wait every night to cook until we're on the phone?”

“Every night. Tonight you and I are having chicken parmesan.”

“Funny, from my perspective we're having yogurt and a peanut butter and banana sandwich.”

“Funny. I don't even like yogurt, and yet here I am.”

I smiled. “Here you are. How was work?”

“Good.”

“Any break-throughs?”

“We're on our way. I'm pretty excited. Colin bought a bottle of champagne and put it in the lounge's refrigerator, so we'll be ready.”

“That's fantastic.” My stomach was all knotted and clenched. I pushed away my yogurt.

“Craig? There's something I wanted to tell you. I'm thinking about having a baby.”

A pause. “Oh. Do you need... more time with Andrew?”

Did I want to end this, this whatever-it-is, he meant. Did I need to get him out of my life to make room for a complete family? I did not. “That's not what I meant.” I said. “I just – I think about you a lot, and about our talks. I think you understand me. And I think...” I wished we were face-to-face; this conversation would have been so much easier. But I pushed on. I explained. And Craig listened, with the same patience and understanding with which I had listened to him talk about his job.

“Let me think about it.” He said, when I had finished speaking. We hung up our phones, and I started to cry. I was a fool and a crazy person.

Before I could get too far in my despair, my phone rang again. “I've thought about it.” He said. “Yes. Okay.”

My meeting with my boss goes well. She's always been both kind and smart, and she doesn't let me down now. I will only have to come in once a week, and can work from home the other two days. They will reshuffle some responsibilities so I can do more from my laptop without being present. Buoyed by this, I do indeed stop for a coffee, and buy Andrew one as well. I'm happy. He will be happy. Isabella will be happy. This can work.

Andrew and Isabella are not home when I arrive. I put his coffee inside the microwave to keep warm and pull out a box of pasta for dinner. Maybe baked mostaccioli. We both like that.

They show up as the water starts to boil. I know immediately that something is wrong, everything is wrong. Isabella has a bandage on her arm. Andrew's eyes are red, and his voice, when he speaks, is hollow and monotone.

"Whose is she?"

"What?"

"Whose baby am I holding?"

"What are you talking about?" I rush to him, take Isabella out of his arms, press her to me. I cling to her.

"Is she Craig's?"

"What?" I cough, sputter for a second, think I might choke, and then try to breathe.

"I read your email. You accidentally stayed logged in a couple days ago, and I did a bad thing, I went through your emails. But you did a worse thing."

"What are you talking about?" It's all I can say. I am starting to cry, but I speak through it.

"Craig, your friend from Italy. Or whatever he is."

I am really starting to cry now, and it's setting off Isabella. Over the sound of our sobs, I exclaim, "No, Andrew! She's not Craig's."

"Well, she isn't mine." His voice is a dead thing.

"How can you say that?" I slide down on the wall onto the floor, clutching Isabella, curling into myself.

Andrew pulls a sheath of papers from his back pocket and tosses them towards me. "They sell paternity tests at Walgreen's, for Christ's sake. Go ahead and tell me I'm wrong, tell me Isabella is my daughter."

I just cry now, my baby and I both cry hard. Andrew stares down at me for what feels like hours, then turns and leaves. He pauses once at the doorway. "I can't believe you lied to me." He sighs. "My lawyer will call you. I recommend you get one, too."

I hear the squeal of his tires as he drives away. Then, for a long time, I hear nothing but our sobs.

I have done a terrible thing. Andrew's right, I've lied to him. But it wasn't a lie, what I said about Craig. He's not Isabella's father.

One afternoon, two months into the pregnancy, I called Craig after he'd missed our lunchtime chat. "What's going on?" The night before, I had told Andrew the news. He had been overjoyed. I'd felt dishonest and sick, and was hoping that hearing from Craig would raise my spirits.

"This is wrong."

I swallowed. "What do you mean?"

"You told me once that you knew I wouldn't do anything unethical. Well, what the hell is this? I shouldn't even be working at this damn company, I should be a professor at some boring school in the Midwest and do research on crops or something. Why did we do this? Your husband will find out. You can't live this way."

“It's what I wanted, Craig. I need this. And it's exciting, isn't it?”

“It was a mistake. We don't even know what will happen, if she'll be healthy, if she'll be normal.”

“She will. You told me the research was good, you said we'd be fine.” I bite my lip. “I don't understand where this is coming from.”

“I've just been thinking about things. It's not too late to stop this, you know.”

An abortion, he means. “I've already told Andrew. And I still want to do this, to try. It would be – amazing. Important.”

“So what?” His voice hurts me. “Whether this leads to great developments for our lab or not, whether Andrew finds out or not, this baby will grow up, you will grow old, and some day, Camille, you yourself will die. That's how it goes.”

I hung up the phone, then. They were the last words he ever spoke to me. He sent me an email a day later, assuring me that he would keep silent, and that no one in his lab knew. We'd been discreet, and he would continue to be discreet. But he didn't want to know anything about this, about me, about her, ever again.

Lying on the floor with Isabella, who's finally stopped crying, I think about calling Craig. But what would I say? He isn't her father. No one is. She's my baby, that's it, only mine. Craig is gone, Andrew is gone, but I won't abandon her.

Isabella, my soul, my self, my attempt at immortality. She squirms in my arms. I squeeze her hard, once, walk her to her crib, set her down, and then add the noodles to my pot of boiling water. I never told Craig that she was alive and healthy, but he must know that I would have contacted him if that weren't the case. So he knows that it worked. We both got what we wanted, in the end.