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MARC DICKINSON

Samantha Harris has been found. Three days missing and after all the search parties, all the theories—abduction? runaway?—she’s discovered at a park two miles from her house.

It used to be a landfill, so sometimes with enough rain the soccer fields release a smell like rotten eggs. A fast snowmelt and the earth emits small pieces of inventory: dogs digging up shards of glass until their paws go bloody, the Little League star sliding into second only to break his foot on a half-buried cast-iron skillet. Occasionally, a syringe is found. So maybe it’s not that strange to find Samantha slumped in the passenger seat of an SUV near the playground—three days dead and nobody noticing the smell until the thunderstorms cleared up.

Of course, the parents are called, but they have their doubts. That’s not Sam’s car. There is no purse or ID. It’s hard to recall what she was last wearing. A Homecoming shirt? Jeans and sneakers? Clothes every girl owned. However, due to the humidity, there’s no more “facial recognition.” Hair is already pulling from the scalp. So the officers have to ask about other identifiers—piercings, scars—when all the parents want to do is look for themselves. They’ll know their daughter when they see her. Instead, they’re only allowed to look at photos, parts of a body that could be anyone. When asked if she has any tattoos, they shake their heads. Absolutely not. Sam isn’t the type. Plus, she’s terrified of needles, which gives everyone hope since there’s a newly inked Chinese symbol on the victim’s hip. The parents take a breath, relieved their little girl is still just missing, until they see the birthmark. A heart-shaped stain sitting on her shoulder. A blemish they always said was a kiss from God.

The father is too angry to cry. In three days his daughter has gone from Homecoming Court to Jane Doe. And even though on Saturday night, against police request, he joined the volunteers to walk through wet fields, comb the nearby woods, turn a light on each dark corner of the town, by Sunday he was brought in for questioning. Yes, he was at the Homecoming game. And

sure, Sam usually left with them. Except that night she had plans. Sam often kept to herself, had only one friend: Meg Sawyer. So Friday night, when she went to a party, the father was almost thankful. She’d be off to college soon and needed some fun. On the drive home, he even confessed these hopes to his wife: that Sam would stay out past curfew, maybe get into a little trouble for once.

He admitted these same sentiments to the cops—and instantly regretted it.

Within two days, he’d gone from proud father to possible suspect.

Now, Monday morning arrives and he’s simply the grieving parent—though he feels anything but innocent. He screams at detectives, knocks over chairs, calls for justice. Someone is still out there and needs to be punished. Hope won’t do anymore. He wants facts instead. When he demands an autopsy, Officer Sawyer—the father of Sam’s only friend—puts a hand on his shoulder, asks him to calm down. He shrugs off the cop, tells him to do his fucking job.

Finally, the mom steps in, says to leave their daughter alone. Some lab rat with a scalpel won’t be going near her child. The girl deserves some peace. The dad may want the case solved, but as far as she’s concerned it’s already closed. What does it matter? Gone is gone and no amount of science is going to bring anybody back.

Today the school is full of stories. A friend of a friend, someone on the force, says once the court mandated an autopsy, traces of opioid turned up in the bloodwork. It’s then that someone recalls seeing Sam after the Homecoming game. Behind the concession stand. Still wearing the *Runner-up* sash over her band uniform. And trading sharp words with Jim Darcy—a guy who graduated years ago yet still hung around high school parties, selling dime bags and oxy. They’d all used his services at some point, but he had no business talking to a girl like Sam. How’d they even know each other? It makes no sense. On the

other hand, neither does Sam being found dead in a car, drugs in her veins. The whole thing feels like a prank, some trick that makes it hard to trust what anyone says—though there is small comfort in the fact that at least lab tests don’t lie.

The mother is told to go home, get some sleep. Her husband can handle logistics: the press, paper work, funeral. But the house is so empty. No dishes in the sink; no shoes by the door. Everything erased—except her daughter’s room. A Bible still by the bed. Laptop left open on her desk. The mother scans its browser history and finds

They form their own search parties—will be their own judge and jury.

several hits for Chinese characters. One for *Love*. Another for *God*. Even one for *Mother*—which is flattering, at first. Then she finds a string of searches: *Devotion, Girl, Heartbeat*. Symbols so similar it’s hard to tell which Sam chose to

put on her hip. Until she sees a strange entry for *Rebirth*, the fonts shaped like two figures holding hands—one small, the other tall—so that it’s suddenly unclear who’s the *Mother*? Whose *Girl*?

She tries Sam’s Facebook, her Twitter, but can’t figure out a password. Soon, the mother gives up and checks her own e-mail. There’s one unread message, but she doesn’t open it.

She logs out and lies on Sam’s bed. A strand of her daughter’s hair rests on the pillow, which she wraps around her finger. Her eyes are raw and heavy, but she fights the fatigue, as if sleep will somehow close down the day—and if the day ends, so does her daughter. It’s such a ridiculous thought. Sam’s been gone for three days. But shouldn’t a mother have felt that loss, like part of her soul escaping? In fact, when Sam shut her eyes and took that last breath in someone else’s SUV, was the mother already in bed, just watching TV? Or was it during that hour she awoke in the middle of the night? Not out of any worry for Sam. No, instead she’d slipped out of bed at two a.m. and snuck downstairs to e-mail an old boyfriend.

She’d promised her husband to stay until graduation, though that was so long ago he probably assumed the deal had expired. But, in fact, she was more than ready for the next stage of life. A chapter where she wouldn’t just be The Mother, The Wife. She’d finally get her own name back—had never even planned to be a parent in the first place. And though it wasn’t fair to call Sam an accident, after looking through the search history, it appears her child already knew about such *mistakes*. Like mother, like daughter.

But now the thought of leaving seems selfish. Who doesn’t consider those left behind, all that love lost? Tonight, she watches the sun leave the sky and thinks about the message in her inbox, calling from the past—waving from a future that’ll remain forever unread. Just like this room, full of bibles and band ribbons, it’ll simply be one more fantasy she’ll never fully grasp.

The next morning, a new story circulates the school. The friend of a friend, their inside source, says the mother ordered an additional test—detecting for HCG. The idea of Sam Harris having sex, much less getting pregnant, feels even more impossible. Except behind the concession stand with Jim, it was obvious in the way their voices cracked that there was something between them. Only people with a history talk like that. Until yet another bystander claims Jim got aggressive, grabbing Sam against her will—which makes it pretty evident, if not certain, there was foul play.

So if it was Jim who took advantage of Sam, knocking her up, it doesn’t seem so strange to assume he’d force her to get rid of it. And Sam, being who she was, having those church-girl beliefs, could never bring herself to do such a thing. Which makes a lot more sense, right? The Sam they knew wouldn’t get into this kind of trouble on her own. There wasn’t any double-identity. Nobody was fooled—she was the same old Sam. And would’ve made an amazing mom. No, someone else did this. Someone they know, or thought they knew, so that today the students have to size each other up in the hall, everyone a suspect now that a murderer is amongst them.

The church had already prepared a candlelight vigil. Sunday night, they picked the best photo for the flyer—Samantha almost angelic in a white dress—and then selected a theme: A Night of Hope. But this word, in order to heal, depends on the unknown. And now, they all know. She’s been found, in the flesh, and there’s no room left for faith. The pastor isn’t sure what to tell the congregation. It seems callous to cancel, but do they really want to get involved? What would they be honoring: drugs, pre-marital sex, unplanned pregnancy? Parents call and say the vigil sends a wrong message. Others say it’s just too soon. But the pastor doesn’t want to give in to rumor. In fact, this could be what the kids need: a chance to process things, together.

He is the youth leader, after all, and today he’s already in a meeting with three members of Shine Alive, the church’s teen revival group, who remind him that Sam was one of their flock. How it won’t be the same without her voice in the choir, her face in the front row. And it’s

true. Since he's been at the church, Sam's never missed a service, both the morning traditional and evening contemporary. He wonders what Sunday will bring when she isn't swaying to the music, hand raised in praise. So maybe there's still something worth celebrating here. At best, he can try to guide their grief, become the shepherd these parents refuse to be. But he can also see it doesn't matter. Because before he can give his blessing one way or another, all three teens have already shut their eyes and clasped hands, their bodies forming a tight circle that leaves no room for him.

The next day, when the HCG test comes back negative, the school is filled with sighs of relief, like they've been holding their breath for more bad news. But when the shocking twist doesn't arrive, a small ache takes its place, like a phantom limb they can no longer scratch. Beneath all the sadness, at least there'd been a story they could've lived with. And now, though Jim may be all the things they suspect—a creep, a deviant, one more deadbeat dealer—he isn't the one thing they want him to be: the reason.

But as soon as they're about to give up on answers, it's reported that the unidentified SUV belongs to Meg Sawyer: the best friend. And it's not long before someone recalls seeing Sam that night at a house party of all places, holding hands with Meg. Others insist it was more than just hand-holding. Blame the alcohol, or maybe Sam was already high—it could've easily been a result of some dare—whatever the cause, most witnesses swear there was a kiss.

It's unclear who initiated, but they've always had a bad feeling about Meg. And not just because her dad's a cop. Or that a junior was best friends with a senior. She was only a year younger, but something about Meg still felt unformed: that pasty skin, her stunted height, all those heavy stares. She was like some little alien trying to act human—studying their words, the way they moved. And just imagine the shame a girl like Sam would feel after a kiss like that. Not to mention the gossip to follow. It would've simply been too much. How could she have lived with herself after such a scene? And as for Meg, what kind of person does that to a friend, betraying them in public? Forcing them into a spotlight where they so obviously don't belong?

The band feels one note short today. All week the halls have been quiet except for an occasional sob in a stairwell, a whisper in the restroom. There are announcements about grief counseling. How if they need to leave class, there'd be no questions asked. This afternoon, at the start of practice,

the band director takes a vote: who needs to play today? They raise their hands, but nobody can focus, each song sounding sluggish. Maybe it's because Sam was one of their own, which had given them such hope last week when she was elected to Homecoming Court.

It was possibly a pity vote. But when the clarinet section saw her at the pep rally standing with those other pretty girls, all they saw was promise. Because Sam was pretty, in an invisible way: the soft-edged face, those tiny teeth, that white-white skin blurring into the background. She was clearly no golden girl with those thick brows and hairy arms. But then came Friday night, when for a moment they were almost envious of Meg, the best friend who never spoke and was barely cool enough to be in band: auxiliary percussion. She'd always been safe in Sam's shadow, but last week she was closer than anyone to touching that attention. Until today when Meg is noticed by everyone—a push against a locker, a lunch tray shoved to the floor—so that now, looking at the girl holding her tambourine and staring at the empty chair in the second row, they're anything but jealous. In fact, if this is the price of promise, maybe they're the lucky ones.

Tonight after the vigil, they're quick to notice the no-shows. Jim, of course, which provides a clear mission for the boys. They form their own search parties—will be their own judge and jury.

But the girls have a different brand of justice. Who doesn't show up to a best friend's vigil? So after finding out where Meg lives, they follow each other to the corner of Maple and Clay. They know what to do but aren't entirely sure why. Seriously, did any of them even talk to Sam? Four years and she'd only been a photo in the yearbook, a girl at the back of the class.

Still, she was always so happy, even when nobody asked her to the Homecoming dance.

But girls like her were *supposed* to stay home on Saturday night. And she was so obviously a virgin. Even the way she dressed—white sneakers, denim skirt—was chaste, childish. This was what allowed her to remain untouched. She wasn't a threat. It's why they put her on the Court in the first place. Give the girl her due. Plus, there was Meg, a best friend to keep her company.

What else could Sam want? She was fortunate they hadn't teased her in the showers, given her a hard time online. They could've made her life a living hell. But they didn't. In fact, until last week, they never paid attention to her at all. They let her be herself. And yet now, just a few days later, they've been made a fool of. Sam was so much better when missing. A pleasant face on a flyer, exactly how they wanted to remember her. But

tonight all they're left with is a best friend, so like Sam in so many ways: just another name at roll call who needed to learn her place.

From a distance, Meg's house looks like it's been decorated. If it was last week, the graffiti could've almost been mistaken as a holdover from Homecoming. But today, instead of *Go Tigers*, the windows are tagged with *slut, loser, dyke*. Meg watches her mom wash the glass, hoping to get things clean before her dad comes home from his night shift, before he pulls up to the house in his police uniform and discovers the truth about his own daughter.

But as each word is erased, Meg's curious how she became all these things in one week.

For years, Sam took Meg under her wing. And now she's gone, leaving Meg open to attack.

Yesterday, at school, she received the message loud and clear. She even skipped the vigil, wanting to keep the peace. Of course, it was silly to think it'd end there. So this morning she puts on a dress, refusing to be scared away from her best friend's funeral—even if she hasn't thought of Sam as a friend in a long time. Not since last month when they both went beyond that word.

Meg wonders if she's the last person to see her alive—the night Sam took her hand at the party, as if not caring what anyone thought. Which, at first, felt brave, like it always does when secrets are brought to the light. Especially when for weeks Meg wasn't sure what secrets meant to Sam: would her mom kill her? her dad disown her? Meg understood all these same fears—and maybe that was the point. The very reason Sam had kissed her that first time in the chapel.

After each contemporary service, Sam would be on a high, spirit-filled and hugging everyone. But last month, when the church cleared, as Meg waited to be wrapped up in her arms, Sam bent down and allowed their lips to touch instead. Meg hadn't known how much she wanted this until Sam pulled away, giggling like it was some joke. Then, a week later, alone in Sam's room, her friend unclasped the top of her denim dress and lay back on the bed like an invitation. When Meg hesitated, Sam had to take her by the hand, pulling her on top. She still recalls the strange milk-taste of Sam's skin, a body both salty and sweet. How the girl writhed under each kiss, let out soft sighs, until Meg brushed against her hip, causing a sudden wince. Meg asked if she'd done something wrong, if it somehow hurt. But Sam simply shook her head and started to unbutton her skirt, as if to show Meg something important, when they heard the garage door.

Sam sat up and fastened her dress, laughing that same laugh. Then, she caressed Meg's face

like a mom does a daughter before walking away as if nothing happened. And it never did again.

So maybe Sam just enjoyed risks—the hush-hush of it. A challenge she could consume like sugar. Which is perhaps why at the party, when Sam kissed her in front of everybody, Meg was the one to pull away with a laugh. Not so much out of revenge as disappointment. The whole thing a tad staged, a little desperate. But this time Sam didn't smile as she ran from the room.

And though Meg wanted to disappear as well, it was instead her SUV that vanished, keys stolen.

So this morning, staring at those streaks of graffiti, Meg can only guess about Sam's courage that evening. She's heard that people who don't care about consequences refuse to consider the future because they've stopped making plans for it. And maybe Meg was that final private regret Sam couldn't stand anymore. Though can't secrets also be a bit more beautiful?

What if Sam was simply trying to reach for something that night? Holding out her hand like a last invitation to another life. A different kind of dare that Meg never had the nerve to take.

Tonight, when the boys bring Jim into the station, they claim he already looked this way: bruised and bleeding. They found him next to Sam's grave, hours after the funeral. When the cops ask, Jim says he was only looking at the stars. He wonders if they sense the high on him, his mind still safely wrapped in a blanket of warmth. Except he can't stop talking about how he went to pay his respects, alone, and got caught up in the sky. How he does this often, ever since Sam showed him a video of the universe: a virtual camera pulling back from Earth, galaxies spiraling and then disappearing into the next layer of space. She said it was to give him perspective of God's greatness, but Jim had just shrugged and walked back into the black hole of high school.

However, that video stuck with him, bringing a certain relief. It felt good to feel so small. Not perspective as much as reassurance that none of it mattered. No God or law. No right and wrong. Just spheres of light and empty rocks spinning in the dark, as if by mistake. Until eventually, even if only by chance, things found an orbit, a way to move through the world.

The officers sigh and put him in a cell to sleep it off.

Yet when he lies down, Jim still sees Sam's moon-wide eyes, that lunar look pulling him near. Like the first time they met in the park—still the best place to sell—when she gave him a pamphlet about Christ. Of course, he laughed, but Sam only smiled and said she loved him. The next week she was there again, and then again, until

one day they discussed creation, the big bang and the apple. Finally, she got around to asking why he did it and he said it was because of the body: that hot pipe burning his hands, his lungs lit from within, his skin like that of another's. The smoke filled him, his brain suddenly alive then quickly quiet, like getting a glimpse of death.

When Sam touched his face and said she understood, he leaned in to kiss her. And though she didn't turn away, her lips went cold, almost lifeless, even if afterward she still said she loved him. Maybe that's why he offered her a hit, as a way to test that love. And she did hesitate, at first. Before saying yes, if he thought it'd help. Until Jim grabbed the pipe back and told her to forget it. But when she said she loved him again, he knew she didn't mean it the way he wanted.

Nevertheless, her words lit up something—about redemption, all that faith it required. As if Sam was his view into that other world: the daylight place where things could still be saved.

So Friday night when Sam met him behind the concession stand and said she was sorry, that she was ready to go through with it, Jim told her to fuck off. To stop acting like someone she wasn't. Then he ripped off that satin sash and left her there alone, looking all but torn in two.

But now, sitting in a cell, Jim wonders what she meant that night. If *going through with it* had anything to do with love? Or did opening up to his universe simply create too much temptation? Maybe she needed a glimpse through the other side of that window as well.

Either way, there's no way he's going to give these cops the truth. Not for her parent's sake and certainly not his own. None of them deserve to be saved anymore. Except for Sam.

And what if she still could be?

Maybe this is his path, his final calling. With a quick surrender, the smallest confession, he could finally be the one to protect *her*—even if it only meant hiding her away from the world.

When the morning of the funeral arrives and there're rumors of vandalism—graffiti on windows, a young girl's SUV keyed in front of her house—the town isn't sure where they live anymore.

For days, they've been living in a puzzle without the right pieces. Over the weekend, they felt robbed, helpless against the mystery. Except on Monday, when it was revealed nobody had gone missing, that she'd been with them all along, everyone simply felt cheated. All they want is the girl who attended church camp and never bared her skin, even at the pool. Fourth chair clarinet. B+ average. Sure, she was voted onto Homecoming Court, but they loved her for not winning because

the girl who became Queen always seemed like the wrong choice. But when her body was found, when the front page of the paper gave her back to them, the town felt twice stolen.

If this is Samantha Harris, who are they?
Where does one go from here?

Until, finally, this evening their regular broadcast is interrupted with breaking news. There's been an arrest. A new lead in the case. And though questions persist, at least for a few hours she becomes that girl again: the quiet victim, a lovely lesson, the sacrifice forgiving them their sins. What's a town without its martyrs? Still, tonight they continue to toss and turn, sick with hope the morning headlines will make more sense. That maybe Samantha can somehow be there for them one more time, telling them all the things they need to hear. ●

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