

After you've gone

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There are certain things that you learn about people when you sleep in their beds, eat from their cupboards, commiserate with their family and friends. There are things that we waltz around and others that are apparent: that you were good, and raised your son with the utmost care. That you loved your husband. That you loved being a wife and mother.

After you died, he immediately took your clothes out of the closet. He took down some pictures. Yet he could never part with you. And the truth is, I don't blame him.

One morning, I tiptoed into your kitchen. It was the winter, and the floors were so cold that they stung my feet as I walked barefoot. Your taste was impeccable. I know that about you. I know that you didn't care to show off your things, because your dishes always came from the best stores, but had no markings or labels. I like that you were modest.

I know that you like birds, because you had birdhouses near your kitchen windows. Your husband would never do that, not because he doesn't like birds, but because he always appears too busy to notice them. I like that you tried to draw attention to those things.

I looked through your cupboards, through your stack of recipes, through a long library of cook-

books. I found a few well worn pages in them, and assumed that they marked favorite meals. I learned that you loved him so well like that, to find new variations of the dishes he loves, to draw in the birds when he was too busy to see them outside. That is something we share.

I was in your kitchen because I wanted to make him breakfast before he awoke. But instead I found pictures of your son. You've raised him well. Not stuffy or arrogant, as so many teenagers are. But soft, and strong.

He will not talk about you yet. I know that he thinks of you constantly. I know that he can't shake off those years. There are moments when, talking to him, I am sure that he is reeling from the way his life has changed. "It will always be different now," he tells me. "Not better or worse, just different." We both know that he is still trying to convince himself of that.

I am concerned that your friends might see me as the younger woman. That your son will see me as a replacement. That he might see me as a distraction. But I am none of those things.

I am the woman who loves your husband. I am the one who doesn't want him to part with his love for you. I am the one who relishes in the direction you give me: to point out the little things when he is busy, to find new ways to make the old things fresh, to love deeply. I am the one who is strong enough right now to keep you alive. And we are the ones—you and me—who will take care of him now, together.

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