

Am I Crying?

Dotty Jablonski worked downtown at the unemployment office. In her strange new life as a widow, she showed up at her desk every day, and somehow did most things correctly. She conducted interviews, made connections, kept her listings up to date, and tried to not let it bother her when someone she'd never seen before came up to her and said, "Thanks for fixing me up at the mall, Dotty," or, "That place you got Dennis at the cereal plant was hell, but he stuck it out like you said to, and now he's OK."

Dotty wouldn't know what they were talking about. She could drive herself crazy by trying to guess what her brain had been up to without her. If she lapsed off while doing paperwork, and looked around with an expression of panic, someone from a nearby desk came over and sat with her. Everyone Dotty worked with was used to bad luck. "At least we have jobs," they told her.

But there was always a limit to what you could show. Sometimes she felt reckless and exultant, with the sense that grief was something to slowly get used to, like ulcers, or like believing in God, then one day you simply didn't. Dotty's husband, Joe, who had worked for the electric company, had died of a heart attack, out of nowhere, at the age of fifty-nine, while shovelling snow from the sidewalk in front of their house. Dotty had found him on the second step of their porch, sprawled out without a care in the world, as if resting. "You look like a lazy old bum, Joe," she had said, but of course he hadn't responded. He had astonished her with his stillness.

It was hard not to bear him a grudge. Every time Dotty turned around she heard another story about men his age having heart attacks from which they recovered.

Other husbands hung on for an ambulance and had surgeries. They went home from the hospital chastened, stopped eating butter and steak, hired someone else to do the yard work. Women passed through the change of life like a trial by fire, and men's hearts began to sputter and clog, like the valves of American cars, and would have to be repaired.

Dotty felt cheated. Sometimes, to know if she'd been crying again in public, she had to touch her own face with the tips of her fingers, just barely, as if her skin were made of clay that hadn't hardened.

In early autumn, when Joe had been dead for eight months, she made up her mind to sell their house: a Cape in the good part of town, with a paid-off mortgage. "The attack house," she started calling it. She knew that she would not be able to bear it alone through another winter. She almost didn't care where she went, as long as it happened soon.

She had never thought of herself as superstitious. The forces of nature were not conspiring to get her outdoors with a shovel at the first big snowfall. Leftover currents of death had not been stored in the yard to rise up at her through snowbanks, and through glittering, cold winter air, as if the taking of Joe had been half of the job. As keenly as an animal, she sensed danger. The danger was as real as a chair or a lamp, or a hairbrush on the bureau with strands of Joe's hair in the bristles.

Would death come back here, like a visitor returning somewhere familiar? In a practical way, she tried to imagine what she wanted. Sometimes she pictured herself in a hut in the woods, like the witch in "Hansel and Gretel." Sometimes, she imagined herself

in a suite of rooms in the Holiday Inn by the highway, with a tiny refrigerator for one, and her meals delivered on trays.

Joe's smell was gone from his clothes. On the day that followed his funeral, Dotty removed from the laundry basket the last pair of pajamas he had worn. She had stuffed them, top and bottoms, with wadded-up t-shirts of his, and socks, underwear, and two pairs of sweatpants. She had arranged these things in their bed. Joe's pillow represented his head. She had realized that she was sleeping with a scarecrow, but did it anyway.

Soon, Dotty began to keep, in the drawer of the bedside table, some bottles of nip-airplane booze, she called it. The liquor store near her office kept them near the cash register, so she never went all the way in there to buy something to drink, like someone with a problem. It wasn't really drinking, she felt, because the bottles were always so small, and just brandies; and it was better than lying awake for hours and hours every night, with her nerves as taut as wires, with her mind always fearing the worst.

She came upon the old brown mill house on Timilty Street while trying to find the way to a cheerful, ordinary place someone at work had recommended, another Cape. The "For Sale" sign looked like it had been there a long time.

Timilty Street was dead-ended. The wide, brown-shingled building, partly renovated by a previous owner, had been a rooming house for the textile mill that used to stand across the road. It did not have the look of New England places from the nineteenth century turning gently, with strength of character, to ruins. No one from a historical society would ever put a marker here, like at the famous houses of Lowell, saying, "This was the home of soldiers in the Industrial Revolution."

It was saggy and shabby; many shingles were loose. Its face was a face of disappointment and diminished expectations, like clients of Dotty's who never quite looked her in the eye as they told her about interviews for jobs they would never receive. The field where the mill had been was full of litter and broken glass. The weeds were as high as sunflowers. New developers had come and gone, and the dirt of their excavations was as gray as the dust of the moon.

The only other building in the neighborhood was an old stone warehouse at the end of the road. The boards had fallen off the windows. After all these years, in that twilight, there were still bolts of fabric inside: silk, wool, jersey, canvas, corduroy, old and faded and tall. They might crumble at the slightest of touches, but who would ever go in? The pillars of cloth just stood there, dozens of them, perhaps hundreds, tilting this way and that, like strange and lovely old trees in a sheltered, pale-colored forest.

It was safe here, and it was silent. Dotty tried to look around with careful, objective eyes. If she bought this house, it would seem that she had lost the ability to walk around in her life as if she knew what she was doing. But there was only one way to explain to herself why her body had already started leaning toward the old cement walkway, toward the front door, like someone who lived here already. The invisible hand of fate had taken hold of her like a counter-action to what had happened to Joe. It was easy to picture herself on the other side of those windows, and walking up the steps like someone going home.

That night Dotty slept well, and the next morning, she called the real estate agent whose number was on the For Sale sign. She moved into the house before the frost came,

before the leaves of the oaks in the back of the attack house began to crinkle day and night in colder wind, signalling winter.

"It's a good investment, and I'm planning to fix it up," she kept saying to the people she worked with. It was odd, she thought, that a place such as this, with its emptiness and open spaces and isolation, with its dusty, ramshackle old age, would be the thing that made something inside her start stirring. She was seized with an urge to join the world again. She saw that she could walk away from her old life and start another one. In a deep, private place, Dotty was as pleased and relieved about the mill house as a crab at the bottom of the sea, encasing itself at last in exactly the right sort of shell, which it had never expected to find.

Then early one morning near the end of March, Dotty looked up from her desk at a woman about her own age, fifty-six, but taller and thinner, with dark good looks and an air of confidence that was hard for Dotty to describe, except that most of her clients didn't have it. Her name was Angela DiNato. She had been waiting in a long line of applicants for a job that Dotty had listed, the day before, in the newspaper.

The first thing Dotty noticed was that Angela DiNato was a container of opposing forces. You'd never guess that she'd been standing on her feet for two hours; she was as calm as the top of a pond. But under her surface, Dotty felt, things were swirling and buzzing. Angela reminded her of the poster of Amelia Earhart that hung behind her supervisor's desk, if Amelia Earhart had longer hair, with some gray in it, and wore squarish brown glasses. The words on the poster said, "The only way to go in life is up."

Angela sat with her jumpiness and stillness in the chair beside Dotty's desk; she handed Dotty her forms. The job she was applying for was managing a rental goods store

about a quarter mile down Main Street from the unemployment office. They rented out wallpaper steamers, lawn care equipment, party supplies, tents, and costumes for Santa Claus and gorillas. It had taken Dotty less than one second to feel that this was out of the question.

"I'll tell you the truth," Dotty said. "I know it's unfair, with all those people still in line, but we filled the position about half an hour ago. I'll see what else I can do, though."

Angela didn't start up a fuss the way Dotty's clients often did at this sort of news, or start telling sad stories of grievances, as if Dotty were a counselor in mental health. Angela just said, "I hope something comes up soon, because I'm running out of places."

Dotty went over the list of jobs on her resume: buyer of audio equipment for a large discount department store; manager of a sporting-goods store, two towns away; then manager of a stereo store at the mall, which had not done well, and had gone out of business when a Radio Shack had moved in--not that the merchandise was similar, said Angela. Angela did not want a position at Radio Shack, or anywhere else in that mall.

"Retailers are feeling it bad," Dotty said. "I think it's a law of economics that stores always sneeze when recessions come down with bad colds." When Dotty heard herself saying this, she nearly groaned. This was not a way she usually talked.

"I was good at selling stereos," said Angela.

Her unemployment benefits were about to run out. Dotty explained what to do to apply for an extension. Then she studied Angela's application forms, and found that her eyes were only drawn to one thing: to the line where Angela had written her address. "I'm running out of places," she had said. It had never happened to Dotty before, in her fourteen years in this office, that she spoke to a client of hers in a personal way, just

directly and honestly. It had been a long time since she had spoken to anyone from her heart; but it began to feel to Dotty that something inside her must have thawed. Suddenly, Dotty wanted to tell Angela DiNato that her husband had died.

Dotty said, "You live in that new apartment complex? I didn't know it was finished."

"Actually, they finished it about two years ago," said Angela. "The rent's high, but someone I used to know was the rental agent and got me an incredible deal."

"My husband said that they built it with so much cement, it would look like a big gray hornets' nest."

"I guess it does, but it's different inside. It's very comfortable," said Angela.

"He's been dead for a little over a year, from a heart attack," said Dotty. She saw that she had held up her arms from the sides of her chair, just slightly. Two half-arcs looped out from her like an illustration. It embarrassed her, but it was too late to hide it. This was where the emptiness was, in this circumference. Her body had unfrozen itself just slightly, long enough to let her see that she was lonelier than she ever would have admitted.

If she looked at herself from the outside in, would she see, was Angela DiNato now seeing, the fragile, raw look of someone who lived alone, who was always alone at a table in a restaurant, say, or in a bar, or alone at someone's party or wedding, glancing at strangers with the obvious clarity that meant, I don't know who you are, but do you think you're a person I could fall in love with?

Dotty looked across her desk at Angela and said, "Am I crying?"

Angela nodded her head very slowly. She didn't seem to think that this was strange. She did not glance quickly away.

"Well, I guess I'll start trying to find you something right away," said Dotty in a quiet voice.

"I'd appreciate it," said Angela. They looked at each other for a moment, but the interview had come to an end. Angela rose, and Dotty fumbled in her drawer for some tissue. Dabbing lightly at her streamers of tears, she hoped that she would never see Angela DiNato again; but the next moment, just as strongly, she had the sense that her life would be nothing but a dreary, heavy thing, until the next time she saw her.

After giving this matter every moment of her time, Dotty found Angela a job as the manager of a factory outlet outside town, which made flashlights, lighting fixtures, small auto parts, camera parts, and lightbulbs. Angela was hired for the position directly at the end of her interview there. It would be a good match, Dotty felt. The shop was large and busy but never crowded; it was separate enough from the factory so that the factory's oppressiveness didn't touch it. But the important thing for Dotty was that she had managed to find Angela a place where the things around her could spark and light up--where there would be, on a regular, daily basis, constant possibilities of illumination.

On the day Angela started her new job, Dotty thought about her. Dotty felt like calling the store to wish her well. Could she do this, as if this were something she did routinely with clients of hers who'd been successful? "This is Mrs. Jablonski at the unemployment office, calling to wish you good luck," she would say. Or she'd say, "This is Dorothy Jablonksi at the unemployment office, calling to wish you good luck, because

I think you deserve it." Or she'd say, "This is Dotty, your employment counselor. It's a private little custom with me to call up my clients and wish them well."

Three, five, eight, a dozen times, and then a few times more, Dotty reached for the phone on her desk, and each time, she stopped herself. If she did this, she would probably sound, to Angela's ears, business-like and artificial, and completely unwelcome, like a telephone call from a dentist's office reminding her to keep an appointment.

Suddenly, in mid-afternoon, on the second day of Angela's job, here she was.

She'd run into the office. "I only have a minute, because I'm double-parked, and I have to get back, but I wanted to stop by and tell you I feel lucky, and to thank you for all the trouble you went to for me," she said.

Shyness crept over Dotty, all over her skin, like a terrible sunburn. She felt clumsy and stupid, as awkward as a teenager. She stood up from her chair in a wooden, formal way, and said, "I was only doing my job. On behalf of this office, I wish you all the best with your career."

"Well, thanks again."

This time, after Angela left the office, an after-image remained in Dotty's eyes, as if Angela had left behind a life-size photo of herself. If the picture could talk like a hologram, what would it say? What words would Dotty most want to hear? "Don't worry, I'm a person who's as safe as your new mill house." That would be it. It might have been the truth.

Dotty could not stop thinking about this picture. She brought it to the grocery store after work; she brought it home with her.

When she moved into the mill house, she had left behind most of her furniture. She'd bought a new sofa and two matching armchairs, a television table, and a stand-up brass lamp. The dining room contained a table that she'd put together from a door she had found in the basement and two sawhorses left behind by workmen. It was supposed to have been a temporary measure, but she was already used to it. She had smoothed and varnished the surface, and now it reflected both shadows and light, like the smooth hardwood floors.

You might say, walking in, that the floors looked like bowling alleys. They were. When the bowling alley near the river had burned down, five or six years ago, the previous owner had bought the wood cheaply at the fire-sale. There were splits and cracks here and there where the boards didn't quite make a fit. She never wore shoes indoors here; after a month or so, when she'd begun to get the feel of the rooms, she'd started moving about in her socks like a skater. There were no neighbors on her street to catch glimpses of her; no one ever drove down this road. Her privacy was like a shield or a force field. It was something to be inside and stretch out in. Soon, life in the mill house meant that Dotty shed more and more pieces of clothing each day as she walked in from work. Dotty had big, heavy, floppy breasts. It was still a surprise to her, when she took off her bra, how much she liked the feel of them plopping against her.

With her supper finished and her few dishes washed, Dotty poured herself a small glass of brandy and sipped it slowly. She felt warmer in her bones than she'd felt in a long, long time.

All the windows were open a little, and everything smelled keenly and richly of fog and the bark of old trees, and of rainwater, and damp earth. The winter this year had

been milder than anyone had expected, and already, in the mud of Dotty's front yard, there were signs of a lawn coming up. Along the fence at the sidewalk that led to Dotty's front door, there was some sort of thickety, viney-looking plant, where tiny leaves might soon start uncurling. Slowly now, as if the basic facts of nature were things she had forgotten about, it began to occur to Dotty that, in this house she had fled to, to get herself safely through a winter, there was going to be, after all, a spring.

She loved her house. She could feel it settling around her, with its creakings and murmurings, with different pipes rattling lightly, with the stirring of wind now and then in the shingles of the roof that were loose.

At a little after nine that evening, the phone rang in Dotty's kitchen. She skated over quickly to answer it. It was Angela, and as soon as Dotty heard her voice, she said to herself, although she hadn't realized this until now, "I knew that she was going to call me."

But at first she felt like hanging up, just pretending that her phone was dead, as if the plug had come out, and would stay out forever. Then she wanted to sternly remind Angela that she never accepted phone calls at home from her clients, no matter what. She felt shyer than ever. She wished she were back in her work clothes. Most of all, what she wanted to do was tell the truth. "I liked the way you sat in my chair," she wanted to say. "And I liked the way you stood by my desk, and I liked the way you looked at me."

"I was hoping you would call me," said Dotty.

"You were?"

"I think so."

"Today, what I really went into your office for, was to ask you something, but I never got the chance," said Angela. "You probably never go out to lunch, though. Do you ever go out to lunch?"

"Lunch?" said Dotty.

"It's that thing where, a meal takes place, in the part of the day between breakfast and supper," said Angela.

"In a restaurant, do you mean?"

"That would be great. If you know one you really like, I could meet you there."

"Timilty Street, the old mill house, across the street from where the textile mill used to be, do you know it?" said Dotty, on a fast rush of breath. She could hardly believe that these words had come out of her mouth.

"Do I know it, are you kidding me? I grew up in this town. That's a restaurant now, that old dump? My God, I thought they tore that place down."

"I bought it. It's my house, and this is where you just called. I *live* here."

"But your number in the phone book says Walnut Street."

"That's where I came from. That's where I was married."

"You moved," said Angela.

"It was after my husband died."

"Oh," said Angela. Then she said, in a quieter tone of voice, "What was his name?"

"Joe."

"Do you have any kids?"

"It was always just us," said Dotty.

"You must miss him."

"Sometimes I do, very much," said Dotty. "Sometimes it's terrible, and I can't always figure out if I'm doing something because, this is what I ought to be doing, or if it's only because, people do funny things when someone dies, because everything feels so strange, if that makes any sense."

"It makes sense," said Angela.

"I think I'll miss him forever. It doesn't seem to be something that goes away," said Dotty.

"Someone I used to be with, I'm not anymore, so I think I know a little of what you mean," said Angela.

There was a pause. It was not an uncomfortable silence. Dotty found herself thinking about Angela picking up a phone book and running a finger down a page, to her name.

Then Angela said, "Even though I called your house an old dump, I hope you don't hold it against me. I'm usually not that careless of a person."

"I'm not insulted," said Dotty. "On the outside, it needs a lot of work."

"Am I still invited to come over, maybe even this weekend, maybe Saturday?"

There was nothing for Dotty to do but say yes. "I wish you were here right now," she felt like saying. She found herself nodding to the phone in her hand, as if Angela, at the other end of the line, could see her, somehow, as well as speak to her.

After she hung up, Dotty sat for a while by her living room window, looking out at the foggy gray darkness of Timilty Street, with its silence and open spaces. She thought about Angela, and what she looked like. Angela's voice was still with her, like a

light, airy thing, floating and bobbing along the surface of Dotty's thoughts, and saying over and over, "Don't worry. I'm not a careless person."

Early on Saturday afternoon, on the steps of the mill house, Angela cupped her hands to the sides of Dotty's face, and held them there a moment, and looked at her and then kissed her. Dotty tried to put into words to herself what it felt like to have this happening to her; but she could not. It felt as if the part of her brain that knew the alphabet had scrambled, the way it probably happens to people who have suffered a stroke. All she knew for sure was that she didn't want it to stop. Then she felt as if her heart had stood up, as pleased and as glad as a bird, when it tips back its head to start singing.

Now it was summer. The flashlight factory was shut down this week, and Dotty was on vacation, too. Dotty would be back at her desk on Monday, but she hadn't decided what to say she had done. Perhaps she'd invent a cottage she had rented, by a lake somewhere, in Maine or at the Cape.

Or she might just say, "My girlfriend came over for the week, and we both just stayed home and hung around, and did some yard work." Dotty didn't know what to do about this at all. She didn't think that the people in her office had put it together about Angela and her. Angela stopped by now and then to say hello or go to lunch, but everyone acted as if Angela felt so grateful for her job, she kept coming by to say thank-you.

It was eleven in the morning. The kitchen was shaded and cool. Dotty put the kettle on. She made herself a cup of coffee. Then she poured half of it down the sink,

took out the coffee brandy from the cabinet over the stove, and filled her cup to the rim. Dotty sipped it.

Where was Angela? She had left two hours ago to buy groceries, and the supermarket was less than a mile away. The keys to her apartment, though, were hanging on their hook by the door. Dotty put a little more brandy in her cup. She poured in some milk. Then she skated over slowly to the bottom of the stairs, and went up, with the thought of just returning to bed, perhaps for the rest of the day.

The upstairs part of the house had been gutted by the previous owner. There were markings along the floor where walls used to be, like scars. The weight of the house sat on six metal columns from floor to ceiling. They looked like they'd been put up in a hurry. It was like a barn up here, clean and airy, without stalls. Hazy yellow summer morning sunlight was everywhere.

The phone rang. It took her a while to get down to the kitchen to answer it. She had never put in an extension upstairs. Dotty's only family now was a brother named Richard, in Seattle, and Richard's wife and several daughters, but Angela was related to almost half of the town. She had four sisters, two brothers, and so many nieces and nephews that Dotty had given up counting. So far, Dotty hadn't met any of them, although someone was always calling with a crisis. That family did not carry on conversations normally. There was always loudness and excitement and stewing, hurt feelings, and gigantic dramatics over the least little thing, like when you turn on the tv and an opera is on with the subtitles, and a singer is going on and on in extremely urgent, extremely anxious ways, and they are actually saying something as simple as, How are you?

Dotty was sure that Angela didn't know this, but she had got in the habit of knocking the phone off the hook in the evening, as if accidentally, or putting it into the silverware drawer. Dotty was always the first one up in the morning. She liked it that her life here with Angela was something split away from all the rest of the world, as if they lived in another dimension. Sometimes Angela went back to her apartment for three or four days at a time, but more and more of her things kept turning up at the mill house, which was fine with Dotty. When Angela said, "I want you to come to dinner with me at my youngest brother's," or, "I want you to come and visit me at the shop," or, "I want you to meet some of my friends," Dotty said, "Soon," and changed the subject.

She answered the phone. It was Angela, calling from the supermarket manager's office. "I was all the way upstairs," said Dotty. "I was about to get back into bed."

Angela sounded odd, all hoarse and choky. "I'm having a sort of a problem," she said. "You have to come and get me."

"Angela! Did you have some kind of *accident*?"

Dotty began to imagine what could have happened. Angela had been assaulted by a hold-up thief with a gun; had pulled out a can of pineapple juice from the wrong part of the stack, which had crashed down upon her; had smashed up her car. "I wasn't feeling so well this morning," Angela was saying. "I thought I might be getting a bug, but I didn't say anything because it's our vacation."

"Tell me what happened!" cried Dotty.

"I was sick, and then I fainted at the checkout."

Dotty tried to picture this. "Someone handed me a paper bag," said Angela. "Then someone else got a bottle of ammonia."

"But you've got your car."

"Sweetheart, it will take you less than fifteen minutes to walk here."

"But I'm not dressed."

"Dotty, I know."

At that supermarket, there might have been employees who'd been clients of Dotty's, at the cash registers, in customer service, in the produce department. Dotty was always placing retirees in those kinds of positions. Was the manager right there in the office, and also assistants, listening to Angela talk to her this way, listening to Angela call her "sweetheart"? Dotty saw herself arriving at the grocery store to have Angela hobble toward her in distress, with a crowd of shoppers all around. Perhaps they would think she and Angela were related; perhaps they wouldn't. Angela's youngest brother lived on the street behind the supermarket. He was a police officer, working the night shift that month.

"Maybe you should call Jack," Dotty said. "He'll get to you quicker."

"He'll still be asleep, and anyway, he always unplugs his phone."

"By the time it would take me to walk there, it's so hot out, you could drive yourself here. Can you get into your car and drive yourself, if you're careful?"

There was a pause. The static on the line was like a seashell pressed to Dotty's ear, and then the sound that Angela made was a sigh, a long one. Dotty looked out the kitchen window. The morning glories along the sidewalk, with their trumpets of flowers, had overgrown the chain-link fence. It looked as if an animal made of leaves and stems and flowers were there: a small elephant, standing at the front of the house like a sentinel, like a lucky charm.

"Oh, Dotty," said Angela, at the other end of the phone, still there.

"Tell me really quick that you love me," said Dotty.

"I do."

"Tell me that you mean it."

"I mean it."

"Tell me you won't call me a coward."

"Dotty," said Angela. "I just threw up in front of one hundred people. The things I am going to call you, if you don't get here fast, you cannot begin to even imagine. Will you please stop talking and get yourself dressed and get down here?"

"You better not act mad at me," said Dotty.

"I'll meet you in the parking lot," said Angela. She hung up.

There was a tiny bit of coffee left in Dotty's cup and she gulped it down. Then she hurried upstairs. She decided that her best course of action would be to just ignore how hot it was. The temperature was over eighty, but she chose, for this rescue of Angela, a skirt and long-sleeved blouse and cotton sweater, as if dressing for work.

She went around the house and gathered up the other things she would need. She found her sneakers and sunglasses and the big, floppy straw hat she wore when it occurred to her to go out and cut the grass; she put them all on. She found her checkbook and put it in her purse, in case Angela hadn't paid for the groceries.

Then she set off down the steps, down the sidewalk, into sunlight and heat of the day. When she had walked a little way down the road, she paused and turned for a moment, and looked back at her house. It was a good wooden ship of a house, and she knew every one of its problems. It was drafty; there was a clammy feel in the walls, and

a slight smell of mold that never went away. But the masonry was as tight as a hull. And the windows were tight, too, and the roof didn't leak, and even when the wind made the shingles rattle, it never came inside. The name on the deed was "Dorothy Jablonski." She owned the house and the yard and the fence along the sidewalk. She owned all of it, and one of these days, if Angela gave up her apartment and moved into the mill house completely, they might buy the stone warehouse with its solemn old forest of cloth, just to have it. If things worked out the way Dotty wanted them to, the two of them could buy the whole street.