

BUILDING
CORDATE
STRUCTURES

a voiceHOUSE experience

HEAR GOD

Small white cards scattered across a dark surface.

Food Drive Dora
(West Wing)

PREFACE

At this point, in terms of scope and subject matter, I have become concerned exclusively with the real. Why? Because there is no truth outside of the real. Every concept, every idea, every thought of the thinking mind, every explanation, every philosophical insight, every concoction born between our ears- unreal. What is real? It is simply the intimacy of our lived experience, our unmediated contact with our life.

And what intrigues me most about the intimacy of our lived experience involves the workings of the heart. Not the muscle tissue, not rhythm and thumping- not the heart of a physical body, but rather the heart of our spirit and our center. The heart of our being, beyond definition or boundary, beyond seeing or touching- the heart of connection, the heart of intuition, the heart which carries us forward in perseverance, the heart which shatters and leaves us defeated in the shadows. It seems that every human experience involves, and requires, the presence of such a heart.

This collection represents my explorations into the real, into the heart which penetrates our lived experience.

And any endeavor which aims to explore the workings of the heart, by necessity, involves some confrontation with a paradox: our lived experience happening inside and around each of us, colored and contoured by a heart we cannot see, touch, or describe from a mechanical or rational perspective. Our empirical and materialistic schemes fail miserably in the realm of the heart. And since we are members of a mechanical-rational-empirical-materialistic society, we are conditioned to ignore the heart. We are conditioned to neglect our intuition, to avoid reaching inward, to belittle the power of this unseen presence inside ourselves, and our fellows. Too often and too easily the heart is either dismissed by cynics, or it is betrayed by flowery language and unclear metaphor.

The heart, unfortunately, has become another perversion in this inverted world of ours. A world whose perversions exist as a result of our self-made lies: our life is insignificant and meaningless; nothing matters; we are specks of dust amongst the cold cosmos; there's nothing worth fussing over that we can't see or measure; we are bundles of neurons; we are programmed for survival and our genetic makeup dictates the terms. And these inherited worldviews, or stories, infect us and distort our ability to experience the real. These pernicious stories are largely responsible for our collective anxiety and depression, for our disconnection from life, for our waning enthusiasm for living.

When it comes to understanding, or merely glimpsing, the workings of the heart, I have found the relationship to 'story' to be critical. Story is a translation of lived experience. Lived

experience and story are not the same. We can never understand or appreciate the entirety of our lived experience, so we are reliant on our stories- even though the whole story is never the whole story, no matter how long it is.

I believe a person's story and a person's heart are deeply connected- they inform each other, bidirectionally. A person's heart is what does the translating from lived experience to story. The heart shapes every story- it impacts how we tell our stories, and how we listen to the stories of others. Depending on how we tell a story, the hearts of our listeners can shift and behave differently. The more effort we put into understanding our story, and the story of others, the more open our hearts become. And the more open we become, the more human we become. It's not about information, it's about connection. It's about love. Love is what separates us from the animals. It is our only recourse. Our only striving should be towards increasing our ability to love.

Consider this: a disheveled woman ambles through a busy intersection with a plastic bag over her shoulder heavy with aluminum cans. Now, one person might look at her and say 'How disgusting? She's always loitering around the neighborhood, bothering people on their way to the grocery store, making a scene. Why don't the police arrest her?' Another person might look at her and say 'It's too bad Janet lost her husband and her son to that car crash. She hasn't been the same since. She has no family to support her. She collects cans to trade in for money- I wish somebody could do something for her, help enroll her in an assistance program.'

In the end, we are all humans, here- born to live, born to suffer, born to love, born to die.

Now I'll end this with a word about death. We call our lived experience life, and the end of that experience we call death. Our fear of death stems from the unease we feel knowing our experience will end, but our fear is misplaced. Life is bound by death; it requires the presence of death to provide a frame for our experience. Death is a requirement for living- it is a guarantee, for how else could life be such a miracle? The real shame isn't dying. The real shame would be not having had the experience in the first place. The only thing we ought to be afraid of is having lived and not told a story, having lived and not taken a moment to listen.

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LANTERNS

I noticed tears welling in the corner of Jerry's eyes. His eyes on any given Monday night in the basement of Grace Church could be described as watery, foggy almost- he reflected a misty kind of royal blue, like his irises had been spraypainted on. A pair of drooping eyelids added to this effect. But as I looked up at him after he had signaled over to me on this particular Monday, there was no hiding he was trying his best not to cry.

He didn't lift his hand to shroud his emotions, though I suspected he soon might.

I had struck a nerve.

In a drawling, phlegmatic voice, "Your mother's note, that was beautiful."

I nodded, then I hunched myself towards him, my palms on the plastic folding table, my shoulders dipped. I focused in on him. Other guys meandered about the dilapidated gymnasium space, at the coffee maker, grouped in segments, talking, laughing. It was a break in the meeting. In a low tone I said, "She's a good woman. I got lucky to be raised by her. She put up with me through everything. I'm glad she's got some peace of mind, at least with me, with how things are now."

I had been sober for eight years.

Eight consecutive, uninterrupted years.

Eight years and a month ago, to believe I might someday be eight years sober would have been a lark. An impossibility. Back then, I couldn't even conceptualize sobriety. It was a word, a word that stood in place of something unknown and secret and inaccessible. To not drink for a day seemed to me, then, an eternity. A liquor store in the morning on the way to work. A different liquor store at lunch. A third liquor store on the way home. Three nips and an orange juice. Three nips and an iced tea. A twelve pack of beer. That was my routine.

Day in, day out.

I had grooved the habits of a round-the-clock maintenance drinker, a person chemically dependent on alcohol.

But here I was, eight years later with a sparkling water in front of me and a sixty-year-old man ready to tell me a story about his mother. "I was sober for seventeen years before my mother died. It was such a gift. And I was a mama's boy, let me tell you." He smiled. The tears had receded. "I loved to let her spoil me. My

sisters, they would roll their eyes. But what did I care? You only have one mother. That's a fact of life."

I nodded in agreement, then took a sip from the plastic bottle.

I had been asked to open the meeting with a reflection, a 'lead' in AA parlance. I had ended my lead telling the group about a note my mother had mailed to me. The note was a tradition of hers, every April when my sober anniversary came around. I looked forward to receiving her note every April. The semantics changed from year to year, but the sentiment of her message was always the same. This year, she wrote, 'I couldn't be prouder of you. What you have become is the man I always knew you were. There was never any doubt in my heart that you were a bright star in this universe- in my universe. You are such a blessing to me.' I didn't recite it verbatim to the group, but I told them why it was important to me. Why my sobriety wasn't just mine.

Jerry went on. "You know, I had to dig her a gravesite. Honest to God." Jerry liked to pause, sit with his words, reminiscing. "The priest, he wasn't going to let us bury her next to my father. Can you believe that? It was one of her dying wishes. But the church owned the cemetery, and this priest, he said there wasn't a plot available."

Neither of us moved, but my proximity to Jerry suddenly increased. "My father had been dead for, oh geesh, forty years? Forty-five years? He died when I was six. A car accident, on his way home from work. My mother was widowed as a young woman. I had four older sisters, the girls, and me. And my mother, she never remarried. Can you believe that? She didn't even date for Chrissakes. And she was a beautiful woman. Beautiful. Red hair. Sparkling blue eyes. Oh she was something. But she never loved another man besides my father."

I pictured a beautiful red-haired woman in a black veil. "Wow. To raise five kids on her own? Talk about an undertaking."

Jerry clasped his hands together. "She was something, let me tell you. But when she died, like I said, we realized that we hadn't bought a plot next to my father. And of course, there were none left. It was a tiny cemetery. I'm from Canada, outside Quebec. A small town. A small cemetery. When my mother buried my father, she didn't think about where she would go. It was an oversight. Who could blame her?"

I squinted and rotated the green cap on my bottle. "So what did you do?"

"Well, what could I do? I called the funeral director, who also happened to be the undertaker at the cemetery- and it turned out he knew my mother and a few of my sisters. We talked. I told him about everything. He was a nice guy, a good guy- he said, Let's go for it. So, in the night, we went out to my father's grave. This undertaker, he had an excavator, a small one, and we started digging. I had a shovel, he was going at it with the- what's it called? The bucket. Yes. It was something."

I chuckled, "That's amazing."

Jerry shook his head playfully, "Let me tell you, I was nervous. It was the most trouble I'd gotten myself into in a long time- but it was the good kind of trouble." He breathed deeply. "We dug until we hit my father's casket, and so we left a layer of dirt on him." Jerry spread out his hands in a gesture of solemnity. "We buried her right on top of him. The priest wasn't happy, but I didn't care. It was her dying wish. I could give a shit about the priest." I chuckled again. "The gift of sobriety."

Jerry looked up at me, focused, jolted by the presence of an obvious truth "That's right. That's right. All because I was sober. And now, your mother, all because you are sober."

"It's a gift."

"Yes it is." Jerry adjusted the sleeve of his shirt. "You know, we had these lanterns out, me and the undertaker. I'll never forget the light from the lanterns on these piles of dirt. It was something. When I told my partner about it, he said I was like an Egyptian grave robber. He couldn't picture me doing it. But I did. You know what? I did it."

The tears returned to Jerry's eyes.

I patted him on the shoulder and excused myself for a cigarette break. I kept my head pointed away from the other loitering group members so I wouldn't have to confront anybody else, not before I was ready to.

LOST & FOUND

Norman Schultz, typically a lucid gentleman, at once appeared out of sorts to his older sister. Only a few minutes prior she had been poking fun at him, criticizing the fit of his navy-blue slacks, but then a lugubrious look on Norman's face caused her an acute unnerving. He appears so worn down, she thought to herself. The energy of their interaction shifted. Her attention transformed entirely onto Norman, the patient.

"I'm going to fix you some tea and bring back a thermometer."

Katherine's husband, Frank Temple, had been secretly wondering to himself how he might be able to leave the pair and begin on his weekend chores. When Katherine left the couch, Frank decided to make himself sparse. He excused himself quietly and left Norman alone in the living room. Norman appreciated Frank's absence- the guest felt embarrassed, ridiculous in fact.

Katherine returned with a blanket and forced the thermometer under her brother's tongue. "Hold it there for a minute. I'll count in my head and give you the signal to pull it out."

She busied herself back to the stove to take the kettle off the burner and left Norman with the formal dining wares, the crystal display case, the Oriental carpet, and the framed Marie Cassatt print.

She hollered from the other side of the kitchen, cutting a lemon on the countertop, "You can never be too careful with these kinds of things, Norman. We're getting old."

Norman was more than happy to have the burden of the thermometer under his tongue, unable to reply or converse. But soon Katherine signaled him to remove the instrument. In the end, the minute expired quickly and without much resistance.

Katherine stood in front of him, examining the meniscus of the red liquid against the indicator marks. "It's slightly above normal. Have you been feeling yourself lately?"

Norman considered what was at stake. "I feel fine, honestly."

"It must just be coming on. Is there a tickle in your throat?"

"No."

She rebuked Norman with, "You need to stay in tune with your body. There are early signs you have to pay attention to. It can be the difference between life and death."

Norman gathered a breath, about to respond, but subsided.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"No, tell me. Frank does this to me all too often. Out with it. If we can't be up front with each other then what can we be?"

Norman placed the mug of tea on a ceramic coaster. Katherine had set it next to Norman, on top of the ottoman. "I'm not in the business of avoiding death, let's put it at that. And leave it at that."

Katherine hesitated. "Because of Anne?"

Norman scratched at his temple. "I miss her dearly."

Katherine fell onto the cushion next to her brother. "Of course you do."

His eyes unwavering and straight ahead, "Sometimes I feel like it's only going through the motions. Without her- I- it's not the same anymore."

"What isn't the same?"

He turned to his sister, as if waiting for her to fill in the obvious answer, then provided it himself. "Being alive."

"I know it's been hard, Norman. I know it." Katherine lowered one of her hands onto her brother's. "But you have to keep going. You have to keep moving forward."

Norman smiled a feeble grin. "Towards what?"

With the other hand, Katherine slipped the thermometer into her pocket and sighed. She wanted desperately to reply with a thoughtful, appropriate answer. But none came to her lips.

Norman didn't wish to upset his older sister, so he began talking without any intention or direction. It was out of character, to speak and not be decided in terms of where his point would be headed, to be certain what he said would be salient. "Anne used to tell a story, from when she was a little girl, about her grandfather, Hank. Hank was a tough man, hardworking- he lost his wife early, not long after Anne's mother was born, but he never remarried. It was uncommon in those days- two young children, a widower, going it alone to raise the girls- most men would have found another mother for their children. But he didn't. He made things work. He loved Anne's mother so much. And he loved Anne, too. And later on in life, when he was near the end- Anne was only a kid, barely a teenager I think- she was complaining to him about a lost earring. She was upset. And her grandfather Hank took her by the hand and said 'I lost the love of my life forty-five years ago. And I might never find her. To hell with your earring, sweetheart.' Anne never forgot what he said to her. It was one of those moments, that..."

Frank was rustling about upstairs.

Katherine waited for Norman to continue.

"I can't help but think of that story now. What if I never see her again? What if she's gone, forever? And you, and me, and everyone- we all disappear, lost earrings? Forgotten. It's a terrible thought, I know- but I can't help but think it. I can't help it. What's the use of anything in the face of that?"

Katherine wouldn't allow her imagination any leeway to consider such a possibility. She adjusted a bracelet on her wrist and replied, firm, "You can't think like that. Nobody knows what happens after you die. Nobody knows anything- which means anything is possible. Anyways- you aren't dead. You're here. That counts for a whole lot."

"I used to think it did. But I'm not so sure anymore."

Katherine persisted, "Your heart is broken, Norman. It's natural to feel this way. But it will pass. You have more life to live."

"It's nice of you to say Kat, but I don't think it will. I don't think this shadow will ever lift up from off of me."

Katherine felt suddenly uneasy. She took a sip of her tea. "It might not lift entirely, but it won't always be this dark."

Norman reached for his mug, then stopped. "She died on a Tuesday. Of all the days to die on. A Tuesday afternoon. People went to work in the morning, they drove home that night. Watched television. Argued over bills. She died on a Tuesday- of all the lousy days to die." Norman's voice trailed off.

Frank clambered back into the front room. He looked at Katherine with a great deal of concern. "I hate to interrupt, but honey, have you seen my raincoat, the grey one that I like? I can't find it in any of the closets."

Katherine didn't respond.

Norman turned his gaze towards a large bay window and shook his head with a muted chuckle.

GOODBYE

I fell in love with her eyes. When she was happy, in the old days, looking at her eyes was like hiking in the canyons at sunset. Her eyes would change colors on me, morphing with arroyo blues and silvers, crimsons and golds. It was her eyes- that's what I fell in love with when we first met. I couldn't get enough of her eyes. I wanted to keep hold of her gaze- when I looked at her and she looked at me, it was like going on an adventure. I could hear booming echoes; I could smell twisting rivers that sprayed white rapids.

That's how it started with us.

But, with time, like everything, it changed. Her eyes didn't bring me into the canyons anymore. When I looked at her, all I saw was red plastic strings tied at the end of garbage bags, handwritten reminders posted onto the family calendar, forms at the doctor's

office. When I looked at her, I heard the seatbelt buckle alarm going off in the car, the one that won't shut down until you finally give in- give up- I didn't want to be the one who gave up. I swore to myself I wouldn't. But I felt it coming. It was becoming harder and harder to hang on. At the end, we couldn't even make contact- we skipped off the surface of each other. Her eyes had lost their charm for me. And I had sensed that my own eyes were equally ineffective- idiotic and dull, squishy and essentially unpleasant. She looked at me the same way I pretended not to look at her.

But I swore, no matter what, that I wouldn't be the one to end things. To quit.

And I wasn't.

A Tuesday in May, a thick haze, out for a nighttime run on a poorly lit road, an old woman behind the wheel who hadn't so much as swatted a fly in the first sixty-eight years of her life- those were the circumstances. My wife died on me like that. "Enjoy your run." It was the last thing I said to her. I didn't kiss her. I didn't hug her. I didn't even say it to her face.

I was in the kitchen loading up a dishwasher.

She was in the front hall, by the closet, ready to open the door. It was a perfunctory statement, automatic. I don't think I consciously decided to say it to her.

"Enjoy your run."

A lot of things I said to her were like that.

"I love you, too."

Mechanical, like they were recorded and played back from off my phone.

I can't even remember what she said in response.

I wonder if she said goodbye...

A police officer called me two hours later. I was asleep on our couch in the basement with the television volume turned low. Asleep as she noticed the headlamps and quickly turned her head over her shoulder. Asleep as she bore the impact of the car's front right bumper. Asleep as her bones crunched. As her skull cracked open. As her eyes bled. As she stopped breathing.

I didn't cry when I hung up the phone.

If I was entirely honest, I'd tell you after that call some part of me was relieved.

But I've been thinking about her eyes lately. What she saw in me. What she saw that night. What she saw in her children, our kids-

that's where those canyons cut into the earth, when she was with the boys. They weren't my trails to descend anymore. They belonged to new adventurers- Theo and Dan. As far apart as we grew, me and her, that never lost its charm- watching Tracy watching them. We haven't said much to each other since the funeral, the boys and me.

What do you say to teenage boys who lose their mother?

"Sorry for your loss."

The only thing better than a great father is a terrible one, as far as sons go. But mothers, as far as sons go- a boy needs a loving woman, one who sticks around, if he's to have any shot at all in becoming a man.

They didn't need to hear that from me, though.

When we sat down to dinner the other night I made a concerted effort to look into their eyes. I wanted to try and locate Tracy in them. But I couldn't do much investigation. They kept their heads pointed down, mostly. On guard. All they wanted to do was blink, and disappear.

Theo's hurting, badly. He's despondent. A few days after the funeral, something changed inside of him. It's like he began to absorb the reality of Tracy being gone. Dan has always been more resilient, less sensitive- he's better at distracting himself. But Theo's not like that. He's going to have a rough stretch ahead. My mother said that to me in a private moment between us, "Theo is going to struggle." Then she squeezed my shoulder. I nodded and agreed with her.

Theo doesn't need to hear that from me, though.

I've been trying to give them each some space. I'm trying to be available, but not burdensome.

I'm trying not to drown.

The funeral was difficult- the whole time I felt like a louse, a phony. I couldn't help it. When Tracy's mother hugged me and wouldn't let go- I tried so hard to cry, desperate for tears- but I couldn't. Nothing came out.

What could be worse than...

So I hugged Tracy's mother while she wept, and then I received her father. He braced me with a stern handshake, and a glare to match. Determined and resolved, he didn't convey any sentimental emotions or sadness. He didn't say a word, but he said plenty. He said, *Don't you even think about giving up. Raise my grandsons right.*

Honor my daughter's legacy. Who knows what my look back to him said. Leaving me, he didn't seem convinced.

The only thing easy about the funeral was distinguishing my family from Tracy's. Sallow Midwesterners, faces like pads of butter, and East Coast professionals with sharp features, crisp outfits, chrome watches and stiletto heels. Theo's face was rounder than Dan's. Dan, once Danny, until- "I'm not a little kid, stop calling me that." Theo is more like me than Tracy- I think that's why Tracy was slightly preferential towards him. That and the fact he is the baby. The boys stood next to me through the service. They drove home with me from the cemetery. They didn't have much to say. Dan expressed how tired he was. Theo commented on the flower arrangements. We agreed on a pizza for dinner.

It's not that I didn't love her.

And it's not that I didn't want to be in love with her.

It's that I forgot how to be in love with her. I forgot my harness, the bolts and carabiners, how to tie a prusik knot- I forgot how to let go, and descend.

TWO

"How old is she?"

"She's two. She turned two in March."

The look of fear had disappeared from off her face. She smiled back at me with dimples in her cheeks, her eyes nearly closed. "I love her."

"I do too."

She pointed her finger at my daughter, who was on the floor playing with a doll. "Oh, I love you."

I could tell my wife was watching my conversation from across the room.

My daughter looked up at us, Aunt Theresa and me, and waved with her delicate fingers.

We both waved back.

I took a drink from a Waterford champagne flute and thought about saying something else. But I remained quiet. My wife and her cousin were whispering conspicuously. My daughter returned back to her Minnie Mouse doll. Uncle Ralph was in the kitchen fussing over the turkey and the potatoes au gratin, and my wife's parents were stalled by traffic and not due for another half-hour.

Aunt Theresa leaned over from the chair next to me. "How old is she?"

"Two. She just turned two."

She smiled at my daughter. "I love her."

"I do too."

I reached down and tapped my daughter on the shoulder. Lucy rotated her head and met us with a coy smile. She was wearing a bright yellow dress with ruffled shoulders. I picked her up from off the antique rug and set her onto my lap. Minnie Mouse remained in her arms. "Lucy, this is Aunt Theresa. Can you say, Hello?"

Lucy waved delicately at Aunt Theresa.

Aunt Theresa waved back with both hands and then pressed her palms to her own cheeks. "I love you." I could tell she wanted to reach out and touch my daughter's fair skin. I shifted Lucy to my knee closest to Aunt Theresa. I waited for a moment, and then Aunt Theresa slowly extended for Lucy's hand. Her thumb rubbed against Lucy's forearm. Theresa's eyes brightened.

I kissed Lucy on the top of her head and whispered, "Can you show Aunt Theresa your Minnie Mouse doll?"

Lucy held up her doll, shy. "Minnie Mouse."

I peeked up at my wife's cousin, Sarah, as she grinned ever so slightly. It was the kind of grin she didn't have to feign, the kind she didn't have to plan, or persuade herself to put on. When we first arrived at Theresa and Ralph's country house, there had been perfunctory grins. There had been perfunctory conversations. There had been a standard protocol we adhered to, pro forma. But while Lucy ambled around the living room in search of plastic eggs, I began to understand their home had changed since my last visit. It was somehow different than the Christmas Eve I remembered, the piano, the cocktails- before Lucy was born. It was no longer a home of gaiety, of laughter or happiness. In fact, I sensed a dearth of life immediately upon our entrance. It felt dead to me, even as we pointed behind cushion pillows and encouraged Lucy to check the bookshelves. Sarah, underneath her makeup, wore a harried look. She had changed, too- she had been eroded since I last saw her. Thinner. Compressed.

Sarah caught me inspecting her so I quickly turned my attention back to my daughter.

There had been a quiet suffering going on in this house. There was something bottomless about it. Seated there with Theresa and my daughter, my heart ached for Sarah.

When my wife's parents arrived, we all seated ourselves around the dining room table. There were more perfunctory smiles, gestures,

words. Napkins were ornately folded. There were place settings with our names printed in cursive. Aunt Theresa sat at one end and Uncle Ralph established himself at the other. After the food was brought out on serving platters, we joined hands.

"For food, for family, for friends, for love- Father, we thank Thee."

Aunt Theresa didn't recite the prayer. When the rest of us began speaking, her face slackened, abruptly, and a kind of terror seemed to leak out from inside her.

Uncle Ralph poured himself a glass of red wine. "Bon appetite everyone."

I didn't have much of an appetite.

My wife's father couldn't help himself and within a few minutes Ralph and he entered into a debate about tax dollars funding highway construction projects. I cut bits of food up for Lucy, who sat in between my wife and I. Sarah and my wife's mother talked about gardening techniques. My wife seemed to be enjoying the meal. I glanced at Aunt Theresa again. I couldn't help but admonish myself for not feeling a sense of heartbreak for the old woman. Why hadn't I felt sorry for her earlier, when I was thinking about Sarah? Here we are- reciting a family prayer, eating on plates and clinking silverware that had been used for hundreds of holiday parties, falling into comfortable habits and routines, reconnecting to a shared past. Here we are- anchored to something, our traditions. But Theresa had nothing to grasp onto. She floundered. Where was she?

My daughter sipped milk from a pink silicon cup.

Then Theresa pointed at Lucy and leaned over to my wife. "How old is she?"

"Two."

As I sat there with my napkin folded across my lap, my mind wandered to the blooming daffodils outside, along the stone walkway leading up to Theresa and Ralph's redbrick house. The daffodils reminded me of the heron I had spotted across the reservoir last week, driving away from the office. The daffodils, the heron, the pools of rainwater, the yellowing of willow branches, the dandelion shoots in the parkway- overnight, from the grey and the cold and the snow, life appears. A coating of spores on the mailbox.

Soon enough we'd have our blurry summer moons suspended in heat and ozone.

Another summer replaced by another autumn with her moss-covered shoulders, followed by another winter, and another spring. Soon enough we'd be back at the Porter's for another Easter dinner. Where would Theresa be?

DAD

"They'll charge you six hundred dollars to replace that end cap. You watch 'em do it." My father-in-law had been drinking since the early afternoon. "Six hundred dollars. A hundred for the part, and five hundred for the labor. Now look here, I found that same part, I showed Vince already- I measured it up- fourteen ninety-nine. Right here. I can have it delivered in a week. It's got a rubber gasket fitting- it'll never leak again. It'll take me fifteen minutes to pull off the old cap and to get this one fixed on. Fifteen minutes, fifteen bucks. Now why in the hell would you want to give a crooked plumber six hundred dollars when I can do it how I told you?"

I didn't know what to say. I wasn't a handy man. I wasn't a blue-collar beer guzzler. I hadn't served in the military. I didn't know when to use mineral spirits or acetone or if plain old soap and water would do the trick. Rex Chapman glared at me. "Tell my daughter, Vince, which option you think is more reasonable."

My stomach began to turn.

Rex was a man whose opinions clung to him like barnacles. He wasn't afraid to tell anyone about how he felt or thought, and he wasn't afraid to tell anyone why they were wrong and why he was right. His mind worked like a balance sheet. He enjoyed making a dollar stretch. He cherished saving his money. And what he loved most was paying less than everyone else.

The first time we took Rex out to dinner, as a couple, when I met him formally after explaining to Maureen that I wanted to take her father out for a steak and show him his daughter was well taken care of- by the end of the night, I presumed the man suffered from a serious form of anhedonia. He grumbled over the waiter. He grumbled over the prices. He grumbled over the way his ribeye was prepared. He refused coffee or dessert. In the parking lot, walking to our car, he mentioned how next time he'd rather he had us over for a hamburger cook out. There were a dozen patties in his meat freezer that he'd gotten on sale last winter for sixty-four cents a pound.

If he'd have received more education, he would have made a fantastic actuary.

Maureen's mother had passed away while she was in college, to breast cancer, and Maureen had made a point of staying close with her father. She worried about him. We made an effort to invite him over to the apartment for dinner as often as we could. But her love for him was complicated. Her mother had always provided the emotional valence, the tender conversations, the warmth, the hugs and kisses, the home cooked meals and the birthday cards- her father couldn't operate in that realm. Maureen continued to wish for more out of her old man, but he simply couldn't change. She wanted her father to tell stories about her mother, to reminisce- he couldn't have been more resistant.

"All I got is what's in front of me. That's all there is to it." He was determined to scratch a life out of things for himself, and he didn't want anybody's help, or input.

I shrugged my shoulders. Rex clicked his tongue into his cheek and waved me off. "Come on son, don't be scared. The woman married you. You're entitled to an opinion."

Maureen rescued me from the situation. "Dad, relax. We haven't paid for anything. I want to see a quote, and then we'll let you know."

There had been water damage on the ceiling of our guest bedroom.

I found the source of the leak, then called the plumber.

I made the mistake of telling Rex about the whole ordeal earlier that day.

"Well, my offer stands. If you don't take it, shame on the both of you. To have money like that to waste- there's plenty of folks who would love to take that six hundred dollars and put it in the bank. It's a sin to be wasting money like that. That's all there is to it."

I was five or six inches taller than Rex, but I couldn't do anything but look up at him.

Digging fence posts in his garden earlier that spring, hands crusted in dirt, I couldn't do anything but admire the energy pulsing through his wiry frame. He moved like a much younger man. He was tough. Very tough.

I had begun to admire him for that.

But it didn't assuage my fear of him.

"Dad, we'll get the quote and we'll let you know. But there's nothing wrong with paying someone to do a job they're trained to

do. I wouldn't try to perform an open-heart surgery just because I saw a YouTube video and found a deal on stints. Different people have different skills, and everything costs money."

Rex took a glug from his bottle of beer. "It's time for me to put it down for the night. It's getting late. So long, alright."

No hug.

No kiss.

A tip of his hat, his coat from out of the closet, and the door closed.

I inhaled a long breath of relief then slowly exhaled it.

Maureen shut off the kitchen sink.

TIME OFF

She was a young woman informed by Wiccan aesthetics- a combination of zodiac signs, goddess iconography, harvest festival regalia. She spent her money on crystals, candles, healing aromatics. She was the proud owner of a male Cardigan Welsh corgi named Baal. A nose ring, a lip ring, fourteen tattoos in various locations around her body. Her hair color vacillated between hot pink, slimy purple, and turquoise blue. Her favorite musical instrument- the theremin. Her dream vacation- the lost sandstone city of Petra, its vast reliefs carved into the canyon walls. When she needed to goad someone on, she preferred to use her eyebrows rather than her voice.

"Ariel? Did you hear me?"

"Sorry, I was busy pretending I was dead."

Francis, perplexed by her response. "What? Are you okay?"

"I was kidding. I'm fine. What's up?"

Over networks fiberoptic, bandwidth overloaded- a voice on the other end of the computer- "Well, I was following up. On the report, the email I sent earlier- how, how are things coming?"

There was nothing quick about Francis Hatch.

Ariel muted her microphone. She groaned audibly. She unmuted the microphone. Chewing a wad of gum, "I haven't had a chance to read through it, Frank. I've been working on the end of month numbers. Can I ping you later?"

Francis' chest tightened, then he pinched at a fold of fat on his neck. "Oh. Well, it's just that I- well, I have to ask if you can prioritize it. I know the end of month is important, but I need some help with putting together some slides. I have to present

this evening to our counterparts in China, and I was hoping to have this available.”

A belabored pause, more chewing, then, “Okay. Let me open up your email.”

At first, Francis couldn't make heads or tails of his new team member. She was as square as a button. During the hiring process, there had been several candidates, but HR had mandated a Diversity+Inclusivity initiative, and since Ariel was the only woman who applied, her application was treated preferentially. Francis and Ariel had never met in person. Every interaction of theirs had been virtual. When she first onboarded, she refused to turn on her camera during their touchpoints, called it “an intrusion into her personal space.” Francis continued to pester her on their weekly status calls to please turn on her camera, per the team policy, and she told him she felt uncomfortable by the requests and proceeded to report the incident to HR. Francis was forced to attend an information session under the topic ‘Workplace Safety- Emotional Trust.’

Francis was devastated by the HR intervention, but at the same time he felt a deep sense of relief when it was confirmed that the incident would not result in any tarnishing of his employee record and could not lead to his termination. What would his wife think? What if his wife found out?

Ariel's picture on the company website- Francis would gawk over it, for minutes at a time, several times a day. It was his secret. Like one of the aristocrats in the Salon when Manet's *Olympia* was first displayed in public- the delicate black ribbon tied around her neck, the pink orchid tucked behind her ear, the heeled slippers- Ariel's image filled him with profound insecurity and fear, yet an equally profound sense of lust and desire.

After decades of a stable, suburban marriage, Francis' eyes had been repurposed into his primary erogenous zone. He was a disciplined man. A committed man. His maladjustments remained hidden in his cortical folds, and he made careful to guard them. There was nothing delusional about his being enamored by Ariel- he knew for certain he could make no claim on the affections of her heart. He crafted no baroque plans of winning her over. He was content with a single image. It tortured him, but it occupied him. It filled him up, and in many ways, that fullness was all he ever wanted.

Her obvious insolence only further complicated matters. He thought to himself, 'When I receive an email from my boss, I open it. That's the way it works. What's wrong with this girl?'

In the same breath, though- he pictured her piercings, her pink hair, her dark brown eyes, her slim figure...

"I'm sorry Ariel, are you reading it this moment?"

She quipped back, "I would if you would give me a second." Whenever Frank called her through the comms channel, Ariel felt an immediate discomfort. Tactile almost- she equated it to a pair of cotton socks after a rainy day. It's the moisture, or the mildew, whatever it is- she couldn't wait to slide them off- to slide him off.

It had been her ninth job in six years.

Ariel skimmed over the message. While her eyes faded over the italicized script, her mind wandered: *Do you think old people, when they look in the mirror, wonder how they got to be so old? Do you think it bothers them? Do they shudder at the sight of themselves? Or is it such a gradual process that it doesn't upset them? I can't imagine becoming that old, that flabby and gray. To become so deteriorated, wrinkled. To become desexualized- what a horror.*

"Ariel?"

"Frank, I made a request for some time off. Can you check the shared team calendar? I just added the dates."

INITIATIONS

He nodded then helped himself to a toothpick from off the platter. He bit into a chunk of tomato, drizzled in olive oil. "You can taste the sun in these tomatoes."

"I think that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me, at least when it comes to my tomatoes."

He savored the taste. "It's well deserved. Honestly, that bite makes me ashamed to have ever called those store-bought cartons 'tomatoes.' When you compare them to this, this... this is a tomato." The woman blushed. "Well, come back next week. We should have the first eggplants of the season ready. Those are my favorite."

"I'll be sure to do that." He deposited his bag full of tomatoes, herbs, and summer squash on the digital scale.

She pushed a strand of grey hair that had come loose across her forehead back behind her ear, rang up a total, and swiped his credit card on her portable card reader.

Another patron moseyed over to her stand.

"You have a nice rest of your morning."

"Likewise." He gathered his bags into one hand and knocked on the chipped, wooden tabletop with his free hand's knuckles. "Thanks again."

--

"You weren't lying about these eggplants. These look beautiful." He stuffed a pair into his reusable bag.

She smiled and responded excitedly. "You made it back."

"After those tomatoes, it was a no brainer."

He set his bag on the scale. "How do you usually prepare them?"

She rang up a total. "I like to fry them up with olive oil, a little garlic salt."

He uncrossed his arms. "Funny enough, there's a copy of my great-grandmother's eggplant parmesan recipe taped to my refrigerator and it starts off with frying the eggplant exactly that way. It's been a little while since I've cooked it- this is a perfect excuse. I should be avoiding dairy, but I'll let myself cheat for a night."

She held out the card reader. "Live a little. I'll tell you what, if you go home and it doesn't live up to the family standard, you come and see me next week and I'll give you a full refund."

He swiped his card. "How about instead I come back next week, tell you about how great it was, and pick up a few more eggplants?"

Her cheeks turned red. "That sounds like a better plan to me."

--

She greeted him before he entered the tent. "How was the eggplant parmesan?"

"To die for. Really. I've had it more times than I can count, but with your tomatoes and eggplants- it was special. Really special. I'm glad you asked, because, well- I was wondering, would you be interested in trying some? What I mean to say is, would you like to come over for dinner some time, and I could cook for you?"

She glanced down to her left hand, her ring finger- where her ring used to be. "A date?"

"I'm sorry if that was too forward, I just- I noticed you weren't wearing a ring. I'm sorry if that was inappropriate. I've been on my own for too long, I don't remember how these things work. For all I know I'm supposed to ask you to pick out a movie at the Capawoc and secure dinner reservations- I've been out of the mix for so long, you'll have to excuse me."

She waited for him to finish, exhaled, then said, "No, it's alright. I'm flattered. And I'm equally uninitiated. It was hard

enough thirty years ago." She stopped. Her face became stern. "You have to make a promise to me, okay?"

He didn't know how to respond.

"You're not just going to use me for my produce, are you?"

He smiled. "I promise."

"Alright. It's a date."

LIAR

"When you say something like that, you know you're lying, don't you?"

"What?"

"You're lying. It's a lie."

"No it's not."

"Yes it is. I can prove it to you."

He harumphed. "Fine. Prove it."

"Because you love Tommy and Nancy. I watched you with them tonight. You washed their hair in the bath. You wrapped them in towels. You read Nancy a book. You kissed them both before bed. You loved them completely. You focused on them, and were completely present for them."

The tone of his voice altered, slightly, "And?"

She felt lighter, better- clarified. She continued, "They're part of me. They're part of us. Every time you love them, you love me. You love us, what we've done. They wouldn't be here if it wasn't for us."

Mr. Robbins looked up from his cell phone. He noticed the rich warm lamplight in the bedroom, a light deserving of cobwebs- the kind of glow that coats your memory in milk. He turned his head to face his wife.

"That's a really beautiful thing you just said."

The last few weeks had been the closest they'd ever come...

Mrs. Robbins pinched her reading glasses from off of her nose and folded them onto her lap. "It's the truth. We forget it, but it's the truth. We've done something beautiful together, Mitchell. I don't want either of us to forget it. Because I'm just as guilty. Even more guilty, in some respects. I gave birth to them, so I like to think they're all mine. And I'm sorry. They're not mine. They're ours. They exist because of our love. When I look at Tommy, I can see your face, I can see those photo albums in your mother's house. And I love that. I really do."

Mr. Robbins blinked slowly. A tension in his shoulder released itself. "I lose sight too, Lauren. Nancy looks more and more like you, every day. They're beautiful kids, aren't they?"

"They're amazing. And they're here because of us, because of our love."

Mr. Robbins turned on his side. He put his palm under his chin. His wife looked over at him and their eyes met. "You're an amazing mother. You really are."

"And you're a wonderful dad. We're doing a good job. We're doing a great job. Let's give ourselves some credit."

"I agree. I totally agree." Icicles lengthened along the eaves of their second-floor roof, but they were both comfortable and warm underneath their down comforter. "I'm sorry, Lauren. I'm sorry for saying that. You're right, what I said, it isn't true."

"I'm sorry too. I want to stop fighting. I hate fighting with you. It's always so petty, so unnecessary. We both work too hard, we have too much on our plates. We deserve to be happy."

Mr. Robbins sighed. "At least it always brings us back together. No matter what, we always end up in this place, where we both realize how important we are to each other. I think that's worth something."

She smiled, "That's worth everything. That's where I want to be."

Mr. Robbins took his wife's wrist from off the bed sheet and clasped onto it. "Me too. This is where I want to be."

--

It had started with a shout, a bark as he left the room.

He stormed back in to confront her, his arms akimbo and his chin tucked to his neck. "Why do you always do that? You always do that."

"Do what?" she responded, stacking the kids' clean laundry into piles on their king bed.

"Do what?" He bit back at her in a mocking voice. "You wait until I leave the room and then say something to me. I was in here with you for five minutes, you didn't say a word. Nothing. Then I stand up to get the paper, and when I'm ten feet out the bedroom door, you mutter something in my direction. You know I can't hear you, you know I'm on my way to do something, but you, you slam the brakes on me."

She kept folding t-shirts and shorts.

He was dumbfounded. "Well?"

THE ART MUSUEM

"It's a vintage Polaroid One Step. I bought it online for like thirty bucks. The film is super expensive, though."

"Cool."

She paused, then asked, "Do you know how to work one?"

"Point and shoot, right?" He brought both of his hands up to his face, made a square box, then pretended to click with his index finger.

She appeared satisfied by his gesture. "Exactly. Not much to it. I left the flash on since we're going to be indoors."

He shoved his hands back into his pockets. "Right."

"I want to take some shots for my Instagram. These old school Polaroid pictures look really cool, after you scan them in with your phone. It's hard to recreate with a filter. There's a feel to them, you know what I mean?"

"Definitely."

--

He slipped his credit card back into his wallet, "So, where should we start?"

With an assertive tone she replied, "Let's do Monet. I want to hit popular works. I think that will trend the best. Monet. Rembrandt. Van Gogh. Hopefully most people will recognize those names, who aren't like huge art fans, you know?"

"Sure."

After a museum attendant scanned their tickets, he followed behind her up the main staircase towards the rotunda. She moved quickly up the marble steps, and a faint echo splashed against his ears. He tried his best to keep pace, and after a hallway of paintings, they arrived in Gallery 254. A sign above the room's entrance read *MONET*. She walked into the middle of the space and began to assess the paintings.

He positioned himself next to her and waited.

After some deliberation, she whispered, "The haystacks are iconic. Let's do one of those." She removed the leather strap from off of her neck and placed it over his head.

He puckered his lips unconsciously, confused as to where everything was headed. As he followed her to the wall where the canvas hung, a boyhood memory flashed into his consciousness- the local pool, a group of older kids challenging him and his friends to a fight, a retreat into the *MENS* changing room, running home at full speed. His insides turned hot.

She inched closer to him, "So, let's take one with my back turned to you, with me looking at the painting."

Demure, he replied, "Sure."

"You'll have to stand about right here, six or seven feet away. Make sure you can see the entire painting in the field of view. Then we'll do another one, where I'm facing the camera. That one will be a little bit lighter, goofy maybe. I'll see how I feel." He stepped back, away from the woman.

"That's perfect. Do your best to center everything, you know what I mean? Remember what I said about the film being expensive- we don't want to screw too many of these up."

He nodded back to her.

She faced one of Monet's haystacks, but then she abruptly shot him a look from over her shoulder. "Count to three- one, two, three, go- so I know when you're taking the picture. It will help me focus on the pose."

He nodded silently. He pulled the camera up to his face and peered through the viewfinder.

"One, two, three." He debated on whether or not to say 'go' then clicked the button. A light flashed from the shutter, and a square piece of film rolled out of the exit slot. He grabbed the white, glossy border and held the picture out in front of him, carefully. She darted back to his side and took the picture out of his hand. She grinned to herself, "This is the fun part. It usually takes a minute or two, then we'll know how we did."

--

She popped the film door latch and inserted a fresh Polaroid 600 cassette. There were eight COLOR INSTANT PHOTOS in the cartridge. "You're a natural," she said to him. "These are going to look so cool. I've been meaning to do this for a while. I had this idea- I was reading a book, and the main character was taking pictures with a Polaroid, and I thought, how cool would it be to use a Polaroid for my Instagram. It would be different, you know what I mean?"

"Definitely."

"Let's go downstairs to the ancient Egypt section. I think there's a statue down there that might be cool. I could do a funny pose there, it would look great."

She put the camera strap back around his neck.

"Thanks," he said.

"My boyfriend would never be patient enough for this. I'm so glad you came."

"No problem," he said.

She began to walk away.

--

He put his tongue on his lips and stared down at his nose, then he scratched at his neck with his thumb. If she would have known him longer, she might have known what that sequence of barely perceptible gestures meant.

Instead, she pulled her phone out of her pocket and swiped across the screen.

They had decided to take a break on one of the gallery couches.

Impulsively, he snatched the camera off his chest, put his eye to the viewfinder and snapped a picture of her.

She made a face at him, surprised. "Hey! What was that?"

He took the strap off his neck and handed her the camera. He clutched the fresh photograph in his opposite hand.

"Take care."

He walked away from her shaking the photograph down near his hip.

"Hey! Hey! You're my ride home!"

Her voice followed him into the next gallery, but by the time he reached the rotunda, there was a perfect silence in his head.

From that silence came a word, a word that summed up his forays around dating and trying to meet new people, relationships- the word popped into his mind as he was leaving the EXIT door. He peered down at the Polaroid and chuckled.

AMPUTATION

For the first time in a long time, he was the one with the meat cleaver.

RECURSION

"A Guggenheim fellowship?"

"Yes. A Guggenheim fellowship."

"Please explain."

She cleared her throat. "What's the biggest controversy in human history? Quick."

"Um."

"Wrong answer. The answer you were looking for was the resurrection of Christ, or the supposed resurrection of Christ. It's the crux, no pun intended, of our story, as a species. Now, we all know the physical laws of nature prohibit bodily resurrection from the dead.

Death and life are mutually exclusive binaries. The physical laws of nature have been programmed this way, if you will. There's no precedent, and there's no antecedent, for such a claim- a dead body, raised back to life. It's a violation of rules that can't be violated. Hence the implications."

"Alright."

"So, how do we explore the validity of such a claim? Everyone seems to think it is a matter of faith- you either believe, or you don't believe. Christians claim that Jesus rose from the dead, and their argument rests on their faith. Science firmly maintains a contrary position, denying the possibility. But I think that science could engage the question more objectively, if you will. I think there's other modes of investigation to probe. There's never been any serious legwork done when it comes to exploring the flexibility of so-called fundamental laws, because well, they are fundamental laws. They can't be violated, by definition. There's an assumption there, and I think it's that assumption which is worth exploring. And, in a nutshell, you have the basis of my proposal."

"But, what's your plan, exactly?"

"It seems to me that computer programs are a logical place to start, if you're looking for a once-in-a-universe occurrence."

"Computers? What do you know about computers? You're a painter."

"I know that you can write simple programs to execute simple, repetitive functions."

"So what?"

"Well, a computer program has rules, and rules are like fundamental laws. When you write a program that has one rule, for example- 'If you hit ENTER, this prompt will return'- it's a fundamental law. Every time you hit ENTER, the prompt returns." She removed a pen from behind her ear. "You could run millions of simulations with computers, billions. You can begin to probe the infinite. You can begin to search for that single, once-in-a-universe anomaly."

"And that's your proposal?"

"More or less. I intend to use simple computer programs, executed on enormous scales, to understand whether or not a fundamental law can break down. Even though it shouldn't break down, even though it's programmed not to- I want to perform some verification. And if I am able to find that needle in a haystack, I think there's a compelling argument to be made about these kind of violations, not only in computer systems, but also in equivalent systems- tying things back to my original question I posed."

He rolled his eyes, then a supercilious grin unfurled across his face. "You want to use basic computer programs to prove the resurrection of Christ was possible?"

She didn't react to his facial features. "More or less."

"More or less?"

"Probably more than less. It's not strictly limited to the resurrection. I think it speaks to miracles, in general. When you build a system with a predefined set of constraints- if you have inherent limitations in a system, and then allow it to progress, to engage in these recursive activities- it's quantum, it's variables outside of normal controls, it's chaos- it's everything. Is the world a stranger place than what meets the eye? I think it's interesting to explore those kinds of questions, to use novel approaches in trying to answer them."

"Do you have a copy of the proposal?"

She handed him a stapled pile of papers. "There are other angles you can take- for example- is there anything special about the individual executing the program? Their intent? Their hopes? One possibility is using an experimental group, nuns, religious people- people who pray for the program to break down. Could that have an impact? There are several approaches I outlined in the proposal, in terms of changing experimental conditions. A human presence versus a non-human presence. Honestly the possibilities are endless- in the way you set it up, there are all kinds of permutations you could induce."

"So you would recruit volunteers?"

"You would need to. The human element is what makes or breaks it."

"At what scale?"

"You could run multiple computers, say fifty at a time, eight hours a day, fifty executions a minute- you'd be over around a million iterations a day. That's just touching the surface of infinity, but you're on your way."

He shook his head while handing her back the papers. "You certainly are."

Her eyes brightened, "All it takes is one aberration, one anomaly." The room was silent, but he heard a faint echo- something in his head- the sound of fingers on a keyboard, tapping- day after day after day- an impossible quest.

He sat down at a humble card table, across from her.

She had grown excited, "I read something recently, I can't remember who said it exactly, but the basic idea was that human

consciousness is what changes everything- it's what makes everything possible, even the impossible. It inspired the idea." Absentmindedly he asked, "How long will it take to hear back?" "A month or two. Enough time to fine tune some of the details." His eyes opened wider than normal. "You expect them to award you a grant?" "Of course. If I didn't I wouldn't have gone through the trouble of putting together the submission." Her friend scratched under his sharp, crooked nose, above his lip, "Have you been taking your medication?"

VOYEUR

He took a sip then felt at his front teeth with his tongue. He made a note to go out for toothpaste, then re-read the post:
As I entered the parlor, there was a buzz of conversation among the many friends and relatives. There were tears of consolation, there were stories being told. Each of them remembering their own special Karl Paul memories. And through the room, as the line moved, there was the man himself. I had not seen Karl Paul since he moved away so I remembered him as a young boy. As I approached I noticed that his body was still very slight. His face hadn't changed much. How could I have expected otherwise? I knelt down to pay my respects and saw the most handsome, lovely face I could ever imagine. His famous smile was bright and shining. In fact, there was something in his face that was more than the "at rest", "sleeping" visage we are used to seeing on one who has died. I was struck, and have been obsessed by this moment for almost three weeks now. I have dreamt about it. I have thought about it morning noon and night. Finally, I think I figured it out. Karl Paul was looking at the face of God and he was showing us his entrance into Heaven. I will never forget the presence of God on his face. Pure happiness. Pure contentment. Pure "I am home where I belong. I knew it would be like this". Thank you, Karl Paul, for touching an old man's heart even in your death. And my condolences again to Patricia and Mark. You were given an angel, and you did an amazing job while he was on earth. You will see him again, I promise.
He crushed the aluminum in his hand, a high-fructose energy drink. Whispering to himself, taking another note- "What a nutcase."
There was a single lamp light, positioned at the corner of a humble desk, next to his bed. He didn't pay any attention to the clock on

his computer screen. He woke up around 8PM EST and had been scrolling over message boards for nearly ten hours.

It was 6:13AM EST. A new day was about to barge through the door, but it wouldn't make much of a difference to him.

His next dissertation chapter was due at the end of January.

He hadn't gone home for Christmas vacation.

He hadn't seen a glimmer of sunlight for nearly three weeks.

He had let himself go.

Three weeks of note taking, of scouring, of clicking, of collating and organizing, of copy paste- obituaries. Specifically, the digital obituaries of young people. More specifically the reaction of loved ones to the death of a young person, represented in chat comments on message boards. He was exploring resilience factors. He was interested in community framing. He wanted to understand how the untimely death of a young person might impact their immediate family members, and then friends and extended family members.

There had been a thesis statement.

There had been case studies.

There had been multivariate analyses.

Professor Lang had commented, "Why don't you get into the heart of the data? Why don't you consider some new sources? There's so much on the internet, between social media, message boards- it could yield some interesting results. You need to bring a fresh angle to the discussion."

A fresh angle.

Three weeks of death.

Three weeks of 'We are SO sorry for your loss.'

But now, this- this post by Roland Daniels on November 22, 2011. This post about the presence of God, about the expression on a young man's face. Obsessed, then coming back several weeks later to share his revelation.

"What a nutcase."

But the graduate student couldn't close the browser window. His eyes remained fixed on the post. He kept rereading it. Rereading. He scrolled up to the boy's picture, Karl Paul. It was alive. It was vibrant.

Karl Paul- a headstone, a casket in the ground, buried.

The truth of the matter occurred to him, a regulatory epiphany after three weeks of scholarship. This young man was dead. Karl Paul had been dead almost a decade. His corpse was rotting. There

had been a room full of people, laughing, crying- and Roland Daniels had been in that room. Roland had kneeled, then looked down upon the young man.

Obsessed.

DISTRACTION

Stacy Duvall's phone buzzed in her pocket. Before she pulled it in front of her nose, she reproached Sean. "Sean, remember what we talked about? You have to play nice with Eamon. You have to be nice, okay?"

Her boyfriend had texted her.

She read over his apology.

Six weeks left of school, our senior year, and he decides to sign on for a job in New York City? Of all places. Could he be any less considerate?

Stacy was approaching her graduation date, her future, her accolades, and her completion of the Semester Practicum under Dr. Roosevelt. Everything was on track. Except for her boyfriend.

I don't need this right now.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Mulcrone was inside the house in her bedroom, asleep with a *Home Digest* magazine spread out across her torso. There was a can of lukewarm Diet Soda perched on the nightstand. When Stacy arrived from the University Autism Center on Wednesdays and Thursdays, Mrs. Mulcrone would retreat into her bedroom for an hour and a half, with the door shut. She was the mother of two young boys, five and eight, the wife to a drunk, and a woman perpetually deprived of sleep. Usually within a page or two of reading her wrist would go limp and she would begin to snore.

Stacy had been a godsend the last couple of months, in fact, the best of all the student assistants since Mrs. Mulcrone had enrolled Sean in the University program: bubbly, fun, energetic, intrepid and most importantly she always took Eamon along with Sean so they could work on "peer socialization."

The summer would be hard without Stacy, or any of the students in Dr. Roosevelt's program, but Mrs. Mulcrone would have to manage.

An hour and a half, twice a week- a godsend.

An hour and a half of peace.

Stacy kept rereading the message.

I'm not going to respond to him. I need to ask Laura and Sam what they think. Maybe I'm being delusional. Maybe people don't marry their college sweethearts anymore. Maybe I'm being naïve. I don't

want to make a mistake with this. Maybe he's not the one. The fact that I'm thinking that maybe he's not the one- doesn't that definitely make him not the one?

There was a loud crunching sound that came from the direction of the Playscape.

Stacy stuffed her phone into her pocket and turned around. Sean was perched on the top of the slide, standing up straight, looking at nothing in particular. Eamon was on the ground next to the slide.

"Sean, what happened?"

Sean didn't respond.

"Eamon? Eamon are you alright?"

Eamon didn't respond either.

Stacy fumbled her way over to Eamon, intending to bend down next to the boy once she reached him. But she stopped, recoiled, upright and still. The boy was making a gurgling sound. His neck... there was something unnatural about the way his head lay in the wet grass. It was dusk and the blades reflected a rich green. She whispered, "Eamon?"

Sean took off down the yellow slide and then flashed towards one of the storage containers full of rubber balls and toys at the other end of the yard.

Stacy screamed. She yelled as loud and as long as she ever had in her life. It boiled up from inside of her and ejected out from her throat. An unconscious act- but somehow different than what she had studied in her textbooks on Freud, or Jung.

Patti Mulcrone shoved open her bedroom window, which faced the rear of the house, and called down to Stacy. "Stacy! Stacy, what's wrong? What happened?" Once she noticed Eamon's body, sprawled out on the lawn, Patti didn't wait for a response.

--

When the police arrived and began to interview Stacy, they realized any formal questioning would have to wait. The girl was hysterical, sobbing, beside herself. Mrs. Mulcrone had left the house with the ambulance.

A junior officer was tasked to watch after Sean until a family member could be contacted to come by. The officer tried to say hello to the boy. He tried a high-five. A thumbs-up. Nothing worked. Sean kept repeating a phrase he had heard, inflected and mimicking the voice of his mother, "Wake up Eamon, wake up, wake

up Eamon, wake up" while spinning a soccer ball on his index finger near the fence of the yard.

--

Of all the images from that evening, the one Stacy would carry with her was the imprint of Eamon's body on the grass- the blades pressed down, clumped together, yet somehow each one was distinct in her memory. A splattering of blood where his head had been. Blood like tree sap, glistening in the dying sunlight. Stacy would encounter that image in nightmares, at train terminals, reflecting off windows at a friend's summer house. She would spend thousands of dollars talking about that image, about that evening, but the money and the words wouldn't make a difference. They clung to her, every blade, and the boy's blood.

FRESHMAN YEAR

"They all seem to really enjoy it. They laugh at everything. They laugh about parties from the weekend, television shows, their moms and dads and little brothers. They laugh about the teachers and the coaches. It floored me, initially. I had to get used to the laughter. To be honest, it made me realize how little I laugh. And when I laugh it's usually because I find something ironic, tragic, like- like a fly who figures out he's been living inside of a cow's bloated corpse his entire life. I can understand why my mom thinks I'm too dark, too morbid. Too cynical. But I can't help it. I think about flies chuckling inside of bovine intestines. I can't help it."

"Have you made any friends?"

"I don't really know. Maybe since I don't know, it means I haven't? I do like one girl, Thalia. I sit with her at lunch sometimes. She talks about her grandfather coming over for dinner and asking if Jennifer Aniston has fake tits or not. And he wears a diaper because he shits his pants. Her mother can't stand him. I like her. Thalia's stories make me laugh. Because I want to laugh, I really do. I want to laugh more. I don't want to be morbid, morose. I don't want to be this huge bummer."

"What else do you like about Thalia, besides her sense of humor?"

"She's atypical in a lot of ways. She doesn't care about the color of her nails or the brand of her shoes. She's more likely to be interested in whether or not a grape flavored condom actually tastes like a grape. She seems original to me."

"Have you told her that?"

"Not really. It's not like we text or anything. She's in a few of my classes, and one day we started sitting at the same lunch table. I know a couple girls from grammar school, but they always look at me like I'm some kind of museum spectacle. Or they give me this sad-faced *it must be so hard knowing you're going to die* look. I can't stand that. That's how it all started, when I caught one of them looking at me that way, like I was a sick puppy. Like I was so pitiful. That's why I walked up to her and I told her not to worry, she was going to die too. And so was everybody else in the building."

"That's when the situation with the Dean of Students escalated?"

"Everything got blown out of proportion. It was taken entirely out of context. I tried to make a witty, Zen remark and all of a sudden I was the next Columbine killer. Everyone is so sensitive."

"Can you understand why?"

"Sure, but that doesn't justify how I was treated. I was guilty until proven innocent. And they were drunk on the idea of a shy, terminally ill girl becoming a school shooter, ready to take out her frustrations on the healthy kids. They seemed so dejected after they searched my locker and didn't find anything. It was twisted."

"So you felt treated unfairly?"

"Of course I did."

"How do you feel about it now?"

"I don't feel anything! I don't have the luxury to waste time! How could I waste another minute thinking about any of that? It's criminal that I have to come and waste an hour with you every week. Between this, the chemo treatments at the clinic, the nonsense commitments my parents shuffle me off too- I'm running out of time. That's how I feel. I feel like I'm running out of time and I need to start being more selfish with what I have left. I want to be selfish, and laugh."

"You view our sessions as a waste of time?"

"No offense to you. I'm sure you worked hard to become a shrink and get into this line of work, and I'm sure you help some of your clients, or at least you try to. I don't mean to take it out on you. But it's the principle. I'm forced to spend an hour a week talking about my feelings with a complete stranger under the auspices that it will prevent me from becoming unhinged, prevent me from sharing my fate with the rest of the student body. It's almost tragic, really. But I guess that's life. Maybe this situation is a metaphor for, for everything."

"Flies in dead cow bellies."

She looked up at him with a pair of bright eyes.

JIMMY F

Red's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Nick's left eye slanted unconsciously and he paused. "What do you mean what do I mean? Jimmy? The tall pollak who's been sitting at the other end of the table the last two years. Jimmy F."

Red coughed. "You weren't here last week, were you?"

"I had the kids while Gianna picked up a night shift. Been away the last two weeks actually."

"You didn't hear then, did you?"

"Cut to the chase, Red."

Red trapped a packet of air into his cheeks and his lips, then released it slowly through a tiny hole formed between his lips.

"He passed. We found out last week. A couple of the guys went over to the funeral, it was at St. Luke's. I couldn't make it, with work and all, but yeah. I'm sorry, I didn't know you didn't know."

"Jesus Christ. How did it happen?"

Red fidgeted with his pack of cigarettes. "Heart attack. He was taking a bath. Wife found him dead in the tub."

Nick exhaled a plume of smoke from his nostrils. "Jesus Christ."

Jimmy F. who used to fling half-pints of rum up into his attic and once he got clean he found them stacked higher than his bedroom dresser, confronting them like a mountain of regret. Jimmy F. who used to stand at the podium and lay it on the line, who never pulled a punch, who told it straight, who explained what alcoholic insanity was like and what happened and how things got better. Jimmy F. who would leave at the break to smoke cigarettes outside the Korean Church with Nick and Red, laughing and grateful for a breeze of cool night air after a hot July day. Jimmy F. who bought a fix-it-up house down the Cape in a renewed partnership and vitality with his wife, the two of them immersed in projects of gardens and fences and a beautiful old horse he had bought that his son loved to ride. Jimmy F. and his ten-year-old boy.

Nick shook his head. "Son of a bitch."

Red bit his upper lip with his bottom teeth. "You never know when you go, but when you go you're gone. Blessing he died sober. Blessing he had those years at the back end."

"Son of a fuckin' bitch."

Red pushed an unlit cigarette back into his pack. He hesitated, considering something, and before walking back, "See you in there. These mosquitoes are killer."

Nick closed his eyes. "Yep."

--

"Did you know about Jimmy?"

Duane replied, "Yeah, I heard last week."

"Did you make it to the funeral?"

"Couldn't get out of work. I think Pat and Marty made it over there."

"Did we do anything for his wife and kid?"

Duane was the group treasurer. "How do you mean?"

Nick paused, considering it, then said, "A collection or something, anything."

"Nothing I've heard of. That's not really our place. No precedent for anything like that. Single purpose, right? I don't think the rest of the guys would be comfortable."

Nick pushed on Duane. "We ain't going to know if we don't ask."

Duane shrugged his shoulders. "Feel free, kid. I'd bring it up at the end of the discussion tonight."

--

That night while Gianna and the kids were asleep, Nick sat on the porch with the light on. He smoked cigarettes and busied himself with a pencil and paper. Draft after draft- he would find a mistake, then start over. He wasn't worrying about the rent or the past due taxes, how to pay for the busted rear bumper on his truck. He reread the letter out loud to himself.

Mrs. Faherty,

My name is Nick P. I am a recovering alcoholic and a member of the Westfield Men's Step Study group that meets Monday night at Grace Vision Church over on Arlington Street. I was away from the group due to my wife's work schedule changing and missed the last couple meetings. This week, I was talking with a friend of mine wondering about your husband. My buddy looked at me stunned, and told me that Jimmy had passed. I have to admit I have not felt right since hearing the news. I feel terrible that I was unable to attend his funeral.

I want to express my condolences from the bottom of my heart. I am so sorry for your loss. I met Jimmy when he first came down the ramp a little over five years ago, as we like to say in the group.

He came into our meeting hurting, like we all do when we're first starting off. But once he got some time under his belt, I noticed a change in him. He wore a smile on his face and always had a joke ready for us outside during the smoke break. I saw him get better, feel better, and put some quality sober time together. I considered him a good friend. I could count on being there and I looked forward to seeing him. I am sorry I did not have a chance to know him longer, he was such a great guy. He had such an upbeat attitude and always wanted to make the guys around him feel better. He was very lighthearted and knew how to laugh, but he also took his sobriety very seriously. He would talk about yourself and your son and how much you meant to him and his recovery. He showed me pictures of your house on the Cape, the horse you had bought. I could tell he had a genuinely optimistic outlook on the life ahead of him. He was so grateful, all the time, that you and your son were a part of his life. Most guys don't talk much about their family in AA. Or if they do, they complain about divorces or troublesome kids. But Jimmy wasn't like that at all. He loved to tell me about how his life was getting better and how he had plans to be the best spouse and father that he could. You and your son were the driving force behind his life.

I only knew him for what seemed like a short time, but I will never forget him, or you and your son. I will always keep your family in my prayers. I don't have any words of wisdom, and I'm sure the pain is still very raw, but I just wanted to tell you what a standout guy he was, and how much I admired him for his commitment to his family. He passed away far too soon. Like I said, you and your family are in my prayers and the prayers of our group. I am so sorry.

The small token enclosed is hardly anything, but on behalf of the group, I hope maybe you and your son can do something nice together with it or use it for something your family needs. All I can really say is that there is love and support for you and your son from people you don't know, but who Jimmy knew and made a lasting impression on. If you ever need anything, ever, please do not hesitate to reach out.

*Sincerely,
Nick P.*

FIRST SHIFT

"What did he say to you?" Her mother shut the laptop screen closed.

"He, he asked me to kiss him." The little girl's voice wilted towards the end of her reply, whispering the words 'kiss' and 'him' like flower petals.

"Peter, are you listening to this?"

Her father's attention remained pasted on the screen of his computer. "A boy asked her to kiss him. Is he cute, Morgan?"

"Peter. He is a forty-year-old Hispanic man with a wife and children."

"What?"

Her mother's eyes had closed into terrible slits, maniacal. "Yes." Her father motioned his daughter over to him, "Is that true, Morgan?"

"I don't know." She sat on her daddy's lap. Morgan was scared. She could tell her parents were upset by something. She didn't want to do anything wrong. She didn't want to be a pain. It was her first job after finishing high school. Twenty-one years old. Thin as a beanstalk. Curly auburn hair. Disability payments from the state. A part time job. She was growing up. She didn't want to be a pain anymore. She didn't want to fumble with locker combinations. She didn't want the boys on the bus to steal her house key and throw it out the window. She didn't want to be a retard.

"It's true, Peter. He's not a boy. He's a cook in the hospital kitchen. He's a grown man."

Her father shut his computer. "What did you tell him, Morgan?"

The young woman began crying. Her lips pulled across her teeth like a tourniquet- an attempt to constrict the swollen fear flooding her insides. "I said 'No' to him daddy, I said 'No thank you.'"

"It's okay sweetheart, you didn't do anything wrong."

Her mother's face had by now turned green with anger, not unlike a weather horizon with a storm coming up. "I'll kill him."

The girl's sobbing cut off immediately. A look of intense concern covered her face. "Kill who, mama?"

"Nobody, sweetheart," her father said.

Her mother closed her eyes. "Morgan, can you let mommy and daddy talk for a minute?"

Vexed, though she wouldn't dare to refuse her mother's request.

"Yes, mama." She jumped up from the table and tucked her chair in before leaving for her bedroom on the second floor.

Morgan quietly shut the door. She fought away a flurry of memories after she fell into her mattress- bus rides filled with cackles,

poking fingers, her long walk from Math to Reading with an overstuffed backpack and her legs burning, a pencil case dropped in a hallway. She struggled to focus on good thoughts. She drew up an image of Ms. Riley in her mind. Of Mr. Hansen. Of her friend Charlotte. Her dog Luna. She tried her best, but they kept assaulting her- the bullies, the mean girls, the jerks. They kept coming on.

Downstairs, her mother was pacing in the kitchen. "I'm calling her manager."

Peter mindlessly eyed over the contents of their pantry, then shut the door closed. "I'll call. I'll call him in the morning. We need to talk to her, though. We need to walk her through what she needs to watch out for, what she needs to do if this guy approaches her again."

"If you make your point clear on the phone with her manager, then we won't have to worry about any of that, will we?"

"Don't put this on me."

"You just made it about you. You want to make the phone call. Fine. Make the phone call." His wife opened the refrigerator and retrieved a bottle of white wine. She snatched a coffee mug from the cabinet, set it on the counter, and filled it up all the way to the brim. "But you let that manager know what's going to happen if we catch wind of any more harassment. You make sure he knows."

"I'm not going to threaten the man, Claire."

After a forceful glug, she wiped her lips and stared straight into her husband. "I'll fucking kill him."

GOOD MORNING

He was awake. He knew his head would split open in a fury if he unlocked his eyes, so he kept them shut. He reached his hand to evaluate the stubble on his cheek and chin, then his neck. He turned from his left side, facing his nightstand and one of the bedroom walls, over to his right side. He rotated slowly. He sensed a faint light which bled through the window blinds. He pulled his eyelids tighter. He inhaled deeply then reached under the bedsheets to adjust himself.

Well, I'm awake- he thought.

He hung there in limbo for a few more minutes, with his mind blank, before it all rushed in.

Then he noticed his son exhaling, inhaling. He couldn't hear his wife breathing, but he assumed she was on the opposite side of the bed.

His son must have crawled in well after midnight.

The boy had been doing that recently.

Nightmares.

The man rotated again, facing away from her, and him. He groped for his phone on the nightstand, then slowly lifted his eyelids. His head began to pulse. He flipped through his calendar for the day, emails that had come in the previous night. There was a regional sales review this morning where he would be presenting. A one-on-one with a direct report. A training session. A couple of customer calls.

Before any of that, he would need a shower. A cup of coffee from the Keurig machine. A bowl of Cheerios. His blue shirt, his pressed grey pants. His watch. His wallet.

Then there would be an hourlong commute into the city.

There would be a parking garage, an elevator ride.

There would be several hello's, small talk, the weather.

His forehead pulsed, a sinus headache. He had drunk too much, too late, last night. Now it hurt to close his eyes. He kept them open, set the phone back on the nightstand, and drifted out of focus. He rested finally on his back. His gaze melted across the ceiling. Admonishing himself. Too much Scotch. Not enough for dinner. Too much television. Not enough exercise.

As his mind began to wind up, his son choked out a snore.

Nightmares, or something of the sort.

A faint rain began to fall outside, and there was a pattering on the roof. He sensed the alarm going off. It was time to sit up, so he sat up. He didn't look over his shoulder, but he made a conscious effort to slide himself out from under the covers without disrupting his son or his wife. His bare feet hit the carpeted floor. It was a short walk to the bathroom. He shut the bathroom door, inspected his reflection in the mirror for about a minute, and then walked to the shower. He pulled the lever and set the temperature on HOT.

By the time he had dressed and applied a layer of deodorant under his arms, tucked in his shirt and adjusted his belt, checked his phone, and snapped on his watch, he could hear his wife and son talking in the bed. They were awake.

He opened the bathroom door. "I have a meeting early, I have to move. I'll call you this afternoon about picking up dinner. I love you."

A few minutes in the kitchen- enough time for the coffee and cereal- then he passed through to the living room in a rush. He gathered his bag, turned off the security alarm, and tied his shoes at the back door.

He inserted the car keys into the ignition.

He released the tension.

As he was about to shift gears, a terrible wave overcame him- like he had missed something important, something he could never get back. Something beautiful, right in front of him- he had missed it, and it was gone.

MOTORCYCLE

"I'll see you tomorrow, girls."

In unison they replied, "Okay, dad."

He walked through the doorway between the kitchen and the front room, past the jamb with the girls' heights scratched into the lacquered wood at various intervals: *COURTNEY SUMMER '92, KRISTINE XMAS '87, MOM THANKSGIVING '95*. He proceeded out the front of his house and down the porch steps with his keys in his hand. When he reached the curb, he stopped and crossed his arms. Then, he leaned forward and inexplicably pressed his forehead against the side window of his sedan. He closed his eyes and pressed into the glass. He waited there, like that, for at least a minute. The rain hadn't started yet but the sky was dark and the smell of damp earth began to flood his nostrils. He focused on the smell, and the darkness. Then he opened his eyes and stepped away from his reflection. His shirt had become untucked in the process. He looked gaunt. Unshaven for several days. He popped the handle to the passenger side door and sat down in warm leather seat.

Most of the cicadas had finished with their mating drone. A few kept at it in spurts.

Soon it would rain.

He had changed the position of the sprinkler in the back lawn for nothing. But he had also taken out the trash. Cooked a meal in the kitchen and plastic wrapped the leftovers. Helped the girls pick out their outfits for camp tomorrow.

He sat, alone, in the passenger seat. He decided he wanted nothing more than to be there to comfort his youngest daughter, Courtney,

when the impending lightning strikes illuminated her bedroom window.

Soon his ex-wife's lover would be home from the garage. Ray. Ray the mechanic. Ray with his motorcycle. Ray with his imperious blue eyes. Ray the barroom drinker, who shot pool with guys named Chuck and Aloha Dave. Ray with his pectoral muscles and cock. Ray in his bed, my bed, with his latest girlfriend, my wife..

Mrs. Nelson, an elderly neighbor, watched him furtively from her living room window, the tiny one with the thin, floral curtain. She was enamored by his pain. Such a pitiful creature, she thought to herself. This whole world and its choreography of suffering. Her beady purple eyes remain fixed on his car after he had shut the door. Her husband, Mr. Nelson, napped on their sofa.

Paul Rivers wanted to cry, but he couldn't. He thought of his father. He thought of baseball diamonds, chores. Then he thought of his mother, her peanut butter banana sandwiches. An image filled his mind- a jar of apple cider vinegar with a paper funnel covering it, a thin layer of soap on the surface of the vinegar, a pool of dead fruit flies. The little black specks. He couldn't get them out of his head. He sat there with his hands gripping his knees, a vision of drowned flies.

Thankfully a rain drop hit the windshield. Then another.

He ran his hand through his thinning hair.

The windshield soon became clouded in fog.

When Molly's father died, in the initial rush of sadness and confusion, Paul had thought to himself that this would be the worst of it. It took Molly several weeks to return to work, to resume her domestic responsibilities, to care about anything. Her mother had died from cancer when she was seven. Her father was all she really knew.

Paul was hopeful that Kristine's birth might snap everyone back into shape. She was born a year after the funeral, two days after the first anniversary of Molly's father's passing. Three months after her father's unexpected stroke, Molly had rustled Paul up in the middle of the night. "I want to feel alive" she moaned to him. Their clothes came off. It only lasted a couple minutes. He closed his eyes, but before he did he looked over at his wife. He realized he was wrong. They hadn't seen the worst of it. Not by a long shot. A streetlight bled blue through the pools of rainwater collecting on the windshield.

Mrs. Nelson remained at her vigil.

Paul Rivers considered waiting for Ray to appear, for the burly man's motorcycle to turn into the driveway. He considered confronting Ray. He considered what he would say. He considered what would happen if a fight broke out. He sat in the passenger seat, considering all of this, as the rain picked up. He thought about Molly, upstairs in the master bedroom, talking on the phone to one of her friends while he finished dinner for the girls.

The girls- he thought about Courtney and Kristine.

How would they handle all of this?

How would they react to seeing their father bludgeoned in the rain by one of their mother's boyfriends?

How would they react to seeing their father kill a man in cold blood, the sound of the gunshot, the blood and water running down the driveway into the steel trench grate?

Courtney hated the sound of thunder.

DISHTOWEL

She squeezes the trigger of a Windex bottle.

Another counter. Another mist of blue solution. Another round of cleaning.

She pulls her lips tight over her front teeth while scrubbing away with her dishtowel, ratcheted like a tourniquet for a bleeding pain deep inside of her.

It was the third anniversary of his leaving.

Almost down to the hour.

5PM. The phone call. The empty parking spot outside their apartment complex.

The past wasn't lost or forgotten on a woman like Irene Schoenberg. Three years alone, raising Martin and Regina, a second job, the dinners and the sports practices, the taxes and the balancing of check books.

She continues to scrub away at the laminate countertops.

The third anniversary of his back-stabbing her. The betrayal. The younger girlfriend from the main office, the bubbly secretary who had been bold enough to accept an invite to their family Christmas party, disguised as a 'work friend' with nowhere else to go. Their torrents of passion. Their plans for California. Their dreams for a new life.

A crucifix hangs above the doorway.

Back and forth- wish, swoosh.

Her eyes are black, like a sacrificial lamb. There are bags underneath them. Wrinkles jut from their corners.

A bead of sweat accumulates on the down between her nose and her top lip.

Dreams- those indecipherable movies you wake up from, only to start another day.

She wipes her face with the dishtowel.

She glances up at the crucifix.

"What else do you want from me? What more can I do?"

The front door opens. "Hey mom."

"Hi Marty. How was your day?"

"Fine."

She folds the dishtowel and hangs it on the oven door. "Tell me something about it. Do you want a glass of milk?"

"Sure."

Martin drops his bag and walks into the kitchen. His mother hands him a plastic cup.

"So?"

"Not much, really. In Phys Ed a girl pissed her pants."

"Peed her pants, Martin."

"Peed her pants."

"I hope you didn't laugh at her."

"Only a little. It was hard not to. She started screaming crying and ran into the locker rooms with this big stain on her shorts."

"Can you try better next time, not to laugh?"

"Alright."

His mother turns away from him, and pretends to look through the refrigerator. A smile moves across her face before she is able to shoo it away. She turns back to her son after shutting the refrigerator closed.

"How much homework did you get?"

"Not much. What's for dinner?"

The toaster is broken. The coffee machine is jammed again.

She glances up at the crucifix. "I don't know. Maybe a frozen pizza, how does that sound?"

HINDSIGHT

Finnegan's aunt broke the latest silence at the bar counter. "Remember when he was four or five, and he would get these boogers all over his cheeks. He would refuse to blow his nose in a tissue. My God, he would have this green crust on his cheeks, and he would

cry if you tried to get him to blow his nose. He would tell his mama he was scared to blow his nose. It would drive her mental." Eliza, her sister, smiled. "He was a stubborn kid, wasn't he?" Eileen continued. "When he was born he wouldn't nap without his mama, you remember that? Evelyn would have to go in the room with him and let him sleep on her shoulder."

It had been a couple of hours at *Kappy's Tavern*, the site of the gathering. The funeral had ended. The casket had been sent into the earth.

Eliza replied, "He would argue with those baseball coaches, you remember that? He'd shout over to that dugout and tell 'em he was throwing a curveball no matter what. I remember going to one of his games and he stomped out his hat on the mound, plumb refusing to throw."

Eileen looked at her sister, then at the line of liquor bottles against the wall of the bar. "He was something."

Eliza smiled, "Stubborn as they come."

Eileen corrected her sister in a friendly way, "Tenacious."

Eliza nodded, "Tenacious indeed."

Joseph, Finn's uncle from his father's side, who had recently set his glass down at the bar for lack of being able to secure a seat at one of the small tables, interjected with a sneer. "That's a nice way of putting it."

Joseph's wife, Nora, looked at her husband sternly. "The boy's in the ground, Joseph. Let's give him the benefit of the doubt."

"He was nothing but trouble, Nora." Joseph said it loud, intending for Eileen and Eliza to hear. "Nothing but trouble from the jump. Hell, he stole a case of beer from out my refrigerator last time I laid eyes on him. I don't owe that boy a good word for nothing." Eliza and Eileen exchanged a look.

Nora grew nervous in the midst of a new silence forming and let out, "Poor boy couldn't focus his energy somewhere. That's all. He should have been doing karate or something like that."

Eileen set her bottle of beer on the counter. "Karate? You trying to pin this on Evelyn? Like if she would've signed him up for karate, then none of this would have happened? Like she raised him wrong?"

Joseph took his wife's defense. "She ain't blaming it on anything. All she's saying is that the boy was the restless sort, and he grew up to be one of those young men who's at war with the world."

A man like that needs something to fight against, something constructive. That's all she meant by it."

Eliza snapped back, "Why don't she explain it herself then?"

Joseph smiled. He adjusted his bolo tie. "She don't have to. She's got a husband here to speak on her account. Unlike the two of you."

Nora, barely above a whisper, offered, "I ain't blaming it on anything. I'm not. Especially not Evelyn."

Eileen nodded then began shaking her head. "Well, the way you was talking seemed like you knew some better way, like you could've kept a needle out of his arm."

Nora's volume increased. "I did not say it like that."

Eliza moved closer to her sister. "Then how did you say it?"

Eileen answered the question, "She said it like she knows better. Like she's got some bright idea about how to keep needles out of kids' arms. She said it like she's got this world all figured out."

She turned to Nora, "Easy for you with your kids in college, with your nice house, with your boat on the lake."

Joseph spoke up, "Our kid's got nothing to do with this. I'd appreciate if you kept him off your tongue."

Eliza glared, "Then you keep Finn's name off yours, by God. You weren't around. We were. We knew that boy better than everyone except his mama. You don't know a damn thing about him, or us. So stick to your own advice."

Nora felt her hands shaking. Her eyes watered. Before Joseph could say anything else, she looked at Eileen, then Eliza. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. I don't have any answers. There's thousands, millions of boys, just like Finn, who go too early. I don't claim to know anything about the Lord's ways, or how to judge His creation. And I'm first to say my boy ain't no better. There's no reason why he's alive and Finn's gone other than dumb luck as far as I can tell. That's the truth, and I'm sorry for both of you, for having to lose him this way. That's all you'll hear out of me on it."

Eliza looked at her sister.

Eileen looked back. She picked her bottle off the bar counter and took a sip. "He's the victim of a dead-end town in a dead-end county. First the government tried to kill us all off, now these pills and these drug companies are going to finish the job. Ain't nobody's fault. Not Evelyn's. Not Finn's." She turned away from the bar and faced Nora. "I appreciate your condolences, but it doesn't do us a lick of good. You got your boy to go home to. It's

easy for you to give out condolences." Then she turned to Joseph. "And you, you can kiss my ass. You always thought you were better than us, and I bet you think this just about proves it. But it doesn't prove a goddamn thing, other than you're a sick old man without an ounce of compassion in his heart."

She spit on the ground in front of Joseph and walked away.

Eliza followed behind.

PRESCRIPTION

The younger man pulled the zipper of his jacket midway up to his chest. They planned for coffee at 8PM, but he had arrived fifteen minutes tardy. He didn't apologize. "Yeah, so I was driving down to Marshfield, on 212, past Sherbourne Farms, after the apple orchards, before you hit that steep approach to Mount Woonsocket, and there's a stretch of maybe two or three miles- there must be a throng of poplar trees down there in that stretch of woods- it was like it was snowing down there. You ever seen those white, fluffy seeds? They're not quite like dandelion seeds, they have more of a texture to them. It's hard to describe. And I don't know if it's the new meds I'm taking or what, but driving through there, with these puffy clouds bouncing off the windshield- I felt like I was in another world. It was the same feeling you get when you're underwater. That's what it felt like. Underwater. The light changed. The speed of the car changed. It was something."

The older gentlemen commented, "That sounds beautiful."

"It was probably the meds, but yeah- it turned me around. I had been feeling so down, so depressed, anxious about everything- the new job, leaving the halfway house, applying for classes. But then, all of a sudden, I felt great. I haven't felt that good in a long time. It pulled me out of myself for a little bit. And there wasn't another car on the road, it was me and this snowstorm of seeds for about three miles."

The old man blew on the opening of the lid to his drink. "It's a hell of a life sometimes- the wind blowing at the right speed, in the right direction, on the right stretch of road, at the right time with the trees releasing their seeds- you were meant to be there."

The young man opened his pocket and pulled out his phone.

Outside the cafe, seated on one of the benches.

The older man took another sip of his drink. "Music does that for me sometimes. Certain songs, a particular crescendo at the right moment- those goosebumps show up."

The young man swiped his phone blank. "I definitely had some goosebumps going this afternoon."

"Frisson."

"Frisson?"

The old man nodded. "When your hair stands on edge. It's almost that same tingling you feel when you first fall in love with somebody. When I listen to one of Beethoven's symphonies, it's like I'm being transported to another world. Like waking up in a dream."

The young man looked down the street. "Who knows, it might have been the new meds."

His friend remonstrated him. "It was you. It was the universe. Everything opened up for you, for a moment- and you belonged. You belonged right where you were. That's a signal. An important signal."

"I guess so."

Excitedly, "Know what it really is? When you hit that sweet spot? Right where you're supposed to be? It allows you to forgive everything in the world, everything about yourself, every regret, every dumb decision, every hurt ever done to you or by you- it's all alright. You know why? Because it all had to happen to get you into that spot. That's the magic of it. That's the poplar seed magic."

The young man shook his head. "You got a funny way of looking at things."

"Each of us has our own way. Did you bring anything for the second step work we talked about? The conception of God?"

The young man shifted his body on the bench. The night air was cool, and he felt a chill. "Not really. I didn't know what to make of it."

"It's almost a Zen koan, in the sense there's no right answer. But it's worth a little bit of thought, some consideration."

Dismissive, "It's a ridiculous question."

The older man was swept over by a vision from his past, "You know, when I first got clean and had to do this, I remembered a Religious Studies teacher growing up who gave me the same assignment. Mrs. Jacobs. She told us to write an essay about what we thought God was. Who knows what I wrote. But when I think back, it's the only

assignment I remember from grammar school. What is God? I probably thought Mrs. Jacobs was a fool. That's how I was as a kid even, defiant. What good was it to think about what God is? I could tell you what He isn't, that's for sure. I had lots of answers for that, for a long time. But as I've wrestled with the answer throughout the course of my life, either consciously or not, I've come to realize it might be the only question worth asking."

The younger man couldn't resist. "So what is God to you?"

"That snowstorm of poplar seeds. That first time listening to Beethoven's Seventh. God's an energy. It's a connection. And I only feel it when I show up, when I'm present. When I'm clean and sober. That's where I've landed, more or less."

The young man scratched at his hair. "I still think it could've been the meds."

RIGHT OVER THERE

Two men in red taqiyahs, they pay me no mind as I wait behind them. They have the attention of both of the secretaries now.

I've been back and forth at the front desk several times. I'm fed up with the television programming in the main area, and this damn phone...

The men appear to be having a difficult time, because I hear one of the secretaries say "Google Translate never works, we're going to need to call Patient Services."

The gentlemen smell like rich pipe tobacco, like cinnamon and leather.

I had been on one of the couches in the waiting area, trying my best to sort out the App my girlfriend had downloaded onto my phone. I was supposed to be able to track the progress of her surgery. I couldn't navigate past the startup page, there was a red warning and an exclamation point. After a few minutes of clicking I decided to approach the secretaries. Or the administrators. I don't want to offend anyone.

My girlfriend is good with that stuff- she has an instinctive understanding of how to operate technology. Cell phones, Apps. I don't care for any of it. I started off behind the curve, and I keep falling further and further back. The crazy thing is, more recently, I've been debilitated by not knowing how any of these things work. We went to a restaurant a few weeks ago where you had to download the menu. If my girlfriend wasn't there, I wouldn't have been able to order. I can barely interact with the world

anymore. Between Venmo, FaceTime, QR codes posted everywhere- what the heck does QR stand for? And the worst part is being behind the curve is costing me money- there's a financial incentive to everything now! Download the App and order online and receive a 10% coupon off your order. It's crazy. I'm paying more for everything because I don't have my eyes glued to my phone. Maybe it's worth the cost? Maybe not. I don't have much of a choice at this point but to accept the losses.

One of the secretaries motions me over to the other end of the desk. Patient Services has everyone else on hold.

She glares up at me, "Can I help you sir?"

"Hi, sorry to bother you again. I'm just checking on the status of my girlfriend. Jacynisinki is the last name. J-A-C-Y-N-I-S-I-N-K-I. Stephanie, first name."

"Sure, give me a second here. She's in OR 14. A hip surgery. Does that sound right?"

"That sounds absolutely right."

The men are speaking with each other in hushed voices, in a language I can't understand. I wonder if everything is going alright? Who are they here for? There's so many of us in this waiting area- I was shocked when we checked in four hours ago.

The secretary glances up at me, "Can you have a seat over there, sir? I have to check on one thing. I'll be with you in a minute. Right over there."

I turn over my shoulder. There is an empty seat by the entrance door- three others are occupied by people 'multitasking' on their cellphones. I point. "Over here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sure. Thank you."

I walk over to the seat.

I sit up straight in my chair. Nobody glances in my direction. I can't see above the desk at the administrators' station, so I'm not sure what the woman is doing, or what she needed to check on. Did she seem tense? I couldn't remember how she came off previously when I approached her for an update. I'm sure she was stressed. Everybody is stressed. Operations are stressful. Hospital units, insurance payments, doctors and nurses- I can't imagine being in this world fulltime.

I close my eyes.

Should I be worried?

I take a deep breath.

Maybe I should try the App again?

"Mr. Jacyinski?"

I open my eyes. "No, no I'm Stephanie's boyfriend. I'm Charlie. Charlie Moony."

A nurse offers her hand. "Nice to meet you Charlie, I'm Mary Kate. I'm one of the OR nurses. Can you follow me?"

A FAVOR

"Those things will stunt your growth, kid!"

Cormac Kelly shut the car door behind him. It was early, minutes after sunrise, and the clean-shaven cabbie was surprised to see his neighbor from down the hall out loitering in front of the building. The driver was aglow in a wash of red sunlight.

Squinting from the glare, "Early morning or a late night, Mack?"

"The latter, unfortunately. Friday overnights- you can beat the company, but you can't beat the pay. Sargent Marcy thinks I'm getting too old for the hoot owl shift, but she never complains when we make off on our January exodus down to Florida. Nothing in this world is free."

The bearded neighbor feigned a smile.

Cormac zipped up his leather aviator jacket, "Say, speaking of too old- you mind doing a favor for your neighborhood senior citizen?"

"Sure. What do you need?"

"Oil change. The speed demon needs a service visit to Valvoline, but I'm hoping I'll be asleep until at least the start of the UCONN game this afternoon. I'll leave you a hundred to take her in- standard synthetic, check the tires and the wiper fluid- you keep the change. I got a coupon in the glovebox."

"No sweat."

Mack unclicked the car keys from off his ring and tossed them in a perfect arc. The younger man reached across his body to snatch the keys out of the air with his left hand. Mack followed his shot and slapped a hundred-dollar bill into his neighbor's hand with the keys. Mack stepped away. "A deal it is then. A good one for me- I appreciate it. Drop the keys in the mailbox once you're done. I'll be back out tonight, probably around 5 or 6, depending on what Sargent Marcy has planned for supper."

"I'll take care of it before lunch."

Mack kept his green eyes locked into the cavernous gaze of his neighbor, and tipped his tweed flat cap towards the younger man, "My good sir, I thank you, and bid you adieu."

The old man gingerly made his way up the front steps of the three-story apartment building, turned the door handle, coughed, and disappeared inside.

The younger man inspected the keys and the money in his hand. It had been years since he had owned his own car. He wondered why Mack had decided to entrust the lifeblood of his business over to him, a near stranger? They had only been acquaintances for a couple of months- Mack had kept him one night outside the building's front steps for nearly an hour, a life story condensed and communicated like a grand soliloquy, a piece of performance art. The man was happy to listen, and Mack was happy to talk. Cormac Kelly. Private Mack. His wife, Sargent Marcy, "sharp as a surgeon's scalpel." The happy couple had met ten years ago, when Mack was sixty-three and Marcy was fifty-one. Mack had two sons from a previous marriage, a marriage that ended in divorce. A divorce that came about from the "grooving of habits" as Mack described it- narcotics distribution and abuse, various criminal enterprises including an infamous insurance fraud scheme involving car theft rings in South Boston. Mack had partnered up with accomplices named Myles Donnelly, Basil Thorpe, Dell Bradwell, Roger Tomcat and Apache Simpson. "Eventually, I ended up in an enclosed cargo trailer with no running water, no electricity, parked in a junkyard lot my cousin owned. I had a kilo of cocaine strapped to my abdomen which I had no intention of selling." Mack shared a theory of his about the deterioration of society's moral fabric, "This country is where it is because of chemical alterations in the brains of its citizens. That is my belief. I have seen the effects of these chemicals ruin families, ruin talent, ruin youth- all of my buddies from the chop shop days are dead and gone, God rest their souls and grant them pardon for their sins." Mack used the desperation he found in the junkyard lot as fuel for a new life, "God's got a plan for all of us." He reconnected with his childhood interests, "I spent more time at the driving range than I did anywhere else those first couple of years," and established a successful cab company in Marblehead "the birthplace of the United States Navy." Mack stumbled into Marcy at a grocery store, took her out on a date, and hadn't let her out of his line of sight since. They lived a relatively peaceful life between their quaint apartment outside of Boston and their beachfront condominium in Ft. Meyers, FL. And if his peace was disturbed, he was quick to avenge its loss. "You hear those kids playing their boom boom music yesterday morning?"

I'm asking an old detective friend of mine to drop them a visit today. Nothing physical of course, more of a polite reminder. A little consideration is all I'm asking for. You watch and see- they won't be playing any more of that boom boom, mark my words." Mack had acquired many different friends over the course of his life, like Stevie Bernard, the founder of Cape Cod Chips, "Stevie was not your average bear, and you hated to see him leave the room you were in." Mack enjoyed both the reading and quoting of books, "There is no folly of the beasts of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men," particularly Melville. He was as much a philosopher as he was a head-down, hard-working proletariat, but above all he was a lover of life, "You can literally see the sands of time when you get old like me. Each grain as it falls. You get to cherishing them."

The man extinguished his cigarette in the designated butt-station (a rusty Folgers coffee can, packed halfway up with sand) and turned inside. Through one door, then another, down a bleak khaki hallway paved with industrial carpeting, past another door and finally inside a one-bedroom apartment. Six hundred square feet. Sparsely decorated and furnished. A humble kitchen table with two chairs, a half-empty bottle of cheap wine- he removed his black, hooded sweatshirt and sat down. Next to the bottle on the table was a sheet of paper- a handwritten note.

Mom,

When you get this, they will have found me already. I wanted to call you, to say goodbye, but I couldn't bring myself to it. I thought it would have hurt you more than it probably already does, to think you could have done something. Let me tell you, there's nothing you could have done. You did everything you possibly could. You were the only one who did. And that's why this isn't what you deserve. I'm sorry. I truly am. I hope you can forgive me, and I know you would be able to if you understood the pain I have been in, the depression. But I know you have some idea. The only reason why I made it this long is because of you. My time with you, your love for me, it kept me going these past couple years, longer than I would have been able to go on my own. I know you tried to help, and you did. You helped so much. You helped me know I was still loved. And even though I had to leave, I know that I left with your love. In a way you gave me the peace of mind to settle it, and to settle it knowing everything would be okay no matter what's

waiting for me. I know God doesn't want me the way I'm in right now. He wants peace for me. I know that, and you've prayed for me for that. I'm at peace. I'm relieved of the pain.

This last six months I've been in such a hole. I thought it was bad when I came home. I thought it was bad when Colleen left me. But I've never been more anxious and lonely and depressed. I'm a grown man and my brain is sick. My emotions are shot. I simply can't operate in this world anymore. There is nothing here for me. And there was no sign anything was going to improve.

Only our Red Sox games at your house, the dinners and the ballgames, those were the best moments I had in the end. I loved being with you watching our Sox. There wasn't anything that made me happier.

When I signed up for duty I really thought my life was going to change for the better. If I knew then how it would change, I would have never put my name on that paper at the recruiter's office. I never would have gone to Basic. I never would have gone to Afghanistan to see my buddies blown to pieces in a Humvee, to have my own three fingers shot off my hand. I would have never done any of it. It was the worst mistake I ever made, to fight for a country that never gave a damn for me. All my country did for me was check me into the VA Hospital and put me on the meds and send me away. They didn't care about how I was feeling. They didn't care about the dreams. They didn't care about the bodies I saw piled up, the kids with their faces melted. They didn't care about how sick I felt. They said take these pills and buck up. None of them want to deal with what's going on with me. I've been a statistic to them. A depressed vet. And now I'll be another suicide vet. A number.

When I punched that supervisor in the face at the car dealership everyone there thought I was a psycho. A nutcase. They didn't care I had served our country. Even the other guys at the VA, when I said I only did one tour, they would try to act superior, like I should have done more. Maybe I should have gone back to die. Then I would have died honorably at least.

I always tried my best.

I never caught a damn break.

Colleen never cut me a break either, she always wanted more than I could ever give her. The job wasn't enough. The money wasn't enough. She decided in her head that I wasn't good enough for her. She didn't love me for who I was. She was only going to love me if I did everything her way. Had to be her damn way, all the time. As

much as it hurt me when she broke things off, it was for the better. She would have been miserable with me. Each time I'd get set back for more treatment, she'd tell me I had to pick myself up. She never leant me a hand. She never reached out. She said I'd have to own it and figure it out on my own. How's that for loving somebody? But I don't want to blame her for this. She wasn't the right woman for me I guess.

It's nobody's fault. God gave me a broken brain. He gave me these broken emotions, and I rode them as far as anybody would have expected.

I tried my best. I really did. But nothing went right for me in the end.

I tried my best to make it so they could still have an open casket. That's why I put the bullet in my heart. I remember when Lucy Gentile's mother died, when she took her husband's police handgun and stuck it in her mouth, I remember that funeral you said what a shame it was for her family to not have an open casket. I tried Ma. I tried my best for you. I loved you. I want you to be able to say goodbye to me before they put me in the ground. But I'm not going in that ground. That's not where you'll find me. You'll see me again, I promise. I'll find a way to let you know I'm alright.

The man felt a wave of dissatisfaction. He reached over to the bottle of wine with his good hand and throttled back a slug. He considered typing into Google best way to write a suicide note but decided against it. Then he considered tearing up the paper, but he left it alone.

His mind trailed off, falling towards a singularity- a singularity that had been aggregating and growing for months- a final horizon, a fixed endpoint- the idea of death, of his dying. Abroad, with an automatic weapon in his hand, he paid it no mind. A particulate of coarse desert sand. A nothing speck of no thought brushed off from his fatigues. When he returned home, as restlessness tortured him, as agoraphobia set in- death began to terrify him. Life had become unmanageable, but death- there were so many possibilities, and no guarantees. What if a Calvinist dogma played out? What if he would be bound for hell, eternal damnation? What if his heart would be weighed against a feather, then consumed by a crocodile? What if he was reborn into another body, as another person, with no memory of this life? What if this life simply replayed, again, back into his mother's womb, to restart and begin with all the same thoughts

and actions and decisions that had led him to producing this fatal document? What if it simply ended, blackness, forever? The overwhelming uncertainty which surrounded death kept him alive. But that same fogginess clouded his life- afraid to live, afraid to die. Teetering between the two. But in recent months, the momentum shifted. The fear which had prevented him from toying with the prospect of suicide began to wane. "It's a damn healthy fear," as one of his VA doctors aptly stated. A notion had entered his mind that began to assuage him of any anxiety or dread, at least when it came to dying. The notion arrived in a sleepless predawn hour, pellets of rain travelling down his bedroom window- a visionary moment induced by a particular arrangement of externals- a curated set of externals like the Tenebrae Mass, its ominous antiphony of psalms, its candle hearse of flames eager for snuffing, each wick extinguished one by one along two segments in a progression upwards until a vertex of singular light remained- with the outside and inside aligned, the notion struck him. A ploughed soul, ready for planting. A seed- then a perfect silence. What if death was simply the vanishing away of all my defective mental structures? All my broken parts, my twisted thinking? The death of lies and false conceptions, prejudices, my own stupidity? What if death came like a broom to clear away everything I've been struggling against? Wouldn't death be a return to the purest state of being? Wouldn't it be a release, freedom from myself?

He exhaled, deeply.

His mouth clung to a bitter taste.

The letter remained unsigned.

The man noticed the weight of Mack's car keys in his pocket, and then Mack's voice began to reverberate in his head. "I got these juju beads from a Buddhist monk. Sonovagun told me they were magic. If I kept them in my pocket, he says, and rub them each time I meet somebody, they would help me see God. No lie. I thought he was half in the bag when he said it, but I swear, after a few months of rubbing these things, sonovagun was right."

The man sighed, and he brought his broad shoulders up from the table.

At the same time, a hundred things happened around the stack of apartments at 2 Bellevue Court. A young woman who had exceeded the spending limit on several credit cards flipped through her phone, looking for a new sweater to have delivered as soon as possible. An old man spit into his sink. A small child finished a bowl of

cereal. A cat pissed in a litter box. A man woke up lonely. A woman woke up and sneered at her bedside companion.

Private Mack, with his head turned sideways on a pillow, assured his wife, "Don't worry Marcy, it'll be fine."

She knew it was no use. "You always say that. You're a blind optimist. You rub your juju beads and think everyone is Jesus Christ."

"Darn right, and it suits me well." A wry smile privately moved onto his face, "Ahab is forever Ahab! I'm nearly seventy-five, Marcy, now isn't the time for changing my swing. Anyways, the guy is a wounded warrior. He's got those far away eyes. You got to put a man like that to work, give him a purpose. It's His will. The idea popped into my head, and the keys went out of my hand. His will Marcy, not mine."

From the other room, "Whatever you say, Mack. But when something happens you make sure you remember *He's* to blame." Her incorrigible Mack- a second husband she never expected to find or love or marry, but was more than grateful to be together with.

Mack cleared his throat, "You told me alright. You told me true. And I love you for it, yes I do!" After breaking out in an off-key melodic sing-song, returning to his normal voice, "Wake me up when the game comes on, will you darling?"

"Yes, dear."

"Hey Marcy?"

"Yes, dear?"

Mack closed his eyes, smitten to be under a wool blanket, a new pair of socks on his feet, "I really do love you, darling."

Marcy held the potato peeler in one hand and grabbed hold of another Yukon gold with the other, "I love you too, Mack. Sweet dreams."

Mack was fast asleep before Marcy had finished the final layer of cheese for the au gratin and tucked the casserole dish into the refrigerator.

PAST DUE

An IBEW electrician, a hearty man with a fulsome neck in his mid-forties, talking from the podium to the group, "I noticed the gas bill, past due, stuck on the concrete floor. It must have been pasted there from the rainwater, run over with my tires- I tried to reach down and peel it off but I couldn't. It was probably a couple weeks, stuck like that, before I bothered to notice it. So

I unhooked one of the shovels from off the wall, and while I was scraping away at this mess, I had a moment of clarity. I thought to myself, 'What the hell have I been doing?' When I picked up a few months ago, it seemed like nothing. It was one drink. Then a couple pills. Some weed. Some more pills. Within a week, I was back right where I left off. And here I was- scraping off this piece of paper from my garage floor, my wife moved out of the house, my bank account empty, everything back to hell."

He chuckled. "See, for the two years I was clean, I had kept that garage in perfect shape. I was in there with the leaf blower every Sunday, the power washer every couple months. It was immaculate. I had arranged all my tools, the rakes and shovels, I installed new hooks and shelves- every fuel can was full, I had sharpened the blades of the lawnmower. I had even hung a tennis ball from the rafters so that my wife would be able to park easier. She always had difficulty judging the distance left between the car's front end and the wall."

His voice changed, slightly, and he gripped the sides of the podium. "I realized that garage was like my head. When I was clean, I had it all together, everything was in its place. But when I started using again, everything started getting dirty. That crummy bill stuck on the floor, it made me realize how far gone I had let everything go. I don't have much else to say. I threw the pills away on Sunday, and I'm here today, and I want to be clean. I want my garage to be clean. Thanks for listening."

TOO MUCH

"You're shaking."

"Huh?"

"The phone, in your hands. It's shaking."

"Oh. Yeah- it's- too much coffee. I shouldn't have finished that second cup." Ryan Whitley sent his phone face down onto the table.

"How does your schedule look?"

"Busy. I don't have a lunch hour, and I'm sure my last client is going to go past the time."

"Can you charge them for it?"

"No. Phil never puts up a fight over ten or fifteen minutes. He calls it an 'investment.' Maybe for him. Not for me. Whatever. I need to leave, I'm going to be late."

"You'll be back at four?"

"I might hit the gym on my way home, I have my bag in case- it depends."

"I could meet you there?"

Riley Whitley took her bowl and her mug with her to the kitchen. "That would be great. I'll call you once I'm on my way back in the car." The sink turned on. "But, maybe we just do cocktails and dinner. I'll see how I feel. Part of me kind of wants to get drunk tonight."

Ryan didn't respond.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"What?"

Riley turned and looked back into the kitchen nook, over the island counter. "If you'd get off your phone you might hear me."

"I'm sorry. Work."

"It's Saturday."

"So? You're working."

"I have to. You don't. They don't control your weekends. You said it yourself- when the market closes on Friday, your time is your time. You promised."

"I'm sorry. It's a bad habit. What did you say?" He buried the phone back onto the table.

"I said maybe I just want to get drunk tonight."

"Sounds good to me." He feigned a wry grin, "If you're drinking, then I'm getting laid."

"Only if you stay off your phone."

Ryan popped up from the table and went into the kitchen to kiss his wife. "I love you."

"I love you too. I'll call on my way home." Her keys in her pocket, a sweater on her shoulder, a last thought before she walked down hall, "Hey," she turned around, "we have to start our taxes. Remember? We said this weekend, right?"

A blank stare.

She continued, "Remember? We wanted to figure out what we had for a down payment so maybe this summer, or fall, we could start looking for a house."

Ryan gulped. "Let's do it Sunday. Tonight we'll have some fun. Sunday we'll get to work."

Riley came back towards the kitchen and put her arms around her husband. "I'm so excited to do this with you, to start our life together."

"I am too, babe. I am too."

She kissed him. "It's going to be great."

He tried to smile back at her.

She turned down the hallway and he closed his eyes.

After a minute, Ryan opened his eyes, confronted by the brass door handle.

Riley arrived at her car, turned the radio up, and drove away- a familiar pop song, a feeling of optimism. Before Riley Fickenger became Riley Fickenger Whitley, she had grown up an only child in a preciously furnished luxury condominium along Chicago's lakefront. Riley knew nothing of cousins, aunts or uncles- her kin, besides her mother and father, were limited to a grandmother on her father's side and a grandfather on her mother's side. Her mother, before she became Madelyn Fickenger, was born Madelyn Hargraves- a small town girl who rode in the beds of pick-up trucks down Old CatHole Road, who stopped off at Ruby's Showcase Emporium to check in on a toaster oven repair on account of her mother's bidding. Madelyn Hargraves had neither experienced an orgasm personally or provided one mutually until the consummation which bore Riley. Madelyn had been endowed with awkward, large feet and was beleaguered by sonic aversions all through her adolescence- lollipop suckles, cereal slurps, potato chip gnashings. She preferred the violin to human voices. For most of her high school experience, she insulated her eardrums with foam inserts. Her marriage to Riley's father, Thomas Fickenger, was considered a miracle by her parents, who regarded Madelyn as little more than an agreeable ingenue. They suspected unclean, nefarious motives in Thomas, but they could not have been further from the truth of his heart. Thomas grew up amidst the redbrick glow of a rustbelt town in an immigrant neighborhood. A determined young man who bicycled along streets of abandoned storefronts and intricately carved brownstones, his dreams wove like the masterfully contorted wrought iron- they bulged like the copper building domes covered in a green patina which silhouetted against the sunlight. He was a precocious young man who established the public library as his second home- a backpack full of notes, tin can kippers for a snack. Thomas' efforts brought him to the Ivy League, to prestigious nominations and grants, and then to Chicago to work as a corporate consultant. His research was focused on technology-assisted consumer interactions, AGORASENZE. Programs which anticipated what you needed before you knew you needed it, programs that executed purchases on your behalf, automatically and convenient, with only

a slight mark-up fee. In Madelyn, Thomas met a woman he could trust, a woman who would unflinchingly support his career and interests, and most importantly, a worthy companion to join him at the symphony orchestra. Riley grew up in a household of commodity excess- mainly as a result of her father's coupon obsessions. Her earliest memories of childhood revolved involved an overrun kitchen countertop littered with rotting, bruised apples and a refrigerator stuffed with pounds and pounds of freezer burn infected hotdogs. Her father was fond of saying, "It's more of a hassle to run to the store than to throw something out." If it was ON SALE, it was justified. Riley couldn't recall her mother once complaining about any of it- the closets filled with toilet and tissue papers, the canned peaches and tomato sauces piled on top of the cabinets up to the ceiling. Riley was treated as an adult and expected to behave as an adult, potty trained before her second birthday. Riley's attraction towards physical therapy, specifically occupational therapy for disabled individuals, was partly a rejection of her mother's sterility and partly an adoption of her father's proceduralism. She relished in getting her hands dirty. She didn't mind diapers on full grown men, saliva and drool, sweat, the touching of legs and arms. Both of her parents were bookish and Riley too excelled in her undergraduate and graduate programs.

Riley's first internship at Boston Children's forced her to relocate from the Midwest, and a Santa Suit Bar Crawl during her first holiday season living in the North End precipitated her relationship with Ryan. He fit the stereotypes for a young East Coast financier on most levels (a former hockey player, member of a fraternity, handsome, well dressed) so in one sense he was certainly not Riley's type, but something below the surface of Ryan's exterior drew her to him. He treated her kindly and thoughtfully at the bar that fatal night, and he didn't force any sexual expectations while they dated casually for several months thereafter. After another year of dating, they decided to move into an apartment together. After three years of cohabitation, it was time to make a decision. Now they had been married for six-months. Newlyweds. Blissful.

Ryan hurried back to the table, his phone. He stared blankly. Finally he muttered, "You've got to be kidding me."

Of course Riley had remembered their conversation from a couple weeks before, a plan to review their collective finances, to

prepare their taxes, to commit to a plan for buying a house- she was a fastidious woman. His foxhole prayers for her to forget everything were useless. He felt embarrassed for even having offered them up.

There was one course of action. It was obvious. He only had one person to call.

"Kev?"

"Ryan! Hey Charlie, it's Uncle Ryan. Say hi buddy." A faint voice in the background. "We're in the car right now, so you're on speakers. Headed to Home Depot. A new sink. The joys of home ownership. What's new with you?"

"Kev, I need to talk to you."

"All ears. What's up?"

"Like really talk."

A faint hum of distortion cleared up and the voice on the other end replied, "Alright, you're off speaker. What's up?"

"I'm in trouble."

"What happened?"

"I need to ask you for a favor, and I need you to not tell Louise about it."

Assertive, verging on the paternal- his brother's tone shifted-

"What happened?"

"I need twenty-five thousand dollars."

"What?"

"I hit a cold spell."

"I thought you quit?"

"I did."

"So how did you hit a cold spell?"

"A few coworkers of mine- I took action on a bet. It was- it was sure fire. I was sharp all the way. But I missed, and doubled down, and missed again."

"So you played the book?"

"I played the book. I owe one guy ten, and three others five."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Kev, I wouldn't call you unless I had to."

"Unless you had to? What are you talking about? I'm always your first phone call! I'm not the end of the line- I'm *the* line! The grand in college to the Nigerian headhunter, remember that? The five grand for the offshore account. It's been going on for years, Ryan. Years. And I thought since you and Riley- why the hell did you start back up?"

"I always pay you back, Kev. Always. And I will this time. But I can't- I can't tell Riley. I promised her- we're saving for the house- I promised her I wouldn't get into it again. If she finds out- I don't know what's going to happen."

"Well, she's going to find out."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're going to have to tell her. Listen, I'm flattered you think of me when you're in these binds, but I don't have twenty-five grand laying around. I have two kids. A mortgage. Louise is out of work. We're going month to month here after buying the car last year. But even if I could help you- you have to come clean. You have to tell her. She's your wife. You can't keep these kinds of secrets."

Ryan flexed his triceps unconsciously, "It's not an option."

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's not. You don't get it. She has trust issues, and she-it's irreparable. If I break her trust on this- she's never going to look at me the same."

"Listen Ryan- she married you. She vowed to stand by your side. She's going to be pissed, but she'll get over it, eventually. Time fixes everything- well, most things. It will fix this. You didn't kill anyone. You're not cheating on her. It'll work out."

"You don't get it."

"I can't help you. I can't. And even if I could, honestly, I wouldn't. You have to own this. I don't know what else to tell you. You have to eat it." A pause, then, "Have you called dad?"

"Enjoy your new sink."

The phone clicked. Ryan held the button, *SLIDE TO POWER OFF*, and the screen became a dark mirror. He failed to take notice of his own reflection.

Kevin was three years Ryan's senior, and perennially Ryan seemed unable to remove himself from Kevin's shadow. All through childhood the competition tormented Ryan, as his older brother seemed to win at everything- grades, sports, arcade games. Ryan eventually found his niche in ice hockey and was able to impress his father, a callous man who rarely displayed affection. John Whitley was the kind of man who believed that sharp criticism was the most efficient form of love, at least the love between a father and son. After Kevin graduated with a degree in psychology, Ryan noticed that Kevin and his wife did not drive nice cars, own a nice house, or go on nice vacations. These observations compelled

Ryan to formulate a new strategy. Like many green-eye'd business majors after the dotcom boom, Ryan became obsessed with the stock market, with diversifying portfolios and investing in exotic financial packages. Futures. Shorts. Crypto. But the payouts didn't come quickly enough, and with the advent of online gambling, Ryan began to invest more and more of his time and money towards games of 'calculated risk.' Texas Hold 'Em. The Kentucky Derby. March Madness. There was always an angle, always a sharp play. There were hot streaks and cold streaks, but after he saw \$10,000 fall out of his account playing roulette in a single evening, he decided he didn't have the stomach to handle such intense swings of fortune. Sleepless and enraged for several days after- he swore it off. For months he would keep his action limited, a couple bucks here and there on an NFL game- disciplined, only for 'fun.' But then the itch caught him. Another \$5000 lost on a sure winner. Another \$7000 lost on a done deal. Riley began to notice the emotional torment gambling produced in Ryan, and when he proposed to her, she accepted on a single condition: he promise to quit, for good.

Ryan had lied to his brother. The money he lost totaled at \$50,000. He had drawn a line of credit against his 401k savings account, an account that Riley assumed was *their* retirement plan, and owed upwards of \$20,000 on each of his credit cards. Ryan figured if he told Kevin he owed the money to people at work then his brother would be more apt to respond with sympathy- if his job or reputation at work was at stake, there was more on the line from a social perspective. His brother fell for that kind of stuff- Kevin was most concerned about being a man of his word. "You do whatever it takes to keep your end of a bargain." A maxim he lived by. Never cheat. Never lie. Never steal. Follow through. Lessons passed down from their father. Ryan admired his brother on some level, but mostly he considered him naïve, hokey- a guy who read too much John Wooden and not enough Warren Buffet.

Ryan exhaled deeply, then began talking to himself. "*Have you called dad?* He must be out of his mind. Call dad. Call dad and say what? Hi dad, I know we don't talk much anymore, I know you think I'm an underachieving, loser son and I've never lived up to my potential, so I wanted to call you and tell you that you were right. I owe over fifty grand in gambling debts. Say, do you think you could spot me a loan? *Sure thing, son. I thought you'd never ask.* Call dad? That's perfect. Literally perfect. *Thanks Kev. Great*

advice. Call dad? You know what Kev, pick up a toilet while you're at it with that sink so you don't miss flushing down all your shitty ideas."

Ryan shook his head.

John Whitley- a man with an avidity to form, who didn't care that Ryan had scored a goal so much as how the goal had been scored. An arbiter of aesthetics who once explained to his wife "I don't understand why we're celebrating Carol's remission. She whined and complained and hijacked every family event the last two years to make it about herself. How you faced cancer is more important than if you beat it or not; beating it or being killed by it implies you're 'better' than someone who died from it- which is absurd, because it's all the same coin flip. The fact that she isn't dead doesn't reveal anything about her character. How she faced the prospect of death, that's the testament to her character- and it isn't one we should be applauding." A man deeply dissatisfied with his own career, a middle-manager forced to compete against a younger, more savvy generation- a generation who betrayed workplace standards, who didn't wear a suit and tie into the office, who talked about their personal lives during company time- a man fighting against everyone and everything to keep hold of his portion of the pie.

Desperation crept in. Ryan began calculating, quantifying-rationalizing. He cooked up various explanations for the depleted 401k, the negative balances on his savings and checking accounts. But nothing made sense. There was no way to avoid the inevitable when Riley and he sat down at the computer to review their finances.

Married- Filing Jointly.

There had to be something he could do...

Ryan left the apartment, out onto the sidewalk. There was no more time for sulking. A stroll around the complex, around the adjacent subdivision- blue jays, sunlight, *en plein air*. He needed something beautiful, something light to combat his mood and allow him the fluidity to think. He needed to think and think quickly because his thoughts weren't going to net any consequences.

On the western horizon, storm clouds were looming.

His pace quickened.

There would be basketball games in the evening. A three or four team parlay. A grand- if he could find a grand and turn it into five...

A father with his daughter, both on bicycles, waved at Ryan as they passed. Ryan waved back, politely. How could they know? How can anybody know?

A PRAYER

The ink had blurred on the back of her hand, in the fleshy bulge between her thumb and index finger. She had written the word 'DINNER' with a black ballpoint pen before she left for work in the morning as a reminder. Over the course of the day, exposed to July's heat, the letters had become indecipherable. But she remembered what she needed to.

On her way home she stopped at the grocery store. She parked, jostled between shoppers, and filled her plastic basket with ground beef, taco mix, a head of iceberg lettuce, a tomato, and a package of shredded cheddar cheese. As the clerk took her bill and worked out the change, she licked her forefinger and rubbed it against her opposite hand, the one with the ink smudge.

She was careful pulling her car out from the store exit onto the road. There were several potholes from the winter that hadn't been filled by City workers. When she arrived at her apartment building most of the parking lot spaces were occupied, but she located a spot in the back corner. With two plastic bags in one hand and a briefcase in the other, she shuffled across the lot and towards the rear entrance.

Mr. Reyes, an older gentlemen who lived on the first floor and spent most of his time on his patio, was reading a newspaper. "Evening, Connie."

"Hi Victor."

"Awful heat today."

She stopped at the door and moved her briefcase to the hand with the plastic bags. She wrestled her keys out from out of her pant pocket. "Sure is. And it looks like it isn't going anywhere anytime soon."

"No it doesn't. Which means I won't be going anywhere anytime soon, at least when it comes to this patio chair. I'm too cheap for the AC."

She smiled and put her key into the door. "You have to pick your battles. Have a good evening."

"You as well."

Up three flights of stairs, down the hall, another key into another lock, then a deadbolt, a door handle turning- "Cecilia? Can you give me a hand?"

Her daughter ran out of her bedroom.

"Hi mom."

The woman bent down at her waist and kissed her daughter's forehead. "Can you take these bags and unpack the groceries? I need to take a shower before dinner, I feel disgusting."

"Sure."

She handed the young girl the plastic bags and set her briefcase by the door. "How was your day?"

"I got an A on my history project."

"The one about the Aztecs?"

"Yep. And I got another A on my spelling test."

The woman wiped at her forehead. "The one with the word indefatigable?"

"Yep."

"Good girl. I'll be back out in a couple minutes to get things started."

The girl looked into the plastic bags. "Tacos?"

"Tacos."

"Yummy. Can I shred some of the lettuce?"

"Sure. But only cut up half of the head. And be careful with the knife."

"I will. Did you get hard shells, or tortillas?"

Her mother sighed.

--

At the rear door, more conversations unfolded while Connie adjusted the shower's lever closer and closer to the end marked COLD.

"This heat is thicker than smoke."

"You said it."

"Makes you feel like a fool for complaining about the snow."

"Ain't that the truth."

--

The girls had finished their dinner and set the plates in the sink. Cecilia took a half hour in her room to quietly finish her homework, and afterwards Connie permitted an hour of television before bed. They flipped between channels, settled on a gameshow, and watched contestants vying for prizes together from the loveseat in the living room. The recliner was empty.

When it was time to wind things down, Cecilia went to brush her teeth while Connie waited on the floor next to her daughter's bed. A copy of Roald Dahl's 'Matilda' was wedged under her thigh. Cecilia returned to the room, sprung on top of the comforter, and her mother read two chapters out loud. Then the book closed, they kneeled and recited prayers together, and Cecilia's smooth black hair fell against her pillow.

Connie waited at the doorway with her finger on the light switch.

"I love you, sweetpea."

"I love you too, mom."

The lights went dark in the girl's room, but there was another hour of dusky twilight waiting outside the windows.

--

The phone cord was stretched from the kitchen to the dinner table.

"How is she liking the enrichment program?"

"She's liking it. Every day I come home she tells me about another A. I would've hated it as a kid, school in the summertime, but she loves it."

"That's great."

"She's always been more like him. He was always in the library, always reading a book. She's like him when it comes to that stuff."

"He loved to read. And there's nothing wrong with being a bookworm. Bookworms earn college scholarships. Bookworms move out of the neighborhood and find a good job. Nothing wrong with any of that. Nothing wrong with raising a bright woman."

Connie sighed. "I'm trying my best."

"Yes you are. I know you are. That's what CiCi gets from you, the grit. He was a dreamer. You are a doer. And that's why you'll keep doing. One day at a time."

"He would be so proud of her."

The voice on the receiver paused. "He is proud of her. And he's proud of you. He's watching over you both, if I know anything in this world- he's right there. You can't see him, but that doesn't mean he's not there."

Without hesitation, Connie confessed, "I feel him less and less these days."

Another pause. "Sometimes, I say to myself, Why can't I feel him? Why can't he give me a nudge, or a signal? I do. My faith is not perfect. But then I remember- when I asked for patience to make it across town on the bus, when I ask for strength in my leg to make it up the flight of stairs, and I make it. Well, that's him. I

remind myself. He's here. He's here whenever I need him. And I know he's there for you. My son loved you and CiCi more than anything in this world, and I promise you he's there."

Connie sat up and walked into the kitchen. "Thanks, Abbi. Thanks for checking in. I'm going to settle down for the night. We'll see you this weekend at Marcos', right?"

"See you there. Kiss my sweetie for me tomorrow, ok? Tell her I'm cooking her something special for Saturday."

"I will."

--

Above her, Connie could hear the neighbors. A man and a woman, arguing. Muffled yells. The man would shout, then the woman would shout back. Back and forth, on it went. Connie nearly sat up to close the window, but it was too hot. She turned over on her side and looked at the framed pictures. One from the previous summer. One from much further back in time.

When the neighbors quieted down, Connie moved to lie on her back. She watched the blades of the ceiling fan spin around.

--

Outside, Mr. Reyes cursed the mosquitos.

ANOTHER BEER

His wife was drunk.

"Did I tell you about Lena's cousin? Oh, you have to hear this. So last weekend, Lena hosts a barbecue, nothing extravagant, friends and family- we couldn't go, we were on the boat. Anyways, her cousin, I can't remember her name, but- she's in her early twenties, three kids already- no college degree, the husband isn't in the picture- of course, that's who's having 'em these days. The ones who need 'em, right? Anyways, during the party this girl brings all three of her kids up to Lena's master bath, and sticks them in the bathtub. For a bath! A bath, in the middle of the party! I said to Lena, What in the hell? And you know Lena, she's so nice. She didn't mind it at all, but can you imagine that? To take a bath at somebody else's home? What the hell is that? Not that it didn't make sense. Oh, it made sense once you looked at those kids. They were filthy! Marcy was there, and she told me how filthy they all were. Covered in dirt, sweat, popsicle juice, the whole thing. They're dirt poor I'm sure. I don't even know what the father does, I think he's a janitor or something. And the girl makes minimum wage as a certified nurse assistant, changing diapers

and that sort. She doesn't have a pair of nickels to rub together, I'm sure. But you know how it is, right? People just don't think. They screw, and then hope for the best! And Lena told me this, too. Listen to this. This girl, she went to such a terrible hospital, for her last delivery- well, they botched something or another and had to give her a hysterectomy. It's terrible I know, but she doesn't need any more babies, lets face it. And of course there's a lawsuit now. A medical malpractice claim- millions of dollars. Can you imagine that? I was floored."

Her husband quietly sat up from his wicker lawn chair. "Anyone need anything?"

Crickets and the crackling of the firepit, at first- then Tom Kramer shook an aluminum can in his hand and replied, "Another beer would be great. Thanks, Tim."

Tim offered a thumbs up and turned towards the house.

An ambulance sounded off in the distance, down the street.

His wife continued talking in his wake.

GOOD TIDINGS

Four envelopes, four stamps, four addresses, four Christmas cards- he had arranged the materials and sat down to finish the job.

A clock radio played music on the nightstand next to his bed. He didn't own a television to turn on, or off. A twin mattress, a three-drawer dresser, a card table, two chairs, and an assortment of donated clothes represented most of his worldly possessions. There was a Peanuts calendar on the refrigerator, several cans of soup in one of the kitchen cabinets, and some cutlery in one of the drawers. A stack of paper plates on the counter, a pile of napkins, salt, pepper, and a toaster oven.

"Let earth, receive, her king," he hummed along with the choir.

The studio apartment had been home for three weeks.

"Let every heart, prepare Him room," he continued to hum.

He pulled at the corner of his grey mustache, deciding on what to write.

The day before Thanksgiving he had been released from the custody of the federal government. He reached out to a second cousin of his, a Christian who never married, asking for a little help to get back on his feet. Cousin Ted organized some donations, settled the first and last month's rent with the landlord, and signed off several court documents. They shared a turkey dinner together in Cousin Ted's home after the three-hour drive from the

Administrative Building of the penitentiary. "I wasn't planning on cooking a bird this year, but I'm glad to be doing it now. I remembered an old secret from my mother. Before you set the turkey in the oven, you put some water on the boil, and then you pour it over the skin. It helps crisp it up. Did you ever know that?" Cousin Ted's uncomfortable guest grinned politely and shook his head. Cousin Ted offered him a glass of wine, but the guest declined. "I haven't touched a drop in so long, I might as well keep the streak going."

At the dinner table with Cousin Ted, with the food out, the guest had been extremely quiet.

Cousin Ted broke the silence. "Well, how's the food?"

"Best I've had in a long time."

"Not sure if that's a compliment, considering everything, but I'll take it."

"No, it's great. Thank you. Thanks for everything. I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for your generosity. Thank you."

Cousin Ted repositioned his napkin. "Thank God. That's who deserves it. Everything is through Him. I'm just doing my small part. I'm glad you got a hold of me. I'm glad you gave me the opportunity to be useful."

The man pinched his lips together and nodded.

Cousin Ted continued, "Have you thought about where you'll work?" The man took a sip of water. "Well, I've taken some graduate level accounting classes, by correspondence. I can still do taxes, balance books. I know with my background it would be tough, but I'd like to stay in that field. I don't know. I'm too old for manual labor. I'm too old to learn a trade. But I'll have to find something. My parole officer is checking in on me, and I have three months to prove I have employment of some kind."

Cousin Ted finished chewing his food. He reached for the butter, and as he spread a dollop onto a crescent roll, he remarked, "One of the parishioners owns a couple of auto body shops. I know him pretty well. He needs someone to help with that kind of thing. Inventory, books, balance sheets. I told him about your situation, and he's willing to give you an interview. He told me no promises, so don't thank me for anything yet, but he said he would sit down with you. I'll give you his number before you go."

"That's great. That's really great. I'll call him tomorrow."

"Might be best to wait until Monday, with the holiday and all."

"Right, of course. I'll call Monday."

"You'll need a phone, too."

"I have the landline, at the studio."

Cousin Ted put his hand to his chin and responded, "Sure, but you'll need a cellphone. Everyone has one. Times have changed a little since you went in."

The man took another sip of water. "I've noticed."

Cousin Ted focused his attention on the gravy ladle, "I got a deal on a family plan, so it's no hassle for me to add another line. We can pick the phone up tomorrow. We'll go over to the mall. Though it'll be crowded for Black Friday."

"Glad that hasn't changed."

Cousin Ted chuckled. "No kidding."

"Ted, I really can't..."

"Forget about it. Forget about everything. It's not me, remember?"

"Right."

After they finished the main course, Cousin Ted returned to the table with a store-bought apple pie. They enjoyed the last bites of crust, and the man began to clear away the dishes. Cousin Ted offered to help, but the man insisted. So as Cousin Ted wiped away at the corners of his mouth, while the man was scrubbing forks in the kitchen, Cousin Ted finally asked, "Have you talked to your kids? Do they know you're out?"

A calm answer from a face he could not see, a face whose expression he could not gauge, "No. No I haven't. The girls haven't spoken to me in so long. I stopped writing them letters a few years ago. I sent Jenny a birthday card, it must have been for her sixteenth birthday, and she wrote me back a note that said FUCK YOU GO DIE. Maggie never responded to anything. Walt visited me once, in the beginning, but he has a family now. He said he made his peace and didn't want to speak anymore. And Danny, who knows where he is. I don't have any of their numbers. I don't even know if I have their right addresses."

"Well, you'll soon discover one of the benefits of the internet. You'll be able to at least locate them." Cousin Ted crossed his legs. "I didn't realize that's how everything was."

There were dishes rattling, running water splashing against the sides of a sink, scrubbing and drying. The noises died down and the man walked back into the dining room.

Cousin Ted started to say something, then stopped, then finally made up his mind. "Would you like to plan on spending Christmas

together? I usually am at one of Aunt Kathy's kids, they rotate. Then Christmas Day I go to one of my good friends in the parish." The man sat back at the table. "That would be great."

Cousin Ted scratched at his chin. "There's not much I can say on that front, since I never had any of my own. Kids, that is. And I don't want to speak out of turn, offering unsolicited advice. But if you don't mind me saying, anything is possible. I'll pray for forgiveness to enter their hearts. I'll pray that time heals those wounds. I recommend you do the same."

"I'll try that."

The man sounded genuine. Cousin Ted put his hands on his belly. "Well, how about some football on the television?"

DEACON AL

It was a rainy Tuesday morning, the kind of morning that leaked onto you after your feet hit the bedroom floor, like a mixture of concrete and spiderwebs. It must have been either November or March, I can't remember exactly. It's hard to tell the difference between November and March, the damp and the cold, the naked boughs, the ennui.

It started after I had volunteered to leave class when Mrs. McIntyre asked if anybody would like to help with a funeral service. I was an altar boy, so I raised my hand, and she picked me from my classmates.

What a boon, I thought to myself. No boring history lecture to endure. And I might even earn a cash tip from the family of the departed, if I was lucky. Then I would be able to pick up a new pack of basketball cards on my way home that afternoon from PRIMO'S COINS AND COLLECTIBLES.

I drew up plans in my head as I snatched my coat from my locker. I ran out of the drab classroom before anybody could change their mind.

I had done plenty of funerals before. There were a couple of extra steps, different cues on when to stand, where to walk, what to bring the priest- but it wasn't an issue. I dressed in the white robe and went through the motions.

The service was nearing its conclusion. I was at the altar with one of the parish priests, Fr. Chuck, a middle-aged man with a prominent mustache and a tendency to rock on his tippy toes during the homily, and the other server, a kid named Gus Lopez. I didn't

know Gus very well. He was a seventh grader who played baseball. I was an eighth grader who played basketball.

My eyes had fallen on the stained-glass window above the pipe organ loft. A soft, grey light barely illuminated the reds and blues and purples- the lamb in the center, the flowers, cherubim and seraphim- it was subdued, and it made me feel good. I remember feeling relaxed. I felt good about being alive. I felt content.

Before Fr. Chuck concluded the mass with his typical 'Let us go in peace,' the congregation joined together in the Prayer of St Michael the Archangel: "Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil; May God rebuke him, we humbly pray; And do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all evil spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls. Amen."

The prayer marked the end of the proceedings, and the recessional hymn was the only thing separating you from the outside world. The Prayer of St. Michael was recited at the end of every service in our parish, but I was still vexed. None of the other churches I'd been to concluded with this particular prayer. It was only our church, so far as I knew. The Prayer of St. Michael.

It wasn't like the other prayers I recited, the mechanical prayers that said themselves; the prayer of St. Michael stuck in my mouth like peanut butter. After muttering my Amen, its effects still clung onto me. My imagination fixated on certain words, phrases- snares of the devil, thrust into hell, evil spirits, ruin of souls. It never occurred to me that a life had ended, that there was a dead man in a casket nearby- I was thirteen years old, and death, despite there being a corpse within ten feet of me, was impossibly far away. Death simply wasn't real for me. But hell was real. My imagination glommed onto those words from the prayer and painted a desolate picture. I remember suddenly being unnerved. I didn't like that prayer. I didn't like being reminded of Satan.

Fires. Moaning. Chains. Torture. Screeching.

My endless scroll of venial sins, mortal sins...

After the pall bearers rose and positioned themselves around the casket, Fr. Chuck nudged Gus and I into formation. I hoisted the crucifix above my head and proceeded down the main aisle. Gus waved the brass censer and trails of incense lilted in our wake. We walked slowly, reverently, to the back of the church and peeled off toward one of the side aisles, pointed for the sacristy.

When Gus and I made our way back up to the front entrance of the church and turned into the hallway, we noticed the door to the sacristy was open and Deacon Al was in a chair waiting for us. I was terrified of Deacon Al. Aloysius Keenan. He was a tall, glowering man who never smiled, who trudged around the parish with his bad knee and his cane. Even with his pronounced limp, the old man was intimidating. When you served Sunday mass, he would be waiting in the sacristy after the offertory donations. You would hand him the basket and he would grunt at you. He wore a soft forehead with folds like wads of dough, like he hadn't been cooked in the oven long enough. The top of his head was bald and shiny. Amongst us altar servers, there was a rumor that he would pick out his belly button lint and roll it between his fingers.

I helped Gus dispose the coals from the censer and then we pulled the white robes from off our school uniforms to hang them back on the hooks in the Altar Server Locker.

In a gruff voice, "Make sure you hang those in the right spot. The sizes keep getting mixed up. Keep the smalls with the smalls, the mediums with the mediums, got it?"

We nodded at Deacon Al and made certain our vestments went into the correct section.

I walked out to the altar and retrieved the mysterious book with all the readings and the Gospels and the secret instructions for the priest. It was heavy, with a gold cover- I never dared to open it up. I brought it back into the sacristy.

"Here, give me that."

Our duties finished, Gus and I zipped up our jackets, ready to saunter back to the adjacent school building.

But we lingered for a second, hoping... hopeful... we were almost brave enough to make eye contact with Deacon Al. This was the moment of reckoning. If the family of the departed had left a tip, the tip inevitably made its way into Deacon Al's pocket. He was the one who handed you the money, who grunted at you while you folded up a bill or two and stuffed it into your pocket.

"What are you waiting for? Scram! Get to class!"

We were jolted back into our bodies and rushed out from the sacristy.

Outside in the rain, Gus turned to me. "He's a crabby old bastard, isn't he?"

I remember Gus saying that, and it made me laugh.

I laughed hard when I heard Gus say that.

I laughed and I stopped thinking about heaven or hell, God or Jesus or Mary or Joseph, venial sins or mortal sins, saints or eucharistic ministers, apostles or sinners, penance or contrition—instead I thought about basketball cards. Before we pushed the button at the entrance to buzz the Secretary's Desk, I asked Gus if any of his buddies in the seventh grade were interested in making trades.

ON THE HOUSE

Anthony Spano spends his Wednesday evenings at the same spot in a candlelight darkened room. He sits hunched over, on the edge of a cushioned barstool. Waiters and waitresses trot past him to send in the occasional drink order, but altogether there isn't much activity during the couple of hours he lingers at the bar. Tony doesn't guzzle beer or swill booze or crack jokes about women. He doesn't grouse over his wife or his kids or the bills. He sips on a Coke. A large, ice-cold Coke. He prefers the carbonation and the taste from the pressurized nozzles better than from an aluminum can. He once told me it fizzes more. I assume I'm the only person who understands his preference, because I've never seen or heard him talk to anyone else.

Most Wednesdays I ditch out of work early and stop by *Elliot's Tavern on Fifth* on my way between the train station and a crummy apartment. It's my own tradition, forgoing the usual weeknight routine of a lonely bottle on the couch. Most Wednesdays are nearly every Wednesday. And every Wednesday, I walk in to find Tony at the bar drinking his Coke. I don't know if he sits at the same spot the other six days of the week because I only go to *Elliot's* on Wednesdays.

I'm a creature of habit just as much as him, or anybody.

That evening I walked up to the bar and said, "Hey Tony. How's things?" Every Wednesday, when I ask him how things are, he tells me things are pretty good. Every Wednesday I tell him I'm happy to hear that, and I order a double whiskey from Will the bartender. The only reason why I know Will's name is from the printed tag he wears on his left breast. It says: WILLIAM. I call him Will, and he's never corrected me. He doesn't say much to me, or to Tony. I wonder sometimes what Will thinks of our exchanges.

But that particular evening was different. Tony broke his communion from the muted television set in the corner of the bar and

explained to me, "Jack, Jack there's bad news. Yes there's, there's bad news. It happened, last, last night."

I laid down a \$20 on the bar and Will knew not to bring back any change. There would be subsequent orders. "Jesus Tony, what happened?"

"Jack, Jack they, they took, they took my brother away. They took him away. Last night. Last night they took him away and my mom, my mom said he will not, not be at my party. No. He will not be at my party."

My drink arrived. I shot it down in one gulp. For all the big brothers of the world who let down their kid brothers. For Tony's brother, for me. "I'm sorry to hear that. That's a shame. But you know what, maybe he'll be able to come back before the party? You still have time. Something might happen. You never know. When's your birthday again?"

"My birthday, it is in ten months. Ten months and two, two days. Ten months, and two days until my, my birthday."

I offered, optimistic and belying my own personal worldview on such things, "You never know what can happen, right?"

There was no pageantry to our conversations, no need to ask for any details. I didn't want anything more than what Tony was willing to freely give, and he showed me a similar courtesy.

Tony was a pragmatist, and after a moment's contemplated, he rebuked me with, "But, but my mom, mom she, she said, said he will not be at my, at my party. No. He will not be at my party. I asked her."

I decided not to argue with his mother. I secured Will's attention with a barely perceptible gesture, "A Bud, please?"

Will set the beer down in front of my place at the bar and removed the empty glass in a single motion. I looked up at the television after noticing Tony had his head pointed down towards his feet. I was going to wait for him.

"Won't you, won't you come? To my, my birth-day? Will you come, to my party?"

A couple months ago, Tony had asked for my phone number so he could text me about coming to his birthday party. Hesitant, I obliged. He put my number into his phone, then he sent me a message, the both of us seated together at the bar. He invited me to meet him at a movie theater. I told him I would check my schedule. We left that night, and I never responded to his message. I never made it to the movie.

But when his birthday came around, I bought him a Coke for a present. He didn't seem upset with me that I didn't show up. I suppose I must have rattled off some kind of excuse. He told me all about the film and made me promise I'd be there the following year.

I confirmed with him, "Ten months and two days?"

Tony nodded.

"I'll try my best Tony." I offered him a handshake, our preferred exchange, and he promptly extended one of his hands to oblige.

We shook.

Then I went back to my beer.

We both watched the silent, glowing television for a while.

Once my beer was finished, I caught Will's attention. The bartender was folding up a towel and refilling a glass with lemon slices.

"Another Bud if you don't mind, Will. You want another Coke, Tony?"

"My mom, she said to only, only have one. She said, it's bad, it's bad for my ap, ap-e-tite. She told me."

"A Bud and a Coke, Will. Thank you." I rotated in the wooden bar stool, elbows pinned down to the curved arm rests. It was a comfortable seat, as far as bar stools go. *Elliot's* was the classiest joint I had the pleasure of making regular stops at. The patrons were quiet and dressed well. They took their time while they ate. "Seeing as you had some rough news and seeing as I had a little luck with a scratch off ticket yesterday, let me buy you a Coke, Tony. This one's on me."

The drinks fell onto a fresh pair of coasters. I clinked his glass, and I opened up for a nice pull. Tony stared at the red, plastic straw, at the bubbles rushing up along the sides of the glass. He waited. Will the barkeep went back to his dishes, his towel, his mustache, and his black bow-tie. Before I set the bottle down on the coaster, I tipped it at Will in appreciation.

I felt a draft of cold air, then I heard footsteps. A young couple sat down next to Tony, with a chair or two of buffer between him and them. The winsome pair shook the snow off their coats. They dropped a pair of brown shopping bags next to their seats, laughing and trapped in each other's eyes, bright from love. When they had settled in, they ordered wine. Two glasses of red. Tony gave them a furtive look and went back to the debate with his glass of Coke. "Jack, my mom, my mom said I should, I should only have one Coke. I asked her. One Coke. So my, ap, ap-e-tite..."

I watched the pair of grinning faces next to us while Tony spoke to me. I watched them holding hands on top of the bar. I watched them and drank my beer. "Ok Tony, then don't drink it. No pressure. Maybe have a sip. A sip won't ruin your appetite."

Tony thought about it, then abandoned the dilemma entirely. "For my birthday, my birthday this year, I want the *Lion King*. I would, I would like a D-V-D, *Lion King* D-V-D. I have, I have it on V-H, V-H-S. But I, I want it for D-V-D." He nodded the letters, up and down, satisfied.

Tony never asks me about my drinking. He doesn't count how many beers I've drank, why I don't take it easy. He never asks how things are going with me. That's why I sit next to Tony. I never ask him about the neon-blue windbreaker that he wears on top of his regular winter coat, or the headphones around his neck that never play music, that aren't connected to anything except a ball of lint inside one of his pockets. There's a simple, unspoken agreement between us, and we get along fine.

"Ok Tony, DVD. I got it. *Lion King* on DVD."

"Yes, *Lion King*. D-V-D. I also, also like *Ninja Turtles*, but, but my favorite is *Lion King*. For my party, I want, I want my mom to bake a cho-co-late, chocolate cake. With hats, hats and candles. I want, I want a-lot of decorations. *Lion King* decorations. Ten months, and two, two days." Tony blurted out the final string of his words awkwardly. I saw the couple turn to him, the man and the girl, from the corner of my vision. I saw them give that look that people gave Tony. I saw it often enough growing up. I had given it out often enough, too.

I took a long sip from my bottle of beer.

Lots of folks had probably called Tony names. Nice people like teachers or sympathetic adults might have called him slow, or special, or different. But I bet plenty of people called him retarded. Others might have called him a moron or brain dead. Every so often I bet they taunted him to his face, but mostly I figured they whispered behind his back.

I thought about all those folks that while I finished my beer.

I decided this young couple, they looked like they were the whispering type.

Tony finally decided on taking a sip from the Coke in front of him. I didn't say anything, and after a minute, he decided to take another sip. I kept glancing over Tony's shoulder. The guy had his

back towards us. He had hung a navy pea coat over his chair. I could just make out the girl's face.

Another beer fell in front of my post. Most of Will's orders from the dining room were for draft beer, but I preferred mine out of the bottle. Snow continued to fall outside. Tony watched the muted television.

I took another sip.

Elliot's was a quiet bar, a bar to sit with your thoughts. I thought some more about Tony and the fellow with his back turned to me. I thought about my own self a little bit too. Pretty soon I decided I was done thinking for the time being.

I took my last sip.

"Tony, I'll be back in a second."

I stood up with my bottle and walked the six or seven steps past Tony, in front of the darling couple. They were talking, enjoying themselves, but they fell silent when I stopped in front of them. Will was busy with one of his sundry chores. The hostess was on the other side of the wall. There was nobody else at the bar except for Tony, me, and them. "Good evening."

I don't remember much detail about their faces. It wasn't a very well-lit bar, and details like their eye color or their hair or the shape of their cheeks seemed unimportant. I crossed my arms and waited.

The guy responded. "Good evening."

I made him wait an awkward moment or two before the niceties of, "How's everything going?"

"Um, fine." He smirked at her after he said that. I remember him smirking.

I also remember the girl taking a deep gulp in her throat. That gulp- it meant something. It was a signal. It told me to keep going.

So I did.

"That's good to hear. Real good. My evening was headed in that same direction. A real nice, quiet evening. But then you walked in here. You walked in here and started mumbling under your breath, staring at my friend over there. What do you think you know about my friend? What makes you think you know anything about that man?" The guy looked up at me. I remember him looking up at me and saying, "What are you talking about? We don't know you, or your friend. And we sure as hell didn't say anything about him."

I remained calm in tone and articulated carefully, "You're right. You don't know me. Or him. All you need to know is that you had better put that cute little coat on her shoulders and walk out of this bar. Walk both your asses out and never come back. If you know what's good for you, that's what you'll do."

He stood up to confront me. "Listen, who the hell do you think you are? You can't tell me what to do. We weren't talking about your friend. I don't know where you're getting all this, I don't know what put this in your head- but you need to relax. What the hell is your problem anyways?"

The girl whispered, "Parker, Parker why don't we just go." Will must have been down to the basement to change one of the kegs, because he was nowhere in sight. I could tell the girl was looking for him, for somebody in a position of authority.

"Listen to your girl, Parker. I'll buy your drinks. Just pack up, and leave." Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the shelves of liquor, the elegant shapes and designs of the amber whiskies, the crystalline gins, the glowing tequilas, the syrupy vodkas, sparkling.

"Parker, come on, this guy is crazy."

The guy looked at her then at me, "No. I'm not letting some nutcase intimidate me. Where's the bartender? I'm going to have your ass thrown out of here. That's what I'm going to do."

I chuckled. It was all over. "You're that kind of guy, huh? You call the police. You call mommy and daddy to clean up your mess. You probably let your girl here fight your fights for you too." With that he grabbed my shirt, yanked me towards him and geared up his muscles. I kept talking, "I bet she's a feisty one. I'd like to get a taste of..."

I took his best shot. I took it across the left side of my jaw. It was a solid punch and I staggered back as he let go of my collar. I think the girl might have screamed. I'm not sure what Tony thought, or if he even saw it.

For a couple of seconds I stayed low, tucked away.

Then I gathered myself, a deep breath, and switched the bottle to my strong hand. When I rose up to meet him, he had turned his back to me. I saw a terrified look in her face as I brought the bottle back behind my shoulder, stretching, and then clicked it into motion above my head, pointed at his skull.

All I heard was a thud.

Then he fell to the ground.

I didn't stick around for long. I jumped back to my barstool, retrieved my coat and my gear, and was out the door.

At first I couldn't feel anything. I didn't feel the wind, the eyes of pedestrians, the bruise on my lip. I took off running. I didn't feel my breath, the melted snow as it dampened my socks, the alcohol in my stomach. I made it a half dozen blocks or so, to Western Avenue, and dipped inside a plastic weather hood, a bus stop.

I began panting and buttoned up my coat.

It was a bitter cold. The last remnants of sunlight were escaping from the sky.

In a minute or two, a city bus pulled up. I paid the fare and jockeyed for position like everyone else in the swaying aisle, anonymous amongst a huddled mass. Once I found a handhold, I closed my eyes. I could taste the blood in my mouth. I could feel the sweat under my arms, on my chest. I felt almost perfect for a moment.

One of the passengers pulled the cord, and a ding rang out.

As the bus slowed down to a stop, I thought if Tony ever reached out to me again, and invited me to his next birthday party, I would be there. I would like that very much. It was a place in the future, a place where everything made a little more sense, a place to aim for- ten months, and two days.

ICED TEA

I admired her. She was my older sister and she looked out for me. She was the one who walked me through my first period. She let me borrow her clothes, her shoes, her makeup. There was never any competition between us, even though we played the same sports, went to the same schools, enjoyed the same hobbies. Once, during a lacrosse game, she knocked over a girl on the opposing team because the girl had checked me in the back and the referee missed the call. When my parents were going through their divorce, she let me sleep in her room. When she went away to college, she made a point to stay in touch. I didn't know it at the time, I didn't recognize how much she cared for me. I was a kid. I took things for granted.

In many ways, I still feel like a kid.

My parents asked me if I would give the eulogy. I remember my father's voice, in my mother's apartment, the three of us at the table. "So do you think you can do it?" I wasn't looking forward

to dealing with the emotions of that moment, but I knew I had to be the one. I couldn't leave it to them, to fight over, to bicker and argue which of them was more important to Katie. It would have gotten ugly. It's not what Katie deserved.

I got through that.

I've gotten through a lot.

It's been two or three lifetimes since then- moving forward, with my sister buried in the past. A headstone, and nothing more.

Anyways.

I really felt bad for Mark's parents. They were the ones left to deal with the aftermath of everything. They never did anything wrong, but a lot of people blamed them, a lot of people pointed their anger and their frustration at Mr. and Mrs. Koenig. I didn't like that. That hurt me to watch. I made a point of refusing to engage in any of that kind of talk. The Koenigs had to bury a son. They were going through enough pain, as far as I was concerned. I had seen where the blame game brought people- bitter resentment, divorce, unhappy. It wasn't how I wanted to live. It's not how Katie lived.

When I picked up the phone to call Mrs. Koenig, to ask her if I could come over, I had a feeling it was something I needed to do. I was hurting badly inside. It was six months or so after the accident. People had stopped acting concerned. Nobody dropped off food anymore, nobody asked how I was doing. The world kept moving forward. That was a tough period of time for me- I had to decide to leave my grief behind, and it took a real effort. But in the midst of that process, I figured if I could help Mrs. Koenig and her husband do a little healing, it might be good for me. I think that's what Katie would have wanted.

I followed my intuition, and I was right.

Mrs. Koenig opened the screened door, and I could tell she didn't know what to expect. I didn't wait to be invited inside. I walked up to her and gave her a hug. She started crying. Weeping. We stood there like that for a minute, and then Mr. Koenig came over and joined us. The three of us, with tears in our eyes. I had only met them briefly a few times, but I felt so connected to them. We were bonded together by this terrible loss.

I'll never forget that hug.

Mrs. Koenig poured me a glass of iced tea and asked me if I wanted to look through some pictures with them. There were piles of albums on their coffee table. "We've been looking through these albums

since the funeral, we don't know what else to do with ourselves." Mr. Koenig made that statement, and he said it without embarrassment or self-consciousness. He was a man struggling to stay above water, and he was so forthcoming about it, casual almost. It struck me. It was really beautiful, the way he said that. My parents didn't communicate that way when it came to their emotions, how they were feeling.

Of course I agreed to page through the albums with them.

We looked through Mark's childhood and made our way to the wedding between him and Katie. He was a cute kid who turned into a handsome man. It made sense why Katie fell in love with him. I had fun at the wedding, I was happy for the new couple. There were a few pictures of me that night- holding Katie's dress, her bouquet, dancing at the reception. Mrs. Koenig pointed me out with excitement and told me I looked beautiful. I told her I loved the way Katie's hairdresser had fixed our hair that day, how I've never been able to recreate it.

I had another glass of iced tea. I could have declined when Mrs. Koenig asked, but I didn't. Even though we had finished the photos, there was more to be done.

"I want you both to know I don't hold anything against Mark. I'm sorry he's gone too. I liked him. He loved Katie, and he was a good man. He made a mistake that night, and there's no doubt in my mind he would take it back if he could. I've made mistakes too. I want you to know that. I'm really sorry for what happened, for what you're having to go through now. I want you both to know that."

Mrs. Koenig started crying softly.

Mr. Koenig cleared his throat and said, "Thank you for that. It means, it means more than we will ever be able to tell you. You're just like your sister, you know that? You've got a damn big heart. Don't let what happened ruin that. Keep that big heart. It's what this world needs." He had tears in his eyes when he finished choking out the last words.

So did I.

I called Mrs. Koenig from time to time over the years, to check in on her and her husband. Mr. Koenig passed away five or six years ago from a heart attack, and she followed him about a year afterwards. Unfortunately, I was traveling for business when Mr. Koenig died, but I was able to pay my respects to Mrs. Koenig. I

didn't suspect anybody would recognize me at her funeral, but a man tapped my shoulder outside on the church steps.

I turned around.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but are you Katie's sister?"

"Yes."

"You look just like her, just like I would have imagined- if she'd had the chance to get older. I'm sorry, that's awkward. I just- I'm Ken, I'm Mark's cousin. Noreen's nephew. It's nice to meet you."

"You too."

"That was so tragic what happened to her and Mark. I'm sorry to bring it up- I, I thought about that a lot after it happened. In a weird way, it helped straighten out my own life a little bit. I can't really explain it, but, I'm- I'm sorry for what happened. I really am. Losing your sister so young must have been really hard for you, and I'm sorry to bring it up- I just, I want you to know she and Mark, they helped me live my life better. I guess that's what I've been trying to spit out. I'm sorry."

He was so genuine. It took me by surprise. "It's ok. I know what you mean- it straightened me out in a lot of ways, too."

AN AFFIRMATION

By the time the pregnancy wrapped up and Melanie's son was born, she realized nothing would be able to sew the holes in her life back together. Everything splayed open, further and further apart. Her fitness life. Her professional life. Her social life. Everything was upended. No more mimosa brunches. No more Friday night tacos. No more dancing. No more gossiping or hooking up. Nothing.

None of her clothes fit.

None of her friends called her.

She felt trapped.

She felt betrayed.

In the hospital, with her mother by her side, the baby latching onto her breast, she doubted herself. It was a moment of panic. She was unsure whether she would ever be able to love the child as much as she ought to. In fact, she told her own mother, only a few weeks after the boy was born, "He doesn't like me, and I don't like him."

The boy reminded his mother of his father.

It was the boy's eyes. They were like tape cassettes; they didn't glow like planets, like the eyes of other children Melanie saw in the baby magazines. The boy's eyes were opaque, clumsy and black. Buried inside was an anger, like his father.

The boy would cry and cry and the girl would call her mother, then the girl would cry. "Why didn't I get an abortion? I've ruined my life!" Her mother would try to calm her down. Her mother would spend the night at the girl's apartment, she would cook and clean, she would help with the baby's bottles and formula.

"It will get better. It won't always be this hard."

There were lessons in the beginning- how to wrap a swaddle, how to coo, how to rock, how to install a car seat, how to prepare a bath. The girl's mother knew from experience. The girl's mother had raised two children on her own, practically. Two children, two different fathers, never married. She had worked through double-shifts and weekend overtime for most of Melanie's childhood. The woman had sacrificed the nights out with friends, the dancing and the drinking. Anything to make ends meet. She was sad for her daughter, but a secret part of her was happy to know that a measure of justice was being delivered. She never told her daughter about that, however.

There was enough going on, enough justice being served. There was the legal battle, the lawyers and the child support. The visitation rights.

Melanie wondered, "How long exactly would it take to get better?" At the boy's three-month doctor appointment, something happened. Melanie pulled her beat up Honda into the parking lot at the pediatrician's office, and she noticed a man. His face looked older, maybe in his 40's, but he dressed like he was in high school. He wore a graphic t-shirt, a backwards hat, trendy jeans, Air Jordan sneakers. He had a cellphone at his face, his eyes vacuumed into his palms, and with his other hand he held onto the tiny fingers of a toddler, a little girl. The little girl appeared to be directing him. They were aimless, between cars and across the flow of traffic. Melanie parked and watched the man and his daughter for a couple of minutes. The man was completely distracted. He looked ridiculous with the little girl leading the two of them around the parking lot.

Melanie took the keys out of the ignition, and adjusted herself into the backseat, so she could see her baby boy.

"Look. We're going to make the best of it. From here on out. Alright?"

She unbuckled the boy from his car seat, kissed his lips, and brought him inside.

CARRION

It struck him, aimed between yellow lines of a parking spot- there had been an extraordinary number of dead animals on the side of the road this morning on the drive into work. Multiple squirrels. A deer by the reservoir. A racoon before the highway ramp. A sparrow. A couple of field mice. And a skunk, right before turning into the office complex. How often do you see a dead skunk, he thought to himself.

The roadkill had been a distraction.

A welcome distraction.

The typical Monday drive consisted of shaking hands, a hangover, low energy, bile in his throat, red eyes, and a whirlwind of psychic activity. His nerves would be shot from the booze. His mind would race. His heart would jump out from his rib cage. The anxiety would be terrible. Then, at his desk, a great debate would ensue- should he go back to an AA meeting, maybe that one in the church rectory? Should he try to quit, ride it out for the day and go this evening? Or should he head to the liquor store during his lunch break? Should he chase the hair, try to settle down?

His thinking would spin and go but then suddenly congeal like frozen mud.

Every Monday afternoon he found himself at the checkout counter inside a liquor store. A half-pint of vodka. A bottle of cranberry juice. A bag of honey roasted peanuts.

He was desperately hungover this morning, but completely distracted.

Walking into the building, he thought to himself, Wasn't that in Mr. Lilly's class, medieval philosophy, Thomas Aquinas and the argument against suicide? There are no examples of suicide in nature- that was the basis of the proof. An innate drive to preserve life, the will to life, or something like that? No other species in the animal kingdom commits suicide except human beings, and human beings who do so act in a state of sin. That was it. Well, it seems to me nature is changing course. How else could so many animals be out there like that? Who's to say none of those bits of carcass were crunched apart intentionally or

unintentionally? Who's to say one of those rabbits didn't decide enough was enough?

It was early May, and the weather was beautiful.

His mind was on high school philosophy and rodent carnage strewn about the Lake County backroads when he sat down at his desk.

The computer screen blinked ON.

He closed his eyes.

CAMPING TRIP

"Sorry to bother you folks. I was wondering if you'd seen a couple of guys on bikes riding around this evening?"

Jonathan was at the grill, about to flip a pair of hamburgers, and he looked over at his wife. She spoke up, "Yes, actually, when we were walking back from the showers, maybe three hours ago? There were two of them, right?"

"Yep."

Tessa set the napkins down on the picnic table and placed a citronella candle on top of them to keep them from blowing off.

"Is everything alright?"

The woman replied, "I sure hope so. My husband and his knucklehead friend left their phones behind and we've been expecting them back for over an hour. I'm sure they're just drinking beers somewhere by the lake. Sorry to bother you folks."

Tessa offered, "If there's anything we can do, let us know."

"Yep." The woman turned around and left, her pink flip flop shoes squeaking underneath her.

Tessa waited until the woman was out of earshot. "I hope everything is okay."

Jonathan set a helping of shredded cheddar cheese down on each of the burger patties. "I know it. My mom used to always say drinking plus water equals accidents. You hope they didn't do anything stupid. There must be five or six kids over there, that would be terrible."

Tessa glanced over at the camper parked in the site next to theirs. Several little girls were bouncing a volleyball around in a game of foursquare. Another woman, presumably the knucklehead friend's wife, was smoking a cigarette and looking at her phone. "No kidding. Should we go help look for them? I feel like something bad is about to happen."

"Let's wait and see if she comes back. She's probably right. They're probably drinking beers down on the lake, enjoying some time away from their families. Guys being guys."

Tessa glared at her husband, "It's selfish. Leaving your family and not telling them where you're going, that's selfish."

"I wasn't justifying it, Tess. I'm trying to say everything is going to be alright."

Tessa reached into the cooler and pulled out a carton of potato salad.

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There was a shout from the neighboring campsite.

Jonathan woke up with a jump. He looked over to Tessa, and her eyes were already open. Alarmed, she brought her index finger to her lips.

From outside, a woman's voice, "But? But nothing! You couldn't bust your nut at the camper, so you went down to the beach to sniff around! Ain't that it? You two went sniffing around for some hoes to bust your nut with, didn't you? I ain't no idiot! Well good luck busting that nut, 'cuz you ain't getting any around here, that's for sure!"

A minute or so of silence.

Then a beer can cracked open.

Jonathan fought back laughter.

Tessa was horrified. She whispered, "What's so funny? This is awful."

Jonathan pulled his hand away from his mouth and took a deep breath. "The guy popped open a beer. How is that not hilarious?"

Tessa shot him a look, then closed her eyes and turned the other way in her sleeping bag.

--

"Listen Tess, I'm sorry." Jonathan wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead and finished rolling up the sleeping bags while his wife pulled the tent stakes out from the dirt. Birds chirped in the trees overhead. It was early, but it was already hot outside. "I couldn't help but laugh. You know how I get sometimes. I didn't know it would upset you."

She put the yellow stakes into a little drawstring sack and set it on the picnic table. "It's not your fault. You do better with everything than I do."

"What do you mean?"

She put the suntan lotion and the bug spray into a beach bag. "I couldn't stop thinking about those kids. Growing up in that kind of environment, in that kind of chaos. Why is it that those people deserved to have kids, and we didn't? Why do they get a campsite full of kids, and not us?"

Jonathan set the rolled sleeping bags into the trunk of their car. "I don't know Tess. I don't know. If I thought about it that way I'd be angry all the time. There's so many idiots out there who are parents. They can't help but take it for granted I guess. I don't know."

"We would never have taken it for granted. Never."

A gust of sticky, humid air blew the tent on its side. Jonathan reached over and grabbed one of the beams. "No, I don't think we would have."

BUTTERFLY

He was still a good man in those first confused moments. He was still a father, a provider, a husband, a successful business owner, a member of the School Board, the owner of three automobiles, two homes. He was still a church goer. He was still Uncle Ron at our family barbecues.

But in the course of one sunset, one half turn of the planet, each of those elements of his personage had been stripped from him. He was no longer any of those things. He wasn't a good man. He wasn't a father. He wasn't a husband. He wasn't a successful business owner. He wasn't welcome at family parties.

He had been stuffed into an awful chrysalis, and overnight, emerged a monster.

It had been a long night, that first night when everything broke open, at least from the details Mateo eventually conveyed to me. Tears, shouting, unease. By the end of it, I can only assume that even the bulbs in the recessed kitchen lights were relieved to be dimmed off.

Mateo was in the third grade when it happened. He told me the night when his father left, when his mother discovered the note left behind on her pillow, that he heard a police officer and his mother talking quietly at the kitchen table. He heard the word 'suicide' and didn't know what it meant, so the next day at school he asked one of his buddies on the playground. His buddy bent his fingers into the shape of a gun, pointed the barrel at his temple,

pretended to pull the trigger, then fell down laughing. His buddy told him, "It's when some dummy blows their own brains out."

When Mateo got home from school, he asked his mother, "Did Dad blow his brains out?"

His mother put her hands to her face, rubbed her eyes with her index fingers, and sighed. "Unfortunately, no. Things would be a lot easier on us if he had."

Mateo told me she had thrown his shoes in the trashcan. A leprous pair of tired, brown loafers.

Details trickled in over the coming weeks. Tax fraud. An affair. Credit cards. Uncle Ron had left in a hurry and told nobody about his plans. He had booked a flight back to Greece with the intention of spending what was left of his money on a personal vacation, one last hurrah. One last party, before he had to face the music.

My parents never said a word about it. I asked what happened to Uncle Ron, and they told me I'd better mind my own business.

I hadn't thought about the man for decades.

Then, one afternoon, on my way out of the office and headed to my car, I saw a shuttle van driving by. I knew the face in the window. The driver. It was a pear-shaped face. The man had large cheeks, and a thin, grey mustache. I knew that face. It belonged to Uncle Ron. I was sure of it.

I asked around. Apparently, the shuttle bus was the daily commuter shuttle. At FlexiCor, in the mornings and afternoons, the shuttle provided free transport for employees from the facility to the MetraRail stations nearby. It went on rounds between the manufacturing plants, the office suites, and the trial laboratories. Uncle Ron picked up whoever was at the designated station, at the designated time- so long as they had a badge to scan, they came onboard.

I confessed my motivation behind my questions to a colleague who I knew rode the bus, and she told me the driver was a nice man. She told me when people occasionally looked up from their phones to make small talk with him, he talked about beekeeping. He said he did it as a hobby. He said he was retired. He said he owned a couple of acres, kept bees and harvested honey. He loved bees, that's what he told the engineers and marketing executives on their way back home, passes in their wallets for access to eastbound tracks.

I couldn't believe it.

I felt like I had uncovered somebody in witness protection. An exile from hostile territories. I felt a surge of energy, and one afternoon I decided to ride the bus, to fix a look at the man for myself.

I walked up the steps after the sliding door opened.

He didn't make eye contact. He focused on my badge.

It was him.

I sat a couple of rows back and caught glimpses of him in the rearview mirror. He was quiet. He drove cautiously. He said hello to some people, he said goodbye to some people. When my turn to disembark came, I looked down at him and said, "Appreciate it." He nodded back at me.

He made no indication he recognized me.

On the train into the city, seated in a crowded passenger car, I stared down at my phone. I had scrolled through the contacts to the name MATEO. I stared at the letters of his name. I couldn't decide whether or not to push the button, so I put the phone away.

I did that again and again and again.

I couldn't bring myself to push the button.

INHERENT BIOLOGY

"All those kids ever ate were chicken nuggets. No greens. No fruits. She used to say, That's all they'll eat. I said guess what, here's what you do- you don't put anything else on their plate except for greens and fruits. Sure, maybe they skip out on the first meal. They don't eat dinner that night. Fine. But when they wake up in the morning, and they're hungry, when they see those greens and fruits on the plate, guess what? They'll eat 'em up. Mark my words, inherent biology will kick in. Inherent biology wins every time. No animal willingly starves."

Dennis Murphy looked at his nephew.

His nephew looked back. His uncle's face was pinched, his eyes were slitted. The older man seemed red cheeked, determined.

His nephew, Christopher, took a deep breath. Christopher hoped his wife wasn't listening from across the living room. He hoped that the conversation would shift. He searched around for a way out. "Well, everyone's just doing the best they can, I think. It's not easy."

Christopher glanced at his wife and his daughter.

His daughter wore purple stains around her mouth, thanks to a grape flavored popsicle.

His wife had joked only a couple of minutes ago, "Why do popsicles always end in tears? They're supposed to be a treat, right?"

Aunt Kathy and Aunt Violet laughed at that. Christopher's mother laughed at that. His daughter continued to pout, angry because she couldn't have another popsicle.

After Uncle Dennis had goaded Christopher into the seat next to him, in front of the television, he began talking about Aunt Rose's kids. Kids who were all grown up, as old as Christopher.

Christopher caught on. He knew Uncle Dennis didn't care about Aunt Rose or her boys. Uncle Dennis was being critical of Christopher's own parenting. Uncle Dennis was criticizing Christopher and his wife, and their daughter with the purple stains on her delicate chin.

"Well, people like to think they're trying their best. It's tough to do your best. It's damn tough. But the tough is what makes anything worth it."

Christopher nodded, absently watching the baseball game on the screen. He took a sip of beer. The muscles on his chest and arms tensed.

He was ready to say something.

Before he did, he looked up at his mother. She had settled his daughter in her lap, and they were playing with a pink stuffed elephant. The scene made him smile. His mother, a grandmother. His own grandmother, Grandma Faye. A vision flashed inside of Christopher of Grandma Faye's funeral- Uncle Dennis, in the front row with his second wife, Aunt Skye, who ultimately ended up with a tennis coach and a divorce settlement. Uncle Dennis crying hysterically, crying at the cemetery, crying at the bar later that night, sobbing like a helpless animal.

Christopher relaxed in his seat. A run scored. "When are they gonna learn to stop pitching to this guy?"

RECORDING LIVE

The first storm of the season came earlier than usual, two weeks before Christmas. He had been planning on buying himself a new snow blower, with all the trouble the Toro had given him last season, but he hadn't expected on needing one so soon. He decided on one last go. It would be cheaper to buy one after the holidays. Before he started the engine, he looked at the machine, "You've got one more in you, don't you?"

Up and down the driveway, slow and steady. But he only made it a few passes before the chute clogged up on him. He killed the engine, cleared the slushy snow from the chute, and yanked the cord. A few more feet, another clog. Then another clog. And another. He got lazy, and on the last pass he decided not to shut off the engine. He reached into the chute, cleared some ice, and then felt a sharp pain. The auger had brushed up against his middle finger and sliced it open. The doctor at the ER said called him lucky. "Every year we see a handful of missing fingers because of snow blowers. You're lucky." In the end it was seven stitches and a broken knuckle.

He retold the story again and again, having to explain the bandage to coworkers and family members at various parties and gatherings. He tried his best to avoid the topic, to no avail.

Then, after New Year's, a fiscal review led to a series of department cuts.

It had been almost two months since the layoff. There had been interviews, follow-up calls, resume submissions- but nothing had materialized.

He brought the Toro to the town dump and decided the cost of a new machine was too much. It wasn't the right time to be buying a new snow blower.

And he still hadn't regained feeling at the tip of his finger. After the accident, then the loss of his job- small things had begun to wear on him.

Now, at home with his sick daughter, chilled and sore after shoveling another six inches of snow thanks to one of February's three blizzards, he couldn't calm himself down. He sorted the junk mail from the bills at the kitchen counter. He opened the drawer for a can opener and started warming a sauce pan full of Campbell's chicken noodle soup.

A text message from his brother- a picture, perfect blue skies, bathing suits and mixed drinks, a family of five arm in arm on the deck of a boat with a sparkling horizon in the backdrop.

He slammed the pantry door shut and clicked on the burner.

The garage door opened- his wife had come home early from work to check on things.

"This storm is brutal, isn't it? How's Samantha doing?"

His socks were still wet from being outside earlier in the day.

"How the hell should I know."

Samantha was in the basement, relaxing on one of the couches and watching cartoons.

His wife motioned him upstairs to the bedroom. He turned the burner off and followed her. She closed the door and whispered to him, "What's going on?"

He didn't respond to his wife's question. He shouted. He cursed. His face burned sanguine and he threw a lamp from off one of the nightstands. He emptied the dirty laundry hamper in the middle of the room. He waved his hands. A vein appeared in his neck.

Outside the window, snowflakes continued to drift by.

Then he caught sight of himself in their full-length vanity mirror. His scrunched face, his flushed cheeks, the vein- in a few minutes he would bend over and begin stuffing the clothes back into the hamper, walk the hamper downstairs, and start the washing machine. He would finish warming the soup for his daughter. He would put on his boots and coat, and head back outside for another round of shoveling.

--

"It was like I was a camera man in a documentary film crew, filming my own life, if that makes any sense. I saw myself from a different vantage point. The closed system of everything going on inside of me, inside my head, my frustrations and my anger, everything that had been boiling over- the system opened up. And I became disarmed. It was almost like having a guest in the house. You know when you have people stay over, your mother-in-law, for example- when there's somebody else at the table for breakfast, it changes the dynamic. Your behavior, your speech, it becomes externalized. You're projecting everything onto this observer, an audience. And you unconsciously account for this audience- an audience whose approval you must gain, whose confidence you must earn. I became my own audience, in a way. And as I saw myself in the midst of this explosion, a feeling of disgust penetrated me inside and out. I fell apart. Instead of trying to double down, like I normally would, and rationalize my anger, justify my behavior- I saw right through it. My position was ridiculous. Here was my wife, home from work, the breadwinner in our house- here she was having to deal with me, a stupid child. Who was this person? I was horrified, in a way. I wanted no association with him."

SUNDAY MORNING

It was the last day of vacation. A Sunday to Sunday trip, an end of the summer tradition. Each morning, she had made her way out to the lagoon, to the northernmost tip of Indigo Beach, and turned back towards the forest trails and then the main road and then a series of dirt roads, eventually finishing at the screened in porch of the rental cottage on Moonstone Way. She clocked the round trip at a little over five miles. Yesterday, she had finished her run in under thirty-four minutes.

Today, she felt good. She burst through the cover of oaks and pointed towards the sand dunes. It was a couple hundred yards to the shoreline. A cool breeze cushioned her efforts. The sky was overcast, slightly, and there were whitecaps over the water. She had picked up the habit of sprinting across the white sand, rushing up to the water, scooping a handful of ocean up into her palm, and turning away with a splash of saltwater onto her face. It was the halfway mark in her race. It let her know it was all downhill from there.

Running was her passion.

It was her true love.

In three weeks, the season would kick-off. There would be an official preseason camp, then tryouts. She would be a mainstay on the Varsity squad. She had goals for herself this year. She had dreams of a college scholarship.

A brunette, braided ponytail bounced behind her.

Her breath was even, focused.

She bent down as a wave pushed water into her hands.

After the water hit her cheeks, after she pivoted sharply and exhaled and loped back into stride, her eyes were drawn to a silhouette on one of the smaller dunes. She geared down her pace. There was a pair of heels, and a pair of men's dress shoes. She slowed down a little more.

The beach was empty. It was 6AM on a Sunday morning. Nobody was around. There were no boats, no paddle boards, no picnic blankets or coolers.

Instead of taking the path back to the parking lot, she decided to run along the beachfront. The sand provided extra resistance. Her quadriceps burned. She dug in and kept her eyes open.

Nobody.

After a couple of minutes, she turned around and headed back for the Point. Back to the route. Back to her plan.

She finished the out and back trip in thirty-five minutes and sixteen seconds. The extra running on the beach had cost her. But she wasn't upset by the number.

--

Her father read the paper differently when he was on the island. When he was in the city, in their condo, he read sections out loud, kept a lively commentary, called some of the column writers liars and lauded others. But with the kitchen windows open and the thick musk of saline in the air, with the paper spread open and a cup of coffee in front of him, it was as if the words didn't register. It was almost as if he was pretending, as if he was simply admiring the roundness of the O's and the curve of the J's and the angularity of the W's.

She sat across from him with a bowl of mixed fruit and was convinced the words didn't mean more to him than a meadow of wildflowers. They were something pretty to look at. He didn't rush between pages. He was happy to sit with each one. The color advertisements for restaurants, for fishing excursions, the art galleries and the seashell boutiques. There was almost a sense of relief on his face. She didn't want to interrupt him.

Before she had to, he lowered the paper and set his eyes on her. "How was the run this morning? Did you go sub-thirty-four?"

"Thirty-five and change."

"Still a good time. Were you a little sore from yesterday?"

"No, I felt great actually. I just, I got distracted at Indigo Point and added some extra distance on the beach. It slowed me down."

"Oh. That's alright then. I bet you would have hit it."

He noticed a certain look on her face, like a distressed Aphrodite, beset by a polite and dignified terror.

He set the paper down entirely. "What distracted you?"

"A pair of shoes."

"Shoes?"

"Empty shoes, up on one of the dunes. A man's and a woman's. And there was nobody around."

He unconsciously folded the paper into his lap, and began fluffing it like a pillow. "I'm sure they were left behind by accident. Plenty of folks go out to the Point after they have a few drinks, looking for romance. That kind of stuff happens all the time."

"How can you be sure?"

"I can't be sure, of course. But I can tell you I've been guilty of leaving shoes and things behind at a beach. So has your mother. There's nothing to worry about."

"But I think we should still do something. Let somebody know. Like the police- can we call the police?"

He joked at her, "You've been watching too much television, you know that?"

Her face was uncompromising. "No. I'm serious. What if somebody was hurt?"

He sighed. He ruffled the paper again. Then his eyes widened. "Here. Here's the proof, right here. Take it." He handed her the Saturday Edition. "Nothing about missing people. Not a word. This is a small island. If folks would have gone missing, or if there was suspicion of an accident, or foul play, it would be in here. It would be front page."

She took the newspaper from him and began to inspect the headlines and the columns.

She flipped through the pages, bound and determined.

He waited.

"Alright. You're right. It was probably nothing."

PASSPORT

"You look different. Did you get some sun or something?"

"I feel different. I feel lighter."

"Lighter?"

"You know, my lease expires in two months, and I decided I'm not going to renew. I told the landlord this morning."

She perked up. "You're finally moving in with me in Midtown! Oh my God, it's about friggin' time."

"No. I'm leaving the city."

She pinched onto the plastic straw in her iced coffee with her forefinger and thumb. Her jaw opened. "What?"

"I'm not sure where to, but I'll be gone at the end of October."

"What?"

"It felt like the right thing to do."

She couldn't bear the obvious question, so she decided to ask, "What, what about your job?"

"I put in my notice yesterday."

"Stop messing with me."

"I couldn't be more serious."

"After they sent you abroad for that conference? After they picked your pitch, your product? It doesn't make any sense."

"Something happened to me over there."

She jabbed back at him, "What do you mean something happened? Did you meet somebody else?"

He decided to take a risk. "I met a lot of people. I met humble people, happy people, kind people. I was nervous, headed to this foreign country, this unfamiliar place- but I couldn't have been more at home. I saw children holding their fathers' hands, the beaming eyes of mothers. It was folksy, a little quirky- but it made an impression on me. The way they acted towards each other. On the flight back, I wished I could have stayed. They had this sense of togetherness. There were no big shots, there were no egoists, nothing was cutthroat. Everyone I met was genuinely concerned about the people around them. It was so different than New York. And I realized I was tired of the self-promotion, all the self-concern. I'm tired of all of it. So I'm going to make a change."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I know I want to spend more time outside. Spend time in forests. With trees. I want to be sentimental. I want things to mean more, but to be lighter at the same time- I need, I need more tears, and more laughter."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Forests? Tears and laughter?"

--

Years later, with a baggie of white tablets in her hand, a full glass of merlot on the counter, with her eyes bloodshot and sunken, a bruise on her ribs, she would remember their conversation. She would undo the buttons of a designer blouse, massage a string of pearls on her neck, and remember the look he gave her. It was written on his eyes. On fire, piercing- like Gautama's eyes gazing out from the royal palanquin, a curtain drawn to the village street breaks open and a vision flashes of an old leper hobbling into an alleyway. His eyes told the story of his transformation. She would think about his eyes, about people and change. She would deposit another tablet on her tongue and wonder why some people changed and others didn't. To wake up with a fresh perspective, a perspective unimaginable only moments before- she would be desperate. Desperate for something like that to happen to her, but scared it never would.

INTERSECTION

From across the continent, "Did you know?"

"Know what, darling?"

The young woman tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear and rolled up the windows in her car. "You really don't know?"

Her mother pressed the receiver to her ear. There was static in the background, a white noise that made it difficult for her to hear her daughter. "I have no idea what you are talking about, darling. Know what?"

"What he did to me."

"Who?"

The woman reached for the Diet Soda in her cupholder and opened the bottle with one hand. She took a sip and began to screw back on the red cap. "Dad."

"Your father?"

"Did you know?"

"I'm afraid you're confusing me, darling. I'm very confused. And a little concerned. You sound upset."

The woman chuckled. "Upset? Um, yeah. That's a word for it. Upset. Mortified. Scarred for life. Damaged irreparably. Those words could work, too."

The paperboy drove his bicycle past the widow's Pueblo-style home and flung a tube of coupon magazines, held together by a rubber band, up on the porch steps. "What's the matter, darling?"

"He molested me."

"Your father?"

"Yes. Your husband! He touched me when I was a little girl. Did you know that?"

The widow's heart sank for a moment. It had only been a few months since the funeral. For God's sakes, the headstone was only set down last week. Everything was so raw. Unreal. His heart attack, cleaning through his closets. And with Janice in rehab, unable to leave, unable to be with her- things were supposed to be calming down. Things were supposed to be getting better. Janice was supposed to be checking in on her.

"Where are you, Janice?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, where are you?"

"I'm in the car, headed back to the halfway house. I just left my therapist's office."

"You're clean?"

"Of course I'm clean! Is it so hard to believe? Jesus! Even if I wasn't- why are you changing the subject? I just told you Dad molested me. And you want to know where I am? What the hell is that?"

The widow sat down at the kitchen table, in the seat closest to the window. She outstretched her hand so it touched one of the rays of sunlight pouring in from the backyard, between the shade created by a small grove of ponderosa pines. There was a cup of tea on the table, and a plate with a few breadcrumbs and a butterknife.

"So your therapist helped you arrive at this conclusion?"

The woman set both hands on the wheel. She was stopped at a red light. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Her mother's voice grew louder, more pointed. "Why didn't you ever say anything? Why now? You're twenty-six years old. Why now?"

The young woman sighed. "Haven't you ever heard of repression? Repressed memories? I've been repressing it, and it's been coming out of me in all these unhealthy ways."

The widow turned the ceramic teacup clockwise and set her pinky finger into the handle. "The drugs, the needles, the countless men you've slept with."

The light turned green. "Mother!"

"You want to blame your father for your poor decisions? I won't let you. I won't let you besmirch his memory! You hear me. You and your therapist can cook up whatever excuses you want, but your father was a good man. A decent man. A man who didn't give into this decaying world. Do you hear me?"

"You're in denial."

"And you are delusional. You are a delusional drug addict who never wanted to take responsibility for anything in her life. I'm sorry darling, but that's the truth of the matter. I love you, and I always will. But I won't let you talk to me about your father being the cause of all your woes. He loved you with every bit of his heart. In fact, he was the one who protected you from the harshness of the world, from my harshness. And now he's not here. So you get to hear me, now, unfiltered. And what I have to say is this: grow up. Until you do, you'll be stuck in your own poison."

CASH ONLY

After the bank loan cleared, Pete got to work. He had been planning for months. Flea markets, electronics stores, pawn shops- he had

amassed an incredible stockpile of VHS tapes. He enlisted his daughter to help organize the titles, to divide them into genres. He devised a cataloguing system. He bought a rewind machine. The renovation had finished in December, and by the New Year a sign out front of the gas station, painted in blue letters, read NOW RENTING MOVIES!

"I've done the math. In a few years we'll have the extra loan paid off. And in ten years we'll have the lease paid off and be outright owners of the station and the property. It will be something to leave to the kids. It will be our ticket to retirement. Don't worry." He explained all this to his wife in a series of intense conversations. She was concerned about taking on additional financial pressure, about dealing with the bank again. They had been able to make ends meet with the profits from the gas station, from the cigarette and beer sales- but an expansion, a construction project, a video rental venture- it felt like too much. She told him.

"Baby, it's too much."

He didn't listen to her.

He constructed the shelves, painted the drywall, lined up the selections and hoped to take advantage of a tax loophole by displaying another sign which read, MOVIE RENTALS- CASH ONLY, on a strip of cardboard pasted next to the register.

He focused on the *For Kids* and *Adults Only* sections. He figured the parents with families who drove in for summer vacation would want something to quiet the children down at night, while the crickets chirped, while they drank cold beer on the porch. He also figured the rougher crowd who hung around the biker bars and shot pool would want some additional entertainment after last call hit. He wanted to keep everyone happy, so all of the covers of the *Adults Only* tapes were obstructed by a laminated sheet of opaque plastic.

At a family friend's house during an annual summer barbecue, while explaining his business plan, a question was put his way. "What about DVDs?"

"DVDs?"

"Yeah, the things that look like CDs, but play movies."

He did some research that week. He made some phone calls. In the end, he decided it was a scam. Merchandise retailers and the electronics companies were testing how dumb the public was, enticing people to pay more money for the discs, for the laser

reading systems- everything was more expensive than VHS. Sure, the quality was allegedly better, but it was an obvious cash grab. It would all blow over. VHS was here to stay.

The loan went through, and everything went into action.

Sam Hightower, who hosted the annual barbecue, who asked the question about DVDs, was privately chastised by his wife. "Sam, you should never pass up a good opportunity to NOT say something." Sam itched at his beard and put the extra onion and tomato slices into a Tupperware container.

He looked down, away from Nicole's glare, "I, I didn't mean any harm." Sam wore a drab expression that belied his stocky build.

"Well, it doesn't matter what you meant." Nicole tore off a strip of Scotch tape and sealed the opened bags of potato chips. "Julie is worried sick about the amount of money they're about to put into this movie rental business. Just keep your mouth shut next time, alright?"

Sam nodded to his wife.

Things seemed to work out that first summer, and at the next barbecue in the Hightower's backyard, Sam was relieved to hear that "business was booming."

The next summer, "business was okay."

The summer after that, nobody brought up any talk of movies or rentals or discs or cassettes. And Nicole made sure to warn Sam about Julie's little girl, Lenore. Lenore showed up to the party with a nose ring, a lip ring, and a tattoo on her lower back. Sam knew not to ask about any of that.

On the way home from the barbecue, with Julie and Pete in the front seat and Lenore in the back, a conversation started.

"I'm moving in with Billy."

"Like hell you are."

A few weeks ago, Pete had driven over to Billy's house to find Lenore. There was a guitar and a microphone plugged into an amplifier somewhere out in the yard behind the house. Pete listened from the driveway to an awful warble of bass frequencies and hysterical screaming:

Grandmas stashed amphetamines

To save her soul

Let's move to Iowa

We can find God between the corn rows

Julie supported her husband. "That kid's on dope. He's a loser, Lenore. That ain't the kind of man to choose to take care of you." "He ain't no man at all. Look at his haircut."

Lenore shouted back, "Why? What makes a man? Because he didn't waste all his money opening up a movie rental store, right before DVDs took over? Because the bank isn't going to foreclose on his dumbass?"

Pete swerved the truck over to the shoulder of the road. "What did you say?"

Lenore defiantly replied, "You heard me."

"Get out. You can walk home. Or walk to that punk's house. Do whatever the hell you want. Ruin your life. You know where I stand."

Lenore shut the door behind her. She didn't say a word.

Pete pulled the car away.

"Are you going back to get her?" Julie asked after a minute.

"Wasn't planning on it."

"She's a child, Pete. She doesn't know anything. Come on. Let's go back and make peace."

"I ain't in a peace-making mood."

That night, as he was falling asleep, a hypnagogic jerk bounced Pete back into consciousness. It was late. Lenore had called and told them she would be home in the morning to pack up her clothes and a few other things from her room. Pete was on the couch. Julie had cried on the phone, protesting her daughter's decision, but it didn't seem like any progress would be made.

The next summer, Pete and Julie did not show up at the Hightower's barbecue.

Over the following years, Pete lost his daughter to California, his gas station to the bank, and his wife to a brain aneurysm. He lost his home, his truck, and his sense of purpose. He lost and lost some more. But Sam Hightower found a job for him at the power plant, as a third-shift supervisor, and Pete had moved into an apartment near the shopping center after spending a few months in Sam's basement to save money for the rent.

On an otherwise desultory Tuesday, in the employee cafeteria during a break, Sam handed Pete a Tupperware container full of chocolate chip cookies. Nicole had remembered the anniversary of Julie's passing, and she had baked something for Sam to bring to the plant to give to Pete.

"We're sorry about everything, Pete. Wish there was something more that we could do."

Pete glared at Sam and snarled, "Me too."

INVASIVE

"The only thing more patient than buckthorn is garlic mustard. See all these patches? With the white flowers?" He walked over to a clump of plants and uprooted them from the ground. "Pull these before June. All of them. It'll take you five or six years, because of seed dormancy, but if you get them every spring you'll eventually be rid of them."

Rob looked back towards the house, at the kitchen window overlooking the backyard, then sighed, "Alright."

Rolf Saunders, the owner and lead consultant for Saunders Tree & Landscape, threw the clump of plants onto Rob's lawn. "The roots release chemicals that inhibit other plants from growing. They are relentless."

"Alright."

"Look up there, next to the Virginia Creeper, see that?"

Rob squinted, "I think so."

Rolf looked quickly at the man in front of him, then jostled his focus back to the Norway maple. "That's oriental bittersweet. Here, let's follow this vine down," Rolf plodded over to the base of the tree, snatched a thick, woody vine, and followed it out into the surrounding dirt. About four feet away, the vine disappeared into the ground at a thick node. Rolf unsheathed a bush knife and cut at the node. Then he jerked at the node several times. A clump of roots sprung into the air and dusted his khaki shirt with dirt. "Orange roots. See those?"

Rob nodded.

"You need to take care of this, too. These will choke out a tree. Your eastern white cedars over there are almost gone because of it. If you clear it out, though, they might have a chance."

Rob made a step back away from Rolf towards the house.

Rolf snatched a red bandana out from a cargo pocket and began wiping his forehead and cheeks. "It's a nice piece of property. Previous owner didn't do much for it, though, in terms of upkeep. But if you get active this summer and keep it up for a few years, it'll be in good shape. Then you can plant some native species, in those areas there and there, or put in some raised beds. There's a lot of good space, good sunlight. And the willow is beautiful."

Rob nodded, "Thanks."

Rolf's cheeks flushed. He put the bandana back in his pocket. "So I'll draft up a proposal for the two ash trees by the powerline, and Jenny at the office will be in touch in terms of scheduling." Rob piped up, "How long do you think? In terms of getting on the schedule?"

"It's busy this time of year. Hopefully by the end of August. Maybe middle August if you're flexible and we get a cancellation."

Rob turned back to the house, the kitchen window, "Okay. If that's what it is we'll have to live with it. There's no danger now, though, right? With the powerlines?"

Rolf looked up the side of the house at the ash trees. "Nothing immediate. No. But mother nature, she can do whatever she wants- I can't make any guarantees."

Rob gulped. "I don't think I'll tell my wife that bit."

Rolf brushed at his khaki shirt and put his notebook back into his vest pocket. "I'll leave that up to you."

It seemed like a natural place to stop.

But Rob had a quizzical look on his face.

Rolf took off his work gloves. "Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

"That bucksweet and mustard and everything, those ones that you were talking about earlier- the invasive ones- do you have a service to get rid of those?"

Rolf scratched at his neck. "Typically, I just let the property owner know. It's not a service we generally provide, because it's easy enough to do by hand, on your own. You got any little ones?"

"A five-year-old."

"Perfect. You can set them up with the garlic mustard. There's nothing dangerous about any of it. And they're easy to pull. Good way to teach kids about nature. You, your wife, your kid- fun little way to spend an afternoon."

Rob looked back onto his property, then at the house. "Sure."



AFTERWORD

It's frowned upon in most literary circles to reveal your secrets, your hopes and dreams for how an audience might engage in your work. I'm not sure if it's more a matter of cheating, or simply poor taste. Luckily, I do not hold memberships to any literary circles.

I collected some notes on a few of the stories presented in this collection, and I wanted to share them with whomever might be interested.

JIMMY F- *What excited me about this story was the space between Nick's conversation with Duane and the contents of the letter. A surplus of questions emerge from that space. The principal question, for me at least- does the group break precedence and take up a collection, or does Nick have to sacrifice his own money to put into the envelop? If he does end up using his own money, why give the group any credit in the letter? There are different indications, and it can go either way. This was one of those stories where you can pose a very tangible question, without ever using a question mark.*

RIGHT OVER THERE- *Who signed off on a world in which an alert on your phone informs you that one of your loved ones has died? It's important to remember, this is a world we have all created, that we permit to exist.*

FIRST SHIFT- *I loathe unoriginal machismo energy. It is a despicable form of violence. Frat house violence. Back of the school bus violence. Posturing, shoving, barking out obscenities- there's nothing less intelligent, or less productive. But it's only one form of violence. Other forms of violence are necessary. Some forms of violence are beautiful. Nature is violent. A volcano erupting, a tornado touching down on the plains, a satellite image of a hurricane- awe inspiring. There's something intrinsically beautiful about focused energy. It lays the groundwork for change, for renewal. And maybe the most beautiful form of violence I've ever witnessed involves a mother protecting her child. It is so primal, so direct and uncompromising. To be a child, and feel defended by your mother- that feeling of reassurance and security is incomparable.*

GOOD MORNING- *I woke up one morning very early, clear minded and in the midst of a rainstorm with my son's arm rubbing my face. I looked over at his brown, tousled hair. I saw my wife, one of her arms wrapped over him. I stared at them and listened to the rain. I felt like crying. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever laid eyes on. The entire purpose of my life- right in front*

of me. Every existential tremor, every nerve, every ounce of displaced anger, every anxious moment- every problem I'd ever made of this world, it melted away from me. I'm surprised I didn't float out from the bedsheets. I watched over them and couldn't stop gawking over how gorgeous they were, how alive, how entwined in my life- they were my story. They were my purpose. I felt my mortality, I felt the precious gift of life, the tenuous aspect of it, one day in the future... this would be over, gone. Who knew where it would go. It broke my heart, but in the same breath it moved me to such a sense of presence, here in this experience, with them. This was the ballgame, the whole point- in that moment, it all came together. A Tuesday morning in April, a rainy day- it all came together.

TOO MUCH- There is always more suffering around us than we are willing to imagine, perhaps more than we are capable of imagining.

A PRAYER- The best stories are often told through omission. A mediocre reader is a better storyteller than the best writer. It's a fact. And another fact is boring people tell you everything about themselves, everything they are thinking, everything they are feeling. Those facts guided the editing of this story, in particular the ending. By omitting any details on Connie's thoughts, the reader would be able to feel the sensation of that ceiling fan pushing stale air around Connie's bedroom and be forced to enter into her world.

ANOTHER BEER- I hold a deep admiration for Chekov, and one aspect of his work I try to emulate is this synchronistic harmony he links between the internal and the external worlds. If a character is mired in stasis, they might be driving a cart along a road and find themselves stuck in a rut of mud. In this story, the ambulance in the distance is that synchronistic bridge.

BUTTERFLY- The American tradition is one of second chances, of comebacks, of the sinner's redemption. A friend of mine from Sweden once told me this tradition was his favorite aspect about America. "You are the land of the underdog, the loser who finally scores a win. This is cool." That's what my friend said to me. It was an enlightening observation from an outsider. And it made me feel proud. There are elements about our American society which ought to be attacked and chastised, but this was one to celebrate. We always root for the wayward traveler who is on the road back home, no matter how they got lost or why they fell into the ditch. And what I love about our brand of redemption is that it isn't dependent on God's forgiveness or a pledge of allegiance or a dip in mystic waters; it's dependent on love, our collective embrace.

We rally around the hopeless cause. We don't wait for permission; we show kindness to those the world has been unkind to.

INHERENT BIOLOGY- *In the face of such confusion, such chaos, such complete and absurd complexity- we still have to find a way to 'be right.' Our 'need to be right'-ness is one of our most debilitating hang-ups. As if anybody can know anything. As if any truth can be proven on a sheet of paper. As if there's a side worth fighting for, worth dying for. It's a pernicious defect of character, and it's a defect we all seem to share. In the end, is it more important to be right, or to be kind?*

RECORDING LIVE- *It's hard not to be small minded. It's hard not to be mired in pettiness. Whenever we are able to step outside of ourselves, whatever acts of compassion or kindness or understanding we are able to undertake- there are far more miracles happening around us than we are willing to grant.*

INTERSECTION- *We're unreliable historians. We think we remember the details, but we don't. Our mind curates our memories so we can fool ourselves, so we can believe we are a consistent person and possess a consistent personality. It's slightly terrifying how easily we can retool the past to fit our current models of who we think we are. But it's an important element to our humanity. Because we are the architects of our past, we always have the opportunity to change our future self. It's forever about the story...*