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A slice of the pie

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A SLICE OF THE PIE

Thesis

Submitted to

The College of Arts and Sciences of the

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree

Master of Arts in English

by

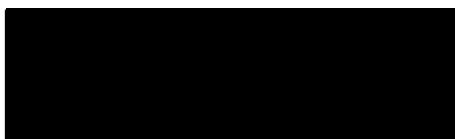
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE.....	2
I. SHADOW BOXER.....	15
THE FINAL PIECE.....	23
II. STEALING THE NOSE.....	41
THE YIN, THE YANG AND THE BANG BANG.....	50
III. JUST DANDY.....	68
DR. PEPPER RAGE.....	75
IV. GIVING THANKS.....	90
THE BEST LAID PLANS.....	98
V. PURGING THE PAST.....	117
MIDGET SOLDIERS.....	124
EPILOGUE.....	139

A SLICE
OF
THE PIE

Listen to the fiddler play
When he's playin' til the break of day
Oh me, oh my
Love that country pie
Raspberry, strawberry, lemon and lime
What do I care?
Blueberry, apple, cherry, pumpkin and plum
Call me for dinner, honey, I'll be there

– Country Pie, Bob Dylan

PROLOGUE

At approximately seven p.m. on the third Saturday in July of 2006, an ambulance wails its cry down the length of Georgetown Avenue. It carries an old man who fights for air as he also fights the thought that with each successful breath he takes, he is losing his opportunity to reunite with Marguerite, his one and only love. As the ambulance passes Allison Avenue, two little girls gleefully run barefoot in their front yard, chasing a yellow and orange butterfly that good-naturedly taunts and teases them with each flap of its wings. A few streets over, an old beagle stretches out on warm concrete, his aged brown eyes watching as overgrown weeds rhythmically dance around the perimeter of the sagging fence that holds him captive day in and day out.

Just up the road and two left turns later, the Weavers sit around a sticky table at McDonald's, silently munching on soggy fries and sipping runny milkshakes. Frazzled mothers chase ketchup and mustard-smeared kids into dirty bathrooms as teenaged, zit-faced employees gossip behind the counters, half-heartedly filling the orders of impatient customers.

Olive Weaver, the youngest of the family at the age of twenty-three, lethargically dips a salty fry into her chocolate shake and makes a sour face after tasting it. She always orders chocolate shakes and yet, she thinks taking off the lid of her milkshake, they always taste like strawberry. Olive is the only one at the table who hates

strawberries – a point she has often brought up to support her argument that she is adopted and not, in fact, related by blood to any of the other people at the table. It is an argument, at times, she believes to be true.

Under the pretense of watching Olive inspect her milkshake, Harrison Weaver, the middle child at twenty-five years old, scopes out the occupants of a table a few feet away as he slowly chews his hamburger. Unlike most of the families that are littered about contentedly munching away, a young man and woman are seated at the table, whispering sweet nothings into each other's ears in between the munching. As they are seated side-by-side and facing him, Harrison can't help but notice the young man's left hand casually resting on the woman's right knee. He wonders if their affection is real or just a show.

Meanwhile, twenty-eight year-old Georgia Weaver, the oldest of her siblings, dismally pushes her food around the paper wrapper that rests on the table. She doesn't understand why her family has chosen to eat fast food when they all know she is trying to watch her weight. Leaning back into her chair, Georgia crosses her arms across her chest and stares at the cheeseburger she had begrudgingly ordered. She desperately wants to eat that cheeseburger but, looking over at a rail-thin girl who is quietly playing with her food rather than eating it, she pushes it away from her and sighs.

Not having seen their three children together in a number of years, Walter Weaver and Nora Weaver, perhaps realizing that this rare occasion will only become more uncommon over the course of the following years, observe their children in silence, attempting to capture each moment in their minds like a camera – snap, snap, snap.

At fifty-two years old, Walter, at least more consciously than Nora, realizes this is the first time the five of them have been together in the same room in approximately a decade, give or take a few months. Glancing surreptitiously at his ex-wife and his now grown children, Walter feels a connection to these people he hasn't experienced in quite awhile. It rather startles him as he dunks his nuggets into a pool of honey.

In the same vein, fifty-year-old Nora feels like she has traveled back to a time when the kids were throwing food at each other and screaming at the top of their lungs, when the dog was running around the backyard frantically trying to capture the ever-elusive squirrel, and when her marriage was (in the only way she could remember it to be since it wasn't a particularly happy, peaceful, or productive marriage by any means) stable. Perhaps it is the stability of family life and marriage that Nora misses the most. However, even as these very thoughts spring to life, a surge of sadness ripples through her body, causing her to lay down her Big Mac, which grows colder by the minute.

These five people continue to eat in silence, lost in their thoughts and in their food, not knowing what to say to each other or how to say it. Their perfunctory phone calls to each other over the years have allowed them to all keep in touch, but barely. Now, however, they aren't able to simply hang up. As they continue to silently eat, they take it in turns to look around the table, realizing that they still have the rest of the day before them, stretching out like an endless ocean.

Thirty minutes later, the Weavers exit McDonald's, wiping grease on their bare legs and switching their sunglasses into place. The hot sun beats down on the family as they walk toward their cars. Walter stops next to his brand-new green Ford Taurus and instructs everyone to follow him, although no one listens. They all know how to get

there. Olive slides into the same beat-up maroon Ford Tempo her dad bought her for high school graduation, while Nora reluctantly gets into a beat-up gold Saturn that looks much older than Olive's, although it is younger by six years. Georgia and Harrison simultaneously enter their cars – both of which are fairly new Hondas, white for Harrison, blue for Georgia.

Their makeshift caravan travels down the road in a steady line, one after the other, as if they are members of a gloomy funeral procession. After driving for twenty minutes, the paved road turns into a dirt road, just bumpy enough to be uncomfortable. The dust kicked up by their cars lazily floats in the air. Houses thin out as trees and fields take over, making all the Weavers breathe differently. “The good ole’ country,” Walter used to call it, although most people never considered Bay Grove to be country as much as suburb. But Walter hated it when people called Bay Grove a suburb of Indianapolis, so it became “country living” for the Weaver family so long as they ignored the mall located only twenty miles from their house.

After another fifteen minutes of dusty driving, the parade of cars turns onto a long driveway covered in pebbles. One by one, the engine of each car dies down, replaced by the sounds of car doors squeaking open and slamming shut. The Weavers exit their cars in staggered time – first Walter, then Harrison, Georgia, Nora, and Olive – each occupied with memories of the two-story red brick house that used to be their home.

None of them are prepared for how different the front of the house looks. The light green shutters flanking the eight windows at the front of the house are now midnight black. The white, chipped front door with its antique brown handle has also been painted black, proudly displaying a big golden doorknob – the kind of doorknob that sardonically

states, “*This is a modern house.*” The two birch trees and four azalea bushes that used to envelop the front yard are now gone, replaced by grass, grass, and more grass. Even the yellow plastic mailbox has been replaced with a black metallic mailbox bearing a fancy inscription in silver cursive: *The Sheldons*. Not the Weavers.

As everyone continues to catalogue the changes, Georgia looks at Walter. “Are you sure they left?”

Walter nods distractedly, staring at the house with new eyes. “That’s what Bill told me. He said the Sheldons moved out a few weeks ago, right after the inspection, so the house should be empty.”

Nora slowly shakes her head. “No wonder you kids were so sick,” she says, looking at Georgia, Harrison, and Olive. “You kids were in the doctor’s office more than anyone. Do you remember? All the nurses and doctors knew who we were because we were there so much. Our home away from home,” Nora says softly.

She frowns at the thought of her children, sick and exhausted. She had always thought she was a terrible mother for allowing her kids to get so sick so often. Her own mother would yell at her, telling her the kids weren’t getting enough vitamins, weren’t spending enough time outdoors, weren’t washing their hands enough. But now everything makes perfect sense. She shivers at the thought of co-habiting with all that mold for so many years.

“Do you think it’s unlocked?” Harrison looks at the gleaming golden doorknob and then at Walter.

Walter smiles and raises his eyebrows. “Let’s find out.”

He and Harrison walk up the stone pathway to the front door to find that it is, in fact, locked. When they see the door is locked, Nora, Georgia, and Olive walk up the driveway to try the side door that leads into the kitchen. As Georgia and Nora walk up the steps, Olive silently passes them and walks up the pebbly driveway and into the backyard.

Unlike most houses that are attached to the garage, the driveway separates the red brick house from the massive two-car garage. Olive stops at the gate, looking at the clunky latch that never quite fit into its resting place. There were so many times she used to run Bobby back into the yard, bent over in order to hold onto his collar for fear he would run away. And there were so many times she wouldn't check to make sure the latch was secure, only to come back later to find an open gate, an empty yard, and a dog on the prowl for some excitement. With a small smile, Olive pushes open the gate and walks through.

At the side door, Georgia and Nora are both surprised to find it hasn't changed – the flimsy screen door and the heavy green door with the old black doorknob look just as they had left them twelve years ago. Opening the screen door, Nora tries to open the green door but it doesn't budge.

"You have to hold the doorknob up and then turn it to the right," Georgia says. "Remember?"

A little embarrassed that she hasn't remembered, Nora follows these instructions, pushing the doorknob up a little with the palm of her right hand as her left hand twists the doorknob quickly to the right. As the door swings open, Nora is automatically shocked by the smell. She was expecting it to smell musty and old, but it smells exactly as she

remembers it – a hint of cooking oil, stale crackers, and rosemary – just as the kitchen used to smell.

Georgia follows her mom into the kitchen, sad to see it so ugly and bare. The pretty blue and white wallpaper has been torn down and replaced with gaudy dark green wallpaper covered in geometric designs. Her eyes intuitively look for the wooden ducks that always used to sit above the square archway separating the kitchen from the family room. She remembers her mom saying, “Now, Georgia, are all your ducks in a row?” It always made her think of the ducks lined up above the archway – as a little girl she had named them – the parent ducks were Bob and Mary, the baby ducks, Leila and Steve. She wonders where they are now.

Harrison walks past Georgia and through the doorway leading into the dining room, enters the hallway, and then turns left into his old bedroom. He looks around the empty room, stunned by how small it seems. When he was younger, his room seemed enormous, but looking at it now when it is so empty, Harrison wonders how he managed to fit everything in there. He walks over to the closet and sees a sticker he stuck on the back wall when he was eight. It reads “Rock On.” He remembers his rock star phase – banging his head to the music, sticking up his forefinger and pinky in a “Rock On” gesture, and begging his parents for a drum set. They gave him his dad’s old trumpet instead.

In the dining room, Walter softly chuckles at what he sees. The bright yellow walls are still the same with the dark blue ducks still in the top two corners of the right wall. A few years after they moved into the house, Nora started to complain about how humdrum the dining room looked. So, Walter painted it yellow. But that wasn’t enough

for Nora. She wanted to stencil ducks across the top of each wall, but couldn't find any duck stencils at the crafts store. So, Walter decided to make his own duck stencils. The result was a big glob of blue in each corner, with four feet sticking out from under each glob. He stares at them, happy to see they survived.

In the family room, Nora walks over to the window overlooking the backyard. Her eyes travel to where the clothesline used to be and she smiles as a memory floods her mind. Staring out at the phantom clothesline, Nora can see Bobby swinging in the air, his left paw caught in one of the wet afghans she just threw over the line one soggy April afternoon many years ago. By the time she raced outside, the entire line full of clean laundry was lying on the muddy grass and Bobby was looking up at her, his big brown eyes feigning innocence. She remembers falling on top of the wet laundry, patting Bobby's head, and laughing the hardest and longest she had laughed in a long time.

Outside, Olive looks around the backyard, picturing where the swing set used to be, where the glider used to sit, and where the berry bush used to rest along the side fence. All are now gone, replaced by alternating sections of mulch and grass. Olive sighs, walks to the back of the garage, sits down on the ground, and lights a cigarette. As she smokes, she stares at the thick elm tree standing tall before her and wonders if it is covered in locust skins like it always used to be. When she was little, she used to collect them in a jar and even took them to Show and Tell one day. The girls in her class were grossed out, but the boys thought it was cool.

As her eyes search the vine-covered tree trunk for brown, crusty skins, she hears someone walking toward her. Harrison comes into view and stares at the cigarette resting in her left hand. She smiles guiltily, but doesn't try to hide it.

“When did you start smoking?” says Harrison, not bothering to hide his astonishment.

Olive casually shrugs, taking a long drag. “I don’t know,” she says. “I guess for a while now.”

He sits down next to her, wrinkling his nose at the smoke. “I can’t believe you smoke,” he says. “I mean, you’re the one who started the “Just Say No” club when you were in the second grade.”

Olive smiles at the memory. “Yeah, I remember that. Joey Wilkes wanted to join the club but I wouldn’t let him because I saw him smoke a cigarette after school one day.”

Harrison laughs at the thought of a porky Joey Wilkes lighting up on the playground. “Man, that club was popular. You had kids begging to join.”

Olive shrugs. “I don’t know why it was such a big thing,” she says. “All we ever did was draw crossed-out pictures of drugs and cigarettes.”

“You used to write stories too,” Harrison points out. “Remember those stories you used to write, where unknown bad guys wearing dark trench coats and sunglasses wander into the school and try to force the students to take drugs?”

Olive laughs along with Harrison. “I remember. Those were fun times.” She flicks ash off the cigarette and takes another hit before glancing at Harrison. She holds out the cigarette toward him.

He shakes his head. “How come you started smoking?” he asks, his voice ringing with a mixture of accusation and superiority that Olive can plainly discern.

"People change," she says, blowing a ring of smoke out of her mouth, a skill that took her months to perfect.

"That they do," Harrison says with a frown on his face.

"So, how's life?"

Harrison shrugs and turns to watch two squirrels race up and around the elm tree in some sort of noisy battle. As one of the squirrels makes a flying leap to a high branch, he wonders if the squirrels are related to each other. They're certainly acting like it.

"Life is good, I guess," Harrison says, his eyes searching for the second squirrel that seemingly disappeared. "How have you been?"

"I'm fine," she says.

"How do you like working at the registrar's office?"

Olive makes a face. "I guess it's fine. Kind of boring though, but I guess most jobs are. How's the graphic design business?"

"Good. It keeps me busy."

"How's Gretchen?"

"She's fine. She's fine."

Olive looks at her brother out of the corner of her eye. She knows he has a tendency of saying things twice when things aren't really fine. She remembers watching an eight-year-old Harrison fly off their rickety old swing set, landing awkwardly on his left leg rather than on his two feet as he had declared he would before attempting the stunt. When she ran to him and worriedly asked if he was okay, he said, "I'm fine. I'm fine." They later found out he had shattered three bones and would have to have surgery.

"Are you sure you don't...."

He quickly holds his hand out toward her and says, "Maybe just once."

Olive grins mischievously as she passes the cigarette to her brother. If anyone in the family is health-conscious, it's Harrison, yet here he is smoking. She watches him inhale, the orange glow of the cigarette burning a bit brighter, then exhale. Seeing his ease in handling the cigarette, she wonders if he has smoked before. As she watches him raise the cigarette to his lips a second time, she again hears someone walking toward them.

"What are you guys doing?" Georgia asks as she comes into view.

"Nothing," Olive says shrugging her shoulders and taking the cigarette back from Harrison. "Want a smoke?" she asks, holding it out to Georgia.

Georgia walks over and takes the cigarette without hesitation. She takes a long drag and sits down, leaning against the elm tree in order to face her brother and sister.

"You don't seem surprised to find us smoking," Harrison says. He was expecting a lecture on the dangers of smoking, a lecture he would have performed for Olive if he hadn't been craving a smoke himself.

Georgia shrugs. "Nothing surprises me anymore." She leans over and hands the cigarette back to Olive. "So what do you think this is all about?" she asks.

"What? Coming here?" Harrison asks. Georgia nods and Harrison shrugs. He has no idea.

A few nights ago he noticed the blinking light on his answering machine – "Hey buddy, it's your dad. I was thinking of a family reunion at the old house. Don't know if you've heard, but they're going to tear it down pretty soon. Mold, all over the house. I was thinking we could all meet for dinner on Saturday and then head over to the house so

we can all talk. Call me back. Love you.” For the past three days Harrison has wondered what it is his dad wants to talk about with everyone.

“Do you think he’s dying?” Georgia asks. Her voice is nonchalant as she says this, as if she doesn’t really care what the answer is. She knows that deep down part of her does care, but she can’t help but feel that the other part of her really doesn’t care.

Olive and Harrison look at each other. It hasn’t occurred to either of them, but it makes perfect sense.

“Do you think?” Olive asks, her hand trembling slightly.

Harrison shrugs. “Probably not,” he says unconvincingly. “He looks pretty healthy.”

“Really? At lunch I was noticing how much older he’s gotten since the last time I’ve seen him,” Olive says.

Harrison shrugs. “Mom’s gotten older too,” he says.

“Yeah, but it’s different,” Olive says.

“How?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know, there’s just something different about dad. Mom seems the same, dad seems different somehow.”

“Yeah, because he’s probably dying,” Georgia says, playing with a piece of grass.

Olive and Harrison look at her, but before they can say anything, they hear their dad yelling for them. Harrison walks around the other side of the garage and sees his dad looking out the open window.

“I want you all to come inside,” Walter yells to Harrison.

“What for?”

“You’ll see.” With that, Walter closes the window and walks away.

Harrison turns to look at his sisters. “Well, let’s go find out what this is all about.”

The three of them slowly trudge through the backyard, over to the gate, and up the driveway. As they walk, raindrops start to slowly fall down. Olive quickly throws the cigarette on the driveway, grinding her foot against the smoking stub and the pebbles. As the rain starts to fall harder, Georgia looks up at the dark sky and notices the heavy gray clouds swirling around.

“How appropriate,” she says, still looking up at the sky. Harrison and Olive turn to look at her. “It’s going to storm.”

I. SHADOW BOXER

Nora paced the floor in worry. She wondered if she should call the cops, but she knew there was no point in filing a missing person's report until forty-eight hours after the disappearance. Only forty-three to go.

"Mom," Georgia said, walking up to her, a look of concern on her thirteen-year-old face. "What do you think happened to dad?"

Nora shook her head, too upset to answer. When she saw her non-answer made Georgia more upset, she pulled her toward her.

"I'm sure he's okay, Moph," she said calling Georgia by her nickname, Mopher Gopher. "He probably just lost track of time at the game."

Georgia looked at Nora, a small frown on her face. "But the game ended a long time ago," she said. "Besides, dad knew he was supposed to pick me up at Marci's house after the party."

Nora felt like she was about to fall apart. It didn't help that Georgia was still awake, looking at her as if saying, "You're the adult. Do something." But Nora didn't know what to do.

The Indians game *had* ended a couple hours ago and Walter *hadn't* shown up to fetch Georgia from Marci's birthday party, even though Nora had heard Georgia remind him multiple times to pick her up at nine sharp. Otherwise, she had told him, she would

be forced to wait with Lisa – the girl nobody liked because she stared too much and talked too little, the girl who was always last to be picked up because her parents always forgot about her, even though they always blamed their late arrival on the traffic. But, Georgia had pointed out to her dad, how bad can traffic be at nine o'clock in Bay Grove, Indiana? He had merely laughed at her question and then promised to pick her up on time.

But now it was eleven o'clock and no Walter.

As Nora walked around the family room, picking up toys and fixing the cushions, she could feel Georgia's eyes on her, waiting for her to do something. Anything.

She threw a cushion back on the sofa and turned around to face Georgia. "Get your shoes on," she said, her voice determined.

"Why?" Georgia asked, her eyes wide.

Nora didn't answer her. "I'm going to wake your brother and sister up," she said over her shoulder. "Make sure to put a jacket on."

Twenty minutes later, Nora turned around from the driver's seat of her beat-up brown station wagon to make sure she hadn't forgotten one of the kids. "What's Bobby doing here?" she asked, catching sight of their three-year-old motley mixed terrier, his scruffy paws hanging over the backseat, his head floating in between Harrison and Olive's heads, his tongue hanging out.

"We couldn't leave Bobby behind," Harrison said in his pitiful ten-year-old voice. "Are you mad?"

"It's okay, Harry," she said, momentarily forgetting Harrison hated it when people called him Harry. He was forever correcting people, whether it was his parents,

his teachers, or his friends, whenever they tried to call him anything other than Harrison. "Check my birth certificate," he would tell them, "there's no Harry there." He got most irritated, however, when Walter would call him "my Harry Son."

Tonight, he didn't correct Nora as she quickly checked on seven-year-old Olive, who was blearily rubbing her eyes with her right hand as she patted Bobby's head behind her with her left hand.

"You okay Olive Oil?" Nora asked, using the nickname Harrison had christened Olive with when she was just two years old. Olive nodded.

As Nora turned around, the brown fabric from the ceiling billowed down onto her head. She impatiently grabbed a thumbtack from the middle console and stuck it in the ceiling to hold the fabric up. Turning the key in the ignition, she looked at Georgia in the passenger seat, her hands clasped together as if in prayer. Nora wondered if her hands had naturally fallen that way or if she really was praying. Thinking about it, she said a quick prayer herself as she put the car into reverse.

Nora felt strange driving so late at night – she hadn't driven in the dark in a long time. For years, her nights had consisted of dinners, homework, baths, and bedtimes. She looked around and noticed her car was the only one on the road. At a red stoplight, she looked to the left and to the right and, hesitating only slightly, continued driving right through the red light. It felt oddly liberating.

The car was silent. Nora had forgotten to turn on the radio and Georgia hadn't done it for her, even though she hated being in a car without the radio playing. It had become one of her rules for her parents – "you must leave the radio on at all times," it read, "but it must be a station that does not play Christian, country, or oldies." She had

written eighty-two rules, ranging from “no pajamas in public” to “no nicknames of any kind in public.” Her parents had accepted Georgia’s list, tacked it to the fridge, and forgotten about it the next day.

No one spoke as Nora continued to drive. Olive was too tired to say anything, Harrison too frightened, and Georgia too worried. Even Bobby behaved himself, perched on his high throne, drooling, but not making a sound.

As the station wagon headed downtown, Nora made sure the doors were all locked. This was the route Walter took to work at the phone company and he always talked about the people he saw every day. There was the shadow boxer – an old black man who walked up and down Pennsylvania Avenue punching and jabbing his shadow, bobbing and weaving for hours on end. Walter had told Nora that he had rolled his window down one day to ask the shadow boxer who was winning. The old man had looked at him, smiled a toothless grin, and said, “Nobody ever wins, my friend.”

Then there was the gaggle of angry homeless people who lived in the park by Belmont Street – in the early morning, Walter told Nora he would see them alternately feeding the birds and throwing bread crumbs at passing cars. The angriest of the bunch would sometimes pop out at cars stopped at the intersection with a ketchup bottle, squirting it on the windshields, smearing it with his hands, and then innocently asking the drivers if they would like their windshields washed. Even though Nora didn’t see any of them now, she knew they were still there and it scared her.

Within the hour, she made a left-hand turn into a parking lot situated across the street from the run-down ballpark where the Indians played. There were a few stray cars in the parking lot, but Nora instantly spotted Walter’s lime-green Malibu. Her heart

started palpitating at the sight of it. She was instantly relieved that he hadn't been in a car accident.

But as she sat looking at the car, she wondered what could have happened to him. Her mind ran through all the horrible possibilities, not realizing that Georgia and Harrison's minds were doing the same. While Nora concentrated on health issues (strokes, heart attacks, choking on hot dogs), Georgia wondered if he had been mugged (and shot to death, stabbed to death, beaten to death). Meanwhile, Harrison had just seen a movie at Jimmy Thorn's house where a kidnapped man had been chopped up into pieces and the kidnappers had sent the man's fragments to his family in the mail. Harrison wondered if they would soon be receiving a package with his dad's ear or toe or finger.

Nora parked the station wagon next to the Malibu and, without a word, got out to look inside the car. She cupped her hands up to her face and pressed her nose against the passenger side window, but she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. She wasn't even sure what she was looking for. Blood, perhaps.

She got back into the station wagon and thought about what to do next. Her husband was missing, but his car wasn't. What could that possibly mean? A tiny red flag rose up in her mind, but she was too worried to pay attention to it.

"Here honey," she said, grabbing a pen from her purse. "Write down your dad's license plate number on your hand."

Georgia leaned forward to get a view of the license plate and hurriedly scribbled AZ502 on her left palm. "Why?"

“So we can give it to the police,” Nora said simply. She hoped she sounded calm. She was focusing all her energy on worrying one minute and then trying not to show it the next.

Silently, she put the car in drive and headed toward the parking lot exit. As they passed a Toyota Celica parked toward the front, the passenger door opened and a man got out. Nora glanced at him absentmindedly. She was trying to figure out if she should take the kids to the police station with her or take them home and call Mrs. Herger to watch them, when she saw the man wave his arms in the air.

She slowed the car down, surprised to see that it was Walter. He quickly walked toward them, but no one in the station wagon paid him any attention. They were all looking back at the car he had just exited. He had left the passenger door open, which caused the dome light to stay on. And in the light, they all clearly saw a blonde woman sitting in the driver’s seat. She was putting on lipstick and watching them in her rearview mirror.

Nora felt the blood drain from her face. She stared at the steering wheel and didn’t hear a thing Walter said, as he stood outside her car window, leaning in a little to talk to the kids and explain what was going on. He didn’t look at Nora. When he returned home an hour later, she still didn’t hear a thing he said. She didn’t have to hear anything. She had seen enough.

As she drove away, she didn’t look behind her. She didn’t even look before her. She just drove back down the same dark streets she had just come from, her mind and body on autopilot. At a red light, she gently eased the station wagon to a halt. She looked over to her left and wondered if there were people sleeping within those shadows,

living within those shadows. As she started to drive, she wondered if the shadow boxer Walter had told her about was out tonight, fighting, fighting, but never winning.

The next morning, the kids sat in a row on the family room sofa, silently eating apple pie. Georgia wasn't even hungry, but she ate in order to be doing something. On her left, Harrison fed Bobby his pie crust – Harrison hated crusts of all kinds and always fed them to Bobby. On Harrison's left, Olive mushed her pie with her fork. She didn't like apple pie, but everyone always forgot.

Nora and Walter sat across from them. Walter was seated on the old green chair, his hands folded in his lap. Usually, Nora was perched on the arm of the green chair, her right arm around the back, her hand casually flopping over the side. Now she sat in the old red chair, her arms folded in front of her as if she was holding herself. Her mouth was tight and her eyes were red.

Walter cleared his throat. "Kids, I think we should talk about what happened last night."

He waited for them to speak, but they all sat silently, staring at him with big eyes. "I went to the Indians game last night and saw a woman who works with me at the phone company," he said.

Nora closed her eyes and turned away from him, not realizing Georgia and Harrison were watching her more than they were watching Walter. Olive still played with her apple pie on the far end.

"She and I ended up talking after the game and we lost track of time," he said, placing his palms upward, as if to say "My hands are clean."

Nora turned back around to look at her children. She couldn't look at Walter.

“Are you and mom getting divorced?” Georgia asked.

“Of course not,” Walter said. “It was all just a big misunderstanding.”

Nora forced herself to smile at the kids, but she couldn't say anything. They stared back at her in misery and only took their eyes off her when Bobby retched, throwing up Harrison's pie crusts all over the beige carpet.

THE
FINAL
PIECE

Ouch I have lost myself again
Lost myself and I am nowhere else to be found,
Yeah I think that I might break
Lost myself again and I feel unsafe
Be my friend
Hold me, wrap me up
Unfold me
I am small
and needy
Warm me up
And breathe me

– Breathe Me, Sia

The sight of a hunched figure, intently leaning over the round kitchen table as if inspecting secret documents, made her pause. She thought he had left for the night.

“Which puzzle is that?”

Framed in the archway of the kitchen as if caught in a snapshot, Georgia Weaver scratched her nose and waited for Sam’s answer. Her shoulder-length reddish-blonde hair was full of grease and hung limply around her face, sections of her hair plastered to her forehead and neck as if she had just been running a marathon. Her skin was ghostly pale and covered with a light sheen of sticky grease, her thin lips blood red, her green eyes bloodshot and puffy. Mickey Mouse’s stupid grin mockingly blazed forth from the center of her black shirt, just above her round, bulging stomach and her oversized pair of raggedy gray sweatpants that were too short, stopping just above her ankles and swollen bare feet.

“Um, it’s ‘Night-Time in Paris,’” came Sam’s hesitant response after a quick peek at the label on the box.

He was wearing a pair of holy jeans, a Steelers sweatshirt, and blue socks that left lint everywhere he walked. He pushed his blonde curly hair off his angular face and nervously clamped down on his lips, causing deep dimples to appear. Georgia’s heart couldn’t help but flutter a bit at the sight of his dimples. Whereas most people stared at Sam because he was so tall at 6’6, Georgia hadn’t been able to stop staring at his dimples when they had first started dating. Whereas most girls would have been thrilled to be dating a former basketball star (who had led his high school team to two state championships and his college team to three NCAA tournament appearances) Georgia

had been more thrilled that she was dating a man with dimples. She was obsessed with dimples.

“Oh,” she said, shuffling into the kitchen, her head down, her arms lying dormant by her sides. She headed over to the table and slowly settled into the empty chair across from Sam, whose gray eyes restlessly flitted back and forth between Georgia and the puzzle that was spread out before him. He was surprised to see her in the kitchen and a little unnerved – the rest of the apartment, but especially the kitchen, had become his domain while she had imprisoned herself in the bedroom. He had enjoyed having the run of the place to himself.

Georgia paid no attention to Sam, instead inspecting puzzle pieces as if inspecting her fingernails for dirt. He nervously cleared his throat, one of his few nervous ticks, before looking back down on the section he had been working on – the bright yellow glow of the streetlights lining the path. There were four streetlights in total and since he had begun the puzzle three days ago, he had already completed two, after having first secured the puzzle’s perimeter.

Georgia, meanwhile, gravitated toward the starry night sky hanging over the city of Paris. Grabbing all the black pieces she could find, with tiny stars thrown about here and there, she made a small pile of darkness in front of her. Even as a little girl she had always loved fitting together the sky in puzzles. Not only was it the hardest section that most people avoided, leaving her a clear path, but she always felt God-like creating the sky. Because, according to her rationale as a nine-year-old, everyone lived beneath the same sky.

“Do you think I’m beautiful?” Georgia asked suddenly. She listened to the rock music playing softly from the small radio Sam kept perched on top of the refrigerator and strained to figure out which song was being played. Meanwhile, with a bright puzzle piece resting in his long fingers, Sam looked out the window as the sky gradually darkened, making the kitchen lights seem brighter than they were. He was waiting for her to repeat the question.

Having figured out the song to be *Janie’s Got a Gun* Georgia focused her attention on Sam, knowing that he would make her ask him again. But she simply stared at him.

“Yes,” he awkwardly began, not able to block out her pitiful appearance, “of course you’re beautiful.”

She knew he was lying, but she didn’t care. All she wanted was to feel beautiful. All she wanted was to stop feeling so ugly. So big and so fat and so ugly. She glanced down at her stomach, fighting the urge to rip off her skin, to cut off her fat. Without a word, she got up, walked over to the refrigerator, and turned up the volume on the radio before heading back to the table and concentrating on the puzzle. Sam sighed through his nose, feeling his body tense up and his right foot start to cramp.

“You know, the church fair is tonight,” he said. “We could....” He stopped, noticing the flash in Georgia’s eyes. He knew she wasn’t ready to leave the apartment – it wasn’t fair of him to ask her to do so. But he didn’t think he could handle spending the evening with her alone. He almost wished she would go back to bed and sleep for another three days.

Georgia thought about the church fair. She knew he was just trying to help, but she wasn't ready to face people – especially a crowd of pious churchgoers. Everything had to be done in its own time – a different kind of time that she had never before realized existed. With a bitter smile, Georgia thought that she would have loved to go to the church fair tonight if this night had been four weeks ago, three weeks ago, even last week. But, time had interfered and now today was simply today, tonight simply tonight. And tonight was the night for puzzles, not fairs.

As Sam's quick eyes searched for a piece he was missing, his stomach began to growl. He checked his watch and realized he had forgotten to eat dinner. He glanced at Georgia, wondering if she was hungry. She had to be hungry – she hadn't eaten anything he had given her since they had come back from the hospital. And Georgia loved to eat.

"Hey, I'm going to order Chinese – you want anything?" he asked, half-scared that she would be offended by his appetite.

"I'm not hungry," she said simply, never looking up from the puzzle.

As Sam walked over to the phone hanging on the wall, she ignored the hunger pains stabbing at her stomach. More than she needed food, she needed this pain. It was her penance and she wanted to ride it out until she felt better. A fleeting feeling of triumph flared within her as she connected her first two puzzle pieces together. She didn't need food anymore, she thought, the emptiness filled her up now.

Sam slid back into his seat, ready to be consumed by the puzzle yet again. He felt guilty for wanting food at a time like this. But he was hungry, he thought stubbornly. He thought about all of the worry and energy Georgia had put into her food choices these past couple of months. She had changed all of her eating habits – her nightly fast-food

trips, her caffeine addiction, her nervous eating. And he had begun to see a change in her. Now, that seemed like such a long time ago.

While Sam thought about the positive changes she had begun to make, Georgia instead thought about all of the pointless sacrifices she had made. She had tried so hard, so very hard, to do everything right. She joined a Pilate's class, even though she hated to exercise. Actually, it wasn't the exercise she hated so much as she hated to sweat. She kept her apartment very cold so she wouldn't sweat – even in the winter. Sam had complained many times about the icy air that stung from the corners of her apartment, but she always refused to change the thermostat. She threw him blankets instead.

She also started taking a handful of vitamins every morning, facing her childhood fear of choking on pills – a fear that had started the night a baby aspirin had gotten caught in her throat as a feverish, chubby little girl and it had taken her dad pounding on her back to get it unlodged. Ever since then she either crushed her pills up and poured the powder into applesauce or she just avoided taking pills altogether.

But the biggest change she had made was with food. She started eating more fruit and she incorporated fish into her diet, even though she disliked all fruits except grapes and all seafood except tuna. Everyone liked tuna. She wondered if everyone also liked grapes. She stayed away from too much sugar and processed foods. She stopped eating canned food. She stopped drinking coffee. She had completely rearranged her life – all for nothing.

The doorbell rang, interrupting Georgia's thoughts. She hadn't heard that ding-dong sound in what felt like ages. It sounded fuzzy, as if the doorbell was feeling a bit

off-color. Sam left the kitchen and came back a few moments later carrying bags steaming with a mixture of warm aromas. Georgia didn't smell any of it.

Sam was soon munching on egg rolls, sweet and sour chicken, and rice, eating his food precisely with a gleaming silver fork. He had never mastered chopsticks, something he had always been embarrassed about before meeting Georgia, but she hadn't cared. She had simply said he was more interesting for not being able to use chopsticks than if he could use them. And she had meant it. He smiled unexpectedly at this thought.

Georgia listened to Sam eat as her eyes roved the puzzle pieces. She had a feeling he wanted to dump her. He wasn't the kind of man who could handle something like this. He was the kind of man who kept on going when he faced difficulties – who kept on going like nothing had ever tried to stop him in the first place. Georgia was waiting for him to break up with her so that he could move on with his life and forget Georgia had ever existed – so he could forget everything. A part of her thought that if he broke up with her, maybe she could move on too.

The radio stopped playing its long stretch of music and started the commercials. The first commercial was an anti-drug commercial – “I'd rather get high on life,” boldly spoke a young man with a touch of sarcasm in his voice Georgia couldn't miss. Without looking up from the section she was working on, she addressed Sam. “I had a really weird dream before.”

Sam swallowed a large chunk of unchewed egg roll, feeling the food travel awkwardly throughout his body before a small pain settled in the middle of his back. He glanced at her, before quickly looking back down at the streetlight he was attempting to assemble with his left hand, while the fork occupied his right hand. “Oh?”

He didn't know if she wanted him to ask her for details or if she wanted him to just remain quiet. He decided to not say anything.

Georgia continued, her small, pale hands moving the puzzle pieces expertly. "I was driving a red convertible with the top down," she began. "I remember thinking in my dream that the interior of the car should be black, but it was tan interior – tan leather. And it was the middle of winter – sometime in January maybe. The snow was just falling and falling," her voice became a bit dreamlike, "and as I was driving, I looked up at the snow and I could see each individual snowflake. As I watched the snow, time slowed down. Even though I was driving, I don't know, maybe ninety miles an hour, all of the sudden everything was happening second by second. And all I wanted to do was get closer to the snow. So I stood up and I stretched my hands up into the air and felt the snow fall down on top of me. But, the snow wasn't wet and it wasn't cold – it was warm and velvety-feeling. It felt wonderful."

Georgia paused, closing her eyes at the thought. Sam watched her in interest, trying to imagine how warm velvet would feel against his skin. However, he couldn't remember what velvet was exactly, getting it confused with other fabrics. As he was trying to sort it out in his head, he couldn't help but wonder if the Velveteen Rabbit was made of velvet. In his mind, it only seemed natural that he would be made of velvet.

"And then I saw something lying on the side of the road out of the corner of my eye," she continued, interrupting Sam's thoughts. "It was a blanket, yellow and green and tattered at the edges. I inched toward it and I knew I needed to grab it. And the minute I thought that, the snow came down harder and thicker and I could barely see anything, but I made sure to keep the blanket in sight."

She stopped and Sam found himself leaning forward in his chair, wanting to know what happened next. He always loved listening to Georgia's dreams – he either didn't dream or could never remember them, but she dreamt every night, up to four or five a night and she would remember them all. He had once told her to start a dream diary that she could maybe publish someday, but she had laughed at the idea, saying that nobody was interested in other people's dreams, just in their own.

Georgia continued. "Just as I leaned over to grab it, time changed back to normal speed and I was flying down the road. Before I could get the car under control, I saw a huge elm tree about thirty yards away. It was the thickest, tallest tree I've ever seen, but the leaves were bright white and I couldn't stop staring at them, even though the tree was getting closer and closer."

"Did you crash into the tree?" Sam couldn't help asking.

Georgia smiled limply. Sam, who hadn't seen her attempt a smile in a long time, wondered if she was smiling because of the dream or because of his child-like reaction.

"No – I didn't crash. As the car was about to crash into the tree, all the white leaves, every single last one of them, fell to the ground and the car suddenly stopped, inches from the tree. And then I woke up."

Sam frowned, deep in concentration. "What do you think it all means?"

Georgia shrugged. "It could mean a lot of things," she said. She had thought that by talking about the dream it would all make more sense, but if anything, Georgia was only more confused. She had no idea what it meant, but it was irritating her, like a scratch she couldn't reach or an actor's name she couldn't remember.

Sam sighed, looking down at the scattered puzzle pieces on the table. "Well, it was an interesting dream," he said, not sure of what to say. He couldn't help but remember his mother's belief that dreams were answers to questions, and although he could figure out the question that was seeking an answer, he couldn't figure out what answer Georgia's dream was trying to convey.

Georgia simply nodded, her attention drawn back to the night sky she was working on. It felt good to be doing something again. It felt good to have a goal. The only goal she had had the past few days was to not throw up. And when she had failed, she had determined not to think about anything. But the images were burned into her like the brand burned into a calf – they would never leave. The stabbing pain, the blood, the frantic ride to the hospital. The look of concern on the doctor's face as the sweat that had formed on top of his shiny bald head had steadily drip, drip, dripped down his shiny plump face.

Still thinking about Georgia's dream, Sam wondered if the blanket she had so desperately tried to grab was a baby blanket. At that thought, Sam felt the guilt boil inside of him. Of course he felt sad that his child, their child, was gone, but he felt even guiltier that he was relieved by it.

It was six weeks ago when his life had changed. She had invited him over to her apartment for an ordinary Friday night dinner of chicken and pasta, a salad, and their favorite red wine. He had been prepared for an uneventful evening with a woman he was, with each passing day, liking more and more. He had known – the very minute she had refused the glass of wine for a bottle of water – that she was pregnant. And the very

next thought that raced through his mind was that he wasn't ready to be a father. He didn't know how to be a father. He didn't even want to be a father. Did he?

Sam leaned back in his chair, pushing the carton of Chinese food away from him. His dad was a dad, his grandfather was a dad, old Mr. Coombs who used to show him magic tricks at church was a dad, but Sam? A dad? He just couldn't see it. As these thoughts raced around his head, a little voice seemed to whisper in his ear, did he really think Georgia would have been a good mother? He wasn't so sure either of them were ready to be parents. Even though Georgia was twenty-four and Sam was twenty-five, he just felt like they were too young. He felt he would always be too young.

As Georgia's starry sky began to take shape, a thought surfaced that she tried to fight down – it was a thought that often made its way into her mind at least a dozen times a day. Maybe she could have done more. Maybe she could have eaten better or exercised more. Maybe she shouldn't have indulged in the few mocha lattes she had snuck in as a reward for doing so well. Maybe it was all her fault.

Sam finished the third streetlight, taking a moment to enjoy his success before moving onto the final streetlight. He had known what Georgia had to say when she said she had something important to tell him. He had known, but he had still clung to the hope that she might instead say something else, anything else. But all he heard was, "I'm pregnant."

He had pretended to be happy. He had hugged her and congratulated her, not really knowing what else to do or say about this unexpected turn of events. Meanwhile, he had tried to figure out when this could have happened and how it could have happened. He wasn't one to shirk his responsibilities when it came to protection – he

was always prepared. Holding her in his arms, he had wondered whether or not the condoms he had been religiously using for the past five years had finally failed him. While he was trying to figure out which brand to switch to, Georgia had been thinking about all of the cute maternity clothes she could buy and then thinking about all of the cute baby clothes she could get so their baby would be the trendiest baby in town.

Although Sam had been terrified by Georgia's declaration, he hadn't been angry with her for being pregnant. His older brother Nate had once gotten a girl pregnant when he was a freshman in college and had been quite convinced that she had done it on purpose. He had gotten her so upset that she had agreed to have an abortion. After that, Sam's brother had been quite happy with her, although he had still dumped her two weeks after the abortion. He told Sam that he could never trust her again, not after the stunt she had pulled. After a short pause, he had then laughingly (yet with a deadly serious look in his eyes- a look Sam had never forgotten) told Sam that no woman was to ever be trusted, so he better make sure where he put his pecker if he didn't want to end up in a bad situation.

No, he wasn't angry in the way his brother had been. Instead, he was angry that Georgia hadn't even asked him for his opinion in the matter. He never would have told her to get an abortion, he thought desperately, but he still would have liked to discuss their options. They did have options. But she had just assumed that he wanted what she wanted. And he had let her assume that because he hadn't known what else to do. But at the time she was breaking the news, he had convinced himself, almost, that everything would be alright because he loved Georgia.

It wasn't until he had gotten into his car to go back home that evening, when he realized he wasn't sure if he loved her. He hadn't even been sure, at the time, that their relationship would make it to the next level. But with the thought of a baby on the way, he had pushed those thoughts aside and started focusing on baby names and doctor's visits and all of the unknown costs that he had never before realized. It had occupied his thoughts so there was no room for anything else to think about. There was no time to think about his own life that was slip, slipping away.

Now that it was all over, Sam couldn't help but breathe a small sigh of relief. And because of that small sigh of relief, which nobody heard but himself, he felt guilty. Guiltier even than the time he had cheated on his final exam in one of his finance classes in college. But, even though he felt guilty, he realized that maybe fate had intervened to cut him a deal. Maybe God or the cosmos or fate or whatever it was that directed the goings and comings of the universe had saved them all from a miserable life. It just wouldn't be right, he thought, to bring a child into this world when they hardly even knew each other. He didn't even know Georgia's middle name and he was quite positive she couldn't name his favorite basketball team. Shouldn't two people about to have a baby know these things about each other?

Georgia watched Sam gain energy as he quickly fit the pieces of the puzzle together. She wondered what he was thinking about. She had known that Sam wasn't as thrilled about the baby as he had claimed to be. In all honesty, she hadn't been all that thrilled when she had first found out. After staring at the little blue line on the home pregnancy test, her automatic reaction was to have an abortion. But the more she had thought about it, the more she had liked the idea of being pregnant. Everyone loved

pregnant women. Everyone thought pregnant women were the most beautiful women in the world. She desperately wanted to be one of those women.

She looked down at her protruding stomach and imagined a little baby inside – her little baby. She wondered when she would have given birth – if he would have been born early or late. Georgia had been born a week late, but her brother had been born two weeks early and her sister had been born four days early. She imagined him screaming at the top of his lungs, shouting his arrival for all the world to hear. Her mom had told her how frightened she had been when Georgia was born – she was so quiet that her mom had thought the worst.

Her icy hands hovering over the puzzle, she shook herself out of these thoughts. Over the past few days she had, at times, willingly forgotten so that, even if for the slightest second, she was still pregnant and still beautiful. Now, as the memories came crashing back through as they always did, she felt ugly – uglier than she had ever felt before. All she wanted was to have everyone tell her how beautiful she looked, how much she glowed. But she knew she didn't glow. Not anymore.

They continued working in silence for almost an hour, finding, to their immense relief, that there was no need to talk while working on a puzzle. Sam finished the last streetlight and began working on the people in the puzzle – two young lovers taking a romantic stroll in the city of love. Or is it the city of lights, he wondered. Meanwhile, the sky began stretching out across the table, black, vast, and smooth to the touch.

At long last, they both had one puzzle piece left to fit into the puzzle. Sam placed his piece with a snap into the center of the puzzle and waited for Georgia to complete the

picture, surprised that they had been able to finish it and even more surprised to see how dark it was outside. They had worked for hours.

"I almost don't want to," she said to him, looking at the puzzle, all of the sudden scared by its being almost complete.

He studied her for a minute, listening to the strumming of an electric guitar in the background. "I don't think there's anything sadder," he said, "then a puzzle that is missing its final piece."

She looked up at him and saw white leaves fluttering to the ground in the distance. She knew he was right. But she didn't want to give it up. As the white leaves began to fly through the air, carried by a silent wind, she slowly placed the piece on top of the one empty space and, making a fist, pushed the piece down into place, hearing the small click of a finished puzzle. They both stared at the scene unfolding before their eyes – the lovers, hand-in-hand, strolling down a cobblestone lane, the soft glow of the streetlights lighting their way, the starry sky winking above them. They seemed untouchable.

"I've never wanted to go to Paris," Sam said, unexpectedly.

Georgia stared at the picture. "I think Paris is some made-up place people talk of when they want to escape. This," she said, motioning to the picture, "is not real."

Sam nodded. "It's totally fake. And totally cliché, come to that."

"It looks nice though."

"It looks nice because it's not real."

"I wonder who these people are," Georgia said, staring at the young man and young woman. They appeared to be faceless, but she could still make out the looks of

happiness stretched in their red smiles and their dark, glittering eyes. "And I wonder how they fell in love."

"They met at a fountain in the middle of a forest. They were both there to make a wish."

Georgia paused a beat, surprised by Sam's quick response to her strange inquiry. "She wished she would find the antique watch she lost. It was her great-great-grandmother's watch." She smiled at the little story her mind had just created from nowhere.

"And he wished he knew how to sew. He had holes in all his clothes and no way to fix them."

"And as she threw her coin, her wish, into the water, she heard not one, but two splashes."

"And he heard not one, but two splashes." Sam was fast, saying the words before even thinking them.

"And she walked around to the other side of the fountain and saw him standing there, scratching his head."

"And they found each other."

"And they got so much more than they had wished for." Georgia finished, her voice a bit melancholy and wistful.

They looked at each other for a moment and then burst out laughing – true laughter. As their laughter died down, Georgia looked back down at the puzzle, not knowing what to say. Sam looked at the ground, running his hand through his curly

blonde hair before speaking again. He knew that if he was ever going to talk to her about it, this was the time to do so.

“Do you think your dream,” he stopped, unsure of how to form his question, “do you think it had anything to do with, you know, the baby?”

It was the first time he had mentioned the baby to her since their trip to the hospital. She simply stared at the puzzle as if she didn’t hear his question, but then looked up. “I don’t know.”

They were silent for a long time.

“I wonder,” Georgia finally said, staring at the image of the happy young woman, “if she’s pregnant. I wonder if she knows she’s pregnant and is waiting for the perfect time to tell him she is. I wonder if, maybe five minutes after they walk down this street, she tells him.”

“Are you going...” He paused. “Are you going to be okay?”

She glared at the picture. “I wonder how he’ll take it. I wonder if he’ll be happy, truly happy, or if he’ll just end up hating himself for ever having met her at that stupid fountain.”

“Georgia. It’ll be okay,” Sam said softly.

She turned away from him and faced the opposite wall. She didn’t want his sympathy, because it was sympathy without understanding. He couldn’t understand what she had gone through, what she felt. She didn’t think anyone could understand. Sometimes she wasn’t even sure if she fully understood.

“You know what I wonder most of all?” Georgia asked. “I wonder if they lived happily ever after?”

Sam looked at her frail back and sighed. "Happily ever after what?" he asked, unable to hide the sadness in his voice.

"I don't know," she said.

"I don't know either," he said.

He began gathering up the cartons of Chinese food and walked over to the refrigerator where he stowed the leftovers. Flipping the radio off, he turned around and saw that Georgia had left. He walked over to the puzzle and stared at it for a long time.

The next morning Georgia walked into the kitchen to find the puzzle was no longer sitting on the kitchen table. Sam had glued it together and hung it on the wall – his farewell gift. She couldn't help but think that in the daylight, the lovers seemed foolish.

II. STEALING THE NOSE

Two months after his dad finally admitted he was having an affair, they started family counseling. It was his mom's idea. It was a bad idea.

Harrison scuffed his sneaker against the waiting room floor and continued waiting. Georgia was reading *Oliver Twist* on his right and to Georgia's right Olive was scribbling in a Mickey Mouse coloring book. Across from him, his mom sat crocheting a blanket. A few days ago, he had heard her tell someone on the phone that it helped her to relax, but he thought it did just the opposite since her face was always screwed up in frustration whenever the yarn got tangled. A few seats away from his mom, his dad sat, idly flipping through a magazine that had been sitting on the end table next to his chair. Harrison could tell he wasn't reading. His eyes were just scanning the pictures page after page.

Harrison wished he had brought something to keep him occupied, but he had left his Game Boy at home. It needed batteries and he didn't want to bother anyone for something as small as batteries.

After a few more minutes of waiting, a door opened and a man said, "I'm ready for the Weaver family." He smiled at them as they slowly got to their feet. Olive pranced forward, Georgia kept reading while walking, and Harrison timidly walked forth, unable to see his parents behind him. The man was wearing a blue sweater, a pair of green corduroys, brown loafers, and his red hair was coiffed as if he had spent hours

working on it. As Harrison passed him, he could see how stiff the man's hair was. One of Harrison's pet peeves was men who used hair spray. He didn't like him already.

The man talked the entire length of the hallway, making small chat about the weather. He stopped by an open door and motioned them through, taking a chance to look at each of them carefully as they walked by him. Harrison refused to look back at him.

Just like it was their family room, Harrison took his place between Georgia and Olive on the sofa, while his parents sat on chairs in opposite corners of the room.

"I'm Dr. Grady," the man said as he took a seat behind a large mahogany desk. The desk was practically bare except for a gold lamp, a small stack of folders neatly piled on top of one another, and a few gold-plated picture frames. Harrison looked to see who would be smiling back from the frames, but they were all pictures of barns. He wondered if Dr. Grady had taken those pictures.

Everyone sat in silence, waiting for Dr. Grady to start talking. Harrison squirmed uncomfortably on the sofa. He didn't have a problem sitting still when he knew he could get up, but it was a different story when he knew he couldn't leave. He hated that trapped feeling.

Dr. Grady touched his fingertips together and surveyed them. Harrison thought Dr. Grady stared at him the longest. He wondered what Dr. Grady thought of him.

"Why don't we all take a minute to introduce ourselves," he said. When nobody said anything, he smiled indulgently and said, "I'll start. My name is Devon Grady, I've been a psychologist for six years, and," he paused, "I enjoy staying up late at night watching old black and white films."

He looked toward Harrison and his sisters with a grin on his face. Harrison glanced at Olive – she was twirling her hair, lost in her thoughts. Georgia held her book in her lap and continued to read. Harrison looked at Dr. Grady but his eyes traveled to the pictures on his desk. He wondered if any of the movies Dr. Grady loved to watch so much had barns in them.

“Okay,” Dr. Grady said. “Now it’s your turn.”

They all looked at each other, silently refusing to be the first one to talk. After a few moments, his mom began. “My name is Nora Weaver,” she said. “I’m thirty-eight years old and I’m a stay-at-home mom.” Harrison could tell she was trying to sound enthusiastic. It wasn’t working.

“Wonderful,” Dr. Grady said. “Now tell us something about yourself that no one in this room knows about.”

Harrison felt his cheeks burn. Was he going to have to do the same? He really didn’t want to.

“Well,” his mom said slowly, clearly stalling for time as she tried to think of something. “When I was a little girl I wanted to be a ballerina.” Harrison grinned at the floor. He knew that was a lie – she had always wanted to become a federal judge, not a ballerina. She hated to dance. But, he had to agree with his mom that wanting to be a ballerina somehow sounded better in a shrink’s office.

The word “shrink” still sounded weird to Harrison. His mom had called Dr. Grady a therapist who could help them sort through their feelings. His dad had called Dr. Grady a psycho-babble shrink. Harrison still wasn’t sure what psycho-babble meant, but he had asked his mom what shrink meant. She had just said it was a different word for

therapist, and then she had told Harrison not to use that word. He still didn't know why. He wasn't sure if she knew why either.

Dr. Grady smiled encouragingly, his large white teeth gleaming against the light on his desk. "Good. Now, who's next?" He looked at Georgia.

Harrison nudged her and she looked up from her book. "I'm Georgia, I just started seventh grade, and my favorite poet is Emily Dickinson." She said it in such a rush, Harrison could barely understand her.

"Good. It's nice to meet you, Georgia. I'm quite fond of Dickinson's poetry myself." Georgia simply nodded and looked back down at her book. "Next?" He looked at Harrison.

Harrison swallowed hard. He hadn't expected this to go so fast. He had thought he would have more time to come up with a response. "Um, I'm Harrison. I just started third grade. I like to play basketball."

Dr. Grady smiled. "Now is that something no one knows about?" he asked, without breaking his smile.

Harrison looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I want you to share something with your family that they don't know about," Dr. Grady said. "Now, *I* didn't know you liked basketball, but I'm pretty sure everyone else knew. I want you to share something that *no one* here knows." He looked expectantly at Harrison.

Now Harrison really didn't like him. Everyone knew Georgia's favorite poet was Emily Dickinson, so why was Dr. Grady (it really wasn't much of an insult, but he couldn't think of anything else) picking on him?

He looked at Dr. Gravy and wondered how long he would have to sit silently before he spoke again. As the minute mark approached, he saw his mom out of the corner of his eye. She didn't look angry, just sad. It was like a punch to the gut whenever he saw that sad look on her face. It knocked the wind out of him a little.

"I don't know," he said, trying to think of something to say. All he could think about were barns. He squirmed in his seat and for a split second thought he could smell hay.

"I don't think this is necessary," his dad said from the corner after Harrison continued to squirm for a few more moments. Harrison looked over at his dad, but his dad was looking at Dr. Gravy with an irritated look on his face. It was the same look his dad had whenever he didn't agree with a call the referee or umpire had made on television during whatever game he was watching.

"And why do you feel that way," Dr. Gravy glanced at a notebook on his desk, "Walter."

His dad said, "I just don't think Harrison should have to do anything that makes him feel uncomfortable."

Dr. Gravy sat silently for a minute. Harrison could hear him breathing through his nose. He wondered if Dr. Gravy had hay stashed in his desk drawers. "Do you feel uncomfortable?" he asked, looking at Harrison with a penetrating look.

Harrison didn't know what to say. He just sat there, his palms face up in his lap, his eyes darting back and forth between Dr. Gravy and his barns.

"Look," his dad said, "he's only ten years old."

Dr. Gravy said, "And because he's ten years old, you feel that he's not capable of sharing his personal interests?" His voice was calm and cold. Harrison could tell Dr. Gravy didn't like his dad.

"Look," his dad said, getting up to his feet, "I think this is...."

"I stole the nose." Harrison heard himself say the words before he even realized he was talking. He just didn't want everyone to start fighting again – he was sick of the fighting. Whenever his parents started fighting he would run to his room, close his door, and hide underneath his desk, sometimes sitting there for hours. Bobby didn't like the fighting either – he would always follow Harrison under the desk and lay on the floor beside him. Harrison always appreciated it, especially since he knew Bobby hated to lie on the hardwood floors.

Everyone stared at him. "Excuse me?" Dr. Gravy said, leaning forward in his chair as if to hear Harrison better.

"When we went to the circus last year for my birthday, I snuck in the back and stole one of the clown's noses," Harrison said. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "no big deal."

For a second everyone stared at him in silence. Then his dad started laughing as he plopped back down into his seat. His mom looked at him. "Is that where you disappeared to?" she asked.

Harrison nodded. For some reason, the barns had reminded him of the circus. He remembered sneaking behind the curtain and watching the clowns get ready. One clown in particular was a fat man who was wearing green and yellow striped suspenders, purple

billowing pants, and a plaid cowboy shirt. His face was all made up and his green bowler hat was sitting at an angle on his head. All that was left was the red nose.

When the clown walked away to talk to a female clown with pink hair and orange pants, Harrison darted forward, grabbed the nose, and ran all the way back to his seat in the stands. Later, when the clowns came out, the fat clown didn't have a red rubber nose like the rest – his nose was painted red instead. Harrison had laughed louder than any of his friends and his parents had been pleased that he was enjoying his birthday so much.

Dr. Gravy frowned, a deep indentation appearing between his eyebrows as they furrowed. "Why did you steal the clown's nose?" he asked in a serious voice. He obviously hadn't heard Harrison's "no big deal."

Harrison shrugged. "I don't know. I saw it and thought it would be funny to steal it."

He looked at Georgia. She had a big grin on her face. He looked at Olive. She was giggling. His dad was still laughing. Even his mom was trying to suppress a smile. Harrison wasn't sure if everyone thought it was funny that he stole the nose or that he was now bringing it up as the something nobody else knew about.

Dr. Gravy was not pleased. "Now, this is an enabling response to an unhealthy action," he said. "Harrison did something wrong and rather than reprimanding him, you're all laughing, which in this case is a positive response to a negative action. It not only makes Harrison feel like he has done nothing wrong, but it makes him feel like he has done something good. Is this how you want your son to behave?"

Harrison was angry not so much that Dr. Gravy was insinuating that he was a bad person, but that Dr. Gravy had the audacity to say he knew what Harrison felt. Harrison

had known stealing the nose was wrong even when he had been cramming it into his pocket, but he had still done it. And he knew now that it was still wrong, but he couldn't take it back. There was no use getting all upset about it. It was just a nose, after all.

Everyone else seemed to agree with Harrison. Everyone except Dr. Gravy.

He addressed Harrison. "You do know that stealing is wrong, don't you?" He sounded exasperated and looked irritated.

Harrison nodded and looked at his parents. They were looking at each other. They had matching smiles.

"Kids, why don't you head out into the waiting room," his mom said. "Your dad and I are going to talk to Dr. Grady for a few minutes."

Harrison sprung to his feet, happy to be moving. Dr. Gravy watched them go. He didn't say anything and he didn't stand up. Harrison took one last look at the barns and walked out the door. It didn't smell like hay out in the hallway.

Out in the car ten minutes later, his mom turned around and said, "Out of curiosity, what did you do with the nose?"

Everyone looked at him. His dad's eyes looked at him through the rearview mirror. Harrison smiled.

"I sold it."

"You sold it?" Georgia asked.

Harrison nodded. "What else was I going to do with it?"

Everyone laughed again and he saw his dad reach over and hold his mom's hand. From the middle seat, he could see how happy they both looked and he thought he could

hear sunshine in his mom's voice as she asked everyone if they wanted to stop at Patti's for a piece of pie. His dad said, "A la mode of course."

THE YIN,
THE YANG
AND THE
BANG BANG

What you've become,
Just as I have
Are you and I so alike?
I don't hear you
Just as I am
Afraid if we dance we might die
Mock the world
Live safe, say why
Don't you know if you live life
Then you become what you are

– What You Are, Dave Matthews Band

“I got married.”

Harrison Weaver held the telephone up to his ear in a tight grip, waiting for a response. He could hear static from the phone and a television in the background. It sounded like some kind of game show was on. During the grainy silence he tried to figure out which game show it was, but it was pointless since they all sounded alike. He wondered if the contestant – it sounded like his name was Jim – was winning or losing. Either Jim will finally be able to afford that dream car that’s been haunting him since puberty, he thought, or he’ll go home depressed with the realization that he’ll still have to drive his beat-down, “daddy” car.

“You what?” finally came Charlie’s response. The tone was neutral and even, with just a subtle biting tint. Harrison only heard indifference.

“I got married,” he repeated, a wave of dizziness whooshing into his head, like a gust of wind blowing a newspaper against a tree.

“Oh.” Flat and smooth.

Harrison didn’t know what he had expected Charlie to say. He thought about what he would have said, had the situation been reversed. He couldn’t think of anything.

“Congratulations.” Dispassionate.

“Thanks,” Harrison said awkwardly.

“So,” Charlie began, his voice crackling over the phone, “when did it all happen?”

Harrison wanted to say it all happened when he was in the third grade. “Tonight, actually,” Harrison said. “We got married tonight.”

“Oh.”

Harrison waited for Charlie to say something else, but when the only sounds he heard were distant audience cheers from the television and paroxysmal bursts of static, he continued, wanting to fill the silence. "Yeah, we finally just decided, what the hell, so we flew to Vegas and got married."

As he said this, he thought about Andy – his best friend from college – a big-boned, square-jawed boy of Russian descent from Atlanta who claimed it was his duty to speak his mind and his hobby to offend people. Andy always said the only way he would ever get married was if he could marry his gal (as he put it) in Vegas. Gambling, strip joints, and booze were the least a man could ask for as he married away his freedom, Andy used to argue. Whenever he brought it up, Harrison always laughed, half of him fearful of the word marriage and all it expected of him, a quarter of him agreeing with Andy, another quarter of him sad that marriage was such a negative experience for so many people.

As a skinny, shaggy-haired freshman sitting in the crowded, babbling dining hall listening to Andy one day, he had decided Vegas would be the last place he would ever get married. He wasn't one of those guys who needed to be distracted in order to go through with it. That's what he had thought as an eighteen-year-old "man of the world," even though his world was still a small one, as the farthest he had ever been from his Indiana home was Ohio to the west, Illinois to the east, Michigan to the north, and Tennessee to the south.

"Did Elvis marry you?"

Harrison laughed. He had known Charlie would ask that – he was fascinated by Elvis. Late, double-chinned Elvis, not early hip-swinging Elvis. Charlie had been to

Graceland three times so far and was hoping to make his fourth trip in the summer. After his third trip, Charlie brought back an official Elvis signature button for Harrison's wall-o-butt-ons, as Charlie called it.

After staring at the blank white walls that enclosed his bedroom for the two weeks after he first moved in, Harrison had started to feel like a patient in a mental institution, with nothing to look at but white. However, he wasn't allowed to paint the walls and wasn't brave enough to try. His solution was to stretch a king-sized black sheet against the far wall and fill it, button by button – the names of politicians (mostly Democrats) on the biggest buttons, funny phrases on the brightly colored buttons, the names of struggling bands on the cheapest buttons.

As the entire wall had slowly filled with buttons, Charlie had asked Harrison if he could rearrange the buttons. It had taken Charlie all day one rainy Sunday, but he had turned Harrison's wall-o-butt-ons into real artwork. He had taken all the buttons off and had then divided the wall with a full-sized black sheet and a full-sized white sheet he had brought with him. He had then created a circle with the buttons, placing all the darker buttons on the white sheet and all the lighter buttons on the black sheet, effectively creating a yin and yang symbol.

On the yin side, Charlie had placed one white button among the dark buttons – the Elvis button which was white with light red writing – and on the yang side he had placed one dark button among the lighter buttons – a purple button with orange lettering that said "The Yin, The Yang and The Bang Bang." Of all Harrison's buttons, this was Charlie's favorite because while he loved eastern philosophy, Harrison loved western movies and he thought the button summed their interests up quite well.

When Harrison had asked Charlie why he had done that with those two buttons, Charlie had said, “The yin and the yang can’t exist without the other.” He said, the single light button on the yin side and the single dark button on the yang side represented this fact. While lying in bed some nights, Harrison would look at the buttons and his eyes would always automatically zero in on those two buttons. He wouldn’t even notice the others.

Lying on the bed in his hotel room, Harrison realized how much he missed his wall-o-butt-ons. “No. We didn’t go to one of those places. Gretchen wanted to go to a nice chapel with an organist.”

“Oh.” His voice was iron.

“It was a lot nicer than I thought it would be. I guess I’ve always pictured Vegas weddings as, I don’t know, drunk couples walking down the aisle of some shady chapel with dirty shag carpet and bad fluorescent lighting – the kind that shows everyone’s scars and pockmarks.”

While Harrison frowned at the image he had conjured, Charlie smiled. There was no kind of lighting that would ever dim the glow of Harrison’s good looks, although Harrison didn’t see it that way. The soft blue eyes that changed colors according to the shirt he wore (“my eyes are squinty”), the strong, dark eyebrows that contracted very handsomely while he was in deep thought (“they look like dead caterpillars”), the long, dark eyelashes that made deficiently-lashed women envious (“they’re too feminine”), and the dark, unruly hair carelessly thrown about his face in a naturally perfect way that can never be copied (“it always looks like I’ve been in a windstorm”). These were features that attracted the eye far more often than his tight athletic body (“I’m too skinny”).

Charlie, on the other hand, was bulky and big (“I’m robust”), but his tall stature accommodated the extra weight quite naturally. His light blonde hair was buzzed clean to his head (“hair just gets too annoying”) and, combined with his erect posture (“I don’t want to end up hunch-backed”), it seemed as if he had been recently discharged from active duty, although he was a self-proclaimed pacifist who didn’t believe in war (“war is the easy way out”). However, Charlie’s face, according to Harrison, was what made him so interesting-looking (“are you calling me ugly?”). His smile was crooked and his nose jutted out at an angle after having been broken twice (“no one knows how to pitch to a left-handed batter”), making the right side of his face appear bigger than the left side (“symmetry is overrated”). Even though Charlie didn’t think he looked as interesting as Harrison proclaimed, he didn’t mind the way he looked (“nobody else looks like me, which is something”).

“That’s the general impression I’ve always had,” Charlie said in agreement, thinking about run-down chapels, bad costuming, and the permeating smell of alcohol.

“But it was nice. It was kind of a Grecian theme I guess – there was ivy draped along the walls and there were tall, white Greek columns at the front, draped with ivy and flowers. And the chairs were covered in white cloth and tied with big gold bows – it all looked really formal. And the carpet was black, leading up to this red satin, I don’t know, platform I guess where we, you know.”

Charlie remained silent for a minute before responding with, “The carpet was black?” A hint of humor surfaced.

“Yeah, why?”

"I don't know. It's just strange that the path you walked along to get married was black."

"Why is that so strange?"

"I don't know. It just is."

"Well, anyway, it was really nice," Harrison said, intent on redirecting the focus. "We even got silk flowers for the bouquet and boutonniere – red roses, Gretchen's favorite."

"Silk flowers – that's nice." Casual.

"Yeah, and it was all for a very reasonable price."

"Hmm."

"How much do you think it cost?"

"I don't know." Charlie hated playing this game, but Harrison loved it – "guess who I ran into this afternoon," "guess what my boss said to me this morning," "guess how much this suit cost me."

"Come on – just guess."

"I don't know, a thousand?"

"Less than two hundred," Harrison said triumphantly. "Can you imagine that?"

"Well, it's more than two hundred," Charlie said. "You have to figure in the cost of the plane tickets to Vegas, the hotel, the food, and I'm assuming Gretchen bought a wedding dress – she never gives up the chance to buy new clothes."

Harrison could hear Charlie roll his eyes through the humming phone. "Yeah, she bought a new dress – it wasn't an official wedding dress or anything, but it was a white dress. It looked nice. And it wasn't too expensive."

"I just don't understand," Charlie said, doubt in his voice.

Harrison's heart beat a bit faster. "What don't you understand?"

"I always figured Gretchen to be the kind of girl to want a big, fancy wedding in a church with all her family and friends. I just can't believe she actually went for it."

"Well, it was kind of last minute," Harrison said.

"It was your idea though, right?" Charlie pressed.

Harrison didn't answer the question. "You would have liked it."

"I probably would have if you had invited me," Charlie said.

"We didn't invite anyone. Like I told you, it was last minute. The only people there were the priest and organist."

"A priest married you?"

Harrison paused. "I don't know. I guess I just assumed he was a priest."

"Are you sure? You know, I've seen those Dateline stories about con artists who marry people, and then it turns out that everyone's marriage wasn't even legal." Charlie stopped short, all too aware of the change in his voice.

"It's legal," Harrison said. "I think."

"Oh." Charlie paused. "Did you have cake?"

"No. We didn't think to have any cake."

"Oh." He paused again. "Champagne?"

"No, that cost extra. A lot extra."

"Soooo," Charlie drew the word out, his lips puckering up. "What are you up to now?"

"I'm in the hotel room, talking to you."

“Well I know that,” Charlie said irritably. He hated it when Harrison took things so literally. “What are you planning on doing tonight?”

“What do you think I’m planning on doing?” Harrison asked, a hint of anger creeping into his voice.

“I don’t know. It’s your wedding night. I don’t know why you’re talking to me on your wedding night,” Charlie snapped. “Shouldn’t you be spending time with your wife?”

Harrison sighed. “Your wife” – it made him cringe. He was twenty-two years old and he was married. He had never felt so foreign in all his life. It was a new life and a new language he didn’t understand. He wished he had thought to get a case of beer for the evening – that was a language he understood quite well.

The silence on the phone was only interrupted by the static as it buzzed and droned in their ears. Harrison could tell Charlie had turned off the television. He could picture him, sitting on the floor, leaning against his brown leather couch, his knees drawn to his chest, his arms around his knees, his chin on his knees.

He wondered if Charlie was trying to picture him in the hotel room. He knew that whatever Charlie was imagining, it was ten times better than where he actually was. The popcorn ceiling and walls were dingy and yellowing, the dark blue carpet was scuffed and hard with stains, the mirror in the bathroom was cracked and hanging at an angle, and it made him itch just looking at the bed, although he was stretched out atop the comforter. He wished they had thought to bring their own blankets, but in their haste, they had forgotten a lot of small details. They had forgotten a lot of big details as well.

“Where’s Gretchen?”

“She’s downstairs on her cell talking to her parents. She couldn’t wait until tomorrow to tell them and she didn’t get good reception here in the room.”

“Have you told your folks?”

“No.”

“Are you going to?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll have to at some point.”

“At some point,” Charlie repeated. “You should call them now and tell them. They’ll be happy.”

“I guess,” Harrison said, twisting the phone cord around his finger before realizing he had forgotten to sanitize the phone. He always sanitized phones before he used them, even his own phone.

“Are you happy?” Charlie asked.

“Of course,” Harrison lied. “Are you happy for me?”

Charlie contemplated his answer. “I’m happy if you’re happy.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harrison asked, annoyed that Charlie had answered with a cliché. Clichés were so impersonal. So thoughtless.

“You know what it means Harrison.” Quiet.

Harrison looked down at the bedspread and slowly traced the flower pattern with his forefinger. There were so many things he wanted to say, so many things he needed to say, but he knew he could never say them. He knew that once he said them, he could never take them back. They would be in the atmosphere – they would be real. And more than anything else, he didn’t want them to be real.

“Look, I’m going to let you go,” Charlie said. “I have to get up early in the morning and I’m pretty tired.”

“Sure,” Harrison said.

“I guess I’ll see you when you get back,” Charlie said. “When are you coming back?”

“I don’t know. Gretchen was talking about taking the week off to stay in Vegas for our honeymoon. But, I need to get back to work soon, so I’m sure I’ll be back in a few days at the latest.”

“Well, give me a call when you get back and we can,” Charlie paused, “we can hang out and celebrate.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Okay. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Harrison hung up the phone and sat in silence, staring at the bed without seeing it. He suddenly felt lonely, so he decided to turn on the radio alarm clock – he needed some background noise. Flipping through the dials of static and incoherent voices, he left it on the first song that was audible – a dim rendition of *Float On*. He listened to the steady beat of the drum without hearing the words floating from the radio. As the song ended, the door of their hotel room opened.

He looked up and watched Gretchen, her thick red hair bouncing and her brown eyes sparkling, excitedly skip over to the bed, throwing her cell phone on a stuffed chair in the corner that Harrison hadn’t even noticed. Watching her, he realized she was what Charlie called stereotypically beautiful – delicate eyebrows, small nose, big smile, hour-

glass figure, thick, flowing hair. However, there were times when Harrison would look at her and only see her as if she was asleep – bad breath, ratty hair, oily skin, loud snores. He wasn't sure which version of her he preferred.

“My parents are so happy,” she said, jumping onto the bed and throwing her arms around Harrison's neck.

“They're not mad that we eloped?” he asked, knowing full well Gretchen's parents could never be mad at him. They loved him like a son. Actually, they loved him more than Gabriel, their son, who had gravely disappointed them when he became a musician rather than the great businessman they had expected him to be. Harrison empathized with Gabriel. He felt he had gravely disappointed his parents when he had become a graphic designer rather than the great lawyer they had expected him to be.

“Well, a little,” Gretchen said. “I think my mom was just a little upset that we didn't get married in church. So I told her that when we get back home we can start planning a real wedding so we can invite all our family. Won't that be fun? Two weddings in one year?”

Harrison lightly pushed her away from him so he could look at her. “No, no, no. I thought that's why we came to Vegas – to avoid planning a huge wedding.” That's the reason he had told himself over and over again like a mantra. It was what he wanted to believe.

Gretchen laughed. “No, silly. We came to Vegas because we couldn't wait to get married. But,” she said, running her hands over his chest, “now that we're officially married, we can take our time planning our real wedding with all our family and friends,” she said.

“What if I don’t want a church wedding?” Harrison asked, angry that she expected him to go through another wedding when he was barely able to make it through the first one.

“Don’t be silly,” she mumbled into his neck. “Now give me just a little while to get ready, sweet husband of mine.” With a girlish giggle, she ran off to the bathroom, snapping the door shut behind her.

Harrison lay down on the bed, sincerely hoping the bed didn’t have bed bugs. He knew he would never be able to get married in church – that was just something he couldn’t do. It was something he wouldn’t do. They were already married and if that wasn’t good enough for her, then she would just have to deal with the disappointment. She better get used to it, he thought.

Harrison rolled over and picked up the telephone, pausing only a moment before dialing. “She wants a church wedding,” he said in a whisper, hoping Gretchen couldn’t hear him from the bathroom, even though part of him just didn’t care anymore.

“What? Harrison what do you want?” Exasperated.

“She wants a church wedding,” he repeated, slightly louder. “I can’t do it.”

Charlie walked into his bedroom and sat down on his bed, placing his head in his hands. “Listen, just because your parents...” he began.

“No,” Harrison said impatiently, his voice a little louder. “I don’t care about that,” he said, although he knew he still did care that his dad had cheated on his mom with a woman from church. “You know....” Harrison abruptly stopped, not knowing how to finish the sentence.

There was no need. Charlie realized that it was almost a year ago to the day that they had met. Charlie had walked into St. Anthony's a little late, having been held up by a long line at the bank. Realizing that he wouldn't be able to find a seat, he stood out in the lobby area to listen to mass over the sound system – the same lobby where Harrison stood reading the bulletin board.

Harrison had stood by that bulletin board for over an hour, having arrived at church long before anyone else. It was the first time he had been in a church since he was in middle school, but not having been able to get any sleep the night before, he stayed up flipping the channels between infomercials and music videos until he stopped on what he called the "God channel." The religious nuts, as Charlie later called them one night, were passionately discussing the importance of attending church and the community feeling one needs to experience in order to connect with God.

Although dubious, Harrison decided to go to church the next day – he desperately needed a community to belong to. He felt as if he had been living on the fringes for too long, too *this* to be accepted into that community and too *that* to be accepted into this community. He figured he would be accepted into a church community, but once he actually arrived at church, he just couldn't force himself to go through with it – something was holding him back. Perhaps it was the thought buried deep down that he would never be accepted into this particular community. Never.

Although Harrison barely paid him any attention at first, Charlie couldn't help but watch him, unexpectedly awestruck by his good looks. What Charlie didn't know was that Harrison had noticed him long before that day – he had seen Charlie in the grocery store almost a month before, in the cereal aisle. After re-reading a flyer announcing an

ice cream social for the hundredth time, Harrison turned around to leave when he saw Charlie.

It was Harrison who had spoken to Charlie first, asking him what time it was. Charlie had responded with, "Do you like Italian?" Forty-five minutes later, Harrison sat in a booth across from Charlie, slurping up noodles as he silently thanked the religious nuts.

"Remember when we got caught in that terrible thunderstorm?" Harrison said suddenly, his voice quiet.

"Yeah," Charlie said, smiling at the memory. "We were heading back from the Sox game when it started pouring from out of nowhere."

"Who won that game?" Harrison asked.

Charlie thought for a moment. "You know, I don't remember."

"Me neither."

"Man, I thought we were going to die that night," Charlie said, laughing. "You were so nervous driving in that storm."

"Well, I hate driving in the rain," Harrison said. "Besides, I couldn't see anything, it was coming down so hard." He laughed. "I kind of thought we were going to die too," he admitted, thinking about the sheets of rain that had impaired his vision. At one point he hadn't been able to see a thing outside of the car – it was as if the rain had isolated the two of them in his white Honda as the world disappeared around them. Harrison had felt like he and Charlie were the only two people in the world and the feeling had stayed with him long after that night. He laughed again. "But we didn't die."

"Nope – we're still alive. And you're even married."

“Yeah, I’m even married. Alive and married.” Harrison sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

“You sound tired.”

“Yeah, I am a little tired. Marriage is exhausting.”

Charlie laughed. “That’s what my parents have always said.”

“I can’t believe your parents are still together after all this time,” Harrison said, smiling at the thought of Charlie’s parents whom he had met during Easter. “You know, they’re pretty good dancers – I should see if they’ll teach me sometime,” he said, remembering how Charlie’s dad had put a record on the night of Easter Sunday and danced with Charlie’s mom, holding her close to him. Within the first five minutes of meeting Charlie’s parents he had known they were very much in love. Within the first five minutes of meeting Gretchen’s parents he had known they were very much in love with their “G” names – Gaby and Gary, Gretchen and Gabriel.

“They really liked you. My mom thought you were handsome, she called it classic good looks, and my dad thought you were smart, especially since you don’t like Elvis as much as I do.”

“What can I say – everyone loves me.”

Charlie laughed and then grew silent. “Gretchen’s really lucky. I hope she knows how lucky she is.”

“I don’t know about that,” Harrison said, a slight frown stealing across his lips.

Charlie grunted. “Man, I just still can’t believe you’re married. Never in a million years.” Wistful.

“You didn’t sound surprised earlier,” Harrison said defensively.

“Well, I’m good at that,” Charlie said. “You could say anything to me and it wouldn’t appear to faze me in the slightest.”

“Okay,” Harrison said sarcastically.

“Go on. Try me.”

Harrison could feel his heartbeat against the collar of his shirt. He felt pricks of warmth shoot down from the top of his head and into his cheeks. His mind automatically traveled back to the dreary October night when he had slept over at Jimmy Thorn’s house. Jimmy, clad in his blue and white striped pj’s and ratty black slippers, had taken Harrison into his dad’s study. “I have something really cool to show you,” he had said, pushing Harrison onto the plush loveseat. After rummaging in the bottom drawer of his dad’s desk, he walked over to Harrison, a superior, excited look etched across his boyish face, his hands behind his back. Harrison had felt the same way he felt now – like a spray of hot, intense water was rushing down his body. He was excited and scared, but he felt ready.

When Jimmy slowly revealed a small plastic box with a baseball inside it, Harrison’s entire body had gone numb. That’s when he had known he was different from Jimmy. Jimmy was so excited by that baseball, signed by some pitcher from the Yankees Harrison knew to be quite famous; yet all Harrison could do was smile weakly, disappointment and fear and anger making its way into his small frame. That’s when he had started hating himself. Sometimes, especially at night, he wondered if he could ever stop.

“Hey, you still there?” Charlie asked. The static from the phone started buzzing louder now.

“Yeah. I’m still here.”

“What – you can’t think of anything?” Charlie said, his voice light.

Harrison looked straight ahead and saw his outline in the reflection of the dark, streaky television. He couldn’t make out any of his features – all he saw was a shadow.

“I can’t think of anything at all,” Harrison said, feeling a mixture of victory and defeat, shame and pride. “Listen, I should go. It is my honeymoon and all.”

Hesitant. “Okay. Have fun.”

“Bye.” He hated Charlie. He hated Gretchen. He hated himself.

He hung up the phone before Charlie could say anything, feeling as bad as he had ever felt. He would never stop hating himself. Even when he wondered if he could stop, he knew he never would. His hand still attached to the telephone receiver that rested in its base, he heard the bathroom door open and Gretchen call his name, but he turned his head away.

III. JUST DANDY

The first time her dad had moved out, Georgia had awkwardly hugged him good-bye, her face smashed into his blue jacket. He smelled like onions.

He said, "I'll see you soon," but it was two more weeks before she saw him. During those two weeks, she would go up to her bedroom every day after school, unload her backpack, and wonder where he was. She knew he worked at the phone company until five every night, but she didn't know where he went after work. Georgia could tell her mom didn't know either.

When he finally called, he told Georgia how nice his apartment was and how much he wanted them to visit. He only had two bedrooms, he said, but Harrison could sleep in his bed and he would take the sofa. Georgia was surprised he had an apartment. She wondered if it was near their house.

That Friday, he was parked in the driveway, waiting to pick them up as they straggled home from school. He rolled the window down and told her to pack for the weekend and make sure Harrison and Olive did the same. He also told her to bring pillows and blankets – he didn't have any extras.

It took her almost an hour to get everything packed. Her mom sat in the rocking chair in the living room and crocheted. She didn't offer to help. Her dad stayed out in the car and listened to the radio. He didn't come into the house.

His apartment was small and he had tried to make it look less depressing than it was by stringing up Christmas lights along the doorframes. But all the furniture was foreign. Georgia had never seen the ratty gray sofa before or the brown recliner that squeaked. She wondered where he had gotten everything.

They put all their bags, pillows, and blankets into the room Georgia and Olive would share. There was only one twin bed and an air mattress on the floor. That night, Georgia and Olive would share the bed and Harrison would sneak in to sleep on the air mattress while their dad snored loudly on the sofa.

He ordered a pizza – a pizza pie as Olive called it – and they watched TV while they waited. He told them they could watch anything they wanted. What they wanted to watch was their favorite Disney movie *That Darn Cat* but he didn't have it. When Georgia said they should have brought it from the house, her dad pointed out that he didn't have a VCR yet. They ended up watching *America's Funniest Home Videos* and her dad laughed loudly, but he was the only one.

When the pizza came, they ate silently, eight eyes intently focused on the television, four mouths quietly chewing. When Olive dropped a piece of pizza facedown on the carpet, they all looked at their dad, waiting for him to lose his temper. He just smiled and quietly cleaned up the mess. He seemed more relieved to be doing something, than angry that his carpet was stained. As Georgia watched him scrub the carpet, she realized that they could get away with practically anything. She wasn't sure if she liked that or not.

After they finished eating, her dad sat on the recliner, looking at them with a helpless look on his face. She knew he didn't know what to do with them. She suggested

they play a board game. His face brightened and within minutes he had set up Monopoly. Olive was the thimble, Harrison the shoe, Georgia the dog, her dad the racecar.

As Georgia landed on Kentucky Avenue, Harrison said sadly, "I wish we could have brought Bobby with us." He was looking at the dog on the game board. It kind of looked like a silver version of Bobby.

Georgia looked at her dad, wondering why he had gotten an apartment that didn't allow pets. She thought he liked Bobby. Sometimes she thought he liked Bobby more than the three of them. Bobby was easy to please and he didn't talk back.

"I'm sorry buddy," her dad said as he rolled the dice. But he didn't say anything else.

They played until the game got boring. They always started Monopoly off with high expectations, feeling rich with the fake money piled high before them. But it always turned out to be a letdown as their money dwindled and they repeatedly passed "Go" without really going anywhere. Olive rolled the dice, hoping for doubles for the fourth time so she could finally get out of prison. When she saw she had rolled a two and a six, she asked if they could play Clue, her favorite game. But all he had was Monopoly.

They all went to bed early that night. None of them were tired.

The next morning Georgia instructed Olive to say she had a sore throat. She had strep throat all the time, so the story was believable. Her dad decided they better go home if Olive wasn't feeling well. Georgia had known he would do this.

Two weeks later he moved back into the house. It confused Georgia to see him peering into the refrigerator and reading the newspaper on the family room couch. He had been gone for over a month and she had gotten used to his absence. It had been

strange at first, but now his presence was much stranger. She wondered what had happened to his apartment.

At night she could hear her parents. They were either always talking or arguing and even though they were always quiet, she could still hear them. During the day they would pretend everything was “just dandy,” as her grandma used to say. They would eat breakfast at the island in the kitchen, Olive at the head of the table, Harrison seated next to her mom on the left side of the island, and Georgia seated next to her dad on the right side. At dinner they would talk about their days, but Georgia noticed that it was only Olive who spoke, talking about the green and blue bear she had painted in art class or how Zach Dixon had vomited Cheerios all over his desk.

He remained in the house for a few weeks, sometimes startling Georgia when he would suddenly appear. One day she came home from school to discover he had moved out again. It turned out he had kept the apartment, “just in case,” her mother told her later.

Over the next six months, he moved in and out, in and out. Sometimes Georgia could tell her mom had kicked him out, other times she could tell her dad had left on his own accord. On the nights he left, her mom would sleep on the living room sofa. On the nights he left, Georgia would stay awake all night long, listening to Bobby’s long nails click-clacking on the hardwood floor as he checked on Harrison, then Olive, then Georgia, then her mom. After making sure they were all breathing, he would then make a pit stop in the kitchen for some Alpo and water before making his rounds again. Around three in the morning he would finally head into Harrison’s room to collapse on

the makeshift doggy bed Harrison had made for him out of old blankets. Georgia would listen to him snore and whimper, wondering what it was he was dreaming about.

The fourth time her dad moved out of the house, he again invited them to his apartment for the weekend. He made sure to tell Georgia he had moved into a new apartment that allowed animals. He also made sure to tell her he had a VCR, so she should bring some videos. These were signs that he was going to stay out for good. Georgia felt relieved. It was the going back and forth that bothered her more than anything else. She just wanted someone to make a decision, any decision, and stick with it.

That weekend her dad did more with them than he had ever done with them before. He took them to a park near his apartment and played basketball with Harrison, swung on the swings with Olive, and played fetch with Bobby. He tried to spend time with Georgia, but she made sure she was always busy playing with Olive and Harrison. If she wasn't busy, she pretended to read the book she had brought along for this very reason, but she never got past the first line.

She hoped no one she knew saw her in the park. None of her friends knew about her parents yet. A lot of her friends had divorced parents, but she didn't feel comfortable talking about it. If her parents were divorced, that would be one thing. But Georgia wasn't sure what they were. Besides, she knew it was too confusing to explain to her friends, what with the constant moving in and out. She couldn't keep up with it herself sometimes.

They left the park and headed back to the apartment. Her dad stopped for a pizza on the way and while he went inside to get it, they played I Spy. Back at the apartment,

Georgia, Harrison, and Olive sat on the ratty gray sofa, with Bobby at their feet begging for scraps, and her dad on the squeaky brown recliner. They watched *That Darn Cat*. Harrison and Olive laughed and yelled out the lines they knew. When Olive yelled out, "I'm going into the house to murder someone!" her dad laughed. Georgia saw that he was relaxed.

That night, Georgia thought Olive would be fine in bed by herself and Harrison would be fine in her dad's bedroom since he had Bobby with him. After twenty minutes of lying on the slowly deflating air mattress, Olive poked her head over the side of the bed to ask Georgia if she would sleep with her. Ten minutes after that, Harrison tiptoed into the room, bent over in order to hold Bobby by the collar. Georgia watched as he settled onto the air mattress, Bobby lying on the carpet next to his head. When she checked on them later, Harrison was lightly holding onto one of Bobby's paws.

The rest of the weekend passed by in a blur – they went to the movies, they returned to the park, they even went shopping and her dad told them they could each have one thing in the store. Olive chose a teddy bear, Harrison chose a video game, and Georgia chose a book. While they were walking around the store, busy looking for their one thing, Georgia saw her dad buy something small and then stick it in his jacket pocket. When she checked his pocket later, she saw it was a coral bracelet. It was a bracelet she would later look for on her mom's wrist, but she never saw it.

As Georgia was packing up her bag that Sunday, her dad came into the room and asked her if she had fun that weekend. She nodded and said it had gone by fast. He smiled and told her they could come back whenever they wanted to. She wondered if he

really meant it. She had heard him on the phone the night before telling someone it was just too crowded in his apartment for three kids and a dog.

The sixth time he moved out of the house, he called to invite Georgia to his apartment the weekend of her fourteenth birthday. She said she already had plans with her friends. He got angry and asked to speak to her mom, but when Georgia tried to give the phone to her mom, she walked out of the room. Georgia sighed and said into the receiver, "Fine. I'll come over on Sunday."

She went to his apartment with her brother and sister and acted like she was having fun. Her friends had come over to the house the day before for her party and only Marci realized her dad was missing – Marci's parents had been divorced for two years. With a knowing look she had asked Georgia if she was okay. Georgia had looked at her and said everything was fine, but she knew Marci didn't believe her. It made Georgia angry that Marci felt sorry for her, especially when Georgia was the one who used to feel sorry for Marci.

As Georgia closed her eyes to blow out the candles on the brownies her dad had made, she wished for the same thing she had wished for the day before. She opened her eyes, blew out the candles in one big blow, and looked at the yellow wax that had dripped all over the brownies. She wondered if her parents were ever going to get a divorce.

DR.
PEPPER
RAGE

The world is a vampire, sent to drain
Secret destroyers, hold you up to the flames
And what do I get, for my pain?
Betrayed desires, and a piece of the game
Even though I know – I suppose I'll show
All my cool and cold – like old job
Despite all my rage I am still just a rat in a cage
Despite all my rage I am still just a rat in a cage
Then someone will say what is lost can never be saved
Despite all my rage I am still just a rat in a cage

– Bullet With Butterfly Wings, Smashing Pumpkins

It didn't take much to make Nora Weaver happy – a warm bath or a nice bowl of mint ice cream was enough to put a smile on her face. It also didn't take much to make her unhappy – a woman forgetting to say “thanks” when she held the restroom door open at a restaurant or gas prices going up two cents was enough to make her blood boil.

Her kids called it “Dr. Pepper Rage,” referring to the time when Nora had browbeaten their young waiter for management's decision to stop carrying Dr. Pepper, her drink of choice. Nora called it menopause, claiming her hormones were all over the place and Dr. Pepper was one of the only things that calmed them down. “Take away her Dr. Pepper and behold the Dr. Pepper Rage,” her kids would often say, teasing her. Nora didn't find it very funny.

As she haltingly paced the floor of her tiny, cluttered bedroom in the apartment she had, over the last six years, come to loathe, she glanced at her ratty duffel bag and wondered what else she needed for the weekend retreat she was preparing for. She had never attended any sort of retreat before and wasn't quite sure the casual wear she had packed would be appropriate. Nothing says “take back your life” like a pair of faded jeans, grimy tennis shoes, and an old sweater with a tiny hole in the left armpit.

A tall woman with short sandy blonde hair, large green eyes surrounded by long, pale eyelashes, a crooked smile with slightly oversized front teeth, and a strong, erect posture so straight it almost seemed to be an overcorrection of years of slumping, Nora was impatient with trying to look good for other people. It only took her half an hour to get ready each morning, as it took but a minute to blow her short hair dry and only a few more to throw on her usual khakis and sweater that she wore to the middle school where

she worked with deaf students. She often noted, with satisfaction, that it took her longer to drive to work each morning than it took her to get ready.

After surveying the contents of her bag, Nora edged out of her bedroom and into the hallway, measured by inches, before stopping in the dining room – or rather the room that was supposed to be the dining room. In Nora's apartment, however, it was more of a storage room, filled from floor to ceiling with boxes and tubs full of belongings she either didn't have the heart to throw away or things she actually needed, but couldn't find space for in her small living quarters.

While some boxes housed the contents of Christmas decorations accumulated throughout the years, faded and ripped homemade decorations and all, others were filled to the brim with old college textbooks and notebooks full of lecture notes she had saved to remind her of better days.

Turning away from the massive stacks occupying her dining room, Nora faced her living room and a small sigh of misery escaped her dry, parted lips. Between the lumpy brown couch resting on the left wall, the oversized coffee table with one bum leg that constantly fell off, and the duct-taped flickering television that sat on top of a rickety old garage-sale table there just wasn't much room to move around within the walls of her apartment.

While other people fantasized about winning the lottery and moving into big mansions, Nora fantasized about winning the lottery and buying the apartment complex she lived in so she could tear everything down and have all the space she desired. Sometimes she wasn't sure if her fantasy was more about space or more about tearing things down, but she knew she craved both.

Crossing into her kitchen, which was no larger than her small bathroom, Nora stared blankly into her fridge. She still wasn't quite sure she wanted to go on this retreat, but the opportunity to get away from her apartment for an entire weekend was too good to pass up. She was not a homebody by any means, but be that as it may, Nora still didn't have anywhere else to go at night on the weekends.

A sense of relief coursed through her body at the prospect of ditching her lousy neighbors for two entire nights – no more loud partying, no more smoke, and no more teenagers hanging out in the parking lot just below her bedroom window until four in the morning shining their car lights through her flimsy drapes and blasting their rap music – the kind that didn't bleep out all the bad words.

A bottle of water and duffel bag in hand, Nora backed out of the apartment, glancing at the odd shapes starting to take form amid the cover of the darkness. Only half-joking, she flipped her apartment the bird and quickly closed the door behind her. With a satisfying click, she locked the door. Throwing her duffel bag into the backseat of her slowly disintegrating brown station wagon, Nora started the engine, which roared to life. It continued to roar loudly throughout the journey to Saint Bernadine's College, a small college nestled in the woods about a hundred miles away.

She had been to this campus before, what exactly the occasion had been she couldn't now recall, but she did remember how peaceful and quiet the campus was, especially the winding path that was situated on the outskirts of the woods. She looked forward to taking long walks along this path – she did her best thinking and her best praying when walking in silence, something she couldn't exactly indulge in while living in a noisy city. And, according to the women in her prayer group, who really did care

about her no matter how self-righteous they appeared, she needed to pray and reconnect with God – a God she had grown to despise, for she blamed God for the life she was living.

Two hours, a bottle of water, and a throbbing headache later, Nora sat on a stiff, hard-backed chair staring dispassionately at Eveline, a chipper young woman with the looks and mannerisms of a beauty queen. With elaborately curled pale blonde hair that cascaded in waves down her petite back, a heart-shaped face delicately painted with makeup, and perky small breasts peeking out from beneath her crisp pink suit, Eveline stood in the front of a small room filled with approximately twenty men and women, most of whom seemed to look rather young, according to Nora.

Some of the people seemed exceptionally depressed, their heads lowered and their shoulders drooped as if it took too much energy to simply sit up straight. Others looked slightly bemused by Eveline's appearance, a few men blatantly looking her up and down and a few women staring at her perfect figure, wondering how many hours she worked out a day – at least two hours, many of them thought with awe.

"Hello, everyone. Welcome to *A New Awakening* retreat for those who have suffered loss in their lives," Eveline said a little mechanically as if she had done this many times before.

Pausing to beam at everyone, her brightly manicured and bejeweled hands importantly flipped through the professional-looking clipboard she held against her chest like a shield. Sitting in the very back of the small room Nora, with her arms crossed over her chest, frowned slightly – she already didn't like Eveline. People with busy hands were the kind of people who couldn't sit still for five consecutive minutes. They were

the kind of people who constantly needed to be entertained. Nora was tired of entertaining people.

“Now, to the first order of business,” Eveline continued, her bright eyes quickly glancing at a sheet filled with loopy handwriting atop her clipboard. “We not only want to make sure that everyone here is happy, but that they are also safe. That being said, we have a few announcements. First of all, there have been some problems with the scrambled eggs, so we would recommend that you not eat those during your stay here.” She smiled vivaciously, and for the first time Nora noticed her left front tooth was slightly smeared with dark red lipstick. “In addition, we just want to let you know that there’s no reason to be alarmed if you hear the sound of gun shots in the distance.”

Nora, who had been more intent on cataloguing Eveline’s appearance rather than listening to what she had to say, uncrossed her arms and sat up straight when she heard this statement. She detested guns. She had always wanted to start an anti-gun group but had never gotten around to it for fear that she would end up getting shot by those who actually did have guns.

However, that hadn’t stopped her from picking a fight with a gum-chewing, ponytail-swinging employee at the dollar store down the street from her apartment. The toy guns, Nora argued, sent the wrong message to kids. The toy guns, the employee countered with a snap of her gum and a swing of her ponytail, were just for play. She continued to snap her gum, flip her hair, and stare at Nora like she was insane, so Nora had decided to show her what an insane person could do.

She grabbed the girl’s ponytail, ripping it right out of her head. Nora had stared at the synthetic hair in her hand and, with a quick glance at the wide-eyed, wide-mouthed

girl whose hand was snatching the spot where her hair had been like an amputee who still tried to scratch a lost limb, Nora hightailed it out of the store. She still had the fake ponytail – it was attached to the back of a horse sculpture she had gotten for Christmas one year.

Eveline again consulted her clipboard before continuing. “No reason to fret – the shots are not specifically aimed at any of you,” she said, laughing a high-pitched, tinkling laugh that grated Nora’s ears. “There is an overpopulation of deer in the area so hunters are in the woods taking care of the problem. So don’t be alarmed by the noise and please, don’t go wandering around in the woods. We don’t want anyone getting shot, now do we?” She laughed again, looking straight at Nora who frowned back.

She had only been at the retreat for twenty minutes and already the long walks she had looked forward to were snatched from her. As anger started to dump into her system, she slowly looked around the room, taking in all the gaudy decorations she had been trying to ignore up until this point. The bright balloons bunched together in every corner of the room, the crepe paper framing the doors, and the welcome banner stretched across the wall as gold and silver glitter steadily flitted down onto the dark red carpet that was patterned to look like bricks – it all simply stared back at her.

Averting her gaze from the décor, Nora took to watching people again. She could easily pick out the people working the retreat – they were all a bit older and had much more energy than anyone else in the room. They nodded and smiled and a few times even smacked their legs in anticipation of the coming weekend when they could help all the lost souls on their path to recovery. Nora looked forward to it – she wondered what they would do when they discovered that some souls weren’t meant to recover.

A half hour later, after having met her roommate who was just recovering from bronchitis and had the booming cough to prove it, Nora again sat stiffly in a hard-backed chair this time listening to Jim share the traumatic experience that defined his life. She sighed as she watched looks of sympathy and understanding being thrown around as if they could actually mean something to this young man who had, just three months ago, lost his wife of only two years in a car accident.

“Okay, Nora, now why don’t you share some of your thoughts?”

Glancing at her group leader, Nora hesitated, unsure of where to begin. Her group members, consisting of four other individuals, had all willingly shared their stories and their tears as if on command.

Sheri, the thirtysomething single mother of two, had obliged the group with her story about catching her no-for-good husband in bed with the next-door neighbor. Carol, the thirtysomething beauty of the group, had regaled everyone with her dramatic and teary-eyed account of watching her best friend die of breast cancer. And before Jim had shared his emotional story, Stan, the thirtysomething self-proclaimed perpetual bachelor as of late, had told everyone about his girlfriend who had, after five years of happiness, left him for a total stranger she had met at the grocery store.

Father Tim, the group leader, watched Nora in concern. Whereas everyone had some emotional response as each person shared their personal trauma, he was disconcerted by Nora’s lack of response. In fact, it seemed as if she was almost bored by everyone.

“I don’t know exactly what you want me to say,” Nora said bluntly, looking at Father Tim.

“Well, why don’t you tell everyone why you’re here,” he said encouragingly.

“I’m here because a woman from my prayer group paid my registration fee. Lord knows I don’t have a hundred bucks.” Nora paused. “And, I guess some of the women from my group thought I would benefit from this retreat.”

“Why is that?” Father Tim asked, curious to know what Nora’s story was.

“Because I have issues with anger,” Nora said, twisting in her seat a little bit. “I honestly think a lot of it has to do with being menopausal. My hormones have been pretty crazy lately and all I ever feel is angry.”

“Why are you angry?”

Nora shrugged. “I just am,” she said. “My life is not exactly as I had planned it to be.” She looked around at the young members of her group who, even if they felt old, really had the rest of their lives ahead of them. They had time on their sides, whereas the clock was starting to tick for Nora. It was a tick that wouldn’t quite go away.

“And how is your life?” Father Tim asked gently.

“It’s shit, that’s how it is,” Nora said as her anger flared up. “I’m forty-eight years old and I still don’t have a clue. I hate my job, I hate my apartment, I don’t have any friends. I just don’t have any energy left to fight it anymore. I just don’t,” she said plainly.

The people in her group looked at each other, taking pains to avoid Nora’s fiery eyes. “And to cap it all off,” she continued, “my ex-husband, who, by the way, cheated on me and left me to clean up his mess, is sitting pretty in his brand new house, with his brand new car, and his pandering girlfriend. He doesn’t have credit card debt. He doesn’t have to deal with a car that breaks down every two weeks. He doesn’t have to

deal with noisy neighbors. No, he gets a nice new life wrapped in a shiny gold ribbon while I get shit in a box.”

Annoyed by the shocked faces staring at her, Nora contemplated her options. She could either go for the total mental breakdown and really freak these people out or she could just leave and stop by Dairy Queen on the way out for a sundae with extra nuts. She decided on the latter.

“Look,” she said, getting to her feet. “I think I’m just going to head out.”

“No,” Father Tim said, standing up and putting a hand out to stop her. “You were sent here for a reason. You need to deal with these issues.”

Nora shook her head. “No, I was sent here because I was otherwise going to be kicked out of my prayer group. And considering that’s about the only thing I look forward to anymore, I decided to come.”

“Please sit down,” he said, refusing to give up on her. “At least stay until the end of this session.”

Rolling her head on her shoulders to crack some of the tension in her neck, Nora plunked back down into her seat. The young man who had lost his wife, Jim, cleared his throat and timidly addressed Nora. “Why were you going to get kicked out of your prayer group?”

She shook her head dismissively. “Because I was upsetting some of the women with my views on God.”

“And what are your views on God?” Father Tim asked, his cheeks tensing up as he smiled a fake smile.

Nora shrugged. "I believe there is a God. I believe that He can hear our prayers and that He can answer our prayers. And that's why I hate Him."

"You can't seriously mean that," Father Tim said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, I do seriously mean it," Nora said. "Take this retreat for instance. I thought this was an answer to my prayers – a chance for me to get away, relax, take long walks outside to clear my head, meet people like me who have been to Hell and back."

She stopped suddenly and looked around the circle at the people in her group. "And then I arrive," she said with a sarcastic smile. "And the first thing they say is that there are men outside slaughtering poor defenseless animals so, not only do we have to listen to gun shots all weekend, but we can't enjoy the grounds or else we may get shot. And then I get stuck with a roommate who is sick and stays up all night every night hacking. And then...."

After a pause, Father Tim said, "Yes?"

With a sigh, Nora said, "I thought this experience would be able to help me, but I should have known better. My divorce took place over eleven years ago. I'm in a different place now and I just can't relate to anyone here."

She looked at Sheri, who was sitting next to her. "We have similar stories, but your pain is fresh, your suffering is new. My pain and my suffering are stale. And there's really no comparison between the two. The time between changes everything until it's practically unrecognizable."

Everyone sat in silence, occasionally glancing at Father Tim looking for a sign of what to do. He crossed his legs and looked at Nora. "Maybe this retreat really is the answer to your prayers," he suggested.

Nora wearily shook her head. "No, it's not the answer," she said. "It's just another illusion. God is full of them, just as much as people are."

An hour later, Nora started to pack her duffel bag to go home. She knew she didn't belong there and her group, including Father Tim, had come to realize it as well. As she had gotten up to leave, she told Father Tim he wouldn't be seeing her the next afternoon. He had simply nodded and watched her walk out of the room.

As she quickly threw her few possessions back into her bag so she wouldn't have to deal with her roommate again, she heard a soft knock on the door. She ignored it thinking it might be Eveline on the other side begging her to stay. A moment later she was surprised when the door opened.

A maintenance man stood at the door, the name Barry stitched in black thread on his blue shirt pocket. A pair of spectacles was resting on top of his head, his hands were dirty, and his jeans were just a smidge too tight. He glanced at Nora in surprise.

"Oh, sorry about that," he said. "I didn't think anyone was in here."

"What do you want?" Nora asked irritably as she zipped up her duffel bag.

He consulted a small paper in his hands. "I got a complaint about a flickering light," he said, his eyes leaving the paper to look up at the bright fluorescent light above them. It cast its light in a steady stream without flickering.

Barry shrugged. "Maybe I got the wrong room. This is room 217 isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's what is says on the paper." He looked at Nora. "Did you file a complaint about the light?"

"No, that was probably my roommate. Or my ex-roommate I should say," she muttered under her breath.

Barry studied Nora, glanced at the duffel bag, and smiled. "Hey, are you the one who threatened to run away this afternoon?" he said, a twinkle in his eyes.

"What? I didn't threaten to run away, I just told everyone I thought I was going to leave. And I am. Going to leave," she said, glaring at Barry. She wondered how he knew about it.

He laughed. "Everyone's talking about it. No one's ever threatened to run away before."

Nora wished Barry had a ponytail so she could rip it out of his head. But his salt and pepper gray hair was cut short.

"Why are you running away?"

"Look," she said in a high-pitched voice. "I'm not running away. I'm leaving because this stupid retreat can't help me. I'm not going to stay here and waste my time." Nora was unaware that her face was bright red.

He smiled. "You're the angry one," he said. "'That woman is a firecracker that won't stop exploding' I heard someone say while I was on my way up here. He must have been talking about you."

"Who?" Nora asked aggressively.

Barry shrugged. "Hell if I know. Just some guy." He smiled again. "I like strong women. There's nothing wrong with that."

Standing by her bed, Nora suddenly felt exhausted, like she hadn't gotten a wink of sleep in years. She plopped down on her bed and leaned over, putting her head in her

hands. She was tired of feeling so angry so much of the time. She really did believe a lot of her anger had to do with menopause, but she knew she had a lot of issues she was just burying underneath the hormones.

“You okay?” Barry asked awkwardly, hoping she wasn’t about to start crying. Nothing made him more uncomfortable than watching a woman cry.

“No,” Nora said honestly. She sighed. “I’m just angry all the time.”

Barry grabbed a desk chair, turned it backwards, and sat on it so he could lean forward on the back of the chair. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Nora said quietly. “I feel like it’s controlling my life.”

Barry shrugged. “Just let it go,” he said.

Nora laughed. “Sounds simple enough,” she said. “But it’s harder than that.”

“Why?” Barry asked, looking at Nora. As he began to talk he looked down at his hands. “You know, my dad was a terrible drunk. He had this really heavy brown belt with a big gold buckle on it and he would hit me with it until I couldn’t feel it on my back anymore. For years I just wallowed in my anger until I let it completely take over me. And then one day I finally realized I had been recycling my anger over and over again and it was time to finally dump it once and for all.”

Nora sighed. “That’s what I need to do, but it’s just so hard.”

“You know, I was watching TV one day and I heard one of the characters say something that got me thinking. And you know thinking’s pretty rare when it comes to watching TV,” he said with a small grin. “Anyway, this man told his son that he was holding onto his anger like it meant something, but it doesn’t mean anything at all.”

Nora thought about it for a moment. “Yes it does. It means a lot.” She needed it to mean something. It had come to define her life – without it she was just Dr. Pepper Rage without the Dr. Pepper.

Barry shook his head. “No. It doesn’t.”

Nora twirled her crucifix around her finger, pondering this thought. Barry started to sing *Let It Be* in an extremely bad English accent. For the first time all week, Nora cracked a smile.

IV. GIVING THANKS

Three weeks before the divorce was final, Walter knocked on the side door of the house. It felt strange to be waiting for someone to open the door to the house he had lived in for the past fifteen years. In all those years he had never had to wait out on the stoop. He stared at the railing while he waited and noticed it was crooked.

Olive opened the door and looked at Walter like he was a salesman. He asked to come in and when she hesitated, he felt his throat close up. But she held the door wide and he walked into the kitchen.

He heard the television blaring and followed Olive under the archway separating the kitchen from the family room. Georgia and Harrison were sitting on the sofa, their backs to him, watching *Hoosiers*. It was the only movie all five of them could ever agree to watch. It was Walter's favorite movie.

"Hey kids," he said, hovering awkwardly behind the sofa. He didn't feel comfortable walking past it. It was as if the sofa was an invisible barrier that couldn't be crossed.

They turned around and looked at him. Harrison said "hi," but Georgia didn't say anything. Olive walked back over to the chair she had been sitting in and plopped down to watch the movie.

"What are you up to?" Walter asked.

"Watching a movie," Harrison said, nodding his head toward the television.

Walter nodded. "That's a good movie," he said. When none of them said anything, Walter cleared his throat and placed his hands on the back of the sofa in order to lean down a little bit. "Is your mother here?" he asked, looking at Olive. She wasn't paying attention to him.

"She's upstairs," Georgia said, her back to him. "What do you want?"

Walter felt his face flush at her bitter tone. He looked at the television as Jimmy announced his decision to start playing basketball again. This was one of his favorite parts in the movie.

"Well, Thanksgiving is next week," he said, nervously shaking his leg. "I was just thinking that maybe we could spend it all together as a family."

When his kids just looked at him, he cleared his throat, told them to mention it to their mother, and showed himself out. As he walked out of the house, he thought about Thanksgiving. It was his favorite holiday – the one holiday they didn't travel to see their relatives. Christmas and New Year's, Easter and even Halloween sometimes would be spent hours away from home. It was always exhausting and it was never enjoyable with the kids trapped in the car for hours. Those holidays always ended with a headache.

But, Thanksgiving was the one holiday that was stress-free. It was food, football, and parades. The kids would run around the house and play outside with Bobby. The house would smell delicious. And he would never even have to get out of his sweatpants.

Walter couldn't imagine spending Thanksgiving anywhere else with anyone else. He belonged with his family in their home. At least one last time.

Three days later, Nora called him. She told him the kids had mentioned something to her about Thanksgiving. She waited for him to say his piece and his heart

beat faster as he started talking. He said maybe it would be a good idea to spend one last Thanksgiving together as a family. He said the kids might like that. He said it might help them transition more easily.

He hoped what he was saying made sense and sounded good. But Walter wasn't really sure the kids wanted him there for Thanksgiving. He wasn't really sure if it would help them to be together. He just needed it to happen.

Nora was silent for a minute – he could tell she was thinking hard. Then she sighed and told him to be there at eleven.

For the next five days, Walter was nervous. He wondered what they would talk about. He wondered if Nora was going to fix the same food. He wondered if the kids knew he was coming or if his arrival would be a surprise to them.

Walter went to the grocery store every day to buy something he thought they might need. He bought potatoes one day, corn the next, rolls the next – he kept buying things until he had bought everything they could possibly need for Thanksgiving. He even bought a turkey and stuck it in his freezer.

The night before, he called the house. Olive answered and he told her to go ask her mother if she needed him to bring anything. A few minutes later, Olive told him he didn't need to bring anything. He hung up and checked on the turkey in freezer. The turkey had always been his job. He was the one who woke up at six in the morning to thaw the turkey. He was the one to clean the turkey and dangle the gizzard in front of the kids to gross them out. He was the one to check on the turkey, baste the turkey, and carve the turkey.

Walter grabbed a beer and sat down on the sofa in silence. The night before Thanksgiving was the night he and Georgia would make the stuffing. It had become their tradition while Nora and Harrison worked on the pies. Olive would sit at the table in the family room and watch the rest of her family making the stuffing and the pumpkin pie – the things she hated most. She refused to help every year, opting to watch and make sarcastic comments about how disgusting everything looked.

The night before Thanksgiving was tradition and Walter missed it. He missed tossing bread crumbs to Bobby. He missed listening to Christmas music as they fixed the food. He missed Georgia's insistence that they taste-test the stuffing every few minutes, Harrison's teasing that his pumpkin pies would be the star of the meal, and Olive's comments floating from the background.

He went to bed that night, but he didn't get much sleep. Around six, he got up and walked down to his kitchen. He stared at the fridge for a moment before opening it and taking the turkey out. He set it in on the counter and went back to bed. It would remain there the rest of the day, dripping water onto the counter and tingeing the air with a slightly putrid smell.

At seven he was in the shower. When he got out of the shower, he wondered what he should wear. He had never dressed up for Thanksgiving before, but he somehow felt it would be inappropriate to wear jeans, let alone sweatpants. He ended up choosing a pair of khaki trousers and a blue sweater. He looked in the mirror and sighed.

At eight he was watching television, wondering if the kids were up yet. Harrison was the early riser in the family – always the first one up for everything, but especially holidays. When Walter and Nora had crept out of bed at three in the morning one

Christmas to put presents under the tree, they were interrupted by a wide-awake Harrison – he had learned the truth about Santa Claus at only six years old. Walter was certain Harrison and Georgia were awake, but he wasn't sure if Olive was up yet. She liked to sleep and would only get up once she was thoroughly annoyed by her brother and sister who enjoyed turning her lights on and tearing her blankets off her. Most times she would get up, but sometimes she would ignore them and keep sleeping.

By nine, Walter was pacing, trying to work off some of the energy coursing through his body. He needed to be doing something, but there was nothing for him to do except wait. He started to wonder if he should still go.

By ten, Walter was in the car, heading over to the house. He couldn't wait any longer and he didn't care if Nora got mad at him for being early. But when Nora opened the door, she didn't look angry. She looked tired. Without a word, she held the door open for him, closed it behind him, and walked back over to the oven to check on the turkey. Walter looked at the turkey with a pang of remorse. It didn't look very appetizing.

He peeked into the family room and saw the backs of three tousled heads all facing the television, watching Big Bird bob down the street. Bobby ran over to Walter and jumped on his legs, his tail wagging excitedly. As Walter patted his head, he realized he hadn't seen Bobby in almost a month. It was a strange feeling, especially since he was the one who had rescued Bobby from the animal shelter.

When Bobby jumped down, Walter walked into the family room. "Hey kids," he said as he passed the sofa and went to sit on the green chair Olive had been sitting in the

last time he had visited. Olive looked at him through bleary eyes, Harrison grinned, and Georgia scowled.

The four of them sat in silence for almost an hour, watching the parade. Walter had to keep stifling yawns – he had forgotten how boring the parade was. He used to get into arguments with the kids when he would snatch the remote and change it to football. But he didn't feel like he could do that this year, so he resigned himself to watching the parade.

Nora called for the kids to help her set the table, so Walter stood up and walked into the kitchen looking for something to do. Everyone ignored him, so he ended up grabbing Bobby's plastic yellow ball and playing fetch with him. The seventh time he threw the ball, Walter checked his watch and sighed. The day seemed like it was dragging on forever. He wished he hadn't come.

When they all settled around the dining room table, Nora looked at Walter and then at the kids before saying a quick prayer. They started to pass the food around and Walter couldn't help but notice that everything smelled differently than he remembered. When he started eating, he noticed that everything tasted different too. As he tasted the stuffing he realized it wasn't homemade.

After eating in silence for a few minutes, Olive said they needed to go around the table and say what they were thankful for. "You start, daddy," she said, looking at Walter as she tore a roll in half.

He swallowed his piece of turkey and looked around the table. "I'm thankful for this food," he said, "and for my family."

"What family?" Georgia asked, refusing to look up from her mashed potatoes.

“Georgia,” Nora said warningly.

Harrison cleared his throat and said he would go next. He was thankful for his family and for Bobby. Olive said she was thankful for her family and for the fact that she was not one of the many starving children in China she often heard about. Nora sighed and said she was thankful for her three wonderful children. Everyone looked at Georgia.

Without looking up, she said, “I’m thankful for divorce.” With that, she angrily shoveled a forkful of mashed potatoes into her mouth and didn’t stop eating until her plate was clean.

Walter turned red and kept eating. He didn’t know what to say to any of them anymore. Thankfully, Olive and Harrison kept up a steady stream of chatter about school. Walter listened to them talk and realized he hadn’t heard them talk about school in a long time. Whenever he asked them how school was, they just shrugged their shoulders and said, “Fine.” But listening to them now, he was surprised to hear Olive’s music teacher was pregnant and that two of Harrison’s classmates had been in a fistfight. He wondered why they never mentioned these things when they came over to his apartment.

When Nora served the pumpkin pie, Walter ate quickly. Before anyone else had finished, Walter stood up and said he needed to get going. He didn’t see Harrison’s crestfallen face or Olive’s confusion. He didn’t notice Georgia glaring at him or Nora staring at him. He looked at them without seeing them and said, “Happy Thanksgiving.”

In his car, he breathed a sigh of relief. As he began his drive back to his apartment, he realized this was the first Thanksgiving he had ever had to travel, even if it

was only fifteen minutes. He sighed, slipped a tape into his tape player, and listened to Bing Crosby crooning about a white Christmas.

THE
BEST
LAID
PLANS

The sea it swells like a sore head and the night it is aching
Two lovers lie with no sheets on their bed
And the day it is breaking
On rainy days we'd go swimming out
On rainy days swimming in the sound
On rainy days we'd go swimming out
You're in my mind all of the time
I know that's not enough
If the sky can crack there must be someway back
For love and only love

– Electrical Storm, U2

Olive Weaver peered through the windshield of Ted's red truck to look at the black sky. Her eyes searched for the constellations she had learned in grade school, but she couldn't find any of them. She never could find them. As her eyes searched the sky, she hoped to see a shooting star – it felt like ages since the last time she had seen one. Someone had once told her to see a shooting star was to have good luck for a year, while someone else had told her it meant someone would die. She didn't believe either explanation, but she still wanted to see one.

Olive's eyes moved from the sky to the glowing yellow digits on the clock and she wondered what Ted was doing. He had told her he would be just a few minutes, but he had been in the drugstore for almost fifteen minutes now. She wondered if he was talking to Anastasia.

When Olive had first met her, Anastasia had looked her up and down with a look of amusement on her face. Olive knew Anastasia was wondering why her ex-boyfriend had hooked up with a kid. Even though Olive had turned twenty-one the week before she met her, she had still felt like a little kid – especially compared to Anastasia.

Everything about Anastasia suggested sex and lots of it. The miniskirts she wore, the long dark legs that seemed endless, the mountain of cleavage always spilling from her tops, the long red hair that looked like flames streaking down her back, the forbidding tattoos etched on her skin. Her appearance screamed at everyone and it seemed to be screaming obscenity after obscenity – indeed, her favorite shirt read, "Fuck Me" on the front and "Harder" on the back. Even her name was sexy and striking: Anastasia.

The name Olive, still to this day, made Olive think of a little girl getting caught with cookie crumbs around her mouth and chocolate stains on her shirt. In fact, Olive

still looked like a little girl – her slightly chubby face, small rounded nose, thin eyebrows, and wide green eyes all gave her an air of innocence usually reserved for children. Her small, thin frame, short stature, and curve deficiency also contributed to her youthful appearance. Olive liked to think her short, jet-black hair, which she ritually dyed in order to make her ordinary brown hair more exotic, seemed very mature. However, it was cut in a youthful bob and stopped just below her chin, slightly flipping up so that it seemed childish and unruly.

Whenever she complained about her appearance to Ted, he would always tell her she was crazy and that she was beautiful. He had started calling her CB – his nickname for her. When he started using the name in public, Olive felt special. It was a code only two people in the whole world knew and she was one of them. She decided she needed to come up with a nickname for Ted, but she could never think of anything to call him other than Ted. He seemed to like that. He didn't tell Olive that Anastasia had used to call him The Beav. He had hated that name and the way Anastasia used to say it in a sugary voice.

As Olive started flipping through the stations on the radio, she saw Ted walk out of the drugstore. She loved to watch him walk. He moved his shoulders and his hips when he walked so it looked like he was strutting down a catwalk. He also talked to himself a lot, so his lips would be moving as if he was singing a song. His walk was quite a performance and Olive always enjoyed it. When he reached the truck, he slid into his seat and put it into gear without a word.

"Anything wrong?" she asked, trying to see his face in the dark.

"Nope," he said.

“Okay.” She knew by now that if Ted didn’t want to talk, he wouldn’t talk. It had bothered her at first, but she had grown used to it.

They sat in silence, listening to the radio. *Meet Virginia* started playing and Olive sang the words quietly, wondering why anyone would ever want to exercise in high heels. As she botched up a few of the words, Ted tensed up. Sometimes he loved it when Olive sang – he thought her voice was sexy – and other times it irritated him more than anything else, especially when she massacred the words. Tonight, he couldn’t stand it.

“I saw Anastasia,” he said as he flicked on the windshield wipers. They quickly swiped an arc across the windshield. It was Ted’s form of a prayer. When Olive had first seen him do it on a bright, sunny day he had explained that whenever he didn’t do it, he got into a car accident. It used to amuse her, but it was one of those things she didn’t notice anymore.

Olive stopped singing and looked at him. “How is she?”

The last time she had seen Anastasia, Olive had been terrified. Her eyes had been rolled back in her head so only the whites were showing and gobs of drool had been sliding down her chalky face. Anastasia had overdosed. Olive still wasn’t sure what drugs Anastasia had been using, but Ted later told her that it was the combination of the drugs that almost killed her. Olive and Ted rushed her to the hospital and stayed there all night long. The next morning Anastasia refused to let Olive come into her room, so she waited for Ted in the hallway. He had been in there a long time and when he finally came out she thought it looked like he had been crying. She had waited for him to tell her what happened, but he never had.

"She's fine," he said in a tense voice. He looked out the window and shifted in his seat.

Olive could tell something was wrong, but she didn't ask. She hated it when people asked her what was wrong – most of the time nothing was wrong and if something really was wrong, then she would talk about it when she was ready. Because she hated the question, she hardly ever put it to other people. This trait of Olive's was appreciated by some, despised by others. Ted went back and forth, sometimes grateful for her distance and sometimes wishing she was more concerned.

They drove another few blocks before Ted cleared his throat. "She wants to get back together with me."

Olive didn't say anything. She had always known Anastasia was still in love with Ted. Anastasia had made that very clear when they had first met. "I don't know what the hell he's doing with you," she had told Olive, adjusting the nametag on her blue smock that she wore as a cashier at the same drugstore Ted worked at. "But he's going to come back to me." Olive knew Anastasia truly believed Ted would end up with her. Sometimes, she wondered if Anastasia knew something she didn't.

"Did you hear what I said?" Ted asked, turning to look at her.

"Yeah," Olive said. "I heard you."

"Well?"

Olive shrugged. "What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know." He really didn't know what he wanted her to say, but he did know that he wanted her to get jealous. Olive never got jealous. Girls would flirt with him and she wouldn't bat an eye. Anastasia would occasionally call in the middle of the

night trying to persuade Ted into having phone sex with her, and Olive would just roll over and go back to bed. Ted would even sometimes admit to Olive he had been to the strip club down the road – when he hadn't – just to get a rise out of her. But she never got jealous. It bothered him.

“Do you want to get back together with her?” Olive asked.

Ted sighed. “I don't know.” He didn't really want to get back together with Anastasia, but he couldn't admit that to Olive. Sometimes he thought Olive was just waiting for him to ditch her for Anastasia. It was an illusion he needed to keep alive so that he could feel powerful and in control, especially when she was the one with the power in their relationship. She just wasn't aware of it.

Olive nodded and looked out her window. She watched a car full of young high school girls drive by, their music blaring, their heads bopping to the music, their bodies gyrating in their seats. She wondered if they were heading to a party.

“Are you okay?” Ted asked.

Olive turned to him. “I'm fine, Ted.”

He knew she was telling the truth. It made him feel helpless. All he wanted was for her to, just once, lose control and break down. But she never did. He sped up a little and ran the tail end of a yellow light. He kept driving, his foot pushing down on the accelerator harder and harder.

Olive didn't say a word as he continued to speed through the streets. She sneaked a look at the speedometer and saw he was nearing seventy, but she didn't say anything. She knew if she said anything he would just go faster.

As he passed their turn-off, she turned to look at him. "Aren't you taking me home?" she asked.

He didn't answer. Instead, he turned the radio up and kept speeding down the bumpy street. They drove for a half hour. Olive tried to figure out where they were going, but it had gotten so dark outside, she wasn't sure where they were, let alone where they were going. Even though Olive had been attending Kent College for almost four years now, she still wasn't familiar with the area. Ted had made fun of her the first time she had gotten lost on her way to the grocery store. The second time she had gotten lost, he had asked if she was doing it on purpose to be funny. But Olive was used to other people driving and she never paid attention to directions.

Barely slowing down, Ted turned sharply into a parking lot. Olive thought the building standing on the property looked familiar, but she couldn't place it in the dark. Ted parked the truck diagonally across three parking spots, turned the ignition off, took the keys out, and held them in his left hand.

"What do you want from me?" he asked in a low voice without looking at Olive.

"Nothing," she said, startled by the question.

He remained quiet for a long time, staring out the windshield. Olive watched him and began counting the number of times he blinked. When she reached twenty, he turned to her.

"Then why are you with me?"

She looked at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

"If you don't want anything from me," he said, "then why are you with me?"

Olive sighed. "I'm with you because I want to be with you."

He laughed a short “ha” laugh. “That’s the kind of shit Anastasia would pull. You can do better, Olive.”

Olive’s thumb started twisting the emerald ring on her middle finger. Her great-grandmother had given her that ring when she was twelve and she had worn it every day without ever taking it off. As she twisted the ring ‘round and ‘round, she tried to figure out what to say. There were a lot of reasons she was with Ted, but she knew none of them would sound good once she said them. Ted was unlike any other man who had ever paid her any attention – he was a novelty to her and she had been attracted to him because of it.

“Does this place look familiar?” Ted asked quietly. He looked around the parking lot and thought he saw ghosts gliding by in the darkness. It took a moment, but Olive remembered.

Almost a year ago she had ducked out of her friend Samantha’s wedding reception to both avoid the bouquet toss and to catch a quick smoke. Looking up from her purse, she had seen Ted, sitting on the hood of his truck, staring up at the moon, a bottle of beer in one hand, a joint in the other. Olive had been fascinated by the image and had planned on working it into a short story she was writing for her fiction writing class. When she would later turn the story in, her professor would tell her it was the best story she had written.

As she watched Ted’s solitary figure outlined against the moon, she had thought about just smoking on the sidewalk and watching him, but, a little drunk, she decided she wanted company. So she walked over to Ted’s red truck, a truck that looked brand new,

and without a word, slipped off her uncomfortable heels and hopped onto the hood next to him.

The truck rocked, but he didn't look at her. After a few moments he held out the joint to her. She took it and pretended to take a hit. As she handed it back to him, she saw him smile faintly.

"You don't smoke?" he asked, taking a sip of beer, his eyes still raised to the sky. He still hadn't looked at her.

"Cigarettes," she said. She hoped she didn't sound stupid.

"That's cool," he said.

Olive studied his profile. His blonde hair was messy and choppy, sticking out at angles from his head. The space between his large nose and thin lips was exceptionally small. He had a silver hoop earring in the cartilage of his right ear. On most guys it looked cheesy, but on him it looked good. He had blonde side burns and a patch of blonde stubble across his face. Even though he was sitting, she could tell he was short, probably not much taller than she was at 5'5. But what struck her the most was how he looked in his white tuxedo. The jacket was open, the top buttons of his shirt were unbuttoned revealing a small black bumblebee tattoo on his chest, and the black tie was untied and draped around his shoulders. He looked like a rock star.

As she lit her cigarette and inhaled, she continued to watch Ted's profile. She wondered what it would feel like to kiss his neck.

It took the entire cigarette before he looked at her. As he turned toward her, she jumped a little – like she was scared he was about to attack her. But she was just startled by the movement. He had been sitting still for so long she had started to assume he

wasn't going to talk to her at all. She had been planning on finishing her cigarette and then sliding off the truck to head back inside.

"So," he said, looking at her. She looked into his eyes, expecting them to look drunk or high, but his light brown eyes appeared surprisingly sober and surprisingly serious.

"Sew buttons on your underwear," she heard herself say. The second the words left her mouth she blushed. It was something her dad used to say to her and she had said it so much as a little girl that it had become second nature.

"Wouldn't that be kind of uncomfortable?" he asked with a slight grin on his face. He was thrown off guard by her comment. But, in that moment, he wanted to know her.

She nodded distractedly and took a long drag to finish off the stub. She threw the small stub to the ground and fished in her purse for another cigarette.

"So," he repeated, "what's your name?"

"Olive."

He extended his hand. "Nice to meet you Olive. I'm Ted."

She shook his hand, trying to avoid the joint that still rested between his thumb and forefinger. It was an awkward handshake.

"Friend of the groom or the bride?" he asked.

"Bride," she said.

"Groom," he said. "I was an usher."

"Yeah, I think I saw you earlier," she said as she lit another cigarette.

They sat in silence for a moment and Olive saw him look at the moon again. It looked like it was a full moon. It hung in the dark sky like a bright, thin wafer. Olive

thought it looked like the communion wafers she would gingerly cup in the palm of her hand at church and that got stuck to the roof of her mouth. She hated it when things got stuck to the roof of her mouth. That's why she refused to eat peanut butter.

"So, you think they're going to make it?"

Olive smiled an ironic smile. "No. Do you?"

He looked at her and shook his head. "I give it six months."

"That's generous," Olive said, raising her right eyebrow. It was generous. She knew Samantha had already cheated on Warren and she was pretty sure he had cheated on her. She had no idea why they had gotten married.

Olive felt like she was slipping off the smooth hood, so she scooted back a little. Her dress hitched up a little as she did so, rising to just above her knees. She noticed him glance at her legs and she wondered what it would feel like to have his hands running up her legs.

"So," started Ted, "what do you do?"

"I'm a student at Kent College," she said.

"What are you studying?"

"English."

"You want to be a writer?"

Olive laughed and flicked some ash off her cigarette. "That's the plan. I'm not exactly sure if it's going to be realized, but that's the plan."

He took a long sip of beer. "Well, you know what they say," he said.

Olive looked at him. "What do they say?"

"The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry," he said in a slow drawl, for some reason adopting a Southern accent.

She smiled. "What about you?"

"I work at a drugstore," he said with a bitter smile. "I'm the manager."

"That's nice," she said, nodding her head as if to affirm the sincerity of a comment she knew to be rather shallow.

He looked at her and she could see something stir behind his eyes. "I'm twenty-four years old and I'm working at a drugstore. It's anything but nice." He took a long hit off the joint.

Olive felt stupid, but the alcohol inside her made her continue talking. "Well, what would you rather be doing?"

He studied his hands for a minute. "Nothing."

"Oh come on. You have to have some sort of passion," she said. He shook his head. "What did you want to be when you were a kid?"

He smiled and looked back at the moon. "That's easy. An astronaut."

"There you go," she said.

He laughed. "When I was in, oh I don't know, fifth grade I think, my science class watched a NASA video. I don't remember too much about the video, but I remember this astronaut, Alan Shepard. I just became obsessed with him for awhile."

"Why's that?"

"Oh, a lot of reasons. I mean, the man played fucking golf on the fucking moon."

"Yeah – I've seen those pictures. That's Alan Shepard?"

Ted nodded. "That's him." He sat still for a moment. "But, the best laid plans..." he said softly.

He looked over at Olive and she smiled. He held out the joint again. When she hesitated, he took a long hit, leaned over, and gently placed his mouth on top of hers, blowing the smoke into her mouth. She swallowed, coughed, and exhaled. Looking at Ted, she hoped with all her might he didn't think she was stupid. But he laughed, leaned over, and kissed her, his left hand resting on the right side of her face, his fingers just below her ear, his right hand softly resting on her left knee. The joint Ted held in his right hand was close to her knee and warmed up her skin.

Sitting in that same parking lot, now a year later, Olive remembered the feeling of that kiss. It was a perfect kiss – the kind of kiss that would haunt her for the rest of her life. At times, Olive craved that kiss. At times, she expected Ted to kiss her like that again. She was disappointed every time.

"Do you know why I'm with you?" Ted asked suddenly, breaking into Olive's thoughts.

She looked over at him and shook her head, a curious look in her eyes. She had always wondered why Ted was with her. He was cool and could entertain people by playing jazz riffs on his guitar, while Olive preferred to pop in a movie and crochet a scarf. He had a lot of friends who threw crazy parties, while Olive only had a handful of friends who preferred to play cards, using pretzel sticks and raisins as poker chips. He could get any girl he wanted – girls like Anastasia – while Olive had only ever had two boyfriends before, Steven in junior high who collected bugs and Kyle in high school who

served as the basketball team's mascot and would sometimes wear his eagle outfit when they fooled around.

Ted stared at Olive. "I'm with you because you're my reason to live."

She looked at him, surprised he was being so romantic. Ted wasn't one for romance. He didn't buy her flowers, he didn't whisper his love for her in the dark, he didn't surprise her with candlelight dinners.

Samantha had once asked Olive if it bothered her that there was no romance in her relationship. "Warren," Samantha had said, "is so romantic." He bought her a bouquet of flowers every week, he left little love notes in her purse and in her jeans pockets, and he bought her anything she wanted, no matter the cost.

Olive had listened to Samantha's description of Warren, wondering what it was he was hiding. Olive thought people only used romance to get what they wanted or to make up for something they had done. The cards accompanying the flowers usually read, "I love you," when they should have read, "Sorry baby, but I slept with a stripper last night." Olive wondered if men around the world followed the same motto: "Buy your girlfriend a bouquet of roses and all your indiscretions are erased."

Olive didn't mind that Ted wasn't romantic. She thought their relationship was more real without the romance. Romance was an illusion, it was fake. Instead, she appreciated the small things – the way he lightly rubbed her forehead whenever she had a headache, the way he took her hand in his whenever they had to wait in a line, the way he would wrap a towel around her when she had just stepped out of a bubble bath.

Looking at Ted, she said, "That's sweet." She didn't know what else to say.

He shook his head. "No. You're not following me." He sighed and placed his forehead on the steering wheel. In a muffled voice he said, "I was going to kill myself that night we met."

Olive felt a chill race through her body. The top of her head started to tingle and her eyes started to water. "You're kidding," she said in what sounded like a very loud voice to her ears.

He lifted his head off the steering wheel and faced her. She could see the pain in his eyes. "I had a gun in my pocket and I was going to...." He couldn't finish.

Olive opened her mouth, but no words came out. She didn't want to believe him. He had seemed so cool when they had first met. He had seemed like he didn't have a care in the world. That's why she had been attracted to him in the first place. Sitting on top of Ted's red truck that night, Olive had felt cool for the first time in her life. She had felt an excitement she had never felt before – like she was ditching math class to make out with her boyfriend underneath the bleachers in the gymnasium, something she had never done.

"I don't believe you," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I guess you don't have to believe me," he said. But he knew she did believe him. He looked up at the ceiling of his truck. "I was staring at the moon, thinking if only there was a reason to stay alive. Any reason." He turned to her. "And then you walked over."

Olive searched his face. She saw that he hadn't shaved in awhile. She loved kissing him when he hadn't shaved. He sometimes asked her if his bristly blonde hairs

hurt her soft skin, but she had told him it didn't bother her. It felt good. She wondered if it had bothered Anastasia.

"Why?" she asked. "Why would you want to do that?" She didn't understand.

"I had nothing to live for, Olive," he said, his voice angry. "I hated my job, my relationship with Anastasia was fucked up, I didn't have anyone I could turn to. You know my friends aren't good for anything except partying and my family...." He paused and Olive knew he was thinking about his family.

Ted had painted a picture of his family as the most devout Catholics alive – "they have halos above their heads, Bibles in their left hands, and stones in their right hands" he had once told her. He had said his mother was judgmental, his father was unforgiving, his older sister was a lawyer who strove for perfection and accepted nothing less, and his older brother was a stiff, politically correct accountant who never understood people's jokes. Ted had never gotten along with any of them, but he had tried his best to respect them. That worked until his parents had kicked him out after finding marijuana in his jacket when he was seventeen. He hadn't spoken to them much since.

"I just gave up," Ted said in a tired voice. He looked down at his hands.

"Haven't you ever felt like just giving up?"

Olive sighed. "Sure. Everyone feels that way at some point in their lives," she said. "But suicide?"

He shook his head. "You can't understand," he said. "But, Anastasia..." He stopped, but Olive knew what he was going to say.

"Let me guess," she said, "I can't understand, but Anastasia can."

He slowly nodded. "That drug overdose," he said softly. "It was no accident."

Olive couldn't believe she was hearing this. Ted and Anastasia were two of the coolest people she had ever met. She had never expected they would try to kill themselves. Not them.

"How do you know?" Olive asked.

"She told me."

Olive sat silently for a minute. "Did you tell her about...?"

He shook his head. "I never told anyone."

He wondered if anyone had ever suspected what he was planning. His friends had noticed how quiet he had become. Anastasia had noticed his lack of enthusiasm for sex. But none of them had ever asked him what was wrong. They all just made jokes about it, saying he was working too hard at the drugstore helping old ladies pick out hand creams.

"Was that the only time?" Olive asked.

"For Anastasia or for me?"

"For you."

"I had thought about it before. I had even fantasized about it before. But that was the only time I ever planned on actually going through with it." He reached over and held Olive's hand. He needed to touch her. He needed to feel her. "But the best laid plans..." he said, squeezing her hand.

She held onto his hand, but she couldn't look at him. She now realized the real reason Ted was with her.

"I really don't want to go back to Anastasia," Ted said softly. He traced Olive's hand with his thumb. She turned to look at him.

"I don't know, Ted," she said. "I don't know what to say."

He stared into her eyes. "Tell me you love me." His voice was pleading. He knew if Olive loved him, everything would be all right. He needed her to love him.

She shook her head. "It's like you're expecting me to save you," she said. "And I can't."

"What does that mean?"

Olive sat silently for a long time, her eyes closed, her hand limp in Ted's hand. At last she said, "Your life hasn't changed, Ted. You're still the manager of a drugstore. You're a year older and no closer to where you want to be. Your friends are still stupid, you still don't talk to your family, Anastasia still harasses you.... Your life isn't any different."

"You're the difference, Olive." He squeezed her hand hard.

She closed her eyes and saw Ted lying on the floor of his apartment, a gun in his hand, blood trickling from his head, his brain exposed as fragments of gray matter. She knew she couldn't deal with that.

Olive shook her head. "What will happen when we fight? Are you going to go grab a gun? What will happen if we decide to take a break? I can't be your reason to live. And I can't be your reason to die. I can't, Ted."

He withdrew his hand from hers and turned to stare out the window. Without turning to look at her he said in a hoarse whisper, "You don't love me do you?"

Olive looked at his back. She wanted to hold him in her arms and cry with him. She wanted to run her hands through his hair and kiss his ears. She wanted to tell him everything would be okay, that they would be together forever. She wanted to tell him she loved him and always would.

“We should get going,” Olive said. “It’s late and I have class tomorrow.”

Without looking at her, Ted jammed the key into the ignition, started the car, and began to drive. Olive pressed her forehead against the cool windowpane and turned her eyes to the sky, not realizing she had just missed a shooting star whizzing through the black sky just above the red truck.

V. PURGING THE PAST

Only a week and a half after the “For Sale” sign went up in the front yard, their house was sold. A middle-aged couple had walked through the house just a few days after the sign had gone up. The man’s face was covered in wiry brown hair and he wore his large, round sunglasses inside the house. The woman had long brown hair that went down to her knees and wore a long jean skirt. Olive thought they looked Amish, but they drove a black Lexus and Olive was pretty sure Amish people weren’t supposed to drive cars. And if they were allowed to drive cars, she thought, they were supposed to drive an old jalopy, not a nice black Lexus.

They had walked around the house, their eyes seeking out all its faults. They noticed the scratched-up hardwood floors from Bobby’s long nails. They noticed the water spots on the ceiling from when the roof had leaked. The man had even kicked up the rug lying on the family room floor to discover the bright yellow mustard stain permanently affixed to the beige carpet. Olive remembered when her parents had fought particularly fiercely one day and her mom had thrown a bottle of mustard at their dad. During that same fight her dad had broken two of their oak chairs from the dining room.

Olive had thought they weren’t going to buy the house. But that was before they entered Olive’s room. Olive’s room was the best room in the house. It had three large windows against two walls, so it had the most light of all the bedrooms. It was also the

biggest bedroom – Olive had plenty of space for her few possessions. Whereas her sister’s tiny room was filled to the brim with clothes and magazines and her brother’s small room was full of gadgets and video games, Olive’s spacious room held the bare essentials.

Her bed and nightstand occupied one corner of the room, her dresser another, and in the center of the room nestled between two windows, stood an ornate, white wall unit. The top portion of the unit consisted of five long shelves, neatly decorated with curly trimming, the middle portion consisted of a flat desktop, and the bottom portion consisted of cabinets housed behind two swinging doors with gold handles.

All of Olive’s bulky toys and games were neatly organized in her large closet and efficiently concealed behind the doors of her cabinets. Her box of shells, albums of baseball cards, sports equipment, and bins of Barbie clothes sat primly behind these doors. The flat desktop held a solitary notebook and pen – her “Idea Journal” for stories. The bookshelves didn’t hold books, but tinkling bells, ceramic and glass figurines, a small statue of the Empire State Building, a small glass from Dollywood, and other ornaments Olive thought too important to shut away. On the very top shelf sat a Raggedy Ann doll and two American Girls dolls – Molly and Felicity.

It was this wall unit the woman fell in love with. She whispered to her husband that she could use it to store all of her crafts. He nodded in agreement and said it was a fine room. He liked the peach walls and the fact that only one of the walls was papered with white wallpaper covered in small peach squiggles. A few days later, they put an offer on the house.

Now that the house was sold, everyone had to start packing. Her mom had started packing the day the sign had gone up, but Olive, Harrison, and Georgia had put off their packing, thinking they would have plenty of time. But the day the papers were signed, Olive's mom had come into her room and told her they had to move out by the end of the month. That gave them a little less than three weeks to pack up a house that had been lived in for fifteen years by five people and a dog, not to mention the gerbils, hamsters, fish, hermit crabs, and frogs that had lived in the house at one point or another.

Her mom gave her a few boxes and told Olive, "When in doubt, throw it away." But as Olive packed, she didn't throw anything away. Everything was important to her.

Given that Olive's room was already so organized, she was the first one finished packing up her room. She tried to help Georgia, but Georgia kept yelling at her to stop going through her private things. When she tried to help Harrison, he kept annoying her by telling her the story behind every single thing he owned. When he started telling her the meaning behind a rock he had saved since the second grade, Olive interrupted him and said she should help pack up the kitchen.

When she walked into the kitchen, she found her mom throwing a bunch of pots into a garbage bag.

"Aren't we going to need those?" Olive asked.

Her mom shook her head. "Grandma and Grandpa have plenty pots and pans. Besides," she said, looking at the rusty old pans, "these are pretty much worthless anyway."

Olive couldn't stand to see her mom throwing things away so carelessly, like they didn't mean anything to her at all. All week her mom had been throwing things away.

The garbage bags were piled up outside on their driveway and Olive could only wonder what was in all those bags. A few days ago, she had asked her mom why she was throwing so much away. Her mom had told her, "I'm purging the past." Olive wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but she knew it had something to do with her dad.

Her dad knew they had put the house up for sale, but he still didn't know they had already sold the house. Her mom had told them they weren't allowed to tell him until she said so. Olive wondered why they couldn't say anything. She thought it might have something to do with the fact that they were moving three hours away to live with their grandparents.

Olive really didn't want to live with her grandparents. She only ever saw them twice a year – at Christmas and during the summer. They were always yelling – at each other, at her parents, at her cousins. One Christmas, Olive had complained to her mom that they didn't have the chocolate pie she had asked for and her grandmother had scolded her, saying, "Life is tough, Olive. When you get lemons, you just can't make chocolate pie." Olive had no idea what lemons had to do with chocolate pie, but she had merely nodded, too scared to say anything.

Georgia and Harrison were just as reluctant to live with their grandparents as Olive. Georgia complained every day about the fact that she would have to share a room with Olive, when she had *never* had to share a room with *anyone* before. Harrison was less than thrilled that he would have to sleep in the basement – he thought it was scary down there and he would soon discover that it was freezing down there as well. They all knew their mom didn't want to move in with their grandparents any more than they did. Her fake smile and perky voice didn't fool them.

Olive wondered if this was the worst part of divorce. She had thought that once the divorce was final, everything would go back to normal. But being forced to move to a new town, go to a new school, and share a house with her grandparents was far worse than all the fights she had overheard.

Olive wandered around the house, noticing how it had transformed in such a short amount of time. Boxes and garbage bags were everywhere, shelves were empty, the walls were bare, and the little reassuring trinkets that had been scattered about the house were missing. The broken red and white clock that used to hang on the family room wall was gone. Georgia's picture of a horse, Harrison's picture of a car, and Olive's picture of a skyscraper were taken down from the living room walls. The big blue vase Olive used to hide money in was gone from its place atop the mantle in the living room. Even their family portrait that used to hang in the dining room had been taken down. It was probably sitting in one of the garbage bags outside, Olive thought.

As she walked around the house, it already seemed empty even though there were boxes everywhere and everyone's possessions were scattered all over the place. She looked forward to walking around the house when it was completely empty. However, she didn't realize the sight of the empty house, and especially her empty bedroom with the sad wall unit blankly staring at her, would bring her to tears the divorce was never able to call forth.

She knew she escaped most of the "drama" as Georgia called it. Georgia would often tell her she was lucky for being so young, because she couldn't understand anything. Olive knew Georgia was right. She was only seven when her parents had started having problems and she was only ten now. She still didn't understand half of

what had happened and she was pretty sure Harrison didn't understand all of it either. But Olive knew Georgia understood everything, or at least as much as a sixteen-year-old can understand, which Olive thought to be a lot.

Walking out of the kitchen, Olive decided not to help pack up the kitchen. Her mom had a look on her face like she wanted to be alone, so she decided to go out in the backyard to what she called "The Tree Bar."

"The Tree Bar" was Olive's favorite spot. It was an old bar she had found that she had nestled between the arms of two trees. The two trees stood just behind the fence in their backyard that separated their property from their neighbor's property, so technically they were her neighbor's trees, but he had told her he didn't mind. With a concrete block sitting at the base of the fence, Olive would step onto the block and climb the fence. Making sure to hold onto the tree, she would slowly turn around and settle herself onto the bar, her left hand always resting on the tree for support, her feet resting on the fence below. She could sit on that bar for hours, dreaming, thinking, and creating stories about the squirrels and rabbits that frequented their backyard.

As Olive settled herself onto the bar, she sat still for a minute, but before she could enjoy the scenery, the bar suddenly jarred and rolled forward. Olive rolled with it and found herself stomach-first on top of the fence. She could feel the wind had been knocked out of her and she struggled to breathe. Leaning back, she planted her feet on the ground and fell backwards, lying on the grass, gasping for air.

That had never happened before. Olive stared up at the bar, annoyed. She couldn't believe "The Tree Bar" had been ruined. She couldn't even leave the house with the few happy memories she had left intact. In later years, Olive would always remember

“The Tree Bar” as the place that turned on her during one of her most difficult times, rather than the place that had inspired stories and poems – including one poem that had even won first prize in a poetry contest sponsored by their public library.

Olive struggled to her feet and slowly climbed the fence back into her backyard. Lifting her shirt, she saw her stomach was already starting to bruise. She walked slowly back into the house, never mentioning what had happened to anyone else, and she started helping her mom throw things away so they could purge the past together.

MIDGET
SOLDIERS

Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name

Nobody came

Father McKenzie wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the
grave

No one was saved

All the lonely people

Where do they all come from?

All the lonely people

Where do they all belong?

– Eleanor Rigby, The Beatles

Walter Weaver preferred the company of the dead rather than the company of the living. The dead didn't see him as the rest of the world saw him. The dead didn't see the years of worry, regret, and sorrow etched into the sharp lines of his once smooth face. The dead didn't pay attention to his drooping shoulders and slumped head – life's burdens used to roll right off him, but they now inexplicably weighed him down. The dead didn't notice his once thick brown hair starting to recede at his deep, wide forehead, thinning and graying in the process. The dead didn't care that he had gained weight, his stomach hanging over his pants and never disappearing, not even when he sucked in his gut. The dead only distinguished him as a living man, not as an old man.

Late one cold Saturday afternoon, he walked down a muddy path lined with colossal trees and, stepping away from the path, strolled past rows and rows of protruding stone tablets. In the middle of a row, he suddenly stopped walking and faced the graveyard, squinting his eyes until everything went soft and fuzzy. He often did this to help him gain perspective. The dreary grave markers transformed into midget soldiers standing as tall and erect as they could, impressively clad in gray uniforms, filed in straight lines, ready to go to battle. Ready to die.

As Walter slowly opened his eyes, the fuzziness lifted like someone was snapping open a blind and letting the sunshine stream in. He looked around and felt a chill of the past sweep through him. He hadn't been inside a cemetery like this since he was a little boy, more concerned with one of his toy trucks breaking than one of his relatives dying.

From the time he was five until he was eleven, Walter had attended nine funerals – four of his uncles had died (three from his dad's side – two strokes and a car accident, one from his mom's side – suicide), both sets of grandparents had died (dad's side –

congestive heart failure and stroke, mom's side – lung cancer and diabetes), and his own dad had died (brain aneurism). As a small child in a family of practically all adults (he had no siblings and his four cousins were all in high school or college), his mom had allowed him to bring a toy to each funeral so he wouldn't get bored.

While everyone else bustled around talking and crying and laughing, Walter would always find the darkest corner of the room, sit for hours, and play with his toy of choice – always a truck. Blocking out the incessant buzzing noise of funerals (the noise never failed to surprise Walter – he had always equated funerals to libraries since everyone always hushed up when talking about funerals and everyone spoke softly at libraries) he would create stories in his head about cowboys and firefighters, robbers and aliens each using his truck as the getaway car or the rescue vehicle.

At the first funeral Walter went to – Uncle Art's funeral (stroke) – he had conjured up a wild story about aliens crashing their spaceship in a cornfield near his house, stealing his truck, and fixing it so it would fly them back to their home-planet. It was a story that made him giggle with delight as he zoom, zoomed his truck around in the air on its way to Wekonian – Bufar and Gufar's home-planet. Great-aunt Phyllis, her hawk-like eyes watching Walter through her spectacles, walked over to him, her wide hips stretching out the black dress she wore, and knelt down on the floor looking like an animal crouching to attack its trembling prey.

“Walter Ormond Weaver! What *are* you doing?”

His glassy green eyes wide with fright, Walter lowered his hand and carefully placed his truck on the dark red carpet, quietly apologizing to Bufar and Gufar for the unexpected delay and quietly hoping great-aunt Phyllis wouldn't eat him. She terrified

Walter more than any other person he had ever seen, ever heard about, or ever imagined. The pointy nose, the cold eyes that seemed more black than blue, the scary mole on the left cheek that seemed to grow darker by the minute, and the severe scowl perpetually stretched across the wrinkled face, making the black eyebrows seem very big and the blood-red lips seem very thin – it all reinforced Walter's notion that she was, in fact, a monster.

It didn't help that Walter's cousins enjoyed telling him scary stories about great-aunt Phyllis which usually ended with her gobbling up some little boy or girl when they annoyed her. "That's why she gets fatter and fatter each time you see her," they would tell him.

Looking at great-aunt Phyllis and trying to avoid looking at her mole, Walter had tried to think of an answer that wouldn't annoy her. But all he could come up with was, "I'm playing with my truck."

"Well, of all the things," great-aunt Phyllis huffed, her voice loud. "I don't know why your mother let you bring that dumpy little truck to poor Arthur's funeral. Completely disrespectful. He lies dead in that coffin and you play with that truck. Do you understand that your uncle is dead?"

"Yes, ma'am," Walter whispered. He knew Uncle Art was dead. He just wasn't exactly sure what that meant.

"Well, you should show some respect to poor Arthur. All the things he's done for the family...." She trailed off, an odd look on her face that scared Walter. He was sure she was getting ready to eat him. Instead, she threw him a dirty look, mumbled something Walter couldn't make out, struggled to her feet, and walked away to argue

with Walter's mom. Only when she was on the other side of the room did Walter breathe, unaware that he had been holding his breath.

It was during the funeral that Walter's truck had broken, one of the wheels falling off although he had barely touched it. Glancing sideways at great-aunt Phyllis, who was seated in the row behind him dabbing at her eyes although she wasn't crying, Walter wondered if she had put a curse on his truck. It was a curse he came to believe in over the years, for almost every toy he brought to subsequent funerals had either broken (most of the time one of his relatives stepped on it) or gotten lost – every toy except for the one he had taken to his dad's funeral as a ten-year old boy who needed the small fire engine his dad had bought him more as a comfort than as a playmate.

As Walter stood between the rows of graves thinking about his childhood, he remembered how all of the cemeteries had seemed jungle-like with thickets of trees bordering the land, vines snaking from tree trunks to tombstones, and eternal weeds growing wild. The cemeteries had also had a feeling of the ancient. The tombstones looked old and decrepit, the gray stones faded and crumbling, weather-worn and sad. Now cemeteries seemed sterile and new, with fresh paths, filtered dirt, waxy green grass, and shiny tombstones that gleamed in the sunlight.

But the cemetery he now stood in was one of the ancients – the black, wrought-iron fence hemming him in, the lumpy, uneven ground, the canopy of thick trees blocking out the fading sunlight, and the uniform gray tablets slowly decomposing. There were no heart-shaped tombstones here, no pink marble, no shrines with balloons and bright flowers and teddy bears. Just the gray stones, the dark earth, and the occasional old

statue staring at passers-by with a serene, yet reproachful look – “thank you for coming, but please shut up,” they seemed to say.

Walter knew somewhere in the cemetery Jesus was nailed to the cross, but he couldn't remember where he was and didn't feel like looking for him. It always made him feel guilty, seeing the look of agony, the writhing body, the slow death. He figured Jesus wasn't as upset for being nailed to the cross as he was for being nailed to the cross in order to save people like Walter. Whenever he looked at the statue, Walter could hear Jesus cry out, “Why do I have to die for *that* guy? He cheats on his taxes and picks his nose! Shouldn't he be up here instead of me?”

It was the statues that made Walter feel uncomfortable – they always seemed to be watching his every move. Other than that, he felt quite at home in the cemetery, happy at the sight of the dark and decaying – it reminded him of his dark and decaying childhood and although the memories weren't the happiest or brightest, they were memories all the same. Good or bad, they were his and would always be his.

Looking around, Walter spotted a pile of fresh dirt that appeared out of place among the surrounding yellow and brown patches of dead grass and old, packed dirt. He quietly walked the twenty yards to the grave and stood, intently watching the dirt as if expecting a hand to pop out, snatch his ankle, and pull him down under.

Two weeks ago, Carl, one of his co-workers at the phone company, had a heart attack and died, right there at his cubicle, slumped across his keyboard, his nose resting on the f button. By the time he was discovered, his nose had typed out twenty pages of the letter f – single spaced. A joke surfaced in the hallways of the office that Carl's dying

message was the word “fuck” – a message he wasn’t quite able to finish, but a message that got its point across all the same.

It was by this fresh plot that Walter had recently stood, watching Carl’s wife cry and his kids stare blankly at the casket that housed the man who used to be their father. They cried and stared and cried some more, but none of their emotions affected Walter. It was the use of the past tense that bothered Walter the most. “Carl was a good man.” “He lived a good life.” “He would have wanted us to remember the good times.” Within a matter of minutes – seconds even – Carl had gone from living, breathing man to cold, dead remains. It was a thought that terrified Walter whenever he allowed his mind to think about it.

When Carl’s casket was lowered into the ground, Walter had barely paid attention – he was more interested in looking at all of the gravestones, trying to see if there were any Walters or any Weavers among the bunch, as he used to do as a child. But, a few of the guys had invited him to grab a beer afterwards so he hadn’t gotten a chance to walk around very much.

Now, Walter left Carl’s grave with a quick thumbs-up at the mound of dirt (he didn’t want to be rude) and walked at a brisk pace among the rows, his eyes quickly scanning each of the tombstones for the names of its occupant – Maria Anderson, 1914-1945; Matthew Alexander, 1933-1988; Rory Lansing, 1952-1971; Kate Wilson, 1965-1990; Meredith McCormick, 1961-1971; Michael Lewis, 1978-1992. He walked until he came across a crumbly tombstone splashed with bird poop – Patrick Smith, 1945- 2003. He stopped, catching his breath in the cold air.

“You were my age when you died,” Walter said.

"I know," Patrick said from the ground, leaning his back against the tombstone.

"How did it happen?" Walter slid down to the floor and leaned against the tombstone next to Patrick's. The cold from the stone traveled through his sweatshirt and chilled his skin.

"Old age, ya know?"

"Old age? You were only fifty-eight years old."

"Only!" Patrick snorted, shaking his head. His gray hair ruffled slightly in the breeze and he twitched the side of his nose. Walter noticed his fingernails were caked with dirt and grime.

"That's young," Walter argued in a defensive voice.

"If you say so," Patrick said, shrugging his shoulders.

Walter watched him for a minute. Patrick studied his dirty fingernails, brushed some dirt off his gray jeans, and cracked his knuckles. He seemed completely unaware of his surroundings and uninspired by Walter's presence.

"You know, I was here last week...."

"Yep," Patrick interrupted him. He smiled at the startled look on Walter's face.

"I saw you."

"So you must have seen Carl too?"

"Sure."

"He was three years younger than me when he died. Three years."

"So? Nobody knows how long they have – do they? I died at fifty-eight, my old man died at eighty-two, my granddad when he was ninety-one, and my niece when she was four. Everyone goes their own way at their own time."

"I suppose," Walter said sticking his hands in his pocket to warm them up. The crisp air was rapidly cooling down. He wondered what he should ask Patrick. It seemed like he could ask him just about anything. What did dying feel like? What did Heaven look like (or Hell)? Were there really angels? Was there really a God? Was there life on other planets? Who shot JFK?

But he didn't feel like he knew Patrick well enough to ask him those questions. So he settled on, "What do you miss most?"

Patrick turned his blue eyes on him. "About what?"

Patrick laughed at the uncertain look on Walter's face, his mouth open wide. Walter noticed he was missing a few teeth. "Just kiddin'. Man, you gotta lighten up. You don't and you'll end up in here," he said, patting the soft earth. "Let me see, let me see. What do I miss most?" He thought about it, his face in earnest concentration, the lines around his mouth deep and sharp. "I miss takin' road trips with my family." He unleashed a loud, deep guffaw that startled Walter. It was a laugh full of memories, the kind of laugh that comes from the deepest part of a person. "Damn man, every time we hopped in our little, blue Escort, somethin' would go wrong and we'd all end up hatin' each other, wantin' to tear each other's eyes out. I miss those trips most," he said.

Walter noticed a sad look in his eyes.

"Really?" Walter wondered if he was messing with him again, but Patrick just nodded.

"Everythin' has an opposite, man. Up, down. Hot, cold. Love, hate. And I'll tell you what. We never would have been able to love each other so much without those trips where we could hate each other. It's funny the way life works out."

He stopped and looked up at the darkening sky as a plane soared across the sky, the engines humming louder and louder as it flew straight over their heads. Patrick turned around and continued to watch the plane fly away. Walter stared straight ahead. He tried to think about what he would miss most when he was gone, but it was a question he wasn't sure he could answer. It seemed like everything in his life had already been taken away from him. What else did he have to lose?

Last month, Walter had been a middle-aged man who felt thirty, acted thirty, and lived thirty. What a difference a month makes, he thought. Within those thirty-one days, his own death was made more inevitable through Carl's death, his girlfriend had left him for another man, his health was slowly being flushed down the toilet, and he had been called an old geezer by a group of unhappy teens congregating in the parking lot of the grocery store. His life was in a slow decline and he was going it alone. The going it alone part was what scared him more than the actual decline. He had never been alone before. First he had his parents, then his wife and kids, then his girlfriend. Now, he had nobody.

The day before Carl's funeral Jane had told him she was leaving him for a man she had met at the gym. No apologies. No "we have to talk." As Walter ate a Twinkie, she simply said, "I fell in love with someone else and I'm moving out tomorrow." It was as if she was saying she needed to go grocery shopping to get some milk and eggs. His Twinkie mid-air, Walter said he thought they were happy. He thought they were in love. "No," she said. "You're happy. You're in love. I'm not. I don't think I ever was."

She blamed him. She told him they never did anything fun – all he ever wanted to do was sit around and watch television. He couldn't argue with that because he knew it

was true. She had nagged him since the beginning to go to the theater, the opera, out to eat, dancing. She even wanted to go on trips to the Bahamas and Jamaica. But he always had an excuse ready – not enough money, a headache, work. So they would stay in and watch basketball or baseball or all of the crime shows he enjoyed so much even though Jane would have to look away most of the time since she got sick at the sight of blood.

He asked her who the man was and she refused to tell him. Just someone from the gym, she said with a casual wave of her hand as if shooing a fly away. Seeing how unaffected she was, Walter realized that she wasn't in love with him. It surprised him. It shouldn't have surprised him though – he had always known he wasn't in love with Jane. He had thought he might eventually fall in love with her, but he had never been all that fussed about it. He had started the relationship with her for two reasons and two reasons only. The thrill and excitement of a double life (he preferred double life to cheating) went without saying, but the second reason no one knew about.

The main reason he had started seeing Jane was because he knew Nora was thinking of leaving him. The word "divorce" seemed to always hang in the air between the two of them. And he knew he wouldn't have been able to handle it if she had left him. So, he made the first move and like dominos, their marriage toppled over until everything fell flat. Walter liked to think of it as self-preservation, but he knew it was really just his fear of being alone that had driven him outside the marriage. And look where it got me, he thought. All alone.

Jane had left the next day. It confused him as to how she could have packed all her belongings so quickly until he realized she must have been planning this for months. That made him feel even worse. All this time, he thought everything was fine and she

was plotting her escape. It made him feel stupid. He should have seen it coming, but he hadn't been paying attention. He was too busy watching TV, going to work, and pretending to be someone he wasn't. Now that she was gone, he had decided to try to figure out who he was. But he didn't have the faintest idea who he was – his identity had always been wrapped up in other people. Now that he had nobody in his life, it was almost like he no longer had an identity.

Walter looked at Patrick and cleared his throat, trying to get his attention. But Patrick was still looking at the sky, now intent on watching the soft glow of the sunset fade slowly into darkness.

“Are you lonely?”

Patrick smiled, his eyes still looking up at the sky. “Course not.”

“Really?” Walter didn't believe him.

“Sure. Why – you lonely?”

Walter shrugged. “I guess so.”

“What about your family?”

“I haven't seen my kids in a long time.”

“Why not?”

“I don't know. I don't think they really want to see me. I think they all blame me for splitting up the family.”

Patrick lowered his eyes and turned to face Walter. “Why's that?”

“Because I did,” Walter said frankly, slightly lifting his shoulders up in a weary shrug.

“Don't know what to tell you man.”

"You don't?" Walter was disappointed.

Patrick laughed. "What, you think I'm God or something? I ain't no God. I ain't nobody no more. Just a ghost talking to a lonely man in a cemetery. I know what I know and that's about it."

"What do you know?"

"Man, all I know is that in the end it all comes down to life and death. How do you live and how do you die? The answers to those questions tell a lot about a man. An awful lot."

"How did you live?"

"Worked hard, played hard, loved hard. Had my faults and sinned from time to time, but I always kept going and tried to do better. That's about all a man can do."

"How did you die?" Walter tried to hide the curiosity in his voice.

"My little girl? Thought she was still in the house when it caught on fire one summer. Went back in after her and got stuck. Next thing I know," he said, placing his palms up in the air, "I'm dead."

"Was your daughter okay?"

"Yep. She jumped out her window and broke her leg, but she was all right. So was everyone else, 'cept Johnnie, our old dog. And me, come to that."

"What happened after you died?"

"I don't quite remember. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. Right now is one of those times I don't."

"Were you burned?"

“Yep. I got charred up pretty bad. Looked like a blazin’ marshmallow.”

Walter frowned. “How come you don’t have any burns on you now?”

Patrick laughed. “Man, my body was burned, not me.”

“Oh.” Walter had no idea what Patrick was talking about.

“So, why are you here tonight?” Walter heard the curiosity in Patrick’s voice. It seemed strange that anyone could ever be curious about him, especially Patrick.

Walter saw a pair of glowing eyes staring at him in the distance. He figured it was a raccoon scouting for food. “My house is empty – it’s just me and my TV and my couch. I feel dead there. I feel alive here.”

Patrick nodded. “Sure. It takes death to feel alive,” he said. “Makes sense.”

Walter sighed. “I don’t know. Sometimes I just want to be a little kid again. I want to tag along with my dad to the hardware store and watch him hold the tools up so close to his face that he would sometimes bonk himself on the nose and then laugh about it. I want my mom to tuck me in at night and sing *Hey Jude* so I can join in with the na-na-nas.” He stopped suddenly, surprised at the emotion welling inside his chest. He had almost forgotten these things. He wondered what made him remember them.

“Man, people grow up. It’s what they do.”

“I know.”

Walter continued to think about his parents. Neither of them had been big on emotion – he could count on his fingers the number of times his dad had said “I love you” and it didn’t take all of his toes to figure in his mom. But, Walter had still felt loved by both of them – the happy look in his mom’s eyes, the gentle voice his dad always used, even when he was impatient. He wondered if his kids felt loved by him. At the end of

every phone conversation he always said “love you” and he meant it, but he knew it never sounded like he meant it. They were just words to say most of the time and he knew his kids picked up on it. Their “love you too” responses were quick and standard, sometimes rushed to the point where he couldn’t make out the words.

“You should call your kids. See if they want to get together.”

“They wouldn’t want to,” Walter said.

“You gotta try, man. My little girl? Not a day goes by I don’t regret I went back in to get her. I died ‘cuz of it, but if she had died? If I had never tried? Couldn’t live with myself, man. I’m better off for tryin’ and dyin’.” He smiled at his rhyme.

Walter looked down at his hands and sat in silence.

“Call them.”

Walter continued to sit in silence for a long time. When it started to drizzle, he reached into his pocket and grabbed a tiny flashlight attached to his keys. Shining it on the base of Patrick’s tombstone, he picked up a small twig and worked its way into the grooves of Patrick’s name, slowly working out the dirt and grime that had built up.

When he was done, he snapped off the light and stowed it back in his pocket. Shivering, he slowly stood up and saluted Patrick’s tombstone – in the dark, it looked less like a tiny midget soldier ready for war and more like a tombstone quietly resting in the shade of night.

EPILOGUE

As the wind begins to howl and the rain starts to pour down in torrents, Walter stands by the fireplace in the living room, silently staring into its empty chambers. He always loved lying in front of a hot fire, with the kids running around the room, Bobby wanting to play fetch, and the fire burning brighter and higher as he threw newspapers on top of it. As he looks into the fireplace, he realizes he hasn't enjoyed a fire in years.

Nora stands by the front window, looking across the street. She wonders if the Burkes still live across the street in the white house and if the Hergers still live next door in the green house. Of everyone on the street, Nora always liked Betty Burke and Sara Herger the best. When they found out about Nora's marital problems, their words had been most comforting. Perhaps it was because they had both experienced cheating husbands first-hand and had told Nora to grab the nearest knife to chop off his dick. It was exactly what Nora had needed to hear.

Georgia, Harrison, and Olive walk into the living room and observe their parents. Olive, for some reason, feels like she's a little girl, standing in her Rainbow Brite nightgown and bare feet, trying to subtly pick a wedgie. Standing next to her, Harrison begins to feel the strangeness of being in the old house, knowing it's going to be torn down the next day. He looks around the living room and realizes this is the last time he will ever be in the living room. It's a strange feeling. Georgia, on the other hand, feels a little relieved that the house is going to be torn down. She always felt the house was

cancerous and she has always been prepared for its death. Deep down inside of her, so far deep down that she's not even aware of it, however, is a feeling of hope. Walter turns around and looks over at his kids. He focuses on Georgia.

"Remember all the fires we used to have? You used to love those fires," he says, turning back around to the fireplace and squatting down as if to stoke the nonexistent flames. "Every single time we had a fire, you would put on a show for your mother and me, whether it was singing and dancing or acting out a play you had made up. You always had a trick up your sleeve to keep us entertained." He turns around to look at Georgia and stops, seeing the stony look on her face.

"That was a long time ago," she says.

"Yes, it was," he says with a sigh. He stands up and looks at the mantelpiece where they used to string up Christmas lights and silver garland after every Thanksgiving. The long, white mantel is covered with a light coating of dust. He runs his forefinger along the wood and wipes up some dust.

"I'll be right back," he says, already edging out of the room. "I'm just going to grab something from the car real quick."

As she watches him walk out of the room through narrowed eyes, Georgia wonders if he's going to come back. Meanwhile, Olive quickly walks over to the wall facing the driveway, as if she has just remembered something.

"Look how little we used to be," she says, softly fingering the pencil indentations their parents had made in the wood paneling in order to measure their height each year. Next to each indentation are the initials of each of their names, as well as their age scribbled into immortality right there on the wall.

Harrison walks over, leaning close to the wall to get a good look at their faded history. "I completely forgot about this," he says, laying his hands flat against the wall as if to soak in his childhood, and in turn, his innocence.

They continue to examine the wall, working their way down to when they were at their shortest when Walter walks back into the room, shaking his wet hair like the dog used to do after a bath.

"Look what I brought," he says. He sets two dripping grocery bags on the floor and pulls out plates, plastic forks, Styrofoam cups, a bottle of wine, and a large butter pecan pie. It is the only kind of pie they will all eat.

Everyone watches as Walter arranges everything neatly on the floor. Harrison clears his throat nervously, glances at his mom, and says, "What's this all about, dad?"

Walter shrugs as he attempts to open the bottle of wine. "I just thought it would be nice for everyone to see the house one last time," he says. "That's all."

Olive glances at Harrison, who then glances at Georgia. Olive and Harrison wait for Georgia to say something, but she remains silent. Nora watches Walter struggle with opening the bottle of wine. She too wonders what Walter is up to. After sixteen years of marriage she knows when something is on his mind. However, she has more important things she wants to talk about.

"So, Georgia, are you still seeing Tony?"

"Yep, we're still together," Georgia says in a tense voice. She knew it would only be a matter of time before her mom would start harping on about their love lives. She was always first to enter the ring, followed closely by Harrison and Olive.

"It must be serious," Nora says eagerly. "This is the longest you've ever been with anyone."

Georgia shrugs, but Nora doesn't notice her. "Let's see, your first real boyfriend was Andre when you were in college, he wanted to be a lawyer. Then there was Billy, the goofy one who wanted to be a comic even though he wasn't very funny. Then Sam, the basketball player. And now, Tony, the dentist."

Georgia nods and says, "I think you've covered everyone mom."

"Have you heard from any of them?"

"Who?"

"You know. Have you heard from Andre or Billy or Sam? Do you know what any of them are doing now?"

Georgia rolls her eyes as her dad starts handing out plates of pie. "The last I heard, Andre was engaged to some girl he met in law school, Billy moved to Los Angeles, and I haven't heard anything about Sam." She accepts a plate from her dad without looking at him and sets it down on the ground before her.

"I always liked Sam the best," Nora says, glancing at Georgia. "I know you weren't with him very long, but he just seemed so nice. And he was so tall."

Georgia looks away from her mom and says, "He was tall."

Although Georgia hadn't heard anything from Sam for almost three years after they broke up, he had finally contacted her about a year ago. He wrote her a long letter, telling her he had decided to join the Army for "a new perspective and a new purpose." After that first letter, Georgia has received a letter almost every week. She keeps them in a shoebox she has hidden in the top of her food pantry. Although she's not sure how she

feels about Sam, she realizes the connection they have between them is special and always will be special. She knows that when he comes back from Iraq she would like to see him.

Nora looks over at Harrison. "Well, how about you honey? How's Gretchen?"

"Oh, she's fine," Harrison says, cringing that his turn has come on him so fast.

"You should have brought her with today. Why didn't you bring her?"

Harrison shrugs. "She had other plans."

"So when are you two going to give me some grandkids?" Nora asks in a teasing, yet serious, voice.

"Maybe never, mom," Harrison says in a sour voice.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nora asks, a look of concern on her face. "Are you two having problems?"

Harrison quickly shakes his head. "I was just joking, mom. We're just not ready for kids yet." But, he's not joking. Ever since they got married three years ago, things have gone downhill. But Harrison knew that would happen, so although it took Gretchen by surprise, he wasn't bothered by it.

Walter studies Harrison for a moment as he hands him a cup full of red wine. "How's Charlie doing?"

Harrison takes the cup, smiles, and looks up at his dad. "He's good. We went to a Sox game last weekend actually. We're planning on going to another game pretty soon." He and Charlie have been spending a lot of time together. And although Gretchen always offers to fix Charlie up with her single girlfriends, he always declines, saying he prefers the simple life.

Olive says, "I like Charlie. He's cool." She starts to dig into her pie, but is interrupted by her dad who says he wants her to wait until everyone has a piece of pie and a glass of wine. She sighs and puts her plastic fork down on her plate, annoyed by being chastised.

Nora raises an eyebrow. "Well, maybe your brother can arrange a date for you and Charlie, seeing as how you're not dating anyone."

Olive rolls her eyes as Harrison says, "I don't think Charlie's really Olive's type."

"No offense to Charlie," Olive says, looking at Harrison, "but you're right. He's not my type." She grins at the thought of dating big, lumbering Charlie.

"Well, what is your type, Olive?" Nora asks. "You've never really dated anyone before. Don't you want to have a boyfriend and be in a relationship?" She looks worried when she says this, as if the word "spinster" is flashing like a neon sign in her mind.

"Maybe when I'm forty," Olive says with a slight shrug. "Oh, I'm just kidding, mom," she says, seeing the startled look on her mom's face. "I just still feel too young to be in a relationship. I see how much trouble it is for everyone else and I just don't want to have to deal with it yet."

Nora shakes her head. "I'm just worried about you, Olive."

"Don't be," Olive says in a clipped tone. She looks away from her mom and thinks about Ted. She hasn't heard from him since they broke up last October and she often worries about him. The stress of worrying so much is starting to get to her, especially since she has no one to talk to about it. She never really told anyone in the first place that she had been seeing Ted – none of her family knew he existed and only a few of her college friends had known about him and they all thought they were still

together. Olive just hadn't felt like explaining why she had broken up with him to everyone, not when they had always been commenting on how happy she looked and how in love she must be.

"How about you mom?" Georgia asks unexpectedly. "Are you seeing anyone?"

Walter tenses up at this question, rearranging his face so that it looks casual. He has always wondered if Nora ever dated after their divorce, but he has never asked. He tries to look busy as he cuts himself a piece of pie.

"Of course not," Nora says. "All men are evil." She glances at Walter when she says this, but he doesn't look at her. She smiles, glad she decided not to mention John. They met three months ago at a movie theater. They both went to see a movie by themselves and ended up having dinner together. For the first time in her life, Nora feels like she has found her soul mate. However, she keeps her fingers perpetually crossed just in case.

Walter quickly pours himself a cup of wine and then holds his cup up in the air.

"I propose a toast," he says, looking around the room at his family. Everyone is sitting in a loose circle, a big empty space between Walter and Harrison, another cavernous space between Olive and Georgia.

He waits for everyone to raise their cup. Harrison does so without hesitation, but Olive rolls her eyes, Nora sighs, and Georgia grumbles, just barely lifting her cup above the ground.

"To a wonderful house full of wonderful memories," he says. "Cheers." Because the circle is so large, they all thrust their cups forward a bit before drinking.

Everyone is silent for a while as they alternately eat their pie and drink their wine. Nora is surprised at how good the wine tastes. She glances at the bottle and recognizes the label – it's a very expensive wine. Olive digs into the butter pecan pie, a sound of sugar ecstasy escaping her lips. She hasn't had butter pecan pie in years, but it tastes just as she remembers it. Georgia feels a bit sick to her stomach, realizing red wine and butter pecan pie don't necessarily make a good combination. Harrison drinks his wine slowly, lost in his thoughts. He can't help but feel something is still wrong. After a few more minutes, he decides to broach the subject again.

"Is something wrong?"

Walter looks up from his pie. "Why do you ask that?"

"I don't know," Harrison says. "It's just," he pauses looking at his slice of pie.

"Do you realize whenever you and mom had bad news to tell us you would always serve us pie?"

Nora looks over at Harrison. "That's not true," she quickly says without really thinking about it.

Georgia nods her head slowly and looks at Nora. "Actually, it is true. Think about it. I remember you gave me and Harrison pie when you told us you were pregnant with Olive. I think it was strawberry pie."

"Hey," Olive says in dismay. "You consider my birth bad news?"

Georgia shrugs, but Harrison grins. "Well, not anymore maybe," Harrison says.

"But at the time, yeah."

Olive rolls her eyes. "Well, you also did it when you told us you were going to put Bobby to sleep," she says looking first at Walter and then at Nora. "We had blueberry pie then. I remember because I hate blueberry pie."

"You hate practically all pies," Georgia says a little irritably.

Olive shrugs as if to say, "so what?"

"Yeah, I remember," Harrison says slowly, nodding his head. That sunny August day had been one of the worst days of his life. He hasn't thought about it in a long time, but now that he is thinking about it, he feels a deep longing for his old companion. Bobby was the only one who ever truly understood Harrison, the only one who accepted Harrison for who he was, rather than who he could be or who he should be.

Georgia sighs. "No wonder I don't like pie anymore," she says looking at her barely-touched piece of pie. "Too many bad memories."

Nora looks at Georgia. "We did not always give you guys pie when we had bad news," she says in a slightly argumentative tone.

"We had pie when we told the kids we couldn't take them to Disney World," Walter says, looking at Nora. "What was it, lemon meringue?"

Olive makes a face like she's about to throw up. "I remember that," she says. "Lemon meringue is the worst." She shoves a big bite of pie into her mouth as if to get rid of the bad taste from the lemon meringue still lingering in her taste buds all these years later.

"We had cherry pie when you told us Aunt Mary had died," Harrison says, referring to an old neighbor everyone called Aunt Mary, even the adults. She used to give the neighborhood kids candy in exchange for a drawing or a colored picture hastily

ripped from a coloring book. All the kids had been in agreement: Aunt Mary had the best candy.

“We had apple pie after we found you with your girlfriend,” Georgia says quietly, looking at Walter. “Remember?”

Walter looks down into his cup of wine. The room is deathly silent. He looks back up at his family and finds them all staring at him, waiting for his response. Nora has a look of curiosity on her face, Olive a look of surprise, and Harrison a look of apprehension. Georgia’s face is stone – Walter can’t tell what she is feeling or thinking.

“I remember,” he says in a broken voice, nodding his head slowly. “I remember.”

He looks back down at the pie resting on the floor and feels pressure on his chest, like he needs to cry. He knows his relationship with Georgia has suffered the most. He knows it may never be repaired. It hurts him more than anyone will ever know.

Although a big part of her enjoys watching Walter squirm, Nora doesn’t want her last memories of the house to be that of a big blowout fight. She has too many of those memories and really doesn’t need any more. However, she doesn’t know what to say or how to change the subject. She looks at Harrison.

“So, there’s no bad news then,” Harrison says, looking at his dad.

“No,” Walter says. “No bad news. I just thought it would be nice to get together in the old house one last time. One last Weaver hurrah.” As he says this, lightning flashes outside the windows and a deep rumbling thunder shakes the house.

Georgia glances at Harrison, relieved he changed the subject. Over the years she has made sarcastic comments to her dad and has always felt better after speaking her mind, but tonight, dredging up the past is making her feel worse. She can’t help but

wonder if it's finally time for her to forgive him. She has a feeling everyone else has, even her mom.

"Well," Walter says with some hesitation. "I guess I do have some bad news." He looks around the room, a sheepish look on his face. "Jane left me for another man," he says. As he says this, he expects to feel sad, but he doesn't.

"You're kidding," Nora says, wondering if Walter really is making a joke.

He shakes his head and unexpectedly begins to chuckle. "She met some guy at the gym and fell in love with him," he says, laughing harder. "She said I was boring." He holds his stomach, he is laughing so hard.

"Are you drunk?" Olive asks her dad.

He shakes his head and wipes his eyes. Tears are streaming down his face.

Georgia watches her dad and a small smile spreads across her face. "Remember that time when I persuaded Harrison and Olive to spray paint the garage with red spray paint," she says to her dad. He nods, still laughing.

"It took me three coats of paint to get it back to normal," he gasps, still holding his sides.

Harrison walks over to where his dad is sitting and grabs the wine bottle, slowly walking around the room to refill everyone's cup. When he sits back down, he joins in the conversation, reminiscing about the time when the entire family played a practical joke on their neighbors on April Fool's Day. Everyone is now laughing freely as they share memories and drink wine.

It is approximately half past midnight on the third Sunday in July of 2006 and the storm rages on outside. The thunder bangs loudly at Hawkins Lane where it startles a

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small boy with straw-colored bangs from a deep sleep. He jumps out of bed, races into his parent's bedroom, and snuggles in between his mom and dad who both lightly snore. A few streets over, a middle-aged couple lie in bed, exhausted from making love. As his wife drifts off to sleep, the man wonders, as he often does, what life would have been like if he hadn't crashed his car into her fence that summer many years ago. Meanwhile, the Weavers remain in their home, spread out across the living room, sharing one last slice of the pie.