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Seal

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Seal

Seal Nowak in the upstairs bathroom, brushing her long, red hair in front of the mirror. Sixteen, with the best trumpet-lips in the county. Actually she played the cornet, and she played well.

It was cold out, February, and the snow was responding to gravity, lightly, when Seal looked out the window. The sky was white and she pulled out the hair dryer. On days like this Seal used to ride with her dad on his snowmobile. He would take it up to 70 miles an hour—but only if Seal promised not to tell her mother. She could barely hold onto her dad's waist around his thick winter coat. He'd finally slow down when they reached the edge of the woods, unless Seal couldn't stand the cold and the speed anymore, and screamed.

She left the bathroom after drying her hair, grabbed her cornet, and went downstairs. Seal's mother was reading the paper, turning the pages slowly. She poured coffee into her mug from the pot on the table, keeping one hand on the pot, pouring more as she read. "Um, I'm leaving now," Seal said.

"OK Seal," her mother said, "Good luck, honey." Her mom tried to make her voice sound cheerful.

"Going to see Dad now?" Seal couldn't make herself say the word "hospital."

"Pretty soon. I'm waiting for Carley to get up. I'll come back in a few hours to get you."

Seal walked the 0.7 miles to school with one frozen hand clutching the handle of her instrument case. She walked on the left side of the road, against the direction of cars. Long yellow grass covered the banks of the ditches, sticking out through patches of snow. There was an empty bottle of Colt 45 beside a Taco Bell bag. Broken glass from 20 years of beer bottle litter was scattered in the ditches.

In the parking lot Seal met her principal, who opened the door of his rusty black station wagon. It was strange seeing him on a Saturday, without the usual gray suit and tie. He was wearing black earmuffs and he clapped his hands together to shock warmth into them. "Hello, Seal. Let's get going, shall we?"

Seal, riding in the front passenger's seat, hardly breathing the whole time, afraid of having to form responses to anything he might say. She looked out the window at the small tract houses and dead fields, concentrating on the muted colors of Ohio. Everything was black, brown, and white—the trees, the patches of old grass under the snow, the cold, blank sky. Seal began pounding the fingerings to "Take Five" on her knee, but quickly remembered where she was.

Seal's principal only broke the silence once, and that was to ask about her father. "He's doing fine, thanks." And then, because she could tell he wanted more, "They've moved him out of intensive care. They're planning a double bypass for Monday. We're all doing fine." She didn't mean to sound defensive.

After about five minutes they reached the cemetery. Seal's principal stopped by a group of men in military uniform. They were ten of them lining up, about two football fields away from the burial site. "Well," her principal said, snapping the doors unlocked and staring out Seal's window at the men. She said "thank you"; he nodded and contin-

ued on through the cemetery road, utilizing the turnaround. Seal watched him park across the street. He stayed inside his car.

A man in a military uniform walked up to Seal and handed her an envelope. Inside was a check made out to "Seal S. Nowak," for twenty-five dollars. This was the most ever. She smiled the cemetery smile of a thin line, "thank you." He returned to his place in line, moving his rifle to the right side.

Seal Nowak walked to her place at the edge of the woods. She stood behind the military men with her cornet case, frozen hands, winter coat with the fake-fur collar. Seal wanted to be invisible. Checked her watch: thirty minutes until her cue. She'd better start warming up.

When you press the cornet hard against your lips, searching for high notes or trying to hang onto your breath, a red ring forms on your mouth from the pressure. Seal rubbed at her lips to warm them up a little, remembering what she'd promised her boyfriend in the third grade. "I'll keep my lips warm for you," placing one hand over her mouth and blowing out to create a warm space. It had been snowing out, February, and they were planning to kiss at recess.

Seal Nowak began to play. Scales, first, the B flat to warm up, checking her pitch on the middle C. Long, slow notes, while she tried to concentrate on her inability to keep a steady pitch, her tendency to pinch the sound. How the water built up in the cold mouthpiece, the spit she used to warm up the cornet, and gargled when she played. Right before it was her turn, after blowing warm air in the instrument for twenty minutes, she would wipe the mouthpiece out with her fingers and begin.

It was a quick service, and it was very far away. The point was that she be heard, not seen. From where Seal stood, she could barely make out the priest's gestures, but she didn't want to see. Instead Seal listened to the winter noises of wind and footsteps crunching on snow. The military men behind her were stomping up and down to keep warm. The wind was cutting at her cheeks.

Seal tried to force herself to think about music. The tall pines around her were almost black. She was going to have to play against the wind, something she hadn't counted on.

Finally the uniformed men fired shots, and there was silence. It was Seal's turn. Standing up very straight, Seal Nowak, playing "Taps" for the dead man she'd never met. She wiped the spit out of the mouthpiece, pulled the cornet up to a military right angle, and pushed the cold metal to her lips.

It cracked. She cracked. The sound cracked. Seal might as well have cracked herself, have been seen, have screamed in the attentive silence of this military funeral. There was still some spit left in the instrument, and she was muffled, garbled, pinched. She was sorry. The first note of "Taps" cracked with Seal's spit; she sucked in the musty water and finished the song.

She was sure the widow's hands flew up. She knew she heard the cries of the dead man's children. She anticipated the disappointment of her principal, who had attested to her ability and suggested her for the job.

Seal Nowak finished playing "Taps" to the silence. She couldn't tell if it was a respectful silence, or an embarrassed silence, or a very, very angry silence. She didn't want to talk to anybody. She couldn't see through the cold water in her eyes; the wind was now

slashing at her face. The black station wagon circled in the turnaround to scoop Seal up. She blinked her eyes to clear them, saw the car, and ran to it. The cornet case bumped against her leg as she ran.

Seal's principal unlocked the door, but didn't get out to open it. He smiled his own cemetery smile. "Very lovely, Seal. Very nice." They drove off in the February, Seal watching the same black, brown, and white scenery pass, but from the other side of the road. Driving back, Seal couldn't remember ever messing up that badly before. "I'll just take you home, Seal." Her principal turned right on Ridgewood, instead of continuing on to the school. At home, Seal pulled the garage door open and grabbed the house key from under the trash can. She waved good-bye and closed the garage door. Entering the house, Seal was afraid to look at the refrigerator. She didn't want to see what kind of message might be waiting for her there. Usually it was a list of chores, but yesterday it had been: "Your father doesn't feel well, we're taking him to the hospital. Call Grandma. She'll come get you." And Seal could hardly dial the numbers. It just didn't make sense. Her father wasn't a "sick" person, whatever that is.

But today there was nothing. Seal didn't know what to do while she was waiting for her mom to come back. By the time her mother pulled in the driveway, she'd left the house. Seal's mom parked the car outside the garage and got out. "Honey, what're you doing? It's freezing out here."

Seal Nowak, sixteen, practicing the cornet outside because it's cold and she needs to. "I know, Ma. I'll be right in."

"We're going back soon. Visiting hours end at eight."

"I'm coming."

In her front yard, in Ohio, waiting for the cars to pass so she can play. Seal Nowak played until she got it right, and the sound was so full it became nature, the cold wind. She brought the cornet down from her lips, and went inside with her mom.

—Lynn Tramonte '98