

The Secret of Her Silence

Honors Thesis

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of Education**

In the School of English
at Salem State University

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Commonwealth Honors Program
Salem State University
2018

Abstract

Writing has always been a passion of mine and writing a novel has always been a goal. This thesis was the perfect way to bring passion and goals together. To achieve this goal, I worked closely with my thesis advisor, Kevin Carey, to meet a goal of 7-10 pages weekly and edit them along the way. After around 3 weeks of submissions and editing the smaller chunks, I would submit everything I had edited and he would re-read it and give me more notes on how to strengthen the story. This process went on for four months until I had the first 60 pages of a novel completed.

I got the idea of the story from my distaste of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* because it is so unrealistic and an inaccurate representation of true love. The original play takes place over the span of three days and ends in teenage suicide, even though the main characters barely knew each other. I decided, instead of modernizing the play which many people have done, to take main characteristics of the characters and either enhance them, or remove them completely. For example, Romeo is more damaged and more of a womanizer in my thesis, while Shakespeare's innocent Juliet is not-so-innocent which leads her to become a selective mute. Although the characters were originally based off of those from *Romeo and Juliet*, the story went in a completely different direction than the original. For example, Justin, my character with an enhanced womanizer characteristic, to try to figure out why Rose, my selective mute character, stopped talking while also trying to figure himself out.

I learned that it is very difficult to write a novel, more difficult than I had imagined. I had to create a new place with believable characters who were interesting enough to read about. It was challenging to do this because I did not want the reading to

become stale, but I also couldn't make a story only about one small plot that could be resolved in under 60 pages. Professor Carey helped me to find a balance between the two and I learned that the setting and introduction to the story is just as important as the story and plot itself. In hindsight, I would not make any changes to this, I might edit it more, but it is something that I will continue to work on and hopefully publish in the future.

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Acknowledgements

I would first and foremost like to thank my family for always supporting me in whatever I do. I would not have been able to accomplish this without their continued encouragement. I would especially like to thank my parents who believed in me, and continue to believe in me always. I could not have achieved half of this without them always pushing me to do the best I can and for being my greatest support system. I would also like to thank my friends for listening to me talk about this constantly and letting me read it and re-read it numerous times until it sounded perfect to me. Finally, I would like to thank my advisor, Kevin Carey, without whom this would not be possible. He spent countless hours helping me edit and believing I could do this. Thank you to everyone, you mean the world to me and I honestly couldn't have done it without you.

1.

Fuck this. I stared out the window, at the passing trees. I wished one would fall on the car, crush both my bitch-for-a-mother and I under it. We drove in silence, not even the radio was on to break it. My mother wouldn't even look at me. I hadn't been close to Linda since I was young, and after what she was about to do to me, I doubted I'd ever speak to her again.

We'd been driving for hours. Every state we drove through was just a blur of trees, trees, and more trees. We only stopped twice to use the bathroom. The drive was miserable; not only was I stuck in a hot car for 10 hours, but I was stuck in a hot car with Linda. I was starving, not that Linda cared or would stop to get food if I said anything. My stomach began to growl, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop it. I pulled out my pack of cigarettes; I figured if I couldn't eat I should at least be able to smoke.

"Justin!" Linda snapped. "Do not smoke in my car!"

"Linda." I snapped back with a cruel bite to my tone "Do not ship me off to Agatha's." I pulled out my lighter and inhaled as I put the flame against the end of my cigarette. It calmed me down. I closed my eyes and exhaled the smoke. I was about to take another drag when Linda ripped it out of my mouth and threw it out the window.

"You bitch!" I shouted at her. Linda snapped her head to look at me and raised her hand. I flinched backward toward the window. Linda's face softened and she lowered her hand. She may have been a heartless backstabber, but she wasn't violent. She never had been, that was the job of whatever asshole she decided to date for the month. I had no problem giving Fred a black eye or Henry a broken nose, but I could never hit my mother—no matter how much I hated her. I put my cigarettes back in my pocket. She should be

lucky it was just the cigarettes I pulled out. I had a plethora of pills in my pocket I could have popped in front of her out of sheer spite. I could have made her car smell like the joint hidden in the pack of Marlborough Reds. But I didn't, I was tired of fighting. We continued to drive in silence until we passed the sign that said "Welcome to Meredith". I looked out the window at the small town. Nothing about this place seemed welcoming. It was *too* bright, *too* cheery, and *too...perfect*. Nothing in life was supposed to be this perfect. I felt like I was stuck in *Pleasantville*.

I kept my eyes out of the window. The buildings blurred together as Linda sped on. I saw a couple brightly colored houses with white picket fences, there were kids playing with their dogs in the yard. There were families going out for walks, I was nauseous at the sight of one neighbor waving to the other with a damn smile plastered on their faces. This was the smallest most boring town I had ever been in. I had never wanted the business of Boston so much in my life. I couldn't believe she was choosing a man she barely knew over me. Actually, I'd be more surprised if she chose me over him. Tim was a huge asshole. He was tall with broad shoulders and a constant look of hatred and disgust on his face—especially when I was around. I was no stranger to his large, unforgiving hands or his loud booming voice. When he spoke, it was hard not to listen. He was so loud that he commanded fear and that's what gave him power. But Linda said that she loved him, I didn't think she knew the difference between fear and love anymore. She hadn't been in a decent relationship since my father and he died when I was 3. What a guy, he couldn't handle being a father, so he chose to not just leave but to die. The son of a bitch, it was just one more thing that Linda hated me for. It was, after all, because I lived that he chose to die. I used to pray at night that I had never been born so that my

father would live. He deserved it, he made my mother happy, made enough money to live comfortably, and from what I heard from Linda, everybody used to love him. That is, until I came along. I used to see pictures of the two of them smiling, like they really cared about each other. But I was never in those pictures; the family pictures that I was in were all burned by Linda and one of her many “boyfriends”.

We pulled up to a large white house, the grass was short and bright with flowers lining the driveway. There was a long porch wrapping around the house. We pulled up the driveway where I saw a beach. I had forgotten that Agatha lived on a beach; I hadn't seen her since I was like 5. She didn't care enough to contact me, she didn't want me either Linda was just throwing me at the only person who would take in a stray and even then I assumed she was being paid to take me in. I saw the old lady rocking in a chair, with a sweet tea in her hand. It was so stereotypically southern that I wanted to vomit. Linda stopped the car and started to get out.

“Stop.” I said sharply “Don't help me. I don't want or need it.”

“I wasn't going to. I was going to say hello to my mother and thank her for taking you off my hands.” Linda said, without looking at me. Half of me hoped that she would help, that there was still part of her that cared what the hell happened to me. But that just wasn't it. The only thing she cared about was Tim and the only thing Tim cared about was Tim. I fucking hated Tim.

I opened the trunk and pulled out what few bags I had left. The other bags were apparently unnecessary so they were generously donated by Linda and Tim to the Salvation Army. All of my baseball trophies, all of my music, even my guitar. Gone. I came home a day ago to all of my shit that they hadn't donated packed. The only things

they kept were some clothes and a picture of the two of them, because obviously I would want to remember the two most vile people on the planet. Nothing that mattered to me mattered to them. Nobody would want to buy my old guitar or the trophies that I used to boast on a shelf in my room. They just wanted to get rid of them, make my time with Agatha even more miserable. I was sure that the music I had written wasn't donated like I was told; it was definitely burned, just like the family photos. Now all I was to the two of them was a memory, a pile of soot in the fireplace. The conversation we had about me living with Agatha was just her cleaning up her mess. She decided to tell me yesterday, she didn't even give me time to say goodbye to anyone.

“Justin. I don't know what to do with you anymore,” Linda told me with no emotion in her voice “so I'm sending you to your grandmother's. Maybe she can fix you.”

“*You're sending me, or Tim's sending me?*” I slurred, still high from the Molly I had taken about an hour before coming home and drunk from the bottle of vodka I was supposed to share. Suddenly there was a sharp slap across the side of my face. That was one way to sober my sorry ass up.

“Is that how you talk to your mother, boy?” Tim yelled.

“Is that any of your business?” I retorted, immediately regretting it. I saw Tim's fist racing towards my face as Linda watched, saying and doing nothing.

“Is that how you talk to me, boy?” Tim bellowed.

“No, sir.” I said, looking down. I couldn't beat Tim, I could try, but I knew I'd end up dead. Looking back, I wish I had tried to fight back. At least I wouldn't have to be here in Meredith, at least then maybe the woman who drove me here would start to care.

I carried my bags through the door without a word to either women talking on the porch. I didn't care to talk to them, I didn't want to get to know them. I hated them, I hated Meredith, and I hated myself. I just hated.

"Justin." Agatha said calmly "Come out and say goodbye to your mother." Her southern accent was distinct as she enunciated every syllable.

I stayed in the house, right outside the front door. I knew I should at least say something before Linda abandoned me totally, so I walked out of the porch where Linda was standing. I looked Agatha straight in the eyes and said: "I have no mother." I don't know what was worse, the hurt look on Agatha's face, or the blank uncaring stare on Linda's. I flinched backwards, expecting a beating from Agatha; I deserved it for what I said, after all. Instead, I was met with a calm steady voice that said "Justin. Go in the house." For the first time in a while, I happily did what I was told, I never wanted to see the woman who gave birth to me again. But now, it wasn't her who abandoned me, I abandoned her.

2.

I walked into the house and looked around. The mantle above the fireplace in the living room was covered in pictures. I walked over to them and saw faces of strangers staring back at me. There was two people in one picture who looked like they just got married—probably Agatha's wedding. It looked like it could be her without all of the wrinkles on her face. She wasn't ugly in the picture; she had light brown hair that was pulled out of her face by her veil and her eyes were a bright blue, so bright that they were almost mesmerizing. She was thinner than I thought she'd be and it looked like she was

genuinely happy. The dude standing behind her was tall and something about him made me squirm just by looking at him. I looked at another picture of the two of them, but Agatha was holding a baby in this one—probably Linda. I looked over this picture, the baby and Agatha were both smiling, but the man wasn't. He had a serious face. In this picture his head was shaved and he looked sad. I looked over at the next picture of the baby who was standing now, but something caught my eye. The baby was a boy. Linda never told me about her brother, I never knew I had an uncle. I picked up the next picture and looked a new baby smiling up at Agatha. The picture was in black and white, I turned it over to see an inscription written on the back of the frame. *Linda, my little miracle*, it read. So this baby was definitely Linda, but who was the other baby? I put the frame back on the mantle and another picture caught my eye. This picture had three people in it and I almost couldn't even look at it. Linda looked so happy beside my father and me. I couldn't have been more than two years old in this picture, but I knew I was the kid. I looked at the smile on Linda's face and the way my father looked at her. I picked up the frame slowly, this was the only family picture I had ever seen. I touched the glass as I thought about what my life might have been like if my father hadn't killed himself, if Linda didn't hate me for it. I wouldn't have to worry about Tim or being thrown here like a damn stray. Maybe my life would have been fucking good for once. I put the frame back as I heard Agatha walk into the house. I heard the ignition of the car and walked over to the window to see Linda pulling out of the driveway in her white Mercedes. It was a gift from one of the guys, I don't remember which one—there were too many to count.

“Which one's mine?” I said as Agatha walked into the living room.

“Pardon?” She replied, walking towards me.

I picked up my bags and said: “My room. Which one’s mine?”

Agatha walked up the stairs and turned the corner. She walked into a spare room overlooking the ocean. I threw my bags on the bed and began unpacking. I turned around to see Agatha still standing there in the doorway.

“You can leave now.” I told her, turning back to my open bags. Without a word, Agatha closed the door and walked away. I threw the clothes in the wooden dresser and threw myself onto the bed. I screamed into the pillow and passed out. It had been a long ass day and I just wanted it to be over.

When I woke up, I began to panic. I forgot I had been dropped off like an unwanted animal to anyone who would take me in.

I pulled out my cigarettes and opened the window. I sat down and began to smoke, it helped calm me down and relax more. I was enjoying my cigarette until Agatha burst through the door, took the cigarette from my hand, snuffed it on the windowsill, and threw it out the window.

“No smoking in the house.” Agatha said calmly. “I’d prefer you to not smoke at all but if you must, go outside and leave my property. I don’t want to find butts in or around my yard.” The calmness in Agatha’s voice pissed me off. I could handle screaming, but the relaxed tone in Agatha’s voice made me wary of her.

“Fine.” I said “I’ll go smoke downtown. I need to buy another pack anyway.”

“Okay.” Agatha said “Have a nice walk. Mickey’s is the nearest store.”

“How far is it?” I said angrily.

“Oh, about 3 miles from here.”

“Can I get a ride?” I asked, getting angrier.

“No. I will not drive you to support a habit I don’t condone.” Agatha said as she walked out of my room. The door shut softly behind her. I grabbed my wallet from the bed and stormed out of the house. If Agatha thought she could control what I did, she had another thing coming. I had been taking care of myself for as long as I could remember. I didn’t need or want some old hag telling me what to do. Fuck that.

As I walked, I looked around the town. Half of the houses looked like they hadn’t been renovated since the 1800’s. The other half looked picture perfect, the grass was perfectly cut, the house itself had no chips. Some even had a white picket fence around them. It was bullshit. I felt like I was stuck in a neighborhood out of the fucking 1950’s. There was even a family having a damn barbeque. I tried to picture Tim hosting a barbeque and chuckled to myself. He’d probably set the whole damn house on fire and somehow make Linda think it was me. I saw kids running around playing in the streets, and a couple walking a dog. They smiled and waved to me as they passed me. I looked the other way and kept walking.

As I made my way downtown, I noticed all of the local shops. They had clothing stores, cafés, and a bookstore. There were no clubs, no bars, nothing fun and definitely nothing I saw worth stopping for. It was one of those towns that you could just drive right through without even realizing it existed. It was a small town in the middle of east bumfuck and I just wanted to get the hell out. I took the last cigarette out of my pack and began to smoke. It was the first time all day that I could smoke without someone taking the damn thing away from me and throwing it out a window. I finished my cigarette as I

walked up to Mickey's. It was just a local country store. They had overpriced food and drinks but most importantly they had my smokes.

I walked up to an old man at the counter who greeted me with a smile. "Hey there son, what can I do for you?"

"A pack of Marlborough Reds." I said, putting a \$10 on the counter with a \$1 bag of chips.

"Do you have an ID with you today?" the man said, still smiling. He was too fucking happy to be there. I pulled out my old fake ID from Massachusetts and put it on top of the money. The man looked it over and handed it back to me with the pack of cigarettes.

"Ah, a Boston boy." The clerk said with a smile. "What brings you all the way here?" He said handing me a nickel. I stared at him blankly and walked out without a word and opened my new pack. There was nothing more satisfying than seeing a perfectly organized pack of smokes, each cigarette lined up perfectly with the others and stood up together. I ruined the pack by pulling one out and lighting up.

"Hey man!" someone said, jogging towards me. "Think I could bum a smoke off of you?" The guy was tall with broad shoulders. His skin was dark and his black hair was shaved close to his head.

"Yeah, whatever." I said, handing him one of my cigarettes and a lighter.

"Thanks," he said taking both and lighting up "I haven't seen you around here. You just move here?"

"I gave you a smoke, not an invitation to my life story." I said, inhaling the smoke.

“Fair enough, man. I’m Michael, by the way.” He said to me, looking up.

“Justin.” I replied.

“So will you at least tell me where you’re from?” Michael asked.

“Boston.” I answered.

“Damn. I thought I heard an accent.” He said, chuckling. I suddenly became really aware of how different I sounded from everyone. I stuck out like a sore thumb—just one more reason to want to leave. “Is Boston wicked pissah? Do you pahk the cah in Havahd?” He said, chuckling to himself.

“Fuck you.” I said. We just stood there for a bit, not saying anything. Michael seemed chill. But I didn’t like him much. I didn’t want or need anyone in this hillbilly town. I watched as a few people passed us; a group of giggling girls, a few guys, old people with kids, old people without kids. This was clearly a family town. Someone like me didn’t belong here. I watched as a hot blonde passed by. She had long blonde hair, she was skinny but not too skinny. It looked like she worked out a lot. Her blue eyes glanced my way as I gave her a nod. She didn’t smile, she just gave me a blank expression and kept walking.

“That there’s Rose.” Michael told me. “She’s pretty easy on the eyes, easier to get into bed.”

“Oh really.” I said, watching her as she walked into Mickey’s.

“Yeah.” He said. “She’ll give you a real Meredith welcome if you ask her to, if you know what I mean.” Michael gave me a sly look like he knew what I was thinking.

“Here, let me introduce you.”

“Nah, man. I’m good.” I said as I watched her saunter into the store.

“Well there’s a back-to-school party at my place if you want to crash it.” Michael told me “Maybe Rose will be there.”

“No thanks.”

“Gimme your phone I’ll text you the address.” He said taking my phone out of my hand and putting his number into my phone. “I texted myself so I have your number. Be there at 7. Don’t pussy out.”

“Just because I don’t want to go to some lame party in some lame hick town doesn’t make me a pussy.” I said, walking away.

I walked back to Agatha’s slowly. I really didn’t want to go back, that woman probably hated me. Hell, my own mother hated me. Agatha was never even a part of my life so why was she suddenly taking me into her home? I hadn’t seen her since I was 5 and I assumed she croaked years ago. As I walked up the old creaky stairs of Agatha’s house and opened the door to smell food cooking. I walked into the kitchen and saw Agatha pulling chicken out of the oven and stirring vegetables on the stove. I looked down at my phone and saw a text from a random number. It was definitely Michael, I opened the text that read: “71 Chatham Ave. 7pm. Don’t be a lame pussy.” I scoffed at the message; there was no way in hell I was going to some dumb jock’s party. I wasn’t that desperate for friends.

“Welcome home.” Agatha told me as she took the chicken into the dining room. The table was set with plates and water glasses and a salad. Agatha had put her plate at the head of the table and mine next to her. I picked it up and moved it to the other end of the table and sat down. I looked at the meal in front of me and up at Agatha who sat down without a word.

“Well?” Agatha said “Eat up, you’ve had a long day.”

“A long day? Just a day?” God Agatha was so stupid. “I’ve had more than a long day.”

“I’m sorry, Justin.” Agatha said, beginning to take some chicken and vegetables.

“Yeah.” I muttered. “Me too.” Agatha didn’t try to make conversation during dinner. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to talk to her. Linda was her spawn. She raised the woman who pawned me off on her. Why the fuck would she want me? What was she getting out of this? Why the fuck was I even here?

We finished dinner in silence and I looked up at the clock that read 6:03. I got up to have a smoke when Agatha said: “Where are you going?”

“Out.” I said, standing up. It was none of her business where the fuck I was going.

“Not before you clean up.” Agatha said in her usual calm tone.

“Excuse me?” I said, challenging her. *I was dragged here I was forced to stay and I had to do the cleaning?*

“I cooked, you clean.” Agatha said.

I stood there staring at her. There was no way in hell I was going to do anything for her.

“You may leave once you’re done cleaning. That’s that.”

I heard the soft thud of Agatha as she walked up the stairs. I waited to hear the door close behind her before walking out of the house and heading outside. I pulled a cigarette out of my pack and lit it. I walked down the street a bit, my phone lit up with another text from Michael: “Pussy.” I rolled my eyes and looked at the time. It was a little after 8. I plugged Michael’s address into my GPS on my phone and it said I was

about 2 minutes away. How fucking ironic. Whatever. As long as I was stuck here I might as well drink some free booze so I followed the GPS to Michael's.

The house was huge. There was a long driveway leading to a barn that was completely lit up. Beside the barn was a three-story house that towered over me. I walked by to see if I could see Michael and sure enough, there he was in the driveway talking to a bunch of guys. I hadn't expected Michael to live in such a big house, but I just met the guy so there wasn't much I knew about him in general. I walked over to Michael and he greeted me with a huge smile.

"Justin!" Michael staggered towards me "Dude you made it!" He walked me into the barn, stood up on some boxes and started yelling: "Guys! Guys! This right here is my new buddy Justin. He's cool." I watched as Michael as he lost his balance and fell of the boxes.

"I'm gonna go get a drink." I shouted over the music.

"You're sheets are pink?" Michael asked.

"No!" I yelled louder "I'm going to get a drink!"

"Oh!" He yelled. "Me too!" We walked over to a table in the corner of the barn where a table of half empty bottles were sitting. Vodka, Tequila, Gin, Rum, Whiskey, soda and water filled the table. It was obvious that he stole it from some sort of liquor cabinet that his parents must have. The shit wasn't cheap. I filled my cup most of the way with El Dorado rum and put a splash of Coke in it.

"C'mon, man!" Michael said "I want to introduce you to the guys!" He walked me over to the group of jocks in their letterman jackets he was with earlier.

“Guys, Justin. Justin, guys.” Michael said proudly like I was a damn football trophy. “Justin here’s a big city boy. He’s from Bahston.”

“A Bahston boy, huh?” A large boy bellowed. “Well what are you doing all the way out here?”

I looked him up and down. He looked like his last brain cell was about to jump ship. “Probably your girlfriend if you manage to find one.” I said. He looked at me and tilted his head in confusion. I guess that last brain cell was gone. The stupid grin on his face quickly faded and I knew that Tyler finally understood what I meant. “You mockin’ me?” He asked, stepping closer to me. “I don’t much like bein’ mocked.” I could barely take him seriously with his thick accent.

“I reckon you don’t.” I said, giving my best southern impression. The dumbass lunged at me, but lost his balance and fell on his face.

“Get outta here, Tyler.” Michael said, standing over him.

“But—“ he said, standing up.

“Out.” Michael said, unwavering. Tyler looked like he was about to say something else, but then just staggered out of the barn. As soon as Tyler was out of sight, Michael started laughing. “Damn. I thought Tyler was about to start throwing punches.”

“The guy seems like he’d knock himself out before hitting anything.” I said.

“Tyler’s dumb as dirt, but he ain’t weak.” Michael chuckled. “He actually got into a shit load of fights over your girl, Rose.”

“He fought her?” I asked, finishing my drink.

“No, he fought over her. When she first quit talkin’. People started realizin’ she was a freak when she began makin’ up stories and he’d fight the people who called her

out on her bullshit. But even he quit believin' her and let her be. But he got suspended more than a few times. Like I said, dumb as dirt." Michael walked over to the booze table.

"Why did she stop talking?" I asked Michael over the music.

"Nobody knows. There's a ton of stories about it but there aint nobody who knows for sure. She just stopped talkin' one day. Fucking freak. Why do you care?"

"I don't. It's just the only interesting thing I've heard about this hick town."

"Shots?" He asked, handing me a bottle of vodka. I took it and began to drink.

The rest of the night was a blur of booze and people. I didn't care to remember their names or what they said, I just stood there and nodded as one guy told me about his cheating backstabbing girlfriend. I drunkenly pretended to care while another dumb jock told me about his fifth touchdown. The people blurred, the lights blurred, everything about the night began to blur. Eventually people started to leave and I staggered out of the barn and back to Agatha's.

I stumbled on the sidewalk and couldn't walk in a straight line if my life depended on it. Fucking Linda. Fucking Tim. Fucking Meredith. Nothing about being there was fair. I thought about just walking past Agatha's house, just continuing to walk I opened the door and saw her in the living room on the couch.

"Dishes." She said, not turning away from the T.V.

"Fuck off." I replied, as I struggled to walk up the stairs.

"Excuse me?" Agatha said, definitely more stern than I had ever heard her talk.

Shit.

"Nothing." I muttered, as I continued to try to make it upstairs.

“Justin...” Agatha’s voice trailed off. I waited for her to keep yapping at me, but she didn’t.

“Agatha...”

“Justin. Can you come here for a minute?” Agatha’s voice was softer. I was definitely about to get a beating from the old bag. I slowly made my way over to her and stopped far enough so that she couldn’t reach me. “Well come on I won’t bite.” Agatha said, tapping the seat beside her on the couch.

“What?” I said, sitting down slowly.

“Please don’t talk to me like that anymore. When I asked your mother to bring you here I—”

“Wait what?” I interrupted “*You* asked for me to come here?”

“Your mother didn’t tell you?” Agatha asked. I shook my head, Linda never really told me anything.

“I’m sorry,” I looked downward “I didn’t know. I thought Linda sent me here because of what happened.”

“I don’t know what happened, and I won’t make you tell me, especially not while you’re drunk. If you ever want to tell me soberly, I’ll listen but right now I can tell you why I asked to take care of you, if you’d like.” I nodded subtly, so Agatha continued. “Linda called me, crying. She said that Tim was going to leave her and then she’d be stuck with just you—her words, not mine. She was saying how miserable she’d be without Tim...” There was a brief pause and Agatha was about to continue, but I stopped her.

“But she wouldn’t be miserable without me...”

Agatha raised her hand quickly and I backed away. She looked at me, confused for a moment, but then she seemed to get it.

“I won’t hurt you.” She said softly.

“Thank you.” I muttered.

“Go upstairs, I’ll bring you some water and Aspirin on my way up later.” Agatha said.

“Goodnight.” I said, as I staggered up the stairs.

3.

Shit. I thought to myself as I tried to open my eyes the next morning. The light felt like daggers digging into my scalp. I slowly managed my way out of bed and found Aspirin and water beside my bed. Agatha might not be so bad after all I thought to myself as I took the Aspirin. My stomach growled so I went downstairs to see if Agatha made breakfast. Nothing was out, but Agatha must have had some cereal or something so I started looking everywhere. I opened every cabinet and found Agatha’s pills but no cereal. Too bad none of the pills would help with a hangover or I would have just eaten those. But I did steal some old oxy, she probably wouldn’t even notice. I looked over at the fridge to find a note from Agatha: *Went out to run some errands and go grocery shopping. Love, Agatha.* “Love” I scoffed to myself. She might not be the worst, but she still didn’t love me. She didn’t even know me. I opened the fridge to find a couple of apples and an almost empty bottle of orange juice. “FUCK” I yelled, making my damn headache worse. She couldn’t even bother to make sure I had food for breakfast. My stomach rumbled again and I started to feel nauseous. If I didn’t eat soon I was gonna puke so I grabbed my wallet and walked out the door.

I walked downtown without really paying attention to anything or anyone, I felt like death. People kept smiling at me and I just wanted to tell them to fuck off or to make them feel how I felt. I finally got to Mickey's and was greeted by that same old man with the same happy smile. "Welcome back, son." He greeted me. I grunted in his direction and looked around. I found chips, cookies, ice cream, snacks, and finally cereal and other breakfast food. After a while, I decided on a bagel with cream cheese and some orange juice because they didn't have Lucky Charms. I headed over to the counter, but the old man had left to help some customers with some shit. I pulled out my wallet and saw the nickel that the old man gave me yesterday, my fake ID, and some gift cards to some dumb stores like GameStop and shit, not that I needed it anymore. Tim had tossed my Xbox and all my other gaming systems. Asshole. I looked through my pockets, and found some lint. Shit. I turned to the old man who still had his back toward me so I stuffed the bagel and orange juice into my pocket and hurried out the door.

"Wait!" A voice chased after me. "Hold on there a sec, son!" I started to run, but tripped over my shoelaces. I tried to keep running, but the old man was faster than he looked. Fuck. "Son, I don't recall you payin' for that today."

"And I don't recall you paying enough attention to cash me out." I replied.

"Look, we can do this the easy way or the hard way, which one will it be?" He said, holding out his hand to take the bagel from me. I began to hand it to him, but quickly took a bite of it before he could grab it.

"My grandmother didn't feed me and I have no cash. Do you really want to see me starve?" I said, taking another bite of the bagel.

“Oh,” the old man said, sitting down beside me “so you never eat? Your grandmother never feeds you?”

“I didn’t say that.” I said “I—”

“No” the old man interrupted me “but you said you were gonna starve, so it must be pretty serious.”

“Look Agatha went out to get food but I just needed something now, so can you lay off?”

“Agatha?” the old man said “Agatha Prince.”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Me and Aggie go way back. I haven’t heard from her in ages. It would be a real shame to have to tell her that her grandson is goin’ to jail for a bit because he was a tad impatient and stole a bagel.”

“What?” I said, taking the bagel away from my face. “It’s just a bagel, man. I don’t think we need to get the cops for it.”

“You stole my bagel, son. I have to report it. If everyone stole bagels and orange juice, think of how much money I’d lose...”

“Listen, man. I don’t want any trouble.”

He looked at me for a bit and finally said: “Well, I could use some help around the shop. Aggie would never have to find out and no cops would get involved.”

“Look man, I’m going back to Boston in a few days.”

“So? Work for me for a few hours. I’ll get a little extra help before the school year starts up and I’ll even pay you once you work off payment for the bagel. So whaddaya say, son?”

This old crock must be off his damn rocker if he thought I was gonna work for him. No fucking way.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.” I said as I stood up and walked away, keeping my damn bagel.

“Stop by tomorrow at 8!!” He yelled after me.

I kept eating my bagel as I found a bench to sit at. I looked around and for the first time really saw the shithole I was in. Seemed like Meredith was the type of town where people went after they were done living. There was no nightlife here, no nothing. Just families and old people; that was it. I looked around and saw a familiar blonde sitting under a tree.

“Hey,” I said, walking over to her. “Rose, right?”

She just stared at me.

“I saw you the other day outside Mickey’s. I was with Michael, remember?”

She still stared. This bitch really wasn’t gonna talk to me?

“Uh ok then. Well good talk.” I said, walking away, but I turned around before I could get very far. “What’s your deal?” I stood over her. “You just don’t talk? You sit there and listen and you never actually say a fucking word?! Pathetic.” Rose stood up, looked me square in the eyes, and smacked me across the face; and believe me, this bitch could really pack a punch. I wanted to hit her back, I wanted to show her what it felt like to be smacked around, to know that the person hitting you only wanted to make each slap hurt worse than the last. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t be Tim, no matter how much I thought this bitch deserved it. So I let out a heavy sigh and just walked away.

I looked down at my phone and debated texting someone from back home, but none of those assholes have texted me since I was dropped here. Fuck them. Not even my damn girlfriend called me. I pulled her up in my phone and decided to send her a text: “We’re done.” I put my phone back in my pocket and waited for a response, not that I actually expected one. If she had wanted to call me or text me she would have. Clearly that bitch didn’t care. I was a little upset that it ended—the sex was pretty damn good, but she was so fucking dumb. Every time she opened her mouth I just wanted to tell her to shut the fuck up. So I guess it was for the best. I’d find another fuck buddy when I got back, it shouldn’t be too hard, I knew most of the sluts in Boston anyway. I looked back at Rose and thought to myself: “If I’m stuck here I might as well have a little fun...”

“Mind if I sit with you?” I said as I walked back over to Rose. She looked up at me and looked back down at her book.

“What are you reading?” She showed me her book, *Romeo and Juliet*. “God I fucking hate that play. I had to read it a few years ago for school.”

Rose looked up at me. “What?” I said “Yes. I know how to read. I actually used to like to read, but that doesn’t change the fact that the play is the dumbest fucking thing I’ve ever read.”

Rose kept reading.

“Look. If you want a good book try reading anything by Stephen King. Now he is a good author, way better than Shakespeare, anyway.”

She still kept reading.

“Thinner is the best, I think. Try reading that, trust me it’s way better than the shit you’re reading.”

She looked up at me and slammed her book closed.

“That’s your favorite book, isn’t it…” I said. She shook her head no and reached into her bag. Rose pulled out a piece of paper that read: “Summer Reading List AP Literature” and right at the top was Romeo and Juliet.

“Oh.” I said “Schools really need to pick better books. What are you supposed to learn from this shit? That it’s okay to disobey your parents, meet someone, and kill yourself to be with them three fucking days later? That’s bullshit. They were fucking kids who barely knew each other. Dumbasses.”

Rose looked at me with her blue eyes. She never smiled though. Not once. I jumped at the ding from my phone. I looked down to see that the girl from back home had answered. Now she decides to care enough to send me a text. I opened it and it read: “Whatever. Chris is way better than you anyway.” I threw my phone against the grass.

That fucking slut! Chris was my best friend from back home and as soon as I leave he decides it’s a great fucking idea to screw the girl I had been seeing? I hadn’t even been gone for a fucking week! What a dick. I stood up, got my phone, and stormed off.

“I’ll see you around.” I said to Rose as I ran off. How could my fucking friend do that to me? Didn’t the fucker know I ‘d be back? I looked at my phone and decided to text Chris. “Enjoy my sloppy seconds, fucker.” Who needed him anyway? The more I thought about it, the more pissed off I got. I ran to Agatha’s and slammed the door to my room behind me. I reached into my drawer and found the pills I stole yesterday. I popped one, then another, then another. Finally, I started to calm down. I sat on the bed and

thought to myself: “Who needs them. Not me. I don’t need anybody.” I laid down on the bed and quickly passed out.

I woke up a few hours later and walked downstairs. Agatha was sitting in her usual chair watching TV.

“Justin.” Agatha said calmly. “Dishes.”

I glared at her.

“Now.” She said, not turning away from the TV. I growled under my breath and walked into the kitchen. I looked around for the dishwasher but didn’t see one.

“Where’s the dishwasher?” I asked.

“I don’t have one. The dish soap is under the sink and the drying rack is beside it.”

I rolled my eyes and turned the water on. I reached under the sink for the soap and a sponge and started to wash the dishes. I looked out the window above the sink at a swing set in Agatha’s backyard. It was pretty close to the beach, but I didn’t think Agatha had any young grandchildren. A flap of paper in the window caught my eye. It was another picture of the baby that I saw in Agatha’s living room. I picked it up and turned it over. *Billy, my little angel*, it read. What the fuck happened to Billy? I quickly put the picture back in the corner of the window when I heard Agatha stand up. She walked into the kitchen and pulled a carton of milk out of the fridge.

“Who’s Billy?” I asked, turning to Agatha.

She stopped dead in her tracks. “Pardon?”

“Billy, who is he?”

“Someone very special to me.” Agatha said, looking down.

“I mean, you have pictures of him in your living room and now in the kitchen window. Do you have a son?”

“I did, yes.” Agatha said, turning to me “He died with my husband in a car crash a few weeks after your mother was born.”

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry, I had no idea.”

“Thank you, but it was a long time ago.”

“Linda never mentioned having a brother, she never even mentioned her father.”

“I’m not surprised. She was so young when he died, and he didn’t leave on good terms.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was leaving me when he got in the crash. We were having a custody battle over Billy and Linda. He got drunk and stormed off with Billy, that was the last time I saw them. Arthur, your grandfather, didn’t even make it down the street. He hit a tree and that was it. Him and my little Billy were pronounced DOA.” Agatha wiped a tear from her cheek. I didn’t know what to say or do. I suddenly felt bad for Linda; that must have been hard for her. I looked at Agatha who turned away from me. It was obvious that she was upset by talking about Billy, but I was never any good at comforting people.

“I got a job today.” I said, changing the subject.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. At Mickey’s, I figured I should do something while I’m here.”

“He’s such a sweet man, giving you a job. I think he has a daughter your age too, maybe you’ll have a few classes together.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when you start back up at school.”

“What about it? I’m sure I’ll be back in Boston by the time school starts back up.”

“Justin...”

“What? Linda will call and I’ll be back by Sunday, school starts Monday.”

“Justin...”

“What?”

“Linda enrolled you in school here before she dropped you off.”

So it was official, Linda really didn’t want me back. I was stuck here.

“I’m sorry, Justin. I thought you knew.”

“No, I didn’t.” I turned back to the dishes and started washing them again.

“I ordered pizza for dinner, so hopefully that will cheer you up a bit.”

“Thanks.”

I finished the dishes as fast as I could and went back upstairs. I just wanted to be alone. I didn’t even know why I was so fucking upset, it’s not like Linda was ever there for me. At least Agatha seemed to care, but it still sucked. First my dad fucking offs himself when I was three and now even my own mother didn’t want me. Whatever. Who needed Linda. Not me. She can go and live her life with the wonderful asshole she picked out for herself. I hoped Tim would leave her while I was in Boston, but they fucking deserved each other. *The Asshole and the Bitch* it could be the next great fucking Disney movie or something. Fuck them. Fuck this. Fuck.

I stayed in my room until I heard the doorbell ring for pizza. I trudged down the stairs and sat at the dining room table.

“We can eat in the living room tonight, if you’d like.” Agatha said from the kitchen.

“Ok.”

“I don’t usually allow it, so don’t get used to it.”

I sat down at the couch in front of the television and Agatha brought the pizza box in.

In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous.

In New York City the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are part of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories.

“Do you like SVU?” Agatha asked as she sat down. “I can change it, if you’d like.”

“No, that’s ok. I like this show.”

“See? Looks like we have something in common already.” Agatha smiled at me.

“Yeah, I guess.” I watched the TV mindlessly as Agatha and I ate in silence. I still didn’t really know what to say to her. I finished my pizza and started to go upstairs, but I stopped.

“Thank you.” I said to Agatha.

“Pardon?”

“Thank you for taking me in.”

“You’re welcome, Justin.”

“Goodnight, Agatha.”

“Sweet dreams.”

I set my alarm for 7am the next day. I wasn't sure what Mickey would do if I was late on the first day and if I was stuck in Meredith for longer than a week I really did need a job.

4.

I didn't really sleep much that night. I was still fuming from finding out Linda really wasn't gonna take me back. I think it was around 4am when I finally popped a couple Oxys and fell asleep. I wasn't asleep long though, because just 3 fucking hours later my alarm was blaring, yelling at me to get my ass out of bed. I rolled out of bed, threw some clothes on, and walked to Mickey's. I was around 15 minutes early so I pulled out a cigarette and lit up. "Breakfast of champions, amirght?" I thought to myself.

The old man walked up to me as I was finishing my cigarette and opened the door.

"What's your name, anyway?" I asked him.

"Mickey."

"What a shock." I said as I rolled my eyes. "I'm Justin."

"Well Justin, it's nice to officially meet you. Step inside and I'll show you around."

We walked in and Mickey showed me each aisle and how it was organized. Chips were organized by brand, toiletries were organized by type, medicine was organized by type and so on. I was pretty sure a trained monkey could figure it out.

"So all I need you to do today is put those boxes on the shelves." Mickey said as he pointed to a stack of boxes in the corner. "It shouldn't take you too long. If you start now you'll be out by noon."

“When do I get paid?”

“Monday of next week.”

“Super.”

Mickey went into the back and I started unloading each box. They weren't overly heavy but it was definitely tedious and boring. I was stocking some chips when I saw Rose come into the store. She was looking at the candy when I was about to walk over to her. But instead I saw Michael walk in after her and start talking to her.

I listened to Michael talk to Rose, but she seemed uninterested with him.

“Hey there.” Michael said with a crooked smile. The same smile that I used to make all the girls back home swoon. Michael winked at her and began to stroke her arm. She pulled away as soon as his hand touched her and slapped him across his face. Hard.

“What the fuck?!” Michael yelled at her. No answer. “Seriously, bitch why the fuck did you do that?! Answer me, dammit!” He waited for a response but instead she just stared at him; hatred and fury burning in her big blue eyes.

“Hey man, that wasn't cool.” I said as I ran over to the two of them; Michael was still rubbing the side of his face.

“What, that? Oh c'mon, Justin don't go defending her. She's the town freak. She stopped talking like 3 years ago and nobody knows why. I'm guessing she has some major daddy issues if you know what I mean.” He glared at Rose who stood her ground.

“C'mon, why'd you do that? You fuck with her a lot?” I asked.

“Yeah, the ones with daddy issues are always a fun time” Michael said, nudging me in the side. “Plus, she used to do much more than just talk with her mouth.”

“Oh really?” I said “And how would you know? You got some of your own?”

Michael glared at me. “I meant that bitch. But I don’t kiss and tell.”

“Bullshit.” I said, stepping closer to Michael.

“Don’t think that the slut will just open her legs because you defended her. But hey, if you wanna try and get her to open up, be my guest.”

Rose and I watched as Michael started walking out of Mickey’s. Rose’s eyes were glossy, but she didn’t shed a tear. But instead of leaving, Michael turned around and said: “Oh c’mon babe, if you’re not gonna talk you could at least do *something* with that mouth of yours.” Rose spun around like a damn tornado stormed over to him and kneed Michael—right in the dick.

“You gonna be a dick, boy?” Tim’s voice rang in my ears “You gonna lose a dick, boy.” I watched as Michael curled over in pain and stumbled out of the store.

I turned to Rose. “Are you ok?”

She just stared at me and sat down in the middle of the aisle.

“Look, that guy is a rich prick, that’s all. I’ve seen so many guys like him back home, he’s all talk. Trust me.” Rose looked at me for a second before burying her face in her knees. I sat down beside her.

“Rose, I had someone like that back home in Boston and it sucks. But he’s just gonna keep doing it until you stand up to him.”

She kept her face buried.

“Just talk, then maybe he’ll stop.” She shook her head in her knees. “You don’t know that. Are you really not even willing to try?” She nodded and then put her head on my shoulder. I felt uncomfortable, I really had no clue what to do or say to make her stop

crying and now she had her head on my shoulder. I wanted to nudge her off of me, but I couldn't.

"If he talks to you again, I'll beat the shit out of him." I murmured.

I sat there with Rose for about 10 minutes before she calmed down and stood up. I got up and said: "I better get back to work before Mickey fires me on my first day."

Rose looked at me, and then picked up a pack of Peanut M&M's.

"Mickey!" I shouted. "You have a customer." Mickey walked out of the back and ran over to Rose.

"Did he say something again, hunny?" Mickey asked as he hugged her tightly.

Rose nodded. "We have to go to the police. You have to tell them about the harassment."

"You know each other?" I asked "Small town, everyone knows everyone type of deal?"

"Rose is my daughter." Mickey said, letting go of her. "Did he hurt you?"

Rose shook her head no.

"Are you talking about Michael?"

"Yes. He's been harassing my poor Rose since she stopped talking. Probably because she's an easy target. It's not like she's going to run off and tell anyone what he's been doing." Mickey turned to Rose and said: "Why don't you wait outside, sweetheart. I'll give you a ride home." Rose nodded as she took her candy and left.

"So do you know why she stopped talking?" I asked Mickey.

"No, I've been trying to get her to talk for years, but I don't think I'll ever hear my babygirl's voice again."

I didn't know what to say.

“I’m gonna go back to putting these chips away. I can watch the store while you’re gone.”

“No, that’s okay it’s just about noon anyway. I’ll just shut down for the day.”

“But I didn’t finish.”

“I figured you’d be done with this place by now. After all, it’s just a small town shop, nothin’ much to it. But if you’re really lookin’ to come back, I could always use the help. You’d have some cash, I’d have some help. We both win.”

“You’re alright, Mickey. Thanks for the job.”

“So I’ll see you tomorrow at 8?” He asked.

“See you tomorrow.” I said, walking out.

I saw Rose sitting beside the building eating her M&M’s and wanted to say something to her, but I didn’t know what. I watched as she reached into her bag and pulled out an old book: *Thinner* by Stephen King. I was about to go over to her when my phone started ringing.

“Hello?”

“Justin? It’s Agatha.”

“Oh, hey. What’s up?”

“I figured you might be getting out of work soon and wanted to know if you wanted to go back to school shopping. I wasn’t sure if you brought any school supplies from home.”

“No. I didn’t bring any.” I said, I thought I would be back in Boston by tomorrow.

“I’ll pick you up outside of Mickey’s then. I should be there in around 10 minutes.”

“Ok. I’ll see you then.” I said as I hung up the phone. I turned to talk to Rose for a minute, but she was gone. I pulled out a cigarette, I was starting to run low. Great. I had no money for more cigarettes. I lit up and inhaled deeply. The taste was soothing to me. I looked around and saw the same faces that I’ve been seeing for days. Same kids, same dogs, same families, nothing seemed to change in this town. I finished my cigarette as Agatha pulled up in her old Toyota. I snuffed my cigarette on the sidewalk and got in.

“So, where are we going?” I asked.

“What do you need?”

“Everything. Linda and Tim gave all my stuff away before I came here. They only left me some clothes in a bag.”

“Well, then we better get started.” Agatha said as she drove down the street. We stopped at a small plaza down the street from Mickey’s. There was a bookstore and a clothing store here. I followed Agatha into the clothing store.

“Good afternoon, Aggie!” The store clerk greeted us with a smile. “And who might this young man be?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Hello Connie! This young man is my grandson, Justin. He’ll be staying with me for a while to keep me company.”

“What a peach!” Connie exclaimed.

I looked at Agatha who winked at me with a smile.

“Can I help you find anythin’?”

“Oh no, dear. We’re all set, but if we need anything I’ll holler.” Agatha said.

“Well alright then!” Connie said with a smile as she walked away. Agatha led me over to the guy’s section of the small store and we started to look around.

“Damn.” I muttered to Agatha “Does her face ever get tired from smiling like that?”

“Connie?” Agatha asked “I’ve never seen her frown a day in her life.”

“Oh.”

“Between you and me, I think her face might be frozen like that.”

I chuckled. Agatha could be pretty ok, I guess.

“Are you nervous?” Agatha asked, looking at some shirts on a rack.

“Nervous?” I asked.

“For school. New town, new people, new friends.”

I scoffed. “No. I figured I’m here for a year, tops. I graduate in May and then I can go off to college.”

“A year with no friends can get pretty lonely.”

“17 years with no family can too...” I said “I think I can manage. Plus, I already met someone so what else do I need?”

“That Michael fellow?”

“How did you know about Michael?”

“It’s a small town, people talk. I had heard about his party the night you went out, and I wasn’t born yesterday. Clearly.”

I chuckled again. “You’re pretty funny, Agatha. I’ll give you that. But no, Michael’s kind of a dick. I was talking about Rose.”

“Rose who?”

“I don’t know her last name. I just know she doesn’t talk.” I said, trying to stop talking. I was never really much for talking about friends or anything. I was never much for talking in general. Maybe that’s how Rose felt before she stopped talking, maybe that’s why she stopped talking. Maybe she had nothing to say.

“No.” Agatha said firmly “You let that girl be.”

“Look—I”

“No buts. That there girl’s been through hell and back and I’ll be damned if anything else happens to her.”

“But—”

“I said no buts. I have very few rules and that’s one. Stay away from Rose.”

“Fine.” I sighed with no intentions to actually stay away from her. “Will you at least tell me why she stopped talking?”

“I don’t know why she stopped talking, but even if I knew I wouldn’t tell you. It’s her business, not mine.”

“Then how do you know she’s been through hell and back?”

“Because she was the sweetest girl, she had a lot of friends and she was always laughing. You don’t just up and give that away overnight because nothing happened.”

Maybe I was wrong about Rose. Maybe she didn’t stop talking because she had nothing to say. Maybe she had something to say, but nobody would listen.

“Now, if we could drop it that would be preferable. I don’t much like talking about anything that’s not my business.” Agatha said, looking down.

“Were you two close?”

“I said drop it.”

“You just seem protective over her, so I was just wondering...”

“Yes. She would come by the Senior Center downtown and help with the activities, over the years we started talking and she’s like a granddaughter to me. When she stopped talking she stopped volunteering. I haven’t seen her there in three years. Now I’m serious, Justin. Drop it.”

I wanted to ask more, but from Agatha’s tone, she wasn’t kidding. What the fuck happened to her? Not even her own father knew why she stopped talking and the girl was being fucking harassed for it. There had to be someone else that fucking knew, there just had to.

“How’s this shirt?” Agatha said, pulling a black V-neck shirt from the rack, clearly trying to change the subject.

“It’s fine.” I said, taking the shirt. I almost forgot how much I hated clothing shopping. Linda rarely took me, but I never complained until the bottoms of my shoes had holes in them and I absolutely needed a new pair. Even then, though, Linda would yell at me for “wasting money” or “going through shoes like it was my damn job”. She’d get even more mad when I’d remind her that I hadn’t gotten new shoes in years, but it was better to listen to Linda than letting Tim find out. The one time I went to Tim for new shoes, he beat me with my old pair and then threw them out. I had no shoes for like a week when I was in fourth grade until Linda finally noticed and bought a pair that was way too big because “I’d grow into them”. I never did, instead I tripped while running around during recess and broke my left foot. God, I still remember what Linda said to the doctor when he asked how I got hurt.

“Oh my silly boy” she said while laughing “he must have run out of the house in his father’s shoes again. That boy looks up to his father so much you know!”

“Yeah sport?” The doctor said, looking at me “You want to be like your old man when you grow up?”

I looked at Linda who was staring at me. Even at just 9 years old I knew that I better keep my mouth shut if I knew what was good for me, Linda didn’t look like she’d be very forgiving if I told the doctor what really happened.

“People are always talking about filling my dad’s shoes. How was I supposed to know I wasn’t supposed to wear them?” I said. The doctor and Linda laughed, I sank back into the bed that they had me on. Linda had just met Tim at the time, and I already knew that he was a piece of shit.

“Justin?” Agatha asked.

“Huh?” I said, looking at her absentmindedly, clearly she had been trying to get my attention.

“Is there anything else you need?”

I looked down at my hands, they were filled with new clothes that Agatha said she’d buy for me. I looked down at my feet and back up at Agatha. “Can I get some new shoes?”

“Of course.” Agatha said to me as we started walking towards the shoes. I picked out a pair of black sneakers and we headed out of the store.

“How about some food?” Agatha asked me as we were putting the new clothes in the car. I looked at the time that read 2:36 and I was hungry, I hadn’t gotten a chance to eat after I got out of Mickey’s.

“Uh yeah, sure. That would be great.” I said to Agatha. I still couldn’t get past the fact that Linda was her spawn, but Agatha didn’t seem like the worst person ever.

“Great. There’s a small diner right beside the clothing shop, we can get a quick bite there.”

We finished putting everything in the car and walked into Sally’s Diner right beside the shop we were in like Agatha had said.

“Wow, wonder who owns this shop.” I said under my breath sarcastically.

“Oh you’ll meet him, I think he’s working today.” Agatha said.

“He?”

“Oh yes, Doug is such a nice guy, really cares about his customers and always smilin’ and such.”

“So Sally, doesn’t own ‘Sally’s Diner’?”

“Oh no, dear. Sally was his wife. It was always her dream to own a diner like this one day. Not too long after she passed, Doug opened the diner up and named it after her.”

“Oh.”

“Everyone has a past, Justin. But that’s not what makes us who we are. It’s how we choose to move forward that really defines us.”

“Well sometimes, we can’t really move away from the past, Agatha.”

“Are you talkin’ about yourself? Because it seems to me that in only a couple days away from your past you’ve seemed to change a bit.”

“Only because I don’t have to deal with Linda and Tim right now.”

“Ok.”

I looked over the menu that had been put in front of me by the host. The food here didn't seem terrible, it reminded me of how I pictured the fifties. The whole diner did. The bright red booths against the white and blue-checkered walls were clearly taken out of the fifties. There was a "bar" that just served smoothies and shakes that anyone could sit at. The tables had white tops but were shiny and silver around the edges, just like the chairs. The menu was basically just burgers and shakes. I ended up deciding on a BBQ bacon burger with a chocolate shake. I looked around the place more at the pictures around the walls and the jukebox in the corner, everything seemed so authentic.

"So Doug liked the fifties then?"

"Pardon?"

"The whole diner seems like it was taken out of the fifties."

"That's when Dough and Sally met. They were two peas in a pod."

"You knew Sally?"

"Knew her? I babysat her! When you live in a town this small for so long you get to know everybody."

"Yeah, everyone knows everything about everyone else. Not exactly a comforting thought when you think about it, Agatha."

"That's what your mother thought when she left here."

"I am nothing like Linda."

"I'm not saying you are. I'm just saying that sometimes knowing another person isn't always so bad. Friends know friends and that friendship can grow and expand to other people, now we're a town of friends. That's how I see it, anyway. Plus, wouldn't it

be nice to know that a person is a nice person before inviting them to be a part of your family?”

I knew Agatha was referring to Tim. It would have been better for everyone if Linda had known right away that he was such an ass.

“I mean look at your father” Agatha continued “it would have saved your mother so much time and energy if—“

“Tim is *not* my father.” I snapped.

“I wasn’t referring to Tim, dear.” Agatha said, looking at me. “Justin, how much do you know about your father?”

“Not much. Linda just told me that he was a great guy who offed himself because I was born. I think that’s why she hates me so much too. It’s my fault that he’s dead.”

“I see.” Agatha said calmly. “Justin, do you really think that a nice guy would leave his wife and child alone? Do you really think that he killed himself because you were born? Your father was a miserable man, far worse than Tim, from what I understand.”

“How so?”

Agatha looked around and whispered: “Now is not the time or the place to have this discussion. We can talk more about it later at home.”

What was the big deal about my father? Was he really not the genuinely amazing guy that Linda had said he was? Why wouldn’t Linda tell me more about him here? My thoughts were interrupted by the waitress handing me my burger and fries.

“Ketchup?” She asked.

“Uh do you have honey mustard?”

“Sure do! And what about you ma’am? Will you be needin’ anything?”

“I would love some ketchup if you have it.” Agatha said with a smile. The waitress left and came right back with our condiments. I bit into my burger dripping with BBQ sauce and piled high with lettuce and tomatoes. The meat was juicy and warm, the burger juices mixed with the BBQ sauce perfectly and the bacon had a nice crunch to it that really completed the burger. The bun was slightly toasted, but it was still soft.

“This is the best burger I’ve ever had.” I told Agatha in between mouthfuls.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Agatha said, smiling.

“How’s your burger?” I asked her.

“It’s delicious, thank you.”

I think it took me maybe a minute or two to finish my entire burger and all of the fries. I looked up and saw ketchup dripping from Agatha’s chin and couldn’t help but laugh.

“What is it, dear?” Agatha asked me. I pointed to my chin and Agatha clearly got my message because she quickly wiped the glob of ketchup off of her chin.

“You got it.” I said, while still laughing to myself. I don’t even know why it was so fucking funny but I couldn’t stop laughing. Even Agatha started to laugh a little. I hadn’t laughed like that in a while, but I didn’t trust it. Nothing in my life ever stayed good. Nothing. I sat there, staring at an empty plate, wondering when my life will go back to shit.

“Justin?” Agatha asked, touching my hand, but I pulled it away.

“Yeah?”

“C’mon. It’s time to go.”

Agatha put some money on the table and we walked out. I looked at her while we walked to the car, her face was wrinkled with worry.

“Are you ok, Agatha?” I asked “You look worried.”

“You want to know about your father, right?”

“I told you, Linda already told me about him. I don’t need to know anything else.”

“You deserve to know the truth, Justin.” Agatha looked down. We got into her old Buick in complete silence. Agatha turned the radio on and we drove home to “Livin’ on a Prayer” by Bon Jovi. It was one of my favorite songs, I had always dreamed of being the dude in the song, the one who took the Midnight Train. I didn’t care where it would take me, I just wanted it to take me somewhere I’d be happy. I looked out the window at the storm clouds forming in the sky. The thunder rumbled in the distance. I loved thunder. It would always drown out Tim back home, so all I could hear was the storm. It was the one time I could be at home and have everything seem ok, it was almost like Tim wasn’t even there when the thunder rumbled. As we pulled into the driveway, I looked at Agatha and said: “You don’t have to tell me about him. Really. I don’t want to know any more about him.”

“Justin” Agatha sighed “You’ll want to hear this.”

Neither of us said anything else until we got inside. Agatha put some hot water on the stove and made herself a cup of tea while I put my school supplies away. What did she mean by I’d want to hear about my father? I really had no interest in hearing anything about him. Maybe if I wasn’t the reason he died, I’d be a little more fucking interested in

him. But hey, that's life, right? It didn't take me long to put my stuff away, but when I went back downstairs, Agatha wasn't in the kitchen anymore.

"Agatha?" I called out.

No answer. I walked around the house trying to find her. She wasn't in the living room, she wasn't in the bathroom or in her room. The dining room was also empty.

"Agatha!" I called again.

"Back here, dear." Agatha called from the back porch. I walked over to find two cups of tea on a small wooden table between two large wooden chairs. The screen protected us from the rain that started to pound against the roof. The waves crashed against the shore.

"I like to sit out here sometimes; especially during a good southern storm. The chaos outside makes it seem calm in here, somehow."

"I know what you mean." I said "I love thunder."

"Have a seat, enjoy a hot cup of tea and we'll talk." Agatha said to me, motioning to the blue wooden chair beside her.

"What more do you have to tell me about my father?"

"Other than telling you that he killed himself after you were born, what did Linda tell you?"

"Nothing. I never wanted to know more. I don't even know the guy's name."

"His name was—"

"Stop." I interrupted "I don't want to know his name."

"Your father was not the man that your mother said he was."

"How so?"

“He was a cruel man. Vicious. Spiteful. Your mother and he were high school sweethearts, actually. He was the quarterback and she was the head cheerleader.”

“Pfft.” I scoffed “How fucking cliché.”

“Justin, please.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s alright. Anyway, they met in high school and fell deeply in love. She was a freshman and he was a sophomore when they started dating. I liked the kid, he was clean cut, always had good grades, and he made my daughter happy. What more could I ask for? But Linda started to change during her junior year. Her grades started dropping and she started skipping cheerleading practice. I thought she was just rediscovering herself so I didn’t interfere. I tried to encourage her to start hanging out with her friends more, but she said that, let’s just call him “D”, was all the happiness she needed in her life. That should have raised a red flag, but hindsight is a beautiful thing. I thought my daughter was just blissfully in love and as long as she was still maintaining a steady B average, I wasn’t worried.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Being a parent was hard. Being a single mother was even harder. I worked two jobs so I wasn’t around as much as I should have been and I thought she was fine. Teenage rebellion, not unlike yourself.”

I looked down

“I just thought that everything would work out. But one day, Linda came home with bruises on her face and she was crying. I asked her what happened and she said that she fell hard at cheerleading practice. I was just happy that she was cheering again, it was

what she loved most in life. So I put some ice in a bag and sat with her on the couch. She said that she was fine and was going back out with D after he finished practice. ‘I thought your practices got out at the same time’ I told her. She said that she was let out of practice early after she fell, but something didn’t feel right. I told her that she was staying in tonight to make sure that she was really alright, but she insisted on leaving. When I said no, she smacked me across the face.”

Linda paused and held her hand to her cheek. She looked out at the ocean and sighed.

“You don’t need to tell me more.” I said.

“I do, though. You deserve to know. Now, where was I?”

“Linda was a bitch...”

“No, she wasn’t. She was actually a very sweet girl who met a very bad man. Ah, I remember now. I had sent her to her room after that and she stormed out of the house. I wanted to follow her, but I couldn’t. God, I wish I had followed her. If I had, then maybe she wouldn’t have gone to D’s house that night. Maybe things would be different. Maybe too different. I don’t know.”

“I’ve done the math, I already know how old she was when she had me. That was the night he knocked her up, isn’t it?”

“No, dear. She was already pregnant with you, I just didn’t know yet. But I was about to find out. D drove Linda home not long after she left. He got out of the car and stormed into my house. Linda followed him, begging for him to stop. Begging for him to calm down, but he wouldn’t. He stormed into my house and started screaming at me, telling me what a horrible mother I was for trying to punish ‘poor sweet Linda’. I’ll never

forget the wild look in his eyes, like he was some sort of animal or something. I told him that she just needed to rest because she had a hard fall at practice and she would be able to go out with him the next day. Well, that wasn't good enough for him because he grabbed me by the hair and got real close to me. He whispered: 'that there was no fall and if you keep trying to keep us apart, your face will be so bruised and bloody not even Linda would be able to recognize you'. I looked over at Linda who turned away from me. I pulled away from D and started yelling at him to get out of my house. He said he'd go but he was taking Linda and their baby with them. I hadn't even known that she was pregnant..."

"I'm sorry, Agatha. I had no idea."

"Linda would never speak badly about D. She never even said goodbye when she walked out the door. I tried to stop her, but D grabbed me and shoved me backwards on his way out. I tried to follow them, but it was raining and dark. I lost the car and lost my daughter. I heard from her years later, D had killed himself and she needed help with her 3-year-old toddler. I helped her for a while, until she found a new man and left again. That was the last I had heard from her, I never knew the guy she left with, never knew his name, never even knew that she went to Boston with him."

"Agatha," I asked softly "why did my father off himself?"

She sighed softly and looked at me. "D was a troubled man; a cruel, troubled man. I don't know why he killed himself, nobody will ever really know. But I do know one thing, it was most certainly not your fault. You didn't kill him, he killed himself."

"Then why..."

"Why what? Why did Linda say it was your fault?"

I nodded.

“Again, I don’t know why. But I can only assume that she was so dependent on him and so intertwined with him that she needed a reason. I don’t think she knew why he did it and she needed someone to blame; unfortunately, that someone was an innocent toddler.”

I wanted to say something. I wanted to fucking scream out at the ocean. I just wanted to not be so fucking angry at my father for so long, but now I was angrier than ever. I had thought for 17 years that my father was a good man, but he was fucking worse than Tim. But it wasn’t my father who I was mad at anymore; it was Linda. My father didn’t raise me to believe it was my fault that he wanted to die, my father didn’t even tell Linda why. No note, no goodbye, no nothing. Linda made me believe everything about him, Linda hated me for it, but it was never my fault.

“So why...” I started to ask, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t fucking talk I was so choked up. Agatha just sat there and put her hand on my shoulder. Instead of shrugging it off, I stood up and walked to the door of the porch. I thought about running into the ocean and pulling some Sylvia Plath type shit. I thought about running to the bus station and going back to Boston just to tell Linda what a bitch she is. But I didn’t. Instead, I walked over to Agatha, bent down, and threw my arms around her.

“Thank you.” I said “You’ll never understand what you did for me.”

Agatha and I held each other close and just listened to the storm howling around us.

“I’m gonna go upstairs for a bit.” I told Agatha.

“Alright, dear. I love you.”

“Yeah.” I said with a small smile “Back atcha.”

5.

I left Agatha on the porch and walked into the living room. I saw the pictures of Linda lining the mantle and wondered how Agatha could fucking love her still and put her damn face on display. She was a fucking bitch to Agatha! I could never forgive her for what she'd done to me, let alone what she did to Agatha. I started to shake from the anger and I couldn't stop. I grabbed an umbrella from beside the front door, walked out the front porch and pulled my cigarettes out of my pocket and decided to light up. They were one of the few things that could calm me down when I was this mad. I inhaled the smoke and exhaled slowly over and over and over, but it wasn't helping enough. I had stopped shaking, but I was still so fucking pissed. I put my cigarette out and threw it into the street so that Agatha wouldn't find the butt. I went upstairs and opened my top drawer. After shuffling around for a bit, I finally found the bag with the small white pills in it. I only had 1 Oxy left, so I just popped one and sat down on my bed. The rain pounded against my window and the wind howled outside. I smiled when I heard the thunder rumble loudly, shaking the house. I lay down on the bed and waited for the pills to kick in. I stared at the white ceiling above me and let the anger bubble up in my stomach. I felt like I was gonna fucking explode if I didn't do something so I grabbed my pillow and screamed as loudly as I could into it. I screamed louder and louder into my pillow until I felt the familiar lightheadedness that the pills gave me. My head felt like it was floating and nothing felt real. I closed my eyes and felt like I was leaving my own body before falling asleep. I dreamt of nothing, just darkness. I was just floating around in the dark the entire time, I had no control over my body, no movement, I was just there.

I didn't even have any fucking emotions in the dream, just a blank face staring out. It was fucking creepy. I had never been so relieved to have someone wake me up in my life when I felt Agatha's hands gently shaking me awake.

"Justin," she said "Justin, it's 7am you have to wake up and go to Mickey's now. You said you had to be there by 8."

"Mhm....." I said, drifting in and out of sleep. "Wait." I said bolting upright "I slept all afternoon?"

"I tried to wake you for dinner, but you were out like a light."

"Oh. Thanks for waking me up for work."

"No problem. Get dressed and come downstairs for breakfast. I'll drive you after."

"Ok."

I dragged myself out of bed and threw on some jeans and a black t-shirt. *Next time I pop an Oxy, I really need to remember to only take half* I thought to myself. I walked into the bathroom and brushed my brown hair out of my face. The bedhead was fucking real this morning. After my hair and teeth were brushed I met Agatha in the kitchen.

"Smells good." I said.

"Chocolate chip pancakes, my specialty." Agatha said, flipping a pancake. I had always loved pancakes and they smelled pretty damn good. Agatha brought the plate of pancakes over to the dining room table and had a plate set at either end of the table. I reached into the cabinet and got out the maple syrup then got the carton of orange juice from the fridge and brought them over to the table. Seeing where my plate was, I picked

it up and put it at the seat beside Agatha. I might be stuck here, but she was making it seem like things might actually be ok for once.

I looked over at the clock on the wall and saw that it was starting to get late. I covered my pancakes in maple syrup and shoved them into my mouth as fast as I could.

“Excited to go to work?” Agatha said watching me stuff my face.

“Not really. But the job is easy enough and Mickey leaves me alone. Plus he’s paying me, so it could be worse.” I told her with a mouth full of pancakes and syrup.

“Take your time or you’ll choke.”

“I don’t have time to take.” I said, focusing on the clock.

“Well why don’t I just take you now, then.” Agatha said standing up and getting her keys. I took my plate to the sink and rinsed it for her before following her out the door.

It was just starting to get brighter out as we drove downtown. The trees looked different with the sun shining on them from that angle, kinda like they were glowing or some shit. There were no families outside yet. I just saw a couple walking their dog. We passed the small church in town, it had a full parking lot so I guess there were some people awake this early on a Sunday. I thought back to when I was younger. Linda would take me to church on Christmas Eve when I was younger every year. I remembered that Santa would come at the end and read “The Night Before Christmas” to us and hand out small ornaments as presents. After I was like 6, that was the only present I ever got. I think I had kept them, but Linda probably donated them with the rest of my shit. What a bitch.

We pulled up beside the plaza with Mickey's in it and Agatha told me to have a good day at work. She said that she would be back at noon to pick me up because she would be home anyway today. I thanked her for the ride and went inside. I looked around for Mickey but couldn't find him anywhere. He was probably in the back, so I figured I'd get started on putting the chips and shit away. They were exactly where I had left them so I got to work.

"Good mornin', son" Mickey said to me, coming out of the back around 5 or so minutes later.

"Hey, Mickey." I said, lifting a box and bringing it down the candy aisle. "How's Rose?"

Mickey stopped for a second and looked at me carefully. "Why are you askin' bout her?"

"I dunno. I just saw Michael giving her some shit and wanted to make sure she's ok."

"My daughter is fine, thank you kindly for askin'. But she should be no concern of yours. She's been through somethin' fierce and I don't want her to go through anything more."

"I understand your concern, but I just thought she could use a friend."

"A friend?"

"Yes sir. My plan is to still make my way back home to Boston, but while I'm here I'd like to try to be her friend. There is a lot of shit in life and I've found it can get pretty damn lonely. Maybe she needs a friend."

“I’m akin to thinkin’ you might be right, son. But nothing more, understand? You hurt her and I’ll make you wish you were never born.” Mickey told me. I laughed to myself, Tim had that job, but I got where Mickey was coming from.

“Understood, sir.” I said to him.

“Now get back to work, those boxes aint gonna unpack themselves. Come find me when you’re done.”

“Yes, sir.”

It took longer than I thought to unpack the boxes, but I finally finished around 11. Thank God because I was so tired of putting bags of candy and chips on shelves, it was so fucking boring. It felt like a never-ending stream of gummy worms and Hershey bars. The Sun Chips seemed like they would never fill the shelves. At one point I debated quitting because it was TOO damn boring. And here I thought I’d hate working with other people. Turned out, it was worse to work just by myself.

“Mickey!” I called out, walking out back. “Mickey! I finished putting everything on the shelves. What do you need next?”

“Well it aint too busy today, I could teach you how to work the register.”

“Aint too busy? Mickey, we haven’t had a customer all day.”

“Well folks are down at the church now, but they should be comin’ by soon.”

No sooner did Mickey say that then a person walked through the door.

“See?” He said “Right on time.”

I guess there really is nothing ever changing in this town. People go to the store at the same time, people go to church at the same time, people start their day at the same time. I started to feel trapped by the damn daily routine of this town.

“I’m gonna head outside for a minute. I need some air.” I said to Mickey who smiled at me and nodded towards the door. I walked outside and felt the warm sun. It was a hot summer day and I debated going back inside where at least there was A/C. But I couldn’t I couldn’t trap myself again, at least not until I calmed down. I pulled out my pack of cigarettes and started to smoke. The taste of the mint mixed with tobacco calmed me down. I closed my eyes for a minute and imagined that I was back in Boston. The cars raced by as I took drag after drag. My friends were all calling me over under the Tobin Bridge to have a drink, or 10. Everything was back to normal until I opened my eyes and saw the park across the street from Mickey’s. I was definitely still in Meredith because there were no parks like this in Boston, just Boston Commons and this park was way too small to even try to be like the Commons. This park just had grass and trees, there were no food carts, no ponds, and no people. The Commons always had people there, I’d go there sometimes to people watch when I was younger. Sometimes I would even imagine my life if I lived with some of the couples that walked through holding hands. I would imagine growing up with two parents who loved me, and smiled as I ran around them holding an ice cream or candy. I wished that was what my life could be like, but instead I got to walk home and get beat for not being home, even though I had permission to leave. Or Tim would yell at me to get dinner ready, or just beat me because it wasn’t ready. No matter how great my park-life was, I always went home to anger and misery. Those were just the cards I was dealt.

When I finished my cigarette, I snuffed it on the side of the brick building and went back inside.

“You’re gonna kill yourself with those things y’know.” Mickey told me, clearly smelling the smoke.

“Yeah, ok.” I said walking behind the register. I knew he was right, but I wasn’t about to stop doing the one thing that made me calm in life. It was better than popping pills every day like I did back in Boston. I had debated popping Oxy’s more often here, but I had nowhere to go yet and I couldn’t risk being thrown out by Agatha. Once I had a place to go and get out of this town, I’d probably start again.

“So, how do I work this thing?” I asked Mickey. It took him the rest of my shift to show me all the buttons in the register and to teach me how to ring in produce and everything else that didn’t have a barcode or that needed to be weighed, like the meat. He told me that I’d get a few more shifts of training on the register before being able to do it by myself, which I was pretty happy about. I really didn’t want to fuck up this guys life by screwing up the drawer.

“So, when are you free to work during the school year?” Mickey asked me before I left.

“I can work weekends for you, but I don’t know about the week, yet.”

“Then I’ll see you Saturday at 8. Good luck on your first day tomorrow, kid.”

“Thanks, Mickey.” I said, walking outside. I looked at the park across the street and saw a familiar face. I walked over and remembered that Agatha said she’d pick me up when I was done. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and found her number in my contacts.

“Hello?” Agatha said, answering the phone.

“Hey Agatha, it’s me.”

“Oh, hello Justin. Are you out of work already?”

“Yeah, but I’m all set with a ride. It’s a nice day and I don’t mind the walk.”

“Are you sure, dear? I don’t mind getting you.”

“I’m sure, but thank you.”

“Alright. See you back home, dear. Love you.”

“You too.” I said as I hung up and walked over to Rose. She was leaning against the same tree as yesterday reading *Thinner*.

“Don’t tell me you’re in the same fucking routine as the rest of this town.” I said, standing over her.

She looked up at me confused.

“This town” I said, sitting beside her “it never changes. It’s always the same. The same people going to the same church who go to the same store at the same time after. It’s fucking insane.”

Rose just looked at me and nodded.

“So it’s not just me, then? You’ve noticed it too?”

Rose nodded.

“Thank God, I thought I was going fucking nuts for a second there.” I looked at Rose for a second and continued “I see you’ve branched out from *Romeo and Juliet* there.”

Rose looked down at the book and smiled softly.

“Do you like it?”

She nodded.

“I’m glad. What part are you on?”

Rose handed me the book and I skimmed the page.

“You’re at my favorite part.” I said, handing the book back. “I always wondered what that cherry pie would taste like in real life. Do you think it tasted normal?”

Rose shook her head no.

“So you think the dude had an idea that shit was about to go down?”

Rose nodded.

“That’s pretty fucked up, Rose.” I said as she looked away from me. “But I think you might be right.” We sat there in silence for a little bit, I had no idea what to say to her, and I knew she wouldn’t start any sort of conversation. We just sat there, Rose reading her book and me watching the people start to pass by. Rose tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a couple having a picnic.

“What?” I said to her “You want to have a picnic?”

She shook her head no.

“Do you know them?”

Again, Rose shook her head.

“Do you want me to make up a story about them?”

Rose smiled and nodded her head.

“Well you see, that’s Meg and Pete. They’ve been together for years and Pete thought to have a picnic in the park where they met. But this is no ordinary picnic. Because you see Pete has a surprise in the basket. On the bottom of the basket there’s a bottle of champagne and beside that there’s a small velvet box with a ring in it. Pete’s about to propose.”

Rose smiled.

“But what Pete doesn’t know is that Meg has been having an affair with his twin brother, Paco. So as soon as Pete pulls out the ring Meg will tell him about her affair and their relationship will end in the same place it started.”

Rose looked at me with a blank stare and then back at the couple who began unpacking the basket. We both watched as they pulled out a blanket, some sandwiches, some other containers that I couldn’t make out and finally a bottle of champagne. I looked at Rose who turned to me with a smile. We turned back to the couple just in time to watch the guy pull out a fucking velvet box and get down on one knee. *No. Fucking. Way.* I thought to myself as he opened the box. *This is too fucking ironic. That bitch better say yes. She better not tell some bullshit soap opera story about screwing around with his brother.* I held my breath until the girl squealed and hugged him after he put the ring on her finger. I let out a sigh of relief. That would have been way too creepy for me. I looked at Rose who was looking at me and started laughing hysterically.

“I can’t believe he actually proposed. Who the fuck are those two, anyway?”

Rose shrugged and looked back at her book. All I could think about was what she was thinking. Was she as freaked out as I was about the picnic couple? Did she ever know them? They didn’t look much older than her. Then it hit me. I knew more about that couple than I did Rose.

“How old are you?” I asked, breaking the silence. “18?”

She shook her head and pointed downward.

“Same age as me? 17?”

Still wrong.

“16?”

Bingo.

“So you’re gonna be a junior, then?”

Rose nodded her head yes.

“Interesting. And Mickey’s your dad, what about your mom? Are your parents still together?”

Rose shook her head and looked down.

“Are they divorced?”

Rose shook her head no.

“Did your mother pass away?”

Rose nodded her head yes.

“I’m so sorry. Is that why you stopped talking?”

Rose shook her head no.

“Will you ever tell anyone why?”

Rose looked up at me and sighed as she slowly shook her head no.

“That’s ok. You don’t have to. It’s your life and your story. I just want to understand it. But I get it, I’m the new guy who showed up a few days ago. You don’t know jack shit about me, right?”

Rose reluctantly nodded.

“Thought so. Well I’m just a kid from Boston dropped off here by my mother. Great lady. You’d really love her.” I said sarcastically while rolling my eyes. Rose smiled so I continued on “No. Really. She’s great. Linda lied about my shitty father, dated assholes who couldn’t keep their hands off of me, and then just cast me aside while she’s off with her shitty boyfriend Tim.”

Rose looked at me with her blue eyes as if to say *we're all broken on the inside*. Aint that the truth. We're all just fucking broken puzzles trying to figure out how to put ourselves back together, right? What a great meaning to life. But the truth sucks, almost as bad as life itself.

“Life sucks, amiright?” I said as I looked at Rose and then away.

Surprisingly, she shook her head no.

“What do you mean? I figured you of all people would agree with me. I mean life sucks so bad that you stopped talking. That doesn't happen from a great life.”

Rose looked at me and shrugged.

“You mean to tell me that you think that life is good?”

Rose shook her head no.

“Then you think it's bad?”

Again, she shook her head no.

“God I wish you'd talk, at least you can explain yourself. If it's not good and it's not bad then what is it? Just okay?”

Rose raised her hand and gave a “meh” motion with it.

“I just don't understand how you can't think life sucks. When I was younger I'd sit in Boston Common and imagine what my life would be like if it was good. If life was good and fair and doesn't make mothers blame their fucking sons for their father's suicide WHEN IT WASN'T EVEN HIS FUCKING FAULT. Maybe then I'd be happy. Maybe.” It felt good to vent to someone. To scream out that it wasn't my fault that my father offed himself, Linda just decided to blame me. I looked at Rose who put her hand on my shoulder. I shrugged it off.

“Thanks anyway, but I’m not much for being comforted.”

Rose looked away at the kids who started running around with a dog.

“Do you have a dog?”

She shook her head no.

“I had a dog, back in Boston. Roxy was my golden retriever that Linda got after my father died. But she ‘ran away’ after Tim started dating my mother. I’m still not convinced that he didn’t throw her to a shelter, or worse...”

Rose tried to put her hand on my shoulder again, but I shrugged it off again. I don’t like pity. I never have.

“It’s fine, really. That was a long time ago. But I’ll be back there soon enough, Linda will make me go back even though she’s the one who dumped me here in the first place. Fucking bitch. At least my grandmother was nice enough to take me. She’s not as bad as I thought she’d be. A little on the strict side, but at least she cares.” I stopped for a second and thought about what I had just said. Yeah, Agatha might be strict and annoying sometimes, but at least she does seem to care and at least she’s not lying to me about anything in my life. She even bought me new clothes for school. Why did I want to go back to Boston? To see all of my friends who never bothered to text me? To see my ex who shacked up with my best friend? To give Linda and Tim a big, loving hug and tell them how much I missed them? Fuck no. Maybe Boston didn’t have anything for me anymore. Maybe I could find a new place to go. Yeah, I’d find a new place all my own once I left here. I’d run off and never have to see any of the assholes in my life ever again. I was about to say something, but my phone started ringing.

“Hello?”

“Justin, it’s Agatha. Could you be a doll and pick up some milk on your way back? I forgot to pick some up the other day.”

“I have no money on me, sorry.”

“That’s alright. Just go into Mickey’s and tell him it’s for me. He’ll put it on a tab.”

“Wait, what?”

“I guess you could call it a perk of living in such a small town. Everyone knows everyone and if you owe someone something you pay it back to them. It’s just how things are done here.”

“You’re joking, right? I’ve seen shit like that on television but not in reality.”

“That’s because big cities like Boston can get crazy. But if you could do that for me it would be really helpful.”

“Uh yeah, sure. But if he says no then I have no cash.”

“Alright. Thank you, dear.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

I turned to Rose who had started to read her book again and said “I gotta go. I’ll see you tomorrow in school?”

Rose smiled and nodded at me as I stood up to walk to Mickey’s.

“See you tomorrow.”