

SUCCEEDING SERENDIPITY

A University Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of
California State University, East Bay

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

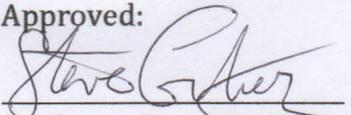
By
Jacquelyn A. Spence
August 2018

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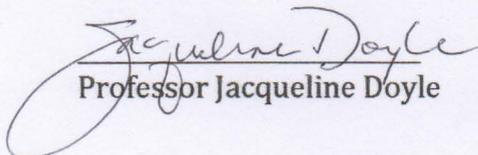
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Table of Contents

Clay: August 18, 1986.....	1
Jeanine: November 3, 2002.....	15
Jeanine: April 11, 1982.....	28
Violet: April 20, 2018.....	37
Tom: March 24, 2015.....	52
Helen: September 3, 1986.....	69
Jeanine: April 25, 2020.....	80

Clay: August 18, 1986

I had hoped I'd make my parents proud. That was all I was trying to do, growing up. I did good in school, mostly. I played baseball for my high school team. After school, I worked at a shoe store so I could help my parents out a little. Not much, but I'd put aside \$100 here or there. Made 'em proud when I got my diploma. Mom and Dad were seventeen when they had my older sister and never got the chance to finish up. Mom always talked about trying for her GED, but she worked as a receptionist and took care of the house and the neighbor's kids and she was just too tired by the end of the day to think of picking up a book. And Dad was never that interested in school anyway, I guess. He just liked shop class, which I guess is why he started working at the garage. He was always pretty practical. I feel like he sometimes wished people were like engines he worked on; wished they were a little simpler and more predictable. Mom always understood that about him, which was nice. It was nice to watch them together. Dad brought home flowers every Friday, when he got his paycheck; Mom always kissed him as soon as he walked through the door, even when he was covered in grease and dirt from work and didn't smell too good. I always wanted what the two of them had. But I guess I knew I'd never have it.

I took the Greyhound to San Diego as soon as I was discharged. I remember the paper still, even without looking at it. The word UNDESIRABLE right above DISCHARGE. The biggest words on the whole page, even bigger than 'from the

Armed Forces of the United States of America'. So I didn't call home, didn't tell anyone. Instead, I just went to the bus station and bought a ticket west.

Fort Carson to San Diego was more than a day's ride, but that was fine by me. Gave me time to think. And when the bus stopped, I made my way past Gaslamp Quarter's tall old buildings. I didn't know they had such old buildings out here on the west coast. I always imagined everything being shiny and new out here. Even during the two years since enlisting, I hadn't left the country or even moved all that far from where I'd grown up. But I'd always hoped to go to California, ever since I was twelve and my aunt sent us a postcard of the US 101 with palm trees and bright blue skies and clear, frothy water. My mom hung it up on the fridge and it stayed there for years. Growing up in Kansas, it barely seemed real. So I always told myself that I'd go one day and see it for myself. And as I walked through Seaport Village, right by the water, I felt like I was right in that postcard. I walked farther along the water, and passed a plaque that said La Punta De Los Muertos—Dead Men's Point. I felt a pit in my stomach form, but I made my face hard. I tried to remind myself of my duty and kept walking.

After another couple minutes going down the road, I passed the USS San Diego Memorial and the Taffy 3 Memorial and the Navy Pier. They made me feel worse. I wasn't in the Navy. I wasn't sure if I'd make it in that branch. I was always scared of water. Growing up, all the guys used to call me a bitch for not jumping in the pond with them, but that water was brown and dirty and made me uncomfortable. It wasn't blue like ocean water. It was dark and it seemed dead and I

always thought it smelled musty and old. It didn't move. I always imagined—or maybe I just hoped—that I wouldn't be so scared of a moving body of water. I guessed I'd find out.

I kept walking north along the embarcadero, just looking out at the water. I liked how the air felt a little heavier here. The air in Kansas felt like it was sucking something out of you and Colorado was mostly the same. At least in the summer. But here, in San Diego, the summer was something different. The sun was brighter, but less burning. There was a breeze from the ocean that kept the beads of sweat on my brow from ever falling down my face.

After walking for a couple hours, I reached a diner that looked pretty empty and I decided to go and grab a bite and something to drink. I was pretty thirsty and my throat was sore. I sidled in the front door, and sat myself at a booth by a window. A pudgy woman with a perm and blue eye shadow walked over to my booth, "What can I getcha, hon?"

"Er, I..." I realized it had been a couple days since I'd actually talked to someone and my voice sounded scratchier than I remembered. I didn't want to pick up the menu on the table because my hands were sweaty. "Maybe just a pop? What kind you got here?"

The waitress looked up from her pad of paper and stared at me for a moment, her eyes studied my face before moving to the rest of me. "Out-of-towner?"

"Uh yeah, I'm..." I'm interrupted with a fit of coughs. The waitress looked concerned but also a bit disgusted. When I had finished coughing, I apologized,

“Pardon me ma’am. I’m just a bit allergic. I’m from Kansas originally. ‘Bout an hour east of Wichita.”

“Kansas, huh? My sister’s lives in Tulsa. Loves it, but I can’t imagine why. Seems like a bunch of bible thumpers and bumpkins, if you ask me. What brought you out here?”

“Just...wanted to see the ocean. Never seen it before.”

“Really?” The woman exclaimed placing her hand on her hip. Gesturing out the window, she asked, “Well now you have!” She burst out laughing. When she had finally calmed herself, she asked, “Does it live up to expectations?”

I paused for a moment, looking out the window at the ocean in the distance, admiring the sun, just beginning to set. In a few hours it would be dark. Finally I answered, “You know, it really does. I’m glad I made the trip.”

The waitress—Sheila, I now realize is her name after reading the tag attached to her collar—smiled briefly. “Well, honey, I’m glad you did too. Now you want a coke? How about a burger? You lookin’ awful skinny. Can’t enjoy the water on an empty stomach, now can you?”

The thought of eating anything—especially a burger—made my stomach turn over. I worried I’d throw up, but then remembered I hadn’t eaten since Fort Carson and there was nothing in my stomach. “Just the coke, please.”

“Honey, you look faint. You need to eat.”

I gritted my teeth before I finally said, “Yes ma’am. A burger, please.” I guess women are pushy everywhere, not just Kansas.

The soda soothed the sores in my mouth, but the smell of the burger made me nauseous and I had to breath through my mouth. After an hour of picking at the burger, I asked Pam for my check. She scoffed at my unfinished meal, and set the check down wordlessly. I tipped well—everything I had left in my wallet.

My dad always used to sigh and say “You can’t take it with you” at the end of a rare family meal out, as he shoved his worn out wallet into his back pocket. It always seemed funny to me. It wasn’t until my uncle said it at the reading of my grandpa’s will that I understood it. I was surprised that I had missed it for so long. But I was even more surprised that Dad had been talking about dying so casually. But I guess you reach a certain age or watch enough people go and starts to seem like a pretty casual thing.

The sun was now low in the sky and little stars had made their way out. Civil twilight. I stood to leave the booth, but before I did I opened my rucksack and dumped its contents to the ground beneath the table—clothes, soap, toothbrush. Even the little box where I kept some letters and a couple pictures of my mom, dad, and siblings. *You can’t take it with you.* I closed my empty rucksack up and bolted from the diner.

After walking a couple minutes further up the embarcadero, the beach became more vacant, with only a few houses far down the beach. I made my way off the sidewalk and stepped into the sand, feeling myself sink down into it. This sand wasn’t like the red dust of the roads I used to drive on my way home back in Kansas or sandbags in the bunkers. I took off my boots and socks to walk through the sand.

My feet and ankles were mostly numb, and I had a couple new sores on my heels, but I could see the sand slipping in between my toes and it was good enough. I walked slowly towards the water, the sun now a half circle on the horizon, the sky a perfect gradient of reds, oranges, yellows, and pinks.

As I walked along the beach, I picked up the smooth rocks I found. Some were striped, some were colored, some were odd shapes, and others were perfect-looking ovals. Little thick for skipping stones, but nice to hold in your hand. I held each one for a moment between my thumb and forefinger, appreciating the smoothness, before I tossed it in my empty pack. I did that for a long time, until it was heavy enough on my back that I hunched a bit. And my arms and legs ached even more than they usually did. So I found a spot a good distance from the water. The sun was nearly set, and the moon was faintly visible. I closed my eyes and matched my breathing to the rhythm of the waves.

I don't know how much time passed. It could have been just a couple minutes, or it could have been a whole lot longer. Part of me thought I might die right there on the beach listening to the waves, tracing patterns in the sand with my fingertips. But then I heard a gentle pattering on the sand and high-pitched laughing that roused me from my dozing. There was a little boy—about five, I'd guess—kicking at the shallow water a wave brought in. He clapped at the water, flinging it in the air, giggling the whole time. I felt my mouth curve into a smile, watching the child play in the water. I watched him pick up a stick and write words in the wet sand.

I used to draw pictures in the dirt on our property when I was about his age. Words, cities, pictures. Once I drew my whole family: Mom, Dad, me, Kimberly, and Bobby. All of us in a line, laid out right next to the barn, all with big smiling faces. All the details I remembered. Mom's little gold earrings, the scar on Bobby's forehead, Kimmy's bellbottom pants, and Dad's baseball cap. When I was satisfied with my work, I ran inside to have my mom come look. Even though Mom was busy baking a pie for after dinner that night, she took a moment and walked outside. Holding her hand, I guided her to my artwork. But when we got there—well, I guess there must have been some strong gusts of wind because the dust was all spread around. My drawings were gone. I started to cry. But my mom told me to stop—I had nothing to cry about because 'I had the real thing' and it was no use crying over pictures drawn in dirt. She led me inside and gave me paper to draw on and we sang along to the radio as she finished up dinner. Dad complimented the drawing when he got home from the garage; he told me I was 'a regular Picasso' before ruffing up my hair. I chuckled thinking of the memory. It was a good one.

The kid's head jerked upward as he noticed me, sitting there on the beach. He had a big grin with a couple teeth missing from it. I looked at him closer and I saw he had bright green eyes and one of his pupils looked like a keyhole. He ran over to me "Hey Mister, what are you doing?"

I cleared my throat for a moment before saying, "I'm just enjoying the view."

"Oh ok. You wanna play catch? I live over in that house," he said, gesturing down the beach to the houses far down the beach, "and my mom and dad are comin'

out soon and were gonna have a bonfire and roast marshmallows and hotdogs. Do you want to do it with us? Mom bought a really big bag of marshmallows so were gonna have some extras,” the boy spoke in one breath, without waiting for answers to his questions, “I brought this baseball out, but dad doesn’t like to throw it ‘cause he says it hurts his hands. You know how to throw a baseball?”

I paused for a moment, looking at the ball in his small hand. I thought about the last time I help a baseball. Must have been the championship game in my senior year. “Uh, yeah, I can play for a bit. But I gotta sit here. You see, I’m real tired, but I can still catch and throw.”

“Cool!” He backed up twenty feet before he started throwing the ball to me.

The air had started to cool down and my hands were stiff, but the stitches of the ball felt just the same as they did when I was fourteen, a high school freshman, and made the JV team my first try-out. When I told my dad that I made the team, he gave me a hug and played catch with me until Mom called us in for dinner. And after dinner we played another couple hours. Dad loved baseball; he played in high school too, till Mom got pregnant. Bobby never showed an interest; he got a girlfriend when he was twelve years old and never really cared about sports or school or anything apart from girls after that. I heard Dad tell Mom that night after he thought I’d gone to sleep “I see so much for him. Just so much.” I went to sleep with a big dumb smile on my face.

I threw the ball one last time before I started coughing. It was a deep one, a hacking cough that sometimes brought blood with it. The kid came running over,

“Hey Mister, you ok? You need some water or something?” But all I could do was gasp at him, holding out my hand to keep him from coming closer.

“Stop! Don’t touch him!” I heard a much deeper voice from down the beach, accompanied with quickened steps plodding through the sand.

“Dad! Mom! You’re here! I think there’s something wrong with him!” I recovered enough to look up and see a man with a thick neck and red face charging down the beach. A blonde woman stumbled through the sand behind him, gingerly holding her skirt to the side with her thumb and index finger, a pair of flip-flops hanging from her other hand.

“Tommy, honey, come here! Please, come here!” The blonde woman yelled shrilly. The boy gave me a sorry look before turning and walking towards his mother and father. When they reached each other, the man and woman enveloped the little boy in their arms.

Then, the muscled father stood and moved in front of his wife and child, as if shielding them. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

I felt my body start to shake and in a weak voice I responded, “We were just...”

“I know what you were doing, you fucking sicko,” he said before I could finish.

From behind him, she still clutched the boy and said softly, “Brad, let’s just...”

“Shut your fucking mouth, Sharon. I’m handling this!” The woman dropped her head and began ruffling her son’s hair with one hand, her other arm still

wrapped around the kid, holding him close. Tommy's eyes were wide, darting from his father to me, still on the ground. "This is a private beach," Brad's voice boomed. He towered over me and stared down at me intently, the veins in his neck bulging even more. I tried to imagine what he saw. I was 5'7" and probably just about 110lbs. Last time I looked in a mirror, my skin stretched across my cheeks like saran wrap around a bowl. I had dark circles so bad that it looked like I had bruises under my eyes. My clothes were dirty and sweaty and my hair was oily and matted down to my head. I probably looked like a monster. He was scared I'd hurt his kid. Finally the man bent down, and in a quiet voice, he said, "You ever step foot on this beach again and I'll kill you. And you better make sure you tell your little faggot friends I said that." He stood back up and took a step back. In a normal voice, he continued, "No one's gonna screw with my kid." And then, in one swift movement, the man pulled his foot backwards and kicked it right into my gut with all the force he had.

I fell to the side with my eyes focusing and unfocusing randomly, my body and brain overwhelmed with pain. I gasped for breath and inhaled sand, which started another coughing fit. I grasped at my middle, as if my insides might fall out. As I lay in the sand, I watched as the family walked in the direction of the houses down the beach. The little boy kept glanced over his shoulder, back at me, until his father jerked him forward and he could only walk looking forward. The three of them became more distant and my vision became blurred from tears. Then I realized I was passing out. Eventually the family was too far for me to see. And then in the next moment, I fell into unconsciousness or sleep or purgatory.

I don't know when I woke up. It could have been very late or very early. The moon was high up in the sky. I was still on that same place on the beach, sand was stuck to the side of my face and I could taste it in my mouth too. I tried to spit it out but my mouth was too dry. I wanted to a cup of water. I wanted the bed I used to sleep in growing up. I wanted my mom to wipe my face with a cold towel and my dad to call me 'Champ' or 'Bud' once more.

I thought back to the night I left. It was a month after I graduated and I was gonna go away to college in the fall, but for the time being I was working with Dad at the garage. Jimmy was over. I met him when I worked at the shoe store. We hung out a lot. Things were different with him than the boys on the baseball team or the guys at the shop or the buddies I had from school. That night, in my parent's basement I put on some tunes and Jimmy brought out a joint for us to share. And maybe it was the smoke or the music, or something I just had been waiting around to realize, but Jimmy looked different to me that night. Not like any of the girls I'd taken to dances, but how those girls were supposed to look to me. It was him who leaned over to kiss me, but it was me who kept it going. I don't know when my dad walked down stairs, or how much he saw. But it was enough. I remember his confused, "What the hell?" and then the moment when he understood what he had seen. He said a lot of things that night. But what I remember the most was when he chased Jimmy out with a baseball bat. And when he asked, "So you telling me my

son's a fucking faggot?" And when he told me to get out of his house and not come back. And when my mom just cried and wouldn't look at me.

The night I took off, I went to a motel. And the next morning I went to the recruiter. He told me I was doing a good thing. Something about joining a brotherhood. Before I knew it, I was at MEPS and then basic training in Oklahoma. I called my parents to let them know where I was when I got to Fort Sill because that's what all the other guys were doing. We were told it'd be the last time we'd be able to call our parents or anyone back home for a while, so I decided I would. Dad picked up. I told him I was trying to make myself a better man and I would talk to him in another couple months. He mostly made grunting-type sounds.

I went through the training and I learned a lot. And I got so tired from the long days that I didn't even have a chance to think about home too much during the first couple weeks. But eventually I guess I got pretty used to it and I started to get sad. So Mark and I got to be pretty tight; he was a small town guy too. He played baseball in high school and our schools even played each other. Not that we knew it at the time, of course. Mark was a bit older than me. And I got the feeling that he was like Jimmy. He made me think and feel the way Jimmy did, so that was just what I figured. One thing led to another, and we got real close. Closer than we should have. I felt bad later. I said goodbye to Mark once basic was over and was happy to hear he was headed to Fort Knox and I was going to Carson. I hoped I could start over there. Do what I had set out to do. Wanted to make my parents proud. I didn't call my parents after basic. I wanted to be better first.

The tests happened all at once in October of '85. And everyone who tested positive got taken out of their units and sent to live on the third floor of the admin building. The tests were supposed to be anonymous, but everyone knew. I might as well have had HIV stamped across my head. I was doing pretty good in the military up before that. But I got demoted. I was told I could keep working until I got too sick, but I didn't really know what that meant. They weren't good at explaining. They told me I should call my parents. But that was when I realized I couldn't. And I maybe wouldn't be able to ever. I started crying right there in front of the nurse. She threw a tissue box to me and told me that I could make someone else sick if I didn't stop. She said my tears might be contagious.

And that's pretty much how I ended up here on this stupid beach, half dead and alone. My body was aching more than it was before. The sky looked a little lighter and I figured it would probably be dawn pretty soon. I looked out to the continuously crashing waves and said aloud to no one at all, "Nothing's changed."

I picked up my rucksack and flung it over my shoulders. The rocks weighed heavily on my body and I trudged towards the waves of the ocean. The cold water lapped at my feet and washed the sand from the sores on my feet. My knees wobbled when the waves hit them, but soon my thighs were accustomed to the chill of the ocean. When I was chest deep, I looked back once at the beach and the dim pink light that illuminated the far-off buildings. Back in Kansas, Mom would be making breakfast. Dad would be reading the paper. I imagined myself as a kid climbing up on Dad's lap, Mom kissing my head as she cooked eggs and bacon. I

hoped they'd imagine me like that too. And then I looked back to the endless waves in front of me and dove, the weight of my backpack pulling my body down and down.

Jeanine: November 3, 2002

“I’m engaged!” Sheryl screamed while jutting out her left hand towards the middle of the circular table. Nearly everyone in the restaurant turned their head in the direction of the table. The five of us were enjoying Saturday morning brunch as we did most weekends. As Pam, Alicia, and Christy chortled congratulations, ooh-ing and aah-ing at the size and cut of the diamond, I felt the freshly baked muffin I had just eaten threaten reappearance. I covered my mouth, hoping I simply looked surprised at my best friend’s wonderful news. I felt the ring finger of my own left hand burn in the absence of a ring.

“Well it’s about time!”

“So how did it happen? Where were you guys?”

“Have you started planning yet?”

My friends knew all the right questions to ask, and I did too when Christy got engaged. Same with Alicia, and even Pam despite the fact that we all knew it was just because after their last pregnancy scare Pam had threatened to break up with Steve if he didn’t pop the question. Pam’s very Catholic family would disown her if she ended up pregnant out of wedlock, even though she was 24 years old, had her own apartment, and had been going with Steve for two years now. But I was now the last one—extremely single and without any prospects.

I looked across the table at Christy and Alicia, both tall, slender, gorgeous blondes, beaming at Sheryl and giving insincere complaints about how men were just so frustrating with their commitment issues and inability to plan. But Sheryl and

Mike, now those two were a good match. They looked great together; Mike was an accountant and could definitely support her once she got pregnant, and, speaking of which, they would have the *cutest*, most *darling babies!* Sheryl nodded along in agreement, not saying a word, as was generally the case when Christy and Alicia got going. Though the five of us had been friends since middle school, it was Christy and Alicia that were mistaken for sisters. Not only because they both looked like girls from California with the blonde hair and tanned skin, but also because of how seamlessly they chatted. Whether it was to one another or to a group, it was hard to tell who was speaking. They worked as part-time as real estate agents and had married wealthy lawyers three years ago. They were engaged within weeks of one another and had a joint summer wedding on the lake.

Pam, Sheryl, and I were not gorgeous blondes. Pam was 5'4" and very pear-shaped with hair the color of hay. Sheryl was red-headed and freckly and even shorter than Pam, to the point that she sometimes was mistaken as someone's little sister, just tagging along with us. And then there was me. I was even taller than Christy and Alicia at 5'10", but I didn't carry it well. I was awkward; my limbs seemed to get tangled. Christy would lay her hand on a man's shoulder in the most relaxed way. When I did, my hand was claw-like and stiff and more than one guy had shrugged it away uncomfortably.

"Well I don't want to steal your thunder, Sheryl, but I actually have news too," Pam finally said loudly enough to interrupt Christy and Alicia's prattling. I rolled my eyes, annoyed that she couldn't just wait for them to finish up with Sheryl, but if I'm

being honest, it could have gone on a lot longer than it should have already. The pair of them regularly turned our brunches into four hour-long affairs.

“What’s up Pammy?” Sheryl said, graciously.

Pam looked around the table making eye contact with each of us to make sure she had our full attention before announcing, “I’m pregnant!” All I could do was stare at my plate of scrambled eggs as my friends’ screeching overwhelmed my ears.

I *was* happy for them. All of them. I was glad they had found men that made them feel so secure. I was glad that their lives were working out the way they wanted. But I just didn’t understand why I was so far away from that kind of happiness. What was wrong with me? Why couldn’t I have what they had?

The next morning, I drove home to St. Eugene for church to visit my mom and stepdad. My mom asks me to come by every couple of weeks to help her with one thing or another. She likes to have a garden, but isn’t very good at making plants grow in the Minnesota cold. I’ve always been better at that. She likes me to help her bake for some ladies function at the church, even though she always says my food isn’t flavorful enough. Sometimes she’ll just ask me to help her clean up around the house. I always come because she’s getting older now. She had me late in life; she avoided the word ‘accident’, but just barely. She was 40 when she had me and never stops reminding me that she is a senior citizen and could kick the bucket at any day now. I can’t get too mad at her for anything when she always reminds me that she

could die at any moment. Because people do that, you know. They can die in a second and you ought to be ready for it.

It's only a thirty-minute drive from Rochester to St. Eugene, Minnesota. But it feels like it could be an awful lot longer, really. Rochester is a big city, with 85,000 people. There's a community college and an art center and an international airport. And, of course, the Mayo Clinic, which is world-renowned; it's a real point of pride for everyone that lives there. But St. Eugene is a lot different. Last I checked, the population's right around 2,700.

We're known for "The Sweet Singer of Minnesota" Juliana Morris. She was a woman who lived in St. Eugene in the 19th century and wrote truly terrible poetry. She published poetry throughout her life and was consistently ridiculed. Finally, after a particularly poorly received reading, her husband forbade her from publishing any more poetry. She was reclusive after that. She stayed at home, and people only ever really saw her sitting in a rocking chair on her porch. Her husband was a wealthy, well-respected man in town and to this day, many stores bear the name 'Morris'—Morris Drug, Morris Hardware, etc. There's a bench in town that memorializes her. The plaque reads "In memory of the 'The Sweet Singer of Minnesota', the poetess of St. Eugene". People stick post-it notes and scraps of paper to it with dumb little ditties on them. Still making fun of her a century later.

We're also known for our Winter Rose Festival, which is an indoor event held at the church. That's what Mom's looking for help with today; she needs help preparing for it. The church ladies always sell lots of sweets and different kinds of

home goods and Mom always volunteers for more than she knows how to do. I pulled up to their house and braced myself before getting out of the car. It was November, but still no snow. I was thankful for this as I pulled my wool coat close and ran towards the house.

The house is large and has a rather nice view of the town. Although I think that's maybe so that everyone else can see the house, rather than the other way around. My dad owned a construction company and when he went to build a home for his wife and daughter, he found the place with the biggest hill, and then added extra dirt to make it even bigger. Because of this, the driveway was long and winding, and visitors avoided driving up it in the winter. For a long time after Dad died, when it was just my mom and me, it felt like a fortress that we'd locked ourselves into.

"Hey Nee-nee!" Of all the nicknames for Jeanine, I never understood why this was the one my mother had latched on to, "What are you doing in that big ole coat? Close that door before you make the whole house cold!" I bent down to give her a hug. She was 5'5" and rather plump. Her body curved in all the places mine was supposed to, though, and even in her 60's, people in town still called her a beauty.

"Hi Mom. It's awfully chilly out here. Worse than Rochester, I think." She just made some sort of grumbling noise; she never liked it when I brought up Rochester. She didn't know why I didn't just get a job around here and wait until I met a man. And I guess I was starting to wonder why I didn't do that too. But I felt like I knew every man in all of St. Eugene and I just didn't think I could spend my life with

someone I'd seen wet their pants in first grade or who'd stuck gum in my hair on the playground. I thought there'd be so many others in a city with different jobs and interests and lives. I wanted someone who could tell me about his childhood and I wouldn't know it already. When your graduating class is 23 kids, you've gotta move. Plus, all my friends—Christy, Alicia, Pam, and Sheryl—moved to go to the community college there. So I figured I would too.

“Well sit down now! No use in standing! We got church in a couple hours, might as well be useful until then and help me frost these cupcakes.” I sat down at her dining room table which was covered in newspaper and about ten trays of unfrosted cupcakes.

“We only have two hours, mom. How we gonna frost all these?”

She rolled her eyes at me, as she so often did when she felt I was being too uptight, “Jeanine, when you're bringing cupcakes, you're never late.” I nodded slightly and got to work.

After thirty minutes of frosting, during which time Mom had eaten two of the freshly frosted cupcakes and drank half of her morning screwdriver (‘It has orange juice’, she had said incredulously when I gave her a look) I finally said, “You know, Sheryl got engaged. And Pam is pregnant.”

She looked at me and when she finished sipping her drink, she said, “Well it's about time. You all are getting up there. I know you hate it when I bring it up, but all you girls got clocks and they're tickin' tickin' tickin'.”

“I know mom.”

“So how about you? You still going with that Hispanic boy?”

I tried not to groan aloud. “No, he, um, had to go back home.”

“To Mexico?”

“He’s Venezuelan.”

“Well Venezuela then.”

“Yeah.” Santiago had come on some sort of student visa. I had met him in my math class at the community college. I was always bad at math and he helped me along in the class. We studied together. We became friends and then one night when we were studying, I asked him to show me how to roll my Rs like he did. He told me it was all about the tongue. He told me to put my tongue against my teeth and he got very close to inspect the positioning. And then he leaned in even more and started kissing me. And I learned it really was all about the tongue.

We dated off and on for a while. He was pretty understanding of my situation, my ‘convictions’ as I called them when I had to explain to some guy I was seeing. But he didn’t want to commit to anything. And then a year ago, his mom got sick and he had to go home. Even after he went back to Venezuela, he called me weekly until a couple months ago. I hadn’t heard from him for a while. I don’t know for sure, but I suspected that his friend Sofia had become more than a friend because his calls to me had become awkward and hurried. I do wish he had said goodbye though.

“Well we have news too, actually” Mom says, pulling me out of my reminiscing.

“Oh really? What’s that?”

“We’re moving! To California! In two weeks.”

I stared at her, feeling as sick as I did at the restaurant with my friends.

“You’re leaving?”

“Well you know me and Carl are getting older now and we want to see the world a bit. Or at the very least, get out of this cold! California’s just the ticket.” I just nodded and let my mother chatter on about her move. I finished frosting the cupcakes by myself.

After church, I told my mom goodbye and promised to help her move next weekend. She pulled my head down to hers and gave my forehead a kiss. “You know I love you, right?”

“I know, mom. I love you too.”

As I pulled away from the church, the steeples in my rearview mirror, I started to pray. I prayed every morning and night and before every meal; I said the “Now I Lay Me” and “Come Lord Jesus” and “Our Father”. But I rarely said one with my own thoughts. Despite all the years I had gone to church, Baptism through Confirmation, they never taught us how to come up with a prayer for what’s going on in our lives and they never mentioned that that might be helpful. But, not knowing who else to talk to, I started praying right there in my car as I drove by open fields of dead grass.

Dear God. I feel like I’ve done all the things I was supposed to. I went to church, read the bible, Luther’s Catechism, the Book of Concord. I love my mother and sister,

and Carl too, I guess. I do not sin. At least not in big ways. I take part in the Eucharist every Sunday. I gave up sweets last Lent and didn't cheat at all. And I'm saving myself for marriage, just like I'm supposed to. But still I do not have a husband or even someone who wants to date me. I thought Santi might be it, he was so kind, but when I told him—about the waiting, I mean—he backed away. No one wants to date me because I won't do that. Please, Lord, give me a husband. Dad's dead, Melissa's moved away, my mother's leaving now; don't leave me all alone. Ok, that's all. Thanks. Amen.

I was nearly home by the time I had stopped praying, and as I pulled into the parking lot of my apartment, I wiped my face with the sleeve of my coat. I pulled my jacket close around me as I walked into my dark studio apartment. Tomorrow, I'd have work and in the evening we'd be celebrating Sheryl and Pam's news. But for the rest of this Sunday, I'd have a very quiet evening alone.

"You have to come visit, honey," My mother shouted to me over the phone. She always shouted when she tried to talk on the phone. "It's so beautiful here!" After two months, my mother was finally settled in out in California and kept telling me how much I'd love it.

"I will, Mom. It's just awfully expensive." It didn't help that I'd never been on a plane before.

"What do you even have to spend your money on, honey? You just stay at home anyway, might as well spend the money and visit your dear old mom. You know I'm not getting any younger."

“I know,” I paused for a moment. As much as I hated it, the I’m-gonna-die-eventually angle was pretty effective. “When should I come?”

Stepping off the plane in San Diego, I felt like I was on a different planet. One where the sun was continuously present, and people didn’t care about the decorum of white after Labor Day. I walked to baggage claim and saw my mother standing with her arms wide open. In a voice much louder than anyone said anything in Rochester, she shouted, “Welcome to paradise, Nee-Nee!!”

After several days at my mom’s house, I realized that, just like in St. Eugene, my mother had found a set of ladies that occupied most of her days. I offered to go with her to her various meetings, but of course she told me that it was ‘no place for a young woman’ like me. The first couple days of my trip I just worked on organizing her kitchen after I realized all her dishes were still in moving boxes. The evening of my third day in California, my mother and Carl took me out to a restaurant by the beach that smelled of musty seafood.

“You know, honey, you don’t have to spend all day at home. Why don’t you go to the beach tomorrow? You look so pale.”

“But it’s March.”

“No one told Southern California. The water will be fine for swimming. You could get some color, at the very least. You look a little ill, you know.”

I sighed, but finally said, “Ok, I’ll go to the beach tomorrow.”

I walked from my mother's condo in Little Italy. I didn't know where I was; I've never been great at directions, but I could see the ocean from in between some tall buildings so I made my way in that direction. When I reached the sand, I breathed in deeply noting how different the ocean smells than any other body of water I've come across. It's a heavier, deeper scent; almost lemon-y. The sun was high above my head and I could feel my scalp burning, but I didn't much care. I walked along the sidewalk that bordered the sand for a long time, looking at my arms from time to time to see if my pale skin looked a little browner.

Finally, I reached a strip of beach that was empty apart from some far off homes. I walked close to the water's edge and laid down a towel that I had brought from my mom's house. I looked around to make sure I was truly alone before I started undressing. I always wore one-pieces, but Alicia had talked me into buying a bikini for California. *Don't be such a prude* she had told me when I hesitated at the register.

Out in the sand with so much of my body exposed, I felt free in a way I hadn't before. I walked towards the water until the waves touched my toes. My mom was right; the water was warm. I stood there for a long time, just letting the water wet my feet, never going in deeper than my ankles to keep the rest of my body exposed to the sun. I closed my eyes. I wondered if monks felt this way when they meditated.

"Aren't you cold?" I jumped at the voice that came from behind me, whipping around to look at who it might be.

To my surprise, I saw a handsome man, tall and tanned with sandy blonde hair. Two bright green eyes, one with a pupil like a keyhole. "Uh, no. No, I think it's very nice out, actually." I resisted the urge to wrap my pale, spaghetti arms around my exposed stomach.

The man bellowed a big laugh before saying, "I'm guessing you aren't from around here."

I chuckled back. "No, I guess I'm not really blending in too well."

"Midwest?"

"Minnesota."

"Well, how'd you end up all the way out here?"

"I'm just visiting my parents."

"Really? Me too. My parents live down the beach in that house over there."

"What a coincidence!"

"It's serendipitous, really."

Tom and I spent the rest of the afternoon sitting on my towel talking. I put my shorts and tee shirt back on and he took off his tennis shoes. He was funny, and good looking and visited his parents often. He was in the military and on leave, just until tomorrow.

"It's awfully lonely, coming home to an empty house on base," he said, drawing in the sand with his finger.

I put my hand lightly, carefully, on his shoulder and looked him in the eye,
“It’s awfully lonely coming home to an empty studio in Minnesota too,” I said with a
smile.

Jeanine: April 11, 1982

“Mommy, these hurt my feet” I said as I tried to fit my wide, pudgy feet into the pointed, glossy, white shoes my mother had bought me to match my floral Easter dress. The tulle underneath the skirt made my legs itchy. And there was a hat. It was made of straw with a ribbon around the brim that matched my dress, but it poked my scalp and made my head hot.

My mother paused her own primping to look at my shoes. “Honey, they look so pretty with your dress. You need to wear them. To church, at least.” I huffed and flopped onto the carpeted floor of her bedroom.

I watched her finish getting ready. She used a skinny comb to push her curls into place and licked her thumb and forefinger to help place the stray hairs that wouldn't lay flat. She wore a purple dress that flared out at the bottom, emphasizing her hourglass figure and off-white pumps with rhinestones on the toes. Much prettier than my outfit. She looked at herself in the mirror for a moment, knitting her eyebrows together and pursing her lips. Finally, she picked up a fuchsia lipstick and swiped it on her lips, perfectly outlining her cupid's bow. I was not allowed to wear makeup yet, but sometimes my mom would put a little bit of lipstick on me. *Not out of the house* she'd always say when she was done. And then a murmured *Don't tell your father*.

My mother took one last look at herself and sighed to herself, “Well I guess that's as good as it's going to get.” She turned to look at me, still flopped on the ground. I'd stopped pouting by then; I loved watching my mother get ready. I always

thought that she was the prettiest person in the whole world. "Get up off the floor, Nee-Nee. It's time to go to church. Go get your sister."

I stepped out of my shoes and took off running down the hall as fast as my stubby legs could take me. When I got to the end of the hallway to my sister's door, I knocked carefully and quietly and then said as pleasantly as I could, "Sissy? Are you ready? It's time to go."

My sister stuck her head out her door, her eyes red and bloodshot, and the thick layer of foundation caked on her face was streaked from tears, "God, Jeanine, you're so annoying. Anyway. I'm not going. Go tell Mom."

"But Mommy told me to get you. It's Easter. You have to come, Sissy. I'm gonna sing a song in front of the whole church."

She let out a deep, frustrated groan before screaming, "Stop calling me that! My name is Melissa!" and slamming the door shut again.

I slouched as I walked down stairs to the kitchen to report my inability to fetch my sister. I saw Mom leaning against the counter, sipping something with bubbles from a pretty fluted glass and staring at the ground. Dad sat at the table and drank his coffee steadily, sometimes pouring more from the slim metal container he always kept in his pocket. He looked very tired and he was more dressed up than he should have been for church. His hair was not slicked back as it usually was, and instead, it fell in his face. He had purple circles beneath his eyes and a scar on his forehead that went through his eyebrow. Still, he looked just like a movie star from one of those old movies that they played on TV late at night in black and white. But

they were very quiet, Mom and Dad—and I didn't know why. Too much quiet in the house was usually a bad thing. "Mommy?"

My mother jumped slightly, as if startled. "Sorry, what is it Jeanine, honey?"

"Sis, er, Melissa won't come down. She said she's not going."

"Did you remind her that it's Easter?"

"Yes. She still won't come."

My mother groaned, "Jesus Christ, what is it this time? I swear that girl gets worse by the day."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Well, 15 can be a hard age, I guess," She walked over and straightened my hat. "Who knows, in ten years you might be like this too."

"Well let's fuckin' hope not," Dad grumbled from the table, not looking up from his coffee.

"Robert, just drink your damn coffee," Mom shot back. I felt even smaller than normal looking between the two of them. They looked so mad at each other.

Mom took a deep swig from her fluted glass. Finally, she announced, "I'll go talk to Melissa," and she marched from the room, her pumps clicking with every step.

I stood in the middle of the kitchen, unsure what to do. I was pretty sure my sister and mother would be screaming at one another soon. Dad seemed pretty grumpy at the, so I decided to try cheering him up. "Whatcha doin', Daddy?" I said

and I walked up next to him, poking him in the arm. He smelled strongly of aftershave and tobacco and I couldn't help but wrinkle my nose at it.

He grunted at my touch, "I'm just drinkin' my coffee. Daddy's not feelin' too great today, Darlin'. I think it's just gonna be you, your mama, and Melissa at church today."

"But I'm supposed to sing in front of everyone today!" I whined. Dad clutched his head, and I realized I was probably being too loud. Dad had lots of headaches from his job and he liked it best if we talked to him in quiet voices.

"It ain't about you, Jeanine! It's about Jesus, righ'? Easter?" He took another swallow of his coffee. "Are you ready for church?" He turned to look at me and looked me up and down with his bloodshot eyes. "Where are your shoes? You better go finish gettin' ready. Don't make me give a whuppin'. You ain't too little for the paddle and your sister ain't too big. You can tell her I said that." He turned back to his mug.

I hung my head. "Sorry, Daddy. I'll go put on my shoes."

His only response was a "Hmmp". I walked up the stairs in my white tights to retrieve the uncomfortable shoes from my mother's room. When I got to the top of the stairs, I heard Mom and Sissy talking; they weren't yelling but from their tone I could tell the conversation wasn't going well. And I couldn't help but listen.

"You don't get it, Mom."

"Please explain what I don't 'get' Melissa."

“You don’t understand...what it’s like to look like this! Especially when you look how you look.”

“Melissa, you are very pretty. You just need to lose the weight. If you could just eat a little less and you didn’t lay around moping so much, you’d probably not have to worry about it. Have you been taking the pills I got you? They’re supposed to help. They helped your Aunt Helen. She started taking them and the weight just melted off.”

“They make me feel nauseous and...like kinda nervous. Jittery”

“And is that any worse than how you feel now? Start taking the pills again and if you feel sick, think about how you feel right now, how you feel not fitting into your dress.”

“Why did you buy me one you knew wouldn’t fit?”

“Well I guess I just thought you were a little more motivated, Melissa. Summer’s right around the corner and don’t you want to be able to wear a swimsuit—”

“We live in Minnesota! There is no summer!”

“—If you just lost 20 pounds that dress would look great. And Helen said she lost 20 pounds in the first two weeks!”

I heard Melissa groan before she responded, “It’s not even just that. It’s...” and then in a much softer voice, as if telling a secret, “...it’s my face, too.”

“I know, I know, the pimples,” Mom said hurriedly, clearly becoming more frustrated by the minute. “It’s fine, Melissa. Everyone has pimples. Just wash your

face and they'll clear up. Stop eating sweets and junk food—which would help with your weight too, by the way—and it'll get better. You're 15, honey, everyone has acne."

And then Melissa, quietly again, "Not everyone."

"I don't want to hear anymore about it, Melissa. Wear that green wrap skirt and a blouse. That'll be good enough. We need to get going."

"Ok."

"I expect you downstairs in five minutes. And wipe that makeup off your face, it looks terrible."

"Ok." And then I heard my sister's door gently close and my mother start on her way back down the hall. I slid on my shoes and ran down the stairs.

Finally, all of us were assembled by the doorway—even my very sullen sister in an ugly lime green skirt—and my mother hurried us out the door. Dad got up from the kitchen table and stumbled to the front door to say goodbye to us. He tottered, leaning against the doorframe and kissed my mother. She glared at him and then whispered, just barely loud enough for me to hear, "You smell disgusting."

And then Dad said in his regular speaking voice, "Don't be a bitch."

Mom turned away from him and back to us, "Come on girls, let's go. It's Easter. We can't be late."

The ride home from church was quiet. Mom and Melissa were talking, but I was just thinking about church. I was just thinking about how sad it is that Jesus had

to die and even his friends turned their back on him. My Sunday school class sang “Jesus Christ is Risen Today”, which is a happy song. And Pastor John kept saying that we should be happy because Jesus came back and saved us from our sins. But I just kept thinking how mean everyone was to him and I don’t know if him coming back makes it better. I don’t feel like you should be happy when something bad happened to someone just because it caused something good to happen for you. But I guess maybe I don’t know that much. Maybe it’ll all make more sense when I can go through confirmation like Sissy did. But she seems to like church even less now that she’s been confirmed and done her first communion.

When I wasn’t paying attention, Mom and Melissa started fighting in the front seat. I wasn’t listening so I didn’t even know how it started, really.

“It’s embarrassing Mom. People can tell that something’s up. Dad’s out at all hours of the night. And it’s not enough that he employs everyone in town. People still talk. It’s embarrassing.”

“You need to watch your mouth. Did you ever think you might be embarrassing this family? Always so sullen. And the weight. Every time we go to church, you’re a little heavier. How do you think that reflects on this family?”

Melissa shrieked in frustration, “Ugh, you think I’m an embarrassment to this family? Dad is doing god knows what at all hours of the night, not even coming home half the time and then you; you’re a fucking lush, mom! What do you think people say about that?!”

Mom was quiet as we pulled up to a stop sign on the southern edge of town. And then, still stopped at the sign, she turned to Melissa and said, "God says to honor your father and mother." And then she slapped Melissa's face so hard that her head clunked onto the passenger window.

Melissa held her cheek and started to cry and I did too. Through my tears I asked, "Mommy, why did you do that?"

"You shut your mouth, Jeanine. I'm disciplining your sister." And I fell quiet too, instead just looking out the window at the trees and driveways that we passed. I counted the telephone poles that we passed and wondered how the birds were able to balance on the wires. I counted 36 poles by the time we got home.

When we went inside, Dad, now laying on the couch, looked at the three of us. He saw Melissa and I still crying and sniffing and said, "Well it doesn't look like I missed anything good." He settled back onto the couch and closed his eyes, his coffee mug had been replaced with a fancy, clear glass with etching on the sides and filled with a liquid the color of amber. I wrinkled my nose; the room smelled like the stuff Mom used to wash my knees when I fell off my bike.

Melissa went to her room and I knew I wouldn't see her for the rest of the day. I followed Mom to the kitchen and watched her pour herself another bubbly drink, adding orange juice this time.

"Mom?"

She looked at me like she was very tired. She sighed and then asked, "What, Jeanine?"

“Can I take off my shoes now?”

“Yeah, honey. You can take them off.”

I slide off my white patent shoes and sat on the floor rubbing the indents they had created on my heels. “My feet hurt.”

My mother looked down at the pumps she still wore. “Mine do too.”

“Why do you wear them, Mommy?”

She thought for a moment and then chuckled before saying, “‘It hurts to be beautiful.’ That’s what your grandma always used to tell me.”

“It’s supposed to? Hurt?”

“I don’t know if it’s supposed to. But that’s the way it seems to go.”

Violet: April 20, 2018

I stared at the clock. I'd been binge-watching some show from a million years ago on Hulu and attempting to write my AP Art History essay, but really I just stared at the clock. It's 3:34—no, 3:35 now—and my mother was *still* not home. I felt like she was never around anymore. Which, honestly, I wouldn't say I'm like *that* upset about it because when she is here all she does is get mad at me about the million and one things I'm doing wrong. But it would be nice for today. Because I have my stupid hair appointment and I only have my driver's permit and I can't call an Uber or a Lyft because my mom thinks they're scary and even if I *could* get to the salon, I don't have enough money because my mom thinks I can't use a credit card responsibly. So, instead, I just sat there, waiting for my mom to come home.

As I stared at my phone, the Art History textbook on my lap snapped shut and slid off my lap to the ground. *Ugh, whatever.* I scrolled through Instagram, I checked Snapchat, checked Twitter; anything to stop looking at the damn clock at the top of the screen. Finally, I rounded back to my email. One new message.

Sender's Name: Thomas Draven

Subject Line: We really need to talk, Violet.

I rolled my eyes and tossed my phone to the couch cushion next to me. I closed my eyes and leaned back, taking deep, steady breaths to keep from screaming. I was nearly rid of the screaming-feeling, when I felt my mom's hand on my shoulder.

"Oh, you're home," I said, trying to keep the irritation in my voice to a minimum.

“Yeah, sorry I’m late. There were some problems.”

“What kind of problems?”

“We can talk about it later. Why don’t you tell me what’s wrong with *you*?”

She stopped me before I was able to protest. “Violet, I saw you doing your anger-breathing thing. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

I inhaled deeply before finally saying through gritted teeth, “Dad.”

“Oh.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m sorry, Lettie. Try to not get too upset. It’s...well it is what it is. And who knows, maybe things’ll go back to normal eventually. We just gotta give it time.”

“Things are never gonna be normal again, Mom. You and I both know that.”

She paused for a moment, chewing on her lip. “Yeah, I guess not.”

And then we were quiet for a moment, not looking at each other, lost in our own thoughts. My phone interrupted our silence with a sing-songy chirping noise. I grabbed it, “Mom, it’s 3:55. We’re gonna miss it,” my voice grew in volume and pitch as I reached the end of the sentence.

“Oh shit, your appointment.”

“Yeah, what’d you forget?” I asked, irritated again.

“I...whatever, do you want to go or not?”

“Fine,” I said as curtly as I could manage without making my mother too mad.

I scooped up my phone and shoved it into my jean’s pocket.

As I stood up, my mother looked me over up and down. “You could have dressed a *little* nicer.”

I look down at my tank top, jeans, and sandals, and then back at her. “What’s wrong with it?”

“You look like you’re going camping or something. And maybe you could find some jeans that are a little more flattering. You look like you’re about to burst out of them.”

“We live in San Diego! Everyone dresses like trash!”

“That is *not* true. And besides, I don’t know why you feel the need to dress so...so *provocatively* all the time,” my mother said, the word ‘provocatively’ dripping with revulsion. My mother was a 5’10” green bean of a woman; she was beautiful and skinny and curve-less and had been her whole life. If she had ever been less prudish, I imagine she could have been a model. I, on the other hand, was 5’5” with a butt and boobs that were noticeable regardless of what clothing I wore. I turned 12 years old, and it was like my body erupted. My mother was horrified. She called the doctor when she saw that pink stripes had blossomed on my chest and hips. She bought vitamin E pills and told me to break them and apply the sticky, gooey contents all over my body. At the time, I felt deformed, like I had just sprouted new appendages. But then, one day, I started getting a different kind of attention at school. Boys didn’t think I was deformed. Overtime, I stopped feeling like such a monstrosity, but my mother never stopped looking at me like I was an alien.

“Well this is how I entice my men.” I said sarcastically, frustration finally boiling up. Despite the obvious sarcasm, my mother’s eyes widened in horror.

“Mom, I’m just kid—”

“We’re talking about this later! Go to the car! Before I change my mind!”

I fiddled with the music as we drove. My mother never minded; we got along when it came to music for the most part. I was pretty into 80’s and 90’s indie music like the The Smiths, Pavement, Sonic Youth—that kind of thing. My mom said she never really liked stuff like that when it was popular, but she kinda liked it now. She said it reminded her of what her friends listened to or what she heard on the radio. I asked her what she listened to when she was my age, but she kind of just shrugged and said she just listened to whatever other people liked. It’s hard enough for me to think of who my mom was before she was my mom. And when she says stuff like that it makes pre-mom Mom even more mystifying.

I turn settle on The Cure’s 1989 album *Disintegration*, skipping the first song and going straight to “Pictures of You”, which is one of my mom’s favorite songs—mine too, actually.

“This is a good one.”

“I know.”

“I’m still upset with you, I hope you realize. We will be discussing this ‘men’ comment.”

“Ugh, mom, I was just being obnoxious—”

“And disrespectful,” Mom interjected.

“—but I promise there are no men. I don’t have a boyfriend. I don’t even date. I live an extremely chaste life, I promise.”

“Well I would hope so! You’re only 15!” My mother exclaimed, trying her best to keep from yelling.

“Oh my God,” I said, my exasperation obvious.

“Hey, don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” this was a rule that my mother only reminded me of when she started to worry I was ‘straying away from God’. For someone who constantly reminds me how young and stupid I am, she worries about what will happen when I die quite a lot. “You need to remember what Pastor Henry teaches. What you learned when you went through confirmation. I know you don’t like going to youth group as much anymore because there’s no one you’re friends with anymore, but you need to keep God close. I worry about you.”

I bite my lip, remembering the lie I told my mom last year—‘All my friend’s have quit coming or moved away! I’m all alone!’—to get her to be ok with my lack of participation in the church youth group. Really, I was just sick of it. After Dad left, the pitying, judgmental looks everyone shot at me were just nauseating. I know my mother felt better going to church. People consoled her and she had something to distract her. But my family being what it was created an even bigger separation between the church kids I had grown up with and me. And it made me think about a lot of pretty messed up stuff. Like my best friends at church were Abigail, Lily and Esther, but they were their own little clique, which kinda bothered me anyway. We

hung out every Sunday and went on trips and stuff with the youth group but they barely acknowledged me at school. And then there was this rumor going around school that Esther was gay and Abigail and Lily just stopped talking to her. Esther just sat in the library at lunch and she just looked so sad all the time. And so this thing that I thought I was a part of—this nice, happy, friendly group thing—it just really seemed like a fraud. I didn't want to talk to my mom about the whole thing because I didn't think she'd understand, but my image of the whole thing, like church in general, just was kind of... cracked, I guess. Finally, I turned to my mom and said, "Mom, I'll be ok. I promise."

She nodded to herself, keeping her eyes on the road. "I know..."

I really wanted to change the subject, and we were almost at the salon anyway, so I asked, "Mom, what happened with Grandma today? What were the problems?"

"That's a longer conversation... And I don't know if I'm supposed to talk to you about it anyway. You know how it is with Grandma though. Good days and bad days."

"And today was bad?"

"Today was...normal. That's what it's becoming, anyway. And that's what's upsetting about it."

"I'm sorry, Mom. Are you ok? You wanna talk about it?"

She looked at me and winked as she pulled into the parking lot, "I'll be ok, Lettie. I promise."

We walked into the salon and I sat down on a plastic-y chair that squished uncomfortably when I sat down. My mom went to the counter to tell them I was there. She knew someone who knew someone who worked here and was able to get some sort of deal on chemical straightening. I looked through pictures of hairstyles in magazines imagining each one on me. An asymmetrical bob, a pixie cut, a textured lob—all styles that I would be able to have after today, after my hair was finally fixed. I have always had curly hair, but when I reached puberty, the ringlets from my childhood turned kinky and frizzy and just generally unmanageable. My mother and her straight hair were no help; no one I knew had such an uncontrollable mop. My mother had told her church friends I guess (I cringe at the thought of a prayer circle devoted to my ugly hair) and one of them happened to get their hair relaxed and suggested I try it. My mother made me an appointment without asking, but I didn't even mind because I was willing to sacrifice any plan I had for the chance to have pretty hair.

The hairstylist led me to a chair and my mom waved goodbye, saying that she would be back in three hours to pick me up. She was going to pick up my little brother from baseball practice and make something for dinner. I sat down in the chair and looked at my hair, tied in a messy knot at the top of my head—the only thing I really felt I could do with it. The hairstylist pulled out the rubber band and my hair stuck straight out around my face. I looked down and decided to avoid

looking at my hair until it was better. As she poked and prodded at it, she laughed and asked incredulously, "Wow, how did you end up with hair like this?"

"I don't know. Maybe my Grandma. Her hair's curly, but not like this."

"Your mom has such pretty straight hair; I bet you're jealous of that!" she said, laughing to herself some more.

"Um, yeah, her hair is very pretty. Easier to do than mine, for sure," I said, shifting around on the chair.

"Well we'll see what we can do to get it looking like hers," she said with a big smile.

"Thanks," I said slowly, "that'd be great."

Four and a half hours later, my mother finally came to pick me up. I had to call her once and tell her I'd be longer; the first round of relaxing didn't take and the stylist had to reapply it. The salon had officially closed half an hour ago and she was clearly growing very impatient. I had to pee but didn't want to annoy her by getting up. Also, I was even more anxious to avoid my reflection after my hair was shellacked in some sort of foul smelling cream and wrapped in saran wrap. I mentioned to the hairdresser that my scalp was tingling, but she just said that meant it was working.

The stylist's friendly chatter had ceased once she realized she had to reapply the relaxer and I had been entertaining myself by looking at more hairstyle magazines, most of them terribly outdated. There was a picture of a skinny blonde

woman with weird flipping hair titled “The Rachel” for some reason. There was another brunette with spiky twists around the crown of her head held in place by plastic clips. And, perhaps worst of all, was a redhead with a full head of crimped hair. I couldn’t help but wonder if these women looked at these pictures now and thought *What was I thinking?*

After a final quick rinse, she blow-dried and straightened of my hair, before she finally whipped off the cape and told me not to wash my hair for 72 hours. I grimaced because the smell had still not dissipated and neither had the tingling—which was more like burning now. But then the hairstylist told me to look in the mirror and I stopped caring. My hair was straight. Perfectly straight and shiny, no frizz in sight. I shook my head back and forth like girls in shampoo commercial do, and while it wasn’t quite the same, it resembled it enough. I turned to the stylist to thank her, maybe hug her even, but she just said, “You really need to get going; we closed an hour ago.”

“Oh, ok. Sorry. Thank you. For my hair.”

“Like your mom’s right?”

My mother walked up a second later so I just nodded and quickly said, “Yup, it’s good. Thanks again.”

“Uh huh,” she said, and I realized she was now much more interested with my mother’s credit card.

As we walked out of the salon, my mom looked at my hair and said, “It’s so straight! It looks great, honey. You look beautiful.”

Within thirty minutes of coming home, my scalp started burning to the point that my eyes watered and I felt like my head might be on fire. I couldn't even yell at Tommy for asking if I got a head transplant. I found my mom making me a plate of food because she and my brother had already eaten while I was at the salon. "Mom?"

"Yeah, Lettie?"

"I think there's something wrong. Like with my head."

She stopped what she was doing and faced me, "What do you mean?"

"My scalp. It's burning. It's making me feel kind of...dizzy?"

"I'm sure that's just how these things work. I know they're very strong. Just eat your dinner and I'll get you some Tylenol and we'll see how it is tomorrow."

"Uh, ok. Yeah, maybe I'm just hungry or something."

"Your hair looks really pretty, you know. Much more flattering."

"Yeah, I like it too."

I couldn't eat much dinner, because in addition to the burning and the dizziness, I was starting to feel nauseous. After swirling the food around the plate for a few minutes, I decided to go to sleep. The hairdresser had suggested I tie my hair up in scrunchie to avoid messing up the straightness, so I gingerly gathered my hair up in my hands, trying to touch it as little as possible. I laid down to try and sleep, but the pain was becoming unbearable. Eventually I crept into my mother's bathroom—I could hear her downstairs, watching the nightly news—and took two

of the sleeping pills she had been prescribed after my dad had moved out. After they finally kicked in, I was able to drift off to sleep.

I woke up very early and noticed that my pillow was stuck to the bottom part of my hair. Once I had peeled the pillowcase from my head, I touched my hair. It felt like it had been gelled. It was hard and stuck together in clumps. My scalp was oozing pus and blood and my pillow looked like the wrappings of some sort of wound. My head had stopped burning and now it was just pain. I could feel myself beginning to panic as I imagined my hair coming out in chunks. I yelled down the hall for my mom.

My mom ran down the hall half awake, "What's wrong, Violet? Are you ok?" Rather than answer, I just pointed at the pillow and then my hair. Her eyes widened in concern. "Are you ok?"

"I...I don't know. I don't think so."

"I'll call the salon. They'll fix it, ok?" and my Mom hurried downstairs. I went back to my bed, laid a towel on top of my pillow, and tried to sleep. Less from tiredness, and more to not have to think about what was happening with my head.

My mother woke me hours later from a dream in which I was being grated like cheese as a topping for a giant pizza. I guessed I was missing school. I couldn't have imagined going anyway considering the pain of my scalp. "Honey, here, put this

on,” my mom said as she flung a shirt and pants at me, “I called the salon. You have an appointment. They’re gonna fix it.”

After lots of fussing and concern, the manager apologized and said that the neutralizer must not have been used properly. “You shouldn’t lose any hair though!” The relaxer had given me chemical burns on most of my scalp. The manager washed my hair herself and put some different things in it before finally telling me to not brush or wash my hair again until my scalp dried out and stopped oozing. As disgusting as that was, the pain had finally lessened so I just decided to put the thought of ‘oozing’ in a separate place of my brain and deal with it later.

I started walking out of the salon, my hair sopping wet, but my mom hung back for a second. I heard her ask the stylist, “Her hair will still be straight though, right?”

That evening, once my hair had dried—frizzy, but straight—my mother had me sit on the floor in front of her on the couch. My scalp still ached and my hair was clumped together and stuck to my head. I now understood the bit about my scalp drying out—it was going to take a while for the burns to stop oozing.

Sitting on the floor, my mother gently went through my hair in sections, breaking up the clumps and applying Neosporin to the worst parts of my scalp. It was slow work. “Thanks, Mom. This is helping.”

“I’m glad. I’m sorry this happened.”

“It’s ok. Who could have guessed?”

“Apparently burns happen a lot, but they’re just not usually this bad.”

“Oh,” I didn’t know what to say so I just sat quietly and let my mother work for a while. And then I remembered our conversation from yesterday, “Mom, what happened with Grandma? I know you think you shouldn’t talk to me about it, but I can handle it.”

My mom sighed and then said, “I know you can. I think it’s more me that has a hard time with it. It’s just...your Grandmother is getting worse, you know. The Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s both are getting bad and she’s...difficult when it comes to her medication.”

“I know. She doesn’t get better, really, does she?”

“No. And sometimes it’s hard when there’s this...gap. Yesterday, she was trying to put on lipstick, which she couldn’t of course, with how bad her hands have gotten. So I did it for her. And I asked her what it was for. And she said she wanted to get gussied-up for your Grandpa...”

“Grandpa Carl? That’s kinda nice.”

“No, your real, er, your...my dad.”

“Oh...” I didn’t know that much about my mom’s dad. She didn’t talk about him much and he died when she was a little girl. Like six or so. I just know that things weren’t great for a while after that and my Aunt Melissa moved out and it was just my mom and Grandma for a long, long time.

“I haven’t told you too much about your grandpa because you and your brother never got to meet him and...I don’t know, it just didn’t seem right. But

towards the end there, he just wasn't great. And he was, um, unfaithful to Grandma. And he had some issues with drinking and other things. He passed away driving home one night. Drunk. Coming back from some woman's house, who knows where. He was on—ok, in the 80s there was something called car phones that some people had—the phone in his car calling your grandma, maybe fighting, I don't know the specifics. But they were talking when he drove off the road. And that's what happened."

"Oh my god."

"Yeah. And she doesn't remember...all the bad stuff. She's 80 years old and in a convalescent home and she thinks she's dating her first husband and everything is...sparkling and new! She's happy. *Happy*. Because she can't...she doesn't know. She doesn't know what happens. Happened. And I can't tell her. And I can't tell her that I did the same damn thing! I went and married someone who... This, this I should not be telling you. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, mom. I didn't...realize. Any of it."

"I know. You're not supposed to," she said, squeezing my shoulder. She sighed deeply. "You know, your hair actually looks pretty nice. Apart from the scalp situation."

"I know. That's kinda the part that sucks. My head hurts so frickin' much. But it's kinda pretty."

"Well, you know what Grandma used to say—'It hurts to be beautiful.'"

I ran my fingers through my hair, avoiding the sensitive parts. When I looked down at my hand, I saw a clump of hair the size of a quarter. I felt nauseous again. Finally, I held the clump up so my mom could see it and in a quiet voice I asked, "You think this is what she meant?"

She gasped and put her hand over her mouth. After a few seconds, she responded, "I don't think I have any idea what she meant."

Tom: March 24, 2015

“Thank you, both, for coming in,” said Dr. Hernandez, a tiny woman sitting behind a large desk. A nameplate sat at the edge of her desk, displaying her name in gold lettering, “I know this can be a very anxiety-provoking experience for parents,” she said in this aggressive, gruff voice. I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes; I hate it when women try to act like authoritarians. I mean I get it—you went to school and now you get to put a ‘Dr.’ before your name. Probably just happy to not have to choose between ‘Ms.’ and ‘Mrs.’ I looked at the tiny woman, her dark hair pulled into a tight bun, a gray turtleneck emphasizing her short neck and lack of tits—even so, she’d be pretty if she put on some makeup or let her hair down.

Just wishing she’d get to it, I finally said, “Could you just tell us why you called us in? Both of us?” I said gesturing to Jeanine, who was seated to my left. She was clutching her purse on her lap with both hands and I could swear her chin was quivering like she was gonna cry. *Of course she can’t even hold herself together for 15 fucking minutes.* I rolled my eyes and sighed deeply before continuing, “No disrespect, Ms...” I looked back at the nameplate, “...Hernandez, but could you please, you know, get to the point?”

The woman’s already thin lips receded until they were nothing but a puckered line across the bottom of her face. “Yes, Mr. Draven. The issue is with Tommy. He’s been having some...concentration issues in his classes. So I’ve been meeting with him weekly to see how we can best assist him.”

“I had no knowledge of this. How long has this been going on? Are you pulling him out of class?” I turned to Jeanine, still sitting there like a kicked puppy and biting her bottom lip. “Did you know about this?” She just looked down at her feet. “For fuck’s sake, Jeanine.” I turned back to the Hernandez woman, “Sorry for my language,” I said grimacing—I fucking hate apologizing for my language, “Apparently everyone was aware of this situation except me.”

“Er, yes, Mr. Draven, that seems to be the case. Jeanine and I have been in communication about Tommy’s progress for the past couple of months and we felt it was time to bring you in.”

“I’m his father! You see his last name? Draven? He got that from me!” I look back Jeanine. She’s still cowering in her chair. “What the hell, Jeanine? Why did you keep this from me for so long?”

Finally she looked up from the floor and spoke directly to me, “Tom, look at how you’re reacting. I wasn’t gonna bring you in until it seemed necessary. And well...now it seems necessary.”

I gaped at both of them, these conniving, manipulative... I tried to stop myself from finishing the thought. I took a deep breath before finally asking, “Okay, so what have you guys decided is wrong with Tommy?”

Mrs. Hernandez sat up a little straighter in her chair. I rolled my eyes—she still looked like a little girl playing in her dad’s office chair. “Mrs. Morgan, his teacher, reported to me that Tommy has been having a hard time paying attention in class and tends to be...irritable. My initial assumption was that he might be dealing

with ADHD. However, after speaking with him, I'm concerned this might be a part of a bigger problem."

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder—what a joke. Of course a bunch of women get together, hear about some kid who wants to go out and play and think there must be something wrong with his brain. A ten year old gets bored in class and their solution is to drug him up so he'll sit still. "He doesn't have ADD. He's just a kid. Maybe if you guys let him run around once in while," I looked at Jeanine, "And he had some *structure* at home," back at Hernandez, "he would be able to sit still. I'm at work all day though so that's Jeanine's thing."

"Mr. Draven, I do not think your son is dealing ADHD. As I said, I think this is a bigger issue."

"What does that mean?"

"Tommy experiences what I would describe as extreme bouts of depression."

"He's 10. What does he have to be depressed about?"

"I..." She looked at my face intently, squinting slightly, "He has exhibited low self-esteem and isolates himself. He sits alone in the library during lunch, which is a change for him. And he has expressed to me a desire, to, well, I think he might be thinking of trying to...hurt himself. In my opinion, he needs more intensive therapy and possibly medication. These are things that need to be taken care of with a psychiatrist. There are several I can refer you to."

I didn't know what to say, for a moment. I thought of Tommy, tucking him in at night. He seemed happy, in his sleep at least. And on the weekends, I was usually

pretty busy and working from home. And maybe I'd play a round of golf or two, but I still saw him and he was hanging out with his friends. Maybe I hadn't been *that* attentive. But I know if my kids depressed or something. And I work hard so he doesn't have to be worried about anything. I could feel myself starting to get angry again so I tried to reign it in as I answered Hernandez, "Okay, look, I understand he may have said that to you, but aren't you taking him out of class to talk to him? Maybe he's just trying to skip a little and took it a bit too far. I can talk to him."

I'd almost forgotten about Jeanine sitting next to me when I she finally interjected, "What the hell are you talking about, Tom? Our son is having a serious problem. You know Tommy's a good kid; he wouldn't pretend to be suicidal to get out of class. Look at my family history; look at yours. It would make sense if he had something."

"Well it's not from my—"

"Be quiet, Tom." The ice in her voice stunned me into silence. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes tightly before saying, "Dr. Hernandez, can we please have those numbers? I'll make an appointment as soon as I can."

"Of course, Ms. Draven."

This office had couches and the desk was over by the wall, surrounded by diplomas and certificates. Dr. Williams was a short guy with thick glasses and weird pointy shoes that made him look like a goddamn elf. He sat on the edge of his armchair and gestured to Jeanine and I to "Sit, sit." The cushion was overly soft and I

felt like I was sitting on the ground with my legs all crunched up. The shrink was at least a head taller than us, looking down. Probably some kinda power play or something. I straightened up, putting my fist on the armrest. I noticed that the brown leather was weathered and creased and I couldn't help wondering what kind of nuts had sat here before me. It made me shiver just thinking about it.

"Thank you for coming in, Mr. Draven. Jeanine and I agreed that it was especially important that we discuss the current situation all together."

"Uh, yeah, no problem," I grunted. I didn't love this 'Jeanine and I' business, but I figured I'd let it go for now.

"As you know, Tommy's been coming to see me twice a week for the past month—"

I couldn't help but mutter, "Yeah, I know, I've seen the bill." I saw Jeanine roll her eyes out of the corner of my eyes.

"—And I think we've made some progress, but I also think it's time that we take additional intervention."

"What does that mean? 'Additional intervention'? Lemme guess, more money, right?"

Jeanine turned her head towards mine and said quietly, "Tom. You said you'd behave."

Something about the way she said 'behave' really pissed me off so I said right back to her, but not quite as quiet, "I'm not a fucking child, Jeanine," I turned back to Dr. Williams, "I'm sorry, Doc, I just don't love the idea of my 10 year old being

shranked. He really seems fine to me. And you said he's feeling better, so why do we need to do more?"

"Well I think I'd like to make an official diagnosis at the point, and also get him started on some medication."

"Diagnosis?', 'Medication'? No, no I'm not on board with this. Talking to the kid, fine, talking can't hurt. But you wanna stick a label on him? And then drug him up? He's in 5th grade! Who knows what kind of effect this is already having on him? Kid's are gonna make fun of him, bully him, who knows what. And then he's gonna actually have problems!" I could feel the spittle coming out the sides of my mouth as I spoke. I didn't know who the hell this *Dr. Williams* thought he was, trying to screw with my kid. Tommy had always been a good kid. No problems in school, making friends, he liked his little league team and was pretty damn good too. He was getting a little down right now, but everyone has those ups and downs. When I was a kid, I'd get down sometimes too, but that didn't mean I needed to be put on drugs. My parents didn't go for the easy way out, they just helped me to learn how to buck up. And that was all that Tommy needed too. I turned to Jeanine, "Are you ok with this? You're ok with doping up Tommy? Slapping a label on him? What if he wants to join the military or buy a gun? This will follow him his whole life, Jeanine. You really wanna do that to our kid?"

She looked at me and sighed and looked like she was trying not to roll her eyes, which made me grind my teeth together. She always acts so fucking superior. "Tom, why are you talking about Tommy like he's an adult? He's not even in junior

high. If taking medicine makes it better for him now, isn't that better than letting things get worse?"

"What's getting worse?" I knew I was basically yelling, but it didn't matter, "I still don't see what's so wrong with Tommy!"

"Your son is suffering from bipolar disorder, Mr. Draven," Dr. Williams said quietly after I was finished.

The room was very quiet for a while and I felt like my head was spinning. *What did this asshole know?* And then I looked at the degrees on his wall and saw names like Harvard University, Johns Hopkins, and UC San Francisco. I didn't know that much about schools, but I knew those were good ones. And that Hernandez woman had recommended him. *How does he know my kid better than me?* And then I tried to remember the last time I had had an hour-long conversation with Tommy. We watched TV together and I'd play his shooting video game with him, but we didn't talk that much. And this guy, this homo in goddamn elf shoes, he talked to Tommy two times a week for the past month. About his feelings, too, I guess. Maybe...maybe I didn't know what was going on with Tommy too much. And this *bipolar* business...well, that seemed pretty serious. *What kind of dad misses something like that?*

I was pulling at a loose string on the sofa while Jeanine asked, "What can we do, Dr. Williams?"

"I'd like to continue seeing him weekly and I'd like to start him on a low dose of an SSRI. We'll see how he does on that and adjust, as we need to. Nothing's set in

stone. And I think it'd be ideal to get enrolled in some group therapy. That way, he'll have some other kids who are going through something similar, and you'll have support from other parents."

Jeanine reached over and took the hand that wasn't fiddling with the string, sliding her fingers in between mine, "Tom, honey? This is both of us—we have to make this decision together. What do you think?"

I looked at Jeanine. We've been married nearly 15 years, but she looked just as pretty as she did back then. Her thick, black hair curved around her heart-shaped face in such a nice way. She was a skinny thing, even after two kids, but you wouldn't know it with how tightly she squeezed my hand. As much as I wanted to make her happy, I couldn't kick the image of I Tommy walking around with the label of 'crazy' for the rest of his life. I looked at her apologetically, "We can't do this to him." And then I turned to the fucking quack scribbling his little notes and said, "No one's gonna screw with my kid."

"I know this is difficult, but the fact that you are both here is promising," said Shannon, a stupid-looking chick with big hair and bright clothes. Of course this is who Jeanine found to be our couple's therapist. I guess I'd agreed to go and it wasn't like I was gonna look for someone to meet with. She was probably referred by a friend from church or something.

It'd been three months since Dr. Williams and afterwards Jeanine just kept pushing that we do something with Tommy. I knew he'd grow out of it though, if she'd just stop focusing on it so much. But she was just such a bitch about it, always telling me how we were doing permanent damage, there was something wrong. She quoted studies that she probably didn't even understand and just recited what Dr. Williams and Dr. Hernandez prattled off. I *explained* to her that shrinks only care about money otherwise they'd want to be real doctors. But still, she just kept going. She made it impossible to be around her. I started staying a little later at work than I needed just to have a break from the nagging. And there's this woman in accounting who stays late too, and well, we fooled around a couple times and Jeanine caught wind of it. We never even had sex, but that didn't matter to Jeanine 'Cheating's cheating!' I could still hear her yelling, like that makes any goddamn sense.

She gave me the usual ultimatum—move out, or she'd leave with the kids. I didn't wanna upset them, though—specially Tommy, since he's having a rough time—so I said I'd go. I asked her not to tell them the whole thing. She agreed, which was pretty good of her, I guess. I packed my bag when they were at school. Took the day off for it, like it was a fucking holiday. I was supposed to be gone by the time they got home, but I kinda dragged my feet packing up so I could see them for a minute before I left. I didn't want them to feel so abandoned, like I left without even thinking of them. I remember Lettie crying and hugging me, asking 'Why?' a lot. Tommy glared and stayed silent, but tears were on his face too. He wiped them away with an angry balled up fist. They both seemed extra little, standing there crying,

still in their backpacks. Man, I hated myself right then. I kissed Lettie and told her I loved her. When I went to do the same with Tommy, he just walked away. That was a month ago, and I hadn't seen them since. They kept refusing to see me when I came by. Jeanine had promised I could see the kids, but I guess they're too big to make them. Plus, I guess they had a right to be so I didn't press it.

So here we were, sitting in front of another fucking shrink, this time without degrees even—no 'Dr.', just 'Shannon'. Jeanine said if I kept coming her and we worked through stuff then maybe I could come home. So what else was I gonna do? I mean...I love her. And the kids. Our whole...family situation.

Jeanine finally answered the fluffy-haired fruitcake, "Thank you for seeing us, Shannon. I know you have a busy schedule."

"Of course, not a problem. Marissa told me about your situation and I wanted to fit you in just as soon as possible."

"Marissa's such a sweetheart, she's been so helpful with all of this," Jeanine said conversationally. I don't know who the hell this 'Marissa' was, but I fucking called it—I knew this would be some friend of Jeanine's. So, of course, she's gonna be on her side. There's no winning when women team-up like this. I sighed. Might as well just brand myself with a friggin' A and call it a day.

Shannon finally decided to stop chatting with Jeanine and asked, "Tom, what are some of your concerns in your relationship? In your own words. The first step in solving relationship problems is making sure there's a clear understanding of what the problems are."

“I don’t have any problems. Just want Jeanine to stop nagging me all the time.”

“Okay...how about you Jeanine?”

“I feel like Tom isn’t receptive to anything I have to say. His handling of our son’s mental health issues really shows that. He doesn’t respect my opinion, or the opinions of the doctors. He doesn’t want to put Tommy on medication, doesn’t want him to be in therapy; he just wants to pretend it’s not happening. The cheating is just part of it. When things go bad, he pretends everything’s fine and will do whatever he can to ignore the problems.”

“Okay...that’s, wow, that’s like a prepared answer!” Shannon chuckled, and I started to too, but then Jeanine shot me a look like I better shut up right now so I did. Shannon continued, “Thank you, Jeanine. It’s great you’ve given this a lot of thought and figured out your feelings. That’s usually half the battle of therapy. Maybe more than half.” She paused for a moment shifting her whole body to face me, “Tom, what do you think of what Jeanine just said? Do you have any feelings about it?”

“I get that she feels like I’m not listening about Tommy. But I am. I just disagree with her. And the cheating was just... We were fighting a lot, and I screwed up. She knows it didn’t mean anything. Also, as I told her, I didn’t actually have sex with the woman. I know it’s still bad, but I think that makes a difference.”

“A blowjob is sex, Tom!” Jeanine yelled.

“Ookay, I think we’re getting just a bit off topic, and a bit too heated.

Remember, this is supposed to be a safe place to express your feelings openly,” Shannon said while gesturing around with both hands. It was like she was trying to direct an invisible orchestra or something. She encouraged us to take some calming breaths (I told you she was a fucking hippie) before finally asking, “Tom, do you think you avoid acknowledging problems?”

“No, I just think...” I started thinking about Tommy and the bipolar thing and how everyone seems to think he’s messed up but me, “I think I see things differently.”

“You see things how you want to see them!” The calming breaths did not help Jeanine.

Shannon turned to speak to Jeanine directly, “Let’s try to allow Tom to speak his truth, ok?”

Jeanine humph-ed, and flopped back in her seat, and folded her arms in front of her. She looked so cute, sitting there pouting that I wanted to laugh, but then I remembered why we were there. Finally, I said, “Maybe...maybe there are times I want to think things are better than they are.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I just think I’m trying to be optimistic.” I heard Jeanine groan, but she didn’t add anything

“Do you think that optimism might be damaging sometimes? Maybe it might be better to be realistic?”

"I...I don't know, what's with all the questions?"

"You're right, this is more about creating a dialogue between the two of you. Jeanine, why do you think Tom deflects when dealing with difficult situations?"

"Because of what happened when he was a kid. He'd never dealt with it and now he never deals with anything."

"Tom, do you want to respond to what Jeanine has said?"

"No." I clenched my jaw.

"Tom, this is only going to work if you engage."

"Ok, well I think Jeanine needs to stop obsessing over shit that happened over 30 years ago!" My stomach started to feel churn and I turned to address her directly, "I'm fine with it; you seem to have more of an issue with it than I do."

"Tom, you have dreams all the time still. How can you say it's not an issue?"

"It's not a fucking issue, Jeanine!" I was yelling now, and I could feel myself starting to sweat even though it was freezing in Shannon's office. I took a couple deep breaths, but had a hard time bringing all the air into my lungs. "Just stop fucking talking about it!"

I gripped the arm of the couch, trying to keep my stupid hands from shaking. I felt Jeanine hand touch my shoulder from the other side of the couch and I flinched. Finally, from the other side of the couch, Jeanine said, "Honey, you gotta deal with this at some point." I closed my eyes to try and calm down and I heard her scoot down the couch to the cushion next to me. Very gently, she started rubbing my back. "I love you, but you have to deal with this shit, Tom."

I opened my eyes and looked at Jeanine, “How the hell do I do that? Where the fuck do I start?”

She gestured around the room with an open palm, to me, to Shannon, “Talk.”

So now it's just me and Shannon. After our last meeting, she said she wanted to meet with just me before meeting Jeanine and I together. I tried to protest, but Jeanine was weirdly firm about it. *You figure you out, then we can figure us out. And then we'll see.* I had expected her to fold on this honestly, just because I know she must be struggling being alone all the time. And she called me about her mom; guess she had to put her in a home finally—a ‘facility’. Guess that was pretty tough on her and she cried a little on the phone. I'm not great with saying words to make her feel better. I can fix things. If she needs a doctor for her mom, I can find one and I'll pay for it. But I don't know how to make her feel less guilty; not with just a phone conversation. Maybe I could hug her or something and then she'd really get crying, but after she'd always tell me she was feeling better. But I guess she doesn't want that kind of thing anymore; she just keeps telling me to deal with my shit so we can deal with ours, but the longer I'm apart from her, from the kids...It's like, I'm afraid they're forgetting me. I'm afraid they don't remember what it's like to have their dad around. And I'm worried I'll forget about that too.

Shannon and I have met twice now, this being the third. I think we've fallen into a bit of a routine. She offers me a glass of water, and while she's getting it I sit down on her hippie couch and push the pillows to the side so there's actually room

for a person. I don't know how someone expected to sit there when it's covered in pillows and blankets. Makes me wonder if people just use therapy as an excuse to take a damn nap. Which, honestly, I wouldn't mind. It's been tough sleeping without Jeanine.

"So, Tom, we've talked about your feelings regarding your separation, about missing your kids, your concern with your son. All very important things, of course, but we need to talk about your childhood. Clearly, you're struggling in that regard. If you start to talk, we can figure out coping mechanisms."

"I...ugh, it's fucking stupid. I was in the navy. I knew people that got blown up. Not a ton, but still. I was six years old—this shouldn't still be upsetting me. I'm nearly 40 years old, for Chrissakes!"

"Sometimes little things can stick with us. Or big things. Why don't you just try telling me. In your own words, you can take your time."

"When I was a kid, there was this guy on the beach..." I could still see the guys face. He wore a military type outfit. He was skinny—gaunt almost, but with friendly, brown eyes. I knew I could trust him because of those eyes, even though I was just a dumb kid. And we played catch out on the beach for maybe an hour, but it could have just been ten minutes. Time moves so different when you're a kid. There's so much of it, I guess. And then, all of the sudden, my dad came out sputtering and mad and scarier than normal. It was confusing. He yelled at me, he yelled at the guy, he yelled at my mom. And the guy, he looked so scared, but more than that, he just looked real sad. Like he wasn't surprised to be screamed at. And then my dad...Well

he just swung back and kicked him and he fell over and I don't even know if he died right then. I realized I was starting to shake a bit so I had to close my eyes to steady myself again. I took deep, calming breaths. I remember his shuddering breaths, the guy, out on the beach. Deep, heavy full of sand. My parents pulled me away and took me inside. My dad smacked me around a bit because I wasn't supposed to talk to strangers—that was one thing I'd never do, you know, never smack around my kids—I cried but my mom tucked me in and she sang me a song in her shaky voice and told me everything was fine, nothing to worry about. Always fine—nothing ever needed worry or concern. We lived in a big 'ole house and nothing could hurt me here. I didn't know the word for irony yet, but I sure knew what it was.

The next afternoon, mom told me to go play outside because the handyman was there and she wanted to talk to him alone. I went out with my baseball, to play catch alone again. I walked along the water's edge for a while, felt it on my toes. It was nice. And then I saw the guy! Down the beach, laying on his side, facing away from me. I called to him, but I figured he was sleeping or maybe he was mad at me because of my dad. So I ran all the way down. When I reached him, his jacket was wet and I guessed he must be pretty weird to go swimming in his clothes. I grabbed his arm and pulled him over to wake him up. His face was bruised purple and blue, bloated to twice its size. Little chunks of flesh were missing from his cheeks. His gaping mouth was filled with murky water. One eye was missing; in its place just a gaping hole. The other eye, though, looked right at me. I was as scared as I was sad. I didn't wanna leave him alone so I picked up his prune-y, purple hand and screamed

for my mother, still looking at the eye. My mom didn't come though. We sat like that for hours, the two of us. Police came eventually, but I didn't want to let go of him, didn't want him to be alone. I held on to his hand until a police officer pulled me away. I guess I was holding too tight, because his little finger popped off. I dropped it when I heard a woman scream that sounded like my mother. Someone screaming my name. "Tom! Tom! Are you ok?"

I opened my eyes slowly, and realized I had slumped over and fallen off the couch I guess. Shannon was standing over me, shaking me awake. "I..." And then I threw up on her shoes.

Once I had regained my balance, had a glass of water, and paid Shannon money to get her carpet steam cleaned and buy new shoes, I got into my car and put the key in the ignition. I paused for a moment, before pulling out my phone and calling Jeanine. When she picked up, I said, "Jeanine, take Tommy to Dr. Williams or whoever. Do what they say, whatever you think is best. Medication, therapy, yoga, buy him a puppy, whatever. Just do it." She started to respond, but before she could I cut her off, "Jeanine, I can't do this. I love you, I love our family, but I can't give you what you want. I'm...too far gone, I think. Take care of the kids, we'll figure out visitation later. And take care of yourself." And then I pushed 'end' without waiting for a reply.

Helen: September 3, 1986

It's starting to get dark out earlier and earlier. It's just five o'clock in the evening, but already, I needed to call Jeanine in because I could see the sun going down. She'll come in all sad and dirty, whining that she wanted more time in the yard playing this game or that game because it was just getting good. I'll yell at her because grass stains are such a pain in the ass to get out. I know she's savoring the last bits of summer before everything outside turns icy, but I'll wonder why she can't just play nice indoor games like house or have a tea party. Part of me thinks that women's lib bullshit's probably trickled down to the kids. So then I'll be watching her bounce around the kitchen babbling about an animal she learned about in school or some girl's new shoes. Robert will be coming home, expecting dinner to be ready, on the table, still nice and hot no matter what time he walks through the door. That's my job; everything's *on the dot*, right when they need it, right when they want it. I poured myself a glass of wine and opened the door to get my ten year old, "Nee-nee, it's time for dinner!"

As she walked through the door, Jeanine asked in a singsong voice, "Can I help you get make dinner?" Sweet as she was, Jeanine had the tendency to make a mess of things. She was the size of a small adult despite only being in the fifth grade and she seemed to have very limited control over her body. I was making stroganoff—if she helped, it would somehow end up all over the floor.

"You know honey, I don't need any help right now. Why don't you go change out of your dirty clothes?"

She looked disappointed. "Ok. When's Daddy coming home?"

I sighed and took a deep swig of my wine. I reminded myself that she was only ten so it made sense that she'd ask things like this, but it seemed like every goddamn night I had to say something like "I'm not sure. You're daddy's a busy man and comes home when he can."

And then she looked even more disappointed. "Oh ok. I hope he comes home soon," and she started walking slowly upstairs.

I whispered to myself, clenching my jaw, "He better." And then I drained my wine glass and poured myself another.

At 8 o'clock, I finally told Jeanine to eat. Robert still hadn't come home; hadn't even called. I sat at the table sipping my third glass of wine, watching Jeanine eat. The rest of the food was in the oven, even though keeping it warm was probably hopeless. Jeanine frowned as she shoveled little bites into her mouth, "What's wrong, Nee-nee?"

"I was just hoping Daddy would be home a little earlier tonight. I like it when we have dinner together at the same time," she said, staring down at her plate.

"Yeah, I like that too, but your father doesn't give a—" She looks up at me with big eyes and I stop myself. "—your father is very busy."

"What's he doing? They don't build things at night, do they?"

I close my eyes and look at the wine swirling around my glass, "I don't know what he's doing, honey. Finish your food. It's about time for you to go to bed."

Jeanine started complaining, whining about how it's too early and she just ate and no one else has to go to bed at 9 o'clock and how she wanted to see Daddy before she went to sleep. I finished my glass of wine as I listened to the whining—it was like drill coming into my brain through my temples. I couldn't fucking stand the *whining*; always so much whining with this one. Melissa whined too, I think, but she was twenty and had her own baby now and was married to some asshole who moved her to Tennessee so it was hard to think of her as little and whiny. It was hard to think of her as anything but gone. "Jeanine, I'm your mother and you will do as I say!" I yelled, clearly enunciating every word, making sure to not slur any of them. I saw her giant eyes well up and I felt like I might scream if she started crying. "Nee-nee, honey, I'm sorry for yelling. Mom's just a little tired."

"It's fine," she said quietly, "You always yell when you drink wine."

That really pissed me off, because I was pretty sure it was true, "That's enough, young lady! You think you're a big girl and can sass me like that?" I stood up and grabbed her plate and ripped the fork from her hand, "You be a big girl and go upstairs to sleep then. You put yourself to bed." This was partly a punishment for her, but mostly it just made it so I wouldn't have to slog all the way upstairs and do the praying and cuddling like I did most nights. Once I had heard her little feet pat all the way upstairs, I picked up the wine bottle and drank the last of it, not bothering with the glass. I tossed the bottle in the trash and listened to it shatter when it hit the bottom of the can. I liked the sound. I opened the cabinet and pulled out a bottle of vodka and poured myself a glass of that. As I dropped ice cubes in,

enjoying the way they *plopped* and then *clinked* when they bounced off the glass's bottom, I felt the crawling warmth of the wine. It was like sliding into a warm bath. I sat down in Jeanine's chair to drink my vodka and ice and stare at the phone.

At nine-thirty, the goddamn phone finally rang. It was Robert. "Hey babe, it's gonna be a while longer." He was drunk. And I heard a woman giggling in the background. How fucking stupid did he think I was?

"Yeah, ok, Robert."

"What, are you mad at me?"

"Nope."

"You know I work hard to make sure you have a fancy house and drive a nice car and all the shit. So don't be a bitch about it. I know you don't understand work or money, but it takes a lot making sure you and the kids are taken care of," he said. Apparently his companion thought this was pretty funny because there was more giggling.

"Kid."

"Huh?"

"We have one kid now. Just one. Melissa has been gone for two years now. Or did you miss that one?"

"Er, yeah, I know. I just was saying."

"Just come home when you're done with her, ok Robert?"

"What's your meaning with that?"

“Just wear a fucking rubber, Robert.” And I slammed the receiver into its cradle.

I was fuming so much that my head felt a bit clearer. I stood up from the kitchen table and turned around trying to figure out what to do with myself. I didn't know who it was this time—the woman my husband was sleeping with, I mean. I had guesses. There was the slutty secretary he hired, or the widow who was building a mansion down the damn street with her dead husband's money. Or any of the other women in this town, really, because he was wealthy and good-looking and I was fucking oblivious. I guess that's what they probably thought, anyway. I heard the other women whispering at church. It was either, oh, poor woman with an unfaithful husband. Or it was whispered questions and suspicion. What was I doing wrong? What had I done to drive my husband to cheat this way?

I was looking around my sparkling kitchen, the glass of vodka still in my hand. My new cabinets were installed three years ago, right before Melissa left, after I found out he cheated with the wife of one of his foremen. The installation was done by his own company, even though they usually do bigger projects, so he stopped by in the middle of the day to check in and we'd eat lunch together. He said I made the best tuna fish sandwich in the whole wide world and he'd kiss my head before he left.

I looked at the counter next to the refrigerator. He bought me a KitchenAid last winter when I found a little baggie of white powder in his wallet. I didn't even ask him what it was—I'd seen the shows on TV and had a good idea. I just held it up

in front of his face and asked "Is this the man I married?" He grabbed it away from me and told me I was overreacting, he said he was sorry, and he said it wouldn't happen again. And then the next day, he made it home at 5:30 and gave me the damn mixer. He made me martinis as I cooked dinner. He turned on the radio and we danced in the kitchen to some old-timey song. He held me close and I felt in love again.

Still sipping my vodka, I turned around to face the oven. That fucking oven. He bought that for me two months ago. One night at 10 o'clock, he came home drunk and who knows what else and yelled about the casserole being cold. He threw the dish on the ground, breaking it, and I slapped him right in his stupid face. And then he got real angry, more angry than anytime before. He stood up from the kitchen chair and I was reminded of how big he was. He shoved me into the wall it knocked the wind right out of me and I fell to the ground, next to the broken casserole dish. His big hands wrapped around my throat and it was right then that I figured I was gonna die and there was some part of me that wanted to laugh because I was gonna die over some cold food. He looked down at me as he squeezed the life out of me and his face was tomato-red and his eyes were blazing. I always loved the golden parts of his eyes. Brown and gold; they were so pretty. Like the ring he bought me when we first started dating, the one with the brown stone. So pretty. Sphalerite was what it was made out of. I put it on my finger and held it up next to his face *They match!* and he said something that sounded sweet about always having his eye on me. As I was losing consciousness, I just kept thinking about that goddamn ring that he had

given me before we got married. He let go, eventually, and the blood rushed back to my head and face. I wheezed and coughed a lot. And then I saw that Robert was crying. He scooped me up off the floor and carried me upstairs and laid me in bed. He took off my clothes and put on my nightgown. He patted my face with a cold towel and cleaned the cuts on the back of my arm with a Q-tip and alcohol the whole time whispering, "I'm so sorry." When he tucked me in, he kissed my head and told me he loved me. I didn't say anything back right away, but then I heard myself say, "I love you, too." The next day, I slept a long time and when I finally woke up, I walked downstairs to see a clean kitchen and the new oven.

Maybe it was because I was drunk, but I thought about making a pie. I preheated that goddamn oven and laughed to myself about it—what a stupid idea. Then I started pulling out ingredients. I combined flour, salt, shortening, and butter for the crust and rolled it out. And then for the filling, I beat 2 eggs in the KitchenAid and stirred in sugar, salt, ginger, cloves. And then I added a can of pumpkin puree and some evaporated milk. A pumpkin pie—Robert's favorite. I thought about adding rat poison from the shed outside. Then I shook my head, scared of my own thought. Ipecac, maybe. But then I'd have to take care of him as he barfed his guts out. I thought about castor oil, but then I thought Jeanine might eat some and I scrapped the whole idea of messing with Robert's pie.

As I placed the pie in the oven, I thought of how Sylvia Plath killed herself by putting her head in her oven. People said she didn't really want to die because her neighbor or doctor or somebody was supposed to come by. But I also heard she

stuck her head real far into the oven so I think she meant to die. I thought about killing myself with the oven. But the one Robert bought me was a fucking electric.

I set the oven for 40 minutes and went to sit back down at the kitchen table. I poured myself another glass of vodka and just watched the minutes tick down. After 30, I heard the phone ring. *Who the hell could that be?* I thought to myself. All the church ladies would have said their prayers and tucked themselves into bed by now. Melissa only called about once every three months, on special occasions. Easter, Christmas, Mother's Day. That kind of thing. I picked up the phone, "Hello?"

"Helen?" It was Robert. He sounded upset and even drunker than earlier. His words slurred together, but I had been listening to his slurred words for years so they didn't bother me.

"Yeah, what is it, Robert?"

"Helen, oh my god, Helen." He sounded like he was crying, but I couldn't find it in myself to care.

"What is it Robert? You know I ought to just hang up on you so you could at least speak quickly."

"It's Clay. He—oh my god, Helen."

"Clay? Your little brother? Back in Kansas?" Robert had left Kansas when he was 17 and come to Minnesota to work on the oil rigs. He didn't realize till he got here that there wasn't oil in Minnesota. Not a single oil well in the whole state. He'd turned to construction instead. When he left, though, he never looked back. He

hadn't called his mom and dad in years, and his siblings—Kimberly and Clay—well, they were mysteries to him.

“He's dead! He's dead. I don't...my brother is dead.” I didn't know what to say. I wanted to blame the vodka for clouding my mind, but I don't think I would have had much else to say if I were sober.

“Well, what happened? Do you know?”

“He killed himself! They think anyway. He washed up on the shore in San Diego with a backpack full of rocks. People...they were talking about AIDS or something.”

“Oh that's terrible,” I said and it I really thought it was. It seemed like such a lonely way to die. All I heard was more of Robert's crying and blubbing—no words at all. The buzzer for the pie went off so I set the phone down and got it out and set it on the table to cool. I picked up the phone and he was still blubbing. Then I heard some screeching and clicking. “Robert, are you driving?”

“Yeah, I just left Dani's. I'm going home!”

“Well, ok...” I was a bit surprised that he didn't even attempt to lie about screwing the divorcee that just moved to town, but I didn't even care to get into it. “When will you be here?”

“There? No, I'm driving to Kansas!” As angry as I was, about the cheating and the coming home late, I became even madder. I cleaned up after him, I cared for his children, I behaved as I was supposed to in public even though he was a liar and a

cheater and everyone knew it. But I wasn't home for him? "Why the hell are you going to Kansas?"

"My mom called. I gotta go for the memorial. Gotta try to make this better. Who knows what people'll be saying... I just... Ah, Helen, I feel like shit. You think... You think my leaving made things bad for him?"

"No."

"You don't? That's a relief! I was blaming myself, Hel, I really was."

"I think he would have killed himself sooner if you'd stayed."

"What? What'd you say?"

"I said that you make people want to kill themselves. God knows I've thought about it. And I think you should blame yourself for Clay. If you weren't such a shit to everyone, if you ever cared about anyone else, maybe he wouldn't be dead. You might as well have drowned him yourself." The words were tumbling out of my mouth, almost faster than I was thinking them. I don't know if I believed all of it, but part of me did and the rest of me didn't care.

"Helen, how can you say that?" And the rest of what he said was mumbled because he had started to cry.

I finished the rest of my glass of vodka in one gulp before I said, "I can say it because it's true."

"Helen, I—" His response was cut short by the sound of skidding, screeching, and crunching. And then the line went dead.

I gently put the phone back in its cradle. I stood and grabbed a plate and fork from the cabinet. I sat back down at the table. With a shaking hand, I poured myself another glass of vodka. And then I cut myself a big slice of pumpkin pie.

Jeanine: April 25, 2020

I parked my car carefully in the parking lot of Uncommon Grounds. Even though it was eight o'clock in the morning and the café just opened, I knew that the lot would be packed within an hour and I wasn't sure how long this was gonna take. As I was driving in, I noticed that Tom's car was already parked and I was excited for a sec; for a moment I felt like we were just meeting for a cup of coffee and a long chat rather than to end our marriage. But then I looked at the manila folder holding the divorce papers and the excitement was gone.

I squeezed the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white. I'd have expected myself to be nervous, but that wasn't what I felt. I was just sad. I closed my eyes, and for the first time in a long time, I said a prayer. It was short: Dear God—I am sorry. Please forgive me. And please let this all be ok one day. Amen. I opened my eyes. It was time to go. I didn't want to keep Tom waiting.

I stepped out of the car and immediately felt the intensity of the sun on my bare shoulders. Though it wasn't technically summer, this spring had been unseasonably warm and so I'd been living in sundresses and shorts, even though it was probably inappropriate at my age. Violet kept rolling her eyes when I walked downstairs in the morning—probably irritated that her aging mother was wearing so little clothing. She probably thought it was hypocritical for me to dress in this way, after all these years of telling her to cover up. It was, and part of me felt bad about that, but it was hot and I was tired of following rules.

The dress I wore was one that I pulled out from deep in my closet. It was cornflower blue and as I stood there trying to flatten out the wrinkles that had formed while I was sitting in the car, I realized I had bought it when Tom and I had taken cruise to Ensenada years and years ago. The kids had been little and stayed at with their grandparents, so it was just the two of us. I hadn't realized how hot it would be, so I bought the dress while we were strolling around and wore it to dinner. I remember that Tom had told me I was the most beautiful woman in the world. It was a good night, a good trip. A good memory. And then I felt like such an ass for wearing this dress on this day.

I looked at the rest of what I was wearing—the watch he bought me five Christmases ago, the sandals I wore on our last date. I had tied my hair up in the French braid that he liked so much. I was even wearing my wedding ring. I groaned to myself at my oversight—everything about me was going to remind him of us together. But then I thought about it for a while, trying to figure out something else I could wear, and I wasn't sure there was a single thing I didn't associate with Tom in one way or another. I guess that's how it goes when you're with someone for nearly 20 years. I sighed and walked towards the café.

Tom was already sitting down at a table in the corner, sipping what I guessed was a Mocha, from a paper to-go cup. He liked black coffee most days, but when he was upset, he liked to have something sweet and chocolaty. I used to tease him about it and he would sulk even more with his cocoa or cookies or whatever. I

probably said something about him acting like a girl on her period. I don't know why I did that. I wish I hadn't.

Tom looked up at me as I walked toward him and grinned his big grin. But then it disappeared. I think he realized it was maybe weird to look happy, given the circumstances. But we hadn't seen each other in a couple months, so I guess we were kind of happy, even if it didn't fit the situation. As I approached the table, pulling out the chair across from him, Tom said, "Hey, Jeanie. How're things?"

I smiled a little smile at him and said, "Hi Tom, I'm good. How about you?"

"Good, good," he said, looking a bit uncomfortable. Then he slid an iced drink towards me, "Grabbed this for you. Iced latte, 3 shots, with soy milk, right?"

"Aw, thanks. You remembered," I smiled again as I picked up the drink.

"Of course. I figured iced since your food always follows the weather."

I laughed. This was a constant point of contention between us—I felt like you should eat cold things when it was hot and hot things when it was cold. As a lifelong San Diegan, though, Tom didn't understand why food and drink would correspond with the weather. "Thank you for the consideration."

There was a long pause, during which we both drank our coffees and stared at the table between us. Finally Tom asked, "How are the kids?"

"They're good. Tommy's doing well. He took almost all AP's this year so he's getting ready for his tests. He doesn't seem too worried though. And Violet... Well she hates me so she's just biding her time until she can move away to school next year."

“Aw, I’m sorry about Lettie. I can try to talk to her the next weekend I have them.”

“That’s ok. It’ll blow over eventually, I think,” I said. But I was pretty skeptical. Last year I finally told her that I was the one who kicked out her dad—she’d been thinking he just left. So she went from hating him to hating me. Tommy was always egalitarian though, and tried his best to not show a preference. Still though, after months of cold shoulder from Violet, my patience was growing thin.

“Do you...Do you think we screwed ‘em up?” Tom asked slowly.

“The kids?”

“Yeah. Do you think all of this,” he gestured between us with his hand, “the stuff between us, the separation, and now the divorce. You think we...you know, messed them up?”

I thought for a long time, sipping my drink. I thought about the last five years. The therapists, the arguments, the long conversations. The kids and I moving to a smaller house, and Tom buying a condo up in Fallbrook. The month where Tom tried moving back in. When we realized nothing had been solved and he moved out again. And, of course, trading the kids back and forth every other weekend. I wondered if that was enough to ruin them in some permanent way. Finally I said, “I don’t know. But I think we did better than our parents did with us.”

“Well look how we turned out,” he said. He chuckled as he said it, but he was serious.

I thought for a while, again. Tom didn't interrupt me. He was always good about that. Finally I said, "I don't think kids are like eggs where you have to have them in perfect conditions—refrigerated, in the carton, you know—in order for them to be ok. I think they're more like... Um, I don't know, like—"

"Bagels? Poptarts?" Tom said, his grin back again.

I laughed, "Sure, yeah, kids are like Poptarts. Ideally you toast them, but, you know, if you can't, it's ok. Does that make sense?"

"I don't think so, but I get what you're saying. Let's hope Lettie and Tommy are some high quality Poptarts, I guess."

"Sounds good." Both of us chuckled, but once we'd stopped there was more silence. We both knew where this conversation was going, why we'd met, but neither one of us wanted to be the one to bring it up.

Finally, Tom said, "So you brought the papers? They just need signatures right?"

"Uh, yup, that's all." I reached down into my purse and pulled out the envelope and slid them across the table. "I already signed where I need to. Just sign where the arrows are."

"Ok," he said, pulling a pen out of his pocket. He paused looking at the papers. "I...God, this sucks, Jeanine."

I blinked away some tears, "I know. It really does."

"Is this...are we sure about this?"

"What other options do we have, Tom?"

“I know... It’s just... You know I love you, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” I stopped blinking the tears away and let them roll down my face. “And I love you too. Who knew two people could love each other and it could still not be enough?”

Tom was crying now too. He just nodded and started signing the papers. When he finished, he looked at my face like he was trying to memorize it. “You remember what I called it? When we met out on the beach that day 18 years ago?”

“You called it serendipity.”

“You still think it was? You think it was serendipitous that we met?”

I reached across the table to hold his hand in mine, “Yeah, Tom, I think it was. Just a different kind of serendipity.”