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## These Romantic Dreams in Our Heads

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THESE ROMANTIC DREAMS IN OUR HEADS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2007

B.A. University of Central Florida, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
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## ABSTRACT

*These Romantic Dreams in Our Heads* is a collection of linked essays that study how key relationships in the narrator's life intersect. The essays attempt to show the complicated nature of relationships and how multiple lives are affected by one's decisions. Taking place over two years, the relationships in focus involve the narrator's parents, his girlfriend, and his dog. The essays deal with themes of manhood, parenthood, gender roles, religion, and memory. The characters deal with discovering their limitations and searching for a balance between responsibility for others and responsibility for their own lives.

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## FATHERHOOD\*

*\* Originally published in "Fatherhood," Redivider, Summer 2013.*

The other fathers look away as his girlfriend finishes the paperwork to kill their baby. They look away from him regardless of the length or intensity of his gaze. When the woman across the aisle catches him staring, she pulls her blue hoodie over her eyes. Studying her cheeks and cracked lips, he decides she's eighteen, maybe nineteen. She's still young enough to have a decent reason for being at the clinic.

Without looking up, his girlfriend hands him the clipboard. "Check it."

The form looks like every medical form. She might as well be getting a flu shot. For some reason, he thought it would be different, more important. The waiting room is well-lit, filled with magazines, and the wall near the entrance is painted bright green. It's nothing like the dim, seedy room from that video in ninth grade religion class. The video that made that one boy, the one everyone called a pussy and a faggot, run out of the classroom and vomit in the hall. He tries to recall what happened in that video, to piece together what will happen. But he only remembers the pieces being dropped into a garbage bag. A bag like the one his mother would yell at him to take out, but that he would leave for his father.

He hands her the clipboard. "Looks fine, but I don't know your info." He whispers, not able to disturb the stillness of the room. It reminds him of church minutes before Mass began. Everyone static and quiet.

Careful to avoid his hands, she snatches the clipboard from him and takes baby steps to the counter. The large words painted across the green wall draw his attention. “Diversity, SELF Determination, Privacy, Quality of Life.” SELF is painted three times thicker than the others.

\* \* \*

Years earlier, he sat on his grandmother’s white sofa and tried to stop her from reaching for more photo albums. Undeterred, she placed album after album of his family onto his lap. She rambled on about his family, pointing to them as if he had never met them.

“Yes, I remember,” he said. “I was there. That’s me on the right.”

When she exhausted her stash of albums, she gave him a letter hidden behind one of the photos. Then, she was silent.

“Well, you’re going to be a grandma again,” the letter read. “Ma, please don’t bitch to me. I know it will be hard. But this is what I want.” He was confused until he reached his mother’s signature at the bottom. She wrote about what she wanted. His father was absent from the letter. She used “I” not “we” or “us.” Did his father side with his mother or his grandmother?

“You wanted to kill me, Grandma?” He inched away from her.

She never told him why she showed him the letter. “Your mother had such beautiful penmanship.”

\* \* \*

When his girlfriend returns from the counter, she leans away from him, hiding her face behind the fake plant near the other side of her chair. Her Coach purse separates them—a barbwire fence neither dares to cross. She stares at her phone, perhaps checking Facebook or playing Scrabble. He waits with his thoughts, refusing to reach for the stack of magazines on the nearby table or for his phone in his pocket. The receptionist calls his girlfriend’s name. Her voice is soft, but he hears it clear and loud.

His girlfriend walks past him as if he’s not there, a ghost of the boyfriend who would send text messages of hearts he drew in her absence.

A boy next to the girl in the blue hoodie holds her hand tight. His black hoodie mirrors hers, covering his face except for his trimmed, brown beard. As she fidgets in her seat, their hands twist and turn in the air, fighting to stay together, to stay one. How did this boy discover he would be a father?

\* \* \*

One Saturday morning, she slapped him across the chest. “Guess what? I’m pregnant. You got me pregnant, you bastard.”

He wiped his eyes. His girlfriend stood by the bed, arms crossed.

“No, you’re not.” He rolled onto his stomach. “Come back to bed.”

She stomped her way to the bathroom as if he were the floor. She returned with the test and tossed it at him. “See?”

He stared at the tan stick. “I don’t know what this symbol means.”

“It means I’m fucking pregnant.” Her voice trembled. Her face reddened. For a second, he thought she would cry.

He assured her the test, the one she had kept under the sink for over a year since the last scare, was wrong. That they had gotten back together two weeks before and that her period was only a day or two late. There was nothing to worry about.

Driving to Walgreens for a second test, he played Springsteen’s “The River” from one of the many CDs he had with that song. *Then I got Mary pregnant and man that was all she wrote.* When she finished cursing him for ruining her life, she cursed him more for playing that song. He told her that he wanted to make her smile, to lighten her mood with the overly dismal song, to show her the silliness of their situation. But he knew he played it to prove his mother right. When he was a child, his mother would play the song as she drove. She would turn up the volume and say, “Listen to this. This is what happens when you have sex. The girl gets pregnant, and she’ll trap you. You’ll be stuck with her for the rest of your life. You won’t be able to do anything you want to do.” He would listen in silence and wonder if that’s what she did to trap his father.

\* \* \*

Sitting at the clinic, he imagines his father on a couch hunched over a veterinary textbook, or perhaps writing that novel he’s talked about for years. Papers are scattered throughout the living room, along with glass tanks filled with fish and turtles. His mother stands in front of a coffee table, arms crossed, holding the pregnancy test. She tosses it to his father,

who knows what it means before he catches it. His father closes his book and puts his pen down. He must know that he'll never pick them up again.

His mother leans against his father's shoulder, crying. He doesn't cry, of course. Leaning back, his father allows her to snuggle in the nook created by his armpit. Maybe he lies and tells her everything will be okay. Maybe he tells her that he'll always be there for her. As her crying turns to a whimper, he watches his books, his pets, and his life dissolve. Does he know that he'll only be left with overtime work, Little League games he's forced to coach, and an ever-growing silence and bitterness? It doesn't matter. He does not falter. He knows his responsibility.

\* \* \*

His girlfriend returns a few minutes after going to the back room. He knew she would chicken out. She stops in front of him, his face near her thigh. "C'mon."

He stands, facing the exit, but she heads toward the receptionist. He follows, thinking because he's the father they need to talk to him. When they reach the counter, the receptionist says, "Seven hundred and fifty."

He looks at her like she's speaking Russian.

His girlfriend elbows him. "Give her your card."

"Oh." He does his job as the father and hands the receptionist his credit card.

\* \* \*

When he was a child, his mother took him and his two siblings to the mall to meet his grandmother every Saturday. One time, his mother bought a Coach purse, and joked with the cashier that her husband was working overtime at that moment to pay for it. Maybe he exchanged looks with his sister, both embarrassed by their mother. Or maybe he made one G.I. Joe punch another off the counter, trying to block out his mother. These jokes were common.

That night, after his father wished him goodnight and perhaps told him the story of Beowulf, his favorite bedtime story, his parents argued. Lying in the top bunk, he put his book down when their voices grew louder. Peeking over the bed's wooden frame, he watched down the hallway into the sliver he saw of his parents' bedroom. He knew their fight was about more than just a purse. He thought his father had heard about his mother's joke, but how could his father have found out?

His parents paced, coming and going from his view. His mother was in her blue and white nightgown, and his father wore his white and black bus driver's uniform. With her finger in his chest, his mother forced his father back. A few minutes later, his father shoved his finger into his mother's chest. At one point, his mother lay on the bed. His father stood over her. His mother must have picked up the phone on the nightstand because the phone clicked. His father's palm hovered high in the air, ready to strike.

He climbed down from the bunk bed, careful not to wake his brother, and put one foot onto the cold hallway tile. His father's hand still hovered above his mother, who dared his father to hit her, saying something about how she would love to see him in a jail cell. She yelled at his father to be a big man, to hit her. He wanted to run between his parents. To stop his father and be

a hero like he read about in his comic books. But his father had been pushed, disrespected. He wanted his father to hit her.

His dog, a Boxer, whimpered under his bed. Blood stuck to the side of her head, half an inch from her eye. He's forgotten when his father hit the dog, but his father must have. The dog bled. Perhaps his dog tried to protect his mother. With his thumb, he wiped away the blood. His father stood over his mother for a few more minutes before walking off, defeated, to the couch. His mother threw his father's clothes into the hallway, and shouted for his father to get out. He caressed his dog's paw and fell asleep.

The following morning, his father's clothes were splayed down the hallway. His father made tea in the kitchen. He told his father, "I don't want you to leave."

His father faced him and bent down, his hands on his knees. "I'm not going anywhere."

It's the first memory he has of lying to his father.

\* \* \*

After he signs the credit card slip, his girlfriend is silent, turning toward the back room without a glance in his direction. He can reach out and stop her. Grabbing her arm, he can say that he loves her and he wants to be a father. He can tell her everything will be okay. He's in control. She's doing this for him. With a few loving words, he can become the man he was raised to be. He can, but he won't. He's trapped with a child and cursed without one. Returning to his seat in the waiting room, he takes out his notebook and writes, an act his father has been unable to do since having children.

\* \* \*

It took his father twenty-seven years to leave. After his father asked for a divorce, he drove home for a weekend to help his mother. As she hugged him, her eldest son, his father walked through the front door for the first time in two weeks. The three of them ate dinner together like they did when he was a child. He sat on his mother's right, while his father sat at the far end. Pictures of his family lined a cabinet behind him. His parents talked to him about his own life, but neither spoke to the other. After his mother ate, she walked to her bedroom in silence. He sat with his father for another hour, trying to answer his questions without posing any. That night, his parents slept in the same bed. He heard no arguing from across the short hall. He heard nothing at all.

The next day, he joined his father in the backyard. His Boxer puppy chased lizards, while his father cut bananas to feed the tortoises. He sat on the brick wall bordering the turtle pond his father spent much of his time building over the past couple of years. After the bananas were laid in the grass, his father took a seat next to his son. They watched the tortoises eat. The single sound for ten minutes was when he yelled at his puppy for stealing a piece of banana. When the animals finished, his father said, "I'm sure your mother told you about what's going on."

He stroked the dog's fur, saying nothing.

His father told him how he left and had been sleeping on a couch at his grandmother's condo. His father told him that he would not be coming home. This was the end. Neither person

looked at the other. He watched his dog, and his father watched the tortoises. “We married very young,” his father said. “Your mother was only nineteen. Seventeen when we met. And then...”

A man of few words, his father stopped. There was no need to finish because his son knew what came next. *And then the children came. Your sister, then you, and then your brother.* He knew that this is what his father would’ve said. That his father’s life was thrown away years ago.

“What will you do now?” he asked his father.

“Maybe I’ll write that novel. I’ve always wanted to do that. Maybe someday open a pet shop like I had when you were young.” His father stared at the sky and smiled.

\* \* \*

The door near the receptionist’s desk swings open, and his girlfriend returns. She’s been gone a few minutes, not enough time for the procedure. He clutches the armrests, about to stand. “I’m not done.” She reaches over him for her purse. “I just wanted my cell phone while I wait.”

“What have you been doing?”

“Ultrasound. We’re lucky. It’s fifteen weeks along.” She’ll never refer to the baby as a baby. “If we waited a little longer, they wouldn’t do it.”

Leaning over him, she ruffles through her purse. He leans forward, an inch from her ear. “Whore.”

She stops moving, even breathing.

“Fifteen weeks puts it at mid-September. We didn’t get back together until mid-October. That’s not my kid,” he says with a smile.

She’s frozen, her hand still in her purse. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Fuck you.”

“Lower your voice.”

“Fuck you, lower my fucking voice.” He knows this is not the way to treat a woman. His father taught him to be polite, to open doors. He doesn’t care, not anymore.

“Sssshhhhh. This is how they do it. You’re the father.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? I can clone my dog. I can see pictures of the surface of Mars, and you expect me to fucking believe that science is a month off with this? That they can’t get within a fucking month?”

“Lower your voice.” She looks at him for the first time since he opened the clinic’s front door. “You’re just trying to make this easier on yourself.”

“Yeah, I got time traveling sperm. Go fuck yourself.”

“Asshole.” She turns away, returning to the back room.

After she’s gone, he mumbles to himself. “Fuck you, fucking whore. Trying to fucking trap me with another man’s kid. Fuck you.” The girl in the blue hoodie watches him talk to himself. He drops his head to his notebook and writes, wondering if his girlfriend is right. What does he know? Maybe the timing is off. Maybe the doctors are wrong. Maybe he’s wrong. Does the identity of the father even matter? It’s a baby either way.

\* \* \*

When he was nine, his uncle went to prison. His mother's brother stole a car, or maybe robbed a house. He doesn't remember. His uncle's daughter came to live with them for a year. His mother tried to adopt the girl, but Social Services thought it best for the girl to live in a single child household. During this time, he has no memories of his father. He tries to remember, but he only sees the empty driveway behind his mother's van as they piled in for the ride to school, and going to bed without hearing about the adventures of Beowulf. His father left for work before anyone woke and came home after his family was asleep. He doesn't remember his parents fighting during that year. It doesn't matter if they fought. The girl stayed, and his father worked. That's all that matters.

\* \* \*

A few hours after his girlfriend returned to the back room, he receives a text message from her saying that she's done. He pulls his car up to the front entrance. She swings open the passenger door and slams it shut before he can move. After she sits down, he asks, "How do you feel?"

"Empty." She stares at the road in front of them.

That night, they ring in the New Year at their new apartment, the one with the spare room for the baby. As they walk their dogs by the lake at the back of the apartment complex, they lie to each other with talk of hope and happiness. Little Julie or Jackson is dead. At midnight, he kisses his Boxer on the forehead, while his girlfriend stares at the lake. He knows she's not

empty like she says. She's filled with bitterness and resentment. Over the next few months, the silence between them is broken only when she comes home in the darkness before sunrise after a night with another man. She holds a beer, maybe a glass of wine, which she drinks on the drive home. After waking him, she wanders back and forth between the bed and the bathroom arguing with him. She tells him that he was selfish in his decision, that he took motherhood from her. Some nights, he lies on the floor in the spare room and stares at the corner where they decided the crib would go. His drafting table stands in its place. Some nights, she joins him, telling him that he's the only important thing in her life, and they make love. Other nights, he sleeps alone. He decides he must live in this purgatory and wonders if his father felt the same way all of those years with his mother.

\* \* \*

Months later, his father comes to town with a woman and her seven-year-old daughter. His father has been dating this woman for at least two years, but he hasn't heard anything until two weeks before his father's visit. He joins them for dinner. The young girl smiles when he's introduced to her. Her cheeks rise, and her white teeth are announced to the world. He thinks of what he took from his child. As his father jokes with the girl, he wonders if she would've braided little Julie's hair. Or maybe she would've helped Jackson with his math homework.

His father asks how his girlfriend is doing.

"Great. Busy." It's one more lie to his father added to the ever-growing pile. "What have you been doing?"

“Same old thing. Working mostly. She has another kid, a son in high school. I go to his soccer games, but mostly work. Try to catch as much overtime as I can.”

“Have you written anything?”

His father laughs. “If I had the time.”

At the end of the night, he walks with his father’s new family to their car in the rain. When he and his father give that half handshake, half hug that he’s grown used to over the years, he wants to throw his father to the ground instead. He wants to kick him in the face, to squeeze his hands around the old man’s fat neck, and force tears from his father’s eyes. He imagines spit, dripping down his chin as he yells at his father. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You could have done anything you wanted. Nothing was in your way. No child or wife stopping you.”

Instead, he lets his father pull him close and hug him. His face hovers over his father’s shoulder, close enough to feel his father’s polo shirt on his cheek. But he refuses to allow himself to rest his head on his father.

They stand there for longer than usual.

## BORN TO BE CONSUMED

Dad calls the mice pinkies. As you name each one, he stops you because you will kill them. Your snakes need to eat. Still, you peek at the three of them, hairless and huddled together, at the bottom of the brown paper bag. Pink, semi-translucent skin stretches across midnight blue organs. Black eyes stare back through thin, closed eyelids. They look like fetuses.

When Mom was pregnant with you, Dad fed a snake a live mouse. Instead of accepting its fate, the mouse clawed out the snake's eye. Now, the mice must be killed.

You are given the choice between two procedures.

The paper bag can be placed in the freezer atop the ice cube trays. It's as simple as taking a pill. You can play hockey with the neighborhood boys as if nothing is happening. You can run. You can shoot the puck. You can score. The pinkies will freeze quietly out of sight.

But Dad says while it's easier for you, the mice die slow. They are allowed to hope. If a man needs to kill something, then he must do it himself, make it quick.

He gives you the chance to change your mind before he takes the mice into the other room. His eyes won't meet yours—you know he wants to spare you, that he'll do this for you. But you will be a coward if you turn back. Like Mom says, you're in the double digits now, you need to grow up. Girls want a man, not a child.

Dad leads the way down the white hall to the garage. Three aquariums, each with a snake and a log they can sleep under, sit on a long, wooden bookshelf against the wall near the toolboxes. The shelf is stuffed with old veterinary magazines. He preps and you flip through a decade-old issue of *Reptiles Magazine* like you're in a waiting room and need to distract yourself from what is about to happen.

As if his hand is a curette, Dad scoops a mouse from the bag—it reaches for something, anything it can use to pull itself free—and he whacks it on the edge of the shelf. The mouse is dropped into the first glass tank—eyes open, body limp, tongue out. The python stares at the corpse, disillusioned at the quickness, the casualness of the killing.

You're offered the bag and you lift a mouse by the tail. Does it understand what's happening—is it capable of thought—does it know to be afraid?

You raise it high and slam it down. Your fingers throb.

Blood is on the wood.

The pinky bellows, or moans, or cries. The wailing of the dying creature is like a child's cry, directionless and absolute. You want to cry. You want to go back in time and raise the mouse to adulthood—to set up a cage next to your bed where you can take care of it, even if it's by yourself, and give it everything a mouse could want.

Dad takes the pinky from you and smashes it again. Its skull is split and wet with blood. The room is quiet.

Once it hits the newspaper at the bottom of the cage, your red rat snake wraps around the mouse and its mouth opens three times larger than you imagined it could.

Then, the mouse's leg jerks.

Its tail beats against the scales.

For a moment, you imagine that the mouse rises, kills the snake, escapes. You want to interrupt the feeding and rescue it.

But there is no escape. The mouse is being fitted for the snake's jaws.

As the snake swallows the mouse, you tell yourself you will play with your snake more, love it more—you will take it out of the cage in the afternoons and let it wrap around your arms, your neck.

## BIG DAMN CACTUS

I.

I wanted the freedom to leave, so even though my parents' driveway was empty, I parked on the swale. My one-year-old brindle Boxer, Hankelford, looked out the passenger window and then back at me. "Ready?" I asked.

When I opened the door, he jumped over me and into the grass to piss. By the time I got my luggage from the trunk, Mom was on the porch. It had been a month since I'd last seen her, but she looked a decade older. Her chin and neck were loose, and she hadn't bothered with make-up. No longer dyed red, her short hair was a dark grey. It had been dyed for so long, I forgot red wasn't her natural color. She seemed naked with only her wedding ring and an emerald bracelet I bought her for Christmas years earlier. There were three jewelry boxes on her dresser overflowing. Arms crossed, she looked at Hankelford who sniffed her ankles. She shook as if she were cold. Although, even with a breeze off the Atlantic two miles away, it was still a 95° July day in South Florida.

"I expected you an hour ago." She held her jaw to stop it from quivering. I assumed she had been crying. My sister, Kerrie, later told me Mom took half a dozen pills daily for depression—something Mom hid from me. Shaking was a side effect.

As a child, I knew my parents hated their lives, so I wasn't surprised when Kerrie told me they were divorcing. I was only shocked my father chose their twenty-seventh wedding anniversary as the right time to leave. Now that I had my first professional job out of college, I thought it was my responsibility to help my family, even though I was unsure of what help meant.

Once I stepped onto the porch, Mom went inside. Five pomeranians (Princess, Sugar Bear, Precious, Sasha, and Sneeck) circled the tile by the front door and yapped. Excited for other dogs, Hankelford ran to greet them. They retreated to other rooms and nearby couches, which Hankelford was too small to jump onto.

I brought my bags in, and when Mom went to close the door behind me, I pretended not to notice she paused for one last look at the driveway. It was almost six—my father usually came home then. I placed my bags on the couch and Mom hugged me. “Thank you for coming. I’m glad you’re here.”

I wanted to squirm away, but I rubbed her back instead. “Me too.”

She rubbed my arms. “Remember when you were so tiny? Where does the time go?”

To avoid answering, I caught Hankelford running after the other dogs and picked him up. “Those dogs don’t want to play? They’re racist against Hankelfords.”

“I got you something.” She walked over to her Coach purse at the dining room table and returned with a McDonald’s Happy Meal toy, a black dragon. “I know you like that dinosaur stuff.”

“Thanks.” I held it against Hankelford’s nose for inspection, and then placed it into one of my bags. The gift surprised me. When I was eight, I told her I wanted to be an archeologist. “You can’t,” she had said. “Archeologists don’t make much money. You’ll have to take care of your family. And I can tell you that your wife won’t be happy at home alone, taking care of the kids, while you’re out traveling the world. No, you’ll be a teacher or a doctor. Something like that.”

Mom petted Hankelford. “How’s Mara?”

“Good. Busy.” I stared at my dog. It wasn’t the weekend to say I had been looking at engagement rings.

The pomeranians barked and the front door opened—my father entered, wearing his Broward County Transit white polo and black dress pants. He held out his hand so I shook it. “How was the drive?”

How did he know when I’d be home? Did he wait down the street or circle the neighborhood until I drove up? Or was it just a coincidence he arrived so soon after me?

A door slammed. Mom was gone. She had run to her bedroom.

“Been to the gym?” My father, a man whose chest and arms were so thick with muscle he had difficulty reaching across to buckle a seatbelt, patted my stomach.

“No.” I wondered why he spoke to me as if we were friends. We hadn’t been close since I quit his wrestling team in the eleventh grade. I had argued with Mom about quitting—she said I wouldn’t get into college without it. My father had emerged from the hall and punched me in the face. I fell against the wall. He stood over me and said, “Sometimes you have to do what you don’t want to do. That’s life. Get used to it.”

I quit.

“Get to the gym. You don’t want to end up like me or my brothers.” He moved to the kitchen for his usual English tea. “You don’t gain a hundred pounds in a year. You gain ten a year for ten years.”

When his tea was ready, he took it into the backyard along with sliced bananas and strawberries for his tortoises. Hankelford and I played tug-of-war in the living room where I had a clear line of sight to both the back door and my parents’ bedroom. Mom returned—I expected

her to leave the house, but she went to the stove and cooked dinner. Maybe Kerrie overreacted, I thought—My parents fought and Mom was still mad, but they would be okay.

At dinner, my parents sat at the ends of the rectangular table. Meant for six, the table seemed bare with only three. Timmy was backpacking across Europe. Did he know what was happening? He left his phone behind and only checked email once a week. It was better that he was away. He was our father's favorite and he spoke without thinking about people's emotions. Mom would've been angry with him the whole weekend. Kerrie was eating with a friend—Mom told her to, something I didn't know until later.

As children, Timmy sat to our father's right, and Kerrie and I fought over the seat to his left. Most nights, our father came home as dinner was served—we were excited to see him. Mom would finish setting the table and say, "What am I? Chopped liver?"

I sat to Mom's right without thinking about it, and we ate pork chops. The only food Mom cooked that I liked was lasagna and London broil. I've never eaten an entire pork chop. Usually, I'd pick at the side dishes until I sat there long enough to leave. That night, it felt wrong to leave Mom alone with my father. Both spoke to me but not to each other. I wanted them hold to one another—to talk sweet like they must have done when they first met. I've always needed it, to understand why they were together. The reason needed to be something other than having children.

I remember only one time my parents touching in a way that anyone who saw would know they loved one another. I was five. Mom cooked French toast. I sat at the kitchen table and held the front legs of my Pound Puppy. My father hugged Mom from behind and kissed her

cheek. I giggled. “Stop it.” Mom pushed him off and wiped her cheek on her shoulder. “I’m cooking.”

I tore small pieces of my pork chop and forced them down. My father posed questions about Hankelford. When dog questions were exhausted, he asked about my job.

I gave the shortest answers I knew. If a nod would suffice, I nodded.

Mom stayed quiet. The moment she finished eating, she went to her bedroom, leaving her plate on the table.

My father finished a second pork chop and brought the dishes to the sink. I stood and turned toward my bedroom. He said, “Wanna watch a movie?”

I didn’t, but I said, “Sure.” We only spoke when Mom forced us. If I called, Mom made us say our hellos and how are you doings before I hung up. If Mom wasn’t there for us to hide behind, would we still talk?

Hankelford joined me on the couch, while my father took the loveseat. We watched *Black Hawk Down*, even though both of us had seen it. My father wondered out loud about how real it was. I said even though it’s based on a real story I’m sure they changed things. Halfway through, he fell asleep.

When I was younger, this was routine. He left for work at four in the morning and returned at six in the evening. Once the lights dimmed, he was out. Most nights together were spent watching movies or talking comic books. The only father-son day we had without Timmy was when I was five and he took me to see *Batman*. My father left an empty seat between us. I figured he did it because he was a big guy and needed room. Maybe he wanted to pretend he was alone. Between driving a bus sixty hours a week, coaching wrestling, a wife, and three kids, my

father had little alone time. When *Batman* finished, we searched for turtles by the canal behind the theater. Wherever we went—the credit union, the barber, the comic shop—we searched for turtles if there was a canal nearby. No matter how many dozen he had at home, it was never enough. If he was home, he'd spend his time napping or taking care of the turtles.

When the credits to *Black Hawk Down* rolled, my father woke. "I fell asleep, didn't I?" He wiped his eyes and sat up. "Sorry. Been working a lot of overtime."

He patted my knee and headed to bed. Later, when I went to bed, I expected to find him in the bottom bunk. Some days, after school, I found him there sprawled with his legs hanging off as if he just collapsed. I peeked through the crack in the doorway to my parents' room. He slept on top of the covers next to Mom, who had her back to him and the covers pulled tight.

The next morning, I woke with a text message from Mom. She had gone to the mall with Kerrie. Hankelford and I went out back where my father was feeding lettuce and bananas to the tortoises. Neither of us spoke. As Hankelford sniffed everything he could find, I sat on the brick wall of one of the turtle ponds. My father spent several years building two ponds on opposite sides of the backyard—one for the babies and the other for the adults. The ponds were the only things not in decay. Flowers Mom had planted along the fence were picked clean by tortoises and pomeranians. The grass, where it grew, was brown. White patio furniture was stained from years of being forgotten in the rain.

My father joined me, and we watched Hankelford steal food from the tortoises and splash through the ponds. Eventually, he said, "I'm sure your mother told you what's going on."

I reached for Hankelford running past.

“It’s over. I can’t do it anymore. I can’t keep working and coming home to someone spending every dime.” There was anger in his voice. Usually, Mom was the angry one. My father, while he had his moments, spent his time feeding turtles and drinking tea. “I made like 90,000 last year. That’s 30,000 in overtime. And what do I have to show for it?” He shook his head. “More overtime. I’ll never retire.”

My father never spoke to me about money. In that moment, I felt he respected me. As a child, I was told not to worry about it.

Taxpayers had complained about the amount the Sheriff’s Office paid in overtime. In an attempt to push blame, the Sheriff’s Office pointed a finger at the Transit department. The newspaper released the pay for Transit employees. My father, a supervisor, was number two behind a bus driver pulling in a hundred grand. At work, drivers joked with my father about how rich he was, and his wallet was empty. His anger was understandable. Mom worked in billing for the county’s water department and pulled in about 30,000. Saturday was her shopping day. Sundays too, as well as some weekday evenings. Long ago, her walk-in closet failed to hold all her clothes. Blouses and pants were draped over her treadmill, the computer desk, and anything else clothes could be draped over. Most clothes would go months unworn, if they were ever worn. My parents declared bankruptcy twice that I know about, although Kerrie has hinted at more.

I nodded. What could I have said? I’m sorry? One week the digital time clock at work failed to enter my father’s hours because he had worked 105 and the programmers never planned on someone working into the three digits in one week. My father was always broke. That’s why he searched for turtles on the shores of canals. But it wasn’t just Mom’s shopping. Kerrie,

Timmy, and I went to private school from sixth to twelfth grade. Disney trips were five or six times a year. My father had comic books waiting for when he picked me up from school. If he hadn't had kids, he'd have been able to retire. The skin near his eyes was wrinkled and his black hair thinning. An apology will never seem enough.

"It's my fault too," he said. "I should've tried to control her spending." He patted my knee. "I can't blame only her."

He was right—more could've been done. Afraid on confrontation, he let Mom spend and spend.

He inspected Hankelford for a moment, and then he said, "We married young. Your mother was only nineteen—seventeen when we met. And then—" He paused as if he was working out a better way to say it.

There wasn't a better way. *Then, we had children.* Mom said many times, casually, that if she could do it all again, she wouldn't have kids. My father has never admitted he felt that way, but he must have. I was young, not blind. My parents threw clothes down the hall and screamed at one another—I wished they would divorce, that they wouldn't stay together for their children. When Mom got pregnant, my father quit his veterinary studies. A few years later, he quit his job as a manager of Pet Supermarket to drive a bus because it offered better medical coverage. He spent afternoons coaching wrestling for a discount at a private school for his kids. Once Timmy graduated from college, when his children no longer needed his support, my father left. His own father left when he was young. He didn't want to do the same.

To change the subject to something more positive, I said, "What're you going to do now?"

He looked into the sky. “Maybe write that novel I’ve spoken about. Open a pet shop like I had when you were young. Maybe travel.”

“Well, if you need writing advice, let me know.”

We stood, and when we shook hands, he hugged me. I was excited for him. He spoke often about places he wanted to go, but something always got in the way. When I was in elementary school, we planned on going camping. I wanted to learn the outdoors and mentioned wanting to see a giant cactus. He promised, but he was always afraid overtime would dry up so he took as much as he could. For twenty years, he’s spoken about how a new policy will take effect and overtime will be cut. It has never been cut.

“You’re grown up. You got a job, a dog, a life. You don’t need us.”

When I headed back to Orlando Sunday evening, Kerrie texted me that our father left ten minutes after me. Quietly, he walked out the front door. I’ll never ask him why he came home. If I ask, I’ll know the answer. I want to believe he came home for me, that he took one last shot to fix me and him.

A few minutes after we went inside, my father got a call about overtime. Mom and Kerrie returned an hour after he left. Mom dropped a few shopping bags on the coffee table and went to her bedroom. I sat in the loveseat and shook my head. My father was leaving because of Mom’s spending, and what did she do? Go shopping.

Kerrie sat at the dining room table and faced me. Like Timmy, she took after our father. In high school, she had run cross-country and was in good shape. Something happened in college though. She went away to school for a year, and then returned home for a boy, if I remember

correctly. But they broke up. She no longer had a bunch of friends, especially male ones, and had put on a lot of weight.

“Mom nearly lost it at the mall.” She leaned forward. “We had to leave. She just started crying. It was so embarrassing.”

I shrugged and petted Hankelford. Of course Mom cried, her husband was leaving her.

“Dad told me they’re divorcing,” I said. “But I don’t understand why he’s here.”

“I didn’t know he was here.” She shook her head. The innocence in her voice made her seem younger than me, even though she was ten and a half months older. “Mom didn’t tell me.” She sounded hurt. For once, Mom kept something from her.

Mom returned and looked around lost. “Your father left?”

“At work,” I said.

“He’s leaving us.” She paced and wiped her mouth. “Did he tell you that? He’s abandoning us.”

Kerrie told Mom to get her bills together, that we’d look over them and help sort them out. Mom brought a stack of papers from the bedroom and handed them to Kerrie. Some were crumpled and torn, others just crushed into a ball. Flipping through the mess, Kerrie said, “Is this everything?”

“Everything I have.” Anyone who saw the way Mom looked away would know she was lying. She petted Sugar Bear and Kerrie told her to pay attention. Mom said, “I don’t know. Most of them.” She looked around as if she was searching for a way out. “Half. At least half.”

“We need *all* of them.”

“I don’t want to do this.” Mom wiped away tears, walked to her bedroom, and then back again. “I don’t want to do this.”

Annoyed, I leaned back. For all my father’s faults, at least he took responsibility. Kerrie and Mom fought, with Mom saying things like, “I’m your mother,” and Kerrie saying, “Then act like it.” I tried to stay quiet, to be supportive, to be a good son, but as they argued, I said clear and loud, “Sometimes you have to do what you don’t want to do.”

Everyone grew quiet and stared at different sides of the room.

“Why’s he doing this? I never thought he would leave.” She stood and paced. “I was a different person before you kids. You don’t know who I really am. I was a different person.”

I pitied her.

“I did it all for you. He’s mad at me for the spending, but I tried to give you a better life.”

What’s a better life? Between Kerrie, Timmy, and me, we have a total of eight college degrees—nine once Timmy finishes his PhD in Nuclear Engineering. We have visited most of the fifty states, as well as most of Europe. None of us have had trouble with the law. Yet, we have never married or been engaged. We have no children. Our relationships end on bad terms. We can hold a job, pay bills, but we can’t hold onto a relationship. Alone and successful in a career or living in the suburbs with three kids and borrowing money from one another to pay the mortgage, what’s a better life? When people say it’s possible to have both a family and a career, I wonder why I can’t see it. I think that’s what my parents taught me—it’s one or the other.

“He’s punishing me for what I’ve had to do for you.”

I stared at Mom. My face and neck burned. I didn't need to hear how their problems were our fault. "You're going to lose everything." I said it slow and loud. I let every syllable hang on my tongue. I took such joy in her sad eyes as she stared back.

Then, she rose and locked herself in her bedroom for the night and the next morning. When she left, I didn't regret my words. Kerrie and I sat and joked at Mom's expense. Regret will come Monday, when Kerrie calls to say Mom swallowed three bottles of pills. It will come when I'm trapped in rush hour three hours away. It will come when my father tells us not to visit Mom in the hospital, that if we go, she will know she can always swallow pills to get our attention. It will come when Mom proves him wrong and does it again. And again.

And again.

It will come.

II.

When I returned with the U-Haul, my parents' house was still and quiet. Mom had taken the pomeranians to her new apartment. There was an empty fish tank on a dark mahogany stand near the front door. The turtle ponds were cleaned out. There were no tortoises eating flowers in the yard. It was a new year and I hoped things would be better.

After our father moved out, Kerrie's fights with Mom were harsher and more prolonged. Mom told me all she did was tell Kerrie to get a job. Usually though, when a person is told to get a job, that person looks for one in the city where he or she lives, not move from Florida to Arizona that week. Mom said Kerrie abandoned her. Kerrie needed to leave. It was the best thing for her. For the first time in years, she was living.

Timmy flew to Cornell, even though he still had a week before his second semester in grad school began. He said he needed the extra time. “I’m studying nuclear engineering, after all. It’s hard work.” But Kerrie told me one of his classes was wine tasting. I thought of telling Mom, but I’d have come home either way.

A Dunkin’ Donuts box filled with Boston crèmes, my favorite, sat on the dining room table. “Help yourself” with a smiley face was written on a napkin. Even in elementary school, notes lacked smiley faces. Mom had been going overboard showing appreciation. It was no longer appreciation. It was a method to guilt me for not calling more often, for not visiting on weekends. I even felt guilty for thinking Mom got donuts to make me feel guilty.

Mom returned as I took a second donut. She lifted the box’s lid and said, “Another one?” Then, she patted my stomach. “Mara doesn’t wanna date a fatty.”

I pretended to laugh. Mara texted me three times the night before, and I knew I should text her back. She was upset about not getting a ring at Christmas. She thought she would—I did too. I couldn’t concentrate on building a marriage during my parents’ divorce.

Later, three of Mom’s coworkers helped us move. One of them, a man at the end of middle age with a gut and not enough hair, helped me lift a 60-inch TV my father had won at a company picnic two years before. He was interested in Mom. It wasn’t what he said, which was flattering, but how he watched her pass. When we finished, she attempted to pay him, but he said, “Felicia, Felicia, no, I’m a friend,” and waved it off. He had pasty skin, sweated too much, and breathed too heavily when hoisting light boxes. When she walked by, though, he watched, instead of cutting bananas for tortoises. I hoped she wanted him too, that he would keep her company when I returned to Orlando.

Everyone left, and Mom and I returned to the house. Not much had changed. Mom's bedroom lacked a bed and a dresser, but the computer desk and treadmill were still there. The sofa was in the living room along with the coffee table. Kitchen cabinets were half filled. Kerrie's white bed and matching bookshelf and dresser were still waiting for her. Sheets were spread over the mattresses on the bunk bed Timmy and I shared.

Weeks earlier, I told Mom to have a yard sale or to sell things on Craigslist. "What if they rob me or worse?" she said. "I'm a single woman now. Maybe if you came home, but I can't do it alone. It's not safe."

The bank took the house. My parents' divorce was finalized the first week of January, two weeks before Mom's move. Even with alimony, the mortgage was too much for Mom. At Christmas, Kerrie, Timmy, and I convinced her to abandon the house. I figured a change of scenery would pull Mom out of her depression. We moved there a year before I left for college—I had no stake in it.

Mom grabbed the last few things and said, "Take whatever you want. Might as well. Bank's just gonna dump it all." Then, she left.

My Civic was small, but it felt wrong to leave it all. I started in my bedroom. Except for holidays and the occasional weekend, the room had gone untouched for four years. Star Wars novels filled my bookshelf, along with old board games. If I left it behind when I moved to Orlando, it could be left behind now. The TV and PlayStation could've been sold, but I didn't want to take up trunk space just to make money. Ripped comics were packed inside a drawer built into the bunk bed. My father and I used to go to the shop most Wednesdays. He was a

reader and wanted his children to be readers. I took a shoebox from the closet and filled it with the comics.

Next, I went to my parents' room. There was a gap between clothes hanging in my father's closet, as if he'd grabbed whatever was upfront and ran off. Wrestling T-shirts worn weekly still hung there. I took as many as I could carry. Encyclopedias, World Books for each letter and for each year from 1971 to 1995, were stacked on the floor. They've been in my closet since, although I've never read a page.

The hallway closet used to have a dozen photo albums packed in, but now the shelves were empty. Later, Mom told me she threw them out, the photos were lies and needed to be destroyed. Next summer, when I visited Kerrie in Arizona, she said she took a few with her. I found a few random photos in kitchen drawers—photos of wrestling, of me and my siblings when we were young, of my father's fiftieth birthday party. It was a surprise Mom spent six months planning. Family had flown in from New York. It was one of the few times the whole family was together.

With my car full, I drove to Mom's place. A guard was at the gate. I walked into her apartment, and she told me to sit on her new, leather couch. I did and she smiled. "How's it feel?"

I patted the armrest. "It's a couch."

"Shut up." She laughed. "What do you think of the place?"

It was small. That's what I thought. The apartment could've fit in the garage of the house I rented in Orlando. I wanted to tell her to come to back with me. I had a spare bedroom I used as an office. When I used to dream of my parents' divorcing, I thought there would be no

difference. Two Christmases, two weekly phone calls, but my parents would lead the same lives, just apart.

I told myself I didn't speak up because she had a job, friends. But I wanted to be far away, like Kerrie and Timmy. I wanted my relationship with her to be over the phone and on holidays. I wanted a life doing something other than taking care of someone else.

After Mom got settled, we took her three pomeranians (Princess, Precious, and Sneech) for a walk in the courtyard. Food and vet visits for five were too expensive. Most apartments had a max of two. Mom tried to get away with a third. Two months later, I took Princess, but Hankelford hated her so Mom took her back. She worried for a little while, but managed. Sugar Bear and Sasha were given away. Sugar, as Mom called him, was first. He spent eight years with us. Sometimes at dinner, Mom stared at the remaining dogs and said, "I wonder how Sugar is doing." I pretended not to hear.

I went with Mom to give Sasha away to a woman she met through her vet. A few days before Christmas, we drove to a shopping center off Dixie and Commercial. There was a barber with one of those red and white poles and a Publix with a Santa ringing a bell. Mom kissed Sasha on the forehead and got out of the car. "You coming?" she asked. I shook my head. I know now—Who am I lying to?—I knew then she needed me at her side. But I wanted her to suffer. Who gets five dogs on a whim? She'd go out on a Sunday afternoon shopping trip, and instead of a pair of jeans and a blouse, she'd return with a pomeranian.

When she returned, she said, "I hope you never have to do what I just did. You're lucky. Hankelford is young. You have another ten years with him." I looked out the passenger window. I thought she was weak, that she wanted to buy new clothes instead of medicine and food for her

dogs, these things she was supposed to care for. I was disgusted when she spoke of giving away the others. “All these people’s dogs are dying, why can’t mine?” But I was unaware of Hankelford’s brain tumor, unaware he had only one more year. It was still three months before his first seizure. Years after the vet waited on me to sign the paper to put him down, I know Mom was strong. Or at least stronger than I thought at the time. Hankelford was in the middle of a seizure and I barely signed. Sasha was healthy, happy. When Mom was at her most depressed, Sasha would lie next to her. And Mom handed her to a stranger. She drove home knowing she could go to Sasha, that she could take her home. Perhaps Mom knew they would be treated better elsewhere. Mom didn’t shop much after the divorce either. By giving away the two, Mom had money to take care of the other three.

Years after Hankelford, when I look back on when Mom gave Sasha away, I can see why she bought each pomeranian. After my twelve-year-old Boxer, Jade, died, Mom got Princess. Kerrie went to college and Mom bought Sugar Bear. Precious came when I left for school in Orlando. Sasha was bought when Timmy left for Cornell. And Sneech joined the family in the final years of Mom’s marriage. I can see Mom’s heartbreak when those she built her life around left her. When I returned to college for my second degree, my English degree, Mom said, “I’m so happy you found your passion. I never did.” Mom said many times, “I’m still trying to figure out what I want to be when I grow up.” By twenty-three, Mom was married with three kids. I see people with kids complete school, even graduate school, even single parents, but Mom never did. She went to a community college for a short time when I was young, but taking care of three kids and working two jobs required most of her time. My father drove a bus for Broward County, another for the City of Margate, coached wrestling, washed cars, and worked for the city’s park

department. There was no time for passions. Maybe she could've finished. Maybe she quit because she's a quitter. Maybe there's a reason hidden from me. But she was there for all of our sporting events, our parent-teacher nights, our doctor's visits.

And then we left.

When the dogs finished in the courtyard, I said, "I'm going to visit Mara." Her parents lived fifteen minutes north.

I went to leave and Mom said, "It would be awful not to have a mother. To not be able to call her. I'll be a wreck when my mom goes. You're lucky. You don't know how lucky you are to have a mother."

Mara's mother had been fighting cancer for years and recently stopped chemotherapy. It was only a matter of time. I drove to my aunt and uncle's house and wondered if Mom knew I'd lied. My girlfriend was in Orlando. I had no idea how Mom would've found out. I wanted to tell her I was going to see my father, but she had been cursing his name since he left. She would ramble on over breakfast that he was going to Hell, how he'd be ass-raped by demons. Whenever one of us spoke to him, she would start a fight or just stop talking to us for a week or two. Lying was easier.

It took a few knocks for my father to answer. "You know you can just come in. I trust you won't murder me or rob the place."

I followed him to the patio where he kept his makeshift turtle pond. Half a dozen quarter-sized spotted turtles swam in a plastic box filled with water and a couple of flat rocks. My father carried it inside to protect the turtles from raccoons at night and asked about Hankelford.

I answered his questions as we headed to his bedroom—the guest room across the hall from my aunt and uncle’s room. Pond water spilt on the tile when he placed the plastic box on a chest near the bed. He got down on his hands and knees and cleaned it with a towel. “Don’t let your aunt know I’m doing this. She’d kill me if she knew I was using one of her towels like this.”

“I won’t.” I doubt he wanted an answer. The image of a man in his mid-fifties on his knees being afraid of his sister-in-law was sad, affecting. “Oh, I got some of your stuff from the house. It’s in my trunk. Pictures. Books. Nothing great.”

“Thanks, Sean.” He smiled, and when he patted my arm, he paused for a moment before taking his hand away. “Can you hang onto it for a little while? Till I get outta here and into my own place? I’ve been saving and I’d like to get a place in a few months.”

“As long as you need.” His stuff will stay in boxes on my closet floor. He will never get his own place.

He wiped the towel across his forehead and asked if I was hungry.

I nodded. I wasn’t, but we were running out of things to say and food needed to be introduced. If not, we would sit in the living room watching a movie and not speak.

He headed to the shower to get cleaned up, and I studied his bedroom. Fantasy novels were piled in the corner next to reptile magazines. My aunt’s things filled most of the closet so my father’s clothes were either hung on a rack at the foot of the bed or draped over cardboard boxes against the wall.

At least Mom had her own place. My father tried to save, but things would come up. His car broke down. My aunt’s washer broke. At Christmas, I stuck a hundred dollar bill in a fantasy

anthology for him. It seemed awkward to hand him the money directly. I thought of giving more, but I knew he wouldn't accept it. A couple of weeks later, he called me, "I think you left some money in the book you gave me. Do you want me to send it to you?"

I told him it was meant for him. "That's why it's a perfect hundred-dollar bill."

Once, I asked my father why he couldn't quit his job, or at least stop working doubles or triples, and maybe buy a pet shop. I offered my own funds to help. He said he was too close to his pension, that it's best to play it safe.

My parents seemed worse after the divorce. Money still controlled their lives. Both lost weight, but they seemed older, weaker. They aged half their life in the six months after my father left. I told them they were still young enough, that they could start over, that there's always time to start again, but they didn't listen. They continued living as they always had.

At dinner, I reached for the check, but my father beat me to it. "Use your money to get Hankelford another rope or something."

By the time, I got back to Mom's, she was asleep with the TV on. That had been routine, not just since the divorce, but for the ten years before. Mom would wake, go to work, and then come home and lie in bed with the TV on until she fell asleep. She only came out for dinner and laundry. I'd come home and Mom would ask about my day from bed. I'd stay in the hall, too uncomfortable to step closer, and say, "It was good."

The next morning, Mom hugged me tight before I left. An hour into my drive to Orlando, I noticed a text message from her. "You think your mother is stupid. That I wouldn't know where you went last night. He abandoned us. And you go to him, instead of spending time with

your loving mother. You don't want me around? Fine. You think I didn't notice you looking for the pills when we moved. Well, I got news for you, mister. I got more."

I pulled onto the shoulder of I-95 and texted back.

No answer.

I called.

No answer.

Ten minutes later, Kerrie called me. Mom sent her a message too. Kerrie had called 911, and Mom was on her way to the hospital in an ambulance.

"I'll turn around," I said.

"You know Mom. She's just doing this for attention. Dad said she has to be left alone."

My father drove an ambulance in college. Before that, he was a medical officer in the Navy. Perhaps that's why we followed him so blindly. But I also wanted to get back to my life. So I drove on. I went to work, hung out with friends, took my girlfriend out on dates, made my one call a week to Mom, and lived my life.

### III.

After our plane landed, my father and I took the shuttle to Enterprise Rent-A-Car. On the drive out of San Diego International and past the bay, I checked my phone. Mom had texted me. "How's work?"

It was just after five Eastern time. "Just headed home."

I had been lying more and more. If I spoke to my father on Sunday, but didn't call Mom until Monday, she started a fight. If Timmy talked to him, she would still fight with me. She had

become so difficult to deal with that I had begun doing the bare minimum to keep her in my life. Before the divorce, I never saw how much Mom depended on a man. Now she wasn't capable of doing anything other than going to work and coming home. I lost count of her suicide attempts. None of us took them seriously anymore. It was just something she did. She swallowed whatever pills her psychiatrist gave her, even though she knew the worst they would do is give her a stomach ache. It had been a year since my father left, she needed to move on, get her life together.

We had flown out for the annual San Diego Comic Con, the largest comic book convention in the U.S. I had planned on going with two friends. When I told my father, he said, "I always wanted to go to San Diego. Their zoo is supposed to be one of the best." My friends dropped out, so I invited him. He said, "You know, I really did want to travel more." When I was young, I'd follow behind him as he tended to the tortoises in the backyard and talk about the X-Men. He'd say how much better Conan and Thor were. We devised scenarios over who would win if they battled one another. Comic Con seemed fitting for our first vacation just the two of us.

After we got our rental car, my father said, "I was hoping to see Kerrie. She's like six hours away, but still closer than Florida. Do you mind if I drop you tomorrow, wherever you want to go, and then I'll head to Kerrie and return the day after? I'll miss the first day of that comic thing, but I'll be back for the others."

"Why don't I go with you?" We arrived two days before the convention so I wouldn't miss much. It wasn't even my first time at Comic Con. My father's black hair was duller—his face more wrinkled. When I visited him in May, we went to the gym, and I lifted more than he

did. He took more breaks and needed the whole day to recover. I wanted to see Kerrie too. After my parents' divorce, family seemed more important.

First thing in the morning, we left with a trunk full of bottled water and snacks. My father drove. Yuma, Arizona was halfway—we planned on stopping there for lunch and to switch spots. California was all mountains. We joked about what fantasy movie the terrain reminded us of: *Krull*, *Willow*, *Conan the Barbarian*. We recounted favorite scenes and ideas for what could've made the films better.

A few miles across the Arizona border, close to Mexico, we came to a checkpoint. State troopers stopped cars, searching for illegal immigrants. A German shepherd, soaked, stood in a puddle near a few officers. The car's dash read 117°. My father rolled down the window, and a trooper asked, "Are you a U.S. citizen?"

"Si, señor." My father and I laughed.

Stoic, the trooper waved us by. My father repeated his joke for the next mile.

After the joke died, he said, "I really want to see a cactus. You know, one of those huge ones like in a cartoon. As big as both of us put together. Just a big damn cactus."

I asked if he saw the dog. He said he did, and then asked about Hankelford.

Since April, Hankelford had been having seizures. Tests returned nothing, so the vet diagnosed him as an epileptic and prescribed Phenobarbital. The pills weren't working.

"I think your vet doesn't know what he's doing." He shrugged. "Epilepsy makes no sense." He straightened his hand and tapped it against the wheel as if cutting vegetables. "Why would he start now? In my opinion, it's a tumor, and now it's grown enough to push against whatever part of the brain controls seizures."

I knew my father was right, even then, even before the vet changed his diagnosis. My father knew everything there was to know about animals. It saddens me to think that he wanted to be a vet and never became one. When I was young, and Mom and Kerrie would browse clothing racks, my father would test me and Timmy with riddles about which animal we would rather face. A lion or a tiger? A wolf or an anaconda? He would explain the right choice, taking into consideration time of day, location, and how long it had been since the animal's last meal. When I'd come home from school, the smell of death surrounded our house. My father would be in the backyard dissecting our pets. Snake skins, turtle shells, and iguanas hung from the chain-link fence. Flies buzzed. My father would show me the insides of a black hognose snake and explain how he knew it had died because it ate a poisonous frog.

Yuma was deserted. Our only knowledge of the town was from the film *3:10 to Yuma*, and we had assumed it would be larger. There were only a few construction companies, fast food restaurants, and gas stations. We ate and switched spots, wasting no time.

Two hours later, we came to a rest stop. *OK to Drink* was spray painted under the faucet of the water fountain. Unsure of whether to trust the sign, we drank from the water in the trunk.

My father took a gulp from the plastic bottle and said, "So I heard you broke up with your girlfriend. What's her name?"

"Mara."

"Things not going well."

I shrugged. "Guess not."

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want."

I wanted to, but I couldn't. We never spoke about women. I watched his relationships, and he watched mine. The morning we left for California, my father walked far away, to a point he thought I couldn't hear, and told a woman over the phone that he loved her. At first, I thought of Mom, then Kerrie. But I had never heard him tell Mom and it was too early in the morning for Kerrie. I pretended not to hear.

Even though our relationship was stronger than before the divorce, I wouldn't call it strong. We ignored the past—it was the only way. I'll never forget times like when I was seven and my father, the pack leader for my Cub Scout group—something Mom signed him up for while he was at work—coming in from the backyard and telling me to watch the snacks, a bag of powdered donuts, for our meeting before jumping into the shower. I, in my blue Scout uniform and yellow neckerchief, played *Super Mario World* in the living room. When my father returned, he found my Boxer, Jade, licking the donuts on the floor. He smacked my dog in the face, and then lifted me by the throat and slammed me against the wall. The thermostat cut into my back, just to the right of my spine. The donuts cost three or four dollars. "It was your job," he said.

I'll never forget years later, the first Christmas after he left Mom, playing Texas Hold 'em with him, my uncle, Timmy, and Mara. He said, "The one time I ever let stress from work get to me is when Sean was little. Jade got into the food he was supposed to watch. I just lost it. Picked Sean up by the neck." He laughed. He laughed and threw a few more quarters into the pot. "Remember?"

I looked at my cards, a losing hand, and matched his bet. "No."

Apologies mean nothing. I can't keep waiting for one. What happened can never be changed. We either forget it and move on or let the past ruin us.

When we turned to leave the rest area, my father spotted a cactus. We headed toward it, past a sign that read *Pet Play Area* and another that read *Poisonous snakes and insects in the area*. We laughed at the proximity of the signs, but continued on.

Up close, the cactus was smaller than it looked against the horizon. It wasn't quite the size of both of us, but it was tall and thick. My father said, "I guess it'll do."

Tired of looking, I agreed. One by one we took photos in front of it with our hands on our hips like Superman.

Then, we got back onto the highway.

An hour later, my phone beeped—a text from Mom. I scrolled down further and further before reading. "I can't believe you. I know where you're at, who you're with. He left us. He doesn't want anything to do with us." I skipped to the end. "You'll spend time with him, but I'm the one who always has to call you. You want to be rid of me. What kind of man wants his mother gone? Well, I gave you everything else so why not this."

I put the phone on my lap and shook my head.

My father asked who it was.

"Roommate. Hankelford's good." I didn't want him to know about my problems with Mom. I didn't want him to blame himself. I wondered if she had the pill bottle in hand. I pictured her in bed. Not in her apartment and not in her last house. I saw her in my childhood home, in her bedroom down the hall from mine. Jade licked her palm, which hung off the bed. I approached her. I could hear my father working in the backyard. The TV was on in her bedroom. Pill bottles were on the floor. The veins in her neck were blue. Her eyes bloodshot. White foam, like Hankelford had during a seizure, poured from her lips. Was this imagination or memory?

I could've continued lying. I could've begged forgiveness. Mom just wanted me to call more often, to say I loved her. But she was right. I wanted her dead. It would've been easier. Later, when Kerrie tells me Mom said I chose my father over her and she no longer wanted to speak to me, I will still think about her funeral. I wanted to live without being told how miserable my parents were, how their kids ruined their lives. My father asked nothing of me. His life was far from perfect, but he was trying. Mom seemed incapable. She wanted to be miserable—it was her mission in life.

If she killed herself I'd feel guilt, but I felt it anyway. At least if I pushed her to kill herself, I'd be guilty of something I had done, something I had control over.

I texted Mom, "Okay," and put the phone away.

## BOY, YOU'RE GONNA CARRY THAT WEIGHT

“You’re fine. You’re going to gain weight,” I said, shook my head, and looked at her. She stared at herself in the mirror, placed her fingers under her chin, and pushed up. She had known she was pregnant for almost two months and had gained a few pounds, but she looked good. Her cheeks were rounder—her skin, her eyes, brighter. Dark blonde hair cascaded past her shoulders. Her blue dress was tight against her breasts. For that moment, she was everything I wanted, and I felt at ease.

“You look good,” I said and took her hand.

The casino lights shone bright in the black night. While the Hard Rock opened a few years back and was only half an hour south of where Mara and I grew up, we had never gone before. My brother played Texas Hold ‘em there enough to know a few people. When we came into town for the holidays, he said he could get us into the VIP room.

Mara flipped the visor up. “I need a drink.”

“You can’t drink.” She knew it, but I said it anyway. Mara was three years younger than me and still in college, but I never felt the age difference until she was pregnant. When she took the pregnancy tests, both of them, I asked when she was going to the doctor’s so I could take off work. She said women had been getting pregnant for years before doctors and that she didn’t need to go for months. She didn’t have health insurance. I told her I’d pay and that we needed to know if the baby was healthy, if she was healthy. I was surprised and annoyed about spending weeks convincing a pregnant woman to see a doctor.

“I know.” She ruffled through her purse. “Have you told your family yet?” she asked, head down.

“No.”

“Will you?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“When we know what we’re doing.”

“What are we doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you want to do?”

“What do you want to do?”

Neither of us wanted the responsibility of the decision, the weight of it. I was angry that she didn’t want the responsibility, but I would have given anything for her to decide, to tell me what to do. The day she found out she was pregnant, she wanted to get rid of it. But I told her we could be good parents, that we could still be happy. Then something happened. Doubts came. I don’t remember when. Maybe they were always there. If I didn’t make a decision fast enough, I thought, then the decision would be made for me. It’d be out of my hands.

“You tell me,” she said.

“Well,” I said and followed the line of cars into the casino’s garage. “There’s good things and bad things about having it.” I spoke like I did to my students, not wanting to say they were wrong but still saying they were wrong.

“Like what?” She turned her head toward me but still wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Well, the good things are...” I headed up the ramp to the next floor. “You know, it’s a baby. I want kids.” True. In high school, I figured I’d be one of those people who went off into

the real world and settled down within a couple of years. My parents had started young. Mom was married with three kids by twenty-three. I can't remember why I wanted it.

"I don't know if I'm ready." I tried to leave it open just in case she wanted to keep it. "I'm not sure I'll ever be. Maybe I need to be, I don't know, I don't want to say forced, but kinda, you know, *forced* into having one. Does anyone really know when they're ready? I'm not sure if anyone knows they're ready."

"And the bad?"

I didn't bother looking for a spot. I just drove to the next floor, heading toward the roof. "If you, *we*, have it, the *baby*, I won't—it's a big decision." I waved my hand above the steering wheel like I was making a presentation. "You haven't graduated yet, and then you wanted to get your doctorate. You probably won't do that. You've wanted to move to Colorado for years. We're not going to be able to do that. I won't have the money."

"We can move to Colorado, and if we can't, then we won't." She wiped her eyes without ruining her mascara. "If you want me to have an abortion, just say it."

I didn't know what I wanted. I wrote in my free time, but never thought about it as a career. I taught graphic design and web design at a technical school and made decent money. I was content and had no problems. I had a good job with a good salary, a dog, a girlfriend. There wasn't something specific I was worried about missing out on. Yet, being content wasn't good enough.

"An abortion would be tougher sooner, in the immediate future, but we'd get over it and move on. If we have a kid, that's it. There's no getting out of it. Look at my parents. It doesn't matter if the first few years are good. You might not hate me now if we have a kid, but twenty,

thirty years—and you couldn't finish school or go to Colorado.” I meant what I said. I didn't want to be responsible for ruining her life. My parents divorced after twenty-seven years, and, in the end, they hated one another. My father blamed Mom for her spending, for ruining his life. Mom blamed my father for never being able to follow her dreams. I was thinking of the long term—Mara the short.

“So you want to have it?” I glanced at her. “The baby?”

“Yes. This year's been so shitty. This could be good.” The last sentence clung to her throat. “We love each other, right?”

The night before she found out she was pregnant, she couldn't say she loved me. She said she wasn't in the mood.

“Like you said, there's never going to be a time when we decide. This is how it happens.”

Maybe she was right, but I thought it'd be different. I thought I'd come home and she'd sit me down and smile and say, “We're going to have a baby,” and then we'd hug, instead of her crying and saying, “You ruined my life, you bastard.”

I said okay without meaning it. When I was in college and I was offered a job teaching, I didn't want to take it. I was shy and didn't want to stand in front of a classroom for seven hours a day. I thought if I took the job, I wouldn't be shy anymore. I'd be normal. I thought it would be the same with the pregnancy. If we decided to keep it, then I would accept it and look forward to being a father.

“You don't want it.”

“I do.” I picked up her hand, shook it, and held it tight and told myself I never wanted to let go.

\* \* \*

A tall, young man in a black suit stood in front of a red velvet rope with his hands clasped in front his belt buckle. A black door behind him had a gold sign that read *VIP*. Mara and I stood, my arm around her waist, on the other side of the long, wide hall. The sound of slots being cranked and bells going off deafened us. We waited for my brother.

“This is so exciting,” she said and seemed unable to contain her excitement.

I kissed her forehead, my lips lingering for a few seconds before pulling away.

She looked up at me. “My dad said that when we have the baby, if we aren’t married yet, that the kid should take my last name.”

I let go of her.

“I’m just saying what he said.”

“You mention that now? Ten minutes ago we decided to keep it and now it’s fucking marriage talk.”

“Don’t curse at me.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“No, I’m—” I shook my head. “Fine, fine. I’m sorry, okay?” I pulled her to me, trying to get back to where we were.

She couldn't say she loved me before the baby. Now she wanted to get married. I finally convinced her to see a doctor and the night before the appointment as we climbed into bed, she said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you. I switched the appointment to Tuesday."

"I teach Tuesday. You know that."

We fought. She said she wanted her sister with her at the appointment. The evening after the doctor's visit, she said, "They didn't run any tests." It would have cost \$500 and she didn't want to spend my money. "We have until June anyway."

"July," I said. "The baby is due in July. October to July is nine months."

"September," she said, walking toward the kitchen. "The conception date is September 15."

Mara said it was fate that we ran into one another that night and got back together after three months apart. Since her doctor's visit, I wondered if she was taking advantage of me, thinking I'd be a good father. I felt guilty for wondering, but I felt like the paternity shouldn't have even been a question.

If it was another man's child, would that make my decision easier? Was I thinking that to make my decision easier? What if we were broken up for three years instead of three months and she had an infant? I still loved her. Didn't I?

If it wasn't my kid, I just wanted her to admit it, even just the possibility of it being another man's, that I wasn't stupid or insane for thinking the date was wrong.

We waited near the VIP lounge for fifteen minutes until Timmy walked up. He was flanked by two friends I didn't recognize. Timmy was two and a half years younger than me, but his friends seemed older than me by five or six years. Even after all these years, I still expected

him to show up in a Dan Marino jersey or a wrestling T-shirt, looking like a skinny chimpanzee with an egg head and too big of eyes. His hair was grown out from the buzz cut he had as a kid. He wore a blue and white striped, long-sleeved shirt, with the top three buttons undone and the collar separated to show off his smooth chest. Later that night, he told me the shirt cost two hundred, but he knew a guy so he paid eighty. “I buy a dress shirt with a tie for twenty,” I said. His sleeves were down, unlike mine, and the shirt was tight around his upper arms and shoulders. He was showing off the result of spending four years wrestling at Cornell.

My older sister, Kerrie, and I stayed in Florida for college, but Timmy got money from Cornell in New York—enough to decide at eighteen to attend, but not enough to save him from \$100,000 in student loans by twenty-two. Science and Math were his subjects. Kerrie got her degrees in history and religion. I went into computers. When we were young, our father would test us on our homework. Kerrie and I would get a lot wrong, but Timmy would score perfectly. He teased us, and we told him he only knew the work because he had listened to us get it wrong for years. That excuse ended when he was in high school and taking AP courses in calculus and physics.

Mara gave him a friendly hello. I forgot they graduated from high school together. Timmy introduced his friends and led the way to the lounge. We walked in a straight line toward the man in the suit—I hung in the back expecting the man to stop us. *Nice try hotshot*, or something like that. But he shook Timmy’s hand and unclasped the velvet rope. Timmy patted the man’s shoulder and continued into the lounge.

Inside, I felt like a kid intruding on an adult conversation. There were only a handful of people, all middle-aged in suits and dresses. I’ve never enjoyed going somewhere fancy. I feel

out of sorts. My brother strolled over to the far corner and sat in a love seat. Mara and I took the couch beside him. It was large enough for four, but Mara sat up against my leg. Timmy's two friends took the chairs. We sat around a glass coffee table far away from the other patrons. I whispered to Mara, "It's like we're at the kiddy table."

Timmy raised two fingers and the waitress came right over. I ordered a whiskey and coke without thinking. When it was Mara's turn to order, I stared at Timmy, who stared back with a smile.

Mara said, "Just cranberry juice," and the waitress left.

Timmy asked, "You're not drinking?" laughed and looked at his friends.

I went to speak—What? I don't know.

"No," Mara said. "Dad's making me get up early, go to church. Don't wanna deal with a hangover."

"One drink won't give you a hangover. Unless, maybe you're a lightweight."

Mara pinched my arm, but I had nothing to say, nothing that wouldn't sound defensive.

Mara said, "One drink leads to many more." Timmy's friends laughed—I just stared at my brother. He nodded and I knew he was trying to figure it out. He didn't say anything, just leaned toward me. I expected him to nod at Mara and whisper, *She's pregnant. You can cut the shit.*

"There's a whole bunch of food up there if you want, but I'd wait for the lobster. They'll put it out in a bit." He leaned back with his hands behind his head. "It's fucking fantastic."

I had never heard my brother curse before. Maybe under his breath—maybe as he walked out of the room. But never openly. This was the first time I drank with my brother. We weren't

close, never were. When we were children, I'd pick on him. When we played hockey in the street with the neighborhood kids, I would have to sit out on a regular basis for getting too rough with him. He'd leave each game bleeding. In high school, I was a senior and he was freshman. We barely spoke.

When the waitress returned with our drinks—after I dipped my head toward Mara and said, “Sorry, I forgot,” and she patted my hand said it was okay—I sipped my whiskey and Timmy downed his. He finished three by the time I finished one. As we ate and drank, he was the center of attention, telling stories about last summer’s vacation backpacking across Europe. Stories of running with the bulls in Pamplona, of being lost in Rome, of drinking and picking up women in Berlin. Instead of getting a job after graduation, like I did, like our father did, Timmy went to Europe. He slept wherever he ended up, went to whatever country he felt like. I interrupted his stories with phrases like “Cool” and “Wow” and “Yeah.” It wasn’t as if I hadn’t been to Europe or even wanted to go again. It wasn’t like as he went on I was telling myself how I wanted to do what he did. Sleeping at train stations and not being able to eat more than once a day doesn’t sound fun. I wasn’t interested in Europe, only who my brother had become. I only hung out with him once or twice a year, mostly with other family members. He seemed so different from the boy I knew. He wanted nothing to do with work even though he was getting a master’s in material science. Timmy wanted to spend his nights playing Texas Hold ‘em and having fun. He wanted no family, no wife. Once we hung out, years later, I spoke of a female friend who was sleeping around and leading guys on. Timmy said, “Who cares?” and shrugged. “She’s just having fun.” The only dream I had involving travel was to hop in my car one day and

just drive, having no destination in mind, just hitting the road. I would stop where I felt, if the name sounded good, if I just felt like going west, then I would go.

Timmy stopped laughing and said, “You’ll like this. When I was in London, Granddad told me to tell you that you need to have kids. He said that we have to keep the Ironman name alive and that there’s not many young guys left in the family.” He laughed.

Mara looked at me and smiled.

“He said—sorry, Mara—he said don’t worry about marriage.” Timmy swiped his arms into an X. “Just have a bunch of sex and knock out some kids.” His laugh reminded me of when my father and I would call him a chimpanzee. His drink splashed in his hand.

I pretended to laugh and sipped my drink. He has to know, I thought. Maybe one of Mara’s friends told him. They went to high school together. Our high school only had around two hundred in a graduating class. They knew many of the same people. I hadn’t told my family, but Mara told everyone. At first, she said not to tell anyone, but day by day more people in her life were told. I let a handful of my best friends, but not my family. I told myself I shouldn’t tell my family until Mara and I decided what to do. In truth, I kept it from them because I thought they would be disappointed in me. Parents want their children to have a better life than they had.

After the lounge, we walked through the casino floor to a dance club outside. Timmy shook the bouncer’s hand, patted his bicep, and we skipped the line. Timmy led us through the crowd to the second floor. Mara was behind me with her hand barely in mine. The music was deafening. Timmy and his friends danced. Every couple of songs, one of his friends would whisper in a girl’s ear and point to my brother. Later, Timmy told me his friends told these girls

that Timmy is a marine, or a firefighter, or whatever else they thought would get the girl interested. Left out was Timmy sleeping on Mom's couch and begging people for rides.

Mara and I stood on the dance floor. She was wrapped around my waist, as if I were protecting her from a storm. She looked up at me and I kissed her. My brother danced. Women grinded against him. I watched him and knew I didn't want this child. I didn't want my brother's life, either. Skanky women grinding up against me, no thanks. I was never that type of man and never wanted to be. It wasn't a want of a different life. It was the want of possibility. I didn't want contentment.

Mara tugged my arm. "I'm tired."

I interrupted my brother and told him Mara and I were leaving.

\* \* \*

I shut off my headlights and pulled into Mara's father's driveway. The sound of her father's boat rocking at the dock in the backyard carried across the breeze. I rubbed the small of her back as she opened the front door. We passed the Christmas tree in the living room on our way to her bedroom. Miley, her puggle, sprinted out and shook her whole body in excitement. Mara grabbed her leash and went out front—I sat on the bed waiting.

A Coach diaper bag, light brown with the dark brown Coach C logo patterned across with pink trimming and a pink cross over the center, sat in the middle of the floor. Two weeks earlier, she went shopping with her sister. When she saw it she texted me, excited that Coach made a diaper bag. I felt like I was the only one taking this thing seriously.

Mara returned and we sat on the floor against the bed, her head on my chest. I wanted to do what was right. She kissed me, and I pulled her dress straps down.

She pulled me on top of her. As we kissed, she unbuttoned my pants and pushed them down. I wanted to reach for a condom even though I knew there was no reason. At first, we went slowly—more kissing and embracing than sex even though I was inside her. But I grabbed her wrists and held them against the carpet over her head and quickened my pace. I stopped kissing her and held her neck with my other hand.

She squeezed her legs around my waist. “Slow.” She tried to kiss me but I kept my head back from her reach. Tired of her squirming, I pulled out, pushed her over to her stomach, pulled her to her knees, and fucked her. My hand pushed her head down near the diaper bag.

She cried.

I pulled out, finished, and leaned against the bed. I didn’t look at her. I was afraid of what I had done and what I could do. She stayed down for a few minutes, and then wiped her eyes and leaned against the bed next to me.

“You made me feel like a whore.”

“You said you liked it rough.”

“I’m the mother of your child.”

I put my arm around her and she leaned into me. I didn’t want her to cry, but I wanted her to hurt. I tried to imagine what we would be like in twenty years if this was where we were already.

“You don’t want the baby.”

“I told you earlier I do.” I kissed her forehead. “Don’t ask again.”



## HANK CANINE IRONMAN

You hesitated when the light went red and stopped over the white line by half the length of your Civic. You stared into the bright light, foot ready to pounce from the brake to the gas and the throbbing in the back of your head returned like the marching trumpets of war, closer and closer. The pain, which five months ago, you described to your neurologist as a rusted ice pick fucking the back of your skull, centered behind your right ear. In and out.

In. And. Out.

You closed your eyes and rubbed against the cloth headrest. It was futile—you knew it—but something needed to be done. You had to keep moving.

Sighing, you grabbed the phone on top of the pile of veterinary receipts near the gearshift. Still no missed call so the phone was tossed to the passenger's seat. Sweat and tears dripped off your unshaven chin onto the black and blue tie loose around your white collar. You planted your elbow on the armrest, solid and firm, wiped your mouth, and studied traffic like Indiana Jones eyeballing the weight of the golden idol, as if it were possible to figure out a way to make the light change. You waited.

Waited.

Waited.

Hankelford was dead. You knew it. You could see him, your brindle Boxer, on an operating table. A catheter stabbed into his front paw, the only white one—his single white sock. Rapid breathing. Brown eyes darting from side to side looking for you, wanting you. Foam bubbling from his mouth. Eyes closed. His eyes closed and his breathing ceased. Dr. Smith threw her latex gloves in a blue garbage bag, like on *ER*, and her assistant, Caroline, picked up the

phone. But Dr. Smith, in her Scottish accent, said, “Wait for him to come in. It’s better face to face,” so Caroline hung up.

It was possible there was another reason, a simpler one, explaining why you didn’t have a voicemail from Caroline when you finished teaching class like you’ve had every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for three months. Radiation therapy could’ve started late, and Hankelford wasn’t finished. His treatments end next week and Dr. Smith might have wanted to talk. Good news maybe. She could’ve said his brain tumor had been taken care of, that you did everything you could and it worked. It worked. You could’ve called, found out. In a minute, you could’ve known everything.

But you wanted to feel that depressed, that lost, that burden. You weren’t there when he got sick. No, you were at a beach house in California staring at smiling girls in bikinis.

Your phone beeped, it beeped, and by the time the beeping had finished it was in your hands, flipped open and ready to be read. Hankelford’s hair stuck to it, black and brown and white. It covered the passenger’s seat, *his* seat. Before radiation, he barely shed, but now his hair covered everything. Was that good or bad? You decided it was good, that the bad was being expunged and you checked your phone.

It was a text from Mara. “Want fajitas for dinner and then look at apartments online?”

She never asked for fajitas before—was that pregnancy cravings kicking in? How soon do those begin? It had only been a week since she broke it to you that you would be a father and she a mother and together a family, forever and ever. Would you, though? Would you? After the second test, she had you drive her to the clinic to get a couple of brochures about her options. When she got back in the car, she stared at you with the brochures loose in her grasp. What did

she want you to do? What did she want you to say? You said everything will work out, that the two of you could be loving parents, but maybe the words came out too slow, or the pauses between them showed your doubt because she said the two of you are too young, only just starting your life after college, that you can't care for a child, and you took that as an insult but maybe she was right.

You knew you should've called her back, avoid a fight, instead of dropping the phone on the passenger's seat, but you couldn't think of anything but Hankelford then, could you? What was there to say anyway? What does it say about you if you thought about dinner at a time when Hankelford might be dead? Later, when Mara asked if you got her message, you just said no and looked at your phone as if it were broken.

The son of a bitch behind you in the beat-up Accord honked 'cause the light was green, so you hit the ramp onto I-4 and muttered *asshole* and stared at him in the rearview mirror.

Your heel dug into the hole in the floor near the gas pedal. The engine thundered and the car picked up speed and headed straight to the next exit, *your* exit. That's when the blue van cut in front of you and decided to cruise ten under the limit like a fuck and you rode their bumper, wanting to drive straight through them.

The sharp pain in your head worsened. Vomit rose to the base of your mouth, and then dropped away, leaving you empty. Vision to the right blurred and you raised your sunglasses to wipe it with the back of your hand, hoping it was sweat making everything on the right look like watercolors running. Your neurologist said blurred vision was a sign of near stroke, that it was just a matter of time for a full one to come, but how could you be near a stroke? Wasn't it either a stroke or just nothing? Thirty vials of blood, two MRIs, and a cerebral angiogram failed to

show the cause. More tests were needed, but Hankelford's vet bills hit the five figures. You were told not to raise your blood pressure, and your workouts went from bench presses and squats to a brisk walk on the treadmill. You can still go about your day, though. When Hankelford had the strength to walk, it would only be in circles and stumbling instead of walking, really. Nights he had half a dozen seizures drained him. You're supposed to take care of him, so you told yourself you can live with the migraines the near strokes leave behind. That's what makes a man—sacrificing for those he's responsible for.

You swerved left, muttered a string of variations of *fuck* as you stared down the van's driver, and cut back over. You sped through the yield sign at the end of the exit ramp and switched lanes to the left one, the one that's supposedly the "fast one," but it was just as slow as the other. You slammed on your brakes. And with all that, both lanes were deadlocked anyway. You could've killed them. You could've killed yourself. He was so close to being done with treatment. You just had to hold it together for another week. You didn't need to do anything, just continue like you had. No decisions needed to be made. You just had to stand back and let what will happen happen.

Instead, you cursed and hit the wheel again, and again, and again. Your hand pulsed—stinging spread under your skin to your wrist, which was a welcome distraction for a few seconds.

Could you have made a U-turn over the grass median and head up one more exit? Found a different way?

There were no faster ways. You drove that route twenty-five times in three months—enough to know the most direct path. If you got back on I-4 and went down one exit farther,

bumper-to-bumper traffic in front of the Altamonte Mall would've blocked you, and if you took a left at the next light, one too soon, you'd been forced to drive the limit because of that motorcycle cop a quarter of a mile down who watched for speeders at the street just past the house with the green roof instead of doing real police work.

But you thought about it anyway.

Tears ran past the frames of your sunglasses. There was a woman in the silver Audi next to you. She was young—maybe mid-thirties—and wore a black business suit. She seemed relaxed, like traffic didn't bother her. She looked as if nothing did, bother her that is. What does life look like if you do everything right, you wondered, if nothing comes along to upset your plans—if you went to a good college, got a degree and then a job, got married and then had kids. Would it have been easier without Hankelford? What if it was just you and Mara and downtown bars and weekend getaways to St. Augustine?

The woman looked over at you. Did the look last too long, like she was judging you? Did she see you cry? Did she wonder what could've made you upset? She would have laughed, wouldn't she? Crying over a dog. Crying because you couldn't handle caring for a puppy.

You hurried to wipe away the tears and grabbed the steering wheel with both hands and flexed your biceps as if you were trying to tear the wheel from the car.

When Hankelford started having seizures, Mara felt sorry for him—and you. Even during the three months you and Mara were broken up, she helped you with him. When you were in California, she watched Hankelford as he got worse. But now, when you're up in the middle of the night, holding him until his seizure fades and he can sleep, Mara's busy dreaming, getting spared the look in Hankelford's eyes that scream out for help. Now she says he's *just a dog*.

Saying you would do the same for her if she were sick causes another fight because she's your girlfriend and the mother of your child and you're supposed to help her. She says you should use your money on a down payment for a house, or on that engagement ring from the Tiffany's catalog—on something so that the two of you can use to build a life together.

Two years ago you signed that contract from Starting Over Animal Rescue when Hankelford was only four weeks old. You've forgotten what the paper said, but you know you're responsible for him so what choice did you have when he got sick? Three months ago, Mara held your hand as Michelle pointed at black areas on Hankelford's MRI. Michelle said it was no longer about survival—that radiation therapy might be able to make Hankelford comfortable with the time he has left. He had been having seizures for four months, but you never got him an MRI. "He's too young," his vet said. "Dogs that young don't get brain tumors. It's epilepsy. An MRI would just be an expensive picture." What did you know? You had to go ahead and trust in a vet with ten years of experience and a degree but didn't know shit about Hankelford. When you met Michelle, you asked, "What if he had the MRI sooner?" She said not to think like that, but you can't help but think like that, that you messed up and because of that Hankelford is going to die.

In the parking lot after, Mara was angry and stopped you from getting in the driver's seat. She wanted to discuss the treatment because Hankelford is her dog too since he was only five months old when she met him. But, when you and Mara had brunch at First Watch when the two of you got back together, you asked her what she would do if her three-year-old puggle Miley, got sick like Hankelford, and she looked at the sidewalk and said Miley would be put down because treatment was too expensive. You asked her what if you did have the money, and when

she said it was pointless to think about because she would never have enough money, you felt sorry for Miley and stopped talking because Mara was supposed to take care of Miley.

Something so young shouldn't die.

Traffic dispersed, and you realized there was no reason for traffic to have stopped in the first place and you wished there was a bad accident and maybe a death because that might have been a decent enough reason to slow you down.

You took the second left and turned down the dirt path at the end of the white picket fence like the vet said to do three months ago when he sent you to Dr. Smith. Trees formed a canopy over the road, keeping the AVS sign at the end in darkness, and you released the gas, drifted toward the sign, and hoped you never reached the end because until you're told Hankelford is dead, he's alive.

The car coasted into a spot facing away from the building and you stared at the front door's reflection in the rearview mirror, wondering how long you could sit in the car before people started wondering and it became about you and not Hankelford. Your vision returned, or at least returned to a point where smeared colors were now blurry shapes, and the near stroke faded into a migraine, and you knew when you got home, you'd shoot back the aspirin bottle, swallow as many pills as you could, and then nap on the floor with a wet washcloth across your forehead.

You checked your phone—which still had no missed call—and pushed the door open and marched toward the entrance, and even made it five feet from the entrance before you looked back at your car and pretended to lock it so you could wipe tears from your eyes without anyone inside noticing. You got in and leaned on the white reception desk splitting the room in half on

the usual spot at the far end by the dog treats that Hankelford never liked. A receptionist (the short fat one with blonde hair who was there every Friday afternoon) asked how you were doing, and as you said “Fine,” you wondered if you could get away with the lie. For some reason, the thought came up that if you told her the truth, that every day you wanted to stop treatments and that maybe Mara was right and that you were just prolonging the inevitable and that you couldn’t handle the stress and your chest felt tight and you didn’t sleep or eat, that they would take Hankelford away or stop his treatments because you weren’t strong enough to handle it. She said that she saw you walk up—Did she see you cry?—and you nodded and looked down on the counter and pushed the pen that was attached with a silver chain, and she said she called to the back and someone would be right up, but she never mentioned Hankelford.

You stood there without asking about him because you didn’t want to sound stupid, like you didn’t know what you were doing. You had to act like you were in control, that’s what everyone expected of you. You had to pretend you could take care of him so that Mara would say it wasn’t a mistake, that he could live, that you could go to work, put food on the table, and give him everything a dog needs in life. If you pretended, then you could have believed it too.

The sound of footsteps grew louder on the other side of the double doors behind the receptionist desk. You stopped leaning and stood straight, trying to get ready for the news, hoping his stance would be strong, hoping he could walk, hoping he would smile when he saw you, hoping he was healthy and had a full life in front of him.

Then, the doors swung open.

## NO MAN'S LAND

To avoid being an inconvenience, I shut off my headlights so they wouldn't shine through the large window to the living room and wake someone as I pulled into the driveway of my aunt's house at three A.M.. Aunt Sue told me to come and go as I please, but I still moved around quietly as to not get in the way. I was a few feet from the front door when my father, dressed in typical black pants and white polo with a cartoon bee and *Broward County Transit* sewn over the heart, backed out carefully and shut the door. Halfway through his turn, I said, "Hey," and waved.

He jerked his head back. "Scared me."

He looked old in the porch light. His arms and chest were no longer thick and muscular, no longer stretched his polo. He seemed more fragile since he left Mom a year and a half before. Thin, black hair still wet from the shower stuck to his head.

"How was the casino?" My little brother, Timmy, invited me and my girlfriend to the VIP lounge. "Did you have a lot to drink?"

When I was young, my father drank beer with three neighborhood fathers on the front lawn. A few times, he gave me a sip. Mom drank too. My parents met when my father was a bouncer at a beach bar in Ft. Lauderdale and Mom was seventeen and sneaking in. Something happened though. I don't know. Alcohol was banned. Bus drivers gave my father liquor and wine in an attempt to butter up to their supervisor, but the bottles were left on top of the fridge unopened. For years. Even when my sister, Kerrie, turned twenty-one, she wasn't allowed to order a drink at dinner.

"I had a couple."

“What about your girlfriend? Michelle, um, Mary. What’s her name again? Sorry.”

Whenever he worked too much, he got worse at remembering things, really just thinking in general.

“Mara. It’s okay. No, she had to wake early. You know, Christmas.” I had known for two months that Mara was pregnant, but hadn’t told my family. I told myself my father should know first and that it was the sort of news best told in person. I was close to telling him when I arrived, but Aunt Sue came in and sat on the couch. I put it off. I was afraid of how he’d react. He was my age when he started having kids. He was miserable for years since in a loveless marriage that ended the January before. And now his first-born son was following in his footsteps. Also, I was ashamed, or am ashamed, of thinking my father’s life was wrong. Even though I thought it was a mistake, I respected him for staying in the marriage for his kids.

“That reminds me.” He slapped my arm. “Merry Christmas.”

Awkwardly, we stood in silence. I could’ve told him then and there, but it never crossed my mind. If I told him, I’d be too ashamed to push for the abortion.

My father laughed. “You know, your dog will not move once he’s asleep. I walked in there and he’s lying in the middle of the bed with his head on a pillow. I tried to push him aside. He didn’t even look up.”

“Hankelford’s a stubborn fella.” I’d have said *fuck*, but in my family, unless Mom’s driving, there’s no cursing. “Mara says the same thing.” We had just moved in together the week before. My father didn’t know that either.

He said Hankelford didn’t have any seizures or anything while I was out.

“I know.” I was offended, as if he’d implied I shouldn’t have gone out, had fun.

Hankelford’s last seizure was almost three months ago, two weeks into radiation therapy. It was another two months of waiting to see if radiation was any help.

“Well, I gotta get to work. Merry Christmas.”

We shook hands, and he left.

Inside, I stopped at the sight of the Christmas tree. Pictures of my cousins, Lisa and A.J., hung next to ornament that must have had meaning. What happened to my Scooby Doo ornament? My Boxer with angel wings for Jade? After my parents’ divorce, Mom threw out most of our photo albums. Did she throw out the Christmas ornaments too?

My father’s room was across the three-foot-wide hall from my aunt and uncle’s so I carefully opened the door to avoid it squeaking. My father invited me to stay when I came to town. He’d been there since he left Mom. He said he’d take the couch and I could take his bed. “That way you don’t have to sleep next to a man.” When we realized I’d be out most nights and he’d be off to work early, we slept in the bed in shifts.

Moonlight shone through the cracks in the blinds and across my brindle Boxer. “Sorry I took so long.” I kissed his forehead. His hair had nearly grown back from being shaved for treatment. I wondered if others could still see that rectangle or if I had just grown used to it.

I kicked off my sneakers and took my father’s place on the bed, off to the side, not wanting to move Hankelford. Too uncomfortable to sleep in someone else’s bed half naked, I stayed in my jeans and black button-down. Hankelford moved his paw and touched my foot. His routine. If I went to a different room, he’d wake, follow me, and sleep so his body could be pressed against mine.

Christmas Eve as a child was exciting. I'd listen to my parents take the presents from their closet (presents we'd have already inspected while they were at work) and put them under the tree. Along with Kerrie and Timmy, I'd tiptoe in socks (barefoot would make smacking sounds against the tile) to catch a peek.

My aunt's house was quiet.

As we got older, Mom would say Christmas was no fun. It required a child's joy.

I imagined next Christmas, or tried to. I tried to find something to look forward to.

There was a couch, white cloth with specks of light blue, the couch I had when I was kid. I sat with my daughter in my arms. She wore a red and green dress and had a red ribbon on her head. Mara stood beside me. Hankelford lay at my feet, but I remembered he wouldn't make it to next Christmas. Then there was only carpet.

I unwrapped a gift for my daughter. She smiled as the paper came undone.

The mattress shifted, and I opened my eyes. Since April, when Hankelford started having seizures, I had been unable to sleep for long. Most came at night. I'd wake when I felt him move.

Hankelford jumped off the bed. I said, "Hankel, you good?" and crawled to the edge of the bed.

He drank from the water dish I had placed near my father's closet. He stopped and looked at me. Prednisone twice a day made him thirsty. Shortly after he started the medication, I got a water bowl twice the size of his last one. "It's okay. You drink your water."

Water dripped from his jowls as he jumped back onto the bed and curled up against my side.

I shut my eyes and tried to place myself back in the same dream.

Christmas. Present. Mara. Daughter.

Why was it always a daughter, never a son?

The dream wouldn't return.

Instead I was alone. A one-bedroom apartment. A present on the kitchen counter. A phone waiting for Mara to call.

We could have raised a child and not been together. But I thought that if it was a question from the start that meant something.

Hankelford moaned. I opened my eyes and his head was in the air. He shook. When I touched his paw, he stopped. He scratched his neck. "Sorry, Hankel. I thought you were being a Shakelford." I told him he could scratch if he wanted.

He stared at me, waiting for something.

"I'm sorry I messed up your scratching." I petted him and he laid his head on my chest. We closed our eyes.

The night went on like that, the same as most nights. An hour or two of sleep, of trying to dream, and then I'd wake when Hankelford would adjust himself.

In the morning, before I opened my eyes, my nose felt wet. I woke to Hankelford facing me, his nose pushed into mine and his eyes wide open staring at me. "Hankel, you're a fucking creeper."

He licked me. I rolled onto my back, and Hankelford stood on my chest and licked my face.

There was a single, light knock on the bedroom door. Aunt Sue said, "Seany, are you up?"

I put a finger over my lips and stared at Hankelford. He sat and stared back.

Aunt Sue waited a minute and then said, “Lisa, get A.J.”

I pushed Hankelford over and rubbed his belly. “You almost ruined everything.” When I stopped, he slapped his paw in the air—his demand for more petting. I did as he asked for a couple of minutes, and then went to the bathroom to brush my teeth. He went to the bedroom door and looked back at me.

“You can’t just be a bad dog and piss on the floor?”

He looked at the doorknob, then back at me.

“Fine.” I opened the door and Hankelford sprinted out.

Uncle Dave sat in a chair next the Christmas tree, exhausted and indifferent to the whole gift-giving ceremony. His gray polo was pushed tight by his stomach. His graying beard made him look older than my father even though he was the younger brother. Constant bouts with gout made it difficult for him to walk. Uncle Dave was a criminal defense attorney in Staten Island. His family lived down here in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. The plan had been to build a client list in Florida, but that never panned out. That was fifteen years ago. He’d fly down every couple of weeks to visit. During the holidays, he had a little bit more time for a visit.

Aunt Sue, who wore short shorts and a sleeveless blouse, sat on the floor and leaned into his knees. Lisa, two years younger than me, sat with her boyfriend on the other side of the tree. They exchanged gifts. A.J., still in high school, was in the corner, wearing only boxers, and looked high and hung-over because he was.

Hankelford ran to each one, sniffed them, and let them pet him before he moved on, but he kept away from Lisa’s black Dachshund. When they met the year before, they were

inseparable. This year it was as if the Dachshund didn't exist. I couldn't tell if it was because Hankelford was older, going on three years old and out of the puppy phase, or if it was the tumor and radiation eating away at him.

My family and I said our hellos and Merry Christmases, and then I took Hankelford out back.

After he squatted to piss and sniffed everything he could find, he ran back to the living room. He loved company, especially women. Soon after I adopted him and he was four weeks old, I broke up with my then-girlfriend. As I dated and brought women to the house, Hankelford would be all over them. He had a thing with breasts. He would try to pull down their tops. He also wouldn't allow me to touch them, the women or the breasts. Once, I watched a movie with a woman on the couch and held her hand as it rested on her thigh. Hankelford jumped up and knocked our hands away and sat in between us. After a few minutes, he left and lay on the other side of the room and watched us. When we touched again, he repeated his actions.

As my family opened their gifts, I sat away from the others, near the front door, and tried to concentrate on petting Hankelford. Uncle Dave sighed and leaned forward to hand out presents.

“Hankel,” I said. “Get me a rope.” I pointed to my father's bedroom.

He brought back a small tire dog toy.

“No, Hankel. A rope.”

He placed the tire in my hand.

“Fine.”

We played tug-of-war with the tire. When he would win, he'd place the tire back in my hand for another round.

Lisa opened a present, a laptop. "This isn't the right one. We need to go shopping tomorrow for a Mac."

Uncle Dave handed a present to Aunt Sue and said, "Okay, Lisa," as if he'd expected her response.

Hankelford got a strong grasp on the tire and I brought it about my head and then dropped it to the floor. He held tight. I went higher and dropped it faster and faster. He growled louder and louder. We formed a wave. I wanted him to growl, to fight back.

Lisa said, "Seany, don't do that. You're not supposed to play that rough." She said I'd hurt him.

"How can I hurt him?" I continued playing. "He's already dying."

The room was quiet.

We played long after the gifts had been opened and the family had scattered.

A few hours later, I carried an eighteen pack of Miller Lite up the driveway to Mara's father's house. This was my third Christmas with her family. On the first, I had asked Mara what her father would like for a gift. She said Miller Lite. I thought she was joking and had laughed. But that is really what he wanted. He was a dentist, forced to retire due to back pain from leaning over people for hours each day. He spent his time either on his boat, or drinking Miller Lite and watching *Two and a Half Men*.

I dropped off the beer on the kitchen counter and sat at the patio table like I was told. Her father got a beer. Mara worked on the food. Miley, her puggle, jumped onto my lap. I picked up her front legs. “Why’s Hankelford so sick, but you so healthy?”

Miley turned her head from side to side looking for someone to explain my question.

“Tell me, Miley. You’re supposed to save him. He’s made of love, but you is made of shit.”

Mara put biscuits on the table. “Don’t be mean to my dog.”

I put Miley on the ground and she ran toward Mara.

“He being mean to you, Miley?” Mara walked back to the kitchen.

I watched her finish cooking and setting the table. As I stared at Mara taking charge of a household, I might as well have been hearing the cries of our daughter.

Her father ate as Mara set the table. I waited. He wore a white Jimmy Buffet T-shirt and blue shorts. He was short and thin. He talked about taking us on his boat before we headed back to Orlando. The boat swayed on the waves at the other end of the backyard. The house was on the Intercostal. I was never much of a boating man, but the few times he had taken me and Mara out were fun and I looked forward to the trips when we visited.

As he spoke, I couldn’t help but stare at the empty chair that Mara’s mother sat in the year before. In April, the same week Hankelford’s seizures began, she died from cancer. Something was missing in the conversation between Mara and her father, some pauses where her mother would have spoken.

After we ate, we sat in silence, enjoying the breeze. Mara said, “Dad, do you think Mom is watching us?”

He stared at his boat and sipped Miller Lite. “I don’t know,” he said in a way that I thought was clear he wanted the conversation to be over. The next summer the three of us went to Colorado. At night, we’d sit out on the porch and drink beer. After a few, he admitted to hating his dead wife. Staring at the mountains, he said that she wouldn’t listen to him when he told her to go to the doctor’s to get a checkup and by the time she listened, the cancer was too far along. He said he was mad at her, that this was the time of their life they should be happy. They should be traveling and enjoying life, and she left him alone.

Mara fed Miley some ham and said, “I told Sean that David was watching our child in heaven.” David was an ex and a roommate who had died driving drunk a week before she woke me with the pregnancy test in hand. At first, she wanted an abortion, but after a few weeks, we began to discuss names. Her top choice for a boy’s name was David. I did not agree.

Her father didn’t look at her.

I muttered under my breath without thinking, “Yeah, that’s gonna make me want to keep it—you giving birth to your ex.”

Her father was silent, but I know he heard. Mara dipped her head to look me in the eyes. “I didn’t say our baby *was* David. I said he’s *watching* our baby.”

“Sorry.” Neither idea was uplifting.

When Mara and I got ready to leave, I invited her father to my family’s celebration. He declined. I watched him as Mara got her things. He just sat and stared out at the water. Like with my own father, I felt guilty for looking down on her father. He seemed to have done everything right. He became a doctor, married, and raised a daughter. But there he was, alone on Christmas.

I'm unsure if he was sad or if I just viewed him as sad. I knew there's not a right way to live, but it seemed at the time there were only wrong ways.

When we got to my aunt's, Hankelford stood on his back legs and hugged my waist. A kiss on the forehead wasn't enough for him. "C'mon." I picked him up and held him against my shoulder, like my father held me as a child. I had been told many times that at fifty-five pounds, Hankelford was too heavy to carry, but it seemed to make him happy. Me too.

Mara scratched Hankelford's back. "How are you, Hankelford? Miley misses you." She stared at me as she touched him, as if she was saying, "Look, I care."

People were scattered throughout the kitchen, family room, and the living room. It was the same people every year. Our two sides of the family, along with some of their friends and their friends' family. About twenty in total. The food, catered by Toojays, had already been served. It was put out buffet-style near the family room. The living room had the TV, so anyone who wanted to watch whatever game was on ESPN was found in there. The kitchen was where my aunt hung out with her friends. My uncle sat at the dining room table eating and talking to people who passed by. The family room was where the few stranglers hung around.

That's where my sister, Kerrie, was. She stood a few feet from the buffet, picking off a plate she held. She was paler than I remembered. I was surprised, but I guess I shouldn't have been. I wouldn't have wanted to stay out in sun in Arizona unless I had no choice. She was tanner when she lived in Portland, and maybe even when she was in Massachusetts. She waved a couple of fingers as she put a piece of ham in her mouth. I went directly to her without speaking to anyone else. I hadn't seen her since July, when my father and I went to California and stopped by her place for a couple of days.

She asked, "Do you know when Dad's coming?"

I adjusted Hankelford. He placed one paw behind my neck and one on my chest. "I figured he would be here by now."

"Sue said he got out of work at two thirty and would be here at three, but it's three thirty."

I wondered why she was surprised. There were days when we were children that he would tell us he gets off of work at two and would come at five, a few minutes before my mom would get home. I had wondered if he had another family somewhere. Years later, I talked to Kerrie, and she said she thought the same.

I asked her how Christmas morning went with Mom and Timmy. She said it was sad for me and our father to not be there. Mom refused to celebrate. It wasn't until Kerrie and Timmy said they would leave that she gave in.

Mara elbowed me. "You should call your mom." She tried for months to get me to call my mom. She would tell me, "You don't know how lucky you are." I refused to listen.

Kerrie said, "We're going to the mall tomorrow. I'm sure she would like to see you."

I stared at Hankelford and pretended to eat his ear.

Mara said I should go.

"If it sounds so fun," I said. "Then you go."

"Maybe I will."

Kerrie shrugged. "Fine by me."

We paid attention to Hankelford, even fed him some ham.

Mara shook one of Hankelford's paws. "Did you like your Christmas presents, Hankelford?"

"Sssshhhh," I said. "He doesn't know yet. I haven't given them to him."

"Why not? Hankelford needs presents."

"Well, we'll have to give them to him, won't we?"

Before I had a chance to get the presents, Aunt Sue called my name. I carried Hankelford to the kitchen. She was laying out the desserts. She asked, "You're going back to school, right?" She looked over at a couple of her friends.

I looked back at Mara. She was talking to Kerrie. The due date for the baby was June. I knew I wouldn't go to school if the baby were born. Maybe eventually, even if I could juggle it all, I wouldn't know that until I would miss out on the fall semester.

Mara looked at me. Was she imagining a child in my arms instead of Hankelford? Is that why she smiled?

"Hello, Seany." Aunt Sue snapped her fingers. "I'm talking to you."

"We'll see. I'd like to."

"You don't think you'll get in? You're smart. A lot smarter than your silly sister out there." She pointed to the other room. "Running all over the country."

I felt guilty for not standing up for my sister. She stood up for me when her boyfriends picked on me when we were younger. But it wasn't worth arguing, and it wasn't just Aunt Sue. It was my entire family. My family, both sides, grew up lower middle class in Queens and the Bronx. What you did in life was graduate from high school, go to college if they could (the

military if they can't), find work with good job security, and have a family. The last two can be in either order. It was as if the last half of the twentieth century didn't happen to my family.

I turned to leave, but Aunt Sue said, "Wait, Seany. Can you fix A.J.'s computer?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"It doesn't work."

I shrugged. "I'll do it in a bit. Gotta give Hankelford his presents and let him out."

"Are you kidding me? He's a dog. Help your cousin." She called for A.J. to bring his computer.

Every time I visited I need to fix at least one computer. I had a degree in Digital Media, therefore according to my family, I knew everything there was to know about computers.

Hankelford tried to climb up on my lap, but I couldn't work with him in the way. Aunt Sue went to the back door and called him to let him out.

He sat there staring at me.

Only four hours late, my father arrived and apologized. By that time, I was walking back and forth between the desktop in the living room and Lisa's old laptop and A.J.'s laptop on the dining room table. I stopped working and went with my father to his bedroom. I was on the verge of mentioning the baby as we handed each other presents. The moment passed and I returned to the computers.

Mara put a plate of food in front of me that I shared with Hankelford.

Lisa said, "Seany, don't feed him turkey. It could kill him."

"Brain tumor's already doing that." I gave him another piece.

Lisa left.

My father came and stood behind me. He wasn't a computer guy so I knew he didn't know what I was doing. He asked, "What are you doing tomorrow? Want to have lunch? Maybe go to a movie?"

"Sounds good."

The next day, my father was two hours late. I rocked back in a recliner with Hankelford sleeping on my lap. We missed the movie, but my father still wanted to have lunch. I thought lunch would be a good time to tell him. But my father invited Uncle Dave, and before I knew it the three of us sat at a booth at Smokey Bones.

Uncle Dave pitched us a business venture—medical billing. He knew a doctor who was opening a new practice the next year. With my computer knowledge and his connections, we'd pull in a few million a year, according to Uncle Dave. I was tasked to acquire textbooks to learn the medical bill process and codes. When I returned to Orlando, it was one of the first things I did. I knew Uncle Dave would never bring it up again, but I did it anyway. Each year there was a different plan to make millions. Uncle Dave wasn't a get-rich-quick-kinda-guy. His life consisted of eating at airports and packing and unpacking for the next trip. He was looking for a way out.

The conversation changed to me. Both don't speak too much about their own lives.

"You're smart," my father said. "Good job. Good dog. Concentrating on your writing."

Both were the most supportive of my family about my writing. My father spoke of writing a novel for years. My uncle wanted to write a movie and a television show. He sent me a couple of scripts once. They were good. Too good to be left in a drawer.

When the waitress dropped off the check, I grabbed it before either of the men saw it and paid it.

Later, I visited Mara. I sat on the floor, back against her bed. “How was shopping?”

“You should call you Mom.” Mara packed her bags. We were leaving the next day to go back to Orlando.

“Did you tell her?”

“You should be the one.” She stopped packing and sighed, tired of this conversation.

“Don’t call her if you don’t want. I’m just saying.”

I grabbed Miley’s back legs and pulled her toward me. “You is so full of hatred. It’s eating away at Hankelford’s brain. You’re killing him, Miley.”

Mara sat next to me and rested her head on my shoulder and I let go of Miley. I closed my eyes, enjoying the quiet moment.

“My dad said he’ll get us a crib,” she said. “If we need any help with money, we just need to ask.”

I didn’t want to hear about having to borrow money, about living paycheck to paycheck.

“Did you hear me?” Mara poked my arm. “My dad says its fine.”

“No.” I shut my eyes and shook my head. “No. I can’t do it.”

She lifted her head from my shoulder, and asked carefully, “Can’t do what?”

“I can’t.” In the months to come, Mara would have outbursts during arguments about petty things and would say I forced her to have an abortion, that of course she would have one if that’s what I wanted. She couldn’t do it alone. I’d say I never forced her, I just asked her. But I knew she would do whatever I said. It was the only thing I was in control of. “I can’t take care of a kid. I can barely take care of myself.”

“You’re taking care of Hankelford.”

“I took real good care of him. My dying fucking dog who’s barely old enough to be called a dog and not a puppy.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” I wanted her to argue with me, to tell me that we could do it, that I was just letting stress get to me.

“I want it done before the new year,” she said. “I want it to be over.”

For a minute, we sat, neither of us looking at the other, before she returned to packing.

When I returned to my aunt and uncle’s house that evening, my father fed turtles in the backyard. Uncle Dave sat in a patio chair, and the two talked about wrestling. Both were coaches for different schools. Hankelford greeted me and I kicked off my sandals and felt the grass against my feet. The soil was cool. The grass itched. I sprinted from one side of the yard to the other. Hankelford followed trying to keep up. When we reached one side we’d slap each other and run to the other side. My father watched with my uncle for a few minutes and asked where I got the energy all of a sudden.

## TOMORROWLAND

### **Brain Tumors**

A brain tumor is formed when a mass of abnormal cells, which occurs due to a disruption in the cycle of cellular reproduction, grows and multiplies. Specific causes for the growth are unknown, but research has shown genetics, specifically mutations in a parent cell, may be at fault. A doctor may perform a variety of examinations in diagnosis, including a neurological exam, a CT scan, or an MRI. When the cells reproduce and the tumor expands, surrounding cells are damaged and pressure inside the skull and on the brain increases. Symptoms depend on the tumor's size and rate of growth, as well as the location of the brain receiving pressure. For example, the occipital lobe in the back of the head controls vision, while the brain stem controls breathing and heartbeat. Symptoms may include:

- Exhaustion
- Insomnia
- Loss of coordination
- Personality changes
- Excessive weight gain or loss

Steroids may help control these symptoms, but when treatment can no longer slow the growth of the tumor and it reaches critical mass, the patient will become increasingly tired. He or she will sleep for longer than usual. Waking the patient will become more difficult. He or she may be unconscious for weeks before dying.

\* \* \*

It rang. My phone rang. It was the vet—I didn't need to look—but instead of answering I paced from the snack machine against one wall of the breakroom to the sink against the other. The sound was off, and the vibration travelled up my arm. I'd waited three hours for the call, three hours since I had dropped off my Boxer, Hankelford, and gone into work to design some new flyers even though I had the day off and ended up spending the afternoon staring at a computer screen and talking to myself. I read the flyers on the chalkboard near the exit and the laminated sign above the sink that said, "Do NOT dump food into the sink. Use the garbage can." I knew I needed to answer, stop my hand from shaking, but I wondered how long could I go without answering. When was the last possible second I could answer before they were sent to voicemail?

Coffee pots were empty except for Decaf and German Chocolate Cake. Does it really taste like cake, I wondered. Or just coffee with a hint of cake on your tongue for two seconds?

When there was nothing left to read or study in the room, I flattened my red tie against my chest—I wore the red one on days I had something important to do. Red is associated with confidence and power. I flipped open my phone. "Hello."

"Mr. Ironman?" It was Caroline, Dr. Smith's assistant. During the course of Hankelford's treatment, she'd greet me in the morning when I dropped him off and again the afternoon when I picked him up. She'd call in the afternoon to say he was okay and I could take him home. Her voice was young and soothing.

I nodded as if it were customary to nod to someone on the other end of the line.

“Hank’s awake. A bit groggy but fine.” I pictured the brunette twirling the phone cord around her finger like we were teenagers. “His MRI came back. Good news, bad news.” She got right to it and didn’t ask which I wanted to hear first. “His tumor was destroyed.”

That’s what she said. *Destroyed*. Not only did the term not make sense with their original diagnosis—the best I could hope for is 50%—but also it seemed too commonplace. I expected a medical term. I expected to pause so that she would explain it to me, and that her explanation would use other terms I didn’t understand, which I would pretend I did understand and would mark it down in my pocket notebook to research later but wouldn’t because as long as he was healthy, what difference did anything else make?

“It’s still there,” she said, which confused me because destroyed made me think it wasn’t. “It’s dead though. It’s not growing. I’ll show you when you come in.”

“How?” I said, not caring how things worked only that they did or didn’t. I still thought ignorance could be comforting.

“Honestly,” she said. “We don’t know. We’re not questioning it. We’ll take what we can get.”

I bobbed on my toes and smiled. A miracle, I thought, since even the doctors didn’t understand and I found solace in that thought. I had been so worried about the checkup that I had pushed it back by a month, not wanting an answer, not wanting to know about how much time he had left.

Seven months earlier, when we found out about the huge mass as Caroline called it, they gave him three to six weeks to live. I went to the office thinking I’d be putting him down. Mara came with me even though we weren’t dating anymore, and before we walked into the office,

when we got out of our cars, she kissed me. She said nothing, just walked over and kissed me. It was different and I knew she didn't want to get back together or to fuck, but it was comforting and it almost made Hankelford's sickness worth it, almost.

When we left, I wanted a repeat, but she wouldn't. She came to be at my side when Hankelford was put down, but I didn't put him down. Once Caroline mentioned the possibility of radiation therapy, putting him down was off the table and the kiss along with it. Mara kept her distance when we left with Hankelford in tow and said, "You're actually doing it?" She said her mom was miserable in chemo.

"Chemo is everywhere. Radiation," I said and pointed at her head with my finger. "Radiation is specific." That was as much as I understood about the process, or wanted to understand.

"Hankelford's going to die." She then said some line about making him comfortable.

I turned so my back was to her and looked at Hankelford in the front seat of my car ready to go home. Even after we got back together and he was over halfway through with treatment, she was against it. Her dad said I was crazy, she told me one day at brunch.

I think part of her, even subconsciously, liked my decision. Especially once her pregnancy test came back positive. Or perhaps I prefer to think I was proving her wrong. Someone making sure something they loved took medication, ate right, got to the doctor's on time. I don't know what women expect from the father of their child—I never read any of those books Mara got—but I imagine caring for something else was a good thing.

Perhaps it made things worse between us—seeing me take care of Hankelford at the same time I convinced her to end the pregnancy. It didn't matter in that moment on the phone with

Caroline. Mara asking me to stop treatment. Mara's silence to me before, during, and after the clinic. My own migraines from stress. My doubts over the last six months.

In the end, it was all worth it. Mara would come home that night, come home to me, and I had saved Hankelford.

The doctors said it couldn't be done. Mara said it couldn't be done.

I'd saved him.

I had made all the right decisions.

## **Abortion**

According to most women, the abortion pill is the easiest method with which to end a pregnancy. It requires fewer doctor's visits and feels more natural than surgical options. This remains an option until the ninth week of pregnancy. When the pill is unavailable, the most common surgical procedure is aspiration. A hollow tube (cannula) is attached to a jar with transparent tubing. In order to provide a vacuum, a pump is attached. The tube is inserted into the uterus.

The suction, which is twenty-nine times more powerful than a household vacuum cleaner, removes the fetus either whole or in pieces. One woman once said it sounds like a child sucking the last of the lemonade through a straw. The amount of tissue removed is dependent on the length of pregnancy. At fifteen weeks, the fetus can taste the mother's meals and the mother can feel the first pulsing of baby kicks. Aspiration lasts about five minutes. This method may have side effects, such as:

- Damage to organs
- Vomiting and diarrhea

- General feeling of illness
- Hormone problems
- Death

After the fetus is suctioned, the tissue is examined to confirm that the whole fetus has been removed. A dilation and curettage procedure may be necessary if the suction failed to remove all of the tissue. To remove the remaining tissue, the uterine cavity is scraped with a hook-shaped instrument called a curette.

\* \* \*

I got so caught up in the good news, I forgot Caroline had some bad as well. She probably went right from the good to the bad, but in my memory it seems hours apart. I don't know what I expected the bad news to be. I had never looked. The long-term damage the brain tumor would have caused was foreign. I had never asked.

Caroline said, "He's developed a second tumor."

I sat in a chair that faced the snack machine and thought about the word *developed*. Like a photograph, in a dark room, in a bath, fading in as if it was there all along.

She said it was in his brain stem. I barely passed tenth grade biology, but I knew it was worse than the last one, which was at the front somewhere. Caroline spoke, but I stopped listening. What else was there to say? I had failed. It would be rude to hang up, but I thought about it because she might be more sympathetic to me. I held on and studied the snacks in the machine. *Only one Snickers left. Three Hershey bars with almonds. M&M's are packed. Both peanut and original. Peanut's better, but original can really the spot. Grandma used to give me*

*original when I was a child and we'd meet at the mall on Saturdays. What does M&M stand for? Morgan and Marion? Mikey and Monty?* It seemed very important in that moment to find out.

"Mr. Ironman?" Courtney's voice faded back in and I stood and paced and said, "Yeah."

"The tumor is small and usually we'd recommend surgery, but no one's gonna touch the brain stem. It would kill him."

Monty Burns, I thought. *I haven't watched The Simpsons in a while. The Planet of the Apes musical was the best thing that show ever did. Dr. Zaius. Dr. Zaius. Can I play the piano anymore? Well, of course you can. Well, I couldn't before. Doot doot doot.*

"We'd normally begin radiation therapy, but he just completed a round. Dr. Smith isn't sure he can go through it. We've reached out to Dr. Lurie for his opinion."

*I miss Phil Hartman.* On the day his wife shot him, I was at Disney World on an eighth-grade class trip. When Mom picked me up that night, his death was the first thing she said. I felt guilty for having fun while this man had his head blown away. A bullet blew out his brains, I thought, while I walked around Tomorrowland and rode Space Mountain and ate ice cream.

After I hadn't spoken for a few minutes, Caroline said, "I'm sorry," and said something about two to four weeks to live, but followed it up quickly with "It could be longer." But followed that up with, "Could be less."

Karma, I thought. For Mara. We'd talk further when I got there, she said and then hung up. I sat in the break room for...how long? A few minutes? Half an hour? When I left, I thought about calling Mara, but she wouldn't have told me what I wanted to hear.

For the first time in two months, I thought of the abortion. The night of, we watched the ball drop on TV and Mara said, Miscarriage. Tell them it was a miscarriage.

In the days following, when we climbed into bed, when everything else in life had been said and we couldn't escape into work or errands or setting up the new apartment that had a spare bedroom, I'd ask her how she was.

She refused to talk.

I stopped asking. By not speaking about it, we thought it would have no meaning.

One night, after Valentine's Day, still not ready to admit any regret, I asked again, and she actually spoke about it. We lay in bed, faced the ceiling with our dogs at our feet and she wiped her eyes while talking about repercussions. "I might not be able to have kids one day."

"You can go to a doctor," I said. "Get a check up. I'll pay."

"It's not that," she said, her voice sticky. "What if I'm going to Hell?"

I turned to watch her cry, but not to comfort her. I wanted to, well I guess that's not true or else I would have. *Wait*, I thought. *Since when does she believe in Hell?* In the two and a half years we had been dating, she was into reincarnation. Both of us attended Catholic high school, but neither of us would say we were Catholic. In the final months of her mother's cancer, Mara spoke about her mother returning as a giraffe. "Mom wants to be tall in her next life. She wants to see over everybody's head." Her brother, who had died years earlier, had returned as a butterfly, she once told me. Was this belief just easier? The thought of a person you love being out there somewhere in the world?

Do the unborn reincarnate? Do you have to be born to count?

I was more religious than she was when I was younger. I wanted to be an altar boy in the sixth grade. I knew abortion was against Catholic dogma, but I hadn't thought about it during her pregnancy. I hadn't thought about it until Mara mentioned Hell. I wondered what had happened

between sixth grade and the abortion to change me, but too much had happened to make sense of it.

“You’re a good person,” I said, but I said it more for me than her, and I patted her arm.

“You’re not going to Hell. We’ll have another Julie or Jackson someday.”

“No, we can’t.” She pulled her arm to wipe tears. “We killed our child.”

“If you feel bad about it,” I said. “You can do something to make it right. Be a good person. That’s how it works. Someone sins, then they do good and God says you’re good to go.” I tried to get myself to believe my words.

“Like what? What could make up for it?” She was crying more and just wiping and wiping her eyes.

“Well,” I said and tried to think of something. “You can volunteer with kids. One kid dies, but then you help another. It’s meaningful in a way.”

She said that wasn’t going to help.

We lay there in silence for a few minutes, until I said. “You’re not going to Hell.”

We stared at the ceiling until we fell asleep and never talked about it again.

\* \* \*

After Courtney showed me scans of Hankelford’s tumor, I took him home. Still uneasy from the anesthesia, he walked like he was high and drank from his water dish right away. When he was first prescribed with steroids, he drank so much I had to buy a water dish twice the size of his last one. Mara’s puggle, Miley came out to sniff him and welcome him home. I wondered if

she could tell he was sick. They say that about dogs. They're sensitive. I grabbed a bag of Beggin' Strips and gave one treat to Hankelford, and then threw one into the living room and Miley ran off to get it. Once she left, I dumped a few more strips in front of Hankelford. Miley returned to see Hankelford shoving down more treats and she looked at me. I put the bag down. "At least you're not dying."

I sat at my drafting table in the spare bedroom, my office, and tried to draw. Hankelford slept at my feet. I only drew gibberish.

My phone rang. I answered.

Dr. Lurie, Hankelford's radiation oncologist, said, "Mr. Ironman? Dr. Lurie here."

"I know." I paced in my office.

He said he had looked at Hankelford's new MRI. "I've never seen a dog so young get a tumor, nevertheless two so close together," he said, and I wondered if that made the news better.

"Since the tumor is in a new location, he might be able to handle another set of radiation therapy." He said something about risk, but I drowned it out with, "What's the difference? If he's going to die anyway."

He said treatment could begin on Monday and that it always begins on Mondays.

"I know."

He paused for a moment before he said, "If you want to treat him that is. I know it's a lot to deal with."

"I'm good." I shook my head and sped up my pace. "Yeah, I'm good." I knew Mara would be angry. I had told her many times during and after Hankelford's last treatment that he would be done—that there would be nothing more to do for him. But I told myself I could handle

it, that I could take him to the vet in the mornings and pick him up after school, that I could give him his pills at 7:30 A.M. and 7:30 P.M., that I could go a few more months of nights where I woke every couple of hours to check on Hankelford.

I knew how to do those things.

We said our goodbyes and hung up.

## **Radiation Therapy**

Once a brain tumor is diagnosed, surgeons will attempt to remove the mass. Surgery may be unavailable due to the size or location of the tumor. When this occurs, radiation therapy is the primary treatment. Instead of treating the whole body, like in chemotherapy, high-energy light targets selective tumor cells while normal tissue is left unharmed. Photons, electrons, or gamma rays strike the nucleus of a cell and damage the DNA. When the damaged cells attempt to reproduce, they die. In turn, the tumor shrinks. The idea is to kill as many tumor cells as possible and allow time for the normal cells to repair and repopulate the area. Most radiation treatments involve multiple small doses, usually between ten and thirty, instead of one large dose. This method may have side effects such as:

- Damage to organs
- Vomiting and diarrhea
- General feeling of illness
- Hormone problems
- Death

After radiation therapy is finished, an MRI is examined to confirm the status of the brain tumor. Sometimes the damaged cells do not die and only temporarily lose their ability to reproduce. Radiation therapy also increases the risk of subsequent brain tumors. If the tumor

remains, doctors may perform surgery to remove the remaining tissue, or, if surgery is still unavailable, radiation therapy may be repeated, depending on the health of the patient.

\* \* \*

I was still fooling myself that I was accomplishing something with drawing when Mara came home from work. She stood in the doorway to the office, careful to keep her feet firmly behind the wood block separating the room from the hallway. She said hello and walked away. She never came into my office. She had said, "It's your space. I don't want to interrupt or move something and then you get mad at me." When we searched for an apartment, we looked for one for a room for the baby. Even though we hadn't yet decided what to do, I said we should look for a two-bedroom apartment just in case. If we decided not to keep the child, then the room could be a guest room or an office.

I left my desk and went to her. She stopped in the kitchen and saw a T-bone thawing on the stovetop. "Oh, you making steak for dinner, baby? That's so nice of you."

I leaned against the counter. "That's for Hankel."

"You can't feed him this. It'll kill him."

I shrugged.

She walked to the bedroom. I followed.

"So what're we doing tonight? Eating out? We could meet my friends later at Roxy."

"I don't know. I spent like three thousand at the vet today."

"So, no date night?" She kicked off her shoes and took off her shirt.

"No."

She hated spending time in the apartment. She came back from a cruise with her father in February and said it didn't feel like home, even though I hadn't changed anything while she was away. "We can still go out. I just want to save some money."

She went to take a shower and I sat on the toilet seat. If only one of us needed to shower, the other would sit in there so we could talk. Although, I can't remember a time when I showered and she sat in there.

I said, "Hankel's checkup was today."

"I know."

I asked why she hadn't asked if she remembered. She said she was waiting for me to talk about it.

"He has a second tumor. In his brain stem. First one's gone."

"I'm sorry, baby," she said. "Maybe Hankelford is just not meant to live long."

"He'll be three next month." I spoke not to her but to myself.

She pulled back the curtain. "I'm just saying that *maybe* he was supposed to be part of your life for these three years, and now you're meant to do something else. Maybe Hankelford is meant to help someone in Heaven."

Fuck people in Heaven, I thought. I never understood why people fall back on *meant to be*. How could she think Hankelford was meant to die but thought the abortion would send her to Hell? How could some things be choice and others fate? For a moment it gave me comfort, but then I thought about Hankelford. "Meant to do something? Hankel isn't meant to die. He's not meant to do anything. He's supposed to be with me. He's starting radiation on Monday."

She returned to wash herself. "I thought they couldn't do anything more for him?"

“Since radiation worked so well last time, they think it could have the same effect this time.”

“Did they really say that?”

They didn’t, but I said, “Why would I lie? That’s what they said.”

For dinner, Mara cooked grilled cheese and chicken noodle soup. As we ate, she sat on the far side of the couch. At the time, I thought she hated Hankelford. Her child died so that meant my dog should too. Was I not supposed to take care of anybody ever again just because of the abortion?

At one point, I held half of my sandwich low enough for Hankelford to grab. He took it and ran off. Mara said, “Don’t give him the whole thing.”

I played innocent, and she said, “Punish him.”

“Yeah, a tumor on one side of his head and my fist on the other.”

She shook her head and stared at the TV. When the show finished, Mara said, “Ready to go?”

I petted Hankelford and stared at him. “Can we just stay in? I’m worried about Hankel.”

She didn’t speak for a minute and I didn’t look up. “Fine,” she said and walked into the bedroom. Her keys jingled so I stood and walked toward my shoes. “We can still go out.”

“No, I’m going out.” She still wouldn’t look at me. “You want to stay with Hankelford? Go ahead. I can’t stay in this place anymore.”

As she walked out the front door, I said, “He’s sick. This is what being a good person is about. Sometimes you have to do what you don’t want to do.”

## **Post-abortion Syndrome**

Most women experience relief and happiness after an abortion and do not come to regret the decision. The same applies to men. The American Psychological Association does not recognize post-abortion syndrome and many people have argued it is only a tactic used for political purposes by pro-life advocates. Yet, some women find it difficult to deal with the combination of relief and sadness after the abortion procedure. The opposing thoughts may cause some women to shut down emotionally. Although, research about men's reactions to abortion has been limited, there have been cases where a man's role in the decision to end the pregnancy have caused feelings of anguish and regret. Symptoms may include:

- Exhaustion
- Insomnia
- Loss of coordination
- Personality changes
- Excessive weight gain or loss

Social stigma associated with abortion may create a situation where women and men feel they do not have the "right to grieve." Many times, after experiencing grief following the end of the pregnancy, men and women may not associate their feelings with the abortion. Instead of dealing directly with their emotions, men and women may attempt to circumvent those feelings. This avoidance may turn into depression, and some people may become angry without realizing the source of their anger. Methods of avoidance may include: drug addiction, alcohol addiction, eating disorders, promiscuity, becoming pregnant again, and becoming a workaholic. Some women choose to never speak about their abortion, even to the father. Commonly, the relationship with the father ends shortly after the procedure.

\* \* \*

When the bars closed, Mara returned. I had taken a spare comforter and a pillow and slept on the floor of my office with Hankelford. I heard her drop her keys on the kitchen counter and walk to the bedroom before coming to look for me. When she opened the office door, she leaned in the doorway, a silhouette in the bright hallway. “You’re not in bed.”

I tried to say no with as little emotion as possible.

She got down on her hands and knees and crawled toward me. She was drunk and sweaty. Her shirt was crumpled and her hair was a mess. “Why wouldn’t you sleep on the couch?”

I shrugged. I hadn’t thought about the couch, only of the floor of the spare bedroom.

She poked Hankelford, who slept by my side. “Wakey, wakey, Hankelford.”

He stood and moved to another part of the comforter, far away from her reach, but she crept toward him and grabbed him by the collar. “This way, Hankelford.” She led him from the room and let go once he was past the doorway. He turned and stared at me as she shut the door.

We were alone.

Still on her hands and knees, she moved over me and we kissed. She tasted like vodka and cigarettes. I wondered what she had done that night, why she was sweaty and disheveled, and I knew we should stop, talk, but I didn’t want to know what she had done, not really. I didn’t want to face anything. She stopped, grabbed my chin, and looked me in the eye. “You’re the most important thing in my life,” she said and sucked on my neck. “The only thing.” She seemed

to be speaking more to herself than to me. Trying to convince herself. In six months, when she finally confessed to sleeping with another man, I decided this was the night where it all began, not with the abortion, but with fighting for Hankelford's life after giving up on the life that was in her.

Eyes shut, we kissed and stripped. We didn't so much fuck or make love as try to press our bodies together. I rolled over so I'd be on top, propped myself on my elbows, and held her head in my hands. We alternated between kissing and staring into each other's eyes.

"Come," she said.

I took her request as not just to finish, but to impregnate her, to rescue her from whatever had happened that night and whatever was going to happen the nights after. We could have had another child. Like with Hankelford, we had one more chance to do it right. I sped up and shut my eyes. I wanted to fulfill her request. I told myself I wanted to. But what was done was done and I pulled out, and finished on her stomach.

We said nothing and slept.

She woke me sometime later, maybe five minutes, maybe an hour. Her head was on my chest and her palm on my stomach. "I want to sleep in our bed. It's uncomfortable in here."

I kissed the top of her head and then stared at the fan twirling above us. The darkness hid it well and it could have been whatever I wanted to imagine.

"In a minute," I said. "Let's just lay here a little longer."

## ACT OF CONTRITION

For the first few years of elementary school, I attended CCD on Tuesday afternoons at Our Lady Queen of Heaven. My parents felt the Church was important in a child's life. One day when I was six or seven, all of the classes gathered in the chapel and the head nun told us about death. I sat cross-legged next to my teacher—I was shy back then and was nervous around kids I did not see every day in my regular school. *Once you die*, the nun said. *You can never come back*. She spoke of Heaven and Hell. If I was bad and hurt others, I'd spend eternity being punished for my sins in Hell. If I lived a good life and followed the rules, I'd be reunited with my loved ones in Heaven, except for my dog Jade—she would just die.

The idea of a dog not having a soul didn't make sense to me, or perhaps I refused to make sense of it, and when I got home, I hugged Jade and said, *I'll sneak you in*, as if she'd be waiting outside of the gates of Heaven and all I'd have to do is pull the fence apart.

My parents went out that night, and while my brother and sister were in their bedrooms, I knelt on the couch, my stomach against the cushion and my clasped hands hanging off the back. I prayed. Every few minutes, I stopped and tried to lose myself in the war my G.I. Joes were desperately trying to win against Cobra, but it wasn't long until I couldn't think about anything else and I returned to making the couch my pew. I felt foolish and would look down the hall to make sure my brother and sister weren't coming. I prayed not just so I could go to Heaven, but for my whole family to go as well. What was the point if those I loved went to Hell?

I hadn't memorized Catholic prayers yet, but I held my hands tight until they hurt and pointed them toward the ceiling and cried and begged and squirmed into the couch cushions before resetting my position. It must've been an hour before I gave in.

I promised God I'd be a good person—I couldn't imagine ever not being one.

## 1. Catholic School

In the sixth grade, I wanted to be an altar boy. It was my first year at St. Malachy's, and two boys I had become friends with were altar boys. It seemed like I would be accepted if I were one too—I'd share in that experience with them. When my mother got home from work, she sat on her bed and listened to the messages on the answering machine. I handed her the form and she said, "Another one?" In my switch from public to Catholic school I wasn't doing well academically or behaviorally, and she thought it was another note from my teacher.

"No, it's good," I said.

She read it. "Are you kidding me?" She handed it back, unsigned. "You never showed any interest before."

"I went to public school before. They don't have altar boys."

"I just got home. Don't bother me with this stuff." She lay down in bed and I walked off. From my bedroom, I heard her say that my father needed to pick me up right after school to get to work, anyway. I hadn't anticipated her saying no, even though she had done so the year before with the Boy's Club. My mother was Jewish before marrying my father, and I figured she didn't understand. She was an outsider.

Once, my mother and I were heading home after a shopping trip and we passed St. Malachy's. I told her the priest said our class needed to go to confession. We were brought into the church one day and taught the proper etiquette of confession—to kneel, to hold our hands and plant our elbows properly, what to say to the priest on the other side of the confessional box.

I tried harder to remember all the steps than I had in any other subject in school. If I failed an English test, I'd get a bad grade. But if I confessed the wrong way, God wouldn't forgive me for punching my little brother or lying to my mother about a bad grade and I'd spend eternity in Hell.

My mother waved me off while changing lanes. "There are much worse kids out there."

Sin being relative confused me, as if Hell had a maximum capacity and only a million of the most evil people who had ever lived would go there.

When I saw my father, I mentioned confession. He was in the back yard dissecting a red rat snake. Two others, covered in flies, hung from the fence. "None of that stuff matters," he said and cut the snake open down the middle. "There are all kinds of religions. Who's to say which one is right?" He stood and moved his hands as if he were a professor giving a lecture. "They're all the same anyway. Just don't be a jerk. That's all religion is."

I brought up that might be all well and good, but what happens when I die and stand before God in judgment.

"What difference does any of that make?" He seemed to get annoyed and got all worked up. "If Heaven and Hell exist, then you'll go to one of them. Just be a good guy, don't be a jerk to people for no reason, be nice to your little brother, and you'll be fine." He stopped talking and went back to the snake. Then, he said, "What kinda God would send you to Hell if you're not a bastard? I don't want to worship that guy."

I stopped talking to my parents about religion after that, even though we attended Mass on Sunday mornings. We didn't pray before meals or before bed. We didn't volunteer at soup

kitchens or donate to the poor. Mass was just something we did, like going to the dentist or to the credit union.

Trying to be good seemed doable on paper, but that was before I entered Cardinal Gibbons High School at five foot tall and eighty-five pounds. In the tenth grade, I was a member of Student Leadership and led groups around campus during eighth grade visitation. A history teacher thought I was an eighth grader. The class laughed and a cute brunette said, “Oh, he’s so cute. Look at him. He’s so small.” It’s hard to be good as a teenage boy who’s getting shoved into lockers and slammed head first onto the concrete floor of the locker room. I had to fight back, or I had to impress whatever boys I could. Once, I took a picture of a science teacher, drew a few dicks on his face, and taped it to the door to his classroom. I started a rumor that a student was sleeping with one of the Spanish teachers. She quit at the end of the year. Friday nights senior year, we’d go to the Galleria and sneak into the employee entrance in groups of two and head to the roof. We’d keep the door to the outside propped open with a rock and have Casino Night. We’d play Texas Hold ‘em and roll dice. One boy had a pair of boxing gloves and we’d have some one-arm boxing for entertainment. Those that were dating would sit off to the side, making out and giving each other hand jobs. We rolled dice during class as well. Once Sister Janet saw the dice on the floor and confiscated them. No one came forward to admit the dice were theirs, and after school, we went to Toys R’ Us, cut the plastic off a game of Monopoly with a Swiss Army knife, and got another pair. I don’t think I was a bad kid, but I knew what I did was bad. I’d see the other boys having fun, and, wanting to fit in, I’d push things too far. I told myself it was okay to be bad, just for that moment, just to fit in. After high school, I’d be

good. But there never comes a time when you stop being who you are and become who you want to be.

Catholic school had so many rules. It wasn't difficult to break one, or many. A girl I had been friends with in middle school left after ninth grade because she got pregnant. That wasn't allowed and neither was having an abortion. There was a clinic a mile away and if a girl wanted to go, she'd have to sneak in and out in fear that a teacher or faculty member would be driving by at that moment. She kept quiet until summer came. Then, she slipped away.

## 2. Confession

I was in the eighth grade the last time I had a proper Catholic confession. Before graduation, we had Confirmation, one of the seven sacraments. Confirmation makes one a true witness of Christ and the confirmed is obligated to spread and defend Christ through good deeds. The priest said it made one an adult in the church and was a choice, but we had to get confirmed in order to graduate. For the sacrament, we had to choose a saint. The saint should be someone we respected and who will pray for us in Heaven. The decision seemed so important and I put it off. Not wanting to choose a saint someone else had chosen, I went with St. Matthias because I read he was the patron saint of alcoholics and thought it was funny that alcoholics had a patron saint.

Before we could get confirmed, we had to go through confession. There were too many students to go one by one into the confessional box, so we were separated into small groups across the campus and multiple priests were brought in. I stood in line outside of the first grade classrooms in the garden. When it was my turn, I sat at a desk someone had brought out from the

classroom. There was writing on the inside where the pencils and books went. The priest faced me and we had no divider, which I heard was not proper but no one seemed to care. It was uncomfortable to look directly at the priest. I didn't understand back then what bad things really were so I told him how I fought with the other kids. He laughed—he laughed at me. I was embarrassed by my confession.

In Catholic school, the topic of religion came up often. Even outside of class. We discussed what we perceived as holes in the belief system. Like what could be forgiven. Religion teachers said that when a person confesses their sins to God, God would forgive them, no matter what that person did. God would never turn his back on us. That didn't make sense to me. Plus, I thought it was unfair to those who did good all the time. If someone did bad, they should be punished. And why did Hell exist if God never turned his back on us? Priests said we went to Hell because we turned on God. But who would choose Hell over Heaven? Why wouldn't everyone just confess at the end of his or her life? It seemed like God did turn his back on us.

A common topic in the parking lot before the morning bell rang was attending Mass and confession. The argument we offered, and one I supported at the time, was that if God was everywhere, why did we have to go to Mass? Why couldn't we just pray in our bedroom and go to Heaven? Or better yet, God could read our thoughts, so why did we need to say anything, couldn't God just know we were sorry, and then we'd be forgiven? We said the Church just wanted our money. We were sixteen and had no money, but that didn't matter. We were trying to get what we wanted—no judgment. We wanted a way to do whatever we could think of and have no repercussions, or at least repercussions we couldn't run from.

But God doesn't matter. I couldn't understand that in the tenth grade, didn't want to understand it. Thinking something and not speaking it out loud allows one to hide from it. To fool oneself. Even if it's not in front of someone else, saying something makes it real. Confession isn't about being punished, being told to say ten Hail Marys and twenty Our Fathers. It's not about facing God. It's facing yourself.

### 3. Eternity

I'm asked from time to time what religion I practice and I always say Roman Catholicism, although I feel guilty for not having been to Mass in years. I wonder if I ever really believed, not in God, not in an afterlife, but in Roman Catholic teachings, even in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. I can't remember ever believing.

But death still worries me. I repeat my father's words, but I find no solace in them. It doesn't matter what we think, what we believe, in the end.

I've come to the conclusion that I'm afraid of death, not because of Hell, which does still scare me, but I'm scared of Heaven too. Really, I'm scared of eternity. At night, when I'm staring at the fan and I'm alone, I squirm in my bed like I did all those years ago on the couch, and think about eternity, of a never-ending world. I like endings. I can start over again with an ending. There's hope. Hope of being someone new. Hope of correcting my wrongs.

Instead of trying to get myself to believe, I try to get myself *not* to believe.

Some nights I want to die. Not to go through the act of death. But to see the other side, like an astronaut blasting off into the cold black. To stop wondering. Sometimes I want to get it over with.

I once had a girlfriend, Mara, who believed in reincarnation. Her mother had died while we were dating. Her mother, she said, wanted to be a giraffe in her next life because she was so short in this one. She wanted to see over everyone's head. Mara's brother, who had also died young was a butterfly, according to Mara and her mother. Sometimes when we saw a butterfly, she wondered out loud if that was her brother saying hello. In the months before we broke up, Mara spoke about getting a tattoo with a butterfly and a giraffe in memory of her lost family. If I spoke to her again, I'd ask if she ever got that tattoo. I hope she would say yes and tilt her foot or her arm and there it would be, bright and clear.

She stopped believing in reincarnation while we were dating. I wondered if she ever truly believed. How does one stop believing, completely and truly?

She had an abortion. On the morning of New Years Eve, I drove her to the clinic and paid the receptionist. Then, I waited and, when it was over, pulled my car up to the entrance. That night, from our living room, we watched fireworks and the ball drop and began a new year, one for some reason we thought would be better. We decided not to talk about what he had done, to bury it like we couldn't bury our child.

I failed to though. I'd walk the aisles of Publix and watch the kids in the cart with their moms and dads, smiling and playing. A couple of years ago, I watched a friend play a video game based on Dante's *Inferno*. The character entered an arena and dead babies who weren't baptized crawled from holes in the wall and attacked him. I left the room. What happens to the children that aren't confirmed, who aren't baptized? It seems unfair for my child to go to Hell because of my decision. What would God have expected he or she to do?

Mara said she was going to Hell. Two months after, when I finally got her to open up, she said that. I wonder if the person who helps someone sin is as guilty as the sinner. Does that make me worse, calling her the sinner?

After we broke up, I went on a blind date and the woman asked why I no longer went to Mass. After our date, I wondered, and not having an answer and wanting comfort, I attended the following Sunday. I sat in a pew in the back and out of the way of the other churchgoers. Halfway through, the normal Mass stopped so that a child could be baptized. The moment of happiness was a welcome break in the somber ceremony. The infant girl was in a white dress, and everyone seemed happy, even me, when the priest poured water on the child's forehead. When Mass finished, the priest went to the back door and shook hands with people as they left. Afraid of meeting him, I took a side door and never went back.

That's what this is really about, isn't it? That's why I'm writing this essay. My confession. I know it's not literary, the confessional essay, or at least that's what I've been told. But all writing is confession—all writing seeks understanding. When I write an essay, I choose a subject I am curious about. No matter how long I've thought about something, when I write it down, I discover something new. I can figure it out. Isn't that why we confess to others? For them to understand us, for us to feel better that we are not alone. After I tell people my secrets, or share my essays, I feel lighter. Even if we just confess to ourselves, we look into the mirror or squirm in bed and speak out loud, we understand ourselves better. I once wrote in an essay that some things can never be forgiven. Maybe forgiveness isn't the point.

## CHASING SOMETHING IN THE NIGHT

Mara unwrapped the towel from her wet hair and lay with her back to me at the edge of our queen-sized bed. When I reached far enough for my fingertips to touch her shoulder, she rolled onto her stomach and tapped the cherry bed frame—a calling for her puggle, Miley. I wanted Miley at my feet, but Mara said, *Come here*, and pulled the dog to her chest. Before my Boxer, Hankelford, died, he would lie at the foot of the bed and stretch his paws until one touched my leg. Then, we would sleep.

I'm often asked why I stayed with Mara for so long after it was clear our relationship was over. I smile and say as if it were a joke, *You can't break up with someone who just had an abortion*. Then, after a moment of awkward silence, the subject is changed to something lighter. But that's not why I stayed, even if I failed to understand the reason when we were together. It had been seven months since the abortion, more than enough time to leave. She had spent the past four sleeping with Julio, although he was nameless to me at the time. I knew there was no saving our relationship—it was beyond saving. I also knew in an hour and a half the sun would rise, an hour after that I'd put on a tie and head to work, and then I'd come home to the same night we had been having for four months.

Yet still I lay facing her, my hand stretched across the steel blue sheets, waiting for her to roll back.

Before we climbed into bed, Mara showered and I sat on the toilet with the seat cover down, wearing boxer briefs, and picked my toenails. Her puggle pushed the door open with her head, and I said, *What you doing, Miley?*

She shook her butt, unable to wag only her short, curled tail.

*Go get Hankelford*, I said. *Go get Hankelford*.

She ran off, and I shut the door. Whenever I wanted her gone, I told her to get Hankelford. He had been dead two months, but she would still search the apartment for him. After looking in every room and behind every piece of furniture, she would return with her head low, having failed.

Water splashed against the tub, and I stared at the seashell curtain and imagined water running down Mara's face, her arms, her legs, and into the drain. She used to expect me to join, as if her saying *I'm gonna take a shower* meant *We're gonna take a shower*.

Eventually, she said, *How was your night? What did you do?*

*Nothing*. I stared at the red towel alone on the rack. *H.H.H.* was sewn near one corner—Hankelford Henry Hank. There was a sale the year before, and thinking how ridiculous it would be, I bought two. When they arrived, I unfolded one, showed it to Hankelford, and said, *Hankel, you so fancy*. He smiled and panted, happy I spoke his name.

Most nights, as Mara showered, I asked about school. She was less than a year from a Master's in Mental Health Counseling, but I was unsure if she would graduate—in the last two months, she had skipped a few classes and did poorly on a couple of term papers. Instead of studying at home or in the library like she had done in the past, she went to the T.G.I. Fridays where she worked as a server. She preferred studying there, she said, because she could drink and joke with friends. When I brought up school, she would talk about no longer wanting to be a counselor, no longer wanting to deal with other people's problems. She was sensitive about her future, and any topic that dealt with it began an argument, so I stayed quiet.

Our time in the bathroom was the best part of my day. I didn't want to mess it up. It was the only time we seemed intimate with one another. I spent most days alone. If I taught class, I came home after Mara left. When she returned from work—from Julio—I sat in the bathroom while she cleaned up. We talked then, and on occasion told a joke or two. Days I taught were easier because I spoke with students and colleagues as well. On days off, I sat on the couch with Miley as the TV went from show to show filling the room with sound. I only spoke to Mara and Miley those days. If I were lucky, instead of sleeping twelve hours and heading straight to work or class, Mara would wake in the afternoon in a good mood and ask me to run to the burrito shop around the corner. There, I'd talk to the cashier, perhaps a customer at the salsa station. That life seems so foreign now, so strange. At the time, it seemed right—I hesitate to admit it was wrong.

After Mara was silent for a few minutes, I pulled back the curtain to see if she was still there, just on the other side. Her head was tilted and she squeezed water from her blonde hair as if it were a washcloth.

*Close it, she said and let go of her hair. Water is getting on the tile. You want me to slip and break my neck?*

I did as I was told.

Before I followed Mara into the bathroom, my legs dangled off the bed as I watched her lean over the sink, naked, and pick at zits on her chin. I used to smack her ass on my way to the shower when she did that. She hated it. When she got really pissed, she waited until I washed the shampoo from my hair, until my eyes closed and my head tilted, to get me back. She'd hit me

harder, leaving a red handprint on my ass. Then, we'd giggle and hold hands, squirming to avoid another attack.

As she leaned toward the mirror, legs straight and ass out like a pin-up, I realized I had no sexual desire for her. She was attractive—she looked as if she had been in good shape but had relaxed for a year—just a bit of meat on her curves. I should have wanted to grab her, to kiss her, to fuck her. But I had no urge. I told myself I wanted to have sex with her, to make love, but only as a way to be close again.

She leaned too far and stumbled—She was drunk. For the past few months, she had been coming home inebriated. Blackouts had become a regular occurrence. It seemed impossible for her to leave our apartment and not drink.

I turned my attention to a dark spot Hankelford created on the wall near my nightstand. The night he died, instead of the usual minute-long seizure, he ran through the apartment yelping and ramming his head into everything he could find, as if trying to knock something loose. After making his way through every room, he gave in and lay next to my side of the bed with his nose against the wall, breathing heavily.

I looked up at Mara and whispered, *Why can't you just leave?*

But I must've been too loud because she shook her head and said, *This again? Yeah, I went out and fucked some guy.* She faced me and leaned against the bathroom door. *You think I'm some fucking whore? Fuck you.* It wasn't like her to curse. Whenever I cursed, she stopped talking to me.

At the time, I knew she was cheating, just not with whom or how often. But I still doubted myself. Even with her late nights, her emotional and physical distance, the smell of

sweat and sex when she walked through the door, the McDonald's soda cup in my office that she said was hers even though she didn't drink soda or eat at McDonald's, I believed she was right—I was nothing more than a jealous asshole. How dare I not trust her? We had lived together for eight months. Soon, we would celebrate our three-year anniversary. A month later, when she finally left and I found out I was right, I was angry, not just with her for sleeping with another man, but with myself for not trusting my instincts.

Mara returned to the sink. My fingers traced the lines carved into the wooden box on my nightstand. *Hank*. That's what the gold nameplate read. Hankelford's ashes were inside. Usually at the start and the end of the day, I touched the box—I wanted to remember when he was alive, when she spent the night with me, when I was not alone.

*So, tonight, Mara said staring at the mirror. All these guys were going around Eli's showing off pictures of their kids. They wouldn't stop. They wouldn't shut up about them. She stepped toward me and seemed to wait for me to speak, to say the right thing for once. But there wasn't a right thing to say. She was drunk and angry. She needed a release, and I was a willing participant. Do you know how that made me feel? She cried and didn't care to wipe the tears away. To stand there and listen to these men go on about their daughters, about going to the park, pushing them on the swings, about how they can't wait to see them again? How they can't imagine their lives without them?*

When she first began showing her anger to me, she blamed the abortion, about me asking her to have one. But she was either lying or unsure of why she was angry. For the first few weeks of the pregnancy, she wanted to get rid of the baby—I was the holdout. Maybe she was angry I changed my mind—that I left fear get in the way. Maybe she was angry I could change my

mind—that I was unreliable. Either way, these nights didn't begin right after the abortion—they began three months later, after Julio. If she was so angry, it would've shown sooner. Wouldn't it?

*I'm sorry.* I stared at the floor. *If you were unhappy, you could've come home.*

*You don't get it.* She paused and shook her head. *You don't get it.*

*I get it.* I knew by speaking I would only make it worse. I thought if she went all out, if she really lost it on me, she would've felt better, moved on. When I'm angry, I lift weights, ride my bike, wrestle the dog. I need to use all of my energy. I thought she needed the same. *You know I regret—*

She slapped me. *You don't get to do that. You killed our child. What does regret even mean?*

I believed her at the time—I wasn't allowed to feel sad. I asked her to have the abortion. Maybe it was because the pregnancy hadn't seemed real to me yet. Maybe I just thought we could have a kid later, that one aborted child meant nothing. Maybe I was so afraid of who I had become, so guilt-ridden over what I had done, that it wasn't until after Mara and I broke up that I thought about the baby. My regret wasn't because of the lost child. Before, she dreamt of helping families deal with cancer and illness. She wanted to be the person families depended on. After, I lost count of the empty wine bottles, the missed classes and low grades, the days spent in bed. Even now, I regret causing her depression.

I looked her in the eye. *It means it wouldn't be the same with another baby.* For a time, unbelievable as it sounds, I thought if we had another child we could be fixed.

She hit me again—harder. *Don't use that fucking word.* Baby. She pulled her fists to her chest, and with that, her anger was gone. Instead, she cried, walked back to the bathroom, and shut the door.

I lingered on the bed. *Why can't you just leave?*

At the time, I felt I needed a kind of Purgatory—that I should see her through this period of sadness. I'll never know why she stayed. In those months following Hankelford's death, I thought she took pleasure in seeing me beaten, like she was getting the last laugh. In a text message after she left, she wrote that she stayed because she wasn't ready to concede that the baby had come between us. Maybe that was the truth. Maybe she felt obligated to stay after Hankelford died. Or maybe she wanted to see how things would progress with Julio. Maybe there doesn't have to be only one reason.

Ten minutes later the shower started and the door opened. Mara said, *You coming to sit in here?*

Before I let her take her anger out on me, the front door opened and I pulled the black comforter to my chin and pretended to sleep. My arms were crossed over my chest and my legs were straight. That was how I slept as a child. The ends of the covers folded underneath me and my nose pressed against the wall—I couldn't do that in our apartment because the bed was in the middle of the room. I'd imagine a ghost, white with a rotting skull, smiling and sharing my pillow. If the sheets covered me completely, there would be nothing for the creature to grab. If my nose touched the wall, there would be no room for the ghost.

Keys banged against the glass dining room table. I realized I never put our couple's photo back on the kitchen counter, and I got nervous Mara would ask about it. She probably never noticed. The bedroom door opened. I shut my eyes.

Mara said, *Where's my Miley? Where's the best dog in the world?*

The puggle crawled out from under the bed.

*What you doing under there? He being mean to you?*

I used to wait on the couch for Mara to return home. Hankelford would sleep with his head shoved between my hip and the cushion, and Miley would lie against him. Mara's night finished earlier then—around two. She would walk in and say, *You don't need to stay up for me.* Her voice lacked surprise or sweetness—there was only annoyance. She would head straight to the bedroom without looking at me. When I pretended to sleep, she came to me, talked to me, kissed me. Maybe she liked knowing I was okay—that I could sleep. Perhaps I made it easier for her to spend her nights with Julio. Maybe I pretended to sleep so she wouldn't worry about me and leave for good.

Mara sat near my knees and waited. I imagined her staring at me and asking herself why she had come home. Finally, she poked my arm and said, *Wakey, wakey.*

How long could I have gone before opening my eyes?

*Your baby's home. Wake up and talk to me.* She sounded happy—happy and drunk. I'd take happy and drunk over sober and annoyed any day.

I wiped my eyes, pretending to wake. *Hello.*

*I'm home.* She threw her hands up as if it were a surprise party. The red wine she held nearly left its glass. *I'm home early just for my baby.* She poked my chest. *You're happy.*

I forced a large smile.

She put her lips to mine, but I hesitate to call it a kiss. It was equal to the poke she gave my arm. Her lips tasted like cigarettes. Before we dated, she had quit smoking, but had picked it up again sometime after the abortion. I hated smoking so she hid it from me. But over the last few months, a line of cigarette butts had formed leading from the parking lot, up the flight of stairs, and to our front door. I imagined her stumbling out of her car in the dark, desperately puffing away to get in that one last smoke.

I grabbed my cell phone charging on the nightstand and checked the time. It was a few minutes after four. *How are you early?* I turned the phone so she could see.

*You asked me to come home before 4:30. I'm early.* She crossed her arms, pushed out her lips, and pretended to pout. *Don't be a meany pants.*

I pointed at the wine glass. *Didn't realize we had wine.*

*Nope.* She drank some and shook the glass in front of my face. *From Eli's. I was in such a rush to see my baby, I didn't finish.*

I had given up telling her not to drink and drive. The year before, her friend left the same T.G.I. Fridays where Mara drank with coworkers in the parking lot after closing and died hitting a tree head on. She knew the risks. Most nights, after Fridays wore out its welcome, they continued at Eli's apartment. He was one of the dishwashers and might have introduced Mara to Julio, although I'll never know for sure. Mara rarely gave specifics about what happened at Eli's, but I pieced together a few things from mutual friends and the rare comment from Mara. I know about the heavy drinking and the cocaine. I know about the nights the police came. I know about a few men running a train on one of Mara's drunken friends. Most nights Mara left with a beer or

a glass of wine. I was amazed and horrified she could drive drunk with an actual glass of wine without spilling any. The week before, in a rush to get home after five A.M., she hit someone. She woke me and, in the middle of her greeting, said, *I hit someone*. She said it, finished her drink, and started the shower. I wondered if she meant another car or a pedestrian. I dropped the pretense of being woken and told her to tell me exactly what happened. It took her a few minutes.

A car had stopped at the light at the end of the exit ramp. *And I was trying to text you*, Mara said. *To get you to love me 'cause you're so mean to me*. She drove into the back of the car. I received no text message so I'm unsure if I should believe her. She said there wasn't much damage—the other driver just wanted to go home. The following morning, I checked her car. The front of the white Versa was dented and scratched but wasn't too bad. I still wonder if she stopped or if she just kept driving.

I was terrified that not only could she kill herself, but also that someone else could be hurt by our self destruction. A month later, after our usual Sunday brunch at Toojays, she went to work. At five A.M., when my calls and text messages went unanswered, I searched for her. I drove the twenty minutes from our apartment near downtown Orlando to her Friday's in East Orlando. I drove the length of Dean Road, where she once told me Eli lived but offered no specifics. When I headed home, I looked for police lights and found none. Brunch was the last time I saw her. The following evening, she texted me to say she was never coming home and that she would grab her things in a few days when I'm at work. That's when I realized she was alive.

I used to ask her to see a psychologist. She refused and said it was for crazy people. I found it odd that someone studying mental health counseling thought counseling wouldn't help. I

told her that's like me, a writer, not believing in reading. It's obvious now my staying did more harm than good. If I had left months earlier, or if she left, we might have been okay. But both of us stayed and helped each other get worse.

Before Mara returned home, Stuart knocked on my door. That might not have been his real name. I had used an alias—Henry. He could've done the same. I'm unsure of what I expected from a man I had found in an online ad, but Stuart wasn't it. He was three or four inches shorter than me, fifty pounds heavier, and dressed in short sleeve flannel and baggy cargo shorts. He looked like an overgrown child. As we stood in the doorway not speaking, I wished I had told him to meet in the parking lot instead of giving him my apartment number. I could've stayed inside.

Stuart walked past me, past my office originally meant to hold a crib, past the second bathroom I had wanted to decorate with dinosaurs but was now empty except for Hankelford's shampoo. Was the spare comforter still on the office floor where I slept some nights? He stopped in front of the master bedroom. *Nice apartment.*

Leaning at the edge of the kitchen counter, I noticed a photo of me and Mara standing in front of her old, red mustang. My mom had taken it when she first met Mara. I laid the frame flat on the counter and pushed it under some coupons from the paper.

Stuart studied the room, and I wondered if he had a gun or a knife. In the Sentinel, there seemed to be an endless amount of news articles about people meeting online for sex or to sell couches and TVs and the person who showed up killed the other one. I wanted him to have a

knife, a jagged one. I wanted him to slam me against the glass coffee table, for shards to cut into my flesh.

Instead of taking my usual spot on the couch, I sat in Mara's on the opposite end of the L. It never crossed my mind. I sat there as if it were natural for me to sit there. Stuart looked confused, but then took my usual seat. He must have wondered why we weren't in the bedroom.

Miley ran to him—I had forgotten about her. What was I planning on doing with her? He petted her and said, *Cute dog.*

I said, *She's my girlfriend's*, and wondered what he'd say knowing I have a girlfriend.

*When will she be home?*

It took me a minute to answer. I needed to calculate a time soon enough to get Stuart out, but not too soon that he'd question why I invited him. It was just after ten. She would come home at four at the earliest. I had asked her to come home early, but I knew asking was useless. *Not until midnight.*

*Mine won't be home until three.*

What pushed him to go behind his girlfriend's back? Why not just leave her? I wanted him to tell me—I wanted to ask—but he came for only one reason.

*We should get started.* He rose and headed to the bedroom.

I followed.

Was I so lost?

A couple of hours after Mara left for work, I stared into the bathroom mirror, pushed the tip of a steak knife into my wrist, and watched blood streak across my arm. It had taken me a few weeks to get that far. At first, I would stare into the mirror for hours, studying the beard I had

grown since Hankelford died, studying the wrinkles near my eyes. Then, I would pace between the office and the master bedroom mumbling, acting out conversations I had planned on having with Mara. After a couple of weeks of that, I introduced a knife. I would lay it beside the sink, stare at the mirror, then at the knife, and then back at the mirror.

That night I wanted to use it. Blood hit the sink, and I wondered how far I needed to push, how close I could get to the artery without tearing it. I put the knife down. Slitting my wrist would be too easy, too quick.

I walked out to the living room and sipped Jameson I had left on the coffee table next to a cold plate of broccoli and vegetarian chicken nuggets Mara had bought for me. I hadn't been eating unless Mara was with me. She wouldn't force me to eat, but I felt like I could when she was close. When she was gone, I'd get hungry, but then I'd think about Mara, about Hankelford, about myself, and I'd forget to eat, even if the food was in front of me.

I checked my cell phone. Jon had left me a message. He had been trying to hang out for a couple of months, but I had stopped returning his calls. After I drove Mara home from the clinic, we invited Jon over to celebrate New Years and watch the ball drop on TV. She wanted him there so it wouldn't just be the two of us. Before he arrived, Mara said, *Don't tell him. Don't tell anyone.* To those who knew she was pregnant, I said she had a miscarriage. It no longer felt comfortable to be around friends and family—to have that secret between us, to hear them say how sorry they were about the baby.

After a few more glasses of Jameson, I searched for ways to punish myself, ways that would last. Whatever I found needed to be worse than what I had been doing. If I built a tolerance, it would cease to be punishment. I also needed human contact—I was desperate for it.

Not sex. To be embraced by someone. Maybe I wanted to cheat—to have Mara walk in and catch me—for her to hurt. Maybe I didn't want to worry about a woman getting pregnant. Or maybe I just wanted to be someone else, someone completely different. Maybe it was for more than one reason.

So I found Stuart.

Since that night with him, I've found studies of men doing the same after an abortion. Reasons were difficult to pin down because of the limited research being done. Every study seemed to be written in a way that said it was all right, that it's normal to feel so lost. I had hoped researching would help me somehow. To this day, knowing I'm not alone doesn't make me feel better.

Stuart stood near my dresser and turned toward me. I lay down on Mara's side of the bed and stared at the fan as he shut the bedroom door. He lay on his side, head propped up by one hand, and faced me. *You look nervous.*

*No.* I doubt I was convincing.

He kissed me. I had never kissed a man. There was a softness, a sweetness, to Mara's kiss, even in a passionate one. At first, Mara would be hesitant, but then came a moment when her inhibitions would be lost and she trusted me. A moment when I was the center of her world, when I was important. Stuart was aggressive. His tongue rammed through my mouth like a cop searching for contraband. His wet lips slid over mine, never taking hold. It didn't matter who he kissed.

After a few minutes, he pulled back, and I hoped he wasn't into it and would leave. But he took off his shirt, and then mine. Stretch marks ran down his stomach and hips. Black hair

covered his gut, but not his chest. He smelled and felt like he had been soaking in a sauna. He took off the rest of his clothes, except for his blue-striped socks. His dick was short and fat, like the rest of him. I shut my eyes as he stripped me. His hands were damp. He kissed me, and then worked his way down to my neck, down to my nipples, and further down. I stayed soft. It was difficult enough getting hard for Mara—it wasn't going to happen with Stuart.

In Catholic school, I learned about STDs, about AIDS. I wondered if Stuart had something. Years later, I'd know he was clean, or at least failed to infect me, but that night, for a moment, the quickest of moments, I hoped he was infected. I would suffer. Would I have forgiven myself then? I want to say yes, that it would be more than enough, but at the time I knew nothing would ever be enough.

I turned and stared at Hankelford's wooden box. I was supposed to be the strong one—the one everyone depended on to save them. That's what my father said when Hankelford was diagnosed with a brain tumor, when he told me to put Hankelford down. *You need to be strong. This is what being a man is about. Doing the right thing even when it makes you feel shitty.* But I didn't put Hankelford down then. I put him through radiation therapy, refusing to stand back and let him die. Because of that, I lost him and Mara. I should have snapped out of my depression, out of blaming myself, but at the time I felt I needed to be punished for not being the man I thought I was supposed to be.

Why did Stuart continue? Was he so desperate for sex? He must've known I wasn't enjoying myself. How many doors had he knocked on? How many times had he continued with a person like me? Eventually, he lay back and masturbated. I did the same and stared at the carpet in front of the closet. When Mara and I went to the gym in the months following the abortion,

before Julio, we would watch each other run and lift weights on opposite sides of the room and when we would get home, on our way to the shower, we would kiss and fuck on the floor, unable to make it to the bed.

I stayed on that thought, but it didn't work. When my arm tired, I said, *Yeah*, and pretended to finish. I even wiped my stomach with my T-shirt. Then, I waited.

Stuart said, *I'm close. Where should I go?*

I shrugged, wanting to be left alone. He got on his knees and masturbated over my stomach. My eyes were closed tight when he finished. It felt cold as it hit near my navel and dripped down my side. He dressed, and, leaving, said, *If you want to do this again, let me know.*

It took me an hour to get up. After, I sat in the shower until my fingers were wrinkled and I had scrubbed myself raw so that warm water stung. What if Mara didn't leave for good a month later? What if she stayed another month? another week? another day?

What else would I have done to myself?

Before Stuart, months before, I thought I was in control. Hankelford lay next to me on the couch with his head on my thigh. Even though he was in his second round of radiation, I still had hope. Mara was driving home after switching shifts with a co-worker so we could have date night. She was more distant than before the abortion, quicker to anger, but I still felt we could be who we were.

Mara walked in, dropped her purse, and kicked off her shoes. *Want to go downtown? Or maybe a movie? We could do both.* She didn't wait for me to respond and headed straight to the bedroom to change.

As she took off her shirt, I stood in the bedroom doorway and said, *Let's stay in. Hankel had a bad day at radiation. I had to carry him up the stairs.*

*He's a dog. He's fine.* She looked at Hankelford who sat at my feet. *Aren't you, Hankelford? You fine?*

*The vet bills are adding up. Eighteen thousand.* I stared at my dog as I spoke and rubbed his back with my foot. *Why don't we get Chinese from that place you like and watch a movie or something?*

She said, *Fine*, and put on sweatpants and a T-shirt. I spent the movie petting Hankelford and feeding him popcorn. She spent most of it on Facebook.

Before the pregnancy, before Hankelford's sickness, we spent days off at Busch Gardens. Mara liked the roller coasters and I liked the animals. We would leave Hankelford and Miley at my place, a house I rented with Jon. Before we left, I'd let them run in the backyard until they were exhausted so Jon would be spared two hyper dogs. When it was time they came in, I'd open the back door and Miley would rush inside, but Hankelford would stay out there. If I let him, he'd spend all day in the sun chasing lizards and digging holes. The entire world excited him. I'd look at Miley and say, *Go get Hankelford, Miley. Go get Hankelford.* She'd turn, butt shaking, and Hankelford would be there. If Jon or Mara called him, he'd ignore them. When he heard me say his name, he always came. Later at Busch Gardens, we'd call the animals Hankelford names. *Check out that long-necked Hankelford. That one's a horned Hankelford. That Hankelford has a trunk.* We even pointed at fat people and said, *Look at that big 'ole Hankelford.* If the fat person had a child, we said, *Look at that Hankelford and his Miley.*

Both of us did. She liked Hankelford then.

When the film's credits rolled, Hankelford and I went to bed. Mara joined a couple of hours later after Facebook grew tiresome. We slept close. We didn't cuddle, but we were close. Or maybe we were just closer than we were when the worst of us came.

In the middle of the night, Hankelford removed his paw from my shin. I was a heavy sleeper in non-Hankelford situations, but I had gotten used to waking when he moved. Most of his seizures came at night. I rarely had a full night's sleep in the thirteen months he was sick. Usually, I'd wake every two hours and pet him until I fell back asleep.

He stood on the edge of the bed, ready to leap.

*You okay, Hankel Baby Hankel? You need water or something?*

He jumped.

I crawled to the foot of the bed and watched him wander the room. *You okay, Dr. Hankelford?*

He stared at me—I could see it in his eyes. No recognition. A seizure was coming.

Mara sat up. *What're you doing?*

*Hankel's gonna have a seizure.*

*You can't tell that. He just wants to sleep on the floor.*

*I think I know my Hankel. He never wants to sleep on the floor. He wants to sleep with me.*

*You just want him to sleep with you.* She lay back down.

He did have a seizure. If I watched closely, I could see it move through him. He shook his head and stepped back as if trying to escape. Then, his neck straightened and he bit into the air—it looked as if he was howling at the moon. His eyes rolled back until they were all white.

His single, white paw curled inward as if it was in the midst of being deformed. Finally, he lost his balance, fell, and shook. Foam spilled out of his mouth and ran down his jowls.

I ran to him. We sat on the floor near the closet, and I petted him and wiped his mouth with my hand. *You'll be okay, Hankel. You'll see. Hankelfords don't die. That's what makes them Hankelfords.* What could I have said? *You'll get better. Everyone will see.*

Was Mara asleep or was she pretending? Would I have done the same if Miley were sick instead of Hankelford?

As I ran my hand through his brindle coat, I pressed harder and harder. Even now, I hesitate to admit it, but I thought about breaking it, his neck—I thought of squeezing it, of snapping it. When the vet would ask what happened, I could have said he fell off the bed, mid-seizure. If the vet didn't believe me, I could have said I was so worried, I rushed toward him and didn't know my own speed, my own strength. They would believe that, wouldn't they? That I hurt him on accident? That I hurt him trying to protect him? That's possible, isn't it?

But I didn't want to break his neck to end his suffering. I could've understood that—I could've been okay with that. I wanted him to die, not so he would be put of his misery, but so I'd be put out of mine.

When I eventually put him down, I was alone. It was one of those nights Mara spent with Julio. The vet at the emergency clinic said more Phenobarbital might stop his seizure, one that lasted two hours. Hankelford might've had more time—not much, but another month, another week, another day. I was given a choice, and I chose to kill him. Did I not believe the medication would work? Or was I too exhausted to care?

When it thundered or other dogs barked, he ran to me—he needed me. And I know that a part of me, nearly all of me, just wanted it to be over.

That night in our bedroom, as his seizure calmed, I stared at Mara. I wanted her to sit beside me, to pat my hand and hold it in hers. It's too easy now to see my fault. I told her we'd be a family, and then I got scared. She thought if she had the abortion, she would still have me. But she didn't. Call me naïve or stupid or both, but I just didn't think about her after. She wanted to forget about the abortion. She refused to speak about it. I thought it was no problem for her. In and out—like getting a wisdom tooth pulled. It hurt for a day or two, maybe a few, and then she moved on. Maybe she was. Maybe she wanted to know I was there, that she was important to me, that she wasn't second to a dog. Maybe she was angry that I gave in so easily with the life inside her but fought so hard for the life of my dog. She could've cheated for other reasons. She had in previous relationships. If I had the chance to go back in time, nothing would change. Even if it were wrong to put Hankelford first, even if it does in Mara's words make me an asshole, I'd do it again. He was so close to death. He was diagnosed on a Wednesday afternoon, and the vet was unsure if he'd make it to Monday when treatment began. Mara was sad, but alive. Without me, Hankelford would've had one less year, a third of his life, but I thought Mara could still go on. Maybe I didn't want to choose. To me, it wasn't a choice. Death is more important than grief, regardless of whether it's a person or a dog. Not having a tomorrow is more serious than spending the day in bed.

After Hankelford died, I concentrated on Mara. In part because I felt guilty for not being there for her, and in part because she was all I had left. We took trips to the beach with her friends. We spent weekend afternoons before her shift at Fridays at the mall. She wanted me to

dress preppy, so I did. I changed my entire wardrobe—new shirts, shoes, pants, underwear. I met her and her friends at Universal Studios after work. We rode roller coasters and drank pints and shots at the bars. We stumbled and leaned into one another on our way to the car. When she had a Saturday night off, the first in months, I researched the most romantic restaurants in Orlando. She wore a new dress. I bought cologne and wore a new suit. At dinner, we joked and held each other. But nothing would be enough.

Before it all, years before, our mutual friend, Dan, introduced us. I came back to the townhouse I shared with Dan after a date. Mara was in the kitchen, visiting to check out the university. Dan mentioned my girlfriend, and Mara said, *You can do better*. Eventually I broke up with that girlfriend, and by the time Mara and I reconnected, she was a sophomore and I was a senior. We didn't date until after I adopted Hankelford, but we had fun and knew there was a mutual attraction. One Sunday, Mara invited me over for ice cream. She had gone to the store with her roommate and returned with a pint. I didn't want ice cream, but I wanted to be with her. Everything was a joke to her. Like me, she was never serious back then.

We sat at a table in the dining room, while her roommate watched TV on the couch. I hoped her roommate would leave, but after a few minutes I forgot he was there. We pushed the ice cream back and forth and shared a spoon.

She told me about studying psychology, about how she wanted to help families deal with cancer, like she was with her mom. I remember how passionate she was about her career. She said, *People just need someone to talk to. It's so important just to be there*. She asked what I studied.

*Digital Media.* I lacked the passion she had for her field and felt lesser than her for it. I told her how I thought of dropping out, about the deal my mom made so I wouldn't. If I graduated and got a job and a place to live, if I was an adult, my mom would get me a dog.

Mara took another spoonful. *What would you name it?*

*Hankelford.* I told her about how I'd pull him in a little red wagon, about how he would love to lick people and how those people must allow him to lick, about how my future children would ride him as if he were a small horse.

*How do you know he's gonna do all that?*

*I think I know my Hankelford. We're best friends after all.*

She laughed—I loved her laugh. She would lose control and sway, even snort. She could never hold anything in.

The best part of looking back is that I get to see everyone get better. Mara doesn't vanish in the night. She smiles again and nearly falls out of her chair, failing to hold back her laughter. I get to remember when Hankelford was just an imagination, an imagination that was never sick.

A few months after Mara and I broke up, I dated Abigail. But I wasn't the same as I was before Mara. I didn't tell silly jokes, didn't share my planned future—didn't have one to share. I was quiet, guarded. After two months, I grew annoyed with myself, and after our date one night, I invited Abigail back to my apartment. Most of the furniture was gone, most of everything. I thought if I got rid of it all, I'd move on. I gave Abigail an essay I wrote about Mara. The essay lacked Stuart. It lacked most of it. But it was a start. I thought if she knew, even a little, I wouldn't be as protective of myself. I could relax. When she finished reading, she yawned and went home to sleep. On her drive, she sent a text message. *Don't worry. I'm not judging you.*

I never saw her again.

That's the worst part. Some things can never be forgotten or forgiven. I will never be who I was, no matter how much time has passed. I want to go back to eating ice cream and being silly. I want to go back to when Mara still had pretty dreams and Hankelford was just a name in my head.

After Mara and I finished the ice cream, her roommate said, *Dan's on his way.*

*Let's play a game.* Mara grabbed my hand. It was the first time we touched. She led me to her bedroom. Pinks and yellows were everywhere. UCF logos and Britney Spears covered the walls and furniture. When we moved in together, our place was only dark wood and white walls.

*Let's hide,* she said. We looked around, but there was no place big enough for the two of us. She threw the covers off her bed. *C'mon.*

We jumped in and hid underneath her comforter. We faced one another and tried to lie as flat as possible. We still held onto each other even though there was no longer a reason.

Her roommate greeted Dan in the living room, and Mara whispered, *He's here.* Her smile was so large. She was so excited to play—it excited me too. I studied the blonde hair curling over her ear. I studied her lips, her cheeks. Her skin seemed to glow with the blood rushing underneath.

I smiled and held a finger to my lips. *Sssshhhh. I'll protect you.*

## RECEIPTS

For years, I've kept a stack in a folder in my nightstand. The cover of the plastic folder is divided into four rows and four columns, with a cat or a dog in nearly each one. It was given to me at East Orange Animal Hospital the day I first brought in my Boxer, Hankelford. A red square in the second row, second column, reads, "my important documents." The folder is overstuffed with credit card slips and other papers.

Most receipts are older than half a decade. I never look at them, think about them. But I keep them—I'm protective of them. No one else is allowed to touch any of them, read any of them. In my apartment, I have only one photograph of Hankelford. But I have almost every veterinary receipt from the thirteen months he was sick. I keep them like I keep movie stubs from every first date I've been on, hidden yet easy to access. When I read one, study one, I don't see the price I paid, what I lost. I only see what I was willing to lose. I see a time when I thought I could go to work, earn dollars and dimes, and exchange those for time.

At the top of the pile are two postcards with their envelopes. The first envelope, white and ripped at the top, is from Affiliated Veterinary Specialists and has a yellow sticker from the post office stating the letter was forwarded. I forgot to update my address when I moved halfway through Hankelford's radiation treatment. Inside, the card has a dark green background with a forest of dead trees. Paw prints imposed on top of the forest walk toward sunlight in the top right. It reads, "Good Friends leave paw prints and fond memories in our hearts." On the back it states Sole Source, your best source for veterinary cards. It lists a URL for a website.

The website reads, "We know how important it is for you to keep your practice strong and growing. Sending the right pet sympathy card will go a long way in building client loyalty.

Includes your choice of white, green, blue, yellow or purple colored envelopes. FREE Envelope imprinting of your return address on orders of 200 or more!”

There are 209 designs across eighteen pages under the heading sympathy. Mine, called *Forest Light*, is on page five, #V GC 1304C. Fifty-one dollars for fifty cards, but if you buy a thousand you only spend \$482.

Dr. Lurie, Hankelford’s radiation oncologist, is the first signature on the inside at the top. Before I met him, I didn’t realize dogs had radiation oncologists. Maybe it was because I barely passed high school biology, but I didn’t know medication for humans and dogs was the same, just different doses. Dr. Lurie wrote, “He was a really great guy and he will be missed by all of us at AVS who knew him. Please know you did everything possible to help him.”

Why did he write that last sentence? I guess he’s done this enough. He knew what I’d ask myself, even after two treatments of radiation therapy over thirteen months. To me, May 14<sup>th</sup> will be remembered as the day Hankelford died, but to Dr. Lurie it was just another Saturday. How many dogs has he treated? How many died? Lived?

Caroline is next. She greeted me most mornings I dropped him Hankelford off for treatment and handed me the end of leash when I picked him up after work. Most Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, she left a voicemail while I was teaching a class. “Hank’s doing well,” she’d say. “You can take him home whenever you’re ready.”

Not counting her signature, she wrote eight lines—eight lines that start small on the left, and, by the end, the letters are twice the size. Her Ys don’t curl at the end—the line drops straight down. Her Ms are rounded at the top, not sharp. Her Ss are short and fat, as if there’s an anvil on top of them. She calls him *Hank*. They all called him Hank—all the vets, the office staff,

my friends, my family. They didn't know Hankel is the shortened form of Hankelford, not Hank. When I adopted him, I noticed everyone calling him Hank, so I made his full name Hankelford Henry Hank. I covered all my bases.

She wrote, "Hank will never be forgotten here at AVS." I appreciate her sentiment, but I doubt her words. AVS's website states, "Over 70,000 dogs since 1992."

Two more names are on the card—Emily and a name I can't make out—Kristiseinte, Kristislinte, Kristisliunta? I don't know who they are. They've blended in with the rest of the office staff at the half dozen vet offices I visited in those thirteen months. "If there's anything we can do please let us know." What would I have asked them for?

In the months following Hankelford's death, I planned on writing AVS a letter. I planned on donating money, as if I hadn't given them enough. I wrote it on my To-do list, and when I needed another page for my To-do list, I wrote it again, and again. I'd sit down with pen in hand but nothing to write. What would I have said? Thank you? It sucks that he died anyway? I told myself I should write to them to thank them, to tell them I appreciate them. But, now, I know what I wanted was to let them know I was okay. I had been with them for the last ten months of Hankelford's life. I felt connected to them—Dr. Lurie, Dr. Smith, Caroline. We had fought together to save his life, and after, I lost them too. It took me a few months to realize that, to understand even though there was a life between us, I knew them only as doctor, and they knew Hankelford as patient and me as patient's owner.

*Over 70,000 dogs since 1992.*

The second envelope is an off-yellow. The Animal Emergency Center is printed on the flap. This is where he died, where I put him down.

The card's image is a close-up of a hand holding a paw. In white cursive is "Friends Forever." Another Sole Source creation. Page thirteen, #V GC 0929C.

The website states, "Sole Source Greetings is a three time International Greeting Card Association Louie award winner!"

An award winner.

There's a photo of the staff on the About Us page. At least forty, maybe fifty men and women in the oval image. Their families were fed off of sympathy cards, off bone-shaped sticky notes, off appointment cards. They go to Disneyland. They celebrate Christmas, Hanukah.

The inside of the card contains names of people I don't know. I wonder if in the morning over coffee they sign a stack of cards for the owners of pets who had died the night before. I had never been there before that night.

A few months after his death, I drove past the Animal Emergency Center. Half the building was torn down. A crane was parked outside. I smiled and thought the place where Hankelford died should be torn down.

A year after his death, I drove by again. It had been rebuilt. Gave it a new paint job. I paid four hundred. Now they have a fancier workplace.

I put that card away.

Next is a small white envelope with no stamp—it must not have been mailed alone.

Inside is the Rainbow Bridge, a short story about meeting your pet in heaven, along with a picture of a park with a bridge over a stream and a rainbow in the sky. There's a website at the bottom of the story. Please visit our peaceable kingdom at [www.rainbowsbridge.com](http://www.rainbowsbridge.com)

The Rainbow Boutique. I can buy pet bereavement poems. Memorial DVDs. Pins. I can buy a \$25 gift certificate for a friend or family member.

I have two copies of the Rainbow Bridge. One on 8 ½ x 11 stuck to my fridge and this small sympathy card.

On the inside of the card is a certificate of cremation from Greenbrier Memory Gardens for Pets. Hank Ironman was cremated on May 17. There's four choices for what to do with the remains.

1. Interred in Section \_\_\_\_ Lot \_\_\_\_
2. Scattered on Cemetery Grounds
3. Returned to Owner
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Returned to Owner has an X in the box to the left of it.

I didn't receive them until almost June though. *We tried to call*, the receptionist said, *but the phone number was dead*. I told myself they were incompetent. But I may have written the wrong number in a rush to get in the room with the vet that night.

Underneath is a red, heart tag for his collar. *Register tag with awolpet.com to protect this pet.*

I never registered. Never read the text.

There's a card from AVS, an appointment card. *2wk Recheck Monday 5-16 @ 3:30*. He made it twelve days after his second round of radiation finished. Eleven actually. I guess you can't count a day if he only made it three hours and thirty-seven minutes into it.

Eleven seizure-less days.

Eleven days of walks, of tug-of-war.

Eleven days of Beggin' Strips and steaks.

Radiation therapy was eighteen treatments, plus days to recover. Eighteen treatments to get eleven days. He had two sets of treatment. One for each tumor.

I don't remember those eleven days. I know what we must have done, what we had always done.

A bookmark, off-white with a heart and a poem.

On the back, it states, *Remove adornment from the Bookmark, plant in your garden and wildflowers will blossom in memory of your loved one. Plant in 1/4" to 1/2" soil, keep moist. Cut along dotted line.*

I have no garden.

A website for a veterinary hospital and luxury pet resort is at the bottom next to a note that states it's 100% recycled cotton. They have an underwater treadmill. Acupuncture therapy. Massage therapy.

Next is a bill. May 14. Invoice number 48637. Animal Emergency Center, Inc.

Diazepam Injection 5mg. Quantity four. \$40.88.

Euthanasia 20-70lbs. Quantity one. \$55.00.

Catheter IV euthanasia. Quantity one. \$52.00.

Cremation Private Dog 30-50lbs. Quantity one. \$175.00. He was fifty-five pounds. Did they not weigh him, or were they giving me a deal?

Emergency examination. Quantity one. \$85.00.

Biomedical Waste Charge. Quantity one. \$8.91.

Total \$416.79.

Luckily, my father had given me a few hundred for my birthday. I was nearly broke when I paid. This tipped the total cost just over \$21,000. Maybe more. I stopped counting in those final months. A month before he died, when he was halfway through his second round of radiation, my pay was cut by \$10,000 per year. I used what little I had left in savings, tutored on the weekends at the library, ate ramen for dinner, skipped lunch.

The doctors don't tell you that, what it will really cost, what it will do to you. When he first got sick, it was \$150 for blood work. Then, \$300 for a liver test. The MRIs get expensive, but that's not until later.

At first, it seems so easy. I won't buy as much on Amazon this month. I'll only put \$300 into savings instead of \$700. I'll pay and he'll be home that evening, healthy and happy.

I paid one day to get to the next. There was no plan.

It's blackjack. Once you've bet \$10,000, what's another \$2,000.

For a bit before he was sick, I researched cloning. A company in South Korea would have done it for twenty thousand. After he died, I joked that it would have been cheaper to clone him than try to save him.

When they brought me the paperwork to kill him, I had four choices.

1. Euthanasia without me in the room. Not given ashes.
2. Euthanasia without me in the room. Given ashes.
3. Euthanasia with me in the room. Not given ashes.
4. Euthanasia with me in the room. Given ashes.

Each option with me by his side was one hundred dollars more than not being there. Was there a different procedure if I walked away? Take him out back and shoot him? A hammer to the skull? A hundred dollars to get into a room. A VIP.

There's a second page attached to that bill.

Reason for visit: Hank presented to the AEC actively seizing. Owner stated he just finished under going chemo therapy for two brain tumors.

Chemotherapy? No. Radiation therapy. They're different. Don't they know that?

Vitals Upon Admission: Temperature 107.3 F°. Pulse 146 BPM. Respiration panting.

Eyes: vertical nystagmus.

Oro-Nasal: salivating.

Heart: tachycardia.

Lungs: tachypnea.

Abdomen: distended abdomen.

Musculoskeletal System: seizures.

Neurologic Exam: grand mal seizures.

Doctor's Notes: Hank had been treated for two brain tumors for over a year and has been deteriorating. He presented tonight in grand mal seizure and did not respond well to initial treatment with diazepam. The owner declined hospitalization and further treatment. The owner elected humane euthanasia due to his grave condition and prognosis. We are deeply sorry for your loss. Thank you for your referral.

*The owner declined hospitalization and further treatment.*

Where's the part where the doctor told me medication wasn't working, that they could keep giving him more and more, but they were closing in an hour and at that point I needed to leave with him? Where's the part when I said isn't there anything you can do to stop his seizures, and she just stared at me like I was crazy, stupid?

After I got home from putting Hankelford down, my girlfriend said, "I told my friends that you were putting him down. I told them you just spent like twenty thousand to treat him. They said that sucks."

When Hankelford had his first seizure, the one in the car when we were driving back to Orlando on I-95, I knew he'd die. Not from that seizure. Not when.

But I realized he could die, would die.

The money I paid wasn't for his life, but for time.

How much is time worth? For now, let's not think of the act of saving a life, what the caregiver must do, but just the dollars. That's what my girlfriend saw. Would you pay \$1 to add five years to a dog's life? How about \$100? \$200? \$300? \$500? At what point is the money worth more than the time?

When Hankelford got sick, a coworker said she had a \$500 maximum at the vet. Once the total hit \$501, she would put her animal down. I should have asked, what if it was six \$100 visits?

I paid \$400 to adopt Hankelford. Is that where I should have cut it off? Like a car, if he cost more than I got him for, then junk him.

Now, to me, money isn't worth anything. I can make more. In July 2013, there was 1.2 trillion dollars in circulation. But there's only one Hankelford.

I was building my savings, putting away for retirement. In my twenties, I was so concerned about retirement. I think it says something about how unhappy I was in my career. I was counting down the days till I was free.

I don't regret trying to save his life. I don't regret things I do, only what I don't.

Next is his discharge papers. *Today Hank completed his definitive course of radiation therapy. Hank received 19 fractions at 250cGy for a total of 4750cGY. At this time Hank has had no side effects from the radiation therapy. Hank's head tilt has completely resolved at this time. Hank was a wonderful patient today.*

It's easy to forget how happy he was when I picked him up from radiation. We'd take long walks to the dog park, and he'd chase squirrels and passing cars. We'd be out there for hours. He became more alive after a day of treatment.

I have twenty-one 8 ½ x 11 sheets listing his treatment along with a credit card receipt stapled to the corner. The costs differ. Three are around \$2,250.00 One for \$3,275.00. MRIs, bloodwork, other tests. One is for his first week of radiation therapy. The very first week, he couldn't come home most nights.

It gets worse before it gets better.

As the tumor expands, it pushes against the brain. Radiation creates swelling, which also pushes against the brain. After a week or so, the tumor begins to shrink back. Hopefully.

The rest of the receipts vary in cost. Most are \$815.00. That's how much one week of radiation treatment—Monday, Wednesday, Friday—costs without staying over night, without other tests, or extra medication. \$220.00 for one day of Radiation Definitive. Plus \$155.00 for whatever a 21069999 Custom Profile #212 is.

A few dates are missing. Most of October. A week in September. I used to keep them shoved in a pile in my car. Some might have blown out. Some thrown out.

There's a photo in the stack of bills. The back of the photo says August. Exactly two years before his diagnosis. He was five months old. He has stopped walking down the hall. His right ear is flopped down, but his left is up. The red heart hangs from his collar.

He stares at me.

Underneath that are directions to get to AVS. East Orange Animal Hospital gave them to me. I had forgotten my phone that morning. This was the day he was diagnosed. Four months after he began having seizures. At first, they called it epilepsy. *He's too young. Dogs that young don't get brain tumors.* He was the youngest dog his vet, his radiation oncologist, and his neurologist knew that had a brain tumor, that had two.

When I got to AVS, I signed a consent form.

Possible complications may include: Anesthetic risks (inclusive of mortality), infection, adverse reaction to contrast medium (seizures, coma, acute renal failure, anaphylactic reaction, death), non-diagnostic imagine, non-curable disease.

I have his prescription from the first day they diagnosed him as epileptic. Sixty 30mg tablets of Phenobarbital. Thirty days. \$10.95.

I was nervous about the cost of the pills walking to the Publix behind the vet's office. \$10.95. Once a month. Nothing.

The pharmacist wouldn't take the prescription at first. She wanted his social security number. It took eight or nine minutes to get her to understand Hank Canine Ironman was a dog, and therefore didn't have a social.

I like that story. The only funny one of his treatment.

There are two rabies certificates—one when he was one and a half and he weighed 44.70 pounds, and one when he was six months and weighed 21.40 pounds.

The pile is nearly exhausted.

A pamphlet. Health Record of Hank. Sex: Male. Markings: Brindle. There's a checklist inside. Nine weeks to seventeen years. It stopped being filled out at forty-two weeks. The vet had told me to use this whenever I brought him in. It would be easy to see how his health progresses. But I stopped. I didn't think any of it mattered. Back then, I didn't know what it meant to take care of something.

The last 8 ½ x 11 sheet has "Adoption Contract" at the top from "Starting Over" Animal Rescue. But the *scue* in Rescue is crossed out. Above is written *efuge, Inc.* Starting Over Animal Refuge, Inc. His name was Dozer back then. *Appears in great health.* I had gone for his brother Dumpster. He was fatter in the pictures online. But he was taken by the time I had arrived. So I got Dozer.

Before Hankelford, I worried about money a lot. Before I graduated college, I almost took a job selling insurance because I didn't want to graduate and be out there with nothing. I took a job teaching instead. Not because I loved teaching, but it was better than selling insurance. I thought it was a good job because it paid well. I watched my bank account. Put money in savings with each paycheck.

Growing up, I was nervous about becoming an adult. Making money was synonymous with being successful. I needed to be able to take care of myself, of my family. When I first went to college, I studied computer science for the sole reason that the jobs paid well. I didn't enjoy it.

In college, I began writing and said if I don't make some money at it by the time I graduate, I'll quit.

I saw Hankelford for the first time and I told myself I had to take care of him. That's what adults do. They take care of the things they are responsible for.

When I got Hankelford neutered, the vet wanted to charge me for painkillers to take home. It was a hundred dollars. I looked at Hankelford and said, *No, he's good. He's tough.*

My father made fun of me for it. Still does. The man who wouldn't pay a hundred dollars for painkillers later paid twenty thousand for radiation therapy.

At the bottom of the pile are a couple of booklets. *101 Things You Didn't Know Could Harm Your Pet. What Would You Do If Your Pet Got Lost? ASPCA Pet Health Insurance.*

\$12 billion are spent on veterinary care.

Tags lines are found on each page.

*It's really You-Are-My-Best-Friend-In-The-World Insurance.*

*It's really I-Don't-Know-What-I'd-Do-Without-You-So-I'm-Going-To-Protect-You Insurance.*

*It's really Nobody-Gets-To-Hug-You-Except-Me Insurance.*

*It's really We-Treat-You-Like-Family-So-We're-Going-To-Protect-You-Like-Family Insurance.*

Before he died, I never called him my dog. Friends introduced me to women and say I owned a dog. I'd say no, I don't. The woman would come over and see Hankelford. "I thought you didn't own a dog."

“I don’t. You can’t own a Hankelford. He’s a free spirit.” Or “Oh, Hankelford. No, he’s just a friend who’s fallen on hard times and needed a place to stay.”

I got a lot of crazy looks.

I meant it. I didn’t feel like I owned him. How do you own a living creature?

It wasn’t until after he died that I became his owner.

There’s nothing left in the folder. It doesn’t seem to capture everything. Anything. There’s not much life on the papers. Bills mean nothing. I brought him to the vet, yes. I put him down, yes. I was so excited to get him. I searched for four months and had wanted a dog for years. When I adopted him, I thought that was it. The final piece. I had a professional job with a nice salary. I had a girlfriend who I loved and wanted to marry. At first, I kept Hankelford at arms length. I was strict with him. He wasn’t allowed in bed, and I tried to teach him tricks and how to behave.

A few weeks after I got him, Anna broke up with me.

We were in bed. There was no fight. We had a double date earlier. The lights were off. Hankelford was in a makeshift pen in the corner asleep. My hand was on her thigh. Our eyes were closed. Then, without moving, she said, “What are we doing?”

“Sleeping?” I knew what was coming. A couple of weeks before, I asked her to marry me. She’d said no, and I hop`ed this moment wouldn’t come.

She climbed over me and got out of bed. It was dark and I could only make out her outline. “We want different things. Like, you want a dog. You like dogs.” She pointed at Hankelford’s pen. “I can’t stand dogs.”

“You don’t have to do anything with him.” I’d take care of him, I told her.

She smacked her hands against her side. “You can’t take care of a dog by yourself. If we get married, he’s my dog too.” That’s not the point anyway, she said.

I grabbed her hand, but she told me she didn’t love me anymore. She offered to stay until morning, but I said I’d be fine. When she left, I stared at the ceiling unable to sleep, so I picked up Hankelford and placed him next to me in bed. Then, we slept.

When I’m done with the folder, I place it back in my nightstand. I can look at it the next time I want to remember taking care of something.

## DRIVE ALL NIGHT

On his third birthday, my Boxer, Hankelford, wore his finest red bow tie. Mara, my girlfriend, bought it for him earlier that day while I was teaching. The tie was a collar and attached behind his head with Velcro. Against the white fur on his chest and his brindle coat on his shoulders and down his legs, the tie made him look like he was wearing a suit. Mara took a photo of him, and I said, “Bond, Hankel Bond.”

Before she unwrapped his gifts, a collection of bones and treats, she opened the party invitations she bought. On the front was an English bulldog wearing a party hat, and, on the inside, Mara signed her name and the name of her puggle, Miley. He sniffed the card, but wanted the bones.

Mara was so excited about his birthday—I wanted to punch her in the face.

Ten days before his birthday, Hankelford was diagnosed with a brain tumor, for the second time. The first was seven months earlier. Mara and I had broken up the month before. After months of seizures, Hankelford’s vet finally gave him an MRI. The assistant who showed me the photograph later that day didn’t call it a brain tumor. “A huge mass,” she said. The next day, I went in to put him down. Mara joined me. She kissed me in the parking lot and held my hand as we walked in.

When we got inside, the vet talked about radiation therapy, that perhaps it could prolong his life. Mara’s mother died four months earlier—a month after Hankelford’s second birthday—from a five-year battle with cancer. Hankelford was supposed to die that day. Mara came to be with me when he died. She didn’t want to be around during a lengthy treatment. We only got back together at the end of his first round. That was supposed to be it—the big Hankelford-life-

saving push. Then, he got another tumor and another round of treatment. Her playing nice on his birthday was just that, I thought, playing. That's not where my anger came from, though. I had forgotten about his birthday. Mara texted me on my way home and reminded me.

She showed me up at my own dog's birthday and she was the one who wanted to stop his treatment.

\* \* \*

They say anger builds. Anger explodes.

That's not true, though.

Anger tightens. Anger cannibalizes.

Three weeks after Hankelford's birthday, I came home from the vet with Hankelford. He was good, but not as good as before. A couple of days into treatment, his head tilt caused by the tumor had disappeared, but he still had seizures. During his first round, seizures stopped. Mara sat on the couch, legs crossed, with her computer on her lap and Miley at her side. She was dressed in a T-shirt and gym shorts. Miley got up and greeted Hankelford like she always did—sniff and lick his mouth as he tried to walk from his water dish to the living room.

“Leave him be, Miley,” I said and shoved her a bit with my foot, but she followed after him to the couch where he stared at Mara for being in his spot.

She slapped the couch cushion next to her. “Lay here, Hankelford. I'm working.”

I took off my tie and dress shirt and stood in the bedroom doorway. “We still having date night?”

She stuck out her lips, closed her eyes, and tilted her head. When I didn't move, she made kissy noises. I went over and we kissed. Then, I backed up and said, "So, date night?"

She went back to typing. "Sorry, can't. Have to write a paper. Only on page one and it has to be ten pages long. Can you believe that? Ten pages. What am I supposed to say for ten pages?"

I walked back to the bedroom, but came out again after a few seconds. It was nearly six in the evening. "What have you been doing all day?"

The back corner of the L-shaped couch lined up with the door frame of our bedroom. Her back was to me. She didn't look up from her screen. "Watching *Weeds*." She stretched her legs onto the glass coffee table, tilted her head to hang off the back of the couch, and closed her eyes. "Sowweee."

I went back to the bedroom, took off my socks and shoes, and then walked back out and sat at the dining room table behind the couch and stared at the back of her head. After a few minutes, I said, "If I cancelled date night to write, you'd be pissed."

"It's not the same. This is school work. You can write whenever."

"I can't write whenever. My writing is just as important as your school work." She didn't mean to insult my writing, but I wanted to argue.

"I didn't say that. But this is due in a few days."

"If it was so important, why didn't you do it earlier?"

She said it was her day off and to leave her alone.

I went to the bedroom, and then returned to the dining room table. After a minute, I got up and got water from sink even though I wasn't thirsty, sat back down, drank it, and got some more.

"What do you want for dinner?" I asked. When she didn't answer right away, I peeked over the couch and saw she was on Facebook. "I thought you had a paper to write."

"I'm thinking, and Facebook helps me think."

I went to lay down in bed. Hankelford joined me. Mara's phone rang and she answered it so I got up and stood near the doorway but still inside the bedroom so she couldn't see me. I knew I was pathetic and hated myself for it and that made me want to fight with her more.

On the phone, she said, "Sounds fun" and "Bye," and then she closed her laptop.

I stood behind the couch and asked who it was. She said it was Eli and I held up my hands as if she saw me. "And?"

She said Eli and friends were going to Friendly Confines, a sports bar twenty minutes away. She was going to get ready to meet them. The nights we didn't have date night, she spent with friends at bars and clubs.

I said, "If I cancelled date night to go out with friends, you'd bitch."

"I didn't cancel to go out with friends." She still sat with her back to me even though her laptop was closed. "I canceled to do school work, and then I canceled school work to go out."

"Oh, fuck you." I paced behind the couch.

"Yeah, cursing at me is going to make things better." Her calmness pissed me off more. She scratched Miley's side. "And you wonder why I want to go out, get away from this. Why do you have to do this? It's not that big of a deal. I'm going out with friends."

“It is a fucking big deal. To me it is.”

“If I didn’t cancel date night, you just would have so you could stay home with Hankelford. Now you get to do that. Stay home with your dog. You get what you want. I get what I want.”

I canceled a few date nights since Hankelford returned to treatment. Radiation therapy isn’t cheap, and I’d get angry when I canceled a date telling Mara it was because of money and she wouldn’t offer to pay. I paid most of the rent and all of the bills. It was just one more thing to fight about. When I look back on this time, I remember canceling a lot of date nights, but when I view the bank statements, I didn’t. We went to Busch Gardens once. We went to Urban Flats where her friend, Lauren, worked three times that March. Each Sunday, we still had brunch at Toojays. We went to the movies twice. I canceled nights drinking and dancing downtown. I stopped writing at the T.G.I. Fridays where Mara worked as a server.

“I want to go out. I can’t. He’s sick.” I pointed at Hankelford.

“You don’t want to be with me. Why are you pretending?”

“If I didn’t want to date you, then why would I?”

“Cause you’re going through your own shit. You had your chance to show you wanted to be with me, and you decided for me to have an abortion.” She took her phone and texted someone.

She took a pregnancy test a couple of weeks after we got back together. I said we weren’t ready, that we just started to work things out between us. On New Years Eve, I took her to a clinic south of downtown. She used it against me during fights.

“If you didn’t want to have it, then you shouldn’t have. I didn’t force you.” I kept switching between sitting and pacing behind the couch.

“You didn’t force me?”

“I didn’t put a gun to your head.”

“Why are we even talking about this?” She shook her head.

“Because it came up. We obviously need to.”

She typed on her phone, saying nothing.

“Hello?” I stood.

“What do you want me to say? You didn’t want a kid.”

“I didn’t want a kid?” I pointed to my chest.

“Yes, you killed your kid. Good for you.”

“I wanted a kid. I didn’t want *my* child to have *you* for its mother.” It was the cruelest thing I could’ve said. I didn’t think before I said it, but that doesn’t make it better. It makes it worse. Those words were waiting until I found the moment to release them. And when I did, they felt right.

Mara said nothing and wiped her face.

“Hello?”

She remained silent.

“Hello?”

“What do you want me to say to that?” She got up and went to the bathroom.

I followed. She sat to piss. I stood in the doorway. “Are you going to say something?”

“There’s nothing to say.”

I paced in the short space in the doorway. “Something. Just say something.”

“I’m going out. Maybe if you were nice to me instead of being an asshole—”

“Fuck you.” I took the TV on the dresser next to the doorway and pushed it off onto the floor in front of me. The front cracked and part of the doorframe shredded.

“What’s wrong with you?” she said.

“It’s my TV. We never watched it anyway.” I was calm and no longer cared about fighting. I picked up the TV and put it back on the dresser. “I’ll toss it tomorrow.”

She shook her head, finished, and got dressed for her night out. I sat in the living room with Hankelford and Miley. I even petted Miley, knowing Mara would like to see me being nice to her.

When she came out, she said, “Well, are you going to get ready so we can leave?”

I got dressed.

At Friendly Confines, we drank with her friends. I only remember two—Eli and Julio. These friends were from Fridays. I only liked her school friends, though. These guys were only interested in women, beer, and sports. I couldn’t relate to them. I kept quiet most of the night until the bar closed. I didn’t want to be there, but I didn’t want to be anywhere else either.

Mara wanted Taco Bell and after we got food, I got onto the highway. I missed these moments. Us alone at the end of the day, drunk and not thinking of anything serious. She still had these nights. She still went out. “I dodged a bullet,” she said after her pregnancy. She didn’t have to grow up, she said. Not yet. I had the opposite reaction—I wanted to prove I could be responsible. I canceled other nights like this one. I thought I had to be what I believed was an adult.

I didn't want to go home to Hankelford, to the spare bedroom meant for the baby. I could have driven all night with her. I didn't think about how drunk I was, how I could have killed someone. She held my hand and we joked.

As we rounded the lake near our apartment, I let off the gas and drifted to a parking spot at the end of the road.

\* \* \*

Mara spent more of her nights out and I grew a beard and let my hair get long and messy. At work, I stopped preparing for classes. I'd show up in the morning fifteen minutes before class, look at the schedule to see what I was teaching that day, and then wing it. Some days I showed up late and would have to look at what textbook students had so I knew what to teach. I came in shirt untucked and wrinkled and tie crooked. One day, my boss told me to stop by her office before I left. She cut my pay by \$10,000 per year. They no longer needed me to create their marketing materials as well as teach. It was two days before pay day and when Hankelford's next vet bill for radiation therapy was due. I sat back in the chair, stared off into space, and said, "I got a vet bill Friday."

She shrugged.

I offered my services as a tutor on Craigslist and put some things up for sale. Weekends were spent tutoring or working odd jobs, anything to pull in a few bucks. I don't remember Mara's response to any of it.

At night, I'd dream of dying. Hankelford was there. My family. My friends. They sat in pews. My coffin was up front next to a lectern, flowers, and a photo of me. While people said their goodbyes to me, Hankelford sat a few feet away and stared at the coffin. He whined like when he wanted to play tug-of-war. Mom tugged at his collar to move him out of the way. He wouldn't budge. My father said, "Just leave him." Hankelford continued to whine.

That would be easier, I thought and felt guilty for it.

During the days, I had another dream—of coming home to find Hankelford dead. When he first got sick, I'd rush home or to the vet, worried I'd find him dead. I didn't want him to be alone when it happened. But that was in the past. I no longer cared if he was alone. As long as I didn't have to watch it happen. I didn't want him to die, but if he was going to die, I just wanted him to do it already. I drove home, hoping to find him lifeless next to the bed, or perhaps the couch. I rehearsed my phone call to Mara.

One night, I woke in the living room, sitting on the couch. Mara stood and cried nearby. I don't remember what happened. She said, "You were crazy. Did you drink more after I left?" She told me she came from work at three A.M. and shook my shoulder to wake me, like she had every night. Some nights, I even set my alarm so I'd wake and talk to her as she showered. According to her, I mumbled and pushed past her. Then, I yelled incoherently. When she stood in my way, I threw her onto the bed, marched into the living room, and collapsed on the couch.

A couple of days later, seeing no way to get Mara to come around, I made plans with my friend, Liddy. I wanted to get out the house. Let Mara take care of the dogs for once. Why does she get to be the one who gets to be carefree and go out and do whatever? When I told Mara I had plans for Thursday night, she said, "You made plans? Thursday's Hankelversary."

“We can celebrate Friday,” I said.

“Hankel wants to celebrate. Look at him.” She pointed at Hankelford, who stared back at her with his underbite pushing back his upper lip. He leaned forward and sniffed the air, thinking she had a treat.

“I’m going out. You go out all the time.”

“You’re making Hankelford sad.”

“He’s fine.” I went to the bedroom and lay down in bed. Let her be the one who waited at home.

When Hankelford was diagnosed, Mara said not to put him through treatment, that the doctors said treatment would only postpone his death. I said, “I’m just trying to get him to his birthday.” He was two when diagnosed. At three, he could no longer be called a puppy. For some reason, I read back through the paperwork I was given when I adopted him. I had been celebrating Hankelversary on April 21, but it turned out I had adopted him on April 14. How did I forget that day? He was four weeks old when I got him. If Hankelversary’s date changed, then his birthday got to be pushed up by a week too. It was one less week he had to live to.

Thursday evening, I came home from work to find Mara and a couple of her friends in the kitchen. They were making drinks before heading out to a party. “I thought you were staying home,” I said.

“Why would I?”

After she left with her friends, Liddy came over. Liddy was short and stick thin, with black hair long and straight. She wore a black blouse, schoolgirl skirt, black tights, and big black

boots with silver metal clips. She smiled large and waved when I opened the door, and in a high-pitched squeal, said, “Hi!”

I drove her over to Red Star Tavern, one of those sports bars that you wonder how they stayed in business for so long with three times as many employees working than patrons eating and drinking. We sat at the bar and I bought Liddy beers. Liddy and I had gone back a few years. I used to take her out on what we referred to as Liddy Dates. Basically, They were dates without their being a romantic element. She was my best friend soul mate, I told her. We didn’t see each other often, but when we did, we fit right back together. She was always able to make me feel better.

We might have dated if she didn’t date my roommate for a year, and I didn’t date her roommate for a year. She went to high school with Mara, but they didn’t get along. I didn’t get along with Liddy at first, either. It wasn’t until after her roommate and I broke up that I started to warm to Liddy. While we drank at Red Star and for a few moments I could forget everything else in my life, I wondered if I had made a mistake. Perhaps I had dated the wrong roommate all those years before. Perhaps if Liddy and I had dated, I wouldn’t have gotten together with Mara, I wouldn’t have gotten Hankelford.

Anger turned to depression. Or maybe it was depression all along.

Liddy noticed I had become despondent and we called the evening short. When I returned home, the house was dark. Hankelford joined me on the couch and put his head on my lap. I petted him and said, “Sorry, Hankel.” He was too worn down to move.

\* \* \*

On May 13, I came home after work. Mara had gone to work for the night. I drank whiskey and paced through the apartment. I used to write at T.G.I. Fridays in a section that was closed so we could see each other when I worked during the day and she worked at night. That ended when Hankelford went back into treatment. I thought about driving over there and sitting down with my notebook. She wouldn't have liked it. Once, we had plans to go out when she finished her early shift. I showed up at the bar and had a beer and wrote. She came over. "What are you doing here? Go home." She needed to concentrate on work, she said.

"I used to write here." I pointed at my notebook.

"That was then."

She canceled our date, and I went home.

So I stayed in. When it got late and I was tired of being confined, I took the dogs for a walk to get the mail. Hankelford liked late nights when it cooled. He chased a squirrel, I remember. It ran up a tree and Hankelford sat under it waiting for a moment for the squirrel to return. That's all I remember from our walk, our final walk. When we got back to the apartment, I sat on the couch, but Hankelford chose to lay at my feet instead of resting on my lap. He slept.

Fifteen minutes later, he howled in pain. For a moment, I didn't realize it was him who made the noise. It sounded like the roar of an animal twice my size. The cry was long and piercing. He scrambled to his feet and knocked the glass tabletop off the base. Then, he ran to around the living room, ramming his head into the wall, the couch, the DVD rack, the bookshelf, the entertainment center. Piss flowed out of him. Then, diarrhea.

It wasn't a seizure, although I tell people it was. It was worse. He didn't shake like in a seizure. He seemed to know where he was. He was conscious of everything.

When, he found the gap between the wall and the couch, he escaped into the dining room, continuing to ram his head into chairs and bookshelves. A poster showing Captain America punching Hitler fell and the glass broke. Hankelford ran to the kitchen, tipped his water and food bowl over. He was still pissing and shitting.

I texted Mara, "Hankelford's doing bad. I gotta take him to the vet."

"Okay," she sent back.

I followed Hankelford around the apartment. He would lay for a few minutes, breathing heavily, before continuing his rampage to a new location. I texted Mara, "Will you come with me to the vet?"

"I'm working."

It was two thirty in the morning. Her restaurant closed at two. Later, I found out she was with another man. "Can't someone else cover your cleaning duties?"

Hankelford found his way into the bedroom and lay next to the nightstand, his face pressed against the wall, creating a dark spot of slobber. I stood over him.

"I'm going to have to put him down."

"Call the vet."

"Come with me."

"I'm working. Call the vet."

She didn't respond.

I leaned back on the bed, my phone enclosed around two hands, and stared at Hankelford, hoping he'd stop and stand up. I waited and waited.

## BE HAPPY NOW

### MAY

When I arrived home after I put my Boxer, Hankelford, down, the apartment was empty, and, not knowing what to do with myself, I sat on the bed and waited for my girlfriend, Mara. She walked in ten minutes later, and when she sat beside me on the bed, I wrapped my arms around her waist—my ear pressed against her stomach as if I were listening for a heartbeat—and said, “I can’t lose you too.”

Her arms went limp. “Don’t worry about that now.”

We stayed like that for a few minutes not talking or looking at one another. After we broke up, I told friends I should have split with her sooner, and they said I stayed with her because I was comfortable, but being with her wasn’t comfortable. She had been seeing another man since March, although I didn’t know for sure until September, weeks after we broke up. It was four thirty in the morning and she came home two and a half hours after the T.G. I. Fridays where she worked closed with the excuse that it took longer than usual to clean up. I called her before I brought Hankelford to the vet, but she didn’t answer, instead she texted that she was mopping and no one else could do it. As I clung to her, I pictured her in bed with a man as her phone went off with my requests.

On Poker Night five days earlier, Mara came home with her best friend, and, as our card group lingered at the dining room table, she brought me into our bathroom and said it was over, but nothing about the other man, even though I asked. Then, she left. After the bars closed, she returned and crawled into bed with me. We never spoke of it.

Eventually, I let go and sat with my head down and shoulders slumped. I expected some kind of *I told you so* speech. *I told you he was going to die. I told you not to spend your savings on vet bills.* Instead, she stood. “You know what you need? Alcohol.”

I wasn’t much of a drinker and waved off the offer, but she was already in the kitchen, probably needing a drink more than I did. I pictured her getting my message about Hankelford being put down and her saying, “Oh, shit,” and thinking she’d be stuck with me, not wanting to leave right after my dog died.

She returned with whiskey shots, and after we drank them, said, “Another?” I declined, but she took up her own offer.

Then, we slept.

At eight, I was woken by text messages from family and friends. My phone would beep and then beep again two minutes later. The first message was “Happy birthday!” followed by the second, “Oh my God, I’m so sorry about Hankelford.” Before going to bed, I posted on Facebook about Hankelford. They were waking up and sending me birthday wishes, and then checking Facebook. There was nothing to say so I put my phone on silent and went out into the living room with Miley, Mara’s puggle, and sat on the couch until Mara woke around eleven.

She sat on the armrest. “We can stay home if you want. Clean up. Relax.”

For months, Mara wanted to go to Universal Studios, but I couldn’t afford it while Hankelford was in radiation therapy. I told her if she wanted she could get me a ticket for my birthday. I was unsure if the offer of cancellation was her way of showing sympathy or if it was an attempt to get out of an obligation. Hankelford did not go quietly in the night. Our apartment was a mess. The night before, he rose from his spot at my feet, howled in pain, and stumbled into

the glass coffee table, knocking the top off the legs. Then, he squealed and rammed his head into the end table, the DVD rack, bookshelves, his food and water dishes, everything he could find. Piss and shit trailed him.

“Let’s stick to our plan,” I said.

I wanted to go to Universal. It was a new year for me. There was finally nothing bad on the horizon. Mara’s mother’s death from cancer. Hankelford’s first brain tumor. Mara’s roommate dying in a drunk driving accident. Mara’s pregnancy. The abortion. Hankelford’s second brain tumor. It was all over. We could go back to being a couple.

We arrived at the theme park and went to Finnegan’s, an Irish pub near The Mummy. We spent \$130 on shots and beers. We drank, rode The Mummy, and then returned to the bar. I drank whatever she ordered. It was the only way I knew of at the time to show that I cared for her, that I was sorry for concentrating on Hankelford during his treatments.

Mara loved Universal, especially roller coasters. That summer, we went to Universal two or three times a week. I met her after work and drank pancake shots and Blue Moons and ate corned beef sandwiches on a pretzel bun. She’d steal my pickle. We came to know the bartenders’ schedules and what drink to order from which one. That was our bar. For those few hours a week, we soaked ourselves in liquor, held hands, and laughed together.

On our way out that evening, we stopped near the exit so Mara could use the restroom. Bloated with a headache from drinking in the sun, I sat on a bench facing the split entrances for men and women. A father came out of the restroom with his infant daughter in his arms, and I wondered if was possible that Mara and I would have a child one day, one we kept. After a few

minutes, I got out my phone and looked at the last photos I took of Hankelford, photos from minutes after he died.

Eventually, Mara returned and leaned against me. “Ready to go?”

I stared at Hankelford.

“What’re you looking at?” She leaned the phone to see. “That’s creepy.” She smacked it and pushed off me.

After a minute, she said, “I hope you learned your lesson.” She stared not at me but at the exit and seemed to speak to herself. “You shouldn’t love a dog like that. He was always going to die.”

She was right and I knew it, but I shrugged and said, “You’re going to die.”

“I’m a human being.” She turned toward me. “I’m your girlfriend. You’re supposed to love me. You put that dog in front of me. You put him in front of everything.”

I had hoped we could get away from all our problems for one day, but we couldn’t even make it to the exit.

“He was dying.” I looked at her. Her face was red and she was crying. “What was I supposed to do?”

“Let him die. He’s a dog.” She slumped down at the edge of the bench and was quiet for a minute. “What do you have left? You pushed me away. You spent all your money.” She paused to think. “Nothing. You have nothing.”

If I pushed her away, why was she on the bench with me? It’s why I chose to ignore the other man she was seeing. As long as she was with me, there was still hope, or so I thought, hope to get back to where we were before the past year happened.

We sat on the bench near the exit for a few minutes before she wiped her eyes and we left. I drove us to the T-Rex Café at Downtown Disney, where we planned a dinner with a few of my friends. While we waited for a table, the two of us browsed the store attached to the restaurant. She pointed to the Build-A-Dino section in back. “I’ll get you a dinosaur.” It was the first thing she said since leaving Universal.

I shook my head.

“C’mon, you love dinos.” She took my hand and led me to the back.

I picked out a Woolly Mammoth and a pair of sunglasses for him. A couple of years before, we went to the restaurant for my birthday and she got me a green Triceratops who roared when his hand was squeezed. I named him Ralph because she said I already had a Hankelford, who later ate Ralph’s eyes. For whatever reason, he didn’t like stuffed animals to have eyes. I told him, “Hankel, you a serial killer.”

Near the cashier, there was a computer to name the dinosaur. Mara sat and typed.

“Wait,” I said. “We have to think of a name.”

“C’mon, I know what you want to name him.” She typed *Hankelford*. “Now you’ll always have a Hankelford.”

I didn’t want a Hankelford. I didn’t want to be reminded of him. I wanted to move on—I wanted out of the consequences of his sickness, of Mara’s anger. I wanted to believe as if it never happened. At least that’s what I should have wanted. Instead, I smiled and said, “Prehistoric Hankelford.”

Then, we held hands, walked to the front, and pretended everything had been forgotten.

## JUNE

As we pulled up to the Caribe Royale Hotel, Mara said, “Use the valet.” We were dressed up, she said, it would be nice. She wore a new blue dress, and I wore a white dress shirt and a red tie. While Mara was at work, I shopped and bought a shirt, a tie, slacks, underwear, socks, and cologne, even though I already owned nice clothes. I wanted that night to be special. It was the first Saturday night date night in months. I hate valets—my Civic is trash and I am embarrassed by it—but I pulled up like she asked.

Mara and I walked arm in arm across the red carpet into the hotel.

The Venetian Room was hidden in the corner past the lobby and down a flight of stairs. The entryway looked like an Italian patio—white lattices wrapped in vines formed a canopy near the podium. When the waiter led us to our booth, he asked, “Are you perhaps celebrating tonight? Anniversary?”

“Just date night.” I smiled. It felt good to defy his expectations. I assumed he saw us, a young couple, and thought we needed to save for months to eat there. While Hankelford was in treatment, most nights were spent eating Chinese takeout or burritos and watching Netflix. I still had a couple thousand more to pay off on my credit cards, but I wasn’t worried about it. I made good money doing corporate training and, since my dog’s death, had been taking Mara out doing whatever she wanted. We drank with her friends on the beach, drank at Universal, drank at Happy Hour at Elephant Bar, and drank downtown. We knew how much to drink to successfully feign happiness and when to stop before we got too drunk and forgot we ever wanted to be happy.

We sat on the same side of the booth, which was separated by lattices with vines from the other booths. Two other tables were taken. Both with older men in suits and their wives in dresses. I imagined they were successful businessmen, although they could've been fakers like us. I chose to believe I had taken Mara somewhere, not just to a restaurant, but to a way of life. These couples made the right decisions in life, and we were the same room with them, and still so young. We could overcome.

Mara was right there with me, the happiest she had been in months. I felt like I was up against not only our own problems but the other man as well. I wanted to make her happy enough to leave him, but never mention it to me. If she mentioned him to me, then I wouldn't have been able to keep avoiding our problems. The week before, Mara and I had brunch before she went into work. When we finished, she asked if I could run to Starbucks and get her a latte and bring it to her at work. I couldn't find her when I showed up at Fridays with the drink. I stood beside the hostess trying to spot her. Mara got out of the nearest booth and was awkward. "Oh, you're back," she said. I held up her coffee and she took it. "Thanks," she said and gave a little wave. I looked at the booth where she was sitting. There were a few Latino guys I didn't know staring back at me, but I couldn't see the side she got out on. Mara said, "Okay, good bye." I could've walked over and met those men. We had been dating for almost three years. I knew her friends. I'm sure one was her lover, although I have no proof. I left and planned our date night.

I remember few details from our dinner. We drank wine, which Mara ordered because I know nothing of wine. I ate duck and Mara had steak, having given up on being a vegetarian. I had a cappuccino with whiskey and we shared Tiramisu. We sat close and talked. She wasn't on

her phone and neither of us was drunk. We talked about our life in Colorado after she graduated the next year, how we'd get an English bulldog named Chester and sit on the porch in the evenings and look at the mountains. For \$200, I bought us two hours to forget.

When our time was up, Mara said, "What now?"

I said, "Whatever you want," and meant it.

"Downtown?" She dipped her head and leaned into me. "Dancing?"

I wasn't much of a dancer, but I agreed.

She took out her phone. "I'll text Lauren."

"Lauren? I thought tonight was just me and you."

"We can't go downtown just us." She typed her text. "That's no fun."

I was still upset when we walked up to Lizzy McCormack's, an Irish pub downtown. I wasn't getting anywhere with her. We got beers and sat at a table in the corner. Mara stayed on her phone, and I sulked, sipped my Guinness, and stared at the college kids coming to get drunk on a Saturday night. I imagined I was with them, a few years younger. I hoped I hadn't wasted my life. There must be a point when a person realizes that they messed up, that now he or she is stuck with the life they chose.

Mara said, "Lauren's not coming. Cheer up." Lauren had made plans on the other side of town. Mara patted my hand as if I was a child. "Be happy now."

"That's not the point," I said and looked away.

She said sorry and I told her if she was, then she wouldn't have texted Lauren in the first place. She leaned forward across from me at the table. "You know this is difficult for me. I'm trying to get used to us again."

I closed my eyes and drank deep from my Guinness. It was cold and thick. Then I stood, patted my pockets to make sure I had my phone, keys, and wallet, and left. Did she look shocked when I walked away? Or was she indifferent? I didn't rush—I just strolled away confidently. If I reached my car, it'd all work out. I'd leave and she'd be mad and call a friend and spend the night, and in the morning, we'd realize we'd been fooling ourselves about overcoming the life we had thrown away.

Halfway to my car, Mara caught up. "Slow down," she said and slipped her arm in mine.

When we got home, I went to my office and pretended to draw at my drafting table. I figured I'd be sleeping on the floor like other nights. There was nothing I could do to change her mind about us. After fifteen minutes, Mara came and stood in the doorway. "Shower?"

I nodded.

As Mara washed her hair, I studied her neck, her breasts, her thighs. We hadn't had sex since before Hankelford died. She had said it was because she was afraid of getting pregnant again. But the abortion was in December and we fucked through the rest of the winter until Mid-March. I grabbed her waist and sucked on her nipple. She continued washing her hair. I grabbed her ass, pulled her against my hard dick, and bit into her neck—I knew she liked that. I thought of the other man. What did he kiss like? Was his dick bigger, thicker? Did he have a flat stomach? Did he lick her pussy better?

"Like this," she said and moved us so I was under the faucet, and we kissed and slowly got down on our knees in the shallow water. She put her feet up on opposite sides of the tub and lay back in the tub. We stopped kissing, and she fingered herself. I went to help, but she said, "No touching."

Hunched over her, I masturbated. I imagined watching us from the doorway. I imagined my spine as individual knives ripping from my skin, my skin graying as I pounded my dick over this blonde, pale creature.

She kept her eyes closed and bit her lip, imagining—someone else I'm sure, this phantom. I grabbed her whole breast and she smacked my hand. "No touching."

"I'm going to come," I said and leaned over her, aiming between her breasts.

"Not on me." She pushed on my thigh. "It's gross."

"Since when?" I said and finished in the water between her legs. Some got on her thigh, and she wiped it with the fingers on her free hand—eyes still closed, breathing still increasing—and washed them in the water.

"Can you get my toy?" she said and pointed to the door. I went out into the bedroom naked and wet and returned with the pink, bunny toy. I went to use it on her, but she took it and did it herself.

With her eyes still closed, I know she thought of the mystery man, and dabbed her lips with her tongue as she got closer to orgasm. Not knowing what to do, I sat on the side of the tub and waited for her to finish so we could go to sleep.

## **JULY**

Mara and I stopped spending time together, except for an hour in the middle of the night between when she came home from the other man, and when she went to sleep. Some nights I set my alarm for 3:30 and woke before she arrived so I wouldn't miss our hour. Yet, there were days we still went to Universal Studios with her friends, and, if I was able to drag her out of bed on

Sundays, we still had brunch. On her last night of class for the summer semester, she texted me, “On my way to Fids. Come.”

Fiddler’s Green was an Irish pub near her college. I was excited to get the invite. Now, I see her invite not as a sign she was trying, but as another act to put on. She had two sets of friends—work friends and school friends. Most of the servers at T.G.I. Fridays were just happy screwing around. I couldn’t relate. But I got along well with her classmates, who were driven. I thought of that group as adults, and the Fridays group as kids. The Fridays group drank in the parking lot and hooked up with one another. The classmates went to Wine Bar and conversed about important things. That night, the school friends wanted to cut loose from a tough semester.

I wanted Mara to think that I had a life outside of hers, so I put back on my button-down shirt and tie that I had worn to work, pretending that I wasn’t at home waiting for her.

By the time I got there, empty pint glasses and plates of mostly-eaten food crowded the tables. I figured her classmates asked about me, which is when she told me to come out. I managed to order a sandwich and a Guinness, and I ate it quietly in the corner before we left. Half the crowd went home, but the rest of us continued at Big Daddy’s, a karaoke bar down the road.

We left Mara’s car at Fiddler’s Green and drove to the next bar. She talked a bit about class, but other than that was silent. When we got there, I started a tab—Mara drank wine and I drank beer. One by one her classmates sang, and many times as a duet or as a trio, like when Mara got up there and sang the Spice Girls with a couple of classmates. I wanted her to look at me as she sang, but she didn’t.

An hour in, one of Mara's friends, a short, cute blonde, sat beside me. She asked if I'd sing Springsteen with her. I had met this woman the year before at a party one of Mara's classmates had thrown. Being from New Jersey, she was a big Springsteen fan—I was too. It took us a couple of minutes to decide which song. The bar had eight or nine of his songs. We decided on *Badlands*, her favorite. When our names were called, we went up. I stared at Mara for the first couple of minutes, like a child wanting Mom to pay attention. She never did. She spoke to one of her classmates the whole time. I wanted to sing to her, to show that I could be fun too. As we sang, I turned to the blonde next to me on the stage. I wanted to kiss her, to grab her around the waist and lift her to my hip, to grind into her. I thought of what Mara would do.

A year later, after Mara and I were no longer together, I ran into the blonde downtown in a club. We spoke briefly, but then I made an excuse to keep moving. She reminded me of Mara and our karaoke night, of every night Mara and I had that summer.

After the song finished, the blonde asked Mara if we were good, and I wanted us to be good, not because I wanted to be able to sing well, but that there was something between us, something special for Mara to be jealous of. Mara laughed and said no.

Near closing time, Mara and I spoke to one her classmates. He said, "You guys are really cute together. I hope you can work it out."

I looked down at my almost-empty pint, embarrassed that she had told her friend about us. How much did he know? For a moment, I was angry with him, thinking he knew about the other man kept it from me, even though we weren't friends. I turned to Mara and nodded in agreement with her friend.

She shook her head and said, "I don't think so."

“Why?” I asked, but she ignored me, and we sat there awkwardly for a minute before leaving.

She was drunk, and I told her so, but she said she needed her car. When I dropped her off, she said, “I really want grilled cheese,” and we caravanned to Pom Poms, a sandwich shop near our apartment, but it was three in the morning and the shop was closed.

When we got home, I headed to the kitchen. She sat on the couch and said, “What’re you doing?”

I turned on the stove. “Grilled cheese.”

“You’ll just mess it up.” She waved me off. “You always mess it up.”

“I’ve never made it for you.”

“You mess up everything.” She leaned into the couch. “You’ll burn it.”

I ignored her and buttered some white bread and put it in a pan, then returned to the couch, and instead of my usual spot on the opposite side of the couch from her, I sat next to her for some time. We joked and spoke about trivial things, and then I smelled burning toast. She was right. One side of the sandwich burned. I scraped off the burnt marks the best I could and gave her the sandwich. She ate it up, but complained and said, “It’s gross. I said you’d fuck it up.” After she slid the empty plate across the glass coffee table, we kissed, and then I lifted her and carried her to the bedroom.

When I stood back to slide off my pants, she wiggled on the bed to take off hers.

“C’mon,” she said, and I stumbled toward her.

I grabbed her by the hips and slid her to the edge of the bed and was inside of her. For a minute, everything was right. We were like who we were when we got together, when we made

out on the floor by the front door at her roommate's birthday party. I could take these couple of minutes and place them anywhere in our first two years together. Then, I got scared and put on a condom, and she said, "Just get it over with."

This was the last time we had sex. The next morning, she didn't remember and cried when she saw the condom wrapper in the trash. After we broke up, she said she was upset because she had been unfaithful to the other man.

## **AUGUST**

Her name was Helga, and she was the largest horse they had. The stablehand brought her over, and I climbed up and felt giant with my chest out and the reins loose in my hands. I patted the side of her neck and leaned forward. "Helgalford," I said and steered her toward the group. Once everyone had a horse, the guide got us in a straight line and we went along the trail through the Rocky Mountains. I was up front, and Mara and her father were behind me.

For most of our ride, our guide stayed near the middle of our dozen-member group, only coming in front of me to signal a change in direction. I didn't speak to Mara, although a few times she attempted to say something to me. I pretended I was alone. As a child, I used to imagine I was someone else, an undercover agent, when I went on vacations with my family. We'd go to Disney World, and I'd pretend I was there to capture a supervillain. The rides were traps, obstacles to overcome.

I made my way along the trail, pretending I was the first person to reach that part of the country. The only sound was horses stomping rocks and dirt, and I thought of myself as a leader, bringing these people to a new land. I felt better than I had in months. The ride lasted two hours.

After we left the ranch, her father drove us to The Stanley Hotel. Mara's family went to Estes Park, Colorado nearly every summer since before she was born. They only missed the year before because Mara's mother died of cancer. This year, her father invited me. The night before our flight, I needed to get out of the house after another argument. We were to celebrate our three-year anniversary that night, but Mara didn't come home until ten. I went to an ATM to get cash for the trip. I sat in my car for half an hour across the street from the ATM and considered my options, if it was worth losing the three hundred for the plane ticket. But I went anyway. I didn't want everything that had happened between us to be for nothing. After we broke up, I asked Mara why she invited me if she was seeing someone else. "I didn't have the balls to break up with you," she said. Maybe because her father was there, she thought she should put on an act. Maybe she, too, wanted to see us in Colorado, the place we had talked about moving to when things were good between us.

For our anniversary, I bought tickets for a ghost tour at The Stanley Hotel. It was up on a hill overlooking the town. The hotel inspired Stephen King to write *The Shining*. The television show *Ghost Hunters* investigated the property. Mara loved ghost stories. We went to St. Augustine shortly after dating and went on a ghost tour. She said, "Movies make people think ghosts are bad. But they can be good too." I think she felt comforted in the thought that the dead weren't really gone. She said the dead had unfinished business, that they stayed to help their loved ones through difficult times.

We wandered through a couple of ballrooms and went upstairs to room 217 where Stephen King stayed. We ended the tour in the basement and Mara had me take a picture of her

with the tour guide. After, we drank mimosas on the porch in the afternoon and looked out onto the town so small in the distance.

Later, Mara and I got ice cream and walked down the main street. There were touristy stores selling knick knacks and ice cream shops all over the place. We walked into one store and I went over to the books with my ice cream cone. The cashier came over. “I don’t mind if you eat your ice cream inside, but please don’t touch the books.”

There was a sign with an ice cream cone with a red X over it on the door, but I failed to notice it when I entered. Before I said something, Mara came over and said, “Oh, you don’t have to tell him. He’s a writer. He loves books.”

The woman asked what I wrote and where it was published. I was embarrassed. Mara had been doing this to me for a few months, introducing me as a writer instead of as a teacher, which was my job. The next month, I was returning to school for an English degree and had only one published essay in a journal I hadn’t even heard of until I submitted to them. I couldn’t tell if she was trying to boost my confidence or make fun of me.

For our anniversary, I bought Mara a moose that served as a wine holder. It looked as if the moose was upside down trying to drink the wine. She liked it and we called the moose Hankelford. When we broke up, she took the moose and left the wine.

We passed a real estate agency and Mara told me to wait outside while she went in, said I still needed to finish my ice cream. Mara was entering her final year in graduate school, and after, we were supposed to leave Florida behind. Our old future was one of sitting on a porch facing the mountains with a notebook in my lap and Hankelford at my feet. Mara had wanted to move there for years, even before we dated. She used to say that when I went one summer with

her parents, we would check out places to live. It was a future I had no stake in. But I missed that future. It was something. It was what everything we had done was for.

“Just give me a minute,” I said. She didn’t and went inside to collect brochures. She came out with a few, but kept them as we continued down the street.

We came to a pizza parlor and got calzones for us and her father and brought them back to the condo her father had rented near the edge of town. The three of us sat on the porch, which faced the brewery across the street. We drank beers we had bought from the brewery. It was the first stop we made when we got into town.

Her father had never had a calzone and talked about how good it was. I found it odd a man in his sixties had never had one. There was still something new for him to enjoy after all those years. At one point, as her father enjoyed his meal, she said I had no one in my life to talk to.

“I have you,” I said and drank from my beer. A couple of days after we returned to Orlando, she went out one night and never came back. Some nights, even on the good ones, I thought about leaving her. I told myself I would once we got back to Orlando, that I could do it.

“You need someone other than me.” For the first time, I thought she was with me for a good reason, to build my confidence, like one of her psychology patients.

“Hankelford.”

“Do you hear him?” she said to her father. “The dog.” She laughed.

Her father spoke about the dog he had as a kid. He’d run with the golden retriever mutt through the Illinois farm fields near his house. One day, the dog was hit by a car and died. He said he would never get another dog. Then, he cried.

Mara and I looked away.

When the beer was gone, we called it a night.

## MATRIMONY

Even though it had been only two and a half months since I saw my father, I didn't recognize him when he picked me up from La Guardia. He was thinner and there was less black hair on his head, but that had been happening for the past two years since he left Mom. He looked older, but really I was the one who had changed. For six months I hadn't spoken much to my family. A couple of text messages here and there. We had dinner once when he came to Orlando with his girlfriend and his girlfriend's daughter. I had been on my own for a while.

We didn't speak until we got clear of the airport traffic and headed toward Huntington. My father said, "How was your flight?"

"Good. Yours."

"Not bad. I just sleep on planes now. It's a couple of hours with no one bothering you."

I agreed.

He said we had a couple of hours until my sister's flight came in and he needed to run some errands. Then, we were silent.

We had so much to talk about—I had so much to say. I could have told him how Mara no longer lived with me—I could have told him why. I could have told him how that past July he was supposed to have become a grandfather. I could have told him about how in back in December, eleven months ago, I drove Mara to a clinic so that wouldn't happen. I could have told him about my Boxer, Hankelford—he liked dogs. I could have told him about Hankelford's brain tumor, about his seizures, about his death. I could have told him about how it felt to drive Hankelford to the vet and how every day I thought he'd die. I could have told him that those days lasted a year.

Anything would have been better than silence.

“What are you writing there?” My father pointed to the spiral notebook on my lap.

I was writing a new essay, an essay about the abortion. I kept it out of my bag because I wanted to be able to jot down notes, at least that’s what I said at the time. I wanted him to pick it up, to read it. It’d be easier if he read it than to tell him about it.

I said he was in my new essay. He laughed. “Like what a bastard father I was to you?”

I pretended to laugh. “No, nothing like that.”

After a trip to the bank, we walked across the parking lot to a coffee shop. In line my father asked, “You drink coffee? You want something?”

“I drink coffee.” I said. “I’m fine though.”

“You hungry? They have Danishes, muffins.”

“No.” I patted my stomach. “Ate on my layover.”

It was the truth, sort of. That’s the thing with the truth. There are all kinds of in-betweens. I did eat, just not much. I had a few bites of a sausage and egg croissant at the Burger King in the terminal. I hadn’t been eating much. I lost nearly thirty pounds in the past six months—felt weak.

He ordered and I went to the window and looked out at the parking lot. It looked cold, drained of color. It was odd to go from wearing shorts and T-shirts in Orlando and then three hours later need a winter coat and wait for the snow to drop. It had been a long time since I traveled. Really, it had just been a year and a half, but it seemed much longer.

As my father mixed milk into his coffee, he said, “Did you dye your hair?”

I wondered when he would notice. Instead of brown, it was black, like his. “You didn’t notice?”

“I noticed.” He stirred his coffee. “I noticed.”

We drove to Uncle Terry’s house, where we were put to work rubbing chalk on a homemade chalkboard. My uncle explained, somewhat successfully, that rubbing chalk across the board roughens the surface, takes the smooth surface and makes it a real chalkboard. It was for my cousin’s wedding reception the next day. The idea was that people would be able to write or draw things while wearing funny hats and disguises and take a picture in front of the board for the newlyweds.

Uncle Terry went inside to gather other supplies needed to be dropped off at the hotel where everyone was staying. My father and I tried to cover every centimeter of the board as the chalk broke in our hands.

“Hey,” my father said. “Tim told me you weren’t living at your place. I didn’t know that. Everything okay?”

“I was at Jon’s place for a few days when Timmy came up.”

“Sorry about what happened with...what’s her name? Michelle? Marcia?” He grabbed more chalk. “I know it sucks, but you can’t stop her if she wants to be with somebody else. I know it’s tough to think of her, you know, sleeping with somebody else.”

I didn’t know what to say so I just kept rubbing chalk. Whenever somebody tried to make me feel better about Mara, they would say something like that—about me needing to get it out of my head that she slept with another man for the last six months of our relationship. I never thought about it.

It wasn't the thought of another man touching her that upset me. It was times like when Hankelford died, when I stood outside my car with my Boxer in my arms at 2:30 A.M. I cradled him like a baby and he shook my arms, white foam pouring from his mouth. Before I left the apartment, I called Mara to tell her I needed to bring him in, but she wouldn't answer, except by text message. *I'm at work*, she wrote, even though the restaurant closed an hour earlier. The door to my car was locked—the keys were in my pocket. But I couldn't drop him to grab them. His piss and shit leaked out of him and down my arm. I had to lean against the car and bend down, careful not to drop Hankelford, while I get my keys. In moments like that, I thought of Mara, not having sex, just sitting around, leaning against another man, giggling. It wasn't that she was sleeping with another man.

As I rubbed the chalkboard, I smiled. I wanted to remember that moment. It made me want to wrap my fingers around Mara's throat and squeeze. It gave me a reason to hate her forever. I wanted to hold on to that anger so I wouldn't move on.

After Kerrie's plane arrived, my father drove us to our hotel, a different one than the rest of the family. I forget why that was, but I remember our father caused some confusion about the hotel. Kerrie wanted to split a room to save money.

My father lifted one of my bags from the trunk.

"I got it," I said.

"It's okay." He held onto the bag. "Go ahead and get the door."

My father placed the bag on a chair near the front door and then left. He said that he'd be back in a couple of hours to take us to the rehearsal dinner. I claimed the twin bed by the door,

while Kerrie unpacked into the dressers. She was paler than I thought she would be, but thinner like our father. I sat on the bed and unzipped my bag.

Kerrie said, “Do you know if Dad is bringing his girlfriend?”

“I don’t think so. Why?”

“I don’t want to have dinner with her.” She tossed clothes onto the bed. “He didn’t even tell me about her.”

I rumbled through my bag searching for the sports coat my father told me to buy.

She sat. “I had to find out from Timmy that Dad was even dating somebody.”

I was silent. I didn’t want to hear it. I just wanted her to shut up.

She returned to the drawers. “Do you need any drawers?”

“No.” I had grown used to living out of a bag.

Mara had left a month before she admitted to cheating on me. That night I went downtown with my friend, Kristina. I lost track of my drinks in half an hour. I lost count at four Margaritas and three Tequila shots. The rest of the night is just snapshots: laughing at how high the five story building is, dancing with Kristina, puking over the counter onto the bartender, security, puking out the window of a strange SUV with Kristina next to me.

I woke on a futon in a strange living room. A Husky licked my face. Before I opened my eyes, I thought it was Hankelford. The dog left and I held my pounding head. Cursing myself for hiding behind alcohol like Mara did, I took out my phone. I remembered Jon blocked Mara on my Facebook account, so I logged into Hankelford’s account.

Her status read, “So, what’s the word on eloping?”

I imagined hanging myself from the fan. My corpse tied to the fan with the bed sheet I held in my hand. There was something beautiful about my slumped shoulders and limp legs flying as the fan moved. The fan looked weak, though. I was sure it would shatter with my weight. I clutched the tan bed sheet and stumbled, still drunk, to the bathroom. I tied the sheet tight around my neck. I put the other half the sheet on the inside of the door and shut it. Then I sat down, and felt the sheet tighten around my neck, felt it choke me.

Kristina found me passed out in front of the door.

She untied the bed sheet from my neck and we sat on the couch for a bit before returning to my car and then my apartment. When we arrived, she went to her car to get a change of clothes.

I was left alone.

I snatched a bottle of wine. It sat for a few days on the moose holder I bought Mara in Colorado. The moose would lay on its back and look as if he was drinking the wine. We named the moose Hankelford. She took the moose, left the wine. Wanting to see it shatter, I flung it at the fridge. It bounced off of the fridge and dented the pantry door. It fell to the floor and rolled to Hankelford's water dish that hadn't been moved since he died.

“Fuck.”

I took the long mirror, the one Mara used to put on her makeup before work, and I kicked it with everything I had. Glass shattered across the living room and the dining room. For months after, I'd find glass pieces. I dropped what remained of the mirror's frame and moved to the shower. Tired of standing, I sat, letting the water flow down my body. The water mixed with blood on his calf and shin. My fingers became wrinkled and soft.

When I got out, Jon and Kristina were sitting on the couch Mara bought. The mirror and wine bottle were in a garbage bag by the front door. Jon drove me to class in the evening. I put up no argument. After class, I found Jon and Kristina at the end of the hall. Back at Jon's apartment, we watched *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and had a slumber party. No one mentioned the bed sheet or Mara. The next morning, Jon left me a key. I stayed for a month.

My father was late picking us up so the rehearsal dinner was well underway when we arrived at the Italian restaurant. I pulled on the sleeves of my sports coat, but gave up trying to be comfortable. My father and Kerrie mingled with our extended family. I stayed at Kerrie's side while she talked to Aunt Martha. They said something about how nice it is to see each other after so many years. I didn't care, wondering why I flew to New York to see a cousin I barely know get married. I found it strange that all these people are together because they share the same last name even if they didn't know anything about each other.

Aunt Martha said, "Sean, why don't you go introduce yourself to some of Jess' friends." She pointed to a group of girls on the other side of the room. "They're cute... and they're doctors." She tapped the back of my hand.

I watched the girls. Why should I care if they're doctors?

I sat at a round table with my father and my grandfather. We waited for the food line to shorten. My grandfather joked about marriage and said, "Paul's not one for marriage anymore, I guess." My grandfather smiled and slapped my father's hand. "You wouldn't get married again, would ya?"

"I'm not against marriage." Without hesitation, my father said, "Marriage is fine with the right person. I'm against the person I married."

I never heard my father comment on my mother before. When my mother forced me to decide between the two, I chose my father because my father didn't comment on my mother. My father left my mother alone. I pretended not to hear.

After dinner, my father drove me and Kerrie back to our hotel. I wrote in bed, while Kerrie watched T.V. She asked, "What's dad's girlfriend like?"

"I don't know."

She sat up, facing me. "He never even told me about her. Timmy told me. I would've come up here and it would've been a surprise."

I said, "He didn't tell me until a week before he came up with her and her daughter to go to Disney. I thought you knew. I barely talk to him."

"And he better spend time with us tomorrow." She leaned forward, arms out. "And before he leaves Sunday. I didn't fly from Arizona for a family weekend not to see my dad, you know?"

I pulled my notebook close, hoping that will be a big enough hint. I wanted her to grow up. This is life, I wanted to say. Our father had a new family. That wasn't just my thinking. My father told Uncle Terry he had a new family.

"And what am I supposed to tell mom if she asks if dad brought someone? I doubt she will, but still, you know?"

I put my notebook down. "She doesn't know?"

"No, she might suspect something, but I don't think she knows." Kerrie shook her head.

I sat up. "I figured she knew. I suspected something was up last year, when we flew to visit you. He was on the phone and told someone that he loves them. I thought it was you."

She shook her head. “No, she doesn’t know.”

I looked down. “How’s mom?”

“You should call her. I know she misses you.”

“She said that?”

“No, but I know she does.”

I got out of bed and brought my notebook to the dresser. “She should call me then. She’s the one that stopped talking to me. Told me I betrayed her when dad and I visited you.”

“She probably won’t even mention it if you call her.”

I crawled across the bed on my knees, back to the pillows. “No. She was ridiculous. She didn’t want any of us talking to dad. She didn’t want us going to Christmas dinner with him, but she refused to plan anything. She just wanted our attention. She played the little victim, like she did nothing wrong. I got tired of it.”

“She’s changed a lot. You should call her.”

I turned from Kerrie and looked out the crack in the blinds. It was cold outside, I knew it. I didn’t turn on the heater. I laid on the side of the bed closest to the window, leaving room on Mara’s side.

My father was late picking me and Kerrie up. I sat in the passenger seat after Kerrie passed it up. My father said, “Charmaine is at the I-HOP, is that okay with you? Or did you want to go somewhere else?”

“That’s fine,” I said and stared out the window.

Kerrie shook her head, throwing her arms in the air. “If she’s already there, why would you ask where we want to go?” She looked out the window.

“Well, she has a car. She’ll meet us wherever. You don’t like I-HOP?”

“It’s fine.” She shook her head. “I’m just saying.”

At breakfast, I sat with my father and sister on one side of the booth and faced my father’s girlfriend and her young daughter. Only my father spoke, and only to the woman’s daughter. I exchanged glances with Kerrie. I asked myself about the father of the young girl. For a minute, it crossed my mind that the young girl could be another sister. When I was young, my father spent so much of the day away, working late, he said. My father told a corny joke and the girl laughed.

Before the wedding, I put on my suit jacket and straightened my tie. My father said, “You dress up pretty nice. Who knew?”

I stared into the mirror. “I guess.” I sprayed Acqua di Gio onto my wrist and held it to my nose.

At the ceremony, the music played, but I couldn’t see with everyone standing, blocking as Uncle Terry led Jessica down the aisle. My father leaned forward to my ear. “Terry looks like he’s going to kill someone.” Uncle Terry’s lips were horizontal and he stared straight through the groom and the wedding party. I decided Uncle Terry must be angry because he’s giving his daughter away.

Uncle Terry kissed Jessica on the cheek and took his seat. I was too far in the back to hear anything. Jessica wiped tears from her eyes and she kept her smile through the ceremony. Her about-to-be husband slid a ring across her finger. The couple kissed and walked down the aisle together.

Ushers led the guests outside and gave everyone a sparkler. We lit them and created a corridor in the garden. Photographers snapped photos. Waiting for the couple to run through the lit corridor, I watched my sparkler burn.

A month earlier, I stood in the kitchen, my kitchen. Dozens of garbage bags were scattered throughout the apartment. I flipped through one of Mara's photo albums, one of many I lined up along the counter where our smiling picture used to sit. Her mother sits on a couch in Mara's childhood home, smiling back at the photographer. I imagined Mara knee deep in garbage. She would pull the photo album from the wreckage and smile, holding it to her chest.

Removing the photo from the clear frame, I placed it over my candleholder. The candle's flame burned a hole in the middle, about at the place of her mother's shoulder. The photo broke in half, falling into the candle. It burned.

I dropped the sparkler on the ground when my father told me to, after the newlyweds ran by. I pictured walking into my bedroom and the wooden box of Hankelford's ashes smashed on the carpet. Ashes form a line from the box to the toilet.

Jon told me to change the locks. He told me that he would keep Hankelford's ashes at his place while I was away. I had it under control, I said. Mara wouldn't do that. I told myself that if Mara flushes Hankelford down the toilet, we'd be even.

I found the chair with my name on it near the dance floor. Kerrie, my father, and my grandfather sat at the same table. After Uncle Terry and Jessica danced to a cover of Black Sabbath's *Iron Man*, people crowded the dance floor. I watched them dance and wished I brought Kristina, my dance partner.

My father, with his arm around his girlfriend, said, "Sean, why don't you dance?"

“I will later. I want to go see the chalkboard.”

I left my untouched food and found the chalkboard in the next room. A young couple stood in front of it making goofy faces and touched each other. The photos printed out twice in a long string, like a photo booth. The couple left and I stepped up to the board. I wrote, “Congratulations!” and drew Hankelford’s face. I remembered the bump at the top of his head and how his eyes folded down. I stood in front and smiled as four flashes of light go off. One printout was placed in a book and the other was given to me. I placed it in the chest pocket of my suit.

My grandfather walked up to me. “Those girls over there, they’re talking about you.”

I looked at a couple of cute girls a few feet behind my grandfather.

“Ask one of them to dance.”

“I don’t know.” I looked at them again.

“The family name’s gonna die out. You need to start having kids.”

“I don’t think I’m gonna be having kids tonight.”

“No, no, no.” My grandfather shook his head and hands. “But ask one to dance. Show some good Ironman dance moves.”

“Have you ever watched one of us dance, grandpa? We move like rusted tin men.”

“Ask her to dance.” He patted my arm and walked away.

I looked at the girls. They looked back.

I walked back to my seat.

Aunt Martha sat in my seat when I walked up to the table. “Oh, I’m sorry, Sean. Just keeping it warm for you.”

“No problem.”

She stood and grabbed my arm. “Don’t sit yet, let’s dance.” She tugs on my arm.

“I don’t know.”

“C’mon, one dance.”

I smiled and followed her to the dance floor.

We danced to an 80’s song that blended in with every other 80’s song. My father laughed and whispered something to Kerrie. I looked away and smiled. I closed my eyes and danced like I do with Kristina. I was breathing heavy at the end of the song, but stayed for more. Others danced over to me and Aunt Martha. A circle formed.

I discussed weddings with Mara once. Mara lay next to me in bed. Her fingers caressed my palm. We smiled and stared into each other’s eyes. She asked, “Who would be your best man?”

I pointed to my feet, at Hankelford. “Hankelford, who else?”

She laughed. “Not Dan or Jon.”

I looked around and shrugged. “Man’s best friend. It’s in his job description.”

“Miley can be the flower girl.” She grabbed my hand. Miley looked up next to Hankelford.

“No, that’s Hankelford’s job.”

“You hear that, Hankelford, he said you a girl.” She nudged Hankelford with her foot. “Hankelford is the best man. Miley’s the flower girl.”

I stopped smiling and counted on my hand. “Hankelford is the best man, flower girl, priest, pianist, and the bride if you keep it up. Hankelford is multi-talented.”

Hankelford moaned, rising. He lay between us, smiling. Mara petted him. “You hear him, Hankelford. You stealing him from me. You mean to me, Hankelford.”

Hankelford smiled.

“Hankelford knows what real love is ‘cause he’s made of love.”

Hankelford licked me.

“He can’t do all of those things. He’s just a dog.”

I grabbed Hankelford and kissed his forehead hard. “Hankelford Henry Hank, you don’t take that fucking shit. You can be whatever you want to be. Don’t listen to her telling you that you can only be a dog. You can grow up and do whatever you want.” I kissed Hankelford.

Hankelford licked me and didn’t stop.

I shouted, “Make out session.”

Hankelford lay on my chest, licking any inch of my face he could find.

“Okay, Hankel, that’s enough.” I moved my shoulder to roll Hankelford off.

Hankelford planted his paw on my shoulder and repositioned himself to force me down.

Hankelford licked.

“Rape.” I smiled and giggled. “Rape.” I reached for Mara. “Help me.”

She knocked my hand away and petted Hankelford. “You get him, Hankelford.”

Kerrie sat opposite from me on the train into New York City. I asked, “What did you think of dad’s girlfriend?”

“Charmaine?”

“Is that her name? I always forget.” I wrote in my notebook.

She puts her foot up on the seat next to her. “Yeah, Charmaine.” She looked around. “I don’t know. She’s nice, I guess. But did you see how she didn’t talk to either of us?”

I nodded, facing my notebook.

“And did you see how dad was with that girl? She’s really close to him. Little girls aren’t like that. She would be scared and her mom wouldn’t let just some man get to be so close to her daughter so soon. Dad’s been with her for a while, I think.”

I put my notebook down. “By my count, I think they’ve been together for a couple of years. He said, “I love you,” to her on the phone when we came out to see you. It must have started before then.”

Kerrie leaned forward. “Do you think it started before he left mom?”

I leaned forward. “I remember as a kid thinking dad might have someone else.” I look over my shoulder. “Do you think he’s the father?”

“The father?”

“Of her kid. She’s much lighter than her mom and I never hear about her dad.”

“No, she can’t be.” Kerrie shook her head, and then stared down the train. “No, you think?”

I nodded. “It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“That would kill mom.”

I nodded, leaning back.

“She’s having a hard enough time.” She wiped her cheek.

I was unsure if she was crying or not.

“He can’t be.”

I shrugged.

Kerrie shook her head. “He can’t be.”

“How’s mom?”

“She’s pretty bad.” Kerrie looked down, playing with her purse. “She’s being tested for Parkinson’s next week.”

“What?” I wanted to pace down the aisle, but managed to stay seated.

“You should’ve seen her when she came out to visit me a few months ago. She’s just sitting there shaking, trying to drink some coffee when we went to Starbucks. She said it might be her medicine ‘cause you know she’s on all this medication for depression. You should call her.”

“I should.” I shook my head. “I should. Her birthday is Friday. I’ll call then. She’ll like that.” I nod so slight I’m not sure if I’m actually nodding. “She’ll like that. Do you think mom knew? If he was cheating, that is.”

Years earlier, my mom carried a laundry basket into the garage. “Sean.”

I took my feet off of the coffee table.

“Sean, can you come here?” My mom closes the garage door behind her.

I dragged my feet through the living room to her. “Yeah?”

She crossed her arms. “You know I saw you out there on the couch with Anna. You two cuddling up next to each other, acting like two little, young, love birds.” She shook her head.

“So?” I shrugged.

She put her hands on her hips. “I don’t want to see it in my house anymore, okay?”

“What are you talking about?” I walked away. “It’s not like we’re having sex on the couch. We’re sitting next to each other. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that other people live here. We don’t want to see it. You do whatever you want in Orlando, but when you’re in this house, you will obey the rules of my house.”

“We’re sitting next to each other. Nothing else happened.” I looked to make sure I threw out the condom wrapper.

“I don’t care. I don’t want to see any hand holding or anything.”

I plopped down on the couch, and shook my head.

As the train barreled to our station, I imagined my mom lying in bed at night waiting for my father to come home. She checks the clock on her nightstand. It’s almost four and my father isn’t home. She hears the door creak open and close. My father walks into the bedroom and she pretends to be asleep. She hopes my father doesn’t notice her tears as he moves past her to the shower. When he closes the bathroom door, she goes to the remains of his pockets on his dresser. She sees a receipt for a bar from an hour before, a bar she hasn’t known him to go to. My father doesn’t seem drunk enough to have spent that much on alcohol by himself. She moves slowly back under the covers, hoping not to make a sound. She closes her eyes and tells herself that she must put up with it because of the kids.

The train came to a stop. When the doors opened, I rushed out I unzip my jacket and closed my eyes. I let the cold wind blow through the darkness against my chest and face.

When we got back to Long Island, Kerrie collapsed into a chair in Aunt Martha’s dining room. “Do you have anything to eat? We walked like all over the city and we didn’t want to miss the train so we didn’t eat anything.”

Aunt Martha laughed. “Kerrie, we have so much food, so much.”

Kerrie chose some kind of sandwich and a glass of water.

“Sean, I know what you want.” Aunt Martha disappeared into the kitchen.

“I’m okay.” My phone rang. It was my father. I put it on silent and took a seat next to Kerrie.

Aunt Martha returned with a white box and placed it in front of me. “I’ll start some hot chocolate.”

“I love hot chocolate.” I smiled.

“I know. I remember when you were here last. It’s been... how many years? five? six? But I remember.”

I opened the white box and a large cake with white frosting rests, untouched inside.

Aunt Martha peeked her head in from the kitchen. “It’s the top of the wedding cake. Jess can’t eat it.” She explained that Jessica is allergic.

I held the fork over it, unsure if it was right to eat it. My stomach grumbled and my fork tore into the cake.

Aunt Martha returned after a few minutes with my hot chocolate. I was a quarter of the way through the cake by then. She put her elbows on the table and leaned her chin into her hands. “So, how was the city?”

Kerrie and I exchanged looks. She said, “What’s going on with our dad?”

“What do you mean?” Aunt Martha sat across from us.

“With his girlfriend. We think he was cheating on our mom with her.”

I ate my cake.

“Oh, don’t think like that.” She grabbed Kerrie’s hand. “You guys shouldn’t think about things like that.”

“‘Cause our mom, I know she knows more than she’s telling us.” Kerrie cried.

I wanted to tell her that it’s okay, to comfort her, but I took another bite of cake.

Aunt Martha held Kerrie’s hand. “I don’t know what’s going on with your father. I asked him about Charmaine, but you know your father. He doesn’t like to talk about relationships, important things. But he should talk to you.”

Kerrie nodded. “I’m just worried about my mom. You know what she tried to do.”

I remembered that text message Kerrie sent me. I remembered the three text messages. I’ve forgotten the types of pills my mom swallowed to end her suffering, but I remembered the text messages. I told Kerrie that mom just wanted attention, that she wanted to play the victim and not take responsibility for her actions in her failed marriage.

I felt my throat, remembering the bed sheet tied tight around it. I had never felt closer to my mom. I’ll call her like I told Kerrie I would. Most of the twenty minute phone call will be silence, but the second phone call and the ones later won’t be.

Aunt Martha tried to comfort Kerrie, but she cried more. Kerrie’s muttering something about our mom, but she’d cried too much for it to make sense.

Mara always told me that I should talk to my mom. “I don’t have one,” she would say. “You don’t know what you have.” Mara emailed me a month after I returned from New York. She wanted to meet for coffee, for closure. I didn’t answer. What was the point?

Aunt Martha wiped away her own tears. “I don’t think your father would do that. I’ve known him for many years. I don’t think he would do that to your mom. Whatever happened at

the end between the two of them, they loved each other for many years. Your dad loved your mom. I'm sure he still does in a way, even if he can't admit it. But their relationship was toxic. No matter what happened at the end, they're both better now. You told me yesterday how your mom's been hanging out with her friend a lot. What happened doesn't matter, it's what they do now."

Kerrie stopped crying, and I pushed aside what was left of the cake.

## ON HANKELFORD RACISM

In one year, I brought my dog, Hankelford, to the vet approximately sixty times, totaling an estimated \$22,000. During that year, people would say, “Oh, he must be so special.” When I write about him, readers say, “I want to know why Hankelford is special to you.” What reason will be good enough for them? Hankelford once dragged me from a burning house? He taught me the importance of family or how to lighten up? Swam the English Channel? Walked across to the U.S. in an effort to find me after I moved?

He was a runt for a brindle Boxer at fifty-five pounds, forty-five before steroids. He had four legs, one with a white paw, and an undocked tail with a white tip. I say he was a Boxer, but he was a mutt. Boxer is easier, quicker. My best guess, and the vet’s, is that he was part Boxer, bulldog, and Boston terrier, which may explain his small size. He had a large underbite, which made him look evil, and dog owners would stop at the gate of the dog park, look at him sitting and staring at the potential new friend and wagging his tail, and then the owner would walk in the other direction. But he was a big baby, afraid of thunder, dogs barking, any loud noises really, as well as birds that flew over his head. He played tug-of-war every chance he got and with any object he could find—rope, a tire, loose-leaf paper, a shoe, my girlfriend’s hair.

Hankelford wasn’t special.

\* \* \*

Some dogs are special. Take Sergeant Stubby, for example. For eighteen months, the brindle bull terrier, served in the 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, 26<sup>th</sup> (Yankee) Division in the trenches of France

during World War I. Private Robert Conroy adopted the pup while training at Yale in 1917.

Stubby learned the marching routines and how to salute with his paw. When it was time for the soldiers to ship out to France, Conroy smuggled Stubby onboard in an overcoat.

On February 5, 1918, he entered the front lines north of Soissons, which is northeast of Paris off of the Aisne River. For a month of heavy fire day and night, Stubby protected the wounded as they slept. When gunshots rang out, Stubby howled and barked, entering a kind-of battle rage. A few weeks after getting to the front lines, Stubby was injured in a mustard gas attack. For those of you who don't know about mustard gas, after a person gets hit, their nose and throat swell due to blisters being formed inside. It seals one's airway. Mustard gas, by the way, killed an estimated 91,000 people during the war and earned the title of a weapon of mass destruction.

Yes, the dog was hit by a weapon of mass destruction.

Instead of dying like 91,000 other people, Sergeant Stubby, like Spider-Man getting bit by a radioactive spider, gained new abilities. His sense of smell became sensitive and he was able to feel an on-coming attack and warn his unit. Later in the war, while attacking the town of Schieprey, Stubby was wounded once more, this time by a German hand grenade.

Let's pause here.

The dog, a forty-five pound mutt, was gassed and then hit with a hand grenade. He survived, was sent to the rear to recover, and once he was healthy, he returned to the trenches.

The dog. Returned. To the trenches.

Fuck anyone who doesn't like dogs.

Stubby took part in four offensives and seventeen battles. He located American soldiers in no man's land (Allegedly, he could tell the difference between the English language and German) and ran through the trenches warning of gas attacks and incoming artillery, which he could hear before his human counterparts.

During the Battle of the Argonne Forest, at the time the largest battle in United States history, Sergeant Stubby (and keep in mind this is out of 1.2 million U.S. soldiers) was solely responsible for the capture of a German spy. In the middle of the night, the spy attempted to escape over to the German trenches, and Stubby ran up and bit his ass, refusing to let go until help arrived.

The dog went on to become the most decorated war dog of the time and remains the only dog to be promoted to sergeant through combat. By the end of the war, Stubby outranked his owner, who was only a Corporal.

Following the war, Stubby was inducted into the American Legion and given free food for life from the YMCA. The Grand Hotel Majestic in New York City lifted its ban on dogs to allow Stubby to stay there. In his retirement, Stubby served as the mascot for Georgetown, where Conroy attended law school, and was the star of the half-time show that consisted of him kicking a football around the field. After his death in 1926, he was preserved and can be seen at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. His obituary in the New York Times, which was three columns wide and half a page long, began, "Stubby of A.E.F. Enters Valhalla."

If Stubby were my dog, I'd have no problem defending the decision to spend a year and half my salary treating him.

\* \* \*

At brunch one Sunday, my girlfriend told me her father thought I was crazy for putting Hankelford into radiation therapy. She said, "It's too much to spend. He's just a dog." Whenever I doted on Hankelford, my girlfriend would say he's just a dog. I took it as an insult, but she was right. Hankelford was *just* a dog.

Just a dog. She wasn't calling him a dog, was she? No, not with the *just* there. Calling something *just* anything is an insult. The anything at the end is inferior. The unwanted. The unnecessary. Like the anything is being given up on. Oh, well.

Just deals with one superior thing and one inferior thing.

Anyone who I felt was cruel to Hankelford was labeled a Hankelford racist. Not just labeled in my head, but out loud with me shouting at them, "Hankelford racist!" The park behind the Altamonte Springs Mall was a Hankelford racist because dogs weren't allowed to come to the Fourth of July fireworks display. The cruise line Mara wanted to go on was a Hankelford racist because he wasn't allowed to come even though he could get fancy in a tie. People who crossed the street to get away from Hankelford were Hankelford racists. Squirrels that ran from him in the park were Hankelford racists. God was a Hankelford racist after giving Hankelford two brain tumors. Death was not, however, because he took Hankelford in. Nearly everyone I came in contact with minus vets, me, and my father were labeled a Hankelford racist at one point. Even Mara was a Hankelford racist.

I expected more from Mara. She had a puggle named Miley. How can you take the time and energy to feed and care for another living thing and think that it's inferior to you? Is the grandmother who needs help climbing stairs or needs rides to the weekly doctor's appointments inferior? Is a lover inferior when he or she is sick?

In a way, I guess he or she is, inferior. It comes down to the physicality of the being. My grandmother, near the end of her life, had lung cancer. She needed help moving, getting up and down into chairs. If I were a heartless man, I could have killed her. Or I could have let her fall one of those many times she stumbled. And if I did, I would have been wrong, a bad man, in not just my eyes but in the eyes of countless others. When Hankelford got sick, I was crazy for helping him. In an online course, a classmate started a discussion thread about dogs and I mentioned Hankelford and his seizures (this was before the doctors found his brain tumor). One classmate wrote that it was good of me to still take care of him, that many people wouldn't. I didn't understand. He was a sick dog, not a bad one.

I understand that most people, even those who like dogs, won't agree with me. I'm not asking you to. Dogs are inferior to humans. Yes. So what?

\* \* \*

What do we expect from a dog? What do we hope to get out of one when we purchase or adopt one? Before I got Hankelford, I told my girlfriend that he would like to lick people. So I expected my dog to lick. To take walks. To play. That's about it. After I adopted him, I taught him a few tricks. *Sit. Slap hands. Rope*, although he'd bring whatever he could fit in his mouth.

The basics. I trusted him on our daily walks to be off his leash. He'd walk closer to my side without one than with one. Perhaps he felt safer that way.

Whatever I taught him, I felt it was for his safety. Except for *Rope*, I guess. For me, teaching a dog to sit isn't about making him sit. It's about calming him down so that he doesn't scare a stranger or run into traffic.

A roommate, who used to call Hankelford *just a dog* adopted a black Labrador retriever named Loki a couple of years after Hankelford died. My roommate never had a dog before. He taught Loki tricks. *Sit. Jump. Lie. Stay. Shake. High Five. Roll over.* When I'd come home, he'd trot Loki out, showing off all his tricks, like a circus elephant.

When Loki would be let out into the back yard, he'd bark at a squirrel or a bird or a cat, and as soon as one bark escaped him, my roommate would call him in and force him into his cage, and then place a blanket over it so that Loki couldn't see. Loki would sit in his cage until my roommate felt he was punished enough, sometimes for hours.

If Hankelford barked, a rarity that might explain why I never got mad at him for doing so, I'd walk over to him and say, "Whatcha barking at, Hankel? That [squirrel, person, bird, grass, etc.] bothering you? You tell him, Hankel. You say, don't bother me [squirrel, person, bird, grass, etc.]." Dogs bark. They don't know English. Would you punish a French houseguest for saying the mail is here in French?

Sometimes Loki got a bone as a treat, and after a while of chewing on it, my roommate would take it from him, keep it away at height that Loki couldn't reach, and then give it back a few minutes later. He did this, he said, to show Loki that he was in charge. Loki had to know he was the inferior one.

\* \* \*

Names are everything.

I gave Hankelford his name because I thought it was interesting. I had wanted a dog named Hank for years, but one day I thought Rutherford would also be a good one. A second later, I thought of Hankelford, shouting it out in the back of a friend's car.

We didn't share a last name. He wasn't Hankelford Ironman. His full name was Hankelford Henry Hank. He was his own being.

Mara named Miley Jeanne so they would share the same initials. They shared a last name. Both of their initials were MJA.

After my Boxer, Jade, died when I was sixteen, my mom started collecting Pomeranians. Over a few years she ended up with five. Their names were Princess, Sugar Bear, Precious, Sasha, and Sneeck. I can't stand names like that. There's something about naming a dog with those types of names or naming a dog to share your initials. Is it that those names show the dog's inferiority? Or the owner trying to keep their superiority?

You can't really love something if you think it's inferior to you.

\* \* \*

I'm not a cat person. Cats are okay. I had one when I was a child. After a couple of years, Mom said it was now an outdoors cat, and I would feed him in the evenings and he would lay

next to me when my friends and I played Magic The Gathering on the porch. We moved when I was sixteen to the other side of town, and Mom left the cat behind. For months I imagined him returning to the front door for food. How long did it take for him to learn I would not be coming? Cats, Mom said, take care of themselves.

I hear that a lot when a discussion turns to cats and dogs. Dogs are needy and require the owner to take them out. Cats can be fine alone. An animal that wants to be by itself doesn't sound that great to me.

In college, a girlfriend, a blonde with strong thighs, got mad one night because I didn't need her, she said. I don't remember what kicked off the complaint, but I didn't understand it at the time. I said, "Aren't I supposed to be self-sufficient?"

She said she needed me and I helped her with many things, which I didn't realize were important. Life things. Like paying bills and getting around and finding things at stores and online. Helping her around the house. Gave her advice. But she couldn't do anything for me. "You can give me a blowjob," I said. "I can't do that for myself." But that's not what she was looking for. In her opinion, in order to show that she loved me, I had to need her to do things for me. I had to rely on her, put my trust in her to help me live my life.

The question that comes to me now from that lovely girl: is it a bad thing to need somebody? Is it a failure of your being to require someone else to do something for you?

I think not. It's a sign of maturity, isn't it? To recognize your failings? That you are a part of a community and can rely on others? No one, after all, goes at it alone. We all get help from somebody. So, then why are dogs thought of as lesser creatures because they require us to do things for them? When you think about it, dogs only require our help because we want them to

live in our society. Dogs need to be let outside because we want them to live in our houses and don't want shit on our rugs. They require us to feed them because we keep them inside and don't allow them to hunt.

Domestic dogs evolved from the gray wolf somewhere around 100,000 years ago. It's thought tens of thousands of years ago, man domesticating dogs. They were used primarily for hunting early on and as a source of fur. They joined us on the pilgrimage to the Americas. Bodies of dogs have been found mummified with Egyptian princes in the pyramids. Dalmatians were used to protect carriages in the 1800s, like a canine secret service running alongside. One can't forget Sergeant Stubby helping us win the First World War. Kennedy is said to have called for his Welsh terrier, Charlie, during the Cuban Missile Crisis so that he may pet the dog and relieve tension. We built our modern society with the help of dogs. And now that our society is built, we cast them aside. We spent thousands of years beating them into submission to do our dirty work, and now that the work has been done, they can go fuck themselves. They're like those factory workers losing their jobs to technological advancements.

\* \* \*

Winter coming? Buy your dog a mink fur coat. Only \$725. Dog having trouble sleeping? Try the Louis XV Pet Pavilion. \$23,990. Or how about the 52-carat diamond collar going for the low low price of \$1.8 million. Having trouble measuring the wood for a new dog house? Forget the work and get Super Dog House with Plasma TV and Spa for \$410, 825.

Hankelford never had any of that kind of crap. He wasn't fancy. I'd get him dollar ropes at Target and he would be the happiest thing I ever saw. At some point once we had no more jobs for dogs to do, they became our children. Mom had a dog stroller so she could bring one her five Pomeranians along on a shopping trip. Once, she came to visit me in Orlando when I moved into a new house shortly after I graduated from college. She brought her third Pomeranian, Precious. At a furniture store, the salesperson came up to the stroller, hoping to greet a infant. I was embarrassed and ended the shopping trip.

Many people view their dogs as their possession, but I never did. He wasn't like my car or my couch.

He wasn't my child either. When people would call him that, I would say, *We are not of blood relation.* A dog is not a child.

Why does he have to be my child for me to care about him? A person should be able of caring about someone or something that isn't related to them.

\* \* \*

Hankelford wasn't my first dog. Not even my first Boxer. When I was young, my father managed a Pet Supermarket at the Broward Mall in South Florida. He once studied for veterinary school, but joined the workforce instead. Mom would take me and my siblings with her to visit some days. He'd let me crawl into one of the dog cages and pretend to be a dog. My earliest memory is from when I was four and Mom got a Boxer from my father's pet shop. He wasn't working that day and wasn't with us. We played with the puppy in a small room for a few

minutes before leaving with it. On our way out, Mom asked what her name should be and I said, “Spot.”

“She doesn’t have spots,” Mom said.

“She has one spot.” I pointed to the white of her chest.

Mom named her Jade.

Over the years we gained a cat, a bird, iguanas, snakes, monitor lizards, hamsters, fish, turtles and tortoises. When we travelled, we’d have to spend a day at a zoo. My father dissected dead snakes, turtles, and iguanas in the backyard, and, in random places around the house, would be a turtle shell cleaned off as if it were a statue, but the smell remained.

One day, as I played with Jade, my father talked about people who are mean to dogs. “How could someone be mean to a dog?” he said. “All they want to do is love. What kind of person could mistreat something that only wants to love them?” He scratched Jade behind the ear.

Most afternoons, if he wasn’t at work, my father could be found in the backyard tending to his turtles and tortoises. On drives home from school, if he spot a turtle trying to cross the road, he’d pull over and help it across so it wouldn’t get hit by a car. That includes my father running out into the middle of a highway to pick it up and carry it to the other side before running back through traffic. No matter what else my father did, the times he’d come home and Mom would say I misbehaved and he’d spank me with his belt, seeing my father care for animals showed he was a good man.

When he got home, he'd go to take care of his turtles first. Not feed them, but take them inside before dark, before the raccoons came out. My father said the animals needed to be taken care of first. They weren't able to take care of themselves.

Mom seemed to love animals, and, as a child, I thought she was like my father. But she seemed to love animals if they were cute and she could show them off. When I think of her loving animals, it's mostly the five Pomeranians she bought after Jade died. She would buy them shirts and fancy collars.

When I picture Mom with Jade, she's not really with Jade. In my memory, Mom lays in bed watching TV, and Jade is in the hallway near my parent's bedroom. As time passes, Jade stretches onto the bedroom's carpet, and Mom yells at her to get back in the hall. I see it raining and Jade's wet at the back sliding glass door. I go to let her in and Mom says, *Wait till your father's home*. I'm not to be trusted to dry the dog off and Mom doesn't want to do it. Jade shivers in the rain.

Yet, Mom never hit Jade. My father did. My father hit her and she bled. I hit Hankelford too. He'd be chewing on my dresser or eating books from my bookshelf, and I'd push him away and then smack him. I didn't duct tape his mouth shut or hit him with an object, just a smack across the face or the ass. But I would have done the same if he were human. If I came in my bedroom to see a grown man shoving pages of the novel I was reading in his mouth, I'd hit him. After Hankelford got a brain tumor, I felt bad about smacking him in the face, guilty. When I did hit Hankelford, which was rare, and I think this goes for my father with Jade too, I hit him because of other stress, usually work. Not much of a difference I guess, but enough for me, kind

of like manslaughter and murder. Hitting a dog I can live with if I'd hit a person too. But I guess that brings me back around to the inferiority thing. I hit him because I could.

\* \* \*

One Saturday morning in the dog park, I nearly beat a man because he didn't want his dog playing with Hankelford. As I bent to attach my Boxer Hankelford's leash and leave, a man with his own Boxer, one twice Hankelford's size, stepped up to the dog park's gate. I put the leash away, happy Hankelford would get a friend to play with.

The man had a shaved head and beer belly. He was a few inches taller than me and few pounds thicker. As he opened the gate, he said to get my dog away.

I grabbed Hankelford's collar and held him as the man entered the park. His dog peed, and then I let Hankelford go, thinking it would be okay.

"I said get your dog away from mine."

"Why?" The dogs licked each other's faces and sniffed each other.

The man sighed. "I don't want your dog touching mine. Get him away."

Hankelford smiled as he ran with the other dog. I stared at the blue cross drawn with marker on the shaved spot on his forehead by his radiation oncologist. "No."

The man walked toward me, and then away. "Why can't you just get your dog away?" His hands turned to fists as he paced.

"No." I stared at Hankelford.

He walked toward me. His feet nearly touching mine. "Get him away from my dog."

My face burned. Did he see me shaking? I wondered if Hankelford would come to my protection. Would his dog come to his? “No.”

“Get control of your dog.” He shoved me.

“No.” I shoved back.

He stayed inches from my face for a couple of minutes. My face burned. I imagined grabbing him and shoving his head onto the top of the green fence.

I was seconds away from hurting him, or him hurting me, when he called his dog and left. I’d rather hurt a person than interrupt my dog’s good time.

\* \* \*

I haven’t gotten another dog since Hankelford died. It’s been years.

I get asked about it from time to time, when someone finds out I love dogs. It can be odd to tell someone I love dogs but I don’t have one. Sometimes, I say I will get one when I finish school. When things become less crazy at work. When I get a house. When I settle down. A few months after Hankelford, I wanted a three-legged, white Boxer. I wanted a German shepherd. I wanted an English bulldog.

But not really.

I don’t want another dog.

A friend of my brother’s once asked me to come to Nepal to teach English. “You help people,” he said. It feels good.

It does feel good to help others, to help those that have less, those that others may consider inferior. But I've found I'm still searching for a balance. When do you stop helping others and help yourself? Is it always selfish? It's exhausting to take care of something all the time, to put something else first. Maybe I took too long to learn that. Maybe that's why people say Hankelford must have been special.

## ONE HUNDRED QUESTIONS

How good must a story be in order for it to replace ever holding your child? How many good stories must there be? How many pages over how many years must be written? How many lines of dialogue? How many commas and semicolons? How many people must read them? How many awards must be won?

Can one stop writing? Drawing? Playing the piano?

When does life become about more than making the most of it because of those who died to get me where I am today?

What does it take to cleanse oneself? How many children's faces must one see smile and laugh?

Is it just fear that stops me from moving on? Can someone live, really live, without being afraid?

What will happen when I no longer think of him? About her? About it?

What becomes of me when I no longer remember the color of the chairs in the waiting room as my girlfriend walks to the back room without looking at me? Can I still look at myself? What happens when I forget what it was like to know I would be a father? What happens when I forget why I decided not to become one?

What happened to the excitement I felt when I was first told there would be a baby? Can I ever be excited again?

What will next time feel like? Will there be one, a next time?

What will it look like to stand by a different woman as her stomach grows? What will her name be? What color hair will she have? Will she fear what will be going through my head?

And what will be going through it?

Is that when the excitement will return? Is that when the future will return?

Or will it be the fear? The fear of fucking up? The fear of resenting “it”?

When I hold the new child, the one I chose to keep, to love, will I think of the other one?

Will I force the new one to live as two?

Will the child be given anything and everything it could desire? New books and toys? A car at sixteen? College paid for? A home? Love?

Or will I not look the child in the eye?

Do I tell the new one about the dead one?

What’s to be said? You once had a brother or a sister? I didn’t want it so I got rid of it?

What will the one I kept think? Say?

What will I say if the kept one does the same one day?

What do I become I don’t mention it to the one I kept? What do I become if I feel there’s no need to mention it? If I moved on? Do I just return to who I was? Do I return to the person I was going to be? Is that possible?

Or do I become something worse?

What happens to a man when he feels relief that he is childless? When he thinks about it one morning with his hand out the car window and the cold wind blowing and he smiles?

Does enough time heal everything? Is that an excuse? How long must one hold onto guilt?

Can’t a man just continue with his life and still call himself a man?

Is it okay to look back at the years since and say the decision was right? That you are finally happy, not just content, with your life? That you feel complete and proud of yourself? That you have become the best version of who you can be? But childless?

Can I tell others? Must I pretend to be depressed? To be holding on to guilt?

Could I have become the same person I am as well as a father?

What makes me who I am? Does sitting at the cherry desk on the university campus in my office? Does having the option of not going home tonight without calling? What about just walking out of the house without a word?

What will happen in fifty years if I am still childless? Regret?

Can I live with only a career writing essays like this? Essays off the corpse of my would-be child? Can good come from it all? Is that allowed? Can I allow it? Should I write something else? Can I?

When did I stop regretting? What day was it? How many years ago? What was I doing? Why does writing make it all come back?

Was it ever gone?

Did I regret? Or was it an act?

Last week, when drinking beer with a colleague and baby names came up, what was my colleague thinking, knowing my past? Why did the subject change?

Why have I become so comfortable that I can make off-hand remarks about the dead?

Why do I feel better?

Why?

## HANKELFEST

“Day by day and night by night we were together,—All else has long  
been forgotten by me”

- Walt Whitman

I received the wooden box almost two weeks after the death of my Boxer, Hankelford. It supposedly held his ashes, but the box felt empty. Even if it contained ash, I wondered, how would I know that ash was the remains of my dog? When I put him down, the woman at the front desk said, “It takes two or three days,” but they never called me. Eventually, I called. The woman said she tried but the number was out of service. They might have thrown out his remains, I thought, and just handed me whatever they swept up. What difference did it make, though? I could still pretend it was Hankelford.

The rectangular box was fancier than I thought it would be. It was a box, though, not an urn. An urn has a base or pedestal and usually looks like a vase. If the nameplate were to fall off, it would look like a wooden brick. When I checked off the form requesting his ashes returned, I figured I’d get a small, plastic box with a flimsy lid, like you’d get when you buy crickets at a pet shop, just something for transport until you got home and decided what to do. It was a heavy, solid wood. The brown in the wood varied from an almost white along the edges near the top to a rich brown in the center. There was a line-art design on top of the box, but I don’t know what it represented. It looked like what I doodled in the margins of my notebook during class. On the front (the only way to tell it was the front), was a gold nameplate that read, “Hank.” On the bottom were two small screws to keep the box closed.

There is no good place for a box of ashes. If it's left out in the open, perhaps in the living room or family room, guests may feel uncomfortable, especially with dog ashes. You will look odd. The ashes cannot be placed in a closet or somewhere out of sight because it's disrespectful to the dead. They will be forgotten. On the nightstand, the ashes could only be seen by me and my girlfriend. I saw them before I went to bed and when I woke in the morning.

Soon, I took one of Hankelford's stuffed animals (all toys and ropes were kept after his death), a tan bear from Build-A-Bear also named Hankelford and placed it to sit and hug the box. I bought it when he began having seizures. I was shopping at the mall with my girlfriend and thought he might enjoy one. I said, "Hankelford makes me feel better, so maybe if Hankelford had a Hankelford, he'd feel better." He chewed out the eyes and carried the bear with him from room to room.

A clay paw print followed. I got it with his ashes. It was a gift, the woman said. They do it for everyone who gets ashes returned. It came in a plastic Ziploc bag along with a sheet of paper listing step-by-step instructions. Too afraid to cook the clay myself, I asked my girlfriend. "If I mess it up, you'll never forgive me," she said. The clay went uncooked. I pushed too hard once with my thumb at the edge of the clay so along with Hankelford's paw, it also contained my thumbprint. Months later, a crack formed in the middle of the paw.

After my girlfriend broke up with me and I had the apartment to myself, I put the ashes on a bookshelf in the living room, no longer caring what people thought. My friend, Kristina, gave me soda bottles that had "Hank" written on the label, and I placed them behind the ashes. I also bought a picture frame, the only one in my apartment, and positioned the frame with a close-up of Hankelford's face next to the other items.

Within six months, I had a shrine.

A shrine I never looked at. It became just another thing in my apartment. When I was a child, my grandfather died and was buried at Star of David. For months following, Mom couldn't drive down that road, couldn't pass the cemetery. When she did, she cried. But that wore off. It always does. Soon we took the road to get to the mall quicker.

We build these graves, these shrines, these books, to remember, to honor the dead.

I hate shrines. By forgetting Hankelford's shrine existed, I felt I betrayed him. That I told him I loved him, that he was important, and then I went on with life.

In the end, he was nothing.

\* \* \*

I had to get rid of his ashes, I decided. What do you do with dog ashes when you don't own land? I moved three times while Hankelford was alive, went to multiple dog parks. I spent months thinking of what to do, something that showed Hankelford respect.

There are many things one can do with ashes. They could be used in tattoo ink or printer ink. Mark Gruenwald, a Marvel Comics writer and editor, had his ashes mixed in the ink for the first printing of the *Squadron Supreme* collection. They could be used in fireworks, but Hankelford hated loud noises. Ashes could be used to create a diamond ring. My friend, Dan, said I should do that and offer it to the woman I want to marry one day. If she accepted the ring knowing it was Hankelford, then she would be a keeper.

A month after I adopted the brindle Boxer, I celebrated my birthday. For a gift, Dan gave me a piggy bank in the shape of the golden idol from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. At first, Hankelford was clumsy and would trip walking across the living room or stumble into a door. “One day little Hankel will go to Harvard and study to become a doctor,” I said. The piggy bank became his college fund. Friends would come over and drop spare change inside, without me asking, and say, “Gotta get you to college, Hankelford.” We called him Dr. Hank L. Ford.

I said, “Hankelford’s going to get to Harvard one way or another,” and decided to spread the ashes in a park on the Harvard campus. I called the trip “Hankelfest, a celebration of Hankelford.”

I invited Dan and Kristina, and two other friends, Jon and Sabrina. Actually, Sabrina wasn’t invited, but asked to come because it sounded fun. It would be a road trip, I decided, because flying ended the trip too quickly. Each person was to choose a place to stop along the way for a day trip. One rule of the trip was that no one was allowed to rush another on one of the day trips. The trip would most likely be around two weeks, give or take a day or two. We planned on driving from Orlando, Florida to Boston, Massachusetts as fast or slow as we felt that day.

“There will be an opening ceremony with dinner followed by the burning of Woolly Hankelford and pre-Hankelfest drinking. We will have a sleepover with the unveiling of the goodie bags and so that we can leave early the next morning after breakfast.” I received so many questions from the four friends, I gave them a three-page PDF with all the necessary information.

During the opening ceremony, a Woolly Mammoth my ex-girlfriend bought me the day Hankelford died was to be burned by the lake at the back of my apartment complex. I thought we should have an opening ceremony like the Olympics so we needed something to set on fire.

Each person would receive a custom duffel bag, mostly black with a strip of white, representing the brindle Boxer. Inside would be an official Hankelfest flask filled with the alcohol of that person's choice. The flask had the official Hankelfest logo with the text "My only friend left" at the bottom. A T-shirt with the logo was to be included as well, along with a T-shirt with the person's requested design of a Hankelford version of a character—Hankenstein, Captain Hankelamerica, Hankel Von Teese, Hulkelford.

I would pay for all of these items, as well as the whole trip. Jon and I had professional jobs, but the other three worked hourly retail jobs. I wanted everyone to be able to do whatever we did in each city and eat and drink wherever we went. I wanted there to be no problems.

As for the spreading of the ashes, I wrote, "Boston will consist of at least two days. The first will be a general day and the second will be the spreading of Hankelford's ashes at Harvard."

The trip became less about Hankelford, however. My friends and I had never gone on a road trip together. Dan, Jon, Sabrina, and I met in college. Kristina came along when she began dating Dan. We had been spending less time together. Jon bought a house. We could reconnect on this trip.

Two months before we planned on heading out, problems arose. Kristina said, "Are we going to be sharing one room for the hotel? What if I bring back a guy one night?"

"Please don't fuck someone on the trip," I said. "That'd just piss Dan off."

She laughed. “Yeah, it would.”

Dan said something similar. They broke up eight months earlier, but couldn’t let things go. Dan was still mad Kristina cheated, and Kristina was mad because Dan was mad.

I thought that they might get along for the sake of Hankelfest, but with each passing day, it seemed unlikely. They fought and would spend time trying to think of how to get back at the other, so one night, stressed at trying to think of ways they could get along during the trip, I sent everyone a text message, “Hankelfest is cancelled.”

No duffle bags. I had a flask and the logo, but no grand ceremony of the spreading of Hankelford’s ashes. Kristina stopped speaking to me. Dan was all right until I said I would continue the trip myself. He couldn’t understand why he still couldn’t come if Kristina couldn’t.

When my job denied me time off for the trip, I put in my notice. I was doing this. Nothing would stand in my way.

Why?

The trip needed to be special. If it was special, then everything I did would be worth it. Not just the things I did with Kristina and Dan, but pushing my girlfriend aside during the year of Hankelford’s treatment. All the wrong choices that arose that year could be made up for in the end. All those choices would mean something.

\* \* \*

The night before I left for Boston, I went to the Hard Rock Casino in Tampa with Hankelford’s college fund—\$130. I hadn’t been to a casino for a year and a half, and that time

was only once. I walked around the slots, playing games for a few minutes every half an hour, games that were based on *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones*. I was up thirty bucks before I sat at a Texas Hold 'em table. I played growing up and for a few months with my girlfriend and some friends before Hankelford died.

I turned the \$130 into \$1,100. I kept Hankelford's yellow bandana in my pocket and between hands, I'd run my fingers over it. It was signed by the vets and the other employees when Hankelford completed his first round of radiation. He had a green one, too, from his second round. But he died less than two weeks after that, so I consider the yellow one luckier.

The next morning I got in my Honda Civic, which had a broken AC, and hit the highway. Twenty minutes in, I realized I forgot my car insurance card and drove back. It didn't count, I said. I hadn't left the city.

My voice recorder was kept in the cup holder for easy access. I told myself this would be a meaningful trip and that I'd write about it one day. I needed to take notes.

On the drive, I kept trying to make landmarks seem important. I passed an outlet mall near St. Augustine that I had gone to years earlier when my ex and I started dating. I told myself that passing it meant I was moving on. I was going somewhere new and leaving that life behind. At least that's what I said into the little red voice recorder. When I passed a bridge just south of Jacksonville, I said, "It's like I'm passing into new territory," even though it was about fifty yards long and I was literally passing into new territory since I had never driven that way before.

For lunch, I stopped at Cracker Barrel in Brunswick, Georgia. As a child, I was part of a bowling league at Brunswick Lanes in South Florida. See, I said. This represents my childhood and how far I've come. I ate pancakes alone and left.

The first night, I stayed with a woman in North Carolina I'd once had a crush on. I forget what I thought that meant, but I tried to get myself to believe it meant something.

At the end of the second day, I went to Atlantic City. After winning in Tampa, I thought I could replicate my success. I parked in a garage across from Harrah's Casino, which I had found on Google. I wasn't sure if the casino was any good, but I didn't want to go to one I heard of. If I heard of it, I figured, it was really good so I'd lose my money. Since my car had no AC, I had spent the day baking in the sun while stuck in traffic between Richmond and D.C.. My T-shirt and shorts were wrinkled. I looked and smelled homeless. Before I walked in, I put on more deodorant.

I wandered around the casino for twenty minutes, but I was too nervous to play. If I lost, that would make the Tampa win less meaningful. I would just be a loser. So I got back into my smelly car and searched for a cheap motel in Jersey. But it was one in the morning by then and the roads were dark. I couldn't find a hotel, but I found a Friendly's restaurant so I parked and cracked my windows before I slept. When I woke up, I said, I could get breakfast at Friendly's.

I woke at eight, but Friendly's looked out of business in the daylight with no other cars in the lot and the lights being off and nothing on the windows and under the sign letters spelled "Out of Business." There was a McDonald's down the street. Before I ordered, I went to the bathroom and freshened up, which consisted of washing my arms and face in the sink. When I ordered, the cashier didn't ask me whether it was for here or to go like she asked the other customers. I was handed a bag by the manager who said, "Have a nice day." I never felt more like a homeless man.

All of this just means I'm persevering, I said.

The third day was spent stopping randomly to get out of my stinky car and trying out different air fresheners that might work even though I couldn't use the AC. I could have spent the day in Long Island with my aunt and uncle and then driven over to Boston comfortably the next morning, but I made myself believe I needed to be out there alone. I needed to prove I could do this myself. I couldn't find a hotel cheap enough on the third day, so I pulled over to a rest stop near some woods in Long Island. When I pulled off the road, the car behind me followed. It was too dark to make out details (there were no lights on at the stop), but it was some kind of sedan. Even though there was room for a dozen cars to parallel park on the side, the car pulled right up behind me. I shut off my lights and stared into my rearview mirror with the keys still in the ignition. The sedan's lights shut off and I saw that the driver was fat and bald.

After a few minutes, it pulled up in front of me, still with its lights off. The man parallel parked a foot in front of me.

He stayed still.

Again, after a few minutes, he started his car and pulled off to the side, and reversed back to the spot behind me.

Once his car turned off, I started mine and took off as fast my Civic could go. I don't know where I pulled off the highway, but I found a Chili's still open and slept in the parking lot. At four, I was woken by a cop shining his lights at me. I started my car, and he drove off, so I turned the car off and went back to sleep.

When I woke, I continued my trek to Boston. I found a highway that led right to Boston, and I came to a toll booth. I couldn't find a sign that said how much money I needed to pay so I

threw a handful of quarters at what looked like an opening. I heard most of it hit the road and then noticed I just needed to take a ticket.

I took it and continued on.

By lunch time, I was in Boston and checked into a Travelodge just outside of downtown in Malden. The place smelled like the snakes my dad dissected when I was kid. Out of eighty-one reviews on TripAdvisor, fifty-six were terrible and fifteen were poor. But it only cost sixty bucks a night for a hot shower and a bed that was more comfortable than my car seat seeing how it was horizontal. Someone checking out asked the woman at the front desk, “How long do guests usually stay here?”

She said, “Most are by the hour.”

I paid for two nights and kept my valuables on me. I showered for the first time in two days, took a nap, and then headed to Friendly’s for dinner since I missed out on the one earlier.

That night, when I laid in bed, I looked up Harvard on my laptop. Twenty-one minutes to Harvard Square. I made it.

\* \* \*

In the morning, I drove to Cambridge with Hankelford’s ashes on the front seat under a red Harvard hoodie my father had gotten me for Christmas—his show of support for my trip. Self-conscious, I didn’t want anyone to see the box. I parked at the first garage I found, only a block from Harvard Square, and placed the box of ashes inside my messenger bag, but I didn’t go straight to spreading the ashes. That would’ve been too easy, too quick. I wandered.

There was a comic shop a few stores down, New England Comics. I bought a collection of *Swamp Thing*. I went to the bookstore across from Harvard's library and bought *Supergods* by Grant Morrison. Then, I bought a T-shirt with Harvard Medical School written on the front and had lunch at a local burger place. I tried to go to the library, but the guard wouldn't let me in because I didn't have a student ID. I sat on the steps and wrote a poem. When I had nothing else to hide behind, I went down the street to John F. Kennedy Memorial Park next to John F. Kennedy School of Government. Originally, I had planned on spreading the ashes near a medical building, but I hadn't found one.

I sat on a green bench that was long enough for seven people. Trees lined the park with the center being an open field with short, bright green grass. In one of my voice recordings, I mention Hankelford ducks were walking in a straight line across the grass. I've no idea what a Hankelford duck is. A man played catch with two boys to my left. I assumed father and sons. One boy wore a navy blue and red baseball cap backward, while the other boy wore a blue and white one forward. I wrote another poem—I'm not a poet, but poetry seemed like the thing to write at the time.

Hours passed.

When I felt I sat there long enough, I stared at the grass and saw Hankelford. He was running in the park, chasing those Hankelford ducks. The wonderful park would be such a nice place for Hankelford to spend eternity. But if I got up to leave him there, I knew Hankelford would look at me with the same look he gave when I'd walk out of the gate of the dog park without him. He wouldn't have wanted to be left there. So, I got up, his ashes still in my bag, and left.

That's bullshit, though.

I didn't see him in the park. I couldn't.

I no longer remembered what he looked like unless I looked at a photograph. Sure, I knew he was a brindle Boxer, but dogs can look so different, even if they are the same breed.

When I was a child, I had a Boxer named Jade. She wasn't a brindle, instead a solid brown. I got her when I was four and she died when I was sixteen. Mom put her down when my father took me to the doctor. It was easier, she said, without me there. Three months after Jade's death, Mom drove me to the Coral Square Mall. A photo of Jade was on the visor wrapped with a rubber band.

"That's Jade," Mom said.

"I know." I lied.

Her brown coat was lighter and she was fatter than the dog I remembered. Her face more wrinkled and she looked grumpier. I told Mom once that I wouldn't go to a college where I couldn't bring Jade. The last time I saw her was on the final day of tenth grade. I knelt to pet her on the bathroom floor between when I got home from school and my doctor's appointment. I promised her we would have fun now that school was out for the summer. Now all I see is a brown blob on the bathroom floor.

Months after Hankelford's death, I sat with Kristina on my couch and we talked about our recent breakups. "There's a good chance we'll live till we're ninety," I said. "How long did you and Dan date?"

"About two and half years."

“Today, two and a half years seems like a long time, but when we’re ninety it’ll be nothing. You probably won’t even remember anything about him.” Twelve years with Jade and I’m left with a brown blob on the floor that’s the wrong shade of brown. What chance did Hankelford have with only three?

When the vet told me Hankelford was gone, my fingers continued to move across his wet, brindle coat. My eyes stayed on him as the vet said, “Take as long as you’d like.” She left and I walked around the table to face him. My fingers never left him. I stared into his eyes that no longer locked with mine. Moments before his death, I wanted his eyes to beg me for help. But they didn’t. They were just confused.

I wanted to feel him begging.

I wanted him to say, “Sean, save me!”

It was beyond his understanding.

There was a story from the newspaper the year before. A man put his dog down, and when he got home to bury him, he opened his trunk to find the dog alive. The man called it a miracle and said he wouldn’t put his dog down again. I watched Hankelford’s stomach, but it didn’t move.

With one needle, he was gone. Jade needed three shots, according to Mom.

Hankelford went quick, easy.

There was nothing special about it. Just another dog put down.

I put both my hands on him. I wanted to remember how his fur felt, the wetness, the softness, the everything. If I forgot, I told myself, that would mean he wasn’t special, that

everything that happened over the last couple of years was for nothing. All the radiation treatments were wasted. The divide in my relationship with my girlfriend was for nothing.

I pulled out my phone and turned the camera on. I captured his face, eyes open, drool running from his mouth to the floor. I captured his body fat from a year of steroids. I captured his tongue hanging from his mouth.

I slid the phone back into my pocket and kissed the white fur where it narrowed between his eyes, pausing when my lips touched him, like he would pause when his tongue me. I sniffed trying to remember his scent. I ran my right hand down his back. If I just concentrated hard enough I could do it, I could remember.

The vet opened the door. “Oh, you’re still here. Did you get your receipt?”

“Yeah, I have it.”

With her back to me, she lifted Hankelford from the table. His head hung off her arm.

She took him away.

I’d look at those photos when I missed him, when I wanted to remember the feel of him. When I sat on that green bench in Boston, I no longer remembered how his fur felt against my fingertips, how his tongue felt against my cheek. Even in those photographs above, he looks fatter than I remember. His colors are lighter. His underbite smaller. The white of his chest thicker.

I’ve forgotten what it was like to be with him.

I remember the facts. I adopted him on a Saturday morning in April. They said he was eight weeks old. A few days later, his vet said he was only four. I bought him a stuffed turtle with a colorful shell that first day. I used to buy him dollar ropes at Target. He had a faux leather

jacket and a jacket that made him look like Sherlock Holmes. I don't know what he really looked like though—only that I said he looked like Sherlock Holmes. He used to sleep with a part of his body touching mine. But I don't know what that felt like.

I can't see him run.

I can't hear his bark.

I don't know what it felt like to come home and have him greet me.

There are so many things I want to forget in life, things I wish I hadn't done. But I remember those, my regrets. That's because we don't regret feelings. We regret facts, the things we told someone, the things we did. We don't need to feel to regret. But the good things, we want to feel. It's not good enough to know Hankelford greeted me when I came home. I want to feel it.

I have many photos of him, in many different places, from many different angles. Not just the dead ones. I thought when he was alive I took photographs of so many things, but now he's been dead longer than I had him and I'm tired of seeing him in the same situations. I want to see a photo of him without the red eyes, without some kind of computer fix. I want to see something new.

I can tell you that he sat in the passenger seat of my car regardless of whether there was another passenger or not. I can tell you I called him Hankel, not Hankelford, nearly every time. I can tell you his water dish was green. I can tell you I paid \$400 to adopt him and \$400 to put him down. I can tell you his birthday was March 14. Hankelversary was April 14. That he died May 14, at three years and two months old.

I can't get you to feel the joy of watching him get so happy he sprints through the house and runs through the screen door into the backyard and back again as if he was on a racetrack. I can't make you feel his paw against your shin in the middle of the night. Or the feel of him nibbling on you when his spot was itched.

I can't make myself feel those things.

No trip will bring him back. He's not in my heart. He's not in my head.

He's gone, completely.

I think I wanted him to carry on when I started writing about him.. He'd become something more than just my dog. Like, when Mara and I would call things Hankelfords, he'd become an idea. If I wrote about him, I'd be able to remember him.

But my plan backfired.

He's not real anymore. He's become another literary character.

I spent a year trying to save his life and years trying to remember his life. They say when we recall a memory, a little bit of it is forgotten. Each time you remember something, you forget more of it. With every sentence I write, with every revision, I lose more of him.

Stress affects memory, too. Under long term stress, our bodies can't relax. We never reach a state of homeostatis. I was stressed for that year trying to save him and it made me forget him faster. If I let him die, I might remember more.

But, you know what? None of that affected me in the park. You see, I didn't bring a screwdriver. I knew the box needed to be opened with one, but I didn't bring one. I had half a dozen at my apartment. I didn't forget to pack one. I chose not to. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't open the box.

I didn't travel to Harvard to spread his ashes. Maybe a part of me traveled there stupidly in an attempt to have something to remember him by. I'll forget the details of the trip. I've already started to. I think about what I did for him—not just the trip, everything. It's really shitty to think of what I did for a dog. I was out of my mind. Maybe I wanted to throw a wrench into my life—lose friends, lose my job. That way my life would change. Everything would mean something.

\* \* \*

When I left Boston, I drove to Huntington, Long Island. My aunt and uncle lived there. They were out of town for the first couple of days, but had left me a key. I fed their cat and spent my days writing on the porch. I was born in Huntington and lived there for a couple of years before we moved to South Florida. One day I walked around a collection of storefronts. As people passed by, I asked myself if we would've been friends or lovers if I had grown up in town. How much would've been different, I wondered. Would my parents still be married? Would I be a writer? It seems that our lives are affected more by the things we can't control rather than the things we can. That life is a series of reactions, instead of actions.

In my more pessimistic years following high school, I thought in life we formed beliefs when we were young and then each day those beliefs were whittled away at until we had nothing left, like a cliff against ocean waves. The lucky ones die before their dreams. I wonder now if that has some truth to it, but perhaps might be more optimistic.

When Aunt Martha and Uncle Terry returned, we ate dinner on their raised porch. I'd tell you what they looked like then, but I don't have a photograph and I did admit earlier I can't remember things like that. I've visited their house twice in ten years, and listening to them made me wish I had visited more. As a child, I visited more on family trips to New York. My cousin, Laura, the youngest in the family and entering her senior year of high school, was so young then. There was a swing set and a slide, then. On the way back from Hankelfest, there was only grass.

Aunt Martha said, "You know your parents were married here."

"Really?"

"Sure, couldn't you tell in the photos?"

"Never saw the photos. After the divorce, Mom got rid of 'em."

She pointed at different spots on the yard and mentioned where people stood and how it looked. It was odd trying to imagine, the two happy in love. I wondered how much has affected my life that I have no idea about.

That night, I Googled "Things to do in Huntington." I spent most of my time writing and hanging out at my aunt and uncle's house and didn't want to waste the trip. Taking a train into the city sounded good when I arrived, but I became more interested in seeing what Huntington had to offer. I wanted to stay in my hometown. Huntington, I discovered, was the birthplace of Walt Whitman, the *Leaves of Grass* guy, which, in retrospect, I should have known since my aunt worked at Walt Whitman High School and there was a mall nearby called the Walt Whitman Mall.

My aunt said, "I'm related to him." Distantly, she said.

Since I had begun calling myself a writer, I figured it was my job to go to his birthplace, a small house on Walt Whitman Road.

The next morning, I went off. It was between a Dunkin' Donuts and a RadioShack and across the street from the Walt Whitman Mall, which was under construction to add more stores and make it more upscale. I was a bit offended on behalf of Walt that someone named a mall after him. Honestly, I hadn't read much Whitman, except for some excerpts from *Leaves of Grass* and a few of his poems, but I thought that a mall was against what he believed in.

That's what we do with the dead. We honor them, memorialize them, in the ways we want. Like Hankelfest. It's more about us than them. Years ago, an ex-boyfriend of my girlfriend was killed driving drunk. At his funeral, friends stood behind a podium beside the casket and told stories. A few people in, I wrote in a pocket notebook, "Selfish. People telling stories only about themselves. Nothing to do with David."

It used to make me mad. Things like that. People should show the dead respect, I thought. I didn't know, back then.

Life is only about the living. The dead truly do not matter, or do they? We use the dead like Native Americans used all the pieces of the buffalo. We can't just leave the dead buried. We use them so we can continue on. Well, not continue on, but strive. Lives are both meaningless and meaningful, at the same moment. Fifty years after I'm dead, no one's going to give a shit. I'll become to my grandchildren like my grandfather was to me—a man who bought me a red bike once but I have no memory of him. He existed.

We use the dead to become who we are.

## MOTHERHOOD

The day after I got into town, I met Mom at her apartment, and then she drove us to pick up Grandma for a shopping trip. I wanted her to pick me up instead of me driving over to her place just for her to drive, but since I was staying at Aunt Sue's house, I knew Mom wouldn't come get me. After my parents' divorce, Aunt Sue sent Mom an email stating how she never liked her and that Aunt Sue was glad Mom was getting what she deserved. Mom forwarded it to me, and I had kept it in my Inbox for a couple of years and had it read it many times. I was torn about what to do, but the simple fact was that even though I felt my aunt shouldn't have sent the email, I agreed with her. Mom isn't an awful or cruel person, just a difficult one to like. If I weren't her son, I wouldn't spend time with her.

I brought Claudia Emerson's *Late Wife* with me for the car ride, even though I knew it would just be something for me to carry. I've found I take comfort in having something to hold when I'm uncomfortable. Sometimes, I'll take my messenger bag with me to a restaurant when eating alone. It's safer somehow.

Grandma lived in a condo for people over fifty-five that was across the street from Star of David, a funeral home and cemetery where Granddad and Mom's oldest brother, Bobby, were buried. Grandma had a burial plot reserved there too. When Grandma first got sick and would complain, Mom joked, "Okay, I'll drive you across the street. Just tell me when you're ready."

When we got to her condo, Mom knocked and then entered. Grandma sat in the loveseat in the living room. I wondered what she was doing because the TV was off and so were the lights. She looked bad. Ten months before she was diagnosed with cancer. It came from her lungs—she spent her youth smoking and her adulthood living with a man who smoked even

though he had lung cancer—and it had spread to her ribs and spine by the time the doctors found it. Grandma complained that she went in because her knee hurt and they gave her cancer.

Mom told her she needed to lock the door. Grandma said, “You were coming. I unlocked it for you.”

Mom said she had a key and went to the bedroom to get Grandma’s things so we could leave. Grandma smiled at me and I stepped closer. She took my hand. Hers was bony and long with dark spots all over. Extra skin hung from her arm leading up to her shoulder. She seemed to have twice as much skin as bone and muscle. She was small, and looked even smaller in the large loveseat, like a wrinkled toddler. I could see her collarbone and her red lipstick was spread unevenly on her lips. Instead of a bright, almost-orange red, her hair was white and thin enough to see her scalp. I asked her how she was.

She let go. “I was good until I wasn’t good anymore. Now I’m nothing.” She shook her head and stared off. “Grandma’s sick. Grandma’s very sick.”

She always referred to herself as *Grandma* in the presence of me and my siblings. If Mom called Grandma *Mom* when we were around, Grandma would say, “Mom? Who’s Mom? I’m Grandma.” Our father’s mom was referred to as Grandma Anne or Dad’s mom, but Mom’s was always just Grandma.

When Grandma was ready to go, we went to Sawgrass Mills in her car since the trunk had more space for her walker. As we walked up to The Oasis, an outside collection of outlets near the mall’s entrance, Grandma looked at me and said, “You’re so excited. Shopping trip with Grandma. Yay.”

I hated going on mall trips with them. It wasted time—it was more efficient to order something online or go directly to the store that sold the item needed, instead of wandering from store to store. When I was young, we'd spend every Saturday at the mall with Grandma, unless a sports team we were on had a game. We'd meet at Coral Square most weeks, and, when we'd enter the mall through Burdines, me and my siblings would look for her red hair near the pond where she waited. Grandma would greet us with a packet of M&Ms, and then we'd have lunch at the food court before going from one end of the mall to the other. On days off from school when Mom and Dad still worked, Grandma picked us up and brought us shopping. The mall was my family's entertainment. It's what you did when you didn't have work.

I followed the two into Nordstrom Rack. Grandma asked if I needed a shirt or anything, and I said no, I'm wearing a shirt, that I have more than enough shirts. She said, "I hear ya. I got more junk than Carter's got liver pills."

Having no idea what she was talking about, I tried to get her to explain, but she just kept repeating "Carter's liver pills." A couple of days after her funeral, I cleaned out her condo with Mom and my sister, Kerrie. It took two days to clean out her walk-in closet. She had over a hundred pairs of shoes. Most of her clothes still had the tags on them. When I opened the cabinets in her entertainment center, I found they were stuffed with pants and blouses. In another closet, she had seven containers of aluminum foil, eight boxes of Ziploc bags, twelve bottles of Glade air freshener, forty-two bars of Irish Springs soap. Mom said, "That's just how it was back then." She learned to store things because of the Holocaust, Mom said.

In Nordstrom, Grandma left her walker in the aisle and wandered through the racks. Mom told me to watch the walker and she went off to her section. I used the walker and followed

Grandma. She said, “You keeping Mom company? She loves you kids, you know that. She’d do anything for you and your brother and your sister. That’s what a mother does. Takes care of you.” She turned and smiled. “A grandma spoils.” Then, she asked what I wanted for lunch.

Grandma never mentioned it outright, but Mom and I hadn’t been on the best terms for years, not since the divorce. We didn’t speak for a year and a half. I called her on her birthday, at Kerrie’s suggestion. The phone rang a few times. When she picked up, she said nothing. After a few seconds I said hello. For months, we went back and forth—some weeks good, others bad. If I called every three days, she was happy. If I missed a day, she got mad. It’s why I stayed at Aunt Sue’s house, instead of with Mom.

Grandma went to the shoes. “Look for red ones. No heels. I’m too old for heels.” She wanted them for dancing. When she moved into her condo, she made friends at the community dances. She spent her Saturday nights dancing. I picked up red ones and she said, “No, red. Not Orange.” She held up orange ones. “Like these, but without a heel.”

Mom said, “Are you blind? The ones you’re holding aren’t red.”

They argued for a few minutes, and I went and sat at the end of the aisle. I didn’t know why Mom bothered arguing. I think she just liked to argue. Let Grandma get her orange shoes, I thought. What difference does it make? Should you really spend the limited time you have left arguing? Just give in.

Grandma picked up a pair in gold with heels. Mom said, “Those aren’t red, and you didn’t want heels.”

“Yeah, but I like ‘em in the gold.”

She bought her shoes, and then we went to lunch at the Cheesecake Factory. When we sat down, Grandma said, "It's so cold in here. What are they trying to do? Freeze me to death. Cancer's not enough?" She called over the server and told her, "What are you trying to do to me? Freeze me to death."

When the food came, Grandma looked at me and smiled. "Look at him. He's hungry." I don't know why she said it. I didn't do anything and I wasn't very hungry. "When are you going to be done with your school and find yourself a nice Jewish girl? Once I'm gone, Mom needs to become Grandma."

"I'm too young to be a grandmother," Mom said.

"Mom needs to become Grandma, huh?" Grandma pointed her fork at Mom.

Begin a man who drove his girlfriend to a clinic for an abortion, these conversations can be awkward. I felt like I let Grandma down. I took something away from her that I never realized I was taking away. She'd never be a great grandmother.

Being from a different generation, Grandma wanted me and my siblings to settle down and have a family. That was the most important thing. One Christmas when Kerrie, Timmy, and I were in college, Grandma told us to drop out. Kerrie, she said, needed to drop out and find a man. I should drop out because I didn't know what I wanted to do. Timmy should stop studying nuclear engineering because it's dangerous. It's not like we were going to be doctors, she said.

I dated a Jewish girl for a little less than a year when I was an undergraduate. She was the worst girlfriend I ever had, but Grandma loved her. Grandma knew nothing about her, except that she was Jewish. I was raised Roman Catholic and we were celebrating Christmas, but that didn't matter to Grandma. She said, "Whatever happened to that Cutler girl?"

It took me a minute to realize whom she was talking about. I had even forgotten the girl's name. I said she went to take a shower one day and just never came back. "They did that," Grandma said. "They did that."

"I know. That's why I said it."

It was the only way I found to combat her remarks about my life. I knew she wasn't trying to be mean or insulting, but that's how I took it.

After Sawgrass, the three of us went food shopping for Grandma, who rode a motorized cart around the store. She bought 2 one-liter bottles of ginger ale even though she had three unopened at home. Feeling guilty for not spending more time with her, I offered to take her out one night to dinner and a movie. She had said since she got sick she didn't get to go out at night. Two days later, we went out. The first day, she canceled because she wasn't feeling well. She held my arm as we walked up to the theater. At the end of the night, I paused at her doorstep and watched the sliver of her face as she closed the door. I took her in. I wanted to remember how she was before the worst of the sickness came. Even though, I didn't leave for three days, I didn't visit her. I never wanted to see her again.

\* \* \*

On Christmas Eve six months later, Kerrie called to say Grandma was admitted to the hospital for blood clots in her legs. Kerrie wanted me to come to the hospital with her. I was staying with Dad and his girlfriend, who lived only a few minutes from the hospital. I told Dad

I'd be back in an hour. He said he had Christmas shopping to do, but he'd get us a pizza that evening and that maybe we'd watch a movie.

Machinery next to Grandma beeped. She was propped up in the hospital bed near the window with a few pillows. She had the white sheets and a tan blanket lay on top of her and she complained she was cold. She still wore red lipstick and her hair and short and even thinner than before. She had a nasal cannula feeding her oxygen she messed with to make it more comfortable. Because she lay at an angle, the loose skin on her face and neck dripped down and made her look like a toad. When I walked in, she held up her hand for me to hold even though I was still fifteen feet away. I went to her and held her hand and tried not to look like I would cry. Kerrie sat near the bedside with a binder of class lessons she was preparing for her AP History class. On the nearby wall was a white board divided into multiple sections. At the top read, "You Room Number is:" and in marker next to it was, "511B." Under "Please Call Me:" was "Millie." "Plans and Goals for the Day" was "To Breath Easier."

After some small chat, I sat next to Kerrie and didn't talk. A man walked in half an hour later. He had a trimmed, graying beard and a shaved head. He looked like I imagined Timmy would look like in twenty years. His shirt was two times too large, and faded tattoos covered his arms. He stopped for a moment when he saw me and Kerrie before approaching Grandma. It took me a minute to remember he was Uncle Steven.

"Sorry, Mommy," he said. He apologized for being late. He said he had to take the bus and it took him three hours. She had Kerrie hand her her purse and gave him a twenty for bus fare. Later, I told Dad, who's a supervisor for Broward County Transit, that it took Steven three

hours to get what would take me in my car thirty minutes. He said Steven had no right to complain, that he tells the bus driver that he's my dad's cousin or brother to get a free ride.

Then, Steven stood back, stared at her, slapped his hands against his side, and cried.

She asked him why he was so upset.

"Because my mother is in the hospital." He shook his head and took a seat. He called me Timmy and Kerrie corrected him. I didn't take offense. It had been twenty years since we were in the same room together. The last time I saw him was at Coral Square and he threatened to kill Mom, and we spent the afternoon at the mall security office. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade and spent his life doing drugs and going in and out of jail for theft. He last went to prison for breaking into a car for a cell phone and three bucks in change. Grandma didn't give up on him, and, when making a new will, made sure Mom would take care of him when she was gone. I think she knew who he was, it would be difficult after so many years to continue to avoid the truth, but he was still her son.

A nurse came in to perform some test, and Kerrie and I waited in the hall with Steven until it was done. I stood with my sister on the opposite wall than Steven. For the first couple of minutes, we didn't speak. "I messed up," he said. "I know you don't believe me, and I don't blame you, but I've really turned things around." He went back to Temple, he said. Learned Hebrew in prison. He spoke some words, and not knowing Hebrew, I assumed he did well. Kerrie didn't offer him much, and I knew Mom wanted nothing to do with him. After Grandma passed, Mom said, "Yeah, she left me all her stuff, but she left me with my brother too." For a moment, I wanted to offer him encouragement, and perhaps my phone number to keep in touch, but even though he was family, I didn't want him in my life. He had a daughter once, named

Michelle. For a year, she lived with us after he went to prison, along with his wife—or was it his girlfriend? I was nine. Michelle was four. Even though Mom tried to adopt her, to keep her in the family, Social Services sent her to live in a foster home. Michelle cursed a lot, which caused me and Timmy to giggle. At the time, I just thought of her as screwed up, but not in a sad way. I figured her parents cursed in front of her, and that was it. That was the worst of it. Years later, Kerrie told me Michelle would crawl under the bed in the middle of the night and piss herself. “That’s a sign,” Kerrie said and leaned closer. “You know? Of being molested. That’s what kids do so that they don’t get touched.” She didn’t say Steven was the molester, but he was still her father. If he did it, it was unforgiveable, and if he didn’t, he still should have stopped it.

When the nurse finished, we went back into the room and sat in silence. Every now and then, Grandma wheezed and got agitated trying to breathe. Without looking up from her binder, Kerrie said, “Fix your nose thing.” A different nurse came and wheeled Grandma downstairs for an ultrasound. Kerrie and I had planned on leaving then, but Kerrie said Grandma didn’t want Steven to be left in the room alone with her purse. So we waited until she returned.

I stared out the window at the parking lot, not wanting to see Grandma in the hospital bed. Kerrie stood and went to say goodbye, but then I saw Mom walking toward the building from the lot. “Mom’s on her way,” I said and wondered if there was a different exit we could use.

After my trip in July, Timmy got in a fight with Mom. I’m not sure what happened, but Mom sent me a text her three kids a text message. “I’m done being a mother.” She said she didn’t want anything to do with us. I figured it was like every other time and she’d call a week or two later. Usually, the first few words were awkward, but after a short conversation, we’d talk

again. She'd call or text. She didn't. One day, Kerrie went to Starbucks with a friend, and Mom came in with a friend too. Mom walked past without saying anything. After Mom ordered and took a seat, Kerrie went over and said hello. "Mom wouldn't even look at me," said Kerrie. "She just stuck up her chin and turned away." Mom didn't even know I was in Ft. Lauderdale.

There was no place for us to go. The hospital was small. We'd run into her somewhere between the fifth floor and the exit.

When we first got to the hospital, Grandma brought up Mom. I said she needs help. "You know, she's bipolar, right?"

"Why do you say that?" Grandma said. "Don't say such things. She's your mother. She loves you. Why do you give her such a label? That's bad."

Mom came in, saw the three of us sitting, and looked right at Grandma and stood by her bedside. Steven offered her a chair, but she just shook her head without looking over. Steven said, "Look at this. I wish I had a camera. It's the first time in twenty years the whole family's been together. We should take a picture."

I nodded. I had a camera on my phone, but I knew Steven was the only one who wanted a picture.

"Look at your children, Felicia," Steven said. "Look at them. They're grown up and beautiful. Be proud of your kids."

Mom said, "I see them. I see them," while staring at Grandma.

Either because the awkwardness or the bus would be there soon, Steven said goodbye and left. Mom took his seat. She spoke to Kerrie a few times, mostly about what the doctors said or

didn't say. Then, we sat there. Mom was on Facebook on her phone looking at pictures of dogs. Kerrie prepared for her classes. I sat and every few minutes spoke to Grandma.

It was like there were two people in her body. For half an hour she'd be saying, "I want my shoes, my shoes. Get my shoes. I'm going home. I want to go home." Then, she'd become peaceful. "Remember, Felicia. Remember our cruise. Lovely. When are we going on another one?"

Mom said, "I'm not going."

Grandma looked at me and Kerrie. "Any takers? A cruise?" She looked at me. "Good food. It's good."

I told her I had never been on a cruise and I didn't want to be trapped on a boat. I was heading on a road trip soon anyway. I was looking for new luggage.

"I got new luggage," she said. "Red. It's red. I gotta go on a trip."

Mom said, "The only trip you're going on is to the grave," and laughed and typed on her phone.

Grandma smiled. "Yep. She's right. Your mother's right. I'm not going anywhere."

I didn't like Mom. I kept imagining that we'd go back to what we used to be. We used to be close. It was common for family members to remark that I was her favorite of her three children. When I saw Mom, I tried to ignore the things that bothered me about her. I thought that would make me a good son. But it was difficult. Once, we were driving and she went to make a right. A pedestrian saw Mom waiting to turn and jogged out of the way, and Mom said, "That's how you know he's white. He actually got out of the way. A black person would just keep walking." Once when she was looking to move, she got mad at the real estate agent for showing

her a place in Wilton Manors. “That’s where the gays live. If Rita came over, or if we went to dinner out there, they’d think we were lovers.” I know she didn’t mean harm. She’s not a violent person, just an unhappy one. An unhappy person who has refused to change with the times. Her psychiatrist changed her medication instead of changing her. How long can someone be medicated before a doctor realizes it’s not helping?

It seemed impossible for her to be happy. She’d find fault with everything—not just her family. Driving. Waiters. Cashiers. Coworkers. Maintenance at her apartment. Everyone was against her for whatever reason she could come up with.

I’ve grown used to having a good relationship with her for three months and then not speaking for four. It seems like she can’t find peace in this world. It’s like watching a cancer patient in chemo—the quality of life just isn’t there. She’s never happy for a full day, no matter what pills she has been given. Even if she goes to Disney World or on a cruise or on a road trip with friends, she seems miserable. Perhaps in the next life she will be happy.

Kerrie and I said goodbye to Grandma, who waved her hand at Mom and said, “Give him my luggage. I don’t need it. He needs it. He has a trip.”

“I’m fine, Grandma,” I said.

“Felicia. Let him have it. You know where it’s at.”

Mom said fine, and I gave in too. We took separate cars to Grandma’s apartment. We didn’t speak, and after I got the bright red luggage, Mom said, “It was nice to see you.”

“Nice to see you too,” I said, and then we left.

When I got to my dad’s place, he wasn’t home. He came home two hours late with a pizza and apologized. I forgave him. I always do. My father beat me as a kid. I don’t like saying

that because I picture kids from movies or memoirs getting cigarettes put out on his or her arm, or a real beating. I got spanked, punched once, slammed around, hit with a belt. But I never broke a bone, went to the hospital. I was fine, physically, the next day.

He broke promises—let me down, all the time. And it was nothing. I expected it of him. Mom did something, said something derogatory about gays, and I'd get angry, say how bad of a person she is. Dad did the same thing and I didn't bat an eye.

I'm sexist. I expect different things from Dad than I do from Mom. I don't expect Dad to love, be loving, to show love. I expect him to go to work, take care of the tortoises, fix things around the house. From Mom, I expect her to love, to be there for me, to make me feel better. I expect more from Mom than I do Dad. And no matter how many years have gone by, when Mom fails to give me what I expect from a mother, I blame her.

\* \* \*

Grandma died on a Saturday morning, on her birthday. She turned seventy-eight. I woke to a text message from Kerrie. The night before, Kerrie said Grandma was getting bad and that I should make plans to come home soon. I had planned on leaving that Saturday. A few minutes after Kerrie's text message, Mom called. "My mom died."

"Yeah, Kerrie texted me. I'm sorry."

"Will you come down?"

"Yeah."

Then, she hung up.

I packed the luggage Grandma had given me, and I drove to Mom's apartment. She showed me brochures that walked people through the stages before death. "Look," she said. "This is exactly what happened." Mom didn't seem sad, not really. She had spent a year and a half caring for a dying woman. Now she seemed lighter.

The funeral was the next day. Mom said it was Jewish custom to bury the dead within twenty-four hours. Grandma had arranged everything. It was all taken care of. No one had to worry. When we woke, Mom and I went to Einstein Bros. Bagels around the corner. I worked there in high school. Mom got me the job. She went there every day and was friends with the manager. I had the job a week after I turned sixteen. She knew I wanted a car and was looking for a way to buy one. I hated her at the time, for getting involved in my life. But I got a new truck and worked there for two years.

After breakfast, we went back to her apartment, relaxed for an hour, and changed clothes. Steven called a few times, but Mom let it go to voicemail. He called Grandma's cell phone, not having Mom's number. Mom turned to me and said, "I'll tell him I left it at home." The phone rang a couple of more times.

The two of us arrived at Star of David half an hour early, so Mom drove across the street to Grandma's condo and got the mail before heading over. Steven was there already. With his Rabbi. I shook the Rabbi's hand, but Mom wouldn't. Grandma specifically asked for Rabbi Frank, an energetic and well-spoken man who was popular with the old ladies in the area. Rabbi Frank was on his way. Steven looked at Mom, who refused to look back, and said, "He's here for me, Felicia. He'll say a few words, but that's it."

Mom just sat and shook her head.

Kerrie showed up with her roommate. Timmy followed. He hadn't spoken to Mom when he found out. Out of the three of us, he could live with not speaking to Mom the easiest. Kerrie told him Grandma passed away, and he took a day trip to the west coast of Florida. Mom called him a playboy.

We weren't sure he was coming, but I looked out the window and saw him get out of his car. Mom wanted to kill him. When he got out of his car, he was dressed in a wife-beater, slacks, and sandals. I wore a black suit and a black tie. Even Steven wore his finest black shirt and slacks. Timmy had his shirt and shoes in the trunk. I went out to greet him. He said, "What's up?"

"What're you doing? You couldn't get dressed before you came. Mom's pissed."

He shrugged. "That's just Mom."

I didn't realize that Mom should be treated better until I saw how Timmy treated her. When I brought him to the family room before the viewing of the body, he said hello to Steven but not Mom. He didn't even look at her. No matter how she treated us, I thought, her mom just died. He could show some sympathy. The difference between the two of us is that while our relationship with Mom was strained, I still wanted a relationship, while he didn't. He was always the logical one, no emotion. It took me awhile to realize it, but when something doesn't meet my expectations, I try to force it to. With girlfriends, when they don't meet my expectations for what a girlfriend should be, I argue and fight with them, instead of just moving along. For Mom, I argue, trying to convince her to be a different way. Timmy just gives up, leaves. Mom's not the Mom he wants, so he doesn't have a mom. He shrugs it off.

There's a third way, I think. To question one's expectations. If Mom isn't the Mom I want, then I'll take the Mom I have.

When Grandma died, I got to have some family photos. Mom got rid of the photos after her divorce, but Grandma kept copies. I got first crack at the ones I wanted to keep. In one, I'm a toddler. I'm on a red tricycle in a living room I don't recognize. I have one hand on a handle bar and the other points at the camera. I'm wearing a white shirt and red shorts. I have no shoes on. Mom is thin and young. She looks like a teenager. She smiles at me from a foot away. In another, we sit with our backs to the camera. A Christmas tree is in front of us. We're turned and staring at the camera. She's holding my hand. Another is dated June 6, 1993. I hold my father's hand. I'm wearing a Space Jam T-shirt tucked into my jean shorts and sticking my tongue out. Kerrie is next to me, holding Michelle, who's the only one not staring into the camera. Timmy is off to the side, the shortest and farthest away. Mom stands two feet from Dad. No one is holding her hand.

We were a family once.

It's difficult to find where it all went wrong. Was it never going to work? Or could we have done something to stay together?

I want a family. I want my family. I want to go back to when my dad was Dad and my mom was Mom and we lived at 7611 SW 7<sup>th</sup> Place and I'd climb the tree in the backyard to get onto the roof and Grandma would babysit when my parents went on a date.

That's the problem with time, though. It's malleable. If I want the past to be better, I can present it as such. If I want it to be worse, I can do that too. Maybe that's why I write nonfiction. I can make my life whatever I want it to be.

When we viewed the body, I brought in my voice recorder. I took pictures with my cell phone in secret, not of the body, but of the candle nearby, of the chairs, of the side table with a pink tablecloth. I recorded Steven and Mom talking and crying over the body of their mom.

But I won't listen to it.

When I was around Mom, my family, I recorded conversations. It was a way I could separate myself from what was happening. I can change the past later. But it doesn't matter. There's no use lamenting on what could have been if I'm not working on changing it now. What good is writing an essay about falling out with Mom, if I don't try to fix it in real life? No matter what I write later, it won't be a life. I won't have the experience of what I consider to be a good mom, a good family.

After Mom and Steven finished their goodbyes, I walked up and looked down on Grandma. It was the first time I viewed a dead body. I had been to funerals, but never viewed the body. At some funerals, I've heard people say the dead looks asleep. At others, I've heard people say the dead doesn't look the same person. Grandma looked like Grandma. But she looked dead, not asleep. She had bright red lipstick on and her head was wrapped in a shroud so you couldn't see her white hair. I stared at her until everyone started leaving the room.

In the hall, a friend of Grandma's asked who I was. I told her my name. She tilted her head, and, right next to Timmy, she said, "You were her favorite grandson." She said Grandma never mentioned the other one. "She was so sick, but you took her to the movies. She had so much fun." She said Grandma loved me and that I should know she appreciated me taking her out. We shook hands, and then she went to an older couple and said, "That's the good one," and pointed at me.

I didn't think I was that nice to Grandma. I took her out that once, sure, and I used to visit more often, but I rarely called. I felt like a liar.

After the attendees greeted one another and Rabbi Frank arrived, we went out to the gravesite. I drove Mom and Steven. The first row of chairs was only four long. Steven, Mom, Kerrie, and I took them. Timmy stood off to the side, out of the way. I offered my chair, but he waved it off. The Rabbi spoke and had us repeat Hebrew. Not being raised Jewish, I did my best to replicate sounds without knowing the meaning. Rabbi Frank pinned a black ribbon to my chest. There was a little disagreement between Rabbis during the ceremony, but it went smoothly, and later, Mom remarked that she like Rabbi Frank, that is was the best the funeral could have been.

After the prayers were done, Rabbi Frank asked people to speak. Steven stood up and said, "I know you all know I'm a screw up, but I've really turned things around." He said he loved Grandma, but his speech was more about his own troubles than his mother. Some of her friends spoke about how she loved to dance. Mom cried too much to talk. Kerrie wouldn't, neither would Timmy. I didn't want to. It seemed like a lot of pressure to sum up a person's life in a short speech. But I raised my hand and stood. A family member needed to say something about Grandma.

I looked for faces I knew in the crowd of thirty or so. A second cousin. Grandma's neighbor. So much of Grandma's life I didn't know. In the days following, Mom told me how Grandma got married young because she was pregnant. "My mom was a slut," Mom said. She told me how Grandma cheated on her husband with a customer at the bank she worked at. "That's how she met Bill." But to me, she was just Grandma.

I said, "My grandfather on my mom's side died when I was very young. My grandparents on my father's side live far away and I never saw them much. But Grandma." I paused and nodded my head. "Grandma was Grandma. She never denied us anything." Which wasn't true, but what difference does it make now? I can make her whatever I want her to be. I looked at Timmy, and then Kerrie. "She loved us. We were never lacking in the love of a grandparent. She filled the role of four." I paused, said we'd miss her, and then I sat down.

An old woman in the back said, "She had the best grandson." I shook my head.

After I spoke, we poured some dirt Rabbi Frank gave us. He said it was from the Holy Land, and we let it drop on the coffin. Then, we took a shovel and sprinkled dirt as the coffin descended. Rabbi Frank offered a few kind words to Mom, and Mom cried, but instead of crying on Kerrie's shoulder like she had been doing the whole ceremony, she stepped back and cried on mine. I held her until she stopped.

When the crowd dispersed, Mom and I walked back to her car. "You still have the keys?" she said.

I said yes, and she said, "I didn't know you were going to speak?"

I shrugged. "Kerrie and Timmy weren't. One of us had to."

"Figures it be you. The writer."

Mom seemed happy I'd spoken, and I was happy I did too. It didn't cost me much. It was only words.

## APPENDIX: READING LIST

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