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THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

jess greenwald

On Monday April 20, James Anthony Collins died.¹ It was, actually, the warmest day in quite a while. In the morning, he got the kids ready for school. His wife, Lila, still snoozed on her stomach, the morning light casting washes of gold across the planes and angles of her face. James touched her knotted hair with chapped fingers.² Hesitantly, he bent closer and could smell the whiskey. He sighed, thinking of promises unkept.

James made sure the kids were up. The boy, Isaac, was awake, blinking at his half-open window, the covers tangled around his waist. He told his father he would be up in a minute, and James smiled.

The girl, Anna, was already getting dressed. She said so when he knocked. She sounded a bit hoarse.

"Are you feeling sick, honey?"

"No, I'm fine, Dad. I've got a big test today." Sunlight poured like warm honey against the nape of his neck.

"Okay. I'll put out some Ibuprofen downstairs."³

In the kitchen, as he rummaged through the medicine drawer for the allergy tablets and pain relievers, he remembered when he proposed to Lila. His heartbeat pounding in his ears, remembered her eyes like empty jam jars, the rainstorm when Anna was born.

Later, Isaac ate his Honey Nut Cheerios forlornly.

"What's wrong, buddy?" asked James. He could hear Lila's stumbling footsteps over their head, in the bathroom.

The boy raised solemn gray eyes from his soggy milk.

"Don't worry, Daddy," he said, so James ruffled his hair and rose to pack lunches.

When he dropped the kids off at school, Anna blew her nose in the backseat, and James handed her a pack of tissues from the glove drawer.

"I think I have a cold, or something," she said stuffily, then sneezed.

Actually, she had Strep C, a mutated virus different from the usual strain; it involved cold symptoms on top of sore throat.⁴

"Gross!" Isaac complained, scooting as far away from his sister as possible.

1 My state as well as his. Are we not all, all living things, mere phantoms, shadows of nothing? *Sophocles, Ajax*

2 I really need to stop biting my fingernails. I really ought t--

3 She's a better student than I ever was

4 Please see your doctor or medical technician if you have these symptoms within the last week. The CDC has released a memo that--

After the kids had gone, James rubbed the smooth steering wheel. He had taken the car into the shop his friend Mateo owned last week because he'd realized they'd put another 50,000 miles on the car.⁵ He had forgotten to buckle his seatbelt.

Last week, Mateo R. Valdez, the owner of Valdez Mechanics + had a sore throat as soon as he woke up. On April 13th, he woke up with a sore throat, Strep C given to him by his daughter, María, who got it from Ariella at preschool, who got it from her postpartum depressed mother, who got it from the co-worker she was sleeping with, who got it from his wife, and who knows where Strep begins, anyway?

Mateo called in sick to work. He had recently hired June to answer the phones. His business was growing fast. June's last job was at a motel, also answering phones. This was harder. She tucked her dyed-blond hair behind her ear. She called Mateo's back-up mechanics. They were all busy, sick. Strep, really? "It's a plague, these days," said her friend, Eleanor, when she called, adjusting her metallic purple glasses to the bridge of her overlarge nose. Jane's cheap perfume made the air stiff. She coughed, then pumped hand sanitizer, rubbing her sweaty hands anxiously. Strangely, she thought about calling her mother. She thought about calling her ex-boyfriend, Brian, except he was in jail. The back of her neck hurt. The clock ticked too loud. Desperate, she decided a little white lie couldn't hurt anyone. A butterfly beating its wings.⁶ She called Brian's little brother, who she knew could fix things here and there. It would be okay.

Anyway, remember James? He was driving this car he'd just picked up from the shop yesterday. This car that Brian's brother, Ian, had fixed up. Well, thought he fixed up, anyway. He actually accidentally damaged the brake line when doing the oil change, and as James drove back to make sure Lila was okay, to try to convince her about rehab, they snapped. Just like that.⁷

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⁵ If your car is less than three years old and has fewer than 36,000 miles (or whatever the terms of your warranty are), mechanical problems will be fixed under the bumper-to-bumper warranty for no charge. However, this doesn't cover wear items like brake pads, and your car will still need "routine maintenance" for which you will have to pay. Routine maintenance is most often oil and filter changes, tire rotations and various inspections. After about the length of your warranty, the routine maintenance often becomes more involved and more expensive.

⁶ In chaos theory, the Butterfly Effect states that a tiny change in a complex system can result in gigantic ramifications later. In Thailand, a tiny butterfly beats its wings. That small wind builds up across the world into a hurricane in Key West. And then, everything changes.

⁷ The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins? *Edgar Allan Poe, The Premature Burial*

The car spun on the road. He felt a yell torn from his throat. He turned the steering wheel wildly, pumping on the brakes. A van honked behind him. The car crashed into the medium. A UPS truck T-boned into the driver's side. James' body went into shock. His body rocketed forward, whiplashed, and his brain severed from his spinal cord.⁸

In the classroom, Anna sneezed. Her throat ached. She scratched a pimple on her temple.

On the playground, Isaac played hopscotch. He grinned at his best friend, Peter. The day was warm.

At the house, Lila puked again. She heard sirens outside on the street, speeding west, but she did not notice the fire trucks, the paramedics, or the policemen headed to discover her husband's dead body. She wondered if James had thrown out all the booze yet. Perhaps it would take her headache away.⁹

8 To die:—to sleep:

No more; and, by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. *William Shakespeare, Hamlet*

9 So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. *F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby*