

## The Thief

The teenagers file into the front row with downcast eyes. The middle one has her nose. Seeing something so familiar on a stranger pierces me.

I open my bag to get some tissues and the clasp on my handbag clacks. Heads turn.

I'm the stranger at the back. They'll think I'm a funeral junkie.

The husband holds himself upright and the congregation hold their breath as he gets up and gulps through a poem by Dorothy Parker. The microphone shrieks and everybody ducks their head as the words stick in his throat. Dorothy Parker was her choice; I helped her select it and he's messing it up.

The eldest awkwardly pats his father's back when he sits down in the pew. The teen was caught dealing gummies recently and he looks like he needs a hug and a joint. I know I do.

Cate was surprised when I first suggested medical marijuana. "As in cannabis?"

"As in pain relief. Better sleep. Less nausea."

Her face had collapsed. "Everyone wants me to keep swallowing chemo pills and I don't want to."

The husband hadn't approved, so I smuggled cannabis to her in different forms. Brownies. Oils. Gummies. She told me not to judge her partner, but I did. He put his morals above her discomfort.

Now, seeing his shoulders slump, I want to meet him but how can I introduce myself?

*I am your wife's name. I loved her too.*

The ache in my heart swells.

Her extended family are lined up like sentinels in the front pew. I know which ones loved her fully and which ones, like her sister, came with conditional love. Listening to the words said about her – some things I knew, some I didn't – I wonder how they might react if I introduced myself.

*I am your sister's name. I am your mother's name.*

Together, our names and stories briefly entwined.

I would tell them we met through a picture framer.

I would tell them we had the same name.  
I wouldn't tell them she'd stolen my frame.

My father had given me the print, *Wheatfield with Crows* by Vincent van Gogh, and I liked the blue sky and yellow field, but not the feeling the crows gave me so thought a gilded frame would help. Six months later I was embarrassed it took me so long to collect the framed print, and the framer was embarrassed they accidentally let it go to the wrong Cate. They offered to call her, but I asked to handle it, curious about this picture-stealing woman who had my name.

My text was brief. *Hello Cate Riddell, Cate Riddell here. You have my picture, could I collect it?*

Walking into the café, I spotted her expectant bright eyes immediately. She had tried to cover up nervous energy with lip gloss and a forced smile, but it was there. "Thanks for coming. Coffee?"

Sitting down in the booth I felt as awkward as her. "Espresso thanks."

"I'm not sure I understand it myself," she'd said when the coffees arrived. "It's not like me to take something." She gripped her mug with both hands. "Do you ever feel you're so far away from who you thought you'd be you crave a jolt?"

*Constantly*, I thought but didn't admit it. "Have you stolen anything before?"

"I never did the teenage thing. When I saw the print at the framers, I coveted it. The blue sky. The yellow wheatfield. I felt a flash, an energy, a compulsion to take it like something was daring me."

The righteousness in me dissolved. Our cakes arrived, both cheesecakes. "To be fair, I had left it there," I said.

"That annoyed me," she said. "I wondered who this other Cate Riddell was and why she thought she was so special she could leave something lying around a small business for six months."

And just like that a gap in my life opened and I wanted her in it.

Born 24 months apart, her in Tauranga, me in Whangarei, we were the only Cate with a C at our schools. She'd married a Riddell, and I was born as one. She was worried her work was meaningless, I was worried I was addicted to mine. I told her the framers were always closed when I drove home, and she told me that was dismal.

After the cheesecake, I put the van Gogh in my car but the next time we met I gave it back. "Just for a while," I'd said. The image unsettled me with its thick paint strokes in the sky, the circular white clouds and dark crows. She was thrilled.

On our second café date, we quickly got to the real stuff we couldn't talk about with our families as they got offended or defensive. We operated swiftly, propelled to speed up the friendship and get to what mattered as if our instincts knew what our minds would later learn.

The fifth time we met she told me about her diagnosis. The cancer had spread from her ovaries out and her oncologist had said hope was important.

"I'm riddled," she said. "Is it because I married a Riddell?"

"Different spelling," I reassured her.

"I told my husband I might look for my soul," she said, "and he told me it was in my shoe." We'd laughed until the tears came.

She never stopped making jokes.

"It's comforting you're not part of my normal life. You won't be bereft when I'm not around to do things like book flights and sort cupboards."

I told her I could see she was many things and Cupboard Sorter and Flight Booker were not in the top 50.

I didn't have thoughts of loss from my life then because Cate hadn't been in mine for long. She liked keeping me a secret and said one day over brownies. "I can tell you I'm scared without worrying that I'm scaring you."

Her children all get up and struggle through a psalm. Their courage is unbearable. I can't look. I can look. I must look for her.

Swallowing hard, my body feels leaden. My heart full of wet cement.

Once she was housebound, I encouraged her to vent over text. Everyone had a story about someone who made it. *'I'm sick of hearing about strangers. This is my life! I have cancer, but it doesn't have me,'* she kept saying.

But it did have Cate. It was coming for her. Once she looked visibly sick everyone treated her differently. "People offer me cups of tea like I'm 85," she whispered over the phone one day. "I don't even like fucking tea."

"You're a thief," I said.

"I'm a thief," she repeated, and I could hear her smile through the phone.

Looking at the formidable box in the front of the church I think about her final days. I would have loved to say goodbye, but her family didn't know me to ask. I found out about the funeral on Facebook.

She tried to give me the Van Gogh the last time we met in person.

"I want you to keep it. Always." I said.

"There is no always." she'd replied. "But deluded humans ignore this pretty much the whole time they're alive."

Neither of us knew then that Van Gogh had produced *Wheatfield with Crows* the same month he died, July 1890. His final gift.

The pallbearers get up and move towards the box. Her husband, her sons, her sister. I can't look. I can look. I must look for her.

'Amazing Grace' begins, and tears cascade silently down my cheeks.

She's moving down the middle of the pews.

*I am your wife's name. I am your daughter's name. I am your friend's name. I was her friend too.*

Frozen, I stay until everyone's left.

Walking into the sunshine, I grip my bag fiercely to stop my hands flying out and touching her children.

Hovering at the edge of the crowd, the tears relentless now, my ears hum with the finality of the hearse doors closing.

Then a blast of wind sweeps around the corner of the church fluttering sleeves and hems. My hair lifts, drawing my eyes skyward. There in the endless blue, small white circular clouds are scudding by. *Cate. Cate.* I can feel her. Her brilliance. Her warmth. Her smile. The wind shoots over to a pile of yellow leaves frothing them up. I look around but nobody is watching what I can see. She's beside me again. I can almost see the paint strokes.

*Hello Cate Riddell* the wind whispers.

*Hello Cate Riddell* my heart says.

And I know it's OK to go.

She doesn't need me to meet her family or talk to her children. She wants me to remember her and our connection when I look at the frame, and think of her when I hear my name, her name, knowing deep in my bones I am alive. I am alive.