

E. K. Ota
Lockstep

When my daughter and I still lived on the East Coast, I knew a man who used to be a pastor. Peter and I worked together at an art supply store in Burlington, and on summer nights we sat on the balcony of my second-story apartment drinking beer and talking long after the sun set. This was the summer my husband left, when I often felt angry and afraid. Peter's voice was low and steady. The kind of voice that makes you want to sink into it until you're polished as a river stone. Because I liked listening to him, and because I was lonely and wanted him to stay, I asked him many questions. He answered everything obligingly. Still, it took time before Peter told me about his other life—the church he used to pastor in Beverly, his wife, the daughter that died in a car crash.

His daughter was sixteen the day she died. The week before, they had celebrated her birthday. The problem had been with her car, which was the gift they'd given her—an old Honda Civic that used to belong to the elderly mother of a congregation member. His daughter, Rebecca, had gone to the mall to meet her friends, and on the way back the transmission went out on the highway. She was rear-ended by a semi. To console them, the young doctor at the hospital said everything would have been over in a split second, too short of a time for her to feel much pain—or fear.

It was Wednesday, four days before Christmas. When they came home from the hospital, the house was as they left it with all the lights on and dinner half-eaten on the table. On the floor was water and shattered glass, the cup his wife had tipped over in her

haste after they received the call. *Like a museum exhibit*, was his thought when he was confronted by everything again in the stale hour after midnight, *preserving the moment of calamity*. And it felt unbearable that life would be different from now on—just as it had felt impossible on the day Rebecca was born to think that life had once existed without her. Their miracle child, they had told themselves then, touching each tiny finger and toe, and instantly their hearts had calibrated themselves to waltz in step with their daughter's. But now? Now that their third and indispensable beat was lost?

On Christmas morning Peter woke up early, before dawn. He was scheduled to preach. His assistant pastor had offered to take over for him, but he had insisted. In the week before the accident, his wife had talked about baking coffee cake for breakfast before church, because she liked creating moments for the family to have time to themselves away from the rest of the congregation. But after what happened she did not mention breakfast and he did not ask. In the subsequent days, neither of them felt very hungry. His wife did not cook. She stayed in bed. At odd hours of the day, she rummaged through the pantry and ate handfuls of nuts, bread and peanut butter, chocolate chips; she ignored the casseroles and soups brought by the church members, letting Peter answer the door and receive their sympathy alone.

You're going? said his wife from the bed on Christmas morning when she saw him come back into the bedroom in a dress shirt and slacks, his face shaved for the first time in days, and he knew what she meant really meant was, How could you?—an accusation, not a question.

He went into the closet and found a tie. After days of feeling bloated with grief, it felt good to get up and do something productive.

Yes, he said. I told Bill I would.

But that was before, she said.

In bed, she lifted a hand and brought it to her eyes. The room was stuffy, tinged with the slightly sweet smell of something rotten, as if grief was a dead thing that had begun to decompose.

I'm sure they'd understand, she said.

He hung the tie around his neck, tying it expertly the way his father once taught him to do it while they waited for his mother in the car. His father had also been a pastor. On Sundays, Peter had watched him speak from the pulpit and had been in awe and also proud. Sometimes, his father took him along when they visited congregants at their homes or in the hospital. Do you know where the word *pastor* comes from? his father had asked him once while on the way to such a visit, and Peter had shook his head. No.

It comes from the Latin word for *shepherd*. And do you know what makes someone a shepherd?

Again, he shook his head. No, he said.

A shepherd lays down his life for his flock, understand?

You don't get it, do you? said Peter's wife to him on the Christmas morning after their daughter died. She spoke without looking at him, her hand still covering her eyes. And he knew that she was angry with him for going, because she had been angry with him before: for pushing himself to his limits, preaching when he was exhausted or sick, meeting people with a smile even when at home there was discord. In a voice she had never used before, his wife said, You're not Jesus Christ you know, and Peter pretended he did not hear.

I'll come back as soon as I can, he said. He looked at his wife, but she did not remove her hand from her eyes, as if she needed to keep it there to shield herself from seeing something appalling. If she had looked at him, he would have gone to her, bent down and given her a kiss. But there was something different between them now. He could sense it. It made him afraid. Before, they had weathered difficulties together, hand in hand, and that had given them strength; but darkness had wedged itself between them.

On the way out he passed Rebecca's room and glanced inside at the purple bedspread, the array of books and papers scattered about on her desk. Mylar balloons from her party still drifted in the furthest corners, huddled together like lost lambs. Before leaving early for church every Sunday morning, Peter had always gone to Rebecca where she slept and kissed her forehead. He had done this since she was a baby. But he hurried past now, as if wishing to outpace memory, and as he did so he knew it wasn't duty that called him to church but because he did not want to be in the house, in those rooms fermenting with loss, being changed inexorably because of it. It made him sick. He had to get out. As he left, the thought crossed his mind that he was running away like a coward.