

Mona's Dead

"Since when do you drink coffee?" I ask, switching the portable phone from one ear to the other while I step into the laundry room to get some privacy. "It seems like yesterday that I was driving you to the grocery store to buy candy bars."

"Well, I still eat candy bars, Ian. Why do you find it so strange that I drink coffee?" This is Patty talking.

I'm at my parents' house in the Midwest, talking on the phone with Patty for the first time in months, and it's strange to hear her voice again. She sounds so much like Mona, who once whispered "I love you" into my ear with those same high, slippery tones that Patty used now. Patty is Mona's sister, but we never talk about her. That topic of conversation is off-limits, and we both know it.

"It's not strange, exactly. Just new."

She continues defending herself. "I love coffee. Is caffeine culture too high-class for a girl like me?"

"It's not that, Patty. I'm just not used to you making an adult proposition like that...let's go out for coffee..."

"I'm nineteen, you dope. I'm allowed to make adult propositions."

"Of course you are. Just give some time to get used to that."

Patty is six-and-a-half years younger than me. I was once

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married to her older sister Mona, and Patty remains a friend despite the age difference and what her sister once meant to me. In my earliest memory, my parents took me to a bicentennial parade downtown, and at that time Patty wasn't even born yet. I remember nuclear anxiety and impending armageddon quite clearly while she only knows the Berlin Wall as a relic of a long-distant Cold War.

After I lost Mona, I took a cross-country job transfer and started a new life. Shortly after that, Patty started classes at the university and buried herself in college life. Busy as she is, Patty has been good to keep in touch with me over the months, especially after all that had happened. We wrote letters to each other, exchanged cassette tapes of fun party music, recommended books and movies, and so on. She sometimes asked me for love advice and I was more than happy to offer it. I didn't go out with girls in my teenage years, so discussing these issues with Patty was like a refresher course in Remedial Dating:

Where does love come from?

What can we do with it?

Where does it go?

And why should it go so horribly, horribly wrong?

Patty wants to spend some time with me while we're both back in town for the holidays. She is staying at her mother's house in the suburbs during winter break and doesn't have access to a car, so I offer to pick her up in my rental. When I landed at the

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airport, I splurged by renting a brand-new Mustang rather than settling for a sensible subcompact. Patty can't wait to see it.

I drive down the old avenue, turning the old corners and passing the old mailboxes, and my emotions start to cloud over. These are the streets where I courted Mona years ago. The slushy streets and snow-covered lawns seem to be no more than a dusty memory being taken off a shelf in the back of my mind. This couldn't be happening right now, could it? Surely I'm not really on my way to Mona's house, when I know she's not there.

But Patty is there. And I came to see Patty.

She waits for me at the front door as I come up the driveway, saving me from an uncomfortable encounter with my old mother-in-law. Patty runs up to the passenger side of the shiny rental car and pounds on the window, smiling broadly. She is bundled up in a colorful stocking cap and thick mittens. It takes me a moment to find the automatic lock for that door, and then it clicks open. Patty slips in the car and immediately leans over to embrace me.

"I missed you, Ian!" she says, burying her face in my shoulder. I can smell the apple shampoo in her hair.

"Me too, sweetheart." I give her a quick hug and settle back into the driver's seat. "Where should we go for coffee?"

"I don't know. Just get me out of here." She pulls the seat belt around her waist and clicks it into place. "My mom is driving me crazy!"

I nod quietly and back out of the driveway.

"She wasn't too thrilled about me seeing you today. She always liked you before...but ever since..." Her voice trails off. I