

Call Your Daughter

Leah Christianson

Call your daughter. Listen to the clinking of cheap china you bought her after she showed up stateside, tan and broke after a post-graduate summer in Ibiza. Nod into the phone as she tells you about the weather. She's upset because Los Angeles had the nerve to rain again, because her roommate broke her turntable, because her mother doesn't call enough.

"I'm calling now," you say.

"Well isn't that something," the china chides.

"I think I want to be a professor," she tells you. "I think I want to be a writer. I think I'm losing my mind."

Tell her to get her oil changed, to hush, to meet a nice boy.

"There are no nice boys," she sighs. "Why do you think I want to be a writer?"

She set off into the world for the grandest of adventures, just as you wanted, leaving everyone behind only to end up craving the smell of red leaves falling outside your house on the hill. Just as you wanted.

"I've been watching the creepiest TV show. I can't sleep; it's absolutely fantastic. You'd hate it. Do you believe in zombies?"

"Sure," you tell her. "Look around the 5:00 a.m. metro downtown."

"Dad," she says with the little laugh she reserves for things that aren't funny.

"Tell Mom to call me. I don't care if it's five minutes," she says. "Seriously?" she mutters under her breath. "Is it so hard to soak a pot after you use it? I need a new roommate." She's always doing seven things at once, your little girl. Sometimes, being woven into her many lives makes you feel like a string stitched too tightly through unforgiving fabric.

"You could call. Piper? Are you listening?"

"You know I do."

Picture her shuffling around her two-bedroom apartment on the West Side, not too far from the apartment you inhabited as a broke graduate student. A soundtrack of traffic plays in her background. Her hair is probably pulled back the way you like it and she's probably in those slippers you bought her as a joke—bigger than her head and with dragons on the toes. She loved them, much to your dismay. She's probably twirling her ponytail around her finger, the way her mother does.

“Most mothers want their daughters calling more.”

“I’ll have her call.”

“Yes, do. Dad?”

“Yes?”

“How are you?”

✱

Catch the bus across town. You’re still surprised when people offer you their seats after you board, forgetting that your exterior continually betrays you, showing others a man twenty years older than the person you know yourself to be. *Time is the trickiest mistress you keep*, your father used to say. You think of time as a hard candy. Seems like it will last forever when you first get a taste of something good, but before you finish that thought—you’ve got to get your wife to call your little girl—it’s gone, leaving you wanting more and wondering where it could have gone so quickly.

At the home, bad paintings are plastered crookedly upon long hallways. You like them, actually, but your wife deemed them terrible, so terrible they must be. *What’s so bad about them?* you asked once. *Look at this one, with the family in the park. Look at the laughing children playing with their Labrador. What could be bad about that?*

“Hiya Joe,” your wife calls as you enter her room. “Thought you’d forgotten about me.”

“I could never forget about you, love. I’m Cliff. I’m your husband. You’re Anna. You’re my wife.” This speech reminds you of reciting the Pledge of Allegiance as a kid; you say the words without contemplating what exists between its lines.

“Yes, that’s what I said. Anna and Cliff, joined at the... hiff. Get it? Ha!”

You listen as she tells her favorite stories; theories on extra-terrestrial life, the pranks she played on her neighbors in college, the first time she rode a bike. She talks with a twinkle, tweaking each time-honored tale every time she tells it. You fell in love with her storytelling skills before you tumbled for the rest of her. Thirty-two years later and she can still make you laugh with the same stories, despite sometimes misplacing the people or places now. You’ve never been able to figure how that might be.

The nurse brings a pot of coffee. Before she leaves, Anna taps her on the arm.

“Has Joe called, dear?”

The nurse looks at you, back at your wife, then back to you so quickly you think you’ve witnessed self-inflicted whiplash.

“Joe’s here, Anna. You’ve been talking to him for a few hours.”

“I’m Cliff,” you say. “I’m her husband.”

“Exactly. He’s Cliff. I watch the world from his edge,” Anna says, clapping her hands in delight.

The nurse looks ready to speak, but instead shuts her mouth. When you leave, see her whispering to another girl, shaking her head the way people do when they see a sign for a missing puppy. When she begins to walk towards you, head for the elevator. She will only have more to say about potentials and uncertainties, two things you don’t need any more of.

You aren’t lost.

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Your house feels too big. It doesn’t smell right without Anna’s favorite Chinese takeout in the kitchen or her lingering perfume in the bathroom. There is nothing womanly about your home now. The twenty-year-old inside you is delighted—you’ve got the place to yourself, *man*—but then you catch a glimpse of your hair in the mirror. You are an old man, *man*. You need something more than sparse refrigerator shelves and late nights bathed in the television’s blue glow. Shuffling through old phone numbers collected on various sticky notes does nothing but remind you of who you’d rather be talking to. Her dinner table conversations took at least three wrong turns before dessert. Her left eye was bigger than the right. She used to judge men based on how they took their coffee. She loved sex before dinner and a good book after dessert.

Without her narration, life tastes stale. Fall into bed with hopes of a quilted respite, but your arm still finds its way to her pillow. Soon you are burying your face in it, unearthing the small scents she imprinted in its fibers. All you want is sleep—heavy and rejuvenating—but the pillow is too firm with memories. *Made from Memory Foam*, she would have joked. So you stay up nights, not counting sheep, but killing them. Wake up alone to the tepid sun of another cool morning, fucked and beautiful.

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When you tell your daughter, she begins making plans immediately. “I’ll take off work this week. We’ll find her the best. Maybe I can—”

It’s not that bad, you say. Should be cleared up soon, you continue. The doctors think it could be an imbalance, you know, chemically. Up there.

“This doesn’t make sense. She’s too young for memory loss,” Piper’s voice jumps a few octaves into a tight, dangerous space.

That's true, isn't it? She is too young for memory loss. Your hand instinctively rises to run its fingers through your hair, but there's less there than you remember. Isn't everyone too young for everything, really?

"Although that's not exactly it, is it? What is it? Maybe we need a second opinion. I'm going to call Marie." Marie, Piper's best friend, is in medical school. She has all the answers, apparently.

Don't tell her that Marie couldn't know more than a trained doctor. Don't cut her off as she rattles off home remedies for poor memory she picked up while backpacking through South America. "Maybe if we just double the dosage," she begins as you nod into the phone. Your head is no longer yours—a mere bobber on a fishing line being jerked by an invisible hand.

"Dad," she begins with the voice she reserves for things she finds unreasonable. "Let me help. I'll come home this weekend—get your mind off of it. We can go hunting. I've been practicing at the range."

When you tell her to save her money, she grows very quiet. She's a serious one, your little girl. When you ask her if there's a boy who can take her out, get her mind off things, she hangs up the phone. Before you realize the line has gone dead she is already calling back, the ringing rattling your jaw.

"She'll be better soon," you say and she doesn't call you a liar. She doesn't say a word.



Catch an earlier bus on days when it rains and grab a seat by the window. Your city muddles together like weak paint on a dirty palette. *Who doesn't love a good storm?* you think, before answering your own question. Anna hated them. Remember one storm that cracked the trunk of Anna's favorite maple tree. "That's what heartbreak sounds like," she sighed as a particularly large bough fell to the ground. You began listening for heartbreak in unexpected places, like ripped off band-aids and peeling bananas.

"What do you think heartbreak sounds like?" you asked your old friend Natalia at lunch the next week.

"I think I just heard it when you uttered such an ungodly sappy sentence," she replied before smacking your arm. You took to rolling up your sleeves around Natalia so she would know exactly where to hit, because you were always saying something she deemed slap-worthy. Natalia had thunderous laughter, lightning words, and eyes like winter. She pops into your head on rainy days.

"Anna's having a rough day today," the nurse says when you walk in. "A little more confused than usual. I'm sure she'll be glad to see you," she says. Her smile

is round and drooping slightly to one side; there is lipstick on the front tooth of her Dali smile.

Don your fakest grin—the one she used to recognize in a second—before you walk through the door.

“Hi there, Anna!”

“Well, I’m so glad you’re here. I just had to tell someone—I’ve had the strangest dream,” she said, waving you in without any version of hello. “Why are you smiling like that?”

Her eyes look so clear today that you think, just maybe, the nurse was mistaken.

“I was chopping carrots on a beach, the way I used to with an old friend. I don’t know which friend, and I’m not sure where she had gone. But the waves came up and began to wash them away. And then, for some reason, I just began screaming—crying harder than I had since... well I don’t know when. But the point is, I was crying so hard that my Aunt Bonnie—you remember her, the one I don’t talk to anymore—came to wrap her arms around me very, very tightly. And I howled, ‘Don’t let her go, don’t let her go again. Don’t let my girl leave me again.’ And I kept crying into my aunt’s arms until they all washed away. Now what do you think that could mean?”

“I haven’t a clue,” you say.

“There’s more to it,” she says, moving her hands in small circles as she spoke. “There were two couples there, and they were having the hardest time. They were searching for something. Kept laughing and running around together, but it was never enough. Whatever they were looking for, they couldn’t find, even though they looked so happy. The other woman came to sit with me. She picked me up and put me in a canoe. When we got out into the water she was crying too. Now, that has to mean something.”

“I don’t know, love,” you tell her. “I don’t think a dream has to mean anything.”

“Well of course it does. Joe, it must.”

This is a test, you tell yourself. This is an exercise in will.

“Anna, you know who I am. Do you know me? I’m Cliff. Do you remember when we met in the park? You were wearing blue.”

“Oh I’m sure I was, you know blue is my favorite. We were in the quad; you followed me out after class. We were friends for so long, Joe. You always said it would be you and me. After we graduated, when we got our lives together, we would find each other again. And you’re still right here.”

You met her when she was twenty-nine, seven years after she graduated. She

used to judge men on how easily she could make them fall in love with her. She used to pick the weeds and braid them into bracelets for you.

“I can’t remember a lot of things, Joe.” The rain has stopped and she is looking out the window now, watching a surprisingly bright sun reflect off car windshields and wobble the pavement. “Tell me about our life. Did we have children?”

Piper. Your little girl, the one who is so serious, so funny, leading so many lives. She cracks her fingers when she’s thinking hard. She has very telling eyebrows. She’s just like her mother and it scares you.

A few months after you’d met her, Anna changed. Took too long to answer your questions, got too quiet after a few drinks, carried a small notebook everywhere and jotted down things all the time, even in the middle of your dinner dates. Once, she started crying in the middle of a football game, locked herself in the bathroom, and snuck out the window before coming back in the front door and handing you a flower she’d yanked up by the roots from your neighbor’s garden.

“I think I’m starting to bore her,” you told Natalia at lunch that week.

“What?” she exclaimed, crunching at her salad. She always ordered salad and ending up stealing half your meal anyway. That day, you didn’t mind. “No. You’re, like, the opposite of boring.”

“You know what she said last night? I have to start liking something other than her, because she doesn’t like herself. So we don’t even have that in common.”

Natalia shook her head. “She sounds messed up. You should leave.”

“No, she makes me better.”

She shrugged. “Maybe you make her worse. Are you going to finish those cheese fries?”

These words rattle about as your wife asks you about her life with another man. Maybe you made her worse. Maybe you should have left. Time is a hard candy, you think to yourself. Her crunchy outside is dissolving. You know who’s at her gooe center.

“I’m so sorry,” says Anna. “I never wanted this. I wanted to remember every bit of you. How can I fix it? What can I do? What do you want?” She knots her eyebrows tight.

You want thunder crashing. You want packed freeways and sandy optimism. Sheer cliffs with letters etched at the bottom. You want rhinoceros sleep. Heavy and thick-skinned; the kind where you don’t move an inch.

When you leave, do it hastily and without explanation. “It’s what Joe would do,” you spit.

Pace the parking lot while wind fills its open space. So strange, this small town. When a car goes by—“Zoom, zoom,” says a toddler Piper in your head—remember how it felt to hit the road without a single tie. How it felt to be proud of the life you were living.

Anna had loved your adventurousness, but that was the trouble. Once you were hooked, all the things she loved about you kept on floating by. You tried to grasp them—those pieces of your personality she deemed interesting—but they continued onward, swept up by the current that carries those with even a flicker of wanderlust. Somehow, you’d washed up on her shore, only to have her steal your compass and send you back out to sea.

“Who are you?” asked Natalia. “Who is this person she’s made you?”

At this moment, there’s nothing you want more than Natalia standing across from you in the parking lot, dark hair blowing in her face and getting stuck in her wide mouth while she laughs.

“Shot to the head or poison in her morning coffee?” she would ask. While other girls were so good at breaking hearts, Natalia specialized in patching yours up with quick words and impromptu luncheons. A few years after you married Anna, Natalia moved to the Upper Peninsula. She met a lumberjack and married him quickly, as if that wasn’t cliché enough. She sent Christmas cards that read like catalogs. You’d wondered why you two had stopped talking, but never thought to ask.

Perhaps I should go, you think to yourself. *To California or Lake Michigan or Timbuktu. Maybe leaving will make her remember you.* The sky looks bigger, with so much space between the rooftops and the pillowcase clouds. You miss the noise of Los Angeles. You miss your little girl.

“Are you eating better?” Piper’s message asks. “Can Mom call? What have you been doing with your time?”

You’ve been tucking leftover love between the waistband of your jeans and the freckle on your hip. You’ve been ripping yourself in half and watching with feigned interest as the different pieces fall. Mapping the patterns they make. You’ve been feeling fingers in your hair.

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Call your daughter. She is crying.

“Stop calling!” she screams. “You don’t get to say you’re sorry until you feel better. I don’t want to hear it.”

Repeat her name until it loses its meaning, until she realizes that you are the voice in the phone, until her breathing slows.

“Sorry,” she exhales. “I thought you were someone else. How are you, Dad?”

She acts so tough for you, although you never asked. But now she’s a sugar cube, melting on some clueless punk’s tongue. She’s forgotten to protect herself. When you tell bad jokes, her laughter is singed around the edges.

“You better figure out how to keep that girl,” said Natalia, the only time she visited. Piper was five and Anna had bronchitis. “Look at those eyes. She’ll break some hearts, that one.”

You spent years teaching her how to cushion a heart, because you saw how fast she could make them drop. Now, as Piper steadies her voice, you hate yourself more than before. Hers was the only heart you should have been thinking of.

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“Hello Cliff,” your wife says when you burst into her room. “I was beginning to think you’d forgotten about me. Do you like my new nightgown? It’s blue, your favorite.”

“Anna, we’re going to make a phone call.”

She looks distrustfully at the box. “I don’t think so.”

“You need to talk to Piper. She needs her mother.”

“Hmm?” she picks at lint on her nightgown.

“She’s so sad—boy trouble, I think—and I don’t know what to say.”

“It’ll pass. Don’t you remember what it was like to be twenty-four and in love?” She moves on to her fingernails, considering. “Switching between lighting yourself on fire and crawling your way out of the charred hole.”

“Do you mean twenty-four and heartbroken?”

“Hmm?”

“Anna, our daughter is miserable. She needs you. We’re going to call her.” You say it firmly; you demand respect.

She looks at you with a simple curiosity, not her old inquisitiveness. “Yes, of course,” she says. She won’t reach out her hand. So you dial for her, trying to ignore the genuine interest she takes in how to press the buttons.

“What do I say?” she whispers in a voice that’s less than two feet tall.

“She just wants to hear your voice. She wants to tell you about her life.”

Your wife nods once. The phone rings twice.

“Hello?”

“Hi—hello?”

She looks to you. Her eyes ask questions where they used to hold answers.

“Mom?”

She puts the phone to her chest, blocking the mouthpiece with folds of

blue cotton.

“Who am I?” she asks, eyes wide but not with fear.

“You’re Anna,” you say. You reach out with both hands; you turn your palms up. “You’re my Anna.”

“Hello Anna,” she says into the phone.

“Hi Mom,” you hear Piper say.

Anna pauses. “Talk to your father. Joe, take the phone.” She reaches toward you.

So you take it.

And what descends is not comfortable, nor is it stinging. It simply perches on your lap, the way your daughter used to as a little girl.

She begins to fill the silence with little snippets of her big plans.

“I think I want to be a composer. I think I want to study the mating rituals of Alaskan Salmon. I think I found my mind last week but decided I was doing better without it.”

“How are you doing?” She is always asking. “Dad?”

Shrug and tell her that you are doing—you are trying—your very best.

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By the time you make it to the bus, the sky is growing dark. Natalia’s voice surfaces in your head again. “Why are you riding the bus, old man?” she calls, as if across an open field. You’re not sure, really. Your car runs fine. But there is something calming about watching your small city zoom by without responsibility.

“It’s nice not to think,” you respond.

Remember what Natalia said on that last visit as Piper ran circles around the two of you with eyes peeled wide.

“I’m glad you’re happy. Love should make you feel good.”

She was about to continue when Piper jumped into her arms with a resounding plunk, knocking the wind, along with the words, right out of her. She cried for two days after “Auntie Nattie” left. Anna put her in her room, went to the store and said, “You deal with it.” Think about rummaging through your stack of sticky phone numbers and pulling out Natalia’s—asking her to call your daughter.

“Make it better; fix her up,” you would beg. “Please. I don’t know how to do it. You always know what to say.”

“But Cliff,” her voice booms in your head, “that was years ago.”

You made a choice. You deal with it.



When you arrive home, the house doesn't feel so big. Go digging. Unearth the photo albums and broken dollhouses. Pull out old sweaters and tattered poetry collections. Find stacks of moleskin notebooks in her bedside table. Remember how you loved to watch her write. She would hold her coffee cup against her cheek while scribbling new ideas on how to sell Nutmeg Creamer or Whirlpool Jacuzzis or Handyman Tool Belts. Occasionally, some coffee from her saucer stuck to the bottom of her mug, but she would ignore the trails that ran down her arm.

Spread everything out on the bedroom floor. Pretend it is enough.

From one of the old notebooks tucked in the back of her drawer, a letter tumbles. It has been folded repeatedly, ink bleeding through a thinning page. You've never seen it before but recognize her writing, pointy and rushed. Intrusive as it feels, you begin to read.

You are not the first to toss me a spitball of somedays; I am not the first one to trace your jaw line with my lips. And I know there is so much more to say, love, because I'm overflowing with these words for you. But since I'm running out of air—you've been walking so much closer these days—let me tell you now. I know the moles on the back of your neck and which way to breathe upon them. I have never been more relieved to feel warm skin under my hands as I was when you pulled me close in the bathroom, and I don't know why you make me cry so often. I know which of your smiles are real, and which ones are less so. But don't worry, I won't out you to everyone else, just so I don't have to see your sheepish shuffle away. I hate when you call yourself a coward, because sometimes I worry you're voicing my own fears. But that's only after I make myself cold, purposefully you know, because the heat you bring is terrifying. You forget how wild you are. Sometimes, I do too.

There will be a day when I do not have to hold back. When I can bury myself in you in some primal way—when I can press my body against yours in a way that is both starving and ready. There will be a day beyond this timid chasteness, when the way you brush your fingers through your hair or get overly excited about winding conversations will not be enough to take me out.

Know this, love. No one wipes my fears of planning away like you do, because when I grab the spitballs that fall from the ceiling, I know I couldn't plan a thing without having you to come home to.

There is no name, no address in the top left corner. There are simply these

yellowed words in an undelivered letter, truer than any you've ever heard her say aloud.

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Time inches along. You don't visit her. Time speeds up a bit. After four days, you take the bus across town. Open her door with words like swinging fists.

"Joe left you," you tell her. "He's been gone for years. I love you now. Me, Cliff. You love me too; you've just forgotten what it's like to have a love that makes you happy. Love shouldn't make you sad. It should take its time. Love takes a lot of time, if you're doing it right."

"Am I going to die?" she blinks up at you.

"Of course not. Anna. Do you hear what I'm saying to you?"

"I remember when my father died," she says. "They put him in an urn and they put that urn under a tree. We had lunch in between the service and going to his gravesite. I didn't like that. It was like an exclamation point in the middle of a sentence. Why did they put him under a tree? He would have hated that. He wanted sunshine."

"Don't you dare put me in the ground," she says, a bit of her steely conviction shining through, a reminder. "You can put a headstone somewhere if you need something to talk to, and I'll do my best to answer. But my body? Nope. Burn me to a crisp and take me on the road. Put me all the places I've loved. I've left bits of my heart there anyway, might as well see what beats they're playing to. Drop me somewhere new. I've always loved an adventure."

She loved setting off on the grandest of adventures, leaving everyone behind, only to end up craving the smell of red leaves falling outside your house on the hill.

"Will you take me somewhere, Cliff?"

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Call your daughter. A mop sloshes into a bucket—she is always cleaning. You swim through oceans inside yourself, fishing out tidbits to feed her. She is planning another trip, self-funded this time. She is moving into a place of her own; she wants you to see it. She's purchased new china and wants to set it out for someone other than herself. She met a man in a coffee shop and he doesn't scare her.

"How's Mom?" she asks.

She's still here. She is all the colors of the sea.

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