AN ORIGINAL STORY

Broken Things

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Broken Things

About the Author
By Jodi Picoult

When I was a kid, it seemed to me that everyone knew my mother better than I did.

That's a Hannah O'Toole, people would say, pointing at one of her famous photographs, reprinted in a book or framed on a museum wall.

On television, in a *Jeopardy!* clue: *This American is the only woman to win both an International Photography Award and a Pulitzer*.

Who is Hannah O'Toole?, Alex.

My mother was an icon, a legend who used her visual arts skills to document catastrophes and suffering so that those who saw her pictures from their safe, first-world homes could find the empathy (and cash) to mend the other parts of the world. She was most often described as if her Leica was a natural extension of her body, an adaptation to a limb that somehow gave her the superpowers of insight and recording. What people didn't see was what happened when she put that camera down. Without that prosthetic, she faltered.

My father was a conservator, an artist who colored within someone else's lines. Unlike my mother, who created art, he claimed he didn't have the eye to tell his own story. Instead, he meticulously painted over chipped plaster on the frescoed ceilings of Newport mansions; he used Japanese tissue and wheat starch paste to mend tears in watercolor paper; he repaired water damage and smoke damage and insect damage to the canvases of Old Masters. His jobs lasted from months to years, depending on who was hiring him and how deep the wounds he was repairing. He was also the one who patched together the ceramic pig I made at summer camp when it fell off my dresser; who could stitch an invisible seam when my favorite dress got caught on a fence and tore; who could rewire the old Tinker Bell lamp we found at a thrift store so that it worked again. He could fix anything that was broken.

Except, maybe, my mother.

•

In April 2000, just before I was about to turn ten years old, my mother was headed off on assignment, shooting pictures of a nine-month drought in Ochelata, Oklahoma, to accompany a *Washington Post* feature on climate change. She had been away for more of my birthdays than she had been present. In fact, I probably would have been surprised had she rearranged her work schedule to be home in New York City with us.

The truth was, I had grown accustomed to my mother missing huge chunks of my life—both the ordinary ones and the milestones. When I was in first grade and parents had to sign up to bring a snack for the whole class each Friday, my father was the only dad who came in. When everyone else had a mother at the *Nutcracker* recital last Christmas, I did not. Even Alistair's mother, who was on a television show about detectives, managed to come in and talk about her work during Career Day. My mom was in Myanmar.

For this reason, or maybe because I was a masochist at heart, I clung to her like a shadow when she was home, counting down silently the moments before she went away again. This time, I sat cross-legged on her bed, doing a word search puzzle while she packed. She had a gift for filling every square inch of her carry-on suitcase efficiently; I suppose that's what comes of practice. "It hasn't rained in Oklahoma in eight months," she told me.

"Oklahoma," I repeated. "That's the one that looks like a pot with a handle." We had been doing timed quizzes in school, where we had to fill in the names of states on an empty map of the United States. The square ones all looked the same to me, but Oklahoma I could find easily.

"I guess it does," she considered. "Anyway, that's why I'm going there. To shoot a drought."

"How do you take pictures of no rain?"

“You take pictures of what happens in its absence,” she said. “How the land is changed.”

She leaned across me to pick up her hairbrush and jam it into the spine of her suitcase. She smelled like lavender. Even now, years later, when I catch a whiff of that scent, I look for her. Her chin paused, notched over my shoulder, looking down at the word search. “I’m missing one,” I told her.

She knew that I would not be able to go to sleep until I finished it, crossing off each word on the list neatly and decisively. She pointed to a reverse diagonal, the last word in the puzzle. “SUNBATHE,” she traced, letter by letter. “People always forget to look in that direction.”

I circled the word with my red pen and crossed it off the list. My mother folded up the clamshell of her suitcase.

“Will the drought ever end? In Oklahoma?”

With a grunt, she zipped it shut. “Of course, Diana,” she told me. “Nothing lasts forever.”

•

My mother had been gone for two weeks when my father announced out of the blue that we would be flying to the Midwest to join her at her work site, so that we could celebrate my birthday together. I was shocked, for several reasons. First, my father and I were a tight little nugget of family, forged as a result of my mother’s dizzy swoops in and out of our lives. Second, my mother did not like to be bothered when she was working. Third, my dad didn’t believe in pulling me out of school for doctors’ appointments or routine dental visits, much less last-minute vacations.

I should point out that I did not like surprises. Above my bed was a color-coded calendar that reminded me I had piano lessons on Tuesdays and dance on Fridays and that every Thursday night I had to have my spelling test signed so I could return it to my teacher the next day. I was that rare child who never had to be told to pick up in

her room. I liked things in their places, which was maybe why it bothered me so much that my mother never seemed to be in hers.

Almost as soon as we left the airport in Oklahoma City in our rental car, we saw evidence of the drought: fields scorched black from brush fires, soil as parched and cracked as the throat of a man in a desert. The deeper we drove into the country, the worse it got: farms with foreclosure signs, heifers with ribs that pushed against their hide.

According to the sign at the town limits of Ochelata, there were 424 residents, and not much else. There was a Walmart distribution center within driving distance, which provided employment, and a slightly bigger town—Bartlesville—which had a motel or two.

My father turned right at a sign that said NEXT OF INN, 2 MILES. “Well, Diana Banana,” he said, his pet name for me, “looks like we made it.” We chugged down a dirt road, dust flying up around the car. A small gazebo rose from a dusty lawn. At the end of the drive was a small farmhouse with a screen door and a few ceramic pots of geraniums lining the porch railing. As my father got out of the car, the door opened and a woman stepped out of the 1950s. Her hair was curled in twin rolls on either side of her head, her feet grounded in sensible shoes, her apron covering a worn blue dress. She had one of those faces that might have been thirty or three hundred. “You lost?” she asked, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Actually, no,” my father said, giving his most charming smile, the one with both dimples that I had inherited.

“Well, I don’t have any vacancy. There’s a motel if you head—”

“We’ll be joining one of your guests,” he said, holding out his hand. “I believe my wife has already checked in.”

As if he’d conjured her, a rusty blue Jeep zoomed into the yard, parking behind our rental car. The driver was a man in his late fifties, with an explosion of white hair and camouflage pants and a T-shirt that said MISTER TWISTER. My mother got out of the passenger seat, a camera looped around her neck.

"Mom!" I cried, and I raced across the desiccated lawn to throw my arms around her waist. She caught me the way you catch the flu—squarely, and with a flutter of resignation.

Over my head, a whole novel was being written without words. My father smiled at her. "Surprise," he said.

•

The owner of the Next of Inn was Mrs. Evans. While my mother took my father up to our room to drop off our suitcases and to make up the cot that had grudgingly been pulled in for me, Mrs. Evans got me a glass of milk and a chocolate chip cookie that was still warm from the oven. "Shouldn't you be in school?" she asked. As she handed me a napkin, she peered at me like I was a bug she found in her coffee.

I nodded. "It's my birthday this week."

"Don't expect a discount," she said. She was scrubbing viciously at a frying pan with a sponge that looked like it was made of chain mail. "What do you think of Oklahoma?"

I'd only been here a couple of hours. "It is shaped like a pan," I said.

"You're from New York," she said, and I gasped, thinking she was psychic until I remembered my mother would have told her this at check-in. "New York looks like a sea lion."

Well, she wasn't wrong.

"My mom came here for the rain."

"Hmph. That could take a while."

Upstairs, we heard voices being raised. Mrs. Evans looked at me, and for the first time, her eyes softened. She took an apple from the counter and handed it to me. "Why don't you take this outside to nitpick?" she said.

I wiped my mouth with the cloth napkin and wandered into the front yard. I didn't know if this was a Midwest thing—if nitpicking was some local way of peeling an apple, maybe. Then I realized that I was not alone. On the porch was the man who'd been in the driver's

seat of the car that carried my mother. He squinted at me. “You looking for something?”

I frowned at the apple in my hand, turning Mrs. Evans’s words over in my head, and then brightening with a conclusion. “Are you Nitpick?”

He laughed. “I am not,” he said. “I’m Vietnam Tim.”

“Oh. Okay.” I hesitated. “I’m Diana. My mom probably told you about me.”

“No,” he said. “She didn’t.” He stood up, moving down the steps of the porch with a noticeable limp. “You coming?” he asked.

I scrambled after him. “Are you a photographer, too?”

He crossed the dusty expanse of lawn and slid open the peeling door of the barn, which groaned on its track. “Sure.” He shrugged. “Sometimes.”

I blinked into the darkness. Suddenly there was a shriek like someone was having their skin flayed from the bone. I flattened myself against the wall, and then the barn flooded with light.

Vietnam Tim stood with his hand on the chain he’d pulled to turn on the bare bulb. In front of him was a single stall, in which a mangy brown donkey stood, making that horrible sound. “That,” he announced, “is Nitpick.” When I didn’t move, he plucked the apple from my hand and held it over the edge of the stall door. “He’ll take your fingers off if you’re not careful. He’s also the closest thing to a Democrat you’ll see in this fucking hellhole.”

My eyes flew to his. “You’re not supposed to curse in front of me.”

“Why not? You heard that word before?”

I nodded.

“Then I ain’t telling you something you don’t already know, am I?”

I inched closer to him and the stall. As a city girl, the closest I ever got to animals was the Bronx Zoo. There was something so visceral about this donkey, with its velvet eyes and nicotine teeth. “It has eyelashes,” I marveled.

I looked up to find Vietnam Tim staring at me. “You don’t get out much, do you?” he said.

“I’m *nine*.”

He nodded. “Fair point.”

“Are you here because there isn’t any rain?”

“I’m here because I’m betting there’s *gonna* be rain, real soon. I’m a tornado chaser.” When I blinked at him, he narrowed his eyes. “I go all over the country, trying to stay one step ahead of the storms.”

“I didn’t know that was a job,” I admitted.

“I didn’t know that was a job,” I admitted. “Me neither, but I been doing it for a decade,” he said. “Came back from the war so messed up in the head that I needed to find something worse off than I was.” He glanced down at me. “You ever seen a tornado?”

I shook my head.

“It takes three things to make one: vertical air movement—like the kind in a thunderstorm, a change in wind speed and direction inside that thunderstorm, and lots of space so the twister can expand.”

I wondered what it was like inside the heart of a thunderstorm. All I knew about tornadoes came from *The Wizard of Oz* and the *Twister* movie, which I hadn’t been allowed to watch. I looked nervously over my shoulder at the rectangle of light and sky through the open door of the barn. I didn’t even like it when I went to school and Mrs. Hathorne was out sick and we had a substitute teacher; the thought of a catastrophe that might sneak up on me was utterly terrifying. “How can you tell if one’s coming?”

“Hail,” Vietnam Tim said. “Roaring. Thunder. A yellow sky.” He reached out and gently stroked the ears of Nitpick. “Wind can get past two hundred miles per hour for an EF5 tornado. I’ve seen five of ’em, firsthand.”

“Why would you want to be there for that?”

His eyes lit up. “Because everyone else is running away,” he said.

Nitpick chose that moment to bolt at some imaginary slight and gallop out of the open rear door of the stall into a fenced pen outside.

I imagined Vietnam Tim standing like a superhero as a dark black funnel cloud raced toward him. It was the way I sometimes imagined my mother in war zones and tsunamis and all the other gateways to hell—fierce and fiery and invincible.

"Your mom might have come here for the drought," Vietnam Tim said, "but she's an adrenaline junkie, just like me."

I did not know what an adrenaline junkie was, but I knew a stupid idea when I heard it. "Well, I think it's pretty dumb to sit around and wait to get hurt."

Even as I said it, I thought of all the nights I tried to stay up, straining to hear the sound of my mother opening the door of the apartment, of the whir of her roller bag wheels on the wooden floor.

Vietnam Tim raised a brow. "Everyone gets hurt sometimes," he said.

•

There was one restaurant in Ochelata, and it was full. I listened to the clink of glasses and tableware and watched a teenage waitress carry a sizzling steak with onion rings across the room. My stomach growled loud enough for my parents to hear.

"At least an hour?" my father said, repeating what the hostess had told them. "Why does it take so long to turn a table?"

"Because going out is a big deal here," my mother said. "No one's in a rush to get back home." She squinted, looking across the street. "New plan," she said, pointing to a business with a Budweiser sign blinking in the window. "You can get wings and chips and stuff at Pete's."

My father put his hands on my shoulders, pulling me closer. "We are not taking a nine-year-old to a bar," he said.

Almost ten, I corrected silently.

My mother's cheeks flushed. "Right," she said.

"What about takeout?" my father suggested. "We can bring it to the playground we passed at the school. Have a picnic." He smiled a

little. “I mean, it’s not like it’s gonna rain on us.”

My mother stepped back into the restaurant to place an order with the hostess. Burgers, a salad to share, those amazing onion rings I’d seen passing by. A side of macaroni salad.

“Diana doesn’t eat macaroni salad,” my father interrupted.

My mother glanced down at me. “Since when?”

“Since she got food poisoning two summers ago after eating it.”

“Of course,” she said. “I knew that.”

Then why did you order it? I thought.

In the entryway of the restaurant was one of those carnival machines, where you’d put in quarters and try to pick up a stuff ed animal with a claw. I had begged my father for money (and had been denied) enough to know that the odds of getting what I wanted were so slim, it wasn’t worth the expense. Instead, I jiggled the buttons, pretending that I could maneuver the claw. From the corner of my eye, I saw my father slide an arm around my mother’s waist, saw her settle against him like a ship coming to dock. He whispered something to her, and when she laughed, I felt a smile rise in me, too, like the fizz in a soda.

When our food came out in little white Styrofoam containers, the hostess stacked them in a plastic bag, which my father carried in one hand. With his other, he held on to me. My mom took my other hand, just like the way they used to when I was really small, when they would swing me between them and I’d feel perfectly balanced, like an astronaut hitting zero gravity or a roller coaster at its apex. I didn’t know of many fourth graders who wanted to go around holding on to their parents’ hands, but I didn’t feel like a baby at that moment.

“Mom,” I asked, turning toward her. “What’s an adrenaline junkie?”

She thought for a second. “Someone who lives for the things that make their heart pound,” she said, “even when they’re scary.” Then she squeezed my hand, like she was passing me a secret.

Like she knew that on the back of the green blotter on my bedroom desk, I kept a tally of every day she was gone. And that when she came home, I tracked how many days I had with her before she left again.

Maybe I had more in common with her than I'd thought.

•

I was allowed to stay up past my bedtime. My father and Vietnam Tim were drinking beers on the porch, my mother was nearby editing images on her computer, and I was beside her doing another word search. "So you got a warm, humid, restless air mass," Vietnam Tim explained, "and it meets an area of cold, and the atmosphere gets unstable. The cap of cold air eventually gives way, but by then, you got yourself a funnel cloud of storm winds. If that touches down, it becomes a tornado."

"But enough about Hannah," my father joked.

She flicked her gaze toward him. "Very funny."

Vietnam Tim laughed. It sounded like the wheeze from a pool toy that was losing air. "Tornado Alley's the red carpet for twisters. They cut a swath through Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, northern Texas. Here in Ochelata, the chance of a tornado coming is 145 percent greater than other places in the United States. There've been two category 4s here, matter of fact. One in 1974 that killed fourteen people and injured a hundred and fifty others, and one in 1991 that killed one person and injured twenty-four."

"And you're here because you figure Ochelata's due for another?"

"It's a matter of odds," Vietnam Tim said. "If all the other storm chasers are heading for thunderclouds, I'll pick the drought."

My mother shook her head, smiling. "That's not a plan, that's a superstition."

"You'll see, when the tornado hits."

"There isn't going to be a tornado, Tim," my mom replied. "There isn't as much as a passing *shower*." But as she said it, her eyes lit up,

like she was energized by the challenge.

In my puzzle, I found letters spelling out BEAR, even though it wasn't on the list of words to find. I circled it anyway.

"Well," said Vietnam Tim. "I reckon one of us is gonna be right."

•

The next morning Mrs. Evans showed me how to feed Nitpick. His loose lips rubbered against my palm when he took the grain from it. She taught me how to peel a slice of hay from a bale and toss it into his rack. "I wish I had a donkey."

"There's already plenty of asses in New York," she said. "You wouldn't want him, anyway. He's fat and stupid and lazy."

"Why don't you get rid of him, then?"

"He reminds me of my late husband." She patted between Nitpick's ears. "Why don't you get him an apple?"

While she mucked out the stall and refilled Nitpick's water, I ran inside to get the treat. I hadn't made it into the kitchen yet, though, when I heard the voices of my parents in the adjacent dining room, where Mrs. Evans had served pancakes and bacon for breakfast.

You can't keep doing this, my father said. *You need to come home.*

You have no idea what I need.

Okay, then, I'll tell you what I *need. What she needs. You, Hannah.*

I flattened myself against the wall, holding my breath.

So do a thousand other kids, whose stories need to be told if they're going to make it to adulthood, my mother finally said. *How could you ask me to choose?*

My father's words fell like rain. *How* couldn't *I?*

Suddenly, I couldn't stand to be there anymore, eavesdropping, barely breathing. I scrambled back the way I came, without the apple, bursting onto the porch and running across the burned lawn past the barn, till I reached the wide expanse of what must have been green fields once, but now was bleached as bone.

Leaning against the white horse fence was Vietnam Tim. He was squinting into the distance and he didn't seem to notice that I was out of breath or near tears. Or maybe he did, and didn't care. He just waited, staring out at the vast run of nothing, while I pulled myself together. "Any rain yet?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Nope."

"So what do I do"—I panted—"when it comes?"

Vietnam Tim turned, raising a brow. "When," he repeated. "So you're a convert now?"

"Can't you just answer the question?"

He shrugged. "You get about seventeen minutes' notice that a tornado's heading your way, if you're lucky. Take cover in the cellar. If you don't got one of those, hunker down in your bathtub. Stay away from windows. If you're outside, lie down flat and don't go near trees.

"What if you're in a car?"

"Get out of it. They can get tossed up in the air like salad."

"Couldn't you just drive away from it?" I asked.

Vietnam Tim looked at me. "You probably can't outrun a tornado," he said, and a slow grin split his face. "But that don't mean you can't try."

•

When my mother was home with us, everything was a little brighter, molten and golden, like the filter in movies that lets you know the flashback is a good one. Maybe because I knew these times were limited, I savored every minute. I'd sit on the closed lid of the toilet watching her put on her winged eyeliner. I'd pretend to have nightmares even when I didn't so I could climb into bed and feel the heat of her wrapped around me. I'd trail her when she took the laundry down to the coin-operated machines and help her sort the darks from the whites. I'd beg her to be the one to come pick me up

from kindergarten. I wanted her to be the one to read me a story at night.

When I was six, that story was *The Giving Tree*. It was my favorite, and my father's favorite, and I wanted it to be her favorite, too. She sat against the headboard of my narrow bed, the book propped on her lap, and read about the tree that gave up its apples, its branches, and its trunk to the boy it loved more than anything.

She finished, closed the book, and set it on her lap. "That tree needs boundaries," she said.

•

When Vietnam Tim and I got back to the house, my mother was readying her camera bag. "Diana," she asked, "do you want to come with me today? Just the two of us?"

I was so excited to be asked that I didn't pay attention to the fact that her eyes were red. That my father was nowhere in sight. Instead, I climbed into the blue Jeep that she and Vietnam Tim had driven up in yesterday. I didn't ask where we were going, because that wasn't the point.

It was about a half hour before she pulled to the side of the road, fussed with her camera bag, and started trudging across the withered landscape. I scrambled behind her, kicking up clouds of dust with my sneakers. "Where did Dad go?" I asked.

She stopped walking. Her hand fidgeted at her side. "Would you … would you rather be with him?"

"No," I said immediately. "I like it here with you."

Her breath gusted out and she nodded. Then she started walking again, with me trotting behind.

She stopped when we reached a field so dry it had cracked into a thousand shards. It looked like a shattered mirror, a broken windshield, tempered and held together only with sheer determination rather than the laws of physics. I found myself stepping backward gingerly, afraid to put even a toe on one of the

rifts in the earth. What if I was the last straw, the pressure that broke it to pieces?

I thought about the ground giving way, swallowing us whole.

My mother bent down with her camera, trying to find a sight line for her shot. She edged one knee onto the web of crevices, and then another.

Later I would learn about people with trypophobia, who might look at a pattern like this and get queasy; of other people so afraid of the unknown they couldn't leave the confines of their house. But at that moment, all I knew was that my world was literally crumbling beneath us.

"Mom," I cried, panicking. "Don't."

She immediately sat back on her heels, surprised. "Diana?"

"What if it's not safe?"

"It's fine," she said. "*I'm* fine."

But cycling through my head were all the times I wasn't there to call her back from the literal edge of disaster; the million ways she could get hurt. And I'd be in New York, safe, not even knowing what had happened to her.

As if she could read my mind, she sat down, her camera settled on her knee. "I wasn't made to stay at home," she said softly, looking into her lap. "Some women, they love being mothers. They make it look easy. But I needed to know that there was still space for me to go off and do my work. Because then when I was home, I wouldn't spend all my time wishing I was somewhere else."

I stared at her. I knew she was trying to tell me something about herself, something about *us*, but all I could hear was *I wasn't made to stay at home*, and the reverberating truth that I wasn't enough to change that about her.

It struck me that my mother, who was not unsettled by rhino stampedes or the crossfire of drug cartels or raging brush fires, was nervous. "Do you get what I'm trying to say, Diana?"

I blinked at her. That she loved me? That she didn't? That she was sorry? That it was all my fault?

My mother sighed. She turned the camera so that I could see the little two-by-three-inch LCD viewfinder. The photo she had taken of the parched land was a honeycomb, a pattern, whose fissures seemed lit from the belly of the earth. “You see,” my mother said. “Even broken things can be beautiful.”

I turned my face up to hers. And a drop of rain landed square on my forehead.

•

The sky was an unholy yellow by the time we reached the Next of Inn. There were sirens blaring from the town. Vietnam Tim was in front of the house, pointing across the parched field to the rolling storm, which was growling closer, its tail a black funnel of fury. Mrs. Evans was trying to get him to come into the cellar for safety.

My father had been standing on the porch, but as soon as he saw us he ran for the Jeep, scooped me into his arms, and dragged my mother with him to the cellar hatch. My mother was already fiddling with her camera. “But I need to—”

“No,” my father yelled. “You do not.”

Mrs. Evans followed us down there, still muttering about *that fool Vietnam Tim*. She sat down and tuned a little battery-powered radio to a station that was repeating the tornado emergency signal. We tucked ourselves between boxes of storage. Suddenly Vietnam Tim threw open the hatch doors. His eyes were wild, his hair electric. “It’s gonna reverse direction,” he yelled down. “A one-two punch.”

“Come down here before you get killed,” my father said.

Vietnam Tim grinned. “And miss all the fun?” He closed the metal doors.

Even with my head buried against my father’s chest, I could hear the tornado. It sounded like a hundred trains clattering on the same track. I heard glass shattering and car alarms and fire alarms and house alarms and then the monkey shriek of Nitpick.

That’s when Mrs. Evans lost it. She tossed aside the radio and raced up the ladder, throwing open the metal doors and trying to get

to the barn.

“Fuck,” my father said. He put me down on the floor and looked at me and then my mother. “Do not move.” And then he took off after her.

I screamed for him, but my voice was carried away by the wind. My mother stood up and calmly climbed the wooden steps that led out of the open cellar hatch, like a queen walking to her beheading. She stood half in and half out of the cellar, looking out at Vietnam Tim with his chin pointed to the sky. “That’s the cold front,” he cried. “It’s gonna shift back again.”

Just as quickly as it had started, everything went still.

Between-heartbeats still. Hold-your-breath still.

Vietnam Tim’s hair fluttered to lay flat against his scalp again. The wind disappeared. My mother walked outside, and I followed her, like I was tied by a thread.

The gazebo in the front yard was just … missing. The flowerpots were smashed and all the windows on the first floor of the inn had shattered. The twister was distant, undulating, like it was plotting its next move.

“Is it over?” I whispered.

My mother didn’t look at me. “Yes,” she breathed. “And no.”

The leaves at my feet started dancing as the wind picked up pace. The barn door opened, and my father came out, one arm braced around Mrs. Evans, who was sobbing.

Another tornado siren pierced the silence. My feet felt like they were rising, like I was a balloon.

Vietnam Tim locked eyes with my mother. “Wanna go chase it?” he asked.

“Hannah,” my father cried.

She turned to him, her face wide open, as if we couldn’t already see the parts of her that were missing.

How could you ask me to choose?

She was moving toward the blue Jeep before I could grab for her. My father bolted into action, snatching me into his free arm and dragging me and Mrs. Evans to the cellar again, even though the wind had risen so fast that it felt like we were pushing against an invisible wall.

We tumbled inside to safety. As my father struggled to close the hatch, I saw the Jeep drive off , moments before the entire barn was flung into the sky.

•

It took four minutes for the world to be destroyed again.

•

When my father and I went looking for her, hand in hand, the ground was covered with ice crunching under my feet. But it turned out it wasn't hail, it was glass. Shrapnel and splinters and the spoils of a war, the enemy long gone.

The town of Ochelata was a war zone, but it had been a discriminating battle. The side of the street with Pete's bar on it had been demolished. The restaurant, on the other side, remained pristine and untouched. Some houses we passed had no glass in the windows anymore, others had trees upended with the roots now scraping the sky. Some were missing porches, fences, roofs. Others looked exactly like they had this morning.

The home beside the Next of Inn had been completely ripped off its foundation, and reset gently in the middle of the street.

We returned to the inn without my mother. Mrs. Evans was sitting on the porch. "Has she—" my father asked, and the innkeeper just shook her head.

I wandered to the fence where I'd stood with Vietnam Tim; it was still intact. I wanted to blink and wake up in a world where the past two days had never happened.

I rested my forehead on the flat railing and felt a tug on my shirt, plus a hot gust of air. When I looked up, Nitpick was eating the hem.

But before I could tell Mrs. Evans, the blue Jeep drove up. Vietnam Tim got out from the driver's side and executed a little bow. "I hate to say I told you so, but I told you so."

By the time my mother unfolded herself from the passenger seat, her face glowing and her eyes snapping with excitement, I was already racing toward her. I threw my arms around her waist, hugging her so close you couldn't sew a seam between us.

My father walked toward us, an inferno.

"Paul," my mother said gently, soothing. "What's important is that I'm fine. That we're all fine."

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Is that really what you think is important?"

"But the photos—wait till you see—"

"This was a mistake," my father said. "Coming here. Us. All of it." He took me, peeling me off my mother, and stuffing me into the rental car.

"Paul? Where are you going?" My mother took three steps toward us. *"Paul?"*

"See how you like it," he said.

The sedan screamed out of the inn's driveway, fishtailing. If I needed any more proof that the world as I knew it had unraveled, this was it.

My father was the one running away, instead of my mother.

•

I knew, in the way that kids do, to let the silence ride shotgun. It wasn't until we were driving for an hour on the old Route 66 that I finally asked where we were going. "You know," my father said, huffing a laugh, "I have no idea."

We'd just reached Catoosa when we saw the Blue Whale from the road. My father looked at me and I looked at him and by unspoken

agreement, he drove right up to it—this weird, aqua-painted concrete whale half submerged at the edge of a little pond. I didn't think I'd ever seen anything quite so sad before—a landlocked fake whale in the middle of Oklahoma.

It looked like a minigolf sculpture without a putting green, like a kids' papier-mâché version of a cetacean. There was a gift store that was closed, but we could still walk right through the mouth of the whale into its boardwalk belly. There were signs saying no swimming was allowed, but at one point it must have been—there was a ladder and a slide right into the brackish water.

My father stepped up to a little plaque. "After noticing kids playing in a pond near his property, Hugh Davis built the blue whale in 1972 as an anniversary present for his wife, with a swim dock for local children. It became a major hub for people traveling across Route 66. When Davis died, the whale fell into disrepair, until his son Blaine restored it in 1988."

I stared into the painted eye of the creature, which seemed to be saying it knew it was stuck somewhere it was never meant to be.

My father lightly kicked at one of the cement teeth, his hands in his pockets. "Maybe I should have built her a whale," he said.

•

We drove back to the Next of Inn through Ochelata, which was slowly piecing itself back together. Mrs. Evans wasn't there, but she had left us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat for dinner. I ate slowly while my father told my mother that we would be flying home the next day.

That night I woke up from a nightmare where I was doing a word search, and all of the letters kept sliding off the page. I tried to fall asleep again, but this time I dreamed that we were back in New York, and our apartment was nothing but splinters of wood.

My parents were not in their bed. The bathroom door was ajar and a slice of lemon light fell onto the carpet from inside. I could hear their voices over the soft rush of the faucet.

I didn't think you'd be back, my mother said.

I'm not the one who leaves. That's you.

What do you want me to say, Paul?

There was a hiccup of silence.

That you'll come home with us, he said. *That you'll stay home.*

I padded down the stairs and peered out the window beside the front door, which was no longer a window but an open space. The glass had been swept up from the floor, so I had a clear view of the night sky, stars suddenly close enough to touch, like sparks thrown from a fire.

There was also a red ember dancing in the dark. I pushed open the screen door and saw Vietnam Tim sitting on the wicker rocker, smoking a cigarette. "Hey," he said, seeing me. He waved the cigarette toward me. "Want one?" Then he winced. "That's probably like the cursing," he realized.

"Yeah … I'm leaving tomorrow," I said.

"What a coincidence," Vietnam Tim replied. "So am I."

"Where will you go?"

He waved his arm, the bright red tip of the cigarette drawing a loop in the night. "Wherever the winds take me," he said.

"I'm going back to New York," I told him. "I may never leave there again."

His teeth flashed, a lightning smile. "So much for apples not falling far from trees," Vietnam Tim answered.

•

In the morning, Vietnam Tim had left without saying goodbye, and I realized that my mother was not joining us to go to the airport. Instead, she was going to spend a few more days in Ochelata, photographing the devastation of the EF4 tornado. She would chronicle the absence of homes where they had stood hours before, and the empty arms of mothers who had lost children, piles of debris that had been family businesses and churches. The images would

eventually include a Jenga heap of broken beams with the town population sign cracked down the middle; another of a horse rearing as it was being recaptured from the school gymnasium where it had taken frantic refuge; a dog's paw emerging from a mountain of rubble; and Mrs. Evans, staring at the remains of her broken barn, her arm hooked around the neck of Nitpick. This series, Broken Things, would eventually be featured at the International Center of Photography, and won my mother a World Press Photo award.

Before we left, my mother hugged me. "I'll be home soon," she promised, but she looked at my father as she said it. "I can't leave before I finish the job."

"I thought you were here for the rain," I said.

"That *was* the job," my mother agreed. "But now it's something else."

It was always something else.

I watched my mother tentatively move toward my father, and even more tentatively come close enough for her to brush her lips against his. There was only a second of hesitation, and then he kissed her back.

I fed Nitpick one last apple while my father put our suitcases into the rental car. As we drove to the airport I thought about something Vietnam Tim had said, when I asked him how a tornado ends.

The cold air above it breaks apart, he had told me. *Or the storm just gets all ropy and weak.*

In other words, one side gives up.

At the airport, the gate agent who checked us in looked at my passport. "Happy birthday!" she sang, all teeth, something my own mother hadn't remembered to say.

•

The panic attack hit just as the plane leveled after takeoff

What if a tornado comes now?

What if the plane just falls out of the sky?

What if the ground swallows us whole?

I started shaking so hard that my father, who was in the seat beside me with his eyes closed, felt it. He covered my hand with his. "What's wrong, Diana?"

What I meant to say: *Everything*.

What came out: "I don't want her to come home."

His fingers stilled over mine, and then squeezed. "Of course you do," he said, as if I'd just told him the sky is green when it obviously is blue.

I turned away from him, feeling betrayed. If anyone should understand, it would be him.

A fly that had stowed away on this flight buzzed in front of me, landing on the window. I watched it bat up against the thick glass, over and over, like it only now realized it had made a colossal mistake and wanted to be on the other side.

•

Because we had just flown in and it was my birthday, my father let me pick the take-out food. We ate Thai from the place I loved, where they always gave us free dumplings. My father scooped ice cream from a carton in the freezer and put a birthday candle in it and sang to me and we both pretended we were happy.

He told me I could unpack tomorrow after school, but I liked things in their proper places. So before I went to bed, I unzipped my little suitcase, planning to put my dirty clothes in the hamper and hang up the ones that needed to go in the closet.

On top of my clothes there was a folded note addressed in my mother's handwriting.

Happy birthday, Diana, it said on the outside.

Inside was a list.

1. Eggs.

2. World records

3. News stories

4. Bad habits

5. New jeans

6. 6. Piñata

7. Glass ceilings

Things that are great when they are broken …

There was also a present, wrapped in pink tissue paper and sealed with Scotch tape. I opened it up to find a glow stick.

I tore open the foil wrapper and snapped the glow stick. Almost immediately, it turned neon green in my hands, luminous and bright.

Broken things can be beautiful.

This was my mother, trying to *be* a mother. Other mothers would have known what to say before I left. Would have hugged me and instinctively been my safe space.

Would have been sitting next to me on the plane.

There were things missing from the list. Like dysfunctional families, for example. Were they better off when broken apart, too?

If motherhood was catastrophic for her, it meant I was the disaster.

And yet. I was the only disaster that Hannah O’Toole didn’t photo graph, wouldn’t chronicle, wasn’t drawn to.

I finished unpacking. I tucked in my blankets and brushed my teeth and unbraided my hair. I checked my backpack to make sure all my papers were in it for the morning.

Then I crawled into bed, taking the light my mother had gifted me under the covers. I stayed awake until the glow stick sputtered out, just as expected.

About the author

Jodi Picoult is the author of twenty-seven novels, with forty million copies sold worldwide. Her last twelve books have debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* best-seller list, including her most recent, *The Book of Two Way*s. Five novels have been made into movies and *Between the Lines* (co-written with daughter Samantha van Leer) has been adapted as a musical. She is the recipient of multiple awards, including the New England Bookseller Award for Fiction, the Alex Award from the YA Library Services Association, and the New Hampshire Literary Award for Outstanding Literary Merit. She is also the co-librettist for the musical *Breathe*, and the upcoming musical *The Book Thief*. She lives in New Hampshire with her husband.

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By Jodi Picoult

Wish You Were Here
The Book of Two Ways
A Spark of Light
Small Great Things
Leaving Time
The Storyteller
Lone Wolf
Sing You Home
House Rules
Handle with Care
Change of Heart
Nineteen Minutes
The Tenth Circle
Vanishing Acts
My Sister's Keeper
Second Glance
Perfect Match
Salem Falls
Plain Truth
Keeping Faith
The Pact
Mercy
Picture Perfect
Harvesting the Heart
Songs of the Humpback Whale

FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Off the Page
Between the Lines

AND FOR THE STAGE

Over the Moon: An Original Musical for Teens