



WHAT IS LEFT

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A PART OF JUNE WAS DREADING the weekend despite the fact that she had been the one who had made it happen. It was the curse of being the middle child, she supposed, always feeling like she had to be the bridge, to make the peace. Especially now, when they were the only ones left.

On the sisters' call the previous week, Nicole had insisted, "You need to come to the lake house this weekend and help me finish. Everything that's left—I've moved it all out there. It's time we just get this done."

Only their parents' personal items remained: clothing and jewelry, photographs, books, and a few paintings and mementos. The main house had been sold, and the money, the stocks—all of that had been disbursed. They

had put the lake house in a family trust and carved out an annual schedule of which of them would have which weeks. Nicole had set up a Google calendar to document swaps. It was time to finish things off.

Nicole blasted on without pause. "I don't want to spend the next six months chasing you around. I don't have time to deal with this anymore. I'm finishing it this weekend, so be there or you get no say." Then she switched from scolding to commanding. "You each have the inventory of what's left. Now you just need to show up so we can split it up."

June had rolled her eyes but held her tongue. April had not. "Nicole, we have lives too and are not available to drop everything on your schedule. I'll be at Jason's soccer tournament this weekend, not at the lake. I'll send you

my list in advance, but I really don't care that much. You two can make the decisions and send me an email." Her annoyance traveled like lightning down the phone line. "Now I don't need to be on this call anymore." She hung up without saying goodbye.



Nicole snorted. "Typical. April can't ever manage to show up and do her share of the work."

June sighed. "Nicole, that's not fair and you know it. I'll talk to April. I think we all can agree we want to get this over with."

"With or without her, I will see you at the lake Saturday morning." Nicole ended the call, also without saying goodbye.

June called April back right away. "I get that you don't want anything. But you should still come to the lake this weekend."

"No." April was adamant. "I don't need any more of Nicole's bossy bullshit in my life."

"Look, we have to do this eventually,

and it might be a good thing for the three of us to spend some time together at the lake," June contended.

"Got it, June. The call of duty. We must all obey." April was clearly still pissed at Nicole. "Y'know, Dad always used to twist my arm to come back to the lake for holidays or to bring the kids for a week in the summer. Always the big guilt trip, family above all."

"And you listened. You came to the lake," June pointed out. "And it wasn't so bad. At least your kids know their cousins."

"OK, so they know their cousins . . . who they hardly see and who will never be a big part of their lives," April responded. "Look, June, I only came out of respect for Dad. It was important to him, and he was important to me."

"Well then, coming to the lake this weekend should be important too," June replied. "It's what Dad would have wanted. It's what he tried to leave us. He wanted us to have each other."

"So how has that worked out, Junie?" April retorted. "We're all such good friends, aren't we?"

June knew she had a point. For years the sisters had hardly seen each other, and then mostly at a cousin's wedding or an uncle's funeral. They never met for lunch or visited one another's houses. The weekly calls had only started when they were left trying to sort out the estate after Mom died.

"June, you're not Dad," April answered. "Dad's gone, and so is his

family. I'm not coming to the lake house." She hung up the phone. June sighed; April's life was a swim through an emotional sea, the slightest conflict created a storm that rippled across the entire surface and made dealing with her hard to navigate.

June woke the next morning to discover that the battle had continued by email. April sent a request for Dad's old fountain pen and a framed photo of the family at her high school graduation and stated that she wanted nothing else. Nicole wrote back that April should come help with the work and not just send demands. In the end, with a little more cajoling from June, Nicole asked more politely, and April relented and agreed to join them for one day at the lake house.

June had her own list of things she wanted from what remained. She wanted that little painting of a girl with a dog that had hung in the upstairs hall at the main house, and Dad's Naval Academy diploma. She also wanted Mom's ruby earrings, the dangly ones she would wear for weddings and charity galas. June could see her dressed in her trademark red satin, the earrings nestled in her curls all sparkling and magical. She wanted some of the photos too: the photos of the three girls lined up with fishing poles on the dock, Dad showboating on water skis, and the table shot of the big Thanksgiving dinner from when Grandma was still alive.

June was the last to arrive on Saturday morning. She saw Nicole's SUV and April's minivan in the driveway and parked in the pullout. The lake house was unchanged, familiar, and stolid, with dark-brown wood shingles and green shutters that made it blend with the surrounding trees. The big open deck protruded toward the lake, which sparkled in the morning sun. June grabbed her overnight bag and entered through the side door, climbing the narrow stairs from the mudroom to the kitchen.

Sandwiches from the local deli were laid out on the table with a big bag of chips, a bottle of Pepsi, and three giant chocolate chip cookies. That was April's doing, June assumed. Nicole would never have bought chips and cookies. June found April at the sliding doors to the deck, gazing out at the lake, and reached out to embrace her.

"April, it's good to see you." June





stepped back to view her sister better. “You look too thin.”

April shrugged. “You always say that. Don’t worry, I eat plenty. I even brought lunch for us today.” They walked toward the table as April continued, “Nicole is upstairs unpacking her bag and organizing her files.” They sat at the table unwrapping sandwiches and were soon joined by Nicole, who came bearing her spreadsheets and the burden of being in charge. Despite her complaints, she wore her appointment as Mom’s executor as a badge of honor. The final, chosen child.

“Let’s get this done once and for all,” she began. “We’ll go room by room starting with the master bedroom.” June noted with interest that Nicole had not called it Mom and Dad’s

room. Nicole ate half of her sandwich, wrapped up the remains, and put it in the fridge. “After you clean up, please join me upstairs.” She swept out of the kitchen, not waiting for a reply.

June and April finished their last chips and cleared the table. As they did so, they renewed their old argument over who had put the hole in the hull of the rowboat twenty years earlier and speculated on what had happened to the friends and enemies of their childhood. It did not take long to put away the leftovers, but neither moved toward the stairs. June let out a long sigh. “It’s hard. This sorting of these last pieces of Mom and Dad. It feels like they are still a presence as long as the loose ends are not tucked away.”

April turned her gaze toward the

lake. “For me that might be a good thing, tucking away the loose ends. Now that Mom is gone, maybe I don’t have to be her renegade daughter anymore; maybe I can stop hearing her voice in my head.”

“You stopped being her renegade daughter years ago,” June reassured her sister.

When April first left home, she had bounced from one bad boyfriend to another while waiting tables, living in dive apartments, and not speaking to anyone in the family. Dad had found her when the police called to tell him she had been picked up in a drug-induced coma and taken to the emergency room. This led to a string of failed rehab experiences until finally one seemed to work. Now April had a family and lived the proper suburban life.

“Childhood was different for you, June; you were everything Mom wanted. You liked being dressed up in ribbons and lace, you never misbehaved in school, you got the dance solos and won the Bible Bee at church,” April recalled.

April’s memories were not wrong. They were just incomplete. April continued, “On the other hand, I was a disappointment from the day I was born. Mom wanted to name me April, and I was born premature in March. It was my nature to ruin her plans, and she never let me forget it.”

“Mom named you April because you were the first, and April is the first

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month of spring,” June responded. “She loved spring; she called it the season when the earth gets a redo. She would have named Nicole May if Dad hadn’t put his foot down. And remember, eventually we all disappointed her.” They stood shoulder to shoulder and watched the lake swirl around the dock.

Of all of them, April had gotten the worst of Mom. She had suffered the misfortune of being the first. The first to make a mess, the first to throw a tantrum, the first to fight back. June didn’t remember many days when April wasn’t in trouble with Mom. Perhaps as



the first-born April was supposed to be Mom's redo, but no one had clued in baby April.

June's earliest memories were of Mom curling her hair and dancing with her in the living room. But all that had changed when June traded hair ribbons and ballet for torn jeans and school dances. Suddenly she did nothing right. If she got a perfect report card, her



mother told her boys don't like smart girls. If she dated the popular football player, she was wasting her potential chasing boys. Still pliable baby Nicole was the new princess, and June joined April as an ugly stepsister. June found an escape from the palace politics in a corner of her father's study, surrounded by hardcover classics and first editions. It became her hideaway whether Dad was in there or not.

Reluctantly, they turned from the lake and went upstairs to begin the sorting. Nicole had set the rules. Three plastic containers sat in the middle of the room labeled Keep, Donate, and Trash. If anyone wanted an item, it went in the Keep box to be divvied up later.

If nobody wanted it, they decided on whether it would go in Donate or Trash, voting to break any disagreements. June didn't imagine it would get to that point, but Nicole liked having a plan.

They started with the closet, keeping a few of Mom's favorites but relegating most to Donate or Trash. They put all the family pictures into the Keep box, mostly because they weren't quite ready to throw any of them out. Then they started on the big oak bureau packed with years of clothing. Nicole took out the top drawer and placed it on the bed. The old underwear hit the Trash container, a few of the flowered scarves were kept. Nicole returned the empty drawer and pulled the next. They emptied the T-shirts and shorts—many now yellowed and faded but still smelling faintly of sunscreen and Mom's perfume. As Nicole was returning the third drawer to the dresser, April stopped her. "Hey, wait a sec, there's something stuck to the bottom of the drawer."

Nicole returned the drawer to the bed, flipping it over to expose a brown manila envelope taped to the bottom. The tape was dry and crinkly, and April pulled it off easily, then shook out some yellowing photographs and what looked like a handwritten note. It took a minute before June realized what she was seeing in the photographs. They were pictures of her father in a heated embrace with a woman—a woman who was decidedly blonde and decidedly not Mom. A deep silence fell in the

bedroom. June could hear the breeze rustling the tree branches outside and a car passing on the street below.

April spread the note out over the flowers of the bedspread, next to the photographs. It was written in their mother's elegant hand.

Thomas,

I know about Madeline. I know you have chosen to betray me. I promise you, if you try to leave me, I will show these pictures to your children, so they will see your true faithless nature.

Emily

The silence was broken by Nicole. "Huh. Well, isn't that a kick in the pants. Dad always acting the saint, always the hero, the dutiful family man and breadwinner, and it turns out he was your garden-variety cheat." She picked up the note to examine it more closely, "Glad Mom knew how to take care of herself."

April's gaze remained locked on the photographs. "Well, I'm glad to see this picture. Dad appears to have found some happiness in his life. I hope she was nicer to him than Mom was."

June contemplated the note. Maybe that explained why her kind, successful, generous father had stayed with her negative, judgmental, manipulative mother for all those years. She had been blackmailing him. She picked up a picture for a closer look. "He does look happy; and she looks totally in love. No

wonder Mom was jealous. I wonder who she was."

"Probably some floozy he met at the office," Nicole replied, scowling.

"Floozy?" April laughed. "Now there's a word you don't hear much anymore. I agree it was likely someone from the office. Probably someone who was happy, kind, and supportive. Well, whoever she was, she sure was beautiful. Good for him."

The color was rising in Nicole's cheeks. "How can you say that, April? The man was a cheat."

". . . and his wife was a blackmailer." April finished the sentence. "What great role models for building a trusting, loving relationship." She picked up the pictures, examined each one, and returned them to the envelope. She took the note from Nicole's hand, folded it, and tucked it in with the



pictures. Then she looked from June to Nicole and asked, "Which bin?"

Nicole grabbed the envelope and stormed out of the room. They heard a door slam down the hall. Then silence. June sighed. "Let's sort the rest of the



bureau. When Nicole calms down, she can review our work and tell us what we did wrong. That should cheer her up.”

They finished all the drawers and Nicole had still not returned. April went to her room to call home. June sat on the deck immersed in the scent of the lake house, that peculiar aroma of pine, moss, and lake water. When April joined her, they climbed the stairs to tap lightly on Nicole’s door. There was no answer. “Nicole, let us in,” June commanded.

A few seconds later June heard the click of the lock releasing. She waited for

her sister to open the door but in the end had to turn the handle herself to enter the room. Nicole lay on the bed hugging a pillow and staring out the window. This room was not on the lake side and was filled with shadows from the oak tree that kissed the windows. Dad used to lean out the window every year and cut the branches back. Now they scratched gently against the glass, a persistent whisper in the silence of the room.

Nicole turned to June, her mouth tight and eyes stony. “What do you want?”

“What’s going on, Nicole? I know finding those pictures is a shock, but it was decades ago. Mom and Dad clearly got past it. Shouldn’t we?”

“Did you finish sorting?” Nicole asked tightly.

“Yes, Nicole, we finished sorting,” June replied. “You can go in and approve our choices, but first answer my question. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I’m fine. I just needed a break.” Nicole spoke to the wall past the foot of the bed. June walked into her field of vision, crossed her arms, but said nothing. April stood just inside the room, leaning on the doorframe with her arms crossed as well. Nicole changed her focus, her gaze blazing at June.

“Look, June. It’s just the same old shit. The same battle lines. You and April see those pictures. You see Mom’s note and your reaction is: What a bitch.” Now Nicole spoke to the ceiling. “Not

what a bastard to cheat on his wife, his loyal wife home with the kids. Both of you only see Saint Dad, even now, when he was clearly the bad actor. Why do you hate her so much? She was your mother too.”

“Nicole, I don’t hate Mom, but I do have a whole life of bad memories of her,” June answered. Nicole turned her gaze out the window to the rippling leaves that sent shadows across the room.

April joined June by the wall. She looked toward Nicole but spoke to the tall, dark, wood headboard of the bed. “When I was a little kid, I was a bit plump. Mom hated it and always made me ask twice for a second helping of potatoes at dinner or cookies after school, even as she gave them to June. She complained loudly to her friends at church about the limited clothing choices in the chubby department.” April squinched her lips against the sour memory.

“When I was in high school, it really started to get to me. I joined the track team and ran miles every day to try to run the fat off. By sophomore year I could borrow clothing from Mom’s closet. Mom was delighted, until she caught me in the bathroom after dinner with my fingers down my throat. As I sat on the floor, Mom stood in the doorway and told me I was disgusting, sick, weak. She threatened to tell Dad, to tell the school, and to tell Amanda, my best friend. She walked away from me as I sat there crying on the bathroom floor.”

April looked at her sister, but Nicole would not meet her gaze. “By senior year I had quit the track team, found drugs and a whole new set of friends. Mom only spoke to me when absolutely necessary until the day I moved out. You can’t blame me for reacting the way I did to that note. Mom was doing the same thing to Dad, blackmailing him with secrets to get her way.” Nicole said nothing, watching the shadows of the leaves dancing on the wall.

“She tried to blackmail me too.” June now took the stage. “When I was in college my boyfriend answered my phone one early morning and told Mom I was in the shower. She called back later screaming at me that I was a sinner and a slut. She threatened to



tell Dad and to stop paying tuition if I didn’t break up with the guy.”

A motorcycle roared past on the road outside, the grumble of the engine fading as it headed toward town. Nicole started speaking, “OK, so Mom had a temper.” She shrugged, “So, like Dad, you took care of yourselves. You escaped. You left her, left me with her, left her with me.”



June had not thought about it that way, but she realized Nicole was right. Nicole was the youngest by five years and had not even been in high school when she became the only child at home.

“In reality, Dad left her too.” Nicole was now looking at her sisters. “He started working out of his office in the city, staying there a few nights a week when he wasn’t traveling to some meeting somewhere or off visiting one of you. Most of the time it was just Mom and me eating dinner at one corner of that giant kitchen table.”

Nicole stood up, positioning the bed with its paisley pink spread between them like a barricade. She crossed her arms, and something of the efficient, put-upon Nicole returned to her eyes.

“Ya know, June, here’s what pisses me off. You all talk about Mom like she was this big villain of your childhood, you blame her for your unhappiness, you talk about surviving her like she beat you every night. It was always the two of you against Mom. But what about me? Believe me, she was just as shitty to me in high school as she was to you. Told me I couldn’t play softball because everyone would think I was a lesbian. Made me skip the class ski trip to go to a Bible retreat. She told me none of you came to see me in *The Music Man* because after all I only had a small role. Even Dad missed it. He was in London doing some big deal.”

June had no recollection of the play or of any invitation to attend, but imagining young Nicole’s

disappointment made her sad. Their mother had had a particular talent for verbal torture. For her and April, surviving their mother had become their twisted family bond, but they had never woven in Nicole.

Nicole folded her hands in front of her chest. She had that familiar self-righteous assistant-principal pursed-lip look on her face. Baby girl in charge. “All these years you lined up together against Mom while you had this weird competition to be Dad’s favorite. June, you became a literature professor because Dad liked books, and April, you just kept fucking up so Daddy could come save you.” April snorted, but Nicole continued. “But here is the irony: Of the three of us, I’m actually the one most like Dad.”

She looked at her sisters, raising an eyebrow, daring them to disagree. April just looked pissed, but June asked, “OK, Nicole, how do you figure?”

“Because I’m the one who stayed. I’m the one who did the right thing, did what Dad would have done. I took care of Mom after he died. I kept the books, organized the family finances, got you all to show up and do your part, even to be here at the lake house this weekend.”

June knew it was true. While she and April had come when asked, they usually stood around chatting and biding time until told what to do next. Meanwhile, Nicole had done exactly what Dad would have done—just got

shit done. Nicole had been the good daughter, even moved Mom into her house near the end when Mom no longer consistently remembered her name but constantly whined at her with complaints about the health aides.

June realized she actually felt a bit guilty. She could have done more—visited her Mom more, given Nicole a break. It had been a weird kind of competitive game between her and April, trying to top each other with a terrible Mom story, and it had spilled over to their present life. Yes, their mother could be toxic, but she was not always a terror. There had been good times—beach days and bonfires, boisterous family dinners with stories and laughter. She had also turned out to be a wonderful grandma, always willing to play board games and plan picnics and teddy bear tea parties. The next generation had all loved Granny.

April’s gaze remained locked on the photographs. “Well, I’m glad to see this picture. Dad appears to have found some happiness in his life.”

June's gaze on Nicole softened, and in return Nicole dropped her hands to her sides and now looked more sad than angry. "You saw the note and immediately thought of Dad being trapped and blackmailed. I saw the pictures, and I saw Mom's terror. She was not good at making friends, had no job or hobbies. Dad and us—we were her life."

"She would always have had you. You were always there for her," June pointed out.

"Yes, always there, like an old pair of boots. That's me." Nicole closed her eyes. June went to her and put her arm around her sister. Nicole leaned her head on June's shoulder.

"C'mon, come look at what we did," June said as she steered Nicole out of the room.

At dinner time they cooked burgers on the grill and sat at the picnic table by the lake. June found an old fishing pole in the shed but had no luck. As the sun set, they watched the light fade from the rocking chairs on the deck.

"Wow, who would have expected all this intrigue with Mom and Dad?" June spoke their unspoken thoughts. "I kind of wonder what happened to the woman."

"I wonder if she was the only one," April said as she toyed with the soupy remains of butter pecan melting in her bowl. "And why do you think Mom left the envelope for us to find? Why didn't she destroy it after Dad died? Do you think she forgot about it, or do

you think she wanted us to find it, one last jab from beyond the grave?" April stabbed the air with her spoon.

"Neither," Nicole answered. "She would have destroyed the pictures, probably right after Dad died. But she didn't leave the envelope. Dad did."

June and April turned to Nicole with wrinkled brows. April asked, "Why do you think Dad left it?"

Nicole took a moment, her hands at her temples, "Well, that really is two questions. Why do I think it was Dad? Because it was the original note. Only he would have had that note. Mom would have just kept copies of the pictures. As for the next question, why did Dad leave it for us to find? Now that I don't know. Maybe he wanted us to see that their problems were not all Mom's fault, or maybe it was his last jab at Mom." She imitated April's gesture with her spoon.

June turned this over in her mind, trying to square it with her memory of Dad. Then she had a thought. "Another possibility, maybe Mom never gave him the note or the pictures. Maybe she just kept them in case she felt she needed them, her little secret insurance policy under the drawer. And maybe she just forgot about it as she began to forget everything."

They contemplated this theory. There was no way to know. April stood, holding her bowl and crumpled napkin. "I'm done in. I'm going to bed and heading out early in the morning

to try to catch the last game of the soccer tournament. So I'll say goodbye now."

They all exchanged hugs and farewells. June stood holding April's shoulders and wished she would stay

the next day. "Maybe we can all do a sister's weekend here together when the summer is over?" she suggested.

April nodded pensively. "Maybe we can." With a wave and a tight smile, she disappeared into the house. ♦



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