

The Intercom

by Amanda Nazario

Since Joe and I broke up, I haven't been sleeping very much. I catch naps, an hour or two, no more. I think about Joe all the time, but I'm not heartbroken. In moments of weakness I find myself hoping he doesn't hate me, but I know there's no way he would. Because when I think of him I feel love, and sadness, but primarily love.

Last summer I went to Joe's childhood house for the last time. It was also the last time I slept well, deeply, consistently, next to him on the foldout in his mom's basement. Joe's mom cooked all our breakfasts and did our laundry; she was doting and overbearing, and not, as I'd expected her to be, sad. But she did show me two photos of Joe as a child that moved me almost to tears. I think she might have known they would, I think that might have been why she showed them.

Picture one was of Joe and his brother. Joe was five, his brother was a baby in a walker. Standing before the walker wearing feety pajamas, Joe held a giant hairbrush over his brother's head, the bristle end just barely touching the baby's wispy hair. Joe was looking straight at the camera, suppressing a grin, his non-hairbrush-holding hand turned up in a shrug—like, *Who knew?*

I have never met Joe's brother, of course. When he died Joe was just starting to date girls; Joe has said this explains everything I need to know.

Picture two was of the mom, the little brother, and Joe. They were all eating ice cream cones. Joe's mom was looking at the camera, holding her cone and smiling. His chubby brother was hugging her with one arm, smiling too. Joe, age eight, his hair neatly side-parted,

sat apart from them. He was frowning down at his ice cream cone—as if there was something wrong with it, but he didn't know what was wrong with it yet.

Last night Joe was supposed to call me. We spoke on the phone and decided we were ready to see each other again, and he said he'd give me a call when he got off work. He never did. I was disappointed, but not surprised. I ate dinner in a restaurant by myself, came home and wrote emails to a bunch of people, then lay in bed trying to sleep. I enjoyed doing all of these things, even the lying awake, which I am still doing.

In bed I think of Joe and love him. I think of the little boy frowning at the ice cream cone. I wonder, why is it that we always think of them as children when we forgive them? I've heard it a bunch of times before, from my girlfriends, and I've said it myself a bunch of times too, not just about Joe. *He was like a little kid.*

At three in the morning my intercom rings, a loud synthetic-doorbell noise: bee-doo, bee-doo. Disoriented, I pick up the receiver, and wait for the black-and-white monitor to kick on and show me what's happening outside. My heart knocks around. No one has ever surprised me like this before, in the middle of the night.

The intercom is the fanciest thing in my apartment. The first time Joe visited me here he couldn't stop talking about how fancy it was, and how fascinating.

The display flashes into view, and in murky black-and-white I see a boy's back in a wide-striped polo shirt. I've always admired the way Joe wears those shirts—he has the shoulders and arms of a much younger guy, and at thirty is still mistaken for twenty-one or twenty-two sometimes, especially in those shirts. In the monitor the boy's head is bowed, contrite, sad.

Clicking the button to open the front door, I start breathing funny and telling myself things. I don't press the "talk" button; I don't have to ask who it is. No sex, I tell myself. Sex right now, I couldn't handle. We will turn the lights on and talk to each other from opposite ends of the couch. But of course I'll allow him the initial hug. Depending on how he is - if he is crying, I might hold him a long time, pet the side of his head, kiss his damp cheek. After the hug we'll talk honestly to each other, maybe all night, maybe for the first time ever.

A minute goes by and no one appears at my door. The intercom rings again.

In my building there are two doors in the lobby, so sometimes I have to buzz people in twice. If they don't make it inside the vestibule on time, they get stuck there until the second buzz. I lift the receiver again, try the door-opener button, and find it isn't working. The monitor comes on.

I see that the boy is Efrain, my super's son. He leans into the speaker on the wall, and suddenly I hear his voice: "Hey, I'm sorry, can you buzz me in? My dad's sleeping. I'm really sorry."

Efrain is fourteen now; every time I see him he's grown a half-inch taller. He favors striped polo shirts and is going to be really handsome one day. I press the buzzer, he opens the door, and the monitor goes dark.

