

PENNY COUNTS TO SIX

The overhang outside Penny's dorm building creates a contrast in grays between the dry cement under it and the darker, wet cement just outside its reach. Mark walks out of the building toward Penny, his gray clothes adding a third shade, like paint swatches Penny considers for the moment.

"I have a kid," Mark says, softening nothing. "A baby boy—Brady. I found out about him yesterday."

The news doesn't fit into any fantasy Penny has formulated about Mark, and she cannot immediately construct one that fits both her and this new information in his future.

"He's only a few weeks old, but I was looking at his face thinking, who is it that he reminds me of? And it's his mom, even though I barely know her."

"Okay," Penny says. The illogic of her response shakes a two-second smile from her face.

He sees her smile but doesn't understand it. He says, "I'm on my way to go see him. You want to come?"

Penny decides it is the shock and newness of the situation that has him opening up to her and nothing more, but she sees it as an opportunity for connection, nonetheless—a way into his world. "I'll go with you," she says, popping open her pink and white umbrella.

They walk down the cement path, bordered by "wood chip gardens"—replacements for shrubs and greenery that require watering. The rain quickens now, but most of the winter has been a hot, dry disappointment. El Niño was supposed to save Southern California from drought, but it continues to plummet further into trouble. She considers mentioning the rain as she holds the umbrella high enough to cover the both of them, but her self-consciousness about bringing up the weather stops her, so they get to the student lot without talking the whole way.

They drive up Chapman Avenue and then head into the canyons where the suburban landscape drops away, replaced with oaks and sycamores. The sky changes, too. The rain has stopped and bulky, post-rain clouds swim in blue. Two turkey vultures circle above the lake, which is a puddle

of what it used to be—nearly all dried up from the drought. Penny feels the image in her gut as a kicking of nausea and unfulfilled nostalgia—she grew up in the canyons, Irvine Lake an old, familiar landmark. She has never seen the harsh sides of it so exposed and discolored, though. Rings of white and dirt, green and mud funnel above the little remaining water.

Penny distracts herself with Mark's driving profile. His skin is clear and light brown, his jaw line the most conventional representation of handsome. He has some of his dark hair dyed red, and Penny clenches her hands together in her lap, so she won't run her fingers right through it.

"She lives in the canyons?" Penny asks.

"Modjeska. You ever been out here?" he asks, looking at the hills, which are partially shadowed by moving clouds.

"Yeah," Penny says. "This is where I grew up. Not in Modjeska, but the neighboring canyon—Silverado." Penny feels the familiar road beneath her, the familiar landscape around her—she could trace each ridge line with her finger. "It was just me and my dad. He moved up north as soon as I graduated high school, though. Even more out in the middle of nowhere."

She both hopes he asks about her mom and hopes he does not. She wants to feel close to him, but she is also sick and tired of thinking about her mother who ran off when she was so young and lovable.

He doesn't say anything about her mom, and they take the Modjeska turn-off, the olive trees reaching toward them from both sides of the road. She remembers back from when she was a kid, before the fire in 2007, when the olive trees formed a near-ceiling, bright beams of light raining through the branches.

The street winds until they turn onto another road that is so narrow, Mark has to pull to the side when cars come in the other direction. Mark waves back at someone who passes by and they go over two different bridges, the creek beds empty below them.

They get to Sylvie's house—the mom, and Penny finally realizes the obvious. "Do you think she'll mind I'm here?"

"I can bring friends to meet my kid."

"Okay, but have you guys talked about that? How all this will work?" she asks as they both get out of the car. She steps into some mud and feels the air that is cooler than it was just twenty minutes away in Orange.

He waits for her to come around to his side of the car before saying, “No, I don’t think we’ll do it that way.”

They walk past a large house, gray with white trim. At the smaller, matching back house Mark knocks on a glass-paneled door, a tapestry covering it from the inside for privacy.

“Her parents own both of these houses,” he says. “They rent out the main house, but Sylvie gets to live in this one for free.” Ivy grows along the sides of the house, and Penny stares at a spot where the vine is attached to the stucco. She remembers as a kid when she helped her dad pull the ivy off of their house after they’d bought it, the way it felt like pulling stubborn, strong velcro apart before it got old and worn out.

Sylvie answers, her long brown hair in a messy braid and their son Brady in her arms.

Mark takes Brady with gentle skill, and Penny pays careful attention to his technique just in case she gets to hold him.

“This is Penny,” Mark says. “She lives in my dorm.”

“Hi,” Sylvie says.

Penny waves, noticing that she and Sylvie both have small facial features and long, thin necks. Penny’s dark brown hair is short, though, bobbed. And her pickle-juice eyes are hidden behind glasses.

They go inside, and Penny is surprised by how nice Sylvie is to her and Mark—offers them coffee and everything. The living room and kitchen are small and messy, and the bedroom door is open, revealing a closet of a bedroom. There is a potbelly stove in the living room, fire shining through the front grates and a bucket of wood nearby. It reminds Penny of her old home in Silverado, and she is momentarily cocooned in home-sickness as she stretches her hands out to the stove.

Mark gazes at Brady’s face and nothing else, and Penny has a biological response that she can feel all over her, like she is extra-aware of her skin and its ability to feel. She wants to slip her arms around his waist, in between his jacket and his shirt, but instead she falls into her familiar reaction of restraint, which feels both disappointing and relieving at the same time.

“You want to hold him?” he asks Penny.

“Okay, but I only sort of know how.”

"It's easy," he says. He slips Brady into her arms, a space carving out against her torso for his body. She sits on the couch, which is faded lime green with a purple afghan draped across the back, and she stares at his face. She could hold him all day, she thinks, his weight the most welcome kind of heavy. Their eyes lock and she recalls reading somewhere that all it takes to fall in love is six seconds of eye contact. She counts it out in her head, dopey grinned, and it is the most real sensation she's felt in a long while. It is a unique feeling, she assesses. Nothing identical. Joy or happiness—both fall short of fully encompassing the rawness, the specialness of the moment. She isn't nervous or self-conscious at all. She feels like herself, and this person is okay. Everything is okay.

He starts to fuss, though, sticking his fists in his mouth and whimpering a little. Sylvie says, "I should feed him."

So Penny gives Brady to his mom. Sylvie pulls down her shirt, sitting next to Penny, and Brady starts smelling and snorting before latching on to his mom's breast, suckling with healthy aggression. Penny swallows the initial, foreign shock of seeing two bodies locked in this way.

She grows fascinated by it, reminding herself that this is something she could do—probably will do someday. It is her future to be a mom. She feels it.



The next time Penny goes with Mark to see Brady, she notices Mark looking at her in the car, and she thinks something is happening, something is developing between them. It almost feels like the time she held Brady, except Mark is only in her peripheral vision, along with a bulky State Parks pass hanging from the rearview mirror. She still counts the six seconds in her head, though, hoping it is good enough.

They get to Cook's Corner, where they are meeting Sylvie, and it is crowded. Harleys and crotch rockets line the parking lot between the dry creek bed and Live Oak Canyon Road. Sylvie sits out on the picnic benches all the way in the back, near the port-a-potties. Penny's dad used to take her here as a kid, so she associates the place with childhood, even though it is a bar.

Sylvie already has a pitcher of Bud Light and Mark fills the three glasses. He looks around and says, "I hate this place. All these patched in motherfuckers are probably voting for Trump."

He spits in the dirt and his mood is worse than Penny has ever seen. But then Sylvie holds Brady at his armpits as he cries and squishes his whole

body up, arching his back and bending his elbows and knees. "He looks kind of like an alien, doesn't he?" Her voice is full of sighing motherly love and admiration, and Mark softens as he and Sylvie look at each other, Penny feeling the fool.

Penny sits on her twin bed in her dorm room, which is one of the few coveted singles.

She wishes she had a roommate, though. The wall opposite the bed is covered with photographs she took and developed herself using old, thirty-five millimeter film. Her dad had a darkroom. Most of the photos capture an element of home—Silverado creek, the old general store, and her dad squinting down at her from the roof of the small, white house. The images heighten her isolation and nudge her to go see Sylvie without Mark.

"You're alone," Sylvie says, but she sounds happy. "Come in. I'm glad he's not here. I never get any girl time." She waves Penny in and offers her some wine. They end up drinking the entire bottle, the baby asleep the whole time. "He's a good sleeper," Sylvie says, resting her back against the couch as both girls gaze at the mirror on the opposite wall, reflecting the three-quartered moon through the window above them. In the reflection it waxes, but Penny knows it actually wanes.

"Would you mind if I took a bath? Just pick him up if he cries?" Sylvie asks. She is already walking toward the bathroom, slipping her t-shirt over her head, and then reaching for the clasp to her bra. She turns the water on with speed, like she knows exactly how far to turn each knob for the temperature she prefers.

"Sure," Penny says over the sound of the rushing water.

Sylvie says, "Thanks," before closing the door, leaving it cracked.

Penny looks around for something to do. She ends up in the bedroom, watching Brady. His eyes are open even though he is clearly in a deep sleep, which worries Penny, so she looks it up on her phone—nocturnal lagophthalmos it's called. It is common and harmless. She repeats the name over and over, looking at the screen until she can recall the second word with ease.

Then she says it aloud, looking at Brady, "Nocturnal lagophthalmos."

He is tiny, curled on his side, in the middle of Sylvie's full-size mattress on the bedroom floor.

She wonders if this is where it happened, and she begins to visualize Mark and Sylvie having sex. Her mind toys with various positions before settling for Sylvie on top and Mark smiling up at her—conventional, yet heart-wrenching nonetheless. Then she imagines herself in Sylvie's place, wishing so much were different than it actually is.

Brady trembles his eyes closed, but then he starts to cry only a moment later. Once she picks him up, the sound vibrates in her ears and he isn't soothed by her. In fact, his crying goes into overdrive and he is momentarily silenced by the catching of his own breath. His face is full of devastation. She tries dancing with him held against her chest and a few other poses, but it isn't until she flips him on his belly against her forearm that he finally calms down. She really doesn't want to give him up when Sylvie gets out of the bath, her thin, white nightgown tight against her postnatal form, but she does. Penny watches them dance, and she realizes this is what it is like for Sylvie all of the time—always the two of them. Never just her alone. Penny sees the difficult beauty of their arrangement, and almost feels like she is a part of it as Brady locks eyes with her from Sylvie's arms.

Penny makes a habit of hanging out with Sylvie and Brady without Mark. They are walking down the main drag, the road wet but the sky cleared already. Penny holds Brady as the wind shakes some water from the trees.

"I hardly ever get to see him this way," she says. "It's like being a passenger in the back seat of your own car." She pulls out her phone and takes a bunch of pictures of them together.

She flips through them and then holds the phone in front of Penny. "You guys basically look as much alike as he and I do."

"Do we?" says Penny. She isn't sure Sylvie is right, but she does notice the lighting is ideal. Brady's eyes are full of blue, and Penny thinks she looks beautiful with him in her arms, which is an entirely uncommon thing for her to think of herself.

In the middle of the quad, Penny watches students douse each other in paint. They are a pink and blue laughter, yellow and green hugs. It is the

university's bastardized version of the Hindu Holi festival. But as Penny witnesses the pure joy ensue in front of her, she wonders how corrupted it really is—they seem to be celebrating the good, extricating the evil. No one is on a cell phone. Every student on the lawn is covered in paint, touching someone else. The present moment has them.

A girl she's never seen before waves her in, so Penny enters. She is trapped in observer mode, though, and can't embrace the experience like those around her. She walks through the crowd, paint smearing her arms. She makes it all the way across, and on the other side is Mark, watching from outside, too. She walks up to him. He is serious-faced and tall.

"I bet it's fun," he says.

"I can't get into it," Penny says. She twitches her mouth from one side to the other.

"You've been hanging out with Sylvie?" Mark says to Penny.

"Yeah," Penny says. Someone else tries to wave them in, but the two of them just stand there.

"She isn't really your friend," he says.

"What?"

Her face is so clearly full of hurt and innocence, disappointment and shock that Mark backpedals. "Nothing—never mind. I'm just jealous."

"Of what? Of who?"

"I'm going in," he says, removing his shirt and running for the crowd. He gives a wallop of a yell as everyone goes to work on him, covering his body in hot pink, bright yellow, and electric blue. "Come on, Penny," he says.

She is about to join, when someone announces through a megaphone that the festival is over. "Put down the paint, and leave the quad quietly." And everyone does. There are bags on the steps of Memorial Hall, and most everyone rushes to them, wiping their hands off and pulling out cell phones, rejoining the slumber of their day-to-day existence, but covered in paint.

The grass is covered in paint, too. It's the only section of lawn left on the entire campus, and it has been trashed. Mark sits in the middle of it,

rubbing the paint on his arms until no one color can be identified in the mud-colored mess he has made.

“Would it be a drag for you to watch Brady for me tonight?” Sylvie asks Penny over the phone.

“I don’t mind.” And she really doesn’t. She’s excited, even. She was going to stay home and read, but she’d rather do that at Sylvie’s amongst the trees, and she’d rather hang out with Brady than be alone.

“Where are you going?” she asks Sylvie once she’s at her house.

“Out with Mark.”

“What?”

“We have a lot to sort out is all,” she says.

“Like parenting stuff? Custody?” She hopes it is only this, but Sylvie’s got this cute denim dress on and her hair is pulled back nice and neat.

“What? Did he say something to you about that?”

“No,” Penny says.

When there is a knock at the door, Sylvie says, “Can you get that?”

Penny does not want to because she knows it will be Mark, and she is suddenly self-conscious about babysitting on a Saturday night.

She says, “Okay,” anyway and Mark smiles when she opens the door, like he’s forgotten the context of where he is for a moment.

“Penny,” he says. But then he remembers. “She got you to babysit?”

He sounds angry and looks it, too. Penny knows Sylvie is standing behind her. It still feels like his anger is for her, though.

He sees Brady and walks by Penny, coaxing her aside by the hip. Penny closes her eyes at his touch.

He goes to take Brady from Sylvie, but she steps back, pressing Brady to her chest. The action is sentimental, overly protective.

“Sorry,” she says, and hands him to Mark.

Brady starts to cry at the handoff, and as Sylvie finishes getting ready in the other room, Penny asks Mark, “Is this is a date—you and Sylvie tonight?”

“What?”

They cannot hear each other over the crying, and Penny knows she won’t ask again.

They leave and Penny doesn’t want to try and sort out or label what she feels. She wants to remain unclear and out of touch with her own emotions, so she focuses on Brady. She puts him in the baby carrier and goes for a walk in the dark, gripping his small, warm body. Once her eyes adjust, she imagines that she is pregnant—Brady in her belly and not the carrier. She walks wider than she needs to and supports her lower back with her hands. One of the neighbors stares at her, though, and she is embarrassed out of the fantasy, straightening her back and picking up the pace of her walk.



Penny has a suitor named Chris whom she has ignored for months, in hopes of something developing between her and Mark. But Penny is fed up with wondering why Mark asks her to go with him to visit his kid. Are they really just friends? They can’t be, she thinks—it doesn’t feel like that at all, not at all. None of it is spoken, though. He just wants her around, and she feels the same way—like his presence is a necessity. Even just a few minutes in the same room or car fulfills some unidentifiable need, even though dialogue is a far away thing.

Nothing has happened, though—no kiss, no squeeze of the hand. Her frustration with Mark has led her to Chris’s dorm room where they watch Netflix on his laptop while they drink an IPA that Penny can barely get down it is so bitter. Penny has left as much room in between them as the tiny, uncomfortable couch that comes standard in every dorm room allows. They are just above Mark’s room, and while Penny wonders what Mark might be doing underneath her, they hear crying.

“Who brings a baby to a dorm?” Chris says.

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Penny lies as she mentally checks out of the situation in front of her. She watches the clock as the crying becomes more intense. After five minutes, she says, “I gotta go. Thanks for the drink.”

She runs downstairs and knocks on the door. Mark shouts, “Come in,” so she does. He lies on the bed, Brady on his chest wailing so loudly they have to shout.

“What are you doing?”

“Letting him cry.”

“Yeah, but if you get up and walk him around...”

“I know, but I think he just wants to cry. It’s okay just to cry,” he says. Penny sits at his side and realizes Mark has been crying, too.

Without thinking about it, she slides her shoes off and lies down next to him, her bare foot resting against his.



Sylvie brushes Penny’s hair as Penny says, “Don’t you miss Brady when he’s with Mark?” They are cross-legged on the floor of Penny’s dorm room, Sylvie behind Penny’s back.

Both girls have a White Russian at the knee, the Lumineers’ “Cleopatra” playing in the background.

“I’m a horrible mom, Penny. You would be so much better at it than me.”

“That’s not true.” Penny gets a sleepy feeling as Sylvie’s brushing slows into a smooth, methodical rhythm, the knots already all untangled.

“When I’m with him, he’s everything to me. But when I’m not—it’s like he doesn’t even exist. I’m just me again.” Sylvie parts Penny’s hair down the middle and begins to braid one side.

“Well, he’s only two flights down,” Penny says, her eyes closed.

“Or maybe not,” Sylvie says. “Maybe Mark took him somewhere far away.”



Two days later, Penny drives out to Sylvie’s house. It is hot and windy, and her skin feels like it might need to be shed. The wind comes like waves in cyclical sets, blowing hard against the car. When she gets to Sylvie’s, the door is open. The sun has already descended past the canyon’s ridge line, so it is shady and shadowy out, but she can still see back into the bedroom, and Mark is on the bed with Brady in the nook of his arm.

"Where's Sylvie?" she asks. She walks inside and feels suspicious.

He has the window open, and Brady lifts his shaky arms in his sleep at the feeling and sound of the wind. "Sylvie's not here," he says.

Penny notices then that many of the homey trinkets and touches are missing—no afghan on the couch, no tapestry behind the door. "Oh," is all she says—a sound that is barely a word. She feels surprise and concern, immediately erased by certainty and inevitability.

"She isn't coming back, either," he says.

She realizes then that they come together—Brady and Mark. She cannot have one without the other, and she is fine with this—pleased by it. She walks a little closer to them, stopping in the bedroom doorway. She huddles up to one side, noticing that someone has marked it, indicating a child's growth. I could do what Sylvie did, she thinks, touching where O. measured ten years ago.

Mark's gaze is for the ceiling, but she wants it for herself, so she sits on the bed next to him. She allows her fingertips to trace the outline of Mark's cheek, and it works—he looks at her now. She intends to console him for letting himself become a dad so young, for Sylvie leaving, and for everything else in life that is difficult, too. As she leans over him, her face looks fuller than normal, and the wind against her skin registers halfway between soft and violent. She does not remember to count the seconds before resting onto her elbows and kissing Mark, the sensation so overly stimulating she pulls away, confusing its deep pleasure for pain.

Mark watches her with such close attention she must look down. He palms her chin, though, and she kisses him again. This time it feels clearly pleasant, evoking in Penny both satiation of a long-sought after desire for Mark and a hunger for more of his touch, his attention. He kisses her back, and this third kiss is an invitation Penny cannot resist.