**Searching for the Light**

Byrne’s hand trembled, and she caught her breath in fear.

Phil groaned.

Byrne reached out and gripped the edge of the gurney with one hand. She held Caroline’s with the other. Phil lay stretched out before them, and they were all waiting for the doctor.

“My leg, my leg,” Phil whispered.

Byrne hovered alongside him, struggling to listen, to tamp down her fears about Phil’s survival, the hospital, her ignorance of everything around her.

A cheerful technician with a tightly wound, single, dirty blonde pigtail reaching to the bottom of his neck had led them from the emergency room, into an elevator, and down into the bowels of Einstein hospital.

“Okey, dokey folks, he said,

Wait right here.”

He positioned the stretcher, facing Byrne with his sweatshirt that read All Is One underneath the picture of a smiley face. Before Byrne could ask a question, he turned from her and hurried away in a bouncing walk that made his pigtail jiggle.

Caroline spoke in an angry voice, not looking at anyone in this room as small as a utility closet, with stale air, and a naked lightbulb on the ceiling.

“Where is the doctor?”

The anger broke into Byrne’s trance of fear. She unhooked her hand from Caroline’s. She stepped back from Phil and walked the few steps to the doorway. She strained her eyes, searching the hallway, almost eerie in its darkness and silence. In a few moments the concrete stairway at one end became visible. A shard of light split the landing as a door slid open to the corridor upstairs. Someone had hurried through it, leaving the darkness behind. A disembodied male voice announced, “President Reagan’s been shot.” The staticky sound of the radio endured for a minute, then faded to nothingness. There must be panic back in Washington, Byrne thought.

Her heart beat louder as she stepped into the darkness. She felt disoriented. They had come down in an elevator, but she would go up on the stairway to the door she had seen closing.

She reached the door. At first she couldn’t open it, but she braced her shoulders and pushed harder. It worked. In the busy corridor, a tv overhead was showing the news. A spokesman at the GW hospital back in Washington was telling the crowd of reporters that the president was undergoing treatment, all would be well, the country was safe.

Byrne kept walking. She found the admissions counter and the same woman behind it, the one who had checked them in. She sucked her lower lip as she adjusted the clipboard in front of her. Byrne didn’t know if she was nurse, clerk, or guard.

“My father is in pain. We need help.”

“Honey, lots of people need help.”

A whirling sensation invaded Byrne’s chest, almost toppling her over. She thought she might fall.

“We’re aware of the situation,” the woman said, still looking down at papers on her desk.

“Don’t worry.”  
 The whirling around Byrne’s heart ceased. She slapped the counter with her open, angry hand.

“We’re very worried.”

The woman stopped fiddling with the clipboard.

“The doctor is on the way,” she said, somewhat more kindly this time.

Byrne walked toward the stairway again, stopping to take a drink from a water fountain near the door. As she bent her head close to the spout, she let a thin stream of water glide onto her face. As if in a dream, she drank deeply, aware of sounds but not certain if they were distant or close. A child behind her cried, a man in soft-soled shoes hurried past, a woman called, “I’m here now.”

Byrne swallowed the last drop. She stood rooted for a second in front of the stairway.

I’m here now, she said to herself.

When Byrne returned to her parents’ side, Phil’s cries were louder. His eyes were wet and skin ashen. Caroline’s body sagged. Her hand shielded her mouth. Byrne gave Caroline a quick hug, then stepped away from her and closer to Phil.

Following a strong instinct, Byrne lifted one arm, like a conductor with a baton, and she opened her hand over Phil’s head. In a gesture that surprised her, she let her hand float in one smooth movement, just above Phil’s body from his head to his feet.

Phil’s groans ceased.

The air seemed lighter, the room less like a prison cell.

Byrne relaxed.

Caroline took a deep breath.

“Are you all right?” Caroline looked at Phil, but she did not step closer to him.

Phil lifted his head slightly, smiled, then lay back.

“I’m okay. Byrne fixed me up.”

In the next moment the pig-tailed technician entered the room, dragging an IV pole behind him and hooked Phil up to it.

“Finally,” said Caroline.

The young man ignored her.

The doctor entered the room. He greeted Byrne and Caroline and shook hands with them. He looked merciful. His sad, intelligent eyes conveyed patience toward the unknown rather than fear.

“We’ll move him upstairs soon,” he said.

Byrne’s fix did not endure. A week after the emergency room admission, Phil died in his

sleep at the hospital.

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On the third morning after Phil’s funeral, Byrne sat on Caroline’s bed and reached for her hands, entwining her fingers with Caroline’s.

“I can’t come back here to live,” Byrne said.

Caroline sighed, tilting her head back like a child.

“Your father loved me,” she said, “more than my parents ever did.”

The words shook Byrne. She remembered few tender words between them during her growing-up years.

“I’m sorry,” said Byrne, and she kissed her mother’s cheek, a quiet, gentle kiss. She let go of Caroline’s hands and reached out to cover up her collarbone with the sleeve of her flowered nightgown. It had slipped off her shoulder.

“There,” said Byrne, “you look pretty.”

The bedroom had twin beds crammed into it, and the old chifforobe stood in a corner. Byrne remembered the chifforobe from childhood. The bronze baby shoes of her parents’ first-born baby, who had died at birth, were still on a cloudy green glass tray on top of it. The bedroom window overlooked a small lawn between this building and the one beside it. Byrne, not wanting to sleep in Phil’s neatly made bed, had slept on the sofa bed in the living room. When she woke up, she put on her jeans and the turquoise shirt that Caroline liked her to wear because it brought out the light in her eyes, and she went into the bedroom to brush her shoulder-length hair before the mirror in front of Caroline’s bed. She had seen Caroline stir behind her, and look around, pained, as if she was lost in her own room.

Now Byrne went into the kitchen to put on the teakettle for both of them. She steeled herself as she placed the cups and saucers on the table.

Caroline and Phil had moved to this new apartment in Mother of Sorrows parish on a tree-lined street off Roosevelt Boulevard a year after Byrne left for Washington, D.C. It had a tiny living room with a wallpaper pattern of roses and thorns, a sturdy sofa bed and coffee table, a television table, and a cheerful kitchen with pale blue curtains at the one window and two green plants with yellow and purple flowers in brick-colored pots on the windowsill.

Now, as they drank tea and ate toast, Caroline became energized, started again with the argument she had been using now and then for months.

“You’re young and strong. You can be happy anywhere.”

Byrne stirred the tea. She looked down. There was so much she didn’t tell Caroline. She didn’t tell her she had been offered a full scholarship to the Corcoran School of Art and Design, and she was debating if she could accept it and leave the security of her copyediting job at the Urban Research Center. She hadn’t told Caroline about Olson, the graduate student she had met at the Center. They were dating, and Byrne thought she was falling in love with him.

“Maybe you don’t care if I’m happy,” said Byrne.

Caroline squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them.

She stood up abruptly and carried her cup and saucer to the sink. Her back to Byrne, she said, “Do whatever you want to do.”

Byrne remained at the table, her thoughts pounding along with the water rushing full force into the sink.

Mentally she listed reasons to combat her internal accusations of selfishness. Caroline had Phil’s pension from the Teamsters, she had Social Security, she had an apartment that was not difficult to keep up.

A longing to talk to her grandmother Anna pierced the armor Byrne was wearing against Caroline. Anna would have held Byrne and listened to her. She would have told her *life first*. Hold on to life at all cost. It had cost Anna. Anna had sacrificed Caroline for her own reasons. Would Byrne do that too? Anna had left her husband and Caroline and gone to live with her lover when Caroline was 17. After that betrayal, Caroline did not speak to Anna for ten years.

Anna had died a year ago, almost immediately after Byrne left Philadelphia for Washington. The funeral had been small, private, and life went on without much talk about the loss of Anna. Byrne’s intuition since childhood was that talk about her grandmother was not welcome. Talk about the past just meant re-living the pain.

“And who wants that?” Caroline had said more than once when she turned away from Byrne’s questions in elementary school and turned on the news or opened a library book or resumed embroidering a pillowcase.

Byrne took Amtrak back to Washington. She sat in the quiet car, coach class, in the seat beside the window. No one took the seat beside her, and she spread her purse, carry-on bag, and *Modern Art Journal* on the empty seat, knowing this early afternoon train transported fewer passengers than rush-hour trains, and therefore the seat would probably remain empty even as the train passed through Delaware and Maryland on the way to Union Station in D.C.

She picked up the art magazine and started paging through it, but then she stopped at the image of a collage that took an entire page. Deep blue and red colors in large and small shapes fit perfectly within a thinly drawn frame, and Byrne’s thoughts seemed to be penetrating the image as she remembered the walks she had taken as a child with Phil on many early evenings. They walked several blocks up Fifth Street, a slight hill that took them all the way to the free library at the intersection of Fifth and Tabor Road. Byrne sometimes visited the library on Saturdays. She liked the biographies of early Philadelphians like Ben Franklin. He had left his powerful father and bossy older brother back in Boston to go to Philadelphia and found his own newspaper.

Phil and Byrne would stroll by the library and keep on going past Ben’s Bargain Store with its polka dot beach balls, hula hoops, garden hoses, and bathroom mats in the window. All year round, flip flops adorned rising shelves set off on diagonals at the side of the window. They passed the jewelry shop. Its window showed a blue velvet throat, encircled by a ruby hanging from a gold chain, turning left and right on a diamond-studded dais.

Phil did not converse with Byrne on the walk. Sometimes when they stopped at an intersection and waited for the light to change, Byrne leaned against his arm and felt like shouting, “Tell me something,” but she too did not say a word.

When they arrived at the top of the hill, just before the boundary line that would turn Philadelphia into another county, they turned around, and Phil asked the usual question.

“Would you like to take a trolley home?”

Byrne always said yes, and when she saw the trolley coming toward them with blue and orange sparks flying from the wire bending from its roof, a bright word rose from her heart to her eyes:

FIRE!

When they reached home, Phil usually went straight to the kitchen. Byrne would stand in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room and watch him take a frosted mug from the freezer, pour beer into it, and perch his lit cigarette on the tip of an ashtray that Byrne gave him one year for Christmas. Then he would open the top drawer of the hutch crammed with rubber bands, clips, matchbooks, and can openers and take out the folded pages of his map of the stars.

He would sit down and study it. Some evenings he listened to the big band music on the radio, tapping his foot along with the sound. When Byrne came into the kitchen, he let her taste a sip of his beer. She didn’t like the taste, but she liked to ask for it and hear Phil grant her request.

“Look,” Byrne jumped as she heard a child scream happily. The little girl was across the aisle in her mother’s lap, staring out the window as the train sped past the Newark, Delaware, platform where a small crowd of people had just disembarked.

Byrne put the magazine back on the empty seat as she pushed a strand of hair away from her eyes. She rummaged in her purse and found the black rosary beads that had belonged to Phil, and she placed them discreetly in her lap. She had taken Phil’s rosary, with which he had prayed, to keep for herself. She had bought a new one to drape over his hands in the coffin for the viewing when he was laid out at Dougherty’s.

Now Byrne did not say prayers with the rosary, but she held the beads, a man’s black beads, and she replayed the many arguments her parents had at night when she was growing up and the scraps she overheard that she could not forget.

“You’re cold, Caroline. You’ve always been cold.”

Hearing them, Byrne, in her own bedroom down the hallway, had felt a cold fear spread evenly through her abdomen, curl itself together, and become a fist below her breastbone.

Thoughts had tortured her then. Maybe they would divorce. Who would she live with? Phil would be lonely by himself. Caroline needed her close.

Once, on one of their walks, they had stood at an intersection with a street light. The light was still red, and Byrne had pulled Phil back when he stepped off the curb

“The light’s red,” Byrne had told Phil, and he woke up and waited.

“You’re right,” he said.

Caroline had told him more than once that he had his head in the clouds, and Byrne admitted to herself, sometimes he did. She wanted him to talk about himself. He rarely did.

*I didn’t really know him, but I loved him.* Byrne’s fingers tightened around the rosary. She closed it in her palm, and then she closed her eyes.

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