

TALES OF A SMALL TOWN CORONER

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“Read, read, read. Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You’ll absorb it. Then write. If it’s good, you’ll find out. If it’s not, throw it out of the window.”

--William Faulkner

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This collection is dedicated to my father—my inspiration—  
my mother, who is always there to listen and read,  
and my brothers, who have shared in these stories with me.

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## ABSTRACT

### TALES OF A SMALL TOWN CORONER

by Erin Lewis

This collection takes place in the fictional town of Strathmoor, surrounding the life of small town coroner and paramedic, Morrison Cameron and his family—complete with three footstep-following children and his wife. Strathmoor, a small, rural town of Pennsylvania, comes to life in the pages of this collection, featuring a different point of view in each story. The stories tell about the lives and deaths of the people in Strathmoor, the judgment surrounding death, and the reactions the town has to a person’s specific situation. The characters come and go throughout the text, recurring in the minds of people and lingering in the memories of the town, and allowing the haunting nature of death to prevail in the tales of a small town coroner.

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## INTRODUCTION

I have always lived in a small town, but let me define “small.” According to Wikipedia, my town is 0.9 square miles, and the census says that we have 1,852 people per square mile—but only 1,629 people living in it. There are no traffic lights in town, and we finally got our first chain restaurant—a Subway—when I was in seventh grade (that was in 2001). My town is 99.32% white, 0.25% African American, and 0.31% “other,” with a median income of \$32,000 per year.

Small towns are most often associated with conservative, tight-knit communities that tend to be more religious and interactive in the lives of people around them. Most families have been in these towns for generations; their children consider a move down the road to be a large step. It makes these types of places very slow moving, unhurried in changing, and seemingly stagnant. These small towns have stereotypical reputations that are often validated in the eyes of outsiders (and sometimes insiders) when tragic circumstances or situations cause the character of the town to emerge. These character traits include things like projection, judgment, hypocrisy, gossip, and condemnation. As a child growing up in a town like this, and then as an adult who moved away to a larger city, these characteristics became excruciatingly obvious the farther away I got from it.

I do not believe that the people in a small town are bad people, and I do not think that small towns are bad. They do, however, have a tendency to cause a groupthink mentality that brings out some of the backhanded cattiness that small towns have become associated with, especially when it comes to anything that questions the character, faith, or morality of that group mentality.

Coming from a medical background with a father who has been a volunteer paramedic for 17 years and a Deputy Coroner for 10, two brothers who are registered Emergency Medical Technicians, and having an EMT license myself, I have seen the negative qualities associated with death—whether it be judgment from a suicide, gossip surrounding a scandal, or projecting on those who think or feel differently about things that happen. This collection is my attempt to tell the stories of those who can no longer tell their stories. They cannot explain what they were thinking or why they did what they did. And even if they could, who, in a town like mine, would listen to them? Through this collection, I want to give a voice back to those who cannot speak for themselves, and give their story a chance to live on. I want to bring attention to the negative conclusions and the quick judgments that people label others with, and try to shed light on some of the problems associated with scandalous deaths. For my family, myself included, death is a natural part of daily life. I want to bring a few of the experiences from my life into the world so they can understand what it is like to grow up in the medical field in a small town.

There are a number of authors whose work contributed and inspired me while I was writing this collection. To my own surprise, I found myself looking at a lot of Modernist writers for answers, inspiration, or craft ideas. The idea of writing about a specific town came from James Joyce's *Dubliners*, and credit can also be given to Joyce for the “scrupulous meanness” with which he depicts Dublin in his work. While mine does not necessarily show the grotesquery of everyday life, it does show how grotesque moments in life can be, especially in the medical field. Joyce also wrote the following in a letter to Grant Richards in 1906:

My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose [...] It is not my fault that the odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal

hangs round my stories. I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking glass. (Letters, Vol. 2).

For me, this quote is particularly inspiring for two reasons. First because Joyce wrote this letter defending his collection of short stories when publishers thought it was too obscene to print. Joyce was passionate enough to pursue something he believed in, even when other people didn't agree or like it, which is confidence I would love to have in my writing someday. Secondly, and probably more importantly, it shows that there is something to be said about a town looking at themselves in a looking glass. Without acknowledging the problems within a community, nothing can be done to fix them. While this collection might not be something that will fix the small-town-syndrome of my town, this is the first step for me: writing something that made me uncomfortable while I was writing it, and makes others uncomfortable when they read it. It was important for me to step out of my comfort zone because I think art should make people uncomfortable—to make them stop and reflect on what they have read or seen, and think about how it relates to life, and what it is saying about the world.

William Faulkner was another important author in the inspiration of my thesis. Faulkner based his work in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, which was based on a real place in Mississippi. In particular, his short stories were of particular help to me. In this way, Faulkner's work depicting a tiny, seemingly backward town became the standard for what I wanted to portray in my stories. Faulkner is able to achieve a very distinctive feel in his work that is representative of the place he has created, and I wanted to have the same kind of feel in mine. I want the reader to get a better idea of the town I grew up in with each story they read. I also

specifically want to point to “A Rose for Emily.” It is one of my favorite short stories and it is also how I got the idea for different points of view within each of my stories. The short story uses a first person collective point of view, and since rereading the story as an undergrad in one of my writing seminars, I have been trying to craft a story using the same point of view. “On a Night in Strathmoor” is the culmination of those efforts. I also tried to use the grotesque in ways that Faulkner did in his story in order to bring about the suspicion and shock of what happened on that one night—over the course of many years—in Strathmoor.

Other authors that are exceptionally important to my writing are Angela Carter, Toni Morrison, Dennis McKeirnan and Bram Stoker. I love the language that all three use in order to set scenes and evoke specific emotions, but I also love the playfulness of their work. Angela Carter’s style in *Wise Children* and *Nights at the Circus* both have such great feeling of reminiscing, memory, gossiping, and storytelling that I wanted to incorporate into my collection.

Toni Morrison’s playfulness with language, shocking images, and brilliant descriptions have also played a large part in the development of my writing. I have always been amazed at her ability to create images that stick with me, even years after I’ve read a particular book of hers. I only hope that I can use metaphors and similes as well as she can someday, and some of the language I wrote specifically trying to mimic what she is capable of doing.

Dennis McKeirnan’s fantasy novels also have amazing images. His ability to set a scene has always been awe-inspiring, and there is a nod to his work, *Once Upon an Autumn Eve*, within this collection.

Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* as always made me want to write something epistolary: I finally had my chance to do it in two different ways in this collection: in an email written from a father

to his children in “By the Light of My IV Pump” and a grouping of newspaper articles in “On Suicide.”

I have deliberately played with narrative voice in each of the pieces in this collection. When I began at Central Michigan University, I had never written anything other than third person past, which was the traditional point of view my professors during undergrad, in which we were encouraged to write. It wasn't until I came to CMU and read some of my classmates' work that I knew I wanted to try something different. This thesis is the culmination of those experiments, with the points of view shifting between first, second, third person, as well as stream of consciousness and epistolary writing. I also experimented with tense, shifting between both past and present in the various points of view. I think it is important to use multiple points of view in this collection because it gives the reader an idea of the diversity of opinions, thoughts, and feelings within the town, even though the town itself is very homogenous. It allows each of the characters to have a different voice, even though they share a lot of the same morals, values, and ideas from growing up and living within the same town.

When I began this project, I created a list of points of view and picked a specific one for each of the stories. Some were much more complicated than others for me, which is why I chose to experiment—stepping out of my comfort zone a little bit. Coming from a background in which I did not read a lot of experimental literature, figuring out how to craft stories from different points of view was complicated. I had specific troubles with the first person plural point of view in “On a Night in Strathmoor” and “Tales of a Small Town Coroner.”

My collection starts off in the abstract, with a universal narrator speaking in the first person. The town of Strathmoor comes to life to open the collection as a way to ground the

reader in the idea of what a small town is like. I wanted to show the complexity of small towns, and that they are not just stereotypes, although those stereotypes do exist within them. This first piece allows me to explain what the town itself represents, how it feels to be there, and what I noticed growing up there, and it also let me write from a completely new perspective. I also think that this story sets a precedent for playfulness with the narrative voice that helps brace readers for the different points of view and voices that are coming throughout the collection.

One of the points of view I enjoyed writing the most was in “An Accident,” in which I was able to mimic a style Joyce used in *Dubliners*. The point of view is a fairly simple third person omniscient; however, I tried to complicate it by adding empirical perspective and letting the narrative voice shift to that of the character, without slipping into first person. The empirical perspective allowed me to tell a lot about the characters without having to specifically characterize them, and the narrative voice shift allowed the narrative to sound like it was coming from the characters instead of directly from the narrator. I think it is an area with which I would like to play more in the future, but for the first time I did it, I think it was successful.

Of all of the stories I wrote, the stream of consciousness piece, “Tales of a Small Town Coroner,” was the hardest because it is the most different from the type of stories I usually write. I am very big on imagery and descriptions. With the stream of consciousness piece, I had to pull myself away from describing specific things and people, and turn to the free flowing thoughts running through the coroner’s head. There was a lot of self-editing that had to be done while I was writing, and even more that had to be taken out after the fact, but I really enjoyed that particular type of writing because so many of my favorite authors do it exceptionally well—Joyce, Faulkner, and Morrison in particular.

Other than those particular voices, I also used first person, both past and present, second person past, third person past, and first person plural. Each of these really helped me a lot in developing my style a little bit more, and really taught me how to maintain the tense and pronouns throughout a story, which was really helpful in both my creative writing and my academic writing.

One of the strengths of this thesis is the variety of the narrative voices. Because each story is different, it gives the reader something fresh to think about in each piece. The points of view reflect something about the characters in the piece, like in “On Suicide,” where each character’s point of view shows something about where the character is mentally. The cohesion of all of the pieces is another strength because the characters and situations come back, the way that memories do. The collection is supposed to be haunting, and I think the reoccurrence of people, ideas, and deaths help the reader feel that sentiment. The language is also a strength throughout the collection. The descriptions allow the reader to feel and understand the pain that the characters are feeling, and the pressure and the condemnation they feel from the town around them.

The weaknesses of my thesis lie in the exact details within the cohesion of the stories. While it is a strength that they are intertwined, it also makes it difficult to keep track of the details. Creating a fictional town like this can be very difficult because the details between stories need to match so that it does not confuse or become disruptive for the reader. Even crafting the stories as carefully as possible, it can be hard to keep track of specifics, especially while revising. Not only do the details of each story have to change as I revise them, but the details throughout the other stories that coincide have to be revised as well. It made the writing

process much more complex and added another level of stress to this process, and I think it could have been stronger. There are also some pieces missing throughout the collection that I think would have strengthened it if I had the time and the space. I would have liked to use the newspaper articles more because I like the way they complement the other stories, giving a “factual,” cold account, instead of following the characters like a normal story would.

I also believe that there are a few pieces that need to be revised in the future because they weren't as successful as they could have been. The first piece I would like to edit is “A Love Story” because I do not think the narrator in the first section came off the way that I wanted her to. In my mind she is a character who is forgettable in many ways—she's average; there is nothing remarkable about her, except her unwavering love for her husband, and her desire to die with him instead of live without him. Unfortunately, because of my own wavering ideas about why the couple dies, I lost the intention I had for her. I would like to edit this story in the future using the first person limited, and try to stay true to the vision I had of her originally. Similarly, in “An Accident,” I would like to take Amanda's point of view out of the story completely. I think the story is about reacting to death—what happens when you see something grotesque or when you see a loved one die—not necessarily about the relationship itself between Jordan and Amanda. Without having Amanda's point of view, I believe the story would be stronger and mean more to the reader, and it gives me the opportunity to incorporate the actual grotesque into the collection.

Overall, this collection gave me the opportunity to express what it's like to grow up in a medical family. It has allowed me to tell the stories that I grew up hearing, to tell the stories of those people who can no longer tell their story for themselves. I grew up talking about “what he

said in the moments before he died” or “what was the last thought she had before that happened” around the kitchen table, and I have enjoyed the opportunity this has given me to articulate those stories in this collection.

## A SMALL TOWN

I, like most things, am resistant to change.

When I do change, I change slowly. Change happens over long periods of time, shaping and molding, sometimes never coming into clear fruition. Either way, it doesn't bother me. I keep moving onward—moving forward at my own slow pace.

Though I am resistant to change, I recognize superficial changes take place every day. I have been around long enough to know those changes are inevitable. Buildings get older and dilapidated; a business closes and changes ownership; the roads are repaved; the sidewalks are redone. What is underneath the new tar and paint is still the same. I am the same way. My appearance may change but what I am is instilled in people generation after generation, never really changing who I am.

People come and go throughout the generations. It is the natural progression, yet it does not affect me. Of those who leave, many come back. For them, I represent comfort and constancy, home and safety. But most stay. Most never leave, and make a life without questioning where they should be. They contribute to me, and they are proud of what I am.

I am very proud of who I am, who I've become over centuries of progress, and proud that what I am hasn't been lost to the darkness of time throughout that evolution. I have persevered, stayed true to myself, and endured through time, and instilled myself and my pride in those all around me. I have made myself strong, a dominant force in the lives of people, and have watched as each generation becomes stronger than the past, work harder than those who came before, and innovating new ways to prosper and make me stronger than I was. I am more confident with

every change within me, and yet I still retain the humility that makes me easy to love and hard to forget.

I am conservative—though not necessarily politically. I am more conservative in a traditional, old-fashioned, and conventional way, but with a flair all my own, making me unique and distinctive in a world full of unoriginal. I value the past—my heritage cannot be forgotten or dismissed. I do not conform to new norms and fads, but retain my dignity and poise as I slowly move forward. I am unwavering in my character, yet cool, calm, and collected in moments of pressure or doubt. I am poised and composed, even when the worst seems to have left nothing but chaos and destruction. I am unrelenting in my recovery, and steadfast in my beliefs and desire to overcome.

I maybe small, but I am tightknit. I create closeness and supportiveness those in a city could only dream of. I am dignified in my quiet, gracious way, and I am noble, moral, and principled like places of legend. I am venerable, cherished, and admired. I am respectful and I am respected, but more than that, I am loved by people everywhere, whether they pass through, come to visit, or come to stay.

I am Strathmoor.

## A LOVE STORY

She had always considered herself a good Catholic, but sometimes good faith was just not enough. She stood, staring out her front window, slowly twisting the lapis and silver rosary around her delicate hand. She gazed at the house across the street, the one in which she was born sixty-two years ago, searching for any difference in it. The house still belonged to her mother, and the cracked and flaking blue paint was a testament to its age. Her mother had always talked about painting it, but like everything else in town, it had stayed the same. The rickety fence in the front yard matched the one in front of her house, and those in front of the neighbors on both sides. Only the trees had changed; they were taller and fuller now, but still the same shade of green she remembered. She felt something hit her foot, but when she looked down she did not see anything. She lifted the rosary in her hand. The crucifix no longer remained on the end. She opened her hand and let the beads fall from her hand. Religion hadn't helped yet—why would that change now? She turned her attention back to the window.

She never understood why her mother had left the tire-swing in the yard. No one ever used it anymore, and no one probably would again in her lifetime. It swung across the face of the house, turned and drifted the other way in the autumn breeze. She almost wished she could feel the familiar breeze one last time before they went. She watched the breeze rustling through the trees lining the street. The wind reached the tree at the end of the circle where a few withered leaves swirled in the air, provoking and teasing the golden retriever that lived in the house at the end of the street now.

The family that lived at the ends of the street had gotten the first golden retriever when she was a little girl. She could not remember how many they had in all, but each one looked just

as the one before it had; they even barked the same way. As she watched, the golden retriever jumped up, putting its front paws on the fence, trying to get closer to the intruding leaves, but the fence gave no ground. It held him, just as it had all those years before. She could relate.

The lady who lived next door, Margaret, walked on the sidewalk in front of the house, her oversized dachshund in tow, trying to keep up. She waved at the large bay window as she passed, just as she did each morning. The two had been close in high school. She knew Margaret had a picture of the two of them at their high school graduation on her mantle; beside it, a picture of their daughters' cheerleading squad. She knew because she still had the matching frame with matching pictures on her own mantle. She felt a twinge of guilt, realizing how far apart they had grown over the years. A single tear fell from her eye, which she carefully patted away; she did not want it to ruin her makeup. Her gaze followed Margaret as she continued down the road with her dog.

It was a quiet day, just like any other, she thought. The town had always been quiet, and she used to like it. Now, it gave her the uncanny feel that something was wrong—something bad was coming—the calm before the storm, her mother had always said. From her window she could see the backs of the buildings on Main Street, each the same two-story shape as her own. The only difference between the buildings was the pastel colors; each had been painted a different light shade when they had been built more than 200 years ago. The slate roofs all sloped at the same angle, with nothing but a few feet between them. She could see the Presbyterian Church that stood at the end of the street. If she had gone closer, she would have been able to see the colors of the stained glass windows cast on the ground by the sun. The pond on the far end of the church was usually filled with geese, but this late in the fall, she supposed, they had left.

She hated the cold morbidity and the unsympathetic finality of this time of year, with the last of the dried, umber leaves clinging to the branch for their lives, and the residue of the harvest left for dead in the fields that surrounded the town. A chill rose through her body, despite the black turtleneck that clung to her slender olive body and the cream-colored, mother-made blanket draped over her shoulders. She pulled the blanket tightly, holding it closed at her neck. Her delicate fingers skimmed over the scar on her chest, the one of which she had always been ashamed—a large blemish on her body, which she wished was more perfect. Reilly must be watching the leaves, she thought, as her other hand scratched the head of her large chocolate lab who sat beside her.

It wasn't until she heard Reilly's paws scratching against the wood floor and the back door close that she shook herself from her reverie. She had no idea how long she had been standing there, or how long her husband had been gone. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes. He had only stepped out to fill the old truck with gasoline. She turned from the window, arms still holding the blanket tight to her, to see him walking into the white-walled room, Reilly not far behind. He sat on the brown couch across the room from her. His golden-hazel eyes met her deep brown eyes, and then slowly traced her body. He seemed unimpressed as his gaze glided across the floor, and stopped on his faded work boots. He slumped back against the couch, his hands resting lifelessly on either side of his husky frame.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked.

His voice sounded tired, she thought. She walked toward where he sat. His gaze never left his feet, even as she sat down, turning her knees closer to him. She placed her hand on his leg, and looked at his hair, mostly white with a few strands of grey and even fewer black,

peppered throughout. She had always thought it had made him look dignified, though he claimed he just looked old. The deep black bags under his eyes made him look so haggard. They had deepened and darkened over the past few weeks. She couldn't have imagined everything was easy, but she hated seeing him so worn down.

“We... We don't have to go,” she said, softly, not quite believing the words as they fell from her mouth.

He sighed heavily, his shoulders seeming to sink lower. He turned his head toward her, not looking up.

“And if we don't, what happens?” He asked rhetorically. “You can't think they'll let me off a second time?”

“But you *didn't* do anything. I know you-“

“I know that. And you know that. But they ain't gonna believe me. They're gonna believe your granddaughter.”

“But Ivy loves you. She's not going to take the stand against her Pap.”

“She's gonna do whatever her bitch of a mother tells her to do,” he said. His voice sounded weary. She wasn't used to that. He had always been so strong, so intimidating.

“Talk to Cheryl,” she pleaded, grabbing his hand and pulling it toward her chest. “You never tried to understand her. Maybe you can work things out. You said it yourself; she'll do whatever Cheryl tells her to do.”

“I've tried,” he snapped, anger echoing up in his voice. She saw him clench his fists, which still sat by his sides. “Ain't nothing that can be done. We need to go.”

“I have to grab a few things before we go,” she said, softly, her eyes starting to glisten. She looked away before he could see the tears.

She knew Cheryl would never forgive him for replacing her father, even though he had done everything he could; he adopted her, gave her everything she ever wanted, and supported her like a real father would. She had heard the rumors around town—that he touched her, or perhaps more, depending on the severity of the critic—but he had been expunged. Cheryl said it was all made up out of anger. She couldn’t understand why Cheryl hated him so much.

She pushed herself up from the couch, setting the blanket down beside her. The old floorboards creaked as she walked across the living room and to the stairs. Her body felt heavy as she ascended, each step moaning in disapproval at any weight being pushed upon them. The effort left her exhausted by the top. The three doors at the top of the stairs were open. She walked across the short landing to the bathroom and grabbed the door handle and swung it closed, and with a final effort, pulled again to hear the second click that she knew meant it wouldn’t open again on its own, like doors in these old houses had a tendency to do. A few steps and she was at the purple room, where Cheryl once stayed, and where her granddaughter stayed when Ivy was allowed to see her—only when her husband was away.

The room looked the same as it always had, with the small bed, covered in a faded-green, hand-quilted comforter and battered stuffed animals Cheryl had once loved. There were softball trophies, the sport which Cheryl had loved before her biological father had been put in jail. The walls were covered in pictures drawn for her by her Cheryl and Ivy. She walked across the stained carpet to the wall where her favorite picture was hanging beside the window. The three-dimensional house was quite good for a seven-year-old’s sketch. Ivy had always been artistic,

but then again, so had her Cheryl. In the front, there was a tire swing and the trees from across the street. A man, two women and a girl stood, holding hands and smiling. Across the top, in small, perfect seven-year-old letters, the words “My family” slanted downward into the gray, slate roof. At the bottom the words, “To: Grammie Love: Ivy” were etched in red crayon. She pulled the picture from the wall, grimacing as the tape pulled the purple from the walls, leaving small patches of white paint where the tape had been. She folded the tape in all four corners, wondering if that’s really what her granddaughter saw when she looked at their family. She hoped so.

She couldn’t understand how things had gotten so bad. Her ex-husband, Dave, had abused her, but Cheryl said her father had never laid a finger on her. Maybe if Dave had been kicked out sooner? Then, maybe, everything would be better. Maybe Cheryl wouldn’t have gotten so angry and could have continued to do well in school. Cheryl had been so talented, so kindhearted, and so gentle, just like Ivy was now. She had done everything she could to give Cheryl the life she wanted. She took music lessons, played sports, had art supplies, books, even video games, and yet she still seemed unhappy. She even went out of her way to spend time with her daughter and tried to talk to her about everything and anything—growing up, her body changing, school, her friends, boys, sports—but nothing seemed to work. Cheryl just loathed her new husband, Bill, but never said why. He had always been so kind to her and treated her like his daughter. Bill loved Ivy, and Ivy had adopted him as her grandfather without ever questioning a thing. It had been about a month since Ivy had been allowed at the house. Cheryl refused to bring Ivy when he was home. She knew Cheryl didn’t approve the way her husband treated her, but he

swore he had never done a thing to Cheryl or Ivy. She felt her stomach contort into a nervous knot so suddenly it took her by surprise.

She pushed the thoughts from her head as she turned from the residue marks on the wall and walked to the door. She stood in the frame, looking once more around the room, trying to ingrain it perfectly into her memory. She turned her head away, feeling the burn of tears invade her eyes. Her chest felt tight as she turned her back to the lavender walls and memories that resided inside. She grabbed the discolored golden knob, glancing back over her shoulder as she pulled the door closed. The last glimpse inside she saw was a picture of herself and Cheryl sitting on the small desk, beside the collection of books on the light pink desk. She coughed, pushing the tightness in her chest down, refusing to cry.

She walked toward the bedroom she and her husband had shared for the better part of twenty-four years. The room was darker than usual, with the curtains covering all but small strips of sunlight that penetrated into the light blue room, falling across the floor. The floor groaned quietly as she walked across to the closet. She slipped off the black yoga pants and put them in the hamper beside the old television she and her husband rarely used. She walked to the closet and pulled out her favorite pair of dark-wash jeans and pulled them on with ease. She had lost weight since the problems between Cheryl and Bill had started. She spent most of her time worrying about Cheryl and Ivy and Bill, torn between her greatest loves. She walked to the small bathroom and looked in the mirror. Her greying-blond hair sat almost perfectly, except for a few strands that strayed away and were resting against her temple. People had always accused her of being too perfect all of the time. If only they knew everything she had dealt with between Bill and Cheryl—perhaps they wouldn't feel that way.

She walked to the cherry-stained jewelry box in the corner of the bedroom and pulled out a necklace with large black beads and a large gold circle in the middle. It matched the black diamond ring and earrings her husband had given her for their twentieth anniversary. She had always preferred silver to gold, but he preferred gold, so she accepted gold, and had learned to smile when he thought of their anniversary at all. Walking back into the closet, she grabbed her black, leather purse and her white blazer, which she put on quickly, hoping it would warm her.

“We need to go,” her husband called from the bottom of the stairs. “Truck’s already warm.”

She heard his steps moving toward the back door. She heard the creek as it opened, and the rattle of the house as he slammed it shut. The slam made her jump. Her body tensed up, and her eyes snapped shut. She took a deep breath and began to move toward the door, but looked back. Her eyes met those of the old Pixie Mouse stuffed animal that she had gotten when she was a little girl. She looked at it fondly, remembering what it had looked like when it still had its nose and blue bowtie. She smiled to herself and walked back to it. She picked it up and laid it gently in her bag as she turned and walked out of the bedroom door, closing it behind her with a bang and a click.

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They sat in the car together, quietly. She looked out the window, fingers moving quietly over the beads of her Jesus-less rosary. She didn’t say anything, but felt comforted by doing something with her hands. Her purse sat, leaning against her leg and her off-white, mother-made blanket sat folded on her lap.

“I still love that rosary,” he said, glancing at her hands.

“I do as well,” she said, looking at him for the first time since they had gotten into the 1965 Ford F100 of which her husband was so proud. Her head turned slowly back to the window, gazing at the orange-rusted side-mirror of the truck. She wished she would have been more supportive of fixing it, but she thought it cost too much, and they didn’t have the money or the time. Bill loved it, and it could have been a lovely vehicle, but sometimes she felt like he loved it more than he loved her.

Her neighbors’ husbands all said that he had found himself a diamond in the rough; if he fixed it up, it would be quite a sight. It had once been a white truck with shiny chrome detailing. The interior of the truck had once been lavish tan leather, with wooden panels, but it had spent a few too many Pennsylvania nights in a junkyard field for any of those details to have survived. The truck itself was mostly penny-colored now, with so much rust she wanted to argue that he shouldn’t have bought it, but she knew better than to say no to her husband. She sat on the leather seat that had been ripped in a few places, her feet resting on the carpeting that had been snagged by one of her heels the first time he had taken her for a ride in the truck. Her husband had been quite upset. “The one part of the fucking truck I didn’t have to fix,” he had muttered, as he heard the sound of tearing fabric.

“We really should have fixed this truck up,” she said.

“We?” he asked, looking toward her with a smirk on his face. The smirk reminded her of the days before they had married—the days when he had been happy enough to smile.

“I never did give it a chance,” she said, shrugging. “Maybe I would have enjoyed working on it with you.”

He reached over and grabbed her hand. He lifted it off of the blanket toward his lips and kissed it gently. He smiled at her, showing off his slightly crooked, yellowing teeth.

“I would have liked that,” he said, putting her hand back where it had set, but not letting go. For the first time in a long time, she felt like he cared about her.

They sat in silence for what seemed like ages, she, looking down at her rosary, he, staring straight ahead.

“Did you leave the letter?” he asked, breaking the unwelcome silence.

“I did,” she responded, not looking up from the rosary.

“You remembered the dog?”

“Of course I remembered the dog,” she said.

“And, you mentioned your mother?”

“Yes, dear,” she answered.

“And you reme...”

She heard her phone ring. She reached down into her purse and looked at the screen.

“It’s my brother. It’s Carl,” she said. “I should answer it.”

“No!” he said. “You can’t answer it. Carl can’t know what we’re doing. That’s why you left the note.”

“He’s probably worried about us,” she said, her voice becoming tense.

“He’ll be ok,” he said. “He’ll understand everything when he reads the letter. Where did you leave it?”

“I... I left it on the island in the kitchen,” she said shakily.

“What did you write?” he asked, reaching into the glove box to get her a napkin.

“Well,” she hesitated, thinking about what she had written. “I told him to take the dog next door. You know how much the boy—Jordan, I think—loves the dog. He was in the yard again today before school playing with Reilly. I told Carl to keep whatever he wants from the house and sell whatever they can’t use. I asked him to give half of the money to my mother, and to make sure he visits her at least once a week; she hates to be alone. And I apologized for leaving like this, but I think he knows why. Carl’s furious with Cheryl—”

“As he should be,” he interjected, clenching his hands tightly around the steering wheel.

“It doesn’t matter either way,” she said. “I don’t want anyone to have to take sides. It’s not fair to them.” Her gaze returned to her rosary. She began to turn it in her hands.

Her phone rang again. The same name became visible on the screen. She hit the ignore button as a tear ran down her cheek. She didn’t try to stop it.

She yawned quietly. She suddenly felt extremely tired. She was so tired of the fighting. She just wished everyone could be happy, like the family she had so desperately wanted. She had tried to make everyone happy, but she hated having to choose between her daughter and her husband. She couldn’t do it anymore. She reached down into her purse and grabbed the drawing she had taken from the wall. Her head was beginning to throb. She looked at the smiling faces on the page. She breathed in and out slowly, trying to control the sobs she so desperately wanted to let out. She couldn’t. She had to be strong so he wouldn’t see her as weak. Weakness was unacceptable to him. She couldn’t be weak. She had to be perfect.

“God, help us,” she whispered, clutching the rosary and the picture close to her chest, right above the self-conscious scar that would always be there. “Don’t leave us. Be with us...” she trailed off.

“He won’t leave us,” he said, grabbing her hand tightly. “He won’t leave you.”

“I love you,” she said softly, leaning toward him.

He turned his head toward her and kissed her, deeply, but she pulled away, yawning again, the tears flowing down her face freely.

“I love you too,” he said, gazing over into her eyes for a brief moment.

She yawned again, and exhaled slowly, trying to regain control over her untamed, unnatural emotions.

“I’m so tired,” she said between uneasy breaths.

“It’s ok,” he said, tenderly. “Go to sleep. It will all be better when you wake up.” She couldn’t ever remember him being so affectionate. The tears still ran down her cheeks, but a small smile crossed her lips. She knew he still cared about her.

Her eyes met his. They were more hazel than she remembered. He seemed to be looking at her lovingly. The same way he had looked at her when they stood by the creek she had played at as a child, the one beside which he had proposed to her. The same look he gave her when he had said, “I do.” The memories flowed through her head; all she could do was smile back at him through her tears.

“I... I love...,” she said, yawning, “You.”

Her head gently fell back against the seat. Her eyes closed and her head fell to her right shoulder. Her breathing slowed as she fell asleep.

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The first tightening of his jaw caught Bill by surprise, and he tried to suppress his yawn so she wouldn’t see it. He hadn’t expected it to come so soon.

“It’s ok,” he said. “Go to sleep. It will be better when you wake up.”

He wanted her to feel love, even just for a minute. He hadn’t always been this way, this irritated, this bitter, or world-weary. Once, he had been capable of love, of affection, of all those things, but he was just angry all the time.

“I... I lo...,” she said, yawning, “ve you.” He watched her head lean back against the seat.

He took the picture and the rosary out of her chilled hand and looked at the drawing. The smiling faces were mocking him. He tried to imagine how life would have been like without Cheryl. How perfect could it have been? He took a deep breath in and tore the picture in half, the seven-year-old rendering of he and his wife on one side, Cheryl and her daughter on the other. He would never forgive Cheryl. He loved his Ivy and would never have done anything to hurt her. Anything. Cheryl should have known that. He looked back at his wife and wondered how something so cruel and so ugly could come from her.

He knew he was lucky that he had been chosen by her. She was perfect. He had never met someone who always looked seamless and made it look so easy. Despite her crying, she was beautiful. Her mascara had never smeared before tonight. Held up by a black clip, her graying-blond hair sat effortlessly, each piece of hair still in its proper spot. His home was always clean, and dinner was always on the table by 5:30. It was all too flawless. It made him angry. Life wasn’t perfect, and he didn’t know why she always pretended it had to be. He looked at her hand, admiring the small diamond engagement ring and the gold wedding band. He knew he hadn’t picked the right rings, and maybe she had deserved more. But she was a simple, shy woman, though it came off as arrogant to the few who didn’t know her. Everyone loved her after

they got to know her. She liked to look like she would fit in the city, but the small town was where she belonged. He yawned again.

He slowly untangled the rosary from her dainty hand. He heard her phone ring again. He ignored it. It took him a few seconds to unwrap the rosary from her thin fingers, but he finally held it in his right hand, wondering why his wife had used it so regularly. He turned the blue beads over in his hand as his eyes began to feel very heavy. He had always gone to mass with her and pretended to be interested, but religion wasn't his thing. He looked straight up, through the roof of the car and the roof of the ceiling above him to where he assumed He would be.

“God,” he said, looking up, clenching the rosary. “If you're really there, forgive her. It ain't... it ain't her fault.”

He yawned again, and began to lean over, laying his head in his wife's lap as he drifted to sleep. With one final effort, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his own note; he clasped it in his left hand. It simply read, “It is Cheryl's fault.”

## AN ACCIDENT

Morrison was mentally drained. It had been one of the most draining days he could remember. He had always loved computers and designing programs, but his boss made an already tough job grueling. Promising their customers deadlines they could never make, expecting him to work long hours to make up time, managing others without being in a management position—it made Morrison crazy, especially since his boss wasn't skilled enough at programming to understand the time it took to design software. It was days like this, he thought while he was walking to his car, when he was already drained, that something bad always happened. He tried to ignore the eerie feeling nagging in the back of his mind.

When he finally got to his car, he put the key in the ignition but sat for a minute before he started it. 21:02 already. He didn't know where the day had gone. He put his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath and tried to relieve the uneasiness he felt. He opened his eyes, picked up his head, and stared at the gray leather steering wheel. He touched it lightly with the tips of his fingers. It felt warm, having sat under the late November sun for most of the day.

It wasn't completely dark yet, but the sun had mostly set in the sky, leaving small streaks of burnt orange amidst the dark blackish-purple painting the horizon. Morrison watched the sun dip behind jagged horizon line before starting his car and heading toward home.

Morrison drove the same winding back-roads to and from work every day. The roads twisted and turned through the overgrown woods on both sides, and were almost invisible at dusk, even by someone who drove it frequently. Morrison usually drove too fast on these roads to alleviate the stress of the day, and replace it with adrenaline. What should have taken him an

hour and thirty-five minutes, usually only took about an hour and ten. He didn't know why, but on this particular evening, he felt the need to drive it slower than usual, watching the trees pass in his peripherals, trying to suppress the chill threatening to encroach up his spine.

It had finally become dark. The full moon looked enormous as he crested a hill. The few wispy clouds crawled across the moon, casting ghoulish shadows across the road in front of Morrison. The shadows cutting across the trees seemed to reach out toward his car deviously. Threatening, almost.

He reached down and took a sip of the Mountain Dew that he had bought that morning on his way to work. His mouth contorted in disgust at the flat, lukewarm liquid. He looked down to put the cup back into the coaster. His eyes returned to the road.

He took a sharp breath in as his heart seemed to stop beating momentarily. A man was standing in the middle of the road, waving his arms back and forth above his head.

Morrison swerved his car to the left. He hadn't realized he had hit the brakes until the car came to a stop on the berm of the road. He let out the deep breath and sat straight up, hitting his head off the ceiling. He looked at his clock. 22:31. Cursing under his breath, he rolled down the window.

"Thank God!" the man exclaimed running over to the side of Morrison's car. "Thank God! You have to come quickly. Their car went off the road. I saw it go over! Com'on! This way!"

"What the hell are you doing?" Morrison screamed, enraged at the black figure. "You could have killed us both!"

“No!” the man said, closing the space between himself and the car. “You have to come! It went over the road into the ditch. They’re probably hurt!”

Morrison saw the panic on his face. He was breathing hard and beads of sweat dripping dripped down his freckled face. The man wiped the sweat with the back of his right hand, and reached toward Morrison’s door handle.

“Come on!” He shouted, pulling, trying to open Morrison’s door. He was already facing away from the car as though he was going to take off running again. “You have to come quickly!”

“Carl?” Morrison said, recognizing the man as a classmate from high school. “Carl, calm down.” Morrison unfastening his seatbelt.

Carl Bower looked back toward Morrison.

“Morrison! Thank God!” Carl said. “Come on. We gotta go. They’re over there. There isn’t any time to waste. Please, hurry!” He was still too terrified to smile like he usually did when the two greeted each other, but he did seem more relaxed as he met Morrison’s eyes and realized someone was there who was qualified to help.

Morrison turned on his hazard lights, reached to grab the stethoscope that hung over his rearview mirror, and a pair of latex gloves he always kept in the center console, along with a pen light, a pen, and a pad of paper. He jammed them into his pocket and shut the door as he stepped toward the back of the car to grab the large blue first aid bag he always kept in the trunk of his car.

Carl had already taken off down the road, toward the other side where the road seemed to suddenly drop straight downward. Morrison didn't bother to shut the back door after grabbing his bag, and jogged toward where Carl had headed.

Morrison noticed the pain in his leg as he attempted to move his large frame as quickly as possible. He had broken his leg just the year before and shouldn't have been running, but he tried to catch up with Carl and leave behind the foreboding sensation beginning to creep into his mind behind.

As he got closer, Morrison could see over the steep slope of the bank beside the road. Two tire tracks led downward, from where Carl stood. He had a sudden pang of guilt—the last time he'd seen Carl had been under just as horrifying circumstances. Morrison had just pronounced Carl's sister and her husband dead just as Carl had arrived on the scene--the car the two had been in had to be pulled out of the garage so they could get the bodies out, and Carl had gotten there just in time to see his sister being loaded into the back of the ambulance. Now Morrison reached where Carl had stopped the guilt changed into revulsion as he looked down at a car, or what used to be a car.

The shape of the twisted metal no longer looked recognizable. Morrison cringed as he realized he could see the back of the car, but also the front of the car. It hadn't been folded in half, but the car had partially wrapped itself around the large tree; the car's shape almost looked like a question mark. The driver's side door had been crushed completely, and the tree was protruding up from the middle of the car. The two back tires were raised off the ground; the one not by the tree was about two or three feet off the ground, or so Morrison estimated. Broken glass littered the area all the way up to where the car had gone off the road. Each step Morrison

took through the grass sounded like it was taken on breaking ice. The front bumper was completely torn off, lying on the ground in two pieces about five yards away.

Morrison heard a strange noise coming from near the car. As he looked around, he noticed a branch from the tree had broken off of the trunk. It was now leaning on a power line right above where he and Carl were standing.

Carl was holding one hand in a tight fist up to his mouth, and his other arm was wrapped around his chest, with his hand tucked under his armpit. He was blanched as though he was about to pass out, and he looked as though he were trying to choke back tears.

“Carl,” said Morrison, touching Carl’s shoulder, and taking a step backward. “We need to get away from here for a few minutes.”

“No,” Carl said, lifting his shoulder in an attempt to shake Morrison’s hand off. “We have to help.”

“There’s a tree on the power lines, Carl,” Morrison said, using the most reassuring tone he could muster. He had only had to deal with a downed line once before in sixteen years of being a paramedic, but the training had been repeated in his classes—time after time after time—kicked in without hesitation. “We can’t get any closer without jeopardizing our own safety. We have to wait.”

“Wait?” Asked Carl, on the verge of tears. “How can we just let them stay down there?”

“We won’t be any good to them if we get electrocuted,” Morrison said harshly. “We need to call someone to help us.”

Carl stepped back with Morrison, and they walked across the street to where Morrison’s car was parked.

“Carl, I think you should head home,” Morrison said. Before Carl could protest, Morrison looked down at the ground and shook his head. “This isn’t going to be an easy first wreck to see. I don’t thin...” he choked on his own words, and then cleared his throat, trying to prepare himself for what he thought would be the case. “I don’t think anyone in that car can be alive.”

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Jordan picked up the blue jacket from the chair by his parents’ front door. He held it up by the collar, facing away from himself. He waited patiently while his girlfriend pulled one boot up over her thin, muscular calf, and then the other. She smiled at him, took a step closer and pivoted on her left heel, turning so he could slip the jacket over her left arm. She turned her body slightly to the right, as he moved the other arm of the jacket over her other arm, and lifted it to set it gently on her shoulders. She leaned her head down to catch the zipper correctly, and pulled it up slowly. Jordan reached over her shoulders, and pulled her hair back with two hands, out of the track of the zipper.

Amanda turned back around, and brushed against Jordan’s side as she reached down to grab the dark blue scarf with green and white flowers that sat on the small bench Jordan’s mother had placed underneath the coat rack. The scarf had been a gift from Jordan a few months before for her seventeenth birthday. She doubled it over, and wrapped it around her neck. She pulled the two ends through the loop she had created and tightened the scarf to hug her neck lightly. She lifted both hands and put them underneath her hair, pulling it out from the embrace of the scarf. She then lifted her arms even higher to drape them around Jordan’s neck.

“I wish I didn’t have to leave,” Amanda said, leaning against Jordan’s chest. Her head fit underneath his chin almost perfectly. She was short, compared to his six-foot-two-inch frame.

Before they had started dating, he had nicknamed her “Short Stuff.” The nickname had stuck, and each time one of his friends from the football team called her it, she would punch him in the arm. He would get punched doubly hard if one of the girls from the cheer squad called her the name. The first few times she had hit him, he didn’t want to admit how much it had hurt; after they had started dating, he had to break down and tell her. Now, when she punched him, it was much more lovingly—that was, not as hard and with a grin on her face.

“I know,” he replied, hugging her tightly. “Soon enough, we won’t have to say good bye anymore. But you know your mom’s rules. Home by...”

“By 10:30. I know...” she said. “But I can’t wait for next year when I don’t have to go home.”

He felt her twist the promise ring on her right ring finger. It had originally been intended as an engagement ring, they were not quite ready for that. They had spoken about it, and decided it was better to wait until their senior year of college rather than high school. He knew he was going to receive a football scholarship, and she was going to cheer somewhere. He hoped they would end up at the same school so they could move in together, even though her parents, and probably his too, weren’t very keen on the idea.

“I love you, Short Stuff!” He said, leaning back so she could see the playful smirk on his face, and held her tightly so she couldn’t get her arms.

She twisted and shifted her shoulders back and forth. Seeing the effort was useless and the moment fleeting, she settled for a light kick on his left shin.

“I love you too, Towering Tinder!” she said back, giggling.

“Towering Tinder?” Jordan asked, letting go. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“I know. I couldn’t think of anything better this time,” Amanda said, smiling back at him. “And stop being such a baby. I didn’t kick you that hard.” She turned away from him and took a few steps toward the door and reached for the handle. She had started coming up with nicknames to call him back a few weeks back. He found himself calling her by the nickname more and more, laughing at her creativity in coming up with ways to insult him back.

“You’re going to have to get more creative, or I’m telling everyone in college about your nickname too!”

“No you won’t,” she responded confidently. “You love me too much for that.”

She kissed him on the lips. He could smell the peppermint lip gloss she had been using.

“It’s probably true,” he admitted, giving her another kiss.

“It’s definitely true,” she said. “Although, I have come to almost like it now....” She trailed off as she opened the door and started to head “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Reilly, his old, fat chocolate lab came running around the side of the house, panting as she hobbled up the two stairs to sit beside him. He lowered his hand to scratch her behind the ears. Jordan’s little brother, Aidan, came running down the hallway toward the door. The eleven year old stood beside his brother, panting lightly as Amanda reached her car.

“Manders!” Aidan shouted. “Are you coming back tomorrow? We didn’t get to play Lego Batman...”

“Of course, Dan-A-Ay,” she responded in pig Latin. “We got the Joker to beat, don’t we?”

“Yeah!” Aidan responded, his partially toothless grin showing brightly. Even though he was so young, he was almost as tall as Amanda, and the two got along fabulously. Jordan loved

that Amanda fit into his family so well, and put up with both of his brothers; he admired her ability to make each of them feel important. She blew a kiss toward the boys as she got into her car and started it up.

“That was for me,” said Aidan. “She likes me better than you.”

“Okay, A,” Jordan said, grabbing his brother around the neck in a headlock, and grinding his knuckle lightly into his younger brother’s skull. Reilly began to bark playfully from beside him, her feet moving, unable to stand still, but she went nowhere.

“Stoooooopp it!” Aidan said, trying to pull loose from his brother’s clutches. After a few seconds, and hearing Amanda’s car had started, Jordan let go of his brother.

They stood together, watching Amanda back out of the driveway. After she backed onto the road, she waved at the two of them and drove toward home.

“She’s pretty cool, Jordy.” Aidan said. “You should keep her.” He sounded exactly like dad, Jordan thought as Aidan went into the house.

“Yeah. I think I will,” Jordan said, watching Amanda’s car drive out of sight over the hill down the road, and followed his little brother inside.

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As Amanda put her car in Drive, she looked back at the house where Jordan and Aidan were wrestling, but that poor dog, she thought, was going to have a heart attack if she kept getting so wound up.

She was going to be a few minutes late, and she wondered if her mom was in a foul enough mood to yell at her—it always depended on the day. Her mom was overbearing to begin with, but on a bad day, it was a hundred times worse. It always took about fifteen minutes to get

home, but she never managed to leave right at 10:15. She turned on the radio, and hit the scan button, looking for something she could sing along with. It seemed like there were no good songs on anymore. She had a chill that wouldn't seem to go away, so she turned up the heat. She supposed she was just not used to the cool evenings that the beginning of winter brought, and she wished for the warm summer nights she missed so much.

She was ready to graduate and go to college, but she hadn't been ready for her last year of high school. To leave her friends, her squad, Strathmoor—next year would be a lot of change. But, at least senior year came with privileges she hadn't had before. There was Senior Dress Up Day on Halloween—they had had a blast dressing up for that. And there was Senior Skip Day still to come on the 107<sup>th</sup> day of school—the seven coming from their graduation year: 2007—and Senior Prom, where she would be able to leave school early to get ready for the dance that evening. Seniors were also allowed to leave school for lunch at one of the surrounding restaurants, or to eat outside in the school courtyard. She was also looking forward to cheerleading. For the first time in her life, she had been selected as captain.

It would be a good year, she hoped. Her classes weren't overly hard, and she shouldn't have a lot of homework. She was taking band, an art class, two study halls, and no math—Thank God that requirement was over. She could devote her time to what mattered most: spending time with Jordan and with her other friends before they left for the various colleges they would spend the next four years of their lives. She wondered if any of her friends would stay as close as they had been through middle school and high school. Some of them had been together since kindergarten, like she Addison and Chloe had been, and she wasn't ready to let them go, like her mother insisted would happen eventually.

Out of the corner of her eye, Amanda saw her phone on the passenger's seat light up. She looked toward it curiously. Jordan. Probably telling me to text him when I get home safely, she thought.

*Home is where my heart is still beating, and I don't know when I'll see her a-ga-a-ainn.*

She stopped the radio as one of her favorite songs began. The steering wheel became her drum as she began to sing as loudly as she could. She had a way of dancing in the car while she was singing that she hadn't noticed until Jordan had pointed it out.

"You only do it when you are driving," he had said.

He described it to her as a cute little sway that her shoulders and upper body did, while her hips sat still, and she tapped her right leg, almost like she was playing a bass drum to accompany the drum beat she tapped out on the steering wheel.

Amanda smiled as she moved her head side to side with the music.

*She feels like Carolina. Looks like California. Shining like those New York lights on Broadwa-a-ay.*

Once again, her phone lit up on the passenger's seat.

"Jordan," she said aloud. "I'm driving."

She looked at the screen but instead of Jordan, it was Abby, her co-captain for the squad. She sighed, moving her arm down to the screen. She opened the message with a quick tap on the screen. She looked back up, readjusting her car's placement on the road. Then, she looked back down.

**Abby Napp<3 (10:22pm):** Hey! I think we should have  
a quick meeting tomorrow about

playoffs. What do you think?

She and Abby had talked about having a meeting to sell T-shirts to raise some money for the team to get some new signs made for the playoff games the football team would be playing. They had agreed it was a good idea, but Abby always checked with Amanda before letting everyone else know. Amanda appreciated that Abby did that. She never felt blindsided by decisions, and always felt like she had a say in what the squad did.

Amanda hit the “Reply” button. She began to type: Ya. Sounds good.

She felt the car shake forcefully. She hit the brakes quickly, and turned the steering wheel. A strong feeling of dread clenched her stomach, as it lurched from its normal spot to what seemed like her throat.

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Even though he had been lying down in bed for the better part of an hour, Jordan couldn't manage to fall asleep.

It had been almost an hour and a half since Amanda had left, and Jordan still hadn't heard from her. Every once in a while, Jordan reassured himself, she left her phone in the car. Maybe tonight was one of those nights, and she had fallen asleep without getting it. But he couldn't wave the discomfort he felt. He wasn't one to panic, so he insisted on telling himself everything was fine. He rolled over and grabbed his phone from the desk beside his bed to double check that the volume was turned up.

He heard the harsh screaming of an ambulance siren as one flew passed his house. It was a common occurrence, especially living down the road from the Fire Hall. He heard the lower

pitched siren of a fire truck follow a few minutes later. He pulled the blankets up to his chin and closed his eyes...

...He was jerked awake by the sound of his phone ringing, and tried to breathe deeply to calm his racing heart. He could feel it pulsing in his fingers and legs. He took another deep breath, and tried to lighten the tension that had overtaken his body.

He couldn't answer the phone quickly enough, and it stopped ringing. His phone showed it was 12:45. Who would be calling this late? He checked his phone. Nothing from Amanda's phone, but he had missed a call from her house.

He stood up, and stretched, reaching up to touch the ceiling of his bedroom with the very ends of his fingertips. He hadn't been able to reach it until about two years before. He had always promised his dad that he would be tall enough to do it, and now, it had become a comfortable habit. He walked out of his room and down the hall toward the kitchen to get some water. He passed the living room, where his father was still sitting on the couch, even though his eyes were closed and his breathing was heavy.

The TV was on. The volume was low enough that Jordan couldn't hear make out any words. He went to the cupboard and grabbed a glass. He filled it with cold water from the fridge and took a large swig.

As he drank his second glass, the house phone rang. His father jumped from where he was sitting, and looked around, confused. He rubbed his eyes as he leaned toward the table beside the couch. He picked up the receiver, and uttered a sleepy, "hello?"

Jordan couldn't make out what his father was saying, and he was sure whoever was on the phone couldn't either. It sounded garbled, like his father couldn't figure out how to say any words in his half-awake state.

"I'll check," Jordan heard him say as he set down the phone. His father stood up and stretched, touching the ceiling with the very tips of his fingers. He opened his eyes and took a few steps before looking up and seeing Jordan standing in the kitchen.

"Jordy," he said, "you know the rules. Amanda can't stay here overnight. You need to send her home."

"What are you talking about, Dad?" Jordan said defensively. "She left almost..." he paused, looking down at this watch. "Almost two and a half hours ago."

"That was her mom. She hasn't come home yet..."

His voice trailed off as Jordan ran toward the door. He pulled on his hunting boots without tying them, grabbed his keys and ran out the door. He started toward his car, but saw flashing lights just over the hill down the road. A police car drove past his house, and stopped just over the crest of the hill, only a quarter mile away. Jordan took off toward the lights and commotion. He couldn't see what was happening over the hill, but his feet began to feel heavier as he ran and he had to stop to throw up, as his stomach began to turn in frightened anticipation.

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It had taken far too long for help to get there, thought Morrison glancing down at his watch. He had called dispatch more than two hours ago, at 22:37, and the fireman had just found a way to untangle the car from the tree; they were now working on getting the roof off the car. While the group had worked to get the tree off the power line, Morrison had paced along the tape

line marking off the scene, and didn't stop until they began to remove the roof of the car. His leg, now throbbing, was beginning to bother him. He hadn't noticed how bad it had gotten while he was working the scene.

He had called the Time of Death at 00:51. As the only coroner in town, he was glad he was there when they had gotten the roof off of the car to call it. There was no sense working a scene like this, with no hope of resuscitation, and such a gruesome scene. He wanted as few people to see it as possible. No one should have to see that, he thought.

He supposed the girl had died on impact, thank God. A tree branch had come through the sunroof of the car, and—well. He just wanted to forget what he had seen.

He folded his stethoscope up and carried it in one hand. He had lost his notebook somewhere in the commotion, and had written all of his notes—what time the car was found, what time the ambulance got there, what time the power got turned off to the lines—on his hand. His shoes were soaked, and covered in a thick layer of mud, which made walking up the hill incredibly hard. He had almost had to bend over and use his hands to help him.

He felt exhausted. All he wanted to do was make it home. He could do all of his paperwork in the morning, before work, if he decided to go. A sick day sounded good to Morrison.

He started to walk toward his car, which was almost near the edge of the police tape. That was when Morrison saw him.

A tall young man was running straight toward him. He only had on a white t-shirt with the sleeves cut off so far that Morrison could see his chest, a pair of sweatpants on, and untied pair of boots. As he ran toward the tape, Morrison could see he wasn't slowing down.

“Hey!” Morrison called out, as the figure ran closer still, and seemed to speed up.

“STOP!” Morrison shouted on the top of his lungs. His deep voice carried across the scene.

“Sir, it’s my girlfriend. Tell me it’s not my girlfriend....” He said, panting. His face looked panicked. He tried to push past Morrison.

“It’s a young girl,” Morrison said, moving his large body in front of the boy. “She was in a White Cavalier.”

“That’s the kind of car she drives,” the young man said, trying again to get passed Morrison. “Please tell me she’s okay.” His tears began to flow freely.

“What’s your name?” Morrison asked, once again blocking the boy as he tried to maneuver around him.

“Jordan, sir,” he responded. “Please tell me she’s okay. Please.”

“Jordan,” Morrison said, putting his hands on Jordan’s shoulders. “There was nothing we could...”

“NO!” Jordan shouted, trying to take off again toward the tire tracks where the car had gone over the bank. “God! No! That’s my girlfriend!”

“Jordan,” Morrison said sternly, still trying to hold onto Jordan. He knew if Jordan got free, he couldn’t stop him from running, and he was far too fast to catch. “I know you are upset. I know this is hard, but you can’t go down there.”

“I have to see her,” he said, more tears emptying from his eyes. A few had landed on Morrison’s hand. “I have to see her.”

“Listen. I understand how you feel, Jordan. But you have to listen to me,” Morrison said, leaning his body slightly forward so he could look Jordan right in the eyes. “Jordan. Look at me.”

Jordan stopped struggling for just a second and looked right into Morrison’s eyes.

“Jordan, I promise you that you will never forget what you see down there. It’s not pretty. If it truly is your girlfriend, you can’t go down there. You can’t have your last memory of her looking like that. Is your girlfriend’s name Amanda?”

Jordan let out a loud, horrified cry, and collapsed into Morrison’s arms, sobbing wildly. Morrison didn’t know what else to do what but to stand there holding Jordan, until he calmed down enough to take him home.

## ON SUICIDE

### I. Chameleon Boy

Is it possible to exist when no one sees you?

This question has always been troubling for me. I think about it a lot, but I've never answered it for fear of what it might mean.

I've been a chameleon for most of my life. You know what I mean by chameleon: someone who constantly changes and blends in with the surroundings—never knowing who they truly are or where they fit in or belong. I'm that way. I don't know if I really qualify as anything. I'm not a social butterfly. I'm not a bookworm. I'm not an athlete or a nerd. I've never been in trouble, but I've never been a teacher's pet. I'm just me, blending in. I'm a chameleon.

I don't think I was always invisible. Someone had to notice me when I was born. My biological mother didn't really miss my birth. I'm sure she felt it. What I don't know is if it is as painful to forget a child after it is born as it is to give birth to one. I like to think that somewhere out there my real mother thinks about me—that she misses me. That she wonders who I am. But, like everyone else, she has probably forgotten that I even exist. She probably wouldn't even notice me walking down an empty street.

Sometimes I try to imagine what she looks like, and what my dad looks like. My adopted parents don't look a thing like me. They both have lighter skin—blondish and light brown hair, blue eyes. I am the opposite. I have black hair, brown eyes, and darker skin that tans easily. Both of my parents burn. I didn't learn that until I was adopted last year when I took Freshman biology and we did genetics. According to the charts, I should have light hair and blue eyes too. But it was confirmed when we typed our blood. We had to get a permission slip signed to do the

blood testing, but I forgot to ask my parents to sign it. I forged my dad's signature, and found out that I am AB-. I asked my parents what their blood types were casually at dinner one night. My mom said that she was A+ and that Dad was A-something as well, but we had just learned that two people with A blood types can only have kids who have O or A types.

I was shocked, but I guess I'm not surprised my parents never told me. I've never told them that I know. I don't want to make them feel guilty about not telling me because they probably just don't want me to feel awkward or different, being adopted. I went looking, and I found the certificate in my dad's closet. I can't help but wonder if my life would have been different if I still lived with my real parents.

I don't want you to think that my adopted parents are bad people. They aren't at all. They are actually really good people. They're just busy. They've given me a lot since they adopted me. I have nice clothes, shoes, games, books—everything I could possibly want. I live in a great house, in a nice part of town. If people thought of me, they'd probably wonder what I have to complain about. But truthfully, I do have everything—except someone who cares for me. I'm lucky if I see my parents once a day. Usually Dad is out of the house to go to Court or his office before I wake up, and comes back after I've gone to sleep. My mom usually mutters something about ordering dinner, or that she won't be back until late before she leaves for the bank. Most of the time, I'm at my house by myself. I think my house would be the only thing that might miss me if I left.

I don't have friends because most people in school think I'm weird. I developed that reputation in sixth grade or so, and it stuck. I used to play with other kids when I was younger, but I was the geeky, un-athletic one who got picked last for kickball or didn't play at all. I

usually sat on the side and watched. Looking back, I think that's where I learned how to blend into things around me. The other kids eventually started playing video games and watching more TV. They stopped inviting me because I wasn't allowed to play fighting games, and didn't like sports games. I started staying home, reading, writing, and drawing. I really like to do those things, but liking to be by myself more than with other people qualifies me as weird.

There is a girl at school who makes me wish I wasn't a chameleon. Her name is Ashley. When we were little, we played together all the time, but when she got into sports, we grew apart. Sometimes I even convince myself she sees me. Every once in a while, she looks toward me—well, most of the time, through me—but I like to pretend she is actually looking at me.

Ashley's not beautiful like a lot of girls at school. She's pretty, but she doesn't look like a doll. She has long black hair that she always wears in a ponytail. It is long enough to hang halfway down her back. When she gets nervous, she pulls it over her shoulder and twists it around her fingers. I don't know what color her real eyes are because she wears the brightest blue contacts I've ever seen. Her nose looks like it's been broken twice, which is possible, since she plays hockey. It is turned slightly to the right at the very end, and has a huge bump on the bridge of it, where it should be more flat. She even walks really awkwardly, almost like she's trying to skate down the hallways. It's weird, but I like it. It shows how much time she's dedicated to what she loves. Her hands are dry and have little cuts from being in gloves all the time. Her legs look like they are too big for the rest of her body, and she's strong enough that she could probably lift me over her head without ever trying. I really think she might be perfect.

I have the perfect situation for a chameleon—no one notices me, and I'm free to go on however I want to. But I am tired of blending in. I just want people to notice me. I want someone

to care that I exist, and that's why I'm doing this. You will remember me when I'm gone. You won't forget me and that's all a chameleon like me hope for.

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## **Strathmoor Times**

### **Parents and friends grieve local teen suicide**

BY AVA CARILOW — [Ava.corilow@Localtimesnews.com](mailto:Ava.corilow@Localtimesnews.com)

Parents of a local teen, Benjamin Leek, 16, were shocked last Wednesday afternoon when they came home to find their son had hung himself from the rafters in their basement with rock climbing rope.

“I didn't know anything was wrong,” his father, Charles Leek, 43, said. “He seemed happy. He never complained about anything. Sometimes, I would forget he was around.”

Leek's mother, Camilla, 42, said she was too upset to give a statement.

Neighboring teen Ashley Bailey, 16, said that she could not believe that Leek would do something like this.

“He was a really good artist, even when we were little,” Bailey said. “But I never told him. I always felt like he had gotten too busy to notice me anymore.”

Funeral arrangements are being made for Leek, and will be announced as soon as they become available.

Ava Carilow can be reached at 866-2233 or by e-mail.

## II. A Letter

From the first time I saw you, I knew you were different from anyone I had ever met. It was just a passing glance, when you were getting gasoline from one of the two old pumps at the

Walk In. It was a feeling, somewhere deep inside of me. I thought that you were dangerous. I had considered my life satisfactory, until you. But the day you started working in my office, I knew things were going to change. You were new. Novel, even. You were risky and exciting. You were everything he was not, and you were something I didn't know I was ready to try.

I didn't grow up like you, full of adventures and spontaneity. But he and I, we were cut from the same mold. He and I grew up small-town like, with church bells ringing in our ears every hour, reminding us that the town was always watching, and waiting to tell, if either he or I ever stepped out of line. And even if it seemed like no one was watching, each brick of the old buildings lining Main Street were informants. I always dreamed of leaving, of getting away, of seeing the world. Maybe I was the only one who did. But with a sick mother, and a man who loved me, where did I need to go?

I was comfortable there, with him. He was safe. He was going to take care of me. My life was supposed to be, and going to be, perfect—everyone said it. He and I were to be married. He had worked hard to buy me the ring, and harder to make sure we could start a life together without any worries. But you—you were the worry I had never planned on having.

I didn't know how much I wanted something more, until I met you. You had the same interests as me, and showed me what it was like to feel recognized and appreciated. I know he appreciated me, but not like you seemed to. You were the first person I could talk to, who I felt like I could say anything to. You always seemed to understand me, and I always felt like I understood you. You always seemed to get it, whatever it was that was important in that moment. You made me feel unique. You made me feel special.

It began slowly, us seeing each other. We made a friendship, two people just doing the same job, who both needed someone to understand. We started driving to places farther away, to have longer times to talk together. They were pleasant, our little trips. We grew closer through them, and I even came to believe I had found what they call a soul mate.

You told me you loved me on that cold October night, and I believed it. I told you I loved you, too. Then, you told me you wanted me. I wasn't sure how to react. I wanted you with all of my heart, but my mind—and morals—couldn't let me have you. You told me you wanted to spend the rest of your life with me. You convinced me that you needed me. I told you I wanted to wait. I wanted to make things right first. To make us right in God's eyes, too, and maybe even my mother's. At first, you agreed, but then, our love grew. You said you couldn't wait any longer—that if I loved you, I needed to prove it to you. And so, I did.

It was beautiful, from the stained sheets to the citronella candle you bought to set the mood. You said you couldn't find another candle, but you wanted it to be perfect—your first time and mine. I never expected something could be so smooth, so perfect, so effortless the first time. It hurt me a little, but you held me as you fell asleep, and snored louder than I ever imagined possible.

Shortly after, you moved back to your hometown. We decided we would make it work, so I left him, and returned my attention to my mother. She was very ill, and we decided I'd move to you when she passed away. We knew it wouldn't be long, and you were willing to deal with the distance. We agreed to speak every day, and we did. I had never felt happier in my life.

And then, you disappeared.

I sent emails. I texted you. I called you. I left messages. You never returned them. I tried Facebook. I even made a Twitter account to try to find you there. That's how I found out about her.

You changed me. You made me something I am not. You stole a gift from me, and for what? To collect it, and move on?

I LOVED YOU! And you repay me with nothing? You took from me everything that was important. I left a man who loved me, a good man, who did not deserve what I did to him. I threw away everything that I believed in to make you happy. And for what? For you to forget me? To pick another woman? After you told me how special I was? That you couldn't find anyone like me ever again?

You could have at least had the decency to tell me you had moved on. To tell me she existed. But I wasn't even worth that to you.

Maybe everything you ever told me was a lie. Maybe everything was fake, but I still changed. I don't even recognize myself when I look in the mirror. I have become a monster—for you, I became lustful and adulterous. I have become anger. Bitterness. Darkness. I am no longer pure. I threw away the greatest gift I had and it was worth nothing to you.

I hate what I have become. I hate what you have made me. I hope you will feel my pain for the rest of your life. I hope you feel guilty. I hope you cannot live with what you are.

I cannot live with what I have become, and that's on you.

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### **Strathmoor Times**

#### **Six days after suicide, woman's body found in living room**

BY AVA CARILOW—Ava.corilow@Localtimesnews.com

Neighbors of a local woman were stunned to find that six days before her body was finally found, she had shot herself in the chest.

Anna Dutton, 37, was found in her living room, a small firearm near her open hand.

“I didn’t know what it was at first,” neighbor Patrick Engles, 47, told reporters. “But I smelled something terrible coming from her house. She’s usually pretty clean. I asked my wife to check on her. She’s the one who found the body.”

Beth Engles was not available for a comment.

“[Beth] said that Anna had been upset, but we figured it was her mom’s passing that upset her” P. Engles explained, “crazy ol’ bat that she was.”

Dutton is not survived by any family. She was single and had lived alone since her mother passed away, three days before the fateful day, six days ago. Rumors have begun to circulate, however, of her involvement with a man from out of town. Sources indicate that he was the reason Dutton broke off her engagement with Kevin O’Liery.

O’Liery declined any comment on the subject.

A small funeral arranged by the county for Dutton will take place, but no one is really expected to attend.

Ava Carilow can be reached at 866-2233 or by e-mail.

### III. What Doesn’t Kill You

When Dr. Ryan told me I had cancer, I knew he was serious, but couldn’t help but believe that he was mistaken somehow.

“I’m truly sorry to tell you this George, and there isn’t anything I can do to make the blow easier,” Dr. Ryan said.

I looked down at the dark purple bruise on my leg, which I had received a few weeks ago at football practice, when by accident, one of the players hit me by accident instead of the training mat I was holding. It looked as though it had not healed at all since it happened.

“George, are you listening to me?” Dr. Ryan said.

“Of course, of course,” I muttered, looking up toward him. My gaze stopped at the stethoscope around his neck.

“You have lung cancer. That’s why you are having trouble catching your breath. It also explains why your cold lasted so long, and why that bruise still looks so fresh. I wish I had better news for you. I really do, Coach,” Dr. Ryan said. He had been the school’s kicker the first year I started to coach. “Don’t worry. We’ll get through this, one step at a time. What doesn’t kill ya’ makes you stronger, right?”

“Yeah,” I muttered, defeated by my own phrase, and how bad the imitation Southern accent was. “Except I never thought I’d face something that could actually kill me.”

And that’s where everything had started.

I began where anyone would when dealing with emotionally charged news like this: denial. I told myself it wasn’t really happening to me. I didn’t feel sick. It was just that stupid bruise, and the cough. I kept up with everything, working my normal speed. I didn’t slow down for anything, or anyone for that matter.

I didn’t tell the boys on my team I was sick. I figured it was better for them not to know, going into the season like we were. They needed to focus. This was the team that was going to

get me my championship. They were good—real good. They were tough, both mentally and physically, talented, and hard workers, dedicated to me and my staff and to their teammates. If I regret anything in my life, it's not holding myself together like I expect and demand from each and every one of them. I should have followed my own advice, and maybe I'd be in a different situation.

When I began to get more and more tired, it was hard to teach during the day, coach after school, and still have time for my wife, for grading, and for my kids and their families. I'm a Pap Pap, and Pap Pap's don't have time for tired. So I got angry. Real angry, just to hide my exhaustion from my family.

My wife told my children that I was sick. I don't blame her for doing it, but now they treat me like I'm sick. It started almost immediately after they found out. That added to my anger. It was all outrage. I would have given anything to go out on the field and rip someone's head off with a good tackle. And then, I did it.

My coaching staff is a great group of men, except for Danny Rutiger. That piece of shit isn't worth my time, but the school said I had to put him on my staff because he's a teacher at the school (thank God we aren't in the same department. I don't think I could deal with that). He's only doing special teams, but I always feel like he's trying to undermine me, asking the boys if they are okay after I come down hard on them for something, or telling me that kids can't play because they are injured, when they are just afraid of making a mistake.

Well, he was telling me how his kid deserved more playing time, so I gave the kid a chance. This kid was young, even for a sophomore, and looked about half the size of my regular starters. I figured the kid was smart enough to know he couldn't keep up with the older boys, but

he tried, and I give him credit for doing that. Next thing you know, he gets tackled and gets stuck in a large dog pile, and ends up with a broken wrist. His father, damn stupid Rutiger, came and got in my face about setting him up for failure. I was so angry, I just couldn't hold it in anymore. I'm convinced it was the cancer talking and swinging, not me.

So I hit him.

Rutiger pressed charges, and I went to jail for two nights, until he decided he wasn't going to keep the charges against me—probably too much money to pay for the lawyer or something. I'm not proud of what I did, but with the assault charge, and the fact that I hit a colleague—both as a coach and as a teacher—that ended my contract with the school right fast. Even tenure wasn't enough to keep my ass around.

For a while, I tried to bargain with them to get my coaching job back, and I tried bargaining with the cancer at the same time. If I could just hold on for a little while, I could see both my kids get married. I would be able to hold my first granddaughter—she's due in about a month. I could see my grandson's first birthday, and see my other grandson's fourth birthday. Why did it have to happen now? Maybe I could live a few more years if I just started taking some of the medicine they wanted me to.

But medicine's expensive, and when you have no insurance, it just isn't worth trying. Who knows how far something small would go with something like cancer. Probably wouldn't help at all.

So I got depressed. I started spending a lot of time at the local bar, trying to explain to the other patrons what had happened between me and Rutiger. Trying to explain why I lost control

of my temper like I did. Trying to take my mind off of everything, and to find some solace in the bottom of a bottle.

It didn't work. Just got too damn expensive.

And so I stopped going out. I began to hide away in my Lazy Boy and watch old football reruns, or whatever happened to stumble across ESPN. What was the point in going out? No one was interested in my anymore, since I got fired. I'm a bad role model now, and I'm sure lots of people are real disappointed in me. I'm disappointed in me.

Despite sitting on the couch and eating junk and drinking beer, I began to lose weight. I've never looked this sick in my life. And it happened so quickly. I lost all that weight in a few weeks, and now, I'm down to nothing but the skin and bones.

It's crazy how you have something like this happen to you, and you wake up one day and it is okay. Everything is going to be fine, and I know it. My family is going to live on, and do great things without me. I can't afford to fight it, and I can't keep up the nasty drinking habit I've picked up. I am okay with dying. I'm ready even. I am tired of feeling like someone I'm not. I just hope that people remember me for all the good I did, rather than the mess I've made in the last few weeks.

Things are going to be okay. I know that I can still take care of my family, and that I can do something to really help them. I upped my life insurance policy before I told them I had cancer, just because I knew that I was going to die, and right now I got a lot of shit to pay on. Two weddings. Two college tuitions. The wife's hot tub and sitting room. Jail fines. So what else can I do? I am the provider for my family, and when I'm gone, who will step up to bat and keep the income coming?

I've decided there is only one thing I can do. It's the only reasonable thing, and the only reasonable way to make up for all the trouble I've cause everyone in my family. I am ready to die, and I am ready to take responsibility for myself and for my actions.

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### **Strathmoor Times—Sunday Feature**

#### **High school football coach found dead: town distraught over suicide of local legend**

BY AVA CARILLOW—Ava.corilow@Localtimesnews.com

Picture this: coming home for a normal weekend with your parents. You have dinner on Friday, and retire early, only to rise on Saturday, which is spent dabbling around the kitchen, eating various snacks and catching up on family time, which is so dear now. Sunday brings church, slow goodbyes, and promises of seeing each other soon.

This is not how Lucy Vincent's weekend home ended.

Instead, on this Sunday, Vincent came home from church only to say goodbye in a more permanent way, when she found the body of her dead father.

Local football coach and legend George Brown, 62, was found dead in his bathtub two days ago. Reports indicate that he ingested a large number of pills in just a few minutes.

Brown had been on a downward spiral, losing his job at the school because of an incident with one of his player's parents at the Tavern, and spending a night in jail on assault charges (which were later dropped.).

During the interview which would be the last of his life, mere days before the bathtub, Brown commented that, "I used to be a role model. I used to expect the same standard from myself that I always expected from each and every one of my [football] players. I would expect

that none of them would ever behave the way I have in the last few weeks. I would be very disappointed in them, just as I am in myself for my actions.”

But what drove a great man like this to his untimely demise?

Brown had recently been diagnosed with Stage III Lung Cancer.

“I always thought that lung cancer happened to people who smoked,” Brown said during the aforementioned interview. “I never thought I’d get sick. I know it’s sounds cliché, but I figured something bad like that would happen to a bad person, not to someone like me.”

“The doctor said that he was bad,” Vincent said, wiping tears away from her eyes. “He only had a few weeks, months if we were lucky, left. We were looking forward to spending a few more weekends with him.”

Oncologist Dr. Justin Ryan said that Brown had not shown any types of suicidal thoughts when the news had been delivered, or when they began to talk about the treatment plan with Brown.

“He brushed it off,” Dr. Ryan said. “I know he was in denial, but sometimes it just takes a few days for news like that to settle in.”

“He seemed like it was not a big deal at first, and said he would fight it, but he didn’t seem very passionate about it,” Brown’s wife, Debbie, told reporters. “Since the school let him go, he had been worried about the money and what [treatment] would cost, but I made it clear that we wanted him to live, even if it was just for a few more weeks.”

“He had always been a fighter,” Vincent said, sitting on the couch next to her mother. “I’m not sure what he was thinking. It finally seemed like he had accepted what was going on, and was going to try to fight for his life.”

Brown's wife admitted that she and her husband's two younger children still had student loans to repay, which they were helping with at this time.

Middle daughter Jacquie Singer was just married last weekend, and the Brown's youngest son, Bill, is currently engaged.

Local building records also note that the Browns were putting an addition on their house. They had applied for the building permit, which was issued for a sunroom and hot tub deck on the back of their house on Riemer Road.

According to the school, Brown's health insurance had been canceled because of terms of his early termination from the school's employment.

"Jacquie was borrowing money so she and her husband could put a down payment on a house," D. Brown said, when asked if she thought money was a motivating factor in Brown's decision. "Bill was planning his wedding for a few months from now. Money was tight, but we would have managed it somehow."

Debates about Brown's actions have made their way into the public eye. Conversations about him can be heard nearly anywhere in Strathmoor.

"I think it was brave," one lady said, wishing to remain anonymous. "He is taking care of his family, even though he is no longer alive, and I think that is something that not everyone would do. And he isn't suffering with all of that nasty medication and treatment. It's probably what I would do in a situation too."

Others feel the opposite.

"Suicide is a sin," Dave Panther told Local News. "He will suffer for the rest of eternity. It was selfish for him to leave his family like that. It would have been better to trust in God to

deliver him, and not put his daughter through the pain of finding him. He is a coward, and I have lost all respect for him through this.”

Despite the controversy, members of the community have banded together to help Brown’s wife and children. In just seven days, the community has raised half of the amount of money for the down payment on the house Brown’s daughter and her husband will purchase.

“It’s amazing how much people are willing to do for us in this hard time,” she said. “I could never have believed that I wouldn’t have to borrow money for our home. I am so thankful, but it’s so difficult to accept, knowing my father died so I can get a house.”

The community also has been hosting fundraisers for the George Brown Memorial Fund, which will provide monetary support for football players to attend college.

They have also created a candlelight memorial for Brown outside the football stadium, where he had been a football coach for 22 years. The players have all put his initials on their helmets, and have dedicated their season to his memory.

Unfortunately, the season has not been going very well.

“We might not be doing very well this season,” said football captain Jordan Tepper, 18. “But he would be proud that we are doing our best, given the circumstances.”

“I don’t care how he died,” linebacker Craig Harper, 18, said. “He was an important part of our team, and I know the other guys on the team, and me especially, will never forget him. He taught us a lot—not just about football, but about being a good person too.”

Brown’s church refused a memorial service for Brown; however, a funeral will be held next Monday at Cerral’s Funeral Home at 7 p.m., followed by an open house with cupcakes—Brown’s favorite food—and refreshments, for anyone interested.

#### IV. Assist Me

When do you get to the point where enough is enough? How do you know when something is too much? Can you know it's the right time to die?

With a husband—and the two little dogs who kept me company after he passed—dead, children fully grown, grandchildren growing and spread across the country, I can't help but wondering if my time is coming.

I have lived a full life—eighty-seven years is a long time for anyone, especially someone as ostracized and reclusive as I have become.

It sounds bad when I say it that way. It's not that I've been hiding away in my house for years and years and no one has seen me. I go to senior aerobics two times a week, the library once a week to exchange my books and read to the pre-school children—and take them cupcakes and other sweets I've made—and the grocery store every Sunday after church. I see people every day, but I still feel very lonely. I miss my husband. I miss my children. I miss my grandchildren. I miss my dogs. So I suppose what I should say is that I feel ostracized and reclusive when I am home.

My children call often, but it's not the same as having them here. They all seem to be doing well. The grandkids all love the cards I send monthly; they are appreciative, thankful, good children. I think I have done an exceptional job raising my family, and I am proud of the legacy I will eventually leave behind. My husband would have been proud too if he could see them all today.

But at my age, things are hard. It's hard to go up and down the stairs. I can't get into the bathtub or my bed without having a stool or a ladder to help me. I have a very hard time catching

my breath anymore, and my feet are often swollen and achy because of my cardiomyopathy. I am on countless medicines to help, but my fingers get sore after opening so many bottles, and they are hard to keep track of—which pill to take when, with what, and how many times a day. It hurts my hands to bake the sweets I love to make so much, and I can't do any sewing anymore. Books and the television are the only things that don't make me hurt anymore. It's just getting to be too much. And I can't drive any longer—not that I have anywhere to go that I can't walk. Living on Main Street makes it easy to get to the studio, the library, and the corner store—there all just a few blocks away.

But God bless the little neighbor girl who lives in the apartment underneath mine. She's an angel. She helps me carry the groceries upstairs, and my wheeling bag downstairs. She sometimes comes upstairs and organizes my medicines into my two pill cases, and sometimes she helps me get in and out of the bathtub. She worries about me, and keeps a close eye on me. She's in school to be a Registered Nurse—and I do believe she'll do a great job.

I've been asking the questions about death for a long time now. I don't see any reason to stay around any longer. Life has become hard, and the joys of life aren't attainable for me anymore. It's not that I want to die—I would love to continue to live; however, it's not living anymore. I want to go before I forget what it's like to be happy, before I forget what it's like to do the things I love, before I become one of those grumpy old people that people don't like. And God bless Chloe—she's going to assist me just one more time.

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## **Strathmoor Times**

### **Death of local woman upsets local authorities**

BY AVA CARILOW—Ava.corilow@Localtimesnews.com

Police and an ambulance team responded Tuesday afternoon after Chloe Napp, 25, called to report her neighbor, Miss Kathy Wills, 87, was found unresponsive in her bed.

First on the scene was coroner and paramedic Morrison Cameron, 53, who reported the woman's time of death as 8:37 a.m., though, according to Cameron, she probably had passed sometime in the night.

Napp, a nursing student at Strathmoor Community College, was close with Wills, and acted as a caretaker of sorts for the older woman.

"Kathy needed help occasionally," Napp said, "But she was more than capable of living on her own. I just did little things, like carry groceries upstairs."

Cameron said that he will be doing a traditional autopsy to verify there was no foul play, but also believes that in a case like this, they will find nothing.

"When it comes to older folks," Cameron said, "things like this just happen. She's been my patient a few times here and there, but she was healthy. Unfortunately, she was just at an age where anything could happen overnight like that."

Wills three children and seven grandchildren will be arriving in town in the next few days, where funeral arrangements will be made.

Ava Carilow can be reached at 866-2233 or by e-mail.

## BY THE LIGHT OF MY IV PUMP

708...709...710...

I am on my third bag of antibiotics and have been interrupted no less than two dozen times. I have been poked, prodded, tested, injected, and even when they can't think of a reason to interrupt me, they just ask if I need anything, or if they can do anything for me. Sleep might be nice. The assholes. They give you no rest—no rest what-so-ever. A hospital is no place for a sick person.

Your mom fell asleep in the chair in the corner of the room. And with Ashley in California at school, Charles in West Virginia, and Mack at grandma's, I've had a lot of time to myself. I've had a lot of time to think, though, and I was thinking of you guys in my copious moments of awakesness...

Ashley...On February 18, 1989, I was very surprised when you arrived as a girl rather than a boy. My mom always said with the heartburn you gave your mother, there was no way you'd be a girl. You were supposed to be a hairy little boy. But I was so happy the first time I laid eyes on you, and much more happy remembering that I promised to name our first kid Ashley Elizabeth, in exchange for your mom agreeing to marry me. Of course we know who really runs the family, and she wanted a girl. It just wouldn't have worked any other way. After only a few minutes of looking at you, I was completely hooked.

I am very proud of you and who you have become as a person. I have always admired your drive and your accomplishments. I only wish I did better in English and Political Science (and I have no sense of French whatsoever) so that I could truly appreciate some of the details of your senior work. Graduating college already? I can't believe it, but I am glad you're getting to

go out and travel and explore all of the unknown you've looked for your whole life, and I have all the faith in you being able to do whatever you want, even if you have to leave Strathmoor. I never thought that I would be happy for you to leave, but I know you can't stay in a town like this. You're going to accomplish way too much to stay here.

I love your sense of humor and approach to people. I hope you can strengthen the confidence you have in yourself—Mom and I have so much confidence in you, and we know you are meant for greatness. Just believe it yourself. You're such a hard worker and always give 110%. That's a quality that doesn't exist in today's workforce and it will get you far. I am excited and looking forward to getting some more time with the Adult Ashley in Strathmoor during the next months, before you finally leave for grad school and everything else you want to do with your life.

Charles...You—I knew you were a boy! I wasn't sure early on where you were headed but I like where you ended up! And it's only fitting that you came out like the missing link—hairy as all hell, opposite of your sister. You developed your smirk very early in life and we pretty much figured you had the world by the tail. Of course, you were known for much of your life as the kid with the long hair. I guess when I saw hair on the back of your knuckles as you came into life, I should have known hair would be a big part of your life. Such a trend setter.

You've got great people skills and are very intuitive about how to deal with just about anyone and everyone. I know the book work has been somewhat of a strain for you, but like your sister, you focus and do what you have to do. I admire that. I was never able to focus on anything I disliked—reading, English, football—none of it was interesting enough to keep my attention. I guess you got that from your mom.

As I lay here in the hospital again, I really appreciate how much you helped me during the first round of this stupid saga, i.e. the broken leg *before* the infection. You stepped up without complaint, and as shitty as the circumstances were—getting yanked out of bed so early in the morning, having to drive me to the hospital, waiting until your mom got there to leave again, having to help out around the house more while I was hurt—I was glad to get to spend some time together. I know hanging out with gimpy Dad ain't the most exciting thing to do on your vacation, but it meant a lot to me and your mother. Also, I'm very proud of your artwork. You have a lot of your Great Grandmother Ruthie in you. She was quite the artist, too.

Mack... I got to see all of you guys being born, but I got to catch you and that has always been a very special moment for me. Being friends with a doctor has more benefits than one. I miss our days of messing with gadgets and taking about nerdy stuff, and I am glad when we get to do that. You've developed the technical skills and love of the sciences that I have always enjoyed. But, I will say I don't know where this jock thing came from. The other two were athletic, but they didn't take it to the jock level like you have—all of this weight training, the letterman jacket, all of the practices. Thank goodness you offset it with a healthy dose of Band Geek. Percussion, though—it's the coolest way to be a Band Geek, I suppose, and definitely the most mathematical. We were very proud to hear what Coach had to say about you and your approach to hockey, how you support your teammates and how hard you work in your position. That's very important in any team activity.

You have gone in a few different directions in your short career than Mom or I would have predicted, but we are very pleased with what you've accomplished so far and are looking

forward to what's next. You have really matured and done your own thing with the band, with sports, with church, and with your scholastics.

That's what we hoped for all of you guys—to do what turns you on.

732...733...734...735... I've decided I can tell time by my IV pump based on rate and infused amount—Mack's probably the only one who will truly appreciate that mathematics. Maybe it's even too geeky for him....

Jo... My best friend. I realized we've been buddies for 32 years and lovers for not much less time than that. Never thought about counting up the many non-married days before. Thanks for being such a great mom to our kids. From the first day I saw your smile I was hooked, but it took me a few more years to actually realize it. Sorry I can be so stupid sometimes. I should have learned from the beginning to listen to you. I know you're always right, even if I don't ever admit it again.

You have always been there and have supported the kids in all that they do and I'm so glad that you're their mother. God only knows what they would have learned if I tried to do it all. We have created something pretty special, I think, and, I guess the kids probably helped a little too.

I have really enjoyed going to hockey games as a family outing. I look forward to an increased number of dates with you now that Ash and Chuck are at school, and Mack spending all his time at band, sports, and with his girlfriend.

Well, the next injection has arrived.... I have to go.

Love you all—I agree with Ashley—I really like this family!!

—Dad —James

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Jo Bailey walked out of the room and shut the door before the tears in her eyes began to fall. She had never expected to have to say goodbye to her husband so soon. It had been a rough year before this, and now, she didn't know how she was going to tell the kids...

She had called Ashley and Charles to tell them their dad was in the hospital, but told them not to worry about coming home—it wasn't anything serious. James just felt sick, like he had the flu. When they arrived, they told him the white blood cell count was high, and started him on antibiotics—how does an infection get bad enough to kill someone so quickly?

After the heart monitor's beeping had started woken her, she had been told to leave the room. She stood outside, listening to the commotion inside. She knew it couldn't be good. James had been very pale, and he hadn't been able to keep anything down for about a week, but she couldn't believe that he was gone.

She sat beside the door and pulled her knees to her chest and wept into her hands. A few seconds later, Morrison—her best friend's husband—came out and sat down beside her. He put his hand on her shoulder.

“Jo...” He could barely say her name.

He just sat there beside her for a few minutes, rubbing her shoulder.

“I want you to know that you did everything you could,” Morrison finally said. “He was really sick. The infection was really bad, and no one could have predicted he'd have that kind of reaction to the antibiotics. You did everything you could”

Jo took a shaky deep breath, and nodded her head but couldn't stop herself from feeling guilty. Maybe if she would have made him come earlier? No. Morrison said that it was an

allergic reaction or something to the medicine that did it—they couldn't have known it would happen. She looked toward Morrison and saw the tears in his eyes.

“At least he sent that email before it happened,” Jo said quietly. “At least his kids will know he was proud of them.”

## SIREN

\*W\*

When you live on the main street of a small town like Strathmoor, nothing happens without you knowing about it. Blaring police car, wailing fire trucks and screaming ambulances pass at all hours of the day and night without regard for those of us with sleep to get, concentration to maintain, or headaches to soothe. While I was standing by my desk, plugging in my cell phone and setting my alarm for the next morning, I heard them. They sounded different—they sounded more urgent somehow. I didn't think a thing of it.

We had agreed to meet at our spot that evening, just after sunset, when your father would be passed out, and your mother had left for her nightshift at the hospital. You told me at school this morning on the way to our first period class you had something exciting to tell me, and the shine in your eyes made the excitement overflow into me as well. I told my mother I was going to the woods to read; she told me to be back by 10. I argued, telling her that if we were going to Prom, it wouldn't even end until midnight, and that I wouldn't be home until 1 or 2. With a roll of her eyes, and an "Oh, Walter" whispered out between sighs, she told me to be back by 12.

I lived on a cal-de-sac—a circle at the end of a road, with houses that had roofs that sloped at the same angle. They weren't all the same, like some of the other plans in town, but they all were about the same size and shape. They might not have looked the same at a first glance, but I always got the uncanny feeling that they were the exact same. If nothing else, they were all lonely and cold to me. Neighbors who enjoyed each other, but not us—I think they considered us outsiders. I don't think anyone us has moved in or out of the circle since my mom and I got here. It was great, growing up in the circle for the other kids. The always used to play street hockey or run down. I was too clumsy to be any good at hockey, whether it was played

with shoes on or with skates on, and rundown never looked like fun—getting hit with a ball that I was running away from? No thanks, It might have been okay to play today, but not when I was four. Basically anything that involved running. For me, though, the wood behind my house was a safer bet.

I felt cold as death as I was walking. I felt a chill go through me as if something cold were trying to grab my hand. I wasn't surprised; that's what happens in the time between autumn and winter, when the leaves have started falling from the trees, preparing themselves for the long, cold winter ahead. It's early enough that most of the leaves cling to the trees, covering me in color as I walked through our woods.

I felt the same chill as the moon began to rise, and replace the warmth of the golden sunlight with its eerie white light; I felt like the moon was watching me from the sky, not missing a single movement. I could see my breath coming out in small whips of anticipation. In the trees, the first traces of frost had begun to engulf the branches. The whole wood seemed helpless in the grips of encroaching winter. My eyes settled on the small, lethargic brook flowing toward the enclave of hemlocks, grouped in a tight, foreboding circle. Jagged pieces of ice were flowing defenselessly downstream toward the spring we call our own.

I walked up and lifted one of the ageless boughs upward, revealing the path into the clearing. "Are you here, love?" I asked. I felt a light breeze brush past me. I looked in. You weren't there.

*That's not like Ellie,* I thought, and grabbed my phone out of my pocket. No text from you but there was a missed call and a voice message from my mother. *Walter—I need you to come home. Something has happened... You just need to come home.*

The phone clicked at the end of the message; my mother slammed her phone closed. As I started to duck down underneath the boughs to leave our place, I looked back. It's almost like I could see you sitting there in the clearing, waiting for me. As I escaped the snare of branches, I started to run toward home. I dialed your number to tell you I'd be late, but you didn't answer.

The message from my mother had me worried. Something was wrong. You had always answered your phone, but this time, you hadn't. It didn't take me long to get home; only a few minutes. I ran through the front door. My mother was on the couch, tears in her eyes, looking down at her feet. Your mother was sitting across from her, staring at the door when I walked in. The tears were streaming down her haggard face. A new bruise was taking shape around her right eye, and her lip was split open. She looked exhausted. I felt the breath leave my body, and as I walked toward the sofa, I kissed my mom on the cheek and sat down beside her.

"Hi, Camilia," I said to Ellie's mother.

"Hello, Walt," Mrs. Leek said, trying to force a smile.

"Walter," she said, "It's Ellie..."

I could barely hear the words that my mother was saying; I don't remember if your mother said anything either.

"...her father was drunk. He... He basically ran her car off the road..."

Everything looked blurry, like I was looking through water.

"...and her car ended up falling into the river and..."

I know that I said something, but the words felt like they came from somewhere else. I had to leave, I couldn't stay home. I knew exactly where I had to go.

\*E\*

I grab your hand. It's cold as death. I'm not surprised. That's what happens in the bitter nothingness between autumn and winter. The time when fall's beauty has been exposed and the leaves have just started to fall from the trees. They lie on the ground, shriveled and brown, waiting for winter's cold blanket to cover them. But it's just early enough that most of the leaves still cling to the branches majestically, offsetting the jagged trunks with deep reds, rustic oranges, and elegant yellows that blend together in a colorful canopy, and conceal us from the rest of the world.

I follow you, your cold-as-death-hand clutching mine tightly, as you lead me through the trees, which twist upward to the darkening sky. The moon is rising, replacing the warmth of the sunlight with its eerie camaraderie; it's watching us from the sky, not missing a single moment. It casts small pools of white light through the trees, bathing our feet as we walk across the moss-covered ground. I can see my breath coming out in small whips of anticipation. The first traces of frost cloak the branches. The whole wood seems helpless as the grips of early winter ensnare it, but it also seems tranquilly eager to resign itself to the inevitable rime. As my eyes sweep the forest, they look toward the lethargic brook flowing toward an enclave of evergreens, grouped in a tight, foreboding circle. Frozen ice-crystals swirl and spiral in the water, dancing downstream toward the pool we call our own.

I let go of your cold-as-death hand as you walk toward the cluster of trees. A wintry breeze rustles through the leaves and the groaning branches. It kisses my neck, and crawls down my spine. You lift one of the long ageless boughs upward, revealing a dirt path into the circlet, as I take a step closer to your side. "After you, love," you whisper. My shoulder brushes against you and my fingers graze your cold-as-death hand as I walk past you into the pine-needle tunnel.

I feel like I should crawl through on my hands and knees like I did when I was a child, but the menacing ground challenges me not to.

The circle is our place, just yours and mine, since we found it seven years ago. I remember riding our bikes through the woods —mine lime-green, yours grey and black— looking for adventures and buried treasure when we found our place. You went in first because I was scared, though I never admitted it to you. It looks almost the same as it did then. Of course the trees are taller and the branches fuller. The clearing in the middle is covered in soft ferns and grasses, and leads to the rock-covered banks of our deep pool, filled with the ever-clear water from the brook that cuts its way through the wood. This is our place of adventure—the place to which we ran away. This is our place of bravery—the first place you kissed me in seventh grade; the first place I told you I loved you a few weeks later. This is our place of temptation— the first place we slept together after Fall Ball sophomore year, under the gaze of the stars, on a blanket of moss. It's a place of secrets and of secret—a place for making them and a place for sharing them together, while still hiding them from the world.

I know you didn't follow me into the clearing right away. I feel the cold absence I always feel when you aren't with me. I open the lid of the black, plastic storage box we left in the clearing, and pull out the blanket you made me. The once-sky-blue fleece is now faded and stained; a few tears mar the fabric from the constant use. I take off my purple and black plaid jacket, revealing my tight black dress, picked specifically to show off my new curve. I am excited to see the look on your face when you realize I'm pregnant. I sit down on the blanket, flattening the dress underneath me. The ground feels cold underneath my legs as I extend them in front of me, crossing them at the ankle. I look back at the boughs, waiting for you to come in, and play with the thin silver banded ring on my cold-as-death left hand.

\*W\*

We have known each other for so long, you and I. I remember the first time I saw you almost fourteen years ago. I was in our woods looking for leaves to add to the collection my mom and I had just started. She told me bring back any that I thought looked pretty, and she'd help me classify them when I got home. We had just moved to Strathmoor. My father had died, and she needed to start fresh, she said, somewhere in the country away from the hustle and bustle, where things were safer for a four-year-old.

I was looking down at the ground searching for leaves that had fallen, even though it was just the beginning of summer. I was too short to pull the leaves from most branches, and had to resort to the bushes and fallen leaves. I was looking so intently that I tripped over you.

"Watch it!" you said, running the back of your hand across your cheek, leaving a smear of dirt behind.

"I'm sorry," I said, rolling over away from you and sitting up. "I didn't mean to knock you over."

"It's okay. I'm used to getting knocked over," you said, picking yourself up to your knees and continued digging in the dirt with your right hand and a small blue shovel in your left.

"I didn't do that, did I?" I said. I pointing to a dried cut on your arm.

"Of course not," you said, raising your arm and glancing over your shoulder to look at the cut surrounded by a large bruise. "Dad spanked me for dropping his beer."

"Oh," I said. I had never been spanked before, nor did I really know what a beer was.

Dirt covered your arm up to your elbow. There was dirt smeared across your forehead and stuck in your hair, which was tied back in a long ponytail, closer to your left ear than your right. A small patch of your hair did not sit flat in the middle of your head, but rather stuck up in

every direction. You were wearing the weirdest outfit I had ever seen in my mother-picked-wardrobe world: pink and purple polka-dotted shorts and a long blue shirt with pink stripes. You said that the bright green shoes were called Jellies, and you said you had them in every color.

“My name is Ellie,” you said. You reached toward me with your mud-caked hand.

I took a half step back. “I’m Walter,” I said. A small smirk crossed your lips. I’ll never forget that smirk you gave me—the same one you still give me today—as you reached out with your clean hand instead to shake mine.

“What are you doing digging in the dirt?” I asked, disgusted by how much filth clung to your clothes.

“I’m looking for bugs for my collection.”

You held up a bright yellow-roofed bughouse with a number of roly-polys, worms, and beetles trapped inside under the magnifying-glass roof. “What are you doing out here? How are you so clean?” You sneered and your eyes wrinkled at the word clean.

“I’m looking for leaves,” I said. I realized I had dropped my book when I tripped and looked down for the small book I used to transport the leaves I found. For a second, I felt the panic set in, until I saw you flipping through the pages of it. “My mom’s a botanist. We have a pressed leaf collection, and I’m trying to find some new ones.”

“Oh.” You wiped a few straggling hairs away from your face, leaving a trace of mud near your temple. “Why are you dressed so weird?” You looked down at hiking-boot-covered feet, up to my khaki cargo shorts and then at my short-sleeve button down shirt.

“I’m not dressed as weird as you are.”

“My clothes are hand-me-downs.” You put your hands on your hips, the shovel pointing down against your left side, smearing dirt in a line on your shirt. “I didn’t pick them. My cousin did a long time ago.”

“Well, I didn’t pick mine either. My mom did,”

There was an awkward silence; you studied your hole in the dirt, and I looked up into the trees. I looked back at you, and our eyes met. Your eyes were a soft, twinkling shade of ocean-blue. I remember them being so cool and serene, but piercing and captivating as well.

“Wanna help me with my bug collection?”

“No way!”

“Please?” You protested, looking at me your large, sad, blue eyes.

“No!” I clutched my book to my chest tightly and took a step back.

“Please help me! I’ve never had anyone to help me before, and it’s got to go faster with two people...” The words cascaded out of your mouth like the loose dirt from the sides of the hole falling back to the bottom. I couldn’t keep up with some of the things you were saying. “We can even sing while we’re digging if you want. I’ll even sing by myself if you wa—”

“Fine.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I grimaced as I knelt down into the pile of dirt beside the hole you were digging. “But you have to teach me the song you were singing. It sounded good.”

“Okay,” you said, revealing your only-one-front-tooth grin.

You lived on the other side of the woods from me. It was only about a half-mile or so away. We began to meet in the woods almost every day by the hole you dug the day we met. I think you were the only kid anywhere near me who was willing to talk to me, so we became

friends quickly. You taught me how to climb trees, and how to get the leaves from the higher braches. Sometimes you would stand on my shoulders to grab the low braches when neither of us could reach, and then pull yourself up into a tree and climb as high as you could, and then jump down by yourself. I thought you were so brave. I helped you find bugs for your collection, though I still hated the dirt, even after you got sick of them a few weeks later because they kept dying. You switched to rocks instead. I even dug in the dirt a few times to help you find fossils.

You were always singing, and your face lit up every time you started singing. You told me you were going to go to a special singing school instead of regular school. You were going to go away to college for singing, and you were going to become a pop star. I never doubted you for a second. I loved listening to you sing, and sometimes I forgot what I was doing when I heard your voice because I just wanted to listen. I even ran into a tree once while we were walking through the woods while you were singing. You laughed so hard that you fell over. I laid down beside you, and we stayed there for a while, looking up at the sky. It became a new game: stare at the sky and find different shapes in the clouds. It was one that stuck—something we did all the time.

When we started school, we were in the same kindergarten class. You didn't have a lot of friends. Most people thought you dressed weird, and that your hand-me-downs made you less cool. And between my hiking boots, leaf collection, and you, no one gave me a chance either. It was just us. You and me against the world, and we were ready to take it on, as long as we had each other. Everyone made fun of us, and said you were my girlfriend—which, of course, I protested. You were just my best friend. You weren't even a *real* girl, I told them. You dug in the dirt and climb trees; girls played with Barbies and make-up and nail polish. I guess everyone knew I liked you back then. Well, everyone but you and me.

Sometimes you had bruises—bruises you told me you got from soccer or from being clumsy. I didn't know how you could get those bruises by yourself. Sometimes my mom would even cry when she saw you. I asked her about it a few times, but she said I shouldn't worry about it until I was older.

We still met in the woods when we could after school, until my mom turned on the porch light which meant I had to come home for supper. The nights where you came too were some of my favorite nights. We would look at my leaf book, and I showed you my video games—Spyro, Croc, Cool Boarders, and FIFA were my favorites. We played them sometimes and even though you didn't have video games at your house, you were pretty good. We did homework together and shared our favorite books. You loved Dr. Seuss, and I introduced you to the Magic School Bus books. And sometimes, my mom would even read us the Bobbsey Twins or the Box Car Children books. You drew pictures of everything for me, and I thought they were really good. The best drawings were the ones that represented the adventures we made up for ourselves—pirate ships, fighting goblins, rescuing princess or princes from towers—anything we could imagine, you'd put on paper. I told you that you were an artist. You laughed at the thought and let it roll off like you hadn't heard it. And your clothes—they never ceased to amaze me. I never knew anyone else who could wear as many colors at one time as you could. I liked that about you.

As we got older, we spent more time in the woods. We both had bikes by ten. We didn't have to share anymore. Yours was lime-green; mine was gray and black. We made trails through the woods, riding over the same places again and again to carve out the paths. We built jumps, and pretended our bikes were dirt bikes. You showed me how to ride over your dad's empty beer

cans so they would stick to the wheel and make it sound like a motorcycle. That was the same year when we found our spot; the year we both turned ten.

We were on an adventure that day, looking for buried treasure on a map you had drawn of the woods. You drew over the printed image, making it look like a pirate's map, with dark black lines leading the way to a big red X over a circle of trees. You even burned and ripped the paper to make it look old, and drew a chest of gold and a compass on the side. Even though you drew the compass backward, it was still pretty good. The X led us to our spot. There was a small cluster of trees, different from most of the ones around the woods. They were deciduous, I told you: *Tsuga caroliniana*—Carolina Hemlocks—one of my mother's favorites.

"We have them in my yard," I said.

"Walter, we have to go in."

"We can't do that," I said, inhaling sharply at the thought.

"Why not," you asked.

"It looks scary," I said.

"The only scary thing in there would be spiders."

"I hate spiders."

"But if there is anything and it gets me, who will rescue us? We both know I could rescue you better than you can rescue me" you said. "Just go in first. I promise I'll be right behind you in case something happens."

Your whole being seemed to be enticing me to say yes. I thought you had to be as scared as me, but you were always the brave one—spiders were the only thing you couldn't stand. But you were my best friend; I knew you wouldn't let any giant spiders carry me off, no matter how much you didn't like them. So I grabbed a long branch off of the ground to use as a sword, and

hoped there weren't any giant spiders in there. I crawled under the long hanging branches, terrified of what I might find. I drew a deep breath and pushed myself through.

There was a clearing in the middle, covered in ferns and moss. On the far side of the clearing, there was a pool with a creek leading to it, surrounded by large, mossy rocks. I touched the water; it felt cold on my dry, warm skin.

"Ellie," I shouted. "Hurry up. There's a swimming pool in here. The water looks great. Come on!" You crawled through the branches, and your blue eyes lit up with excitement when you saw the water.

Of course, though, in a town like the one we live in, nothing is private, and as I grew up I started to understand more about what was happening. I knew my mom didn't like your dad. She said he had problems, and I wasn't allowed to go over there unless your mom was home and my mom called her first. She said your dad drank too much, and that your mom—well, she just felt bad for your mom. We talked about it as I got older. She said your mom worked the night shift because that's when your dad was the least harmful. I didn't understand why your mom didn't just leave and take you with her. My mom said it was complicated, that she had nowhere to go. I still didn't understand, but as much as I hated it, I was there to protect you.

As we grew up, it got worse for you but for me too. It started to make me more angry, how he treated you. One night, when he was drunk, you called me and told me he hit you. I came to your house and punched him in the jaw as hard as I could. I broke my knuckle—he didn't remember; he was too drunk, you said.

You started sneaking out of your house at night, and staying at mine—not every night, but at least once or twice a week. When you showed up, I knew that your dad had passed out in the recliner in the living room. I was never sure if it was drugs or alcohol on a particular night,

and I never cared to ask. I know my mom told your mom where you were. I think your mom was just happy you were somewhere safe; your dad probably never even noticed you were gone on those nights. You were careful about leaving—you knew when he was inebriated enough that you wouldn't get caught. I know my mom hated it, but at least you were safe at my house. I promised that I would save you from it someday—that we would run away and leave this town behind. But until we could, we had our place—our clearing in the woods.

It was our place of adventure—the place we made our hideout. This was our place of bravery—the first place I kissed you in seventh grade; the place you told me you loved me, and the place I told you that I did too. This was our place of temptation—the first place I saw you naked when you jumped into the water; the first place we had sex, under the gaze of the stars, on a blanket of moss. The place where you fell asleep in my arms, and I knew I could never live without you. It was the place I gave you the silver ring with two small dark blue sapphires and a small white diamond in the middle. The place you said you wanted to spend the rest of your life with me. My siren. The one person in the world I would do anything for.

\*E\*

As I sit on the once-sky-blue fleece blanket, waiting for you to follow me into the hollow in the trees that we call our own, my hand rests on my stomach. I feel alone. You're standing outside the trees; something is bothering you, but for the first time, I can't feel what it is. I don't know how to help you. You come into the clearing for a few seconds; there is fear in your eyes. You don't look at me, but through me, as if I'm not here at all, and then you turn around and leave. I can hear your footsteps getting fainter. You are running, but I don't know where you are going.

I reach into the jacket pocket to find my phone. It's not there. I must have left it at home. That's not like me, but today has been a very exciting day. Prom is today, but neither of us wanted to go. We decided we wanted to be alone together. While other girls were scheduling hair appointments and getting ready, I scheduled a doctor's appointment and bought a new black dress. I'm small enough that no one noticed, not even me, especially with me wearing oversized soccer t-shirts and my baggy-hand-me-down jeans. No one else should know until you do. It is still such a whirlwind—hearing the heartbeat, seeing the pictures. Twenty-four hours ago, I had no idea I was pregnant, and now? I can't wait to tell you!

I must have forgotten my phone in the car or in my room when I changed, but I don't remember going home. I don't remember much after getting in my car and crying. Crying because I am so excited. I know you'll come back. The water looks so inviting, even in the bitter cold of late fall. The water is always cold, but on a night like this, it will feel warm.

I stand up and flatten my dress as I walk toward the trunk where the once-sky-blue fleece blanket stays, and pull out two towels. If you come back while I'm in there, I know you'll jump in too. I set towels on top of the trunk and begin to unzip the tight black dress. I slip the crisscrossed strap off of my left shoulder, and then my right, pull it past my belly and let it fall to the ground. My strapless black corset top clings to my goose-bump covered flesh, and my black panties hug my hips, sliding underneath the slight curve of my newly developing belly. I slip my feet out of my black boots and walk to the edge of the water.

I extend my arms up and dive into the deep pool. When I hit the water, I gasp. It is much colder than I anticipated. My skin feels like a million shards of glass are attacking it. My head feels heavy, like I hit it against something hard. The icy chill overcomes my body. My legs and arms begin to cramp. They try to pull away from the cold but find no warmth. Which way is

up? I begin to panic. I kick as hard as I can to reach the top. I kick and kick. I stuck in something. I can't get out. I kick again. I need air. I can't breathe. My lungs burn. I breathe in again; nothing but cold water. I stop thrashing. My body begins to float upward. I kick hard again, one last time, hoping it's the right way.

I emerge from the water and gasp for air. My lungs fill with the brisk air, and my heart begins to stop racing. The water no longer feels cold against the frigid air. It feels inviting and warm. I lay my head back into the water as I wait for you to come back, and I begin to sing the song that we call our own to pass the time.

\*W\*

My body felt as cold as death as I was walking through the frigid air. My eyes couldn't focus. I didn't see where I was walking, but my feet knew what path they needed to take. The chill of the autumn night surged through me, making me shiver underneath my black-woolen pea coat. The night felt darker, almost as though winter had set in and frozen everything in its place. The leaves that gripped to the trees had faded into the pale moonlight. Traces of gray appeared where the moon hit the trees. The moon's glow couldn't warm the woods, but it crept through the brush creating an uncanny illusion of menacing branches reaching toward me. The moon was watching me, trying to remember everything I couldn't fathom.

I walked up and lifted one of the ageless boughs upward, and ducked into the small path. I crept the rest of the way into the clearing to make sure you weren't there. For a moment, I thought heard a faint song coming from the pool. I turned my head, and the sound vanished. From the corner of the pool, small ripples were spreading across the icy surface as if something had just gone under the water. As I stumbled toward the water, my legs felt weak, and shook

under the weight of my body. It couldn't have happened; you couldn't be gone. We were going to get out of here, start a life somewhere where no one could stop us, where no one could find us.

I needed to splash some water on my face—maybe it would wake me up from this horrible dream. I walked toward the rocks and tried to sit down, but I tripped over the box in the middle of the clearing. I fell, and hit my head—hard—off one of the rocks. Everything turned black for a few seconds as I tried to regain my feet. I could feel the blood slowly running down my temple. I picked my hand up to wipe it off as I tried to stand up. I felt dizzy. As my eyes started to readjust, everything around me started to spin, and that's when I heard it again—a song coming from somewhere behind me. I knew that voice—your voice. It sounded so distant, so far away. I had to get closer. I had to find you, to touch you, to reassure myself you were fine. I took another few steps forward and felt into the chilled water of the pool.

\*W\*

The cold water startles me out of my reverie. I take a breath, and my lungs fill with water. I swim as hard as I can to get to the top. I pull myself out of the icy water, coughing to clear my lungs and fill them with the sweet, crisp autumn air. Your voice rings clearly through the air, hitting notes that give me the chills. I close my eyes, lean back in the water and listen to your song for a moment, before I look up and see you sitting on the rocks on the far side of the pool. You smile at me, and walk across the rocks surrounding the water toward the blanket I made you. The fleece is now faded and stained to a dull grayish-blue, with a few tears in the fabric from the constant wear. Your favorite black boots are beside it on the ground. Your hair is wet and pulled into a messy pile on top of your head. You are sitting now, wearing a tight black dress I have never seen before. I know you picked it specifically to show off your changing body. My

eyes light up as you take a water-logged sonogram picture out of your purse. I walk to where the towel was sitting and wrap it around myself and gaze at the picture, then at you.

You're so beautiful, sitting there with your legs crossed in front of you, playing with the ring on your finger like you always do.

"A boy?" I ask.

"A boy," you say.

I look down at the small bump in your belly. I sit down beside you and touch it. A wave of warmth fills me as I take your hand in mine and kiss your warm lips.

## ON A NIGHT IN STRATHMOOR

1.

When Adam Gregory died, our whole town went to his funeral: the men through a sort of respectful adoration for a deceased hero, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of his house, which no one—except for Scarlet Webb and Chloe Knapp—had seen since his wife had died ten years before.

In the casket, he looked almost just like he did when he had been alive. His dark brown hair was clipped short, almost shaved like an army man's would have been, but even with it so short, we could tell he was starting to go gray. He had a fairly large nose, which protruded from his face and ended with a slight turn downward, almost like the tip of a falcon's beak. He was buried in his police uniform, which hung loosely from his body as though he'd lost a significant amount of weight and never got it fixed—or perhaps it was the lack of bulletproof vest that made it look big. The yellow stripe on the side of his pants made his already long legs look even longer, and ended just before his size 13 shoes—we knew because the cobbler said she made them special for him. It was normal to see his face without a smile—a few had the pleasure of seeing it, but the sightings were few and far between, and he didn't look happy to be smiling like he did before his wife and parent's died. If it wasn't for the ashen color of his normally rose-tinted skin, he could have just been resting his light brown and gold-flecked eyes.

His house was like all the others on Main Street—two stories, pastel colors, flaking paint. Like most others, it was a shop on the bottom, and an apartment on top. It stood at the corner of Main Street and a little alley that no one had bothered to name. On the front of the house, the top half was painted a light, pastel, Easter blue with white window shutters. The bottom and sides

were painted white. In the front, it had big bay windows. On the first level, merchandise lined the windows, advertising the small second hand shop her ran from downstairs before his wife died. It had a small porch lined with white and red columns to support the white trim and awning that hung across the middle, separating his living space from his shop space.

Time had not been particularly kind to his house. One corner was beginning to rot away, and the paint hadn't been touched up since his wife had stopped harping about it. The once white siding was beginning to turn gray, and specks of brown and black had begun to pepper the sides. The blue on the top was beginning to peel, revealing little cracks of black, and patches of the bright white that was underneath from the last time he painted it.

He had been a lucky one, with a small lot on the side of his house that was surrounded by a white picket fence on three sides, and the house on the other. He had opened it as a sort of Dog Park, so people didn't have to walk their dogs on the patches of grass between houses and the dogs could run together freely, even for just a little while.

While he was alive, Adam had been an important part of town. He was not only the police chief for upwards of ten years, but he had also been a helpful, caring, compassionate man. He ran a thrift shop out of his living room, and took in anyone who needed a place to stay for the night. The yard beside was designated for animals, and cleaned it without complaint every evening, even though people were respectful and tried to clean up after their own dogs. He cooked for the Soup Kitchen, and never missed a football game at the school. At home games, he always opened the gate for the boys, and took the time to learn all of the boys' names, even the ones who never played more than a few seconds. He would shake Coach Brown's hand, and wish the team luck. At away games, he would introduce himself to the officer on duty and do the

same. Football games were the only thing he did for himself—everything else he did was for the town, or for someone in it.

In high school, he had been one of the highest scoring wide receivers in Strathmoor's history. He never played for any coach but Coach Brown—he was on a peewee team with Brown before Brown accepted a job at Strathmoor Middle School. Then he was bumped up a year and played for the Middle School in fifth through eighth grade, and he and Coach moved up to High School together. Because of Adam's work ethic, he even played just enough time to letter his freshman year before he could earn a starting spot as a sophomore.

We were all shocked when he quit playing after high school. He said he had better things to do than chase childhood dreams of playing in college or going pro, though he could have. That's when he went to the academy a few counties over, got two patrol jobs, and started saving to buy the house on Main Street. Didn't take him long. The house was dilapidated and really needed fixing up. He bought it cheap, and then did all the work himself with a few of his buddies and their fathers, who showed them how to do it to code. When he opened the shop, he went door-to-door asking for donations, and telling everyone where to drop anything they found later. He finished the shop before he finished the upstairs. He slept on a mattress on the floor, and all of his clothes lived in boxes. He didn't really finish the house until he met Molly.

Nobody knows much about Molly. She was shy, and never really said much. She was a pretty little thing—long black hair that was curly at the ends. She had olive colored skin, and eyes that changed between an emerald green and a turquoise blue. She was always polite, and greeted everyone with a warm smile and a hug or handshake; she just didn't say much. Some thought she was uppity. Some thought she thought she was too good for a town like Strathmoor,

but most of us, we thought she was just quiet. Adam wouldn't have picked someone who thought she was better like that—he was too humble to marry a girl who was that way.

When she died about ten years back, Adam didn't take it well. For a while, he stayed shut up in his house. He left the doors of the thrift shop open, and some of us took turns running it and making sure things kept going. We did our best to send letters or make calls to check up on him, but they very rarely got returned or answered, if he ever returned or answered one. Eventually, he started coming out again, and though he wasn't quite the same, he still tried to do the best he could for the town. He started working more at the police department, and took on the role of Police Chief. He kept going to football games, and he continued take in people who needed his help, but they all stayed downstairs in the shop instead of upstairs with him. But his heart didn't seem in it as much. He was off. Different somehow. He started losing a bit of weight—his cheeks began to sink into his face, and his lips seemed to stick off his face further. He stopped cutting his hair as regularly, and it began to get shaggy, though some thought that he grew it out because he was starting to lose hair. He threw himself into his work so much that he couldn't have had much time for himself. He spent most of his free time at the police station instead of at his shop or trying to get donations for the shop. We were worried, so a group of us sent the Reverend Dave Panther to check on him.

When Dave got there, he said Adam looked the same as ever—a tall, athletic built man, with a police uniform on, bullet proof vest underneath making him look even bigger, elbows out, hands clutching the belt at his waist, boots polished and shined to the point you could see yourself in them. His eyes looked heavy, though, as if he was too tired for his own good, and

they had lost the shine and drive they had had just a few years back, before Molly's untimely passing.

Adam did not ask Dave to sit. He stood silently near the entrance to the shop, listening quietly to what the pastor had to say. Adam looked down at his watch and then back up at Dave.

His voice was exhausted and heavy. "I appreciate you coming out, Dave. I do. But I'm doing just fine. I'm getting closer and closer to my goal every day, and when that happens, I think I'll be even better."

"Adam, we are worried about you. You haven't been yourself for a while. We haven't seen you at church in months now. Haven't you gotten the letters from people asking about you?"

"I've received some letters and some calls," Adam said. "But I really am fine, Dave."

"I wish you would at least come back to church on Sundays. We miss yo—"

"I have to go, sir. I have a shift starting soon. I can't be late. I'll consider what you've said, and do my best to make it Sunday."

2.

Adam did not come to church on that Sunday.

That Sunday marked the anniversary of Molly's death, and that Sunday, exactly three years after Molly died, Adam's parents, Jan and Mike, were killed in a house fire. His childhood home on the farm where he grew up was completely destroyed. All that remains on the property is the charcoaled foundation of a house, a dilapidated barn, with a small silo of rotting cow fodder, and a ramshackle jungle gym Adam's father made when Adam was a young boy. Adam had sold off all of the cows to the local butcher when Jan and Mike died, and had put the farm up

for sale. We didn't want to purchase it—it was a memorial, in our eyes, to his parents. Nobody from outside of Strathmoor bought it—according to stories, it was haunted.

Some say they see Adam there from time to time, standing in the driveway, looking toward the remnants of the house. Still others say it's just some squatter living in the barn. Others say it's his father's ghost, waiting for someone to reclaim the land and rebuild the house and the business on the land so he can be at peace. He was a real hard worker in life, and they say his ghost is tormented by its lack of productivity. No one knows for sure, but the land rests with no one working it.

His parents' death was hard on Adam—even harder because it happened just two years after Molly died. When it happened, Adam quit one of his jobs at the police station a few counties over. He stayed on as Police Chief in Strathmoor, mostly because there was no one else to do it. The other two Policemen in town were young; they weren't ready to take on all Adam's responsibility, and Adam was a man of duty.

Some tried to help. They left meals at his shop for him, or called to tell him they were praying for him, and if he needed anything to just let them know. He always returned the calls with an "I'm fine, but thank you for checking in" and an "I'll let you know if I think of anything I need." He was real good about returning the dishes to people too, clean and always with a thank you note, telling them it was delicious. And so things kept on for a while.

On the anniversary of Molly and his parent's deaths, Adam would take the day off and sit in the cemetery at the gravesites. None of us believed he was going crazy. We believed that he had to go because he had lost all his family, and he had to cling to what he had lost, as most people would do in a situation like his.

3.

Adam disappeared again right after his parents died. When he reappeared, he looked almost like death himself. His eyes sunk farther and farther in, a testament to his torment and depression, and the lines on his face grew longer and darker, making him look haggard and much older than he was. He stopped going to football games or coming out at all if he wasn't working or heading to Roxy's, the local tavern. He started going to Roxy's every night—we figured it might be because he didn't want to go home alone to his thoughts. He'd have a beer or two, and watch everyone at the bar carry on. Barkeep says he never got drunk—never even close. He thinks Adam just didn't want to go home to be alone. The rest of us just believed he had trouble sleeping—probably some sort of psychosis or something serious that would make his face to change so much in such a short time. No one had the heart to ask him.

Adam started coming out again about the time that Scarlet Webb moved into town. She was a sweet girl, reminiscent of Molly in a lot of ways, but she had dark eyes, almost black, and hair that matched her name. It was almost a dark, ruby colored red, and seemed to glow when the sun hit it. She was about the same height as Molly, but much more outspoken. She was very personable and became a popular member of Strathmoor pretty quickly. She even bought the upstairs apartment beside Adam's—the one where Kathy Wills had lived.

We were all glad when Adam started spending time with Scarlet because we all believed she would bring him back to his old self. She was fun and spunky and the perfect remedy for depression. She loved to cook, exercised frequently, listened to music loud enough we could hear it from the street, and was a movie expert—seems like there wasn't a movie out there she

couldn't quote. She often responded to people in movie quotes, asking them to "name that movie" after.

And poor Adam, he just didn't have anyone else—the only child of two only children with a dead wife—everyone was just glad he had someone to talk to again. Many hoped they would finally find out what he had been doing for the past few years, shut up like he had been.

Scarlet had been a detective or something like that before she got to Strathmoor, and we couldn't figure why she ended up here. We didn't have need of a detective in town—nothing ever happened that needed detecting. But she did help Adam at the police station, which consisted of four offices—one for each of the cops in town—a lunch room, a command room, an office for meetings, and a one bay garage for one of the police cars--the other stayed with Buddy Hall and his K-9 unit partner Cooper. She helped them set up some new system to help with looking records up, and submitting police reports electronically instead of filling out the paper work manually. She also helped him pick new guns for the officers.

They left for a weekend together, and came back with a number of different new "toys," according to Buddy. Each of them got a new revolver and a new pistol—Adam apparently bought the revolvers for each of the boys himself because he thought country boys like the four of them needed something cowboy-like. He had the money to spend, so he treated them all to the new guns. The boys at the station enjoyed the guns, and even went shooting together a few times; Miss Scarlet would go along too.

4.

We were all convinced that Adam was going to kill himself, and some of the more cynical folks said it might be the best thing for him—he didn't have anything to live for

anymore, those people said. But when he and Scarlet started spending time together, we all thought he was on his way to being married again instead, despite Scarlet's insistence that she would never marry. We all thought Adam was a good enough man to persuade anybody of anything. His genuine, loving nature, his earnestness, and his generosity—they all made him quite irresistible—and his looks didn't hurt either. It wouldn't be long before those two took the next step. Adam even came to church a few weeks in a row with Miss Scarlet in tow.

Some people were worried about Adam, and said that he wasn't dealing with his grief. That he was just using Scarlet to pretend he didn't have problems anymore. One of the women's Bible studies, the ladies that had been good friends with Adam's mother, asked the Outreach Minister—Bill Grupp—to talk to him. He never told us what he found out when he spoke to Adam, but he said that he thought Adam was doing quite well, considering the circumstances. He said that we were all worrying too prematurely and we didn't have any reason to be.

It was interesting to watch the developments over the next few months. Adam began to purchase jewelry from Dan Sees's shop in town. The first thing he bought, according to Dan, was a small-diamond necklace. Nothing too fancy. And he custom ordered some earrings to match. It was the bracelet he bought next, with the S and W charms that interested us most. We were sure the ring would come soon after.

But next thing we knew, Scarlet disappeared—one night she left Starthmoor without saying a word. We weren't too happy about her leaving, but Adam didn't seem too concerned. She was a breath of fresh air for us, and we were sad she didn't even say goodbye. We didn't know what had happened, and even though we asked Adam, he said she had things to take care of, and she didn't know if or when she'd be back. One of the kids that lived down the road asked

Adam why he didn't ask Miss Scarlet to marry him before she ran away. Adam didn't answer, but he just cloistered himself back into the shop, and we went back to taking turns checking in on him at the thrift shop. He seemed to be doing okay.

About a month later, right near the eighth anniversary of his wife's death, and the fifth anniversary of his parents' death, Scarlet came back. It was a nice, early autumn evening when she arrived with her Jeep packed up to the very top and a trailer in tow behind with her furniture in it. She said she didn't want Adam to have to spend the hardest part of the year alone. She said that she sold the property in Ohio where she had lived before Strathmoor, and was looking forward to making a life in a smaller town instead of the city. It made us happy—one step closer to getting married, we suspected.

The two spent the month together, and things started to look up for Adam. He didn't ever go back to his old self, but he started to look healthier. He went back to only working one job, and started going to football games again with Miss Scarlet and her downstairs neighbor, Chloe Knapp, again. He never went back to talk to the boys, but the three stood by the end of the visitor's section where he didn't have to talk to many people. He looked better. He started putting weight back on again—he and the girls took turns cooking for each other. We saw that the girls were welcomed into his house—not just the shop, but they went up the stairs on the side to the apartment on the top floor. It aroused some curiosity in town—some thought it was a scandal between the three of them; others assumed they were just friends; and others didn't care to make a guess because Adam was finally happier again. It was just as strange of his reclusiveness after the deaths of his family, but because he didn't look bad, it wasn't such a hot

topic anymore. There was less talk about him, and people stopped worrying about him. Of course people pestered Scarlet and Chloe for details—they said the three were just friends.

Dan Sees said that Adam finally bought that ring two days before the grim anniversary. Ten years had passed since Molly died; seven since his parents died. We figured we could start looking forward to a wedding soon. And it wasn't even forty-eight hours later that Adam was found in the cemetery. He was right in front of three matching gravestones with the name "Gregory" on them, as usual, but this time, he was found there dead.

5.

It seemed like the whole town all turned out for the memorial service. There were people packed into the little church at the end of Main Street, and speakers were set up outside for those who couldn't get inside—there were just too many people for everyone to get inside. The line of people who wanted to pay their respects to Adam—a local legend, according to the Strathmoor Times—was exceptionally long. It probably would have stretched the better part of a half-mile down the street if everyone actually stood in a line. Took hours for the last people to make it through the church.

Some of the football players who helped Adam in the thrift shop acted as ushers as we all came to the shop to pay our last respects. We knew the town would never let Adam's shop close, so some people brought food donations for the reception. Others brought food donations to be sold in the shop. Almost everyone brought at least something for the second hand shop in honor of Adam, and a goodly number tried to sneak upstairs to get a peek at what Adam's place even looked like anymore. There wasn't anyone really who could take care of Adam's stuff. Lots of people in town volunteered, saying they'd be more than happy to help clean out stuff from

someone like Adam—probably for the same reason people wanted to peek at the reception. A small group of people who had been particularly close to Adam’s parents—or Adam before Molly passed—were selected to help clean everything out. The door had to be broken down because no one had any of the keys to Adam’s house and the group wanted to get it taken care of as soon as possible—no use waiting for the locksmith to figure something out, since he could just as easily put new locks on. At least that’s how breaking down Adam’s door was justified.

Adam’s door was an old door that swung inward—kicked in real easy, Buddy said, especially since he was wearing his steel-toe police shoes. There wasn’t much light coming into the house. Adam had thick dark burgundy curtains on all the windows, which we knew from the outside. They tried switching on the lights, but neither of the switches in the living room worked. When they pulled the blinds open, things were a disaster. Adam’s TV was knocked over, lying shattered on the floor. Shelves had been emptied onto the floor, and DVDs, magazines, and books lay strewn across the floor. Little knick-knacks were scattered across the floor, broken into pieces, and drawers on the desk were left open with papers lifted out of the drawers spread across the floor as well.

Buddy took out his gun and checked Adam’s kitchen—nothing. The bathroom—nothing. Laundry room—nothing. The door that led to Adam’s bedroom was closed. As Buddy turned the knob and pressed the door open, light flooded from the room. He swung the door open, and a faint, unidentified odor began to fill the room as they stood there. They looked into the room, and gasps arose. In Adam’s bedroom they saw two girls they hadn’t remembered to look for at the funeral—one with scarlet hair lying face down on the bed; the other, her blonde friend, crumpled on the floor.

## TALES OF A SMALL TOWN CORONER

I have seen things you can't imagine. I have seen things that would shock even the brave ones. I'm desensitized. Enough at least to help in the moment, but not enough to sleep well at night. The things I've seen are haunting even in the best of times and they me paralyzed with fear in the worst.

Traumatic issues—cuts, bumps, bruises, broken bones, burns, paralysis, gunshots, knife wounds, shock, lightning strikes, animal bites. Illness—infection, fevers, flu-like symptoms, sever coughing, vomit, withdrawal. Seizures. Hearts stopping. No Breathing. Unresponsive. Diabetic coma. Car accidents—no survivors. Fires—charred flesh. Labor—bleed out.

Death happens. It happens more than people would want to know. I see it (almost) every day. People die from everything. Small things. Simple things. Things that shouldn't kill a person—but they die anyway. A man breaks his leg, but he dies from an infection from the incision the doctor used to fix it. The infection spreads throughout his body; he never knows until he feels sick one day—dead the next, leaving a wife, twos sons and a daughter. Like me. A wife. Two sons. A daughter—

A small daughter, only two, only walking and talking for one year, loves her dad and doesn't know any better than to stay inside, his wife turns her back for a second to make lunch, daughter escapes, knowing she's not watched, runs to visit her father, outside, down the porch stairs while mom's back is only turned for a few moments, mom turns around, daughter gone but outside, her husband is pulling the combine out of the barn she sees her daughter running toward her husband doesn't, and she is hit, one of the worst things to see—thank God it was just a wheel that hit her.

A wheel. Behind a wheel of some piece of shit old car is where they were found, dead together, suicide notes—his and hers—written on the same piece of paper, just a corner torn from hers, stating where the dog should go and to take care of mom. His note, full of hate and blame toward the step daughter, a family of scandals—abuse, molestation, rape, sexual abuse—disgusting, all of it, him and his wife—can't remember her name. Carbon monoxide poisoning, it looks like, but an autopsy just to be sure. Phone rings while loading the bodies—my daughter—no time now, and it's easy to forget to call back.

ADDISON (message): Hey dad! I'm done with work. Mom said you needed to be picked up. I'll be there in about thirty minutes, and I brought coffee for you. See you soon.

She doesn't say goodbye—a habit she picked up from me. I pick up the bodies covered in red splotches just like they should be if they didn't have enough air and too much carbon monoxide, and we go to the funeral home. Autopsy—blood tests to make sure its only carbon monoxide. But he's too big and the needle isn't long enough reach into where it should to get the sample I keep jabbing and jabbing to try and keep not reaching.

My Addison walks in and sees two naked bodies lying side by side on two tables in the morgue. Her face turns white and she sets the Starbucks—she works there, a barista—for me on the desk and grabs the necklace I gave her on her fourteenth birthday—a little heart, gold on one side and silver on the other, three tiny diamonds in the middle—a necklace I got for free with the one I bought her mother on Valentine's Day, three days before Addison's birthday—she wears it everywhere and tugs on it when she's troubled, and she's troubled now with two naked, dead bodies on the tables and me poking one with a needle, but she asks what I'm doing, curiously, stepping closer and maybe that's the first step someone needs to become an EMT or Medic or

even a coroner, but coroners see things that haunt them at night, and see them over and over, trying to forget so they can sleep at night...

...Which is when that girl in the white car was killed, when I almost hit Carl in the road and found her she had been dead since the car stopped and wrapped itself around the tree, with a branch coming through the sunroof to meet her skull. Just a teenage girl, not even quite an adult shaped hole in the twisted metal when we finally pulled her out, the most disturbing thing someone, anyone could see and then her boyfriend screaming in pain like he was to add to it— weeks it took to stop dreaming of that view and that scream...

...And the scream the mother leaked out when she found her son dead, and the sound of her sobs when we got there to take her son away, she didn't want to let him go, didn't see it coming and his dad didn't say a thing, guilty perhaps of not paying any attention, like the dead woman who lay in her house for a week before she was found since no one was there to pay attention and it was just sheer happenstance and smell that alerted anyone to her...

but then there are other times that death is obvious, like the blood mixed with oil smeared across the road like butter on bread after a motorcyclist stuck by a truck which leaves red tinted brown liquid everywhere, a grotesque image even for an experienced certifier of death when the cyclist's foot is missing and takes eighteen hours to get the scene cleaned up and to track the missing appendage down and it gets left in the garage freezer at home for an hour or two while a few hours of sleep are grabbed before disposing of the foot.

MORRISON: Libby, don't open the freezer in the garage—there's a foot in there—we had an accident and it's going to be a few hours before I can take it to dispose of it, okay?

LIBBY: Don't let it touch the steak. I was going to serve it for dinner and foot will ruin the flavor.

MORRISON: I'm guessing they gave you Vicodin at the hospital for your hand after the accident, didn't they honey

LIBBY: Yes, and it tastes good.

MORRISON: I'm sure it does.

I told the neighbor taking care of Libby while I wasn't home about it. She asked Libby if she had purchased Jeffery Dahmer's freezer—took Libby about two weeks to understand the joke.

There are those moments that are dreadfully funny throughout the accidents you see, like the foot in the freezer, morbidly hilarious, and most wouldn't get it, but my kids laugh and ask their mom to tell it over and over again, like the chest hair guy story. A man having a myocardial infarction—that's a heart attack—needed an Automatic External Defibrillator, you know? An AED. The kids nod in understanding. It was right after they came out and hadn't been tested in real life yet, just in the endless case studies saying they work on people with MIs, and the first time I use it is on a guy with a full head worth of hair on his chest. I got the pads out, set 'em up, got it all ready and the voice starts talking:

AED: Analyzing rhythm, everyone stand clear, wwwwwwzzzzzzzzzz, shock advised  
...and it decides it needs to zap him so I press the button

AED: charging, everyone stand clear, beeeeeeeeeeeeepppppppppppp, thu-wunk  
...and I see a spark

AED: shock delivered, begin 5 cycles of CPR

...and so we keep going with CPR and it does it again,

AED: Analyzing rhythm, shock advised

...the whole nine yards, maybe even a tenth yard, and it happens about ten times, and then the sparks get too big and the guy, right in front of my eyes, catches on fire. It smells like burning hair, scorching, singeing, burning hair, and the kid's eyes light up—they know the story and they love it, cracks them up every time.

But there are other times that they don't laugh, but shake their heads and talk about the stupidity of people, or something like a parrot spouting out exactly what I say back in my face... I must be careful what I say and what I do but it's too late, with three EMTs, Nathan and Liam right after their sixteenth birthdays, Addison after she graduated college—she went with Liam—they all did what I did—became EMTs. What's next? Paramedic? Coroner? That's what I did, and they did too, and now they too are stuck in a perpetual cycle of death, accidents, crashes, broken bones, murders—

Murder has only happened here once, as far as the records are concerned, two lovers shot by someone, supposedly a man who made the FBI most wanted list for his actions in Strathmoor—but there have been more than a fair share of deaths that in my gut I know were more complicated than just “a suicide” or “natural death.” Like the woman who lived upstairs of that cute young nurse. It was just an embolism is what the autopsy said—an air embolism that hit her heart and stopped it dead in its tracks. But it's interesting to think how it got there. Perhaps the nurse put it there as a request, but who knows. Can't be proven, just like it can't be proven that the little pregnant girl, Liam's friend, died from more than falling down the stairs. Poor Nathan was there with the new medic at the station—what's her name? —Alex? Alexis?

Something with an x—but he was there and saw the blood, and the mother, and the baby, all of it, hasn't been the same since. But still seems to love what he does, like I do even when it hits close to home, when a kid gets bit by the neighbor's dog and I get to pull the stiches out myself. Still scary as shit when it happens, poor girl, poor Addison—after all these years, what's it been? 14 years now? She still has the scar, and wanted to keep the stiches—wanted her mother to put her hospital tag and the stiches on a scrapbook page when she was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. And even in her jeans and t-shirt, she went to stand in the front row of the chorus concert she refused to miss, even after her hospital journey. Now that's dedication, and the choir teacher thought so too, and didn't fail her, even though it was part of the final grade to be at the concert, and she missed all but one song. Addison stood there, bandage on her arm, bracelet on her wrist, doing the motions full with her left arm, and as well as she could manage with the right, and cried the whole way home because she missed so much of the concert...

Reminds me of the time that she came on the ambulance and cried because I wouldn't let her in the back, like she was aloud sometimes when it was a nice old lady with a fever or a knee replacement that needed to be checked at the hospital. But this time, this guy was a drug addict high as a jet, swearing up a storm and yelling, couldn't get any information out of him, so I started screaming back

MORRISON: Fuzzy wazzy. Was a bear. Fuzzy wazzy. Had no hair

DRUG GUY: fuzzy... wazzy... fuzzy... fuzzy...

ADDISON: I guess he wasn't very fuzzy was he, daddy?

But it stopped his swearing, and I shut the door between the front and the back of the ambulance, and Addison was so upset, wanted to be a part of it, but couldn't—she was too young

to see the drugs and the problems, too young for the dying breaths of a hospice patient, so the kids had to wait outside with a nurse until their mother could pick them up or until I could get done pronouncing a lady dead so they could come in after the sheet was covering the patient, so many times that I couldn't do anything else with them, and so they came along, and I felt guilty, but they loved it.

They loved it so much, like the night Addison was all dressed up in a black dress with red, green and gold plaid on the sleeves—the Christmas dress that Libby made that matched hers that they would wear together to Christmas Eve church—so that we could go on a Daddy-Daughter-Date, and we would see a movie and go to the Daddy-Daughter-Dance at school, but my pager went off, and with a smile and a hand hold she said she wanted to come and help her daddy save lives, and then she couldn't come in the back because of the overdosing, stomach-pump-needing patient throwing up and swearing—I had to promise I'd bring her again and she cried—

And she cried a few tears when she was sitting in the back, holding the woman's hand while I took her blood pressure and gave her some pain medicine for her knee that was swollen beyond belief.

LADY: why are you crying?

ADDISON: Your knee looks like it hurts real bad.

LADY: It's not so bad here, with you and your daddy taking care of me. It'd hurt much worse if you weren't here holding my hand.

ADDISON: I won't let go until we get to the hospital and some nice nurse can hold it instead. I have to be home before dinner. My mom's making chicken and dumplings. They are my favorite!

LADY: Well, I wouldn't want you to miss that.

ADDISON: I will if I have to, but the nurses are real nice, especially Chloe. Maybe she'll be there to hold your hand.

She's always been the sweetest person I've ever met, my Addy, like her mother, the brave, wonderful woman I married thirty-two years ago now and the one who even cut the umbilical chord of our youngest herself.

I caught him, precepting at the time, as required to get my medic card, and I was in the room when the doctor looked at me and asked if I'd done all four of my deliveries yet.

MORRISON: No.

She threw a pair of gloves at me and I caught him—grossest thing I'd seen in a long time then, all pink and bloody—I was afraid to drop him, slippery as he was but I've never been prouder of myself until she volunteered to cut the chord—never been prouder of Libby, who hates the blood and gore and the ambulance, but recognizes its importance and loves my training when it comes to cracked heads, stitches, boo boos, and everything else with blood and gore that she doesn't want to deal with—that's where dad comes in, and that's what I love—being needed by my children and wife whom I love dearly, and who love me back and love what I do, even though I have all of these tales as a small town coroner.