

# *Almost*

BY KELLY GROGAN

**M**ILES PICKED UP THE PHONE AFTER SEVERAL rings, assuming his manager was calling to ask him about the past-due analytics, but it was Camilla calling. It was her birthday, and she wanted to see him. Miles agreed to meet at her apartment in Beacon Hill at eight o'clock, and then called Hannah and told her he needed to work late, not to wait up for him. "They're saying the office is going to be closed tomorrow," he said, "because of the snow." The lie slipped out easily but not without a pang of guilt. For a moment he imagined his wife, standing alone at the window in their unlit house watching the snow fall. A moment only, and then it passed.

Even though it was true that he had some work to finish up, Miles couldn't concentrate. He scrolled through his emails without reading anything and at six-thirty he gave in and left the office, deciding to walk to Camilla's instead of taking the train. He thought it would take longer that way, but even with the slow movement of the crowds he ended up wandering through the Boston Commons by Camilla's apartment with nearly an hour to pass. He watched a group of ice skaters spin and glide around the rink in the middle of the park. Snowflakes stung his face each time the wind lifted.

He used to ice skate in the winter. He'd skated backwards, holding Hannah's hands in his own while the two of them wobbled unsteadily along the perimeter of the rink. Then, with their son—as a child Lucas stood tightly between them, one hand in each of theirs; when he grew up, he flew past them, never looking backwards, always racing faster, faster. Lucas had skated like the boy Miles

watched now, circling the rink alone in a blue coat. In the blur of his movement the boy looked just like Lucas would have—he was the right age, the right height, his hair was a mess of curls. Except Lucas was gone. Even though it'd been two years, Miles still had to remind himself of that.

Miles shivered and glanced at his watch, turning away from the ice skaters and walking along the edge of the crowd to the north side of the park. Across the street, a small market glowed through the dark and he went inside, if only to thaw himself out for a few minutes. It struck him as he entered and scanned the store that should get a gift for Camilla's birthday. Miles drifted through the wine aisle, scanning the rows of bottles lining the shelves. Camilla had ordered red wine when they met at the restaurant last week, but what kind? Merlot? He couldn't remember. Reading the labels, Miles felt suddenly too warm, weighted down in his damp clothing.

As he turned to leave, a splash of color caught his eye, a bucket of flowers, their bright blossoms contrasting with the darkness beyond the window. He sifted through the bouquets and picked a slender bundle of orange, yellow, and red flowers. The clerk tugged a plastic bag over the buds, a barrier against the snow. Miles carried the bouquet through the Commons and up the steep hill to Camilla's apartment, avoiding the patches of black ice that slicked across the brick sidewalks.

After pressing the buzzer to Camilla's apartment, he waited outside, brushing the snow from his coat and stamping ice from his shoes. The plastic bag covering the flowers was dimpled with melting snowflakes and he tugged it off and rolled it into a ball, stuffing it into his coat pocket. A few snowflakes drifted onto the flowers and turned into dew. He cradled the flowers against his chest, hugging them as though he could keep them warm. Miles pressed the buzzer

again, longer this time, and cleared his throat. “Camilla?” he called into the intercom. “It’s me, Miles. Are you there?” After another moment, the door buzzed and he walked up the narrow stairway to her apartment.



Camilla barely noticed when the bell rang, so immersed was she in the swirls of her painting. She dabbed the tip of her brush against the canvas in small, gentle strokes, her face pressed close to the details. Her palette was thick with globs of cadmium, crimson, and vermillion, all brushed through with zinc. The bell rang again and Miles's voice called out through the intercom, scratchy and distant. Camilla sighed and sat back, setting her paintbrush on the table. Why had she invited him in the first place? She should have known she'd get caught up in painting, that she wouldn't want to be disturbed. But it was her birthday. It wasn't right to spend it alone. Allowing herself one last glance at her work, Camilla walked to the entry and let Miles up.

When she opened the door to greet him, Miles held out a wilted bouquet of daisies, their petals drooping. His face was flushed pink from the wind and Camilla thought of her painting, the warmth of the sunset reflected in the water, the wisps of clouds stretching across the sky to the edge of the canvas. She almost said to him, then, that she'd made a mistake calling. She almost told him to go home. She could have used the excuse of the storm, told him she wouldn't want him to get stuck there.

But it was too late. Miles walked through the doorway and held out the bouquet. “Happy Birthday,” he said, and she instinctively took the flowers and raised them to her face. They smelled sour, tinged with the scent of the cellophane. The daisies were red and orange—not the subtle, shifting hues of her paints, but saturated and artificial, like

they'd had food coloring in their water. She glanced up at Miles, and she kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Thanks," she said. "Come in, come in."

While Miles peeled off his coat and scarf, Camilla carried the flowers to her kitchen. She filled a slender vase with warm water and stuffed the daisies inside. When she bought flowers for herself, she always chose bouquets that were light-colored and delicate—carnations or lilies, hydrangeas, peonies. Occasionally, in spring, after so many months of winter, she would bring home bright, creamy daffodils, their faces round and yellow like the sun. But how could she expect Miles to know what flowers she liked? She should be grateful for the daisies, and grateful to him for coming over.

Miles coughed from the living room, and Camilla called out to him. "Can I get you a glass of wine? I have a Malbec that's nice."

"Yes," he said, his voice echoing from the living room. "Malbec. Of course."

She pulled two long-stemmed glasses from the cabinet and filled them, splashing a bit extra in both. She paused beside the vase of flowers on her way out of the kitchen, then scooped it up in the crook of her elbow, the petals brushing against her neck while she walked to the living room.

Miles was standing beside the bay windows, silhouetted in falling snow, his head bent while he watched the street below. The pose was familiar to her, somehow. He did not move when she entered but stood silently with his hands in his pockets until Camilla set the vase on the table with a thump and held out his wineglass. Miles turned to face her and his eyes crinkled into a smile so that he seemed to light up from within at the sight of her, and she found herself smiling back.



Free from his winter layers, Miles felt lighter as he walked into Camilla's living room. In the warmth of her apartment a heaviness settled upon him, all the restlessness and anticipation from the day giving way to a comfortable exhaustion. He walked to the window and traced his fingertips over the veins of frost that formed along the glass. Outside, snow piled up against the buildings and cars in windblown drifts.

An older man shoveled a slim path from the stairs of his building to the sidewalk, and Miles thought that he had to hurry home early enough to spread some salt on his own steps before the snow froze overnight. At the thought of home, another pain of guilt tore through him, just for a second. A vision of his wife lying in their bed at this very moment, reading or watching the weather report with her steaming cup of tea. The framed photo of their son staring out at her with that small, unknowable smile. Before Lucas had died, Hannah would shovel the steps with Miles, pausing to throw snowballs and laughing when he fell into the soft snowbanks. Now he had to do it by himself. He had to shovel, or it would never get done.

Camilla startled him as she set the vase of flowers on the table, and Miles stepped away from the window and faced her with a grin so that she would not ask if anything was wrong. She held out a glass of red wine, and they sat on the couch, her legs curled into his lap. Miles sipped his wine and watched Camilla over the top of the glass. She had been painting, dressed in too-big jeans and a stained Red Sox t-shirt. Her fingers were smudged pink and yellow, and Miles reached across the couch and wiped an orange dot from her cheek, a barely visible freckle in the warm glow of her living room.

"What were you painting?" he asked. Camilla took a long sip of her wine, her gaze flickering to the side of him.

"Nothing," she said, shaking her head and waving her

hand dismissively. "A neighbor commissioned me to do a piece for her husband's birthday next month."

Miles took Camilla's hand in his own, stroking his thumb over the lines of her palm. "What is it a painting of?" he asked, pressing for more. She was distant, she kept glancing at him and then away again.

"It's just a sunset," she said, and paused. "It's cliché, I know. But it's from a photo they took on their honeymoon."

Miles traced a pattern of freckles over her forearm, meeting her eyes. "Can I see it?" he asked, then, "I'd like to."

For a moment, Camilla didn't answer. She looked at the flowers and frowned, barely, almost imperceptibly. Then she smiled at him and wrapped her fingers around his own.

"Ok," she said, standing up and pulling him to his feet. "I can show you. But first, more wine."

As she moved to the kitchen, Miles took her hand and leaned in to kiss her. She pulled back and looked at him and he wondered if he'd done something wrong, if he'd trespassed somehow. But then she brushed her lips against his and took his wineglass, her movements lithe and graceful, and he forgot her hesitation.



As she led Miles through the hallway to her studio, Camilla wondered if he would be able to tell she was lying. She told herself he wouldn't. She reminded herself they'd only met a month ago, only gotten together a handful of times – he didn't know her well enough to catch her in a lie.

Reminding herself again that she had been the one to invite him over, Camilla pushed open the door and walked into the studio. Miles followed, his footsteps heavy on the hardwood floor, and she watched his gaze travel around the room, pretending that she, too, was seeing it for the first time. Empty frames were stacked up along the walls,

loose canvas in rolls on the counter, splotches of color on the cement floor, mason jars brimming with liquid along the shelves. It wasn't tidy, but it was organized—Camilla knew where to look when she needed something. She followed Miles's gaze to the center of the room, where the new painting rested on the easel, glistening with thick, oily color.

Miles walked to the painting with his hands behind his back, as though in an art gallery or museum, and his posture struck her again as familiar, and she remembered. It'd been how he stood the night they met—they'd been standing beside each other studying a Degas statue, *The Little Dancer Fourteen Years Old*, at the Museum of Fine Arts. She'd caught his eye through the edge of the dancer's rippling skirt, and that night, over drinks, they talked about the tilt of the dancer's chin, the emboldened, unflinching direction of her gaze. With the lights of Fenway winking around them, the muffled roar of the crowd in the distance, he'd kissed her, suddenly, on the sidewalk. She hadn't stopped him.

When Miles reached Camilla's easel he paused, leaning in to look at the half-finished sunset, his eyes roaming over the canvas. She moved beside him, certain now that he could see the truth—it was not a honeymoon photograph, there was no neighbor, no commission. The sunset was a fragmented moment from her own memory, far away enough to be a dream; and still, even now, a dream that threatened to pull her under if she looked too closely.

Camilla turned her gaze to the window, unable to look at the painting anymore at all. It wasn't right, she could see that now. The oranges were too vivid, the yellows too dark. She'd spent hours hunched over the canvas trying to get the details right and missed the bigger picture—the slant of light curving across the water, the changing hue of the waves. All she'd wanted was to capture the sparkling ocean

and the feeling of sand between her toes, to be immersed in the memory of Rachel's flushed smile, her warm hand in Camilla's while they ran into the waves, splashing and laughing in the setting sun. She could have lived in that moment for the rest of her life, suspended, watching it over and over and over. Camilla waited beside the window, and she looked out across the road, snowflakes falling across the streetlights below like so many stars.



Camilla's studio wasn't what Miles had pictured, but then, once he stepped through the doorway he wasn't sure what he'd imagined it would look like. The room itself was bare—white walls and a strong, unforgiving light. Most of the paintings leaning up against the walls were half-finished, some of them marred with a broad, frustrated brushstroke, a colorful erasure. It seemed Camilla often changed her mind mid-painting, or decided to try something different each day. The painting she'd been working on, the sunset for her neighbor, caught his eye from across the room and he walked over to the easel.

This painting was exquisite. It, too, was not yet finished, but somehow Camilla had managed to capture the presence of light. Golden streaks were brushed through the clouds and the swirling water. Looking at the painting felt like falling into a dream, a place a world apart from the gusting wind outside and the icicles that hung from the windows. Even as he turned away from it, the painting lingered in his mind like it'd been imprinted there, a memory of a place he'd almost been to, a place that did not quite exist. He could picture, there, the sound of his son laughing; and Hannah, no longer the ghost of the woman he'd married, taking his hand in her own. The distant vision of a life that receded inevitably into the past. A world erased and redrawn. He



wondered what Camilla saw, what memories lay hidden for her that so illuminated her work.

Miles glanced up at her. She stood beside the window with her back to him. He absentmindedly picked up a paintbrush from the table, rolling it between his fingers. Then, almost without realizing he was doing it, he slid the paintbrush deep into his pocket.

When Camilla glanced at him, Miles straightened and smiled at her, hoping she hadn't noticed. "It's stunning," Miles said, gesturing toward the painting. "Your neighbor will be really happy."

He walked to her and wrapped an arm around her back, pulling her close and breathing in the perfume of her, the scent of wine and linseed oil and beeswax. She wove her fingers through his own, her touch warm, and kissed him.

"Should we go to the bedroom?" she asked, and he nodded into her neck.

As they walked back through the studio doorway, Miles noticed something beneath a shelf in the corner, something that'd fallen or been swept into the shadows. He bent down and picked it up, shaking the dust off. It was a mask with ebony satin, striped feathers, and elaborate patterns of beads woven around the edges. A string of dark pearls was wrapped loosely around the thin handle—real pearls, imperfect and round.

Miles held up the mask as he followed Camilla to the bedroom and when she saw it her lips parted for a second, her eyes glinting with something he didn't recognize. So quickly that he wasn't sure he really saw it, just a flash, then Camilla smiled as she took the mask from him.

"Oh, I forgot about this," she said, running her fingers over the soft edges of the feathers, the uneven pearls. "Where did you find it?" She turned to the mirror without waiting for an answer and held the mask up over her face,

studying her reflection. That delicate movement, her eyes lifting, the angle of her chin—it was as though the mask were made for Camilla.

He kissed her and the feathers brushed against him, but when he reached up to tug the mask away she stopped him. Camilla pulled back and looked at him through the mask, not blinking—what she thought then, what she saw, Miles didn't know. She looked at once bemused and sad. He brushed his hand against her cheek, letting his fingers graze her lips, then he kissed her again. Camilla's voice was soft in his ear, her hair tangled into his fingers.



Camilla kept her eyes closed while they lay together, entwined in the sheets. She felt as though she'd stood at the edge of some precipice and then plunged in, to a space cold and bottomless. She sank into the feeling, deeper and deeper, like she was falling into a dream. Perhaps this was the reason she'd called Miles earlier, the reason she'd slept with him that first night in Fenway—the feeling of falling while they stood on either side of the dancer statue, inching toward each other step by step. It was the opposite of the gravity that had tugged at the soles of her feet the summer she met Rachel: that long, warm, Californian summer together, lying head to head in the sand while sunlight spilled around them. With the sapphire ocean stretched out before them it'd been easy to let herself fall in love, easy to miss the signs—the marks on Rachel's arms, the tiny puncture wounds where needles left bruises behind, the way she'd disappear for days at a time. All Camilla noticed were the blue skies, the way their bodies tangled together in front of the fan when the Santa Ana winds blew at night, the feeling of the sun in her skin. She thought about how she and Miles had met each other in the middle of a vast

emptiness, their hands outstretched, trying just to touch.

Miles stirred beneath her arm, sitting up.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, and ran her hand across his knee. Nothing—just as Rachel had said, all those years ago, the last time she saw her. *Nothing, dear Camill-ia*—that’s what Rachel called her, Camellia, like the flower, the extra syllable sending a shiver through her whenever she heard it.

Camilla rolled toward the edge of the bed, searching for her clothes. “What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said, taking her hand. Then, “I need some water.”

She climbed off the bed and pulled on her clothes, the soft t-shirt hugging her bare skin. Rachel’s mask lay crumpled on the floor at the foot of the bed, and Camilla picked it up, smoothing the feathers out. It had been so strange, to wear it—for a moment, she had not recognized herself at all.

Camilla set the mask on her bureau and walked back to Miles, handing him his shirt. She had already begun thinking again about the painting again, disappointed at the way the colors looked faded and the towering clouds had turned out flat and lifeless. No matter how delicate her brushstrokes and how accurate her blending of color, the painting would never compare to the memory.

Camilla almost turned to Miles to ask him to stay, to pretend the snow was too deep to walk through, pretend the trains were shut down already, pretend they had no choice but to spend the night together. She didn’t want to be alone. Not tonight. But the empty-eyed mask stared at her from her dresser and she could not bring herself to ask.



For a moment, while he stood in the entry and wrapped himself back up layer by layer, Miles thought that Camilla

might ask him to stay. He wanted her to ask. He thought about sleeping beside her while the snow buried the world outside. His own house had been an empty shell for so many years; the sadness was palpable, he sometimes felt he could not breathe. As he pulled on his coat and his boots, stepping through the melted snow that pooled on the floor, Miles met Camilla's eyes and he pleaded silently for her to ask him to stay. But her smiles were too quick and her silences too long, her eyes staring past him, always past him, like she was somewhere else. He searched her face for some betrayal of feeling, some secret signal, but he couldn't read anything in her eyes. She was as much a stranger to him then as she was the night they'd met.

Outside Camilla's apartment, Miles fumbled through his pockets to find his phone, to see if Hannah had called. He pulled out the crumpled plastic bag that'd covered the flowers, still damp, and tossed it into the snow. There were no missed calls, but he thought he should call her, so he dialed home. The phone rang unanswered, and Miles was struck suddenly with a sharp stab of fear. Perhaps Hannah was not home. Perhaps she'd run away, or gone to a hotel with a bottle of her sleeping pills, or she had followed Lucas, gone into his bedroom where his books were still strewn on the desk, gone into the room where the memory of his body still hung in the closet. He had not known his son was dead, would not have guessed until the moment he saw him there. He called again, more frantically, and then, she answered. Her voice was tired, groggy. Miles had woken her up.

"What's wrong?" Hannah said, and he heard the rustle of the blankets. He breathed a long sigh of relief, his breath hanging like fog in the air before him.

"Nothing, nothing," he said. "I'm sorry I woke you. I'm just calling to say I'm on my way home. I'll be there soon."

“Ok,” Hannah said. There was a silence, a vague static like snowflakes against the window.

“I love you,” Miles said.

“You too.” A click.

Miles rounded the sidewalk and walked to the train station, sniffing in the cold wind, his hands in his pockets. At the edge of his fingertips, he could feel the paintbrush he'd taken from Camilla's studio. By now, Camilla had probably forgotten Miles completely, gone back to painting as she'd wanted to all along. He thought he should toss the paintbrush aside, let it be buried in the snowfall like the plastic bag. Instead, he put it back in his pocket, rolling it back and forth between his forefinger and thumb.



After she closed the door and Miles's footsteps faded down the stairway, Camilla leaned against the wall, closing her eyes. She listened to the thud of the door closing, and the silence that followed. When she moved again, she walked to the living room and took the flowers from the vase and carried them to the trash, their many-colored petals falling in clumps into the bin. Then she returned to her studio and sat down before the painting, staring at it for a moment before dipping the tip of her paintbrush into a dab of crimson paint and dragging it in a single line across the sky, ruining all her work, all those hours she'd spent hunched over the colors. She walked to the window and looked outside again, feeling for a moment like she was peering out from the inside of a snow globe, the lights of windows twinkling out in the distance. The dark and bare limbs of the trees were heavy with snow and icicles clung to the eaves of the rooftops across the street. When Rachel died, the rain poured for nearly three weeks without stopping, flooding the creeks and the gutters. As though the sky knew

what to sculpt out of Camilla's sadness. Tonight, the world was cold and empty, but beautiful still.

Perhaps she should have asked Miles to stay. He'd stood in the doorway wrapped in so many layers, hesitating as he always did before saying goodnight. She could have asked, and he would have said yes.

Camilla returned to her easel, moving the ruined sunset painting to the floor and replacing it with a new canvas, blank, ready for color.



When Miles reached the station, he stood at the top of the escalator, the rumble of the subway moving beneath him, and decided to walk to the next stop. He passed the market where he'd bought the flowers, now closed, its lights turned off. The flowers, their bright petals spreading open in Camilla's living room. The elegant shape of the black feather mask and her eyes looking out from within; the painting of a sunset, a window into another world, to a place both foreign and familiar.

He could have asked to stay. If he'd stayed, Miles would be listening to Camilla murmuring in her sleep, the warmth of her filling his mind, leaving no room for thoughts or memories. He could still go back. Turn around, knock on her door, go into her apartment and refuse to leave. Miles pulled his coat tight around him, hunched against the wind with his fingers wrapped around the paintbrush inside his pocket. When he reached the next station, he walked on, barely pausing beside the entrance before continuing forward. He would get a train eventually. But for now, the streets were empty and the snowflakes clouded the road before him, erasing everything, making the way unclear.