

(one)

The morning after noted child prodigy Colin Singleton graduated from high school and got dumped for the nineteenth time by a girl named Katherine, he took a bath. Colin had always preferred baths; one of his general policies in life was never to do anything standing up that could just as easily be done lying down. He climbed into the tub as soon as the water got hot, and he sat and watched with a curiously blank look on his face as the water overtook him. The water inched up his legs, which were crossed and folded into the tub. He did recognize, albeit faintly, that he was too long, and too big, for this bathtub—he looked like a mostly grown person playing at being a kid. As the water began to splash over his skinny but unmuscled stomach, he thought of Archimedes. When Colin was about four, he read a book about Archimedes, the Greek philosopher who'd discovered that volume could be measured by water displacement when he sat down in the bathtub. Upon making this discovery, Archimedes supposedly shouted "Eureka!" [1] and then ran naked through the streets. The book said that many important discoveries contained a "Eureka moment." And even then, Colin very much wanted to have some important discoveries, so he asked his mom about it when she got home that evening.

"Mommy, am I ever going to have a Eureka moment?"

"Oh, sweetie," she said, taking his hand. "What's wrong?"

"I wanna have a *Eureka Moment*," he said, the way another kid might have expressed longing for a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

She pressed the back of her hand to his cheek and smiled, her face so close to his that he could smell coffee and makeup. "Of course, Colin baby. Of course you will."

But mothers lie. It's in the job description.

Colin took a deep breath and slid down, immersing his head. *I am crying*, he thought, opening his eyes to stare through the soapy, stinging water. *I feel like crying, so I must be crying, but it's impossible to tell because I'm underwater*. But he wasn't crying. Curiously, he felt too depressed to cry. Too hurt. It felt as if she'd taken the part of him that cried.

He opened the drain in the tub, stood up, towed off, and got dressed. When he exited the bathroom, his parents were sitting together on his bed. It was never a good sign when both his parents were in his room at the same time. Over the years it had meant:

1. Your grandmother/grandfather/Aunt-Suzie-whom-you-never-met-but-trust-me-she-was-nice-and-it's-a-shame is dead.
2. You're letting a girl named Katherine distract you from your studies.
3. Babies are made through an act that you will eventually find intriguing but for right now will just sort of horrify you, and also sometimes people do stuff that involves baby-making parts that does not actually involve making babies, like for instance kiss each other in places that are not on the face.

It never meant:

4. A girl named Katherine called while you were in the bathtub. She's sorry. She still loves you and has made a terrible mistake and is waiting for you downstairs.

But even so, Colin couldn't help but hope that his parents were in the room to provide news of the Number 4 variety. He was a generally pessimistic person, but he seemed to make an exception for

Katherines: he always felt they would come back to him. The feeling of loving her and being loved by her welled up in him, and he could taste the adrenaline in the back of his throat, and maybe it wasn't over, and maybe he could feel her hand in his again and hear her loud, brash voice contort itself into a whisper to say I-love-you in the very quick and quiet way that she had always said it. She said *I love you* as if it were a secret, and an immense one.

His dad stood up and stepped toward him. "Katherine called my cell," he said. "She's worried about you." Colin felt his dad's hand on his shoulder, and then they both moved forward, and then they were hugging.

"We're very concerned," his mom said. She was a small woman with curly brown hair that had one single shock of white toward the front. "And stunned," she added. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Colin said softly into his dad's shoulder. "She's just- she'd had enough of me. She got tired. That's what she said." And then his mom got up and there was a lot of hugging, arms everywhere, and his mom was crying. Colin extricated himself from the hugs and sat down on his bed. He felt a tremendous need to get them out of his room immediately, like if they didn't leave he would blow up. Literally. Guts on the walls; his prodigious brain emptied out onto his bedspread.

"Well, at some point we need to sit down and assess your options," his dad said. His dad was big on assessing. "Not to look for silver linings, but it seems like you'll now have some free time this summer. A summer class at Northwestern, maybe?"

"I really need to be alone, just for today," Colin answered, trying to convey a sense of calm so that they would leave and he wouldn't blow up. "So can we assess tomorrow?"

"Of course, sweetie," his mom said. "We'll be here all day. You just come down whenever you want and we love you and you're so so special, Colin, and you can't possibly let this girl make you think otherwise because you are the most magnificent, brilliant boy-" And right then, the most special, magnificent, brilliant boy bolted into his bathroom and puked his guts out. An explosion, sort of.

"Oh, Colin!" shouted his mom.

"I just need to be alone," Colin insisted from the bathroom. "Please." When he came out, they were gone.

For the next fourteen hours without pausing to eat or drink or throw up again, Colin read and reread his yearbook, which he had received just four days before. Aside from the usual yearbook crap, it contained seventy-two signatures. Twelve were just signatures, fifty-six cited his intelligence, twenty-five said they wished they'd known him better, eleven said it was fun to have him in English class, seven included the words "pupillary sphincter," [2] and a stunning *seventeenended*, "Stay Cool!" Colin Singleton could no more *stay* cool than a blue whale could *stayskinny* or Bangladesh could *stayrich*. Presumably, those seventeen people were kidding. He mulled this over-and considered how twenty-five of his classmates, some of whom he'd been attending school with for twelve years, could possibly have wanted to "know him better." As if they hadn't had a chance.

But mostly for those fourteen hours, he read and reread Katherine XIX's inscription:

Col,

Here's to all the places we went. And all the places we'll go. And here's me, whispering again and again and again and again: iloveyou.

yrs forever, K-a-t-h-e-r-i-n-e

Eventually, he found the bed too comfortable for his state of mind, so he lay down on his back, his legs sprawled across the carpet. He anagrammed "yrs forever" until he found one he liked: *sorry fever*. And then he lay there in his fever of sorry and repeated the now memorized note in his head and wanted to cry, but instead he only felt this aching behind his solar plexus.

Crying *adds* something: crying is you, plus tears. But the feeling Colin had was some horrible opposite of crying. It was you, minus something. He kept thinking about one word-forever-and felt the burning ache just beneath his rib cage. It hurt like the worst ass-kicking he'd ever gotten. And he'd gotten plenty.

(1) Greek: "I have found it."

(2) More on that later.