What Matters

by Lisa Duffy

The same year I lost my four year-old son on a balmy afternoon in one of the largest urban parks in America, my husband filed for divorce citing an “irretrievable breakdown of the marriage”.

The man who found Ethan, fifty-seven minutes after he’d left my side, happened to be walking down the same path in Central Park at the very instant I discovered my son was not where I believed him to be.

He would tell me later that I reminded him of his mother when she would lose her reading glasses, how she returned to the same place over and over again, in a circle, as if she refused to believe they were not where she remembered them to be.

 While I gave the description of my son to the park police, the man held my arm in the way one holds the arm of a grieving widow at the funeral for her husband of fifty years, bent at a right angle and held together carefully between two hands, as if protecting the arm might also shield the heart.

 The fifty-seven minutes that passed before the man found Ethan shrunk in the retelling to thirty, then fifteen, because really, what kind of mother loses her only child on a balmy day in the park for nearly an hour?

 We found Ethan sitting cross-legged on the concrete watching a group of teenage boys skateboard down the wide slab steps at the base of the bridge.

I say we because at the moment my son was found, I was merely a loud shout of a distance away and really, a mother is the one who should know where to go to find her only son.

When I retold the story later that week to my friend Alice, she asked who *we* was. She was confused, you see, because my story had left out the man who held my arm in the park like I was a widow who’d just buried her husband of fifty years.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter, Alice,” I’d said in an irritated voice. “What’s important is that he was found, not who found him*.”*

 “Of course it is,” she added quickly in a sympathetic tone.

The brief, awkward silence that followed told me that it did, in fact, matter.

 My husband Peter was traveling on business when I lost Ethan, and since he was hundreds of miles away at a meeting in a high-rise conference room, I did not call him until we got home, with Ethan in view.

He was livid.

 “Jesus Christ Maggie, why didn’t you call me? That’s why I have a cell phone.”

His anger unrolled through the phone like thread on a spool and wrapped around my tongue until it was thick and heavy. When he asked what park he went missing in and I told him, he said, “Fucking Central Park. Do you know how many nutcases *live* in that park and you lose him *there?* What in the hell were you doing when you lost him?”

Before I could answer, he asked me to put Ethan on the phone and when I did, and Ethan said hi Daddy into the mouthpiece in the hoarse, little boy voice that a four year old has, I gently took the phone back and covered it with my hand to muffle the sound of my husband’s gulping, helpless sobs. Ethan looked at me and shrugged and climbed back on the couch to his snack and cartoon. I waited until the phone was silent to say that I was sorry, so very, very sorry.

Peter sighed and said, “Maggie, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to shout. It’s just, God, the thought of losing-” his voice faded away and from the other room, I heard Ethan’s throaty giggle and the horror of what could have been slithered around my body like a hungry python.

Peter asked from a thousand worlds away, “Maggie, are you there?”

I cleared my throat and said yes, yes of course I was.

“It doesn’t matter what happened, he’s home and he’s fine and that’s all that matters.”

I hung up the phone and vomited all over my shoes.

When I was sixteen, my father took a job as a construction foreman in the western part of the state. The job required him to work weekends and since good jobs were hard to come by, he took it even though it was four hours away. Instead of driving back and forth each day, he slept in the trailer on site and came home once a week when the workers were waiting for new materials to arrive.

It was the same year my twin sister, Julie, began taking horseback riding lessons at a farm twenty minutes from our house. Her lessons lasted an hour, and since I was accounted for at swim team, my mother decided to save gas and spend the hour watching Julie canter around the outdoor ring on a horse attached to a line held by her instructor.

As Julie progressed in skill, the instructor, who owned the farm, would join my mother on the bench outside the ring while they watched my sister ride on her own. A friendship developed over the winter, mostly I imagine because my mother was lonely with my father out of town, and Julie and I preoccupied so much of the time with our friends.

I met the instructor once, when we went to the Westchester horse show one Saturday in the spring to watch Julie show her horse. He shook my hand and the skin on his palm felt like the inside of the worn baseball glove that sits on the dusty shelf in our basement. He was about my father’s age I guessed, but he didn’t wear the reticent grimace that so often shaped my father’s face.

 We sat on the bench, the three of us, as my sister made figure eights on a speckled tan horse that seemed more like a pony, and the man and my mother made easy conversation about this and that. My mother had grown up on a farm and we had a box in our attic that was filled with medals and ribbons that she had won from her dressage competitions.

I remember feeling proud that she was my mother as I sat next to her that day and listened to her talk easily with this man about things I knew nothing about. I was at an age when I was just beginning to take notice of her as a woman apart from my mother and I had often noticed how at ease and confident she was among people - this man no exception. Her fingers made long graceful arcs in the air as she drew an imaginary picture for the instructor of the heating element in our chicken coop and explained how it kept the hens laying throughout the cold Northeast winter.

I remember also watching my sister glare at my mother from atop her perch on the tan pony, a glare that turned to a shy smile when her figure eight patterns brought her by the bench we were sitting on, though the smile was neither for me nor my mother. I realized for the first time that Julie had a crush on this man.

 After the show, the man invited us to join him for dinner, given that it was a long ride home. My mother politely declined but I was starving and when I told her so in the voice that set her jaw in a fine line, she relented and we followed the man in his truck to a place down the road.

Peanut shells covered the ground of the barn style restaurant and a band played country music on a low stage behind the booth we sat in. Two older couples in cowboy hats were on the dance floor and my mother remarked with a laugh that she’d never gotten the hang of that type of country slow dance. The man winked at Julie and me, stood up, and extended his hand to my mother for her to join him on the dance floor. He did it in a comical, over exaggerated way, with a slight bow at the waist, and my mother, blushing twenty shades of red, accepted because she was polite.

 Julie sat glumly as the man led my mother around the floor. They looked graceful together and when they sat down in the booth, I noticed energy sit down with us that had not been there before and I was happy for it. We got home late that night and I remember my sister shrugging away from my mother as she went to kiss her goodnight and the look of bewilderment on my mother’s face as Julie slammed her bedroom door.

 My father came home the next day in the middle of the afternoon. It was Sunday, and he was supposed to be at work, so when the screen door opened with such force that it slammed against the wooden clapboards, I jumped in my seat and spilled my water on the book report I’d been working on. My father glanced at me, and then set his eyes on Julie for a long moment. She returned his stare and in the silence I heard my mother call from the top of the stairs, “John?”

 My father, who had been still at that moment, looked up at my mother and took to the stairs with such fierce determination that I shot out of my chair with a yelp. Their bedroom door slammed followed by my father’s angry voice and later, my mother’s muffled cry.

 I looked at Julie, who sat calmly on the other side of the table. She twisted her pencil around her fingers in a figure eight. When she felt my eyes on her, she looked at me and shrugged, “What? It serves her right for dancing with other men.”

 The dance had been an innocent one and I knew she knew this. My mother and the instructor had spun around the room in a formal stance; their bodies distanced by a space so wide it had seemed possible that I might fit in between them, my feet on the instructor’s worn boots, the soft wool of my mother’s sweater warming my back. As I watched my sister, I knew the way a twin knows certain things that she had called my father and the dance had taken on a meaning other than it was. My father was a jealous man and it occurred to me then that Julie had inherited this trait.

But I asked anyway, hoping I was wrong, “How did he find out about the dance?”

 She looked me straight in the eye and snapped, “What the fuck does that matter?”

 It would be two years later, after my parents stopped speaking and my mother sank into a depression so deep even a lump in her breast did not rouse her, would not rouse her, until the cancer had spread to her lungs, her liver and ultimately her brain, after I would sit by my sister’s side in the County hospital while she recovered from swallowing an entire bottle of Tylenol in what proved to be an unsuccessful suicide attempt, that I would come to know how very much it did matter.

The day after I lost Ethan I called Julie to tell her what happened. After I recounted how the man held my arm like I was a widow whose husband died and after I told her about how the man found Ethan, I asked her if she ever thought about that day when Dad came home after he found out about Mom and the dance with the instructor.

“Of course I do,” she said simply. “I regret it every day of my life.”

 “Do you think it matters that Ethan’s not really my son?’ I asked.

 “Do you?” she asked.

 Ethan’s real mother died when he was a baby. I became his mother by becoming Peter’s wife. Would Ethan’s real mother have dropped the hand of her only son in one of the largest urban parks in America? This is a question that I don’t ask out loud.

 My mother had thrown my father out of the house after he stormed up the stairs and accused her of cheating on him with Julie’s instructor. He didn’t just accuse her, he called her every name in the book, and when he couldn’t think of any more names to call her, he used the back of his hand to fill the silence.

He’d cried that night in front of us, me on the front steps and Julie huddled on the porch swing behind me. He’d never hit her before, he’d just snapped, he’d said, his voice matching the low rumble of his truck idling in the driveway. Then he bent over, hands on his knees, as if a weight had dropped on his back. A noise came out of him then, a moan of sorts, stifled but loud enough to send a shiver through me. When he stood, he looked bewildered, scared even. I moved to touch his arm but he flinched and stepped back, shoving his hands in his pockets, as if they now needed to be hidden, contained. He left then, but not before he gazed into the dark behind me where I knew Julie sat motionless on the old wooden swing. I could hear her crying softly but my father didn’t move to comfort her. He just watched her with a pained look on his face, one that would be permanently etched on his face in the years that followed, as if what had been broken that afternoon now lived inside of him, ran through his blood and seeped through his bones.

 My mother had an eggplant colored bruise on the underside of her cheekbone for two weeks. Even now, years later, with our mother dead and that day long in the past, when my sister talks about my mother, she rubs that hollow space on her face, traces the underside of her cheekbone with her finger, as if by rubbing it, someday it might go away.

 When I decided to tell the story of how I lost my son and then my husband, I realized it had to be told the way it actually unfolded in my mind, how the irrelevant appeared significant in the immediate retelling of that horrible hour, how even the hour itself diminished in minutes to a time frame my heart could bear witness to hearing out loud.

It was actually an hour and ten minutes that Ethan was missing, not fifty-seven minutes like I said earlier, not thirty like I told the park police and not fifteen, like I told my husband. It took me longer than all of that time put together to accept that I was the type of mother who lost her only child on a balmy day in the park for over an hour.

 My mother spent the last year of her life in a silent battle with my father. On the rare occasion my father made the long commute home from his job, he seemed to be in a state of constant motion; tightening the screws on the shutters framing the windows or scraping the peeling paint off the wooden screen door, as if by fixing the exterior of the dilapidated farmhouse, he might also mend what was damaged inside.

 It seemed as if the house went up for sale before the flowers on my mother’s grave began to wilt. I’d been accepted to NYU and Julie talked me into an apartment off campus. She thought the city was the best place to find someone to help her deal with her depression. She was convinced calling my father that day had been the first spark that ignited the explosion of my parent’s marriage. It was assumed Julie’s suicide attempt was in response to hearing about my mother’s terminal illness. Julie had refused to talk about it with them, bristling at the mention of the word suicide. The bottle of pills she swallowed had only been Children’s Tylenol, she’d said, rolling her eyes at them, she was just upset, *not crazy*.

I met Peter at one of Julie’s grief meetings she’d dragged me to six months after we’d settled into our cramped apartment in Brooklyn. Peter’s wife had died of cancer, and that was about the only thing we had in common, that and our grief.

It took me three months to tell Peter that it was not me that found Ethan the day he went missing. But he barely heard me. He was watching the baseball game and the Mets were winning and Ethan was sitting next to him with his head resting on Peter’s chest. I said it again and he looked at me in a puzzled sort of way and asked why I kept talking about that day in a way that meant, stop fucking talking about that day.

I learned at Julie’s meetings that there are many cures for grief; time is one, hope is another and of course, there’s always love. I was twenty when Peter asked me to marry him.

He’d been traveling all week. The sound of his key in the door had startled me, but not Ethan, whose breath fluttered against my collarbone and warmed the small space between us in his tiny racecar bed. I’d meant to lie down with him only until he dozed off, but it was the week of finals and I was exhausted. Peter had shrugged out of his raincoat and climbed in behind Ethan, rested his chin on top of his son’s head, inches from my own. Marry me, he’d said, a thickness to his voice. He said he hoped I’d be his wife and a mother to Ethan, a family. His last word pulled the yes from my mouth, yes, a family. I wanted to be part of a family again. I don’t remember if either of us mentioned love.

When I told Julie that Peter had asked me to marry him, she rolled her eyes and said, “No shit Sherlock, why pay the babysitter when you can marry her and get it for free.”

“That’s awful,” I said

“He’s old.”

“He’s thirty-two, Julie.”

“He doesn’t look at you the way you want the guy you’re going to marry to look at you.”

We were sitting outside at Patsy’s on West 74th splitting a pizza when she delivered this piece of information, matter of fact, as if she was giving me the weather.

“What do you know about it?”

“I just know.”

“What, from Mom and Dad? Please.” I took a bite of my pizza and waved at the heat in my mouth.

“No, not them together. But my horseback riding instructor, he looked at Mom that way.”

“Lots of men looked at Mom that way. She was pretty.”

Julia nodded, “True, but this was different. Because she…” Her voiced trailed off, the look on her face one of surprise, as if whatever she was going to say had just occurred to her. She was quiet for a moment and I watched her as she used her pizza crust to sponge up the vinegar and oil at the bottom of the salad bowl. She brought it to her mouth and paused before she took a bite. I thought she might finish her sentence. Instead she reached over and tapped my engagement ring.

“You’re right, what the hell do I know?” She flashed me an apologetic look. ”You look good in diamonds. Let’s forget I said anything.”

We finished the meal without another mention of it, but I wondered if she had finished her sentence, she would have told me that when the instructor had looked at Mom with that look, Mom had looked back at him in the same way.

Six months after I lost Ethan in the park, I called my sister to come over one morning when I could not stop crying. I had lost weight, my hair was falling out and maybe I was dying, I told her.

“I believe it,” she said. Just like that.

“That’s helpful.”

“You want sympathy or advice?”

“I want to take that day back, is what I want.”

“You can’t, but take it from me, don’t let that day take you away”

“Easier said than done,” I muttered.

“Yup,” she agreed, rubbing the invisible bruise on her cheek.

I never told my husband that the man who held my arm like I was a widow who had just lost her husband of fifty years did not, in fact, just happen to be walking down the same path at the same time as me when I lost Ethan. It doesn’t matter that I was with the man to tell him I could not meet him again. It doesn’t matter that I also had a deep love for the little boy who walked with his hand in my own until I dropped it to touch the man on the arm while I gave him this news.

When I said my husband filed for divorce citing an “irretrievable breakdown of the marriage”, it matters to clarify the term. It wasn’t the marriage that was “irretrievable”, it was me. I was still on that path in that park, holding the arm of a man I was in love with and dropping the hand of a boy I called my son.

Sometimes you don’t find out what matters until your only child goes missing in the middle of one of the largest urban parks in America and an hour and ten minutes passes and when you finally find him safe, all you can think about is the man who found him, how the man held your arm like you were a widow who’d lost her husband of fifty years, how he looked at you, and how you looked back.