

Poof!

KATHIE GIORGIO

When I was nine years old, a boy socked me on the arm at recess. He hit hard, enough to cause me to cry out, to bring tears to my eyes, though I wouldn't let them escape. It was also hard enough to turn my skin into shades of purple and black with a deep red center. After hitting me, he spun on his heels and ran back across the playground, joining up with a group of boys who stood clustered, grinning at me.

I didn't know what to do. My arm hurt, but it was my voice that was taken. My best girlfriend grabbed my hand and led me to a spot under the trees, just around the corner of the school building. I sat on the ground and finally cried, my hand clasped over the unexpected sore spot on my upper arm. My friend rubbed my back, but said nothing. Her voice seemed taken too.

At home, my mother clucked over the growing lumpy bruise and she pulled an ice pack from the freezer. After securing it to my arm with an ace bandage, she sat me on the couch in front of the television and put on my favorite after-school program, a game show where people won more money than I knew how to count to. My mother brought me a plate of Oreos and some milk. Then she sat on the arm of the couch and said, "That boy...he must really like you, Faith."

I immediately put my hand on the ice pack, my fingers going numb with the cold. "Like me? He hit me! For no reason!"

She nodded. "That's what boys do. It means they like you."

That's what boys do.

Years later, boys later, men later, I stared at my bedroom ceiling and felt like I needed my mother and her ice pack and an ace bandage, even though there wasn't a bruise. Every morning, after I opened my eyes and before I rolled out of bed, I wrapped my arms around my own shoulders and hugged myself, the way I knew my mother would hug me. The way she did hug me after that day on the playground. Carefully, to not bring pain where I was wounded, but fully, to let me know she was there and she would always be there.

I started hugging myself soon after my first anniversary with my husband. The hugs started as an intermittent thing, then grew into routine.

But there were never any bruises. Just words. Specific words, not spoken in anger or even in surprise. Not spoken at a certain time of day or month or season or event. They could come first thing in the morning, before my husband even greeted me to the new day, or in the middle of the night or dinner or lovemaking. Once, at our daughter's birthday, just after we helped her blow out her three candles, he smiled at me over the cake, and he said those words. Six of them.

"I'm going to kill you someday."

The first time he spoke them, just days after our first anniversary, it was over a sinkful of dishes. I was draining the water, my favorite part, watching the bubbles circle, chasing them with the spray from the faucet, and he was drying the last fork. He dropped it in the drawer, slid it shut with a gentle slam, folded the towel neatly and hung it on the rack he installed himself after we moved into the house just a month before. Then he turned to me, kissed my cheek, smiled, and said, "I'm going to kill you someday." And he left the room.

I laughed. I saw myself laughing in the reflection of the window. My husband just made the most outrageous joke. Maybe it was a line from a TV show he'd just watched. He liked to entertain me with non sequiturs and from-out-of-nowhere statements. So I laughed and then went to join him in the living room. I knew in an hour or so, we would have a glass of wine apiece while we read our respective books until it was time for the news. Then we'd go to bed, and if we weren't too tired, we'd make love, attempting to conceive the baby we both wanted.

Eight years now into our marriage, seven years after our first anniversary, I sometimes heard these words even when he wasn't home. I heard him whisper. In my car. In the shower. When I was asleep. Sometimes, months went by without his saying those six words, and I wondered if I heard him at all, but then there they would be again, in the air between us, in my presence, to my face, always when I didn't expect it.

He never gave me an explanation. And there was something about the way he said them that kept me from asking. Except for once. We were passing each other in the

hallway, me with a basket of newly folded laundry, he on his way out to pick up our every-Saturday pizza. We smiled at each other, I said, "Hurry back," and he said, "I'm going to kill you someday."

I stopped dead. Then I turned and called to his retreating back, "Why do you say that? Why do you say that to me?"

He didn't stop, but looked over his shoulder, winked, and said, "Who else would I say that to?" And then he was gone.

I put away the laundry. I ate the pizza. And I puzzled, pondered and worried. At what point do non sequiturs become targeted statements, heading directly for a bullseye, and what do you do if the bullseye seems to be you?

It wasn't like he said the words the same way each time. Sometimes, he was flippant. Other times, the words were so low, the S in someday so sibilant, that I shivered. But there was always an air of warning around them. Don't ask. You won't like the answer.

When our daughter was born, he said the words a week after we brought her home. He was holding her, singing a lullaby, while I curled up on the couch, trying to catch a fast nap. Midway through a line of the song, he looked at me, smiled, and sang with the melody, "I'm going to kill you someday," then he returned to the real lyrics. I was so tired; I fell asleep to it. In the morning, after he left for work and I awoke to the sound of a crying baby, I hugged myself.

Our daughter was five years old now. Elizabeth. My husband and I entered the delivery room, not knowing what we would name our child. Not knowing, by choice, if she was a boy or a girl. But the moment this messy, elegant, outspoken baby was laid between my breasts, the moment I cupped my hands over her head and her bottom, her name rose up through my fingertips. "Elizabeth," I whispered and my husband whispered it after me. I wondered how I didn't know who I carried within me all that time. Who I whispered to for months, and who answered me with gentle stretches and head butts. There would be no shortened version of her name; no Beth, no Liz, no Eliza. She was Elizabeth.

But now, on this particular morning, when I opened my eyes and before I rolled out of bed, I hugged myself and found a new chill I couldn't embrace away. Last night, my

husband added five more words. New words. Words that started with a “maybe”, but that felt as definite, as solid as certainty. We were arguing over whether or not we should put Elizabeth in swimming lessons, something she begged to do. The lessons were expensive and my husband thought we should just take her for Saturday afternoons at the Y during free swim until we knew if she had an aptitude. I knew she had an interest and wanted to encourage it. Elizabeth sat on the floor, pretending to watch television, as our voices rose.

Suddenly, my husband stopped. “I’m going to kill you someday,” he said, his voice heavy with softness. But then he looked at our daughter, looked right at the back of her head. “Maybe,” he added, “in front of her.”

Then he sat back on the couch, propped his feet on the coffee table, and asked Elizabeth what we were watching. I felt the gap of seconds before she answered, animatedly describing the plot of the children’s program. That gap let me know that she heard.

So this morning, I hugged myself. And then I hugged myself again. In between, I heard his echo.

I’m going to kill you someday.

I decided to go to my parents. They’d retired several years ago, tired of the long winters on the coast of Maine, where I still lived, and moved to the gulf of Florida, St. Petersburg, to still have the big blue view they loved, but soaked year-round in yellow sunshine. It was a twenty-four hour drive away.

Maybe in front of her.

It was past time to go. I should never have stayed until the second sentence. This wasn’t what boys do. He didn’t hit me. Maybe he never liked me at all.

Elizabeth was still in bed, but she was awake. It wasn’t yet time to head to kindergarten, but I knew we wouldn’t be going there anyway. I also knew she would protest, she loved school, so I led with a trip to her grandparents, who she loved even more. I smoothed her hair from its nighttime rumpleness. “Get on up and get dressed, sweetheart,” I said. “We’re going to see Grandma and Grandpa. Pack all your favorites in your backpack and your little suitcase.”

She whooped, then blinked at me. “Favorites?”

“Favorite clothes, favorite pajamas, favorite toy, favorite book. And don’t forget Miriam.” Miriam was the cloth ragdoll she’d had since birth. “I’m going to go pack my favorites now too. We’ll get breakfast when we’re on the road. Sausage McMuffin with Egg? Hashbrown? Orange juice?”

Elizabeth threw back the covers and whooped again.

Before we left, I quizzed her on what she packed. When we got to her favorite toy, she explained that would be her legos, which I already knew. They wouldn’t fit in her backpack, but she had them contained in a storage bin. Then she held up her backpack by both straps.

“I know you said favorite book, but is it okay that I packed, like, ten? Maybe more? I couldn’t decide. There are series, Mama.” She dropped the backpack to the floor. “It’s sorta full.”

I laughed. “That’s fine. I should have known. And you have Miriam?”

She held up the doll.

We walked out to the car, on our way to Grandma’s house. I knew, as I locked the door, that we wouldn’t be coming back.

He must like you. That’s what boys do.

He mustn’t like me.

Years after that moment on the playground, I dated that boy who slugged me. I went to prom with him. When I asked him about that day, he blushed and admitted he did hit me because he liked me, that he didn’t know what else to do to get my attention.

I dated him for a year and we discovered lots of ways he could get my attention. Then I went to college. I dated many others. Some caught my attention. Some didn’t. Some even hit me.

It’s what boys do.

I always walked away.

But no one threatened to kill me. Not in any tone of voice. Not as a statement. Not as a non sequitur, not as a joke. Not over and over, for years, couched in declarations of love and the enjoyment of each other’s company. And the birth of a wanted child.

Elizabeth and I would go see Grandma and Grandpa. My parents loved their granddaughter with a ferocity that would stand up to any fist and to any string of words. Together, they were formidable. They loved me with an intensity that would never fade.

I hugged myself before getting behind the wheel. I heard his whisper as I pulled out of the driveway.

Maybe in front of her.

Whenever we visited my parents before, we flew, but this time, I drove. It was rough, but with two nights in hotels with swimming pools and lots of videos on the iPad and Elizabeth's precious books, we made it. I even allowed her to sit in the front seat, which she did with her eyes wide.

My phone buzzed frequently and I finally put it on silent. My husband's voice went from friendly to strident to soft. The last message I heard caused me to stop at a Best Buy in Georgia to buy a disposable phone with a new phone number. Then I turned my old phone off, pulled out the battery, and dropped it to the bottom of my purse.

I called my parents when we were fifteen minutes out. My mother's shock quickly turned over to surprise and pleasure. "I'll explain when I get there," I said. Both of my parents were standing on the front step when we pulled into the driveway.

Elizabeth spilled out of the car and ran into their arms. I walked slowly to them, enjoying the heat and the sunshine of a Florida October that was so unlike Maine's. I tried to look happy. Comfortable. Relaxed.

But my mother breathed, "Honey," and my father clenched his fists.

"We'll talk," I said.

We pulled in our suitcases and Elizabeth's backpack. It was time for Elizabeth's favorite after-school program and my mother set her up as she set me up, on the couch, cookies, milk, though her milk was chocolate, chocolate right from the carton, something my mother never let me have, not white milk with powder, served in a tall glass with ice cubes. The motion of the car gone, the goal of this trip attained, it only took about ten minutes for Elizabeth to drop into sleep, her head on the arm of the couch, Miriam tucked to her

chest. I asked if I could have the contraband chocolate milk and cookies too, including the ice cubes. When my parents and I sat down at the dining room table, the L-shaped floorplan keeping us in view of my sleeping little girl, my mother set a plate of Oreos in front of me. She still kept them at the ready in the kitchen cupboard, even though it was months between visits.

“Honey,” my mother said again.

I thought I had the words at the ready. But instead, I lowered my head to my folded arms on the table and wept.

When my voice came back, I sat up and took a sip of the milk. “This is going to sound crazy,” I said. “But I don’t know who is crazy. Me or him. Maybe I’m overreacting.” I told them everything, from my first anniversary until now. “He changed it,” I said. “The night before I left. He said,” and I nodded toward the couch, “maybe in front of her.”

My parents gasped.

“I’m not going back,” I said. My mother’s hands were pressed over her mouth. Her eyes were wide. My father’s cheeks were red. His fists clenched again.

“You’ll stay here,” my mother said between her fingers.

“You’ll get a restraining order,” my father said.

I nodded. But I knew a restraining order was impossible. My husband used only words. Only.

A few mornings later, my mother and I walked to the elementary school three blocks from their house. I registered Elizabeth, listing my parents as contacts along with my name, and told the school that her father was no longer in our lives for a reason, and that if he should magically appear, he was to have no contact with her. The principal wagged her head in sympathy, and then took Elizabeth’s hand and told her she was going to have a wonderful time there. Elizabeth asked about the size of the school library and how often she would be allowed to go. She would start on Monday, joining kids who had been in school since August, almost a month earlier than our Maine school system. She would be behind, but I had no doubt she would catch up, if she wasn’t ahead of them all already.

Afterward, we visited the playground before going home. Elizabeth investigated the swings, the slide, the monkey bars. It was mid-morning and there wasn't any recess at that time, so my mother and I stood and admired the way Elizabeth scaled the monkey bars until she sat at the top, grinning down at us. She pounded her chest and roared like a great bear. I shushed her, reminding her that school was in session. "You can roar on Monday," I told her. "At recess, you can roar all you like."

She laughed, then hung upside down. The skirt of her favorite pink ruffled dress hung past her head. "Look, Mama!" she called. "I've disappeared! Can you see me?"

"Oh, no!" I called back. "Where did you go?"

Elizabeth stretched her arms toward the ground. Her Littlest Pet Shop underwear glittered in the sun. Puppies and kittens chased each other across her bottom.

When I was Elizabeth's age, I would have been mortified. I would never have hung upside down, unless I was in pants and a shirt that I could tuck in, never exposing my bottom or my bare belly to the air. My girl hung and whooped despite school hours. I wanted nothing more than to press my lips against that brave bare belly and blow. I ran over, did just that, and shouted, "Found you!" to be heard over her giggles.

Instead, I heard my husband.

I'm going to kill you someday.

But he wasn't there.

Elizabeth curled herself up, wrapping her fingers around the bars and slipping her knees free. She dropped to the ground, straightened her dress, and ran over to the swings. My mother and I slowly followed. I picked up Miriam, who'd fallen to the ground when Elizabeth was upside down.

My mother slipped her arm through mine. "Remember George?"

George was a black and white panda bear who was with me so long, I didn't even remember how I got him. I smiled at my mother. "He's in my suitcase."

As we walked back to my parents' house, Elizabeth skipping in front of us and making exaggerated leaps over the cracks in the sidewalk, shouting that she would never ever break my back, I felt that my back was indeed intact. It was strong. I could do this, even though I didn't know yet what "this" was. I could do anything for my daughter.

It was my heart that was breaking.
He mustn't like me.
Or her? We both wanted her. We planned her.
Maybe in front of her.
Maybe he needed an audience.

That night, as I tucked Elizabeth in, she grabbed the sides of my face and pulled me close. "Mama," she whispered. "I heard Daddy."

I lowered myself to the bed and shifted her on top of me. A five-year old on your chest is a lot different than a newborn, but I welcomed her weight, her length, and her presence. She kept her hands on my face so I couldn't look away.

"Mama," she whispered. "You know how I disappeared on the playground?"

"You mean when your dress was over your face? I could see you, honey. It was just pretend."

She nodded. In that nod was something as old as the earth. Her torso pressed against mine, her hips too, and her legs were echoes on my thighs. In that moment, we were as close as when she was tucked deep inside of me. "I know. But Mama. You have to disappear. Like magic. Like a magic show."

I frowned. "What? What do you mean?"

She sighed, just the way I did when I was trying to explain something right or wrong to her. It was wrong to take cookies, even if they were bought for her. It was right to say thank you for something, even if she didn't want it or ask for it. She spoke to me in a one-sentence-at-a-time explanation. "Mama, he can't see you. Then he can't kill you. Then I won't see." Her eyes teared up. "Mama. Disappear." And then, like the child she was, she let my face go, fluttered her fingers in the air, and said, "Poof!"

"Poof," I repeated. And in my mind, a plan started to take hold. "You want me to disappear?"

She nodded again, and the tears spilled over. "Not forever and for always," she said, using a phrase from one of our favorite books to read together. A book where we

declared we would love each other forever and for always. “Just for now.” She rested her cheek against my chest. “Just for now. Like a magic show. The magician always brings the disappeared back.”

I wrapped my arms around her and we fell asleep.

I walked my daughter to her first day at the new school. I sat on a bench across the street at recess time too and I watched as she deftly climbed to the top of the monkey bars and roared the way I promised her she could. I met her after school and walked her home.

My new cell phone remained silent. My old phone was dead, battery pulled, resting at the bottom of my purse. My husband installed a GPS locator app in that phone a year ago. He said he always wanted to know where I was. For now, I was already invisible; the phone had no power. But Elizabeth’s idea was for me to disappear. Poof! Magic.

I would do anything for my daughter. And she was such a smart girl.

On the second day of school, my parents walked Elizabeth. She looked over her shoulder at me and I knew she held back tears, the way I held back tears on my own playground years before, when I was punched. I’d kissed her. I’d hugged her. And I told her I’d love her forever and for always.

Then I put my suitcase in the trunk of my car. My parents thought I was heading back to Maine, to speak to a lawyer and to the police. I told them I wouldn’t go home, but stay at a hotel. And I would, but not in Maine. There was no magic in Maine.

I set George in the passenger seat and buckled him in. My car’s GPS was set on a path toward Chicago, a randomly chosen location that would surprise my husband so much, he wouldn’t question that I was going there, once I turned my old cell phone back on.

It was an 18-hour drive. I decided to take a day and a half to get there. When I called my daughter on the first night, I told her I was fine, that I hadn’t disappeared yet, but I was on my way to the magic show. She told me a little girl came home with her after school. My mother gave them Oreos and chocolate milk. With ice cubes. Before she handed the phone to my mother, I said, “Poof!” Elizabeth echoed, “Poof!” and then added, “I love you, Mama.”

My mother asked how I was.

"I'm fine," I answered. And then I said, "I love you, Mama."

She loved me, the way a mother does. With an intensity. In the days to come, she would look at my daughter and understand.

Poof.

In Chicago, I found a cheap motel room. I called my mother. In the background, I heard my daughter and my father laughing. The sound made me smile.

"So listen, Mom. He left a lot of threatening text messages and voicemails before I shut my old phone down. Tomorrow, I'm going to mail you that phone. I've taken the battery out, and it will be in the envelope too. When you get it, keep it in a safe place. If he comes for Elizabeth, you can put the battery back in and play the messages for the police and show them the texts. It will be proof that he shouldn't have her."

"Okay," my mother said slowly. "Honey," she said, "when will you be back? Why not keep the phone with you? You might need it, for the lawyer."

And so I lied. Magic. "I forwarded everything to my new phone, Mom. I have it. But I want you to have it too, for Elizabeth's protection."

We said goodnight and I shared poofs with Elizabeth. "Mama," she said, "I miss you."

"I miss you too, sweetheart," I said, and then I panicked. "Do you want me to come back? Maybe I'm disappeared enough there, with Grandma and Grandpa."

I heard her breathe. Then she said, "Mama, you have to disappear. He can't see you." Her last word squeaked and shattered and I knew again that I would do anything for my daughter.

"Poof!" I said.

"Poof!" she said, and then hung up.

I heard him then.

Maybe in front of her.

I searched through Google for where I would go next. I found what I was looking for in Wyoming: the Jenny Lake Trailhead, near Jackson Hole. If I wandered off the trail at some point, I'd soon be deep in the woods. Deep.

And there were grizzlies, among other wild creatures. Magicians of the forest, that roared like my daughter did on top of the monkey bars. They could make things disappear.

It would be another 21-hour drive. I hugged George, my panda bear. Then I turned to CraigsList.

The next morning, I turned on my old cell phone. I was immediately deluged with text messages and voicemails. In some, my husband rambled. Some of the texts were incoherent, a string of symbols, like when a comic strip character swears. The last dozen, both voicemail and text, were simply his routine statement, and that new phrase he added which caused me to leave, though it was intermittent.

I'm going to kill you someday.

I'm going to kill you someday.

I'm going to kill you someday.

Maybe in front of her.

I'm going to kill you someday.

I checked to make sure the GPS app was turned on. Then I set my phone on the bedside table. My mind became annotated, a list of bullet points. Do this, do that. Turn my phone on. Get a different car. Pay for the motel room. Turn my phone off. Leave my car and the motel behind. Go to a post office. Put my old phone and the battery in a padded envelope, mail it to my mother. Get on the road for Wyoming.

Going to the motel office, I booked the room for three more days. Then I took a bus to meet the man I spoke with an hour before. He had an ad on CraigsList for an old car.

I paid cash, then drove the tiny car, a 2004 Toyota Corolla, back to the motel. I had an affection for this type of car; I learned to drive in one, and called it the Toy Car. I transferred everything I brought with me to this new Toy Car, patted my own car goodbye after leaving the keys in the ignition and locking it, grabbed my old phone and turned it off, pulling the battery, and then drove away.

George was in my front seat. After I left the post office and headed out of town, I pretended he was Elizabeth and we chattered about the landscape, the things I saw out the

window, our favorite book. I filled my mind with Elizabeth's voice, with what she would say, with what I would answer. We didn't let my husband speak.

But I felt myself growing cold.

I was disappearing. Poof.

Magic.

He mustn't like me.

Or her.

I checked into yet another small motel, but this time, in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. I was already breathless with the beauty of the place, and even though I knew how tomorrow would end, I still looked forward to heading out on the Jenny Lake Trailhead.

This motel was different from the others, in its emptiness. All I had left were the clothes I wore, my new cell phone, and a length of rope from a local hardware store. And George. Along the way to Jackson Hole, I'd stopped at a variety of Goodwills, Salvation Armys, and St. Vincent de Paul's. I donated a few of my things at every place. I still had a few dollars on me. My wallet, filled with all but one of my credit cards, I dropped through a sewer grate in the middle of nowhere, Iowa. It was a place called What Cheer, and I liked the name. It seemed like the perfect place to leave behind the last vestiges of my identity, though for now, I held on to my driver's license. Just in case, though I drove very carefully.

When I called home, I got my father first. "He called here," he said, before he even said hello. "When I told him you weren't here and we thought you were on your way there, he started to say, 'I'm going to —' and I told him to knock it off." There was that gap of seconds that let him know I heard him. "Honey," he said, his voice soft, "did you ever tell him to just knock it off?"

I hadn't. But it was very hard to imagine that it could ever be that easy. Not when a certain set of words, said in a certain order, strike a fear in you that runs deeper than your heartbeat. Deeper than your child's heartbeat.

I'm going to kill you someday.

Maybe in front of her.

I just couldn't imagine that Knock it off could ever wield that much power. There just wasn't that much magic in the world. Poof.

When I talked to Elizabeth, she told me that her school wouldn't let her check out as many books as she wanted from their library, or at the grade level she asked for. "They say I'm only five, Mama," she said, and I could hear her hands on her hips. "I am only five, but I can read older!" She said that her grandmother was going to take her to the bookstore to stock up on more reading material. I told her to find books on magic.

Then I said, "Elizabeth, tomorrow, I'll be at the magic show. Okay? You won't hear from me." I nearly added, "for a while," but I couldn't. I used magic to lie to my mother. I wouldn't, to my daughter.

In the gap of seconds, I knew she heard me. I felt that she also heard what I didn't say. "Poof," she whispered.

"Poof," I answered. Then I hung up the phone, held George, and cried.

I'm going to kill you someday, my husband whispered. Maybe in front of her.

I would never give him that chance.

The morning was beautiful. The air had a snap to it, and I knew my cheeks would redden as soon as I stepped onto the trail. The sky was endless. It felt like a big blue ceiling. There were mountains that actually matched what I thought of, dreamt of, as mountains. I stopped at a McDonalds and ate a breakfast in honor of my daughter.

Sausage McMuffin with Egg. Hash Browns. Orange juice. But I added coffee for myself. I drank it slowly.

There was a parking lot near the trailhead. The man I bought the car from signed the title over to me, but I didn't use my real name when I signed it. I was disappearing. I left the title in the glove compartment of the car, then, again, put the keys in the ignition and locked the doors. I patted its hood. It did a good job.

I tucked George under my arm and followed the signs to the trail. It was a quiet morning, but there were several people starting off, tying their hiking boots, adjusting their backpacks. I hoped I didn't look too strange in my sneakers and hoodie, carrying a stuffed panda bear. But no one seemed to pay me much attention as I started out.

I walked until the sun was fairly high, and I was beginning to feel hungry again. I looked behind me and found the path empty. Taking a deep breath, I stepped off the trail. Fall's leaves immediately crunched loudly under my feet, though I tried to walk quietly. Within a few minutes, I could no longer see the trail. There were only trees and more trees. They surrounded me and I was grateful to not be alone.

I pushed ahead for about an hour. With each step, I could feel myself becoming more invisible. When I stopped and listened, I only heard the calls of birds, the rustle of leaves, the snapping of twigs, and my own whispered, "Poof!" No other voices. Not even my husband's. I began to look for the perfect tree. The magic tree.

It didn't take long, not really, and in some ways, I felt disappointed. It seemed like it should be a special tree, unique, different from all that surrounded it, a magic tree with magic leaves and special colors. But there it was. While it was colored like all the rest, its leaves still intact, ablaze with red and orange and some yellow, it held out its branches like strong, strong arms. Arms that would hold me, like my mother would hold me. Until it was time to let go, as all mothers have to do. There was even a boulder next to it that I could step on, which would boost me high enough to reach a branch and pull myself up.

But first, I took out my phone. I shouldn't have been surprised to see there was no reception, but I was. I teared up; I wanted to send my mother an apology. I wanted to tell her to say to my daughter, "Poof!" I wanted to tell her that my husband mustn't like me.

I told myself my mother loved me. With intensity. She would look at my daughter and understand. All mothers have to let go.

The ground was softer near the boulder, and I found a loose stick and dug a shallow hole. After turning the phone off, I buried it, along with my driver's license and last credit card. Then, I hoisted myself into the tree.

Now, everything was about the annotated list and the bullet points. My body sweated in panic, but my mind ticked off the next thing, and the next thing, and directions on how to accomplish what needed to be done. The steps to the magic act. It was an act that would keep me invisible, keep my husband searching for me, and never ever find me. If he was searching for me, he would leave Elizabeth alone. By the time I tied the rope around a

strong and steady branch, a branch that reached out to hug me, a branch that would drop me to the perfect height, the sun seemed to be going down. It was growing dark. The wild sounds were increasing. It wouldn't take long, I thought, before I was found by the forest magicians. The ones who would complete my disappearing act and set my husband on a search that would never end. Grizzlies. Mountain lions. Wolves, maybe. I sat down on the branch and swung my legs. It seemed such a far way down. I decided, like my daughter, to beat my chest and roar. Even though I didn't feel mighty at all.

I'm going to –

“Knock it off,” I said out loud. I said it for my father.

George was tucked under my hoodie and I hugged him against my bare skin. I wished he could blow on my belly, the belly that was trying to be brave, and make me giggle. Then I tied the noose and slid it around my neck.

My husband would never ever find me. He mustn't like me. He mustn't like her.

I loved my daughter. With intensity. Forever and for always. I would do anything for her.

Even magic. Poof!

I disappeared. □