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The Dog Star: A Collection of Stories

A Thesis in English

by

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Table of Contents

1. Blood Red Roses.....	1
2. The Lady in the Yellow Jacket...	12
3. Cleveland Clams.....	13
4. The Cabin.....	22
5. Sermon of the Diamond.....	24
6. Schmilsson.....	35
7. All Ages.....	36
8. Cleaning.....	42
9. Home of the Braves.....	43
10. Ahoy.....	49
11. The Dog Star.....	50
12. Fishing, not Catching.....	60
13. The Treachery of Images.....	61
14. Turtles All the Way Down.....	77
15. That One Part of the Night.....	85
16. It's a Wonderful Job for People Who Have Never had a Nervous Breakdown but Always Wanted One.....	86

Blood Red Roses

Nicholas heard his first sea shanty by accident during his sophomore year of high school. He was watching TV on a Tuesday night and a concert called "Songs of the Sea" was on PBS. It featured groups of men and women dressed as sailors singing about whales, boats, and rum. He lived near the ocean and was struck by the songs and their melodies and decided right away that he needed to learn them all and sing them himself.

The next day Nicholas went down to the local marina to look for sailors. He walked down a ramp to the boats.

"Hey, you can't be down here. Members only," said a short man with a moustache and a sportscoat. Nicholas apologized to him and went back up the ramp. He saw someone in a captain's hat and blazer with a group of people walking towards him.

"Excuse me," he called out, "do you guys know 'Blow the Man Down'?"

They didn't respond and walked past Nicholas down the ramp where they were greeted by the man who had kicked him out. They got onto a dinghy which brought them out to a yacht named *Aquaholic*. Nicholas watched as they all sat down on the deck and started drinking wine and eating cheese while Jimmy Buffett played in the background.

When he wasn't in school, and sometimes when he was, Nicholas was looking up sea shanties and learning the words to them. He hummed them walking down the hallway and whistled them on the bus. When he played some of the songs for his friends, they all laughed and asked "what kind of weird music is this? You like this stuff?"

That didn't discourage him. He biked down to the fish pier to ask the fishermen what they knew about the songs. When he got there the boats were coming in for the day and unloading their catch. He walked up to a lobster boat named *Rachel* which had just finished unloading and was being washed down.

"Do you guys sing on the boat?" he asked.

"Do we what?" asked one of the lobstermen.

"Sing," he said again. "Like when you're out on the water working, do you guys all sing songs together?"

"No, we don't really sing, unless we're singing along to the radio. We like to listen to the classic rock station and sometimes when the Stones or Bowie comes on, a few of us will sing-along to it. Is that what you mean?"

"Not really," he said disappointed. "Thanks anyway." He got back on his bike and went home.

He convinced his younger brother Michael to learn the song "Spanish Ladies" with him. After spending the morning practicing inside, they went to the backyard. They started singing, but it didn't feel right to Nicholas. There was something missing. After looking around at the grass and trees, he decided it was water. There was no use trying to make these songs sound right on land, they were only meant to be sung on the sea. If there wasn't anyone else singing them out on the water right now, then he was going to have to be the one to do it. That meant they would need to build a boat.

He and Michael went to the library and found all the books they could on boat building. They studied them closely, choosing which ones would be the most useful for the project they were about to undertake. When the librarian came over and told them it was time for to lock up, Nicholas handed Michael one pile of books, grabbed another, and checked them out. They spent the rest of the night going over them at the dining room table together.

Nicholas decided it was best to build a 16-foot flat iron skiff sailboat with enough room to fit 3 comfortably and a small cabin up front for storage. Their Dad was a cabinetmaker, so there was scrap wood lying around the basement that they could use to start the project.

When they were getting ready to start building the boat, Cecilia from up the street walked by with her dog and stopped to ask what they were doing. She was a year younger than Nicholas at school, the grade in between him and Michael, and they had all known each other since she moved to the neighborhood 5 years ago. "We're building a boat" Nicholas said. "I want to take it out and sing some sea-shanties on the water. They just don't sound right here."

"Can I help?" she asked.

"Of course, we would love to have an extra set of hands."

She went home to drop off her dog and came back and got to work with them. It was getting dark when Nicholas and Michael's dad, Joseph, came home and had the same question as Cecilia. "Be careful," he told them. "Let me know if you need help."

For several weeks the three of them met up after school to work on the boat. While they worked, Nicholas tried to teach them the songs he had been learning. Cecilia loved the music

and caught on quickly. Pretty soon, she was bringing new songs she found to teach to Michael and Nicholas. On weekends Joseph would come out and help them, allowing things to progress quickly.

When they were done working for the day, Nicholas read books about sailing from the library to learn the basics and started practicing tying knots with a piece of rope he found in the garage.

Their mother, Chris, watched all of this happen from the window, getting increasingly worried as the building continued and it became clear they were actually going to try and take it out onto the water very soon. One day, she came home with life vests and a flare gun that she handed to Nicholas. "You're going to need these. Also, I signed you up for a boat safety class with the Coast Guard. It's on Wednesdays for the next four weeks."

"Mom! That's going to take up our construction time," said Nicholas. "I've read all the books in the library about this, we'll be fine out there."

"You're going. You're all going if you want to take this thing out on the water."

As the boat started to take shape, the smell of freshly cut wood and the sounds of hammering and sawing became something they all looked forward to. When they stopped to take a break one afternoon, the sawdust was heavy on the ground and created a haze in the workspace.

"You know, your great grandfather was a sailor," said Joseph.

"I didn't know that," said Michael.

"He was in the Navy and after he got out he worked for a while as a merchant marine.

He sailed all over the world. He used to sing some of the songs you guys like when he was around the house.”

“Wow,” said Cecilia. “That sounds amazing.”

“He had great stories of all the places he went and the people he met,” said Joseph. “He used to tell me what it was like to be out in the middle of the ocean, away from everything.”

“Did you ever go out sailing with him?” asked Nicholas.

“No, we didn’t have a boat to go out on when he was alive, and I never thought of building one like you all did.”

Joseph got up and walked over to the boat, inspecting it closely. He ran his hand along the side of it, feeling the curve in the wood. He turned back to the three of them sitting on the ground.

“Working on this boat with you guys, I think I understand why he loved it so much. There’s something special about it. I guess the ocean is in our family’s blood.”

After the hull was finished, Cecilia started sewing a sail. They painted the bottom of the boat red, the sides blue, and the inside white. On Wednesday nights, they took a break from building to attend the Coast Guard classes, and although they wouldn’t admit it, they learned a lot.

Along with the sail, Cecilia sewed three nautical flags that stood for the letters “C,” “N,” and “M,” to fly on the mast.

“What should we name the boat?” asked Michael.

“It needs to be something catchy,” said Cecilia.

“I think I have an idea,” said Nicholas.

He painted the name *Blood Red Roses* on the transom after his favorite shanty. The songs had been growing on everyone as they worked, and together they had quite a catalog that they could sing.

The sky was pink on the morning of their maiden voyage. After lunch, they loaded the boat onto the back of Joseph's truck, stopped to pick up Cecilia, and went down to the marina. Before taking it off the truck, they blessed the boat by smashing a bottle across the bow. Chris had them all get together for a picture, then unloaded a cooler with food and water, three sweaters, and a lantern she had gotten at a camping store. "You never know what you'll encounter out there, better to be prepared."

The three of them carried the boat down the ramp, and as they were putting it in the water, the short man with a moustache that Nicholas saw before ran towards them.

"Excuse me? Excuse me! You cannot be here. This is member's only, and I know you're not members."

Nicholas, Michael, and Cecilia got in quickly and pushed off and out to the harbor. The man stood on the dock yelling at them as they laughed and got ready to raise their sail. While passing through the docked boats, Nicholas noticed the *Aquaholic* again with the same people sitting on the deck listening to the same Jimmy Buffett song. "Did they ever even leave?" he thought to himself. "Why have a boat if you are just going to sit on it in the harbor." The people on board gave them a funny look as they sailed by.

Even with all the reading he had done, sailing a boat was a completely new experience for Nicholas. Being on the water was exciting and terrifying at the same time. He tried to

remember what he had read about, raised the jib, grabbed the tiller, and began taking the boat towards the horizon. The wind wasn't too strong allowing for a gentle ride.

As they got further out, the swells started to get a little bigger and the wind a little stronger. They looked back towards land and saw thick gray clouds rolling towards them. Even with all of the preparation they had put in learning about sailing, storms remained unpredictable. Nicholas tried to turn the boat around, but the swells were getting too big, and they were unable to point back towards shore without risking a wave getting over the side of the boat. Michael went into the cabin and grabbed the life vests, handing them out for everyone to put on.

"Everyone hang on," Nicholas yelled over the wind gusts. He was scared but tried hard not to show it.

The storm was quick, no longer than 10 minutes long, but it was fierce. It pushed them further out than they had ever intended to go. Michael and Cecilia ducked into the cabin while Nicholas stayed out to try to steer the boat as best as he could. Lightning strikes and thunder claps filled the air and waves surrounded them, rocking the boat. The wind whipped and cut a slash through the sail making it useless. After the storm passed, a calm came, and the boat sat still. They could no longer see the shoreline in the distance. Nicholas dropped the anchor. "Where's the flare gun?" Cecilia asked.

"Here," said Nicholas, reaching into the cabin and handing it to Cecilia.

"Let me do it," said Michael, grabbing for the gun and knocking it into the water.

They took out their cell phones, but none of them had service being so far from the land. They were stuck and there weren't any other boats around. It was late in the afternoon,

and the sun was setting in an hour. They started yelling, but no one heard them. Michael stood up, rocking the boat and Nicholas yelled at him to sit back down. Tensions were high, and morale was low. After they accepted that they would be out there for a while, they took out the cooler and the lantern and passed around sandwiches and water. They ate them silently.

After they were done, Cecilia said "Want to sing some songs now Nick?"

"I'm not really in the mood to sing anymore." He was feeling bad that he had gotten them stranded. He was questioning all of it now, the shanties, the boat. He wasn't really a sailor, just a kid who had read some books. He almost got his brother and friend killed, and it was clear no one was coming to get them any time soon.

"I guess we better get comfortable," said Michael. They put on their sweaters and took off their life jackets to use as pillows.

That night it was a full moon and they saw more stars than they ever had before.

"I'm sorry about this you guys," said Nicholas. "I shouldn't have dragged you two into this with me. It was a stupid idea. I don't even know what I was thinking when I came up with it."

"Are you kidding me?" said Cecilia. "This has been the most fun I've had in a long time. We built a boat, and it's still floating, even after a big storm."

"Yeah," said Michael, "I can't wait to tell everyone about this at school."

"It feels so stupid now, to build a boat just to sing some songs that nobody even knows anymore. It doesn't even matter."

"It matters to you," said Michael. "And me."

"It matters to all of us," said Cecilia. "And it mattered to your great grandfather. Maybe the reason people don't sing them is because they don't know them. And no one will ever know them if someone like you doesn't learn them first."

Nicholas didn't respond. He was looking at the night sky and the moon reflecting on the water.

"I think I get what Dad was talking about when we were building the boat now," he said. "There is something really special and beautiful about this."

"Let's get some rest," said Michael.

They woke with the rising sun in the morning. The sky was blue, and a light fog hung over the water. Everyone had slept despite the tight quarters.

"What's our plan for getting rescued?" asked Michael.

"I guess we just hope another boat comes by," said Nicholas.

"I'm sure we will see someone soon," said Cecilia.

"Mom is going to be so mad," said Michael.

It was quiet for a minute as they took some time to look around. Then Cecilia started to sing "My dear old mother, she said to me..."

Michael joined in "Go down, ye blood red roses, go down."

"My dearest son come home from sea...Come on Nick, join us."

He started in "Go down, ye blood red roses go down."

They sang together "Ohhh ye pinks and poses! Go down ye blood red roses, go down."

Well it's 'round Cape Horn you've got to go
Go down, ye blood red roses, go down

For that is where them whalefish blow
Go down, ye blood red roses, go down

Oh, ye pinks and posies!
Go down, ye blood red roses, go down

The song was interrupted by the sound of a motor approaching them. Nicholas looked and saw the *Rachel* coming their way. The lobsterman he talked to at the pier slowed down and pulled alongside them.

“You guys alright? We were hauling up traps when we heard you and we came over to see if you needed help.”

“We’re stranded,” said Nicholas. “We got caught in the storm yesterday and our sail ripped. Any way you can take us back to shore?”

“You’re those kids that built the boat,” said the lobsterman. “A lot of people have been looking for you guys. The Coast Guard started searching last night when you didn’t come back. I’ll radio them now and let everyone know you’re all okay. What are your names?”

“I’m Nicholas, this is my brother Michael, and my friend Cecilia.”

“I’m Anthony. Welcome aboard the *Rachel*.”

They were saved. After tying the sailboat to the lobster boat, the three of them got on board. The crew got them blankets and water and they traveled back towards shore.

They sat together looking at the lobster traps and the other fishermen on board who were still busy working.

Nicholas got up and walked to the helm of the boat.

“Anthony?”

“What’s up kid?”

“Can you turn on the radio?”

“Oh yeah, sure. I hope you don’t mind some classic rock.”

He turned a knob, and a David Bowie song started playing over the boat’s speakers.

Everyone on the boat started singing together as they made their way back to the dock.

The Lady in the Yellow Jacket

I'm with my Dad at the ballpark in the line for beer and we're talking about the time the two of us were here with my sister and the woman in a yellow jacket buzzed over to us and asked to see our IDs, worried that my Dad might be buying his underage children beer. Everyone was of age, so no one got in trouble, but it felt weird how she singled us out.

We get to the front of the beer line and I hand my ID over to the vendor. She inspects it and says, "this is expired you know." I try to explain.

"I know, I went to get a new one and I didn't have the right document, so I have a temporary one I just didn't bring it..."

She cuts me off. "I can't sell you beer." My dad and I look at each other and then she points to him.

"I can sell you two beers though, and whatever you do with that second beer is up to you. You just can't do anything in front of me."

I walk away and stand near a pole while he finishes the transaction. He walks over with two beers, hands me one, and we head back to our seats. We keep an eye out for that lady in the yellow jacket as we sip them.

Cleveland Clams

*But I expect the real changes to start
When I finally get my Cleveland Heart
They're made to take a bashing
And never lose their passion*

-Jackson Browne

It's starting to snow as I walk to the bus stop. They're big snowflakes, not the kind that stick to the ground, but the ones that melt on contact and leave the pavement wet. It's different than rain. It doesn't wash everything away, but cleanses it, like splashing cold water on your face.

I'm catching the bus because Stacey wants me to meet her at the diner around the corner from her apartment. She loves the diner, but I hate it. The bread always comes out overtoasted and under-buttered, and the coffee is gritty. She claims the place has "good vibes" and that she can feel the spirits of all those who have eaten breakfast there before her as she sits at the counter.

We got back into town yesterday after visiting her family in Cleveland. It was the first time I met them, and it didn't go well. I figure she wants to meet me this morning to break up. This makes the walk to the bus feel longer than the three blocks that it is. It's early on a Saturday so not many people are out, just a few walking their dogs or taking out the trash. I take my time and try to follow the snowflakes as they fall from above my head all the way to the ground. I do this for as long as I can until I give in and finish the walk as the bus is pulling out of the stop right before mine.

I first met Stacey on a bus. We both got on with friends on a Friday night. Some of my friends knew her friends and they started talking. I noticed Stacey and thought she was cute

and was excited when plans changed, and we decided to all go out together. The bar we chose was a divey place, known for darts and free popcorn more than dancing and mixed drinks. Everyone else went off to play pool and we ended up in a booth together, just the two of us, splitting a pitcher of beer.

“Where are you from?” I asked her.

“Cleveland.”

“I’ve never been, what’s it like?”

“It’s about what you’d expect. Cold in the winter, hot in the summer, big lake. If you’ve been to the Midwest before, you’ve been to Cleveland. What about you?”

“I’m from here. Well not Boston, but close to here, about an hour away.”

“I like Boston. I came for school and didn’t want to leave, so I didn’t.”

I got nervous that the conversation was stalling and tried to think of something quickly to keep it moving.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah of course,” she said, pouring herself another glass of beer.

“Close your eyes.”

She put the beer down and closed them.

“Okay, now imagine you’re a sea creature.”

“Okay...”

“What kind of sea creature is it?”

“Hmmm...I’m picturing myself as a clam.”

“A clam?”

“Yeah, one with a pearl.”

“Clams don’t have pearls. You’re thinking of oysters.”

“Not in Cleveland. Cleveland clams have pearls.”

“I’ll take your word for it. You’re the only Cleveland clam I’ve ever met before.”

“Now can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Do you want to get out of here and go someplace else?”

“Yes,” I said. “Absolutely.”

We left and went to a place down the street that was playing old soul and R&B records from the 60s and 70s. We danced for the rest of the night and exchanged numbers before heading home. I wonder if the bus I’m getting on now is the same one that we met on that night.

Two days later, we went out for coffee together. The conversation was easy, as it had been the first night, and we kept seeing each other. I started staying over at her apartment almost every night. After we had been dating for a year, I bought her a necklace with a silver clam shell charm on it. It made her laugh when she opened it, but she never wore it. We talked about moving in together and started to look at apartments around the city. At the end of October, she invited me to spend Thanksgiving with her family in Cleveland. I accepted the invitation and we boarded a plane the Tuesday before.

Stacey is the second oldest of five children ranging in age from 16 to 27. I was nervous but hopeful going into the holiday, excited to meet the people I had heard so much about. Stacey describes herself as the black sheep of the family, the only one who has left Ohio. She

loves her family but is trying to forge a new life for herself away from them. I was a part of that new life, so the pressure was on for me to impress them.

The bar fight really wasn't my fault. On Wednesday night, Stacey, her older brother Brett, her younger sister Emily, and I went out to a local bar. We were dropped off by their two youngest siblings, Greg and Penny.

The bar was packed with people that they knew from high school. I was mostly standing off to the side, minding my own business, only going over to Stacey when she signaled me to come and meet someone that she knew. There was a room at the back of the bar that people were going in and out of and Stacey came over and told me to go in with her.

"It's this kid Mark's birthday. Every year, the night before Thanksgiving, they have a cake here. It's a tradition."

I followed her and her siblings into the room and found a spot by the wall to stand so I wouldn't be bothering anyone. After a few minutes, a short guy with gelled hair came up to me and said, "who the fuck are you?"

I tried to explain, pointing to Stacey, trying to get her attention. He didn't seem to understand.

"I asked you who you are, why are you coming in here, crashing my party?"

"You must be Mark," I said.

"Oh, you're a funny guy too? You think it's funny to mess with me?"

Emily came over and tried to lead him away, putting her arm around his shoulder.

"Mark, leave him alone, he's here with Stacey. I'm sorry Roy, Mark's been partying a little too hard."

Mark broke free of Emily and came at me again.

“I want this guy out of here!”

Brett stepped in between us, trying to calm him down. Mark punched Brett in the face, and he fell to the floor. I had never been in a fight before, so acting on instinct, I grabbed onto Mark’s shirt and shoved him backwards until we hit a table. The next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground too, next to Brett. The police came. No one was arrested, but they did escort Brett and me home in the back of the cruiser.

Greg and Penny followed behind with Stacey and Emily. We got inside and tried to explain what happened to Stacey’s parents. Brett and I nursed our wounds with bags of frozen peas, meant for the meal the next day.

“Why didn’t you just leave the room?” Stacey asked me when she found us in the kitchen.

“You were all in there,” I said, “I didn’t know anyone else.”

“Mark is a hot head, you should have told him that Brett.”

Brett took the peas off of his eye. “How is this my fault? I was trying to diffuse the situation.”

“And you did a great job with that now didn’t you? I’m going to bed.” Stacey went upstairs, and I didn’t see her again until the morning.

She was still upset at breakfast. Later, as Stacey helped prep Thanksgiving dinner I sat in the other room watching football with her dad and Emily.

“Stacey can be like this,” she said. “You probably know that already, but she’ll come around. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Stacey’s always been a lover, not a fighter,” said her dad. “I know it wasn’t your fault, but violence upsets her. She won’t even watch the Browns with us.”

Stacey came into the doorway. “Can I talk with you?”

Her dad and Emily shifted uncomfortably on the couch as I got up and followed her into the other room.

She pulled me into a hug. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just feel bad and embarrassed and it scared me to see you in a fight like that. I just wanted this week to be perfect and for you to meet my family and get along, and I just feel like that ruined it. And it wasn’t you. But I just don’t know how to handle it.”

“I’m sorry too, I should have just walked away. I promise, I won’t start any more bar fights when we get back to Boston. Or ever again.”

She squeezed me tight and we went into the dining room to sit down for Thanksgiving dinner.

“Everything looks delicious, Mrs. Croft.”

“Thank you, Roy, but I can’t take all of the credit. It was a team effort.”

Mr. Croft said grace and cut the turkey, handing out large slabs to everyone at the table. We passed the sides around, and someone cracked a joke about the peas, saying they hoped they weren’t eating last night’s ice packs. Things started to feel normal again.

“So, Roy,” said Mr. Croft, “Do you live with any roommates in Boston?”

“I do, I’ve got two of them right now. They’re friends from college. They’re okay, but the roommate I have lined up for next year I’m pretty excited about,” I said, turning to Stacey and nudging her on the arm.

“Oh?” said Mr. Croft, raising his eyebrows.

Stacey turned to me and gave me a look that sent a chill down my spine.

“But I thought you were moving back here,” said Mrs. Croft, turning to Stacey. “Aren’t you applying to Case Western for graduate school?”

“I am, but...”

“So, you two are moving in together? I think we should have a chat after dinner Roy,” said Mr. Croft, focused on me.

“That won’t be necessary, Dad,” said Stacey.

“I want to know what his intentions are, moving in with my daughter before even proposing to her. We just met this boy and now we find out he’s going to be living with you?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I didn’t mean to...”

“It’s good you told us,” said Mrs. Croft.

Penny and Greg kept their heads down and continued eating their dinner. Emily and Brett looked at each other, trying to come up with a way to give us an out.

“You know, there’s this great new steakhouse that opened in Columbus,” said Brett.

“We should try it next time you come down for a visit...”

“Brett, please. Can’t you see we’re in the middle of a conversation?” said Mrs. Croft.

“I can definitely see that,” said Brett.

“So, will you be applying to graduate schools in the Boston area?” she asked Stacey.

“I don’t know,” she said, “I don’t even know if I want to go to grad school.”

“That’s always been your plan” said Mr. Croft. “Not even a plan, your dream! Are you changing your dreams because of your relationship?”

I tried my hardest to disappear. I sank so far down into the chair, I was eye level with the gravy boat. The questions continued through the rest of dinner. Dessert was very quiet. I went downstairs to the basement where I was sleeping on a pull-out couch and I could hear Stacey talking with her parents for the rest of the evening. I kept thinking about going up to join the conversation but decided against it. We talked for so long about moving in together, I didn’t know it was supposed to be a secret. She had never mentioned graduate school to me before and I didn’t even know what she was interested in studying.

Our flight was early the next morning, and Brett drove us to the airport. He patted me on the shoulder and said, “good luck,” before leaving.

The plane ride back was quiet, neither of us saying much to the other. I felt bad for her. There were a lot of expectations and pressure that she had been dealing with.

We got in a cab together, but when we got to her apartment, she told me she wanted to be alone. I was unpacking in my apartment when she texted me to meet her at the diner the next morning.

I look out the bus window and notice the familiar buildings of her neighborhood. The snow stopped, and the city was starting to wake up. Families with strollers walk by and lines for brunch form outside of restaurants.

I get off at my stop and walk the two blocks to the diner. The sense of dread is still there, but with the sun coming out, I start to feel a little lighter. When I get to the door, I take a

deep breath and push it open. I see Stacey sitting in a booth towards the back. She looks up from her coffee and smiles at me. She's wearing the clam necklace.

The Cabin

“Well, this is it.”

He pulled the car over in a clearing. About 100 yards away was an open field with a building in the middle of it. Calling it a cabin would be generous.

“You’re joking right? Dad, you drove us 3 hours and this is all there is?”

“Wait until you see it, you’re going to be blown away.”

“Honey,” said his wife, unbuckling her seatbelt, “this isn’t what you showed me when we agreed to buy it.”

“I know, I know. This isn’t the one that we last looked at, it’s a different one that has some more land. The cabin isn’t as updated, it needs some work, but that’s a family project right there!”

“Wait, you didn’t buy the one we discussed? How much was this one? Please tell me you got a deal.”

“I did. I promise. It was about \$5,000 less.”

“Only \$5,000? The other one was all ready to move in to! We could start coming up on weekends right away. Now we need to spend those days working?”

“Honey, listen, I understand your frustration, and I am realizing now that I should have run this by you, but I didn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

He tried to take her hand, but she shook his away. The two of them got out of the car. Their son stayed behind with his headphones in and didn’t notice them leave. They started walking through the tall grass. As they got closer to the cabin, it looked worse and worse. The

porch was lopsided, the roof was full of moss, and the windows were boarded up. A squirrel sat on the front step, watching them as they walked by.

“I’m not going in there,” she told him.

“You don’t have to, that’s not the surprise.”

They kept walking towards the tree line. They reached the woods started down a path that had already been cut for them. They heard chickadees and woodpeckers in the trees and were overcome by the smell of pine needles and fallen leaves.

“It’s just a little further,” he said.

She walked a few steps behind him with her arms crossed. It got brighter up ahead. The trees thinned, and the ground got rocky. The smell of pine needles gave way to the smell of salt. As they walked on, she could hear waves crashing.

They reached the end of the rocks and were standing on a cliff overlooking the ocean. To their right was a staircase leading down to a sandy beach.

Their son ran up behind them, “What the hell, you guys just left me...” He stopped talking when he saw the view.

“I’m sorry I didn’t run this by you,” he said to his wife, “but it was too good to pass up and I had to act quick...”

She held up her hand to stop him from talking and took a deep breath of the ocean breeze.

She put her arms around the two of them. “I think we can make this work.”

Sermon of the Diamond

Father John stood with his arms outstretched in front of the church. The crowd looked antsy, anticipating his next words.

“Mass has ended, go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

“Thanks be to God,” they replied, some of them not waiting for the procession out before leaving.

The organist started playing and the music echoed through the lofted ceilings. John left the altar and walked down the aisle to the back of the church where he stood waiting to say good night to the congregants as they left. The sunset shone through the stained-glass windows and cast colorful light on the white walls and caramel colored pews. It was an old church, small enough that even now, as the crowds that attended the weekly masses dwindled, it still felt full to John when he preached.

He glanced at his watch. It was 7:00pm and first pitch was in fifteen minutes. Everyone filed out shaking his hand and wishing him a nice evening. When the church was empty, he changed out of his vestments, turned off the lights, and walked across the street to the rectory. He went into the kitchen and turned on the radio right as the game started.

The rectory, like the church, was old and small. It had two bedrooms, a kitchen, a small living room, and a bathroom. John hadn't done much to decorate since moving in a year ago, mostly using what was left behind by the previous pastor. His kitchen table was metal and from the 1950s, with matching chairs upholstered in green vinyl. The walls of the kitchen were covered in a yellow floral wallpaper with dark stained wood cabinets. The curtains on the

windows were a gift sewn by a churchgoer after she walked by and saw there were none. They were cornflower blue with yellow dots that matched the color of the wallpaper.

On the wall were two pictures, one of St. Rita, who some consider to be the patron saint of baseball because of her inclusion in the Dennis Quade movie, *The Rookie*, and one of Father John standing with the baseball team he coached at his previous parish that won the local Catholic league championship. St. Sebastian's did not have a team. When he brought up starting one, he was told that it would be best to avoid activities where he would be alone in the presence of children. The church had a past, and though many decades had gone by, the wounds were still fresh in the community.

John made sure that every Sunday night from April through October he was able to listen to a baseball game on the radio. The new 6pm mass on Sunday was popular, and it almost made him give up this ritual. So far though, he had been able to finish the mass and make it back to his kitchen just in time for the beginning of the game. He heated up leftovers in the microwave and sat down at the table with his scorebook, making careful marks for each hit, out, and run.

It began several years ago with Ellen, a former parishioner. She lived alone and after she confided her cancer diagnosis with John, he made a point of visiting her on Sunday evenings. She loved baseball and they would sit together listening to the game, eating take out that John brought over. She kept score during every game and taught John how to do the same. Sometimes, they would stop listening all together and just talk for hours, the game acting as an excuse to get together. After she passed, he continued the tradition in her honor.

Listening to baseball games with Ellen reignited his love for the game. He found it was a good way to connect with people, something he otherwise had trouble doing.

As he stood beneath the stained glass after mass the following week wishing the congregants a good night, he was approached by one named Colin.

“Father, you like baseball, right?”

He was used to being asked this question. What usually followed was an offer for tickets to attend a game for free. John prepared to recite the speech he gave whenever tickets were offered to him.

“I do,” he said, “and I appreciate the offer, but I can’t accept.”

Colin looked at him puzzled. It took him a second to respond.

“Oh, I don’t have tickets. I have a team. I’m bringing a team to Arlington. The Arlington Alewives. We’re starting up in a few weeks. It’s just a summer league. Starts in June and ends the first week of August. I was wondering if I could advertise the team in the bulletin?”

John was intrigued. He knew all about summer baseball leagues, short seasons that helped college ballplayers stay in shape and get seen by scouts.

“Of course, let me get you in touch with the office and you’ll have an ad within the next couple of weeks.”

“Thanks, Father. I figured it would be fun for some of the families to come by. We’re playing right down the street by the YMCA.”

“That’s great, I’ll make sure to come by as well. The Alewives?”

“Like the fish.”

“It rolls off the tongue. Go Alewives!” said John.

He had not been to a baseball game in person in many years. As a child, his father would take him and his sister to the ballpark often. It was at a game with them that John decided he wanted to become a priest. It was a beautiful summer evening and as the sun went down beyond the outfield, the sky turned a wonderful mix of red, yellow, purple, and blue. The team they were rooting for was down by one, and the next batter hit a two-run homerun to put them in the lead. As the players rounded the bases under the watercolor sky, the perfectly kept green grass surrounding them, John hugged his father and sister and high fived with the other fans around him. He felt a connection to everyone in the stadium in that moment, a love for the players on both teams, the umpires, the people selling hot dogs and peanuts up and down the aisles, and all the other fans there. He knew that this is what real, selfless love was about, and that the only other time he felt something like this was every week in church. He decided that becoming a priest gave him the opportunity to feel this way all the time.

On opening night for the Alewives, Father John walked down the street to the ballpark. An organ was playing, and the smell of popcorn and hot dogs wafted through the air. The ballpark was built in the 1930s and had not been the consistent home to a team for many years. There were concrete bleachers that ran the entire length of the first base line with arched entryways on the street level. The old outfield fence made of wood had been patched in a few places with a paint color that didn't match the original. Small, quick improvements were made so it would be ready for the season including the addition of a snack stand and bleachers behind home plate. Above the snack stand was a small room for the PA announcer and organist.

John bought a bag of peanuts and a hat. It was red with a cartoon alewife herring holding a baseball bat on it. As he walked from the snack stand to the bleachers, he stopped to look at a mural painted behind the home dugout. It was of a group of fish similar to the one on his new hat playing baseball under water. The field was surrounded by kelp and the stands were filled with turtles, lobsters, and other fish watching intently.

A family from the church came up behind him as he looked.

“Hi Father John,” said the young boy, Howie. He was with his parents and younger sister Gina, the first child John baptized at the church after he arrived.

“I didn’t know you left the church,” said Howie.

John chuckled. “Occasionally they let me out.”

“Sorry Father,” said Chris, the boy’s dad. He and his wife Joan came to mass every Sunday.

“Not at all,” said John, “it’s nice to see some familiar faces in the crowd.”

“I forgot how much you like baseball,” said Chris.

“Look at that, you even got a hat,” said Joan.

“Yes, I think it matches my collar nicely.”

“Where are you sitting?” asked Chris.

“I haven’t decided yet, I’m just taking in the art right now,” he said, pointing to the mural.

“Well we’re up behind home plate if you want some company during the game.”

“Thank you, that is very kind.”

“Say goodbye to Father John, Howie,” said Joan.

“Bye, see you at church.”

John waved and watched them make their way up the stairs to their seats behind home plate. He then turned and went in the opposite direction to the bleachers on the first base line. He wanted to sit alone for the game so he could focus on it and keep score. He found a seat in the top row, took out his scorebook, and settled in.

The next morning, Father John was having coffee and checking emails on his phone. He opened the weekly “Bishop’s Bulletin,” sent out by the diocese. One of the announcements caught Father John’s eye: “Local Catholic Radio Seeking New Programming.”

The AM Catholic radio station’s main programming was recordings of mass, church music, and talk shows with priests and nuns. Father John had been a guest on the station several times. The email said they were looking to freshen up what the station played, and any priest was welcomed to submit their idea.

John thought about all of the baseball he listened to on the radio. It was his preferred way of taking in a game. He loved the sound of the crowd in the background, the pacing of the announcers, and the way the description of the game allowed him to envision the action on the field in his head. He stood up with his coffee and walked to the window, pulling back the curtains and looking down the street towards the field where he attended the game the previous night. He went back to the table, got his phone, and started tapping out an email response to the station. John’s idea for new programming was baseball with the station becoming the official radio broadcast of the Arlington Alewives. He would be the one announcing the games.

After not hearing back immediately, John began to worry. He checked his email constantly looking for a definitive yes or no to his idea, but nothing came. A week after he first responded, he was back at his kitchen table when his phone rang. It was the Bishop calling him from his personal line.

“Hello Bishop O’Brien, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Father John, I see you want to start putting baseball games on the church radio station?”

John paused to gather his thoughts. He did not expect he would have to talk about this idea directly with the Bishop.

“Yes, I think it’s a great opportunity for new programming, to reach a different audience.”

“What does baseball have to do with the Catholic church?”

Father John thought for a moment. “Both of them have organ music, and people call ballparks ‘cathedrals.’ I think being a baseball fan is a little like being a Catholic. There is belief and trust in a higher power. In baseball, that higher power just happens to be a manager.”

“John, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I can tell you’re passionate about this. Would it be you announcing the games?”

“Yes, I think I would make a great fit.”

“And the team is on board?”

“Not yet, I wanted to get your blessing before I talked to them about it.”

“See what they have to say and let me know.”

The bishop hung up and John let out a deep breath. He walked over to the portrait of St. Rita and said a little prayer to her. In addition to being the unofficial patron saint of baseball, she was also the patron saint of the impossible.

That night after mass, Father John stopped Colin on his way out.

“Colin, do you have a radio station that broadcasts the Alewives games?”

“No,” he said, “but we would love to get the games on the air. Do you know someone?”

“How do you feel about Catholic radio?”

Colin looked confused. “The church has a radio station?”

“It’s AM, but yes. They are looking for new programming right now and I suggested that broadcasting games could be part of it. I would do the play-by-play for the team. I’ve already talked to the bishop and he is on board as long as you are.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea. Thank you for thinking of us.”

“Great,” said John, elated but trying not to show it too much. “I’ll be in touch. Can’t wait to get started.”

He showed up to the ballpark an hour before the first game that was being broadcasted. They gave him a spot behind home plate on the roof above where the PA announcer and organist sat. From his perch above the field, he could see the bell tower of St. Sebastian’s down the street. The first thing he unpacked was his scorebook and pencil which he placed on the table next to the broadcasting equipment. Once it was all set up, he settled in and heard the producer count down over his headset.

“Three, two, one...you’re live, Father.”

“Hello and welcome to Alewives Field for tonight’s matchup between the Newport Clams and your Arlington Alewives. I’m Father John here with you on this gorgeous night for baseball as the Alewives look to extend their win streak to four games...”

It came naturally to him. He knew the game so well and could explain every detail of what was happening on the field to the listening audience.

In the eighth inning, the Alewives were down two runs with two outs and a man on second. Their cleanup hitter came to bat. “Here’s the pitch. It’s a long high drive, deep to right center...and it’s gone! I hope they gave that ball last rites, because it is not coming back.”

The Alewives won the game and John was both excited and relieved to have made it through. He couldn’t wait to do it again the next night.

People tuned in to hear the “Play Calling Priest.” He became a sensation around the town and the country, getting a profile on the Today Show. More people were showing up to mass and everyone listened to what he had to say during his sermons. His voice, now recognizable, seemed to resonate more with the people than it did before.

John didn’t travel with the team to call away games and the station didn’t broadcast games on Sundays. He went to the games he wasn’t broadcasting in person and sat with the families he knew from St. Sebastian’s. He enjoyed getting to know everyone better and started to feel more like a member of the community.

He wasn’t there for the last game of the season. It was a playoff game away in Connecticut. The team lost in extra innings, ending their season in the semi-finals. John went to the stadium that night with other fans to greet the team as they got off the bus. He shook the

players hands and thanked them for a great season, telling them all he would see them next summer.

During the fall and winter, John stayed busy with the return of CCD classes and Christmas. After the New Year, things slowed down, and he found himself anticipating the next baseball season. He added décor to his home, an Alewives pennant in the kitchen and a team signed baseball on his bureau. As February ended and MLB spring training games began in March, John was ready to broadcast again.

He stopped Colin after mass to talk about the upcoming season.

“Is the team all set for this year?” he asked.

“Starting to be. We have some upgrades we’re making to the stadium and we’re trying to find some players to round out the roster. We should make another playoff run. We’ll miss you though.”

John raised his eyebrow. “Miss me?”

Colin looked surprised. “Did they not tell you?”

“Tell me what?” asked John.

Colin took a deep breath. “The station got in touch and said they won’t be carrying the games this summer. I’m sorry. I figured they let you know.”

Father John turned a pale white and felt lightheaded. He sat down in a pew.

“Are you okay Father?” asked Colin.

He didn’t answer right away. He looked up, surprised to see Colin there. “What? I mean, yes. I’ll be fine. Will you excuse me?”

He went back to the rectory and called the bishop.

“Why am I only hearing now that the radio station won’t be broadcasting the games anymore?”

“John, please calm down. I can hear the anger in your voice. There is a new program director over at the station and they decided they want to refocus the programming to be more religious. A lot of time was devoted to baseball last summer, and I am sure you had fun, but we need to be sure we are getting the word of God out there. It’s nothing personal.”

Father John held back tears. So many thoughts were rushing through his mind at that moment. He wanted to fight to keep the broadcasts, to tell the Bishop what they really meant to him. In the end though, he knew it wouldn’t do anything. The decision had been made. He sighed and said, “I understand. Thank you.”

He hung up and let go of the tears. He leaned against the kitchen table and saw his scorebook sitting on the counter next to the radio. He picked it up and threw it against the wall.

Father John still went to all of the Alewives games the next season. You could see him in the last row on the first base side, fish hat on his head, scorebook in hand. People came up to him to say how much they enjoyed his broadcasts and how they missed hearing them. He’d thank them and say how much of a gift it was that he was given the opportunity to share his passion on the radio. Sometimes his eyes would drift to the roof above the PA booth and he would just stare at the spot for a while, missing the action on the field.

Schmilsson

Rhonda sits down at the table with two cups of coffee, handing one of them to Sheila.

“How’s Reggie doing?” she asks.

Sheila sighs. “He wears his bathrobe all the time now like he’s goddamn Harry Nilsson or something.”

Rhonda takes a sip of her coffee. “Harry Nilsson. Is that the Playboy guy?”

“No, he’s a singer.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” says Sheila. “You know, ‘I can’t live if living is without you’? You’re thinking of Hugh Hefner.”

“Oh right. I know who you’re talking about now.”

Sheila leans back in her chair. “So, he wears this bathrobe every single day and he walks around in it, even outside to get the mail. And the thing is, he wears the bathrobe, but I don’t think he’s actually showered for about a week now.”

All Ages

The first thing that Tom noticed as he went up the stairs and into the main hall was the blast of warm air as he opened the doors. It was January, but it felt like summer in the room. People were packed in, standing shoulder to shoulder to watch the band on stage. The second thing that he noticed was how loud the music was. He could hear it muffled outside of the old church, but inside it was hard to differentiate between the instruments. The drums and guitars reverberated around the room and drowned out the singer's voice making it impossible to understand him.

The band stopped playing and the room went silent for a minute before filling up with the buzz of conversations and the background noise of music being played from an iPod through the speakers. The lights came on and Tom added his winter coat to a large pile as people dispersed around the room.

"What's up Tom?" said Gary, a boy from his school. He was with his girlfriend, Christy, and their friend that went to school a town over from there's who everyone called "Tuna." Tuna was wearing a Have Heart t-shirt that said "Boston Hardcore" on it and had x's drawn on the backs of his hands. Christy was wearing a BANE t-shirt with black eye makeup. She had a lip ring that she was poking at with her tongue. Gary wore a black hoodie, zipped with the hood up.

"What's up you guys?" said Tom. He wore a Nike t-shirt with jeans he was worried were too baggy and a Red Sox hat.

"I've never seen you at a show before Tommy," said Tuna, punching him gently on the arm.

“Yeah,” said Tom, “this is my first one.”

“Who are you here to see tonight?” asked Christy.

“Call to Arms. I found them online a couple months ago and I’ve been listening to them a lot.”

“Have you seen Burning Bright before?” asked Gary.

“I don’t think so.”

“They’re up next, they’re amazing.”

The stage was at the end of the hall opposite from the entrance. It wasn’t very big and still had the set of an old musical production on it, a forest scape of rivers and trees standing behind the band.

Tom’s Nokia Razr buzzed in his pocket. He flipped it open and read the text from his friend TJ.

“Just walked in. Where r u?”

Tom looked towards the doors and saw him standing there. TJ was wearing a polo shirt with an unzipped hoodie over it. His long black hair was messy, like he had just woken up from a nap.

“I’m going to go meet up with TJ, he just got here. See you guys around.”

“Cool man, see you,” said Gary.

TJ had convinced Tom to go the show with him. He was nervous about going, but TJ assured him that they would stick together and have a good time.

He spotted Tom and walked towards him. “Hey dude,” he said. “Let’s go to the merch table. I want to get the Call to Arms CD before they sell out.”

“I want to get a t-shirt,” said Tom. “I was just talking to Gary and them and they said Burning Bright is great. They’re up next.”

The girl behind the merch table had a streak of pink in her hair and a studded belt.

Tom and TJ scanned the table. The room was starting to fill up around them, people streaming in through the doors and heading towards the stage.

TJ picked up the Call to Arms CD. “I’ll take one of these.”

“10 bucks,” the girl said reaching under the table to grab a cash box.

TJ took out his wallet and thumbed through the cash. He looked up at Tom.

“I only have \$7. Can you spot me?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Tom. He turned to the girl. “Can I get the red Call to Arms shirt too? Medium?”

“You got it,” said the girl. She turned to a stack of plastic tubs and took a rolled-up shirt out of one.

“T-shirts are \$15, so that’s \$25 total. You guys here for Call to Arms?”

“Yeah,” they said at the same time.

“Well, make sure you don’t leave and come back. Burning Bright is great, they’re the ones setting up now. I’ve known those guys for a long time and they always put on a good show.”

“Thanks,” said Tom, “we’ll check them out.”

They walked over to the pile of jackets which had grown quite a bit. Tom dug around and found his. He stuck the t-shirt down the sleeve and put TJ’s cd in the pocket. They heard

some people in the crowd starting to clap and turned towards the stage. The band was walking out. The guitarist plugged in and played a chord that mixed with feedback and hung in the air.

The singer came onto the stage and grabbed the microphone.

“Check, check” he yelled. People cheered and started moving closer to the stage until they were pressed against it. The band started playing, the drums and guitars building up in unison, and then slowing back down. The floor moved beneath Tom’s feet, vibrating like it was suddenly made of Jell-O. The old church creaked and swayed under the weight and movement of the crowd. The band stopped briefly before the guitarist started the opening riff to a song. The crowd cheered, and people started climbing onto the stage and jumping off to crowd surf. After the intro, the singer held the microphone out towards the crowd and the entire room yelled out the first words to the song together. Tom and TJ stood towards the back and watched the scene unfold. They saw Tuna get up onto the stage and dive off.

“Come on man,” said TJ, “Let’s get in there.”

Tom followed him into the mass of people in front of the stage. He was nervous, especially because he didn’t know any of the songs and couldn’t sing with everyone else.

The singer came back to the center of the stage. “We’re Burning Bright from West Hartford. I want to make sure everyone is having a good time and being safe out there. Take care of each other and look out for each other. We’re all on the same team.”

The guitarist started again, and Tom got caught in the crowd’s movement. He started moving to the left, crashing into the person next to him, until the entire crowd shifted and moved back to the right. He could feel the heat of the bodies around him and sweat started to drip down his face. At first, he fought back against the movement, trying to regain control, but

he finally let himself get swooped up in the chaos of the crowd. The song started, and everyone started singing along again. Christy got up on stage and dove into the crowd. Hands popped up to catch her and carry her to the side where they let her down. Tom couldn't see the band anymore with all of the hands and heads in front of him, but he was too taken by all of the movement and sounds to even care about seeing them play.

As he rocked back and forth, he started to get the hang of being in the middle of chaos, and his movements started to become more predictable to him. A small clearing formed, and Gary pushed him in. He ran through to the other side, towards the stage. When he got there, someone jumped off the stage and landed on top of him, knocking him over. He helped him up, apologized, and ran away to do it again.

Before Tom even realized how much time had passed, the singer said, "This is going to be our last song. Call to Arms is next."

Tom didn't want it to end. The song started and again he allowed himself to get swept up in the crowd. He looked up at the ceiling. A mural of the Virgin Mary looked back at him. She was up there watching the scene unfold beneath her. Her gaze startled him. What would his family and friends think of him right now if they saw him caught up in all of this chaos? What did he think of himself? Of this band? The music faded into the background and he closed his eyes, giving himself up completely to the movement of the group surrounding him. He opened them and watched as TJ dove off into the crowd and was carried away. He worked his way through the crowd and over to him.

The song ended, and everyone cheered. The lights came on revealing faces, creating individuals out of the mass that was together only moments before. TJ yelled to Tom, "let's go

outside.” They were both sweating and didn’t bother to get Tom’s jacket before making their way down the stairs and out the door.

Stepping outside, the cold hit them like a brick wall. Tom looked around and saw the steam rising off of all the people standing on the sidewalk.

“How about that?” said TJ. “Those guys were incredible.”

Tom kept looking around at everyone standing near them as his ears started to ring.

Tom looked at TJ. “I’ve never experienced anything like that before.”

“I know,” said TJ. “We have to see them again. When I get home, I’ll check their Myspace page and see what other shows they have coming up.”

“Hey TJ,” said someone standing in a group of people next to them.

“Hey man!” said TJ, starting to walk towards them. He looked back at Tom. “Are you coming?”

“I’ll be there in a second.”

Tom sat on the curb. The sweat on his body had dried and his hair was starting to freeze. He felt electric, like he was still moving even though he was sitting still. His body buzzed. He was cold, wishing he brought his jacket outside with him. He looked up at the night sky and took a deep breath.

Cleaning

There was a collection of rocks from the beach sitting on the dresser, and next to them, two pencils from mini golf courses. She pushed them aside to dust the top, and carefully placed them back into the position that she found them in. Over on the bookcase was a framed photo of a young boy with an older man dressed to go skiing. They were standing at the base of a mountain with their goggles on. She picked up the frame and swiped the cloth across it. On the wall were movie posters and band posters, and the bedside table was covered with science fiction books and magazines. She took the dust rag and cleaned them individually before wiping the top of the table and returning them in the same order. She walked over to the desk and looked up at the calendar. It was from three years prior with the month of May showing. May 29 was circled. "Graduation" it said. On every Wednesday, "treatment" was scribbled in. Other dates read "AP Bio Final Due" and "Movies with Joey and Carmen." She reached out her hand and touched May 21. She stayed for a moment, looking around, before stepping into the hallway and closing the door behind her.

The Home of the Braves

Robert called Jack and said he wanted to meet him at Durgin-Park, which Jack took as a bad sign. Robert only went there when something was wrong. He went to his favorite bar, Jacob Wirth's, when he wanted to celebrate; every birthday for the last ten years, after the Braves clinched the pennant in 1948, and after the Red Sox lost to the Indians a few days later. Durgin-Park is where he went when things were bad. They said that five years ago, after the Braves lost to the Indians in the '48 World Series, he spent the entire day and most of the night there, and he only left after the waitstaff carried him to State Street and put him in a cab.

Jack was running late, and when he walked up the stairs he saw Robert sitting at a table by a window chewing on a piece of cornbread. There were a couple of empty glasses on the table and he was staring out into space, lost in thought. Jack walked over and waved his hand in front of his face. Robert snapped back to reality.

"Jack! Welcome to my office. Please, have a seat."

He pulled out the chair across from him and sat down. "You okay Robert?" he asked.

Robert didn't respond right away. After a moment he said "Well, to be honest, I've been better. I have some news to share with you..."

He trailed off, staring again at a picture of a lobster on the brick wall. The restaurant was about half full, with a few couples and families dining at the long tables around them. The low hum of people talking was interrupted by clinking glasses and the scratching of chairs on the wood floor. Waitresses walked by with trays of drinks, clam chowder, baked beans, and prime rib.

"What is it? Is it Mary? Did she kick you out?"

Robert's wife Mary was often kicking him out of the house after long nights at bars, road trips where he didn't call enough, and when she thought he was being a little too "friendly" with the players' wives and girlfriends. He would win her back with some flowers or jewelry, and things would be okay until she kicked him out again.

"No, no, Mary is fine, we're doing alright. This is something worse. Much, much worse. You're not going to believe me when I tell you. I'll come out and say it, but you are going to have to brace yourself."

Jack grabbed onto his hat as a joke. Robert was always being dramatic about things and Jack learned that he should take him with a grain of salt.

"I just got news that they're moving the team."

Jack's hands dropped back down to his sides. "What? Moving the team where? The suburbs?"

"Not quite Framingham, a little further west. They are taking the team to Milwaukee. They are going to be the Milwaukee Braves."

"You've got to be kidding me. This is a joke, right?"

"Dead serious" he said.

Lou Perini was the owner of the Boston Braves and everyone knew he wanted out of Braves Field in Brighton. The stadium was showing its age and there wasn't enough parking. The place sat mostly empty throughout last season and the rumor was he wanted to take the team outside of the city and build a brand-new stadium with ample parking and modern amenities. He secured a deal with the National League to instead move the team out of Boston entirely and to Milwaukee where their minor league team currently played.

Jack was dumbfounded. How could they do this to me? he thought to himself. He had only been with the organization for two years doing promotions and public relations, but he had been a fan for all of his life. To Jack, Boston without the Braves was like Egypt without the Pyramids.

“When did all this happen?” asked Jack.

“The National League owners voted on it earlier today. Perini has been planning it for a long time, but he kept it mostly to himself. They’re taking over the minor league stadium and moving out there immediately.”

“So, what, they are just up and leaving? Are they taking us with them?”

“They’re not sure yet. We might be able to move with the team, but I don’t know, who wants to live in Milwaukee? I’ve heard the winters there are brutal.”

“It’s not like Boston has great winters,” Jack said.

“I know, but at least we have the ocean here.”

“I’ve heard Lake Michigan looks like an ocean. There are even beaches there, and lighthouses.”

“Hey, whose side are you on?” said Robert, his voice rising. “If you like Milwaukee so much why don’t you abandon me and move there too.” People at other tables started to look over at the two of them. A family that had just arrived got up and moved to a table a little further away. Robert took a long sip of beer.

He was the equipment manager for the Braves. He had started working for them part time when he was in high school as a bat boy and worked his way up to his current position. Like Jack, he started out as a fan. Growing up on Commonwealth Avenue, his house was directly

between Fenway Park and Braves Field. His whole family were Red Sox fans, but Robert was devoted to the Braves. He stayed with them through the ups, and the mostly downs of last place finishes and washed up stars on their way out of the league. He was a pretty good baseball player when he was young, but when it was clear a professional career wasn't going to work out for him, he decided the next best thing would be working for his favorite team. He was considered the hardest working equipment manager in the National League. One time in Pittsburgh, he sewed up a hole in first baseman Earl Torgeson's pants in the dugout, while he was still wearing them, just in time for him to go to bat and hit a homerun.

"I'm sorry Bob. I didn't mean anything by it. I can't believe they are actually doing this. I know attendance has been bad, but we just need one more player who will put us over the top. Maybe we can talk them out of this."

"Jack, it's over. The team is gone." He finished his beer.

Jack thought about standing at the top of the dugout after a game and looking out on the empty field. Every time he did, he still felt the same excitement that he had when he went to the stadium for the first time. When he was 10, his father took him on the train into Boston to see the Braves. Jack had listened to them play on the radio, and he had been to some local baseball games before, but nothing compared to the seeing two big league teams playing live. The size of the stadium with seats as far as the eyes could see, the smell of hot dogs, fried clams, and freshly cut grass, the sound of the bat hitting the ball, and the thousands of people there to watch the game overwhelmed him with excitement. The players seemed larger than life on the field. His favorite, catcher Al López, made the game look so easy. That day he had two hits and threw out a player trying to steal second. After the game, they waited by the

locker room exit and watched the players come out. López signed a ball for him on his way by. He knew right then he wanted to be a professional baseball player.

Taking after his hero, Jack played catcher for his college team. Scouts had been watching him during his junior year, and he talked to them about leaving school a year early to join a Major League club. In a game towards the end of the season, he came to bat in the eighth inning with men on second and third and the score tied. He knocked a curveball to the left field fence, scoring both runners, but as he was rounding first to make it a double, he felt something in his knee pop. He collapsed on the base path and while he was able to crawl back to first base safely, he couldn't stand up. The team ran over and helped carry him off of the field and into the locker room. He was unable to play for the rest of the season, and he wasn't fully healed until the fall. He came back to the team in the spring, but he wasn't the same. He couldn't squat behind home plate anymore and had to be moved from catcher to first base. He had trouble moving off of the bag to field routine ground balls, and what were once doubles and triples for him were now singles. The Major League teams that were interested in signing him moved on. He was devastated. His dream of being a professional ball player had evaporated, and he didn't know what to do next. He talked to his coach who knew some of the people who worked for the Braves and set him up with a job there. It was the only job he had ever had, and the only job he ever wanted to have. Now, that was in jeopardy. Jack felt betrayed. How could a team he loved so much do this to him? How could they abandon him and the city?

"What about all of the season ticket holders? They already paid for this year."

"They're refunding everyone" said Robert.

“Well what about the city series? They can’t just leave the Red Sox without someone to play against.”

“They’ll figure it out. This is all new still, but I’m sure they have a plan. Nothing is going to stop them from taking the team west.”

They sat silently for a moment and Robert took another piece of corn bread out of the basket to eat.

Jack looked out the window at the people walking by on the street. They didn’t know that the city was changing yet, that a team that had played there since 1871 was now going to belong to somewhere else. He wasn’t sure that any of them would care, but he envied their ignorance, wishing he could go back to the moment before he walked into the restaurant and his whole world changed.

He looked over at Robert and asked, “What do we do now?”

“Great question” he said motioning to the waitress. He pointed to Jack and said, “Can we get this man a drink?”

“And a clam chowder” Jack added.

The waitress brought over beers for both of them and a chowder.

“I have a friend in New York who works for the Dodgers,” said Jack. “Maybe I’ll move down there and get a job with them.”

“That would be some job security,” said Robert. “Can you imagine them ever moving?”

Ahoy

Bill Googled “longshoreman jobs.” Nothing turned up, as he expected, but it never hurt to look. He put on his turtleneck sweater, peacoat, and watch cap, and rode his bike to the accounting firm

The Dog Star

An orchard is a good place to sit and look at the stars. Apple trees are low to the ground, so they don't obstruct the view the way that an elm or an oak would. It's hard to stargaze at a maple sugar farm. A Christmas tree farm would work. The pines, firs, and spruces stay low there too, allowing an unobstructed view of the sky. But in October, when nights start to get longer and colder, sitting in an orchard looking at the stars is a nice way to spend an evening.

To this day, Richton is called "The Little Big Apple" because it's in upstate New York and at one point produced more apples than any other town in the state. Orchards were like family heirlooms, handed down from generation to generation. They were landmarks in town and were often used to guide people that stopped and asked for directions.

As time went on, the orchards started to close. Competition from the South and the West combined with the falling price of crops took a toll on the town. One by one, land was sold off and redeveloped. The few remaining orchards that stayed open struggled, and children no longer wanted to take over the business from their parents because of the uncertainty. The town started to change. Stores downtown closed, people moved out, and the once thriving place felt like a shadow of itself.

The Wilson's orchard was the largest in town at over 200 acres. Through the years, most students at the local high school spent at least one late summer harvesting for the Wilsons to make some extra money. After owner Roy Wilson passed away, his family decided to put the land up for sale. The town, not wanting to lose more of its history, bought the land and leased it to a nonprofit that promised to keep it as a working orchard. The Wilson's old house became a

tasting room for cider, and all autumn, the hills were full of people in flannels and sweaters picking their own apples.

The nonprofit that ran the farm only had a few full-time employees with most of the staff consisting of seasonal workers and volunteers. Pete worked full-time and was in charge of brewing the cider.

Usually after locking up the old farmhouse after the orchard closed at 8pm, Pete walked straight to his car and went home. On this night, he walked to the top of the hill that the apple trees grew on. He heard on the news that there was a meteor shower that night and he wanted to see it. It was a Sunday with a few wispy clouds in the sky, and an almost full moon. A soft light reflected off the apples and the dewy grass. He looked up at all the stars and could not make sense of them. They just looked like dots to him.

He heard soft footsteps coming through the grass. He started to get up, until he saw the source of the steps, his coworker, Amy. He was thankful to see her, of all people, walking towards him. He watched her come up the hill, her silhouette blending in with the night sky as she became her own celestial body.

“What are you still doing here?” she asked him.

“I could ask you the same question,” said Pete.

“I forgot my sweatshirt, so I came back to get it and when I saw your car was still in the parking lot, I came looking for you.”

“How’d you find me?” he asked.

“I figured you would be up here somewhere. Sometimes I come and do the same thing when I’m the last one here.”

Amy grew up in the town next to Richton. She was from a family of orchardists, but her family's apple farm suffered the same fate as so many others and had been sold off. She put a large tote bag on the ground and sat down next to Pete.

Amy worked for the orchard full-time, and her job was to care for the trees. She knew everything there was to know about pruning, pests, fruit, leaves, fungus, and soil. She also knew about constellations.

She pointed to the sky, "Cassiopeia is right above us."

Pete didn't say anything.

"And over there is Pisces. It's so clear tonight, we can see everything."

"How can you tell the difference?" asked Pete.

"You never learned your constellations?"

"I guess I was out of school that day."

Amy and Pete had been working together for about three years and had grown close. They helped each other out when they needed it, with Pete going into the fields, and Amy coming into the taproom. They would sometimes get together outside of work. Amy and her fiancé, Mike, had Pete and his girlfriend at the time, Julia, over for dinner a few times before they broke up.

"I've always loved the stars. I wanted to be an astronomer, or maybe an astronaut, but I decided to work with the stars of the earth: trees," said Amy.

"What is that one over there?" Pete asked, pointing to the northern part of the sky.

“That’s Ursa Minor, or what you probably know it as, the little dipper. Its name means ‘the lesser bear.’ The tip of it is Polaris, the North Star. You really don’t know anything about the sky, do you?”

“Not a clue. It was never my thing. I’m here for the meteor shower.”

“You’re going to be waiting for a while. It’s not starting until after midnight.”

“Oh.”

Pete tried not to think about the last dinner they had together, the one right before him and Julia broke up. He didn’t like Mike, and after drinking too much, he started to show it. He made fun of his haircut, clothes, the fact that he worked as an archivist, pretty much anything he could think of. Julia had to drag him out of the house and bring him home. The next morning, she confronted him about his behavior, but also about the fact that he could never love her because she could tell he loved Amy. He didn’t admit it, but he also didn’t fight her on it, and she left him.

He felt himself turning red remembering this moment. He hoped the cover of darkness hid it. He and Amy had never talked about it, not officially, they just stopped getting together outside of work. He apologized to Mike through a text message but hadn’t seen him in person since.

“What is your thing?” Amy asked him.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, outside of here, what makes you tick?”

“I’m still figuring it out.”

“Come on,” said Amy, “everybody’s got a weird thing they know a lot about, and they dreamed of doing as their job when they were a kid. What’s yours?”

Pete sat silently thinking for a moment. He was looking at the sky, still trying to figure out which one was the North Star.

“I guess it would be fish. And seashells. Ocean stuff.”

“I didn’t know you liked that,” she said, propping herself up on her elbow and turning towards him. “Tell me more.”

“My family used to vacation in Maine every summer. My mom is from there and we would stay at my grandparents’ house for a couple of weeks, and we’d spend a lot of time out on their boat and swimming at the beach. My grandfather would take me and my sisters fishing, and my grandmother taught us how to dig for clams. At the end of our second week there, we’d have a big clam bake.”

“I’ve never been to a clam bake. Actually, I’ve never eaten clams before.”

“You’ve never had clams?”

“Nope, not once.”

“That’s it. We’re getting you some clams.” Pete started to get up.

Amy laughed. “Sit down, we are not going to get clams right now. Maybe another time. Were you any good at fishing?”

“Pretty good, yeah. I’ve caught my fair share.”

“What is your favorite kind of fish?”

“Probably the bluefish. They live all over the Atlantic and come north in the summer from Florida and end up in Maine. They’re fun to catch and delicious to eat...tell me you’ve eaten fish before.”

“Yes, I promise, I’ve had fish before.”

“What’s your favorite constellation?”

“You can’t see my favorite right now,” said Amy.

“What do you mean you can’t see it?”

“The constellations change with the seasons. As the earth rotates, you see different stars. My favorite is Canus Major, and it’s only visible to us during the winter time.”

“Why is it your favorite?” asked Pete.

“The name is Latin for ‘Great Dog’, which, I think, is the coolest name you can give to a group of stars. I like that the early astronomers loved dogs as much as we do and named stuff after them. Also, one of the stars that makes it up is Sirius, which is the brightest star in the night sky and is called the ‘dog star.’”

“I’m more of a cat guy,” said Pete.

“Oh stop.” She hit him lightly on the arm and they laughed together.

They had a playful relationship and a good rapport. Over the past three years, each of them at some point thought their friendship would turn into something more but the timing was never right. Amy had gotten engaged to Mike two months earlier. She knew that Pete didn’t like Mike, but she didn’t let that get in the way of their friendship. Lately though, she sensed things between her and Pete had gotten a little weird. He felt more distant, and he

didn't want to spend as much time just hanging out and talking like he used to. She was glad that she found him sitting up on the hill tonight. It made things feel normal between them.

"You would have been a really bad sailor," Amy said. "They rely on all of the stars and constellations to get around."

"I actually almost became one, no joke. I was accepted into the Maritime Academy on Long Island. I could've been in the middle of the ocean right now."

"What happened?"

"I was dating Julia at the time, and I decided to stay close to home to be with her. We broke up and now I make cider."

"For the record, I enjoy the cider."

"You are too kind," he said. "I wish we had some right now."

Amy reached into her bag and pulled out a bottle of the cider.

"Always be prepared," she said as she opened the bottle.

They passed the cider back and forth taking swigs.

When Pete really thought about it, Mike didn't seem so bad. If he wasn't dating Amy, they probably would have been friends. Mostly he was jealous of him. Pete felt like he was constantly swimming upstream trying to get his life together. He was full of regrets, of staying at home and not going off to school, of feeling stuck in relationships and jobs he didn't really like. Mike looked like he knew what he wanted with his life, and he made it happen. He had a master's degree, a condo, and a fiancé. Pete wasn't close to having any of those.

"Why didn't you become an astronomer? Or an astronaut? You seem to love it," said Pete.

“My family owned an orchard a town over and it was really important to my dad that it stay in the family, and since I’m an only child, it was up to me to take it over. He got sick, and I kept it going as best as I could. He died a few months later, and with the hospital bills and funeral costs, we had to sell the orchard to cover it all, and now I’m here.”

“You never told me that, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know my dad would be proud that I’m still in the apple business. That feels good.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes. The wind rustled through the branches of the trees, making them sway back and forth. They could see the streetlights on the road in the distance and the occasional car passing by. Pete got up and grabbed two apples for them to snack on.

“What do you think of this place?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, working here and how it still exists but your family orchard is gone?”

Amy took a bite and thought for a minute. “It’s weird, I guess. It feels more like a museum than a working farm. And it’s hard sometimes to do my job in the fall with so many people in the fields picking apples. It puts a lot of stress on the trees, and I worry about how they’ll bounce back. But it’s better than this land being developed into a mall or something. What do you think?”

“It’s strange,” said Pete. “I’m standing all day in this home that a family lived in for decades selling tourists cider. It makes me realize how none of this is real. How all of what we do is being propped up as a way to show people what used to happen here, and not acknowledging what does happen here. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I know what you’re saying. I think it’s tough though. This is what the town and the family wanted. I actually think it’s nice. I wish I could go back to my family’s orchard and see it again, but there’s nothing left.”

They both paused to look at the sky again. A shooting star came across right above them. Pete gasped when he saw it.

“Is it starting?” he asked.

“No, you’ll know when it’s starting. The sky is filled with tear drops of light. It looks like Fourth of July fireworks but better. When I was a kid, our science teacher got everyone to come out to the high school football field at 3:30 in the morning to watch a meteor shower. My Dad brought me, and we all just stood there silently watching the sky together. That’s when I really fell in love with the stars.”

Pete paused for a moment and then turned to Amy. “Hey, I’m really happy for you and Mike. He’s a great guy and you two seem really happy together.”

“Thanks,” said Amy, “that means a lot.”

“Does this mean I’m invited to the wedding?”

“Maybe as a bartender,” she said, taking the bottle of cider back from him for the last swig. She looked up at the sky again.

“You know what’s amazing?” she said. “The light we are seeing from the stars right now is from millions and billions of years ago. It’s just making it to earth now after traveling through all of space. So, what’s happening today at all of those stars won’t be seen for another million years or so.”

“So, some of these stars might not even exist anymore?” asked Pete.

“Right. And by those stars, on those planets, if there are any people there that can see our solar system, in the one they’re seeing, we don’t even exist yet. Dinosaurs don’t exist. There is just nothing.”

“A blank slate,” said Pete.

“A world of possibilities,” said Amy.

They sat for a while longer before Amy got up to leave. Pete stayed behind and tried to remember the constellations that she pointed out to him earlier. He wondered if there was a different version of him out there somewhere among them. One where he didn’t work at the orchard anymore. One where he and Amy were together.

Fishing, not Catching

The fish weren't biting. They never seemed to be, at least for him. The other fishermen around him always seemed to effortlessly pull in large fish. He'd ask them what they were doing to catch them, and they would half answer, not wanting to give away their secret and let anyone else start catching their fish.

Today felt especially bad. After two hours, he spent more time getting his line out of trees and trying to untangle it from around his pole than he did casting. He saw a fish jump. He casted towards the ripples it left behind, but his line got tangled again. He tried to untangle it, seeing more fish in the river jump, but it was too much. He sat down on a rock and stared at his fishing gear. He wondered why he bothered to do something that caused him so much stress.

Looking up at the rushing river, he saw a blue heron standing on the bank about 100 yards away. They made eye contact. The heron took flight, swooping from its standing position into the clear blue sky. It made a big arcing turn in the air and started to follow the river like it was a highway, using the space between the trees and following the curves and turns, its image reflected in the water below. He watched until it was no longer visible.

The Treachery of Images

It was 4:45 and Christine had promised the babysitter that they would be back by 5:00. Their house was 20 minutes away, so already they were going to be at least five minutes late. All week they had arrived home later than they promised they would, making Mia, the babysitter, wait for them to show up. They apologized and told her it wouldn't happen again and went through the same routine the next night, and the next night, and the next night. If she left now then at least five minutes wouldn't be as bad, maybe three if they didn't hit the stop lights on Main Street. She gathered her things into her bag, took her coat off the hook, and locked the door to her office. As she went down the hallway, she heard the Dean's voice call her name. She wanted to ignore it but knew she hadn't made it far enough down the hallway to do that. Christine turned and walked back towards her office.

"Hello Dean Simmons. How are you this afternoon?"

"Dr. Travis. Am I catching you at a bad time?"

"No, I have a minute." She did not have a minute, but she also didn't have a choice.

"I am glad I caught you. I have some tremendous news. Are you sure I am not holding you? Would you mind going into your office to talk more?"

"Of course." She took out her keys and reopened her office, letting the dean in. She moved the papers that were on a chair and offered it as a seat. She sat down at her desk and put some of the books that covered it on the floor.

"I come with good news," said Dean Simmons. "I wanted to let you know that you've been approved for your sabbatical. You're all set to spend next year in Rome."

Christine was a Classics professor. She hadn't been to Rome since graduate school when she spent a summer studying there. She requested the sabbatical on a whim not thinking it would actually be approved.

She fell back into her chair. "Wow. I can't believe it. This is incredible, thank you." She was relieved. She felt like she had lost her touch as an academic. She had gotten so bogged down in grading and lecturing that her research had gone by the wayside. She hadn't been published in almost a year and this was her chance to reconnect with why she got into this field.

"I'm glad you're so excited," said Dean Simmons. "There's some paperwork to do, but after that, you'll be good to go. Will you bring your family with you?"

Her family. She told her husband back when she was applying but they hadn't spoken about it since. Not because she didn't want to but because she didn't think it would happen. She didn't know how her husband, Mark, would take it. He taught history at the large state university down the road from the small liberal arts college that she taught at. He told her once that he felt like he was living in her shadow. That he had dreamed of being at the top of his field, but now he could only watch as she achieved what he dreamed of.

She didn't always want to be a classics professor. She applied and was accepted to school for journalism. Her plan was to be a foreign correspondent, traveling the world telling stories, making connections, living a full life. When she took a classics class her freshman year, everything changed. Reading the *Aeneid*, she felt like her eyes had been opened, like a new beginning had happened for her. She fell in love with Virgil's poetry, got an A in the class, and immediately changed her major. She met Mark her sophomore year in a Roman history class

and would often go to the library with him to study. They got married in graduate school and moved when Christine got her job. Mark started teaching as an adjunct, so they settled down and got a nice house and had two children.

“They’ll be thrilled,” she told Dean Simmons.

“Well congratulations. This is well deserved. You’re a talented academic and we’re lucky to have you here.”

“Thank you so much, I think this is going to be just what I need.”

She shook hands with Dean Simmons and lead her out of the office. She locked the door again and hurried to the parking lot where Mark was waiting for her. When she walked outside, she saw him sitting on the wall by the car with his phone to his ear.

Mark was waiting for his wife in the parking lot by her office. She worked at the prestigious private college in town as a Classics professor. He was an adjunct history professor at the large state university down the street. They usually carpooled to work, a commitment to environmental friendliness that they decided on when they moved to town, and this week was his turn to drive and pick her up. She was running late but that was not unusual. One or both of them was usually running late after work. They had a babysitter that they hired to pick up the kids from school and watch them until they got home, one of Mark’s former students. She never seemed to mind that they were late, although Mark started to feel like they may be pushing their luck with her.

He was listening to a classic rock station on the radio and scrolling through his emails. He put his phone down and checked his watch again. 4:45. He hit the preset button for the local

sports talk radio station. He liked to listen when Christine wasn't in the car with him. She couldn't stand it, but he enjoyed the mindlessness of it and sometimes called in with his thoughts. He loved baseball and one of the classes he taught was "The History of Baseball in America." It was very popular and filled up quickly.

They were talking about a new young prospect that the local baseball team had signed. He was making his major league debut the next night.

"This is one of the most anticipated debuts of a player in baseball history. He has the opportunity to become the greatest first baseman of all time and it starts tomorrow," said one of the hosts.

"I've seen him play in the minors, and I will go even further," said the other. "When he steps on that field tomorrow, he will become the greatest first basemen currently in the majors. I have him down for Rookie of the Year, MVP, maybe even World Series MVP depending how the season goes. I can't wait to see this kid play at the top level."

Mark was used to the hyperbole that they used on this station. Everything was either "the best" or "the worst" that the hosts had ever seen, but he found this conversation to be way overblown. There was no way that they could possibly think that this kid was going to be the greatest first basemen in the major leagues when he stepped on the field tomorrow. He decided he was going to tell them that himself. He picked up his cellphone and dialed the number to the station.

The producer answered, "Sports Talk, what topic are you calling about?"

"Hi, I'm calling about this new first baseman. I have some thoughts."

"Okay, are they positive thoughts or negative thoughts?"

“Positive about the kid, negative about the host’s assessment of him. I am a baseball historian, I think they are blowing this out of proportion.”

“Great, we love when listeners disagree with our hosts. What’s your name and where are you calling from?”

“My name is Mark and I am calling from my car.”

“Thanks, Mark. We have a few callers in front of you, but we’ll get you on the air soon.”

The person talking to him went away and he could now hear the show through the phone. He turned off the car.

“We’re going to take some calls on this now. Tim, you’re on the air.”

“Hi, long time listener, first time caller. Do you guys think they are going to trade their current first baseman? I think they should if this guy is as good as they say he is. I’ll hang up and listen.”

Mark checked his watch again. 5:00 and still no sign of Christine. He got out of the car to stretch his legs and went and sat on the concrete wall in front of it. The show was on a long commercial break. He tried to come up with what he was going to say on the air, thinking of historical examples of great first basemen who didn’t do so well as rookies. He saw Christine coming down the path towards him. She came over, kissed him on the cheek, and said, “can we walk and talk?”

Mark got nervous. He didn’t expect to hear that and didn’t know what it meant. He heard in his ear, “Let’s go to Mark in the car. Mark?”

He didn’t respond to the radio host or his wife for a second.

“Who are you talking to?” asked Christine.

“Mark, are you there? Alright we’re going to let Mark go. Call us back and we’ll try to get you on.” The phone clicked.

“That was the sports radio show I like to listen to. They were being idiots about this new first baseman. It doesn’t matter. Yes, let’s walk and talk.”

They walked back onto campus towards the quad. It was a beautiful spring day. The sun was shining and there were big puffy clouds in the sky. The semester was ending, and students were focused on studying for finals, most of them walking towards the library. The stately brick buildings looked down on them as they moved along the diagonal paths that cut through the manicured lawn. Mark and Christine sat down on a bench that was dedicated to an alumnus from the class of 1948.

“Mark, do you remember when I applied to that sabbatical for next year?”

He thought for a moment. He had a fuzzy memory of a conversation about something like this but couldn’t remember the details. “Vaguely, yes.”

“It’s been approved, and I have the chance to spend the year in Rome. I didn’t think it would be approved, I just applied for it on a whim, but on the way out today the Dean stopped me and told me I was all set to go. I just need to fill out some paperwork to make it official”

Mark leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. Rome. Would he and the kids go with her? Would he stay behind? Was she leaving him?

Christine put her hand on the center of his back. “I’m so sorry we haven’t talked about this more. It’s not official yet and I don’t have to do it if you don’t want me to.”

Mark felt embarrassed and defensive all of a sudden. When was the last time he did something like this for his work? He remembered the one thing he had planned to do that felt similar.

“I’m supposed to do my tour of Negro League stadiums in the south next year. For my book proposal?”

He had been talking about doing this tour for years. He had it mapped out, but always found a reason not to go. It wouldn’t take that long, maybe a month of traveling and then a few more months of writing, but either he needed to stay for the kids or the house needed painting. Christine knew there was no definite plan for him to take on this project next year, and he knew it was a bad excuse, a last grasp to make himself feel better about himself and his work.

“You can still do that, we might just have to adjust the timing a little bit. We can figure all of this out over the next couple of weeks. This is such an amazing opportunity for me. It’s what I’ve been wanting. I think it’s the perfect thing to get me refocused and working on my research again. But, if you don’t think I should do it, I won’t.”

Mark always told people that he didn’t mean to become an academic, that it just happened. This is a ridiculous thing for someone to say because becoming an academic takes a level of commitment and planning that most jobs don’t, and Mark knows this. He’s from a wealthy family and after he and Christine started dating and finished their bachelor’s degrees, he followed her to grad school and got a master’s in history. His plan was to become a high school teacher, but when Christine decided to get her PhD, he followed her again and got his. He had the money and nothing better to do. Christine got the job at the small liberal arts school first. They moved, and Mark started to teach as an adjunct at the large state university. He was

popular on campus, especially because of his baseball class, but he didn't stand out like Christine did. She was a star in her field. She was featured in documentaries and podcasts, and now she had the opportunity to be in Rome for a year on sabbatical. He realized that in this moment, he needed to stop worrying about his job as an academic and switch to his job as a supportive husband.

"Honey, of course I think you should do this. I am so happy for you. I would never stop you from doing something like this. Maybe the kids and I could go with you for a little bit."

Christine's face lit up with a big smile and she threw her arms around him. He hugged her back and they walked to the car. They were now very late.

They drove back talking about all of the great spots in Rome that they would visit and what Christine would be doing for research. Talking more they decided they wanted the kids to spend as much time in Italy as they could next year.

They pulled into the driveway and got out of the car.

"To celebrate, how about we have some authentic Italian pizza from Bruno's tonight?" said Mark. "My treat."

"Maybe a little prosecco too?" said Christine.

They both chuckled and went inside.

Mia was staying later than she expected again. She was hired to pick up the kids from school and was promised by their parents that they would be home no later than 5:00. It was now going on 5:45. She didn't complain to them because she needed the money, and it was the most reliable and easiest babysitting gig she had ever had. It was two professors, one at the

state university that she attended that taught in the history department, and the other at the liberal arts school down the road that taught classics. They were both very nice to her and paid her well. Their children were 7 and 9 years old and loved Mia very much. They were well behaved and very smart, learning how to speak Chinese, play chess, and memorize Roman mythology, all things that Mia did not know how to do and was impressed by.

She was coloring with the 7-year-old, Thaddeus, while the nine-year-old, Margaret practiced her multiplication at the dining room table. She kept picking up her phone to check the time, wishing she could make it stop until Thaddeus and Margaret's parents arrived home and she could leave. It was getting towards the end of the semester and she really needed some time tonight to study.

Mia started babysitting as a way to make some extra cash and was soon offered a regular spot with the professors which meant more cash, but more time too. She was studying to be an urban planner and had many interests beyond hanging out with professor's children, but soon being a babysitter became a key part of her identity. Her friends jokingly called her "Mom" when they were hanging out, and guys were always making gross jokes about her having sex with the husbands of the families she worked for. She of course never had and didn't really interact with them all that much. She would talk to their wives, the mothers, and they loved to talk to her. They would gossip and share their problems and ask Mia about hers. They wanted to be in the know and followed Mia's life as an undergraduate like it was a soap opera. The fathers were more aloof, more focused on the weird projects they had going on like collecting Grateful Dead memorabilia or getting into model airplanes. Only one time did a father make her feel uncomfortable. She was traveling with the family on a vacation to Florida.

Everyone went down to the hotel pool and when she took off her coverup to get in the pool with the kids, she could feel him look her up and down. When they got back from the trip, she made an excuse about school and having to focus more to get her grades up and didn't work for them again.

But with this family it was different. This husband seemed to go out of his way to make sure he wasn't being a creep. He always offered her a ride home which she always politely declined because their house was walking distance from her apartment. His quirk was bobblehead collecting. Their basement had shelves full of bobbleheads from all different kinds of sports teams, amusement parks, and even politicians.

The only problem with the couple was they were unreliable when it came to arriving home at the time promised to her. Often, they were held up with office hours or an impromptu department meeting. Every time it was something new. She stopped coloring again to look at her phone. Thaddeus looked up.

"What's wrong? Why did you stop coloring?"

She looked back at him. "Nothing is wrong! Just seeing what time it is."

"Were you listening to me about the dinosaurs?"

"Of course! Tell me again."

"Thad, shut up with the stupid dinosaurs," said Margaret.

"Mom said you can't say that to me anymore! Mia!"

"Margaret be nice to your brother. Please?"

"Why do I have to do math while you guys are having fun?"

"Do you want to color too?"

“No, I want to make bracelets. You keep promising you’ll make bracelets with me and we never do.”

“Your parents are going to be home any minute, I pinky promise we will make bracelets next time. If you want a break from homework though, you can take one.”

Margaret pouted and slid out of her chair. She went over to the couch behind Mia and Thaddeus, grabbed an iPad off of the side table, and started playing a game.

Mia heard a car pulling into the driveway. She breathed a deep sigh of relief. “Your parents are home!”

The other problem with the parents is that they carpooled, so if one of them was late, they both were late. She watched them in the driveway getting out of the car and collecting their things from the back seat. They walked towards the door, chuckling with each other, and came inside.

“Mia, we are so, so sorry. We promise this won’t happen again. I ran into the Dean on my way to the car and had to stop and talk with her about next semester.”

“No worries,” said Mia, “I completely understand.”

The husband, Mark, reached out to shake her hand. She grabbed it, a little confused. “Thank you for all of your hard work,” he said, “would you like me to give you a ride back to campus?”

“No, I can just walk, thank you though.”

“All right then, see you later,” he said as he walked up stairs.

The wife, Christine, was rummaging through her purse for her wallet. When she found it, she grabbed three fifties out of it and added another ten. She handed the money to Mia.

“For your trouble,” she said.

“No, I can’t accept that much,” said Mia. It was almost double the amount of her usual rate.

“It’s not a question. Get yourself a coffee or something. Or a beer,” she said winking.

“Mom can Mia stay for dinner?” asked Margaret.

“You’ll have to ask Mia if she wants to.”

“I would love to you guys, but I have homework to do so I can’t tonight. I’m sorry!”

“Boo!” said Margaret. Thad gave a “harrumph” and crossed his arms.

“Thank you so much again,” said Christine as Mia put on her coat.

“Bye you guys,” she said waving as she closed the door behind her.

It had been a long day. Her one class was cancelled so she didn’t leave her apartment until she had to pick up the kids from school. She had only interacted with the children and their parents and felt like she needed to be around people her own age. Usually she went and studied at home in her room, but today she walked to the library. It was a big brick building right in the middle of campus, standing twenty stories tall. It didn’t fit in with the rest of the buildings and it could be seen from all around, the lone bump in the school’s skyline.

She stopped to put the money in her wallet. It was fat with cash from her other babysitting jobs that she picked up when Mark and Christine didn’t need her, or on the weekends. Between all of her gigs, she was making almost \$30,000 a year. Her social life had taken a hit, but she couldn’t pass up the opportunity to make that kind of money and get close with the families that she worked for. They were well connected and always offered to write her a letter of recommendation or anything else she may need when the time came. Even with

the other families, Mark and Christine were her most consistent employers and she depended on their money to help her pay for school. She counted on continuing to work for them through her senior year. She didn't know what she would do if something happened and couldn't anymore.

She took an apple out of her bag and snacked on it on her way to the library. It was nice not having to color or make bracelets or hear about dinosaurs for a little bit. She tried to take herself seriously and care about issues that were going on, participating in protests on campus and volunteering on local political campaigns.

Her boyfriend of two years broke up with her recently. They knew each other from high school and reconnected the summer after their freshman years. He went to school in Ohio and they tried making the relationship work long distance, but with Mia working so much and him touring the Midwest with his band, they decided to call it quits. She stayed in touch with him and hadn't started seeing anyone else, but the connection was fading for her.

In front of the library she saw a guy she was friendly with from one of her classes, Greg, sitting near all of the smokers. She went over to see if he wanted to sit with her in one of the study rooms to do some work and talk.

Greg convinced himself that smoking a pipe did not make him look pretentious as he sat out in front of the university library puffing on it. He bought it at a convenience store just off of campus on a whim and watched YouTube videos on how to pack it, light it, and smoke it. He convinced himself that it wasn't as bad as smoking cigarettes, which he sometimes did since his

ex-girlfriend smoked them and got him to as well (but only when they were drinking), because he didn't inhale and only did it for the "taste". He tried to make the pipe his thing.

Greg wanted to be an English major but instead studied political science after he transferred out of music school in New York City and to the state university where he was now. He convinced himself that political science was better for job prospects than English was even though he didn't know what kind of job you could get with a political science degree. He quit music because when he got to music school, he met a lot of musicians who were better than him and instead of practicing more, he decided to leave. Now at the state university, he had serious discussions about global politics and Michael Foucault and felt like he was going to change the world.

He spent most of his time at the library when he was not in the basement of the campus center working at the radio station. He had a show on Tuesday nights called "Teenage Riot," a reference to Sonic Youth, although he did not play Sonic Youth on the show. When he wasn't doing his show, he was in the music library burning copies of new CDs that were sent to the station. He still loved music, making it and playing it, and the radio station helped him stay connected to it. He thought that maybe he had a future working in radio, maybe at an NPR station. Towards the end of the show, he would pack his pipe with tobacco to smoke while walking across campus back to the library where he would set up for the rest of the night.

When working at the library, he found the ritual of going outside for a smoke break relaxing and very grown-up. He would pack up his laptop every time he went out because he did not trust people to watch it the way they trusted him. When someone asked, "I am just going to the printer, would you mind watching my laptop?" he took it very seriously and made

sure to look up every few seconds to make sure the computer was still there, and no funny business was happening. They would come back and thank him and not speak to him again for the rest of the night. He didn't trust people the same way. He assumed that he would pick the wrong person to ask, "Would you mind watching my laptop?" and come back and it would be gone. This meant often times when he would go out to smoke his pipe and then come back into the library, he would lose the spot where he had been working and would need to find a new one.

He learned the layout of the library and had preferred places to sit. His favorite spot was the basement, or "learning commons." It was a place to be seen. The public computers were there, so were the printers and copiers, and most people went down there instead of waiting for an elevator to go up to one of the other twenty floors. If you came with a group, you could take over one of the study rooms and be guaranteed the spot for the rest of the night as long as one person stayed in there when the others went to get a coffee or have a smoke.

Out in front of the library he sat puffing on his pipe, smoke rising like a serpent out of the bowl, watching people come in and out. There were others around him smoking cigarettes, but he was the only one with a pipe. He felt cool. Maybe he would get a sportscoat with elbow patches to wear while he was smoking. After taking some political theory classes he thought that maybe he'd want to get a PhD in that and teach it as a professor at a prestigious university. This was his image of what a political theorist was, of what his future was; sportscoats and pipe tobacco. He sat there puffing and saw a girl from one of his classes named Mia that he had become friendly with over the semester. They worked on a group project together and he sometimes saw her and her friends at parties he went to. Mia was majoring in urban planning

and dressed in really cool vintage clothing. She organized protests and hosted potluck dinner parties at her apartment. Greg wanted to ask Mia out for a date, but he was too afraid of being rejected. He became self-conscious of the pipe when he saw her and quickly put it in the bushes behind him before she walked by.

“Hey Greg, how’s it going?”

“Hey Mia, I’m good, how are you?”

He tried to play it cool but could feel the sweat pooling on his forehead and the stains growing in his armpits.

“Just heading in to do some studying, where are you sitting?”

“Well I was downstairs, but I packed up to come out here for some fresh air.”

“I’m heading down there now, maybe I’ll see you?”

“Yeah, for sure, I’ll look out for you.”

“Is that smoke coming out of the bush behind you?”

Greg turned and saw the smoke rising from inside of the bush where he put the pipe. Mia reached into her backpack, grabbed her water bottle, and poured it onto the bush. There was a sizzling sound as steam rose. She reached into the bush and pulled out the pipe.

“Ugh, what kind of asshole smokes a pipe? Do they think they’re Sherlock Holmes or something?”

Greg tried to play it cool. “I know, right? How stupid is that.”

She tossed the pipe in the trash and started walking into the library. He followed her.

Turtles All the Way Down

Early on a Friday night, O'Neil's Tap in Charlestown doesn't attract many besides regulars and the few people who venture in for a cheap beer. It wasn't the bar you choose to go to first, more like the bar you end up at last. Carl was walking back from the jukebox and "Let's Go" by The Cars came over the speakers. He sat back down at the table with Tony and Jake.

"I love this song," said Jake, leaning back in his chair.

"The Cars, man," said Tony. "They were the real deal."

I love the night life baby...

"Imagine living in Boston back then when they were around?" said Carl. "It must have been so cool."

"The city was different then. It was real," said Tony. "My dad was at Northeastern in the 80s. He said the whole city was incredible, says he doesn't even recognize it now."

"Seeing the Celtics at the old Garden? Larry Bird, Robert Parish. Those must have been the days," said Jake.

Carl, Tony, and Jake were childhood friends who moved to Boston at the same time after college. Carl worked for the state doing research on the budget, Tony worked in finance for a bank downtown, and Jake worked at a local coffee shop and was trying out his dream of being a playwright. When Jake and Carl went to Tony's apartment in Charlestown to hang out, they always made a point of having a drinking at O'Neil's.

When you walk into the bar, there isn't much to look at. It's a small dive with low lights and sticky floors. The bar is on the left with rickety stools and a large TV. In between the liquor bottles lined up behind the bar is a stained-glass window. To the right are high top tables with

stools and another TV hanging on the brick wall. An ATM sits in the corner, used by those who don't know that the bar is still cash only. The space gets progressively darker as you walk towards the back. Going beyond the bar brings you to the seating area. Wooden booths and chairs surround tables and pictures of Bobby Orr and the old elevated subway hang on the wall. The jukebox in the back-left corner is one of the digital ones that lets you play almost any song ever recorded.

"You know what the problem with this city is?" said Carl. "For a place with the nickname 'Beantown' there aren't a lot of spots to get beans."

"That's true," said Jake. "There was Durgin-Park, but they closed."

"And the Fours, but they closed too," said Tony.

"I can't think of one place right now where we could go and get some beans in this whole city," said Carl.

"That's messed up," said Jake, shaking his head.

"You want beans in this city, you have to look hard to find them." said Tony. "It shouldn't be hard. Where's the pride?"

"Exactly," said Carl. "You go to Philadelphia, you get cheesesteaks, and you know where the best cheesesteaks are. What do you think of when I talk about Buffalo, New York?"

"Wings," said Tony and Jake. "You want wings in Buffalo, you go to the Anchor Bar," said Tony.

"But Boston? No one has any idea about where to get beans in Boston." Carl sat back in his seat. He took the last sip of his beer. "You guys want another one?" Jake and Tony gave him a thumbs up. He got up and walked over to the bar to get another round.

“The old Garden sucked,” a guy sitting at the bar said to Carl.

Carl turned to face him. “What’s that?”

“You guys were talking about seeing the Celtics at the old Garden. That place was awful. There were poles everywhere so you couldn’t see what was happening, it was hot, and the seats were so small you needed a shoehorn to get in and out of them. I’d take a seat and my knees would be up in my chest.”

“It couldn’t have been that bad,” said Carl.

“Oh, it was,” said the bartender putting three beers down on the bar. “People like to get all warm and fuzzy about it now, and I mean, it was nice because it was cheap, and the team was good, but overall? I’d take the new Garden over the old Garden any day. You want another one Walt?”

“You know it,” he said, sliding an empty glass forward.

Carl put a \$20 bill down on the bar and the bartender left to get him change. “You guys like beans?”

“You mean like from a can?” asked Walt.

“Yeah, like Boston baked beans.”

“I like them,” said the bartender.

“Yeah, me too” said Walt. “I make them with hot dogs. Why?”

“Just wondering,” said Carl. He left a tip and went back to the table.

Tony was standing in front of the jukebox. “Roadrunner” by the Modern Lovers came on through the speakers.

Jake was singing along to the song. He used his empty beer bottle as a microphone and did his best Jonathan Richman impression.

I'm in love with modern moonlight, 128 when it's dark outside, I'm in love with Massachusetts, with the radio on...

Tony sat back down, and Carl handed out the beers.

"Tony brings up a good point Carl," said Jake. "What about clam chowder? We have that here."

"Ah, well here is where you're wrong Tony. Clam chowder is regional."

"What do you mean regional?" said Tony.

"It's called New England clam chowder. *New England.*"

"What's your point?" asked Jake.

"It's not just a Boston thing. It's all throughout the region. You can get it in any New England seaside town. You ever been up to Maine? Chowder basically flows out of the faucets up there."

"I like chowder," said Walt, turning to face their table. "You guys been to the Captain's Log in the North End? That's good chowder."

"Yes, there is good chowder here, but it's different. It doesn't count. Boston's food is beans," said Carl.

"The beans again?" said Walt.

"Think about it, man, we're in a city nicknamed Beantown," said Jake.

"It's kind of a stupid name," said Walt.

Tony, Carl, and Jake all turned and looked at him.

“How could you say that?” said Tony, sneering.

“I read something recently about this,” said the bartender. “Baked beans were originally a Native American dish. They made it with venison, corn, and maple syrup and would cook it in holes in the ground filled with hot coals. When the pilgrims came, they liked the dish so much they started making it themselves, and eventually it evolved into what it is today. I think it was sailors that liked it a lot when they would come into port in Boston because it was so cheap to eat so they gave the city the nickname Beantown.”

“Where the hell did you read that?” said Walt, turning back towards the bartender.

“I don’t know, the Globe or something.”

The phone started ringing, and the bartender left to answer it. “You know, I don’t actually like beans that much,” said Tony.

Walt rolled his eyes and turned back towards the bar.

Tony’s girlfriend Jody and her friend Tara walked in and joined them at their table.

“Hey guys,” said Jody as they both grabbed chairs. “What have you been up to tonight?” She gave Tony a kiss on the cheek.

“Talking about friggin’ beans,” said Walt. “You two nice ladies really like to spend time with these guys? With all the bean talk? I hope you’re coming from something more fun.”

“We were in the Seaport,” said Tara. “We went to that new restaurant and then to an art exhibit. It was fun.”

“Ugh,” said Carl. “The Seaport.”

“Remember when that area was just parking lots?” said Tony.

“I remember when a guy got shot in front of Anthony’s Pier Four down there,” said Walt. “Is there anything that doesn’t bother you about the modern version of this city, or at least anything from this city’s past that you aren’t nostalgic about?”

“I think that’s easy for you to say,” said Tony. “You lived through all the stuff we’ve been talking about.”

“You know,” said Walt, “when I was your age, me and my buddies would sit around the bar doing the same thing as you. ‘Oh, wouldn’t it have been great if we could’ve seen Bill Russell play? There’s nothing to do in this city ever since they cleaned up the combat zone.’ And 20 years from now, you know what’s going to happen? There’s going to be a group of guys sitting here saying, ‘It would have been so great to see Jaylen Brown and Jayson Tatum play for the Celtics. The city’s not the same ever since the Back Bay filled in with water again.’ You know what I mean. It’s turtles all the way down!” Walt picked up his drink, finished it, and signaled for another. The bartender brought one over.

“He’s right,” he said. “I’ve been bartending here for a long time now and I hear the same conversations happen over and over again. But with you guys? It happens more than usual.”

“I’m going out for a cigarette,” said Walt, getting up from the bar and putting on his jacket.

Jody turned to everyone. “I love you guys, you all know that. And I appreciate how much you like this place. But if you keep hanging out here exclusively, you’re all going to end up being him someday.”

“Actually, I think you’re all him already,” said Tara.

“What do you mean?” said Carl.

“Sitting here at the bar alone, arguing with some guys in their 20s? You already come here every weekend,” said Jody.

“We go other places,” said Tony. “I take you out to dinner,” he said to Jody.

“I don’t see a problem with it,” said Carl.

“No, she’s right,” said Jake. “We come here all the time and just sit and complain. There’s got to be more to life than this.”

The door to the bar opened and Walt led about a dozen people wearing Celtics gear in. The game had been on the TV behind the bar, but they had only been paying half attention to it. The postgame show was on now and they saw that the Celtics had beaten the Bucks 115-106. The people were in a celebratory mood. The bartender started filling glasses and grabbing bottles and trying to keep track of who ordered what and who still had to pay.

One of the newcomers went to the jukebox. As he walked back to the bar, “Sweet Caroline” by Neil Diamond came on over the speakers.

“I think that’s our cue,” said Tony.

They all grabbed their jackets, drank the rest of their beers, and made their way towards the door. They walked by Walt who had his arm around a guy in a Jayson Tatum jersey singing along.

Reaching out...touching meeeeeee, touching youuuuuuuu...

He nodded to them as they passed. They walked out right as the whole bar broke into the chorus together.

The five of them stood outside on the sidewalk debating what to do next.

“Maybe we can go to a place that has beans?” said Tony.

“Enough with the beans,” said Jody, shooting him a glance.

“I’d go for any food,” said Jake. “I’m starving.”

“We’re taking you boys out,” said Tara. “I know a great place to go.”

Carl turned around and looked inside the window at everyone in the bar. There was such joy on their faces as they sang together, buying each other drinks, sharing a moment. He made eye contact with Walt and waved to him again. Walt waved back and then shrugged and smiled before going back to singing along with the rest of the bar.

“You good Carl?” asked Jake, putting his hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah,” he said. “Really good actually.”

“Pick it up then or we’re leaving you behind,” yelled Tony, who was already a block away with Jody and Tara.

Carl and Jake jogged down the street and into the cold night to catch up with them. They saw the bus coming from down the road and started to run to the stop, waving to the driver so she knew that they wanted to be picked up.

That one part of the night

He turned on the basketball game, saw how much his team was losing by, and turned it off. It would just frustrate him to watch if they were already losing this bad. That had been his plan for the night, sit on the couch and watch the game, maybe make some popcorn. Now he had nothing to do. He started wandering through the apartment, out of the living room and into the dining room. He shuffled through the mail that was sitting on the table. He walked to the kitchen, opened the fridge, closed it, went to the pantry and looked at the snacks in there. He picked up some trail mix and then put it back down. He went back over to the fridge, opened it up, and then closed it again, and walked out of the kitchen back into the dining room. He went straight through into the bedroom. He sat down on the bed, started reading the book he had on his nightstand, got distracted by his thoughts, and realized he hadn't taken any of what he had just read in. He closed the book and laid down flat on the bed staring at the ceiling. He'd been having trouble filling this part of the day when dinner was over, but it was still too early to go to bed. He felt unfocused and unproductive during it, feeling an urge to do something meaningful. But what did meaningful really mean? He got out of the bed and left the bedroom and went into the spare bedroom that he used as an office. He sat down at the desk and opened his laptop. He started to check social media, something mindless that would at least pass the time before he felt it was appropriate to go to sleep. He got a text message from a friend. "You watching this game? They tied it up!" He shut his laptop and went back out to the living room. He sat back down on the couch, searched for the remote, and turned the game on. He texted his friend, "Yeah what a game! Can't believe they came back."

It's a Wonderful Job for People Who Have Never had a Nervous Breakdown but Always Wanted One

At dinner, Jane confided in Ray.

"You can't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you. I'm not supposed to say anything about it."

"I can keep a secret." said Ray.

"I mean it," said Jane. "This wouldn't just cost me my job, I could end up in jail. This is top level government security information and I need you to swear you will not tell a soul about it. It's just so cool and I need to share it with someone and I know I can trust you."

"You have my word; my lips will be sealed."

"Okay. The government approached us about a year and a half ago with a new contract. We didn't think much of it at first because it seemed straight forward. But after we accepted, we got a visit from a top Pentagon official who explained everything to us. He told us that they wanted a time machine."

"Okay, that's enough wine for you," Ray said, grabbing the bottle. Jane held up her hand to stop him.

"I need you to listen. A lot of the research I've done has been related to time travel. My PhD dissertation touched on it and MIT recruited me to work on this team with some of the top quantum physicists in the country because of it. So, we were surprised when they told us that's what they wanted, but not shocked. Mathematically we had a pretty good idea of how it could work, and this was our chance to try it. And two weeks ago, we did it."

"Did what?"

"We sent something back through time."

“I’m not following.”

“We built a time machine and it works.”

“Did you send a person through time?”

“No, we sent a basketball.”

Ray squinted at her. He couldn’t tell if she was telling the truth.

“Why would you send a basketball into the future?”

“The past. We’ve figured out how to move things through time, but not through space and time.”

Ray shook his head. “You lost me again.”

“Basically, right now, the machine can send something backwards through time, but, because we haven’t figured out the space part yet, it lands in the exact same spot that it leaves from however many years you sent it into the past. We built the machine in a warehouse off of Mass Ave that MIT has owned since the 1890s and has been abandoned since the 1950s, so we knew we could send it there undetected. We put a basketball on it knowing it would land in the past and stay in the warehouse until the present day. When we called the machine back there was no basketball on it and we looked around the warehouse and found it, dusty in the corner.”

“How does a basketball just roll off of the machine like that?”

“The machine is basically just a large centrifuge that spins so fast it’s able to move through time. It’s basically a chair with rings around it and not much else. Because it spins, we put the basketball on the seat and when it arrived in 1962 and stopped spinning, it rolled off.”

“This is insane. You’re putting me on.” Ray got up from the table and brought the dishes over to the sink.

“I swear I’m not,” said Jane. She pulled out her phone. “Look.”

Ray walked back over to the table and looked at the screen of her phone. There was a picture of a basketball on a concrete floor covered in dust and cobwebs. Below the dust and cobwebs, he could make out the Nike swoosh and the MIT athletics logo.

“You really did do it.”

“Why don’t you ever believe me?”

Ray stood staring at the ball. His wife was a genius. He always kind of knew that, but sometimes he forgot. She didn’t talk to him much about her work, mostly because she couldn’t. All of the projects that she worked on were top secret, so the information that Ray got from her was usual office gossip and drama that anyone who works experiences.

They met online after both moving to Cambridge. Jane had just gotten her job at MIT, and Ray was getting his MFA in writing. They had an instant connection, both smart and funny. Jane liked hearing about what it was like being in an arts program, herself having only ever studied science. She had a mysteriousness about herself, something Ray couldn’t place his finger on, but found excitingly attractive. She was short, no more than five feet tall, with red hair and large arresting eyes. He knew from the minute he met her she was smart, but she was never condescending to him, only explaining things if he asked questions.

Jane liked that Ray was pursuing his dream of being a writer. She had always dated science types, mostly shy, polite men who were self-conscious lovers and obsessed with their research. Ray had a rugged look about him. He was six feet with black hair and a beard that just bordered on being too long. He had the body of a former athlete, someone who used to be skinny but had filled out.

On their first date, they went to a Karaoke bar in Downtown Boston. They watched others singing before Jane got up to go to the bathroom. When she got back she whispered in his ear, "I signed us up."

Ray protested, but Jane dragged him to the stage where they sang "Hooked on a Feeling" by Blue Swede together. They both knew then that they had found their soulmate.

Ray looked up from the phone and back at Jane. "Are you going to do it?"

"Do what?" she asked.

"Go back in time."

"Not right now. We're not sure how a person would handle it. We need to do some more tests before we even think about sending a human to the past. Maybe someday though they will let me try it."

"Where would you go?"

"In time? I'm not sure. I think I would want to go back to the 60s. Maybe during Beatlemania? That would be fun to see them in concert. I know where you would go."

"Where?"

"To the Dick Cavett show!"

The words echoed in Ray's head. He could do it. He could go back to the 1970s and be in the audience for the show. Or, even better, he could give Dick Cavett a copy of his book and be a guest on the show to talk about it. He envisioned himself walking out on stage, feeling the heat from the bright lights as he walked up to Dick Cavett and shook his hand. The cameras would fix on him and he would wave to the clapping audience before sitting down and taking a sip of water.

Ray was finishing a novel, one that he had been working on for seven years. When someone asked him what it was about, he would say, “oh, you know, it’s really about the American experience, what it means to be an American in the twenty-first century. But it’s also a road story, friends going across the country to find themselves. Think Harriet Beecher Stowe meets Jack Kerouac.”

The description always got confused looks that Ray had gotten used to. He knew they wouldn’t understand it. They weren’t worldly enough, hadn’t read the right books to fully grasp what he was talking about. He received rejection letter after rejection letter from publishers that “appreciated his obvious enthusiasm” but found that “the work didn’t fit with what they were looking for at the moment.” In Ray’s mind, the only person who could possibly understand his book and help explain it to the masses was Dick Cavett.

He stumbled upon a rerun of the talk show late one night, and after watching Norman Mailer get in an argument with Gore Vidal, he became obsessed with it. Jane was supportive of her husband’s Cavett addiction. She bought him the complete box set of DVDs with every episode of the show, and occasionally she would watch one with him to unwind after work.

Besides being a writer, Ray was a high school English teacher. He focused his lesson plans around writers who had been guests of Cavett’s in the late 1960s and early 1970s, so he could play his students clips of the show in class. Besides Vidal and Mailer, his class read Truman Capote, Michael Crichton, and W.H. Auden. They also read *The Godfather* for the Marlon Brando interview, and watched *Murder She Wrote* for Angela Lansbury’s episode. Students fought to get into his class because word got around that most of the time was spent watching videos of an old talk show. When they weren’t watching, Ray had the class put on

their own talk shows to discuss works of creative writing that they produced. Ray always played the part of Cavett.

“Honey are you okay?” asked Jane.

“Yes, sorry, I was just thinking about how cool that would be, to go and see Dick Cavett in person.”

“Maybe someday, after they let me go of course.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Ray couldn't stop thinking about the possibility of time travel for the next few weeks. He thought about being a guest on Dick Cavett non-stop. The technology was there for him to do it, but using it was a risk. He would have to go undetected, not wanting to cost Jane her job, much less have her end up in jail for something he did. He also had to consider the risk he posed to his own well-being, the potential that he could get killed in the process or stuck in the past. After struggling with what to do, he finally decided he was going to use the time machine.

After going through the DVD collection, Ray decided to go back to December 5, 1974, an episode featuring David Bowie. He spent the next few months getting ready. He went to thrift shops to find clothing that would fit in in 1974 and grew out his hair. He went to the library and read old magazines and newspapers to get a feel for what was in the news around that time and printed his manuscript in a font that made it look like it had been typed on a typewriter. He didn't have much of a plan for getting onto the show besides acting confident and like he belonged there. He would go, give a copy of his manuscript to Cavett, watch David Bowie perform, come back like nothing happened, and go back again a week later to get his invite onto the show.

As the day got closer, he got more nervous. He stopped eating and became irritable around Jane. She noticed a difference in him, but was working so much, she didn't have time to talk to him about it beyond saying, "what's been happening with you lately?" She hadn't talked to him again about the time machine after that dinner. He could tell she regretted telling him all that she did, and he didn't push for more information.

He loved her and felt terrible about betraying her the way he was about to. He avoided her when she was around the house and couldn't look her in the eyes when they did talk. She always did little things for him like having coffee and breakfast ready when he woke up, picking out movies for them to watch, and bringing home pints of his favorite ice cream. Those things started to embarrass and anger him as the day got closer. He wondered if she would ever forgive him if she found out that he used the machine. Would she be able to see how important it was to him to share his book with someone who would understand it? As much as he loved Jane, and he loved her a lot, he was even more enamored with meeting his hero to share his life's work.

At 2am on December 5, Ray snuck out of bed, took Jane's employee access card, and drove down Mass Ave to the warehouse that was home to the time machine. He had followed Jane to work and saw her enter it the week prior. He went to the door and swiped the card. The machine made a "beep" sound, and a green light went on. He walked into the large dark room and felt around on the wall for a light switch. He found it and flipped it, the lights turning on with a loud "thunk" that startled him. Inside the warehouse were racks of boxes, a forklift, and a desk with papers on it. He didn't see a time machine. Sweat beaded on his neck. Did he go to the wrong place? He saw a door in the back that had another swipe machine on it. He went up

to it and used Jane's card again. This machine had a number pad, and after he swiped the card the numbers lit up. He thought for a second about what Jane's code might be, and typed in their wedding anniversary date. The same "beep" and green light came on and he walked through. There, in the back room sat the machine. It wasn't very big or impressive. It was just as Jane described, a chair with two large circles around it. It resembled an atomic model and he wondered if they designed it like that on purpose. He changed into his outfit and walked over to the machine. It seemed pretty straight forward. On it there was a panel that could be adjusted to different years, and a big green button that said "go" next to a yellow button that said "return." He sat down in the chair and strapped himself in. He adjusted the year to 1974, took a deep breath, and hit the green button. The circles surrounding him started to turn slowly. He grabbed onto the arm rests and tried to stay calm. The circles started to spin faster and faster, and the chair started going in circles as well. He felt like he was going to throw up. He closed his eyes and the whirring sounds around him faded.

When he opened his eyes, he realized he had passed out. He looked around and saw the same room that he had been in. He unstrapped himself and stepped off the machine. As soon as his foot touched the ground he collapsed and threw up. He felt weak. He fell asleep again and woke up 4 hours later at 6:30am. When he woke up, he forgot where he was and jolted to his feet. He got up and went through the door, hurrying through the room with the same racks of boxes, forklift and desk in it and went outside. He stepped out onto Mass Ave and looked towards Boston. He could see the Hancock Tower in the distance, half finished. It had worked. He was in 1974.

He couldn't believe it, but he didn't have time to think more about it. He needed to get to New York City. His plan was to try and hitch a ride with someone. He started walking north down Mass Ave towards Harvard Square.

Everything was a little different than the Cambridge that Ray knew. Some of the stores were the same but the signage for them was different. Small restaurants were in spaces where Ray was used to there being a bank, and the apartment buildings that some of his friends lived in were missing. The sun started to rise as he got into the square. He went over to the Out of Town Newsstand just to look at the papers and magazines. Each one said "1974" in the corner and he couldn't get enough of it. He kept lifting them up and putting them down.

The man behind the counter barked at him. "Hey, if you're not going to buy anything, get out of here. It's a newsstand not a library." Ray went back outside and saw a corkboard across the street in Harvard Yard. On it were listings for apartments seeking roommates, concerts, demonstrations, and carpools. He saw one that said "Looking for someone to drive to NYC with. Free ride if you drive. Leaving December 5. One way. Call if interested."

Ray memorized the number and ran to a pay phone. He remembered to bring change with him just in case something like this happened. The phone rang three times until someone answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi, I'm calling about the ride to New York. Do you still need someone?"

"Yes, that would be great. I'm leaving in 45 minutes. My car is parked on Mount Auburn Street. It's a green 1968 Chrysler Newport. My name's Joe by the way."

"My name's Ray. I'll be there, see you soon."

Ray bought a cup of coffee for a quarter from a place on Brattle Street and walked down to Mount Auburn Street. He found a green Chrysler and leaned against it drinking his coffee. He checked his watch and saw it had been about 45 minutes. He was getting impatient, hoping this Joe guy didn't ditch him.

"Hey, are you Ray?"

Ray looked down the street and saw a man about one hundred yards away.

"Yeah, you Joe?"

"That's me. My car is over here. That's a New Yorker you're leaning against. I can't afford one of those."

Joe was shorter than Ray, wore glasses, and had his hair slicked over to the side. He had on a pair of plaid wool pants with a sweater vest and a heavy parka over it. He stuck out his hand and Ray grabbed it to shake.

"Pleased to meet you Ray, you don't mind driving?"

"Not at all, I love to drive, especially a car like this."

"Well it isn't much," said Joe, patting the roof of the Chrysler, "but it gets the job done." He tossed Ray the keys and got in the passenger seat. Ray got behind the wheel and shut the door.

"You don't mind if I sleep do you? I have a big interview at Bell Labs this afternoon and I want to get as much rest as I can on the way down."

"Not a problem," said Ray. He started the car and eased it onto the road. They had barely left Boston when he looked over and saw Joe sound asleep. He instinctively reached for his phone in his pocket but remembered that he left it at home, and that even if he did have it

wouldn't work. He'd have to find his way to New York without Google Maps and a podcast to listen to.

In Connecticut, Joe woke up.

"Wow, I was out for a while. We're making good time."

Ray didn't respond. His eyes stayed focused on the road.

"So," said Joe, "what's bringing you to New York?"

"I'm going to be a guest on the Dick Cavett Show."

"Wow, you don't say! That's quite a booking. What got you on there?"

"I wrote a book," said Ray. "I'm going on to promote it."

"I didn't know I was riding with an author. What's your book about?"

Ray started his usual description, "oh, you know, it's really about the American experience, what it means to be an American in the twenty-first century..."

Joe cut him off. "Oh, so science fiction?"

Ray was confused. "Why do you say that?"

"You said twenty-first century. So, it's set in the future. I just assumed that meant it was science fiction. You know, like flying cars and time travel?"

"Right, yeah, kind of. It's more nuanced than that."

"I love science fiction. Do you read Vonnegut? Man, when *Breakfast of Champions* came out last year, I couldn't wait to read it. I got it the first day it was available."

"Yeah, Vonnegut is great."

"Did you read the interview he did in Playboy? He's a genius."

"I'll have to check it out."

“You know who does a good interview? Johnny Carson.”

Ray’s eyes darted to Joe. “Carson is a hack.”

“What?” asked Joe, surprised.

“He’s a hack. The guy can’t interview for shit. He relies on all of these jokes and gimmicks and never gets the guests to answer any real questions. He’s nothing compared to Dick Cavett. Nothing.”

“Jeez, I didn’t know you had such strong opinions about it. I’m sorry.”

Ray looked back to the road and tried to calm himself down. He had been on edge the entire ride and didn’t feel like talking anymore. Joe got the hint.

“How about we listen to some music?” he said, clicking on the radio. He scanned the station dial. “Hooked on a Feeling,” came on. “I love this song,” said Joe.

A wave of guilt crashed over Ray. What he was doing was so selfish, thoughtless, and crazy. He was destroying his wife, the woman that he loved, for the chance to see something he had already watched on his DVD set so many times before. There was no guarantee that he would even get into the show, much less meet Dick Cavett in person. He started to cry.

Joe shifted in his seat. “Hey buddy, I’m sorry I said that about Carson. You’re right, Cavett is better.”

Ray’s shoulders lifted up and down as he sobbed.

“Why don’t you pull into that gas station up ahead,” said Joe.

Ray pulled over and went into the gas station bathroom. He splashed cold water on his face and looked at himself in the mirror.

“This is all going to work out,” he said to his reflection. “You’ve come too far now to turn back. No one is going to get in trouble. Dick Cavett is going to love your book.”

He went back to the car and Joe was leaning against it holding two cups of coffee.

“Got you one,” he said handing it to him.

“Thanks” said Ray, taking it. He started to get back in the car. Joe stopped him.

“We have to finish these before we get going again. I don’t want them to spill.”

“Right, no cup holders,” Ray said.

“Now that’s a good idea,” said Joe. “Maybe I’ll bring that up in my interview with Bell Labs, a cup holder for every car.”

When they got back on the road, Joe fell asleep again and Ray calmed down. He pulled over in Times Square, woke up Joe, and thanked him for the ride.

“Good luck with your interview,” said Ray.

“You too,” said Joe. “I’ll be watching for your book to be released!”

Joe drove away, and Ray looked around. He’d heard about Times Square in the 1970s but was surprised to see it in person. He was used to the M&M store and Dave and Buster’s, a family friendly place filled with tourists. Where he was now, XXX cinemas and peep shows lined the street, and all kinds of unsavory people walked by, some bumping into him. He didn’t want to spend much time there, so he hailed a cab.

“The Elysee Theatre please,” he told the cabbie.

“The Elysee, huh? Going to see Cavett?”

“That’s right,” said Ray.

“You know, I like Cavett. People say he’s more for the thinking man, but I enjoy watching his shows. He talks about real stuff, you know? Not like Carson. Carson’s always joking, you can’t take anything he says seriously.”

“Right?” said Ray. “Thank you for saying that. It’s what I’ve been trying to tell people. Cavett is the greatest interviewer of our time.”

“You got that right buddy.”

The cabbie pulled up a block away from the theater.

“Five bucks chief” he said to Ray. Ray pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and handed it to him.

“Keep the change,” he said as he opened the door.

“Whoa, what is this? You trying to pull a fast one on me?”

“What do you mean?”

“What is this a counterfeit bill? It looks nothing like a twenty. Jackson is too big and it’s too colorful.”

Ray hadn’t considered how paper money had changed before traveling in time.

“It’s good money, I promise,” he said, jumping out of the car before the conversation could continue. He jogged to the theater.

He walked inside and saw a man in a suit with a clipboard standing in the lobby.

“Hello, I’m here to see Mr. Cavett.”

“Mr. Cavett isn’t here right now. Who are you? Do you have an appointment with him?”

“I’m Ray. I am going to be on the show in a week to talk about my book, and I’m just here to drop it off, so he can read it beforehand.”

“We don’t have any authors named Ray on next week,” the man said. “Next week it looks like it’s...”

“Gore Vidal, Rabbi Baruch Korff, and Jean Marsh, right.”

“How did you know...”

“But I am being added on too.”

“Sir, I don’t have time for this right now, could you please step back outside.”

Ray didn’t think about how his plan to be confident and act like he belonged would work in a place and time that he so clearly did not belong in.

“Wait, you have to believe me, let me just talk to Dick, he’ll clear this up.”

“Like I said, sir, Mr. Cavett isn’t here right now. Please take a step outside.”

He turned to walk back out to the street but stopped when he saw the man go through a side door, leaving Ray all alone in the lobby. He let go of the door handle and walked back to the theater’s entrance. He pushed on the door and it opened. On the other side was a familiar sight to Ray, something he had seen so many times before on his TV at home. The set was smaller than he imagined it, more compact and closer to the studio audience, but that just made it more magical. He walked up the aisle to the stage, letting his hand slide over the chairs, the coffee table, the desk, the shag carpeting.

“Hey!”

Ray came back to reality and turned to see the man with the clipboard standing at the back of the theater.

“I thought I told you to wait outside,” he said, grabbing Ray by the elbow and dragging him back to the sidewalk.

When they got outside, a car pulled up in front of the theater. The driver got out, went to the back door, and opened it. Out stepped Dick Cavett. Ray's jaw dropped. He felt like he had forgotten how to speak. Right as Cavett stepped onto the sidewalk, the cabbie came around the corner with a police officer.

"That's the guy, the counterfeiter."

The officer started towards Ray and he knew he would have to act quickly.

"Dick," he said, "it's me Ray. I have the book for you to read for next week when I'm on the show. Remember? We met before and you told me to bring you the book."

Dick Cavett kept walking towards the door. Ray jogged over to him.

"Mr. Cavett, hello. This is my book. Remember you said you would read it?"

Dick Cavett slowly turned to Ray and looked him in the eyes. This was it. Ray had dreamed about this moment. His hero was standing in front of him, in his prime, about to speak to him. The officer came up behind Ray and Ray put up his hand to tell him to wait. He wanted to hear what Dick Cavett had to say to him.

Dick Cavett examined his face and then opened his mouth to speak.

"Who the hell are you?"

"RAYMOND."

He turned and saw Jane standing on the sidewalk surrounded by men in black suits. Her face was red, like she had been crying.

"Looks like you've got a lot of people looking for you," said the police officer, taking out his handcuffs.

Ray's head was spinning. He looked around frantically for someone to help but no one there was on his side. Jane couldn't even make eye contact with him. She was staring at the ground with such intensity he thought she might burn a hole through it.

"Mr. Cavett. Dick! Please, help me! At least take my manuscript to read," said Ray, holding it out to him.

The police officer grabbed Ray by the arm and he dropped his manuscript on the ground. The pages scattered onto the sidewalk and started blowing down 58th street. Dick Cavett turned and walked into the theater.