

Laura Dave

Things I've Done Since She's Stopped Calling

I.

I drove to Connecticut. I drove to Maine. I drove to Montreal. This was all the first weekend. I bought a watch, a bike, a bike lock, a toaster, a deck of cards, and a new answering machine. I connected the new answering machine, and disconnected the old one, changing the outgoing message. Before it had said: “hey . . . hey there. You’ve reached Dave.” Now it said, more clearly: “This is David Samuels’ answering machine (It was, after all, not exactly me that she’d reached). I will call you back,” I said. The second week, I listened to song number five on her Katie Melua CD thirty times. I took my guitar to get restrung. I cooked a chicken, whole. I returned the toaster. They would only give me a store credit for it. I lost the credit. I bit my cheek, coffee-burned my tongue, ran twelve miles a day, ran right through my heel-pain, for four days straight. I missed a Patriots game. I woke in the middle of the night, more than twice, in a brutal sweat. The first time, I got out of bed and reconnected the old answering machine, putting the new one back in the box—the old one had always been reliable before. I kept the new one, anyway, in case I changed my mind again. It was possible. I called my father at 1:00 a.m. on a Tuesday—it was only 11:00 p.m. where he was, only 11:00 p.m. in New Mexico—but still. I asked him to tell me the story of when I was born. “Excuse me?” he said. I told him I’d call him later.

I didn’t drink much or smoke marijuana because I hadn’t bothered with that stuff since high school and it seemed wrong to start again now. I did stare out the window, though, from the time I’d get home from school until the time the sun went down, which, from what I recalled, was having a similar effect to doing the smoking thing.

I ate a lot of cold pizza. I read about the mating habits of lobsters and antelopes. I turned twenty-six. On President’s Day, I packed a bag and got in my car and started driving toward Atlantic City for my college roommate’s bachelor party. We were supposed to stay at The Sands. We were supposed to be boys. I knew at some point they would

ask how things were going with my girl. That's what they would call Dani. Mine. I turned around with less than a half hour to go.

I remembered almost every morning, all over again, that she hadn't called yet, and had to close my eyes, tight, getting myself to breathe in. Buddha breaths, as my track coach used to say. Long and solid, long and fluid. They helped. Until they didn't.

Sometimes I did things like she was watching me do them. I put in small loads of laundry, made fresh beef soup, volunteered to water my neighbor's ficus plant.

I also did cry, but only once, and nobody saw.

HER SISTER WAS in my Forensic Science class. That was how we met. I taught one lousy section composed of the seniors who either hated science or loved it a little too much. Sixteen kids, total, most of them my guys, only five of them girls from the sister school, and Dani's sister, Alice, was one of them.

Dani came in the second week of school, during the introductory unit: police station procedures. I had explained to the kids the chain of command—what happened to a piece of evidence from the time it left the crime scene to the time it arrived in the evidence room at police headquarters.

She didn't like my "transport explanation"—I wasn't even sure what that exactly meant—and came storming in after hours to set me straight about how things worked. She was wearing faded jeans and one of those white peasant-looking blouses, her blonde hair held back in a ponytail. I wasn't expecting her to be a lawyer, and I certainly wasn't expecting her to be a senior associate at a firm in Dover. I just thought she looked close to my age (she was, in fact, six months to the day older than I was), which wasn't always so easy to find in small town New Hampshire. And I also thought she was pretty. Not-city-girl-knew-exactly-how-to-put-herself-together-pretty. More and less certain than that. Natural.

"Look," I said, smiling, "I'm really just the track coach." I was trying to charm her, trying to figure out how to work in my own running history. I'd spent the last two years training for the Olympics and would have made the team, almost certainly, if I hadn't stepped on a corkscrew six days before trials, cutting my heel, the soft tissue there, all the way open. "They have me teaching a class because of some regulation that to coach I also have to teach."

“Is that your excuse for being lousy at your job?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t say I was lousy. . . .”

She folded her arms across her chest. She wasn’t hiding how annoyed she was to be having this conversation. Even as she was standing there, she was already onto the next thing: what was she going to make for dinner, what she and Alice needed in the house. She was Alice’s caretaker and had been since their father died five years before. I had heard about this, somehow, at a faculty meeting. Not in a pity context, but as an example: look how well Alice Jacobson is doing—at the top of her class, and talking about heading to Brown in the fall. Talking about Yale. It was because of the older sister, who took such good care of Alice, more like a mother to her, than a sister. It would come back to me later. I’d known all this.

“I just like my sister to have the correct information,” she said. “She likes to have the correct information, even about very small details. It’s how she organizes things.”

“Point taken,” I said. “It won’t happen again.”

“Which part?”

“What do you mean, which part?”

“The part where you were wrong today, or the part where I found out about it?”

She was already starting to leave. I was already trying to stop her. “Wait,” I said. “I want to clear this up. I mean as long as you’re here. Let’s sit down together, for a minute. Let’s talk about how great Alice is doing.”

She turned back toward me, her whole face softening. “She’s doing great?” she said. And, then, the most amazing thing happened. She smiled. And I felt it. I felt it somewhere deep inside of me. (I’m sorry it sounds corny, but that was what happened.) And I thought: it could change everything. That smile.

“Well, it’s a little early to tell,” I said. “But I think she’s going to be my favorite student this semester.”

“You’re not supposed to have a favorite student,” she said. But she was smiling as the words were coming out of her mouth.

And I pulled out a seat for her. And she took it.

DANI WAS AN insomniac, and, after our first date—we went to a movie in downtown Dover—we ended up driving the state of New Hampshire, north to south, for the next several hours. Dani told me that the car relaxed her—that driving around like this was the only way she

ever got any sleep.

“Tell me about your running,” she said.

I didn’t know where to start, so I started at the beginning. I told her about growing up in a river town in New Mexico, how the water tended to keep people there, so I took to the road, early on, prepping myself on how to get out. I started running with my dad on the weekends, and then started running myself. I got better, got a scholarship to a boarding school in Minnesota, got the head-coach pulling me into Dartmouth. . . .

What can I say? I know the story made me sound like something out of a summertime movie, but there was a reason this story ended up in so many of those movies. Girls liked hearing it. But not Dani.

“No, you didn’t understand me,” she said, when I finally finished. “I want to know what running feels like to you.”

I looked at her blankly, which I think she took as me making fun of her question because she rolled her eyes.

“Just forget it, Dave,” she said, sing-song like, before looking back out the window. “I know talking about feelings can be too much.”

“No,” I said, because it wasn’t too much. It was just that people were always asking me what I’d think about when I ran, but no one had ever asked me before how it actually felt. I didn’t have a good answer yet.

Only when I looked toward Dani, to try and explain that to her, her head was balanced against the windowsill, her left arm wrapped around her knees, and she had fallen fast asleep.

BY THE END of September, Dani and I were seeing each other almost every night. It wasn’t that we did much. It was that I didn’t want to do anything, but be with her. There were small things drawing me in deeper—like how she put salt on everything, and how she would spend six hours writing a letter, and bigger things—like the way her hair smelled, or how she was always the same Dani, whether she was dealing with the 10-year-old-twins who lived across the street or the managing partner at her firm. She was never indirect or overeager. Never the least bit tricky. It was like she was missing that gene that made most of us treat people differently based on what we thought they could or couldn’t get for us.

The truth is, by Thanksgiving, I was thinking about asking her to marry me. Not right away, but sometime after Alice graduated, maybe. I drove into Dover to look at engagement rings. I started saving money. I was really, really thinking about it. Dani had told me she wasn’t good

at commitment, but she said it while we were in bed, our bodies liquid against each other, the way we'd figured out—the way we had gotten so good at—about a month before. She was saying how lousy she was at ending things; that she would disappear. I told her that I'd been the same way, in the past, that I did the same thing with most of my ex-girlfriends. I just stopped calling. "So you understand how things might need to go down then?" she said. We were still naked, and I thought we were talking about other people.

Then, for Christmas break, Dani said she was taking Alice to some fancy mountain house hotel in New Paltz, New York. It was their tradition to spend the holidays, just the two of them. I think she expected me to get mad about it. But I wasn't. I still thought we had all the time in the world. How could I know otherwise?

Even when I think about saying goodbye to her the day she left, I can't say she was paying a lot of attention to me, but she wasn't not paying a lot of attention either. I had jogged over to the house, and we packed up her car. Dani was trying to reach Alice on her cell phone. Alice had spent the night at her friend Sara's in the next town over. Dani wanted to pick her up there. She wanted them to make good time.

"I'll just call you when we're back then?" she said, once in the driver's seat. "Thursday night?"

"You're getting back Thursday?" Was I deaf? Didn't she just say Thursday?

"Or Friday, maybe," she said. "Friday at the latest."

"Okay," I said. This was the worst part. This part right here: "Or you can give me a call from there, if you have the time. Just to let me know how you're doing."

"I can?" she said. Then she made a face, so quickly-brutal, that no one but me would know she wasn't joking around. That my request had really annoyed her. It would allow me, for a long time, to point to this last request as my main mistake with her. Because I'd never been left before, I wouldn't understand that if it hadn't been how I said goodbye that day, it would have been something else: some other final piece of evidence that she could use to tell herself I wasn't really what she wanted. When you were looking for that evidence, you could find it anywhere.

Dani turned on her ignition, and the car rumbled backwards. "Just tell me you'll miss me, Dave," she said.

The radio was already on, had been left on—an especially

disheartening Elton John goodbye song hitting its chorus. Or at least I think it was a goodbye song. I've never really been sure. I've never really been sure whether I made that part up.

"I'll miss you, Dani," I said. This was the last thing I'd ever say to her.

Then she was gone.

II.

New Hampshire tended to be warm and perfect the last week of April, and this year was no exception. Almost overnight, the sky went from its winter shade of gray to bright pink, the earth less cold, the pavement less solid. People were scattered outside everywhere, like bugs. Like this was the first time we'd seen the sun, like, any day now, it might get taken away from us again. It inspired me, on some level, to try and take my life back into my own hands again.

Which might be why—on that Wednesday afternoon, four months post-Dani's departure—I was driving down Main Street, toward the local tennis courts, where I was supposed to meet a teacher in the math department (a decent guy, the assistant baseball coach) to play a game of squash. He was in a squash league with two of the other math teachers, and—even though they had asked me a hundred times in the past to play—I was joining now. I was doing anything, now, so I could stop thinking about Dani.

And, it was on my way there, that I saw Alice.

She was walking down the street, carrying a grocery bag in each hand—egg cartons and oil bottles creeping out—her school bag balanced precariously on her back. She was wearing her school uniform and a pair of her famous heart tights. She had several pairs of the tights, a fact I didn't know until Dani mentioned it one day. You'd think I would have figured it out for myself considering that in all my months of dating Dani, I had never seen Alice without the hearts on.

I haven't said much about Alice, but let me say now: I always liked her. She was smart, and down to earth, and very funny—not that I'm sure the average person would know any of this. Alice was too shy. Except she wasn't shy with Dani, and then, once I was around for a while, with me. This, at the time, had felt like a victory.

"Hey there, stranger," I said, pulling up along side of her now. I was

reluctant to stop. Alice wasn't taking any classes at my school this semester, and I hadn't seen her since Dani disappeared. If Alice hadn't been carrying all of those bags, if she hadn't looked so in need of a hand, I wouldn't have stopped. This is the truth. To avoid the discomfort of being around the closest person in the world to Dani, I would have driven right on by. Pretending I didn't recognize those hearts.

But she was looking down, now, into my car window, giving me the most hopeful smile in the world. "Please tell me," she said, "you can give me a ride."

"I'm your guy," I said. Then I reached behind me to open the backseat door for her, so she could put her bags in. She dropped them all, slammed the door, and ran around to the passenger side.

"Great," she said, buckling herself in. "I know I should have taken the bus, but it was just so nice out, I couldn't help it. I didn't properly weigh the walk back home."

I looked in the rearview, pulled back out onto the road, and turned the car around. "It happens to the best of us," I said.

"Really?" she said. "When was the last time it happened to you?"

"The early 80s."

She laughed, turning in my direction, recognizing me as someone she knew—for the first time, I think, since she got in the car. I remember you now, her smile said.

And, so, I smiled back: me too.

"Now I have to go home and bake a cake," she said. "What the heck do I know about making cakes? The one time Dani and I tried before, it ended up as flat as a pancake. A very sweet, cherry-frosted pancake. Dani ate it anyway. Not that that says much. You know how she'll eat anything . . ."

Halfway through the sentence she drifted off and then looked at me, frightened, like she shouldn't have gone there. I was careful not to react, or as careful as you can be when you're trying too hard to do anything, which probably meant my non-reaction was written all over my face. "You saved me, actually," I said, trying to fix things. "I was heading to a squash game."

She made a face. "Squash is for cool people now?"

"Trust me, Alice. Squash will never be for cool people."

She over-nodded, as if seriously taking this in. Then she turned and checked on her bottles in the backseat, her breakable eggs. "Well, at least this time I'm using chocolate frosting. I think that means I'm off

to a better start. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Absolutely," I said.

She smiled at me, again, and I could feel her really starting to relax, which was relaxing me. Still, there was an unmistakable pumping in my head. It was a lot being this near to Alice and not asking about Dani. She would know the things I wanted to know: how much (if at all) Dani still talked about me; whether the mix I'd given her for their trip to the Mountain House made her sad; if she'd been naked with anyone else yet; when the last time was that she wore that flowered dress, the white one that tied at her neck. That little knot, right at the bone. These were my questions, in order.

Alice pointed at the truck in front of us: a moving stable, two black horses, staring back at us through their bars. I hadn't even noticed. These big animals right in my line of view, and I had missed them. Who missed such a big thing? It felt like a sign I was supposed to do something, at least start seeing the entire picture, but I didn't know where to look for it. I was still only seeing what I saw. Which, now, was an unhappy look on Alice's face.

I signaled right onto the side street. Barring any more horses, we would be back at their place in three minutes. And I wouldn't get to know again, all the things I was hoping to know about Dani's life.

Alice turned toward me. "The cake's for Sara's birthday by the way. You remember my friend Sara? She's tall. She'd meet me after class. It's for her."

"Okay," I said, trying not to act confused by this announcement. I hadn't asked, but, now, I couldn't help but wonder: Dani's birthday wasn't for two months, but maybe it was for her for some other reason. Maybe she had gotten that transfer she wanted—the one to her firm's home office in Atlanta—and they were celebrating: Alice's college move and Dani's move down south. Could that be it? It was ridiculous for the idea of Dani's departure to upset me so much, but there it was.

"Well, I'm sure she'll love it," I said. "Sara, I mean. How old is she turning?"

"My age," she said. Then she paused. "A year younger, really."

"Right."

Meanwhile, Alice was recovering nicely, trying to make eye contact again. We were pulling up in front of the house. And I knew it was a good thing for this excursion to be over, but I also knew the end was often when you said the thing you felt like you most needed to say. So

close to holding it in, that's when you had to let it out. It made an unfair kind of sense. And, if I did choose that moment to speak, I knew exactly what I would say: I really loved your sister. I love her still. When you told the truth, it had a way of coming out in short, simple sentences. This was something else I was learning.

Alice took her bags from the backseat, readjusting her backpack. When she was all organized, she leaned down, peeking into the passenger side window. "I didn't even ask you, Dave," she said. "How's the team doing?"

I thought of my guys—the hot-sun practice earlier that morning, no one complaining, the nine-mile run we were taking at 6 a.m. on Saturday. It made me feel calmer. "They're great, Alice," I said. "Everyone's great."

"Glad to hear it." She smiled. "Thanks for the ride."

"Anytime," I said. "Good luck with the cake."

"Good luck with the squash."

And like that, it was over. Alice gave me a small, grateful wave and headed toward her house. She didn't look back. Why would she? But I stayed parked where I was, watching her plummet along, all backpack and high ponytail. Maybe it was because she was Dani's little sister, but I felt my heart seize at the thought of her at college next year. And, as she closed the front door behind her, my heart seized on the other thing that was bothering me. The other thing I knew. I was never going see her again.

I turned on the ignition, getting ready to drive away. Only there was a heavy man—not slightly too thick in the middle, but forty pounds too large all around—standing in front of my car, gripping his briefcase, giving me a terrible look.

I had been concentrating so intensely on Alice's exit that I hadn't noticed him park his SUV in the driveway. I hadn't noticed him walking toward me. His weight made him look older than his age, which still had to be a decade older than me.

"Can I help you?" he said. But he said it nasty, like I was a thief. And, then, I watched as his eyes moved between mine and the now-closed front door, and I understood what he thought he'd just witnessed: me watching Alice walk inside. Me (grown man), watching Alice (un-grown girl).

"No, no . . . no," I said, calling out of the car. "I'm Alice's teacher. Or I was her teacher last semester. I was just giving her a lift home."

His whole face relaxed, and I could see him register this as the truth. Then he came around the car, stopping by the driver's side window. "Oh, thank goodness for that. I thought I was going to have to kill you." But he smiled when he said it, sticking his hand out to shake mine. "I'm Bob Hamilton."

I shook back through the window. "David Samuels," I said.

"It's nice to meet you, David."

"Nice to meet you as well, Bob," I said, which was when it occurred to me, I had no idea what he was doing here. For a minute, I thought he was the Uncle that Dani didn't like to talk about, who lived in Utah, and had a problem with alcohol. I thought it might be him, or a neighbor of theirs I'd never met, until I knew it wasn't. Until I knew, before he said a word, that this was Dani's new boyfriend. It made me sick to know, but there it was. Bob was Dani's new boyfriend. And it didn't matter if I understood why. Dani met this guy somewhere: at work, or at one of those Friday night client dinners she hated going to, or during a PTA brunch. Or: maybe it was none of these places. Maybe it was at that mountain house in New York. That first night there after Alice went to sleep. He was sitting by the fire in the lobby, drinking port, reading *The Economist*. And, almost as soon as she sat down next to him, she sensed something in him. Something kind. And she thought: this could change everything.

"I'm dating Alice's sister, Dani," Bob said.

"I know." He looked at me, confused. "Alice mentioned something in the car."

He nodded, looking happy that he was on the list of what needed to be told about. "Dani is getting home soon. I'm taking the girls into Boston, for a restaurant opening."

Of course, he was. Fatso.

"You should come in for some coffee. I know she loves seeing Alice's teachers."

It seemed like the least appealing idea in the world, and the most. To see Dani. The invitation before me. But then Bob started shaking his keys, getting ready to go inside, and I realized just how many keys he was holding. How many of Dani's keys. I had never had the keys, and he had several of them: keys that would open the front door, the side door, the garage. The car.

"I'd love to, Bob," I said. "But I actually better get going. I'm pretty late for a pick-up squash game with the guys in the math department."

You know those math guys. They'll make me multiply or something."

He started laughing at that, a nice laugh—true-sounding and generous—and even though I didn't want to see it, I could see it then. What Dani had gained.

He put out his hand again. "Well, another time then," he said.

I nodded, taking it. "Sure," I said. "Another time."

Then he walked away, as something occurred to me. Something kind of important. I called out to him, reluctantly, and he turned around.

"I was just wondering . . . it isn't your birthday this week, is it?"

"Sure is. Saturday," he said. "Why?"

Why. He wanted to know why. It was in this moment that I knew a decision needed to be made. Dani's life was going on without me. I had seen it with my very eyes. And, here I was, and I could do nothing with the information I had, or I could do the right thing. If I chose the right thing, it would be the first time since Dani and I last spoke that I was taking a real step toward letting her go.

"I think Alice's working on something in there for your birthday. I'm guessing it's a surprise, so you might want to give a warning call before you head in."

"I'll do that. Thanks for the heads up. I'll make myself scarce."

"Okay then," I said, shifting the car into drive.

"Just give me a hint though," he said, smiling at me, broadly, his second chin flipping down a little. "What's the surprise?"

Of course, no one gave an answer to that. That was the rule of the question. The asker didn't really want the answer, and, as answerer, you took pleasure in saying something like: "Well, you'll have to wait and see."

But not today. "A cake, Bob," I said. "A chocolate-frosted cake."

So I wasn't perfect.

But like that, I said goodbye.

THE FIRST GIRL had been Wendy. She had been the first I didn't call back. Then there was Izzy, Daria, and Renee. There were others, but those were the main ones. And, first, was Wendy. We'd dated in college, and, after graduation, when she left for a small town in Oregon (she wanted to be a television reporter), I stopped calling.

How did it make a difference how you ended things? I used to think. The important part was that it was over. There was no cushioning

that. But now I understood that there was a cushioning in letting someone have the last word. Of course, leaving was the real last word, but there was a cushioning in letting someone hear you say it. What an obvious thing to learn. But maybe it would lead to learning less obvious things. Wasn't that how it worked? You could never see the other point of view until you were the other point of view. And then you apologized to everyone you wronged in that way. As if you weren't doing it, so that she would come back to you and tell you to forget these last months, her unseemly exit, Bob and his meaningful grip. Forget it all. And you would. Even if it was precisely your new awareness that would make you a better man. Who wanted to be a better man, if she wasn't around to see it?

"Operator. How can I help you?"

I was standing in my kitchen—one-hour after dropping off Alice, after birthday Bob—trying to get Wendy's phone number from 411. Wendy Smith in southern Oregon.

"There are thirty-three listed, sir," the operator said.

"Only thirty-three?"

She was tiring of me. "I'll connect you to the first one," she said. And then she was gone, and there was a click, click, and the phone started ringing.

I wished I had a mirror, so I could check out my reflection, ready myself. Not that it would make a difference. Wendy was married already to someone with the name Lopez, and that was what she went by. I would never find her. And Dani wasn't coming back. She'd end up marrying Bob. I was living back out west before I found out for sure, (heading the track program at a college near L.A., about to get married myself to a wonderful woman—though wonderful feels like too small a word to hold her—a musician), and, by then, Dani would only enter my conscience on certain occasions. Like when we were at a dinner party and someone drank too much gin and got to talking about his mid-twenties: about how weird and wrong life often felt then. I wouldn't chime in, but my thoughts would inevitably drift to Dani, and, I would return to that first night, the two of us driving in my car, and Dani asking me to tell her what running felt like.

I had my answer now, and I couldn't help but wish I'd had it then, too. Running felt like a kind of proof. Not of something so disgustingly large as God or death, but of something not so far removed from those things either. It was proof, for me, that a given moment was happening.

These were my legs, and this was my breath, and what was I going to do about it? How was I going to get from here to there? I always seemed to have the answer. For a long time, after I was forced to stop, I went looking for that type of certainty everywhere. In disappearing the way she did, Dani gave me something closer to the opposite, which left me with the lengthy and uncomfortable job of trying to prove it to myself. This had mattered.

“Hello there?” The voice on the other end of the line was that of an elderly woman—her greeting punctuated by the soft rasps of her breath. “Is anyone there?”

I cleared my throat. “I am, ma’am. But I’m afraid I have the wrong number. I’m trying to reach Wendy Smith.”

“I am Wendy Smith,” she said.

“I think I’m looking for a different one.”

“Oh.” She was quiet after that, but, instead of hanging up, she was waiting. I could hear her waiting, apparently, for me to say something else.

I took a seat at my kitchen table, not exactly certain how to oblige her. But I was going to try. I was going to say something so she didn’t get off the phone feeling like my call to her was a waste. That seemed like a fairly hard goal—a hard place to start.

But, as they say, you have to start somewhere.

And, for me, it was right here.