

**Blue Orchid**  
**and Other Stories**

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## Sargent's Orders

The speaker on the wall crackled to life. “G-g-good morning,” it said. Immediately, twenty-four high-school juniors shut their mouths, found their seats, and fixed their eyes on Mr. Sargent. He rewarded their behavior by turning the corner of his mouth up just a fraction of an inch.

The stuttering sophomore speaking over the intercom asked the school to join him in the pledge of allegiance. As one body, Mr. Sargent's students stood and intoned the familiar words. At the last sound of “for all,” they sat. Principal Miller came next to drone his way through the long list of morning announcements: “Good morning, boys and girls. Welcome to another fine day at St. Mary's. Congratulations to the Varsity baseball team on winning their game against Fitzburgh Prep.” By this point in the year, even his congratulations lacked enthusiasm. Everyone's thoughts were turning toward summer—faculty and students alike.

Still, not a peep was heard in Mr. Sargent's classroom. By this point in the year, his students had been meticulously groomed to meet the high standards that St. Mary's Academy had set for its students nearly a hundred years before.

Principal Miller always ended the announcements with some clichéd maxim. Today, he said, “And remember, boys and girls: it's never too late to do the right thing.”

Then, with a snap, the speaker went dead. The silence that followed was deep enough that the buzzing of the fluorescent lights could be heard overhead. If a student shifted in her seat, the creak of the desk sounded like a wounded animal's cry. Late-spring sunlight streamed through the glazed windows on the eastern wall of the room.

Mr. Sargent took a last sip of coffee from a mug emblazoned with “Words Words Words.” He rose from his chair and adjusted the shoulders on his corduroy jacket. He smoothed his starched button-down over his noble bulge of his belly.

“Good morning, class,” he said.

“Good morning, Mr. Sargent,” they replied in unison.

“And how are you feeling today, boys and girls?”

“We are well, Mr. Sargent. And how are you?”

There was a touch of the robotic in that second response. Mr. Sargent sighed and ran his fingers through thinning gray hair. It was June, after all. They had reasons to be fatigued. “Come now,” he said. “A little more enthusiasm, please. How are you feeling today, boys and girls?”

“We are well, Mr. Sargent. And how are you?”

Ah, yes. Even feigned joviality was better than a monotone delivery. Mr. Sargent smiled.

“Why, thank you for asking, my fine young scholars. I am just fine—eager to explore another masterpiece of American literature,” he said. “Let us begin this new day with a writing prompt. Please pull out your notebooks and tear out a crisp, unblemished page.”

As twenty-four backpacks opened and twenty-four notebooks emerged, Mr. Sargent went to the chalkboard and wrote out his prompt in an elegant script:

*How does Dimmesdale cope with guilt in chapters 11 + 12?*

Mr. Sargent clapped the chalk off his fingers and returned to his chair. “We will write for a full ten minutes,” he said. “Please fill your page with illuminating detail and vibrant wit. Show me how well you’ve been reading.”

He lifted his mug and took a long sip. The coffee was pitch black and bitter. Mr. Sargent liked it that way. Coffee should be strong, students should be courteous, and every moment of

class should be filled with deep, resonant learning—June or not. Mr. Walsh, a first-year teacher, had boasted the day before about taking his students outside for a “grass class.” He said he could think of no better atmosphere in which to teach *Walden*. Mr. Sargent shook his head and chortled. What would it be like in five more years? In ten?

He reached for his ragged copy of Hawthorne’s masterpiece, its pages splayed out like a fan, its spine reinforced with masking tape. Gingerly, he opened the book to page 125, the start of Chapter 11. He knew these pages by heart. He had filled every margin with notes and marked almost every word at some point or another. For over four decades, this book had been his favorite to teach—the reason he saved it for June. Every year he understood more; every year his students seemed to understand less.

The minutes ticked by. Mr. Sargent lifted his eyes to examine his students. Melissa Tyler sat in the front row, writing furiously. Her face showed the strain of her effort. She was the best in the class and Mr. Sargent’s favorite. Today she wore a gray high-neck dress, a white sweater over her shoulders, and a sequined pink headband. She was a pretty girl, if a bit plain. Her writing, by contrast, was gorgeous.

Three rows back sat Aaron Hornsby, a rude, ill-tempered young man. Earlier in the year, he had been nothing but trouble. Mr. Sargent saw to it that he learned the meaning of respect. Now his mouth gaped as he stared at the ceiling. The pen in his hand was idle, having no doubt spilled its daily quota of drivel.

Next to Aaron sat Julie Rodrigues, bent over her desk in a facade of concentration. Mr. Sargent couldn’t help noticing the ample cleavage exposed by her halter-top dress. He quickly averted his eyes. To think that her parents would let her leave the house like that. Didn’t they know how desperately she craved attention? Years ago, Mr. Sargent had made perfectly

reasonable requests for a tightening of the dress code, and the administration, as usual, had ignored him. If even a school as distinguished as St. Mary's would let such standards slide, then there was truly no hope for society.

Mr. Sargent rose from his spot and paced back and forth in front of the room. Michael Benson, sitting by the windows, wrote at a snail's pace. He could be counted on to do just enough to maintain his eligibility for the baseball team. In front of him sat Amy Davis, the cheerleader who put little hearts over her *i*'s. Her short green skirt exposed long white legs. John Martin sat beside her. The only black student in the class, he was as smart as a whip, but disappointingly quiet during discussion.

The minute hand on the clock struck 8:35. "Alright, boys and girls," Mr. Sargent said. "Please conclude your final sentence and pass your papers forward."

He gathered the papers and set them on his desk. Then, he returned to the chalkboard. "Miss Tyler, would you please turn to page 126, and start with 'All this was accomplished.'"

"Yes, Mr. Sargent," said Melissa in her sing-song voice. She flipped to the page as quickly as she could. After clearing her throat with a squeaky "ahem," She began to read. "All this was accomplished with a subtlety so perfect, that the minister, though he had constantly a dim perception of some evil influence watching over him, could never gain a knowledge of its actual nature..."

As she continued in her typical fluency, Mr. Sargent began scratching words onto the chalkboard. *Conscience. Atonement. Public v. Private. Hypocrisy. Self-flagellation.*

That would be enough to begin. He set the chalk down and turned back to his students. Melissa was still reading. "...He took himself to task for his bad sympathies in reference to

Roger Chillingworth, disregarded the lesson that he should have drawn from them, and did his best to root them out...’”

Suddenly, something caught Mr. Sargent’s eye. “Miss Chapman!” he exclaimed.

Melissa stopped reading mid-word. Amanda Chapman, a heavysset girl in the second row, froze under Mr. Sargent’s accusatory glare. Her eyes grew wide. She was Melissa Tyler’s best friend, and usually, like Melissa, so well behaved.

“Bring it to me, Miss Chapman,” said Mr. Sargent.

With quaking hands, she produced a folded sheet of notebook paper from beneath her desk. She rose slowly and approached the front of the room.

Mr. Sargent snatched the paper from her outstretched hands and indicated that she should stay put. Unfolding the paper, he saw it was not a written note, but an illustrated one. It was a cartoon. An obscene cartoon. The type of image that no seventeen-year-old, girl or boy, should ever see or even dare to imagine. A young girl wearing a bonnet and an A on the front of her dress was bent over with a ludicrous smile on her face. The skirt of her dress had been hitched up to her waist by a half-clothed man standing behind her. He, too, was smiling. Looking more closely, Mr. Sargent recognized in the man a striking similarity to his own appearance—the same approximate shape, the same wispy hair, the same patches on the elbows of his jacket.

His face turned white. In forty-three years in the classroom, he had never encountered anything so vile. He folded the drawing closed and presented the paper to his students between his thumb and index finger. Each of his students kept their heads down, their hands folded, their eyes fixed on the tops of their desks.

“Which one of you is responsible for this?” he asked.

The class was silent. Amanda Chapman, still standing next to him, trembled violently. The second hand on the clock ticked loudly. Voices in neighboring classrooms could be heard through the walls. A single vehicle whooshed by on the street outside.

“I will ask again,” said Mr. Sargent. “Who is the artist responsible for this crude, offensive, despicable sketch?”

He scanned the room for the slightest signs of guilt. Aaron Hornsby had gone back to staring at the ceiling. Amy Davis looked only at her folded hands. Julie Rodrigues was chewing on her nails. With horror, he realized a disturbing truth: they all looked guilty. They always looked guilty.

“Let us try a different tack,” said Mr. Sargent. He put his hands behind his back and turned to the trembling girl by his side. “Miss Chapman, was this your doing?”

She shook her head vigorously. No surprise there. She was hardly the type.

“Then who gave you this note?”

She lowered her gaze and shook her head more gently. Her lip was beginning to tremble.

“Miss Chapman,” said Mr. Sargent. “Refusing to tell the truth is just the same as lying. It is a lie of omission.”

The girl’s eyes were welling up. “I c-c-can’t,” she stammered. “I can’t say wh-wh-who.”

“It is not that you can’t. It is that you won’t.”

Her eyes reached their saturation point and tears dove down her cheeks. She put her hands over her face and sobbed.

“Take your seat, Miss Chapman,” said Mr. Sargent. The girl readily complied. Her body continued to shudder as it slumped over her desk.



“Now,” Mr. Sargent continued. “There will be more tears if no one will come forward.

Who passed this cartoon to Miss Chapman? Who drew it?”

The students continued to look at anything but Mr. Sargent. He could feel a bit of perspiration forming under his arms.

“Shall we go one by one?”

His question was met by silence.

Mr. Sargent marched to the back of the room and stood over his prime suspect. “Mr. Hornsby,” said Mr. Sargent. The boy sat up straight. “Is this your handiwork?”

“No,” said the boy.

Mr. Sargent slapped his hands onto the surface of Aaron’s desk. “Tell the truth!”

“No, Mr. Sargent,” said the boy.

“Did this note pass through your hands?”

“No, Mr. Sargent. I swear to God.”

“You will not take the Lord’s name in vain in my class.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Sargent. But it wasn’t me.”

A trickle of sweat appeared at Mr. Sargent’s temple. He brushed it off and crossed the room to stand over Michael Benson’s desk. He looked down at the boy.

“It wasn’t me either, Mr. Sargent,” said the boy before Mr. Sargent could ask. “I don’t know anything about it.”

“And what about you, Mr. Martin?”

“No, sir.”

“Miss Rodrigues?”

“Of course not, Mr. Sargent.”

*They all lie*, he thought. *They will always lie*. This was getting him nowhere.

“Fine,” he said. He returned to his desk and leaned back against it. He folded his arms across his chest. “We will wait then. No one in this room will speak or move until someone confesses to this impertinence. And you can be assured that every minute wasted will multiply the ensuing consequences.”

The silence that followed was as tense as any Mr. Sargent had experienced in his career. As he surveyed his students one by one, sweat continued to bead on his head and pour out from beneath his arms. It didn’t help that the sun continued to flood through the windows of the third-floor classroom, raising the temperature of the room.

Time passed slowly, but steadily. 8:50. 8:55. 9:00.

A few minutes past 9:00, Julie Rodrigues raised her hand in the back of the classroom. Mr. Sargent looked her way and pointedly ignored it. After two minutes she put it down.

Melissa Tyler removed her sweater and began to fan herself with her hand. She looked pale with concern. Amy Davis played with a coil of her long brown hair. John Martin’s head bobbed as his eyes threatened to close. Of course he knew better than to fall asleep. He knew what happened to boys and girls who allowed that to happen.

At ten past the hour, Julie Rodrigues put her hand back into the air. Again, Mr. Sargent ignored it. He made eye contact with her and then turned to look at someone else. Thirty seconds later, she spoke without being called on.

“Mr. Sargent?” she said.

“No talking, Miss Rodrigues.”

“Mr. Sargent, I have to go to the bathroom.”

“It will have to wait.”

“Please, Mr. Sargent. I really need to go.”

“You will wait, Miss Rodrigues.”

“Please! It’s an emergency!”

Mr. Sargent spread his arms and presented his open hands to his students. “Well, boys and girls? You can see how much Miss Rodrigues would like to leave this room. However, I have made it perfectly clear that no one moves until I receive a confession. Would someone care to help out his or her classmate?”

From one corner of the room came an audible gasp. Several mouths fell open. *Now they know I mean business*, thought Mr. Sargent. But still, no one raised a hand and no one came forward. The second hand on the clock made another revolution.

“I’m sorry, Miss Rodrigues,” said Mr. Sargent. “It appears you will have to wait.”

The girl huffed. She crossed her legs and began bouncing her foot in agitation.

Time was running out on first period. Mr. Sargent’s students watched the clock eagerly. It turned to 9:15, then 9:20. The bell would sound at 9:25. As the moment grew closer, a few students tucked their pens and notebooks away. Some swung their legs toward the door.

The bell rang and half of the students stood. “Excuse me!” said Mr. Sargent above the commotion. Everyone froze. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Mr. Sargent,” said Melissa Tyler. Still quite pale, she now looked truly panicked. “The bell rang. We have to go to our next class.”

The usual commotion of passing time came from the hall. Students leaving other classes could be heard shouting, slamming locker doors, and laughing at what were surely crude jokes. In Mr. Sargent’s room, however, nobody moved. Nobody uttered a word.

“I’m sorry, Miss Tyler,” said Mr. Sargent. “The guilty party has not made himself known.”

“But I have a chemistry quiz!”

“Please take your seats, everyone.”

Horrified, Melissa sat down. She stared blankly ahead while the rest of the students glanced at each other. Some were standing in place, and others remained seated. They looked at the door. They looked at Mr. Sargent.

Julie Rodrigues expelled a loud, exaggerated sigh. “This is ridiculous,” she said, lifting her backpack and striding confidently toward the door.

“I agree, Miss Rodrigues,” said Mr. Sargent, raising his voice to a dangerous volume. He stepped toward the door himself. “It is quite ridiculous.”

She glowered at him. “You can’t keep us here,” she said.

“Please take your seat.”

“We have rights, Mr. Sargent.”

“And so do I, Miss Rodrigues. I have the right to know the truth. I have the right to set the rules in my own classroom. Please take your seat.”

“My dad will hear about this. He won’t be happy.”

“I will look forward to explaining the situation to him, Miss Rodrigues. Please take your seat.”

For a moment, she appeared ready to bolt for the door. Her face twisted through a range of unpleasant expressions. Mr. Sargent’s face betrayed nothing more than ironclad conviction. Finally, she tossed up her arms. “Whatever!” she said before turning on her heels and going back

to her desk. The rest of the class followed her lead. They all returned to their desks. The impasse resumed.

A few seconds later, Justin Fowler, a student in Mr. Sargent's second period class, poked his head through the door and then froze. He looked at the desks and then at Mr. Sargent.

"Please wait in the hall," said Mr. Sargent.

With a look of abject bewilderment, the boy retreated. Mr. Sargent closed the door behind him.

The clamor in the hall was sustained for a moment or two and then it faded. Only the murmurings of Mr. Sargent's second period students could be heard. The bell rang again to announce the start of the new block. The silence in Mr. Sargent's room was heavier than before.

Melissa Tyler's eyes never left the clock. She sat as stiff as a telephone pole, white as porcelain. Julie Rodrigues kept her black, vengeful eyes trained on Mr. Sargent at all times. In the back of the room, Aaron Hornsby was failing to stifle a laugh.

"Is something funny, Mr. Hornsby?" asked Mr. Sargent.

"No, Mr. Sargent," replied the boy.

Five minutes passed before the silence was broken again. This time, the noise came from the door. Every student in the classroom perked up as Miss Sheehan, the vice principal, opened the door and walked into the room. She held a black radio in her hand. Her heels clicked sharply on the checkered tile floor.

"Mr. Sargent!" she exclaimed. "What in heaven's name is going on here?"

Mr. Sargent had never cared for Miss Sheehan. She was a busybody who'd ascended to the administration after only five years in the classroom. Then, having arrived at that station, she

had proceeded to tell Mr. Sargent how to do his job, the same job he had, in fact, been doing since before she was born.

“Hello, Miss Sheehan,” he said with convincing courtesy. “How lovely to see you today.”

She waved off his pleasantries and stood tall in her high-waisted dress pants. “Mr. Sargent, the bell rang almost ten minutes ago. It is second period now. You have students waiting in the hall, and the students in this room belong with their other teachers.”

“They are free to go, Miss Sheehan.”

“Thank you,” she said, looking immediately relieved. But the students knew their teacher too well. They did not move.

“They are free to go as soon as one of them confesses to this,” Mr. Sargent said. He held the folded note in the air.

Miss Sheehan crossed the room and took the paper from his hand. She unfolded it and examined the illustration. Her face turned red. She looked back at Mr. Sargent, then back at the note.

“Now do you understand?” asked Mr. Sargent.

Miss Sheehan’s expression was inscrutable. She handed the note back to him. In a voice that only he could hear, she said, “I can see perfectly well why this would offend you, and it would be nice to know who drew this, but—”

““But?”” said Mr. Sargent. “There can be no ‘but,’ Miss Sheehan. I will know who did this. The culprit is in this room.” His eyes blazed as he spoke. He made no effort to keep his voice down.

“Alan,” she said quietly. “I would be happy to ask all of these students to serve detention with you for as many days as it takes. But they need to go to their next class.”

“Miss Sheehan,” he replied in his usual volume. “If I let them go now, the culprit will never return. I know how they think. I’ve been doing this my entire adult life.”

Miss Sheehan was slow with her response. Her mouth moved slightly, but no words came out.

“Miss Sheehan!” Julie Rodrigues called out from the back of the classroom.

Miss Sheehan turned to face the student.

“I have to go to the bathroom, and he won’t let me leave.”

Miss Sheehan looked toward Mr. Sargent and then back at the student. “You may go to the bathroom, Julie,” she said.

“You will keep your seat, Miss Rodrigues,” said Mr. Sargent, not missing a beat.

At this point, it was Miss Sheehan’s mouth that fell open. Slowly, she turned to face Mr. Sargent and then positioned herself so that she stood between him and the students. “Alan,” she said quietly. “We will sort this out later. You cannot keep these students hostage.”

Mr. Sargent felt his shoulders tighten. His sweating had tapered off, but now it resumed again in earnest. The room was very warm.

“Do you mean to undermine my authority, Sarah?” he asked. There was a hard edge to his words.

“We will discuss all of this later,” she replied. Then she turned to face the students. “You are all free to go.”

As the students rose from their desks, Mr. Sargent flew to the door. He pressed his back against it and clasped the knob tightly in his left hand. His lungs were heaving. His heart was beating out of his chest. He felt the eyes of everyone in the room resting upon him. A trickle of sweat ran past his temple. “No!” he cried. “Nobody leaves!”

Melissa Tyler started to cry. Julie Rodrigues wore a wicked smile. “Holy crap,” said Aaron Hornsby, grinning like the imbecile he was.

Miss Sheehan appeared to be doing everything in her power to remain calm. “Gather your things and go home, Alan,” she said firmly. “You are in no state to teach today. Do not make me call for additional help.” She brandished her radio to punctuate the message.

Mr. Sargent stared at this young administrator with fire in his eyes.

“So call then!”

“Alan,” said Miss Sheehan. “When word gets out—”

“What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. Do you know who said that?”

Miss Sheehan raised an eyebrow, but otherwise kept her rigid pose. “Actually, Alan—”

“Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Miss Sheehan!”

Melissa Tyler, with tears still shining on her cheeks, raised her head to look at Mr. Sargent. He wiped his brow with his free hand, keeping the other hand tight on the doorknob. His entire body was trembling.

“Okay, Alan. That’s enough,” said Miss Sheehan. She raised her radio and pressed the button.

“No,” said Mr. Sargent, releasing the doorknob. Miss Sheehan let go of the button.

Mr. Sargent glanced at the varied expressions on his students’ faces. He imagined how he must have looked to all of them. A 65-year-old man barring a door and panting like a dog. Sweat streaming down his face. He pictured the vein throbbing at his temple.



Defeated, he returned to his desk. Whispering to one another, his students began to file out. Miss Sheehan stepped into the hall and made an announcement to those who were waiting. She said Mr. Sargent was not well. He would be going home. She would supervise the class until a substitute could be found.

Mr. Sargent felt light-headed. He filled his briefcase with his materials, keeping his eyes down. He tucked away his pens and pencils, his students' papers, and finally his copy of *The Scarlet Letter*. He buckled the bag closed and slung it over his shoulder. Only then did he realize that one student had remained in the room.

"Miss Tyler?" he asked. "Don't you have a class to get to?"

Melissa still had tears streaming down her face. "I'm sorry, Mr. Sargent," she said.

Mr. Sargent was touched. He knew he didn't deserve her compassion. She was mature enough to know he had behaved like a child. "It's quite alright," he told her.

"No, Mr. Sargent," she said. "It was all my fault." In spite of her tears, she spoke clearly. She was always a very articulate young woman.

"What do you mean, Miss Tyler?" he asked her.

"Mr. Sargent," she said. "I drew the picture."

He looked at her face. She was speaking the truth.

A line of charges detonated in Mr. Sargent's brain. It was as if he'd been spinning the last piece of a puzzle all day long, trying to make it fit, trying to jam it into place, and only at that moment realized it was upside down the whole time.

He felt the embers of his rage sparking to life again. He felt his face reddening, his heart beating faster.

"You? You drew the picture?"

She lowered her eyes, focusing on the space between her feet.

“But why? And why didn’t you say anything? Why did you let this happen?”

He could see that her face was wet. It looked shiny in the fluorescent light. She shook her head, causing several tears to drip to the floor, and then she raised her eyes to meet his.

“It was a dare,” she said. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I’ll come for detention until I graduate. I am so, so, so sorry.”

Mr. Sargent could see her anguish, her shame, her apology blended into a single expression of misery. There was no denying the authenticity of her confession.

“That’s alright, Miss Tyler.”

He could see that she was shaking. A chill ran down his spine. Hesitantly, he reached out his hand and patted her shoulder.

“We’ll forget this ever happened,” he said.

The sunlight from the window fell upon her tears, making them sparkle.

## Father's Day

At 6:25, the doorbell rang out in a shrill metallic burst. We loved everything about this old, Victorian apartment except for that ear-splitting sound.

“Uggghhh,” Brent groaned. He rolled away from the morning sunlight streaming through the window and squeezed a pillow over his head. “So much for the phone call.”

“Are you surprised?” I asked. “He’s never been one to follow directions.”

Brent peeked out from the pillow toward the nightstand and groaned again. “I thought he was coming at quarter of.”

I sat on the edge of the mattress to pull a pair of knee-length shorts over my feet. Brent had taken down a few more drinks than I had the night before and was clearly feeling every one of them. I wasn’t in great shape myself. My head seemed to have tripled in weight. I could feel every ounce of acid sloshing around in my stomach.

“That’s just how he is,” I said. “Better to be twenty minutes early than twenty seconds late.”

The doorbell rang again.

“Errr...he and I would *not* get along,” Brent said.

I staggered into the hall and leaned toward the stairs. “Just a minute, Dad!” I shouted. “I’ll be right down!”

Back in the bedroom, Brent had risen to a seated position. He held his phone in his lap and idly flicked his finger across the screen. His hair flared out in every direction. The sunlight illuminated the stubble on his cheek and made his blue eyes shine.

“Well, someday you might have to try,” I said.

“Oh yeah?” he said, without looking up from his phone. “And when might that be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe soon.”

“You’re not embarrassed of me, are you, James?”

I stepped over to the side of the bed, crouched down, and planted a kiss on his temple.

With my forehead pressed against his, I said, “You know it’s not that.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“It’s just that my dad isn’t really the progressive type.”

“But he knows we’re living together, right?”

“Of course. But that doesn’t mean he approves.”

Brent rolled his eyes. Normally, he had no tolerance for intolerance. When it came to my family, though, he begrudgingly limited his reaction to the nonverbal varieties.

“Then again,” I said. “I don’t know if he disapproves either. We don’t really talk.”

“No time like the present,” he said. “Nothing like a little father-son fishing trip to clear the air.”

I smiled. “That’s true.”

I walked into the bathroom to empty my bladder one last time. I kept a hand on the vanity top to steady myself as I stood over the toilet. Hopefully my balance would return before we arrived at the lake. I’d been on my dad’s boat a hundred times growing up, but never while nursing a hangover. It had been a mistake to go out on the night before Father’s Day. So many of our friends seemed bent on drinking away every thought of their own fathers. I may not have had the same motivation, but my efforts to keep the pace were now proving nearly just as costly.

After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I returned to the bedroom and slipped on a worn pair of closed-toe sandals.

“How do I look?” I asked.

“Just adorable, babe,” Brent replied. “Cutest fisherman on the block.”

“Ha ha,” I said.

The doorbell buzzed yet again. “Christ!” Brent yelled. “What’s the rush?”

I laughed as I filled my pockets with phone, wallet, and keys. “Go back to sleep,” I said.

“I’ll see you tonight.” I blew him a kiss and then made my way toward the stairs.

“Bring back one of those big trophy bass,” he called after me. “We can put it on our wall!”

“Ha!” I called back. “That’ll be the day!”

At the bottom of the stairs, I took my sunglasses off the side table and opened the front door. There stood my father with a wide, dopey grin on his face. He wore a pair of ratty flip-flops, droopy cargo shorts, and a khaki fishing vest, every pocket bursting with tackle and lures.

“Morning! What took ya?” he asked.

“Hey, Dad,” I said, stepping through the door. “I thought you were coming at 6:45.”

“Really? I could have sworn I said 6:30.”

I gave him a quick hug, trying to avoid the dangerous hooks and barbs poking out of his vest. “Where’s the car?” I asked.

“I had to park a couple blocks down, just around the corner.” He waved for me to follow him and we set off down the sidewalk. “Not easy towing a boat through the city.”

The sky overhead was splotched with puffy clouds and the air was unseasonably warm. The forecast called for a high in the mid-80s, a temp rarely reached in the middle of June. I put on my sunglasses to dim the world.

“You look good, Jim,” said Dad. “Been hitting the weights?”

“Every now and then,” I said.

“Well, whatever you’re doing, keep it up.”

We walked in silence for a little while and then Dad turned to me again. Hesitantly, he asked, “Are you sure your boyfriend wouldn’t want to come?”

I shook my head. “I’m sure. Fishing isn’t really up his alley,” I said. After a brief pause, I continued. “And his name is Brent, Dad. I refer to him as my ‘partner,’ not my ‘boyfriend.’”

“Oh, okay,” Dad said. We took a few more steps. “What’s the difference?”

I could tell he was genuinely asking. “I don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “‘Partner’ is a little more inclusive, I guess.”

“Right. Okay. I’m still figuring this out, you know.”

“I know, Dad.”

We were nearing the end of the street when Dad’s big dopey grin returned to his face. “Just so you know, I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“Oh, really?” I said.

And then we rounded the corner and I saw. The surprise was leaning against the stern of Dad’s boat with a cigarette dangling from his lips. The smoke swirled above him.

“Wow!” I said, trying to force some enthusiasm. “It’s Grandpa.”

“That’s right!” said my dad, laughing. He threw an arm around my shoulder and jostled me. “Now you’ve got your old man, and I’ve got mine!”

It wasn’t easy to hold a smile on my face. Dealing with my dad could be a challenge at times, but a manageable one. Grandpa was a different story. Much more than his son, the old man wore his masculinity like a badge of honor. He’d never much cared for me when I was a quiet and timid little boy. Now that I was living as an openly gay man, he openly detested me. It had been several years since I’d seen him. The last time, in the middle of a family Christmas

party, he'd cornered me in the kitchen so that he could tell me how I had brought shame on our entire family. He told me he'd been praying every night for me to emerge from this 'phase.'

Seeing him here, I couldn't help feeling betrayed. This was just about the worst surprise I could imagine. I looked at Dad and considered telling him I'd changed my mind. But it was too late. The smile on his face made it clear how much this meant to him. I would break his heart if I bailed.

As we approached Dad's four-door Silverado, the old man looked me over from head to toe and then darted his eyes towards his own son. He pitched an eyebrow and smirked before looking back at me.

"Jimmy boy!" he said. He bent down and snuffed his cigarette in the gutter. His camo t-shirt hiked up over his round, Budweiser belly.

"Happy Father's Day, Grandpa," I said tonelessly. I leaned in to give him a quick one-armed hug and was taken aback when he wrapped both of his arms around me and thumped my back with his open hand.

"Well, how 'bout this," he said, stepping back and crossing his arms over his chest. "Three generations of Reardan men all together."

"Doesn't happen often," said Dad. The glee in his voice might have been a bit more contagious if not for the dread that had filled me.

"Sure don't," Grandpa replied. "Alright, let's get a move on. Early bird catches the fish, you know. So we're probably out of luck already!" With a boisterous laugh, he climbed into the passenger seat.

Dad laughed himself and walked around the truck to the driver's seat. I took a deep breath, opened the rear door, and crawled inside the cab.

Dad started the engine and turned up the volume on the radio. It was about a thousand hours too early for classic rock. My head continued to throb.

We pulled out of the spot and navigated to the freeway on-ramp. Shortly after we got up to speed, Grandpa turned around wearing a smirk.

“You do know we’re going out on a boat, right?” he asked.

“Yep. I’m aware.”

He looked down toward my feet. “You sure?”

“What?”

“This is your best fishing attire?”

“Uh, shorts and a t-shirt? Yes. What’s the issue?”

“I think the term for those is capris, Jimmy boy.”

“Nope,” I said, faking a smile. “Still shorts.”

“A little tight though, aren’t they?”

I let out a sigh. “You think these are tight? You should see what I look like in a really tight pair. Very, very cute.”

Grandpa’s lips parted in a grin, revealing a set of frightfully yellow teeth. “Is that right?”

“Dad,” my father jumped in. “Leave him alone. Who cares what he’s wearing?”

Grandpa turned around again. “Well, if he don’t...”

Dad caught my eye in the rearview mirror. “How about some coffee, kiddo?”

“Sure. I think there’s a Starbucks on the next exit.”

“Starbucks!” said Grandpa. “So you can pay eight bucks for a cup of coffee-flavored water? No sirree! We’ve got the real deal right here.”



He reached between his legs and found a pale green thermos with a metal cap that doubled as a cup. Before I could stop him, he untwisted the cap and filled it with steaming black liquid. The harsh odor of instant coffee seared my nostrils.

Turning in his seat, he offered me the cup. “Sorry—no cream or sugar. Reardan men drink it black.”

I took the cup from him and tried to ignore the smudges around the rim. No doubt this cup had passed back and forth between both of them. The image of Grandpa’s yellow teeth popped into my head, but I was desperate. I took a big slug and then grimaced.

“And?” Grandpa asked, turned in his chair so he could leer at me. “Whaddya think?”

“Mmm...” I said. “Tastes like a tin can.”

The old man scoffed and turned back to face my father. “Millenials,” he said. “If it ain’t fair trade, non-GMA, it just ain’t good enough.”

My dad laughed.

“GMO,” I said. “Not GMA.”

Now both of them laughed. I pulled out my phone and texted Brent: *It gets better and better. Grandpa decided to join.*

A minute later he texted back: *Fun! I’m still asleep.*

*Wish you were here.*

*Still. Asleep.* And then, a few seconds later, a kiss emoji.

I tried to calculate how many hours would pass before I’d be back.

\* \* \*

The drive took just under two hours. The boat launch, though, was already swarmed. Other fathers, other sons lined up in front of us. I counted four trucks and trailers.

“Gall dang it,” said Grandpa. “This whole lake’ll be cleaned out before we ever throw out a line.”

“C’mon, Pop,” returned my father. “You think these kids have even half of your angling expertise?”

Grandpa growled and reached for the cigarettes in the pocket of his t-shirt. Dad had long maintained a “no smoking” policy in the car, but I could tell the old man craved his cigarette far more than the sound of the boat motor. He’d made it seventy-two years on two packs a day. No sense slowing down now.

Watkins Lake was my father’s favorite fishing spot. It measured about five miles in length and a half of a mile at its widest point. On a map it looked like a shriveled string bean. During my high school years, my dad and I had fished here almost every other weekend in the warm months. Back then, only a few ramshackle cottages dotted the shoreline. Now, not an inch of shoreline was undeveloped. The cottages had been swept aside to make room for three-story lodges accompanied by HGTV-quality landscaping. Each lot included a long permanent dock stabbing toward the center of the lake, and fastened to all those docks were kayaks and jet skis, sailboats and bass boats, bowriders and pontoons. But the locals weren’t stirring yet. They seemed content to leave the lake to the parade of out-of-towners.

We waited twenty minutes for the ramp to clear. At the moment the last vehicle rolled away, Grandpa hopped out of the truck, unplugged the trailer lights, unclipped the straps, and frantically lit a cigarette as he walked toward the dock. Then, in a well-practiced maneuver, Dad backed the trailer halfway into the water. I was about to climb out myself, when he reached back and asked, “Hey, Jim?”

“What?”

“Do me a favor, will you? For Father’s Day?”

“Sure, I guess. What?”

He glanced toward the phone in my hand. “Leave that in the car.”

“Why?”

“I just want it to be us today. Is that okay?”

“How about I just turn it off?” I held down the power button and showed him the screen.

“Jim. Please. You know how your grandfather feels about technology.”

“To be honest, Dad, I don’t really care how he feels.”

“Well what about me then?”

I shook my head. “What if there’s an emergency? What if the boat springs a leak?”

A wide smile stretched across his face. “What could go wrong that we can’t fix? We’ve overcome our fair share of obstacles, right?” He was practically giddy. “It’s an adventure!”

“Fine,” I said. “For Father’s Day.”

So I mimed dropping the phone in the pocket behind the driver’s seat, and my dad turned around. “Thanks, kiddo,” he said. Then, as I stepped out of the car, I slid the phone into my back pocket and pulled my t-shirt down to hide the evidence. The motor on the boat was over twenty years old, the boat itself was older than I was, and when I’d checked the forecast a few days earlier, it hinted at a thunderstorm. It would be the height of stupidity to leave the phone in the truck.

A few steps down the ramp, I stepped onto the tongue of the trailer, and from there climbed into the boat. “Okay!” I yelled. Dad backed the trailer in further and the boat buoyed up on the water. I scooted back to the motor, primed the gas, and gave the cord a yank. The motor chugged twice and then stopped.

Grandpa stood watching from the dock with his arms crossed. He exhaled a cloud of smoke. “You’ve gotta pull it, Jimmy boy,” he said.

I yanked the cord again. Chug chug. Stop. I thought of the phone in my pocket.

Validation.

“I said pull it, son! What do you call that?”

“Why don’t you hop in and try it yourself?”

My dad stuck his head out the window of the car. “What’s the matter?” he called.

“It won’t start.”

“He’s being too gentle with it,” said Grandpa.

“It couldn’t be flooded, could it?” I asked.

“Try it again,” said Dad. “Third time’s the charm.”

Gritting my teeth, I bent my knees and ripped the cord with a little extra *umph*. This time, the motor roared to life. Grandpa nodded his head and took another long drag on his cigarette.

I shifted into reverse and took the boat out about thirty yards from shore. Dad drove off for a parking spot and Grandpa lit a fresh cigarette with the last spark of the old one. For the first time all day, I felt a sense of calm. Years had passed since I’d last felt the urge to go fishing, but there was still something to be said for this part: skimming across the water, warm under the sun, a cool breeze running over my skin. I felt my hangover dissipating in the fresh, early summer air. Even Brent, who proudly spurned the Great Outdoors in favor of artificial convenience, would have to appreciate this environment. I pictured him lounging against the bow in his Ray Bans, dipping his fingers in the water, whistling a made-up tune.

“What are you waiting for?” yelled Grandpa, interrupting my moment of reverie. My headache snapped back into place.

Taking a deep breath, I shifted into first gear and steered toward the dock.

\* \* \*

We scoured the shore just a few hundred yards from the boat launch. Dad was convinced that the other boats had been so eager to jet across the water that they'd left this area untouched. After an hour, though, we hadn't caught anything except for lily-pads and milfoil.

Grandpa rammed his rod into a holder and looped the hook of his spinner bait through one of the eyelets. He pulled two cigarettes out of the pack, stuck one in his mouth, and held out the other in my direction.

"How about it, Jimmy boy? You want a smoke?"

"I'm all set," I said. I continued to spin my reel, but I could tell I was dragging a weed.

"You're too healthy, kid."

"My cross to bear," I replied.

Grandpa laughed and flicked his lighter. He stowed the spare cigarette behind his ear. I hauled the weed out of the water and cleared the green tangle off my lure. Back at the boat launch, more than a dozen vehicles were waiting their turn. The lake was filling up quickly.

"Not even a nibble!" said my dad, sounding chipper in spite of our luck. "Who'da thunk it?" He'd switched to earthworms a while ago. His orange and black slip bobber rose and fell over the tiny peaks and valleys of the water's surface.

Over the years, my dad had cycled through countless hobbies. He built model airplanes, went geocaching, dried jerky, carved wooden decoys, collected antique hardware, learned to play the mandolin, and on and on and on. But fishing was his passion. It never got old for him. He'd hung three different fishing calendars on his office wall. He watched fishing shows, read fishing blogs, and subscribed to every fishing magazine he could find. No family vacation was complete

without some sort of fishing excursion, and ever since I'd left for college, fishing had become the sole reason for vacation.

My mom established very early in their relationship that fishing was not for her. I never had that chance. As soon as I could grasp a rod, I was out on the boat in a lifejacket. Through the early part of my childhood, it was fun. I was never the athletic type, but fishing was something respectable—even masculine—that I could do with my guy friends. But then, right around my freshman year of high school, my enthusiasm dissolved. Dad kept taking me out with him, but it felt like a chore.

I'm not sure he ever noticed I'd lost interest. We never really talked. Even today, we hardly talked about anything.

After a few more minutes, Dad reeled in his bobber. He inspected his rig and saw the unlucky earthworm still squirming on the hook. Effortlessly, he plucked the worm off and flipped it into the water. "Well," he said, "who's up for trolling to the other side of the lake?"

"Fine by me," said Grandpa. "I'm starting to think this whole lake is empty."

"We'll see about that," said Dad. He dropped his rod in a holder and found his seat. "Fire up the motor, Jim."

I finished reeling in my last cast, set down my own rod, and turned back to the motor. I yanked the cord hard. The engine turned over for a moment and then shuddered to a stop.

Grandpa smirked. My dad said, "Give it another shot."

I tried again. A couple of coughs and then nothing.

"That's it," said Grandpa, slapping his knee. "Move aside, son." We switched places, I moving to the bow and he coming back to the stern. "Make way for a real man," he said.

Grandpa leaned over the motor and then jerked the cord. This time, the engine hardly made a sound.

“Maybe she needs some gas,” he said. He squeezed the bulb in the fuel line and then prepared for another pull, this time with two hands. Chug chug. Stop.

The old man had plenty of vigor for someone his age, but his limitations were plain to see. My dad must have been thinking the same thing. “Jim,” he said. “Will you give it one more try? Give it a bit of gas after it turns.”

“Hmph!” said Grandpa. “Good luck!”

We sidled past each other again. I set my feet, grabbed the cord handle tightly in my right hand, and ripped the cord across my body. The engine started to turn and I twisted the grip on the throttle. The motor screamed for half a second and then settled into a gentle putter.

“There we go,” said Dad. “Nice work, Jim.” His posture relaxed as he turned his attention to the anchor line.

“Yeah, well, I warmed her up for you,” said Grandpa.

“Sure you did, Pop,” Dad replied. He winked in my direction.

\* \* \*

We trolled along the edge of the lake for about forty-five minutes. We each hauled in a few clumps of weeds, but no fish. If there were any living creatures in the lake, we had to this point observed no sign of their existence.

Trolling is among the most passive methods of fishing. Unless you’re steering the boat, all you can do is sit and wait. Sitting and waiting was never one of Grandpa’s strengths. After burning through a couple more cigarettes, he asked my dad to pass him the cooler. The sun was rising quickly and the humidity rose with it. I could understand the desire for a cold drink, but

had no interest in alcohol after the night I'd had. Besides, it was still the middle of the morning. I made a show of checking my watch.

"Really, Pop?" said Dad. "It's not even noon."

"Agh," Grandpa waved his hand dismissively. "It's noon o'clock somewhere."

I grinned and shook my head. *Noon o'clock?*

The old man must have noticed my reaction. He continued to stare at me as he popped open his Bud Light and took a long swig. His expression was unsettling. I turned my back on him and focused my attention on my line in the water.

In the years since I'd left the closet behind, I'd developed something like a sixth sense for detecting disapproval. The more I honed that sense, the more I came to see that disapproval comes in many forms. There is the principled disapproval of the staunch intellectual conservative. There is the pitying disapproval of the young but empathizing traditionalist. And then there is the aggressive disapproval that emanates from someone like my grandfather. His brand of homophobia was raw and unabashed. On the one hand, I despised him for it, but on the other hand, I took comfort in his extremism. At least I always knew where he stood.

I glanced over to my dad, who was now trying to change his lure and steer the boat at the same time. He looked fairly flustered, but he would never ask for help. The challenge was part of the fun for him.

I loved my dad, and I never minded spending time with him. That being said though, I could never be sure of his opinions. On the day I came out to him, he was sitting with Mom on the couch. I'd come out to her a few weeks earlier, but she wanted to be there for support. After I'd said everything I needed to say, Mom broke into tears, just as she had before. She pulled me into a tight embrace and said, "I love you, James." Part of me suspected she was trying to model



an appropriate response for her husband, but he didn't pick up on her cues. Instead, he said nothing. He looked at me as if I'd just confessed to having cancer. Then he walked out of the room.

A month later, he invited me to go fishing. Thinking he'd want to clear the air, I agreed to join him. But the issue never came up. Not a single word on the topic. Seven years later, almost nothing had changed. Dad had to acknowledge my relationships with men. When I joined him and Mom for dinner, I would discuss my social life openly and honestly. Dad always seemed eager to change the subject.

By the time we gave up the trolling effort, the old man was cracking open a third can of Bud Light. We'd traveled about three miles down the length of the lake. I had long ago lost sight of the boat launch.

Dad killed the motor and stood in place. He stretched his arms over his head, pulled off his hat, and scratched his head. "Let's give this spot a try," he said. "I've got a good feeling about this."

I dropped the anchor and secured the line, and both Dad and I readied our rigs. The water was clear enough that I could see a forest of weeds swaying back and forth about four feet below the surface. On a bright day like this one, those weeds could give shelter to any number of shade-loving fish.

Dad equipped a plastic worm with a weedless hook, and I attached a noisy torpedo-shaped lure that would ride on the surface of the water while draping a pair of treble hooks.

"What are you thinking, Pop?" my Dad asked.

"Nothin' much," Grandpa replied. He took another swig of his beer.

"You want me to set you up? Live bait, maybe?"

Grandpa sighed. "I'm good for now, thanks."

"Suit yourself," said my dad. He threw a look my way. "More for us," he said with a chuckle.

The minutes wore on and the fish still refused to bite. Over our heads, the sun fell behind a colossal cloud that drifted like a zeppelin across the sky. I realized that all of the clouds seemed to be swelling in size.

Grandpa polished off his third Bud Light and popped open a fourth. Every time I turned in his direction, he seemed to have his eyes on me. He made me uneasy. I felt his stare boring into my back.

Since our Christmas Day confrontation, we not only hadn't seen each other; we hadn't spoken or corresponded at all. It was possible that my dad had filled him in on the developments that had taken place in my life, but it was equally possible that he knew nothing more about me than whatever he'd gleaned since I met him on the street near my apartment.

Normally, Wayne Reardan talked a mile a minute. He talked about himself—playing golf, playing the stock market, playing bridge. He talked politics and religion. He talked about other people—how they fell short of his high standards for personal conduct and associations. But today he'd been nearly silent, which only added to my growing apprehension.

The fish refused to bite. To ease my anxiety, I decided to break the ice with the old man.

"How's Grandma?" I asked over my shoulder. I kept reeling in my line.

"She's doing just fine," Grandpa replied. "Nice of you to ask." And then, a moment later, "For once."

That caught me off guard. I stopped turning the reel and swiveled around to face him.

"Sorry?"

My dad kept his eyes on his lure. He made no impression he'd heard our exchange.

"Well," said Grandpa. "It's been over three years, Jimmy. Not even a phone call? Your own grandparents?"

Dad tossed out his line again.

"I didn't realize you were waiting for a call," I replied.

"Of course we wanted a call! What? You go through a few changes, make a few new choices, and you think we stop caring about you? Sometimes it seems like you've completely forgotten your family."

I could feel my face turning pink, my pulse quickening. I reeled my lure in to the boat and jolted it out of the water.

"I'm sorry you've felt that way," I said. "I haven't forgotten you. Mom and Dad have kept me up to date on you and Grandma. I'm sure they've let you know what I've been up to, right?"

"Well, sure. But that's not the same as talking to you in person."

"Again—I'm sorry. But you have my number, too."

Grandpa pulled his cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. "I'm afraid we haven't felt comfortable calling. Not really sure who's going to pick up." He lit one and stuck it in his mouth. Puffed a few times. "I mean, you haven't been to church. We haven't seen you for Christmas, Easter, Fourth of July. No birthday parties. No anniversaries. It was our fiftieth last summer. We sent you an invitation."

I thought about that for a minute. I couldn't remember receiving an invitation. "I don't think so," I said.

“Well, sure! We gave it to your Dad so he could give it to you. It didn’t make sense to pay postage for our own family.”

“That’s right,” said Dad, finally chiming in.

I wracked my brain but couldn’t come up with anything. I would have remembered a fiftieth wedding anniversary invitation. “Are you sure you gave it to me, Dad?”

“Of course!” he said. “I’m sure of it.”

But his voice betrayed his words. I knew my dad well enough to recognize when he was speaking the truth, and, this time, I was sure he wasn’t.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay. I’ll try to do better.”

“That’s all we ask,” Grandpa said.

“Good,” said my Dad. For a moment, his expression looked strange. Then a wide smile stretched across his face again. He stretched over and patted me on the shoulder. He was acting as if we’d achieved something meaningful. “How about we try another spot?”

\* \* \*

I did my best to put the incident out of my head and help with the motor. Just like before, we struggled to get it going. After a few false starts, Dad pulled off the engine cap and monkeyed with the rip cord. When that didn’t make a difference, he replaced the spark plug. Four pulls after that, I finally got it in gear.

“Are you not worried about this, Dad?” I asked. My Grandpa sniggered at the question, though I’m not sure whether he was amused by the sorry state of the motor or my concern over it.

“Twenty-three years I’ve had this motor,” Dad said. “She’s been in and out of the shop a few times, but I’ve never lost her on the water. We’ll figure it out. We’ve got plenty of gas, a set of tools, and a handful of other spare parts. What’s the worry?”

“Whatever you say,” I said. Grandpa chuckled and shook his head. My thoughts turned again to the phone in my pocket. If this were the last time the motor started, at least we would have a way out.

Dad turned the boat toward the far end of the lake and dialed up the throttle. “Looks almost empty up there,” he shouted over the noise of the motor. “That’s where they’re hiding!”

Empty was right. From what I could see, only four boats had gone further from the launch than we had. Of those four, two appeared to be motoring back the way we’d come.

I looked toward the sky. The clouds appeared to be growing still larger and some of them looked to have darkened.

“Dad!” I yelled over the motor. “Did you check the forecast?”

“Chance of a shower in the early afternoon,” he yelled back.

“When did you check it?”

He smiled. “Uhhh... Wednesday!”

Suddenly, my Grandpa perked up. He pointed toward the nearest shore. “There!” he shouted. “Jumping fish!”

Dad whooped and patted me on the back. Had he not taken sides with Grandpa as the old man excoriated me, I might have found his enthusiasm endearing. But the truth was I now found myself all the more eager to return home. If the shower in the forecast became a storm, as I now thought it would, at least it might send us in early.

Dad eased the boat in close to the shore. “Here, Pop?”

“Perfect,” Grandpa said. “Toss the anchor.”

The motor almost seemed relieved to sputter out when Dad let off the throttle. I dropped the anchor over the side and Grandpa stood immediately.

“Move out of the way, son,” he said, addressing my dad. “I’ve gotta take a leak.”

Dad shuffled to the side and Grandpa stood next to the motor and unzipped his pants. I expected the sound of his stream hitting the water, but it didn’t come.

“Gol dang prostate,” he mumbled. “C’mon, Wayne.”

Dad had been tying a knot around a fresh jighead when he abruptly stopped. “Wait a second,” he said. “Did you really see a fish jump, Pop?”

“Ahhh,” said Grandpa, finally managing a trickle. He craned his neck and looked at us with mischief on his face. “Sure I did,” he said. “Big as a truck, it was.”

Dad chuckled and I rolled my eyes. Now that we’d stopped, I realized the breeze was picking up speed.

“Feels like the rain’s coming fast,” I said. “The temperature’s dropping.”

“Good!” said Dad. He threw out his new rig. “The fish can sense it too, you know. They always get nice and hungry before the rain.”

Grandpa shook himself off, zipped up, and went back to the bow. Instead of reaching for his pole, he pulled another can of beer out of the cooler. I wondered if he was done fishing for the day.

“You know what?” said Dad. “I’ll take one of those.”

“Jimmy,” said Grandpa. “Get your father a beer.”

Clenching my jaw, I did as I was told. Then, because there was no other way to pass the time, I picked up my pole and launched a cast as far as I could away from shore.

We settled into our previous routine. Dad fished and I went through the motions of fishing. Grandpa watched and drank and smoke. The only difference now was the weather, which was changing at an urgent pace. The other two boats in the vicinity pulled their anchors and hurried back towards the boat launch. I guessed that their passengers had smart phones in hand. They could see what was coming and they were determined to avoid it.

We fished for another fifteen minutes. The breeze picked up to become a steady wind with occasional gusts that rolled the boat to one side. I was waiting to hear the distant sound of rainfall when the sound of crunching metal hit my ears. I looked to see Grandpa placing a flattened beer can into a plastic bag. Then he repeated the process with another can. And another. Six cans in all. I heard the flick of a lighter and smelled a fresh cloud of smoke in the air. In the growing humidity, the smoke hung over the boat like poisonous gas.

“Jimmy boy,” Grandpa said. “Can I ask you a question?” The old man could hold his liquor better than just about anyone I’d ever met, but his last drink seemed to have put him over the threshold. His voice had become rubbery and needlessly loud.

“Yes?” I replied without turning.

“No,” he said. I felt his hand on my arm. “Look at me.” He twisted me back to face him and then sat down again. He wore an expression of grave concern. “This is important.”

My dad finished reeling in his line and then lifted his rod. I let my own line sink and my rod fall limp at my side. The sky had grown black. Somehow I knew what was coming next.

“Jimmy,” the old man said. “Be honest with me. Are you still living in sin?”

*Jesus*, I thought. *Not again*. I took a deep breath and squeezed the handle of my rod. “Aren’t we all, Grandpa?”

“No, no, no,” he said. “I mean it. Are you still engaging in sinful relations?” He paused as if to summon up the energy to continue. “With other men?”

I turned away and looked at my dad. He had to have known this could happen. Maybe he wanted it to. Maybe this was his way of talking to me. Letting his own father speak for him. But his face was blank.

“God is very clear on this, Jimmy,” Grandpa continued. “Think of Sodom and Gomorrah. Remember what Paul said—”

“Dad,” I said. I looked my father in the face and waited. “What do you think?”

He opened his mouth for a moment and then closed it. He looked at his feet.

“Jimmy,” Grandpa said again. I ignored him.

“Do I embarrass you, Dad? Is that it? Are you ashamed of me?”

I could feel the lump forming in my throat. I didn’t want to believe it, but every moment he remained speechless seemed to confirm my suspicion.

“Jimmy,” Grandpa said.

“Dad,” I said, my voice cracking. “Say something.”

All at once, Dad collapsed. He sat down so hard I felt the hull of the boat vibrate beneath my feet. He shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Jimmy,” I heard behind me. I felt a hand on my shoulder. Thunder boomed overhead.

Without thinking, I whirled around and shoved the old man away from me. Maybe the wind was blowing hard, maybe a wave struck the broadside of the hull, or maybe I pushed him harder than I thought. No matter the reason, the next thing I knew the old man was overboard and Dad was shrieking, “Oh my God! Oh my God!”



Grandpa thrashed in the water until his head broke the surface. After gulping down a breath of air, he began to cough and hack on whatever water he'd swallowed. Dad leaned over the gunnel and reached for the old man's arms. "Help, Jim! Please!" he said to me.

I shook myself from my stupor and knelt down beside him. Together, we took hold of Grandpa and hauled him back into the boat. He was trembling violently and mumbling, "Cold. Cold. Cold." Another crack of thunder tore across the clouds.

Dad raised a seat and pulled out every towel stowed beneath it. The wind threatened to carry a couple of them into the middle of the lake, which had now become jagged with storm-grown waves. Fighting the gusts and the pitching of the boat, Dad quickly covered the old man and began to dry him off.

"I'm f-f-freezing," the old man stammered. "I think I'm g-g-going into sh-sh-sh-sh-shock."

And then, just as the towels were starting to do their job, the sky opened up. Raindrops the size of marbles came down by the million.

"Start the motor, Jim," Dad shouted. He had pulled an umbrella from beneath a bench seat and was struggling to open it. "Do it now!"

I stepped back to the stern, squeezed the bulb for gas, grabbed the handle on the pull cord, and then pulled with everything I had. The result was disaster. Not only did the engine fail to start, but the cord snapped at the very spot where it entered the engine cap to wind around the pulley. There would be no way to turn the cylinder without installing a new cord.

Lightning flashed and the wind caught Dad's umbrella and turned it inside out. Grandpa closed his eyes tightly as he continued to shiver.

"Dad!" I yelled. I held out the broken cord. "Do we have a spare?"

Whatever color was left in his face drained out of it. “No!”

At that moment, anger displaced my sense of panic. *Fool*, I thought. He was a fool. This was all his fault.

“So what do we do now?” I yelled.

He looked back, his face a mess of angst and confusion. “I don’t know!” he cried. He continued to wrestle the umbrella, as if that would help anything.

I kneaded my temples and tried to think. We were a hundred yards from shore. No other boats in the area. Should I get out and swim? Drag the boat with the anchor line? But what about lightning? I’d be electrocuted if it struck the lake. Did Dad have a paddle on board? How the hell had this happened?

I took a deep breath. Suddenly, I remembered: my phone. I felt its weight in my back pocket. We could call for help. The DNR could put a boat in the water within the hour and tow us back to shore. Relief coursed through me, but then the anger came storming back. If it had been up to my dad, I’d have left it in the car.

Furious, I turned on him. “It sure would be nice to have a phone, huh!” I yelled.

Dad spun away from Grandpa to look at me. A blast of wind caught the umbrella he’d been battling and sent it flying through the air. To my surprise, he paid it no attention.

“I said, ‘What about an emergency?’ Do you remember that?”

A spasm of frustration twisted his features. “Yes! Fine!” He shook his head, loosing a circle of raindrops from the rim of his hat. “You were right. I was wrong. So what?”

“Exactly!” I shouted. “I was right and you were wrong!”

“So what about it?”

I pulled out my phone and held it out so he could see it. “So I didn’t listen.”

Dad looked from the phone to me, back to the phone, back to me. He blinked hard and then found his voice. “Well, thank God for that!” he shouted.

“I’m done, Dad. I’m done listening. You don’t tell me what to do anymore.”

He stared at me with narrowed eyes, trying to comprehend, trying to accept the fact that something had changed between us. Slowly, he bowed his head. He began to nod.

“So should I use this?” I yelled. “Is this an emergency? Should I call for help?”

He kept nodding, but he refused to meet my eyes. He looked only at Grandpa, still shaking violently under sopping wet towels. “Yes,” he said. “Please.”

I shielded the phone screen from the pounding rain and checked for signal. Full bars. I navigated to the DNR website, found the number, punched it in. Raising the phone to my ear, I waited to hear the line ring.

“Oh, and one more thing, Dad,” I yelled over the howling wind.

He lifted his head to face me. He was a shrunken man now, pathetic, his weakness visible to the entire world. Even so, I felt myself incapable of pity.

“I hate fishing. I’ve hated it for years.”

He said nothing in reply. A fierce gust of wind rocked the boat. The storm raged on.

## The Pastor's Wife

“You’re sure you don’t want company, Mom?”

Evelyn turned a weary smile toward her only son. She held his arm as he walked her across the St. John’s Lutheran Church parking lot. The reception guests had finally gone home. Only a few vehicles remained in the formerly crowded lot.

“Really, dearie. I’ll be fine.”

“Mom, it’s no trouble. Amy can take the kids after the clean-up crew finishes. We drove separately.”

“Thank you, dear, but you should be with your family tonight.”

“I’ll be with them soon enough. It’s you I’m worried about.”

They reached Evelyn’s car, a year-old Buick Century in bronze. She let go of her son’s arm and looked him over. Though he maintained his usual erect posture and wore a neutral expression, his eyes were still puffy and his cheeks were streaked with tear tracks. The skin between his nose and lips was pink from tissue friction. He had always been such a sensitive boy. Evelyn could never fix that.

His appearance, though, was another matter. Adding to his haggard presentation, the silk knot of his tie had come loose from his collar. The blade and tail had come apart and fallen on either side of his shirt buttons. With a heavy sigh, Evelyn reached up to straighten him out.

“You’re a good boy, Erik,” she said, patting him on the chest. “My good and handsome boy.”

“I’ll make you dinner, Mom. We can watch the news together. And I can pick up a few of his things when I leave.”

“Some other time maybe. I know you don’t believe me, but I *want* to be alone tonight. Really. I need to start getting used to it.”

His eyes grew moist at that phrase. *Getting used to it*. She worried that he would never get used to life without his father.

He wiped his nose with his sleeve. “I’m gonna miss him, Mom.”

“Yes, of course. We all will.”

Evelyn had known he would take this hard. From the moment she’d pushed him into the world, he and his father had been practically inseparable. Richard never experienced the reluctance that plagues so many first-time fathers. He bonded with his baby boy in an instant and showered him with the affection that had once belonged exclusively to Evelyn.

Well, not quite exclusively. Richard had to reserve plenty of affection for his parishioners. As the senior pastor at St. John’s Lutheran Church, he had appeared before half of the town every week for forty-two years. He had performed countless baptisms and weddings and funerals. Over three hundred people had shown up to mourn his passing. Many of them wept with such a perfect lack of self-awareness that Evelyn had to fight back the urge to giggle.

“He was a great father,” she said. “Just like you are now. He lives on through you.”

Her words had the desired effect. Erik pulled her into a hug and told her he loved her and he would see her soon. Evelyn kissed his cheek before climbing into the driver’s seat. She gave her boy a final wave and drove out of the parking lot and onto the street.

Soon the steeple of St. John’s shrunk to nothing in the rear view mirror. Finally, it was over. Evelyn exhaled. She felt her body relax. She unclasped her amber brooch, unpinned the black veil, and peeled off her thin gloves. Flipping down the sun visor, she glanced in the mirror. Somehow her mascara had survived the day. The blush on her cheeks had weathered the tender

kisses of her many friends and relatives. Even her lipstick, as pale as it was, remained primly affixed to her lips.

Smiling, she reached into her clutch and pulled out her phone. She held down the number “2” key to make a speed-dial call. After two rings, she heard a voice on the other end of the line.

“Oh, I’m alright,” she said wearily. “Yes, really. It’s been a long day, but I’m fine . . . I want to see you . . . Yes, now . . . My house. I need to get out of this awful dress . . . No, it won’t be a problem . . . Okay . . . See you soon.”

She ended the call and set the phone on the passenger seat next to her veil. She leaned back in her seat. The afternoon was passing into evening, but the sun was still bright and the thermometer on the dash still read sixty-four degrees. Evelyn figured it had not been this warm since the middle of October. And what a winter it had been! Even by Minnesota standards, this had been one for the record books. But now the gray snow banks were vanishing beneath the warm rays of the early spring sun. Streams of muddy water coursed down the gutter on the shoulder of the road. Evelyn lowered the window. She heard chickadees whistling from the branches of budding trees.

The drive home from church usually took twenty minutes, but Evelyn managed it a little bit faster today. Erik called twice while she drove. She let his calls ring out. He would think she couldn’t figure out her phone again, which was just as well. What good would it do him to keep talking over the funeral with her? It would only make things harder. Erik would be better off with Amy and the kids.

Pulling into the Silver Birches Retirement Community, she let out a groan. Fred Ingersoll stood at the end of her driveway. He was clearing away slush with a metal-edged snow shovel. A

black Lexus SUV with Michigan plates was parked a few yards up the asphalt. Evelyn rolled down her window and reluctantly greeted her neighbor.

“How’re you holding up, Mrs. Nystrom?” He looked at her as if she was the one who had died. She stifled another groan. All day long, she’d been fending off those pitying looks. Had everyone forgotten that her husband had been fourteen years older than her when they married? Didn’t they realize he was a fat, balding diabetic who had already survived two heart attacks? Hadn’t most of them come to visit at the hospital? He had spent the better part of the last four months in a bed on the second floor. The last time she had been in a hospital bed, she had brought a screaming little boy into the world.

For what felt like the thousandth time that day, she forced herself to smile. “It’s been a tough one, Fred, but I’m doing just fine. And thank you for this.” She indicated the driveway.

He gave her a modest nod. “We’re here for you, Mrs. Nystrom.” Then, pointing at the out-of-state car, he added, “Looks like you have a visitor.”

Evelyn could hear the twinge of intrigue in Fred’s voice. She wondered if he had only decided to help when the Lexus arrived. A strange man shows up at the home of a widow on the day of her husband’s funeral—what a juicy bit of gossip for the next evening at the Bingo Hall!

“Yes,” said Evelyn, doing her best to conceal her exasperation. “His name is Paul Donovan. He’s an old friend. He couldn’t make it to the funeral, so I invited him to the house.”

“Well he let himself right in. Went straight through the side door.”

“Oh, good! I told him I left it unlocked. We live in a pretty safe neighborhood, don’t you know.”

Fred dropped the issue then. Evelyn could tell he was disappointed. His wife Brenda would be, too. Fred told Evelyn that he would come back the next day to finish up the driveway. She sincerely doubted it.

After parking, Evelyn went through the side door herself. "Hello," she called out in a bright, high voice. "Anyone home?" She heard movement in the living room. A moment later, a tall, slender man appeared in the hallway. He wore an olive green sweater that matched his eyes. His bronze skin radiated warmth. His thick, chestnut hair had been recently cut.

"Ahh, Evelyn," he said in his warm, throaty baritone.

She set down her clutch and hung up her coat, and then hurried across the linoleum floor to wrap herself around him. He kissed the top of her head. She inhaled his cedar-tinged cologne.

Without stepping back, she looked up to his face. He inclined his head to kiss her lips. When he pulled away, she noticed a brief wince flash across his features.

"Is it your knee, Paul? I see you're walking without the cane now," she said. He had endured a knee replacement surgery a couple of months earlier. As young as he looked, he too was gaining in years.

"It's nothing, love. Just a little bit stiff is all."

With an impish gleam in her eye, she pulled herself tighter against him. "Speaking of stiff," she said.

His eyes widened. "Aren't you a naughty girl!" She loved finding ways to earn that word. "And with Mr. Nystrom not yet cold in the ground!"

She stepped back and put her hands on her hips. "Oh, please, Paul. Not another mention of my dearly departed husband," she said. "I've heard quite enough about him for one day, thank you very much."



“Of course, darling. Not another word from me then. May the bastard rest in peace.”

She started to laugh and then found she couldn't stop. The laughter shook the remaining tension from her bones. She felt as loose as a feather in the wind. Paul, who rarely laughed at his own jokes, found he couldn't help himself this time. They were laughing together and then they were kissing.

When she was finally able to pull herself away, she poked his sternum with her index finger. “Now, you wait here, darling. Have a seat and find something to read. I'm going to slip into something more comfortable.”

It was the sort of thing she'd heard in a movie some forty years earlier. It affected Paul exactly as she hoped. He limped off to the sofa, pulled a magazine off of the coffee table, and pretended to read. Of course, the magazine ended up upside down in his hands.

Laughing, Evelyn went to her bedroom and closed the door. She kicked her shoes into the corner, balled up her nylons, and lifted her damask-patterned dress over her head. The dress came off much more easily than it had gone on. In nothing but panties and a brassiere, she felt an unusual energy rush through her.

At her vanity, she exchanged her pearl earrings for diamond studs. Around her neck she hung a silver necklace. Silver, like her hair, she thought. She let it fall down to her shoulders. In the morning it had been gray, but somehow it looked brighter now. For a moment she imagined she had the hair of a fairy princess. Or at least a fairy queen.

After touching up her makeup, she faced the full-length mirror. What she saw there was not entirely disappointing. Yes, she had some age spots and spindly crow's feet spreading away from her eyes. But her spine had not yet curled her body into a constant hunch. Her belly was flat, her hips narrow, and her breasts had some roundness to them yet. For the first time in years,

she could remember how it felt to be a girl again. If she opened her mouth, she thought a giggle might escape.

She wondered if Paul would see her differently too. He had always told her she was beautiful, but she could never be sure he meant it. After all, he was nearly a decade younger, a lifelong bachelor with a restless energy. When they had first come together, she assumed he'd been enticed by the prospect of sampling a forbidden fruit—the pastor's wife in a small country town. But his subsequent invitations were more difficult to explain. Evelyn wondered at times if Paul had a long list of partners. She never asked. She was just grateful for the times they had had.

Today, though, she wanted to feel deserving of Paul's amorous intentions. She wanted to be wanted. Craved even. The way her husband had craved her when they first met.

With that thought in her head, she unclipped her bra, slipped out of her panties, and left her bedroom wearing nothing but a smile.

Paul's reaction was priceless.

Forgetting his bad knee, he rocketed to a standing position. "Sweet Jesus, Evelyn!" he said.

"Paul!" Evelyn returned, a wicked smile dancing on her lips. "That's the Lord's name."

His own lips stretched into a wide smile. "Oh, God! I'm so goddamned sorry, dearest." As he limped across the living room, he crossed himself and clasped his hands together in mock prayer. Evelyn laughed and then raised her palm, stopping him at arm's length.

"Would you close the curtains, Paul?" she asked.

His eyes grew even wider than before.

She smiled again. "Well, we can't let the neighbors watch, can we?"

Paul rubbed his palms together and moved toward the windows that looked out over the front lawn and the street. He looked practically boyish in his enthusiasm. Seeing him behave as he never had before, Evelyn felt positively giddy.

“While you’re over there,” she added, “could you crack a window or two?”

Paul looked back. “Isn’t it a bit chilly out?”

“I want to feel a bit of spring air on my skin. And, you’ll keep me warm, I’m sure.” She gave him another coy smile.

Watching him crank open two windows, Evelyn tried to remember the last time she had been entirely unclothed anywhere outside of her bathroom. In her first year of marriage, she and her husband had made love in every room. But then came the pregnancy. That put an end to any sort of experimentation. It had been so long since then that this was almost a new sensation.

“One last thing, dear. Would you put on some music?”

Paul hurried to the stereo cabinet. “What would you like, love?”

“You choose,” she said.

He pulled a record off the shelf and dropped it on the spindle. As he set the needle into the groove, the bouncy opening brass line of a Frank Sinatra tune shot out of the speakers. Paul, who was a bit hard of hearing in spite of his relative youth, turned the volume up even louder.

When Sinatra’s voice emerged, Evelyn’s laughter could be heard over the speakers. “You make me feel so young,” the singer crooned.

Paul quickly joined in with his own dulcet tones. “You make me feel as though SPRING has SPRUNG.” He began snapping his fingers as he limped toward her.

They met in the middle of the room. Evelyn lifted Paul’s sweater over his head and began to fumble with the buttons on his shirt. Electricity coursed through her body as he kissed her

neck and shoulders, as he followed her curves with his hands, as he squeezed himself against her, letting her feel his arousal.

Sinatra continued to blare through the room. The song was so loud that Evelyn did not hear the sound of a car engine puttering up her driveway. She did not hear the side door open and close. She did not hear the voice that called from the kitchen. It was not until the visitor had walked right to the edge of the living room that she heard anything but Sinatra.

“Oh my God!” cried the intruder. And then, louder: “Oh my God!”

The voice was terrifyingly familiar. Evelyn twisted suddenly, shoving Paul away from her. He cried out in pain and crumpled to the floor, but Evelyn didn’t have time to be concerned. Covering herself with her hands, she tried to process the glimpse she had of the last person in the world she would want to see her like this: Erik, her one and only son, her good and handsome boy. She had never seen a look of such horror on his face.

“Oh dear me,” she whispered.

“And EV-en when I’m old and gray,” sang Sinatra. Erik went back the way he had come, into the kitchen. Evelyn heard the side door slam.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear,” she said breathlessly. She had to move fast. She yanked a blanket off of her dead husband’s armchair and wrapped it around herself, pinching it in one hand above her chest. Then, after stepping over Paul—who was whimpering on the floor with his recently repaired knee in both hands—she rushed down the hall, out the front door, over the wet snow, and onto the driveway. Erik had just reached his car.

“Stop, Erik! Wait!” she cried.

He climbed into the seat and slammed the door.

“Erik!” she cried again. Still clutching her blanket, she reached the car and yanked the handle of the passenger door with her free hand. The door was locked. She rapped her knuckles on the passenger’s window.

The engine fired up and, with a clunk, the car began to roll backward. Panicked, Evelyn played her last card. She dropped the blanket completely so that she could slap the hood of the car with both of her hands. The blanket fell unhindered and coiled on the asphalt. And there she was: Evelyn Nystrom, the pastor’s wife, on full display, naked as a newborn.

Erik’s car jerked to a stop and Evelyn saw her son’s face go ghostly white behind the windshield. Overcoming the paralysis caused by his mother’s lunacy, he mashed the horn and pointed frantically toward the discarded blanket with his free hand. Evelyn interpreted the gesture as well as she could. She lifted the blanket from the ground and wrapped it around herself again.

But as soon as she was covered, Erik swiveled his head around and hit the gas. The car zoomed backward into the street.

Desperate, Evelyn dropped the blanket again. She ran down the driveway, waving both hands and shouting, “Stop! Erik! Please!”

This time it was no use. After a brief squeal of tires spinning, Erik shot down the road and exited the Silver Birches Retirement Community pushing fifty miles per hour.

Evelyn blinked hard. She put her hands on her head and looked in the direction her son had gone until she was sure he wouldn’t turn around.

“Well. Okay then,” she said to no one.

For the first time since she had burst through her front door, Evelyn took a moment to consider the possibility that someone had witnessed this unusual scene. Sure enough, Fred and

Brenda Ingersoll were standing together on their front step. Brenda held her hand over her mouth. Fred's jaw hung down to his chest. But there were others watching, too. In the window of the house next door, Rod and Judy Hansen stared through their matching sets of bifocals. In the middle of the street, a car had stopped. Mildred Foley was gawking from the driver's seat. She appeared to be in no hurry to get to her destination.

Evelyn lowered her hands from her head and rested them on her hips. She adjusted her posture, throwing her shoulders back and straightening her legs. There was no sense hiding what had already been so abundantly revealed. To preserve her remaining dignity, all she had to do was act natural. So, instead of rushing back to her blanket, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She felt the sun and the crisp, spring air on every inch of her skin at once.

And, wait! Now that her senses were returning, she became aware of a pleasant noise emanating from a nearby source. She looked back toward her house. Yes! Music! How had she not heard it before? Another lively Sinatra melody was pouring out of her open windows. Paul had turned the volume up so high that the song could be heard on the street.

Evelyn heard the crooner's voice again. "Mere al-co-hol, doesn't thriiill me at all, so tell me, why should it be true..."

Oh, it was one of her favorites! She just couldn't help herself. She filled her lungs to sing with Ol' Blue Eyes so the entire neighborhood could hear: "That I get a KICK—out of you!"

And then she was dancing. Her bare feet came to life on the asphalt. She shimmied and skipped up and down her driveway. Her fingers snapped. Her head bobbed. She twirled on her toe for an imaginary partner.

## Blue Orchid

When the hands on his watch indicated quarter past the hour, the refrain in his head shifted from “she’s running late” to “she’s not coming.” He pulled out his phone to check her message.

*Let's meet at Blue Orchid  
around 7:00. I'll wear a big  
white hat so you can spot me at  
a distance. Looking forward to  
finally meeting you in person!  
xoxo Krista*

Around 7:00, she’d said. Maybe her definition of “around” differed from his. Maybe she’d hit some traffic. Or maybe Occam’s Razor applied here. She simply wasn’t coming.

He looked up and down the sidewalk for the hundredth time. Pedestrians came and went, but none wore a big white hat. A small throng of people mingled outside the door of the restaurant, all of them waiting for tables. Through the open windows flowed the incessant din of music, conversation, and laughter.

He checked his phone again. A few more minutes had passed. Still no response to his texts. No call. This was a first. He’d never been stood up before.

Then again, he’d never tried online dating before. Maybe this sort of thing was par for the course. There’s no harm in standing someone up when you’ve never actually met him, never met anyone who knows him, and never have to worry about running into him somewhere down the road. Besides, she had seemed too good to be true. According to her profile, she was a 23-year-old office administrator at a tech start-up in Cambridge. Her pictures all showed blonde hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones. She liked rock climbing, fantasy football, and action movies. Her typical Friday night started with a couple of beers at a microbrewery followed by “just hanging out on a couch somewhere.”

If she was anything like what her profile suggested, he didn't deserve her. In just over a month, he would hit the big 3-0. And what did he have to show for himself? A mindless job as a cubicle drone, a studio apartment he could barely afford, a growing number of gray hairs? It had been almost four years since he'd broken things off with Amanda. His friends had set him up on a few blind dates, but none of them had gone well. He was starting to think he was losing his edge. He had no reason to expect this date to go better than any of the others.

His watch read 7:20. She wasn't coming. He slipped his phone into his pocket and turned in the direction of his parking space.

And then he heard his name.

"Eric?"

The voice was undeniably female, but it must have been the hostess. He had put his name in when he had first arrived, five minutes before 7:00. His table must have been ready. He kept walking.

"Eric!" The same voice.

He turned back and there she was. Below her white, floppy hat, she wore a short navy sundress with thin straps. She had a red JanSport backpack hanging off one shoulder. Her hair, spilling from the hat, looked darker than it had in her profile picture, though it was shot through with highlights. Her blue eyes were bright and her skin belonged in an ad for Hawaiian Tropic.

She looked even younger in person than she had in her photos. Could she really be twenty-three? He felt even older by comparison.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she said before throwing her arms around him in a quick, friendly embrace. "Work was just a disaster. I literally couldn't get away."

He immediately forgot the time she'd kept him waiting. He smiled. "You must be Krista."

She laughed and pointed to her head. "Big white hat! Just like I said, right?"

He tugged on the left sleeve of his shirt and grinned. "Grey polo," he replied. "Should we head in?"



She nodded and put her hand around his arm as they turned toward the restaurant. “Again, I’m so sorry I’m late.” She spoke excitedly, her voice light and bouncy. “God, it’s busy, huh? Did you happen to put our name in? Maybe we could get a drink while we wait?”

As he walked to the bar, Eric tried to shake off his sense of disbelief. Not only had she shown up, but she actually seemed happy to see him. And she was more than just selfie-cute. The guys at work would never believe this.

With drinks in hand, he returned to the hostess’s podium. Krista had managed to find two open chairs in the waiting area and she gestured for him to join her. He handed her a gin and tonic—she had specified Tanqueray—and kept the IPA for himself.

“You have to change your profile,” she said abruptly.

“Why’s that?”

“You’re, like, way better looking in person! Your profile pic is maybe a seven at best and it does nothing to show how tall you are. You really should mention your height. Or find some way to show it in your other pics. Most girls go crazy for tall guys.”

He felt his cheeks grow warm. He’d never considered himself to be an attractive man. “Well, you might want to change your profile, too,” he said, after a moment’s hesitation.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Definitely. I mean, your pic was a ten and everything, but you’re easily an eleven...maybe even a twelve.”

Her smile grew wider. “I’m pretty sure the scale only goes up to ten.”

“They need a new one for you.”

It was a dumb line, and he felt a little bit corny for saying it, but she seemed to appreciate the effort. Reaching out to pat his arm, she said, “Wow. Attractive *and* sweet. Looks like I hit the jackpot.”

He felt himself blushing again. Was this really happening?

They settled into their drinks and conversation. Unlike most of the pretty girls he’d encountered throughout his life, she seemed to have little desire to talk about herself. Instead, she pummeled him with

questions. She asked about his work, about where he grew up, about what he liked to do in his free time. She seemed genuinely interested, even as he complained about the excruciating tedium that came with managing mutual funds.

On the rare occasions that he tried to question her, she quickly turned the focus back to him.

“What’s it like working at Primatech?” he asked.

“Oh, you know. It’s really just like any other job. The hours are long, my boss is a jerk, and my coworkers are just, like, boring. Everyone thinks a tech start-up is nothing but fun and games, but I don’t know how long I’ll stay, really. What about you? Do you see a future for yourself where you are?”

And then he was off again, talking about his commute, his coworkers, his boss. She was so easy to talk to. It had been a long time since he had talked like this with anyone.

Eventually their table was ready. As they rose to follow the hostess to the back of the restaurant, Krista asked for another gin and tonic.

“I’m not the waitress,” the hostess replied curtly.

“Oh, sorry.”

“Thirsty?” asked Eric, giving her a grin.

Krista shook the ice cubes left in her glass. “I guess so,” she said.

Arriving at the table, Eric moved to sit by the wall, but Krista slipped past him. She swung her backpack onto the padded bench. It landed with a *plumph*.

“Do you mind if I sit here?” she asked, reaching out to touch his arm.

“Of course not,” Eric said, taking the chair across from her.

“Sorry. I like to look out at the restaurant.”

The waitress came quickly and Krista ordered a second gin and tonic, this time requesting Beefeater. Eric was impressed by her taste. He still had a third of his beer left, but he ordered another anyway. He had to drive home, but he also didn’t want to fall too far behind.

The music was louder in this part of the restaurant, and the diners around them had raised their voices accordingly. Eric felt as though he had to shout to make himself heard. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving!”

“Me too. I haven’t eaten since eleven this morning. And lunch was kind of gross today.”

“Do they provide lunch at Primatech?”

“Huh? Oh, no. I brought lunch from home.”

“But it was gross?”

Krista laughed. “I guess it was, yeah.”

Eric smiled. She had a great laugh. He opened his menu as Krista did the same with hers. A silence fell between them as they considered their options. Eric used this opportunity to study his date in more detail. By this point she had removed her hat and set it on the bench with her backpack. Her amber hair reminded him of melted caramel—shiny and warm. It rippled down to her shoulders, surrounding a high forehead, slender eyebrows, a dainty nose, and compact mouth. He could see now that her blue eyes took their brightness from the flecks of grey they contained.

“So, you’ve eaten here before?” he asked.

“Yeah. A few times. This symbol here,” she pointed to a tiny flower next to an item on the menu, “means Blue Orchid favorite. Those are bound to be good.” She hesitated. “I could really go for a steak myself.”

She glanced up to meet his eyes. Her expression suggested she was asking permission. Clearly she expected that they would handle the bill the old-fashioned way.

“Go for it,” he said. “I might order seafood myself.”

The waitress returned with their drinks and took their orders. Pan-seared scallops for the gentlemen, and filet mignon for the lady. Eric was about to ask Krista about her fantasy football team when her phone rang. The ringtone shrieked over the commotion of the restaurant. The melody was familiar to Eric, but he couldn’t quite place it. A pop song maybe?

Krista looked panicked as she reached into the front pocket of her backpack. Two yellow pencils and a set of keys emerged before her phone did. She glanced at the screen and then silenced the call.

“I’m really sorry,” she said, looking around the room.

“I don’t think anyone else heard it,” Eric said. “It’s pretty loud in here.”

“Right.” She gave a half-hearted laugh, but her face was still pale with embarrassment.

“Really, it’s no big deal,” Eric added reassuringly.

She continued to survey the restaurant. “Yeah. You’re right. Sorry.” She set her phone face down on the table and offered him a thin smile. He wondered who had called, but thought it would be rude to ask.

As their conversation slowly resumed, Eric became aware that something had changed. Now he was the one asking most of the questions. Her answers were friendly enough, but terse.

“So, you play fantasy, right?”

“Yeah. Just football though.”

“Who do you have on your team?”

“Let’s see...Aaron Rodgers...uhh...Tom Brady—”

“Wow! Both of them?”

“Yeah. Is that weird?”

“I mean, a little. Those guys are first-rounders. Both of them went for twenty-five bucks each in my league.”

“Huh. I guess I got lucky then.”

She didn’t ask about his team. She made no comment about upcoming match-ups. She kept looking over his shoulder, looking toward the door. Was she losing interest in him? Did she want to leave? Was it the phone call? Who had called? Eric felt anxious. He became conscious that he might be tripping over his words.

Ten minutes later, her phone vibrated again. She flipped it over and ended the call, keeping the name on the screen to herself.

“Sorry,” she said, her face drained of color once again.

“No problem,” replied Eric.

By the time their salads arrived, the conversation had grown even more stilted. Eric could barely catch Krista’s eye. At times she watched the door as if she were in a trance. She downed her gin and tonic and ordered a glass of wine. Eric asked for water.

When the waitress brought their entrees, Eric had run out of ideas. He was grateful to the waitress for momentarily breaking the silence. After each of them had taken a few bites, the phone went off for a third time. Krista flipped it in a flash and then more or less slammed it back down on the table. The silverware jumped and an ice cube splashed out of Eric’s water glass.

“Everything alright?” he asked her.

She sighed and looked down at her lap. “Look,” she said. “I haven’t been completely honest with you.”

He waited for her to continue.

“The truth is I just—well, I just recently ended a relationship. About a month ago, actually. My boyfriend—sorry, *ex*-boyfriend—is, like, crazy or something.”

“So he’s the one who’s been calling?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would he be calling tonight?”

“I don’t know. It’s a Friday night, I guess.” She sighed again. “He was really pissed when I told him it was over. He was a real possessive type, you know. I just feel like he’s going to walk right through that door.”

Eric felt oddly relieved to receive some explanation for her behavior. So she had a crazy ex. Big deal. That didn’t mean she’d changed her mind about him. He didn’t think so anyway. He could handle this.

“Well, first of all,” he said, doing his best to sound sure of himself, “if someone comes through that door and goes after you, they’ll have to get through me first.”

The smile she gave him was only half-formed, but at least it was real. “I might not be the one who needs protecting,” she said.

“Oh, you think he might come after me? Please! I know how to handle myself.”

This wasn’t remotely true. Eric had never even witnessed a fight, much less taken part in one. Still, this girl had awoken something inside of him. She made him feel like a better version of himself. This was his chance to be as tough as he wanted. He felt himself putting his shoulders back. He unconsciously tightened his biceps.

“Besides,” he went on. “What makes you think he would look for you here? Was this a favorite spot of yours?”

“We came here once or twice, I guess.”

“But you probably went to other places more often.”

She shrugged and then nodded.

“So, the odds are pretty low that he’ll come walking through that door, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Then let’s just finish our dinner, and we can head to a new place when we leave. Some place he doesn’t know about. Does that sound good to you?”

She smiled at him—a wide, full smile this time. “That would be great.”

The cloud had passed. They each lifted their forks and continued to eating. Between forkfuls, they resumed their conversations. It seemed as though traversing this moment of doubt had brought them closer. Soon they were joking and laughing with ease. He shared a few scallops with her, and she offered him a few bites of her steak and all of her broccoli. She said she wasn’t a fan of vegetables in general.

Her phone rang once more before their plates were cleared. She stopped the vibration casually, but Eric noticed another quick glance toward the door.

“You could always turn it off, you know,” he said.

She shook her head. “I wish.”

Thinking that was a strange response, Eric probed for details.

“It’s—well—I have some family issues I’m dealing with. If someone needs to get a hold of me, I need to be available.” She looked off to the side. “I don’t really want to get into it, if that’s okay.”

“Oh! Totally fine,” Eric replied. “I didn’t mean to pry. Sorry.”

They finished their meals and agreed that they were too stuffed for dessert. When the waitress came with the bill, Eric sent her away with his Visa. Krista, to her credit, offered to cover the tip. Eric waved her off. “They’re just numbers,” he told her. “Totally imaginary.”

After rising from the table and making their way out of the restaurant, Eric realized he was feeling the effects of his drinks, even after the food and the water. Krista, who had chosen boozier options, wobbled a bit as she walked. Her backpack hung heavily on her shoulders and her big white hat sat crooked on her head. Giggling, she put her arm through his and leaned against his side.

“Did you still have a new place in mind?” she asked him.

“Actually, I was thinking maybe you’d like to try my place?”

“Mmmm...” she replied, nodding her head. “That sounds perfect.”

As he drove across the city, he considered how drastically his fortune had changed. At quarter past seven, he had begun resigning himself to another solitary Friday night, drinking cheap scotch and watching bad TV. Now, at just before nine, he was driving home after a great dinner with a stunning blonde reclining in his passenger seat. She was resting her feet on the dash. The skirt of her dress had slid down, leaving most of her upper legs exposed. A thrill of possibility ran down his spine.

His apartment was messier than he remembered. Dirty dishes filled the sink. Junk mail was spread across his kitchen table. He realized he should have at least folded his pullout mattress back into the sofa, but then he really hadn’t expected company. And now, watching Krista stagger across the room to sit on the edge of the bed, he figured she might not be in a state to care about the mess. Those gin and tonics must have been strong.

“What can I get you?” he asked. He walked over to his pantry. “I’m afraid I don’t have anything special. Beer? Smirnoff? A cheap scotch I found at Trader Joe’s?”

She swung her backpack off her shoulders and let her body fall back onto his mattress. Her feet remained rooted to the floor and Eric couldn't help noticing the immodest spread of her legs. "I've never had scotch before," she said. "Is it good?"

"Only one way to find out."

He made two drinks, putting three fingers of amber liquid over ice cubes. She sat up when he handed her the drink, and he took his spot next to her.

"Cheers," he said, clinking his glass against hers.

She took a large gulp and winced. She expelled her breath violently. "What is this stuff?"

"That's what scotch tastes like—cheap scotch anyway."

"It tastes like poison."

He laughed. "Yeah, the cheaper the scotch the worse the burn. Do you want something else?"

"No, no, this is fine." She took a tiny sip. She cringed a bit, but did not cough. "I'll learn to like it."

They sipped their drinks and talked. She told him she liked his apartment. She liked the posters on his wall and the lamp on his side table and the size of his TV. He told her he liked her hair and her dress and her shoes. She asked if he had any tattoos. He told her he didn't and then expectantly asked her the same question. She told him she wanted one, but she couldn't decide where to put it. She asked what he'd recommend. He grinned as his mind veered into lascivious territory.

After a few minutes, they heard her phone buzzing in her backpack. She pulled it out, killed the call, and studied the screen.

"Jesus!" she exclaimed. "He's called four more times."

Eric reached over and took the phone from her hand. He tossed it down to the other end of the mattress. "Maybe don't worry about him anymore," he said. Then, without thinking, he kissed her.

She pulled back for a moment, looking alarmed. Then she smiled. And then she pounced on him.

Suddenly, Eric's world was gone. He was only aware of her tongue, her hands, her hair, her supple body sliding onto his lap. They fell back onto the mattress, collapsing any remaining distance



between them. It had been a long time since Eric had done this. He couldn't imagine a woman who felt like she did. Electricity coursed through his veins.

It took him a moment to realize she was pushing him away from her. "Sorry, sorry, sorry," she said, climbing off him and finding her feet. "I really have to pee." She smoothed out her dress and ran her fingers through her hair. God, she was sexy.

He pointed to the bathroom and she rushed straight through the door, closing it firmly behind her. Through the thin walls, Eric heard the toilet seat smack down. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and waited.

He heard the toilet flush and the faucet turn on and then off. The door, however, refused to open. A minute passed. The bathroom was quiet. He wondered what she was doing in there. Maybe she was freshening up? Fixing her makeup?

At the other end of the mattress, her phone buzzed again. If he hadn't been drinking, he might have left it alone. He would have realized how it would look if she came out of the bathroom to see him staring at her phone. But he'd drowned his better judgment by this point.

He grabbed the phone and examined the screen. "Steven," it said. He ended the call and the lock screen appeared, showing a long stream of notifications.

Eric's heart, which had just begun to slow after the action on the bed, now began to accelerate.

Steven had called three more times, but he had also sent a series of text messages.

8:51. Where are you?

9:14. Please pick up.

9:27. Pick up your phone, Ashley. We're not doing this again.

9:48. Last chance.

10:03. Okay, Ashley. That's enough. I know where you are. I'm coming to take you home.

Eric heard the lock on the bathroom doorknob disengage. The door swung open and Krista stepped out with a mischievous look on her face. She had taken off her dress and was draping it in front of her body as if the straps were pinned to her shoulders. With a mischievous grin, she let it drop.

And then she saw him holding her phone.

“Oh my god!” she cried. “What are you doing?” She rushed across the room and snatched the device from his hands.

“Who’s Ashley?” he asked her.

“What?” she said, frantically swiping at the screen.

“I said, who is Ashley?”

She looked at him with terror in her eyes. “What else did you see?”

“He says he’s coming. Steven. He says he knows where you are. Is that your ex’s name? Steven?”

She punched in the code to unlock her phone and began pacing back and forth. “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” she chanted under her breath.

“What am I missing here, Krista?”

“That bastard...” she muttered. “He didn’t really do it, did he?”

A sudden pounding on the door turned them both into statues.

“Ashley!” A deep male voice in the hall.

Eric watched as Krista shrieked, ran into the bathroom, and slammed the door, leaving both him and her dress crumpled up at the foot of the bed.

The knocking grew more insistent. “Ashley! Open the door. I know you’re in there.”

Eric waited. No sound came from the bathroom. Ten seconds passed. Then the man in the hall pounded the door four times. “Ashley! If you don’t let me in, I will call the police. I’m not joking.”

Something snapped in Eric. He stood, went to the door, and swung it open.

“You—” It was all he could get out before the man shoved past him and bowled into the apartment.

“Ashley! Where is she?”

Eric was stunned. The man pacing across his apartment wore a blue button-down soaked with sweat. He had tucked the shirt into his jeans, which led down to a pair of white, worn-out tennis shoes. He

was balding, and the circle of hair above his ears was silver. He had to have been at least fifty years old. Maybe sixty.

“Hey—” Eric started again.

“Where is she?” The man turned on Eric, grabbing two fistfuls of his shirt. “I know she’s here.”

This was not at all Eric was expecting. He had been picturing a burly football-player type with slicked-back hair and a leather jacket. He had been waiting for Danny Zuko, and Coach Calhoun had walked through the door.

“Look,” said Eric, his voice a mixture of confusion and false confidence. “Let’s take this outside. She doesn’t want to see you.”

This was not the answer the man was looking for. He shoved Eric towards the wall. Despite the fact that Eric stood a half-a-foot taller than the much older man, he showed no apprehension.

“Tell me where she is!”

“It’s over, man. If you wanna talk, you can talk to me. Outside.”

“Listen, son. I know she’s here. Her phone is pinging at exactly this spot on my GPS. I already checked the other apartments. Just tell me where she’s hiding.”

Eric pushed away his confusion. He couldn’t process who this guy was, but he wanted him out of the apartment. “I’ll tell you whatever you want, pal. Outside.”

The man shook his head. He went to the kitchen, pulled a chair out from the table, and sat. “I’m not leaving without my daughter..”

Eric’s mouth fell open. He stumbled back to the wall and then slouched down against it. “Oh shit,” he said.

A delirious cry came from the bathroom. The man rose from his chair and went straight to the bathroom door. Knocking insistently, he strained to keep his voice calm. “Ashley. That’s enough, sweetie. I’m taking you home.”

The answer was something between laughter and sobbing. “Ashley!” the man shouted loud enough to make himself heard.

Mirthless laughter behind the door. "I can't!" she exclaimed.

"Right now! I'm done playing games!"

"No, Dad. I really can't."

Something clicked in Eric's head. He knew why she couldn't come out. "Hey, uh, Stephen?" he said, getting the older man's attention. Reluctantly, he pointed at her dress, lying in a heap on the bed. He expected this man, who claimed to be the girl's father, to fly across the room and beat him to death. Instead, he leaned against the wall on the other side of the room, closed his eyes, and rubbed his forehead.

"Oh God," he said quietly. "I can't believe this is happening." He gave Eric a look filled with anguish and went back to the chair in the kitchen. He put his face in his hands. "Not again."

"Again?" asked Eric.

"We did everything,." The man seemed to be talking to himself. "We took every precaution."

Eric didn't understand what the man was talking about, but he tried to imagine what was going through his head. "Nothing happened," he said.

The man raised his eyes. They were shot through with streaks of red.. "I mean, for Christ's sake, son," he said in an anguished voice. . "She's fifteen! How can't you see that?"

Eric rose from the floor and went to the kitchen. He pulled out the bottle of scotch and poured himself a tall glass. Ashley's giggling could still be heard in the bathroom. "You want some of this?" he asked the older man.

The man shook his head. Eric watched as he went to the bed, gathered up the discarded dress, and carried it to the bathroom door. He whispered a few words and the door cracked open. A moment later, she came out with a broad smile stretched across her face.

"Well, Eric," she said brightly. "It's been quite a ride."

"Let's go," said her father. He gripped her arm like a police officer might.

"Thanks for dinner. Let's do it again sometime."

Eric said nothing. Her father steered her to her shoes and her backpack. As she threw the bag over her shoulder, Eric realized how full it was. Probably full of textbooks—chemistry, algebra, American history.

After the older man ushered the girl out of the apartment, he turned to Eric one last time. “Sorry about all of this,” he said.

“Me too,” Eric replied.

Hours later, the bottle of scotch near empty, Eric tried to piece it all together. There must have been signs. There just must have. Was he really that desperate? Was he really that blind?

He was still interrogating himself as he crouched over the toilet, ejecting his expensive dinner. He wished he could purge himself of the memory, too. Even now he had trouble fending off incongruous ideas. One minute found him questioning whether she really liked him. In the next he wondered what might have happened if her dad hadn’t shown up when he did. At that thought, he felt sick again.

He groaned as he undressed and fell heavily on his mattress. He opened his dating app. The phone screen lit up with a rainbow of hearts and a sweep of smiling faces. He searched to find Krista’s page. Looking at her pictures again, he noticed the signs of her deception—the heavy make-up, the fashion mag attire, the careful lighting, the unplaceable backdrops. He wondered if Primatech was even a real company. He realized how perfectly her interests catered to the “cool girl” stereotype. And twenty-three years old? It was just the right age. Not too old, not too young.

She’d thought of everything. It was an astonishing display of manipulation. But why? Why would she do it? And not only once, but twice? At least twice? He allowed the evening to play out in his head, but the scotch had addled his playback apparatus. Then that terrible comprehension struck him again. She wasn’t twenty-three. She was fifteen. He had to stop thinking about her.

He took one last look at her face. She was a pretty girl—even without the makeup, she’d be pretty—but she was so plainly a girl. A teenage girl. “What is wrong with me?” he asked the empty air around him.

Before closing the app, he navigated to his own profile, tapped into “Settings,” and deleted his account.

## Altar Call

Kyle was staring daggers at his older brother Josh. Actually, daggers weren't good enough. It had to be something more destructive. Ginsu knives. Machetes. Chainsaws, for God's sake.

Since the moment they'd walked into the chapel, Kyle's eyes hadn't once left the back of his brother's head. Through all the praise songs, through the counselor's skits, even through prayer and silent reflection, he maintained his furious focus. It was a glare of unmitigated loathing. The epitome of a murderous gaze. His eyes had gone dry with the effort.

Pastor Chad cleared his throat, causing a hush to fall over his audience. As he delivered the opening lines of his sermon, all of the other campers relaxed into their pews. Even Josh settled into an angelic posture. But Kyle, standing by himself in the very back of the chapel, would never see his brother in that light again.

Over the last six days at Sandy Lake Bible Camp, Kyle had come to accept the truth: Josh was and always had been an asshole. Sure, he'd been a jerk before, but this was a new level of assholery. On Sunday night, he humiliated Kyle in a spontaneous wrestling match. On Monday, he poured orange juice into Kyle's bowl of Cocoa Pebbles. On Wednesday, he beamed Kyle in the face during a dodgeball game, even though he knew headhunting was against the rules, even though he knew their counselor, who they all called Uncle Adam, would see him do it. He had done it on purpose. Squinting through his inadvertent tears, Kyle saw his brother holding his hand over his mouth, trying to muffle a laugh.

Josh would go to any end to embarrass his little brother. Just before dinner the evening before, while Pastor Chad was saying grace, Josh had ripped a huge, resounding fart. Everyone in earshot tried in vain to muffle his laughter and Josh whispered as audibly as he could, "Gross,

Kyle.” When Pastor Chad finished his prayer—which he managed to do without even a pause—he gave the whole camp the “Guys, I really don’t think that’s funny” talk. Kyle felt 300 eyes turn toward his bright pink face. Afterward, he couldn’t convince a single person that it wasn’t him.

But that was yesterday. That was absolute peanuts compared to what Josh had done only a few hours before this chapel service began. This time, he had gone too far. Kyle felt his jaw tightening as his eyes continued to burn holes into the back of his brother’s head. He wanted to grab a hymnal and knock his brother senseless. He wanted to pull the bandana off his head and strangle him with it. He wanted to climb up the rafters to the peak of the chapel ceiling, cut loose the hanging light fixture, and watch it obliterate his brother below.

He was staring upward and imagining the logistics of that operation when a sudden swell of laughter brought him back to reality.

“That’s the thing about guppies,” said Pastor Chad. He strutted across the chapel stage, smiling as he spoke. “They’re stupid. Like, the lights are on but nobody’s home. But I guess my buddy Rocco didn’t get that when he decided to set up the aquarium. Typical Rocco, right?”

The laughter faded into giggling and the giggling faded to silence. Kyle realized he had missed the joke. Why guppies? Who was Rocco? He cursed his asshole brother again. This was his fault, too.

Pastor Chad, in Kyle’s opinion, was the coolest camp speaker he’d ever heard in Sandy Lake. He was a wiry 28-year-old who spoke and moved like his heart pumped Red Bull through his veins. He looked nothing like a pastor. His shock-blond hair was buzzed on the sides of his head, and long on the top. He wore black-rimmed glasses, Weezer t-shirts, and a pair of tattered denim shorts covered in permanent marker doodles. And now, thanks to Josh, Kyle had missed half of his Friday night sermon, which everyone knew was the best talk of the week.



Kyle tried to tune in, but at the instant his eyes drifted away from his brother, they fell on the girl sitting just a few yards away: Mary Caruso. Her dark, wavy hair was tied up in a ponytail, and a teal headband circled the bob. One of her bright pink bra straps had slid out from beneath her gray tank top. It stood out vividly on her sun-browned skin.

Seeing her there, sitting so close to Josh, rekindled Kyle's rage.

That morning, during the prayer and meditation hour that everyone called KBAR (Kick Back And Relax), Uncle Adam had to leave the cabin for a meeting. He told Kyle, Josh, and his other campers that he would be right next door, listening for noise. If he heard too much, there would be "consequences."

Kyle spent most of his KBARs writing in his journal. Outside of school, he never wrote a thing at home. But he liked journaling when he was at camp. It was just part of the experience.

That morning his jottings had turned toward Mary. He had met her at lunch on Monday when his cabin chose the table neighboring hers. He worked up the courage to talk to her and learned that she, like him, was a rising junior. Unlike him though, this was her first time at camp. She was just starting to get to know the girls in her cabin, but she hadn't really clicked with any of them. Seeing an opportunity, Kyle offered to show her around during free time. She told him she would enjoy that. They met up that afternoon, then again on Tuesday, and then again on Wednesday.

Mary had been his favorite thought all week long, and now that thought was spilling onto the page. He was writing about just what he would like to do with her during free time that afternoon when Josh's hand shot down from the top bunk and wrested the journal away.

Kyle sprung out of his bed and lunged at his brother. "Give it back!" he hissed.

“Let’s see what you’ve been writing, huh?” Josh replied. Like the dinner debacle the day before, he whispered just loud enough for everyone in the cabin to hear. Seven other pairs of eyes turned to take in the spectacle. Josh used his feet to push his brother back.

“Give it to me, Josh!” Kyle’s voice was rising to a straining shriek. “I’m serious!”

“Oooh, he’s serious. Must be something good.”

Josh had the book open. He was flipping toward the last page Kyle had written.

“Read it aloud, Josh,” said Stephen Mercer, Josh’s best friend.

Kyle watched in horror as his brother’s eyes grew wide and a smile stretched across his face. “Mary isn’t just beautiful,” read Josh.

“Stop! No!”

“‘She’s classically beautiful. Like a Greek goddess.’ Whoa, Romeo! That’s good.”

The other boys were starting to giggle. Kyle tried desperately to scramble up the bunk past his brother’s outstretched legs.

“Shut up! Shut up!”

“‘Her skin is as warm as sunlight. Her eyes are like blue stars.’”

The laughter in the room was swelling. Where was Uncle Adam? Surely he had heard them by now.

“Stop it, Josh! Please!” Kyle cried. He felt a lump rising in his throat.

Josh lifted his voice to be heard over the rising commotion. “‘Her lips are like rose petals, soft and sweet.’ How romantic!”

Kyle gave up. He dropped his arms, stepped down from the frame of the bunk, and crawled onto his mattress. He knew what was coming next. He pulled a pillow over his head.

“Oh my God!” shouted Josh to the others, before reading on. “I’m afraid I may be falling in love.””

The cabin exploded. Some of the other boys were laughing so hard that they had to clutch their stomachs. They were gasping for air.

“In love!” cried Josh, interrupting his own uproarious laughter. “With a girl?”

Kyle felt his tears spreading on the pillow case. He squeezed the pillow tighter around his ears.

The other boys were still laughing uncontrollably when the door of the cabin burst open. “Hey!” shouted Uncle Adam. “Excuse me! What in the heck is going on in here?”

Josh went on to deny that anything had happened, and Kyle, who had hurriedly tried to dry his face, said nothing. As a consequence for the commotion, Uncle Adam sentenced the entire cabin to twenty minutes of cabin arrest at the start of free time. Kyle realized that this would throw off his plans with Mary, and he felt as if the tears would come back. He hated himself for being so soft. He hated himself for ever thinking he could write something personal in his journal and get away with it. Most of all, he hated his awful goddamn asshole of a brother.

“That’s the thing about guppies,” said Pastor Chad.

The repetition brought Kyle back. At the mention of those stupid fish, Kyle expected to hear laughter. This time, however, there was a total silence. Pastor Chad was still pacing back and forth, but he looked unusually calm. He was speaking slowly. His tone was somber. Kyle wondered if he’d really been talking about stupid guppies the whole time.

“These poor little fish kept burrowing themselves under the volcano and getting stuck. Rocco would see their little tails sticking out, and he’d just completely lose his mind. The first few times it happened, he managed to reach into the tank and save the guppy. Then he would re-

spread the gravel, reposition the volcano, and hope for the best. But those little guys just weren't that smart."

Kyle's eyes had glazed over as he remembered the incident with the journal, but now they shifted back to his brother. A fresh surge of anger rushed throughout his body. Josh could have left things as they were. He'd embarrassed his little brother in front of the other guys; he got the laugh he wanted. But that wasn't enough. He had to take it one step further.

After KBAR had ended, Kyle had decided that everything could be salvaged if he could just find Mary during lunch. They could still spend free time together. They would just push back their meeting time by twenty minutes. No big deal.

After wolfing down his meal, Kyle walked across the cafeteria to the table where Mary was seated. She was facing the opposite direction, so he tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around and smiled.

"Hi, Kyle," she said. "Who's your friend?"

"Friend?"

Kyle looked behind him and the color drained from his face. There stood Josh with a wide grin on his face. Clearly, he had trailed Kyle to Mary's table.

"You must be Mary," said Josh. "I've heard so much about you."

"Oh, really?" said Mary. She raised an eyebrow and glanced at Kyle.

"Of course! I'm Josh, Kyle's older brother. Me and Kyle share everything together. Like most brothers, I guess. He tells me you two have been spending a lot of time together this week."

Kyle could feel his heart thumping like a piston in his chest.

Mary just smiled her beautiful, perfect smile. “Yeah, Kyle’s been helping me to find my way around. It’s my first year here,” she said. She looked at Kyle and he tried to smile back, but his expression came across as a grimace. “Are we still planning on the beach today, Kyle?”

“Oh,” said Josh. “About that.” He threw his arm around Kyle’s shoulders and shook his head dramatically. His own smile stretched from ear to ear. “Not sure he can make it. We got in a bit of trouble during KBAR.”

“Oh no! What happened?”

“Oh, nothing too bad,” Josh replied, with a meaningful glance at his brother. “We found a really funny book and I guess we laughed a little too hard.”

Mary tilted her head to the side. “What were you reading?”

“Well—”

“Nothing!” Kyle yelped, finally finding his voice.

“Nothing?”

“Just—just a comic book.”

Josh barked out a laugh. “Yeah,” he said, “It was pretty comic.”

Kyle’s face had now made the full transition from stark white to bright red. Mary, for her part, looked confused.

“Anyway,” continued Josh, “we have to sit in our cabin for the first twenty minutes of free time. Total silence. Uncle Adam can be a real dick sometimes, right Kyle? A real dream killer.”

Kyle said nothing.

“Well, that’s okay,” said Mary, looking at Kyle. “Why don’t you just come down afterwards? I’ve already invited Jessica and Chelsea to join us. Twenty minutes isn’t that long.”

Kyle brightened a bit. “Cool,” he said.

Josh dropped his arm from Kyle’s shoulders and clapped his hands together. “You know what? I could go for a dip myself. It’s a hot one out there. Maybe I’ll come, too.”

“Sure!” Mary replied before Kyle could think. She looked back and forth between the brothers. “The more the merrier!”

Kyle kept his silence as he walked back to his table with his brother skipping ahead of him. He sat stone-faced as his brother reiterated the whole conversation to the other boys in the cabin. He didn’t utter a single word as they laughed and laughed and laughed.

When free time came around, Kyle found himself unable to shake his dark mood. He crawled into his bunk and turned toward the wall. At the end of the twenty-minute punishment, Josh and all of the others put on their swimsuits and left for the lake. Kyle stayed put. Uncle Adam eventually talked him into going to dinner, but after watching Josh approach with Mary and her friends, he found he wasn’t hungry. He sat in silence at the end of the table, his head in his hands.

After dinner, Kyle rushed back to the cabin while the rest of the camp prepared to play “Capture the Flag.” He ripped the last page out of his journal, tore it into shreds, and then stayed right where he was all the way through evening snack. He nursed his anger and it grew until he could think about nothing else but the thought of causing his brother pain. Uncle Adam had to call in another counselor to help persuade Kyle to leave for the last evening chapel service.

And now Kyle became vaguely aware that another change had taken place in the chapel. The tranquility that had greeted the start of Pastor Chad’s sermon was nothing compared to the stillness that had settled over the audience now. Though a choir of crickets could be heard

through the window, the only sound in the chapel was the speaker's voice. The man in the Weezer t-shirt had put everyone under his spell.

Try as he might, though, Kyle couldn't make out a word of what Pastor Chad was saying. The silence of the room had somehow amplified the voices in his head. They were arguing with each other, all at once. What would he say to his brother? What would he do? As much as he wanted to cut him out of his life altogether, it could never happen.

So Kyle couldn't understand when the sound of sobbing broke the silence. He tore his eyes away from his brother and looked all around the room. Campers and counselors alike were wiping tears away from their eyes. Heads were bowed. A few hands were raised in the air. Then music began to play, a gentle guitar melody accompanied by a quiet piano. And, all of a sudden, campers began to stand from their pews and move toward the front of the chapel.

Kyle looked at Mary as she also rose. He could see that she was trembling. She moved forward with the others. She knelt on the floor and bowed her head.

For the briefest of moments, Kyle saw an opportunity. He could go forward and kneel down beside her. He wasn't sure why she was kneeling, but he could be there for her, maybe put an arm around her. She would trust him still. He knew she would.

But then, out of the corner of his eye, Kyle saw a figure draw close, a figure he knew all too well. He watched in horror as Josh dropped into a squatting position and then clumsily took a knee. He turned toward Mary and whispered something in her ear. She nodded gently and he put his hand on her shoulder and held it there.

Kyle tasted bile in his throat. He clenched his fists tightly and realized he was trembling as well. At any minute, he expected to see his brother turn around and smile at him.

This was it—the final straw. Before, his thoughts of revenge were little more than dreams and fantasies. Now he had to do something. Josh had crossed a line. He was half tempted to rush his brother right then and there, but he knew he would never make it. He would store up his anger for a little while longer. And then, when the moment was right, he would make Josh pay for what he'd done.

At a certain point, the music stopped. Pastor Chad bowed his head and spoke with his eyes closed. He spread his hands at the ends of his outstretched arms. The campers whispered back to him. Call and response. Kyle was deaf to every word.

Eventually, the campers returned to their pews. Josh and Mary went in different directions, but Kyle's eyes never left his brother.

Pastor Chad spoke again. He was smiling through his tears. The counselors left the chapel. There was silence. Then Pastor Chad spoke one final time. The campers stood up to leave.

Sensing his time had come, Kyle made a beeline to the door and squeezed out into the cooling summer air. He saw counselors spread along the path and out across the adjacent field. Each of them held a flickering candle. The little flames mirrored the stars in the sky above.

Kyle moved down the path at a brisk pace. The counselors were staring, but he paid them no mind. He would find a way to evade them and go forward with his plan. He would go back to the cabin and hide behind a tree just outside the door. The moment Josh passed him, he would pounce. He wasn't sure what would happen next. Maybe he'd claw out his brother's eyes. Maybe he'd choke him until he passed out. Maybe he'd pin him to the ground and beat his face into a pulp.



He was about to dodge Uncle Adam, the last of the counselors in the field, when he heard an urgent whisper behind him.

“Kyle!”

A thrill ran down his spine. He turned around and saw his brother. And yet, the voice he heard was not his brother’s. It was too timid, too soft. And something was off about his appearance. Even in the dark, Kyle could see that this figure’s eyes were red and his cheeks were wet. He tried to remember if he had ever seen his brother cry before.

“Hey, man,” Josh whispered, swallowing hard. “Can we talk?”

Kyle did not reply. He did not move. He stared at the ground as Josh stepped closer.

“Listen, Kyle, I know—I know I’ve been kind of a jerk this week.”

The voice was tremulous and faint. Josh was struggling to keep it together. Kyle could tell that Uncle Adam was listening. He saw Stephen Mercer and a couple of other guys from the cabin approaching in Josh’s wake. They stopped at a respectful distance.

“I haven’t been the best of brothers,” Josh continued, moving closer with every word. “I haven’t been a good friend.” He paused. “I’m really sorry.”

Kyle could tell that his brother was now standing an arm’s length away.

“Will you forgive me?” Josh asked.

In a single, fluid action, Kyle pulled back his fist and fired it into his brother’s right eye. Josh went down hard.

“Jesus!” said Uncle Adam.

“Holy crap!” said Stephen Mercer.

A grin spread across Kyle’s face as he turned away and started toward the cabin. “Sure,” he said over his shoulder. “I forgive you.”

## The Bartender

On any other night, I'd have found another bar. Some place with warmer lighting, better music, more on tap than tasteless domestics. A place where the glasses were freshly washed, where the servers were attentive, where laughter graced the air once in a while. But Morgan's had been made for nights like this one. At Morgan's I could do the two things I needed to do most: sit by myself in silence and down glass after glass of cheap, no-name whiskey.

Observing the amber hue of the grime-lacquered wood of the counter though the bottom of my second empty drink, my thoughts drifted randomly to a passage in *Frankenstein*: "I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open." That's what I was becoming. One day I would wake up, walk to the bathroom, and see yellow eyes staring back at me. I would wake up and find myself transformed into some hateful thing—inside-out, my odious soul exposed. But I suppose that was Kafka, not Shelley. I was mixing up my high school English syllabus.

The last of the election results had come in shortly after midnight, just three nights before. All of our efforts—weeks canvassing Podunk neighborhoods, endless hours on the phone, thousands of letters sealed, stamped, and sent, speeches written, rallies attended, post after post on every social media site on the web—they'd all come to nothing. The bastard had won. In spite of everything. Everything! The thought still put bile in the back of my throat.

And tonight, I'd let it out on Lisa. What was it she'd said that set me off? Something about a "paradigm shift." How we all needed to be more "open-minded." Because that was what I needed: another analyst telling me how I'd screwed up.

God, I needed another drink. I waved down Carl, the grizzled ex-Marine who'd been manning the bar long before I'd first stumbled in some ten years earlier. He was bald, but

bearded and easily pushing sixty. His belly, covered by a taut black t-shirt, rolled over the waist of his faded blue jeans. Without a word, he refilled my glass.

At the moment Carl turned away I heard the unmistakable piano riff of “November Rain” come through the ratty speaker overhead. Of all the shitty songs that could have played on that shitty night, that unrelenting deluge of maudlin melody and desperate lyrics had to have been the worst. I rested my left elbow on the sticky countertop and cupped a hand over my ear to shut out half the sound. With the other side of my head, I listened for anything other than Axl Rose. I closed my eyes and, in a few seconds, picked up the *thunk-thunk-thunk* of steel-tipped darts plunging into a fuzzy board. A group of college-aged guys was playing cricket, as they always did. College kids, drawn in by two-dollar PBRs, joined the loners and the old-timers to comprise the three major demographics served by Morgan’s pub. There were just enough of all three put together that the place could float above the flood of gentrification that was sweeping through South Boston.

Interspersed with the *thunk* of the darts hitting the board was the usual babble of sports talk and dick jokes. One of the guys, for reasons unknown, let out a loud, orgasmic moan, followed immediately by another one. I swiveled on my stool and stared. The culprit was right in the ear of the kid standing on the line and trying to concentrate. The kid on the line waved the dart in his hand toward the board, waiting to stop shaking from his breathless, slap-happy laughter. The other two guys watched with smirks on their dopey faces. All four swayed where they were standing. Three of the four were dressed in flip-flops and shorts, seemingly ignorant of the climate of the northeast in mid-November.

I glared at them for awhile, but they never seemed to notice. They were caught up in their game and each other and the jubilant ignorance of youth. Repugnant as they were, I couldn't help but envy them. I tried to remember if I had ever had the luxury of being just that stupid.

I drained my third glass, winced at the burn, and turned back to the bar. "S'cuse me," I called after Carl. When he finally looked my way, I pointed at the empty vessel in my hand.

At the rate I was going, I might have forgotten everything that night. I might have stumbled into an alley and puked up my guts before riding a subway back to my crummy apartment with the expiring lease. I might have woken up the next morning, looked in the mirror, and saw a little more of the creature staring back at me.

But I never reached oblivion because of a lively young man who just then walked through the door. He had a green backpack hanging off his right shoulder and a ratty ballcap propped up on his mess of chestnut hair.

"Carl!" he cried, breaking into a half jog to cover the short distance between the door and the bar. "Carl, I'm so sorry I'm late."

Something about his voice in the dingy Morgan's atmosphere made it hard to accept as real. It seemed to dispel the haze that hung over every table and chair in the room. Even the college kids turned away from their game to determine the source of this incongruous sound.

Carl merely laughed. "Take a breath, Pete," he said. "You're fine." Without any prompting, he filled a glass from the middle tap and set it, foam spilling over its lip, on the counter.

Pete swung his bag from shoulder to floor. He half-stood and half-knelt on the barstool nearest to Carl and then began speaking at a rapid pace.

"Really, Carl. I am so sorry about this. The bus in Philly was late and—"

“Relax,” said Carl, cutting him off. “Have a seat. Have a drink.”

Pete took the glass and raised it. “Cheers!” When he set it back down, a third of the liquid had vanished.

Carl laughed again. “Jesus. You don’t need to chug it.”

Pete used the back of his hand to muffle a burp. “Sorry. But I know we can’t drink on the job and my shift was supposed to start at seven and you’ve gotta go home! You’re acting all calm and cool about it, but you must be kind of pissed, right? I mean, I would probably be kind of pissed if I had to work overtime with no advance notice. You must have better things to do. Like, do you have a family? Or a girlfriend or something?”

Carl’s belly jiggled a bit. He shook his head. “Slow down. Can you do me a favor and just breathe for a minute?”

Pete spread his hands across the bar and blew out his breath through pursed lips. He grabbed his beer, took another sip, and then stood for a moment to take in his surroundings. He nodded at a couple of old guys sitting at a high top, and he waved toward the group of college kids. He caught my eye, too.

“How’s it going, man?” he said.

Carl looked in my direction. “Hey, what’s your name, buddy?”

I raised my head. “Nick,” I said.

Carl turned back to Pete. “Nick’s having a rough night,” he said.

“No, no,” I said. “I’m fine.”

Pete gave me a smile that showed just a hint of pity. I might have resented the look if he hadn’t immediately looked off toward the speaker, which, in defiance of all logic, was *still* playing “November Rain.” Axl Rose was chanting his way through the interminable refrain.

“Dear Lord,” said Pete. “What is this music?”

Carl had turned his back to Pete in order to clean a few glasses. “GNR,” he replied over his shoulder. “It’s almost over.”

“Thank God,” he said, sending a wink in my direction. “And this is is your iPod, right, Carl? What’s next?”

“Uhh... ‘Stairway to Heaven,’ I think.”

Pete nearly choked on his drink. He wiped a bit of spittle off his chin. “Are you for real? What is this, the ‘longest songs in the world playlist?’”

Carl turned back, grinning and drying his hands on a towel. “My shift, my music. You can play whatever you want when your shift starts.”

“Oh yeah? And when does that happen?”

Carl looked at his watch. “Uhh...right now.” The speaker popped as he unplugged his iPod. “Finish your drink and get back here.”

Pete immediately drained the last two inches of his glass and let out a loud “Ahhh.” Carl pulled on a brown leather jacket and walked out from behind the bar. They shook hands, exchanged a few quiet words, and then parted. Carl disappeared into the night and Pete became, in an instant, the new bartender.

I watched as the younger man made himself at home in the old man’s former domain. He stuffed his backpack under the counter and hung his coat on a hook. He plugged his phone into the speaker cable and started a song I’d never heard before. Then, after dropping a few dirty glasses into the sink, he picked up a spray bottle and a rag and went to work rubbing down the bar.

“So, where you from?” he said. He wasn’t looking in my direction, but I assumed he was talking to me. I was, at this point, the only person sitting at the bar.

“Dorchester,” I replied.

“Not too far,” he said. “What brings you to Morgan’s? What’s wrong with the Dorchester bars?”

“I don’t know. Nothing I guess.”

Pete grunted in reply. “This is just where you ended up, huh?”

I shrugged.

Pete gave me another smile. “I just got back from Philly myself.”

I nodded slightly. Pete kept smiling.

“This is where you ask me why I was in Philly,” he said.

Had it been anyone else telling me how to make conversation, I’d have answered with a middle finger—maybe two of them. But this guy, for whatever reason, was winning me over. I couldn’t put my finger on why.

I asked him why he’d gone to Philly.

“My big sister just had a kid,” he said. His smile grew wider as he lifted his phone off the bar and unlocked the screen. Taking care to keep the speaker wire in place, he turned the phone around and showed me a photo of a newborn in a striped blanket and a knit cap. “My first nephew,” he said. “His name is Frank.” And then he laughed. “Baby Frank! Do you believe that?”

I found myself smiling, just a bit. “I guess it’s hard to imagine a baby named Frank.”

“Well, there you have it,” he said, laughing again and pointing to the screen. “He might be Francis on his birth certificate, but he’s Baby Frank, alright.”

“Sounds like a fun trip,” I said.

“Oh, great trip,” he said. “Great trip.” Having finished wiping down the bar, he tossed his rag in a bucket and then turned on the sink so that he could start on the glasses there.

“Trip back was a doozy though,” he said.

Clearly, Pete was born to be a bartender. “Why’s that?” I asked him.

“Well, I took the bus, for one. Never done it before, but it only cost a fraction of what a plane ticket would have. And it beats driving myself. Between gas and tolls, it probably costs the same thing. You ever taken a long bus ride?”

I shook my head.

“You should try it, man. It’s pretty smooth. But anyway, this trip back started at the 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station in downtown Philly when I was sitting on a bench, just waiting for the bus and watching people, right?”

I nodded.

“At first, I’m just scoping out the honeys in the area, as any guy is liable to do. But it’s November, right? Everyone’s wearing twelve layers of clothing. It’s honestly hard to tell dudes from chicks. So that gets old pretty quick.

“So then I decide to figure out who’s waiting for a train and who’s waiting for a bus. Because people wait for both buses and trains at 30<sup>th</sup> Street and I have it in mind that I’d like to have a seat to myself on the bus. But that’s only going to work if there are a limited number of passengers on the bus. So I start trying to figure out who’s taking what, but it’s hard now, because pretty much everyone just has their tickets on their phones—fortunately I printed mine or I would have been in trouble—”

I was surprised to hear myself chuckle.



“What?” Pete asked. He looked surprised himself.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But is this going somewhere?”

Pete laughed. “Yeah, yeah, I’m almost there. So, anyway, I have to give up the bus vs. train thing, and I’ve realized there are a crap-ton of people around no matter what, so I’m probably going to get stuck with someone next to me. So I came up with a new game. I decided to look for the person who I would most and least want to sit with. And, right away, I see this guy across the way who just looks like a grade-A asshole, you know.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? How’s that?” For as much as he talked in circles, I liked listening to him. It didn’t seem to matter what he was saying.

“Well, first of all, he’s wearing the MAGA hat.”

I groaned. “Jesus.”

“Right, right. And this guy is fat as hell, too. Like, if a beanbag chair grew arms and legs, it’d look just like this guy. And he’s sitting on the bench yelling to no one in sight with one of those wireless-earbud-microphone things in his ear. He’s got a bag of potato chips in one hand and a big bottle of Diet Coke—because of course it’s Diet—in the other. His face is greasy with sweat, he’s got this thick walrus moustache, and to top it all off, he’s wearing a Dallas Cowboys jacket.”

“What’s wrong with the Cowboys?”

“Nothing’s wrong with the Cowboys. It’s Cowboys fans that are the problem. If you’re wearing a Cowboys jacket you’re either, A, a genuine Texan, or B, a bandwagon fan from their glory years in the ‘90s. And what grown man wears a Cowboys jacket anyway?”

“A lot of grown men where sports stuff.” I found myself warming up to the story.

“You’re wearing a Sox hat. Not like Dombrowski’s gonna call you up to the show, right?”

“But you know what I mean, right?”

And then the conversation came to a pause. One of the college kids had come to the bar to order another round of PBRs for his “boys.” As Pete filled the drinks, I sat in a bemused stupor. This bartender was a cartoon character come to life. When he talked, his hands danced through the air, and his head bobbed around like a balloon in the wind. He seemed to be bouncing perpetually on the balls of his feet. But most expressive of all were his eyes. Vibrant green and bright, they flashed as he spoke, sparking with every point of emphasis. Watching and listening to Pete tell his story, I had become unconscious of everything else in the bar. It was as if the atmosphere in the room had been charged, electrified, when he’d walked through the door. I wanted him to continue the story.

The college kid walked off holding a tray of beers above his head. Pete eyed him carefully. “So help me, if he drops that...”

We both watched until the kid set the tray down on a hightop to the side of the dart game. Pete breathed a sigh of relief.

“So, what about this guy? The Cowboys fan?” I asked.

Pete put both of his hands on the counter and locked his eyes on mine. “Nick,” he said, gravely. “Have you ever had a premonition?”

I shrugged. “Not really.”

“I’ve had a few in my life. Premonitions, that is. Some people call it a sixth sense. I tend to think it’s just intuition, you know, just another side-effect of my ridiculously high IQ.”

I laughed out loud.

“So, anyway. As I’m sitting on the bench, looking at this clown in the Cowboys jacket and the Trump hat, I had a vision like a lightning bolt., I thought: I’m gonna be stuck next to him for five friggin’ hours on that bus ride.”

Pete paused to pour himself a glass of water from the tap. He took a long drink, set the glass down, smacked his lips, and started nodding. His lip curled into a smirk as he let the silence lengthen.

Finally, I gave up. “Well?” I asked forcefully.

“Aha!” he said exuberantly. “You’re into the story now. You want to see if my sixth sense is legit.”

I shook my head and smiled. “Just get on with it.”

“Alright, alright. So I go for the bus as soon as it arrives, which is probably forty minutes after it was supposed to. Everyone around me is pissed, but I wiggle past all of them to the front of the line. After handing the driver my ticket, I head halfway to the back, throw my bag on the inside seat, and sit on the outside. Sure enough, Cowboys is making his way on board. It looks like he’s shoved past a bunch of people, too. When he gets to the driver, he gives the guy a hard time for showing up behind schedule, as if the guy was in any way to blame for the traffic, and then he starts coming back toward me. My heart’s beating a hundred miles an hour, but there are a lot of empty seats around, so I figure I’m probably safe. The guy would have to be a real weirdo to ask me to move over at this point.

“I’m trying not to look at him, but I have to take some glances, just to see where he is. And right when he pulls even with my seat, he sees me looking at him. I tried to speak, but my mouth just fell open. And then he just gives me this nod and moves toward the back.”

I burst out laughing. “So, that’s it? He didn’t sit with you?”

“Oh, hold up! Story’s not over. The bus keeps filling up, and I’m feeling pretty good, right? I figure if someone needs the empty seat, I’ll shove over, but at least it won’t be Cowboys I’m stuck with. So I put in my headphones, and little by little, the line of people dwindles, and it’s looking more and more like I’m gonna have two seats to myself.

“And *then*, just when it seems like everyone is seated and the bus is starting up, I feel this tap on my shoulder. I turn around, and who do you think I see?”

“Umm...Cowboys?” I asked.

“No!” Pete replied, his eyes wide with excitement. “It’s the driver!”

I let out an exaggerated sigh. “Dear Lord. I never should have asked for this.”

“But! The driver leans down to tell me something. I take out my headphones and he says, ‘Excuse me, sir. But this is a full ride. And this gentlemen gave up his seat so that a couple in the back could sit together.’ And he gestures over his shoulder to reveal—you guessed it—Cowboys.”

Then, abruptly, he stopped. “Oops,” he said, looking towards his phone. “My playlist ended.” I noticed that the speaker had, in fact, gone silent. I was surprised I hadn’t noticed before.

Pete started up a new song. I still didn’t recognize it, but it opened with a loud, catchy hook. One of the college guys turned around and shouted, “Nice, man! Turn it up!” Pete happily obliged. The song clipped along at a lively pace. It was good. My toes began to twitch in my shoes.

Pete looked at the glass in my hand. After all this time, it was still half full. “You good, man?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I said. “So what happened with Cowboys?”

“Well, that’s just it,” he said. “That’s what made the trip such a doozy.” And then his smile stretched as wide as I’d seen it all night. “He’s on his way here.”

“What?”

“Yeah. It turns out he wasn’t half bad after all. I mean, he kind of overflowed into my seat. I had to squeeze against the window. And he had some of the worst B.O. I’ve ever smelled. But he was actually a nice guy. I told him I’d be working here tonight and he said he’d come by after he got settled in his hotel.”

“You’re serious,” I said.

Pete laughed. “Totally. When he sat down, he reached a big meaty hand over to introduce himself—he’s got a killer grip, this guy—and he says, ‘I’m Dan. Dan Kravitz.’ And I told him my name and then put my headphones back on. But he clearly wanted to talk, because he says, ‘You from Boston?’ So I tell him where I’m from and then he just starts talking about why he’s heading to Boston, and how he’d never been before, and he asks me what he should try to see. And pretty soon we’re talking about Faneuil Hall and Fenway and the Sox and the Pats and just one thing after another. He told me about his family. I told him about my girlfriend. We talked about high school. We even got into politics at one point, but it never got heated. We probably talked for two hours straight. It was only some nasty looks from across the aisle that shut us up. I think they were trying to sleep.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Not at all. And before we parted ways, I invited him to the bar.”

“Here? At Morgan’s?”

He laughed. “I know, I know. Not exactly the crown jewel of the city.”

I pushed my drink across the counter, leaving it unfinished. “Well, how about that.”

“Yeah,” Pete said with a shrug. He watched as I stood from my stool and pulled out my wallet. “You leaving?”

“I think so,” I said. “I got what I came for.” I dropped a pair of twenties on the bar.

Pete picked up the bills. At Morgan’s prices, I’d left substantially more than the standard tip. A smile stretched across his face. “So you bought the story, huh?”

I froze. “Wait, what?”

“I thought I might have stretched it a little too far in places. But I guess you’ve been drinking, so—”

“Hang on. Are you telling me—”

“That I made it up? Yeah. So what?”

I felt my stomach twisting into a knot. Pete kept smiling.

“But,” I said, “why would you do that?”

Pete took my half-finished glass and started toward the sink. “Look,” he said. “You got what you came for. You said it yourself. A few drinks, a little conversation. You’re feeling better now. So who cares if the story’s true? It ended like you wanted it to.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand,” I said.

Pete laughed the same rich laugh he’d used all night, and I cringed in response. It was such a genuine sound.

“So what do you get out of it?” I asked him. There was an edge to my voice that I hadn’t expected.

Pete shrugged and grinned again. “Not about me, chief. I’m just here to satisfy the patron.”

I staggered out of the bar into the cold night air, feeling anything but satisfied.

## Collecting

When we got there, the dog was still alive. The morning sun coming through the pine trees cast its light on the still-wet blood that coated the pavement. The dog lay on its side, jaws spread wide, vomit speckled around its head, tongue plastered to the road, and short breaths rattling out of its obliterated rib cage. A few turns off Route 9 in the backwoods of South Jersey, everything was quiet except for that panting noise and the hum of the truck's engine behind me.

The dog was a yellow Lab with a pink collar around its neck. The vehicle must have clipped its hindquarters at a decent rate of speed to send it sprawling onto the side of the road. Then I guess the driver had somewhere important to be. Or maybe he just panicked. Whatever the reason, he was nowhere in sight.

I moved a few feet closer. The fur around the impact region was matted with purple blood. The lower section of the belly was ripped open so that a bundle of intestines dripped out like shriveled, pink balloons. In the three months since I'd started working as a collector for the Atlantic County highway department, I'd seen more guts than the average person does in a lifetime. This was the first time I'd seen them coming out of a dog.

A coil of hair fell in front of my face. I tucked it back behind my ear and took a deep breath. *Just an animal*, I told myself. *Just the first of the day*.

I went back to the truck and Jerry rolled the window down. "We've got a live one," I said, trying to keep my voice level. "Dog."

I expected him to cock his eyebrow and grin at me like he had a hundred times before. I waited for the same dumb line, which never seemed to get old for him: "This ain't woman's work, Joyce." Instead, he dropped his hands from the steering wheel and leaned back against the seat. He shut off the radio. "Well, shit," he said. And that was it.

I hesitated for a minute. Silence always makes me squirm. “I don’t think it’ll be very long,” I went on. “Torn down the middle like that buck we saw last week. Looks like the bastard caught the tail-end of her.”

Jerry flipped on the hazards and killed the engine. He left the truck and walked over to the dog. Bending his creaky knees, he lowered himself into a squat. Some wounded dogs will snarl or growl at you if you get too close. This one just let out a low whine.

“Shit,” he said again. “She ain’t coming back from this.”

I looked at my shoes. After working this job for over thirty years, Jerry knew a goner when he saw one.

Still in his crouch, he lifted his ratty baseball cap off his head and used his free hand to brush back his greasy white hair. He tugged the hat down again and bent the brim into shape. When his hands weren’t on the wheel, this was a compulsive gesture.

“Asshole,” he muttered. “Who hits a dog and just fucking leaves?”

“Do you think it was the same guy who called?”

“Most likely, I’d say. They all succumb to the guilt and wait on folks like us to clean up the mess. Don’t mean he’s not an asshole.”

“I guess he didn’t have to call, right?”

Jerry spat a wad of saliva off to the side. Then he turned back to the dog. Cautiously, he reached out his hand to stroke the clean white fur below the animal’s head. The dog responded by whining a little louder.

In the short time we’d been working together, Jerry had convinced me that tenderness was not a part of his nature. At the very least it wasn’t a side of himself that he’d expose to a broad-shouldered country girl like me. This was a man who peeled chipmunks and rabbits off the



road with the toe of his boot. He chucked squirrel parts into the woods like he was chumming for coyotes. When we happened on a live animal, most often a deer or a coon, his five-inch buck knife was in his hand before he opened the door. A lot of guys in that situation will call a state patrol officer. Jerry always dispatched the poor creatures himself. He did it without expression, as if it were just another part of the job. He may not have been a big man, and he certainly wasn't a young one, but he acted tougher than any man I've ever met. And yet here he was petting this broken dog and whispering, "Shhhh. It's okay, girl. It's okay. Shhhh."

Of course if it'd been me doing the same thing, he would've had words for me. Would've called me soft. Would've questioned, yet again, whether I was cut out for this gig. Jerry was pretty sure no woman was fit to be a collector. I was pretty sure I could prove him wrong. But this was a tougher test than the ones I'd faced before. A dog was different.

The silence was making me squirm, so I asked Jerry what we should do next.

He shrugged half-heartedly. "We wait."

"For what?"

"For the owner to come home. For the dog to die. Whichever happens first." He tilted his head in my direction. "It's a family pet, so that's policy, Joyce. You've read the handbook."

I suppose I knew he would say that. I had read the so-called "handbook." Really it was just eight pages of increasingly unlikely scenarios, each of them spelled out so carefully that even a straight-C student like me could get the picture. And, yes, one of those scenarios dealt with dogs, or, more precisely, 'canine housepets.' It said you couldn't leave a dog until an area resident claims responsibility. It said a living dog could not be dispatched without the actual dog owner's permission. It said questions of disposal must be put to the owner before action is taken. Dogs are considered property. That was their legal definition, anyway.

I tried to think of a way around the handbook. “What about an animal shelter? The ASPCA or something?”

Jerry kept his eyes on the dog. “Rules are rules, Joyce. If a family gets word their dog was euthanized without permission, they could file charges.”

“But she’s suffering!” The words burst out of my mouth before I could stop them. I blushed at the tone of desperation in my voice.

Jerry shook his head. “Rules are rules,” he said. He went back to petting the dog.

Tring to get a hold of my nerves, I studied the asphalt like some kind of forensic cop. A trail of pink-brown flecks led away from the dog to a wide splotch of purple-brown in the middle of the road. That, no doubt, was the site of the collision. Beyond the spot was a pair of black, swerving tire tracks. As soon as I saw them, the hint of burnt rubber in the air finally caught my nostrils. God, this was fresh. We must’ve pulled up fewer than ten minutes after the event.

For a fleeting second, I was struck by the disbelief that so often accompanied these incidents. Why here? And how? But that was stupid. Three months on the job had taught me this sort of thing could happen anywhere. Even still, this road was one of those sleepy, desolate, residential streets you find every which way in the Pine Barrens. From where I stood, I could only see two houses. Not a single car had passed us since we’d arrived. It just didn’t feel like the right place for this.

The dog’s low whine caught my ears again. I looked back at the mess. “What’s on the collar?” I asked Jerry.

He bent down and rolled the pink nylon strip around the animal’s neck so he could see the tags. “Name. Address. No phone number. Looks like it’s had its shots. That’s it.”

I wondered what its name was, why he didn't say it aloud. I thought to ask, but decided to ask about the address instead.

Jerry stood and squinted at the nearby mailboxes. "Looks like it's that one," he said, pointing toward the other side of the road. The house was visible behind a copse of trees: a white, two-story Cape with a detached garage and an empty driveway.

Jerry got back into his crouch and resumed his behavior, stroking the dog's fur. "I doubt anyone's home at this time of day, but you could go check."

I paused and thought about it. "What do I say if someone answers the door?"

"You'll figure it out."

"Well, what would—er—what do *you* say?"

"Jesus, Joyce, ain't you supposed to have woman's intuition or something? Just be real sweet and apologetic. 'I've got some bad news' and all that. You'll figure it out."

The edge in his voice took me by surprise. He spoke as if I'd done something wrong. As if it was my fault there was a dying dog on the side of the road. I started toward the house.

Jerry had been less than pleased when the DOT had paired him with the first female collector in Atlantic County history, but he'd never really taken his frustration out on me. Sure, he made his opinion known through a few sneering jabs, but it became clear pretty quickly that there was a line he wouldn't cross. And when he found out that I could do the work—that I wasn't worried about breaking a nail, that I wasn't squeamish with blood or guts, that I could grab a 4-point buck by the hooves and swing it into the truck bed without help—at that point I think he accepted that I'm not like other girls. He admitted he was grateful to have me around, and I determined that, though we'd probably never be friends, we could at least get along.

At the end of the driveway, I recognized part of me was hoping no one would be home. I had it in my mind that a man would be there, but more likely it'd be some doe-eyed housewife in a bathrobe and hair curlers. That would just make everything worse.

I took a peek through a window in the garage door. I saw cardboard boxes, a lawn mower, and yard tools, but no vehicle. I went to the side entry, which looked more welcoming somehow. The door itself was open by about a foot-and-a-half. The damn dog must have waltzed right outside and right into the road.

I pressed the button for the doorbell, but heard nothing. It must've been broken. "Hello!" I yelled. "Anyone home?" No response. It was a quarter past nine on a Tuesday morning. Why would anyone be home?

For some reason I found myself feeling inexplicably noseey. I took a glance through the door into what must have been a mudroom. I saw a row of jackets hanging on hooks. I saw a bench with a pile of shoes beneath it: men's shoes, women's shoes, and a few pairs of tiny, neon-bright sneakers. My stomach clenched at the sight of those little shoes.

I had to think about whether I should shut the door. Hadn't the damage already been done? But what would they think when they turned in the driveway and saw the open door? They'd forever blame themselves or blame each other. Well, that was assuming that they ignored Jerry and me and a wide stretch of blood-stained asphalt. Geez, I couldn't keep my thoughts straight. *The hell with it*, I thought. I pulled the door shut and returned to the road.

Jerry was still kneeling by the dog, still stroking its head. The dog was still letting out that same low whine broken up by raspy breaths. The smell it was starting to give off was both familiar and new at the same time.

"No one home," I said.

Jerry nodded. He kept his eyes down.

“So what do we do?” I asked him.

“I already told you.”

“It’s nine o’clock. We could be here all day.”

“Yep. That’s how it is, Joyce.”

I was trying not to look at the dog, but I couldn’t look at Jerry without seeing both of them. I walked a few little circles, kicked a pebble down the road. In all this time, I still hadn’t seen a single car drive by. Maybe one had passed while I was at the house.

“Should we call a vet?” I asked.

“She’s not gonna make it. They don’t do organ transplants for dogs.”

“Should we call anyway?”

Jerry sighed and shook his head. “Let’s think it through, Joyce. If we call the vet and he sends a car, nine out of ten times there’s a bill that needs to be paid. If the customer refuses, then what? The department won’t pay it. I sure as hell won’t pay it. Do you have a couple hundred bucks to spare for a dog that’s as good as dead already? Even if some Samaritan wants to work for free, as soon as you move that dog, she’s gone.”

I walked over to the truck and leaned against the grill. “What about the other calls we get today?”

“I radioed in while you were gone. In these situations, they’ll send another truck.”

I wished another truck would come by right then. I felt uncomfortably alone with just Jerry out here. The noise of the dog set my teeth on edge. Jerry seemed somehow oblivious to it. He just kept stroking that fur. It occurred to me suddenly that this was part of the job. Maybe he was just following protocol, some unwritten rule that all of the vets followed.

Five minutes passed. Then five more. The weatherman had called for temps in the 60s, but there was a chill in the air that the bright sun couldn't quite dissolve. I looked into the woods, which looked just like every other stretch of woods in this part of the state. Tall pines towered over scraggly briar bushes and feeble saplings. Eventually my eyes drifted back to the road and the splatter of blood now almost completely dry in the middle of it. I examined it as if it were a Rorschach blot. I couldn't see anything other than some alien creature with tentacles extending in all directions.

“How long will it take?” I asked Jerry.

“What?”

“You know,” I said, gesturing toward the dog.

Jerry yanked his cap off again and put his hand in his hair. “Hard to say. A few years back Steve and I ended up in basically the same scenario. It was a little spaniel mix that time, probably in slightly worse shape than this one.” He paused and looked toward the tops of the trees as his cap returned to his head. “I suppose he held on for almost four hours.”

I swallowed. The dog in front of me still had his eyes wide open. It was still churning out breaths, still giving off that low-pitched whine.

“That spaniel,” I said, “did he whine like this one?”

“Kind of. He was a nasty thing at first. Snarled and snapped at my hand when I came near him. But once the whining started, it kept up right to the end.”

I tried to picture the dog on the side of the road snapping at Jerry's hand now. The image just didn't fit. This was a Lab, for god's sake. This was a dog that let little kids yank its ears and climb on its back and wrestle it to the ground. This dog would just lap at their faces with its big wet tongue. It would lose its damn mind at the sight of a tennis ball. That tail—the same tail that

now lay as lifeless as a hunk of thick rope—that tail would have wagged a million times since the day that dog was born.

My mom had never allowed a dog in the house. My step-dad had wanted to get one that he could take with him on his hunting trips, but my mom had held her ground. I'd had friends with dogs though. One of my friends in sixth grade had had a Golden Retriever who gave birth to eight tiny puppies. I remember going over to her house and seeing them even before their eyes opened. They were just these round little furballs with pink noses.

“Did you ever have a dog, Jerry?” I asked. I was pretty sure he didn't have one now. If he did, it hadn't come up.

“When I was a kid, yeah.”

I waited for a second. “What kind?”

“Lab,” he said. “A lot like this one, actually.”

I thought that would be it, but then he kept going.

“His name was Chester. Got him when I was about five and had him until right before high school graduation. Chester stuck with me through my parents' divorce. He was there when my mom started hitting the bottle. Good dog. He was a real good dog.”

Silence fell again and began stretching out in an uncomfortable way. I was starting to feel pretty lousy as the minutes kept crawling along. My stomach felt tight. The muscles in my shoulders were knotted as though I'd been lugging a heavy pack. I pressed my fingers deep into the tissue above my clavicles. I rolled my neck in both directions. None of it made any difference. And all the while, that dog kept making noise. Its unsettling smell was spreading through the air. I looked at my watch and was discouraged by the time.

Jerry just kept petting the dog. Every few minutes he adjusted his cap or shifted his posture, and then his hand would go back to its task. Any other dog would have fallen asleep, soothed by the steady, hypnotic gesture. This one stayed impossibly alert.

I thought about asking Jerry if I could take a turn. I could relieve him of duty for a few minutes. But then maybe it wasn't a job to him. Maybe he wanted to do it. Maybe he needed to.

But what was I supposed to do? I mean, really, what the hell was I supposed to be doing? Because doing nothing was killing me. Listening to that damned dog was killing me. That smell filling my nostrils was just fucking killing me.

I had my own buck knife in my pocket and I pulled it out now. I flipped it open and then snapped it closed. I did it again. Open and closed, open and closed, open and closed. I had bought the thing at Wal-Mart on the second week of the job, but I hadn't had any reason to use it yet. Now I found its weight in my hand was a comfort. Open and closed, open and closed, open and closed. I tried to focus on the snick of the blade entering the handle.

Eventually, Jerry turned toward me so I could see his annoyance. I stopped fidgeting while the blade was in the open position. I went to press my thumb against the blade to feel its sharpness, but I didn't account for how much my hands were shaking. The metal edge slipped through the skin near my thumbnail.

"Shit," I whispered.

Jerry looked at me. I showed him the thin streak of blood running toward my wrist. "Quit playing with the damn knife," he said. "Stop being such a kid."

He stood up, shaking his head. He turned away from me and the dog and the truck and started walking down the road. "I've gotta take a piss," he said over his shoulder.



I had discovered in the last three months that Jerry always went to great lengths to ensure his privacy. Maybe he wouldn't have done this if I wasn't a girl, but I kind of thought it was just his way. He would walk for a quarter mile if he thought it necessary. He could be gone for ten, fifteen, maybe even twenty minutes.

I decided not to waste any time. When Jerry reached a bend of the road, he turned out of sight. Immediately, I went to the dog, knife tight in my dominant hand.

I knelt down and turned over the tags. "Lucy," I read. Her eyes rolled sideways in my direction. I lifted her head so that she could look at me. "Lucy," I said gently. When her eyes met mine, they were full of everything I expected to see: pain, fear, and desperation. It hurt to look at her. My heart pounded against my chest. I squeezed the handle of the buck-knife. *Yes*, I thought. *Yes*.

As I dragged the blade through the thick white fur of Lucy's throat, I held her gaze. I pushed it deep, just like I had seen Jerry do a few dozen times before. The blood that spurted out was bright on that fur. It felt warm and sticky on my hands. The dog jerked three times and then laid still. Before the light left her eyes, I saw a glimmer of relief. I found peace in the silence that resulted. I did not squirm.

For the first time in over an hour, my stomach unclenched. I stood from the spot as the tension evaporated from my shoulders. Calmly, I walked back to the truck. I cleaned my knife and then dried my hands with a rag. It would take much more than a rag to remove the stains, of course. My hands remained pink except for the bright red still running down my thumb. I retrieved a Band-Aid from the First Aid kit and wrapped it around the self-inflicted wound.

The sound of an approaching car broke the silence. I remember thinking, *Okay. So they're home. I'll have to confess. That's fine. I can live with that. If they thought what I'd done was wrong, so be it.*

But it wasn't them. The car slowed briefly as it passed me and then carried on its way.

Another five minutes passed before Jerry returned. When he realized what I'd done, the color drained out of his face. He took his cap off and then fumbled it onto the asphalt. It landed only a few feet away from the gore. He looked at Lucy, then me, then Lucy again.

"What in the hell..." he whispered, still looking at Lucy. "What the fuck, Joyce?"

I held up my bright-red hands. "I did what you told me," I said.

Jerry stared at me with his mouth hanging open.

"I quit playing with the damn knife," I said.

Raising his hands, he rubbed his face. He pressed his eyeballs deep into their sockets. "Jesus Christ," he said. He turned, took three quick paces, and then turned back. "If anyone found about this—"

"I know."

"Have you lost your goddamned mind?"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

And then Jerry did something I wasn't expecting. He started to cry. He sat down next to the dead dog and let big, heavy sobs shake his wiry frame. His tears flowed through the spaces between his fingers. He reached a wet hand out to pat the dog's fur.

For a minute, I gave him his space. Then, because he didn't seem to be recovering, I crouched down next to him. I thought about putting a hand on his shoulder, but realized some of the blood on my hand might not be fully dry. So I just stayed close.

After another minute, Jerry's voice cracked into speech. "I'm sorry," he said, wiping his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Joyce—I just—" He paused to collect himself. He took a deep breath and turned his face toward mine. "Thank you," he said softly.

## Poolside

*Vega*, he thought, squinting at one of the brightest stars in the sky. *That must be Vega.*

He raised the chart above his head and tried to align the dots of ink with the points of light behind them.

*Or...maybe it's Arcturus...which would mean...*

He lifted the chart again, scrutinizing the angles, spinning it one way and then the other. Frustrated, he set it down on the mottled-glass tabletop next to his vinyl-strapped lounge chair. He let out a sigh.

Too few dots, too many stars. The sky was too clear. That was the problem. With the moon taking a night off and the nearest hub of light pollution over two hundred miles away, the stars were innumerable and not one seemed brighter than any other. In an hour of searching, he hadn't distinguished a single constellation from the mind-boggling array.

It had seemed like a worthwhile venture when the last call was made at the hotel bar. It was a warm, midsummer night, and he had no interest in sleep. After draining his last drink, he had visited the printer in the hotel "business center" and then wobbled to the pool deck with his chart in hand. In no time, he spotted what he thought was the Big Dipper. He decided it would make a good reference point. The legs of the lounge chair made a terrible noise as he dragged it into the ideal orientation. He stretched out and scanned the sky. Yes, there it was, the Big Dipper, and near it the Little Dipper, and a little further off, Polaris, the North Star. But then, before he could even consider his chart, he noticed what looked like the Medium Dipper, the Tiny Dipper, the Short-Handled Dipper. And, come to think of it, Polaris shouldn't be found in the east. Good thing he wasn't a sailor. He'd never find his way home.

Now, as he evaluated the difference between Vega and Arcturus, the alcohol in his blood had thinned significantly. Even so, when he stood from his chair, the stars spun like rhinestones on a dancer's skirt. He steadied his legs and his stomach before making his way to the restroom.

When he returned to his spot, he was no longer alone. A woman had materialized on the far side of the pool. She had short dark hair, a petite figure, and a cigarette burning between her lips. As late and as dark as it was, she wore sunglasses. They covered nearly half of her face.

He glanced at her with what he thought was an excess of caution, but she never once seemed to be looking back. Soon he was quite openly staring as she sat on the edge of her own deck chair and clumsily stripped off her jeans. Then, somehow keeping her cigarette in her teeth, she pulled her tank top over her head. All that remained was a black, one-piece swimsuit, so tight that it might have been painted on her skin. Beneath the inverted Lycra triangle, her long, white legs reflected the rippling, turquoise light of the pool.

She rose from her chair and turned her head in his direction. He scrambled to pick up his star chart and made a show of giving it his full attention.

Over two hundred miles away, Sharon would be sound asleep in their queen-size bed. She'd have all of the covers to herself. He wondered whether she'd thought of him as she pulled the sheets around her. He wondered if she had taken even a moment to wonder about him. "Pack your things and leave," she'd said. So that's what he'd done. He zipped his suitcase, slammed the car door, and drove north. This was the third night they'd be sleeping apart. He'd checked his phone relentlessly through the whole of the first day and most of the second, waiting for a call, a text, anything really—maybe an email. By this point, he was forcing himself to ignore it. He didn't even have it with him now. It was back on his nightstand. He'd left it there before he'd gone to the bar. That was hours and hours ago.

The star chart turned in his hands, but he'd lost his concentration. He lowered the paper. The stars behind it flew together and apart simultaneously. The grouping he thought was Scorpius lost his tail. Cygnus shed her wings.

Across the water, the woman rose from her chair. She walked along the pool deck to snatch a glass off a patio table so she could smother her cigarette. She then carried the makeshift ashtray back to her spot, pulled a pack of cigarettes out of a large, floppy handbag, and rummaged through her discarded jeans for a lighter. Sitting on the end of her lounge chair, facing in his direction, she crossed her long legs and lit a new cigarette.

As far as he could tell, she was staring directly at him. When she caught him glancing her way, she lifted a hand and waved with just her fingers. The gesture reminded him of the way Sharon would wave at a baby. He nodded in the woman's direction and, as he did so, noticed a 'No Smoking' sign attached to the chain link fence behind her.

*Huh*, he thought.

Her gaze remained steady as she puffed on her cigarette. The smoke obscured the patch of sky above her. Feeling a bit uneasy, he feigned a renewed interest in his star chart.

Eventually, out of the corner of his eye, he saw her stub out her second cigarette in the ashtray. She stood once again and stretched her arms over her head with her hands clasped together. She took off her sunglasses and corralled her long hair into a ponytail, securing it with an elastic band she'd been wearing on her wrist. When she turned back toward the pool, he could make out her face more easily. It looked strangely asymmetrical with one side appearing darker than the other. At a distance, though, he couldn't determine what accounted for the contrast.

She stepped toward the pool and sat at the edge. Then, in a single, soundless motion, she slid into the water. Her head disappeared beneath the surface and he watched as the blur of her body sank to the bottom of the deep end.

She stayed down for longer than he expected. A lot longer. Long enough that he grew concerned.

He stood from his chair. Surely several minutes had passed. The blur of her body remained motionless as he took a few steps toward the pool. He was right on the verge of shouting something when he saw her move. She bobbed back to the surface and inhaled a big breath of air.

After wiping the hair off her forehead, she looked straight at him with a wild smile stretching from ear to ear.

He felt inexplicably embarrassed. "I thought..." he said quietly.

He could see her face more clearly now. The lopsided appearance was caused by a pinkish, gray bruise that had formed over her left eye. It was shaped like an apostrophe.

"You thought what?" she replied, still smiling.

He shook his head. "Never mind." He turned away and started back toward his chair.

She started to swim, back and forth from one end to the other. The pool hadn't been designed for swimming laps—it measured no more than twenty-five feet at its longest point—but she appeared to have no interest in exercise anyway. Her strokes were long and lazy. She alternated from her belly to her back. If she used her legs at all, she kept them beneath the surface. She made very little noise as she moved through the water, as graceful and sleek as a seal.

As he watched her slender body his thoughts turned back to Sharon. She was a field hockey star when they'd met in college, and she had the lean, sturdy frame to prove it. But her stature had begun to change almost as soon as her last game ended. Everything grew wider. Every item in her college wardrobe made its way to the donation bin. Even her face had filled out, prompting an alteration of her hairstyle. She'd always worn her wavy blonde hair in long tresses that fell down her back. Then, about ten years ago, she'd cut it into a bob that flipped out at the ends. One day, he'd accidentally used the phrase "mom cut" to describe it. She'd made him pay for that.

It is hardly uncommon for a middle-aged woman to be sensitive about her looks, but her sensitivity was intensified by the fact that his appearance had changed so little. In two decades, his metabolism had barely slowed. His weight had hovered resolutely within a ten-pound range. He was still tall, still broad-shouldered, still thin-waisted. If anything, the passing years had improved his appearance. His face had become more taut, exposing sharper cheekbones and a firmer jawline. The flecks of gray in his hair and beard made him look swarthy and experienced, but not necessarily old.

In her weakest moments, she told him how much she hated going out in public together. Every time they did, she saw dozens of women sneaking glances at him while not a single man looked her way. He, of course, would tell her she was wrong. He told her he would always love her because she was beautiful and she would always be beautiful because he loved her. He swore it was true and, for twenty-odd years, that was enough. She was enough for him and he was enough for her. Until one day he wasn't.

He looked up at the sky. The stars were fading and the night had grown darker. Either that or the whiskey was wearing off. It was very late. A glance at his watch told him the exact



time. He could count on his hands the number of occasions he'd been awake at this hour. His mattress beckoned. It had been far too long since he'd last checked his phone.

A sudden splash brought his attention back to the pool. At the other end, the woman was clambering out. She sat on the edge and squeezed a quart of water out of her ponytail. Then she rose and walked toward her chair. The slap of her feet on the cement echoed off the hotel windows. Relative to her grace in the water, she seemed clumsy and awkward on land. She picked up her towel and bent away from him to dry herself off.

His eyes traced the lines of her body. Her thin ankles gave way to calves as round as softballs. The contour of her hip called to mind the edge of a scimitar. Everything was tight and smooth and limber.

He blinked hard and scolded himself for noticing these things. In a manner of speaking, he'd only had eyes for Sharon for as long as he could remember. His gaze had never lingered like this on any other woman. He made himself look away. Back to the star chart.

A minute or two passed before the sound of her slapping feet stole his attention again. Now she was walking toward him with her towel wrapped around her hair. She had draped her handbag over her shoulder so that its strap ran between her breasts. In her hand, she held the makeshift ashtray, which he could see now was actually a stubby whiskey tumbler. She was older than he thought previously. Mid-thirties. Maybe even forty.

Her swimsuit, he realized, was purple, not black. The wet material squeaked on the vinyl straps as she sat on the chair next to his. She leaned forward with her hands on her knees and looked up and down his body before settling on his face. He did his best to hold her gaze. Up close, he could see some yellow in the apostrophe that covered her eye. It looked painful.

Silently, she inspected him. Then, evidently satisfied, she sat back and crossed her legs. Her bare foot hovered inches away from his elbow. She pulled her cigarettes out of her bag, lit one for herself, and then offered one to him. He shook his head.

She blew a stream of smoke out of the corner out of her mouth. “So,” she said. “Are you still drunk?”

“Sorry?”

“I saw you sitting at the bar. I was in a booth behind you with a friend of mine. You were there for quite a while.”

Her voice was luscious. She was careless with its volume.

“I probably shouldn’t get behind the wheel,” he said.

She nodded a couple of times and reached into her bag to pull out a silver flask. The cap came off easily. She took a swig and then extended the vessel in his direction. “Have some,” she said.

Warily, he took it from her. “What is it?” he asked.

She sighed impatiently. “What the fuck do you care?”

He tipped a mouthful of liquid down his throat. It burned like gasoline. When he grimaced and coughed, she smiled.

She received the flask from him and drank from it again. She pointed at his lap, where his star chart lay. “What’s with that?”

He handed it to her. She looked it over.

“Is that why you’re here? Do a little stargazing? Get in touch with the universe and shit?”

“Something like that,” he said.

“Sure,” she said, her impish grin returning. “And getting loaded at the bar helps that process, I bet.” She took a long pull on her cigarette and blew the smoke over her shoulder. “Are you rich?”

He couldn't help grinning. She didn't mess around. “No,” he replied, shaking his head.

“But you can take off and find time for stargazing in the middle of the week?”

“I can work wherever there's WiFi.”

“What do you do?”

“Inbound marketing.”

“Sounds awful.”

He shrugged and then narrowed his eyes, still grinning. “What about you? What brings you to the north country?”

“Me?” She sucked her cigarette hard and blew the smoke in his face. “I'm the owner. I own this whole fucking place.”

“Really?”

“That's right.” She held out the flask again. “Don't you believe me?”

He took a smaller sip this time, but still couldn't help wincing. He ignored her mocking smile. “Is that why you can break all the rules?”

She considered the cigarette in one hand. “You mean this little thing?” Then she gestured toward the flask. “Or this?”

“And I'm pretty sure the pool closes at ten,” he said.

She laughed. “Well, it's like I said. No one tells me what to do.”

They passed the flask back and forth again. Feeling emboldened by the heat of the drink, he gestured toward her eye. “How did that happen?”

“Oh,” she said. “So you noticed.” As if anyone wouldn’t. She leaned back and sent a cloud of smoke billowing upward. “Boyfriend,” she said.

He watched the smoke for a moment and then pressed further. “Ex-boyfriend now, I hope?”

“Nah,” she said. “I deserved it.” She turned back toward him. “I was being mouthy.”

He considered that for a moment. “That doesn’t sound—”

A bout of laughter cut him off. “No, no,” she said, regaining her composure. “Trust me. I deserved it.”

She pulled the towel off her head and undid her ponytail, holding her cigarette in her teeth. She shook her hair loose and brushed it down to her shoulders with her fingers. Then she uncrossed her legs and leaned toward him. She seemed closer this time. He was conscious of the gap between her legs.

“You ever hit your wife?” She stabbed her cigarette towards the ring on his left hand.

“No,” he said abruptly. Here he’d thought she’d been blunt before. “Absolutely not.”

“Thought about it?”

“Never.”

She leaned in even closer. Her lips parted to reveal a thin row of straight white teeth. “So where is she now?”

He shifted backward and raised his eyebrows. He shook his head slightly.

“Oh come on,” she said. “No one comes this far north for business. If you had family in the area, you’d be staying with them, and married men don’t vacation alone. Unless you’re one of those sad divorcees who still wears the ring. Please tell me that’s not the case.”

“No.”

“So what then?”

He looked up at the sky and focused on a single star. *Vega? Arcturus?* It was impossible to know. “We had a fight,” he said. “A bad one.”

She nodded and settled back into her chair. She tried to take another drink, but found the flask was empty. She sighed and then glanced back toward him. “You don’t have to get into it.”

“No, it’s fine. She told me to leave, so I left. I packed a bag, and I left.”

“Right. I know that part. You left for the middle of nowhere, decided to take up stargazing.”

He shrugged. “We wanted to have kids. We tried for a year or so before we decided to get testing done. It turns out—well—it turns out the problem was me.”

“You’re sterile?”

He nodded. The stars were a blur from one horizon to the other.

“And that’s what started the fight?”

“Well, indirectly, I guess. It’s kind of a long story...”

“What a bitch!”

Startled, he whipped his head in her direction. “Excuse me?”

She started to giggle. “Sorry,” she said. “Sorry, sorry, sorry.” She kept laughing.

He didn’t know what to say. Who did she think she was, using that term for his wife? Sure, he’d spent most of the last three days calling her far worse names in his head, but he’d never given voice to any of those thoughts. Even in the heat of their final shouting match, he’d restrained his tongue.

He waited for her to stop laughing and pondered what to say. But she spoke first.

“I told you I was mouthy.”

He glanced at the bruise over her eye. “It’s just not that simple,” he said.

“That’s fine,” she said. “I don’t really care. It doesn’t matter.”

He narrowed his eyes. He felt more disoriented now than he had with the star chart over his head.

She turned onto her side. Her impish grin was back. “So, you’re sterile, but that doesn’t mean you’re, you know...” She waved her hand toward his lower half.

He guessed at what she meant. “Oh,” he said. “No.”

She made a clicking sound with the corner of her mouth. “Gotcha,” she said. She lay back on her chair.

Silence held for a moment. Crickets sang over the hum of an A/C condenser. The light of the pool continued to ripple across the pool deck. They looked up at the stars together as the woman smoked her cigarette down to the nub. When there was nothing left but the filter, she mashed it into the ashtray and reached into her purse. For a second, he wondered if—hoped that—she had a second flask in there. But she just pulled out her pack of cigarettes. After locating her lighter, she stuck another one in her teeth. Soon, smoke streamed from the end of the stick like water from an inverted faucet. She swung her legs toward him again and scooted herself closer.

“You know what I think?”

“What’s that?”

“I think you need to get further away.”

He gave her a questioning look. “What do you mean?”

She raised a finger in the direction of the pool. “Let’s go for a swim together.”

He looked at her face for some sign that she was joking. Her smile was more wicked now than it had been all night. Her eyes gleamed in the soft light. Even with the bruise, she was spellbinding.

He landed on the most practical response he could think of. "I'm not wearing a bathing suit."

Her smile grew wider. "Who says you need one?" She stuck the cigarette in her teeth and slipped one strap of her suit off her shoulder. She reached toward the other strap and held her hand in place. "We'll just take a little skinny dip." She started to lower the strap. "I make the rules, remember?"

His head was spinning. He swallowed hard. "What about your boyfriend?"

She laughed a quick, scoffing laugh. "Fuck him," she said. "He doesn't need to know. Besides, look what he did to me." She indicated her eye.

"But there are windows," he said. "The hotel."

"Ugh," she said, rolling her eyes. She fixed her straps and popped up into a standing position. "I'd tell you to grow a pair, but that might hit too close to home."

He was taken aback—not only by her remark, but also by the speed of her movements. Suddenly, she seemed to be in a great hurry. She mashed her half-smoked cigarette into the whiskey glass. Then she snatched her handbag and began to dig through it. "I'm kidding, of course," she said curtly.

When her hand emerged from the bag, it held a white, plastic card. "Here," she said. She flipped the card to him and he caught it by reflex. "Room 102. Owner's suite. If you won't swim in the pool, we can swim in my sheets. The name's Lizzy, by the way."

He turned the card over in his hand. It was marked on one side with a black stripe near the edge. The other side showed the hotel name and logo. It looked exactly the same as his own room key.

“I’m going to go slip out of this suit,” she said. She turned on her heel and took a few steps toward the entrance to the building. Then she stopped and turned back. “And do me a favor, will you? Grab the rest of my clothes when you come?”

The door closed softly behind her as she disappeared inside the building.

Alone again, he tried to get a hold of himself. He was almost too dizzy to stand. He thought of Sharon sleeping over two hundred miles away—Sharon who wanted a child he couldn’t give her—Sharon who’d sent him away. He pictured her face as he’d seen it last, her eyes red with anger and her cheeks streaked with tears.

And then he pictured Lizzy stepping out of her swimsuit.

He rose from his chair and walked to the other side of the pool. He gathered up her t-shirt and hooked a finger around her sunglasses. When he lifted her jeans, a phone tumbled out of a pocket. He thought of his own phone on the nightstand in his room. It had been so long since he’d checked it. Maybe there was a message waiting for him. Maybe there wasn’t. He put Lizzy’s phone in his pocket, the same pocket that held her room key. He returned to his original spot.

The star chart lay face-up on the table. A few dozen stars formed a few constellations. It all looked so simple on paper. He raised his head to make one last inquiry of the endless night sky. All he could see was a blur.



## Ocean City

Even from a distance, it was plain as day: Stacy's roommate was a knockout. A smoke show. The hottest chick in Ocean City by a landslide. So far out of my league I felt like laughing.

Donnie and I watched Stacy and her supermodel companion head up the 9<sup>th</sup> Street ramp from the opposite side of the boardwalk. The crowd was as thick as you'd expect on a Saturday evening in July, so our view was almost constantly interrupted, and they hadn't spotted us yet. For a few precious seconds, I was free to stare without feeling like a total creep.

When Donnie had told me she was a nine, I didn't believe him. No way a nine would go slumming with a couple of lowlifes like him and me, even if Stacy was just dragging her along. Now I could see that he'd sold her short. If she wasn't a ten, no one was. Those legs, those hips, that golden blond hair, that taut honey skin, those physics-defying curves. This girl could make the cover of Maxim. Imagining the centerfold made me nervous as hell. How was I supposed to talk to this girl? A girl like her would strike me speechless.

I leaned back against the railing and my thoughts turned to the nips I'd pocketed in my shorts before we'd left. Thank God I'd brought them. I could handle myself after a drink or two, but I made an ass of myself around girls when I was sober. Hopefully I could avoid embarrassment until the nips could make their appearance.

When they made it to the middle of the boardwalk, Stacy stopped and made a full rotation, standing on her tiptoes to try to see through the crowd. Donnie, his face lit up by a big stupid grin, threw his hand into the air and shouted, "Yo, Stace!"

Stacy turned and finally caught sight of her boyfriend. "Baby!" she squealed. She skipped through the crowd and jumped into Donnie's open arms. They kissed like they were trying to swallow each other.

The roommate stepped over to join us.

“Christ,” I said, gesturing toward the lovebirds. “Get a room, am I right?”

The roommate smiled. “Well, she only talked about him the whole way here,” she said. Even her voice was beautiful. “I guess she couldn’t wait any longer.”

“Still. Let’s keep it PG, am I right?”

The roommate forced a laugh. *Damn it, I thought. I just said the same thing twice. I’m already fumbling over myself.*

Donnie put Stacy back on her feet and they looked into each other’s eyes like a couple of sad puppies. You never would have guessed they’d been together for over three years.

“So, I’m Kailey,” said the roommate. “And your name is...?”

*Shit! Now I’d forgotten to introduce myself!* “Max,” I said abruptly, thrusting out my hand.

When she took it, I noted how warm and smooth her skin was. I worried that mine felt clammy and gross. “Just Max?” she asked.

“Oh, right. Burke. Max Burke,” I said. *God, I sounded so stupid!*

She hesitated and cocked her head to the side. “Bond. James Bond,” she said with a smile.

“Yeah,” I said tentatively, wondering why she’d said that.

Donnie, who had finally turned away from Stacy and was now eavesdropping on our exchange, laughed out loud. He threw his arm around my shoulders and put his other hand up like he was trying to tell the others a secret. “Sorry, Kailey. You’ll have to forgive my friend here. He’s a little slow.”

“Screw you,” I said, giving him a hard shove.

“Max!” said Stacy. “Watch the language! There are kids around.”

“Good to see you, too, Stace.”

“Seriously, Max,” said Donnie, dropping his voice to a plainly audible whisper. “Watch your fucking mouth.” I shoved him again and he laughed like the goon he was.

As much as I hate to admit it, Stacy wasn't wrong. There were a ton of kids on the boardwalk. Ocean City, being a dry town, catered to the under-twenty-one crowd. The sun would be setting soon, which meant the little kids would be leaving and the teeny boppers would be dropped off by their parents so they could wander around for a couple hours like packs of rabid Chihuahuas. They were all a bunch of rich tourists from New York and Pennsylvania pretending like they owned the place. I guess they might as well. I lived only a few towns away, but I never felt like a local in Ocean City. The only reason we'd come here was that Stacy wanted to give Kailey a “real shore experience” while she visited for the weekend. She'd invited her gorilla of a boyfriend along, and Donnie'd invited me so that, in his words, they could avoid a “third-wheel situation.” That's what he said anyway. I'm guessing he also wanted to take advantage of my birthdate and legal ID. Donnie was still twenty and Stacy and Kailey were both nineteen. It came as no surprise when Donnie pulled into the liquor store across the bridge on our way over. At least he gave me cash this time.

We started moving down the boardwalk and Donnie tried to make small talk. “So, Kailey—Stacy tells me you're from somewhere out west.”

“Well, the Midwest at least,” said Kailey. “I grew up in Minnesota.”

“How does a girl from Minnesota end up at Nova?”

Stacy gave an exaggerated sigh. “Babe, you know that people outside of the mid-Atlantic region know about Villanova, right?” Stacy never missed a chance to remind us all that she went

to a big, important college. You would think no one from Jersey had ever earned decent grades before.

“Actually, I might not have heard of Nova if not for March Madness,” Kailey said with her little half smile. “My dad’s a big college hoops fan.”

“Of course, Kailey could have gone to any school she wanted,” said Stacy. “She scored a 1560 on her SAT. *And* she plays the violin. *And* she writes for the Villanovan. And, on top of all that, she’s absolutely gorgeous.”

“That’s for sure,” I mumbled—and then was horrified to see Kailey’s eyes go wide. She’d heard me! Her face turned pink and I immediately looked away. Stacy, who thankfully had missed my remark, wrapped her arm around Kailey’s waist and pulled her against her hip. I snuck another glance at Kailey’s face turned pink. She wasn’t looking at me, but at least she was smiling.

“A 1560!” said Donnie suddenly. “Holy shit! I don’t think I even scored a fifteen.” That got a laugh out of the girls. Then he gestured toward me with his thumb. “Still better than this retard though.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “I never even took the SAT.”

“See!” Donnie laughed.

“You don’t have to be smart to *take* the test, dumbass.”

To no one’s surprise, Stacy took offense. “Max!” she hissed. I rolled my eyes.

“Are you going to school, Max?” Kailey asked.

“Nah. I’m not exactly the scholarly type.”

“Ha!” said Donnie. “You couldn’t even spell scholarly.”

“Well, Kailey’s about as smart as they come,” said Stacy, taking the conversation back. “The whole reason she stayed out east this summer is so that she can work on a research project at the Children’s Hospital in Philly. She’s pre-med, and her professors love her.”

Stacy kept babbling as we made our way down the boardwalk. Pretty soon she was telling Kailey every single thing she knew about Ocean City. What the different lanes meant, where to get the best pizza, something about the lifeguard contests. Donnie piped up every now and then, but I kept to myself, still embarrassed by what I’d let Kailey overhear.

But maybe she’d been flattered? It was an awkward thing to say, for sure, but maybe she thought it was kind of sweet or something. I played with that thought as I fell a few steps behind the others. It was no surprise that Kailey looked almost just as good from behind. At some point Donnie glanced back and caught me staring. “Staying with us, Maxine?” he said.

“I’m good, man. Just walking.”

“More like stalking, dude. You’re creeping us out.”

I stepped forward so we were lined up four across. “Did you guys want to do something?” I asked.

“We are doing something, Max,” Stacy said. “We’re talking.”

Stacy got on my nerves sometimes. “As far as I can tell, you’re the only one talking.”

She wrinkled her upper lip and looked to Donnie, who obediently thumped my chest with the back of his hand.

“Hey,” he said. “Be nice.”

“Look,” I said, ignoring Donnie, “I’m just saying we could actually *do* something. There’s more to the boardwalk than walking and talking.”

Stacy blew out this big, overdramatic sigh, and Donnie, following her lead, shook his head like something tragic had happened.

“Actually,” Kailey said. “Could we go down to the water? I’ve never touched the Atlantic Ocean before.”

“There’s a thought!” said Donnie, clapping his hands together. He was always clapping like that, the big galoot. The noise from his humongous mitts echoed in the air.

We left the boardwalk at the next stairway and kicked our flip flops beneath the last wooden step. The sun was falling fast behind us. We followed our shadows across the sand to the edge of the water. The waves were pretty tame this evening, and, though a few heads still bobbed in the water, the lifeguards had left their posts hours ago.

When we reached the water, I stepped into a receding wave while the other three stayed back. Donnie and Stacy turned to look at Kailey. I looked, too.

“Are you ready?” Stacy asked. Another wave was rising towards us.

A wide, toothy smile spread across Kailey’s face. She had beautiful teeth, straight and white as a picket fence. “Three...two...one...” she said. She hopped forward and both feet splashed into the ankle deep water.

“Ahhh...” she sighed. The foamy water swirled around her feet as they sank into the wet sand.

“Well, what do you think?” Donnie asked.

“It’s still so cold!” she replied.

I laughed. “Cold? This is just about as warm as it gets!”

“I’m used to lakes,” Kailey said. “We have ten thousand of them back at home.”

“No shit!” I said. “Ten thousand? All in one place?”

Kailey laughed out loud, a carefree, joyous sound that made me feel warm.

“It’s the state motto, moron,” said Donnie. He put his hands on his hips, proud to know this piece of trivia. “Minnesota. Land of Ten-Thousand Lakes.”

Kailey tilted her head back and forth. “Actually,” she said. “It’s a slogan for the state. The official motto is *L’Étoile du Nord*. Star of the North.”

“Who’s the moron now?” I said. Kailey smiled and Donnie shrugged his shoulders before clapping his hands together again.

“Alright!” he said. “First time in the Atlantic. How about we celebrate? Max?”

I reached into my pockets and pulled out the nips—four tiny bottles of José Cuervo.

“Ooh, nice!” said Stacy, before turning to Kailey. “Ocean City is a dry town, so you have to smuggle it in.”

“Let’s drink to Kailey’s big step,” said Donnie.

I passed a bottle to Stacy and one to Donnie, but when I offered one to Kailey, she shook her head. “Thanks, but I’m all set,” she said. “Tequila turns my stomach.”

“You sure?” said Donnie, looking a bit disappointed. I felt a little disappointed myself. I didn’t peg her as a sober girl. The way she looked there was no way she didn’t get invited to parties in high school. And, not to jump too far ahead of myself, but on the handful of occasions when I’d gotten laid in my life, there’d been alcohol on both sides of the equation.

“No, please! Don’t worry about it! I’ll drink with you in spirit,” Kailey said. She raised an imaginary nip bottle and gave Donnie a big smile.

“And I’ll drink for her!” I said, uncapping the extra bottle and lifting them both. I still felt the need to calm my nerves. Donnie shrugged as Stacy glared at me.

“Cheers,” said Donnie. We drank. Donnie laughed at Stacy for taking her bottle in two separate sips. I took down both bottles at once. Kailey gave me a smile.

Donnie exhaled theatrically and then, in a single motion, he stripped off his shirt and tossed it onto the dry sand behind us. “Who’s up for a dip?” he asked. The dude was ridiculously chiseled, and he took every chance to show off. At 6’3” and two-hundred pounds, he had been an All-State tight end for our high school football team. Stacy whistled at him, and I watched Kailey’s eyes settle on his washboard abs. For a second, I thought about taking my shirt off, too, but I wasn’t sure what Donnie was playing at. He had a wild look in his eye, and he hadn’t made any move toward the water.

Instead, he stepped toward Stacy and said, “What do you think, babe? Wanna take a swim?”

Stacy’s eyes widened and she took a step backward. “What? No, I’m not—”

Then Donnie lunged. Stacy turned to run, shrieking, “No no no no no no...” But Donnie was quicker. He scooped her up and threw over his shoulder. She shrieked and pounded on his back as he marched off into the gentle waves. The shoreline was shallow at Ocean City, so he went about twenty yards before the water reached his knees. She screamed as he tossed her over his shoulder, but he caught her again right before she hit the water. Then he rolled her into his arms and started to kiss her again.

Kailey was smiling. “They’re cute,” she said.

I became aware that we were alone together. “Yeah,” I said. “They’ve been like this since junior year.”

“That’s great. It’s not easy making long-distance relationships work.”

“Well so far they’ve pulled it off.”



Kailey turned to look at me. Donnie and Stacy were still going at it. I fantasized about scooping up Kailey and doing the same thing.

“Stacy says Donnie is a waiter at some seafood place,” Kailey said. “Are you working this summer?”

That was a tough one. I’d been working for my uncle’s flooring company last fall, but when business slowed down in the winter, he’d let me go. I’d done a few odd jobs here and there, but nothing steady. If I told her the truth, I would have to tell her I was unemployed.

“I work in an auto shop,” I said. Then, thinking that Stacy might have told Kailey I was out of work, I added, “Just started last week.”

“Really? My cousin’s a mechanic,” Kailey said. “What kind of work do you do in the shop?”

*Shit. Why did I say auto shop? I didn’t know anything about cars.*

“Pretty much whatever they need me to do. I work on the foreign cars mostly. German. Japanese. British.”

She smiled. Her expression was hard to read. I thought maybe she’d bought it.

I looked back at Donnie and Stacy, and Kailey did the same. I couldn’t believe my luck. Maybe she really was interested. The light of the setting sun shone through her hair, which waved in the ocean breeze. I know it’s corny as hell, but she looked like some kind of angel or goddess or something. Like she was in a perfume commercial.

“Do you spend much time in Ocean City?” she asked.

“Nah. I kind of hate this place actually.”

“Really? Why?”

“It just feels fake. The people who live here, the tourists—they all seem fake.”

“Oh.” She used her toe to draw a circle in the wet sand. She kept her eyes on Donnie and Stacy. Donnie had set Stacy down, but they were just talking now.

I figured I should say something. “Do you have any tattoos?” I asked before immediately wishing I hadn’t. Clearly she didn’t have any visible tattoos. Her arms and legs were bare.

“No. Not me. I don’t think I could ever decide on just one,” she said, turning toward me again. “But they do look good on some people. It looks like you’re pretty pro-tattoo.”

“Yeah, you could say that,” I said. She was looking at my arms now, and I felt a little bit self-conscious. “To be honest, it hurts like hell. Some people can’t handle the pain.”

She smiled at that and focused her attention on a tattoo on my right forearm. It was a man-like creature with wings on its back and tentacles covering its mouth.

“What’s this one about?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah. Scary, huh? That’s one of my favorites. Got it about a year ago. I went into the tattoo parlor and saw it on the wall. It just looked fucking badass, I guess. I’ve always called it Octo-Man in my head.”

That made her giggle for some reason. I couldn’t tell why.

“What?” I asked her.

“Nothing,” she said. “I like it. It’s a good name.”

I couldn’t tell why she was laughing. Did she think the name was silly? Did she think I was trying to be funny? I wasn’t sure. “I mean, now that I’m hearing myself, it sounds a little bit like a comic book or something—like Ant-Man or Iron Man.”

“Did you ask the artist what it was called?”

“No. Why?”

She turned to look at the lovebirds again. Donnie was walking back now. He'd picked Stacy up again and was carrying her like a princess. She looked tiny in his big arms.

"Well, it does have a name," Kailey said, turning back to me.

I raised my eyebrows. "Really? What is it?"

"It's called Cthulhu. It's a monster invented by a writer named H.P. Lovecraft. I wrote a paper on Lovecraft in high school."

"Chooloo?"

"Ka-thool-oo."

"God bless you."

She laughed hard at that and she was still giggling a bit when Donnie and Stacy joined us again. Donnie asked, "What's so funny?"

"Kailey explained my tattoo. Donnie, meet Ka-thool-oo." I looked at Kailey as I pronounced the word.

"Very good," she said. She patted my arm. Her touch sent a chill down my spine.

By this time, the sun had dropped below the horizon, though its rosy pink glow continued to illuminate the western half of the sky. We left the water's edge, retrieved our sandals, and rejoined the crowd on the boardwalk. If anything it had gotten even busier since we'd left. There were fewer little kids and fewer parents, but the mobs of high schoolers had multiplied. I was feeling a gentle buzz from the two shots of Cuervo. The lights on the boardwalk seemed loud and the sounds were unusually colorful.

Stacy looked half-ready to start flapping her gums again, so I made a move to give us some sort of agenda. "Yo, Donnie! Let's get some popcorn!"

Donnie loved Johnson's popcorn, this famous boardwalk kettle corn, so he readily seconded my suggestion. Stacy whined a little bit about the calories, but it was probably just for show. The last time we were here, she'd eaten nearly a whole pound of fudge.

As we walked to the shop, Donnie tried to explain to Kailey what made Johnson's popcorn so good.

"It just sounds like caramel corn," Kailey said.

"No, no," said Donnie. "They make it in these big metal drums and serve it up hot."

"Yeah...that still just sounds like caramel corn. We have that at the Minnesota State Fair."

"No way! It's way better than caramel corn."

Upon arrival, we had to wait in line for a few minutes before we could order. When we made it to the counter, I asked for a medium bucket, no lid. The kid behind the register filled a bucket to overflowing and then dropped it into a plastic bag with the lid beside it. Then he dumped in another big scoop for good measure. Donnie paid for the popcorn and we all grabbed a handful.

"You're right," Kailey said through a mouthful of kernels. "This is good."

We resumed our aimless stroll along the boardwalk. Stacy linked arms with Kailey on one side and Donnie on the other. Then she went right back to chattering away about the dullest subjects. The sound of her voice set my teeth on edge. How could I get close to Kailey when Stacy kept monopolizing her attention? I could hardly believe it, but things had actually seemed to be going well. I looked at the tentacle monster on my forearm. Ka-thool-oo.

After a little while, I fell behind the group, keeping the popcorn to myself. Then a small flock of seagulls fell behind me. That's the problem with popcorn—it always brings the seagulls close. New York has rats, and Ocean City has seagulls. They're basically rats with wings.

The best thing to do when seagulls start following you is to duck inside a shop. If you can't do that, then you have to put the food away. Most of the time I did whatever I could to avoid these garbage birds, but tonight I decided to encourage them. I knew it would piss Stacy off, and maybe I could win Kailey's attention back.

I took a few popped kernels from the bag and tossed them into the air. They fell on the planks of the boardwalk, and the seagulls snapped them up. They started squawking all at once.

"Max," said Stacy, sensing the commotion behind her. "What are you doing?" Donnie and Kailey turned back with her.

I ignored her question and threw another kernel into the air. This time a seagull swooped down and caught it in his open beak. The others cried and wheeled in his direction. Kailey's mouth fell open as she watched. I wondered if she'd seen many seagulls in her life.

"Ugh!" said Stacy. "Please don't feed the birds. They're dirty and gross."

I threw another kernel high into the air. Three seagulls rose after it. The first one there bounced it off his head, and the second one snatched it before it could fall.

Stacy gave Donnie a pleading look.

"Max," he said. "Knock it off."

He reached for me and I stepped to the side. Clearly Donnie and Stacy weren't amused, but Kailey continued to watch carefully.

"It is impressive though," she said. "They have great reflexes."

I threw another kernel. Another acrobatic catch.

“Alright, Max,” said Donnie, taking a step in my direction. “We don’t need every bird on the boardwalk to join us.” Sure enough, there were now nearly a dozen birds fluttering over our heads.

“Fine, fine,” I said. I closed the bag. Then I glanced at Kailey and gave her a sneaky smile. “But watch this.”

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out a cap from one of the tequila bottles. I tossed it into the air. Sure enough, a seagull snatched it out of the air and swallowed it whole.

I laughed and Donnie joined me. Kailey shook her head with a half-smile on her face. Stacy, though, looked livid. She stomped over and hit my chest with the back of her hand. I dropped the bag of popcorn, and kernels shot out of the top.

“Don’t do that, Max! You’re going to kill it.”

“So what?” I said. “It’s a fucking seagull. You just called them dirty and gross.” I gestured angrily at the birds still hovering overhead, and then down toward the spilled popcorn. “Look what you made me do!”

“One: watch your language. Two: a seagull is still a living thing. There’s no need to torture it.”

“Jesus Christ, Stacy. It was a piece of plastic.”

She gave me a big exasperated sigh. “Could you please grow up, Max?”

“Grow up? Who do you think—”

And then I felt something wet hit my neck. I was furious, but this weird sensation pulled me out of my rhythm. “What the hell?” I touched my neck with my right hand. There was definitely a little moisture there, but nothing that I could see. Was it starting to rain? I looked up and saw only a few floating seagulls in front of a black, moonlit sky.

“Did you guys feel that?” They were all looking at me funny.

“Feel what?” Donnie asked. A weird smile had spread across his face.

“I don’t know. Raindrops or something. You didn’t get wet?”

“What are you talking about, man?”

“I just felt something wet on the back of my neck.”

“I didn’t feel anything, dude. But turn around and let me look.”

I spun slowly, showing the others my back for a few seconds. I tried to look over my shoulder, tugging at my shirt, but I couldn’t see anything but the grey of the fabric.

“What is it? Do you see anything?” I turned back to face them. Stacy had her hand over mouth. Kailey’s eyebrows were raised. Donnie’s stupid smile had only grown wider.

“What is it?” I asked.

“There’s nothing, man.” He couldn’t stop smiling.

“What are you smiling about?”

“I think you’re imagining things. Were those nips a bit much for you? You’ve always been a lightweight.”

“I’m not making this up. I felt something.”

Stacy removed her hand from her mouth. “Maybe some kid spit on you. Maybe he didn’t like your bad language.”

“Oh, ha ha. You’re a fucking riot.”

Donnie clapped his mitts together again. He was still smiling like an idiot, but he looked like he wanted to move on. “Alright,” he said. “Let’s not let Maxine’s nervous breakdown get in the way of Kailey’s first Ocean City experience. What next? Max? Why don’t you decide?”

I gritted my teeth. “You’re an asshole. I don’t care what we do.”

I felt embarrassed again, and I didn't even know why.

“Okay then! Well, my vote is arcade. Stacy and I have a long-lasting skeeball rivalry.

Anyone else? What do you think, Kailey?”

“Do they have pinball?”

“Um, yeah. I think so. Only one way to find out.”

Donnie and Stacy started to walk away and I bent down to pick up the now half-empty popcorn bag. If it weren't for Kailey waiting for me, I might have left the boardwalk altogether. But maybe my chances were improving. Maybe now that Kailey had seen the abuse I took from my so-called friends, she was feeling sorry for me. There was nothing wrong with a beautiful girl feeling sorry for you.

“I think that seagull will be alright,” she said. “I'm sure they eat worse things on the boardwalk.”

“God, yeah. It'll be totally fine.”

“I guess Stacy can be a little sensitive sometimes.”

“You're telling me. Though sensitive isn't the word I would use.”

We walked in silence for a while. I really was starting to think she was at least open to the possibility of someday being kind of interested in a guy like me. But the more I thought about it, the less I could think of to talk about. What did beautiful girls want to talk about? Now that I had her to myself, I had nothing to say.

Eventually, she broke the silence. “So, aside from coming to the boardwalk, what do you like to do for fun?”

“Actually, I don't go to the boardwalk that often. Especially not during the summer. Tourists drive me nuts.”



“I know,” she said, smiling again. “You mentioned that earlier.”

“Oh, right,” I said. *Stupid*. “I guess I do what most guys my age do for fun. Drink, drive around, watch TV.”

She nodded.

“I also spend a lot of time at the gym,” I went on. “Lifting weights, little bit of cardio.”

“That’s good.” She seemed to be glancing at my arms again. I crossed them over my chest to make my biceps look bigger.

“Yeah, Donnie and I go together every day during the week.”

“That’s great,” she said. “I wish I had more time to get to the gym.”

“Yeah. We’ve always competed against each other, ever since football in freshman year. Donnie’s got the good genes, so he can definitely rack up the reps, but, just between you and me, he’s pretty lazy. If he didn’t have me pushing him, he probably wouldn’t leave his house most days. Donnie would never admit that, but it’s true.”

“You really go every day?”

“Oh yeah. You’ve got to. Some days I’ll go twice. Morning and afternoon.” That last part wasn’t really true, but I figured she would buy it.

“And your boss at the shop is okay with this?”

*Shit*. I’d forgotten about the auto shop story.

“Yeah, sure. My manager is a really easy-going guy. He knows I can do twice the work when I’m on the clock anyway.”

“Oh. Cool,” she said.

When we arrived at the arcade a few steps behind Donnie and Stacy, they made a beeline for skeeball. Kailey took a look around the place for a few seconds, looking past the shooter

games and the racing games and the fighting games. Eventually, she found the pinball machines. There were two aisles of machines at this arcade, and Kailey walked up and down both before she stopped and threw her hands in the air.

“No way!” she said.

“What?” I asked.

“They have Medieval Mayhem!” She grabbed my shoulders. Her eyes were wide with excitement.

“What’s Medieval Mayhem?”

“Ha! Only the best pinball machine in the world!” She walked over to a nearby change machine to trade in a dollar. “In the summer before my sophomore year of high school, I went to a pinball expo in Chicago. They brought in something like six hundred machines in this massive convention hall. I played dozens of them: Frankenstein’s Monster, London Bridge, Fire and Ice. The winner though? This one right here.”

“Medieval Mayhem?”

“Medieval freaking Mayhem,” she said, heading back to the machine. I couldn’t believe how excited she was. She was practically glowing.

“Cool,” I said. “I guess.”

She gave another full laugh for some reason.

“I know, I know, it’s really not cool,” she said. “In no culture is an obsession with pinball cool. ‘Pinball Wizard’ became a hit song because it was ironic. The best pinball player in the world is still a loser. Pinball is super geeky. But, God, I just love it!”

It really was pretty geeky. Could it be possible that the hottest girl I’d ever met was actually a geek?

As I watched her slide a quarter through the slot of the machine, I said, “I still think you’re pretty cool.”

She laughed again, and said, “Well, that’s very sweet of you.”

The machine lit up and trumpets blared through the tinny speakers. A funny British voice announced the beginning of the contest. She clapped her hands in a flutter across her chest.

I didn’t realize someone could be good at pinball, but she definitely was. Her eyes darted after the ball and she licked her lips with concentration. A few beads of sweat formed on her forehead. Everything she did, she did with intensity—releasing the plunger at just the right point, hammering the buttons with sudden force, watching the ball clang all over the table.

Occasionally she thrust her body against the machine to shift the ball on its track.

I was starting to feel pretty shifted myself. I could smell that fragrant deodorant that girls wear. Even standing a couple of feet away, I could feel heat radiating off her skin. When the ball dropped through her flippers, she would groan. When she set a new score or unlocked a new bonus, she would cry, “Yes!” She was making me dizzy.

After losing the second of her last three balls, she stepped back from the machine. She wiped away a strand of hair that had fallen across her face, and turned to me. “Here,” she said. “You play this one.”

I laughed. “No. I’m happy just watching.” She had no idea how much I meant that.

“No, please! It’s bad luck to play your last ball. It’s good luck to pass it to someone else.”

“That can’t be true.”

“It is! I’ve always played that way. You have to pass the last play. Please.”

“Well,” I said. “If you’re really sure...”

She moved aside and I stepped up behind the table. I slapped the flippers a couple of times and then pulled the plunger. The ball shot to the top and clanged around the bumpers. Then, just as quickly as it had gone up, it came flying back down, straight through my flippers, straight down the drain. I didn't even have a chance to hit it. Game over.

"See!" I said. "I suck."

"That's okay," said Kailey, patting my shoulder. "You win some, you lose some."

A few minutes later, we met up with Donnie and Stacy. By now it was almost 9:30. I was so absorbed in making it work with Kailey that even her horrible roommate couldn't dampen my spirits. Donnie was back to his usual, happy-go-lucky self. He acted like the seagull incident had never happened.

After a bit of discussion, Stacy invited us back to her family's house on the other side of the island. She said her parents weren't around, and then she put on a shameless smile to ask if I'd make a liquor store run. I swallowed the retort that popped into my head and simply said, "Sure." Maybe Kailey would be up for something that wasn't tequila.

I was just about to turn toward the parking lot when Stacy demanded a trip to the bathroom. She said it couldn't wait.

The closest bathrooms were at the Music Pier, which is an old concert hall that juts out over the water. The crowd was starting to thin as we walked down the boardwalk, though the amusement parks were still busy and there were still long lines for custard and water ice.

When we arrived at the bathrooms, Stacy hurried in one direction and Donnie went in the other. For the third time that night, Kailey and I were alone. In fact, this time we were really alone. The south side of the Music Pier features a long, open pavilion made of pillars and arches. Tonight it was empty.

“Hey,” I said. “Want to see something cool?”

“Sure,” she said.

I started walking down the pier, under the roof of the pavilion. Kailey stayed close. I don't think there was a darker location on the boardwalk.

When we reached the end of the pier, I realized this was my chance. As Kailey stopped to look over the railing, I drew in close.

“Kailey,” I said. “Can I be honest with you?”

She turned to look at me, but she didn't say anything. A little grin spread across her face. She looked like she'd been waiting for this moment, too. I dug deep to find the courage I needed.

“I know this might sound crazy, but you are the most beautiful girl I've ever met.”

“Oh,” she said, her face turning bright red. She stepped away, and I stepped closer.

“Like, your face belongs on a magazine.”

“Max,” she said. “That's really nice of you to say, but—”

“I know we just met, but—”

“Max, you've got the wrong idea—”

“But I just can't help it.”

I couldn't wait any longer. I moved in close and pressed my lips against hers. But then, almost simultaneously, I felt a pressure against my chest. She pushed me away—hard.

“Max!” she said, holding me at arms' length. My eyes flew open. She looked stunned. “You've *got* to be kidding me.” And then she dropped her arms and started to laugh.

I stepped back. In the times I'd played out this scenario in my head, I'd never imagined that she'd laugh. My stomach twisted into a knot.

“I have a boyfriend!” she said.

Panic, nausea, shame—all flooded my body in an instant. I felt a sudden urge to run away.

“But you never—” I stammered. “You never said anything.”

“And why would I? It’s not like you bothered to ask.” She cocked her head and squinted her eyes. “You don’t really ask questions, do you?”

“What?”

She put her hand over her mouth to stifle another laugh. “You thought this”—she gestured back and forth between us—“could actually happen?”

I glanced over the railing toward the gentle waves below. If I jumped from this height, I’d be fine, right?

“Sorry, sweetie,” she said. “You’re really not my type. I mean, look at yourself. The ‘badass’ tattoos, the spray tan, the aviator shades.”

Couldn’t she see my embarrassment? Wasn’t that enough?

But she kept going. “And, let me guess,” she said. “You don’t really work at a garage, do you?”

I raised my eyes. She was standing with her hands behind her back like a drill sergeant or a cop. I slowly shook my head. Her mouth curled into a pitying smile.

“Did you even finish high school?”

I turned away from her completely and looked out over the water. I swallowed hard. She already knew the answer. Somehow I knew that she knew. She’d probably pegged me for a dropout the moment she saw me.

“Okay,” she said. The tone in her voice had changed. “It’s fine. You just—” She paused. “Just—you can’t kiss a girl you just met.”

I said nothing. I kept my eyes fixed on the dark line where the sky collided with the sea.

“Really,” she said gently. “It’s fine. Do you want to head back to meet the others?”

I bowed my head and refused to look back in her direction. A lump had risen into my throat.

“Max,” she whispered. I felt her hand graze my shoulder.

“Don’t,” I said. “Please don’t touch me.” My voice cracked just enough to make my humiliation complete.

The sound of her footsteps faded as she left me alone. When I could no longer hear them, I turned to look at her one last time. Her body was a dark shadow under the neon lights of the boardwalk. Even as a silhouette, she looked too good to be true.

## Limited Time Offer

The clock on my nightstand read 2:13 and the TV in the living room was still blaring out the unmistakable strains of an infomercial. Through the closed door and down the hall, I heard an enthusiastic male voice trade off with a peppy female one and the whine of a power tool cutting through something—wood, metal, maybe a hedge. Soon enough, the man and woman on screen was telling everyone watching to “Act now!” “Only six easy payments of \$19.99!” “Call in the next five minutes for a free gift!”

I realized I was grinding my teeth and my hands were shaking again. Mike must have fallen asleep. It had been a long while since I’d heard him moving. He’d probably finished his last beer and then passed out drooling on the sofa cushions.

I considered taking my bag and making my move. But if he happened to be awake, I couldn’t be sure what would happen.

A few months earlier, near the end of July, I’d asked him to move in with me. We’d been dating for over six months at that point, and he was spending most nights in my apartment anyway. Before that, he was eking out his existence as another jobless couch-hopper with a law degree. He’d mentioned finding his own place a few times, but his tone was always tentative. It was clear what he wanted, and, at the time, I wanted it too. Besides, as soon as he found employment, he could help out with the rent. My salary was just barely enough to make ends meet. It seemed like a logical arrangement.

He moved in on a Saturday. Just as we started unloading his car, thunder crackled through the clouds and the sky opened up. We were soaked and miserable by the time we finished the job. I suppose I should have taken that as an omen, but we were still generally satisfied in those days.



That night, the first of our official cohabitation, we ate a creamy pesto lasagna that I had prepared and frozen a few weeks before. Mike provided a nice bottle of prosecco and a store-bought tiramisu. After dinner ended, he pulled a wrapped box out of one of his bags.

“Just a little token of my gratitude,” he said.

I tore off the paper to reveal a nine-inch German chef’s knife. Grinning, I said, “Is this your way of saying you expect me to keep cooking for you?”

He laughed “C’mon, Kate. Is that what you think of me?” He walked around the table and kissed me. “We’ll cook together,” he said.

A week or two later, he assented to taking a temp job at Grover & Ernst. The agency guaranteed him six weeks of work and pointed out that this particular firm had offered several former temps long-term positions. Mike went out of his way to make a good impression with every mindless administrative task he was assigned. He was up every morning at the first note of his alarm. He kept his face clean-shaven, dressed sharp, and put an extra shot of espresso in his Starbucks to ensure high energy performance.

For those six weeks, our life together was everything we’d wanted it to be. With Mike’s first paycheck in hand, we went to Ikea and bought a new dresser. We stayed up late playing Scrabble, and, true to Mike’s word, we cooked together. On the weekends, we went hiking or drove to the shore. And then, in spite of Mike’s best efforts to land one of the firm’s full-time job openings, his temp gig expired and it was back to square one.

On the evening after his last day, I came home to find him in a sour mood. He sat at the kitchen table, using his arms as a pillow for his head.

“Did you contact the agency?” I asked him.

“They’ve got nothing for me. All open positions have been filled.”

I walked to his side and ran my fingernails across his shoulders. “You’ll find something,” I said.

He responded with a grunt. “Easy for you to say.”

“I know. But you have to have patience.”

He sat up and turned to face me. “It’s been eight months, Kate. Eight months since graduation. There’s not a firm in the city that hasn’t seen my résumé.”

“I know—”

“Do you? Do you really know? How long did you have to wait to find your job? A month? Maybe two?”

I stepped back, a bit startled. In the time we’d been together, he’d never raised his voice like that. “Look,” I said. “I’m sorry. I know this is hard.”

He said nothing. He shook his head and stared in the direction of the oven.

“You just have to keep at it—”

“Alright!” he said, cutting me off. He stood so quickly that his chair nearly toppled. “I don’t need a lecture.” He went to the fridge, grabbed a bottle of beer, and left the room. *That’s fine*, I told myself. *Just a moment of frustration.*

Over the next couple of months, though, that frustration would accumulate into a perpetual surliness. Mike told me he spent hour after hour trolling through job sites and sending out applications. He told me he contacted the temp agency on a daily basis. Then one week, he heard back from three different firms. After phone conversations, one offered him an in-person interview. He followed up promptly. In the end, he remained unemployed.

The temp job money evaporated. He decided to sell his car. He said it was the only way he’d be able to keep up with his student loans, and it would help to lose the insurance payment.

He said we could get by with one car between the two of us, and I reluctantly agreed. His reasoning seemed sound, but I suspected ulterior motives when he went out for a case of beer on the same day he'd made the sale.

One night I came home after a long day of work to find him playing video games. He'd pulled out his old Playstation and hooked it up to the TV. He was so absorbed in some kind of shooter game that I wasn't sure he'd noticed me come through the door.

"Any luck today?" I asked over the sound of explosions and gunfire on screen.

"Oh, hi to you, too," he said, without turning.

The coffee table was littered with several empty bottles. "I'll take that as a 'no,' then," I muttered.

I thought I'd kept my voice below the volume of the TV, but somehow he heard me. He paused his game, banged his controller down on the table, and turned around.

"You know what, Kate? I don't need your judgment."

"I wasn't judging anything. I just asked how your day went."

"Oh, please. You think I don't see the way you look at me now?"

I sighed. His voice suggested he had a pretty good buzz going. "How's that?"

"Like I'm—I don't know—like you're ashamed of me."

His face twisted as he said it. I couldn't be sure whether he was going to cry or scream. I stepped forward and rested my hand on his arm. "Mike," I said softly. "I am *not* ashamed of you."

But somehow hearing his own words come back to him set him off. He brushed my hand off his arm and turned away from me. Then, a second later, he turned back, completing the graceless pirouette. His face was flushed.

“Just drop it, won’t you? I don’t want your pity either.”

And now I felt myself growing hot. “Fine. You want to be left alone?” He turned away again. “That’s just fine. But don’t make me the bad guy here. If you want to hang your head and feel sorry for yourself, go ahead. But don’t take it out on me.”

“Okay, Kate,” he said calmly. He looked me in the eyes. “No need to be a bitch.”

Without thinking, I slapped him.

For a moment, we were both stunned. Then he lunged forward and grabbed me by the arms. His fingers squeezed down so hard I could feel them against my bones.

I cried out and he let me go. He stumbled backward. The fire in his eyes faded away as he turned them toward the floor. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

I retreated to the bedroom and shut the door behind me. While I waited for my heart to slow, my eyes filled with tears. I sat on the bed and touched the places where he had grabbed me. I could feel bruises forming beneath the skin.

This had to end. I would not be part of one of those relationships. No way.

But fifteen minutes later, he came into the room and sat on the floor near my feet. “I’m so sorry, Kate,” he said. “I don’t know what came over me. That’s not who I am.” He was on the verge of tears himself. Against my better judgment, I gave him a second chance. He was drunk and depressed. This wasn’t the real Mike. That’s what I told myself.

He made all sorts of promises, and, for a little while, he lived up to them. He boxed up his Playstation, vacuumed the carpets, and cleaned the bathroom. Aside from a beer or glass of wine with dinner, he stopped drinking.

A few days later, the temp agency called to offer him another position. He accepted it at once. He shaved nearly three months of growth off his face, got his hair cut, and took almost his

entire wardrobe to the dry cleaner's. The work ended up being even more monotonous than his previous gig—way below his qualifications, little more than data entry—but he embraced the opportunity.

We fell back into the old routine. Mike went back to telling jokes, and I went back to laughing. We played music. We ate breakfast and dinner together. A shared future once again seemed possible.

Then that temp job ended just as the first one had. As before, Mike had been unable to convince the firm to hire him on full time. As before, the temp agency had nothing else to offer. He tried to keep his spirits up as well as he could, but by the end of his first week back at home, he was just as moody and recalcitrant as before.

I'd learned my lesson the last time. I left every morning before he woke, and, when I returned from work, I left him to his own devices. The Playstation re-emerged. I went back to cooking for myself. I made plans with old friends on the weekends.

Days would pass with scarcely a word between us. On the rare occasions we needed to speak, I could tell he was itching for a fight. I knew better than to ask about his job search, but he could twist anything I said into a reproach.

“Did you pick up the mail today?” I asked him one evening.

“Was I supposed to?”

“No, I just—”

“What else do I have to do, right? I just sit around all day.”

“Mike,” I said, trying to conceal my exasperation. “It was just a question.”

“Just ask me to get the mail, Kate. Don't patronize me.” He turned back to his video game.

I started to think more seriously about ending things, but I couldn't imagine how I'd start the conversation. He was already at the end of his rope. I feared his reaction. Though the skin had healed, his fingers left their imprint on my bones. I shuddered to remember how powerless he'd made me feel.

Things were always bound to come to a head, and tonight they finally did. I came home later than usual. After a long week of work, I'd gone out for a couple of drinks with coworkers. By the time I came through the door, it was after eight o'clock.

Mike was in the living room with a man I didn't recognize. They were both playing the same shooter game that Mike so often played by himself.

"Hey, hon," Mike called. It had been weeks since he'd greeted me and longer still since he'd called me 'hon.'

I took off my coat and set down my purse before making my way into the living room. The action on the screen continued and neither of the two men averted their gaze. I counted at least a dozen bottles on the coffee table.

"Who's this?" I asked.

"This is Chuck," Mike said without turning. "We were pals in college."

"Nice to meet you," said Chuck. He didn't turn either.

I went to the kitchen for a glass of water. The sink was overflowing with dirty dishes. When I opened the cabinet to retrieve a glass, I found that it was empty.

I looked back at the sink. Several of our glasses were visible on the surface of the pile, which rose to and even past the mouth of the faucet. The German chef's knife Mike had given me jutted out at a frightful angle. The trash can had Chinese take-out boxes stacked on the lid.

"Was someone else here?" I called toward the living room.

No answer.

I moved a few steps closer. “Hello! Was someone else here?”

The TV went quiet. Mike had paused the video game.

“Did you say something?” he asked.

“Was it just the two of you today?”

Mike yawned and stretched, still holding his controller in one hand. “No. There were, uh, five of us, I guess. Chuck, Rob, Jason, Kevin, and me. All college friends. They came over for dinner.” He turned back to Chuck. “Ready?” he asked.

Chuck nodded. The game resumed.

“The sink is full,” I announced over the noise of the TV.

Mike hit pause. He turned to face me. “Okay,” he said brusquely. “I’ll deal with it later.”

“I’d like a glass of water,” I said. “But all of the glasses are dirty.”

Mike chucked the controller onto the coffee table and rose from his seat. “I said I’ll take care of it,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

Chuck looked back and forth between us, and then he stood up too. “I’m gonna head out,” he said.

“You don’t need to go,” said Mike. “It’s fine.”

But Chuck was already gathering his jacket from the back of the couch. “Naw, it’s cool. I’ve got work tomorrow.” He put on his shoes and went to the door. “See ya, Mike. Nice to meet you, um—yeah.” It occurred to me that he’d never learned my name.

I watched the door shut behind Chuck and then looked back at Mike. His expression remained unchanged—cold, spiteful. “Thanks for that,” he said.

I took a deep breath. “I can’t do this anymore,” I said.

He stepped toward me. “Do what exactly?”

“Live like this,” I said. “I can’t work all day, every day of the week, and come home to this.” I gestured broadly.

Mike took another step in my direction. I held my ground. “Why don’t you say what you mean?” he whispered.

“Fine,” I said. “It’s you, Mike. I can’t deal with you. The video games, the drinking, the wasted—”

And then I felt the back of his hand smash into my cheek. I fell to the floor.

“What else, Kate?” he yelled. “What else?” He stood rigidly above me.

When he raised his hand again, I threw my arms over my head. Then—nothing. When I looked up again, he had stepped back. His head was bent forward as if he were praying. I scrambled to my feet and rushed to the bedroom, shut the door, locked it.

I stood with my back against the door, breathing hard, half expecting to feel him pound on the slab and twist the knob. I waited for I don’t know how long. Eventually, I heard the TV come back on. Not a video game this time. Some sports program. I went to the bed and collapsed. Only then did I become calm enough to cry.

I touched my wet cheek to determine the extent of the swelling. I imagined an angry mark spreading from my chin to my ear.

This had to end. I had to end it. But first, I had to leave.

I went to the closet and pulled out some clothes, shoved them into a bag. But what then? I’d trapped myself by coming in to the bedroom. My phone was in my purse back in the kitchen. Until he fell asleep, there was no escape.



I set my bag by the door and stretched out on the bed. I focused my attention on the sounds beyond the door. With the TV volume as it was, I couldn't imagine I'd be able to hear anything else. Still, I listened as well as I could.

Minutes stretched into hours. On a few occasions, I was able to hear a few sounds in addition to the TV: footsteps, the sound of the fridge door closing, a toilet flushing, water running in the bathroom sink. At some point, I let my eyes close.

It was the infomercial that woke me.

The pitchman and pitchwoman were driving toward the closing of their appeal.

"Whatever you do," I heard the woman say, "Do. Not. Wait."

"That's right," said the man. "This is a limited time offer. The clock is ticking."

"So pick up that phone," the woman cut in. "And call 1-888—"

And then the TV snapped off. A second later, I heard the clatter of glass bottles knocking against each other on the coffee table. I heard the couch creak and then footsteps on the floor. The fridge door opened briefly and then closed. I heard a voice—Mike mumbling something that I couldn't make out. Silence. Then, the sound of dishes—plates, glasses, utensils—being placed on the granite countertop. The kitchen faucet came on.

I sat up and swung my feet to the floor. The faucet kept running. I heard the occasional clinking of a dish against the basin or against another dish. The sound of the faucet shifted slightly as the stream was diverted, but it never stopped.

*What the hell is he doing?* I thought.

My heart began to beat faster. I went to the door, grabbed my bag, turned the knob. Praying that the hinges wouldn't squeak, I opened the door and stepped through it. The hallway was dark. The kitchen was lit only by the glow of the streetlamps through the windows.

On tiptoes, I crept silently down the hall. I peeked into the kitchen. Mike stood at the sink with his back to me. The entry door stood beyond him. I couldn't make my escape without him noticing me.

I reached for the light switch and decided to take my chances. I flipped the switch.

At the moment the light came on, Mike's entire body jolted and then, a split second later, he yelped as if something had bit him. I expected him to turn to face me, but he didn't. The faucet kept running. He stared at his hands in the sink.

"Mike," I said.

"Jesus Christ," he replied, his voice strained.

"Mike—what the hell are you doing?"

When he turned around, he was clutching a long knife in his right hand. The chef's knife, in fact. His left he held open in front of his face. A dark liquid dripped from it in globs. A red streak gleamed on the edge of the knife.

"Oh, shit," I whispered, comprehension dawning. I found myself anchored to the spot as if ice had frozen suddenly around my feet.

Mike dropped the knife and it clattered across the floor. He wrapped his right hand around his left. In no time, blood ran over both of them. He lifted his head. He was trembling. His eyes were wide. The color had drained out of his face.

*He's going to kill me,* I thought.

"Kate," he said. "Please."

The sound of his voice sent a shiver down my back. His tone was as desperate as his expression, but I'd misjudged his aspirations. He was afraid. Terrified, even.

“What do I do?” he said. His voice was strangely childlike. Hot water continued to pour from the faucet behind him. Clouds of steam rose toward the ceiling. Blood dripped erratically from his hands.

Taking a deep breath, I took a step toward him. And then another. The kitchen floor had never seemed larger. A few more steps brought me within reach of his arms. I waited on him to do or say something. His breathing was slow and steady, his eyes disturbingly calm.

“Can I see?” I asked.

Mike’s shoulders stiffened. He shifted backwards. He inhaled audibly through his nose. Then he exhaled. His body relaxed. He held out his injured hand.

Beneath the dark blood, the supple flesh between his thumb and index finger had been neatly split by a deep, two-inch gash.

Suppressing the urge to gag, I pulled a handful of paper towels off a nearby roll. I wet a few of them in the hot water and then shut off the faucet. As I touched his hand, I felt the warmth of his blood on my fingers. Another shiver descended the length of my spine, but I shook it off and steeled my nerves. I proceeded to wipe the blood away.

Once the wound was as clean as I could make it, I wrapped several dry towels around his hand and then secured them with a long piece of masking tape. I used a few other towels to quickly mop up the mess on the floor. Then I picked up the red knife and dropped it in the sink. He stood motionless through all of this.

“You’re going to need a few stitches,” I told him. “That won’t close without them.”

“I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“Does an urgent care facility stay open this late?” I said, looking at the clock. “Or do you need to go to the hospital? Might as well head to the ER.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

“I’m going to get you some clothes. Just wait here for a minute. Keep putting pressure on your hand.”

“Kate,” he said. I looked at him. “I’m sorry.”

“Yes, I heard you,” I said. I knew what he was trying to say. I didn’t care. He was drunk. He’d sliced his hand open. None of it mattered. I held only one thought in my head: I wasn’t going to leave—he was.

“This is all my fault,” he said.

I shook my head, picked up the bag of clothes off the floor, and made my way to our bedroom. I dumped the bag on the bed and began filling it instead with his clothes, a few items from each drawer.

“I don’t just mean my hand,” he called down the hall. “Not even the dishes. I mean everything! It’s all been my fault.” The more he spoke, the more clearly I could make out how badly he was slurring his words.

I shoved a last fistful of his t-shirts into the bag, marched down the hall, and pushed the bag into his arms.

“Do you have your wallet?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he said, reaching instinctively to his back pocket.

“Do you have your phone?”

He nodded.

“What about your key? To the apartment?”

“It’s on the hook.”

“Good,” I said. “It’s time to go.”

“Do I need the key?”

I opened the entry door and pointed to the exterior hall. “Leave it,” I said.

Mike stood still in the middle of the kitchen. I could see the wheels spinning in his alcohol-addled brain.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“Let me spell it out for you,” I said. “You’re leaving. You’re going to call a cab. You’re going to tell the driver to take you to the hospital. Once you get stitched up, you’ll find somewhere else to stay.”

His mouth fell open. He looked around the room and then back at me.

“But—”

“No, Mike. It’s over.”

His eyes glazed over. “But, Kate,” he said pitifully. “I love you.”

“Ha!” I said. “That’s just too bad.” I pointed out the door. “Time to go.”

He took forever to cross the kitchen. He shuffled his feet and trained his pleading eyes on my face. But he at least knew me well enough to understand the way I made decisions. Once my mind was made up, nothing could change it.

When he passed over the threshold, he turned around one last time. I shut the door just as he was opening his mouth. After throwing the deadbolt and twisting the lock on the knob for good measure, I breathed in, breathed out, and dissolved into the exhilarating silence of my very own apartment.

## Yellow

Charlotte was born with yellow eyes. They were the first things I noticed about her. Only seconds after the doctor placed her on my chest, her eyelids parted just enough to reveal two black orbs floating on glossy egg yolks. Her body was trembling, her head still damp and caked with chalky vernix, but all I could see or think about was yellow.

“Her eyes,” I said to my husband. He was crouched at my side with one hand on my shoulder and the other stroking Charlotte’s matted hair.

“Look at that,” he said. His voice was full of a tenderness I’d never heard before. “Open already. Hello, sweetheart.”

“They’re yellow, Brian,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. He squinted for a closer look. “Only a little bit?”

A nurse standing near the end of the bed stepped toward us and knelt by my side. Patting my arm, she said, “It’s nothing to worry about. Just a touch of jaundice probably. Very common in pre-term babies. We’ll have Dr. Moran take a look.”

Jaundice? I knew I’d read about that somewhere. It sounded terrible. Every time I looked at her, my chest tightened. I wanted to take my thumb and scrub the yellow away. It needed to be gone—immediately.

This was all a terrible mistake. She wasn’t supposed to be here yet. My due date was still three weeks away. This never would have happened if she’d stayed where she was, safe in my body. The more I looked at her eyes, the yellower they appeared.

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The medical staff, after cleaning and weighing and measuring my little girl, passed her on to the pediatrician. He frowned. She cried as he turned her from front to back, prodding her skin

with his fingers. He pressed the bell of his stethoscope against her bare chest and then forced a smile as he passed her back to me. With his hands free, he began scratching down notes on his pad.

“What’s wrong, Dr. Moran?” I asked. Charlotte continued to wail in my arms. It wasn’t only her eyes that were discolored. Her skin was orange. Before, I’d thought it was just the lighting in the room. But when I pressed on her little arm, I saw a bright orange splotch appear.

“On the whole, your daughter is perfectly healthy,” he said. “She’s at a normal weight for her gestational age. Her heart sounds strong. Her lungs seem to be clear. But the jaundice is rather pervasive, and we don’t usually see it this early.”

Brian spoke up. “And what does that mean exactly?”

“We’ll need to take a few precautions. Unfortunately, you might need to extend your stay. She’ll need phototherapy and maybe an intravenous transfusion—an IV.”

Brian crouched down beside me and squeezed my hand. “It’s going to be fine, sweetie,” he said. “No need to worry.”

It was the right thing to say, but I wanted to hit him. I nodded fiercely and tried to hold my tears back.

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The precautions Dr. Moran mentioned kept us in the hospital well past the discharge day we’d hoped for. Charlotte spent the majority of that time in the infant ICU. They stripped her down to nothing but a diaper and a blindfold, locked her in a plastic container, and blasted her with blue-green light. In the Isolette, her skin turned violet instead of orange. When I closed my eyes, I could see her skin transmogrify across the color spectrum—violet, orange, pink, green, purple, gray. But her eyes were always yellow.

They took her out of her cage to change her diaper, and they allowed me to hold her for as long as I would try to feed her. The doctors told us she needed to expel the toxins in her blood through digestive processes. The only way she could do that was to feed regularly. But, despite my best efforts, she would not latch. According to the lactation specialist, my milk had come in quickly, but Charlotte continued to express aversion. She actively resisted my breast, thrashing in my arms and shrieking with every ounce of air in her tiny lungs. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, she would go limp—fast asleep. Lethargy, evidently, was a common symptom of jaundice. The condition was designed to prevent its own cure.

We tried a new trick every time they let me have her. Nothing worked. She rejected the bottle they gave her. They tried to tempt her with some saccharin formula, but she turned that down, too. Eventually, they had to put her on an IV to get some fluids in her system. A second IV introduced an immunoglobulin to her bloodstream. They discussed the possibility of a full transfusion. Upon hearing the phrase “high-risk procedure,” I broke down completely.

Brian did his best to be supportive and encouraging, but he was wired differently than I was. He could compartmentalize anything. He responded to stress by shifting his focus. While Charlotte was quarantined in the ICU, his biggest concern seemed to be his sleeping arrangement. He complained constantly about the bar in the middle of his convertible chair.

“Would you mind if I went home tonight?” he asked on the second evening. “I haven’t slept a wink on this torture machine.”

“Oh, sure,” I said. “You go home and have a nice long rest. I’ll stay here and just keep our daughter alive on my own.”

“I think she’s in good hands, Heather.”

“And you’re not worried about the blood transfusion?”



He shrugged. "They said the odds are only one in ten that she needs it."

"What? That's not enough for you?"

He sat down and folded his hands in his lap. "Maybe I should stay here and you should head home for awhile."

"Great idea. And I suppose you'll pump milk for her, too?"

"Right, right. Forgot about that. I'm sorry, hon. I can stay."

"No. Just go."

"No, it's fine. I'll be fine. Maybe I can find some cushions somewhere."

"If you don't want to be here, I don't want you here. Please. Just go."

"Heather," he said.

"I'm serious, Brian."

I was hoping he would need more convincing. But that was it. He shrugged his shoulders and left.

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The next morning, they took Charlotte off of her IV. After a few full diapers, her bilirubin count had dropped to a safe level. They'd had to supplement the breast milk I'd pumped with formula and rice, but she was starting to feed from a bottle, at least. Another day under the lights and we'd be able to take her home. I tried to point out that her color hadn't changed, that her eyes were still yellow. They said it might take some time. I shouldn't worry. Of course not. Why on earth would a first-time mother worry about her yellow-skinned daughter?

Brian waltzed back into the room sometime after ten o'clock. He had flowers in a vase and an apology on his lips. He begged me to forgive him, and then proceeded to tell me how he

had slept better that night than he had in years. Somehow he didn't think to ask how I was sleeping. The truth was I hadn't really slept since the night my water broke.

That afternoon I was compelled to try feeding Charlotte again. Her lethargy had diminished somewhat, but she was determined to apply all of her extra energy to an oral presentation of her anguish. I couldn't fathom how such tiny vocal chords could produce such ear-piercing volume.

With the help of the lactation specialist, we tried three different positions to achieve a latch, but each one only served to make the baby angrier and louder. She raked my skin with her tiny hands and kicked my arm with both feet. I caught another glimpse of her eyes as she contorted herself to face me. The color made me think of the pus that had flowed from a poison ivy rash I'd had two summers earlier. My own daughter disgusted me.

"What's the point?" I said, lifting Charlotte to my shoulder a little more roughly than I should have.

The lactation specialist, a petite woman with graying hair, offered me a benevolent smile. "It can be challenging once a baby attaches to a bottle. Sometimes they won't imprint on more than one nipple. An artificial one can be easier."

"So what then?"

"Well, we can always keep trying. But she also needs to eat to get through her little issue. So you'll have to compete with the bottle for a little while."

"And what if she never figures this out?"

I received another small smile. "If you want to continue with breast milk—which is the best option for your little one, as you know—then the pump might be your only choice."

I looked toward Brian. He was sitting in his chair with a magazine on his lap. "Sorry," he mouthed.

Charlotte continued to cry.

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We all went home four days after the delivery. Charlotte still looked yellow to me, but her pediatrician told us she could finish her recovery at home.

The first week was a nightmare. Brian worked as a junior producer for the Channel 4 evening news, and he returned to the station after just one day at home. He left me at eleven and stayed at work until after nine.

If I had thought Charlotte was difficult in the hospital that was nothing compared to what she was at home. During the day, she never slept for more than thirty minutes at a time. At night, she slept in two-hour stretches. I tried and tried, but she would not take my breast. Whenever she went down, I hooked myself up to the machine, feeling all the while like a cow on a dairy farm. When I finished pumping, I washed pump parts and bottles, did the laundry, emptied the diaper pail. And then she would wake again, always crying like the world was ending. If I put her on her tummy, she would cry. If I put her on her back, she would cry. The only way to keep her happy was to hold her in my arms and bounce her up and down and up and down and up and down.

Brian tried to be helpful at first. He learned how to change a diaper and, though he had always been a deep sleeper, making him more than capable of snoring through her 2AM scream sessions, when I nudged him awake at night, he would give her a bottle and put her back down. But on more than one occasion, he alluded to the fact that his interrupted sleep was affecting his job performance. He wanted me to feel guilty for waking him, but I just grew angry instead. In

the end, I decided that lying in bed and nursing my anger while he took his turn was just as bad as waking up myself. So I stopped waking him. He got what he wanted.

On the ninth day, Charlotte refused to nap. Every time I put her down, she screamed as if someone had scattered invisible tacks across the surface of her mattress. When Brian pulled in the driveway at a quarter past nine, she had been up for almost sixteen hours straight.

“We have to take her in,” I told him. Her head rested on my shoulder, but her eyes remained as wide as they had since she woke up at six in the morning.

“What’s wrong?”

“She hasn’t slept all day. Everything I’ve read says that newborns should be sleeping fourteen hours a day.”

“Does she have a fever?”

Somehow, I hadn’t spent my quota of tears for the day. “Please, Brian. Something isn’t right.” I must have looked truly pathetic, because Brian agreed to call the pediatrician’s office and go through the emergency line. The nurse on call told him that a lack of sleep could signify some sort of condition, but it was usually accompanied by a fever or some additional symptoms. Still, she said if we wanted to take her in to urgent care, we could.

I could sense Brian’s reluctance. He must have thought I was nuts, yet he drove us to the hospital anyway. We met with a nurse practitioner after twenty minutes in the waiting room. She checked Charlotte’s temperature, her pulse, her blood pressure, her ears, and her throat.

“Well,” she said. “It’s always best to be safe instead of sorry—you’re right to come in anytime you’re afraid something’s wrong. We would rather have that than the alternative. That being said, all of her vital signs are in a normal range.”

“What about her eyes?” I asked.

She gave me a queer look, as did Brian.

“Do they look yellow to you?”

She lifted Charlotte’s eyelids one by one and then turned back to me. Her expression conveyed her misgivings. “Maybe just a little bit,” she said. “Did she have jaundice?”

I nodded.

“There could be some residual discoloration. But I don’t see anything that concerns me.”

Charlotte fell asleep on the ride home.

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For a few weeks, things were better. Or maybe they weren’t better, but I adjusted. And then, abruptly, everything became worse.

Charlotte decided that one of the few activities that could make her happy was actually a form of torture. She developed reflux. She began spitting up after every feeding, sometimes full-on vomiting. Soon she came to associate the bottle itself with pain. When I offered it to her, she closed her mouth and turned her head. At least two bottles a day, bottles of my own precious breast milk, would go right down the drain. Her naps grew even shorter than they’d been before. Putting her back down at night was an hour-long battle every time.

Some evenings, she cried for nearly two hours straight. I invested in a pair of noise-cancelling headphones. Even while I wore them, her cries set my teeth on edge.

I put her symptoms into several health websites. The same answer kept coming back: colic. She exhibited every symptom listed. I contacted Dr. Moran to tell him my suspected diagnosis. He thought colic was likely, but it could be an allergy. He recommended a change in my diet—no dairy, soy, gluten, or eggs. I cut everything out and for two weeks ate nothing but

salad and rice. Charlotte continued to cry. Dr. Moran recommended a handful of reflux remedies. Nothing changed.

I became aware of dark thoughts creeping through my brain. To shut them out, I tried to think of myself as a robot. My routine became mechanical: Wake when baby cries. Change baby. Warm bottle. Attempt feeding. Clean rejected milk. Bounce baby with headphones on. One-handed laundry. Put baby down. Attempt sleep. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

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Brian's solution to this crisis was to remove himself from it. He took Charlotte for short periods in the mornings, and I resented how much better she seemed with him. But otherwise he kept his distance. He refused to involve himself in the nighttime rituals. He stopped making me breakfast. If I was awake when he came home, he would kiss my cheek and then head to bed. He claimed he was looking ahead to the second quarter sweeps week. Stress, pressure, blah blah blah. He made his half-hearted apologies and then receded into the backdrop.

One night, he asked if I could be a little bit quieter when I came back into our bedroom after being up with Charlotte for an hour. I went after him with my balled up fists and shouted until he left the room, which of course woke Charlotte again. I went in to her nursery to console her. He spent the rest of the night on the couch.

At some point it got bad enough that we stopped talking to each other. Days would go by without a word passing between us. I tried to imagine what he saw when he looked at me. A shrew with sunken eyes and a sagging body. A revolting slob who showered once a week, never wore make-up, never did her hair. A wraith drifting slowly through her pitiful, animal existence.

Even his efforts to lighten my mood turned sour. Before leaving for work one morning, Charlotte lay on the living room floor sucking on her pacifier and staring at the ceiling. By some

miracle, she wasn't crying. Brian sat next to her in his work clothes with a bowl of cereal in his hands.

"She's starting to look like you," he said.

I was standing at the kitchen sink washing bottles and pump parts. "Ha!" I replied. "I certainly hope not."

"What do you mean?"

I turned away from the sink to face him and waved my hand along the length of my body. "I look terrible."

"What? No you don't." To his credit, he didn't miss a beat. He rose from his spot on the floor and crossed the room to put his arms around me from behind. "You'll always be beautiful to me."

I laughed. "Even so. She doesn't look like me."

"And why not?"

"I don't have yellow eyes."

Brian put his hands on my shoulders and turned me around so we were face to face. His brow was wrinkled with unease. "Neither does she."

"Oh, really? And how would you know?"

Brian sighed and walked over to Charlotte. He lifted her above his head and lowered her face within inches of his. "I don't see any yellow, Heather."

"It's there, Brian. It comes and goes."

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My mother came to stay with us shortly after Charlotte entered her fourth month. When I picked her up at the airport, we tried to talk over the din of Charlotte's crying in her car seat.

“The poor little dear,” she said. “What baby doesn’t like a ride in the car?”

“She doesn’t like anything, Mom.”

She turned around the passenger seat and reached over the car seat to stroke Charlotte’s head. Somehow, that only served to intensify Charlotte’s displeasure. “You always loved the car,” she said. “And so did your brother and sister. Some nights, when I couldn’t calm you down, we’d just hop in the car. You’d be asleep by the time we left the driveway.”

“Well, Charlotte’s just special, I guess. Lucky me.”

Mom reached over and squeezed my free hand. “I’m sorry, honey. I know it’s been hard.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You just let me take over. Let me give you a few days of peace.”

I forced myself to smile. “Thanks, Mom.”

For the five days of her visit, I tried to focus on the upsides—a few hours of uninterrupted sleep, someone to help with dishes and laundry, dinners that hadn’t been frozen or canned—but I couldn’t help begrudging her the delay. Charlotte was her third grandchild. When my sister’s oldest was born, she hopped on a plane and came straight to the hospital. She would go on to visit what seemed like once a month for the entire first year. Her second received almost the same level of attention. We only lived a four-hour drive away, and yet for Charlotte, though she had made phone calls and asked for pictures, she otherwise claimed she couldn’t get away from work. She couldn’t find the time.

Even when I watched her with Charlotte, I couldn’t help thinking that she was less engaged than she had been with her other grandchildren. She seemed to give fewer hugs and kisses. She took fewer pictures. When Charlotte woke from a nap, she seemed to drag her feet on



her way to the nursery. For the first few days, she offered me plenty of unsolicited advice, confident that her wealth of experience raising three kids could provide answers to Charlotte's problems. "Let's try this," she said. "Perhaps this would help." But nothing did. By the fourth day of her visit, she had given up.

Try as I might to dismiss those thoughts from my mind, they played into my deepest fear: that there was something wrong. I supposed I loved Charlotte on some biological level, but that was it. And now her own grandmother was relieved to be leaving.

There was something wrong with my baby. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I knew it to be true. She was defective somehow—some mistake in her genetic code. Or maybe she was haunted. Maybe that awful color in her eyes was the sign of something else.

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A week or two after my mother flew back to Michigan, Brian and I engaged in a shouting match after he returned from the news station. I don't recall what started it, but I know that it ended with him packing a bag and leaving for a motel. In six years of marriage, that was a first.

After he left, I sat in the baby's nursery and sipped a glass of Brian's Johnny Walker as she cried in her crib. I knew that I was ruining my breast milk. The next time I pumped, I would need to pour my output down the drain. I didn't care.

I let her cry for twenty minutes. I watched the clock. Her voice would rise and fall, but she never stopped. The baby book I'd read before my delivery said that allowing a child to cry uninterrupted for any longer than twenty minutes could do "permanent psychological harm." So I picked her up at the twenty-minute mark. She continued to cry in my arms until she finally fell asleep.

Brian was gone for three or four days. When I heard the keys in the door, it was early in the morning. The baby was asleep, and I was on the couch, staring at the TV without really watching it.

“Did you run out of clothes?” I asked him.

He walked across the room and took a seat on the armchair across from me. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, Heather. I want to make some changes. I know I haven’t been the best husband lately. I’ve hardly been a father at all. I need to do better.”

“Great. So do better.”

“That’s not all though,” he said. “I want to see a counselor. I feel like I don’t know you anymore. I don’t recognize the woman I married.”

“Ha!” I said bitterly. “That makes two of us.”

Brian offered me a pitying smile. “So will you go with me?”

With a sigh, I lifted myself into a sitting position. “Be honest. You just want me to go. You want me to figure out what’s wrong with me. You think I’m the real problem.”

“Heather,” Brian replied, shaking his head. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. I want to work on us.”

“No, no. You just want to fix me. You want me to go back to the way I was.”

Brian shook his head. His eyes were filling with tears. He’d never before been the type. “Please, Heather. We need to make this work.”

The sound of a crying baby came from the nursery. I stood up. “So make it work then. I’m not going to see a shrink.”

I went to the nursery to pick up the child.

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For a little while, things were better. Brian used a few of his personal days to stay home and lend a hand. He changed more diapers in two days than he had in the past two months. He cooked me dinner. He let me shower in the morning and sleep at night.

But, in the end, he had to go back to the station. Just like my mother, he looked relieved to return to his usual life. And in a short span of time, he fell back into his usual habits. Arguments led to long stretches of silence. I went back to eating frozen meals or nothing at all.

The baby got sick. Her nose started running and her breathing began to sound ragged and uneven. The yellow in her eyes gave way to red.

One night, she started screaming at a new pitch. She sounded as if someone were stabbing her. When I walked into the nursery, she was tugging on her left ear. I tried to feed her, but she refused the bottle. I rocked her to calm her down, but every time I returned her to her crib, she would quickly go back to screaming. When I noticed that the sky out the window was beginning to brighten, I gave up. I walked into our bedroom and dropped her on Brian's chest. He woke with a start and then rose to his feet.

“What are you doing?” he cried. “What do you want me to do?”

I ignored him. I went to the couch, lay down, and immediately fell asleep.

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Dr. Moran diagnosed her with an ear infection. So, on top of everything else, now I had to force an antibiotic down her throat three times a day. It was exactly the disaster I expected it to be. She probably spit up more than she swallowed. A week after we ended the regimen, her temperature spiked again, and again she pulled at her ears. Another infection, another round of meds.

Brian left again. He packed a larger suitcase this time. As implausible as it seemed, I came to accept the fact that he might not come back.

Numb. I had become numb. I was no longer disturbed by the dark thoughts in my head. Now I embraced them. I whispered them to Charlotte as I bounced her. She was a monster. She had ruined my life. How could I possibly love her? How could I love anything anymore?

I wanted it all to end.

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When Brian finally returned, I didn't hear him coming through the door. I was dozing in the big armchair when I heard him shout at me..

"Heather!" he said. He stood just a few feet away. I groaned and opened my eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Mmm," I sighed. I smiled at him and stretched my arms over my head, spreading my fingers into stars. "You're home. I missed you, sweetie."

"How long has the baby been crying like that?"

"Hmm?"

"I said, how long has the baby been crying?"

I cocked my head and cupped a hand over my ear.

"I don't hear anything."

"Really? And I suppose that has nothing to do with it?" He pointed at the side table, which, for some reason, held a near empty bottle of some off-brand whiskey.

"How did that get there?" I said. I gave him another smile.

"That's it, Heather. I'm taking Charlotte." He stomped away.

*Isn't that nice*, I thought. I closed my eyes again.

From the end of the hall, I heard a cry. Not a child's cry, but a man's. "Oh my God," he said. I kept my eyes closed. I needed to sleep.

"Heather!" he shouted. I opened one eye. He had reappeared in front of me with a baby in his arms. The child was half-dressed with a onesie draped over one shoulder. One arm had found its sleeve, but the other was dangling outside of it. The arm was bent into a jagged shape. The child's face suggested it was screaming, but I couldn't hear a sound.

"What the hell happened?"

"Stop shouting," I said.

He held out the child. "Look what you did to your baby!"

"That's not my baby," I whispered. "My baby has yellow eyes."

## Sugarcoating

The boy in the hospital bed lifted himself into a seated position and looked toward the door. The pain on his face gave way to a wide, crooked smile.

“Rev!” he said. “What’s up, homes?”

Tom Halsted, tall, wiry, and blond, stepped through the door and took in the room: a narrow window trimmed with vertical blinds, yellow lights overhead, and a dimly-lit monitor pulsing with inscrutable information. Tom had never felt at ease in a place like this, but he did his best to mirror the boy’s expression. “Dion! What’s happening?”

“Not much, man, not much. Just hangin,’ ya know.”

“That’s good,” Tom said. “That’s real good. And how’s the food in this joint?”

“Yo, I’ll be honest with you.” Dion glanced to his left and right before winking. “I probably coulda bounced this morning, free as a bird, ya know what I mean? But, with food like this, I’m’a extend my stay, you know what I mean?”

Tom laughed. “Is that right?”

“Aw yeah, dog! I’m all about gaming the system, right? I mean look at this.” Dion waved Tom to the side of his bed. He lifted the cover of his food tray to reveal two Jello cups, one red and one blue.

“No way!” said Tom. “*Two* flavors?”

“Two! They keep asking me what I want, and I keep saying, ‘Whatever you got, I’ll eat.’ Last night for dinner I had two flavors of ice cream *and* a cookie.”

“Whoa, man. That’s crazy.”

Dion palmed his forehead and sighed. “No, Rev. Not cra-zy. Just cray.”

“Cray?”

“Yeah, dog. Cray. You in the hood now. You gotta start acting like it.”

“Look at me, Dion,” said Tom, gesturing at his outfit: khaki pants, Oxford shirt, penny loafers. “Do I look like the hood to you?”

A bark of laughter burst out of Dion’s mouth and then died just as quickly as he clutched at his abdomen and took a few deep breaths. A quiet beeping in the room, which Tom hadn’t noticed before, now grew faster, more insistent. One of the lines on the boy’s vitals monitor had become dramatic, jagged.

Tom pulled up a nearby chair and sat down. For a second, he considered reaching out his hand and resting it on Dion’s arm. Then he thought better of it. He looked toward the door. A nurse walked past without a single glance into the room. The beeping began to slow.

In a minute or two, the boy’s color returned. “Ya know what, Rev?” he asked. His voice was quiet. “I really ‘preciate this. You making the effort. Not every white dude gets in his car and makes it through some bad parts of town. That makes you more g than most of your people.”

“My people, huh?”

“Yeah, your people.” The boy’s crooked smile appeared again. “You know exactly what I mean.”

“Okay, fine,” Tom said. “I know what you mean.”

He put a smile on his face, but Dion’s comment had given him pause. He wasn’t convinced he really was any better than any other of ‘his people.’ After hearing the news of the incident, he had put off the visit for three full days. Initially, he had heard that Dion was in critical condition. He told himself he shouldn’t intrude. But by the second day, when he learned that the boy’s condition was stable, he found himself hoping and praying that the boy would be discharged quickly so he could see him back at church the next time his Aunt brought him down.

That would be easiest, no question. But it was worse than just taking the path of least resistance. In his heart of hearts, he had entertained the notion that no one would expect him to make this visit anyway. Yes, Dion had shown up for youth group three or four times, but that hardly made him a regular. And Tom was only filling an interim position. He'd taken the job under the assumption that the search committee would find a full time youth pastor in a month or two. His only real qualifications for the job were his relative youth, three summers spent as a summer camp counselor, and a lack of better options. No one who knew him well would think twice about his decision not to tiptoe around such a difficult situation. He wasn't cut out for this sort of thing.

Over the last few years, his doubts had multiplied—and not only regarding his vocation. He had grown up in the church. His father had been the senior pastor at Calvary Community Church since before he was born. He'd attended Sunday School and youth group every week, and he'd even gone on to a Christian college. But somehow that Christian education had chipped away at his faith. He had been challenged by his professors to ask hard questions, but he'd graduated before he could find sufficient answers. In his state of uncertainty, he could hardly affirm some of the most critical tenets of his religion.

When the occasion required it, he could still play the part of the 'good Christian.' He did just that for roughly two dozen high school students every Wednesday night. The questions they asked could be brushed aside with rote responses. Then it was right back to foosball and music and a circle of predictable prayer requests.

Someday, he knew, his blasphemous ideology would be exposed and he would be compelled to have some hard conversations with the people he had deceived. But the prospect of



that calamity didn't seem half as daunting as the concern that was now rattling through his brain. Was he really any better than 'his people?' Or, in Dion's words, was he really 'more g?'

For his part, the boy who had instigated Tom's existential quandary had turned his attention elsewhere. He was picking at one of the strips of tape holding the IV tubing on his arm. Trying to straighten it out, he now lifted it off his skin and then tried to stick it back down, but it had clearly lost its adhesiveness. Frustrated, he pulled the whole strip off, which, of course, caused another two strips to wrinkle and fold. The needle looked like it might pull right out.

"Man, that doc lady really fucked this up," Dion muttered to himself before remembering that Tom, the righteous youth leader, was sitting close by. "I mean, messed up. She messed this up."

Tom ignored the curse word. "Do you want me to go get someone?"

"Nah. Someone comes in every ten minutes or so. It's no big."

"What's it for?" Tom gestured toward the bag of clear fluid hanging on the pole.

"Pain," said Dion. "I can squeeze this pump anytime I need more."

"And have you? Been needing the pump?"

"Rev. You know I took four shots to the chest, right? Someone must've told you that."

Yes, someone had told him. Dion's aunt had called the church office in hysterics while Tom was acting church secretary. He hardly knew what to say in response. Obviously he'd never dealt with this sort of situation. In the end, he just let her talk. He told her he'd pray for her nephew, and lied about visiting as soon as he could. He felt his face grow warm as the guilt rose up again.

"Sorry, man. I guess it was a stupid question."

Dion smiled. "A little stupid, yeah."

“I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s cool, Rev,” Dion replied. He stretched out his arms and let his hands fall heavily on his knees. “I’ll get through. It hurts like hell, but this pump does a lot of good. I’ll get through.”

The room’s temperature hadn’t budged from its clinical seventy-two degrees, but Tom felt warm. He could feel a bead of sweat running down his lower back. For the second time since entering the room, he found himself at a loss for words. A handful of platitudes came to mind, but none of them seemed right.

Finally, the silence was broken by two taps on the door. A male nurse in what looked to be his late twenties walked into the room and went straight to checking Dion’s instruments. “Hey, big guy,” said the nurse. His tone came across as patronizingly gentle. “How’s our bravest patient feeling this evening?”

Because the nurse had his back turned toward his patient, he missed Dion’s exasperated eye roll.

“See, Rev. I told you. They come by all the time.”

At the mention of another person in the room, the nurse turned to face both Dion and Tom directly.

“I’m sorry, Dion. I didn’t realize you had a visitor.”

“Sure do, Carl. This is Pastor Tom from my Auntie’s church. Rev, this is Nurse Carl.”

Carl offered his hand to Tom before returning his attention to Dion’s monitors. Tom, knowing full well that he was speaking more to Dion than the preoccupied nurse, said, “Actually, it’s just Tom. I’m not really a pastor.”

Over his shoulder, Carl quipped, “And I’m just Carl. I *am* really a nurse though.”

Dion squinted at Tom in a look of confusion. “Wait, hold up. What you mean, Rev?”

Tom sighed. “Dion, ever since we met, you’ve called me ‘Rev,’ but you do know I’m not a reverend, right? I haven’t been what’s called ‘ordained.’”

“Yeah, but you work at the church, right?”

“I do, but that doesn’t make me a pastor.”

“But you preach and shit. You play guitar, read the Bible, do the prayer circle and everything.”

“That’s true, but my title is youth *leader*, not youth pastor. And this is really just a temporary thing. I’m an intern.”

Dion shook his head. “Yo, hold up, Rev. If I make art, I’m an artist, right?”

Tom nodded.

“And if I get in a boat and go catch some fish, I’m a fisherman. I drive in a cruiser with a badge and a gun, I’m a cop. You spend your time doing pastor shit—err, stuff—so you a pastor in my book.”

Carl, who had finished replacing Dion’s IV bag, turned to face Tom. “I’d say he’s got a point.”

Triumph gleamed on Dion’s face. “Yeah, Carl. That’s right I got a point. I just owned you, Rev!”

“Actually, Dion,” said Carl, “maybe your pastor friend could go lick his wounds in the hall? Your doctor has requested a private conversation. Is your mom close by?”

Dion’s triumphant look faded. He looked down at his lap. “Nah. She ain’t here. She had to go back to work. Her shift ends at eight.”

“Okay,” said Carl. “What about your aunt?”

“Nah. She’s got her own kids to watch in the evening.” He glanced over at Tom. “Rev, can you stay?”

Tom felt himself clench up at the thought. “Totally up to you,” he replied. “Assuming the hospital permits it, that is.” He was trying to stay calm, but his thoughts were anything but.

“Yeah,” said Dion. “I don’t want to do this alone.”

The nurse looked at the boy and back toward Tom. “We can probably make that work,” he said. “I’ll let Doctor Kate know you’re ready.”

After retaping Dion’s loose IV tubing, Carl left the room and Tom felt his panic increase to a new level. This wasn’t how this visit was supposed to go. Did hospital policy even allow for this? Weren’t there confidentiality concerns? What if the doctor had bad news to share? What then?

“Dion,” Tom said quietly. “Are you sure you want me to stay?”

“I’m sure, Rev.” Then he paused. “I just...I don’t know. Sometimes I don’t know what the doc is talking about.”

For the first time since he’d walked through the door, Tom realized that Dion was scared. It was a startling realization. Dion had always been such a tough kid. He talked as tough as anyone, and Tom had always been lead to believe that living in tough circumstances had justified the talk. But now, seeing him slouched in the hospital bed, looking toward the window, Tom saw him for the kid he was. He was scared. Who wouldn’t be in his position?

Doctor Kate entered the room about five minutes later. She was younger than Tom expected her to be—mid-to-late 30s, maybe— but her straight-to-business demeanor lent her a reassuring air of authority. The smile she gave Dion was warm, but brief. Tom heard alarm bells in his head.

Dion introduced Tom as his pastor, and Tom didn't bother correcting him this time.

Doctor Kate shook hands with the visitor, and then turned her attention back to Dion.

"Alright, Dion," she said. "I have to ask you some questions, and a few of them are a little bit personal. Are you sure you're okay with a non-family member being present at this time?"

"Yeah, Doc. It's cool." The timidity of Dion's response made his apprehension even more fully apparent.

Doctor Kate made a note on her pad and then launched into a series of questions. She asked Dion about his pain level, his energy, his digestion. She asked him about any history he had recovering from cuts or bruises. She asked him if he was feeling ill in any way.

Dion responded honestly and openly while I stared at the floor between my knees.

For a moment, Doctor Kate paused to scratch a long list of notes on her pad. Then she pulled up a chair and sat at Dion's side on the other side of the bed. She took a deep breath.

"A long time ago," she began, "I made up my mind that nothing good comes of sugarcoating. I decided the best way to respect my patients is to be completely honest with them. To speak straight. Are you okay with that, Dion?"

Dion appeared to swallow a lump in his throat. Slowly, he nodded.

"Your most recent blood test gave us a cause for concern. Compounded by your sickle-cell trait, your red blood cell count is dangerously low. Your white blood cells aren't receiving the help they need to do their job, and their numbers are also falling. This suggests two possibilities. First, that the hemorrhaging in your abdomen is not slowing and may actually have intensified since the surgery. And, second, that the damaged regions may become infected, if

they aren't already. If infection sets in, your body will have trouble fighting it due to your depleted white blood cell count, and any infection in or near critical organs is dangerous."

Dion swallowed again. "So what then?"

Doctor Kate responded quickly. "We've scheduled you for a scope procedure—a surgery whereby we can assess the status of the damaged areas. During that procedure, we will do everything we can to stop the bleeding and address any infection we see."

"And what if you can't stop the bleeding?" Dion asked.

"We'll set up a blood transfusion that will keep your systems functioning until we find a way to manage the situation."

"But what if you can't?" Dion's voice had risen to a high pitch. Tom felt a shiver run down his back.

Doctor Kate opened her mouth for a second and then closed it. Her lips stretched into a thin smile. "We'll do everything we can," she said.

Dion tightened his jaw and looked down at his hands. He nodded twice. It was clear that he understood.

The atmosphere in the room had become oppressive. Tom wanted to run, but he knew he couldn't. His heart raced as he sat and listened to Doctor Kate telling Dion when he could expect to go to the operating room. She told him that the hospital staff had been trying to reach Dion's mom, but they hadn't been able to get a hold of her. She asked if there was anyone else Dion wanted them to call. Dion said nothing. Not a word. He was still staring at the same spot as Doctor Kate left the room.

For what felt to Tom like an hour, there was silence. Again and again, he glanced at Dion and then looked away. The boy wasn't crying. He wasn't trembling. Instead, he had become a statue. Aside from blinking and breathing, he was utterly motionless.

Eventually Tom accepted that he had to break the silence. In a voice barely louder than a whisper, he said, "I'm so sorry."

Dion inclined his head by a single degree.

"Do you want me to stay?" Tom asked.

"No," the boy replied.

Tom's thoughts turned to his father. Pastor Halsted had made thousands of hospital visits throughout his career. What would he do now? Surely he'd know what to say. Tom racked his brain for inspiration, and finally it came.

"Would you like me to pray for you?" he asked.

Dion turned his face and a flicker of light came into his eyes. With great effort, he twisted his mouth into a thin, half-formed smile. "Rev. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Dion."

"Do you think I'm going to hell?"

Tom blanched. His heart, which had never quite slowed since Doctor Kate had left the room, now came quite close to stopping.

"I don't know. I guess that..." He trailed off. A half-dozen prepackaged responses jumped into his head, but he rejected them all. How could he give this boy anything less than sincerity? He thought back to the way Doctor Kate prefaced her diagnosis. *Nothing good comes of sugarcoating.*

"You know what, Dion? If I'm totally honest, I really don't know."

“What you mean, Rev?”

“I mean just that. I mean I don’t know. I don’t believe anyone can know for sure where we go when we die.”

Dion shifted into a slightly more upright position. For the moment, he had allowed himself this distraction. “But what about you? You’re not sure you’re going to heaven?”

Tom shrugged. “I don’t know. I hope so, but I’m not certain of anything.”

“For real? But you a pastor!”

Tom smiled. “Not technically.”

Dion did not seem to appreciate the joke. He shook his head.

“All my life, at every church Aunt Kendra’s dragged me off to, everyone’s always gone on and on about, ‘Do you know where you gonna go?’ Like it’s the only thing that matters. Like it’s the whole point of even going to church in the first place.”

Tom nodded.

“But you’re saying you don’t know, and you’re acting like it don’t even matter.”

“I guess so.”

Dion squinted his eyes, giving Tom a hard look. “Rev. Do you even believe in heaven and hell?”

Tom leaned back and put his hands behind his head. “Well,” he said. “I guess...I guess I don’t know that either.”

Dion looked at Tom harder, like he was trying to bore holes in Tom’s forehead. “Every youth night, you and all of y’all talk about heaven basically nonstop. What’re you saying?”

“Well,” said Tom. “There are a couple of schools of thought on heaven, actually. It’s kind of hard to explain.”



Dion continued to stare, but Tom was beginning to feel more comfortable—even in spite of the circumstances. He'd had this conversation many times with his college roommates. He knew his way around this topic. "Most people think heaven is a place we go when we die," he said, leaning forward as he spoke. "But some biblical scholars believe that when Jesus talked about the kingdom of heaven, he was talking about bringing heaven to earth."

"The fuck?"

The blunt force of the interjection, with no apology or correction, surprised Tom. "I know, I know," he continued. "I told you this was hard to explain. Essentially these scholars say that Jesus's teaching was meant to convince people to live so selflessly that they could *create* the kingdom of heaven right here—on earth."

Dion began to shake his head back and forth, back and forth.

"You're not buying it, huh?" Tom hadn't expected this reaction. "Okay. So do you know the Lord's prayer?"

Dion continued to shake his head. He was smiling—though his expression was a long way from benevolent.

"'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,'" Tom said. "'On earth as it is in heaven.' That line is about bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth."

Dion now laughed out loud. A bitter laugh. "And you believe that?" he asked.

"Sometimes," said Tom. "I guess I don't know for sure." The look on Dion's face was unsettling.

"I hate to tell you this, Rev. But that's some *bull shit*."

Tom felt his stomach lurch. "I'm sorry?"

"I said, that's *bull shit*, man. *Bull shit*."

“Okay, Dion,” Tom said quietly. He remembered that Dion had good reason to be in a volatile emotional state. “You asked my opinion.”

“And that’s your opinion, huh? Man, I thought you was smart.”

Tom gave Dion a look of apology, but that only seemed to upset him further.

“Yo, look,” he said, his voice a few ticks louder than it needed to be. “How long has the church been around? Thousands of years, right?”

Tom nodded.

“Thousands of years people been reading the Bible, reading all about this kingdom of heaven on earth and whatever.”

“Right.”

“So where is it?”

“Where is what?”

“Where’s heaven? This heaven on earth? Do you see it? Is it heaven out in the suburbs, man? ‘Cause it sure the hell ain’t heaven ‘round here.”

“Well, we—”

“Well what? Does this seem like heaven to you? What the fuck kind of heaven lets a kid like me get shot when all I was doing was minding my own business?”

Tom noticed the line on Dion’s monitor had grown glaringly jagged. The numbers were rising. “Dion,” he pleaded. “I don’t know—”

“What the fuck kind of heaven gives me a genetic condition so I can’t get better—even with all the doctors in the world working on me? What the fuck kind of heaven leaves me to die alone—no family, no friends? Does that seem like heaven to you?”

Tom could see that Dion was trembling. In fact, he looked as though he was trying to hold back tears. Tom wondered when the monitor would alert Carl or some other member of the medical staff to come check on their patient.

Dion twisted the hospital sheet in his fist. He seemed to be struggling to catch his breath. Finally he said, "You don't even fucking care."

"I do care."

Dion looked into his lap and spoke in a whisper. "No you don't. You don't want to be here. You never wanted to visit. You don't give a fuck."

"That's not true," Tom said. He shifted forward in his chair. "Dion, that's not true."

But it didn't matter. Dion's whole body was shaking now. "Get the fuck out of here."

"Please. I'm sorry. Please."

"I said, get out!" As he screamed, he pounded his thighs with his fists and then immediately buckled over. His hands shot from his legs to his belly. He was shouting every obscenity he could think of and contorting his face in pain. Tears streamed down his face. One of the instruments in his room emitted a high-pitched alarm sound.

Acting on a sudden impulse, Tom leaned over the bed, trying to reach the boy's pain pump. Looking down, he could see blood spreading purple on the hospital gown beneath Dion's hands.

At precisely that instant, Carl and three other staff members burst through the door. Immediately, two of them grabbed Tom by the arms and pulled him out of the room. Tom did not remember what they asked him, nor did he remember his answers, if he gave any at all. He did not remember passing through the halls, taking the elevator to the main level, and finding his

car in the parking garage. It wasn't until he turned the key in the ignition and felt the engine's quiet vibrations that the throbbing in his temple subsided enough for him to think.

His cheeks grew wet with tears of his own. He closed his eyes and clasped his hands together. He bent his head forward until it rested on the steering wheel. For the first time in years, he found himself praying.