

## ABSTRACT

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Writing stories is more than fantastic structure. It's character, too.

This statement is something I hope to illustrate with my thesis: a collection of short stories that focus on characters at different stages in their lives. This thesis represents seven characters (not necessarily in search of an author, but an author in search of their story) who at one time were (some of them most likely still are) trapped in a structure imposed on them by their author. Though I do think these selections are more than character sketches. Maybe a better way to phrase it is character slices. If we take these stories, the first "crush" (though Brooke would be sure to call it love), the first death of someone you *really cared* about, the moment when all you want to do is disappear from "it all" (or try to), they are all of our stories.

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LIFE STORY

By

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## Chapter 1: In the Beginning

### *“Stop The Madness!”*

Today, in second period—Physical Health taught by Coach Schell of the Bushy Eyebrows—I had my presentation about the dangers of Alcohol Abuse. I stood up in front of the whole class with my diagrams and the blurry glasses from the kit I’d borrowed from the nurse and encouraged them that nothing good could come from putting fermented liquid into their systems. I ended with a treaty to everyone to please, “Stop The Madness!” But before I could sit back down next to Jack in the desks pushed up against the left wall of the classroom, Coach Schell of the Bushy Eyebrows said, “Hold on a sec, Brooke,” and held his hand up with his palm staring me down as he wrote and wrote on his grading sheet. It was long enough that I could feel the power of my last, “Stop The Madness!” drifting away and out the open windows of the classroom. I felt like all of my momentum was wandering out to the baseball diamond to play a pick up game while I was left with a sagging smile next to my learn-how-it-feels-to-be-drunk kit (still borrowed from the nurse).

“Okay,” Coach Schell said as his palm rested on his desk. I looked at Jack who raised his eyebrows and rolled his eyes in reference to Coach Schell for me. This morning, Jack was the first person I saw in the sophomore hall after dad dropped me off at school. Dad had told me, “Three-oh-two PM. Don’t miss your transfer into Chicago or else.” And I didn’t ask him, “or else what?” because I already knew he

would give me some answer like, “Do it because I said so,” “Do it because I’m your father,” or “because otherwise mom would be disappointed.”

I’ve decided Jack is best described as a “fully-functional human being,” and F-FHBs are so much harder to come by than one might think. I had found him at his locker, stared a moment at his Star Wars: The Heroes calendar taped to the inside door (the month of April is Liam Neeson as Qui-Gon Jinn) and entered—for the umpteenth time—the dance that two people who could like each other (but I can never quite know for sure) have been entering into since the dawn of time. I said hello, looking at him like he didn’t mean anything to me, because you never want to be too obvious with delicate situations such as love.

“Oh. Hello, Brooke,” he said, still smiling which showed the double set of dimples around his mouth like two sets of parentheses enclosing everything he says. Jack looked at me this way after my presentation, and my smile felt more real until Coach Schell opened up the mandatory Q & A session after the presentation to the rest of the class.

Ericka Sidelinger raised her hand, which I could have predicted a year ago. Ericka said, “But don’t you think alcoholic consumption can be a good thing—*in moderation?*”

“Well,” I said, then paused for effect. “When people have important responsibilities, they can’t always be trusted to ‘just say no’ if they’ve already entered into alcoholic consumption.”

Ericka raised her hand again. Coach Schell nodded to her. “But if people have responsibilities, doesn’t that mean they can be trusted?”

I didn't answer at first. I could feel my voice box quivering in my throat, and I looked at Jack and willed him to remember the time when we, too, had talked about trust. It was on a Friday night after the football game. We were still sitting on the top bleacher when the security guards told us to clear out. Jack had looked at me and asked if I ever trusted anyone. And I thought in response, "Oh how I want to trust you!" but said out loud, "My dog is very reliable." He didn't hesitate to tell me that wasn't what he meant. He had meant people (not dogs) and took the question back before I could cover with, "Mrs. McFadden," who is a great psychology teacher. In response, Jack slouched down onto the bleacher in that way he has, trying not to smile to himself. But he didn't even answer his own question, and I couldn't help but wonder why he'd asked it in the first place. My real answer sticks around inside of me, and I wonder about the next time he might ask me the question, so that I might answer so assuredly, "I think I could possibly trust you some time soon." To which he might reply, "That's sweet." or (at least in my dreams, he says) "Why, I love you, too."

"Brooke?" Coach Schell asked. "Please answer Ericka's question. We want to get to all the presentations for today."

"Not that I think it's relevant." I looked right at Coach Schell, then Ericka. "But no, you can't trust everyone all of the time."

"Thank you, Brooke," said Coach Schell of the Bushy Eyebrows in a tone that indicated that I was free to gather up the nurse's act-like-you're-drunk kit and sit next to Jack in our desks against the wall.

But today in Coach Schell's class Ericka also gave her presentation which just so happened to be answering mine. Ericka said that drinking should be a part of a grown-up's daily routine. She stood up in front of the class with her hand-drawn diagram of a full wine glass and said, "Moderation Is The Key." She didn't mention one thing about how it could cause brain damage to the baby of a woman who is pregnant. And every time she spoke or cleared her throat the faded line of a scar on her neck tangoed with her jugular vein. Her argument only garnered knowing looks from Coach Schell of the Bushy Eyebrows whom everyone knows is a moderate-but-more-like-heavy drinker, because he always carries a bottle of orange juice with him around school which looks like orange juice but is really something that "burns going down" according to one of the more well-to-do boys who goes here named Hughe Marriott. I didn't look at Ericka except for at the end of it all, and I felt a heaviness in my chest, pulling downward.

Then Coach Schell asked for questions from the class, and everyone turned to me like I had been directly addressed, because in some ways her presentation expressed, "I disagree," and in other ways it said, "I, Ericka Sidelinger, am forever in opposition to you, Brooke Summers." And in the end, no one asked Ericka any of the questions they usually ask. She sat back down in her seat with her momentum still intact. And I ignored the rest of the Coach Schell and Ericka knowing looks, which I knew would turn into an A+!!! *Great job, Ericka!!* on her grade sheet.

And what I really wanted to say was, "You don't know anything about me Ericka, so stuff your mouth with a huge cannelloni (an Italian stuffed noodle dish) that's so greasy you'll get heartburn." Because the real reason why I had given my

presentation had to do with a very specific exigence involving my mother—the exact person I am on the 3:02 train into the city to visit this weekend. Because I once overheard mom and dad speaking in hushed tones around the kitchen table about when she was pregnant with me and drank too much that one night because she was afraid to have a baby. And mom and dad were concerned that it had done something to my brain. And they had the right to be worried since it “only takes one mistake during a pregnancy” like I learned in the research for my presentation. And because that was before we knew that epilepsy was what was wrong with me and the reason that I sometimes “lost time.”

During the rest of the presentations Jack wrote to me in the margin of his notebook, *Ericka really liked your presentation*. This was part of his dry humor, to which I wrote back, *Me and her go way back you know*, which is true because my past with Ericka has been sordid at best.

Ericka Sidelinger has hands-down been a bother to me ever since she came to St. Alban’s three years ago, touting about how she’d just skipped the sixth grade. The first time I noticed she had it out for me was during eighth grade English class when she passed me a note that read, *You smell like pickled herring*, which I found very hurtful, especially when Mrs. Cox caught me with it and made me stand up and read the note aloud so it looked like I was indeed telling Mrs. Cox that she smelled of pickled herring. I was sent to Principal Cooke’s office, because that’s where us young people go when we say some thing inappropriate in class so that we can sit and “talk out” our feelings. Later that fateful day Ericka ran up to me during our lunchtime with one of those sugar-coated, strawberry-flavored pies and said, “I am so



sorry. That note was meant for Dean Davis, not you,” and gave me half the pie as a consolation. At first I believed her and said, “Ok, sit down.” But then she told me a story about how her dad was a Vietnam vet who used to work in an ice cream factory and once when they were mixing a vat of strawberry ice cream, an octet of baby rats that belonged to a mother they’d caught in a trap had fallen in. And her father and his friends thought about remaking the whole batch, but then remembered how baby rats have no fur and look an awful lot like chunks of strawberry when they’re chopped up. I responded to this story, having already eaten most of my pie, by stating at a very rapid pace, “I don’t care if you skipped a grade and you are absurdly, very smart. Or if you meant that note for Dean Davis. You are not to speak of chopped-up rat babies around me, and you are not to sit down with me at lunch any longer.”

And she got up and left me. But instead of going back to sit at her other table, she left the lunchroom. In my next class I got a pink slip. And since I got a pink slip, I went to see Principal Cooke again because that’s what you do when you get that particularly-colored piece of paper at St. Alban’s Parochial High. The joke was actually on Ericka though, because dad and Principal Cooke are Great Friends from their time as classmates at St. Alban’s Parochial High and the Golf Course. After I explained the situation involving Ericka, Principal Cooke replied, “Now, Pipsqueak” (because that’s what dad calls me, too) “just calm down and remember that Miss Sidelinger is younger than you. She’s looking to you as an example. And try to think before you speak next time.” (I have to sigh in defeat even as I recall how he didn’t understand.) And I walked up to Ericka as I saw her in the hallway after my visit to Principal Cooke’s and said, “Was it you who made me go to the Office?” and she

answered me, “Did you know on average during conversation that there is an awkward silence every seven minutes.” I didn’t understand right then, during our eighth grade year, why she had said this instead of answering my question. But I know it was to torment me because now every time there is an awkward silence in a conversation (about every seven minutes or so), I remember this trivial piece of knowledge so that I have to tell everyone around me, and then they must think it every time they experience a lull in conversation and tell everyone, and so on, and so on. So I learned to stay away from The Ericka.

At the end of Physical Health, I said good-bye to Jack and tried to ignore (also) that kind of hollow feeling that occurred at the end of class when Jack was looking at me out of the corner of his eye as though he was disappointed that I hadn’t said anything out loud to Ericka and only on paper, to him. Then I went to the Dining Commons for lunch, because our school periods are extremely long. So long I often need a break to get up and move around my legs and arms and grab a swig of metallic water from the drinking fountain outside our classes. I had lunch today with Ken C. and Ken M. (Jack has Second lunch, and we all three have First.) And after I eat lunch I leave the Commons early to go to the nurse’s station next to the Art Room to take my Depakote. It’s for the epilepsy that was diagnosed only a year before my parents separated. (Though the two events are not entirely connected.) The Depakote is really one round circle that looks an awful lot like a pink piece of candy when it’s in the palms of my hands. My nanny used to call candy “medicines,” I remember, so taking one of these with a glass of water is really not that new and different from when I was younger.

Third period for A days is Keyboarding I with Ken C. We instant message each other when Mrs. Arnold isn't looking (which is most of the time). The first thing we do when we get to our respective computers is make sure our wireless internet connections are switched on. Today I flooded his computer with instant messages about how nervous I was about transferring from the bus to the train, because I've never done it alone before. He typed me back from across the room that I could at least ask Jack for a ride to the train station since "its on hsi way home" (because Jack has exquisite access to a car).

Ken C. is friends with Jack, too—much better friends than I am with Jack, so I conveniently omit all the details of my life that involve my love of/desire for Jack Zurad. But Ken C. is a sharp cookie, though only a little above the beginning typist, so I suspect on most days that he's figured things out. I stopped with the instant message flood, and I drafted my plan of attack for Jack while playing my favorite online Jeopardy game, since today is a work day and I've already finished all my assignments.

Playing Jeopardy online always makes me think about when I had one of my seizures before the epilepsy was diagnosed. I had been sitting on the couch at home, watching the end of Jeopardy on the TV. It was near the end of the half hour, and the category for Final Jeopardy was given as "The Animal Kingdom," which I was excited about because ever since I was little, I've been studying those juvenile science books with page-upon-page of illustrated anatomies of mammals, dinosaurs and reptiles, birds. Then mom walked in the room to ask me something, but I can't remember what. And when I looked up at the TV again, Alex was shaking the hands

of the middle contestant, congratulating her on the answer, “What is a crustacean?” And mom wasn’t asking me a question anymore, but she was yelling at me to, “Godammit, pay attention! What do I have to do to make you look at me!” which made me look up at her and see how angry her eyes were, like clenched fists. And then I remember dad was there, holding mom by her shoulders and pulling her away. Because that’s what happens during an absent seizure: my brain loses time, so I can never go back and figure out what question Alex had read that meant the answer, “What is a crustacean?” and I can never know if I would have known that answer, too, which still bothers me to this day, sitting in class, reading Ken C.’s burdens carried through our instant messages.

Fourth period on A days is art class with Luke, or Mr. Jacobs, whom most everyone who goes to this school adores. Once he asked me (when Jack was absent) if the two of us were going out. I replied, “No!” but secretly rehashed the moment over and over to myself—still to this day. Once I got to the Art Room, the first thing I did was find Jack and pull a stool up next to his, so that I could ask if perhaps, possibly, don’t feel pressured, but could he—at all—maybe drive me to the train station after school so I wouldn’t have to ride the public bus? At first I was scared he would say no. But then I realized that if people like me keep trying to not be obvious—when will anything ever get done around here?

“You know I take Ken C. home, too?” he asked, to which I nodded in answer. I had been very jealous of Ken C. because of this exact fact for the past month.

Mr. Jacobs ruined our moment by telling Jack, “Your turn on the tracing machine, Zurad.” Jack looked away from me and nodded in return. Mr. Jacobs is

always like that, using ordinary names for things with high-tech origins. Like the tracing machine which I don't even know what it's really called. You can put a small picture on a glass plate and the machine projects it onto the wall where you tape your paper or attach your canvas, in order to trace the design onto it. The only problem is, since it's such an old machine, the picture translates onto the wall upside down.

Right now, Jack's project involves drawing characters from an anime series he really likes, so it helps to use the tracing machine for the series' title lettering—something that should be as precise as possible.

Jack looked at me and gestured toward the door with his hands, despite the rules that no more than one student should be in the tracing machine room at a time. I couldn't have said no and stayed on my stool at that moment, not with Jack's half-smile revealing the beginning of a parenthetical statement.

I shut the door behind us and jumped into telling a very-involved story about my dog while Jack walked around the room, setting everything up: taping his sketch paper to the wall, placing the picture (a magazine cut-out) into the machine, switching on the machine, then switching off the lights so he could see the brilliantly-colored anime logo bursting upside down onto the wall, onto his paper. He grabbed his pencil and started to sketch in swift strokes.

The machine whirred loudly, so I had to speak louder. I made it to the part where Smoky (even though he's not a bear—dad named him when he was a puppy) was about to greet the mailman on our morning walk when Jack finished sketching and sat down beside me. Since it's spring, we were both wearing shorts so that the skin of our legs right above the knee ended up touching.

“Did Smoky get hurt?” Jack asked like he was real-concerned.

“No,” I told him, and it was hard to keep my voice under control because our knees were touching. “No, it was just that his leash wrapped around his neck a couple times so that the vet told us we needed—meaning I needed—to be careful that the dog doesn’t asphyxiate himself when he’s out on his walk.”

In the dark room with Jack close by and the upside down anime logo lighting his face from below, I thought about how everyone always raves “blue eyes, blue eyes, blue eyes” on the TV, but Jack’s brown ones are just as good as any eyes that I’ve looked into, better than most, like mine or mom’s because we seem to at least share those genes for this blue, marine-like, watered-down color. Jack only mentioned it once when I’d decided to wear eye shadow a few weeks ago. He’d said, “It looks like fish could swim in your irises.” I told him Sea World had called, but they hadn’t hooked me with their offer.

But then, in the darkness of the tracing machine room, with Jack’s leg touching mine, I couldn’t see the brown in his eyes. They looked to me like hard coal and I realized that it had been awhile since we said anything. And, though the silence was nice and I enjoyed just sitting with him and trying to see the color of his eyes, I tried and I tried to control myself and hold it in but out tumbled, “Did you know there’s a lull in conversation about every seven minutes on average?” And I would have clapped my hand over my mouth if I hadn’t been sure it would make Jack think I was crazy. But all he did in answer was look at me and whisper (I couldn’t see if he said it through parentheses or not), “I’ll drive you to the train station, Brooke.” This made me feel like a big exclamation point (!) and not the sarcastic kind. But also

there was an anxious feeling underneath that one, because sometimes when I go see mom I just remember our big fight and when she told me to “Godammit pay attention” so that I’m always so intentional about paying attention that I forget to be happy to see her.

Jack let me leave the tracing machine room first so I might be able to sneak out without Mr. Jacobs noticing, which I did. Then Jack and I waited until the bell rang and met up with Ken C. at his locker. And we all three—Ken C., Jack and I—got our stuff from our lockers, including me my overnight bag, which I swung over my left shoulder since I want it to be just as strong as my right one. And we walked to the car in the student parking lot in the back of the school. Ken C. gave me shotgun so I smiled because he gave shotgun up so easily. Maybe it means something? Jack and Ken C. said they had some “plans” for this Saturday to talk about and they wanted to invite me, too, if I didn’t have to go to the city. I nodded and wouldn’t let myself feel what I was feeling—that chasm opening between Jack and I that was instigated by a simple visit into the city that I may or may not want to take in the first place. And I had to squirm around under my seatbelt to show them both the shirt I had on today that read, “Please Insert Pain Here” with an anatomically-drawn heart on it. They both said “aww” like I was a little girl and so I retorted, “That’s not the reaction I was looking for!” (which was laughter).

Then I remembered my unspeakable answer to Jack’s trustworthy question which is such a haunting questioning in retrospect. Because trust is such a difficult thing to wrap one’s mind around, because even though I love mom, I’m not sure if we will ever completely be able to trust each other. Whenever I visit, we say things like,

“Let’s go get you some new soccer shoes at the mall. Let’s see that new Pixar movie. Let’s go to the indoor water park.” And less like, “How are you? What’s your favorite color? Why do you like that Pixar movie?” I think it’s all on account of the morning after I was diagnosed with my “condition,” as the school nurse likes to call it. And I yelled that well, it was her fault that I was like this because I’d overheard her and Dad talking about that one night she’d run off to drink when she was pregnant because she was scared. At that time my eyes were dark and tight like clenched fists, and the words just rushed out of my mouth until Dad said to me sternly, “Brooke. To your room.”

After I showed them my shirt, Jack asked Ken C. about “culture jamming,” which is closer to jamming many people on a train car rather than improvising at a jazz club like I had first thought. And then Jack drove Ken C. and me to the train station on the East side because it was time! And the last thing Jack said to me as I got out of the car was “I lurves you!” and I didn’t hear him at first. I asked him to please repeat and he said it again and I pretended I didn’t care at first (which made me angry at myself).

And I said back to Ken C. and Jack, “Bye guys!” while waving with my left hand. Then I said, too-late, “I lurves you, too!” looking at Jack and not Ken C. (which I regret because Ken C. may already know how I feel about Jack and I just made it easier if he’s looking for clues) but I don’t know if they heard me but at least Jack was staring at my lips moving. And I feel like each moment I get older, my life five minutes ago is not what I would have made of it if I knew then what I know now. Because I never would have blamed Mom the way I did that morning. And because,



of course, I would have used my right hand to wave to Jack and Ken C. Instead of talking back, I would have smiled and made the “I love you” symbol in sign language with my right hand and waved it right-to-left, right-to-left, and I would still not speak but stand there on the train platform memorizing the time it took the car to drive away.

### Saul's Sons

He leaned against the back of the top stadium bleacher some time during the national anthem and stayed there for the rest of Wesley High's Friday night Homecoming game. Home fans sat on the bleachers below him in bunches, moving closer to the action, on the edge of their seats despite the scoreboard. He noticed a few eighth grade boys standing on the cinder track surrounding the field, ogling the cheerleaders. They mimicked seniors, chatting grandiosely, shouting obscenities at the refs, chewing soft pretzels and pepperoni balls. Each time one of the cheerleaders walked past them, the boys hid their faces under red ball caps.

He showed up to the game to watch Matt—white number 25 who sat in the farthest position on the home bench without a helmet, jersey untucked. He banged the bottom of the bleachers with the rubber part of his shoes, thinking how stupid it was to have a player suit up like that when they only played in practice.

That night the sky was clear, so he looked up long enough to find Orion's three-star belt. And there were the big and little Dipper. Had Matt seen how bright they were tonight? When he looked back toward the game, a cheerleader was sitting next to him, staring.

“Hey, David,” she said, with a smile more real than when it was synchronized with twenty-one other girls in uniforms. When he didn't answer she added, “Aren't you one of Matt's friends? I've heard him mention you—seen you around school once or twice.”

He was struck silent by the vibrancy of her ruby lip gloss, shining from every facet of her lips. Somehow he knew it was raspberry-flavored. He recognized her as

the only daughter of the man who owned the grape vineyards across from his house. Her family owned a winery, too. He nodded at her. She turned toward the game field and pointed at the end of the bench. “He’s number 25.” She smiled even wider, taking more after the pom-pommed, doe-eyed lackeys on the sidelines. “The coach’ll put him in soon—what with the score and all.” He tried to give her a sideways smile but felt it get lost somewhere between the intention and his face.

“It’s sad, isn’t it?” she said. “Our senior year and we can’t even win Homecoming. Are you going out with him after the game?” She turned toward him again, a new expression on her face. One cheek dimpled; the other relaxed like she’d had a kind of stroke. “To the dance tomorrow?”

He leaned forward for the first time since the game started. Looking around the stadium and outside of it, the only trees sticking above the grapevines were evergreens and spruces: trees that never changed except to die. He readjusted himself against the bleachers and felt that he should say something to her. She sat with her chin propped against her bent wrist propped on an elbow on her uncovered knee—stacked on the bleacher so that if she coughed everything would come toppling down. Her eyes were focused—on the game or some distant thought, he wasn’t sure.

“Well, maybe,” she said, “I’ll run into you again.” Her lips curled slightly and she stood up, adjusting her two-toned, pleated skirt. From a few bleachers down, she called up to him, “Your name is David, right?”

But she was on the track, doing a cartwheel before he could answer.

He watched Matt again, still lonely on the end of the bench with the fourth quarter nearly over. The scoreboard read Guests 27, Warriors 3. With nine seconds

left the head coach gestured at the refs, hands shoved together in a time-out. The home team galloped from the field, from opposite corners of the bench and the Gatorade table: a ringed mass converging around their coach, who stood at the center, pointing at various team members. The team threw their hands on the coach's shoulders and into the air, yawping something he couldn't decipher from the stands. And like the cheerleader had predicted, the third string was going in. He saw Matt running through the range of his teammates until he found an empty helmet. The cheerleaders egged the spectators into louder synchronized shouting as nine clean-jersey players huddled on the field. When they broke apart, he saw the quarterback toss the ball to the center, as both teams formed semi-straight rows parallel to the home thirty-five yard line.

The quarterback yelled "Hike!" The clock started, and the quarterback held the ball close to his body, cradling it like a newborn. The last seconds waned.

9 . . . 8 . . . 7 . . .

The ball left the quarterback's hands in a spiral uncharacteristic of third-string and was received by white number ten near the fifty yard line. Number ten pitched it back to Matt on the forty.

6 . . . 5 . . . 4 . . .

And Matt ran with the hard, red mouth guard bared between his teeth.

3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .

He dodged and ran again as the buzzer sounded.

-1 . . . -2 . . . -3 . . .

A large lineman from the away team decided to end the play and moved to cut Matt off from the end-zone, gaining momentum. As Matt dove to skirt his opponent, the lineman drove him into the thirty-five yard line. The play ended, game already over. The rest of the opposing team formed a huddle at the fifty and took a knee.

Blurry and fast, he watched—legs tingling with excitement. The other spectators were on their feet, cued by the collision of the lineman with Matt. On the field, the lineman stood up, wiping off his jersey, and reached down for Matt's hand. The hand slipped back to the ground. From the bleachers, he saw what an odd angle one arm made to Matt's motionless torso.

Team trainers rushed onto the field. Within moments, the on-call ambulance drove around the cinder track and onto the thirty-five-yard line. One trainer rushed up the bleacher steps two-at-a-time to the press box. The stadium announcer's voice filled the stadium with explanation, but the only word he heard was *unresponsive*. The word stuck in his throat where all the things he wanted to say still burned. He watched the paramedics load the body into the ambulance's double back doors. White, blue, white lights lit up the puckered foreheads and tautly drawn faces of cheerleaders and teammates on the field.

He shivered and listened to other spectators converse, question, hypothesize as though from a far away place. The cheerleaders, gasping and crumpling to the ground, held hands to their mouths, fingers wet with spit and tears. They clutched pom-poms to their chests and watched the two teams, now standing stagnant on the field.

He felt the rain before he saw it. Everyone began to slowly drift away in fragments. Each team trudged to separate sides of the stadium into their own locker rooms. The cheerleaders went into the stands and attached themselves to various friends who left within minutes of each other. Some families with small children had already left. The refs left last, and the janitors came after the rain to clean up the leftover trash.

Last night, Matt lay in bed, sheet tangled between his legs and telling him about the scholarship offers for track. “I’m not sure if I should stick around. Go to Behrend next year.”

“Get out now,” he said, lying on Matt’s dad’s old army sleeping bag with a throw pillow under his head.

He heard Matt cough out a laugh. “Yeah, you’re probably right. It’s a pussy thing to stay. People just toss around the word ‘Olympics’ and I freeze up.”

“You’ve had qualifying times, right?”

“Sort of. But I just think of it as a way to get to the next level. Of course, Dad’s a different story.” He lowered his voice, mimicking his father’s monotone. “You’ve got the gift, now use it.” He paused, and his voice returned to normal. “He made me do football to stay in shape.”

Matt flipped onto his back and tried to unweave the sheet from his thighs and ankles. Matt was a restless sleeper who kicked off the covers every night, so the sheet would end up half-covering him on the floor, like Matt had felt him shivering in

the night and tried tucking him in with it. Even Loamy, the family's cat, knew to avoid the bed at night.

Matt cleared his throat. "You really should think about art school. You're great in anatomy, too."

"Not everyone wants to be a neurosurgeon."

"Especially not the way you dissect pig's brains."

"At least we all got our own, so it didn't matter how badly I fucked that one up."

"Mrs. Peresh did her gravely-concerned face over your shoulder that entire class."

"Exactly. I couldn't concentrate from her perfume."

"When I met with her after school that one time, she shoved us in her office. Ten-square feet of gag-worthy perfume."

"She took you back there because you suck up."

"And I'm ridiculously good looking, don't you think?"

"I've seen you in the morning, so no."

"You're a dick."

When conversation lagged, Matt pointed to the glow-in-the-dark stars on his ceiling and named them. "They're the circumpolar constellations," Matt told him once. "You can always see them where we live, no matter what time of year."

"What's the 'W' again?"

"Cassiopeia—I guess sitting on her throne." Matt continued to point at the stickers super-glued to the ceiling. "Ursa major, Ursa Minor, Orion."

“With Betelgeuse, right?”

“In his shoulder. Wow, you really do listen.”

He half-laughed and rested a forearm over his face after pulling the afghan against his chest. They’d been doing this ever since Matt saw what he wrote on the back of his notebook in anatomy class earlier that year, then invited him over to escape Lloyd the Therapist, who preached that depression and inner-anger would destroy a person but felt no qualms about moving in with his ex-patients. “Your mother’s sad,” Lloyd had told him the day he moved in. Being sad sure seemed like sleeping all the time and getting literally fucked by her live-in shrink.

He’d been skeptical at the offer until Matt had shrugged and said: “I just thought a little broken and a lot broken could help each other out.” Now he could hardly remember life without Matt.

The open air above them circulated through the blades of the ceiling fan. He felt free here, him on the sleeping bag, Matt on the bed—like the glow-in-the-dark stars were the real thing.

“You awake?”

They had been still for a few moments. His eyelids had drooped, his breathing slowed. “Do you ever stop talking?” There was a smile in his voice.

“You’re right.” He heard Matt turn over in bed. “It’s late.”

“No. Tell me.”

“It’s all right. I’ll bring it up tomorrow night, after the game.”



At school on Monday, he overheard rumors of a bloody helmet and retired jersey. The Homecoming dance had been cancelled on Saturday. His third period art class was interrupted by an assembly about death and how to live with it. Over the loudspeaker every hour, the Administrators were sure to mention Counseling Services: located directly above the science lab. The viewing would be held at Duncan's funeral home on Wednesday afternoon and evening, while the funeral and burial would be postponed until Saturday to better accommodate the school's schedule.

Everyone in the high school halls seemed to avoid him, skirting his locker, choosing different paths to their classes, leaving empty chairs next to him at tables. They were isolating him, probably afraid of saying something too inappropriate to forgive. In anatomy class they talked him into the full waiting room at Counseling Services. Each magazine on the waiting tables seemed just out of reach. He pictured Lloyd behind one of the counseling doors and gave up the room shortly after.

By lunch on Wednesday, he'd found a way to go unnoticed. He was sitting at a secluded table on the opposite side of the cafeteria from where he, Matt and Matt's other friends had sat last week. He ignored his tray of food and started scribbling on his notebook again: circles, circles within circles that turned into shapes he'd never seen before. The cheerleader from the Homecoming game dipped into his view and pointed.

“God. You're really carving it in there.”

“That's the point,” he said. That first page under the cover was absorbing all the feeling from his penned shapes, and he did love opening the notebook afterward

to feel the indentations, his fingers tracing the lines he had written just a moment before. He'd remember: there was the square, the zigzag, the block letters that he always scribbled over later so no one would see.

She was still standing there next to him, looking over his shoulder. He hoped they would stop meeting like this, that she would forget to talk to him after another week or so. "You walked all the way across the lunch room to ask me that?"

She didn't say anything, just smiled without showing her teeth. He saw her eyes move to the left, where a spirit table was set up for Halloween with the rest of the cheerleaders seated behind it.

"God, does it ever stop?" he said, turning his attention back to the notebook cover.

"I'll see you there—at the viewing tonight. There's a candlelight vigil in the gym afterwards." For a moment she hesitated. It made him wish he was filming the conversation, so later he could blow up her face on the big screen, ten or twenty-times larger than life, so he could re-watch the moment when she hesitated again: pause and rewind it just to see if it was part of some plan or a genuine moment of feeling.

He waited for her to leave and continued to stare at his notebook. His face was hot with the breath he'd started to hold at her mention of the viewing. If he could keep the breath in long enough, could he float away and disappear into the air? But as she sat back down with the rest of her friends, his body took over and he sucked in a breath.

Wednesday evening came and went. The next morning in gym class he noticed drops of wax on the Warrior emblem in the center of the floor. The horse's nose looked like it was dripping. By Friday, he had avoided doing work in all of his classes for the past week. Mrs. Peresh took him aside to say she was worried and thinking about him. He didn't believe her and vowed to skip anatomy just to prove it, wondering if she was more concerned that he hadn't changed his clothes in a week. And, really hadn't he just come to school to avoid home?

After the final bell rang before the weekend, he moved from his seat mechanically and into the white halls with walls of red lockers, swinging his backpack over his shoulder. After passing the Pepsi machine where he met Matt every weekday, he pushed through the heavy glass exit doors. His tennis shoes steadily tattooed the parking lot black top as he passed the football stadium, lassoed by the black cinder track. He had fallen on that track more than once. His knees, smothered into the ground, came up looking like they had been colored with a stick of charcoal: red sores spewing chalky black tablets of dirt. On the rare times when he fell, he had sensed Matt's shadow on his head. He always tried not to look up, ashamed whenever he lost concentration. Matt never seemed to.

“You wanna stop?”

He would shake his head and try to stand, but Matt's hand would be under his armpits, hauling him up like he was a too-skinny girl. Then Matt bent down and scraped the cinders off his knees, avoiding the red spots. Tender fingers picking grime off his knees as though reading brail.

“We’ll get the antiseptic from my mom when we leave.” Matt straightened his back and extended his arms above his head, leaning to one side in a stretch.

“Race you next lap.”

And before he knew it, he was nipping at Matt’s heels with the toes of his sneakers, forgetting the stinging skin on his knees.

He hadn’t gone to the viewing simply because he was afraid of what he would see. It was hard enough sitting in an empty church with two thirds of his schoolmates while family and the facilitator in a white collar talked about “the deceased.” He watched Matt’s mother and father mount the stage and stand behind the podium. (He knew he would never be able to be a part of their family again—displaced without Matt.) He imagined the time after the service when everyone would lie and tell them that the church was so lovely and the eulogy was lovely and the whole damn funeral was lovely—just what it needed to be, a real celebration of life.

He walked out in the middle of the service, because that was the least lovely thing to do he could manage. He was sick of listening to a story about Matt that he didn’t recognize. He walked into the foyer from under the doorway that he noticed had the letters e-x m-o-r-t-e v-i-t-a carved into the molding. Some dead language that no one spoke anymore.

The church’s foyer was cluttered. Pieces of carved wood and bronze molds had been fashioned together and hung in designs along the walls. Knickknacks covered the tables. He went to a table pushed off to one side and littered with self-help pamphlets. He sat on it and examined badly-drawn cartoon versions of Jack and

Jane on each cover. Making out. Smoking cigarettes. Shooting up—was that supposed to be heroin? The caption for one with little x's drawn on their eyes was *Jack and Jane learn about Death, Grief, and Loss* in white balloon letters against a black background. He picked it up and flipped through seven colorful pages that were supposed to fix all of the feelings he had right now. He put the pamphlet down and stared at the floral arrangement to his left. It was spray-painted gold. He stared at the missed spots where blotches of dull synthetic leaves stood out.

He heard footfalls behind him and looked to find the cheerleader walking from the assembly hall, her clipped skirt too short for the somber mood. The doors were closed behind her. She sat on the table to his right and on top of the red pamphlet *Jane explores Gonorrhoea*.

“Hey.” She smiled, something missing in her face. “How do you feel?”

He sat in silence for as long as he could stand it. “Not sure.”

“I get leaving the sanctuary. The eulogy—was awful.” He found himself staring at her slightly flared nostrils, then at the working muscles of her throat as she swallowed. “Did you hear how he died? I didn't see you at the viewing. Did you hear that his heart like--burst?”

The remark made him think of Matt's hot, blue blood flooding his tightened chest, his lungs, esophagus, then larynx. Pouring out of his mouth and onto the green-brown grass of the football field until his jersey and helmet were soaked with it.

“He was probably going to States for track this year, and his heart burst,” she said without satisfaction. He remembered waiting for Matt after school during track

practices and walking home in the lonely spring wind. “I didn’t believe it at first, but you’d think an autopsy of something like that would be obvious. Like they know it when they see it.”

She stopped herself, planting furrows on her forehead. She was frozen like this long enough that he knew she’d rehearsed what she was about to say in front of her mirror, probably as she brushed her teeth and put on that god-awful lip gloss again. In the silence, he noticed her eyes were hazel and gold. He thought of the effect those eyes had on Matt when he was alive.

He was distracted by a muffled voice behind the hall doors sounding something like a prayer. He glued his eyes to a different pamphlet of Jack and a blonde copy of Jack embracing, entitled *Jack’s Sexual Experiment*.

“You two were close, I know. You stayed at his house a lot, didn’t you? Everyone says you practically lived there.” She looked like she was ready to laugh, but it wouldn’t come.

He could imagine what everyone was saying about him.

“It’s obvious Matt cared about you when he was alive.”

He wondered why that mattered to her. “You’re not wrong.” She looked away from him. He wasn’t sure if it was because she was embarrassed or ashamed. It was obvious she couldn’t understand that he never asked for Matt’s charity but Matt had saved him all the same.

“You know what my favorite thing to do is?” Her voice lowered even though they were alone, like she was telling him a secret. “I love cleaning emotional shit out of my closet. I just want to say: Matt’s gone now. He’s left his family and me—and

now I'm understanding that he left you, too. And—I don't know really, but that means something.”

She finished, then hopped off the table and stepped away from him. She fidgeted with an olive-colored tissue, ripping it, shredding it, getting every ounce of use from it, and he noticed that the back of her left hand was blue. When he looked closer he saw words, faded from the wet of the tissue and in the time since the morning. He read in fat, blue lines *MATT'S WAKE!* double-underlined. He wondered who could forget to come to the funeral service of a friend. Was she so busy things like that just fell out of her head? Or did she just want someone to see, then mention the tattooed hand, so scribbled upon from past messages he wondered if she wanted ink-poisoning that badly. It reminded him of the way he would pick the scabs off his knees whenever the hardening appeared.

“Would you ride with me to the grave site?” she finally asked.

On the drive, always behind the hearse and black limos, what she mostly needed was someone to listen. She was worried about her future, college, her family, and she told him all of it. Much more, surely, than she ever imagined revealing to someone she barely knew past an unplanned wink in the maze of high school or a mutual acquaintance.

“Do you ever think about life a year from now?” She glanced at him quickly, then into the rearview mirror.

“No, but I bet you do.” Her car had leather seats. It was automatic (unlike his Honda) with a kiwi air freshener. The passenger-side vents blew hot air in his face, and he blinked until it made his eyes water.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just the damn jet stream in my eyes.” He pushed the vents closed until he felt the air on his knees.

“Sorry.” He looked at her hand, clicking the air to low—the *MATT’S WAKE!* taunting him. He rested his elbow on the window ledge and his head in the palm of his hand after wiping the corners of his eyes dry.

“I mean, in a year our class will all be on to ‘bigger and better things’.” She lowered her voice like she was imitating someone older: her father, or maybe Matt imitating his father. He wasn’t quite sure. “Where do you think you’ll be next year?”

“Not at another one of these.” He gestured to the windshield and the long line of cars parading to St. Anthony’s cemetery. “Probably not here. Away somewhere.”

She nodded and looked at him for another moment. “You wouldn’t miss anyone?”

He felt her short stare and returned it. In the moment their eyes met he saw something flit over her gold irises, like a black-winged bird. He pressed his forehead to the cool window. He told her, “No one left to miss,” and he wanted it to be true.

At the burial, there was a moment after the coffin hit bottom and the crank snapped still when he thought the cheerleader would hold his hand. He kept looking at her sideways. She didn’t cry. She didn’t acknowledge anyone, keeping her head down and her gaze on the coffin. He couldn’t look away. The way she grabbed the



pocket flaps of her pea coat, shifted her weight, kept a stony expression on her face so that all the softness he'd seen in the car had disappeared.

She dropped him off back at the church to pick up his car. And as she parked, her gloved hand brushed against his on the edge of his seat. He unlocked the car door and climbed out without thanking her. He had his keys between his fingers, nearly in his own driver's-side door lock before he heard her door open. Her motor was still running, and she called to him.

“David, we shouldn't be alone in this.” He turned toward her and saw the fall breeze drag blond hair across her pink cheeks. When he squinted, he thought he saw someone else standing in front of him, another person with a crooked mouth and stooped shoulders. Her fingers grew longer even as they tucked hair behind her ears.

“I thought this would be over after the funeral,” he said to himself, then louder, “Why are you still hanging around?”

“I just thought.” She walked around her car and he felt uneasy, like the barrier of her car had been protecting him from her. She didn't stop until he felt strands of her hair on his own face. Her stony expression from the funeral had melted away. Her forehead was smooth, her chin relaxed. “I thought—maybe a little broken and a lot broken could help each other out.”

He opened his mouth and blew his foggy breath into her face, like he was trying to warm the tip of her nose, her ears, those flushed cheeks. He didn't try to figure out who-was-what-broken but wondered if they had both been taken in as Matt's ragged disciples.

He tried to be stern. “What—do you—want.”

“If I need you?” She was looking up at him through eyelashes with too much make-up for a regular day, let alone a funeral. “To talk?”

He wanted to laugh but ended up with the sideways smile that had lain dormant since the homecoming game. “You want my number?”

Now she was smiling and biting her bottom lip. “I’ll get a marker.” She turned and opened her passenger-side door. As she reached into the glove compartment, he watched her skirt inch up her thighs.

He cleared his throat. “No phones.”

“Why not?” She stood in front of him again, holding a blue sharpie in her hand.

“I don’t have my own line.” He hesitated. “My mom—doesn’t like me getting calls.”

“But you have your own car?” She shook her head, pulling the cap off the marker. “Whatever. Address then.”

“You got paper?”

She stuck the cap between her white teeth and shook her head again. She opened her right hand, offering him the palm.

“Fine.” He took the sharpie and grabbed her hand with his. As the marker tip pressed into the flesh of her hand, he felt her flinch.

“Cold?” he asked. She flexed her fingers in answer. He watched the tips of her fingers stretch and contract until they were nearly touching his. Like she was one of those plants that trapped insects just by springing its leaves shut.

“I drive by there,” she said as she put the cap back on the sharpie.

“Yeah. Your dad owns the vineyards across the road.” He looked at her face and turned back to his car. He hesitated and said, “Don’t come by at night.”

“Need your beauty rest?” He shrugged and did not look back at her again, not while he opened the car door, balanced the clutch and gas and turned the key. Not while he shifted into first and scooted from the church parking lot, or as she waved at him from her own car as he turned onto the main thoroughfare.

On Sunday, he tried to escape. The house—Lloyd’s house now—was still the battleground he always knew it to be. He could not go back to the way things were and slammed everything he could on his way out the door. The stainless steel coin dish—he remembered the satisfying splatter of the loose change—lost now between couch cushions, in the toilet, under the easy chair. Lloyd ducked and he smiled at the fright on the older man’s face. He wanted to fling Lloyd’s head into a wall that easily but settled for slamming the door so he could hear the dishes rattle from outside.

He made it to his car, started it, rolled up his windows and squealed out of the driveway, trying to laugh at Lloyd now on the porch in boxers, his face turning red.

He drove on the street, shifting, shifting, shifting, stopping, and shifting again. He pulled into the empty school parking lot, left his car door open and walked toward the stadium. His knees quaked as he stepped on the track. He found the starting line, then drew his own with the sole of his shoe in the cinders. He would race himself.

He and Matt had learned in his anatomy class that muscles can do only one thing: contract. Squeeze. Shift. Dispel. In three seconds he would be free.

3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .

But when the time to begin came, he was unable to move. He was just standing there, behind the signature of his starting line. Like he was a tree, rooted to the school, this field. If he could melt, collapse in on his legs, allow himself the release to be sucked into the track where he could mix with the crumbling foundation and ground-up cinders. Remain dirty forever. Living in the track Matt's sneakers had touched every day for four years.

He forced himself from the cinders and moved onto the field, the grass ripped up in tufts from the football team's cleats. He walked from end zone to end zone so he could think. One hundred yards to figure the solution to all his problems.

He was kicking a pebble with his shoe when the grass color changed from a dried brown and green to rusty. There was a stain as broad as the shadow of his shoulders on the ground. He looked at the yard-marker that read thirty-five, stared back at the grass and did this once more. He pressed his knees to the grass, irritating the healed and re-healed redness under his jeans. He kept hoping he would see Matt run to greet him from around the goal post or down the bleachers. He stayed as silent as possible, waiting for the sound of metal on rubber soles. He lay down, matching his shoulders with the stained-grass, pressing his face on the ground. Cool blades of green and brown pricked his cheeks. He stayed there until he saw the sun dip slowly toward the horizon.

She was sitting on the back stoop, wearing another skirt that cut off just above her knees with black tights underneath. The soles of her rubber shoes bounced off the cement like a sound from a dream. He stood in front of her, shoulders back, hands

pocketed. For some reason, this felt right—like he had expected to see her here in the setting sun. She should have seemed out of place, but her hand was on the hydrangea bush next to her, slowly stroking one of the waxy leaves with a finger.

She looked up at him and he realized she was the only person alive from school who had seen where he lived. “Where were you?”

He shrugged. “Out.” She patted the stoop to the left of her. He tried to decipher the look on her face. She looked at him the same way she had the hydrangea bush. He sat next to her and let his shoulders slump the way they did when he sat down in class, so that his back arched and his stomach muscles crunched, his organs pressed together.

“I didn’t mean to scare you yesterday. I just.” She stopped, waiting for him to save her from speaking.

“You thought we could be friends.”

“Not exactly.” She stood up and faced him. The strange smile she had for him grew into focus. The wind was blowing around her skirt at his eye level. “You loved him.”

He breathed out slowly. “Who here hasn’t?”

He watched her lips press together. She shifted her weight to one side. When he thought she would leave, she said, “So there’s this place I like to go.”

“Uh-huh.” He crossed his arms and grabbed the sides of his torso. “It’s going to be dark soon,” he said as though it meant something to her.

She looked to the ground and he saw her eyes change. “Come on. I’ll drive.”

He laughed and for a moment the smile fell from her face like he had broken something inside her.

“My name’s not David.”

She shrugged and the smile returned. “My dad doesn’t own those grape vineyards. So?” She held out her right hand with his address slowly fading into the skin of her palm.

“Where are we going?”

She shrugged. “Out.”

He picked his right hand up from the stoop and wiped it on his pant leg. As he pressed his hand against hers, covering up his address with the palm of his hand, her fingers closed slowly, softly around his—softer than the look on her face and much slower than he had ever imagined.

## Chapter 2: *In Medias Res*

### *chain of being*

I will write you a story. Now. I will write you a story of me. And most likely, when I'm done, you won't be able to do more than smile and be happy for me—or frown if you're sad. That just seems to be the way of these story things.

They're like that moment when you were in college, maybe sitting in a lecture. You were trying to listen to your professor drone on about Gorbachev at the Olympics or Theravada Buddhism or whatever, and the windows in the classroom were open. You could hear someone carrying on a conversation outside on the sidewalk. You could almost hear every word. Maybe this annoyed you, maybe not. But later that day you were outside walking, and you called out to a friend. You were saying good-bye or maybe "I love you." Then you turned around and saw an open window. Faintly—you could hear that drone—about Cortez or the Koran or whatever. You stood there, looking up and remembering, then knowing the other side. Maybe you laughed, maybe you were angry at yourself. But you just knew. And that's what stories do to you: you just know. Some people—we have to admit—don't know and never will. Sometimes you can tell who's who, but usually you can't.

The pencil I'll use is fluorescent green with black treble clefs and music staves winding their way around the wood—probably a gift from a music teacher from back in grade school. I will touch the white eraser to my temple, and this pencil will

become the key to the hundreds (some days thousands) of voices inside my head that come from anywhere, anything: my currently-platonic roommate, the sirens outside the apartment window, CNN.

And, by the way, a bottle of Lexapro and aspirin will not kill you. After you've trashed the apartment that you've dutifully paid half the rent for over four years, this particular medicinal cocktail will most likely land you in a puddle of your own vomit. Then your roommate will find you the next morning (if you're lucky) when he gets home from his other girlfriend's house (not that you two even do that anymore). Then you'll win yourself a trip to the ER, and they'll call your parents, despite your requests not to. You'll be a walking china doll before you can say, "Voila!" And over and over again, you'll hear from your parents on the phone: "Did we waste all that land we sold for your college tuition? You want it to end so badly?" And you'll say, "Mom, it's okay. I still have student loans to pay. We can't get rid of me that easily." And you'll hear your father grunt from somewhere behind your mother over the phone, ever the silent specter of discontentment.

"How's Joe?" you'll want to ask, until your mother tells you that he's off to "find himself again. Nailing your brother's feet to the floor would be a waste of two good nails. Not to mention the shafts would have to be 8 inches long at least to hold him down." You'll try to answer her, but instead of words, you'll let out a horrible mouse squeak.

But the truth of the matter is—it's not worth wasting a whole \$80 worth of Lexapro and \$7.95 worth of aspirin.



*It* doesn't all happen at the same time, if you were wondering. It's a gradual process just like milk turning bad in your refrigerator. The first thing you notice is that no one's called you in half a month. You may have talked on the phone, but no one has called you. Next you realize that you haven't run into anyone to talk to in about the same time. You could have spent the whole half-month singing to Peter Allen's "I Go To Rio" on repeat, laughing and doing a jazz step or two, but the singing and dancing hasn't been directed at anyone except yourself.

The third thing is the wind. You have to buy earmuffs, because you notice that every time the wind blows—which seems all the time to you—it sounds like a train in your ears. Loud and obnoxious like the train that used to roar by the house you lived in when you still believed in your parents. Back when you had insurance that included the ten complementary visits to the therapist after a suicide-episode like this one. You sleep in the clothes you wear home from work. You wake up with creases all over your blouse and skin, drawn on your face like cuts from a serial slasher. Your roommate's cat, who never bothered you until now, is scratching the corners of the area rug in the living room. Like he's remembering his saber-toothed, feline ancestors, I think. He readies himself to pounce as though on a wooly mammoth or an alligator. But first he must sharpen his claws on only the wildest tree (or area rug) that bears his scent, liquid pheromones smearing, shouting to the beasts of the earth, "I am here. I have made my mark."

But then the worst part—probably the last straw—is when you find yourself unable to dream: at night, when you try to lull yourself to sleep by constructing the latest happy-serene-fantasy. You find yourself dissatisfied with these types of

thoughts before bed. And even praying yourself to sleep—since you’re desperate—has turned sour in its slowly dying, paraplegic hope, like it’s hooked up to a respirator, waiting for you to pull the plug. But you think to yourself *just one more night. Just one more day.*

After hearing this, you may be wondering, So what? Lots of people attempt suicide as a cry for help, and I could say, “You’re right. This all happened because I was trying to carry around someone else’s problems.” All inside of me, like I owned them myself. You might say, who cares? Because if I’m telling the story, that obviously means I’m “well again.” There’s hope. If this is what you’re wondering, then I could tell you, “You are an astute observer.” My mother would read this and still be in denial. I would be at a loss, though, because to you my story is over (before I started it). You’ve decided how I end up and don’t necessarily care how I got there, because maybe my attempt to be interesting has failed. And maybe you’re ready to put me down? Do it. I triple-dog dare you. Because out of the infinite amount of story-ness in the universe, you’re wondering if you already know my story. If this is true, then I could say “Kudos” and, “Stop reading, please.” Because I am getting ready to tell my story here—not yours.

And for the rest of us who are left, I could say that it all started a long time ago—if things like this ever start—before I sang and danced to Peter Allen but really myself. Before I was raped on the pile of corn husks in the field on acre number 29 next to my family’s cow pasture. And before the bathroom shelves were filled with bottles of my pills instead of my mother’s high blood pressure medicine.

The girl stood half-naked on the cement steps, arms across her chest. She was nearly five-years old. The sun shone on her bobbed, dark hair as a warm summer breeze slunk across her shoulders and back, as though trying to prod her from her perch on the steps outside the old farmhouse. She planted her feet more firmly and pinched the skin under her arms to be sure she was awake.

Her father stood in his suffocating jumpsuit, oily from his work under tractors and the occasional lawn mower. Often when she pictured her father it was like this—greasy hair, dirty fingernails—but today he was smiling wider than she had ever seen. His surprised shouts had brought her onto these cement steps where the chipped edges scraped against her bare feet until it made her shiver. The call for her presence had sounded urgent until her father understood that the novelty would not pass quickly: that it would be content to stay in front of their house as long as the grass was still soft and green.

At first the girl had screamed when she saw it—or rather them. That was when her mother rushed behind her and did the same. It wasn't much later that all three were laughing in fits, and her mother called for Josiah.

“Joe! Joe, come down quick or you'll miss them!” After a few moments the girl's older brother stuck his head out of the screen door, then squeak *slap* he was with them on the front steps, mouth hung wide open.

It was a family, for sure, the girl thought. The screen door had startled the papa and he snorted and shook his mighty head so his ears thwap thwap thwapped a sharp cadence against his face. The mama stamped her front hooves on the ground and nudged her baby with her snout.

The girl laughed a before-the-loss-of-innocence laugh when the baby squealed and the papa flopped onto the green grass, tossing his hooves in the air like she had seen her black lab do before they put it to sleep. But this hog was bigger than Tasha. Even the baby hog was larger than her. Sweaty, shiny hogs. Her father ran into the backyard and reappeared with a hose dripping water. He loosened the nozzle and sprayed the hogs with water droplets, like rainbows riding on their sweaty, shiny backs. The girl watched the papa waddle toward the hose water, mouth open—practically molesting the nozzle.

“Watch out,” her father warned both her and her brother. “That hog’s aggressive. Don’t touch any one of them.”

The girl wondered where the hogs had come from. Across the road from their family’s house lay miles of corn fields. She wondered if the hogs got lost in those fields until they were guided into her family’s yard—like it was fate. “Greenest grass in the neighborhood,” her father would say—their neighborhood consisting of five other farmhouses forty square acres apart. Maybe that was why they’d come here of all places.

Her mother was speaking to her father now—something about phoning around the neighborhood. Who would misplace a family of two-hundred pound hogs? She ran inside to make the calls. The girl’s father dropped the hose, then trotted past her and through the screen door after her mother. The girl looked at her brother. He was more than twice her age but nearly as scrawny as she was. Sometimes they wrestled for fun in the field at the back of the house, careful not to careen into the sacks of bug eggs, like nature’s loogies attached to the underside of leaves. It never worked; at

least one of them— always the loser—got their shins wet as they sliced through the knee-high grass.

The girl looked back at the family of hogs. And before she knew why it was wrong, she went to them. She heard her brother yell her name like the way her father had when he caught her stealing Indian corn from the fields. She saw the hose still running water on the ground, making the grass muddy and cold on her feet. She picked it up like it was a snake—right behind the nozzle-head—and watched the papa hog drink from the spray before it hit the ground. The girl looked at the family's ugly mouths and beady black eyes—the hogs' straight backs and rough skin. But how rough—like sandpaper? Like skidding to a halt on the kitchen's linoleum floor? The baby ran its snout into her stomach but she pushed its head back toward the water. She scratched behind the baby's ears and stared at the papa despite herself. She felt like she needed to get her hands on his back.

Her right hand slipped along the hog's skin as she placed it on the papa's sloped shoulder. The girl heard her brother's warnings without understanding them. She drew in a breath as deep as she could and felt the roughness of hog's skin. She closed her eyes—listened to the hose water fall and to the family's content garumphs as they lapped from the pool of water at the girl's feet. In that papa hog's skin she felt the stalks of corn he'd traveled through, the green grass he'd rolled in, and the rainbow water that cooled him now. She felt in the papa hog's hide a freedom she had not known by name but always wanted.

“Rennie!” Then she really heard her brother's voice, “That's enough! Dad'll beat you if you get caught!”

She pressed her fingertips into the hog's back, then bent her lips to kiss the rough skin, still dusty from the papa hog's roll. Her fingers uncoiled from around the neck of the hose. She did not hear the sound it made as it dropped on the green green grass.

*Dear To Whom It May Concern (Meaning You, the One Who Left)*

Dear to whom it may concern

September 21,

2008

(meaning you, the one who left)

My dearest bedfellow and some time proprietor, this is for you. (Not for me, like you may be thinking.) Dearest soul mate, some time pretender, I write this to you on your 27<sup>th</sup> birthday. The first birthday in more than a decade, as you know, that we haven't spoken. I'm writing this letter so late, I know, partially because I've drafted it so many times in my head that I knew it was time to just bite the bullet and write it down, in an outflow of emotion. Part of me thinks/hopes that writing all this down will fix me.

I feel that I should remind you of how it all happened. Here (in very few words) is the timeline of us.) There were the ten years where we danced the dance of friendship. Then you got into that loveless, all about-sex relationship with Jojo. Then you came to me to feel safe because she turned crazy. Then you moved in. And now, there are still some things you need to know—that I need to tell you (for whatever reason).

Firstly, I've tried a yoga class like we always used to talk about doing, but this one's only for women. I didn't know anyone in the class at first and was less flexible than I talk myself up to be. But time passes like usual and I learned the movement, the stances. My body has since formed into a supple yoga machine. I can bend and slide with the rest of the women in my class. I can open my mind to the worlds

around and above me. I can lose myself in downward facing dog just as easily as I lost myself in your promises, your eyes, in my paintings of you. The yoga instructor and I eat dinner together on Sunday nights. She's a she, too, if you're wondering. We're both vegan. After six months of classes (after the three months I spent thinking forlornly about you and me), I feel a difference in my breathing now. I've sensed a change in my sketches and mattes since you last saw them, stepped over them, watched me start them nine months ago. I'm at an ad firm as a visual consultant now—just got the job in June. (It's true.) I'd like to think you'd be happy for me.

Last Friday (a rare day off), I was flipping through the channels and had to stop on Mister Roger's Neighborhood—sometimes I still can't help that desire to sit still on the sofa in front of the TV and melt back into childhood, when the world still followed the rules. The show's set up was that Lady Elaine Fairchild (the one most resembling a witch with the rosy cheeks and pointed nose) moved her house by saying "Boomerang, Toomerang, Zoomerang" about three times, until she landed somewhere that had no work (She was sick of work.) and all play all of the time (which ends up being a playground—cute, huh?). Then Mister Rogers takes us out of the "Neighborhood of Make-Believe" and into his kitchen where he has models of all the buildings from the "NoMB" set up. He says, "In real life, we can't of course just say some magic words and move our whole house. But, in real life we can remember things that were once there but aren't there anymore." He takes away Lady Elaine's house and says, "Remember what was there?" Then he took away the Platypus mound, then the grandfather clock, until the last thing left was Trolley rolling off the



kitchen table. Rogers says, “Aren’t we grown up when we can remember things that are gone?” And after Mister Rogers, Boohbah came on, and I cannot relate to Boohbah. It has lots of grotesque womb imagery—not to mention noises—that keep me from melting into childhood and just make me think of Georgia O’Keefe.

Really though, work treats me well, and it gives me time to paint on the weekends (and apparently to watch educational television and write letters). I still get a little nervous about going into work the next morning when I try to go to sleep at night. I press my face into my green gingham pillow that I never really did throw away and on my worst nights—when I failed a client or passed someone that reminded me of one of your friends in the street—I feel the cold sheets on your former side of the bed. I remember your haven’t-done-laundry-in-a-while smell. When I close my eyes and try to sleep, it’s like my eyelids are a movie theater of memories and my retinas the projection machine. On my worst nights, my mind empties the film canisters before I fade into sleep. The film disappears when daylight falls through my slanted window blinds in the morning and onto my face, so is it maudlin to say “you haunt me?”

I’ve been listening to my collection of Peter Allen songs sung by Donny Osmond recently. I like them, but remember how you hated that CD and would sing the songs louder and better to me when you felt in love. You called me once when you were across the country to ask the name of the composer. That was when I told you, “Peter Allen was Australian and bisexual.” You said, “Huh,” which I knew meant you were suddenly sad, because me saying “was” meant Peter Allen had died

(of complications from AIDS in 1992) and he would never write any more music.  
You liked him despite Donny Osmond.

Once, when we were just-good friends, I had that old green Taurus with the manual locks. We had known each other for a few years (before we were “us”) and I dropped you off at one of your other friends’ houses, but when I leaned over to lock your door after you left, you had already done it. For some reason, I keep thinking of this. I think because it was when I started loving you.

When you first left, the neighbors played loud music and it didn’t bother me. I used to hug my knees and think: I’m a nothing. I’m a what and a what and a what. And I couldn’t replace the “what” with anything. Now, when our neighbors (now my neighbors) play loud music, I watch a loud movie back at them.

One of the questions you asked me once was “Why don’t you tell me what you feel?” in so many words. My boss at the Art Gallery said to us in the lunchroom yesterday, “Are you all sad or happy?” And I thought of the word “dissatisfied” and wondered if everyone felt the same way, but none of us said anything.

Sometimes I think that every detail in the world could make me cry if I let it. The way your hat sat on the ground the last time I saw you in person (but I didn’t know it would be the last time). I could see through the two aeration holes in that hat to the ground underneath, the fragile grass in shadow. I could feel each goddamn blade of grass in my chest where my heart’s supposed to be. I can’t tell you or anyone what that grass means to me because words are not enough. And so, what is love but not needing words?

I've started thinking and speaking of you in the past tense. I remember when it started. I was driving with my friend DeDe and we were talking about the general tendency of humans to seek their equals in relationships. I brought up how, for as long as I'd known you, you were always paired up with women who were too stupid for you. You liked being able to run around women intellectually. I was surprised when you first paired up with me, though we mostly fell into it. You just came over to my apartment one night and sleep on the red corduroy couch. You said it was to escape that psychotic, on-and-off relationship with Jojo. It's funny to think of the beginning of things—when things first evolved between us. We didn't want to waste time—a decade of bridled desire already under our belts, of squelching all those “moments” we'd tried to ignore. When we'd tugged each other's hands too hard, hugged each other good-bye too long. You popped into the apartment like so many pegs into a Mastermind game board (which I've since given away). It was like you'd always been there—really. You didn't leave until a month after the shaving incident. I yelled the Pythagorean Theorem at you when I was too frustrated to think anymore. If I was on my way home from work and saw strange eyes or dark shapes in my peripheral vision, I would call you and ask if you could make dinner. If you were busy, you made Hamburger Helper. Generally, you made spinach ravioli with Hunt's chunky tomato sauce, though I like it on the side.

Do you remember our FIRST TIME? because I don't. I remember a conglomerate: the sheet pattern of the bed we slept in, the way you always wore socks (because I teased you that once), your hands stroking my back/inner thigh in small

circles, the blahblah blahblah, but none of it seems to matter anymore. Even how you would bite my lip when we kissed.

I've tried to write you down before. In journals, on canvas, in lists. Here's my latest:

7 Things you have said that changed my life

1. I owe you more than I ever understood before this weekend.
2. I thought you just never had any problems.
3. Share the epiphany with me.
4. Do you want to play cards?
5. Don't even think about getting your camera.
6. I never wrote that in your yearbook.
7. Why don't you tell me what you feel?

But it's annoying—the inadequacy of these things.

I'm only giving myself this one day to write. I started after breakfast and now it's after lunch. (I did eat.) I wish I could get it all out of me. Squeeze it out of me like a wet t-shirt.

I saw Bull Durham the other day. I thought I'd mention it here because you always ragged on how I hadn't seen it. I've learned there's a point in which you're telling a story and you no longer believe in it, not because the story or the people in the story are boring but because it's your own voice telling it. I think that's one way to think of what happened between you and me. I was sick of telling the story.

Have you ever stopped to watch children play? The Mister Rogers made me think of this. I know neither of us have any, but have they ever stopped you? Some people call it “beautiful” or “innocent.” But it makes me incredibly sad every time I walk by a playground, because I have a memory like an elephant that stretches backward. I remember when fear was pretend. When alone and sadness and fighting and danger and war were pretend and the only thing that was real was the laughter afterwards. And I realize I never asked you. Did you play like that? Make believe villains and cops and robbers and victims? Make roles for all your friends to play at but never believe in? Or were you one of the children who hung back when the bell for recess rings. The kid who stands under a tree and looks at his shoes, even when the teacher on-duty says, “So-and-so, come play.” The child who says, “No thank you, Mrs. So-and-so. I’m fine.” Were you him? The child who stands in the shade of the tree but never climbs it?

Toward the end, we fizzled and broke apart like a badly-planned fire after three years living together and a month of strained conversation. After the aforementioned shaving incident. Which I find myself laughing about now, though it made me cry more often closer to that day I noticed your bags were packed. Can we help it if we never told each other the things we meant to? And I would get angry at the smallest things. And then we joked around one too many times in front of the mirror getting ready for our separate, non-career-oriented jobs, and I remember the razor slipped in your hand and a shallow cut, enough to form three tiny droplets of crimson on the porcelain sink. And we both stopped what we were doing. I took my hands from under your arms (where I’d been pinching you) and everything changed.

You told me, “Don’t even think about getting your camera.” Still staring at the three droplets of blood that I knew would—in a few moments—pool together and swirl into a beautiful crimson floweret, so it was hardly blood anymore but a metaphor for life. And I wanted to—had to capture it. I turned from you to get my camera with the flash from the bottom dresser drawer and the right zoom, and you warned me again and again, but I didn’t hear you.

When I came back in, you were looking at me—shaving cream still half on your face. “If you love me, you won’t,” you said. I love you so much, I thought, that even our strained conversations afterward were tight, sugary embraces. And I said, “If you love me, I will,” adjusted the shutter speed and snapped.

I feel as though I’ve failed you because I wrote to you once that *I will never stop loving you. I will never leave you. I will always be here.* and I’m no longer speaking to you. Sometimes I feel that this is my own failure, even though you left me. I feel as though I failed you because of that. Maybe if you could understand this, I would wake up and see you next to me in bed. You would touch my nose with your thumb after my eyes opened. You would get out of bed and make yourself coffee. You would go into the kitchen and I would hear you doing all the same things that you always did, like goddamning the microwave when you quick-poached eggs. You would make toast too light so the bread never changed color. You would tease me because I liked mine toasted on the skillet till it was all perfectly the same tone of golden brown. If you could understand, maybe you would wake up next to me. You wouldn’t have to smile or be awake or tap my nose with your thumb. You wouldn’t

even have to be there, only let me hear you in the kitchen, swearing at the microwave, flushing the toilet in the bathroom.

Instead I've spent the last 6 months cleaning you out of my apt. and packing our memories away into boxes that I've sealed with clear packing tape, the smell of which makes my nose tickle. I will go to my job. I will earn money, to make a place for myself, until I'll look at the calendar and see the date September 21<sup>st</sup> and think, what is that? What is it? then remember it's the first day of autumn and have forgotten it was your birthday.

Signed, only in dreams,

Jacquelyn Travers,

or "Jackers" to you.

P.S. The most vivid memory that comes to me is of my last night before I went to Berlin for that summer trip. (This was the summer before we were "us.") You came to the going away party late, so we stayed up and played Mastermind. I had a chessboard but I still couldn't seem to find the pieces. (Remember we once played on the living room floor on a board made of kitchen napkins. You were always white, because it goes first. I was black.) That night you asked me how old that microscope was. I asked, "What microscope?" And you pointed at something on my bookshelves. "What do you know," I said. "I have a microscope." I had forgotten about it until you showed it to me. At about 5 in the morning, I noticed we were both waiting for something. I told you to leave and we laughed and talked. The sun was rising. You sat in that pink recliner staring up at me through your eyelashes. "Come

on,” I said, but we both knew I didn’t mean it. I walked you to the door. The sun was rising. I remember this good-bye that happened five years ago so clearly that at night I shake under my blankets. I stare at my chessboard and have to blink the memory away. But the picture that most comes to me of that night was when we said good-bye: You called me the best Mastermind player you knew, then walked down the stoop steps. I really thought you would leave it at that. But you half-turned back to me and waved your hand, clenching and unclenching. I waved back the same way, clenching and unclenching, like there was something I wanted to hold onto but couldn’t quite catch.



All's Fair

“And such as Chaucer is, shall  
Dryden be.” —Alexander Pope

I.

Dryden was a philanthropist on his best days. On his worst, he walked the city streets with his sister Emily and her yappy Schnauzer, reading names of stores out loud as they passed. *Pedersen's Patisserie. Big Apple Deli. The New York Minute Café.* He'd written descriptions for all three in the paper's Living Section spotlight column “Park and Shop.” His job at the newspaper usually kept him from having “best days” often.

The Schnauzer ran between Dryden's legs. He hated everything about that thing, from its annoying dollop of a tail to the barks it rang down the street, into hotel lobbies and the ears of bag ladies. Emily could love anything. Dryden had learned that when she was three and he five. She had cried whenever he caught a toad to squash underfoot. “It was a toad sandwich,” he would mock, but her face screwed into a mask of tears until he returned to the park's pond and found her another toad to replace the first. Now she owned a Schnauzer and named it Kermit.

As Emily walked beside him, she stared everywhere but at her brother. At the evening sky lit by streetlights. The yellow fire hydrants Kermit charged at before she yanked at his leash. The cracks on the sidewalk that seemed to contain a hidden message addressed to her. The street signs: *Gay and Waverly Place.*

“The park?” Dryden asked, though he didn’t need to. They always circled the blocks of Washington Square Park on these walks only to enter under the miniature Arc de Triomphe and explore the grounds until the Schnauzer assaulted a defenseless tree with his shit.

They were near the fountain when Kermit went more berserk than usual, barking and jerking the leash. Emily scolded him but not enough to meet Dryden’s approval. He watched the dog pull her toward a clump of trees and away from the main path.

“Wait!” he called, then heard her scream after disappearing behind a group of fenced-in trees. He broke into a run, ready to drag the dog home slung over his shoulder by that nub of a tail.

When he appeared on the other side of the trees, the first thing he saw was Kermit yapping. His gaze drifted up the dog’s taut leash and into Emily’s face, her mouth covered with her hand. She was staring at two men about her age, their shirts ruffled, eyes trained on her as though waiting for an explanation. Dryden felt he should call a photographer from the paper, because it was a true action shot. One man with straw-colored hair, his left eye darkening rapidly, had his hands on the dark-haired man’s collar as blood dripped from his cheek. The bleeding came from a split lip that looked like it would need stitches. It reminded Dryden of block fights when he was younger. He wondered if Emily remembered those days, too, when she played the hostage, being the only girl in the apartment building worth playing for. She was beautiful even then, with that mound of springy black hair on her head.

“Sloan,” Dryden heard her murmur. Then, to the dark-haired one, “Father Alvira.”

“Connor,” the bleeding man said, and Dryden noticed there was no priestly collar around his throat.

Dryden drew even with Emily. “You know them?” he asked with little emotion. He and Emily always spoke to each other in that way. Generally, she understood him without words.

Dryden smiled as the men—Sloan and Connor he supposed—stared at him. A *rival*, their faces told him even before Emily sealed their fate with her answer,

“I love them.”

Dryden had already written today off as a “worst day,” but he saw that the appearance of these men could still do something to change that. He offered his hand to both of them in turn, helping the dark-haired one on the ground to his feet.

“Connor,” he said, smile pasted on. “Sloan,” he named the one with blond hair and the black eye, then invited them both out to dinner.

Dryden chose a homey Greek restaurant he frequented when he needed to come up with a good story in a time crunch. It was a place where the Schnauzer would go unnoticed. He told them it had spanakopitas *to die for* and ordered a round for everyone. Connor and Sloan stared at the blue-checkered table top, quiet and flustered; Emily, as usual, remained tight-lipped and distracted by Kermit. Dryden felt the obligation, as a good host, to speak first.

“Not everyday you meet two upscale young men coming to blows over a woman in Washington Square Park.” He enjoyed his use of the word “upscale” to

ease the tension passing between everyone at the table. “My sister, no less, who claims quote ‘I love them.’” Dryden leaned back in his chair, raising the two front legs off the ground.

“Tell me,” he went on, “the printable story in 1200 words or less.”

A strained silence followed before the one named Sloan spoke:

“It started at the Historical Society.”

“No,” said Connor. “It started in the confessional.”

A few raw words were exchanged between the two, but it wasn’t long before the story took shape in piece-meal fashion, tripping between their two voices. One finished the other’s thoughts in a way that made Dryden wonder if they were brothers. Except for Sloan’s eye and Connor’s lip, he nearly forgot the pair had been locked in urgent combat less than an hour before.

## II.

Connor was right that all of it had started in a confessional. Then Connor was Father Alvira and still on civil terms with his long-time friend, Sloan. The pair had grown up together in the small town of Parishville in upstate New York, where they were known to trade off winning the regional chess tournament until Sloan opted for the football team. Sloan also became addicted to Warheads at a young age—*an oral fixation, why don’t you just take up smoking?* Connor would mock, but he still gave Sloan a bulk-pack of the candy for high school graduation: two cases of over 300 packets. Both went to Syracuse University for separate B.A.s. They became roommates when Connor went to seminary at St. Joseph’s in the city and Sloan

worked in a coffee shop where he traded in his warhead addiction for caffeine. Connor moved out to be closer to his parish when Sloan finally decided to attend graduate school in the city. They kept in touch, of course. The first Thursday of every month they went to *The New York Comedy Club* until last call after work and school and listened to the bad jokes the comedians made about Connor's collar. There were women sometimes, but only for Sloan, who hardly had time for anything but archival management and historical editing since undergrad.

At word 200, Connor said that he had been interested in religion from a young age. Parishville was predominantly Catholic with a sprinkling of Baptists and Methodists. He converted at age eleven, in time for Catechism and Confirmation. His father had raised him alone after divorcing his mother. Connor was told she died three months after the papers were filed, when a big rig rolled into a Denny's restaurant from the highway. Her body was caught under one of those tire flaps with the women on them, and the medical examiner called Connor's father to ask which dentist she went to. Connor never looked at a home-style grilled hamburger the same way again.

He didn't understand women. So one day when his confessional was occupied by a soft-spoken one, he mistook her voice for the Virgin Mary's. She was telling him something about her brother and her dog—

This was when Dryden interrupted, "What day was that?"

"When you took Kermit's leash and told him to play with that pit bull."

"Oh yes. You called me a prick."

"I hated you."

She had confessed it to Connor—then Father Alvira—but all he knew was providence had stepped into his confessional. His heart cracked open, and he thought about his mother’s death for the first time in years. Emily went on about other things—sins that required more Hail Marys, more Our Fathers—but Father Alvira could not listen. He remembered what it was like before his parents’ divorce and could hear the voice of his mother through the partition. She was holding him with her words. There were fields of tall green grass and wild flowers and the noonday sun beating down on his four-year-old head. His mother’s arms wrapped around him until all he could smell was the warmth of her skin on his face.

When the vision had ended, Father Alvira’s left ear was pressed to the lattice work, as her words tickled it. *Sit up*, he had thought to himself. *Be a good priest, not a god-awful one*. He tilted his head onto the back railing. She was speaking then of remorse—like a butterfly she was trying to catch. He remembered her last word to him was *company*. He mumbled something about her absolution and loosened his priest’s collar, wiping a handkerchief across his forehead, listening as the latch snapped shut beyond the partition. He had to switch off the confessional’s occupied light until his breathing returned to normal.

A week later, Father Alvira was wandering through the pews when he heard the voice again—this time singing softly. A hymn he’d never heard before, as though it were addressed to a god unknown to him. He hid behind a pillar until she stopped her singing. When he showed himself, his eyes met hers without meaning to. Or he thought he hadn’t meant it in *that* way—being a priest for god’s sake. He remembered her eyes were pale silver and found himself thinking of serving

Eucharist. They spoke to each other, though Connor couldn't remember what they said.

This was when Sloan interrupted about the Historical Society on West 77<sup>th</sup> street open Tuesday through Saturday. Father Alvira had told Sloan about the girl with the voice of the Virgin Mary from his parish the Wednesday before, and Sloan had laughed out loud.

“Because he was a priest—he had always wanted to be a priest. He never cared about girls. It was always chess and god and confession and purity.”

“She showed me my past,” argued Connor. “Her voice showed me things I hadn't remembered in ten years.”

“You may have loved her first, but it wasn't as a woman.”

“Sloan, the Blessed Virgin is a woman. She's—”

Dryden cleared his throat. “The Historical Society.”

Sloan had been sitting in a cubicle, distracted from sorting through a stack of books when he saw her springy black hair over the partition. Sloan coughed and stood up to catch her attention. She stared at him, a little startled and squinting. He smiled.

“I'm Sloan. I work here.”

“Emily,” she said, then took his offered hand to shake. He remembered feeling warm all over when their palms touched.

“Come here often?” he asked.

She shrugged, then nodded. A good sign.

“Well, then. Maybe I'll see you around.”

She nodded again, finally smiling before she stood and walked toward the microfiche cabinets. Over the coming weeks, Sloan began to help her with the research she felt was of utmost importance.

“Family trees,” Emily added from across the table. “Lineage.”

Sloan was interested, but he was a student. No time for a relationship on the side, trying to get his masters and doctorate within three years. Even the job at the historical society was part of a required fellowship that counted toward a diploma.

“That was what I cared about, anyway,” he said. “Until I dropped out.”

“What?” Dryden asked, as he wiped spanakopita grease from his mouth with a checkered napkin that matched the table.

“Oh, I kept the job. I already had my archival management certificate”

But that wasn't the whole story. At the cathedral, Father Alvira had made himself content to see Emily as a regular parishioner. He watched her come and go, soon organizing his schedule around her penance. She always attended his confessional: the second of three. He started dreaming whenever he heard her voice.

“You see, it was wrong what I was doing.” Connor wiped a hand on his pants, then through his dark hair. “I had to leave. I bought a car first thing. It's a small Toyota Echo with a sun roof. I learned to drive when I was sixteen but never owned a car. Sloan always had one. But I rolled down the windows and opened the sun roof and just drove down the expressway past all the cemeteries with the wind blowing at me. It felt—I don't know—like all my sins had flown out the window.”

But as the word count reached a thousand, the problem for both of them was finding the girl. Father Alvira—now Connor—had decided to stake out the church



from a back pew; Sloan manned a cubicle at the Historical Society. She was spotted there first, then went to the church where Connor saw her lighting a votive. Sloan waited outside, laughing to himself that she had gone into Connor's church. They hadn't spoken in a while, but the comedy club was tonight. It wouldn't hurt to miss one. As Emily walked out the church's front door, Sloan decided to make the call to cancel after he'd caught her. He didn't notice Connor leave the church a few moments after.

Both men remembered she had said something about a sarcastic brother and Washington Square Park. They didn't know about the Schnauzer.

Dryden snorted. "Then you don't know her at all."

"I ran into him at the park," Sloan said, gesturing to Connor. "It was strange because I asked why he'd come. He said something about a girl, which I thought was crazy, because he was a priest. But then I noticed his collar was missing. 'Are you following her?' I asked. When he nodded, it was like I knew it was the same thing as me."

"So he jumped on me," Connor finished.

"I see." Dryden looked at Emily on his right. Her profile was unreadable, even to him. "Good story—both of you—you made the word count, and you even got a free meal out of the deal." He motioned to the waitress for the check. "Nice meeting you and all, but we should be going."

"What do you mean?" Sloan asked. Dryden paused, not liking Sloan's tone one bit. "I dropped out of my doctoral program for your sister. Connor left the priesthood."

“What do you want from me? It’s not like we can set up a duel right here at Papa Gyro’s.”

“I’m not leaving her.”

“Me either,” Connor added.

Dryden rolled his eyes. “Fine. A game between the two of you. . . in the East Village on the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> and Avenue B. Apartment 3 and ring the buzzer twice at eleven tonight.”

Connor rubbed his chin. “Well, what game is it?”

“Chess, of course.” Dryden finished by setting down the exact change on the table with a generous tip, bills crumpled under his fingers. The men weren’t sure if it was a threat or a trap. The way Dryden had spouted off the instructions so coolly, they both wondered if this had happened before. “Connor, you better clean up that cut on your lip; it’s not as deep as it looked. And Sloan-put some ice or meat on your eye.”

Dryden grabbed Emily’s coat, and they left with the Schnauzer.

### III.

Sloan sat in his apartment with a blue ice pack over one eye and began looking through his bookshelf at a quarter to nine. He found a dusty copy of *Reassessing Chess: Every Move Has a Purpose* and leaned his chair back while reading about offensive and defensive playing. He cracked the book as though catching up with an old friend, then realizing that they were still on the same page. The jargon and processes returned to him like an overdue library book.

He came to a page bookmarked with a crinkled Warhead's wrapper, and his eyes fell on the hall closet. He remembered the stash of Warheads in there—the gift from Connor from high school graduation. He got up from the chair and opened the closet: in an unmarked box in the back were still about 200 packets of Warheads. “For old time's sake,” he said to himself as he opened the box and stuck a packet in his breast pocket.

Connor started flipping through old high school yearbooks in his apartment at 9:07. His sophomore year he noticed there were only a few signatures beside the pictures. He turned past the rows of faces to the group photos. There he was with Sloan in chess club. The next page was Homecoming court and there she was, Darby Serrat. He shut the book at 9:33 and walked the streets, wandering toward the East Village without thought of time.

Emily sat on a park bench, holding Kermit. She was a young woman with a well-bred dog. This is what people passing by saw. Her head was tilted partway toward the Schnauzer who nipped her nose and licked her ears. *It will be fine*, she murmured to him, rubbing Kermit's stomach. At 9:56, she went to her brother's. Dryden was in the shower thinking of his newest headline, so she ordered a pizza and lay on his bed with the dog. She knew Kermit on the pillows would bother Dryden. She grew listless and dozed.

Connor cut back and forth across blocks, remembering Darby Serrat. Her ocean blue eyes and slinky skirts. But they never spoke at school, only at the strip malls afterward or at Mass on Sundays. She had snuck him under a set of bleachers at an abandoned baseball field one day during gym class and explored his mouth with

her tongue. Sloan never believed the story. Connor had stopped believing it too, after a few weeks. Forgot the feeling of his hand on her thigh and her fingers tousling his hair.

She haunted his memory as Emily did—as his mother had. All three images of the women twined together in his mind, braided until he couldn't distinguish memories from feelings—and what had happened three hours before from that of twenty-four years ago. He started walking with awareness at 10 PM, headed toward the East Village and arrived by 10:35. He sat on the stoop, holding his head in his hands until Sloan walked by at 10:53. Connor noticed a book in his hands along with a gray box he recognized from his days with the chess club. He had gotten rid of all his tournament trophies at several parish yard sales. Last time he had visited Sloan's apartment, his friend's trophies book-ended an empty fish tank.

Sloan was sucking something hard in his mouth, and Connor saw the opened Warheads package sticking from his shirt like a pocket protector. “Thought you quit.”

Sloan shoved the Warhead to one side of his mouth with his tongue. “Oh, I did,” he said and pushed the door's buzzer twice. Dryden answered after a few moments, wearing dark pants and a pale blue dress shirt with the collar unbuttoned, a sweet smell wafting from his wet hair.

“I brought the timer,” Sloan shoved the gray box into Dryden's hands.

“It's a good thing, too.” Dryden led them up the stairs with sarcasm in his voice. Connor and Sloan found themselves in a room that was set up with a chess

table. Dryden dropped the timer next to the board where the pieces were already set up.

“Pick your side,” he said as he headed toward an adjoining room. Then called over his shoulder, “Standard rules.”

“White,” Sloan said without thinking, and they took their seats. Connor picked up his queen and noticed a chip in the representative crown, but the enamel finish still felt smooth under his fingertips. The game began, and white went first as usual. Connor felt himself sweating whenever Sloan smiled.

The non-rhythmic dinging of the timer drifted into Dryden’s bedroom where he relaxed in an easy chair, and Emily paced back and forth with no sign of stopping, though occasionally she hesitated.

“Why are we here, then?” Dryden asked, despite her appearance as pensive philosopher. “You’re anxious. I’ll just walk in and put an end to it.” He made no move to rise.

“I prayed,” she said.

“To what?” Dryden yawned and stretched his arms above his head.

She shrugged.

He asked, “Why are we here? Two men are in my living room playing chess for you. I could be drafting next week’s column.”

“I always liked being his parishioner. Receiving absolution from him.”

“Really?”

“I was addicted to researching our family history. You’re named after our great uncle.”

“Fascinating.”

She grew silent. Dryden coughed.

“What if you chose his confessional because it was in the middle, and you were afraid of being on either end because someone else might listen in?” She stopped pacing as he spoke. “What if there’s something in your DNA that likes naming things, so you have a thing for genealogies?” These questions hadn’t come out sounding the way they had in his head, so he repeated, “Why are we here?”

The doorbell rang. He didn’t need to ask: she answered it without thinking. It was the pizza guy. Or it was, until she took off her hat and shook her hair loose.

“Dinah, ma’am. That’ll be eleven fifty.”

Emily patted her pockets. “Left it upstairs. Come on up.” They ascended together. “Took you a long time.”

“We’re busy, ma’am.”

“On a Thursday?”

They walked past the chess match and into the kitchen for Emily’s purse. “Looks like you’ve got something serious going on in there,” Dinah said, taking the twenty dollars in Emily’s hand. She tapped the pizza box lightly. “You should save this for the winner. I’ll show myself out.”

Emily wandered back in to Dryden without the pizza. He commented on this from the smell in the apartment. Emily shrugged again. “Dinah said it’s for the winner.”

“As though my sister wasn’t prize enough. . .”

Emily almost smiled but decided against it.

IV.

By 12:44, black and white pieces alike lay toppled on either side of the board. Once or twice during the course of play, Connor had snagged his fingers on the queen's chipped crown. Sloan was aware of nothing but four moves in the future and the Warheads in his pocket. Connor still had that imperfect queen. Sloan had both of his bishops. Each of them still had one knight. Sloan shifted in his seat and mumbled, "I don't know if I'll be happier that I finally beat you or that I won the girl. . ." This broke Connor's concentration. By 1:09, Sloan's pawns and a bishop checkmated Connor's king.

Both men sat in silence after the last ding faded. Dryden entered the room when he'd noticed the silence, followed by Emily and Kermit. He stared at the board and patted Sloan on the back.

"Congrats," he said. "Your prize."

Sloan turned to look at Emily. He noted the way her curly hair fell around her face, despite being tucked behind her ears. He saw that her lips were larger than he remembered, fuller than the line they were when she copiously scanned lines of civil war enlistments. He stood up and took her hand.

Emily evenly met his gaze. Sloan's teeth were white, his nose straight, his hair that striking blond. She was distracted, hearing Dryden dismissing Connor,

"That's it then."

"Thanks for your hospitality."

"Sorry it didn't work out for you."

Emily's gaze drifted from Sloan's just this once, to see Connor's reaction to the exchange. His expression was pure—as though no sin could stick to the lines of his face. She looked back at Sloan and found herself thinking of the agony it would be for Connor when he left. No lover, no priesthood.

She pushed the pizza between her and Sloan. “Your winnings,” she mouthed, smiling to hide her thoughts. He smiled back, opened the box and pulled out a slice, biting into it. “How did you know green peppers were my favorite?” He swallowed quickly, then drew Emily in for a kiss.

She could hardly keep track of what was happening. She felt Sloan's tongue along her teeth and tasted peppers, but then the kiss was gone. Suddenly.

She thought it felt like that day when she was younger, playing block games on her brother's team, and Louis Aikmans had punched her in the jaw. She remembered Dryden running in between the stars in her eyes, tackling Louis. But her face throbbed. It throbbed in the same way now. The pressure from the kiss, then the vacuum of sudden release. She fell to the ground when she was punched; now she stood. She had lost baby teeth after the punch (they were already loose). Now she was staring at the wall and seeing stars again. She felt eight and twenty-six-years old at the same time.

She blinked twice when she heard Connor's voice, yelling into a telephone for 911, and the stars disappeared. His voice came to her in slow motion, low and garbled. Her head pivoted, her spine twisted, her eyes caught the shadowed figure of Dryden leaning against the wall. He stared at her and shook his head.



Connor was on the floor, holding Sloan's face in his hands, shaking it, slapping it. "Wake up. Come on—wake up. Sloan. Sloan." His voice was anxious. His forehead ran with sweat. They hadn't spoken in almost a week. Had something happened that he should know about? He saw the Warheads package sticking out of Sloan's pocket and grabbed it.

He read the label, then the date of expiration that had passed three years and nine months ago. He wondered if they were the same Warheads he'd bought Sloan that once, if old candy could really do this to a person. He tried not to think of what happened to four-year-old candy. His grandmother always had a dish of hard candy on her dining room table. Each year, he and his parents had visited her on Christmas until his mother died/the divorce. He would eat one piece of candy each year, then remember he hated the taste. He couldn't help but wonder if the jar had never been refilled, that the candy from that year had been around since his family had started paying the visits.

"Why—" Connor tried to shake Sloan out of it. "Wake up!" He ignored the urge to pronounce the final rites. After all, he was no longer a priest.

Sloan's eyes fluttered open, and Dryden heard his first words calling Emily to him. Sloan took her hand and glanced at Connor. *He loved you first, but I won you,* Sloan was saying as his eyes fluttered again. Words of resignation. Connor was afraid he was already gone. But Emily felt a pressure on her hand before Sloan's fingers grew limp and his jaw slacked open.

Dryden watched them from a dark corner of the apartment. He had heard Sloan's last words, "Mercy, Emily," as though she could save him from death. But

her love could not save him, Dryden thought. Because love couldn't save anyone. Not Sloan. Not the frogs from the park pond he had stepped on when he was younger. Not the Schnauzer when it ran away or would have to be put to sleep. Love couldn't save anyone. Dryden couldn't either. Nor the landlord. Nor the construction workers who ate their lunch on the stoop outside every day of the week but Sunday. Not even god, because he didn't even write the headlines anymore. And good riddance, Dryden thought, because the headlines are much better when god doesn't write them. *We sell more copies and the editors have it easier.*

Dryden saw that Connor and Emily were looking at Sloan, unaware of much else. "Why are we here?" Dryden finally asked, but the question clattered unheard to the ground, rolling until it bumped the black king into a worn groove in the hardwood floor.

### Chapter 3: Here, at the end of all things.

*I am a mole.*

“That’s my last duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive.”

-Robert Browning

I am a mole. I sit right above George’s upper lip but not too close to her nose. George is a woman although I wouldn’t consider myself as such. I see and hear everything George does. I am always with her. She doesn’t know or understand that I am the closest thing to a lifelong relationship that she has. I know everything about her. When she gets in the shower, I am in that same shower—wet. I can see the glistening droplets of water caribeen off the turned-up tip of her nose. She cleans me, too, wipes a wet washcloth along her upper lip to clean off the dirt from the air outside.

When she looks in the mirror, it’s the only time I can see myself. But I mostly look at the left side of her face in the mirror, because I am situated on the right side and can’t see past her turned-up nose. Since I rest near her upper lip, I not only hear but feel everything she says. When George’s lips move, I’m moved. I feel everything she says. When she was younger she spent most of her mornings patting

me over with foundation. She's grown to accept me now, though it wasn't always this way.

When her eyes first opened to this wondrous world, before the pink stick, before she met her other life mate Austin, I was there, resting just under the skin, knowing that in a few months I would emerge, softly. At that time I was the same shade as her newborn skin. She cried when the doctor slapped her, like every newborn baby I've seen is supposed to, not too loud, not angrily. She asked her first question with that cry, an "Is this what life is?" question, but I didn't have an answer for her then.

I was there when she pedaled her first bicycle into the mailbox outside her house and cut her head on the aluminum flag. That was my first taste of her blood. It dripped slowly down the side of her nose. She started to cry, and her father gathered her in his arms until she felt safe enough to stop. The blood was saltier than the tears that fell less often after that—her sixth—year than in previous ones. The blood's texture was more robust, made me feel more alive.

I began to darken the summer she and her friends took swimming lessons in the outdoor pool at the YMCA on weekdays. It was right before George entered the third grade, and her mother was worried about all the sun George was getting. She particularly fretted over me and the way I felt on her face. I was slathered with sunscreen like clockwork most mornings, except when the babysitter forgot or looked at the bottle in disgust. George would never remind them. She hated it just as much as I.

As she entered middle school, George started to notice me. She would look in the mirror in our bathroom too long before school, staring at me. There was a depth and intensity in her glares at herself in the mirror. I was privy to these stalwart moments, whereas few others knew about our times in the bathroom, when she would look at me, touch me, and sometimes squeeze me tentatively, as though she was scared I might pop. Her mother would call up to her from down the stairs to say, “Hurry up, George. You’ll miss the bus!” To which George would reply, in a whisper to no one but me and her reflection, “Then you’ll just have to drive me yourself.” She’d sigh and fluff her bangs and add, “That’s what you get for naming your kid Georgina.” And she’d shudder in a way that gave me a better view of her day’s choice outfit. At the time, my favorite was the green pleated shirt and her favorite pair of worn American Eagle jeans.

I must admit that I didn’t mind how long she spent in front of the mirror. It gave me the time I needed to memorize her face and where I fell upon it. I also learned the ways in which she found herself wanting, by how she would pull the skin on her face up toward her cheekbones, how she stretched her forehead between her fingers, how she painted her lips first pink, then black, then red in later years. How she would stare at me and poke and prod. Some days, when she was particularly tired from a homework assignment the night before or after she had been in a fight with one of her friends, she would simply cuss at our reflection in the mirror, brush the hair off her forehead, and run down stairs and out the door.

She had a habit of finding one or two words at a time that fascinated her. The first word was “rendezvous” after they’d gone over the spelling in fourth grade. On

another day she became fascinated with the word “flaccid.” She repeated them in front of the mirror, so that I would again and again be moved by her lips opening and closing in the word’s pattern. Each time she would commit to a word, I would memorize her mouth’s way of wrapping around it.

On her fifteenth birthday she came home from school early because there was a power outage that had extended to the entire school block. Her father worked for the electric company, so she knew she’d hear the explanations around the dinner table that night. In English class she had learned the word “antidisestablishmentarianism” just before the lights went out. And when she walked through the front door of her parents’ house, she said it as the Fox Terrier ran to greet her. She squashed it to her chest before it could make a sound, whispering, “Hey, Rocksy. Attaboy, Rocksy,” into the terrier’s ear. It licked her face in return. She smiled until she walked into the family room and saw a woman she didn’t recognize—nude—underneath her father—also nude—on top of each other on the family room floor.

She slowly backed away from the living room without making noise and ran up the staircase on light feet. She jumped onto her bed face first, and Rocksy growled in her arms. The growl made her wonder if they—her father and the no-named woman—had seen or heard her. I’d noticed that she hadn’t looked at their faces more than a quick moment. Then she was distracted by their horrible movements and the noises they made with their mouths, with their bodies. George flipped onto her back, and Rocksy came over and licked both of us. The dog’s tail was wagging, and George crushed it to her chest again. Her tears washed over me, and I could feel the quickening beat of her heart very loudly in her face. She fell asleep and her hands fell

away from the schnauzer. It wobbled down to the foot of the bed where it curled up next to her stocking feet and sighed, as though it were ashamed it had let in the strange woman downstairs without so much as a yip!

At dinner that evening George was uncharacteristically quiet. Her mother dished her plate full of cut beans and almonds, roasted potatoes, and a ground round steak. George picked at her food. When her mother sat down to say grace, her father took his wife's hand and prayed, but George would write later in her journal that she didn't know who would hear "said prayer." And she wrote to herself that she would forget the day entirely. That she would "never bring it up. Never!" Over dinner there was no mention of the blackout at school, and she blew her fifteen birthday candles out with a silent wish.

Before she went to bed that night, she stood in front of the mirror in our bathroom and began to recite "antidisestablishmentarianism" on repeat. I rode the wave of the word, bumpier than I'd remembered others being. She tired of the word quickly, though, each syllable tripping after another in an awkward pattern. She settled on "disestablish" instead and repeated it, sometimes with an object after it. "Disestablish him." "Disestablish her." "Disestablish me." "Disestablish you."

During her sixteenth year, George's parents separated and her lipstick turned black. She'd get up earlier in the morning just to paint her eyes with gray and navy shadows. She sat alone at lunch. She carved the words "KILL ME" into her school trays every other day until she started getting them back. One day after her father left, she was looking in the mirror, staring at me. She called to her mother in the other room that she wanted to "get that mole removed."

“Which one?” her mom called back.

“The one above my lip.”

“Has it gotten darker?”

Here in the exchange, George paused and stared at me more closely. Then she pressed on me a couple of times like I was a button. “I think so!”

But I had not gotten darker. Not since that summer when she was swimming in the pool for lessons. And so her mother came in and took a look at me, her cold fingers probing the skin around me, then me myself. She pressed me like a button, too, and said, “Well, I guess we should go to the doctor again.”

So George had me removed when we were sixteen.

But I grew back three months later.

“There you are again,” she told me in the mirror. Then she pressed her hand to her forehead like she was having a headache.

She stopped looking at herself in the mirror after she graduated from high school and went to college until she met Austin. The black lipstick disappeared between her freshman and sophomore years. She told the people she met that she and her father were estranged from a very young age, which was a secret lie only she and I shared. She met a boy named Austin who ran on the school’s cross country team. Her senior year, she never missed one of his meets. They moved in together after graduation, and she told me in the mirror that everything was much better for her. She had stopped stretching her face to make it look the way she wanted. Now Austin stood beside her and pointed to her eyes and called them beautiful. He pinched her



cheeks until she smiled. He would look at me and say, “And I love that little spot of joy,” then kiss me so that all I could feel were his lips around me in the moist darkness of his mouth.

She made love to Austin for the first time and her last time, which was very awkward for me, watching Austin’s face quickly coming toward me, feeling his own sweat dripping onto George’s face. They tasted so differently, it surprised me at first. If Austin let his mustache grow for more than a week, George would refuse to kiss him. I always felt that it was out of some loyalty to me, knowing just how much it hurt for me to find myself lost in prickly whiskers, like small pinpricks of love.

It was true that everything was much better—George had a job she enjoyed, working with numbers and wearing reading glasses that she sometimes chewed the ends of—until the day she looked in the mirror while holding the white stick in her hand and repeated to her reflection, “It’s pink. It’s pink.” until Austin called to her from the office where he was working his desk job from home that day. It was a Friday. I could see in the mirror the tears at the corners of her brown eyes. Austin called again. She squeezed her eyes shut and whispered, “Not happening. This can’t be.” and stuffed the pink stick in her pocket.

There was one day after she’d hidden the pink stick from Austin that she was at the doctor’s office waiting for an appointment, and Jenny Mortimer (She sat next to George for her high school graduation ceremony.) came through the double doors with her gaggle of children. They all wore old clothes, handed down from previous Mortimers, and they were fancying themselves in an imaginary world. They were crawling their way around the chairs and tables—all six children—and Jenny

Mortimer just sat in one of those chairs and watched her children with a grand, wide smile on her face that she might have tried to squelch, but it was obviously an impossible task.

I take note of this not just because it was toward the end of things, but because the family seemed to fascinate George. Her heart beat faster as her eyes followed the smallest child, standing alone next to the waiting room toys but not playing with them or staring at them, just standing. George seemed especially interested in this one. I was concerned that George may start to cry, because the way her heart was beating and the way her face was moving was exactly what usually happened before a good cry, but she didn't. She didn't go to her doctor's appointment either. She just stood, walked over to Jenny Mortimer and said, "Please, next time you take them all out, tell them to keep to themselves." Then she left without looking back at Jenny Mortimer's face or the little girl standing alone next to the toys.

George's accident happened on the way home from the doctor's office. She turned onto the street from the office's parking lot, and something crashed into her from the back of the car. I couldn't see it at the time, because George couldn't. I didn't see it until the ambulance came and the paramedics pronounced George dead, which I knew had occurred almost the same time I felt the gush of wind from her head being snapped forward upon impact. I glimpsed a turquoise truck through the closing zipper of the tarp-like body bag, and then there was darkness, then light and a glimpse of George's mother crying onto Austin's shocked shoulder. I had a front row seat for the embalming procedure. I watched all of George's insides turned outside and taken away in coolers of different colors for transplant. But I stayed with her—

the only one—and then I was stuck behind a closed casket with nothing but my own voice.

So I sit here in the dark, underground above George's upper lip, that once quivered but is now still, that she once painted but has now been painted by a stranger with an unfamiliar color. After the accident, I finally understood what the pink stick meant. Because as I sat there on her bloody face and heard her heart beat slow, I recognized another beat, a softer beat. And I understood then that there was another someone growing inside of George, someone who would be smacked on their own birthday until they cried. And that though George died almost instantly, the someone inside her held on for a bit longer, the soft heartbeat growing softer and slower, and the beats repeating with more and more silence between them, until I found myself listening and waiting for the last one that never did come.

Now I am just as slowly fading, behind the closed casket, underneath the buried earth. I am left to wait, for only time will destroy me. The casket's air is stale, and I will never taste George's tears or blood again. I miss her. Terribly. I miss seeing her. I miss feeling her. And oh, how I miss the depth and passion of her earnest gazes into bathroom mirrors. Her face is strangely still, like I'm sitting on a sack of flesh. The heartbeat that lent such rhythm to my life has fallen away. So there is nothing but silence and my own thoughts. But someday I hope to see her again. I believe I will, and I hope beyond hope that I will. Hope, beyond hope, beyond

Life Story

Lorenzo was in his office (situated on a 50-square-foot plywood dais in the back room) when the FBI called. Maybe not the FBI as much as the people they had lured into contacting potential candidates for hire. He'd put his application in a little over four years ago on a whim, a suggestion from Uncle Sergio, right after he got hired as the Human Resources Manager for the national bookstore chain. Working at the store looks a lot like not wearing a suit and scheduling his own hours along with every other employee's. But today, four days away from his thirtieth birthday, he was talking on the phone calling procedural background checks and US citizenry and where were his parents living now?

“They moved back home. For them, I mean. Sicily.”

“Uh-huh.” Lorenzo was sure this was all routine to the caller, but if the FBI was calling him—making even minimal contact—that meant that he was being considered, he'd passed some kind of preliminary test, hadn't he?

“You served overseas for a year?”

“Yeah. Yes. Sir. In Bosnia.”

“What brought you back here?”

“Broken shoulder. The explosion lodged some shrapnel in my lower back.”

“Were you shielding someone?”

“Huh?”

“From the blast.”

“Almost.”

The call ended without any promises, and Lorenzo placed the phone back on its cradle. He watched his line light go dark next to other blinking lights—most likely customers calling in special orders or employees calling in sick for the day. From the amount of lights going off, he would probably end up taking over for someone at the customer service station or a register before the day was done.

His hand was slick from holding tightly to the phone receiver. He wiped them on his pants as he stood, rubbed the back of his neck with a fist, and blew a long breath out through his nose. He noticed Linda was sleeping in the desk behind him, her legs up on the desk, her headset falling from her ears. He'd taken his own headset off when the call came for him. Now it hung unused around his neck. Linda had come into work late and left him to boot up the store's network and do the cash counting and distribution alone. If he had more power, he might have pulled her aside and given her a warning.

He let her sleep and walked into the break room, clapping his hands. "How's everything going?"

The two booksellers at the lunch table looked at him. "You look happy," Tricia said. She was a few years younger than Lorenzo and going to graduate school. He let her work one day a week, something he only did for employees who fell into the "exceptional" category.

"I just a—" He placed a hand up to his mouth, like he still couldn't believe it. "The FBI just called."

The kid who hadn't smiled looked up from whatever he was drawing on the table. "What for?" he said through a plastic replacement piercing in his lip.

“I applied for a job there a few years back.”

“Kick-ass,” the kid said.

“Yeah,” Lorenzo said, half-hiding his face in the palm of his hand. “I thought so.”

~\*~

Nearly thirty years ago, Lorenzo was born in Pittsburgh, but he came over from Italy in his mother’s stomach. He was the reason they came, even though back then there was a little less of America being the land of unimaginable freedom and more the land of Jimmy Carter. But still there was something more on the horizon, something that his parents thought he would have if they headed West across the Atlantic, moving where the money came from, though neither of his parents had figured out how to make it grow on trees. This was why the family ended up in Bloomfield, Pittsburgh, living with Lorenzo’s Aunt Marie.

As he grew up, there were no elaborate gifts, no grandiose public displays of affection. They were parents who showed love for their children in an unremarkable fashion: a travel-sized toothpaste packed in his duffle bag on the way to summer camp, a night when he was allowed to fall asleep on his father’s shoulder watching late-night television on the ten-inch black and white, when he was carried up the creaking stairs to his box spring mattress (“Why buy a frame when he grows so much?” his father asked his mother. “It’s more than Papu gave me in Italia. More than Santo gave your sisters before you.”)

Lorenzo’s most distinct memories of his childhood came from when he knew his parents loved him because when he was young his father would pull slight-of-build

Lorenzo onto his knee, bouncing him up and down in such a way that the boy could feel his baby teeth knock against each other, bite after bite. Papu would state (in rhythm with his foot tapping, Lorenzo's teeth knocking), "We-come-here. We-love-you. U-S-A. All-the-way." ("Except for in football," Papu would add before his foot fell on the next beat, like a syncopated prophecy of the ways Lorenzo would make his ordinary life extraordinary.)

Aunt Marie would come up the stairs to visit. She knocked Lorenzo's face between hands full of rings when she visited. His cheeks bounced between her acrylic press-on nails. *Like eagle's talons*, Lorenzo thought when he was just about 5 and had been learning about birds of prey in his kindergarten class that morning. The school had first placed him in the PM class until Mama had told the principal that any son of hers would learn bright and early. She didn't want him to become the night wanderer her brother had been in Italia, gambling, too many women, missing mass.

And always, Aunt Marie shook his face between her eagle's talons.

"Do you understand," Papu asked her, "the American Dream?"

"Only on Wednesday. You know, when I'm off from the phone company."

Later, she would give Lorenzo and his younger brother journals when Lorenzo went to college: one white, the other black.

"For Lorenzo." Papu patted his son's black Sicilian hair twice, and Lorenzo was careful not to bite his tongue. Papu's hands were tough and heavy, like Mama could use one for a pin cushion.

"It's true," Marie told Papu, her lips coming close to Lorenzo's five-year-old ear, "You will be great some day." His black, Sicilian hair curled tight around the

words until every time he washed it, scratched that groove in the back of his skull where the doctor had palmed him the day he was born, the words came loose and danced behind his eyelids like moving pictures of the story of his life to come.

Papu and Mama stopped having kids after Lorenzo, not because they hadn't attended mass in ages, not because there weren't enough scraps left on the table, but because Papu turned to Mama late at night in their twin bed and told her this one was special. He would do things, like Marie had promised. This one would be enough for both of them. And Mama answered, maybe because they hadn't attended mass in awhile, "I have no more love to give another." When Mama said things like this, Papu would place his heavy hand between her legs and stop her mouth with his.

~\*~

Little Lorenzo felt in his heart of hearts that he was the only child they would look at with the kind of love he grew accustomed to, the only child who would bounce the cadence on Papu's knees. When Mama started tossing her cookies every morning before he went to kindergarten, he was afraid she had the mumps (like he had last month). He'd stayed home from school for three weeks and watched Mama do the house work and sneak downstairs to Marie's for a glass or two of red wine in the afternoon. He never asked her where she went and figured it was outside to tend the 2 square feet of spice garden in the fenced-in backyard. But by the time Lorenzo was 6, he had a baby brother named Angelo.

"Because he came to us like an angel," Papu would say.

"An unexpected guest," Mama said, quietly thinking about the messengers who told Abraham God would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Papu held his thick



fingers out to Angelo who wrapped a fist around the pointer. Lorenzo peered at the baby in his old basinet, then through the bars of his old crib as Angelo grew.

Lorenzo hated him fiercely for a short time after he turned 8 and Angelo was 2. He was watching Angelo cry again after he had bumped his head on the secondhand coffee table with roses carved on the legs. As Papu stopped his dinner to pat Angelo on the head, Mama took Lorenzo's hand in hers and squeezed. "You were my boy," she said. "You never cried. I took you everywhere."

"He has reason to cry," Papu said, his smile wide with bared teeth. And he set Angelo on his knee for the first time Lorenzo had seen. When asked about it now, Lorenzo doesn't like talking about the beginning of things. He doesn't like talking about the end of things, either.

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Lorenzo liked waiting for Julie to come home in his pink recliner—the one right next to the basket of remote controls, with enough leg-space to pop out the footrest, and enough space behind the chair for him to lean it back and fall asleep when he watched the Late-Late show. Though, more recently he'd been falling asleep during the Late Show.

"It's those new vitamin supplements that Marie sent. They must be screwing with your sleeping patterns or something," Julie had said earlier this week at dinner. "I swear if she gave you a horse tranquilizer and called it bran you'd dry swallow it without asking a question."

"They're vitamins, Jules."

She was hunched over the kitchen table in a defeated way. “It makes me think I’m at work when you call me that.”

“And I tell you, ‘Jules’ not ‘Joules’.”

She half-smiled. “I’ve been tired, too. Next year—no soccer clubs. I’m getting too old to balance it all.”

“But you care more about—”

“Something that doesn’t get me paid. What a sad state of affairs.” She took a swig from the bottle of O’Doul’s she’d opened to go with dinner: a microwavable meatloaf dish and some instant potatoes, nothing homemade.

Lorenzo scooted his chair toward hers and put his arm around her shoulders, bare from the tank top she wore—a light blue color that reminded him of her North Carolina days, where she’d gotten a scholarship to play on the women’s soccer team. He hadn’t known her then, only when they went together to her five-year reunion and met the rest of her teammates: half had played in the WLS before it went belly-up (even Julie had for a year) and some had made the national team.

He asked her now the same question he had asked in the hotel the first night of her five-year reunion. “Why did you ever come back to good ole Bangor?”

And she answered in the same way—this time with her mouth half-full of meatloaf. “I wouldn’t want to miss out on this, would I?”

He leaned into her neck and released a breath of air along her collar bone. She tensed, swallowed the meatloaf. “Ticklish,” she reminded him.

“I know.” And he smoothed his hand over her stomach.

“No late-night TV tonight,” she said into his black hair.

“Let’s make a family,” he told her neck.

He felt her hesitate a moment, and she turned away until her back was facing him. One of her hands was still on the table; she tapped her fingers against the table ledge.

He put his hand on her shoulder, but she took her fork and plate of half-eaten meatloaf to the sink. As she ran the disposal, she looked over at him, her eyes sad. But the way she held her mouth in a loose expression that slowly turned wry, he knew that she’d already forgiven him.

She wasn’t as mad as the other times he had mentioned children or starting a family. (She’d even balked at getting a dog when he had brought up the possibility the previous summer.) Once she’d thrown a platter they’d gotten as a wedding present from some distant cousin on his dad’s side of the family at the wall.

He walked up behind her and placed his own empty plate in the sink. She turned toward him and he saw that as he leaned closer to her face, he could see the tan bra under her tank top. A few strands of hair were stuck to her neck where he had kissed her and he smoothed them over her shoulder.

“Turn off the water.” She told him to, and he did it. She put one hand on the back of his neck and he felt a pressure there to kiss her.

“Besides,” she said before their lips met, “I’m not ovulating anyway.”

Lorenzo met his first love in third-grade music class when he started to play the trombone. Mama would ask, “Why pick the instrument shaped like spaghetti and meatballs?” By high school, he was good enough to play professionally, while

Angelo enjoyed the hand-me-down Hot Wheels that no longer changed color in warm water (though at one time they had). Later, people wondered why Lorenzo chose business over music in college. They told him that he could hire himself out—that gigs could pay 500 dollars a night. He could work when he wanted, sleep the day away. He could perform for the rest of his life until he decided to retire. And Lorenzo did love to perform. In retrospect, he would call it his “favorite past time.” And he would remind anyone who asked that girls love a trombone player.

He lost his virginity to a violinist at a local college’s junior concert series the summer he was fourteen. But when he tells how it happened, he tells the story about the fourth time he had sex in the back of Stacey Gifford’s dad’s pick up (with senior at-the-time Stacey Gifford). He lies because the violinist became locally famous when she drove to Cleveland and won a concerto competition. From then on, Lorenzo understood that what they had that summer, what they’d done, didn’t exist.

He played in an all-brass jazz band that he recalls was “by all means a sausage fest.” The only girl was the tenor sax player, and she was eleven-and-a-half years old. (Lorenzo was 16—Angelo 10.) He never spoke to her, because he heard the bass player call her an “idiot savant” when she wasn’t around. In fact, no one in the band spoke to her except for her nanny-slash-chauffeur who came with the band on all of their out-of-town trips—to Columbus, to Erie. Lorenzo knew the Tri-state area better than Papu and Mama by the time he was 18. If Lorenzo ever thinks about the idiot savant again, it’s in terms of the braces she got when she turned twelve. The bitch was that they had badly fucked up her embouchure.

Music is no longer a part of his life in the way that it was. He still has his old gig bag and the trombone, now dented in one too many places with a few too many pockmarks. It used to be the shiniest one in the bandstand; now it's old and unused, like the sheet music stuffed under the hidden compartment in his instrument case. Under a thick felt cushion for the instrument accessories. It's all in the hall closet now. Under the plastic Christmas tree.

When Lorenzo went to college at Penn State, his friends told him that State College was like paradise in the center of Pennsylvania. He joined the basketball team as a walk on, and being a walk on he still needed a way to pay for school— ROTC being the best option put in his head by the high school guidance counselor. Papu and Mama still didn't make enough money to pay.

When Lorenzo left for college, he pretended he wasn't leaving Angelo in a foxhole surrounded by landmines. He pretended that the kids at school didn't treat him like an outcast, but those were the exact words he used when he told Lorenzo so at college graduation. He said there was no one in that damn burgh that knew his name. As they were packing his things in his off-campus apartment, Lorenzo told Angelo high school was shit and there were only a few more years to stick it out, right? And Angelo told him not to stay in the army. He told Lorenzo to come back home. He cried. Lorenzo said, "Stop it. Don't let them see you do that. We're gonna change the world, Angelo. In under ten years' time, the world will be changed on account of us."

The words were partly Aunt Marie's and partly his own, but Lorenzo believed them fiercely in the moment he said them aloud to his little brother. He would think on them often when he went overseas with his unit.

The day Lorenzo heard about his brother was the same day Lorenzo's unit received their first mission assignment. Lorenzo was called into headquarters to speak with his commanding officer.

"I'm sorry to inform you, Private." They both sat across from each other—General Hart on a barstool, him on a fold-up chair. The General held out a piece of paper to Lorenzo. "This message was received today."

Lorenzo took the paper and read the message: so short and to the point. He almost wondered if the whole thing was a joke.

After a moment, the General spoke again. "As you know, we've just received our orders—"

"I'm fine, sir." He gave Hart the paper message back. "No special attention necessary, sir."

General Hart stood then. (Lorenzo stood as well.) The General rested a hand on Lorenzo's shoulder and squeezed, and Lorenzo found that it was the last friendly touch he felt until he returned home with his injuries a year later.

Without the message in his hand, Lorenzo left headquarters and returned to his bunk where the other soldiers had already begun fixing their packs to move out. He found the journal Aunt Marie had given him on his eighteenth birthday between his mattress and bed frame (where he had shoved it his first day on the base). Marie had said to him, "For all those great ideas," and kissed his curly black hair that was

now buzzed off. The book fit in the palm of his hand. It was bound with white cloth, now dusty with Bosnian dirt. Lorenzo could keep it in his back pocket next to his wallet. He had told Marie that he would take it with him. She made him promise: “Everywhere.”

He took a pen from his pack and sat on his bed. He opened it, the binding protesting for only a moment, and wrote in the journal for his first and last time. When he was finished, he put the journal back in his pocket and didn’t open it again for years.

Lorenzo could see—on that day clearer than before—that everyone in his unit was in the midst of their own personal crisis—not because they were in Bosnia, but because they were here and alive. As they marched to the next leg of their tour, he kept the words in his head—*wait-ing for cha-ange*. He kept his eyes forward. He ran with everyone else, trying to blend in, blinking more often than usual and deciding to start the next chapter of his life.

Lorenzo received only one more message that year in Bosnia—sent four months after the first (though he didn’t receive it for another two months after that). Papu and Mama were going back to the Old Country. They’d moved out of Marie’s and left him with the task to sort through the leftover debris of their lives in Bloomfield. After he’d been sent home on an honorable discharge and completed 3 months of physical therapy, Lorenzo found himself in Marie’s house, going through Angelo’s old things and a few things that Papu and Mama had thought he could use in his new life.

Marie had greeted him with her long acrylic press-ons on his shoulders, squeezing tightly. They kissed once on the cheek. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close until he felt her start to shake against him with sobs that wet his shoulder.

“I’m all right, Aunt Marie.”

She drew back and looked at him through bifocals that he didn’t recognize.

“They left us alone, kiddo.”

Lorenzo tensed his shoulders. “Have you listed the house, yet?”

She shook her head. “I’m renting the downstairs out. I’m not so old, you know.” She winked and Lorenzo smiled.

He looked through Angelo’s room. Most of his brother’s things were already in boxes. Marie came in with a glass of red wine and a cold cut sandwich on a tray. There was an opened jar of black olives on the side.

“What do you have in your hand? Oh, I recognize that.” She set down the tray and Lorenzo took a bite of sandwich. She sighed and kept her hand flat on the journal, like she was preparing to swear an oath.

“You know I loved you both so much. But I always thought there was something special about you, kiddo.”

Lorenzo looked at her sideways and nodded. The compliment struck him hard in the pit of his stomach. He was unsure whether he felt sour or proud.

Marie placed the journal on his lap. “He’d want you to have it.” And Lorenzo hoped it was true.



Without parents to ground him in the burgh and with Marie's promise of renters, Lorenzo moved in with Uncle Sergio and worked as a car salesman up in Bangor, Maine. This is how he put his life back together, Mazda after Mazda, working for Uncle Sergio. When he got his own place and started working at the bookstore full-time, he contacted the FBI. He could see himself doing that for the rest of his life and, if he had to, he didn't mind the idea of retiring behind a desk to sift through papers. As he mailed in the application, he couldn't help but think, maybe this is how you change the world.

Lorenzo woke in the pink recliner when he heard Julie shut the door. He didn't hear her call for him like she usually did, but he listened to her shuffle toward the hall closet where she took off her shoes and placed them in front of Lorenzo's old trombone case, then padded into the living room and headed for the couch.

"I'm here, you know," he said. The sun had set since he'd fallen asleep waiting for her, and she hadn't turned on the lights. He saw her startle as she slid onto the couch.

"God, Zoey. What are you doing in the dark?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"That's great." She had her arm over her forehead. He recognized this as her technique to start concentrating on relaxation.

"What time is it?" Lorenzo stretched his legs along the recliner. He yawned with a loud noise.

“Somewhere near 8. I swear those fuckers in distribution don’t know how to do anything by themselves. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I understand.”

“I know you do.” Her voice sounded muffled, like she had shoved her face into a pillow, but he still understood what she was saying. “But I’m that person. I need to apologize, even though we both know it’s not my fault.”

“Linda came in two hours late this morning.”

“It must be Wednesday.”

He laughed and popped the foot rest back into the recliner. “I have something I want to tell you.”

“Oh yeah?” She laughed, too. And for a moment, Lorenzo felt that everything was all right—that he would remember to not bring up children. “Nothing serious?”

“Something I should have told you awhile ago.”

She sat straight up, casting a darker shadow above the couch. “Don’t be mean, Zo.”

“It’s not bad. I promise. It’s just difficult.”

“Not helping here, sport.”

He stood up and reached for her hands. Julie let him haul her to her feet. She fell into him, as exhausted as she seemed when she walked in. “Should I turn on a light?” he asked.

“Not yet,” she said. “Tell me first.”

“We have to go upstairs.”

“Oh, it’s *that* type of thing.”

“In the attic.” She turned her shadowed face toward his.

“Have we even been up there before?”

“Do you ever not make a joke?” He told her to follow and she walked up the stairs to the second floor, her hand tugging slightly against his. She turned the lights on as they walked.

Lorenzo met Julie when he started volunteering at the Bangor women’s soccer league. Her team needed a ball guy. He was 25 and needed something to fill the time. Lorenzo noticed her during the team’s early evening practices—early evening so players with kids could still be home to cook a late dinner. Sitting on the sidelines as he had during college basketball season at Penn State, Lorenzo learned to appreciate the scratching between teams, the hair-pulling. He redefined the way he thought of a “competitive player.” He grew to understand that men played sports differently than women, but only because guys were more afraid of getting hurt. When Uncle Sergio ragged on him about it, he declared that the women’s team played no holds barred—balls to the wall.

This didn’t mean they always won, but the injuries were many. Once when the team played the Erie Lightning, Julie popped her shoulder out of the socket throwing the ball in play. She waved her good arm at the coach who patted the next girl’s shoulder to go in. Julie came out holding her bad arm so it wouldn’t “jiggle and stir up all that pain.” The coach pointed at Lorenzo and said, “You take care of it.”

“You done this before?” she asked.

“Yeah, in Bosnia, for a friend.”

“Shoulder?”

“Sure.”

She put Lorenzo’s hand on her bad shoulder and waited. “Hold it hard,” she said. He braced his arm against her shoulder. “And hold still. Stay there, like that.” She jerked her body against his arm, and he heard the loud snap as the bone slipped back into place.

Lorenzo would later admit at the rehearsal dinner toast for their wedding that this was when he knew she was the one. “Must hurt,” he said and watched her tie her cleats again, tighter this time.

“Like a bitch,” she said, switching shoes. “Happens all the time, too. Coach is sick of it. Doctors want to operate. You’re new, huh?” She looked up at him.

“Thanks a bunch.”

“It’s Lorenzo,” he said.

“Lorenzo from Bosnia.”

“From Pittsburgh. I just.”

“Got it. I’m back in.”

Now Julie volunteers as a soccer coach for 12-14 year olds instead of playing on her own team. She received a promotion at her real job at an engineering firm, so they help each other. Lorenzo teaches the girls on weekdays, about how to aim and kick and throw passes without dislocating their shoulders. Julie gets the games on the weekends, but he usually shows up there, too. There are already a few of the kids wrapping their ankles with aces, rolling the nylon knee braces up their skinny calves.

“I think it’s time for you to read something,” he tells her.

She’s waiting for him at the foot of the stairs to the attic. He thinks it’s funny that their attic is big enough to fix up and house a small family, like their family. He’s thought of calling up Marie, asking her to move in, but she’s been having a bit of trouble going up and down stairs recently.

He gives her the black journal, dusty and worn, that he brought down from the attic.

“What is it?” she asks when it’s clasped in her hands.

“I told you once. About my brother. The car accident?”

She nods and Lorenzo sees her understand. “It’s his?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve read it?”

“Once.” He steps off the last stair and puts his hands in his pockets. “Only once.”

“Why now?”

He shrugs. “I got a call from the FBI today.”

She slowly smiles and puts an arm around him, the journal now pressed flat between them.

“Nothing for sure.”

“Of course. But still.”

He puts both his arms around her and he feels her start to shake. He shifts one hand to her lower back and presses gently. He feels her tears seep through his shirt.

“Jules,” he whispers to her, remembering the way Aunt Marie welcomed him home to sell his family’s things. “It’s nothing. Really.”

He can’t see her face but she holds him tightly. He feels her heart and the book, pressed on his chest. Her mouth is next to his ear, breathing quickly.

“I’m sorry.”

He tightens his grip around her and asks why.

“I haven’t told you something.”

“I love you,” he says.

“I can’t have children.”

Lorenzo doesn’t move, but she does, still quietly shaking against him.

He has always wanted to prove to his family—Papu, Mama, Marie, Sergio—that he was worth moving to America for. Now, he is with his wife in their laughter and love and sadness, just like the old kinds he remembers from childhood. Just like the stuff his brother was made of.

Julie places her hand at the back of his head, filling the groove in his skull from the doctor the day he was born. He remembers Aunt Marie’s words and waits for himself to be great, he waits for the world to be changed on account of him.