

# FIVE STAGES

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This collection is dedicated to my fiancée, Megan Montgomery, for guiding me through my own  
five stages

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## ABSTRACT

### FIVE STAGES

by Paul Anderson

I undertook this project in a rigorous attempt to explore my personal interpretation of the grieving process. The Kubler-Ross model presents us with five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These five stages are meant to constitute the natural human progression through the grieving process. However, I do not necessarily agree that one's grief can always be limited to these five categories, or that the process always occurs in this particular order. Because grief is a complex emotion, my hope with this project is to capture that complexity through the eyes of grieving characters whose actions and reactions are not always on par with the Kubler-Ross model.

I believe, for example, that one does not always experience the denial stage. Some of us first experience an immediate wave of anger, or depression, upon news of loss. Grief, as I have come to understand it, is experienced differently based on the situation (for instance, one reacts differently to news of death than, say, the loss of a job). Also, to further complicate things, as the old cliché goes, everyone is different. No two people react in the same manner. Ultimately, then, this collection is intended to present a complex range of scenarios, characters of varying personalities, and these characters' unpredictable reactions to grief. Perhaps, even, this collection demonstrates a sixth stage of grief: moving on, flavored with just the faintest touch of hope.

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## INTRODUCTION

Because I've dedicated my professional life to the study of literature and creative writing, I've learned how absolutely essential and mandatory it is to read on a daily basis. When I first undertook this thesis project, I was not aware just how much the works of my favorite authors would come to influence my fiction. In truth, I composed three of these five pieces' first drafts before I had ever even heard of Dan Chaon, whom I now consider to be perhaps my greatest influence. However, during the rigorous revision process of these pieces, I found that each of them eventually developed into something far more surprising and satisfying than I had at first envisioned. This is due, in large part, to the close attention I paid to the works of such writers as Chaon, Michael Chabon, Darrin Doyle, John Fante, Kelcey Parker, Thomas Pynchon, and Tom Robbins. Because of this short, exemplary, exclusive list of influences, I was able to successfully develop my thesis collection into something I am proud of—something that I feel stands as my best work to date.

I consider this collection my greatest achievement in fiction mostly because I believe it represents my intent very well. Since I was very young, I have taken a profound interest in the mysterious thing we call the “human condition.” Of course, my interests can be traced to many other ambiguous categories, as well, including love and God among others. But there is something profoundly intriguing about the human condition that appeals to me; something in the array of emotions and states of mind we all experience at various points in our lives that I feel the need to confront in my work. *Five Stages* is my attempt to define this human condition, to put on display our natural struggles to comprehend the sublime, and to hopefully offer resolutions for overcoming grief. Grief, then, because it is one of the human life's most powerful emotions, is one of the overarching themes of this collection.

Each of these five stories deals with grief in a different way. “The Very Best of Things” confronts the grief of a lost love. The narrator’s confusion and inability to accept his girlfriend’s pregnancy leads him to misunderstand the reason for their breakup. Instead of “growing up,” as Penny demands, he thinks that money will solve their problems.

“No Boy,” on the other hand, deals with the grief of a *returned* lover. Drew, the narrator, struggles to overcome the pain of a broken heart, cautiously accepting Julie, his ex-fiancée, into his home once again. He alternates between feelings of euphoria and dread before he finally decides what is best for him.

“Sea Legs” is perhaps the most obvious depiction of grief, as the narrator, Beth, attempts to overcome the pain of losing her mother and father (on separate occasions), while coming to terms with her leukemia diagnosis.

“Settling for Sailboats,” on the other hand, is perhaps the most ambiguous portrayal of grief. The narrator is only partially aware of his emotions and longings, and does not seem to realize the pain his friends are causing him. He has become so accustomed to living without love that he barely recognizes his need for it.

Finally, “Advent,” which is my favorite piece in this collection, deals with the pain of detachment. In an ironic twist, Ron, the narrator, has many reasons to grieve, including the sudden loss of his mother, the absence of his deadbeat father, and the realization that he has grown apart from his twin sister and best friend. However, instead of grieving over any of these, he instead grieves for himself and believes that the only way to overcome detachment is to run away—to detach himself even further.

I consider such things as God, love, and grief as parts of a whole, and I believe this whole is the human condition. In other words, to me, the human condition is the most transcendent of

all of these because it is defined by a vast array of emotions and experiences. Some of these influence us in positive ways, some in negative, and some are complex hybrids of both “good” and “bad.” What I mean is, our lives are not defined by binary oppositions; life is far more complex than that. My hope with *Five Stages*, therefore, is to balance each negative emotion with an equally complex positive emotion. Most often, I attempt to do this by balancing grief with hope.

“Sea Legs” epitomizes this idea by confronting the balance between grief and hope head-on. The perspective character, Beth, is simultaneously dealing with the potential loss of her father, Ed, to cancer, and her own cancer diagnosis. Recognizing that Ed’s illness is terminal, and that his time is short, Beth struggles to keep her cancer diagnosis secret from him in the hopes that she’ll save him some pain. As she battles to maintain composure, using her sarcastic sense of humor to mask her pain, Ed encourages her to hold on to her hope and to trust in God.

Grief, however, is usually more apparent in this collection than hope. Each of my protagonists is caught up in some form of grief or another. Because each of them reacts to grief in different ways, their reactions to hope differ, as well—especially since hope usually counteracts grief in a very subtle manner. Sometimes, even, particular characters are not entirely aware that what they’re feeling is grief, or hope (although they *are* more likely to be cognizant of what upsets them). However, my hope is that readers of *Five Stages* will be able to sense a change in each character, to pick up on each story’s subtle shift in emotion, even if the characters do not always make that shift obvious—and even if the characters are not always aware of their own emotions.

In “Settling for Sailboats,” the unnamed narrator has a faint, implied understanding of his need for love, but he is never quite able to voice it. He senses that his long-time friends are

restricting any potential he has, dragging him down, but he has very little desire to venture out on his own. When he hears a voice that reminds him of a childhood love, he lacks the courage to investigate, instead opting for cigarettes and wasted time with his friends. In the end, he begins to hope for change, but recognizes how distant and unlikely that change might be.

Because I am concerned so much with human emotion, each of these stories is rooted in realism. I believe realism represents humanity better than any other style or fiction genre. However, this collection is flavored with just a pinch of postmodernism, as each character ultimately attempts to comprehend his/her identity through relationships with both other characters and the place they inhabit. Setting plays a large role in this collection because I believe we are affected and molded by our natural surroundings just as much as we are by other people. It is in this way that my work very subtly crosses the line from straight realism into postmodernism—especially since, most often, these pieces do not offer cathartic resolutions to their conflicts. Instead, while I am careful to conclude my stories in logical ways and at appropriate times, I prefer to let my readers decide for themselves what will happen in the future, well beyond what is included within the confines of the page. I believe my style of writing invites this further interpretation, much like, say, Chaon’s and Chabon’s works do. In other words, I want my readers to continue thinking about my stories well after they have finished reading them. Further, I hope my readers feel the need to read my stories again and again. This, I think, would be the ultimate compliment.

Setting plays an enormous role in “Advent,” as the narrator, Ron, struggles to connect with his small-town roots. He is so disconnected from both the place he inhabits and the people in his life, in fact, that he hardly reacts to the tragic death of his mother. He envies his friend, whose name is also Ron, because of his life’s successes, and his travels. The narrator recognizes

that his shortcomings are directly related to his absent father, and eventually realizes that he is very much like his father. Accepting this, as well as his inability to connect with his surroundings, Ron decides—however irrational the decision may be—to leave Michigan forever. However, before heading west to begin a new life, Ron’s father makes an unexpected appearance, causing Ron to question everything he thinks he knows about himself, the place he inhabits, and his father.

Similarly, setting is vital to the success of “Settling for Sailboats,” as the unnamed narrator eventually expresses—or hints at—a desire to leave his hometown in the hopes of discovering a better, more fulfilling life somewhere far away.

While I certainly enjoyed the writing process, *Five Stages* did, however, present me with a number of challenges. Due to its content, I felt it pertinent to leave my comfort zone. In the past, I found it easier to compose stories quickly, in one or two sittings, having done very little research, if any. My revisions were few and far between, as well. But because of my desire to confront the sheer complexity of the human experience, I found my past habits to be lazy and inappropriate for this project. This collection required that I spend long hours both composing and revising—sometimes, even, I found it necessary, although painful, to delete long sections of prose—prose that, in some cases, I liked very much. I also chose to drop my typical omniscient narrator.

While my personal preference usually dictates that I write primarily in third-person, I decided it best, for the purposes of my intent for *Five Stages*, to write exclusively from first-person perspective. I believe this more effectively demonstrates characters’ emotional connections to the worlds they inhabit. I also believe readers will be more likely to understand how each character operates, and why each character reacts to grief (however “big” or “small”

the event that causes that grief is) the way s/he does. However, there are two specific challenges of writing in first-person.

First of all, first-person stories require authors to write in such a way that readers come to know the narrators. In other words, because readers experience the story's world exclusively through the eyes of the narrator—through such a limited perspective—the readers must know what narrators are thinking and how those narrators feel at any given moment. Pulling this off is difficult, especially for a writer like myself, who enjoys presenting images and physical details. There are times when I worry I might be spending too much time on a particular detail, or that I might be presenting a specific detail in a hollow manner. What I mean by “hollow” is presenting that image in such a way that my character is removed from it. Therefore, I believe it is important for my characters to not only describe a particular image or detail, but to also react to it—to give that image or detail relevance.

The second challenge of composing this entire collection in first-person is making sure my narrators are distinguishable from one another. I am very concerned that my narrators' voices are too similar. However, my hope is that readers will be able to distinguish between these characters based on their decidedly very different personalities. In other words, despite the likelihood that most or all of these characters' voices are similar, their diverse reactions to various situations and emotions should be enough for readers to be able to tell them apart.

Drew, the narrator in “No Boy,” is probably my most unique character in that he uses a Tom Robbins novel, *Still Life with Woodpecker*, to gain an understanding of his circumstances. When his ex-fiancée arrives unexpectedly, Drew experiences an array of confusing emotions. To comprehend the situation, and to keep his sanity, he draws parallels between the Robbins novel and his life. As Drew quotes from the novel, he establishes a unique, well-educated voice that

separates him from the other narrators in this collection—and eventually helps him overcome the grief of losing his ex-fiancée yet again.

Obviously, grief is a very important subject for me. Likewise, hope appeals to me, because without hope, we probably would not be able to overcome grief. We would be less likely to move on; we probably would not even *want* to move on. Ultimately, we must accept that bad things happen. Relationships are broken. Loved ones die. These things are inevitable. Each of us is faced with grief in all its diverse forms, and each of us handles it differently. While I clearly have a very specific intention for *Five Stages*, and I certainly hope my readers enjoy my work, the stories in this collection ultimately reflect how grief has affected me at various stages of my life. If my characters' voices are similar, it is because they are all fragments of the person I am. These characters represent a range of emotions and situations that are very specific to my life and experience. These stories are familiar to me—and not just because I wrote them; it is because, in some way, I have lived them. It is for this reason that *Five Stages* is the most important and, in some way, personal thing I have ever written.

## THE VERY BEST OF THINGS

His eyes, although closed tightly, suggested some mysterious pain that must have been as gray as his ratty hair. He never looked up as I walked by, and he didn't seem to care when I didn't bless his open guitar case with the sound of clanking change. He just kept fingering his old guitar and crooning a love song about Halle Berry—a woman so famous he'd almost certainly never met her. The dull nylon strings buzzed subtly from what I presumed to be years of overuse. As an amateur guitarist, I couldn't help but wonder how much difficulty he must have had tuning it.

I imagined him waking early, at dawn every day, and tilting his ear near the old Ibanez's neck, his lonely chocolate eyes examining the faded sunburst finish on the guitar's body as he plucked and tuned each string. I imagined his defeat when he first noticed the instrument's gloss had been worn away, like how everything becomes dull in the moments before a snowstorm. I could picture his moment of realization, his frustration, when the guitar's aged strings could no longer be tuned perfectly. I imagined that frustration growing into despair as his only tool for monetary gain began to fail him, when the case grew perpetually emptier of change.

“Love isn't scary,” he sang, “just as long as I have my Halle, oh, my Halle Berry.”

His voice was raspy, perhaps the result of years of drinking, smoking, and sleeping in the elements. I felt guilty for stereotyping him, however, and began to focus instead on how pleasant he sounded, his voice not unlike John Fogerty's, or Bob Seger's, or even mine. I began to hum Seger's classic, “Beautiful Loser,” as I continued on by.

Penny had once told me I should pursue music. “I love when you sing,” she'd said. “It reminds me of summer. You could make people happy.”

I'd chosen to walk the eight blocks to Penny's house on the city's west side. In fact, most days, walking anywhere was preferable to hailing a cab or taking the subway, depending on distance and weather, of course. I didn't own a car for the same reason I avoided taxis: the streets were constantly congested and not worth the stress. The subway was almost always congested, too, each car packed with more people than seats, everyone standing and sitting around, coughing and sneezing as if in an over-crowded ER. It was gross. And the children always whined and cried or spoke louder than train whistles. Also, walking was cheaper than paying for gas or fares, and I would've done just about anything to avoid children.

I came across the old guitarist after six blocks. I'd probably never seen him before, but I couldn't be sure because Chicago was full of men and women just like him. They lined the streets like children at a parade, but instead of candy, the homeless were eager for someone to throw them a dime or two. Many of them played guitars, too, hoping to impress a few passersby; hoping to make a few dollars every day; hoping to survive.

I imagined what this particular old man must have looked like in the middle 1970s, when he was young and exuberant; when he was confident and hopeful; when neither his circumstances nor his guitar had yet failed him. I imagined a friendly smile on a handsome caramel face, well before exposure and time took their toll, well before he lost sight of his life's dream, whatever that might have been.

I wondered what music had inspired him, and if he was, indeed, a Seger fan. I wondered if he'd ever seen a rock or folk concert, or if he'd been old enough to attend Woodstock in 1969. I wondered how long he'd been on the street and how much money he'd made over the years.

I'd been born and raised in Chicago, but I never cared much about homeless people until I heard the man's dedication to Halle Berry. In fact, I wasn't sure I'd ever acknowledged before that the homeless were human, comprised of the same blood and bone as me. The old man's song confirmed this for me, as well as the notion that even homeless people long for love, perhaps even more than they do money.

I thought about Penny and hoped the old man knew tangible love beyond what he sang about in his song, that someone had shown him more happiness than Halle Berry's face on a billboard or movie screen could. I pictured his arms around a young woman, his fingers as sleek and gentle in her hair as on the neck of the Ibanez. I could hear them laughing. I could hear their joy.

As I continued my jaunt to Penny's house, prodding somewhat quickly, his song gradually faded into the distant din of the city, overcome by the wail of sirens and the obnoxious sound of numerous road-ragers honking their car horns. I heard creaking brakes and shouting. I wished I could still hear, instead, the somehow pleasant buzz of the old homeless man's overused strings.

I looked behind me. The sidewalk vanished into the distance like an old drawing I'd once seen of a railroad track. The artist, my old freshman roommate at DePaul, Jeb, had explained to me in our dorm one night that the railroad was a metaphor for life. "We can run the straight and narrow," he'd said, "and still, eventually, we'll disappear into the horizon." He explained how people we meet along the way only get a glimpse of a very small section of us, and that no person can ever truly know another.

I was only eighteen at the time, eleven years younger than I was when I walked by the guitarist. As a freshman, I was too immature to see the truth in Jeb's work, but old enough to recognize melodrama. As an art major myself, I'd also thought Jeb's piece to be incredibly cliché, if well-drawn and somewhat effective. However, the idea never destroyed my hope, never sent my faith in the idea of knowing someone—loving them—tumbling down like a Jenga tower. Meeting Penny later that semester only solidified my hope, and our nearly six years together did nothing to destroy that hope, either.

“You're full of shit, Jeb,” I'd said in response to the explanation he gave for his drawing. “It's people like you that make me not want to have kids.”

He laughed as if he agreed with me, but replied, “I'm just playing the game, man. That's all. Just like you. Just like anyone.”

I never saw trust, or love, or companionship as games. They weren't things we could put back in the box or take out again. We couldn't win or lose at them. We couldn't roll the dice and land on a space that made everything okay, and we certainly couldn't have our hearts broken just by drawing the wrong card out of a deck.

I knew now, at twenty-nine, that Penny had only broken my heart because I'd broken hers first. I accepted it. I forgave her. And that's why I chose to visit her today after being apart, though separated only by a couple miles, for all these years.

My thoughts drifted back to that day—our last day together, five years earlier—when our lives changed forever...

Penny stood like a lawn ornament, her feet fixed into her parents' front yard as if cemented in, waiting for me as I approached up the driveway. She was as gorgeous as ever, like when you see that perfect sunset and you can't bring yourself to look away until it's gone. But something was different. Something was wrong. I moved closer.

Her crystalline eyes were two pools filling slowly, as if her icy blue retinas were melting beneath the sunset, ready to overflow and collapse down her cheeks. She was six inches or so shorter than my six-two, but she seemed even smaller somehow, frail. Her lemon hair was windblown and frizzed, and dull, as if she hadn't washed it in days. I pulled her into my arms and welcomed her head against my chest.

"I don't care what it is," I told her. "I don't care how bad. We will get through it."

"Not this," she half-sobbed. "Not you."

"Just tell me. I'm here. I'll always be here."

She pulled away then, slowly, like stiff Velcro, as if she knew it would be the last time.

"You aren't working. It's been two years since we graduated."

"Times are slow. There isn't much demand for people in my profession."

She shook her head. Her face pinched together as she strained to tell me the news.

"Then...work at a restaurant. Or a gas station. Just until you get on your feet, until you find something more suitable."

"Please," I demanded. My voice was harsh, blunt. "Just tell me what's bothering you."

Her lips moved then and mouthed something infinite, something catastrophic, something that made the earth beneath me crack and open. My bones were glass and I shattered.

“No,” I snapped, though she hadn’t spoken a word. The answer was in her eyes. It was on the tip of her tongue, cold and white and mysterious like the first snowflake before a terrible storm, and I’d seen it when she’d moved her lips. “No,” was all I could say.

We both stood there, rooted in the ground, as if time had ended. It was worse than finding out someone close to me had died. I had created life and yet, in the process, destroyed my own, reinvented it unwillingly, given it a new meaning that I didn’t believe in.

“I’m keeping it,” she said finally. “I can’t tell you why. I just...want to.”

“It’s a mistake,” I blurted. “I can’t do this.”

“This could end up being the best thing for us.”

I waved a hand at her, dismissing her, disgusted with her for reasons I couldn’t understand. Perhaps, instead, I was furious with myself, and in my desperation decided to unleash it on her. “You said it yourself, Penny. You said I don’t have a job. I don’t have any money saved up. I have nothing. How can I support a family? What do you expect of me? What do you expect will happen if you keep the goddamn thing?”

She shifted, almost stumbled, and her face twisted as wretchedly as if someone had flayed the skin off the bottoms of her feet. I’d never known before how capable I was of inflicting such pain. “I’m keeping it,” she said again. Her eyes were sad, yet defiant.

“Penny,” I pleaded. “You know I want you. I want you more than anything in this world, more than I can express to you. Let’s just...please...make this go away.”

New tears welled in her eyes. “You need to be the father of this child. If you care about me at all. Just please, grow up. Be a man.”

Rage. Fury. My heart pounded bass drumbeats in my head, growing to a palpable crescendo. There was no reason in her, no compromises. I had no say. She had made the decision without me. She had chosen some undeveloped, unnamed larva over me, over our relationship, over our life together. She was willing to risk it all, to risk her dreams, to risk mine, in order to keep this thing, this parasite that was already feeding on our future.

My hand flew out, slicing the evening air, ripping holes in the atmosphere, a rock of rage, a solid mass with no concern for gravity, a meteorite that struck the planet of her face and left a crater that might never be repaired.

She put a hand to her cheek, shocked, hurt. She stared at me. A shadow fell over her icy eyes. “Leave,” she said. “Leave now, and walk away knowing that there is nothing left in you worth loving.”

The gravity of what I’d done hadn’t yet registered in me. So I left.

Penny’s street looked almost the same now, five years later. Some of the trees that had been young back then were now grown to heights of ten feet or more. It occurred to me that I hadn’t once returned here since that day, that I hadn’t even been curious enough to walk by, to sneak a glance in the front window, to see Penny’s beautiful face again, to see my daughter. She’d written an email to me once to tell me that Violet had been born, and that she was healthy.

I'd never responded and today, more than four years after Violet's birth, I was showing up unannounced.

I walked up the steps of what used to be Penny's parents' house, but was now hers, as listed in my phonebook. They'd often talked about leaving it to her when her father retired. I wondered how life was treating them, and if her father had, indeed, retired from the bank and moved to Florida, as they had always planned.

I rang the doorbell. I saw Penny's face. She looked young, the same as five years ago. There were tears in her eyes. I loved her.

"You can't be here," she said.

"I miss you."

She hesitated. "I miss you, too. But you have to leave."

"But you *know* me," I pleaded. "And I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry."

She looked down. She took a long breath as if she were hoping to inhale me, as if she thought I could save her life like I so desperately wanted to. I yearned to be a part of her, to see who she was in her entirety, to contradict Jeb's cynical claims – to prove how essential it is to cling to hope and to trust that love exists beyond human definition, and that it is the very best of things.

I pictured myself entering her lungs like vapor, both gas and liquid at once, surging my way into her veins, through her body, pushing and pushing until I finally entered her heart, a

warm, bright place where I would live forever and ever, far from the parasitic jaws of shame and worry that had fed on me for years.

“I’m tired of being ashamed,” I continued. “I’m tired of this regret.” I dared to reach out and touch her forehead with the backs of my fingers, pushing away a stubborn lock of yellow hair from above her eye. “You know me,” I repeated.

She looked at me. Her tears had dried. In their place, I caught a glimpse of the familiar shadow that had been present years earlier when she’d told me to leave, and that I wasn’t worth loving. “Not anymore,” she whispered, and then disappeared behind the door.

The door closed with a reluctant click. I leaned against it and shouted desperately: “I have money!” I slapped the door with my palm. “Please! I’m a photographer for the *Tribune*! It’s a great job, Penny! *I have money!*”

I’d been working for the *Chicago Tribune* for four years. I’d stewed for the first year after losing Penny, spending nearly the entire year unemployed, feeling sorry for myself. I barely spent any time with friends, except to have them to my apartment for beer and booze from time to time. So, by the time that first year ended, I was ready to prove myself to Penny, ready to prove that I could accept responsibility. The problem, however, was that I still didn’t care for children, and still didn’t want to be a father.

As luck would have it, after applying on a whim, I was hired at the *Tribune* (and it seemed that Penny had been right all along: it wasn’t as difficult to find a job as I had previously imagined). I had compiled a portfolio of some photography I’d done in and since college—to be honest, I was never that impressed with the collection—but something about it stood out, or at

least that's what my hiring manager said. I'd sent in miscellaneous images, including one of the Chicago skyline through fog, a Lake Michigan beach in summer, two children riding bicycles downtown, a woman blazing across the water on a jet-ski, a homeless man on the subway, and so on. My only intention was to capture my roots, to show that Chicago was my home—that it was important to me, and was perhaps all I had left. Luckily, it had worked.

I spent the next four years working extra hours whenever possible, selling photographs and drawings elsewhere for additional pocket change, taking added assignments for the *Tribune* (I'd even traveled to the Middle-East for a special assignment once), and so on. My goal was to save up enough money so I was comfortable confronting Penny again who, although just a couple miles or so away from me, might as well have lived in the Middle-East. Then, one day, I'd finally decided it was time, that I had saved enough to prove I was the man she'd wanted—*begged*—me to be...and now, as quickly as a hummingbird flaps its wings, my chance was ruined. The past four years felt like a waste of time; I may as well have slept the entire time. My job—all the money I'd accrued—felt unclean somehow, worthless.

I told myself I'd never leave Penny's porch, but I did anyways after some time.

On my way home, I stopped at my favorite Mexican restaurant. After I was seated, I stared at the empty seat across from me, a place where Penny's smile was no longer real and the sound of her laugh faded away from my mind like morning fog or distant guitar chords.

I tried to remember good times, like when she dropped her cheesy nachos into her lap, but I could only recall snippets, as if I were seeing my memories through a stranger's eyes. I was an old log in the woods: hollow, empty, and forgotten.

During my dinner, I couldn't understand why nothing smelled or tasted the same as it had when Penny had come with me, as if everything had lost definition. Dissatisfied, I asked for a carryout box, paid my bill, and left.

I retraced my route home. To my surprise, the old homeless guitarist was still on the same corner, this time strumming a tune about whiskey. I noticed a few more quarters and even a few dollar bills in his guitar case. I knelt in front of him and watched him play. When he was finished, he opened his eyes and looked at me. He smiled and tipped an invisible cap. I did the same in response.

"I have money," I told him, but he only shrugged.

"I'm hungry," he said and then pointed at my carryout box.

I took a crisp fifty dollar bill from my wallet and dropped it in his case. "I only want to feel important," I said.

He shrugged again. "I suppose we all want that." He climbed to his feet, still clutching his guitar. "Where you coming from?" he asked.

I smiled at him. "There's this girl..."

He squinted. "Who?"

"Just some girl."

"Her name?"

I laughed. "She's someone I love but can't have. My own Halle Berry, I guess."

He waved his free hand at me. “Bah. Halle’s old news around here. I’ve been playing that song for years now. No one cares. Anyways, I wasn’t talking about that. I was wondering where you got the food.”

I looked at my carryout box. “It’s Mexican. It didn’t taste right.”

“Sounds great.”

I handed the box over and smiled. “Say, do you have any kids?”

He laughed, as if my question had surprised him. “Are you serious?”

“I do,” I told him. “A daughter. Violet.” I felt an odd tug in my chest, as if I had lost some part of my ability to breathe. I realized that there are some mistakes we never stop paying for.

“Me too,” he answered finally. “A son. I tell you, if I had any money back then, things would’ve been different.” He snickered sarcastically. “I might even know his name.”

“Money doesn’t solve everything, you know.”

He shook his head, packed his guitar, and began to limp away, his feet no doubt sore from years without proper shoes to protect them from the elements. I watched as he turned around again to face me. “You have no clue,” he said. “What’s more important than money these days?”

“Love is,” I said. “It always has been. I just wish I had someone to share it with.” I hesitated. “Enjoy that fifty.”

He shook his head again and continued on.

I walked away in the opposite direction. My mind drifted again. I dreamed up a scenario in which the old man and I were racing side-by-side, sprinting toward an invisible finish line. Our hearts were pounding. We struggled to breathe. We pushed our muscles to their limits and beyond. Fire burned under our skin. But we ran on and on, each of us unable to gain a step on the other, but each of us straining to get to the finish line first – each of us straining to fall into the place where Halle Berry would forever stand in wait to make our dreams of lasting love come true.

## NO BOY

I had just (perhaps ten minutes earlier) finished reading Tom Robbins' *Still Life with Woodpecker*, leaving it on my nightstand, when a rap-rap-rapping at the front door interrupted my late-morning nap. It was a not-so-gentle tapping, so I lifted myself out of bed quickly, and lumbered to the door. I pulled it open, gasping at the familiar, gorgeous, angelic horror on my doorstep.

Physically, Julie hadn't changed a bit. She stood two feet away, balancing in another dimension on the other side of the threshold. She was blonde-haired, green-eyed, red-lipped, beautiful, perfect, a wondrous creation. She was a spectacle more brilliant than any landscape Da Vinci ever dreamed, more difficult to net than Moby Dick, and just as deadly. She balanced like a ballet dancer, never wavering, as delicate as ceramic, yet as sharp as broken glass; she was both dancer and assassin.

Her hair was pinned up in a bun, some strands left swaying in the light Michigan breeze outside my door. Silver hoop earrings dangled from her ears like teardrops on the cusp of falling. Her clothes (most notably, the tight, breast-enhancing t-shirt with the Woody Woodpecker logo on the front) were rather ordinary, but she wore them as if she were modeling for the cover of *Maxim* magazine. While she was considerably shorter than me, she seemed to stare down at me somehow, a mischievous glimmer in her eyes.

She had a camouflage-green luggage bag slung over her right shoulder; her left arm angled across her chest, her slender fingers curled like ivy around the bag's shoulder strap. She leaned a bit, weighed down only slightly by whatever was inside the bag. I noticed that her nails were painted black.

I rubbed the scar on my cheek and hoped she hadn't come back just to slap me.

"New glasses?" she said, narrowing her eyes, judging me. "You look tan, Andrew."

"You look white."

"Long flight." She snickered. I didn't understand the joke.

"I'm coming in," she declared, stepping over the threshold. She shouldered past me like a linebacker shaking a block, ready to make a devastating tackle.

Reluctantly, I shut the door, afraid to close the gap between dimensions; I had to make sure she could still get out, back into her own world and far, far away from mine.

"The house looks the same," she said. "Still renting it from your mom?"

I stood dumbfounded, staring at her as she glided into the living area. She slung the luggage bag to the floor where it collapsed with a muffled thump against the thick, brownish-yellow shag carpet. She sunk into my puffy pillow-cushioned loveseat, dug the remote control out from between the cushions, and clicked the television on, which whirred to life with a subtle, high-pitched whistle, a sound reminiscent of a distant, buzzing mosquito. She leaned back, propped her feet up on my glass-top coffee table, and began surfing the channels.

I stood there, my feet anchored to the white tiled breezeway floor. I didn't know how to react. What was she doing here after all this time, after cutting my face and leaving me so she could satisfy her "vagabond's heart," as she'd often called it, whatever that meant? I wanted to ask her, to talk to her, but words escaped me. I was too lost, confused by Julie's sudden and unwelcome return to my life. Her eyes shifted towards me. She raised her eyebrows in a not-so-

friendly way. “Coming?” she asked, patting her palm against the seat next to her. She had the tone of someone who’d been living with me for decades, as if the past six years hadn’t happened. She wasn’t really asking, either. There was something expectant about the way she sat there, comfortable, descending further into the loveseat, trying her best to become a part of it –a part of *me*.

I peeled my bare feet away from the tile and scuffled over the carpet into the living room. I plopped with an airy *whoosh* into the cushy, pastel-blue seat beside her. I began to rub the boomerang-shaped, slightly-raised pinkish skin on my right cheek again.

“There’s nothing on,” she whined, jabbing the remote with each click of the channel-up button, as if the flat-screen TV, ten feet away, could feel the invisible pokes.

“No,” I agreed. It was late Sunday morning. Football wouldn’t be on for another hour or more. I stared at the green bag on the floor.

She clicked the TV off and tossed the remote nonchalantly onto the floor beside her.

“Be careful with that,” I said, although not as harshly as I would’ve liked.

She turned towards me, drawing her knees up to her midsection, her right shoulder pressing into the back of the loveseat. “Why?” she asked, like a child.

“Because it’s mine,” I told her.

She waved her hand at me and sat up. “Oh, it’s just *stuff*, you silly boy.” *Silly boy*. Those same old words, like an echo from six years before.

She stood up, walked back to her bag, plucked it from the carpet, and slung it over her shoulder again. “I’m bored,” she said, turning to look at me again. “Let’s go to your bedroom.”

Our eyes locked. I loved her. I wanted to kill her. “Why are you..?” I began, but couldn’t finish the question. I looked away, to the ten-gallon aquarium on the other side of the room where an army of guppies and mollies swam, oblivious to the happenings outside their tiny sea. I remembered the time one of the guppies gave birth to a hundred babies. I remembered them swimming around, so tiny, so new, glimmering as the hood light reflected off their miniature scales. I remembered, also, when, to my repulsed astonishment, the adults began to scurry about, eating the babies, sucking them into their hungry mouths like fish candy.

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“Why won’t you talk to me?” Julie asked as we lay on my bed –me on my back with my hands behind my head, watching the ceiling fan revolving above us; she on her side, propping her head up with her hand, grinning condescendingly at me. We hadn’t done anything –I’d barely even looked at her –but there was something about her body language, some suggestion in her demeanor that told me she wanted to. I, on the other hand –perhaps to avoid letting her play games with my head and heart (as if she already wasn’t) –wanted to avoid physical contact.

We’d been lying there for many minutes, perhaps an hour. She insisted on prying, asking over and over about my love life, my job, my friends (who had also been her friends), whatever she could think of. The room was silent except for the pitchy, falsetto sound of her voice and the occasional squeak of the ceiling fan spinning. I only gave her sparse, short responses: “Still single.” “Work’s good.” “Yes, still at Sears, second-shift.” “Yes, I still hang with Kenny and Nate.” “No, I don’t see Rachelle much anymore.” “I’m fine.”

Julie smelled like a mixture of cinnamon and cigarettes. I hadn't smoked since she left.

I'd had three girlfriends since Julie, each of whom had smoked, as well. I hadn't felt the urge to poison my lungs with any of them, however. I had lost the desire to feel the pleasant burn.

Julie had always smoked with this enthusiastic, dejected look on her face—a nostalgic vacant look in her eyes as she peered out across the room, or wherever, her oft-lipsticked mouth closed around the filter like a flytrap. It was so lonely and fun smoking with her. After she left, cigarettes lost their allure.

She poked my stomach, nibbling on her bottom lip. The mattress springs creaked as I jerked away, ticklish, inching towards the wall.

“Why won't you talk to me?” she repeated, this time in a whinier tone, sounding hurt as I moved away from her.

I opened my mouth, but could think of nothing to say.

“What? What is it?” she urged.

I turned towards her, rolling onto my side. I thought of the Robbins novel I'd just finished. He says, “There is only one serious question. And that is: *Who knows how to make love stay?*”<sup>1</sup>

“Love doesn't stay,” I said. “No one can make it stay.”

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Robbins, *Still Life with Woodpecker* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), 4.

She moved closer to me, girlishly smiling, as if what I'd just said was the most romantic thing ever –as if I'd just told her we'd be flying off to Paris to live happily ever after or something. "I'm here," she said, softly. "I'm back." She leaned in suddenly, quicker than her soft, decidedly gentle declaration would have suggested, and kissed me. It was fast, a rough peck; before I even knew what was happening, it was over, and she was on her feet, comfortably out of reach.

She plucked the Robbins novel off the nightstand and flipped through it, stopping momentarily on a couple pages to read bits and pieces. She looked at the cover.

"Looks like a pack of Camels," she said. "Except with a big woodpecker on it. Why does it have a match in its mouth?"

I shrugged, withholding the fact that "Woodpecker" is the name of the novel's infamous bomber. "Maybe he wants a cigarette."

She shot me an annoyed, quizzical look, and tossed the book aside, like garbage. She began nosing around my room, rummaging hurriedly through my mahogany dresser's drawers, finding nothing of any real interest. She peered back at me periodically, a mischievous grin on her face.

This was a problem. Eventually, if this hunting continued, she'd find the box. I felt my face flush with anticipated embarrassment.

Finished with the dresser, she turned her interest towards my closet, where she began prodding at the boxes I had stacked both beneath and above my hanging shirts, on the floor and on the overhead shelf.

Without thinking, watching her, I slid over to the side of the bed she'd vacated. It was still warm and smelled faintly of hairspray.

I couldn't contain myself anymore. "You looking for something?"

She turned, frowning. "Where's my stuff?"

*The box.*

"What?" I said, trying to conceal the lie. "What stuff?"

"My stuff," she said, crossing her arms. "The things I left with you."

It was unreasonable of her to assume that I hadn't just thrown her things away. After six years without contact, why would I keep them? The problem was, of course, that I *had* kept them. And she knew it.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lied, and rolled away from her. I looked out the window next to my bed. The sky was blue, so blue. Wispy, tissue-thin clouds rolled slowly by, silent proof that the earth was still turning, that I hadn't died and entered some form of hell or purgatory.

Robbins says, "The sky is more impersonal than the sea."<sup>2</sup> I'm not completely sure what he means by this. To me, there's something decidedly personal about the fact that Julie had used the sky as her highway, that a collection of cirrus and cumulus clouds had hugged her, coiled around her, passed her securely through the stratosphere until she reached me, a speckle on the

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<sup>2</sup> Robbins, *Woodpecker*, 26.

earth's surface, her miniscule destination. My fish tank, on the other hand –that tiny ocean – collected dust in the corner of my living room. Much less personal.

Julie crawled onto my bed again and straddled me, puckering her lips playfully as she lowered her face towards mine. “You’re a bad liar, you silly boy,” she chastised, poking my nose with her black-tipped forefinger. I tried to keep my attention on the sky, but she began to grind slowly against me, rolling her hips round and round. I looked at her, trying to maintain a disapproving scowl, but my body reacted differently, betraying me.

“You silly boy,” she repeated, at a near whisper. She took my glasses off. I reached up, snatched her wrist before she could place them on my nightstand. I squeezed, but she didn’t let go.

“Don’t,” I said, my voice wavering.

She giggled and leaned closer, parting her lips. Closer. *Closer...*

“Under the bed,” I snapped, pushing her away. “Your shit’s under the bed.”

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On its surface, *Still Life with Woodpecker* is about social advancement, beginning at an individual level, achieved via an anarchist political construct (according to some online book review I read, anyways). At the book’s heart, however, it is nothing more than a love story between a terrorist and a princess.

Bernard Mickey Wrangle, the infamous “Woodpecker” bomber (aptly named because of his bright red hair), has a poetic air about him, but he proclaims himself a bandit: “I’m an

outlaw...*not* [a] member of society. However, [outlaws] may be important *to* society. Poets remember our dreams, outlaws act them out.”<sup>3</sup> Wrangle, the perfect hedonist, travels the world, doing as he pleases, with no regard for laws or the ramifications of breaking them.

Princess Leigh-Cheri, on the other hand, is the epitome of solitude, a monarchal heir stuck in Seattle, Washington, where her British roots are all but irrelevant. She is an outcast. She stands for nothing, has no inspiration, until she meets the mad bomber. Outcast meets outlaw, and the two live happily ever after...until love decides not to stay.

It is in this regard, then, that Julie and I could relate: She was, for all intents and purposes, the outlaw, the drifter, the essence of freedom; I was, in turn, the princess.

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She sat on the floor next to the bed, rummaging through the old “Nike” shoebox, naming off each item as she pulled it out: “Oh, our notebook! Are your poems still in there? Oh, and my old Springsteen CD! This is fantastic, don’t you think, Andrew?”

*Andrew.* She kept saying it that way, in that childish tone. *Andrew.* Truth was, no one had called me Andrew for quite some time. My co-workers, for example, referred to me as “Drew.”

Julie smiled up at me beautifully, white pearls lined perfectly between moist, red lips. It was the first time since her vastly unexpected arrival that her expression seemed genuine, as if the past truly did matter to her. She began ruffling through the collection of old love notes I’d written to her and movie ticket stubs I’d kept, fingering them like a child picking through

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<sup>3</sup> Robbins, *Woodpecker*, 95.

Halloween candy. This was going well, despite my concerns earlier. She hadn't even made fun of me for keeping our box all these years.

I fought the urge to show her (what used to be) the most prized symbol of our relationship, but things were going so well I couldn't help it. "There's something else," I told her, climbing off the bed. I reached between the mattress and the box spring and pulled out an old yellow t-shirt. I handed it to her.

She looked it over, a strange nostalgic awe on her face, rubbing her thumb over the faded "Frogger" logo. The frog was sea-green, yellow-bellied, and wore a red vest and polka-dotted tie that flapped behind him, signaling forward motion. His expression was panicked, his legs frozen in perpetual motion, and he carried a brown suitcase. My favorite detail was the tiny black wristwatch just above the frog's fisted hand. It was too small to read, but it reminded me of, appropriately, time –but more specifically, that time always seems to be running out.

It was like we were us again. Memories of lovely, late nights spent play-fighting over who got to wear the shirt, taking turns joysticking obsolete video games on the grossly outdated original Atari console, rushed through my brain like ants to syrup.

"You always loved that game," I said. "And that shirt. It was your favorite, right?"

She rotated the shirt, studying the splotches of orangish bloodstains. She turned her face up to me again, and I was stunned to see tears welling in her eyes. She shook the shirt at me.

"Why did you keep this?" she demanded, her voice suddenly harsh, angry.

I sat on the edge of the bed. I looked down at the floor. "I need it," I said. "To remember."

She shot to her feet. Tears rolled down her cheeks. “You don’t need it,” she scolded, her voice rising. “It’s just... a *thing*. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It’s the idea of it,” I told her, maintaining patience, control. Years before, there were times when she couldn’t be reasoned with or swayed. This was one of those. Fortunately, I’d always had a talent for avoiding these kinds of debates, and it seemed that years apart from each other hadn’t changed that.

She let out a disappointed sigh, placing her hands on her hips, the shirt dangling from her right hand. “I need a bath,” she said, still visibly upset, and stomped out of my bedroom before I could answer.

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Tom Robbins explains the relationship between objects and ideas:

The line that separates objects from ideas can be pretty twiggy...Galileo was right to drop objects rather than ideas off of his tower... *Within the normal range of perception*, the behavior of objects can be measured and predicted. Ignoring the possibility that in the wrong hands almost any object...can turn up as Exhibit A in a murder trial; ignoring, for the moment, the far more interesting possibility that every object might lead a secret life, it is still safe to say that objects, as we understand them, are relatively stable,

whereas ideas are definitely unstable, they not only *can* be misused, they invite misuse.<sup>4</sup>

Robbins' observations are astute, but they're a bit restrictive. He seems to consider objects and ideas as binary opposites: Objects are stable; ideas are unstable. But where's the gray area?

The "Frogger" shirt, for instance, was both an object and an idea, which to me made it far more unstable than any plain old idea: I could've stressed and labored over what it represented to me, using it to build a certain rage I'd direct at Julie because it was the shirt I'd worn the night she left; but it was also tangible, something I could see, feel, smell. For at least a year after she left, the unwashed shirt maintained a subtle, lovely odor that reminded me of her, of happiness. The shirt was therefore pleasant and unpleasant all at once, a catalyst for both love and hate, God and Satan all stitched up together into a men's size medium t-shirt.

Julie was unpredictable. I'd thought the shirt would make her happy. When I saw her holding it again (especially after I'd long ago grown used to the idea of never seeing her again), it was like the past and future had become the same. It was as if I'd never been sad, or that my blood hadn't been spilled. But that feeling only lasted a few moments.

I'd had no idea the shirt would hurt her. It shocked me because it didn't make sense. She seemed so happy to see our other stuff. Besides, she had to have known she might find it when she started nosing around. But that's who Julie was: unpredictable, plain and simple.

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<sup>4</sup> Robbins, *Woodpecker*, 85.

Maybe it was the blood that upset her. Maybe the blood was a stain on an otherwise pleasant memory. Or maybe it reminded her of what she was capable of. Who knows?

Julie locked herself and the t-shirt in my bathroom. I heard the muffled, frantic sound of splashing bathwater filling the porcelain tub through the door. I also heard Julie humming. It was a pleasant, yet lonely sound.

I returned to my bedroom and began placing the relics back in the shoebox, trying to ignore what they represented to me, trying to pretend Julie hadn't seen them. Her reaction to the shirt had ruined the moment, and now I wished it had never happened. I slipped the lid back over the box, and slid it back under my bed, into the darkness where some memories belong.

I looked over, near the closet, and noticed that Julie had left her luggage bag lying there. For a few moments, I fought the urge to unzip it and look inside, but my curiosity got the better of me. I tore it open.

I was mostly disappointed by what I saw inside: A plastic storage baggie full of hygiene products, a partially crumpled package of Camel cigarettes (ironically), a generic lighter, a small collection of t-shirts, shorts, bras, panties, a pair of sandals –warm weather clothes, I noticed, not really what you'd wear in Michigan in Autumn. But there, at the bottom, buried beneath it all, I found a small black ring box.

*She kept it.* I smiled and then frowned, unsure of how to feel about this revelation. I zipped the luggage bag shut without opening the ring box, careful to place the bag in the same spot on my bedroom floor that she'd left it.

The only woman I'd ever really loved was here, back in my life, and I had no idea what to make of it. Should I be angry? Happy? What did this mean? Where had she been these past six years? Why had she kept the ring?

I climbed into bed, fully clothed, pulled the covers over me, and closed my eyes.

I was glad she hadn't asked me why I kept the "Frogger" shirt between the mattress and box spring. I was glad I wouldn't have to explain to her that I still slept with it from time to time; still sniffed it; still rubbed my fingers over the stiff blotches of bloodstained fabric; still, in my lowest moments, wore it.

In the instant I drifted to sleep, I thought about Julie's quick kiss earlier and wondered how many other men she'd scarred.

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Around an hour later, I felt Julie crawl into bed next to me, her body still warm from the bathwater, her skin still moist. Her cold, wet hair, no longer in a bun, tumbled down next to me, atop my pillow, brushing against my neck. She wrapped an arm over me, and I rolled over to face her.

"I missed you," she said. "I missed *this*." She ran her hand through my hair. "No grays yet." She giggled.

"I'm twenty-six," I reminded her.

"So? My friend Jonah started going gray when he was twenty-five." It was either a slip-up, or a challenge, a tactful admission.

I scowled at her. “Jonah? Who’s Jonah?”

She shook her head slowly, still feathering through my hair. “He’s just...it doesn’t matter.”

“Why did you leave that night?” I asked, finally ready, for whatever reason, to confront her. “Where have you been?”

She hesitated, petted my head as she would a dog. “Nowhere, really,” she answered finally. “All over the place. I don’t know.”

“You ran away.” It wasn’t an accusation; it was more of a realization.

She turned her attention to the scar on my right cheek, running her thumb softly over it. I felt a stirring inside, as if some long-dead engine inside me had suddenly turned over and kicked on again. “Was this me?” she asked, a touch of sadness in her voice.

“No,” I said, taking hold of her hand, stopping her thumb. “It was me.”

The memory of our fight, the last time I’d been with her like this, crept into my mind like fog.

She’d asked me to leave (yet again), to abandon my life and travel the world with her.

“I can’t,” I’d told her. “We’ve been over this a thousand times. My life is here. My family, my friends. *Your* friends. Rachelle. Nate. Kenny.”

It was late at night, after midnight. We were laying in my bed, just as we were now, listening to Julie's Springsteen CD; "I'm on Fire" played low in the background, followed by "State Trooper," each song as soft and mellow as ghost whispers.

"I don't care about them," she'd said. "We can meet new friends, new people."

"We have no idea what's out there," I pleaded.

"Which is why I want to go. It's mysterious and exciting. And there's nothing for me here."

Julie's dad was in prison. She didn't like talking about it, however. All I knew was that he'd been there for eight years (it would've been fourteen now, if he was still incarcerated). I had no idea why he was in prison, or how long he'd be there. But that was something we had in common; my dad was long gone, too.

Julie's mom, Sandy, on the other hand, was very nice, and pretty (the two of them looked a lot alike, with their blonde hair and emerald eyes). But for some reason, Julie didn't seem to like her mom. As far as I could tell, Sandy worked very hard so that Julie could have good things, happy things. But Julie only talked about being held back, the same thing she'd always said about everyone who tried to get close to her.

"There's nothing here?" I repeated, angrily. "*I'm* here. I'll always be here."

She'd moved closer to me then, resting her face next to mine.

"Come with me," she begged, almost whispering. "Come see what's out there. This place is so empty."

I pulled away and looked at the ring on her hand. “If you just want to leave, then why did you say yes?”

She sat up and began rotating the ring around her finger. “Because I thought you’d come with me.” She hesitated. “And I love you.”

I let out a frustrated puff of air. “I’m not so sure you do. I’m starting to think you only care about yourself.”

She shot a wide-eyed look at me. “Let’s not go there again, okay?”

“If you really love me, you’ll stay.”

“If you really love *me*, you’ll come.”

I laughed sarcastically. “You’re giving me an ultimatum. That’s not fair. We’re perfectly fine here. We’re happy together here. Besides, all you ever do is talk about leaving. If you truly wanted to, you would’ve left a long time ago.”

Without warning, she punched me in arm, hard. It hurt. “You’re an asshole,” she said, then started to get up.

Angry, I shoved her as she turned away, a bit too hard, causing her to fall and bang her head against the wall, her golden hair splashing around her like water. I remembered the sound, that hollow thump against the drywall. I hadn’t meant to hurt her. I got to my feet and went to her, kneeling down. Julie clutched her forehead, challenged me with hurt eyes, and then slapped me. I like to believe she hadn’t noticed that the ring on her finger had turned somehow, so when

her palm met my cheek, the square quarter-carat diamond fileted through my skin, deep, causing a meaty flap of flesh to peel over. Blood splashed down my shirt like crimson rain drops.

Minutes later, as I rushed to the emergency room for stitches, Julie left; I didn't know she was gone until I returned home around five o'clock the following morning.

In my bed again now, six years later, we locked eyes for a while, searching for each other's thoughts. Her eyes seemed to have lost their wildness, less mischievous now. My chest felt warm. My arm wanted to move up; my fingers longed to touch her skin, to trace the contours of her face. I fought the urge, lying as still as possible. Try as I may, I couldn't shake the feeling that she would hurt me again, perhaps even purposely. Perhaps she'd come back just to make me love her once more, so she'd have a reason to leave again. Maybe the only thing she ever needed from me was my love, to give her a feeling of self-worth, something she could take with her on her travels, or when she did whatever it was she truly wanted to do. Maybe, even, she didn't know what she wanted at all. Either way, as I lay there trying to refrain from touching her, I knew she was dangerous –that she'd always been dangerous, and would probably never change.

Before too long –perhaps a couple minutes –she stood up, easing the tension. I breathed out, only then realizing that I'd been holding my breath.

"I'm hungry," she said, and shuffled out of the room, her bare feet scraping across the carpet. She was wearing the "Frogger" t-shirt, and nothing else.

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We (she naked except for the shirt, me still clothed in a white t-shirt and sweatpants) spent the remainder of the day snacking on junk food, drinking beer, and smoking cigarettes

(lighting up felt like a rebirth, of sorts; it made me feel alive to know we were killing ourselves slowly at the same time). We watched football on my flat-screen TV, making fun of one another, and completely ignored the past (or, at least, our history didn't come up in conversation).

The sun made its rounds, arcing slowly into the sky, reaching its apex, and finally descending into the mysterious western horizon, out where the Pacific licks across the western coastline as if California's irritable tectonic plates are actually giant sugar cubes. Somewhere out there, Julie's new life –her *real* life –had been put on hold, or discarded altogether. Perhaps gray-haired Jonah, whoever and wherever he was, waited naively for her return, for that not-so-gentle rap-rap-rapping at his door. Perhaps he lay holed up in his bedroom eating cheese puffs, flipping through TV channels, obsessing over what had gone wrong, wishing his love had stayed. Perhaps he was me, in another time or dimension, my doppelganger.

Outside my kitchen window, inky darkness crept in, chasing the color out of the sky as it pushed the sun below the distant horizon. A chill, no doubt, stole in, warning the world of the impending winter, just weeks away. During a moment of solitude (Julie had gone to the bathroom), I watched as the last remnants of warmth withered away into night.

A short time later, around midnight, Julie and I lay in my bed like corpses, each of us on our backs, looking up. The beer had gotten to me, setting the room in motion; the walls revolved around me like some tiny galaxy around its sun. I tried to focus on the ceiling fan again, following one of its blade's wild revolutions, hoping it would even things out, make me feel more stable. It didn't help.

I thought about Julie's lips, pressed in a kind of kiss against the rim of a beer can earlier. I remembered distinctly the sensual sound of her slurping the fizz out of the tiny moat that

encircled the top of the can. After a long drink, her tongue had poked out and circled the expanse of her mouth, gathering up any leftover moisture.

I'd wanted badly to make a move, to give in to her confident flirtations, but I couldn't. I was still too afraid to believe she was back for good, still too afraid to let my guard down. There were times when, seated across from where I sat or stood, she positioned herself in ways that restricted the t-shirt's ability to conceal anything below her belly-button. Cheeks hot, I'd tried not to let my eyes wander to the prim tuft of hair between her legs.

She'd lit a cigarette, offering me one. Her eyes squinted against the misty curls of smoke that drifted upwards from the bobbing cherry at the end of her Camel. She withdrew one from the crinkly package, the cellophane crackling in her grasp, passing the cigarette to me. I accepted, drawn in by the appeal of putting something she'd touched into my mouth. She rolled her thumb over the thumbwheel with a subtle *cht* sound, the dark nail polish flicking by at the bottom of my vision. I inhaled, and I wanted to be hers.

I thought about *Still Life with Woodpecker* again, about Robbins' keen observations regarding the Camel cigarettes package.

[T]he package [reads,] *Camel: Turkish & Domestic Blend*  
*Cigarettes: Choice: Quality*[...]On tiptoes, [Leigh-Cheri] held the pack before one clear windowpane and saw in its reflection that the word *CHOICE* reads the same in its mirror image as it does on the pack, it is not turned around by the mirror. That might have tipped her off that the Camel package crosses dimensional boundaries, the

line between matter and antimatter, but she failed to grasp its significance...<sup>5</sup>

I wondered, do I have a choice? Is it up to me to decide whether or not I should jump ship, from the comfortable dimension I inhabited now to the old one, that strange, mystical “Julie” dimension from years ago?

Or was the choice Julie’s?

Now, some time later, the two of us in my bed again, everything was still, quiet, except for the continuous squeaking of the ceiling fan as it spun, clearly in need of oil or minor repairs. There wasn’t really any decision to be made; Julie and I were just inhabitants of the moment.

Julie breathed in, a deep, airy sound that reminded me of life, mortality. It occurred to me that earlier, in this very spot, I’d asked her why she’d left. She, of course, hadn’t answered that question, and perhaps couldn’t have if she’d tried. Perhaps it was a question that had no real answer because the reasons for her sudden departure went beyond even her own comprehension.

But I hadn’t asked her the more pertinent question, the one that, more than likely, *did* have a definitive answer.

“Sometimes,” I said, recalling my dad’s inexplicable departure fifteen years earlier, “people leave, but they don’t know why.” I felt the bed jiggle subtly as she turned to face me; I stared out the window, into the empty darkness. “But when they come back, there’s always a specific reason.”

“I wanted to see how you’d react,” she replied with false seriousness.

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<sup>5</sup> Robbins, *Woodpecker*, 162.

I rolled onto my side, facing her. “Why are you here?” I asked. “Why’d you come back?”

She glared at me. There was something hostile, yet vulnerable, in her eyes, a hurt that hadn’t been there when we were younger. For a moment, I didn’t recognize her. Then she said, “It was all so new. And then it...wasn’t.”

“But I’m not new,” I told her. “This place, me, *us*. It’s all old.”

“But you *are* new, silly” she said, rubbing my hair yet again. “You’re *different* than before.”

“Different isn’t new. I’m still me.”

She lurched towards me and kissed me, roughly. Her tongue tasted like onions and ash. Beneath that, however, there was something sweet. This kiss was a paradox, both wrong and right at the same time. I kissed back.

My thoughts drifted to the “Frogger” shirt again, how it was both object and idea, unstable in every sense of the word. Julie had become emotional almost instantly after I handed her the shirt, the water rising in those two tiny, impersonal green seas before spilling like silent waterfalls down her cheeks –her subtle weeping the mark of her own instability.

She crawled on top of me, forcing me onto my back again, her naked thighs squeezing together against my still-clothed hips. I put my arms around her as she moved herself against me, tangling my fingers in her hair, feeling its lovely weight crashing down like sunrays all around me. For about thirty seconds, time slowed, creaked to a stop, then shot like a rubber band back to this bedroom, this bed, this position six years earlier. We were us again, lovers, Andrew and Julie,

two names carved in the old maple tree out back, sealed together, forever, inside an imperfectly chiseled heart.

Then, out of nowhere, inexplicably, she bit my lip, hard. It was as if her razor-sharp slap all those years ago had awakened some primal instinct in her, some animalistic need for blood. I jerked my face away and touched my mouth, checking my fingers. Julie, still on top of me, giggled.

“What the hell was that for?” I snapped.

“It’s just so *fun*,” she said, trying to sound sexy. She reached her hand into my sweatpants, searching, grasping, again too hard. I pushed her away.

“Maybe I’m not the one who’s different,” I said, angrily.

She fake smiled, shook her head, and ran her tongue across her bottom lip. Her eyes looked hurt, lost. For the first time since she’d arrived, I noticed deep, purple circles beneath her eyes. Earlier, I’d thought Julie hadn’t changed at all physically since the last time I saw her. But I was wrong –she looked tired, un-pretty, somehow older than her twenty-five years.

“Maybe you’re not,” she agreed.

I rolled away, facing the window. Julie moved away for a moment, turned on the digital clock radio on my nightstand, and flicked the lamp off. Van Morrison’s “Moondance” struggled against a radio station’s weak signal, buzzing out of the radio like some invisible fly.

I felt Julie crawl back into the bed next to me, but I could sense her facing away from me. I couldn't be sure, but the way the mattress jiggled as she breathed indicated to me she might be crying. Instead of sympathy, however, I felt something close to rage.

“No one calls me Andrew anymore,” I snapped. “And I’m not some silly *boy*, either.”

“Okay.”

I wasn't yet satisfied: “I saw the ring box in your bag, too,” I continued, disgusted by the memory. “I’m surprised you kept the fucking thing.”

She let out a tiny, pained sob. “I didn't,” she said, her voice cracking. “I sold your ring a long time ago. The one in my bag’s from Jonah.”

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Tom Robbins, through the character of Leigh-Cheri, talks about relationships:

When we're incomplete, we're always searching for somebody to complete us. When, after a few years or a few months of a relationship, we find that we're still unfulfilled, we blame our partners and take up with somebody more promising. This can go on and on...until we admit that while a partner can add sweet dimensions to our lives, we, each of us, are responsible for our own fulfillment. Nobody else can provide it for us, and to believe

otherwise is to delude ourselves dangerously and to program for eventual failure every relationship we enter.<sup>6</sup>

Robbins may as well have been writing about Julie. This quote described perfectly what she had become. Maybe it's what she always was: An object of dependence, void of any ability to fulfill her own needs and desires.

It pained me to be so cynical, to think that our quarrel the night she left actually had very little to do with her need to flee; to think that there was nothing I could do to help her, or make her stay. She wanted nothing to do with a still life; remaining stationary wasn't her bag.

That night, I slept with these things crawling through my heart like worms in an apple.

I dreamed of a glass jar full, almost to the brim, of flies. The flies buzzed, circled, pushed into one another frantically, pressing outward against the glass. Their tiny masses were so tightly packed that they became a large, black, fluid orb inside the jar, perpetually shifting shape. Then, somehow, one fly escaped, buzzing away. Then another. And another, until the glass seemed to melt away into darkness, mutating impossibly into flies. They buzzed away, separately –a speck here, there –disappearing into the white distance, the limited infinity at the edge of my mind.

I guess that's what love does to you –it stays in you and becomes who you are.

That night, I learned that contrary to Robbins' argument, love *does* stay, and the real problem is that no matter how much you have of it in you, you can never really share it or give it away. It's yours, and yours alone.

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<sup>6</sup> Robbins, *Woodpecker*, 157.

So the next morning when I awoke to find Julie and my “Frogger” shirt gone, I cried for a half hour because she couldn’t take my love with her.

Strangely, for whatever reason, she’d left her luggage bag –with Jonah’s ring still inside – lying on my bedroom floor. I couldn’t be sure if she’d done so purposely, or had simply forgotten it. I guessed it really didn’t matter.

When I composed myself, I went to the kitchen for a trash bag, and brought it into my bedroom. I packed my shoebox of relics and Julie’s bag (with Jonah’s ring still inside it) into the garbage bag and carried it outside to the east side of the house where I kept my trashcan. I dropped the bag into the aluminum bin where it crashed with a hollow *ting*.

I looked around. The sun was bright and relatively warm. There was a slight breeze. Distant treetops swayed. Dying leaves rustled lightly. Everything was calm. Nothing had changed.

I’d always thought that the day I threw out the shoebox (if it ever came) would be momentous, somehow significant. I’d thought there would be a feeling of release, the satisfying sensation of letting go. I’d never imagined, ever, that it would be as quiet –as *apathetic* –as this.

It had only been a few hours ago (no more than seven or eight) that I’d thought Julie was back in my life for good. I’d thought that’s what I wanted. Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn’t. I couldn’t tell yet. Either way, standing there in the Autumn air, I knew (hoped?) I’d be okay.

I turned my attention back to the trashcan. I dug my hand inside the garbage bag and withdrew Julie’s luggage bag. I poured out its contents atop the garbage bag, tossed the luggage bag aside, reached into the trashcan, and pulled the ring box out. I held it up and stared at it.

Julie had chastised me yesterday for keeping things and attempting to attribute meaning to them. But she was more possessive than I was. Being with me wasn't enough for her; she needed to own me. Perhaps, then, that's why she'd left during the night. After all, I'd made it perfectly clear that I was no longer "hers."

I laughed. Maybe Julie wasn't as unpredictable as I'd thought. I finally felt like I understood her "vagabond's heart." She had to seek, to find, to own, and finally to run away all over again. It wasn't just about owning things (or people); it was about the process, and the holding on.

So by the time I started to open the ring box, I already knew what I'd find inside, and why she'd left it with me. I no longer wanted to love her, but I certainly didn't hate her, either. She was a bird and I was a tree. She lived in me for a while, but she was compelled to fly. I couldn't fault her for that any more than she could fault me for staying rooted in the ground.

I pulled the ring out and carried it inside to my bedroom. I laid it on my nightstand next to the Robbins book and went about getting ready for work. An hour or so later, I walked outside and took a moment to look at the sky before leaving. It was blue, expansive. I thought of Julie and hoped she was up there somewhere.

Even after eating a bowl of corn flakes and brushing my teeth, my mouth still tasted faintly of cigarettes. It was pleasant because it was new.

## SEA LEGS

Brilliant colors played out across the cloudless evening sky. From orange to pink to purple, the breathtaking display of color extended upward into the unknown before fading into the inky obscurity of space and time. The giant red sun, hazy above the flat ocean horizon, descended slowly, ready to set the world in sleep-filled darkness—a darkness, perhaps, as black as the secret I fought to keep from my dad.

A light, pleasant breeze danced across the ocean before coming ashore, pushing past the palm fronds like scores of restless ghosts eager to find their way home. The tranquil sounds of crashing waves and rustling treetops carried high into the open third-floor window, reminding me of my childhood, of happy times when my father and I would sit together on a beach just four miles from here, sandwiches in hand, watching the day fade into night. On the best days, he'd stack bologna, lettuce, and cheddar cheese between one slice of wheat bread and one slice of white, the whole thing pressed together so tightly that my favorite spicy mustard would ooze out the sides.

"The wheat's for your mother," he'd remind me in between chews, "and the white bread represents me." He never said as much, but I always assumed he made sandwiches this way because Mom was of Mexican heritage and he was as white as drywall.

I closed the window and latched it shut so none of the memories could get through.

"Beth!" my dad exclaimed, trying to project his voice. "Why'd you do that?" His voice was weak, gravelly.

I turned to face him in his hospital bed. His dark beard looked unkempt, old, streaked here and there with snow-white lines of coarse hair. His skin had taken on a yellowed pallor, greasy and tired, hanging loosely from his emaciated cheeks. "The wind's picking up," I lied.

He nodded towards the window. "You oughtta leave it open," he joked. "When's the last time you had a shower?"

"Whatever, Dad," I said in my sternest voice, but then I laughed.

He was right, though, at least in part. The hospital room was quite rank: the unpleasant odors of rubbing alcohol and gauze hung in the air like smog. There wasn't anything pleasurable about the place. I'd tried many times the past few weeks to convince Dad to stay away from there. His body had rejected the chemo. It was over, and he deserved to die in the privacy of his home with Aunt Sandy and I by his side. There was no reason to stay in the hospital anymore. But here we were, stuck in this melancholy old hospital room, stuck between the deadness of its white walls, cold tiled floor, and low ceiling, Dad having refused hospice care.

Aunt Sandy and I had spent the past few days alternating shifts, each of us unable to spend more than a few hours at a time in the dreary room, watching Dad wither away. Dad's DNR order had been signed weeks ago, so here at Mother of Mercy Hospital it was just a matter of hours, or maybe a few days at best. Nurses popped in every hour or so to make sure Dad was comfortable, or to give him a popsicle. Dad kept the cheap wall-mounted TV on ESPN at all times, but the volume was muted, and the TV didn't have closed-captioning. Sometimes an awkward, gloomy silence would fall over the room. During those times, we'd stare at the TV screen with lazy eyes, barely conscious of the millionaire athletes flashing across alien basketball courts like comets.

I looked back out the window, the ocean scene now as silent as my one-bedroom apartment on the darkest nights—and there were plenty of those as of late. “You should get back to sleep, Dad,” I told him, ignoring the pain below my ribs.

"What ever happened to that boyfriend of yours?" he asked. "What was his name? Julio?"

"You mean Adam?"

Dad let out a cancer-muffled, wheezing laugh, clearly amused by his joke. Dad used to make Mexican jokes all the time to try and get a rise out of Mom, but Mom would just laugh it off. “Esperanza?” he’d said once. “What kind of name is that? I’ll just call you Maude from now on.” He was making the same kind of joke now.

"Adam and I broke up three weeks ago,” I said, choosing not to indulge him. “You knew that.”

"Yeah, well," Dad said. "He was nice."

"Not that nice, Dad. We were incompatible."

He waved an annoyed hand at me. "Oh, for the love of..." he said. "Your mother and I were incompatible, too, but we made it last, didn't we?"

I didn't answer him. I took a seat in the cushioned chair next to Dad's bed, ignoring the seat's age-induced stiffness for the moment, and gazed up at the soundless basketball game on ESPN.

ESPN reminded me of how Dad used to take Mom to Dodgers games all the time. He loathed the Dodgers, though, instead opting for the Angels. It was our in-house rivalry while I

was growing up (I, for the record, liked both teams equally, so I never chose sides). They made fun of each other all the time. In the hospital room, as I stared at the basketball game, I recounted photographs of Mom and Dad at the ballpark, she in her Dodgers get-up and Dad in his Angels gear. There were smiling faces and sunglasses and giant plastic cups overflowing with beer, the snowy foam avalanching over the side. Good times. Happy times. Long before Mom's accident, long before Dad's first and last bout with intestinal cancer—and long before my own grim diagnosis.

Now, as I fought the itchy fluttering in my stomach, the hot urge to tell him that my fatigue, joint pain, and fever weren't from a cold I was battling, I hoped all those years of following the Angels would be repaid—for both of us. Not that I believed in God, really (and not that I didn't, either), but it would be nice to know that this world, well, just *wasn't it*. The idea of ceasing to exist was so depressing, so impossible to imagine. How does consciousness just *end*?

In the months after Mom died, I thought a lot about God and the afterlife. There was never much talk of religion in our house, but I think all of us believed, or wanted to believe, in something, some kind of deity or afterlife. I was only twelve, so I couldn't quite understand what it really meant to be alive, but I figured if anyone deserved to keep living, it was Mom—and now, fourteen years later, I hoped Dad might get a shot to live on in another world, too.

“What's on your mind, Beth?” he asked, breaking me out of my daze.

I looked at him and propped my head up with my hand, resting my elbow on the chair's arm. “Nothing, Ed, why do you ask?”

He laughed. “You know, it’s been a while since someone other than your Aunt Sandy called me by my first name. All these nurses and doctors run around going, ‘How are you feeling, Mr. Weaving?’ and stuff like that.”

“They’re just trying to help,” I told him.

“Yeah, well, it gets annoying. I’m not a child. I don’t need to be coddled.”

Dad had worked for twenty-something years as a union electrician. He loved his work, and had a few friends and acquaintances from the union, but it wasn’t the kind of work where you could make many friends. He worked by himself; even on big jobs that required two or three of his coworkers’ assistance, each of them still worked separately, for the most part. Plus, Dad rarely met the people whose houses he wired, as they conducted business with Dad’s bosses and carpenters instead. He used to talk about how it was a lonely job most days, but that he liked it that way. He said it gave him time to think and that it gave him the chance to get the job done quicker. The only downfall was that now, on his deathbed, as he seemed to melt away like ice, he had very few visitors to wish him well. But, strangely, as with his “lonely” job, Dad probably wanted it this way.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” he asked suddenly. “I do. I like to think your mother floats around and checks in on us from time to time. You know?”

I shrugged. “I think ghosts are scary.”

Just then Aunt Sandy walked in, knocking lightly before reluctantly pushing the door open, clearly worried that Dad might be asleep.

“I’m not talking about *monsters*,” Dad said to me, looking over at Aunt Sandy. “Not like the frightening thing that just came through the door.”

“Oh, Jesus, you’re still *alive*?” she said sarcastically before leaning in and hugging him. I noticed Dad gripped her tighter this time than earlier and I had to look away, back at the meaninglessness of the basketball game again. The camera zoomed in on a star player—I couldn’t quite recall his name—focusing on his upper body as he smiled, clapped his hands together, and flexed his muscles in celebration after a slam dunk. He had enormous, tattooed arms, so full of blood and bone and health. And there, in his eye, was the sparkle of cockiness and self-confidence only a young millionaire could possess—a young millionaire who probably had no idea he was just as vulnerable and mortal as the emaciated, cancer-eaten man beside me.

\*

Dad had been diagnosed with intestinal cancer around four months earlier, in December. His illness began with, as he called it, “bloody shit,” before his physician, Dr. Birch, found a lump in his abdomen. Dad had been losing weight and eating less, but before the bloody stool, he hadn’t really shown any symptoms of illness. He had been his usual joking self, and never missed a day of work. It was odd, really. It was as if finding the lump in his abdomen was the event that made him sick—that the cancer would never have existed if Dr. Birch had never noticed the golf ball-sized bulge to the left of his bellybutton. A day or so after visiting Dr. Birch, Dad became very ill, and never recovered.

I was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia in March and I chose not to tell him. After it was determined in early January that Dad’s cancer was terminal, I’d decided there was no reason to burden him with the grim news. Because of this, I’d also decided it pertinent to keep

the news from Aunt Sandy and her two teenage sons. Not that I would have told them, anyways; I had yet to even tell my friends.

Aunt Sandy had come to the hospital to relieve me, so that I might get a bite to eat and some rest. Instead of going home, however, I grabbed a burger and fries in the hospital cafeteria and returned to Dad's room after eating it. I was exhausted, both from the boredom of sitting in the hospital room and my illness, but something about the way Dad had hugged Aunt Sandy disconcerted me. It was subtle, barely noticeable, really, but his fists had been clenched, there was no doubt about it. I wasn't about to go home.

As I walked in, I noticed something troubling about Aunt Sandy's eyes. She was a pretty woman, if slightly overweight, with big round eyes that showed very little sign of her age (she was forty-five). She always looked and seemed happy. But her dark eyes looked tired now, or wary, as if she were keeping something from me. She sat in the chair next to Dad's bed feigning a smile, running a hand through her wavy brown hair.

"Hey, Beth," she said. "Back so soon?" She didn't seem too surprised.

"Yeah, it's just too quiet at home. Feels weird."

"I know the feeling. After Billy and I separated, I could hardly stand being home. Everything reminded me of him."

I leaned against the wall between the window and Aunt Sandy and looked at Dad, who was fast asleep. His chin was tucked against his chest to improve his breathing, but there was a thick gurgling sound, as if he needed to clear his throat.

Hearing Aunt Sandy talk about Uncle Billy was strange. This was probably the first time she'd mentioned him to me in ten years, since the weeks after their separation and subsequent divorce. Uncle Billy always seemed nice, but I'd never seen him again after that, and I certainly didn't know any of the details about what went wrong between him and my aunt. I silently wondered what happened to him, where he was. I thought about asking Aunt Sandy if she knew, but it wasn't my place.

Also, Aunt Sandy and I weren't as close as we were when I was a teenager. For whatever reason, we had drifted apart a bit, so now we always felt awkward in each other's presence, burdened by the need for conversation, yet too uncomfortable to talk about anything.

I looked out the window, into the darkness. It was already after nine o'clock. The ocean was virtually invisible; some thick clouds had rolled in, hiding the moonlight. A steady stream of vehicles passed by on the street below, their headlights and fading taillights adding a bit of color to the otherwise empty darkness. I realized that each of these cars, trucks, etc. was driven by a mysterious person with a story of his or her own. Oddly, it was the loneliest I'd felt since my breakup with Adam. I felt so disconnected from everything, so envious of everyone's ignorance. I felt a twinge in my heart, like a pinprick, as it occurred to me that I'd soon have to live out my days without my dad around. For a moment, I almost wished his death had been instantaneous instead of gradual.

"You look just like her, you know," Dad said.

I looked at him. He appeared to be so much older than his fifty-two years. "Hey, Pops. I didn't notice you wake up."

“God, I miss her,” he said.

Aunt Sandy stood up. “I need to take a walk, grab a snack,” she said, and left the room, allowing us privacy.

I’d inherited Mom’s thick light-brown hair and green eyes. When I looked at old pictures of her, it was almost as if I were looking at another me in some other time or dimension.

“I miss her, too,” I told him. His eyes were like wet charcoal. He had thick, dark circles beneath them that lent his face a skull-like look. “I think about her all the time. I wish I would’ve...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. I looked back out the window, but all I could see was my reflection in the glass.

“It’s not your fault, Beth.”

Talking about Mom always inevitably led to this, which was probably why our conversations about her had been limited the past few years. I’d lived with the guilt of Mom’s accident for a long time—so long, in fact, that it no longer affected me much. I hadn’t accepted the idea that it wasn’t my fault, but I liked to believe I was getting there, making progress. Still, though, I didn’t feel comfortable talking about it, and I was, by now, tired of Dad reassuring me.

“I know, Dad, but I could’ve prevented it.” I shook my head, chastising my reflection. “If only I’d picked up my shoes...”

Mom had spent the day cleaning out the kitchen, packing old glasses, dinnerware, and silverware into boxes to make room for a new set. It was a normal, mundane day. I’d just come inside from playing with a few neighbor kids. I was only twelve, so kicking my shoes off and

leaving them where they fell was to be expected. But this time, I'd left them lying too close to the basement stairs. A few minutes later, from my bedroom, I heard the enormous crash of shattering glass—and the sickening thump of something, or someone, tumbling down the stairs.

I leaned my forehead against the window's cold glass, closing my eyes, fighting back the wave of emptiness washing over me, crashing against me like surf against stone, slowly weathering me. "It *is* my fault," I whispered, more to myself than my father, but his sharp reaction told me he'd heard loud and clear.

"I won't have that," he snapped, his voice breaking. "You hear me? I won't have any of it."

"I hear you, Dad," I half-whispered.

"But you're not listening. You never have when it comes to this."

I shook my head, glancing at him again. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen his eyes so sullen. "I probably never will," I answered, defeated. "Not about this."

It was difficult for me to be honest with him. It was as if voicing it made it true.

"Your mother loved you," he breathed more than said.

"And I love her just as much, Dad. I haven't stopped. She taught me how to be a woman. She made me who I am today."

There was a pause then. After a few moments, he smiled, nodded. "You remind me of her so much."

I looked away. “But she’s gone, Dad. She’s gone, and it’s my fault. You’ll never convince me otherwise.”

There was a sense of finality to my claim that fell awkwardly over the room. My father, on his deathbed, the cancer having grown like a demon-child in his belly, too far advanced for any hope of his survival, wished for nothing more than to absolve me of guilt, to leave the world comfortably, hopeful that I would be okay. What he couldn’t understand, however, was that I’d lived with the guilt for fourteen years, that any success I’d acquired as an adult came despite the fact, and that I would be just fine, should I choose to be.

I’d learned to let go at a young age, but I’d also learned to hold on.

“You’re an angel,” he said. “A California angel.”

“Do I look like a pro ballplayer?” I joked, but Dad didn’t seem to notice.

“You’re living proof of God’s existence,” he said, a distant awe in his voice.

I laughed humorlessly. “There’s no God. If there were, Mom would still be here. You wouldn’t be sick. Everything would be fine.” I stared at him, but he didn’t respond. He just laid there with a mischievous smile on his face. “Since when do you believe in God, anyways?” I asked, mostly just to break the awkward silence.

“Well, the way I see it, if I believe in ghosts, I kinda have to believe in God, too. You know?”

“Why? I don’t see the logic, Dad.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. But people always say God is hope, shit like that. I think maybe it’s time to start hoping.”

“Hope?” I asked. “For what?”

“Hope that in the end, everything happens for a reason, that it was all worth it.”

Before tonight, Dad had never talked of God, or religion, or anything of the sort. His life had functioned just as normally without those things. Therefore, I saw his belief in God as a farce, something that came about not because of some deep epiphany, or at the hands of some profound self-realization, but due to his inevitable need to survive. I saw his belief in God as a defense mechanism against dying—against ceasing to exist.

The adage that “everything happens for a reason” had always seemed so cliché to me, so watered-down. I couldn’t have been more irritated to hear my father speak it to me. I remembered him as a strong man, invincible, someone who refused to conform to the whims of society or degrade himself by speaking in stereotypes. Seeing him so weak, so desperate, attributed to the offense I took to his refusal, or inability, to utter something more profound than “everything happens for a reason.” As a little girl, I never entertained any ideas of immortality like most children; I was always aware that my parents would die someday. But I’d convinced myself that my father was better than most men, more wise, and I’d subconsciously expected him to tell me the meaning of life on the day he died, kind of like how it happens in movies.

“Remember when you were little,” Dad said, “and we’d go out to the beach and eat lunch together?”

I nodded and took a seat next to him. “I do.”

He glanced at the window, but couldn't see outside from his perspective on the bed. His eyes seemed lively, however—rejuvenated. “Remember how we used to kid around about buying a big boat and driving it to Hawaii?” We both laughed. “Your mom would get so bent out of shape.”

“She thought you'd really do it,” I said, which was true; Dad always liked to buy stuff, from candy to fast food to the time he bought a four-wheeler for no reason other than that he wanted it.

“I would have if I wasn't afraid of her,” he said. We laughed again for a few seconds, and then Dad said, “It kinda makes me sad, you know? Knowing there are parts of the world I'll never get to see.”

I scowled at him sarcastically, trying to hide my emotions. “Jesus, Ed, why don't you pull the trigger already?”

His mouth curled into a tired smile and he rested his head back against his pillow. His eyes moved to the ceiling above him, as if he were dreaming. “If I could, I'd go back and buy a boat, take it out to the middle of the ocean. Breathe that untouched air.” He paused, glanced at me. “Maybe puke over the side a couple times...”

“You're disgusting.”

“Well, they say it takes a while to get your sea legs. They said it on *Deadliest Catch* so it must be true.”

He closed his eyes and laughed. Before I could think of a smartass response, he drifted off to sleep, back into his private dreams—back to his private ocean where the air was, and always would be, fresh and new.

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At six-thirty the next morning, the nurses awoke Aunt Sandy and I (we'd both decided it best to spend the night) to tell us it was the end, and I rushed to Dad's bedside to hold his hand while Aunt Sandy stood at the foot of his bed, rubbing his leg softly. I swore at Dad, begging him to stay, suddenly conscious of just how much I needed him.

"Don't you dare leave me, not now, not like this," I pleaded. "Damn you, wake up so I can tell you how much I love you. Wake up, Daddy, so I can tell you how sorry I am."

As humans, we learn a lot about the value of the things we've never said when we lose someone we love. When my mother died, I cursed God, but I also cursed myself for not making sure she knew how important she'd been to me. I'd lived with the shame of it for a long time before I promised myself, a couple years before Dad's diagnosis, that I wouldn't let it happen again, that I'd never take my father for granted.

Instead, I'd broken that promise. I'd lived in bitterness and loathed myself openly, and it never occurred to me before I held his limp hand that he might've taken it personally, that to him it may have been a reflection of his faults as a parent. In truth, he'd been the best father I could've ever asked for, deflecting my negativity, perpetually focused on the good he saw in me. Until he lay lifeless before me, I never credited what good qualities I had to him. I'd told him it was my mother who'd molded me into the person I'd become, but I never acknowledged that it

was my father's influence that had had the greatest impact on me. As much as I'd loved my mother, she'd passed away before my transition into adulthood, and, ironically, it was my father who'd ignored the rift that had grown between us, and helped me grow into a woman. Perhaps, even, there had never been a rift at all.

Sometime later, Aunt Sandy and I took a walk down to the ER. We weren't sure why we went there, whether it was by chance or if we just needed to know that other people suffered, too, but as we sat there among the multitude of sick, injured, and, in some cases, possibly dying, it seemed that neither of us could think of what to say, or do. The smells of sickness and body odor were overwhelming, as were the moans and coughs of people in much worse shape than I was.

I began to wonder how long it might be before I grew very ill. My doctor had yet to provide me a clear timeframe, although she had mentioned that my leukemia was terminal. When I'd pressed her for a more specific estimate, she'd said, "A year or two. It's tough to say, really."

I looked at Aunt Sandy and sighed. It probably wasn't the right moment to let the cat out of the bag, but is there ever really a good time to tell a loved one you're going to die?

Her eyes were bloodshot, puffy. She'd barely stopped crying since Dad passed. Oddly, I hadn't yet wept, although I could feel the dreaded pull of gravity in my heart. I wondered if I'd made the right choice in withholding my diagnosis from Dad. I wondered if I'd ever come to regret it. Ultimately, though, I supposed it didn't make a difference.

"I have cancer, too," I said, avoiding eye contact. "I never told Dad."

Aunt Sandy stared at me, mouth open, clearly unsure how to take the news.

"Wait...what?"

“Leukemia.” I looked at her. “It’s...it’s bad.” Her face contorted, stretching like rubber, and she burst into tears—deep, powerful sobs, as if she were choking. I instantly regretted telling her, but she was the only elder family member I had left.

I leaned closer to her, letting her bury her face against my shoulder. She clenched my shirt, much the same way Dad had clenched hers the night before, clinging to me as if I were about to vanish.

Some of the people in the ER stared at us reluctantly, or pretended not to notice. It was all very awkward and uncomfortable, like the time my bikini top came untied and slipped off down at the beach. Adam had hurriedly snatched it up so I could tie it back on, but not before a few people had noticed. The hungry eyes of a few men crawled over me like ants, and Adam had told them, “Mind your own goddamn business!” before marching me back to the car. In truth, it must have looked very funny to the onlookers (not like the onlookers in the ER, who most likely felt sympathy for Aunt Sandy and I), especially because bleach-blonde, 150-pound Adam didn’t have a tough bone in his body, but I felt the same embarrassment in the ER, anyways.

Thinking about Adam suddenly made me feel very small. I wasn’t sure if I missed him, or if I just missed the idea of being loved by someone, but I made a mental note to contact him, anyways. More than anything, I wanted to visit the beach again; to feel warm and happy; to feel the smooth flow of sand between my fingers and toes; to feel the cool spray of a rising tide as it splashed against the shore; to eat a bologna sandwich for Mom and Dad.

An older man, probably in his late sixties, sitting across the aisle, grinned sadly through a bushy white beard at me, and I smiled in return. He had a severe cut below his left eye; he held a patch of gauze up to it, but the gauze was soaked as if it had been doused with red water. A

stream of blood trickled down his face like a teardrop before it dripped onto his jeans, forming its own tiny ocean there. It was red water, the color of both life and death—the color of *me*—and I had it in my heart, too, where it pumped and flowed and traversed the furthest recesses of my body, from the innermost portions of my brain, to my fingertips, down through my legs, and into my toes. I was suddenly acutely aware of my mortality, of my need for hope, and, almost without realizing it, I let go of Aunt Sandy and reached out for the old man’s free hand, grasping it tightly.

“Everything all right?” he asked nervously, his gray eyes darting from me to Aunt Sandy.

Aunt Sandy leaned closer to me and half-whispered, “What are you doing? Leave him be.”

I squeezed the man’s hand tighter, but in a friendly way, the calluses on his palm rigid against my skin. I leaned in and looked deeply into his curious, confused eyes, before asking him the only question that ever really mattered in my household: “Dodgers or Angels?”

## SETTLING FOR SAILBOATS

Sometimes when I'm here at the mall, smoking cigarettes and wasting my time checking out high school girls with my friends, my mind drifts back to Junior year—way back in '97—and what it felt like to know a guy like Ricky Silvio.

The mall makes me feel nostalgic. Hanging here gives me this warm emotion, like a heat lamp in my belly. It's a feeling of youth and maybe even rebirth, which is something we all need as we get older. My buddies and I are all pushing 30 now, and most of us have facial hair so relentless we can hardly keep it shaved. And even though the majority of the people we encounter at the mall greet us with nervous or disgusted looks, most of us don't even get carded for alcohol anymore, and certainly not for cigarettes. Bobby Harris, for example, looks like he's over 40, and we all tease him about his receding hairline. Of course, he only looks that way as a result of 15 years of smoking non-filter Pall Malls, as well as his insatiable taste for bourbon. Bobby always looked older, and was able to buy cigarettes for us at the tender age of 15, and beer by 18 or 19. Honestly, we probably only loved him back then because of this, but somewhere along the way we got used to him, and even learned to like him as a person.

Bobby was the first one of us who had a run-in with Ricky Silvio.

Silvio's family moved to our small New York suburb from Italy when we were little kids, probably around third or fourth grade, and we knew then, even as boys, that he was trouble. We were young—too young for serious girlfriends or anything of that sort—but we all had our crushes. Bobby and I had a thing for the same girl for a while—Lisa Bennington—but then one day he decided he liked Gina Dixon more. "Who doesn't?" I asked mockingly. Everyone in the

whole school knew that Gina Dixon was the prettiest girl around, but none of us ever seriously thought we had a shot at getting with her. Except for Bobby.

See, that's the thing about Bobby. He is—and always was—ugly. There's no simpler way of putting it, and no reason to sugar-coat it. But he was naive to the fact, or at least didn't care. He got up every day and slicked back his greasy, dark brown hair (a task some of us attribute his now receding hairline to), brushed and flossed his buck-teeth, and put on his daily best (which usually included a flannel shirt and jeans that were well too short). He seriously thought he could land Gina Dixon, and made a point to try to flirt with her every day. The rest of us were completely intimidated by her beauty and popularity, but Bobby just kept right on believing she'd be his, even after her repeated rejections.

Gina had hair the color of deer fur that hung down to her shoulders, where it curled up and swished around her head like leaves when she jumped around on the jungle gym. She always came to school dressed like a girlie-girl, usually in some cute dress with dainty stripes or polka dots, but she was athletic as hell. Bobby, uncoordinated as he was, would waddle up to her sometimes to talk or strike up a game of tag, but she'd sprint off like a gazelle as soon as she saw him approaching. The poor guy never had a chance.

Shortly after Bobby started pursuing Gina, however, Ricky Silvio moved in on his territory. I'll never forget the look on Bobby's ugly face when he saw Ricky and Gina kissing under the jungle gym at recess. Poor Bobby. I don't think he's gotten over the trauma, even to this very day. "Gina could've been the love of my life," he said recently, rubbing his balding head nervously. None of us had the heart to comment or respond, but I think we all fought back a snicker or two. But Bobby's been through a lot. I mean, it's hard enough being a balding, ugly

guy with bad teeth (not to mention his yellow fingertips and the old-smoke odor that sticks to his epidermis as surely as the freckles on his cheeks) without your three best buddies making fun of you all the time.

Ricky and Gina didn't last, though. I think they were an item for about two or three weeks before they broke up. Gina disappeared a short while after that, and I vaguely remember a rumor that went around about her moving to California to live with her older brother, who built sailboats for a living. I never knew if the rumor was true, and I never really cared—although I admit it would be pretty goddamn cool to sail the Pacific!

But Bobby cared, as you can imagine, and vowed to one day find Gina, to ride a white horse into town and sweep her up as he galloped valiantly by. He said he'd whisk her away to London and marry her, and they would have six children together. "No more, no less," he stated matter-of-factly, and none of us ever knew why it had to be six. We never bothered to ask, either. And like I said, I didn't care, because after Gina, Ricky moved on to my crush, Lisa Bennington.

I've always liked red licorice. But the black stuff? Nasty. What I mean is, Lisa was like the one piece of red licorice in a bag full of black. I wasn't interested in anyone else. I saw them all in shades of gray, but Lisa brought color to my world. She was a ginger, but even then I was into that kind of thing. She was different, beautiful, like some mystical little princess who had hair the color of a red moon. She also had these brilliant, bronze eyes, as round as oranges. And she always smiled. It was as if *everything* made her happy. In short, she was rare, unlike the rest of the crowd, and that's all I ever wanted from anyone. I suppose that's why I ended up alone.

Unlike Gina to Bobby, Lisa talked to me sometimes. There were times she would turn around in class and say hello, or ask me a question about homework. She liked to draw pictures,

too, and she was rather good. Once, she drew a very lifelike tiger, at least for a ten-year-old. When she turned to show it to me, her eyes took on this sad weight and she said, “It reminds me of my dad.” To this day, I often wonder what her story was, why she had looked so distant when she showed me that tiger.

I liked to think Lisa and I were friends. In some way, I guess, I loved her for that, but like I said, we were way too young for that kind of thing. But some part of me was so infatuated with her that I came to rely on her, in a sense, so it ruined me when Silvio butted in. Worse than that, I slowly came to realize that Lisa liked him—like in a childish boyfriend way—and even then I developed an awareness of my aloneness. I remember one particular game of tag, the way I watched from a distance, only mildly aware of the other 498 or however many kids running around the playground, like it was slow motion or something: Lisa was “It”, and she ignored the rest of us, opting to chase Ricky’s skinny little ass around, the two of them giggling so innocently it made my mouth taste sour. I remember the moment of smitten contact, too, when her palm met his back with a fleshy, love-filled *thwap*. I think I felt it more than Silvio did.

But, as with Gina, Ricky didn’t take long to move past Lisa. After that three-week relationship, he went on to our friend Mark Montana’s crush, and then to our other buddy, Leo Trivaldi’s. The point is, on average, Ricky only spent a couple weeks with each of my posse’s girls, just long enough so the girls were no longer even marginally interested in us. See, he swooped in out of nowhere and made it his life’s purpose to take away the only thing my boys and I really cared about.

This was the way of things all the way up into high school. Whenever Bobby, Mark, Leo, or I liked a girl, or even had a girlfriend for that matter, Ricky always stepped in and stole her

away. We couldn't blame the girls, really, and we tried not to. I mean, after all, Ricky was the pretty boy from Italy, with thick, black, wavy hair, deep-set brown eyes, a square jaw, and a smile to be envied. He also had that cool accent. We couldn't compete with that. But that didn't stop us from trying. The only problem was, the harder we tried, the quicker Ricky moved in on our women, and not a one of us had the guts to stand up to him.

Ricky wasn't physically intimidating or anything—he never was, even when we got older. But he was so confident—so popular—that we were afraid of him. We all talked a big game, as most boys do, but when it came down to it, we were all terrified of confrontation. We were the types who sat in the back of the room (if there wasn't a seating chart, of course), and never raised our hands to answer the teachers' questions.

Plus there was that time Ricky beat the shit out of Jimmy Geffen. Jimmy was the class runt, but he had a big goddamn mouth, and he must've said something that pissed Silvio off. It was seventh grade. Mark and I were walking out the front doors of the high school, headed out to the bus, when we came across a serious ruckus. Kids screamed like banshees, some of their voices cracking with puberty, some of them deep and monstrous: *Kick his ass!* they said, and *Kill that little bitch!*

Ricky already had Jimmy down and was kicking him by the time Mark and I came out. I still remember the hollow thud of Ricky's shoe against Jimmy's back. I also remember the snarl on Ricky's face, his lip curled up like Elvis's. His hair swayed around with each kick, bouncing like jumping beans from the force. Anyways, Mark and I weren't too impressed because it was only Jimmy Geffen, but Ricky obviously had some kind of beastly rage inside him. Needless to say, it was scary. I mean, who kicks the class runt around once he's already down on the cement

screaming and crying and bleeding? Once Mark and I passed the word on to the other guys—and made sure they knew how violent it was—it was clear that none of us would ever cross the guy.

That is, not until Junior year of high school. It was 1997. We were 17. Bobby was regularly buying smokes for us from Hanson's, the local convenience store. We were all addicted, and we all had bad attitudes. We weren't gonna take it anymore. We were adults, dammit, and adults don't put up with such nonsense.

It all came to a head after second semester began, and Ricky started dating Leo's now ex-girlfriend, Jen King. "I'm gonna rip his ears off," Leo promised, lighting up what must have been his thirtieth Winston cigarette that day.

"I've got a better idea," said Mark, and he explained to us a plot he'd been hatching for the previous three years, ever since Ricky stole away his girlfriend, Francesca Morris. Basically, we were to deface the one thing in the world Silvio really cared about: his car.

Ricky's parents had bought him a red 1977 Trans-Am the summer before ninth grade. He was a freshman, like us, but he was a bit older, so while most of us were fourteen or fifteen at the time, Silvio was sixteen. He was the only freshman in school who could drive. I remember the look on Mark's face the first time the prick rolled into the high school parking lot, windows down, hair flowing in the breeze, his stupid fucking grin.

"That's gotta be a 400 cubic inch engine," Mark said, pointing to the bump rising off the car's hood. "Sounds like a V-8, too."

Leo shook his head both in awe and hatred. "Fuck that guy," he said.

Leo and Mark were usually quieter than Bobby and I, and never seemed to be as deeply affected by Ricky's incessant whoring. Until now. Leo had a friendly face. He had these natural dimples on his cheeks, like parentheses around his mouth. He always seemed to be smiling. Some people called him Joker, but he hated that name, so us guys didn't use it much. He was tall, too, but lanky, like Manute Bol, the old basketball player from Sudan. Except Leo wasn't from Sudan, and he wasn't black. He had cotton-white skin that turned pink in the sun or when he stood in front of a crowd of people. But this time, as Mark explained his plan, Leo's face seemed as hard and edgy as Sylvester Stallone's.

Mark's pudgy face lit up like a great round, smiley sun. His plan was...well, evil. But none of us could take Silvio's ways anymore, plain and simple. The way he lived his life was evil, too, and sometimes you have to fight fire with a nuke. We had to teach the bastard a lesson in humility. He could've had just about any woman he wanted. Why did he always, *always*, go after ours? Payback was definitely long past due.

One Friday night, we hid out behind the shrubbery in Jen King's yard, waiting for Ricky to come by and pick her up for their date. Leo, of course, wanted to knock on the door and talk to her, and I must admit it took some convincing to keep him from doing so, but he eventually relented.

"She can't know we're here," Mark whispered. "It'll ruin the whole plan, and we'll get caught."

Leo just let out a pitiful, defeated sigh, and sprawled out in the grass.

*The story of our lives, I thought. We'll always be like Leo, lying pathetically on the ground while the world continues on around us.*

Within a few minutes of our arrival, Ricky's red Trans-Am pulled up to the curb like some royal coach, engine growling. From behind the shrubbery, we watched him get out, climb the driveway, and then ring the doorbell. Once his back was turned to us, we scampered away from the shrubbery, careful not to make a sound, and hid on the opposite side of his car. Bobby, Leo, and me kept watch while Mark pulled a six-inch filet knife from his back pocket and began the tedious yet fun—as he came to describe it in later years—task of slashing Ricky's tires.

The plan was to slash the tires and run, but devious, destructive plans such as tire slashing never seem to go as well as intended. Mark had claimed the whole idea was fool-proof. "We'll be fine," he'd said. "It's perfectly safe."

But as Mark punctured the left rear tire, the calm quiet of night was unexpectedly interrupted by an explosion loud enough to wake Gina Dixon from her peaceful slumber in California, or wherever the hell she'd disappeared to.

The next minute seemed to go by in slow motion:

We jumped, startled by the sudden thunderous noise. Mark's round face went slack with surprise. Ricky hesitated, saw us, and then rushed at us. Mark stood up. Ricky didn't see him, came flying towards me, fists flying wildly. Leo got in his way at the last second, knocked into him. They went down in a heap, grunting with exertion, knees and palms scraping against the pavement with a sickening scratching sound. Mark knelt over top of Ricky, knife still in hand. Jen's porch light came on and gleamed off the blade. Ricky swung a desperate fist, clubbing

Mark in the temple. The knife fell to the ground, followed by Mark. Ricky got to his feet. Leo, still on his backside, grabbed the fallen weapon. I backed off, not sure how to react. Ricky looked at me, eyes wild, then turned instead towards fallen Mark, still recovering from the punch to the head. Ricky knelt over him, drew his fist back...then, before it crashed down, Leo was on him...

To make a long story short, Leo lopped off the top of Ricky's ear. I never knew an ear could bleed so much. I mean, I've seen ears pierced, and it never bled like that. My little sister screamed and howled when she got her ears pierced a few years earlier, but even then, very little blood. Of course, a large, wedge-shaped portion of Ricky's ear had been amputated, and I'm sure anyone would expect that to bleed. But still...it shocked me.

Oddly enough, Ricky didn't scream. In fact, he showed little evidence of physical pain. He just put his hand over his ear, and looked at Leo in desperate surprise. "What did you do?" Ricky said more than asked, and Leo just pointed at him with the knife and said, "Go home."

Ricky retrieved the piece of ear off the pavement, studied it for a moment, looked at us one last time, then got in his car and took off, the car's left rear tire flat, its rim scraping.

"What's going on?" came a voice from the porch. It was Jen leaning out the front door to see what the commotion was. We ran. Far. Into the woods on the outskirts of town. We never wanted to go home again.

In the woods, we buried the knife. We vowed never to talk about what we'd done again. This was ludicrous, of course, because Ricky would surely tell on us, and we'd face some sort of jail time. It wasn't just some little secret we could hide forever.

But, strangely, Ricky never spilled the beans. Perhaps he thought he deserved it, or perhaps he simply didn't want to be a tattle-tale. Who knows?

I heard later that he went to the hospital that night and was fortunate enough to have the ear sewn back together. It was obvious, though, when we saw him at school a few days later (hiding our shame and fear, and avoiding him at all costs) that the ear would forever pose a threat to his physical beauty. It flopped, and had a very noticeable discoloration. It would never fully heal, and the scar tissue would always mar what was once a physically perfect specimen of the male species. We'd destroyed something beautiful, and we were sure to burn in Hell for eternity.

But girls were even more attracted to Ricky after that. What was it about the dark Italian guy with the cool accent, with the cool hair, with the cool and mysterious scar, that attracted all the babes? We just couldn't...

"Where are you?" Bobby asks, waving his hand in front of my face. "You still with us? Wake the fuck up, man."

I snap out of my trance. I realize I'm standing in the mall, right in the middle of the hallway, staring at the wall. "Bah," I say, moving out of the way of oncoming shoppers. "Just thinking about Ricky Silvio again." All the guys let out disgusted puffs of air, swatting at me as if I'm an insect.

"Fuck that guy," Leo says.

"I wonder what happened to him," Mark says.

Bobby sighs. “Who gives a shit? Let’s go outside for a smoke.” He pulls a pack of Pall Malls out of the pocket of his flannel shirt and starts slapping the box against his palm, helping the tobacco settle—*Settling*, I think. *What an awesome concept. I think I’d like that.*

We’re all standing outside the Victoria’s Secret store, loitering across the hall, watching groups of girls walk in and out with oblivious smiles on their faces. “Nineteen,” I say, pointing at a skinny brunette with enormous breasts.

Mark laughs. “No way, man. She’s not a day older than seventeen.”

“Judging by that rack, I’d say she’s over eighteen,” Bobby says just as a large group of teenage girls passes in front of us, giggling about whatever it is girls giggle about. Something about one of their voices reminds me of Lisa Bennington’s and an image of the tiger she drew when we were kids seeps into my memory again. I wonder where she is. I wonder if she ever liked me, if I had a chance. My heart swells with some distant, unpleasant feeling of love and regret—and then it occurs to me that maybe the voice I heard really *was* Lisa’s!

We fall silent, watching as the group rounds the corner and out of sight. I want to chase after them, see if that voice really belongs to Lisa, but I’m too afraid I might fall down, or do something embarrassing, so I let it go.

Instead, we step outside and light up our cigarettes, breathing in the dry carcinogens as we look out over the parking lot. The sun is shining, gleaming white off the hood of a rusty old red Fiero. *Ricky Sil-Fiero*, I think, and laugh to myself. *How ironic to see a red Pontiac.*

I become aware of details, how everything is just details added up into a collective, and the warm feeling that everything’s connected washes over me. The world is loud, bright, full of

wonderful sounds, smells, and colors, and it's just turning, turning, turning, and here I am—here we are, all four of us—growing older. I think I'd like to drift out of myself, up into the atmosphere like a balloon, before falling slowly back down to a place far away from here—a place like California, where I might disappear—where I might *settle*—and never be seen again, like Gina Dixon all those years ago.

I look up and project my thoughts and energy into the blue, oceanic sky, watching as groups of wispy clouds float on by like sailboats.

## ADVENT

My mom asked me if I was gay once. I was fifteen. When I got home from school, I went to my room, tossed my backpack onto the unmade bed, and then went to the kitchen for some grub. As I rounded the corner out of the long hall and stepped into the dining room, my mom was sitting patiently at the mahogany table waiting for me. She had a serious look in her eyes and a few white papers spread out in front of her like tarot cards. I could tell, even from ten or twelve feet away, that these papers were mine, old schoolwork.

“Sit down,” she said, in her raspy voice, nodding at the chair across from her. “We need to talk.”

I did as told, but before I could ask what was going on, she slid one of the papers toward me, the way detectives on TV pass bloody photographs of murder victims to suspects. I reached out glumly and lifted the paper so I could read it. It was an old Biology quiz, but there at the bottom, underneath a short essay I’d written and gotten half credit for, was a poem.

I had a good friend named Ron. We had a few classes together, and Biology was one of them. We sat by each other at the back of the classroom, near the noisy old aquarium where Mr. Pitts grew algae for scientific reasons I’d never understand. After Mr. Pitts passed back our quizzes, he proceeded with the pointless and boring ritual of going over the answers. To pass the time, I’d written a short poem to mess with Ron, stifling a laugh as I handed it to him. It was truly a work of art. It said:

*I have a friend, his name is Ron,  
It's the nastiest thing you'll ever hear.*

*But hear his voice, see him walk,  
And you'll know that he's a queer!*

Ron wasn't gay or anything. Even if he was, I wouldn't have cared much. But I was taking a jab at his manhood. It was the same kind of harmless barb that teenage boys have been directing at each other since the dawn of time. But there were three problems: the first was that I'd left the quiz, along with a few other assignments that had begun to take up space in my folder, lying on my bedroom floor; the second problem was that my mom liked to snoop around my bedroom; the last problem was, of course, that my name is Ron, too.

\*

This is what I was thinking about as I sat behind the wheel of my old black Cavalier, struggling to tighten the Windsor knot in my red tie. It was a relaxed struggle, though. I was wasting time, in no rush to go inside the funeral home. I'd already spent fifteen minutes flipping through radio channels, twisting the knob left and right in my search for a good song, or at least a song that didn't remind me of where I was and what I was doing, watching as groups of other mourners arrived. I hoped Dad wouldn't come. Although only twenty-eight, I suddenly felt very old, momentarily aware of the almost arthritic weight of loss on my shoulders.

On the night that my mom rolled her Ford Taurus over on Higgins Road, a country road surrounded by deep watery ditches a couple miles from her house in Cushing, I was at my apartment writing. I'd had a heated argument earlier that day about Dad with my twin sister, Rhonda. Rhonda and I had met at Mom's to help decorate for Christmas, but sure enough, as is typical of her, Rhonda started in on me about getting in touch with Dad, something I had little interest in. I could handle Rhonda's prodding because she was a daddy's girl, but Mom, for some

inexplicable reason, had sided with Rhonda this time, which set me off, and I said some things I'd come to regret. The one that stuck with me was how I'd told Mom she deserved to be alone.

Mom was a smart woman with a comedienne's sense of wit. She was always joking around about something, even in serious situations, which was probably why the day she asked me if I was gay stands out as such a hilarious memory. It was as if she'd never been serious before that, and never again after it. What's more is that it was exactly the kind of situation that demanded her brilliant sense of humor.

As I grew into my twenties, our relationship developed into a friendship before it began to deteriorate into an acquaintanceship a year or so before she died. Every now and then we still met for drinks at Browner Lanes, the local bowling alley, and maybe even threw a few awkward strikes and meandering gutter balls, sharing some laughs. But it wasn't the same. It was as if she had ceased being my mother. In some way, even, it was as though our roles had begun to reverse, as if in her middle-fifties she had already begun to fall apart, like when an old flower loses its first petal. There was something in the way we conversed, in the way she seemed to subtly beg for my company, that reminded me a day was fast approaching when my mother would become more like my daughter.

But, of course, that day would never come.

What kept me huddled in my car in a vacant area of St. Paul's Catholic Church parking lot, fighting the urge to twist the top off the fifth of cheap whiskey I'd purchased on the way, was the prospect of seeing my dad inside. Also, because I hadn't attended the showings the previous two days, I was embarrassed about confronting Rhonda and my mom's sisters, Aunt Brenda and

Aunt Cheri. In fact, I'd been intentionally unreachable the previous five days since Mom's accident; I hadn't seen or talked to Rhonda since Mom was pronounced dead at the hospital.

Mom wasn't the only person from whom I'd drifted apart. In fact, in a way, it was as if *I* had come apart, like steam. Rhonda, who had been perhaps my closest friend growing up, was like a stranger now. We were in our late twenties – living our lives, as they say: searching for people to date, working our jobs, and doing a bevy of other things that typical twenty-somethings do. And here we were, twins who were suddenly polar opposites. We should've been sharing in the grief of our mother's tragic death, but some strange instinct in me, some voice inside, warned me to keep my distance. I knew I wasn't being fair to Rhonda, and that I probably owed it to my mom to be there for my sister, but I was still angry. With both of them.

After some time – probably a half hour or so – the chilly December air finally got to me, so I climbed out of the car. I'd been driving the Cavalier since my eighteenth birthday, when my mom had bought it for me (for a little over a thousand bucks). Since then, the old vehicle had deteriorated, but at least it was still running. I kept thinking how ludicrous I probably looked exiting the old rust-bucket, slamming the creaky door. A few folks were standing just outside the doors of the lovely cobblestone church smoking, taking turns blowing out foggy mixtures of breath and smoke. One of them – a third or fourth or six-hundredth older cousin named Pete, a guy I only knew from various family gatherings throughout the years – watched as I approached. I imagined what he must have thought of me, with my brown hair slicked back, my trimmed beard, my dark suit neatly pressed (I'd opted not to wear my Marmot overcoat), my old rust-stained car. I could feel him judging me. I wondered if he'd attended either of the open-casket showings. If he had, what must he think of me? Was I the inconsiderate son of a dead funny

lady—a lady whom *everyone* liked? What did it say about me that I'd not bothered to show my face the past few days?

My nerves rang in my ears like sleigh bells and I wondered, ridiculously, if it was really the sound of my mom earning her wings. It was probably twenty degrees outside, but I felt warm, flushed with embarrassment and, perhaps, shame. I made eye contact with Pete. He had dark, squinty eyes. He was the type of guy you see that just looks shady, like he was always scrutinizing you.

He nodded at me and smiled wanly, exhaling a jet of smoke. "Hey, Ron, so sorry for your loss."

Shocked by his genial expression, I shouldered past him, in a manner that must have seemed rude, through the church doors, now embarrassed for thinking so lowly of him. "Thanks, good to see ya," I muttered, in a hurry to free myself from the awkward confrontation.

It was considerably warmer inside St. Paul's. There was the faint sound of organ music, some pretty and arbitrary old church song I'd never know the title to. I wondered if my mom had known it, or even if she'd believed in God. She'd really never shown any indication of religious belief that I could remember. But, I supposed, that didn't mean she was an atheist. I knew that Rhonda had chosen St. Paul's for the funeral because she was an avid member there. I never knew why my sister had chosen to get involved with a Catholic church, but I suspected an ex-boyfriend had turned her on to the idea.

The church's narthex smelled of pollen and burning candles. There were wreaths and collaged picture boards and myriads of colorful bouquets of flowers placed around the entrance

to the sanctuary. I snaked my way through ten or twelve mourners, most of whom were conversing with each other about things unrelated to funerals, and stepped into the sanctuary without glancing at the photographs of my mom on the picture boards.

I took a seat in the last row of pews, next to the center aisle, and looked around. It was probably twenty minutes before the service would begin, so I figured the church was about as full as it would get. I saw Rhonda at the front, conversing with a man and woman I didn't recognize. The casket, just behind my sister, was elevated on the chancel like royal property. It was surrounded by more wreaths and flowers, as well as a few obnoxiously large leafy plants. The priest, a crew-cut, gaunt old man with horn-rimmed glasses, sat in a gaudily decorated chair, over to the right side of the sanctuary, behind the pulpit, where he would deliver the eulogy. A brilliant violet and white chasuble was draped over him. He looked like an elderly king on his throne, looking out over his ignorant minions and subjects.

There were Christmas decorations everywhere. Tiny pine wreaths, each adorned with a prim violet bow, hung off each pew, staring at one another like opposing armies over the main aisle. There was an enormous cross on the far wall, behind the chancel, upon which dangled an emaciated Christ dummy, complete with a crown of thorns and a gory, bright red wound in its side; above that, however, in stark contrast to Christ's disturbing visage, someone had hung a beautiful, giant wreath, complete with drooping pinecones and a glittery white bow. The wreath must have been five feet in diameter. It watched over the church like a great eye.

There was a tall, wide Christmas tree beneath the cross and off to the left against the wall. The tree was appropriately decorated with alternating violet and white bows, had a violet tree skirt with white lining spread out like a dark bloodstain beneath it, and a gaudy, sparkling white

star placed atop its peak. It was so festive. I wondered silently what the colors meant and how they related to Christmas.

Stragglers began to file into the sanctuary, murmuring quietly with one another. I recognized a few of them, including cousin Pete, as the smokers outside. The people who had been standing and conversing in the sanctuary began to be seated. I did not see Dad anywhere. It wasn't until I exhaled that I realized I'd been holding my breath. Rhonda made her way up the aisle and I cringed, half hoping she wouldn't notice me. When she saw me, her muddy eyes lit up, as if encountering an old friend. I felt my face flush as she hurried her pace.

My sister looked quite beautiful. In fact, she resembled my mom quite a bit. Her chocolate brown locks were curled, bouncing above her shoulders with each step she took. And while she wasn't as thin as Mom – Rhonda fretted outwardly about her weight rather often – she looked confident, strong, which reminded me of Mom. While I'd been passively aware of the hollow feeling of loss in my stomach for the past few minutes, I didn't truly feel sad until the moment my sister approached me.

“Ronald Exley!” she said playfully, almost yelling. “Where have you been? I've been worried sick!” It was as if she'd completely forgotten about our fight.

I stood up and accepted her embrace, which was brief and awkward. She was damp, sweaty. Her hair smelled like an apple orchard, sweet like cider, yet beneath that, sour like rotting fruit. “Around,” I said, meaning just the opposite. “Working on my book.”

“You're writing a book?” I nodded, embarrassed by her reaction. “Well, Aunt Brenda was looking for you, and Aunt Cheri wanted me to tell you she's not speaking to you.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, well...”

She put her hands on my shoulders in a compassionate way. “Listen, I’m *so* busy, but the funeral’s about to start. You should go up front and sit there. Aunt Brenda’s saving you a seat.”

“Nice of her,” I said, trying not to look at Mom’s casket. I felt lucky that Mom’s head wasn’t raised. I didn’t want to see her face. Not that I would’ve been able to see it very well from where Rhonda and I stood.

“I’m going outside to get everyone in here,” Rhonda said, sliding past me towards the narthex. “I’ll be up there in a minute!”

“Okay, sure,” I said, watching as she rushed out. Her dress, the purple hue of a fading sunset, fluttered behind her, as if an angelic breeze had suddenly burst through the entryway.

I sat down in the same pew and faced forward. The mahogany casket shimmered under the soft lemon lighting, mocking me. I knew I should move to the front to sit by my family, but I felt more comfortable alone. I saw the backs of my aunts’ dark brown heads, as well as the blue-gray bouncy curls of Grandma Helen’s perm. I’d felt badly for her ever since Grandpa Jack passed away nine years earlier. But Grandma Helen was still as lively and sweet as ever – well into her seventies, but so full of life, despite losing her husband of forty-something years. I noticed the slight bob of her shoulders and realized she must be crying. I couldn’t take it, so I looked away, back to the priest sitting on his throne. He looked so indifferent – bored, even. My mom deserved better than this. She deserved to have someone who loved her deliver the upcoming eulogy. It was an intimate thing to summarize someone’s life.

“Can I sit here?” It was a strangely familiar voice. I looked up, surprised to see my old friend Ron standing next to me.

Ron was tall and slightly overweight, just as I remembered him. He smiled broadly, revealing a line of straight but semi-yellowed upper teeth. He had thick black eyebrows and purple half-circles beneath his blue eyes. His nose had taken on a curious crooked and bulbous look, which was different from how it had looked in high school. He must have broken it somehow since then.

I’d once heard, a couple years after graduation, that Ron had been drafted by the Cincinnati Reds. He’d gone off to Kent State University on a partial baseball scholarship after high school. He was always a gifted ballplayer – much better than I ever was – despite his size. He’d tied the state record for career home runs late in senior year. He was also a strong fielder at first base. He wasn’t the quickest, and therefore didn’t have much range, but he sucked up any ball that came near him like a vacuum. He’d bailed me out a few times, scooping up some of my errant throws from third base. When I heard that the Reds had drafted him, I knew he must have had a spectacular two years at Kent State, especially if he was leaving early to enter the draft. I’d been happy for him, yet somewhat sad for myself, because I’d thought I would never see my old buddy again. After that, I’d followed the Reds organization loosely for a couple years, but Ron had never made it past A ball. Strikeout problems and a recurring shoulder injury had gotten the best of him, and within three years he was out of baseball for good. That was around five years before my mom’s funeral.

I slid over and forced a smile. “Sure, man, sit down. Great to see you.”

He patted my back as he plopped down into the pew. “Wish it was better circumstances, though.” I nodded and looked towards the casket again. I didn’t answer. Ron said, “So what are you up to these days?”

I shrugged. “Working retail, writing a book. I got my Bachelor’s degree in Literature five years ago, but there aren’t any jobs.”

I’d been working as a stock associate at an electronics store called Corso’s Computers since a month or so after earning my degree. It wasn’t the best job, and certainly wasn’t the type of position I’d planned for during my undergraduate studies at Grand Valley State University, but it paid enough for me to scrape by and offered an impressive benefits package. While I loathed the work at times – the early mornings, the heavy lifting, the tedious process of unloading boxes off delivery trucks – I was in a tough spot because I couldn’t afford to quit.

Ron wasn’t interested in my job, though. “A book?” he asked instead, sounding surprised. “What’s it about?”

I’d been working on the novel for a couple of months. It had become a hobby; I enjoyed it and viewed it as a constructive way to pass the time. Because I’d studied both classic and modern American Literature so closely in college, I had acquired an appreciation for the rigors of the writing process, but also for the potential benefits of producing quality work. While I knew I was no Faulkner or Hemingway, I believed that my education had prepared me to write readable fiction. And, since my job search had never been successful, I’d finally decided it was time to do something with that education. So, I took to outlining a lengthy story about a single mother whose purpose in life was to make her two children laugh.

I wasn't ready to admit this to Ron, however, so my answer to his question was, "I don't know. Life, I guess."

"A novel?" I nodded. "That's awesome. I wish I could write."

I shrugged again. "Nah. It's boring."

"I bet your mom would be proud."

I looked at him. He'd touched a nerve. Despite the fact that we'd been friends for five or six years before our senior year in high school, Ron didn't meet my mom until early that baseball season. She came to almost all of our varsity games the two years I was on the team – and quite a few junior varsity games, too, but Ron had played varsity since freshman year – but for whatever reason, the two of them had never been introduced to each other before our game against Deadwood. Cushing, our hometown, and Deadwood were bitter sports rivals. Deadwood usually dominated us, but on that particular day, I went three-for-four and drove in the winning run in a seven-to-six upset victory. The team and a horde of our parents and students rushed the field and mobbed me in a spectacular celebration. During the melee, Mom and Ron happened to run into each other, and that was their first time meeting.

But Ron and I had hung out mostly in town, at McDonald's, our mutual friends' houses, or at the local diner, Ginny's, where we gorged on pizza and ice cream. Because we spent most of our time running around, and lived four miles apart, we never got to know each other's parents very well. In fact, Ron was never given any opportunity at all to meet my dad. My dad had left us before my ninth birthday, long before Ron and I had gotten to know one another, and I'd stopped talking to the prick by the time I was thirteen.

“How did you find out about my mom, anyway?” I asked. “When did you get back in town?”

“Hey, I may have moved away, but I’m still a small-town Michigan boy at heart. This kind of news gets around when you remember your roots.”

We were quiet for a few moments then, each of us facing forward. I started thinking about God. Like anyone else, I’d wondered about God’s existence many times. I’d made fun of stereotypical biblical stuff with my friends many times, too. And I knew I’d never be a part of the cliquy Christian crowd or anything. But sitting there with my old friend, thinking about my mom, I wanted there to be a heaven like no other time in my life.

Ron sighed, looking around the sanctuary. “All this purple reminds me of my wedding,” he said, sounding somewhat regretful.

“You’re married?”

He shook his head, looking down at his hands, which were folded in his lap. He tapped his thumbs together nervously. “No, not yet, but soon. Two months. Our colors are black and purple.”

“Well, congrats, I guess.” He shot me a confused look. “You just don’t sound too enthused, is all,” I reasoned.

He blew a wisp of air out of his angular nose, forcing a laugh. “It’s just stressful.”

“Well, what’s her name?” I asked. “Tell me about her.”

He looked at me, smiled, and glanced towards my mom's casket. "Remember back in high school when you wrote that stupid poem and your mom thought you wrote it about yourself?"

"Are you serious?" I laughed. "I'll never forget it. That was the most hilarious thing ever. I was like, 'No, Mom, I'm not a faggot!'"

Ron looked back at me with some kind of distant sadness in his eyes. He pinched his lips together and put his arm around me. "Yeah," he said, looking away. "Yeah, I'm sure that would've been a nightmare for her." He patted me on the back and began to stand up. "Take care of yourself, old buddy," he said.

"Wait, what's wrong?"

He turned towards me again, looking down at me with piercing blue eyes. It was kind of like when you gaze into the sky, searching for signs of God's existence. "Back in A ball," he said, his voice low and serious, "I tried very hard to be who I am. I was pretty open about things with my teammates. I think it's important. See, a team only functions well when teammates trust each other." He pointed to his nose, touched the tip and wiggled it. "I told them who I am, and a small group of them dragged me out behind the clubhouse and beat my face in. Then they kicked me around for a while. Now, those guys got in trouble – fined and suspended for a few games. But they were back soon enough, as if nothing ever happened. I had two surgeries on my nose, but it still looks like one of those red balls clowns wear. And don't even get me started on my shoulder.

“See? I lost trust in them after that. I couldn’t hit anymore. And the worst part is, I didn’t really care. I lost my love for the game.”

“I’m sorry, man,” I said.

He laughed sarcastically. “My mom always told me not to apologize unless I meant it. Do you even know what you’re apologizing for?”

I thought it over. “Are you gay?”

He let out a boisterous laugh that attracted the attention of a few people sitting near us. I was mildly embarrassed. “I guess you were right all along,” he shot. “Now you know why I never came back here. I was hoping you would’ve changed by now, but I can’t be friends with someone I can’t trust.” His eyes grew heavy with water. “I truly am sorry for your loss, Ron. Your mother was a great person. I know how much you loved her.”

I looked down at my feet. I was a sucker for tears, especially in men. My face grew hot. I nodded my head. “Thank you. It really does mean a lot. And...I *am* sorry.”

Ron straightened his tie and looked around, his lip quivering. I could tell he was trying to control his emotions. He looked back at me again and said, “I hope your dad comes.” I wasn’t sure if he was being nice, or mean.

Then he made his way up the center aisle, stopped in front of Mom’s casket, bowed his head for a moment, and exited via the aisle on the far left. I watched, with a twinge of sadness, as he disappeared like an apparition into the narthex.

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The funeral service was long and boring, but I left with the feeling that it had been too short, that not enough had been said about my mom. Rhonda had returned rushing down the center aisle shortly after Ron left, but she'd only waved and smiled sadly at me as she passed by. To my surprise, somewhere between prayers, the priest – Father Angelo, as I came to learn later – stepped aside to let Rhonda say a few words about Mom. I tried to ignore most of what she was saying, as if not hearing her words would mean I'd never have to let go of Mom, but one part of her speech stuck with me.

My sister did quite well, from what I could tell, avoiding crying, especially considering that she was the type of woman who cried at the end of virtually every romantic comedy she'd ever seen. I glanced up from time to time, trying my best not to hear what memories she was sharing, or what special characteristic about my mom she was highlighting. But there, at the end of her eulogy, I caught something. Rhonda, clearly fighting back tears, her face puckering exactly the way Mom's used to when she fake-cried, said, "...that Mom would tell us all to live happy and laugh much."

In that moment, it occurred to me that I hadn't "lived happy" in quite some time – if ever. I felt insubstantial, as if I hadn't lived at all, let alone unhappily. I wanted to leave then – not just St. Paul's, but the entire disapprobation of my life in Cushing – to vanish without uttering one word of goodbye to anyone. This realization, of my ability to disappear, was both terrifying and alluring, and I wondered if my dad had felt the same inexorable emotion when he'd left us all those years ago. He must have. For the first time that I could remember, I pitied him – and perhaps missed him.

After the funeral I left quickly, before anyone could stop me and utter some half-hearted or false expression of condolence, and drove into the dull, nearly undetectable December sunset towards Mom's house. I wasn't sure why I was going there; my head told me it was more reasonable to get back to my apartment and pack up. But I had to see the place, the unfinished Christmas decorations inside – I had to feel the death of it.

It was about a twenty-minute drive, so by the time I arrived, it had already grown dark. I parked at the end of the driveway, as I always had, out near the lonely country road. I cut the engine and twisted open the bottle of cheap whiskey I'd left sitting on the worn gray passenger's seat. The car filled with a hollow, metallic ticking sound as the engine began to wind itself down, and I was overcome by the feeling of a journey ending – a journey ending so that another might begin. I swigged the whiskey, stifling a cough as the spicy fluid trickled its way down my throat into my cold belly.

Strangely, I felt no regret for going against custom and refusing to approach my mom's corpse at the end of the service, all stiff and already decaying in its snooty mahogany eternal deathbed. I wondered haphazardly how much the damn casket cost – how much the entire *funeral* cost – and hoped Rhonda wouldn't ask me for any money. As quickly as the thought came, however, I dismissed it, because I'd already made up my mind that I was leaving this place, tomorrow, forever. I'd sell whatever I didn't need and move on to some distant western horizon where the air was always warm and the heart was never empty. I'd hole up in some apartment in New Mexico where I could read and write and be alone all I wanted, without being judged as if it were some great crime to choose not to love.

I took a thicker pull of whiskey and climbed out of the rusty Cavalier, making my way up the driveway towards the garage. Mom's house – the very house I'd grown up in – was a comfortable bi-level with brown vinyl siding and a steep, black-shingled roof. A great bay window and two smaller windows watched the street from the second floor like giant, unblinking eyes. There were also two more small windows beneath the bay window, to the left of the porch and front door. Over to the right of the porch was the garage. Each window had faux shutters on either side of it, painted white to match the front door. As I approached, a memory floated up into my consciousness: my mom and I, fifteen years ago or so, tossing the baseball around in the front yard. I remembered the crack of my mitt and the dull snap of my mother's, as we took turns throwing and catching the ball. I was passively glad to have those nostalgic sounds echoing in my memory.

I came to the porch steps and located my mom's house key on my keychain, but then stopped in my tracks. I hadn't noticed, but my dad was sitting there, in the dark, at the top of the steps, leaning back against the front door. He had on a red hooded sweatshirt and dark blue jeans. I hadn't seen him in quite some time, but I recognized him right away. It was as if an older me, from the future, had come back in time to confront me. Dad even had a beard, although his wasn't as well-groomed as mine.

He didn't say anything; he just sat there, staring at the sky.

"How'd you get here?" I asked, looking for a vehicle.

"Cab," he said. I hesitated, unsure of how to confront the man who had broken me. Then he said, "There's no stars. It's just... black. Empty."

A light snow began to fall. “Why’d you take a cab?” I asked.

He looked at me and smiled. Although it was dark, I could see that his eyes were puffy, as if he’d been crying. “Lost my license a few months ago.” He laughed, a more genuine sound than the moment demanded, as if something about the situation was hilarious. “It’s a bitch, son. I’m telling you, it’s a real fucking bitch.”

“Don’t call me son,” I said, although not as harshly as I would have liked. “You lost that right a long, long time ago.”

My dad raised his hands to the sky and said in a silly voice, quoting *Star Wars*, “A long, long time ago, in a galaxy *farrrrr awayyyyy*...” He gave a sigh that resembled a laugh.

“Dad,” I said, trying to figure out if I should move forward or step back. “Dad, what’s going on?”

“You know why Catholic churches use purple around Christmastime?” I shook my head. “It’s the color they use during advent. Those assholes have all these...” He waved his hands around sarcastically. “These fucking *traditions*.”

“Wait,” I said, coming to a realization. “Were you there today?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I was. I stood back in the lobby area the whole time. They call that the *narthex*.” He made quotation marks with his fingers.

“I didn’t see you.”

“Didn’t want you to. I didn’t even want your sister to see me.”

He leaned forward then, unexpectedly, cradled his face in his hands, and began to sob rather loudly. I looked around, embarrassed for him, but then moved closer to him. I sat beside him and placed a reluctant arm around his shoulder, just as Ron had done to me at St. Paul's.

He squirmed out of my grasp and drew back. "I've been losing things – *people* – my whole life," he said, his voice cracking.

"I know how you feel," I told him, and looked away, blinking away my own tears.

"Do you?" he said more than asked, as if he didn't believe me. "The thing is, Ronald, I never realized it was my own goddamn fault until..." He took a deep breath and choked on his words. "Until *now*." He shook his head and looked off into the distance, a disgusted look pulling at the corners of his face. "It's too late," he said glumly, and buried his face in his hands again.

As I watched him, my heart swelled with a foreign emotion, something both warm and sorrowful. I pulled my dad close, marveling at his frailty, and looked out across the road, into the open field where old Farmer Jackson would plant his corn again next year. I ran my hand through Dad's hair as though he'd done something to warrant my love, as if every part of me, down to my core, didn't want to hate him.

"Don't leave me, son," he said, his voice falling to a strained whisper, with an intensity that sent a chill down my spine. "We can just...figure something out. Right? Can't we just...I don't know...*go back*?"

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against him tightly. His touch sapped my anger, and I began to cry softly. We held each other there, cautious, the wind and the snow and

the empty house pulling us in different directions. The wind picked up, whistling through the barren trees on either side of the house.