

Prologue: In the End

The end came quickly, and there wasn't any pain.' Sometimes, the father whispers it to the mother. Sometimes, the mother to the father. From the top of the stairs, Lucy hears it all and says nothing.

For Lizzie's sake, Lucy wants to believe that the end was quick and painless: a quick end is a good end. But she can't help wondering, How do they know? The moment of the crash certainly must have been painful, Lucy reasons. And what if that one moment hadn't been quick at all?

She wanders into Lizzie's room and surveys it despondently. A teenage girl's whole life is a collection of odds and ends: a turquoise bra thrown over a computer monitor, an unmade bed, an aquarium filled with earthworms, a deflated Mylar balloon from last Valentine's Day, a Do Not Enter sign on the doorknob, a pair of unused tickets for a Machine concert under the bed. In

the end, what does it all mean anyway? And what does it matter? Is a person just a pile of junk?

The only thing to do when Lucy feels this way is to dig. Dig until she forgets everything and everyone. Dig right through the pink carpet. Dig until she reaches the ceiling of the floor below. Dig until she falls through. Dig and dig and dig and dig.

Lucy has finally worked up a good cleansing dig when Alvy (the seven-year-old brother) picks her up off the rug and sets her in his lap. 'Don't worry,' Alvy says. 'Even though you belonged to Lizzie, someone will always feed you and wash you and take you to the park. You can even sleep in *my* room now.'

Sitting primly on Alvy's too-small lap, Lucy imagines that Lizzie is just away at college. Lizzie was nearly sixteen, and it would have happened in about two years anyway. The glossy brochures had already begun piling up on Lizzie's bedroom floor. Occasionally, Lucy would urinate on one of the brochures or bite a corner out of another, but even then she knew it couldn't be stopped. One day Lizzie would go, and dogs weren't allowed in dorm rooms.

'Where do you think she is?' Alvy asks.

Lucy cocks her head.

'Is she'—he pauses—'up there?'

As far as Lucy knows, the only thing up there is the attic.

'Well,' Alvy says, jutting his chin defiantly toward the sky, 'I believe she *is* up there. And I believe there are angels there and harps and heaps of puffy clouds and white silky pajamas and everything.'

Likely story, Lucy thinks. She doesn't believe in the happy hunting ground or the rainbow bridge. She believes a pug goes

around once and that's it. She wishes she might see Lizzie again someday, but she doesn't hold out much hope. Even if there is something after the end, who knows if it has kibble or naps or fresh water or cushy laps or even dogs? And the worst part of all, it isn't *here!*

Lucy moans, mainly in grief but partially (it must be said) in hunger. When a family loses its only daughter, a pug's meal-times can be erratic. Lucy curses her treacherous stomach: what kind of beast is she to be hungry when her best friend is dead?

'I wish you could talk,' Alvy says. 'I bet you're thinking something interesting.'

'And I wish you could listen,' Lucy barks, but Alvy doesn't understand her anyway.

The next day the mother takes Lucy to the dog park. It's the first time anyone has remembered to walk Lucy since the end.

On the way over, Lucy can smell the mother's sadness all around them. She tries to determine what the smell reminds her of. Is it rain? Parsley? Bourbon? Old books? Wool socks? Bananas, Lucy decides.

At the park, Lucy just lies on a bench, feeling friendless and depressed and (will it never end?) a little hungry. A toy poodle named Coco asks Lucy what's wrong, and with a sigh Lucy tells her. As the poodle is a notorious gossip, the news spreads quickly through the dog park.

Bandit, a one-eyed all-American who in less refined circles would be called a mutt, offers his sympathies. He asks Lucy, 'They putting you on the streets?'

'No,' Lucy replies, 'I'll still live with the same family.'

'Then I don't see what's so bad about it,' Bandit says.

'She was only fifteen.'

'So? We only have ten, fifteen years tops, and you don't see us carrying on.'

'But she wasn't a dog,' Lucy barks. 'She was a human, my human, and she got hit by a car.'

'So? We get hit by cars all the time. Cheer up, little pug. You worry too much. That's why you have so many wrinkles.'

Lucy has heard this joke many times before and she thinks, somewhat unkindly, for Bandit isn't a bad sort, that she has never met a mutt with a good sense of humor.

'My advice is to find yourself another two-legger. If you'd lived my life, you'd know they're all about the same anyway. When the kibble runs out, I'm gone.' With that, Bandit abandons Lucy to join a game of Frisbee.

Lucy sighs and feels very sorry for herself. She watches the other dogs playing in the dog park. 'Look how they can sniff each other's rear ends and chase balls and run around in circles! How innocent they seem!

'In the natural order of things, a dog isn't meant to outlive her human!' Lucy howls. 'No one understands unless it's happened to her. And what's more, no one even seems to care.' Lucy shakes her small round head. 'It's so totally disheartening. I can't even be bothered to curl my tail.'

'In the end, the end of a life only matters to friends, family, and other folks you used to know,' the pug whimpers miserably. 'For everyone else, it's just another end.'

Part I: The *Nile*

At Sea

Elizabeth Hall wakes in a strange bed in a strange room with the strange feeling that her sheets are trying to smother her.

Liz (who is Elizabeth to her teachers; Lizzie at home, except when she's in trouble; and just plain Liz everywhere else in the world) sits up in bed, bumping her head on an unforeseen upper bunk. From above, a voice she does not recognize protests, 'Aw hell!'

Liz peers into the top bunk, where a girl she has never seen before is sleeping, or at least trying to. The sleeping girl, who is near Liz's own age, wears a white nightgown and has long dark hair arranged in a thatch of intricately beaded braids. To Liz, she looks like a queen.

'Excuse me,' Liz asks, 'but would you happen to know where we are?'

The girl yawns and rubs the sleep out of her eyes. She glances from Liz to the ceiling to the floor to the window and then to Liz again. She touches her braids and sighs. 'On a boat,' she answers, stifling another yawn.

'What do you mean 'on a boat'?'

'There's water, lots and lots of it. Just look out the window,' she replies before cocooning herself in the bedclothes. 'Of course, you might have thought to do that without waking me.'

'Sorry,' Liz whispers.

Liz looks out the porthole that is parallel to her bed. Sure enough, she sees hundreds of miles of early-morning darkness and ocean in all directions, blanketed by a healthy coating of fog. If she squints, Liz can make out a boardwalk. There, she sees the forms of her parents and her little brother, Alvy. Ghostly and becoming smaller by the second, her father is crying and her mother is holding him. Despite the apparent distance, Alvy seems to be looking at Liz and waving. Ten seconds later, the fog swallows her family entirely.

Liz lies back in bed. Even though she feels remarkably awake, she knows she is dreaming, for several reasons: one, there is no earthly way she would be on a boat when she is supposed to be finishing tenth grade; two, if this is a vacation, her parents and Alvy, unfortunately, should be with her; and three, only in dreams can you see things you shouldn't see, like your family on a boardwalk from hundreds of miles away. Just as Liz reaches four, she decides to get out of bed. What a waste, she thinks, to spend one's dreams asleep.

Not wanting to further disturb the sleeping girl, Liz tiptoes across the room toward the bureau. The telltale sign that she is,

indeed, at sea comes from the furniture: it is bolted to the floor. While she does not find the room unpleasant, Liz thinks it feels lonely and sad, as if many people had passed through it but none had decided to stay.

Liz opens the bureau drawers to see if they are empty. They are: not even a Bible. Although she tries to be very quiet, she loses her grip on the last drawer and it slams shut. This has the unfortunate effect of waking the sleeping girl again.

'People are sleeping here!' the girl yells.

'I'm sorry. I was just checking the drawers. In case you were wondering, they're empty,' Liz apologizes, and sits on the lower bunk. 'I like your hair by the way.'

The girl fingers her braids. 'Thanks.'

'What's your name?' Liz asks.

'Thandiwe Washington, but I'm called Thandi.'

'I'm Liz.'

Thandi yawns. 'You sixteen?'

'In August,' Liz replies.

'I turned sixteen in January.' Thandi looks into Liz's bunk. 'Liz,' she says, turning the one syllable of Liz's name into a slightly southern two, *Li-iz*, 'you mind if I ask you a personal question?'

'Not really.'

'The thing is'—Thandi pauses—'well, are you a skinhead or something?'

'A skinhead? No, of course not.' Liz raises a single eyebrow. 'Why would you ask that?'

'Like, 'cause you don't have hair.' Thandi points to Liz's head which is completely bald except for the earliest sprouts of light blond growth.

Liz strokes her head with her hand, enjoying the odd smoothness of it. What hair there is feels like the feathers on a newborn chick. She gets out of bed and looks at her reflection in the mirror. Liz sees a slender girl of about sixteen with very pale skin and greenish blue eyes. The girl, indeed, has no hair.

'That's strange,' Liz says. In real life, Liz has long, straight blond hair that tangles easily.

'Didn't you know?' Thandi asks.

Liz considers Thandi's question. In the very back of her mind, she recalls lying on a cot in the middle of a blindingly bright room as her father shaved her head. No. Liz remembers that it wasn't her father. She thought it was her father, because it had been a man near her father's age. Liz definitely remembers crying, and hearing her mother say, 'Don't worry, Lizzie, it will all grow back.' No, that isn't right either. Liz hadn't cried; her mother had been the one crying. For a moment, Liz tries to remember if this episode actually happened. She decides she doesn't want to think about it any longer, so she asks Thandi, 'Do you want to see what else is on the boat?'

'Why not? I'm up now.' Thandi climbs down from her bunk.

'I wonder if there's a hat in here somewhere,' says Liz. Even in a dream, Liz isn't sure she wants to be the freaky bald girl. She opens the closet and looks under the bed: both are as empty as the bureau.

'Don't feel bad about your hair, Liz,' Thandi says gently.

'I don't. I just think it's weird,' Liz says.

'Hey, I've got weird things, too.' Thandi raises her canopy of braids like a theater curtain. 'Ta da,' she says, revealing a small but deep, still-red wound at the base of her skull.

Although the wound is less than a half inch in diameter, Liz can tell it must have been the result of an extremely serious injury.

‘God, Thandi, I hope that doesn’t hurt!’

‘It did at first; it hurt like hell, but not anymore.’ Thandi lowers her hair. ‘I think it’s getting better actually.’

‘How did you get that?’

‘Don’t remember,’ says Thandi, rubbing the top of her head as if she could stimulate her memory with her hands. ‘It might have happened a long time ago, but it could have been yesterday, too, know what I mean?’

Liz nods. Although she doesn’t think Thandi makes any sense, Liz sees no point in arguing with the crazy sorts of people one meets in a dream.

‘We should go,’ Liz says.

On the way out, Thandi casts a cursory glance at herself in the mirror. ‘You think it matters that we’re both wearing pjs?’ she asks.

Liz looks at Thandi’s white nightgown. Liz herself is wearing white men’s-style pajamas. ‘Why would it matter?’ Liz asks, thinking it far worse to be bald than underdressed. ‘Besides, Thandi, what else do you wear while you’re dreaming?’ Liz places her hand on the doorknob. Someone somewhere once told Liz that she must never, under any circumstances, open a door in a dream. Since Liz can’t remember who the person was or why all doors must remain closed, she decides to ignore the advice.