

A young boy with light brown hair, wearing a dark blue baseball cap and a dark blue zip-up jacket, is shown in profile. He is holding a small bouquet of bright yellow dandelions with both hands, bringing them close to his face as if smelling them. To his left is a large, dark, textured sculpture of a person's head and shoulders, possibly made of stone or a similar material. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**JENNIFER LESHER**

**RAISING  
JOHN**

# *Raising John*

Leshner, Jennifer

Cavu Press (2014)

---

Raising John  
By  
Jennifer Leshner

---

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, business establishments or locations is coincidental.



ISBN: 978-0-9910570-2-3

Copyright 2013 by Jennifer Lesher

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by  
Cavu Press

*For the children of the world.  
You deserve the very best we have to  
give.*



## *Acknowledgements*

They say writing is a solitary pursuit. It's true, but without my crew of friends and mentors, I would not have been able to bring this book to publication. With humble gratitude, I wish to thank the following:

My very first readers, who patiently slogged through a manuscript that must have seemed, at times, interminable; Anne Corning, Emily Carlson, Sharon Fisher, Chris Hansen, Laurie Peake, Kevin King, and Gabrielle Morris.

For being one of my first readers, and my eleventh-hour cover art ninja, Corinne Alef.

For putting your tireless eyes to the task of proofreading; Brian Jones, Darbi Macy, Elisa Shostak, Ellen Bales, and Roxanne McDaniel.

For your willingness to read as an act of friendship; Julie Terberg, Josh Putnam, Melinda Schneider, Rachel Steilberg, and Erin Reidda.

For reading the near-final revision and providing the tough love that helped me push myself farther than I knew I could go as a writer; Echo Swinford, Steve Rindsberg. Jeff Mack, Amber Welker and Megs Thompson.

For providing an unexpected, well-timed and inspiring compliment, and for generosity in advising a newbie writer; Erica Bauermeister.

For holding firm on your edits, and having the diplomatic skills to get me to make them, my editor, Emily Skaftun.

For encouraging me to believe in myself and to keep writing; Miegan Wegrzyn, Adrian Leshner, B.J. Siefert.

For showing me how children think and behave, the beloved young people in my life – you know who you are.

# Raising John

---

# PROLOGUE

January 2000 – Phoenix, Arizona

John didn't remember his mommy, but his Grammy had a lot of pictures of her. There was a picture of her riding a tricycle, but hers was tall, not like his Big Wheel. There were pictures where she was standing next to a girl with short hair.

In some pictures his mommy was smiling, but in some she had her arms crossed over her front and she looked grouchy, like Oscar who lived in a trashcan on TV. When he asked Grammy who the girl was, she said it was his Aunt Kate. Grammy said Kate was his

mommy's best friend all through her life.

In other pictures he thought she must be a grownup. There was one where she and Grammy were standing in front of a big cactus like the ones at the hiking trail. He asked Grammy about the ones where she wore a big funny hat. It was like a square piece of board with a round part to keep it on her head. She was wearing a robe like the ones they wore in the preschool Christmas show. There was one of these and another where she wore a robe, but instead of the hat she had a shiny hood pulled up over her head. Grammy said that the pictures of his mommy in the robes were from when she graduated. The one with the hood was from when she got her

doctor.

When Grammy talked about his mommy graduating, her voice would wobble. John didn't know why. He thought graduating must be something very bad and he was sorry his mom had had to do it twice. But he was glad she got her doctor because when he was sick the doctor would help him feel better. Maybe his mommy's doctor helped her after she graduated.

His favorite pictures of his mom were the ones he was in too. He would not have known it was him, because how could he ever have been a tiny baby like the one in the pictures? His Grammy said that everybody was a baby once. She said even she was once a baby. John

tried to think about this, but all he could picture was Grammy like she was now, with her glasses and her gray and brown hair, but wearing footie pajamas and holding a sippy cup.

In his favorite picture his mommy stood in front of a big house and she was holding him up near her face and smiling at him. He was smiling too, but back then he didn't have any teeth.

Grammy had pictures of his mommy in the living room and next to her bed, but she had also made a book just for him, with his favorite pictures. She let him keep it in his room with his other books on the shelf where he kept his other favorite things; his moon and stars nightlight and his fuzzy gorilla and his



donut stacker. He was too big to play with the baby toys, but he still liked to look at them. Grammy said that his mommy got them for him before he was even born.

Once he asked his Grammy why his mom wasn't there with them. She got very quiet, and at first he worried he'd said something really bad. He wanted Grammy to stop looking so sad but then she took a breath and told him that his mother had died in an accident when he was a baby. That was why the only pictures of them together were from when he was small. He wanted to know why she had to die, and Grammy told him that in accidents people weren't supposed to die, but sometimes they did,

and she was sorry he'd lost his mom.

1.

August 1997 — Plainview,  
Massachusetts

The blanket was scratchy against his cheek. Robert stirred. He sensed light through his eyelids but he wasn't ready to wake up. If he could just block out

that infernal light he could stay in bed a little longer. He rolled to his other side, meaning to burrow closer to the wall, but someone was shaking his shoulder.

“Mr. Lewis. You’re going to have to wake up now.”

“Mmph.”

“Mr. Lewis. You are going to have to wake up.”

Robert rolled toward the voice and opened his eyes. A jowly guy hovered over him — he recognized the town cop who gave out speeding tickets like they were playbills. Robert was lying on a thin mattress with one of his summer weight cashmere crewnecks balled up under his head. A metal toilet squatted inches from his face. He burped and

tasted the sour tail end of a bender. Jesus Christ, he was in lockup. He sat up and looked up at the cop.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Sir, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. Do you have a lawyer you can call?”

“What? Why do I need a lawyer?”

“Sir, again, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. The state will provide a lawyer if you are unable to afford one. Do you have one you can call?”

Robert's head was pounding. The last time he'd landed in the drunk tank they sent him home after he sobered up. This whole situation was odd. He wondered if the police chief was in today. He

could talk to him and get this all sorted out.

“Since when do you need a lawyer for being in the drunk tank?”

“Again sir, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. Do you have a lawyer you can call?”

Robert stood up and looked around the cell. He caught a glimpse of himself in the clouded mirror over the sink: silver hair standing on end, blue oxford shirt rumpled and stained. He kept himself trim and took pride in his appearance, but right now he looked like hell. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then brought his hands up and ran them over his face and through his

hair, trying to clear his head. Finally he looked over at Jowly.

“Yes, there is someone I can call. Where’s my phone?”

“Sir, I’ll take you to the pay phone where you can place your call. After that you’ll need to return to your cell until your counsel arrives.”

“Your lawyer is here.”

Robert had been lying on his side, trying to fall back asleep. Now he sat up, swinging his feet to the floor. His shirt gapped open and he caught a whiff of himself; stale sweat and body odor. There was a new cop standing outside his cell, swinging a clump of keys. His nametag identified him as Officer

Lambert.

Robert stood up. Officer Lambert unlocked the cell, stepped forward, snapped a set of handcuffs onto his wrists and steered him out of the cell to a glassed-in room. His lawyer, Nelson, sat at a long table, looking over a folder of papers. As the door swung open he looked up, nodded, and returned his attention to the folder.

Officer Lambert pushed Robert in the direction of a chair opposite Nelson and retreated to the doorway.

“Have you been able to get bail posted for me?”

Nelson gave him an inscrutable glance and looked down. He closed the folder and put it aside, then set about examining



the backs of his spread hands. He kept his nails short and trimmed square. They were so shiny that Robert would have bet money he went in for regular manicures. Robert felt like a sloppy chump in comparison. Someone seeing them together now would hardly believe they used the same tailor and barber and sometimes golfed together.

“Aren’t you going to thank me for coming out on a Sunday?”

“Sunday? This is Saturday.”

“No, Robert, it’s Sunday. I’m quite certain. Now, as to your situation, I can post bail, but it will be expensive.”

“Can you please tell me what the hell I’m being charged with?”

Nelson applied fresh concentration to

the inspection of his hands. “Robert, you’re being charged with one count of vehicular homicide. Allegedly you were driving under the influence of quite a bit of alcohol. Allegedly you were solely responsible for an accident that took the life of a young woman. There was also a small child in the car.”

He looked up and met Robert’s eyes.

“The child survived.”

Robert sat back, mentally rewinding the last few days. Friday evening he’d stayed in and had his housekeeper make him dinner. Steak and a baked potato. He remembered opening a bottle of that Sonoma cab. She had made a chocolate cake and left it frosted and waiting when she went home for the night. He’d had a

slice for dessert. A nightcap out at Solly's piano bar. He remembered getting into the Lexus, driving over, Solly's nod as he walked in. He couldn't remember anything after that, but surely ... He looked at Nelson again. "They can't just charge me with this. Where's their proof?"

Nelson leaned forward, and, with the careful enunciation usually reserved for the very young or the very dumb, said. "Robert, you were at the scene. The report says you were lucid. Just because you can't remember it doesn't mean you weren't there. And, frankly, no one was surprised. Get ahold of yourself. You don't even know what day it is."

"When can you get me out of here?"

“You’re going to need \$100,000. The judge set your bail at a million. He believes that under the circumstances, you are a flight risk. Do you have that much liquid? When can you get your hands on it?”

Robert looked at the ceiling and mentally flicked through his portfolio. He could call his broker today, but nothing would move until the markets opened on Monday morning and then he would have to wait a few days for the cash to settle. Maybe Nelson could float him a loan for a few days. He opened his mouth to ask, but quickly closed it again. The look on Nelson’s face said he wasn’t going to go out of his way. The look on his face said that he would

rather lick the bottom of his own shoe than do Robert Lewis any favors.

## 2.

It was a short trial. The police had done their work well that night. The Breathalyzer was damning and the carnage was horrifying. Mary, the mother, had never had a chance. The car seat protected her little boy but nothing could have saved her from the ton of

steel that rushed to meet her; she was gone long before help arrived.

The judge sentenced Robert from the height of a towering rage, at his selfishness, his stupidity and the sheer pointless tragedy he had visited on this little family. Guilty on all counts. She wanted to put him away for life, but was limited to a four-year sentence.

The boy was orphaned. His mother had not named a father on the birth certificate. The state gave custody to her mother, who had come immediately to bury her daughter. When it was all over, she took John back to live with her in Arizona.

### 3.

October 2000 – Phoenix, Arizona

John couldn't wait to get home and tell Grammy all about the field trip. All the kids in his preschool class had gone to the zoo. Some of the mommies came along too. That afternoon during cookies and milk with Grammy he told her all



about the zoo and the mothers.

“Grammy, do you think you can be a room mother sometime?”

“I might, but you know I have to go to work during the day.”

“Allison’s mom was a room mother. I wish my mommy were here so she could be my room mother. Did my mommy go to school when she was little? Did she have friends, like Allison is my friend?”

“Yes. She didn’t go to preschool but she went to kindergarten, all the way through high school and college and graduate school. Aunt Kate was her best friend. They met in first grade. Kate was a tomboy, and lots of fun. She wasn’t afraid of anything.”

“What was my mommy like? Did you

and my mommy look the same when you were little?

“She wasn’t a tomboy like Kate, but she liked to try just about anything. She and Kate loved to invent games to play. I’ll show you some pictures from when I was a child. I think we looked alike in some ways,”

“What kind of toys did she have?”

“Well, she had a bike, and Hot Wheels, and stuffed animals.”

“Was my mommy happy?”

“Well ... she ... your mom worked very hard to have a good life. She loved you very much.”

John chewed on a cookie and wondered why sometimes Grammy answered wrong, like saying that his

mommy loved him when he asked if she was happy. He decided he would look at his memory book before bedtime and think about what his mommy was like when she was little like him.

4.

October 1968 — Plainview,  
Massachusetts

Barbara pulled off her rubber gloves and looked at the clock again. She couldn't wait until her husband got home. He would be so happy, she just

knew it. She could barely stop herself from calling him at work to share her news, but she knew he frowned on that — said it broke his concentration. She had finished scouring out the sink, and the laundry was all caught up and still it was only 5:00. She got out her mending basket and set to work on a pair of his socks to make the time go more quickly. At 5:30 she heard his car in the driveway.

As he came in the back door from the garage, she took his coat. After he removed his wingtips she put them on the boot tray and followed him out through the kitchen. She took a moment to hang up his coat while he got settled in the living room. Then she took a seat

at the end of the sofa closest to his easy chair.

“Honey? I went to the doctor today.”

“Oh, did you? How was it?”

“Well, I have some big news.”

“Oh, well do share.”

“I’m pregnant!”

“Oh! I mean... that’s good news, surely. When is it due?”

“The baby is due in April! Oh, honey, I’m so excited! A baby of our very own! If it’s a boy I want to name him Edward, after your father. And if it’s a girl, I want to name her Mary.”

She watched him closely. Ever since their troubles, it had seemed like she had to be careful — choose her words and make sure she didn’t say anything that

upset him. But this, this was such wonderful news. Surely he would be as happy as she was.

He patted his knee and held his arms out. "Did the doctor say anything about ...?"

Barbara got up and sat on his lap.

"He said it's fine until I get big."

He put his arms around her and nuzzled her neck, then straightened up and reared back a little to look her in the face. He waggled his eyebrows and patted her stomach. "Hmm... we'll have to be sure to keep busy until then. Let's go upstairs."

She got off his lap and he stood and took her hand. Barbara felt a swell of happiness. A husband who couldn't keep

his hands off her and, soon, a baby to love. Their earlier troubles seemed far away. He had promised he would never hit her again, and now she was sure it was true. It had to be.



## 5.

Barbara lay Mary down on the changing table. She put her hand over her daughter's impossibly soft round belly to steady her on the table and turned to look at the Bozo clock that hung on the opposite wall of the nursery; 4:30. One hour to get the baby cleaned up and changed, put her into the stroller

for a walk to the corner market, get back to start dinner, and have a glass of wine ready when her husband walked in the door.

The wine worried her. He had always liked a drink or two most evenings. After Mary was born he promised to quit the hard liquor, but now it seemed like one or two nightly pre-Mary martinis had turned into three, four or more glasses of wine. And if she didn't have his first glass ready for him when he walked in the door from work, she would see his mouth set into that hard line that meant he was angry with her and that she shouldn't expect his attention later that night, or for several nights after.

She gave her head a little shake and told herself to snap out of it. He was a good husband. He provided well for them, and he had kept his promise to stay off the hard stuff after Mary was born. He worked hard all day; why shouldn't he enjoy himself a little when he got home? She looked down and smiled at her wriggling daughter, who cooed and smiled back and then held still long enough for Barbara to get the clean diaper on her and snap a fresh set of plastic pants around her adorable fat little tushie.

She settled Mary on her hip and carried her downstairs into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and surveyed the contents: there was that cut

of flank steak and some mushrooms. Stroganoff sounded good; she could get sour cream at the market and she would need to get more lettuce for his salad. She glanced up at the kitchen clock: 4:45. She put her purse on her shoulder, pulled open the back door and, grabbing the umbrella stroller from the porch, carried Mary down the back steps. She set her down on the sidewalk while she got the stroller open. Mary rocked forward onto her hands and knees and was about to crawl into the grass but Barbara scooped her up and set her in the stroller, snapped the belt around her and started walking before Mary could start crying. Motion would always settle her down.

Most days she liked to describe the walk to Mary, but today there was no time. She set off down the street at a brisk pace, weaving back and forth on the sidewalk to make Mary giggle.

By the time she returned it was 5:20. Ten more minutes. She set Mary on the kitchen floor and opened the low cabinet where she kept her Tupperware.

Mary rocked forward and made a beeline for the open door, reaching in and yanking until the tower of containers tumbled out in an avalanche of semi-opaque plastic. Barbara stepped around the chaos on the floor and retrieved the mushrooms from the refrigerator. Working quickly, she sliced them up and put them in a skillet to sauté, then opened

the deep linen drawer next to the sink that doubled as his wine cellar. Red meat, red wine ... he would probably like the Burgundy.

She retrieved the corkscrew from the utensil drawer and was just about to remove the foil when Mary's shriek stopped her cold. She looked down — Mary had crawled partly into the Tupperware cabinet and pinched her fingers in the door hinge. She looked up at Barbara, her tiny face screwed up in agony and rage.

Barbara reached down and scooped her daughter up, bouncing her on her hip to soothe her. Mary's sobs subsided to hiccups. Barbara smoothed her hair back off her little forehead, then set her back

amid the Tupperware. She returned her attention to the bottle and was just pulling the cork as her husband came through the back door. She followed his gaze from the corkscrew in her hand to the jumble of plastic on the floor to the mushrooms, sautéing solo on the stove and back to her face. She smiled brightly.

“Dinner won’t be long. I opened your Burgundy. Why don’t you go get settled and I’ll bring you a nice glass.”

“It needs to breathe, you know. And I need some peace and quiet. What is all this stuff doing on the floor?”

As he said this, he seemed to become aware of Mary, amid the Tupperware, for the first time since entering the

house. She smiled up at him. He reached down and chucked her under the chin and then straightened up, addressing Barbara.

“I’m going to change out of these clothes. I’ll be in my den. Let the Burgundy breathe for at least ten minutes and then bring me a glass.”

He pecked her on the cheek and strode out of the kitchen, shrugging off his coat as he went.



## 6.

1976 – Plainview, Massachusetts

One Friday afternoon when Mary was in second grade, school let out early for teacher conferences. Mary and her best friend Kate walked home, their feet rustling through dry leaves. Kate had moved to her street last year, before first

grade started. She had an older sister in junior high school and a big brother who was already in college. Her mom and dad both had jobs. Mary liked Kate's dad. He always patted Mary on the shoulder and asked how her day was going.

Mary asked, "Can I come over after lunch?"

"We always play at my house. Why can't we play at your house?"

Mary thought for a minute. Since it was a weekday it would probably be okay. He wouldn't be home until later.

When she got home she ate lunch and then went upstairs to set up the Hot Wheels. That was one reason Kate liked her house. Kate had some new things,

but a lot of her toys were hand me downs from her sister and brother. Mary had a whole lot more toys, plus Mary's room was at the end of the hall so they could put all the pieces of Hot Wheels track together and run them all the way to the other end.

Hot Wheels was the best toy ever. Mary liked the way the cars bounced up and down on their springs, almost like real cars. They raced the cars all afternoon. Mary kept winning, so they put a loop-the-loop in Mary's side of the track to even things out. It was hard to set up. They had to push the pieces of track together just right or the car would hit the crack and jump off.

Finally they got it set up and raced a

few times, but then the crack opened up again and Mary's Mustang jumped off the track. Kate found some ball bearings in the bottom of the Hot Wheels box and sent those down the track instead. It was so fun that they did it over and over again, giggling as the balls zinged down the track.

They were laughing so hard she didn't hear his car in the driveway. She saw him, too late, as he rounded the landing on the stairs. She and Kate stopped playing and waited for him to go into his and her mom's bedroom.

She had forgotten about the Mustang that jumped the tracks. There it was, right at the end of the hallway. She saw it just before his foot came down on it.

He always took his shoes off as he came into the house, so he was just in his socks. He yelled out in pain and then picked up the car and threw it at her. She felt wind as it sailed past her and hit the mirror behind her. There was a loud crack and then the tinkle of glass falling to the floor.

Kate just sat there, looking at Mary's father with her mouth open, like she had never seen him before in her life, and finally said, "I just remembered, my mom wants me at home."

She stood up and reached for her backpack from the pile on Mary's bed. When she found it she didn't even bother to put it on her shoulder; she just hooked a strap on her arm and ran past him and

down the stairs.

Mary felt her throat close up, but she would not cry in front of him. She just stared at him while he stared back at her.

“I told you to never leave your toys on the stairs. You’re to stay in your room tonight as punishment.” Mary just kept staring at him. Finally she yanked the track back into her room and shut the door between them.

A little later her mom knocked on her door and brought her a grilled cheese sandwich and some milk. She said she had some cookies in the oven and would bring those up in a little while. Mary wasn’t hungry, but she tried to eat some of the sandwich so her mom wouldn’t be sad.

She wished he didn't live with her mom and her. Kate's dad was nice. He helped Kate with her homework and would sometimes take her on what he called "dad and daughter outings." But her dad just watched TV, sometimes with a wine glass in front of him. Watched TV, yelled at her mom, and every once in a while yelled at Mary, if she got in his way.

She wished he would just leave. Maybe he could find some other lady to marry and he would leave her and her mom so they could be happy together. She had seen a story on TV about a father who'd just disappeared twenty years ago, and now they found out that he had moved to England and started a new

family there. In the story his first family was sad when he disappeared and angry when they found out about his new family, but if her dad did that, she wouldn't be sad or angry at all, she would just feel sorry for the new family.



7.

1978, Plainview, Massachusetts

Mary liked fourth grade. Her teacher, Mrs. Glassley, was really nice, and there were some other girls that she and Kate were friends with. Today at lunch she was running late. She finally got through the line and found Kate and

Laura at a table by the window. She was just sitting down with her tray when she heard Laura talking about her slumber party. She said she would invite Kate and Mary and Debbie.

Kate chimed in: “My sister had a lot of slumber parties when we lived in Chicago; they got to stay up and watch Creature Feature.”

“Mine is next Saturday. Ask your moms if you can come.”

When Mary’s mom came to pick her up, she asked about going to Laura’s.

“I think that will be okay. Is Kate going?”

“I think so.”

“I’ll double-check with your father, but it should be okay.”

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have to ask him? Can’t I just go? He won’t be home anyway.”

“We’ll see.”

Mary slumped back in her seat and puffed out her breath. She hated it when her mom said, “We’ll see.” Sometimes it meant that her mom would get her the thing she wanted or let her do what she wanted to do, but usually it meant that she hoped Mary would forget about whatever she was asking for.

Friday night Mary was in her room reading a new chapter book called the The Great Brain. It was about a regular boy who had a genius brother. The

brother always played tricks on him and all the people in the town. Mary wondered if she was like the regular brother or the genius brother.

She had just gotten to a really good part when she heard a crash from downstairs.

“Why is it so fucking hard to get edible food around here? What do you do with all that grocery money anyway?”

“You barely give me anything to spend. I thought you would like this.”

“It’s crap! You’re crap. Don’t you dare serve me this shit again.”

“Oh, what are you going to do if I do, big man?”

“Don’t push me. Just don’t. And clean this mess up.”

Mary eased her door open and tiptoed to the top of the stairs. They weren't saying anything now. She heard some clinking noises, then her mom said, "My friends don't have to put up with this from their husbands. If Pauline's had a short day at work, he takes care of the grocery shopping for that week."

"I don't give a shit what your friend's husband does. Maybe your friend actually does a few things for him. Maybe she didn't let herself get fat and ugly."

"Keep your voice down. Do you want your daughter to hear you talking that way?"

"You turned her against me anyway, so why should I care?"

“How dare you say that! She wants to love you, but you’re always so cold to her. And you’re always drinking. Don’t you notice that she’s never around when you’re drinking?”

“Maybe if I you hadn’t saddled me with a brat I wouldn’t have to drink so much. Did you ever think of that?”

“Don’t say that!”

“I’ll say whatever I want, you bitch.”

With this, Mary heard a thump, then, so low she could hardly hear it, her mom said, “No. Please. I’m sorry.”

She ran back into her room and closed the door, putting her fingers in her ears to drown out the sound of her father’s fists landing on her mother.

8.

August 1979 – near Portland, Maine

They had been driving for a few hours when Mary spotted a sign for Big Boy. She didn't really like taking trips with him, even though her mom tried to make them fun, but at least on vacation he would let her have a brownie sundae

when they stopped for dinner.

They placed their orders and then her dad excused himself to go to the bathroom. Mary looked around to see what other people were having for dinner at the Big Boy tonight. Two tables over there was a family with three kids. The middle kid looked about her age — she wondered if he was going into fifth grade like her. There was a girl who looked like maybe she was in junior high and another girl who was smaller, maybe a second-grader. The older girl looked really cool. She was wearing lip gloss, and then Mary saw that she had a Lipsmacker on a string around her neck. She was wearing flares, and a tank top. The best part



about her outfit was her shoes. She was wearing wedgies with rope wrapped around the soles. The top part was sandals, with a big daisy where the thing went between her toes.

She looked up and saw Mary looking at her and made a face that was sort of friendly. Mary thought she liked being watched because she started doing a trick with her Coke glass and straw.

The boy looked kind of like the boy on that TV show that they sometimes watched on Sunday nights. He had shiny blond hair that was kind of long, but not girl-long. He was wearing a red t-shirt that had the band KISS on the front, and Levis and white gym shoes. She wondered if his jeans were real Levis or

the fake ones. She also wondered if he was cute, but she couldn't decide. She had heard some girls talk about how certain boys in their class were cute. Some of the girls even called boys their boyfriends.

The dad was dressed like the dads she saw at Parent's Night at school. He was wearing a polo shirt with a little penguin picture, and what her mom called Bermuda shorts. She couldn't see his feet, but she guessed he would be wearing those brown leather shoes with the white bottoms, or maybe brown leather sandals. He had a shiny head with a little bit of hair around the outside and he had sunglasses pushed up on the top of his head.

The mom was talking.

“So, each of you tell your favorite part of today. Jenny, you go first.”

The little girl said: “I liked the playground. The swings were the funnest.”

“Honey, there’s no such word as ‘funnest.’ Say ‘most fun.’ But, I’m glad you liked the swings. We’ll try to find a playground tomorrow, too. Jason, what about you? What was your favorite thing?”

“I liked it when we got to throw Dad in the pool. Man, that was so funny. Hey Dad, I didn’t know you could swim like that with your clothes on.”

The dad reached over and swatted the boy on the leg, but he was laughing.

“Next time, it’ll be you, little man. When you least expect it.”

“Oooh, I’m so scared!” The boy talked in a high voice and they all laughed.

“And, Kate,” (Kate!) “What was your favorite part?”

“It was funny when we threw Dad in the pool, but I think my favorite part was seeing the baby animals at the zoo. They were SO cute! Mom, can we get a kitten when we get home?”

Mary saw the parents look at each other, then the mom said, “We’ll see.”

Mary knew what that meant — probably no kitten. But maybe this family was different.

Then her father came back from the

bathroom and their food came. Mary ate her hamburger, but she was watching the other family out of the corner of her eye and listening to their conversation. She wished she could get up and walk over and sit at their table. She wondered what it would be like to go home with them. Maybe their house was like Kate's. But she knew it could never happen. For some reason, she had been put in her family. Other families told jokes at dinner and made fun of their dads. Kids in other families sometimes got things they wanted, just because they wanted them.

Last night, in the motel, her father had his wine and then her parents got into a fight. They were going to stay there

another night, and her mom said they could go to the aquarium, but the next morning Mom said she was too embarrassed after all the noise her father made, so they had to check out.

9.

1980, Plainview, Massachusetts

Mary had just zipped up her coat and hooked her book bag on her shoulder when Mr. Sedgefield came up to her.

“Mary, can I talk to you for a minute?”

She set her bookbag back down on her chair. She wondered if she was in

trouble.

He was the best teacher she'd ever had. Until the fifth grade all of her teachers had been ladies. She liked having a man teacher, especially a cute one like Mr. Sedgefield. He wore corduroy pants and polo shirts, and instead of wearing those shiny black dress shoes like her father wore, he wore Earth shoes. Her father was so weird; he always wore dorky dress shirts and dress pants like he thought at any moment someone was going to ask him to add a column of numbers, or make an important phone call. Mr. Sedgefield looked more like an older brother or cousin than a total grownup.

And he was really nice to her.



Sometimes he'd ruffle her hair when he passed by her and it made her feel good. It was kind of like when Kate's dad would pat her shoulder and ask her about school.

"Mary, I'm worried about you."

"Um ..."

"Is everything okay at home?"

Mary looked down. She shifted her feet around and kept looking at the floor. Her mom always told her she shouldn't tell other people about the fights, because you're not supposed to show your dirty linen in public. "It's okay."

"Are you sure?"

"I dunno. Yes. It's okay."

"Do you know your mom was supposed to come in for parent-teacher

conference this week?"

"Um. Didn't she come?"

Mary knew she'd skipped the conference, and she was pretty sure it was because of her black eye. Sometimes when her father fought with her mom he just pushed her, but sometimes he hit her. And she wouldn't leave the house looking like that. Yesterday she'd sent Mary to the corner store for milk and bread and a steak. She put the steak on her eye but it was still purple and swollen. Her mom usually looked pretty with her soft wavy brown hair and brown eyes, but with her black eye she looked scary.

"No, Mary, she didn't come. I tried calling this morning, but there was no

answer. It's not like your mom."

Mary pulled the zipper on her bag back and forth. She wished she could leave. Mr. Sedgefield was nice, but he would never understand. Her mom would be so embarrassed if someone saw her black eye.

"Mary, you're a good kid. I want you to know: if you ever want to talk, you can talk to me. And, can you ask your mom to call me? If she's not feeling well, we can schedule the conference for later, when she's feeling better? Deal?"

Mary couldn't believe she was so dumb. Why hadn't she thought to tell him her mom was sick? Everybody gets sick sometimes. Next time, that's what she would say.

“Okay. Thanks. I’ll tell my mom to call you.”

“Okay, Mary. Have a good weekend.”

Mary nodded, but she knew she would probably not have a good weekend. Weekends at her place were never good.

“Thank God it’s Friday! TGIF baby!”

“What do you have planned?”

“I can’t wait for this day to end.”

“My dad is taking us to Great America!”

“I’m going to lay out, all day, both days.”

“My sister is going to the Rush concert in Boston, and she said I maybe I can go if I can sneak out.”

“I got the new Queen album for my

birthday — wanna come over and listen to it?”

“We’re going dirt biking, wanna come?”

“Me and Kelly are hitting the mall.”

Mary made her way through the chattering throng leaving school for the day. An older girl pushed past her, wearing a shirt that said “TGIF.” The halls were buzzing with talk of plans, the weekend, how great it was to be out of school for a couple of days.

That morning Mary had woken up with a knot in her stomach, like she did every Friday. She wished she could get a shirt that said “TGIM” for “Thank God It’s Monday.” She wished she could sleep through the weekend, or spend the

whole time at Kate's house. She couldn't wait for it to be Monday again.

10.

1980 - Plainview, Massachusetts

It was the last Saturday in July. Mary woke up excited. Kate's family was taking her on vacation! Every year they went to the seashore, near Cape Cod. Last year and the year before she'd wanted to go, but her father said she was

too young to be away from home. But finally, this year she was going.

She was so excited she woke up at 6:00. Kate said they would be leaving at 8:00. She got out of bed. After pulling the comforter up to make it tidy, she went to her closet. She had packed her suitcase last week after her mom did the laundry, but she dragged it out and opened it on her bed, just so she could double-check everything.

She'd never been to the beach, but her mom said to just pack like she was going on a vacation in the summer to a place with a pool. She had packed her new striped swimsuit and some new tank tops, plus three pairs of shorts and a skirt. Her mom said she needed a skirt in



case the Carlsons wanted to take her somewhere nice to eat. She had her windbreaker and a nice top and some t-shirts and a set of pajamas. It looked like enough for a week. She would wear her flip-flops in the car, so she didn't need to pack those.

After she was done packing she sat on her bed. It seemed too early to go downstairs — her mom wouldn't be up yet. She thought Kate might be up, but she didn't want to call her house too early. Finally she picked up her book from the nightstand and read it until she heard her mom go into the bathroom, and then she heard her steps going down the stairs. A few minutes later she heard her father's heavy tread coming up the stairs.

Usually on Fridays he drank so much wine that he would just fall asleep in his chair, still wearing his clothes. When this happened her mom would have to wake him up in the morning and get him to go up to bed. On Saturdays and Sundays sometimes he didn't wake up again until after noon.

Once Mary was sure he was in his room she went downstairs and fixed a bowl of cereal. Her mom was at the table with her coffee cup and the paper. She smiled when Mary sat down.

“It's the big day. Now, do you remember everything I told you about being polite to the Carlsons?”

“Yes Mom. Thank them every time they treat me to something. Clean up

after myself in the cabin. Don't leave my stuff in the bathroom. Help clear the table and help with the dishes."

"Good girl. It's so nice of them to invite you. I want to make sure you're a good guest."

Mary looked up at the clock: 7:30. She had better get moving. She ran upstairs, washed her face and got dressed. Out in the hallway, she listened for sounds from her parents' room. Snoring. Good. He would be asleep when she left.

Finally it was 8:00, and right on schedule the Carlson's station wagon pulled into view. Mary grabbed her suitcase and was ready to just run down the walk, but her mom stopped her.

“I’m sure they’ll want to come in.”

Sure enough, Mr. and Mrs. Carlson were getting out of the car. Kate waved wildly from the backseat, but stayed put.

Her mom opened the front door and beckoned them in.

“I don’t suppose you have time for coffee?”

Mrs. Carlson shook her head. “Oh, no, thank you. That sounds lovely, but we really do need to hit the road. We just wanted to say hello and assure you we’ll take good care of this girl.”

Mr. Carlson took the handle of her suitcase. “Well, Mary, old girl, are you ready to see the ocean?”

“Yes sir.” She caught a look from her mom and remembered to add, “Thank

you for inviting me.”

Finally they were on the road, with her suitcase strapped onto the roof with the Carlson’s luggage. She and Kate shared the middle row seat. Kate’s sister, who clearly believed she was too old for this family vacation, occupied the rear-facing seat in the back-back, where she flipped through fashion magazines and strained to hear tunes emanating from a small transistor radio she held up to her ear, turned down so her parents didn’t have to listen to it up front.

They reached the shore by early afternoon. Mary’s eyes bugged out at the scenery. She hadn’t been to the ocean before. Her father always wanted to take

trips to historical sites, or, if he was feeling especially cheap, campgrounds.

“Mary! What would you like to do this afternoon? Beach or miniature golf?”

Mary started. She had been so focused on the overwhelming expanse of shining water that she didn’t realize Mr. Carlson was talking to her.

“I think they both sound fun. I’ve never been to the beach before,”

“Beach, beach, beach, beach.”

Her dad smiled. “Kate, that’s enough from you. We have registered your preference.”

Kate winked at Mary.

“Here’s the plan then: let’s get to the cabin first. We can unload the car and

have a quick lunch. Then, if this weather holds, we'll hit the beach for the afternoon. How's that sound?"

Kate gave the thumbs-up sign and Mary nodded. Kate's sister just muttered "whatever" but Mary knew she wanted to go to the beach because she liked to wear a bathing suit and walk in front of boys.

At the beach, Mary couldn't get over how big it all was. She had been to a lake on one of her father's camping trips, but it was nothing like this. Kate said that the other side was all the way in Europe, too far to see. At first Mary was afraid of the waves, but then Kate showed her how to jump into them and ride them to shore. There were little

holes in the sand, all over, that Kate said were where the clams put their siphons out.

Mr. Carlson lay down and let Kate and Mary bury him in the sand. After they dug him out again, he helped them make a sand castle, except instead of a sand castle it was a huge sand turtle — it was almost as big across as Mary was tall. After that they played in the surf some more until Mrs. Carlson finally said they needed to get back to the cabin and get some dinner into them. That night Mary fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow. She wished she could spend every day with Kate's family. She wished they were her family.





## 11.

1980 - Plainview, Massachusetts

When Mary and Kate started back at school for sixth grade, some things had changed. Half the girls carried purses. Most of them had the same kind — they looked like they had been made out of the top part of a pair of jeans, with a strap attached. The back pockets of the

jeans were pockets on the purse. They were so cute that Mary wanted one as soon as she saw them, but Kate said they looked stupid.

Hairstyles were different too. Last year most of the girls wore their hair either in ponytails or pulled back in barrettes. Mary didn't like the way ponytails made her head feel, so she wore her straight brown hair parted in the middle and pulled back with barrettes.

This year Beth Norton and Kelly Booth had new feathered hairdos, like Farrah Fawcett on "Charlie's Angels." Debbie said that her mom was going to take her to the beauty school to get her hair feathered like the popular girls'

hair.

Kate and Mary didn't sit with the popular girls at lunch. Kate didn't care because she thought those girls were stupid. Mary didn't care either, but she thought it would be fun to do some of the things they did, like wander around the mall, shopping for cute clothes. They were rich, so they could have any clothes they wanted. Mary thought that even if you didn't have money to spend at the mall it would be fun to look at stuff, and maybe buy some ice cream or pizza with your allowance money.

That afternoon her mom picked her up from school. They were going to the mall so she could get a training bra. Mary hoped she could buy a purse too.

Debbie said they had the jeans purses at Penney's.

Her mom let her out in front of Penney's and went to park the car. Mary pretended she was like Beth and Kelly, at the mall by herself. She imagined what it would feel like to have a purse over her shoulder. It would be nice to have one because she never knew what to do with her hands when she walked around.

The last time she'd gone to the doctor's office, they had a Glamour magazine, and Mary had read an article about how to have good posture. The article said that you could look ten pounds thinner by standing up straight, so Mary always tried to put her

shoulders back and walk like she had a book on her head. As she entered the Penney's she checked her reflection in a full-length mirror. It looked to her like her back was straight. She had forgotten to suck in her stomach, so she sucked in quickly. The article also said something about tucking your hips under. She didn't know what that meant, so she left that part out. Anyway her hips were weird. She used to be straight up and down, but lately her hips had started sticking out.

She was looking at some jeans when she saw her mom come in from the parking lot, so she put them down and went over to the underwear department. Kate had told her about her first visit for a training bra and it sounded horrible.

She said that there was a lady there who put a tape measure around you and then pushed you around to get you to fit in the bra. Mary didn't want the bra lady to touch her so her mom said she would tell her not to.

The lady wasn't as bad as Kate had made her sound. She did have a tape measure, but she was nice about using it and called Mary "honey" while she worked. After she had measured her she went and got some bras from the racks for her to try on.

When she came back with the bras, Mary's mom asked why they were regular women's bras and not training bras. The lady said that Mary was already too big for a training bra. Mary

wished she could just crawl under the rug when they talked about her boobs like that.

After they had paid for one white and one pink bra her mom asked if she wanted to look around the mall. Mary did want to look around, but not with her mom. What if Beth was there with Kelly and they saw her? The other girls went to the mall with each other, not with their moms. She said she had a lot of homework to do.

On the way home she remembered Beth's feathered haircut. "Mom, can I get my hair cut?"

"What, honey?"

"At school today, some of the girls had feathered hair. Instead of barrettes."



“Well ... the hair salon is kind of expensive.”

“Debbie Sanders’ mom is going to take her to the beauty school. They charge a lot less than the salon. I think it’s about seven dollars.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too bad, but I’ll have to ask your father for money. I don’t have enough in the grocery budget to spare seven dollars.”

“Oh, Mom, I don’t want you to ask him. He’ll say no. I’d rather use my birthday money instead.”

Mary didn’t understand why her mom always had to ask for money. Her dad drove a really nice car. According to Eric, a guy in her class who was into cars, it was really expensive. Her dad

loved it so much he wouldn't even let her ride in it until this year. And he always had nice clothes, but if Mary or her mom wanted something he always expected them to make a big case for why they needed it.

"I still need to ask your father. He'll have a fit if you come home with your hair cut and we didn't ask him. I'll ask for the money too, so you don't have to spend your own."

Mary didn't say anything. He would probably mess things up, but she knew that her mother would have to ask him. She had to ask him about everything important.

When they got home, Mary grabbed

the Penney's bag and ran up to her room. She didn't want him to see the bag and ask what was inside, even though she knew her mom had probably already told him what they were shopping for.

She closed the door behind her and put the bag on her bed. She switched on her radio; it was almost time for Kasey Kasem's Countdown, which meant she would get to hear "Don't Stand So Close to Me" and "Another One Bites the Dust." Pulling the white bra out first, then the pink one, she stood in front of the mirror and held them up to her chest and imagined that she was Farrah Fawcett, wearing a red bathing suit, hair falling all feathery in her face. She took off her shirt and put the pink bra on, then

shimmied out of her jeans. She stood there in just her bra and underwear. It wasn't quite a red bathing suit, but it was the closest thing she had.

She reached behind her neck and held her hair up behind her head and imagined she was dressed up, sitting in a cocktail lounge while a man in a suit asked if he could buy her a drink. She squinted at her reflection and tried to figure out if she was pretty or not. She liked her nose; it was small and straight. Her hair would be okay if she could get it cut. Everybody said that Beth Norton had a nice figure because the junior clothes fit her. Mary wore misses' clothes because the junior clothes pinched her legs and the tops wouldn't

stay closed.

It took her a moment to realize that they were fighting again. Her father was yelling while her mother talked to him in the soft voice she always used with him. Mary pulled on her robe then opened her door and tiptoed to the top of the stairs to listen.

“No daughter of mine is going to tart herself up like some whore on TV!”

“I notice you don’t have any problem looking at those whores, as you call them.”

“This is my house and I’ll watch what I want.”

“Why can’t you let her just be like other girls? All the girls in her class are getting their hair done.”

“She’s not ‘all the girls in her class.’ I won’t have her looking like a common tramp. And short hair is for boys, or dykes like her little friend Kate.”

“Kate is a child! What’s wrong with you, talking about a little girl like that? And besides, she doesn’t want to get it cut short, she just wants to get the front cut, in bangs, so it’s out of her face.”

“I said no. Besides, where are you going to get the money?”

Mary went back into her room and closed the door. The Penney’s bag was sitting on the bed. She pushed it off onto the floor and flopped down on top of her bedspread. Why did he always have to ruin everything? People like Beth Norton didn’t have these problems. People like

Beth got to go to Filene's and probably got their hair cut in the city. Why did other girls get to wear nice clothes and go to the hair salon, while she had to wear off-brand clothes and those stupid ugly barrettes?

She was afraid to cut her own hair. Once when she was little, right before the first day of school, she tried to cut her bangs with her school scissors and she messed it all up. She had to go to school that first day with a big space on the front of her hair where her bangs should have been. It took forever to grow out, and everyone made fun of her for the rest of the year.

She could probably do a better job now, but feathers looked hard. Then she

remembered her birthday money. She got her treasure box down from her closet shelf and counted. Nine dollars and fifty-two cents. Debbie said the beauty school charged seven dollars plus a dollar for the tip.

She would have to figure out a way to get to the beauty school. If she could get Kate to go, maybe Kate's mom would drive them both. But Kate's mom would probably call her mom to make sure it was okay, so that wouldn't work.

She went out into the hall and got the phone book from the little table where her mom kept the upstairs phone and took it back into her room. She looked under "Beauty Schools." There it was, on Yorkshire Pike.



That morning she'd heard him telling her mom that he was going away for the weekend. She could ask to spend the night at Kate's on Saturday and ride her bike down to the beauty school in the afternoon before she went to Kate's. She knew she would get in a whole lot of trouble later but she didn't care. It would be worth it.

The next day at school she admired Beth's feathers and her latest cute top. For once she wasn't jealous. Pretty soon she was going to look just as good.

## 12.

Saturday morning Mary got up and made her bed as soon as she had dressed and brushed her teeth. She didn't want anything to mess up her afternoon plans, so she was extra careful to clear the table after breakfast, and rinse the dishes in the sink. She even dried them and put them away for good measure. Her father

had gotten up early for once and left right after breakfast, so she and her mom had the place to themselves. She liked Saturday mornings when it was just the two of them, hanging out like roommates.

Right after breakfast her mom started on yard work, clearing out the late summer flowers and putting out the chrysanthemum pots along the front walk. Mary went out to see if she could help, but her mom said she was almost done. So she went back inside and tried to read a book. She wished she could leave for the beauty school, but Kate's family had gone out for the morning, and Mary's mom would be suspicious if she left for Kate's before their car was back in the driveway. She busied herself

packing her money and her nightgown and toothbrush in her backpack and setting it by the front door.

Around noon she started to get nervous. Her appointment was for 1:00, and she would need at least thirty minutes to get over there. Finally at 12:15 the Carlson's car pulled into the driveway. She waited about ten minutes, then yelled goodbye to her mom, hitched her backpack onto her shoulders, got her bike out of the garage, and started down the street. Her mom had finished the yard work and was relaxing in the living room with the newspaper, so at least she didn't have to explain why she was riding her bike just to go down the block.

She and Kate ran upstairs to drop her backpack off in Kate's room. Then Kate distracted her mom while Mary slipped out the back. She had parked her bike in the alley, so she jumped on it and pedaled fast, heading south. Four blocks down and two over there was a traffic light where she crossed the main drag (as her weirdo father called it). That was the hardest part of the trip; now she could ride through neighborhoods all the way down to the beauty school. It was just past downtown on this side of the river, near the used bookstore and the Seven Eleven. Her mom once said that downtown was about two miles from their house — that didn't seem too bad.

She wasn't supposed to go anywhere

on her bike but her own neighborhood. He had said she could go to Kate's house, and to the little park up the street, but she wasn't supposed to cross the main drag. She wasn't supposed to get her hair cut either, but she was tired of living with his stupid rules. They didn't even make any sense. How could it hurt her to get a haircut? At least the rules about where she could ride her bike were sort of about her safety, except that he seemed to think she was about four years old, instead of almost a teenager. But the rules about her hair and clothes were just weird and stupid and she didn't see why she should have to follow them.

She was starting to get hot and tired.

She wasn't used to riding her bike so far. Sweat was running down her back. She hoped the beauty school would be okay with cutting her hair even when she was all sweaty.

Finally the houses and trees that lined the street gave way to parking spaces and stores. A little farther and she would be past downtown, so the beauty school must be close by. At the next traffic light she turned right, toward the bank, then made a left toward the river. There: the used bookstore. And then there was the beauty school, a plain yellow brick building that took up about a quarter of the block. She locked her bike to a parking meter in front and got inside quickly before anyone could see her.





## 13.

Mary burst through the door to her room and slammed it behind her. She yanked open her sweater drawer and pulled out the big sweatshirt that Kate's brother had brought her from college. She pulled it over her head, sat down on the edge of her bed and crossed her arms tightly in front of her. Then she got up and wedged the back of her desk chair

under the doorknob like she'd seen in the movies.

She didn't think she loved her father, although everyone said that you're supposed to love your parents no matter what. She did love her mom, but she didn't feel that way about him.

Ever since her boobs started growing enough for her to need a bra, her father had been acting weird. And her body was weird. Nothing fit. Kate was so skinny and straight that even at fourteen years old she could put on boys' Levis and she didn't even have to take in the waist. When Mary tried to wear boys' pants they gapped at the waist and dug into her hips when she sat down.

Now that her body was filling out, as

her mother called it, he would just stare at her. She used to sometimes come downstairs after her shower, to watch a little TV before bed, but now she didn't like to because he would stare at her in her robe. It seemed like he was always seeing something about her that he wasn't supposed to see. And every time she tried to hide from him, he would find a new way to look.

And then tonight. She had a bad feeling in her stomach, like the way she felt when Danny Nelson sneaked into the girls' locker room while she was pulling on her pants. Danny had seen her like that and every time she thought of it she felt this hot, tingly, embarrassed feeling like someone could see her secret

thoughts.

He had put his hands ... where her bra was. She and her mom were in the kitchen talking, but he said Mary had to go to her room as punishment because she forgot to bring in the trashcans. She had just wanted to finish her cookies and milk but apparently she didn't move fast enough for him because he came up behind her and tried to haul her out of the chair. Maybe he only grabbed that part of her because he was trying to make her get up, but instead of hooking her under her armpits, he had put his hands right ... there.

She wanted to ask someone about it. Maybe Kate would know if it was okay. She thought about that, about asking

Kate, “does your dad ever put his hands around your boobs?” No. Even thinking it seemed wrong. Sometimes Kate’s father hugged her but it was the same way he hugged her sister and brother, and the same way Mary’s mother used to hug her.

She thought about asking her mother, but lately her mom wasn’t easy to talk to. She would cook dinner, and would sign Mary’s permission slips for school. If Mary needed something she would take her to the mall to buy it. But when her father acted weird, her mother didn’t say anything. Like after she got her hair cut, and he grounded her for the rest of the semester.

Or last month, when he wouldn’t let

her eat dinner — he had even knocked her bowl of chili out of her hands and her mom didn't do anything. Then when Mary tried to talk to her about it later, she just said that Mary shouldn't expect everything to be perfect. Her mom acted like her father was the boss, not like they were parents together. And, when she thought about asking her mother that same question about dads and boobs, she got that same wrong feeling.

She never told anyone about it. For the rest of that night she stayed in her room, and though eventually she dragged the phone in and called Kate, they just talked about school and the new Billy Joel album. Mary didn't want to talk to anyone about her father; she just wanted

to grow up enough to leave for college and never come back. That's what she would do: study hard and get good grades and stay out of his way and when she was old enough to leave home, she would leave and that would be it. She fell asleep thinking about what college might be like. Thinking about what it would feel like to be free and happy.

## 14.

1986 – Plainview, Massachusetts

Mary closed the door behind her and plunked her books down on Mr. Burge's desk. The guidance counselor gestured for her to sit.

“Mary, I'm glad you came in. It sounds like things are looking great for



you. Let's talk about your plan for next year."

Mary took a seat across from Mr. Burge. He looked at her expectantly.

"Well, I got some letters last week. Oberlin, Whitman, and Swarthmore all said yes."

"Mary, that's great news. Atta girl!"

Mary blushed and went on, "Oberlin is giving me a free ride. Swarthmore will give me some help, but I would need about \$5,000 a year of my own money. I can't decide what to do. I mean, a free ride sounds great, but Swarthmore. That's pretty fancy."

"Oberlin is a fine school. If you matriculate there and can graduate with no debt, I say that's the way to go.

You'll get a good liberal arts education and if you keep your grades up you'll have a lot of options after that if you want to go to grad school."

"Okay. That's a good point. But I still want to think it over. How long do I have? And do you know what I need to do once I decide? Do I send them a letter?"

"All that information should be in your acceptance letters. Look those over again and then make an appointment with me if you have more questions or if you need help sending your acceptance. Mary, I can't tell you what a joy it is to help a student launch such a bright future. You'll go far, my dear."

Mary smiled. Whenever Mr. Burge

saw her in the hallway he would stop and ask how her college plans were coming along. He'd helped her fill out financial aid paperwork and write her admissions essays. He kind of felt like a father to her. Once last winter when he saw her walking home he gave her a ride and stopped on the way and bought her some French fries and told her he was really proud of the work she was doing. Sometimes she wished he was her real father, but he already had a family of his own.

She was glad he was proud of her. When she first started high school she'd been worried she wouldn't be able to keep up with the work, but Mr. Burge found her a tutor who showed her how to

organize her homework and study for tests. Her freshman year's grades were just okay because she'd tried to do her studying at home, where her father was always interrupting her or fighting with her mom so she couldn't concentrate. But the tutor talked to Mr. Burge, and he arranged for her to stay after school in one of the guidance offices to do her homework. She could stay there and study as long as the custodians were there, which was usually long enough. Her sophomore, junior, and senior grades were excellent, plus Mr. Burge had written her a recommendation letter.

That night after she and her mom finished dinner, Mary went up to her

room. She reached under her mattress for her book and then lay down on her bed to read. She had to hide the book under her mattress because her mother wouldn't let her read Harlequin Romances. She said they were too old for her.

This one was about a woman who came from a poor family. She lived in a town where everyone was mean to her because her family was so poor. But she was beautiful, and a handsome man fell in love with her. He took her on trips to Paris and Rome and even Tokyo, and introduced her to all kinds of things that she didn't even know about before she met him.

Mary finished the book. After hiding it

under her mattress again, she lay back and gave herself over to her favorite daydream. She was older — maybe in her first year of college. She was with her boyfriend, a man named David, who was older, maybe thirty or so. He was taking her on a trip to the ocean. They were driving in his sports car. When they stopped for dinner, at a French restaurant with candles on the tables, people stared because he was so handsome. He ordered for her in French and then reached under the table and took her hands and told her how much he loved her. When they got to the beach, he had rented a beautiful A-frame cabin with a loft. He carried her up to the loft and made love to her just like the heroes

in her Harlequin books made love to their women.

She would go to college and she would meet an older man just like the one she dreamed of. He would take care of her. He would hold her close at night and whisper to her that she was the most important thing in the world. He would protect her from her father and never let anyone hurt her again.

15.

November 1997 – Bayview,  
Massachusetts

The prison van was full this morning. It was a two-hour drive to Bayview. Robert tried to read, but as the van jostled and rattled on worn-out springs, he felt himself getting queasy. He looked



around at the other inmates, clad in matching orange jumpsuits, shackles clanking as they shifted in their seats. The guard sat at the front of the van, facing them, like a flight attendant in a jump seat, eyes blank, face impassive. Robert leaned back and closed his eyes and thought about how life had brought him here.

He didn't like to think about his father, but his thoughts turned to him now. Except for the prison sentence, Robert's father would have been proud of how his boy turned out. Ed Lewis had been a Rust Belt shop foreman who wanted better for his sons. He had done what it took to push them to greater heights, even if it meant keeping them up

until their heads drooped over the dining room table, making sure they got their homework just right, or administering smacks when, despite their time and efforts, they fell short. Ed didn't want his boys working in the steel mills — it was a decent living, but it was a hard one and he got tired of seeing the bosses come down to the floor in their white shirts and striped ties, getting paid twice what he earned just for walking around. His boys were going to wear white shirts if it killed him.

In high school Robert taught himself to play the guitar and put together a band, doing Beatles covers. Ed wasn't having any of that starving artist bullshit, so he pushed Robert into an undergraduate

business major directly out of high school. Robert kept up the music during college, but once he had his BA, his father made him an offer he couldn't refuse: get an MBA and he would buy him a car and kick him a 20% down payment on a starter house.

Robert spent several wistful evenings caressing his Fender before packing it up, along with his other meager belongings, and catching a ride for Ann Arbor. He didn't enjoy business school but he was a good student. His diligence was rewarded with a lucrative career as a Boston financier and a comfortable early semi-retirement.

He could remember the week leading up to the accident; seeing a couple of his

clients, playing several rounds of golf at the serviceable municipal course. Wednesday night he had taken Sheila — or maybe it was Helen — to see part of the Mozart festival at Tanglewood. He remembered talking to his travel agent Friday morning, planning for his fall trip to northern Italy. He remembered dinner on Friday night, and that decadent chocolate cake. After that, all was blank.

Robert came back to the present as his seatmate shifted and craned to look out the window. Finally they had arrived at Bayview. The van pulled into a cement yard and parked. Two guards ran over, opened the back door and pulled out a ramp. Cold air blasted in. The transport guard, reanimated, stood up and barked

an introduction:

“Welcome to beautiful Bayview Correctional Facility. We hope you will enjoy your stay here. The fine gentlemen in uniform are your Corrections Officers, or COs for short. Exit the van single file and line up against the wall over there. Anyone wanting to escape please be aware that the COs will shoot to kill.”

Fucking power-drunk monkeys. Robert looked around at the other inmates, but no one met his eyes. He took his place in the file and shuffled off the van and into a line leading to a small lean-to against the far wall. Four COs were positioned about the yard. An officious-looking guy with a clipboard

stood near the lean-to.

Clipboard spoke, "You will each be allowed to visit the urinal. You will be cuffed to a CO for this process. After you have relieved yourself line up by that doorway for processing."

Robert's turn came quickly. A CO grabbed his arm, jostling him as he led him to the lean-to, which contained a lone urinal. He unlocked the right cuff and attached to his own wrist. Robert used his right hand to unzip his jumpsuit and do his business. The wind was icy and he was eager to zip his jumpsuit back up, but he couldn't do it with one hand, so finally he gave up and let the CO cuff his hands together again. His suit gapped and billowed in the wind as

he was led over to join the processing line.

After they had all visited the urinal the clipboard guy started yelling out names. “Anderson! Avis! Bartlett!” Finally, “Lewis!”

Robert stepped forward and shuffled through the doorway into a small room with a door on the other end, where they were met by two more COs.

One CO unlocked and removed Robert’s shackles and handcuffs.

“Remove your clothing and shoes and stand with your hands at your sides.”

Robert reached down to pull his shoes off then unzipped his jumpsuit the rest of the way. He shrugged out of it then pushed it down his legs and stepped out

of it. He looked around, uncertain what he should do with it. He felt his balls contract as the cold air hit his bare skin. He never thought he would miss a prison jumpsuit, but already he wanted to put his back on.

The CO stepped forward and took the jumpsuit. He inclined his head at Robert's crotch. "Remove all of your clothes."

Robert had hoped to retain this last vestige of dignity. Sighing, he hooked his thumbs on the waistband of his shorts and pulled them down, stepping out of them and leaving them on the floor.

"Pick up your shorts and shoes and put them in this box."

Robert looked in the box in the CO's



hands. It contained his wallet, his eyeglass case, some books. The small number of items he had had with him in County. He grimaced as he wadded up the two-day-old boxers and added them to his personal effects, then placed his shoes on top of the pile.

“Bend over and spread your buttocks.”

Robert didn't move. This could not be happening. The CO who had taken his jumpsuit pushed down on his upper back. “We need to confirm that there is no contraband in your buttock cheeks. Bend over and spread.”

There was nothing to do but comply, so Robert bent over and did as he was told. After a moment the CO yanked him

upright and shoved a yellow jumpsuit at him.

“Follow me.”

They went through the opposite door into a large cement room. It was crowded with inmates, most naked. Some were standing in the middle of the room and some were showering. The room's floor sloped down to a large drain at the center. Shower spigots poked out at intervals along the walls. Yellow jumpsuits dangled from a series of hooks near the door.

The CO gestured towards the hooks “Put your suit there.” As he spoke the CO grabbed a gray plastic bottle and a pair of shower slippers from a shelf above the hooks.

“This goes wherever you have hair. Everywhere you have hair. After you apply it you will stand still so it can do its work. I’ll tell you when your time is up. At that time you are free to shower and put your jumpsuit on. Shower shoes are provided for your use until you receive your prison-issued clothing. They must be returned when you receive your clothes. If you wish to have shower shoes for your stay you will need to purchase them at the commissary.”

Robert held his hand out for the bottle and shower slippers. He dropped the shoes and slid his feet into them and then looked around, wishing for a private spot. He opened the bottle and poured some of the liquid into his hand and

slapped it on his head. It felt a little cold and he couldn't believe he had to put it on his balls, but there didn't seem to be any way around it. He kept his head down and concentrated on the task. He filled his hand again and reached down to spread it on his crotch. He felt his balls shrivel and draw up in response to the frigid liquid.

As he stood there, one of the other inmates slammed into him from behind. The sound and feel of wet skin on wet skin made him a little queasy. He turned around to confront the offender, a young guy, looked like a punk. He held his hands up as if to say "sorry," but his face belied his apology. His face said he liked messing with the old guy.

Robert turned to face him. He got as close to the punk as possible without actually touching him and muttered, “You want a piece of me, you little shit? Go ahead.”

The punk put his hands down and for a moment the two men stared at each other. Robert looked over the punk’s shoulder to see the CO watching with interest. He dropped his gaze back to the punk and tried to stare him down. Finally the punk turned away. “I don’t wanna fight an old guy; wouldn’t be fair.” The kid busied himself with his jumpsuit. Robert risked a look around the group and got blank stares in return.

“Lewis! Time’s up. Shower!”

Robert got as clean as he could under

the showerhead's trickle of tepid water. There were dispensers on the walls, but only one appeared to have soap and it was on the other side of a very angry-looking, very large guy. Robert did the best he could with the trickle, then retrieved his jumpsuit from the hook. He didn't see any towels, so he did what the other inmates were doing — dried himself off with his jumpsuit then put it on and stepped back into his shower shoes

The CO led him out of the shower room to an alcove off the main hall. They stopped in front of short, barrel-chested guy guarding a storeroom. Behind him were shelves stacked with tan twill clothing. The guy looked him up

and down, muttered “large,” and turned to pull items from the shelves behind him. He stacked the items on the counter as he went, then slapped down a sheet of paper. He ran down the sheet making marks, and shoved the sheet and his pencil across the counter to Robert.

“You are being issued the following items for your stay here. You will be required to turn them in at the end of your stay. You have been issued: three shirts, three pants, five pairs shorts, five pairs socks, one pair black shoes, one thermal top, one thermal bottom, one pair gloves, one heavy jacket, two washcloths, two towels, and one drawstring laundry bag. Please sign the form to indicate you have received these

items and then remove your shower slippers and throw them into the bin to your right.”

Robert eyeballed the stack, hoping the count was accurate. The CO was fidgeting behind him already so there was no time to inventory his new wardrobe. Besides, he was so cold that the rough woven pants and shirt and dingy thermal set looked pretty appealing. He signed his name at the bottom of the form.

He loosened the laces on his new prison-issue black oxfords and dropped them to the floor. He removed the shower shoes and tossed them into the bin and stepped into the shoes. Next he picked up the laundry bag and began to



stuff the remaining items in. He had about half of his things in the bag when the CO shoved him. He lost his balance and fell forward into the stack on the counter, knocking the clothes to the floor. He bent down to pick the items up, scrambling to get them into the bag and keep them off the floor, but the CO pushed him forward. He had no choice but to quickly bundle the rest into his arms.

The CO led him to another room. This one looked a little bit like a hospital waiting room, if the hospital were in the outer reaches of the former Soviet Union. The floor was cement and the walls were painted a nauseous green. Plastic stackable chairs lined the

perimeter. Almost all of the chairs were occupied by inmates dressed in jumpsuits and holding laundry bags. The CO let go of his arm and barked, "Stay here and wait for your bed assignment."

He disappeared for a moment, then came back with a box Robert recognized from his intake: his personal possessions. The CO shoved it in his general direction. Robert reached for it, catching it before it fell on the floor, but this made him drop the armload of clothes. The CO was already halfway to the door as Robert squatted down. He placed the box on the floor and stuffed the rest of the clothes into the laundry bag, shuddering as his fingertips and nails scraped the filthy floor. He tucked

his box under his arm, slung his laundry bag over his shoulder, and found a place on the floor to sit and wait.

Finally a burly CO called his name. He didn't know how long he'd been there but his knees screamed in protest as he stood. He picked up the box and his laundry bag, then made his way across the room to the CO.

“Follow me.”

Robert fell into step as the CO led him back to the hallway. They passed the clothing storeroom and the shower room and continued to the far end of the hall and through a door leading to a covered walkway.

They came to the end of the walkway and stopped in front of another door. The

CO spoke into his radio. After a moment Robert heard clanking and the door swung open to reveal a hallway and another CO who gestured Robert and Burly through, then fell into step behind them. They stopped suddenly in front of one of the windowless doors that lined the hallway.

Burly punched a code into a panel under the door handle and Robert heard a click as the CO swung the door open.

“Get in.”

Robert crossed the threshold into a small cement room, about ten feet by eight feet. A metal bed and sink/toilet were attached to the far wall. A showerhead protruded from the corner nearest the door. There was a small

window on the far wall over the bed.

So this was his cell. He had heard that they bunked inmates together, but apparently not.

Burly cleared his throat: “Welcome to the Hole. You will be here until we have processed your paperwork and assigned you a bed in the main facility. You will receive three meals a day and one hour of exercise each day. You are permitted to keep your personal effects but if you don’t maintain a tidy cell your items will be confiscated. We will keep your clothes until you receive your cell assignment.”

With that the other CO picked up Robert’s laundry bag and he and Burly stepped back over the threshold and

pushed the door closed. Robert heard the lock cylinders click as the officers receded in the direction of the main facility.

He picked up his box and took out a book, then pushed the box under the bed. He might as well settle in to read. He lay down on the bed and tried to get comfortable, but the slats dug into his hips through the mattress. There was no pillow. He squirmed for a few minutes and finally settled in on his side, with the mangy blanket folded and stuffed under his head. He tried to read but it was hard with all the noise. Nearby a man screamed gibberish. Toilets flushed at regular intervals.

On Nelson's advice he had not

included his Tag Heuer in his personal effects since it would have surely been pilfered. Now he wished he had bought a drugstore watch to bring with him. He had no idea what time it was. He could still see light through the window, but it had dimmed. He didn't know if it was waning daylight or the nighttime floodlights. Time had expanded and contracted all day and he had lost objective sense of it.

Whenever he was alone, memories of a motherless little brown-haired boy pushed in. They came now, but he pushed them back out. He refused to dwell; what's done was done. He would do his penance and he would get out and his life would go on.





## 16.

Robert heard noise from the hallway. He had been in The Hole for three days and knew the drill. He positioned himself near the door to catch his meal tray. The first time he hadn't caught it and it had landed on the floor. Even though it was wrapped in plastic, he was revolted at the idea of his dinner touching the cell floor.

But this time a voice on the other side said, “Put your back to the door, put your hands behind your back and through the slot.”

Robert bent a little at the knees to line his hands up with the opening. He poked them through the slot and felt the cold metal of cuffs snapping around his wrists.

“Take your hands out of the slot and stand clear of the door.”

Robert complied. He heard the beep-beep of the digital lock as the door opened. The CO took the few steps across Robert’s cell and picked up his box. Hoisting it in front of him he nodded towards the door.

“Come with me.”

Robert started to ask where they were going, but thought better of it. The CO had looked right through him and except for the fact that he had just cuffed him, didn't seem to know he was there.

Back they went, out to the walkway. When they got back into the main building, the CO steered him to one of the hallways that radiated from the corners of the common room. They passed a few cells, then stopped in front of an open door marked S3-11. He set Robert's box down then reached behind him and unlocked his handcuffs.

"This is the South Wing. You're in block three, cell eleven."

The CO left. Robert picked up his box, stepped into the cell and then pulled

up short. A young man lay on the lower bunk. He peered forward and saw that the guy was asleep. He moved his box to the foot of the bunk beds and looked for a way to climb up to the top bunk. His cellmate sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“Sup?”

“Nothing much. I just got here. I’m Robert, by the way.” Robert stuck out his hand.

The other guy took his hand and gave it a quick shake, but didn’t get up. “Tony. Mainline’s in about fifteen minutes.”

Robert wanted to ask what mainline was, but he didn’t want to look stupid, especially in front of a young punk like this guy. But apparently his ignorance

showed.

“Mainline is chow hall. They take block one first, then two. And so on. We have to wait our turn. You look soft. This your first time?”

“Yes, it’s my first time.”

“Where you from?”

“Originally Northwest Indiana. You ever hear of Gary? My dad was a shop foreman at one of the steel mills. Bethlehem.”

“Oh, yeah. I know Gary. Michael Jackson’s from Gary. All the brothas know about Gary. How’d you wind up in Massachusetts?”

“My father didn’t want his kids working in the mills. I went to college, then came out to Boston to work in

finance.”

“Whooo whee! You’re a smart sonofabitch. I bet you’re rich too. I’m gonna call you Professor. You okay with that, Professor?” Robert nodded his assent. Like there would be any point in objecting.

He was opening his mouth to ask Tony where he was from when a buzzer sounded. Suddenly animated, Tony got up and headed out of the cell. Robert fell into step behind him. He smelled the cafeteria before he saw it, and almost gagged, but he stayed in step. They entered a large room. He could see a food line on the opposite wall. Between the entrance and the food line were rows and rows of tables with attached stools.

Most seats were taken. The few remaining empty tables were filling up as the denizens of Block Three made their way through the line.

When he got to the line Robert took a tray and watched to see what Tony did. Tony held his tray out at intervals and waited while the attendants ladled out glop. It all looked disgusting, but Robert was pretty sure he recognized chicken, so he held his tray out for some. He also saw something that looked like applesauce so he chanced that. Bread was next — he figured they couldn't mess up bread too badly so he got a slice. A bin of tiny apples finished out the line. He held his tray out again and the attendant dropped one onto it. He

missed his housekeeper and her chocolate cakes and steak dinners.

As they exited the food line he started to follow Tony, but suddenly his cellmate turned to face him. “Hey man, don’t take this personal, but you can’t sit with me. I bring a white guy over, my homies’ll kill me. You gotta find your own table.”

Tony turned back abruptly and kept moving across the chow hall. Robert saw him set his tray down at a table full of other black guys. He turned for a moment and met Robert’s eyes, then inclined his head slightly to the left, indicating a half-empty table populated by white guys, including the punk who had bumped Robert in the shower on his



first day.

Robert looked around for another place to sit, but they had been near the back of the Block Three line and by the time he'd finished getting his food and dithering about where to sit, most of the tables had filled up. He made his way over to the white guy table. He saw a seat at the end opposite where his shower nemesis was sitting, so he took it. He ate in silence, not looking up from his tray. He just wanted to get the awful food down so he could get out of there. As he shoveled it in, he felt the table jiggle. Shower Guy was getting up.

“Hey, old guy. I’m leaving. You want my apple?”

Robert risked a glance in his direction

and saw that the punk was looking at him and holding out an apple. He didn't want to take it, sure that it was a trick of some kind. Jesus fucking Christ. How was a person supposed to navigate all this crap? Was this a test? It seemed like a prison-etiquette land mine. What if he didn't take it and the guy took that as an insult and then beat him up for it later?

The apple on his own tray seemed to offer an out. Robert pointed to it and shook his head. "I already have one." This seemed safe, and apparently it was an acceptable response because Shower Guy set his apple back down, picked his tray up and left the table. The others had been watching silently but now they all returned their attention to their food.

When Robert got back to his cell Tony was already there, lying on his bunk. A laundry bag sat on Robert's bunk.

"Your clothes came in while you were gone."

"I see, thanks."

"You going to leave that box there?"

Robert looked down at the box stashed at the end of the bunk. "I, ah, I was going to ..."

"You wanna keep it under my rack?"

"Sure. Thanks."

"It'll cost you."

Robert suppressed a sigh. He should have known there would be a catch.

"Ah, okay, what do you want?"

"You're a rich guy. I bet you get the

max commissary draw. Tell you what. I like me some Three Musketeers bars. You bring me one every day and you can put your stuff under my bunk.”

Robert thought quickly. One candy bar a day; more than ten bucks a week. Almost ten percent of his commissary draw just to put a box under a piece of furniture. Maybe Tony was testing to see if he was a patsy. But if he said a flat no, Tony would probably resent him every time he thought about the Three Musketeers bars he didn't have.

“One a day? That's pretty steep for just a couple square feet of real estate. How about one a week?”

Tony sat up. He let out a short laugh. “You're shittin' me. Three a week or no

deal. Your books are going to look pretty stupid layin' in the toilet bowl, Professor.”

“Okay. Deal.”

“I knew you’d see it my way. I am known to be very persuasive.” With this Tony lay back down and pulled on his headphones, directing his gaze to the bottom of Robert’s bunk. Robert waited a moment to see if he had anything more to say, but it appeared that as far as Tony was concerned, Robert no longer existed.

He unpacked his laundry bag, stashing the clothes in his locker and putting the socks, underwear and hat in the box. He shoved the box under the bed and tucked the laundry bag into his locker. Now

what? He climbed up onto his bunk and lay back, lacing his fingers behind his head. He stared at the ceiling. Nothing to do but wait.

17.

August 1987 — Plainview,  
Massachusetts

Mary thought this day would never come: finally, she was heading off to college. After her last fight with her father, she had moved in with Kate's family. She had worked a summer job,

staffing the counter at a chicken restaurant. It was kind of fun, once you got past the constant smell of chicken and chicken parts, and she went to some good parties with her coworkers. But now summer was winding down and she wanted to get on to the next thing.

Her stuff was all packed and stacked up in her old room. She would go over there after breakfast and help her mom load the car. Her father was away for the weekend (no surprise there — she was pretty sure he was seeing other women), and her mom was going to drive her to Ohio. Kate was leaving today too, but she was going to UCLA and would be flying out.

Her mother knocked on the back door



just as she and Kate were finishing breakfast. “So, are you ready to pack up the car? Are you excited?”

“Oh my god. I am so excited I could hardly sleep last night! I just wish the drive wasn’t so long.”

“Oh, come on Mary, we’ll make it fun. Road trip!”

Mary grimaced. She wished her mom wouldn’t try to act like they were buddies. Her mom was better than her dad, but they weren’t close like Kate and her mom. She said, “I guess we should get over there and get the car packed. He’s gone, right?”

Mary’s mom sighed. “Yes, he is. Mary, I really wish you would reconsider. He’s sorry for what he did. I

can't believe you're leaving without saying goodbye."

"I think if he was sorry, he would have come over and told me so. I've been just down the street. Anyway, good riddance. I've been wanting to get away from him for a long time."

Mary's mother grimaced, but she didn't say anything. Kate had disappeared. Mary found her upstairs getting dressed and stuffing her pajamas into her carryon bag.

"What time do you leave today?" Mary asked.

"Not until noon. You know, I gain three hours going there, so I won't get in too late. I can't believe we're going to college."

“Yeah, I’m really excited. I’m going to miss you but college is going to be great. I better go help my mom load the car, but I’ll come back and say goodbye for real before I go. I need to give your mom and dad a big hug for sure.”

By the time they were ready to go it was almost noon. Mary’s mom drove the sagging car down the street and parked in front of the Carlson’s so Mary could say goodbye. Kate was in the living room when they walked in, but quickly jumped up and stretched out her arms to hug Mary.

“Oh, Mary, I’m going to miss you so much. Promise to write. And call. I’ll call too. As soon as I know my phone

number I'll call and give it to my mom, so you can get it from her."

"Same here. I can't believe we're going to be so far from each other. But we'll always be friends."

Mary felt a hitch in her throat. When she pulled away she saw that Kate was crying too. They hugged once more, then Mary hugged Kate's mom and dad. Then it was time to go.

Her mom drove them through town on the main drag, then, just past the town limits, she pulled over and let Mary take over driving. Mary loved to drive. Her father never wanted her to have the car, but usually when he was out of town her mom would let her take it out. She and Kate would go to neighboring towns,

just for the sense of freedom. That's what driving felt like to Mary: freedom. A wide-open road in front of her. Endless possibilities. Endless hope. The beginning of college felt like that too.

They drove until dinnertime, then started looking for a place to spend the night. Mary's mother didn't want her driving past dark and they would have plenty of time to get to campus tomorrow. Mary saw a sign for a Comfort Inn at the next exit and pulled off.

They had dinner at the Denny's near the motel and then sat up and watched TV for a little while, but Mary was seeing spots from all the time on the

road, and she felt her eyelids getting droopy. She clicked off her bedside light and tossed and turned until she got comfortable. Her mom kept the TV on for a few more minutes, but then she clicked it off and climbed into bed.

“Mary?”

“Ymmes?”

“I’m sorry, were you almost asleep? I just wanted to talk to you about your father. He called while you were still over at Kate’s. He said he wished he could have said goodbye.”

Mary sat up and clicked on her light. She couldn’t believe they were still talking about this. “Mom. We have been over this. I don’t want to see him. I have waited for this day for years. And

anyway, if he really wanted to see me, why did he take off this weekend? Where did he go, anyway?" Mary felt a twinge of guilt at this last part. She was twisting the knife and she knew it. She was pretty sure her father was off seeing another woman — and she was pretty sure her mom knew but didn't want to know.

"Never mind, Mary. I just thought it would be nice if you could get along a little better with your father. And I think you might live to regret how you have behaved for these past few months. Missing your graduation, refusing to speak to your father. You'll look back and wish you had done things differently."

“Oh my god! I can’t believe you can’t see my side of this. He HIT me. I needed to move out. How can you not understand that? As for my graduation, sorry, but it didn’t seem that important. I got into college. I’m going to college now. That’s my real life.”

She reached over and snapped off her light again.

“Goodnight Mom.”

“Goodnight Mary. I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

The next morning dawned clear and hot. Mary was still feeling snippy towards her mom, but at least they had good driving weather. The Honda ate up the miles; they made it to Oberlin by 2



p.m.

As they pulled up in front of the residence hall a girl came down the steps, wild black curls bouncing as she ran. She was wearing a cobalt blue boatneck sweater with ripped jeans and granny boots. A giant gold cuff encircled her left wrist. She somehow managed to look super-stylish and like she had just thrown something on, all at the same time.

“Oh my god, you drove? Are you Mary? From Massachusetts? You drove? From Massachusetts?”

“Um.”

“I’m sorry. I’m Sandra. This must be your mom. Hi, I’m Sandra. I’m a freshman too.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Mary was out of the car now, and Sandra was giving her the once-over. Suddenly Mary felt self-conscious. She had thought her red Forenza sweater and dark gray cargo pants were cool, but this girl looked like she shopped at Benetton.

“So, you guys drove all the way over from Massachusetts. I’m from New York. Harlem. I flew and Daddy had my things shipped.”

“Oh, well, we came in the car.”  
Dammit! She sounded so lame.

Her mom jumped in. “I wanted to do a road trip with my daughter while I still could. It was fun driving here with her.”

“Oh, well, yeah, that’s cool and all. Let me get some of the guys to help carry

your stuff up. Girl, you got a lot of stuff!”

Sandra turned to go inside, then turned back and beckoned Mary and her mom to follow her. Just as they got to the top of the steps the door opened again and another girl came out. She had dark blonde hair cut in a classic pageboy. She was also well-dressed, but her clothes were more preppy than Sandra’s. She was wearing a knee-length khaki skirt, boat shoes, and a blue oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Small gold hoops gleamed on her earlobes.

“Hi, I’m Penny. You must be Mary. I see you’ve already met the unofficial welcoming committee. I’m the official welcoming committee — well, me and

Dale, but he's helping with the guys. Let's go find your room. Do you need help bringing stuff in?"

Sandra cut in. "Yep, I'm going to go get some of the guys to give us a hand. Mary, I'll have them bring your stuff to the lobby until we know your room number."

Mary followed Penny to the front desk. Behind it sat a stern-looking woman with brown and gray hair and glasses hanging from a chain around her neck.

"This is Mary," Penny said. "She just arrived. Can she get her room number and packet?"

"Yes. Mary, welcome. I am Mrs. Frankheim. I'm the dorm manager. We'll

help you get settled in in a jiffy.”

Mary looked around and realized she had lost track of her mom. She went back out to the lobby. There was already a stack of her boxes on the floor, and a cute guy bringing in several more stacked in his arms. He set the boxes down and straightened up to look at her. His face broke into a grin.

“Hi, I’m Rob. Who are you?”

“Hi, I’m Mary. I’m from Massachusetts.”

“Ah, yes, we were wondering when you would arrive. You’ll like this dorm. I lived here for two years. I’ve been off campus since my junior year, but I have fond memories of this place and, as you can see, I visit.”

Mary liked him. He seemed young, but he said he lived off-campus, which made him seem mature. Mary hoped she looked good in her sweater. She was glad she had taken the extra time to style her hair that morning.

Together Mary and her new dorm mates got her boxes of stuff stacked in her room. She would unpack tomorrow after orientation. Her mom had helped with the boxes and now hovered near the door to Mary's new room. She had a room at a motel near campus and would get on the road tomorrow morning for the drive back. Mary flashed on a picture of her mom, arriving home, unlocking the front door, sitting in the

living room alone.

“Mom, do you want to go get dinner?”

“Oh, honey, I don’t know. You might want to settle in with your new friends.”

“There’ll be time for that. Let’s go find a Big Boy.”

18.

October 1987 – Oberlin, Ohio

It was Sunday morning, just after midterms. Mary had aced everything but French, and she was in a mood to celebrate. She grabbed her dining card and went down the hall to fetch Sandra. It took Sandra a few moments to answer



her door and when she finally appeared she was still in her pajamas.

“C’mon! Aren’t you hungry?”

Sandra yawned and stepped back to let Mary into her room. “Yeah, I’m starving. I can’t believe I slept this late, but last week was brutal. Give me a minute.”

Mary plopped down while Sandra rummaged for something to wear. Finally she was ready. They crossed the courtyard to the dining hall. The week must have been hard for many because there was barely a line. Mary ordered a spinach and feta omelet and grabbed a chocolate croissant from the line. Sandra got a Denver omelet and a chocolate croissant for herself. They got a table

near the window and sat down to tuck in.

Mary was halfway through her omelet when Sandra put her fork down and grew silent.

“You okay?”

“Yes, it’s just ...”

“What’s up? Do you want to talk about something?”

“Yes. Look, Mary, I’m worried about you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I’m worried about you.”

“Why?”

“Did you go out last night, again?”

“Yeah. Why? What about it?”

“Rob called you, didn’t he? And you just ran right over when he called. He’s using you.”

Mary set her coffee down. She felt her face getting hot. “It’s not like that with Rob. You don’t understand.”

“Okay, answer me this. How many times have you gone out to dinner with him? Or lunch, or even out for coffee?”

“Last time I was there he had fish and chips and he shared them with me.”

Sandra rolled her eyes and reached up to flick an errant lock of hair out of her eyes.

“Oh my God Mary, do you realize how pathetic you sound? He calls and you zip right over there. It’s really hard to watch. Don’t you think it would be nice to be taken out? Look. Justin has this friend, Chris. He’s really nice. He’s a year ahead of us, a biology major. We

should all go out next weekend. You need to play the field. There are nice guys out there. I don't know why you insist on being used by this loser."

"That's not how it is at all! He's not using me. It's just ..."

"What? It's just what?"

"I ... Never mind. Are you ready to head out?"

As they gathered up their jackets and carried their trays to the window, Mary thought about what she could not say. When she was in bed with Rob, under the covers with his arm thrown over her, she felt safe. She felt loved. For those brief moments, she felt like she was finally on the inside, instead of on the outside, looking in.



## 19.

Mary had just locked her bike up outside the science building when a voice behind her made her pause.

“Nice bike. What kind is it?”

She turned around and almost bumped into a really cute guy standing almost directly behind her. He had green, green eyes and curly brown hair. He looked

older. He wore a soft-looking yellow oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled up about halfway to his elbows, and faded Levis. She noticed his arms were hairy, but not too hairy. Tanned. Nice. Mr. Cute gestured to her bike, "It's cool. What kind is it?"

"It's a Raleigh. It's an English brand."

"That's quite a paint job."

Mary looked down at the bike. She was proud of the paint job.

"Yeah, I did it myself. I got it at a police auction and rebuilt it. I never could have afforded such a nice bike otherwise."

He nodded. "Gorgeous and smart. I like it. You headed to class?"

"Yes. Human Development."

“When do you get out?”

“In fifty minutes.”

“If I come back in fifty minutes, will you have lunch with me?”

Mary hesitated. She thought about Rob. But Sandra was right, they weren't really dating. This guy was better looking. And older. Quite a bit older — like the man she dreamed about.

“Um, okay. Thanks.”

“I'll see you in fifty minutes then. Oh, and by the way, my name is Jack. Jack Cosgood.”

“Mary.”

Mary couldn't really focus on class; she was too excited about her lunch date. Maybe Jack would be the man she was looking for. She kind of knew that Rob



was really bad for her, only marginally better than being alone. She would rather have a mature man, someone who would give her the kind of relationship she'd always wanted. Jack was older, and handsome. Maybe he was the one.

After class he was there as promised, leaning against a tree. He looked so cool and relaxed that she didn't know how to act around him. What if she seemed too young? He took her elbow and steered her towards the street. They headed west. Most of the restaurants were to the south of campus, so she wondered where he meant for them to eat, but she didn't ask. She didn't want to seem unsophisticated.

They walked about ten blocks. The

whole way, whenever they needed to turn onto another street, he placed his hand on her elbow, guiding her. She liked this. She couldn't imagine one of the boys in her classes acting so confident, taking charge. They started climbing away from campus. She struggled to keep up with his long strides, but finally they reached the top of the hill.

He went up the walk to a one-and-a-half story brown brick bungalow. There were geraniums and impatiens, like she and her mom used to plant, in flowerbeds by the porch. Jack pulled a key out of his coat pocket as she followed him up the sidewalk and front steps. The porch looked like somewhere

you might spend a summer evening, with a swing hanging from chains and two white Adirondack chairs with a small table between them.

He pushed open the door and gestured for her to go ahead of him. Mary faltered. She hadn't realized he meant for them to have lunch at his house. What if he was a rapist or something? But then she looked up into those green eyes and realized this was just like her daydream. A handsome older man, taking care of her. She would be safe.

“Kick off your shoes. Make yourself at home. I'll throw together a salad Nicoise. That okay with you?”

Mary felt her eyes grow round. Salad Nicoise! Like they had at the French

restaurant senior year. It was another thing just like her daydream about the amazing man she would meet, who would take her to a French restaurant. It wasn't quite a French restaurant, but he knew how to make French food — it was almost the same. She nodded, then chose an overstuffed chair and sat down to wait.

He disappeared into the back of the house. She stood up and walked over to look at his bookshelves. He had a lot of books. Current fiction. Sociology. Philosophy. Books with foreign titles. She could hear the refrigerator opening and closing, the sound of something being whisked in a ceramic bowl. After a few minutes he poked his head into the

living room and gave her the once-over.

“Hey, why so stiff? Kick off your shoes. Get comfortable. When I come back out here I want to see you in that chair with your shoes off and your feet up.”

Mary put her shoes on the little mat by the door and returned to her chair, this time sinking back into it and putting her feet up on the matching footstool. Some of her friends had apartments, but they weren't like this place. He had real furniture, stuff that matched instead of stuff that looked like someone's garage sale rejects.

Jack reappeared. “That's more like it. Good girl. Now, would you like to eat inside or out on the deck?”

“It’s a little cold for the deck.”

“Nonsense, I have a propane heater. You’ve got to see the deck; the view is amazing.”

Mary got up and followed him through the kitchen and out the back door. He was right — the view was beautiful. From the top of the hill the vista stretched for miles. It was a clear day and the leaves were in their full autumn glory. He fired up the propane heater and dragged it over to the table.

He dished the salad into two shallow bowls and uncorked a bottle of white wine. Mary didn’t really know much about wine, but it all felt very sophisticated, sitting on this beautiful deck with this gorgeous guy, eating

French salad and drinking wine that was also probably French.

Normally she was good at small talk, but she didn't want to sound stupid, so she mostly listened while he talked. He had been to France, and Spain, and most of Western Europe. He could speak French and Spanish and even a little Italian. Mary couldn't believe it; he was so much like the man she had dreamed of meeting.

“But Europe is over. I don't even go there anymore; I go to South America. Curitiba, Quito, Rio. Those cities haven't been destroyed by tourists yet; they still have soul. How about you? Have you traveled much?”

“Well, no. Not yet. I want to though.

Maybe after I graduate.”

“Maybe I’ll take you sometime. I try to get out of this godforsaken pit at least twice a year.”

Mary didn’t say anything; she just took a long sip of wine and looked out over the blazing hills that rolled off to the horizon.

Of course he seduced her, if you could call it that. It didn’t take much. By the time they finished the salad, she’d drunk two glasses of wine and started a third. When he wiped his mouth, cast his napkin onto the table, stood up and reached for her hand, she knew she wanted him.

They stayed in bed until 8 p.m., when



she started to get hungry.

“Stay here, I’ll make us something to eat.”

She dozed a bit but came back to life when he returned with a plate of salmon and asparagus. He fed her bits of salmon while she stroked him into a frenzy that made him finally shove the plates of food aside to go at her again. At eleven she said she should go home, but he persuaded her to stay the night, promising to make sure she got up in time for class in the morning.

After a few weeks of days on campus and nights at his house, he asked her to move in with him.

“I have a room at the dorm. I can’t just give it up. We have to live in the dorm

first year.”

“But we’re so happy together. We’re together all the time anyway; why not live together? Think about it — waking up together every morning. I’ll cook for you so you can focus on your studies. It will be almost like being married.”

“It’s just...”

“It’s just what?”

“It seems so wasteful to have a room there and not use it.”

“But if I pay for everything here, why does it matter?”

“Well ...”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll help you. I’ll pick you up after class tomorrow and we’ll go get your things.”

Mary caught up with Sandra at the dining hall, between morning and afternoon classes. She hadn't seen her in a while and realized she missed her. She'd been eager to tell her about Jack. Finally she had the sort of relationship she had dreamed about. Jack didn't call her just for sex. He treated her like a precious treasure, cooking for her, making sure she got to class on time, helping her pick out her clothes in the morning. Jack told her she was beautiful. She thought her jaw was too square, and she wished she had narrow hips like a model's but Jack treated her like the most beautiful woman in the world.

"You're what?" Sandra raised her lush brows so high they nearly touched

her hairline.

“I’m moving in with him. Aren’t you happy for me? You were the one who kept telling me to find a guy who respects me. Jack really respects me. You should see how he treats me. And he’s in love with me.”

“I’m not saying I’m not happy for you. It’s just so soon. When did you meet him?”

“A few weeks ago. I met him on campus. Oh Sandra. He’s so mature! He has his own house. He cooks these amazing meals. And the sex ...”

“And you say you’re in love with him?”

“Of course. Of course I’m in love. We just click. It’s wonderful. It’s what I’ve

always wanted.”

20.

“So, Sandy – it is Sandy, right? What are you majoring in?”

“It’s Sandra. I’m majoring in Romance languages and literature.”

Jack snorted. “Really? Dead languages and dying cultures? Good luck with that.”

Sandra blinked rapidly. “What do you

mean? If I stay on the academic track I can become a professor.”

“Sure, if you can beat out all the other starry-eyed French poets. I’m telling you, European culture is dead. It’s all been co-opted by rubes and Americans. Latin culture is where it’s at. It’s still vibrant.”

Mary squirmed. She had invited Sandra over to dinner so she could get to know Jack and see how wonderful he was, but she hadn’t realized that to Jack, someone like Sandra would seem childish and naïve. She sat forward.

“Sandra, Jack has traveled all over the place. He’s been to Brazil, Venezuela, Chile.”

“Don’t forget Ecuador. I love

Ecuador.”

“Oh really?” Sandra asked. “So, which cities have you been to in Ecuador?”

“Quito mostly. Have you been to Quito, Sandy? It’s amazing. I spent several summers there. It’s so much better to really live in a city for a few months, with the locals, away from the tourist crap.”

Mary sneaked a glance at Sandra, who was listening silently. She relaxed. Jack was so smart and interesting; she was glad Sandra was able to see that. Dinner was going to be okay.

Jack insisted that they walk Sandra back to the dorm after dinner. On the



way home they held hands, walking fast against the biting wind. As soon as they walked in the door, Jack threw his arms around Mary, coats and all, and pulled her in for a bear hug.

“Babe, that was a great dinner. I was so proud of you. You’ve learned a lot about cooking since you moved in with me. Wasn’t it fun to cook together for your friend?”

“Yes, it was nice. It’s fun to have people ov—”

Jack’s mouth on hers cut off the end of her sentence. His hands snaked up under her jacket, seeking out her breasts. “Mmm, you’re so warm under your clothes. Let’s get you out of them. I love you so much.” He pulled his hands out

from under her clothes and led her upstairs to bed.

## 21.

Mary took out her day planner and sat down next to the phone in the living room and dialed the first number on her list. As she waited for Kate to pick up, she held her left hand out in front of her, palm out, admiring the square-cut diamond on her ring finger.

She felt a little guilty calling Kate out

of the blue. She had really meant to keep in touch once they started college. She missed Kate, but it was hard to find times to call her when they were three time zones apart. They had written back and forth a few times, but with schoolwork it was hard to keep up with extraneous writing.

Kate answered on the fourth ring. Mary took a breath.

“Hi, Kate, it’s me. Sorry it’s been so long since I’ve called.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I can hardly complain. I can’t believe how much work they give us in college.”

“Well, how are you?”

“I’m fine. As hard as it is I am really enjoying my classes. And I love

California. How are things with you? How are things with that new guy you told me about — was it Jack?”

“Yes, Jack. Actually that’s kind of what I’m calling about. I have some news. Jack and I are getting married.”

“Oh! Wow. That’s ... big news. When did you decide?”

“Over the weekend. I think it will be really good for us. I wanted to ask you if you’ll be my maid of honor. We’re still figuring out a date, but Jack thinks it will be late summer.”

“Wow. Um, yes, I can do that. Where will the ceremony be held?”

“We’re going to hold it here. You know I don’t really have any attachment to home and Jack’s family is all

scattered.”

“Okay, well, as soon as you know the date, let me know.”

“Okay, will do. Thank you so much. This is going to be really great. I would love to catch up with you, but I have to go — lots of calls to make!”

“Okay. Sweetie.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Next she dialed Sandra’s number. Sandra picked up on the third ring.

“Hey, it’s Mary. I have some news for you, and a request.”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“First the news. Jack and I are getting married!”

“Oh!”

“So I wanted to ask if you’ll be one of my bridesmaids. I’m going to have my friend Kate from back home be my maid of honor, but I really hope you will be in the wedding. You’re such an important friend to me.”

There was a pause. “Mary, this is all so sudden. Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. I thought you’d be happy for me.”

“Look ... if you’re sure this is what you want, I will support you. I’m just not sure I like this. I mean, you guys barely know each other. You only started dating a couple of months ag-”

“Jack said that if we’re really in love, there’s no reason to wait. He thinks that long engagements are bourgeois.”

“But, but ...”

“And besides, you don’t know what it’s like with Jack. He’s so attentive. He takes care of me. Can’t you be happy for me that I finally found someone who loves me?”

Sandra sighed. “Well, I wish you’d wait. I don’t know what the rush is. But, if you’re sure this is what you want then yes, I will be in your wedding.”

“Thank you! It’s going to be so great. We don’t know the exact date yet, but Jack thinks it will be in the late summer.”

Her calls for the afternoon done, Mary closed her day planner. Everything was falling into place. She had just stood up



to go downstairs and make some lunch when the phone rang. She wasn't expecting a call, but her mom and some of her friends had this number so she picked up.

“Mary, hi, it's Kate again.”

Mary sat down. “Oh, hi. What's up?”

“Mary, look, I've been thinking about you a lot lately. For some reason you're on my mind a lot. Then you called and said you're getting married to this guy you haven't known very long. I don't know what my point is exactly, but I had to call back and tell you: I don't like it.”

Mary felt herself stiffen a little. She shifted her position and switched the phone to her other ear. “What do you mean you don't like it?”

“Just that. This guy is a lot older. You don’t really even know him. Mary, I was there when you were growing up. I know how messed up your father was. Do you think maybe ... ?

“What, you think Jack is my dad? That’s crazy. Remember when we used to talk about what it would be like to find the perfect guy? Well, with Jack, it just clicks. All of the things I used to dream about, they’re there with him. Can’t you be happy for me?”

“I want to be happy for you, but oh my God, Mary, it’s just weird. You meet this mysterious guy on campus and the next thing I know you’re living with him and planning a wedding. Don’t you want to be a kid? ‘Cause I can guarantee you,

I am going to stretch out childhood for as long as I can.”

“Are you saying you won’t be in the wedding?”

“If you want me to be, of course I will. But it doesn’t sit right with me, so I thought I should say what I was thinking. You know me, I can’t keep anything back.”

“Well, thank you, I guess.”

“Will you think about what I said?”

Mary heard footsteps on the stairs. She hadn’t heard Jack come in. “Yes, thanks. I have to go now, though. I’ll try to call you over the weekend.”

Just then Jack appeared in the doorway. “Who’s on the phone?”

“It was just Kate, you know, my friend

from home.”

“What was that about the wedding?”

Mary hesitated. She didn't know how to explain her friends. To him they must seem very childish. “She just said she worries about our getting involved so quickly. It's okay; she's just worried about me, but I explained that it's all fine.”

“Is this the friend you want for your maid of honor?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you're going to have to call her back and tell her that's off. I'm not going to have some bitchy little friend undermining our wedding. You'll have to find someone else.”

“But ...”

“Just call her back. It will only take a moment.” Jack picked up the phone.

“What’s her number?”

“Jack ...”

“Don’t ‘Jack’ me. You are engaged to be my wife. Your first loyalty should be to me. We can get someone else to be your maid of honor. Maybe one of our friends. Someone who supports us. Now, what’s the number?”

Mary read it off to him. Jack punched in the number and handed the phone to Mary.

Mary took the receiver. She hoped Kate wouldn’t pick up, but after a few rings, there was Kate’s voice on the other end. “Kate, hi, ah, it’s Mary again.”

“Hi. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, look, there’s something I need to tell you.” She looked up at Jack. He nodded.

“Okay.”

“Jack says I have to find another maid of honor.”

“ ... ”

“Kate?”

“Yes. Is he there?”

“Yes, he’s here. But, I think he has a point. You don’t seem to really be on my side for this. I hope you’ll still come.”

“ ... ”

“Are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m still here. Mary, I ...”

Mary didn’t get a chance to hear what Kate was going to say. Jack took the

receiver out of her hand. “Kate, thanks, I think we have it handled. Maybe we’ll see you at the wedding.” He put the receiver back in the cradle. He gestured for Mary to make room for him in the oversized chair. She scooted over and he wedged in beside her, putting his arm around her shoulder and nuzzling her neck.

“I can’t stand it when people try to come between us. I love you so much.”

Mary snuggled into him. “I love you too. Our wedding is going to be so nice.”

“See, you don’t need your negative friends. Come on, let’s go to bed.”

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“Yes, but we can eat later. I want you

more than lunch.”

He stood up and reached for her hand. Mary took one last look at the phone, then got up and followed him.



22.

“Who’s your little friend?”

Mary started. She had just arrived home from her afternoon classes. It was dusk and Jack was sitting in the living room with the lights out. She could barely see him in the gloom.

“What?”

“Your friend. Who was the little friend you were talking to after your two

o'clock class?"

Two o'clock class. Mary stepped back through her afternoon. Biology.

"Oh, him. That's a guy from my biology class. He sits next to me. I missed class the other day, so I asked him for his notes."

"We'll get to the part about missing class in a minute. I want to know why you were talking to him. Aren't there young ladies in class who can give you notes?"

"Well, he sits next to me. And anyway, it's not like I like him. You're my boyfriend."

"I'm your boyfriend. How cute. You are engaged to me. I'm your fiancé."

"Sorry. Fiancé."

Mary crossed over to his chair and put her arm around his shoulders. She sat in his lap. He liked to put his hands up her skirt. She never used to wear skirts, but Jack had taken her shopping and bought her some skirts because he said only American women wore pants every day.

He put his arms around her and started to nuzzle her neck, then abruptly pushed her off and stood up.

“I’m not in the mood for this right now. I’m going out.”

“I thought we were going out to dinner later.”

“Why don’t you go out with your biology friend?”

“But ...”

Before she could say more he was gone, slamming the door behind him, hard. Mary watched it for a few moments, expecting him to come back through it, but it just stared back at her, obdurate. Tears pricked her eyelids. She wanted to run out the door and find him, but he would be too far away by now. She stood there for a few more minutes, trying not to cry. Maybe she should go out to the dining hall for dinner. But then she would miss him if he came back. Finally she curled up on the sofa and cried until she was dry and hiccupping.

What was going on? They had been so happy together, but now she couldn't do anything right. Last week he had gotten mad at her because he thought her history

paper wasn't good enough. Now he was mad at her for talking to a classmate. She didn't expect things to be like this. She loved him. He was always there for her. He took care of her and took her out. He respected her. She had thought being in love would be different. She thought that couples who were in love didn't fight, but lately she and Jack fought all the time.

He came back late that night and found her already in bed, asleep. He woke her up. "Baby, I'm sorry. I was such a jerk. It's just that I can't stand the thought of those pimply-faced boys looking at you. You're mine. We're engaged. I love you so much — you have no idea. You're going to be my wife. Maybe we should

just go away and get married. Maybe that will settle me down.”

Mary rolled over and faced him. He looked terrible and he smelled like he'd been drinking. She was glad he wasn't mad at her anymore, but she was too groggy to think of anything to say, so she just pulled back the covers so he could climb in next to her.

Later that week she found Sandra in the dining hall, grabbing a quick lunch between classes. It seemed like she never saw Sandra anymore except on Saturdays, unless she sought her out.

“Jack wants us to elope.”

“Really? When did this come up?” Sandra asked.

“The other night. We had a fight. He was jealous of some guy in bio. But then we made up. It worked out okay, but when he came home he said maybe we should just elope now, so he can quit being so jealous.”

“Well, this is all happening pretty fast. Do you want to elope?”

“Well ...”

Penny walked up and set her tray down. “What are you guys talking about? Is somebody going to elope?”

“Yeah, you know Jack, Mary’s boyfriend? He wants her to run away and get married.”

“Oh, that’s so romantic. He must really love you.”

Mary nodded. “Yeah, he does. He’s

really sweet. And he gets so jealous when he thinks he might lose me.”

“Awww. Sounds like you’re keeping him hooked. Nice,” Penny said.

Sandra grimaced. “No, not so nice. I don’t know that marriage is going to make him less jealous. It makes me nervous. I was watching this episode of ‘Oprah,’ and she said that jealousy is actually a bad sign.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “Pooh, what does Oprah know? She doesn’t even have a man, really.”

Mary glanced at her watch and started gathering up her jacket and bookbag. “Guys, I gotta head out. English Lit in ten.”

She walked out of the dining hall,



thinking about what it would be like to be Jack's wife. From beneath those thoughts other images pushed forth. An older Mary, in a black crepe suit, carrying a leather briefcase and click-clacking across a marble lobby. An older Mary, shimmying in a dance club with bodies sweating and writhing around her. An older Mary, walking through the streets of Paris, alone.

## 23.

The next morning Mary got up and threw on her sweats. She loved Saturdays; a leisurely brunch in the dining hall, a break from studying.

Normally Jack would stay home with his coffee and newspaper, but when she came downstairs he was fully dressed and sitting in the living room.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“I’m going with you.”

“But ...”

“No buts about it. I’m not going to have you prancing over there in your tight little sweatshirt for all those knuckle-dragging boys to drool over.”

“But ... I don’t have any guest cards and I’m not sure I can get one today. It’s the weekend.”

“I know what day it is, my dear. You can sneak me in.”

Suddenly she felt very tired. “Okay. I hope I don’t get caught.”

They walked to campus without speaking. The only sound was the crackling of leaves under their feet. Mary hoped there wouldn’t be a scene when she snuck him into the dining hall.

She had really started to look forward to Saturday mornings, gossiping with her friends, talking about classes and what they were going to do on winter break. It wouldn't be the same with him there. He thought gossip was beneath her. He liked to tell her friends about his travels, or the book he had been working on, a key to the thematic similarities between large-scale street festivals of today and the celebrations of ancient Greece.

But today Jack was so quiet she almost forgot he was there. The table was a-chatter with talk of finals and plans for winter break. Amid the hubbub Jack ate his eggs and croissant, his only sound the slurping of his coffee.

Dan and Seth, roommates from the

second floor, appeared with fully loaded trays. The arrival of Seth, the dorm clown, always livened things up. The chatter got louder. Suddenly Jack jumped to his feet. His palms were flat on the table and he leaned forward so his face was inches from Seth's.

“You keep your eyes to yourself, you pig!”

Seth froze, a croissant halfway to his mouth. “I was just ...”

“Just nothing. I saw where your eyes were! She is engaged to be married. To me. Not some pencil-necked little eunuch like you.”

“Jack ... please, don't make a scene,” Mary said.

“I'm not the one making a scene, little

girlie. It's your little dorm friend here, giving you the once over like you're a piece of meat. Come on. We're leaving."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. Her half-eaten toast fell to the floor. She turned to look back at Sandra, pleading with her eyes for Sandra to explain things, to make it better with their friends. She was so embarrassed. The way Jack was acting, it made it look like he treated her badly, like they were unhappy together. She hoped Sandra would explain to everyone that it wasn't always like that.

Jack pulled her along so she had to run to keep up with him. When they got out onto the sidewalk he turned to her, his eyes snapping, his face contorted and

almost purple.

“Don’t you EVER do that to me again!”

“Jack, what? What are you talking about? I didn’t do anything!”

“Don’t act cute. I saw that little prick look you up and down. He’s lucky I didn’t make more of a scene. He’s lucky I didn’t rip off his balls and shove them down his throat. Oh, that’s right, he has no balls.”

Things were not supposed to be like this. She had thought college would be so different. Jack said he loved her and she knew she should be grateful, but why did they fight all the time?

“Maybe we should just break up. When I met you, I thought you were

mature enough to handle a man like me, but maybe you're not. Maybe you should go back to kindergarten where you belong."

"Jack, no, it's not like that. I can handle it. I want this. I'm more mature than those kids. Why won't you trust me?"

"I'll trust you when you show you can be trusted. Let's go home. Maybe you can make it up to me."

Mary looked back over her shoulder. Sandra was just exiting the dining hall building, talking animatedly to Penny. She had her pea coat cinched tight and her purse tucked under her arm. She was gesturing like she always did when she was trying to make a point. She looked



up and as she did, she caught Mary's eye, but then quickly looked away. Mary waited for a moment, hoping Sandra would come over to her, but she had turned in the other direction. Finally Mary turned and followed Jack.

When they got home Jack fell on her like a starving man. The makeup sex was always the best, but this time she felt a little bit distant, like she was watching herself from above. After he finished he got up and started getting dressed.

“Where are you going?”

“Out. I need to clear my head. And you need to think about whether you can keep your commitment. We're supposed to be engaged, but you're not really acting like an engaged woman.”

“But Jack – “

“Don’t talk. Think.”

“When will you be back?”

“I’m not sure. Expect me when you see me.” Jack stomped out of the bedroom. She heard his steps clomp down the stairs and cross the living room. The front door opened and slammed shut. Suddenly she just wanted to cry and sleep, to curl up into a tiny ball and cry it all out and sleep forever. She hugged the pillow to her, letting it soak up her tears as she drifted off.

When she awoke, it was dusk. She must have been asleep for at least four hours. She got up and turned up the thermostat and checked the house for signs of Jack, but things were as they had

been when they returned from the dining hall that morning.

She thought about calling Sandra to talk, but she didn't know what she would say. Everything was going so wrong, but she'd told all of her friends that it was so great. Some of them envied what she had with Jack. She didn't want to disappoint everyone. And she didn't want them to think she couldn't handle her life. She had waited so long to be on her own. She would just have to work things out herself.

The one thing she knew for sure was that she didn't want Jack to break up with her. She had waited so long to meet a man like him. If she lost him, she didn't know what she would do with

herself.

When Jack came back the next morning he woke her up.

“Baby, I’m sorry I was so hard on you yesterday. Why don’t you get dressed and head over for brunch?”

“By myself?”

“Yes, I’ll just have to trust you not to talk to those eunuchs.” He fetched her coat and buttoned her up and kissed her nose. “I’ll see you later, babe.”

Maybe things would be okay after all. Maybe they could go back to the way things were. Her spirits lifted as she nearly trotted the distance to campus.

When she got there, Sandra and Penny were halfway through their eggs. As

Mary approached, Penny looked at her watch and got up. “Oh, I have to run. I didn’t realize how late it was getting.”

“Aren’t you going to stay and finish your eggs?” Mary asked.

“Nah, I have to run. It was nice to see you. Sorry I can’t stay and talk.”

Mary took the seat across from Sandra. She hoped Sandra wasn’t mad at her. “Hey, how’s it going?”

Sandra put down her fork and swallowed her eggs. She took a sip of coffee and set her mug down carefully. She took a deep breath. “Mary, I need to talk to you. I’m really worried.”

“What are you worried about? Jack and I worked everything out. He said he was sorry, and he let me come over to

the dining hall today.”

Sandra winced. ““Let’ you?”

“Well, not ‘let’ me. That’s not what I meant. I just mean that he wanted to make up. He gets jealous sometimes, that’s all.”

“Mary. Look, I know you love him, but I’m worried about you. You don’t know how it looked yesterday. Everyone was so shocked.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that it’s hard to watch you do this to yourself.”

“Oh, so you’re saying that what happened was my fault?

“No, no. No. That’s not what I’m saying at all. I’m saying that everyone was upset for you. Not at you.”

Mary picked up a paper napkin and twisted it. “Well, they don’t understand.”

“Don’t understand what?”

“They don’t understand Jack. And me. And how much we’re in love.”

“You know what Mary? Count me among them. Because I don’t understand. He dragged you out of here. If the resident heads had seen it they would have called the police. The RA wanted to, but we talked her out of it.”

Mary felt her throat close up. Why was Sandra mad at her? It was like she couldn’t do anything right.

“Well, I’m sorry I cause so many problems. I’m sorry no one likes my boyfriend. I guess everyone thinks I’m

some kind of loser, is that it?"

"Mary. Stop and listen. No one is blaming you. No one thinks you're stupid. We all like you. It's just that ..."

"It's just what?"

"You seem stressed. We never see you anymore. When we do see you, he drags you away. And besides, what is his deal? How does he have time to walk you to classes and have lunch with you and all that? Doesn't he have a job?"

Mary tore a strip off the napkin. "He has money from his grandfather. He doesn't want a job because that would take time away from his research. He works hard on his book, you know."

"Does that mean he has to be glued to



you all the time?”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I waited my whole life for someone like Jack. And now everyone is blaming me because they say I’m doing it wrong.”

“Mary. No. One. Is. Blaming. You. For anything. Look, will you do one thing for me? Will you call the counseling center on Monday? Just call them and talk to someone. See how it goes.”

“All right, all right. I’ll call them. Now will you get off my back? I know what I’m doing.”

“Okay. Look, I just care about you. Call me if you need to talk.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Mary stood up,

knocking her chair over behind her. She didn't look back. She just put her head down and hurried from the dining hall.

## 24.

Mary kept her word and reluctantly called the counseling center. They assigned her to Ingrid, a blond, strapping, thirtyish social worker who spoke with a trace of an accent from her native Denmark. This was Mary's third visit to the cramped beige office in the student mental health center. She still didn't really see the point, but maybe

Ingrid would be able to help her fix her relationship with Jack.

“Tell me more about blame.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your language centers around blame. Tell me more about blame and its role in your life.”

“Well, when things go wrong, it’s always somebody’s fault, right? So, I guess, that’s like, blame?”

“Tell me more about that. Why is it always somebody’s fault?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, why must fault be assigned? Is it always someone’s fault?”

“Well, yeah.”

“What if there is an act of nature?”

“Well ... okay. I see your point. But

when it's people doing things to each other, it's always someone's fault."

Ingrid raised an eyebrow. "What are some things that were your fault?"

"My father drank because he hated his life, being saddled with a family. I make my boyfriend angry because I let the boys in my dining hall talk to me. That's my fault. And ..."

"And, what?"

"Never mind. It's not important." What she had been going to say was that it was her fault that everyone from her dorm thought Jack didn't treat her right, but she veered away from that thought.

"Why do you think it's your fault that your father drank?"

"Because he said it was. Once when

he and my mom were fighting, I heard him say that he drank because of me.”

“Does he still drink?”

“As far as I know, yeah. I don’t talk to him anymore.”

“We have to stop for now, but between now and next week please think about how blame was assigned in your family. I think that might help us here. And if you need to talk in between, please call the center. They will page me. If you have an emergency, leave me a message, then call the hotline.”

“Thanks. I guess I’ll see you next week?”

“Yes. Till then.”

Mary pulled on her coat and hat and exited the counseling center into dusk

and a howling wind from the west. It was going to be a cold walk home. It would be completely dark by the time she got there. Jack had gone on a research trip that morning and said he wouldn't be back until late. She didn't want to face the dark house by herself.

She knew he preferred that she study at home, but as she passed the main library she looked up at the brightly lit windows and the people moving around inside. It would be warm in there. She could study on the fourth floor for a while, maybe find some friends in the coffee shop and take a break before going home.

She found a squashy chair by one of the windows and settled in. She tried to

study, but the conversation with Ingrid kept playing back in her head. Blame. Why was Ingrid so obsessed with blame? She shifted in her chair.

Sandra's words came back to her: "It's hard to watch you do this to yourself."

She veered away from that thought. She didn't want to think about how Sandra thought she was doing this all to herself. Her whole life, her father had blamed her for everything. She made noise when he wanted quiet, she left toys for him to trip on, she told Kate about things that were supposed to be secret. If she had never been born, then maybe he would have been happy and probably wouldn't have had to drink all the time.



Now that she was on her own she tried so hard to get it all right. She couldn't take any more blame. But Sandra had also said no one blamed her. What if it was true? What if Sandra didn't blame her for how Jack behaved? If she wasn't to blame, then who was? Things had to be caused by something, didn't they? And it wasn't an act of nature, like Ingrid had been talking about. But, if it wasn't an act of nature, and no one was to blame, what was it?

On tiny silent feet, an image crept in. It was older Mary again. This time she was wearing a doctoral hood, standing in a row with other men and women, also wearing hoods. They were facing an almost-elderly woman on a podium.

There was a young man in front of her. As they watched, she handed him a diploma then helped him pull up his hood. Then she saw herself standing at the front of a lecture hall, wearing a gray skirt and a black jacket, with low black pumps. On the lectern in front of her she saw a thermos and a briefcase, a little scuffed around the edges.

Jack kept talking about how they could have a baby right away. He said that if she married him she wouldn't have to work because his money would be enough for both of them.

Every time Mary tried to think about having a baby she wondered how she would take care of a baby and still have a chance to do all the grownup stuff she

wanted to do. She would have to find a way to talk to Jack about this — she wanted to have a baby with him, but later. After all, he loved her and wanted what was best for her.

Suddenly she had a thought: ‘I’m responsible.’ It wasn’t blame; it was choice. No one was blaming her for her problems. But... she could make different choices. It was her life, her responsibility. She had been so afraid to be blamed that she had forgotten to make her own choices. After all those years of wanting her freedom so badly, she had forgotten she had it. She resolved to talk to Jack about making some changes.

When she got home she went straight to bed. When Jack came in later, she

woke, but didn't stir. She kept her eyes closed, pretending not to hear his "Babe? You awake? C'mon babe. I had a big day, I wanna tell you about it."

25.

Mary woke up resolved to talk to Jack over breakfast. It was time to change things around. She really did love him but she missed living with other kids. She would explain it to him. She still wanted to be his fiancée, but she wanted to date him and live apart until it was time to get married. She wanted to wait

to have a baby, so she could finish her education and figure out what kind of job she would have. Maybe once he saw that she was independent he would quit trying so hard to control her life.

For the first time in months she felt relaxed. She didn't have to pretend everything was perfect. She just had to take responsibility for herself.

He was already dressed and halfway through breakfast by the time she entered the kitchen. She didn't have class until eleven, so she was still in her bathrobe. She went to the cabinets over the dishwasher and got a cereal bowl. She glanced over at him. He was eating those awful fiber twigs and branches. She crossed to the pantry cupboard for her

box of Cap'n Crunch. He looked up just long enough to roll his eyes at her cereal choice then returned to reading the paper.

She put her cereal and bowl down on the table and poured herself a cup of coffee from the Mr. Coffee next to the sink. Then she sat down, ready to have a grown-up talk with her fiancé.

“Jack. I want to talk about something.”

Jack looked up from his paper. “Yeah, babe? What is it?”

“Can you put the paper aside? I want to talk about something serious.”

Jack closed the paper and laid it down, smoothing it flat. He sat up straight with his elbows on the table and rested his chin in his hands. “I’m all

ears, baby girl.”

“I want to go back to living in the dorm. I can still spend some nights here, but I want to live back there.”

“Go on.”

“I miss my friends. I want to be a college student. It’s lonely all the way over here.”

“Okay.”

“We can still see each other, but it will be like it’s supposed to be. We’ll date. It will be romantic. I think I moved in with you too quickly.”

“I said okay.”

“Will you help me move my stuff?”

“Sure, just answer me one question.”

“Okay.”

“How many?”



“How many? How many what?”

“Seven? Ten? Twelve?”

“Twelve?”

Jack lunged across the table. Cap'n Crunch and fiber twigs rained onto the floor as he grabbed for her. He was going for her neck, but he couldn't quite reach so he grabbed her hair instead and yanked it. She screamed as he hauled her towards him, bringing her face within inches of his.

“That's just what I thought, you slut! Who's going to be number thirteen? Answer me that. Which one of those little pencil-dicked college boys is going to be thirteen?”

“Jack, I ... no, it's not like that. I just want to live in the dorm, like a normal

college student.”

“Yeah, and everyone knows, most ‘normal’ coeds are sluts.”

He had pulled her almost prostrate across the table now. Suddenly he released her hair, but before she could pull herself back upright he put his palm flat on the back of her skull and shoved her head down, hard. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her mug bounce off the edge of the table. The coffee splashed her bare legs as the mug shattered on the floor. He stood up, and she pulled herself upright in her chair, trying to focus through the shooting pain in her head.

“You know what? I don’t give a fuck any more. You wanna live in your little

dorm, go ahead. I won't stop you. But it's over between you and me. You hear me?"

He stomped out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Mary heard him in the bedroom, opening and closing drawers.

She struggled to her feet. Her head throbbed. She wondered if she should yell for help, but the neighbors would be at work by now. She just needed to get out of there. She wanted to talk to Ingrid.

First she needed to get dressed.

In the bedroom her clothes were everywhere: on the floor, strewn across the bed, on the floor of the closet. Jack had her favorite shirt in both hands. He gave a heaving tug and the shirt ripped from hem to collar.

“I told you if you left me, it would make me crazy. I told you. You slut. How many boys are going to like you if I ruin all your pretty clothes?”

“Jack, please stop. We can talk later, but I need to get over to class.”

“So you can LEAVE ME!! FUCK YOU! I told you. I warned you. I told you it would make me crazy if you left.”

Mary looked around for something to wear. She saw a pair of old sweats on the floor, amid the tangle of clothes. They would do. She picked them up and balanced on one leg while she put the pants on her other leg. Before she could switch legs, Jack’s fist shot out and landed squarely on her jaw, knocking her to the floor. She scrabbled, trying to

get her feet under her. She was on her knees when Jack kicked her hard, in the ribs.

Pain bloomed through her midsection as she toppled sideways. She started to scream, panicked, animal screams. Someone had to come. Someone had to help her. She pulled herself into a ball, trying to protect her middle. She saw his foot, inches from her face, but it seemed a million miles away. As if from a distant vantage point, she observed that he was barefoot. She wondered what would happen if he kicked her head. She kept screaming, stopping only long enough to draw breath. She didn't know what else to do.

Now he retreated across the room and

picked up another of her shirts. He was between her and the door but at least he wasn't in kicking range. She sat up. He was panting now, dancing from foot to foot like a prizefighter. He had dropped the shirt. His face was a deep red and his fists were clenched. "I told you. I told you it would make me crazy. I can't lose you."

She forgot all about choice and responsibility; it was down to survival. She got to her knees, fixing her eyes on his. "Oh baby. I didn't know you loved me so much. I didn't mean to hurt you. I just thought ..."

"Thought what? That you could leave me? You promised to never leave me. You promised to marry me. After

everything I've done for you? You were nothing when you met me."

"I thought we could have a longer engagement, you know, to strengthen our bond. But I see now how much that hurt you. I love you, baby."

"I think we should get married right away. I don't think we should waste any more time. Let's go now."

"Oh baby, I think you're right, but you know, if I don't show up at class Sandra will wonder what happened to me."

"Oh, that stupid ghetto cunt Sandra. Fine. Go to class. I'll pick you up at four and we'll go downtown for the marriage license. Get up off the floor; you look pathetic. And wash your face. Do you want people to think we were fighting?"

He rummaged through the clothes on the floor and picked out a pair of baggy jeans and a thick sweater. “Here, put these on. It’s cold outside. You can clean up the mess when we get home tonight.”

With that he was gone. She heard him on the stairs then heard him rummaging in the hall closet before, finally, the front door opened and slammed closed. She was trembling and thought she might throw up, but she worked quickly. She untangled herself from the sweats and stood up, pulled on the jeans and sweater and went into the bathroom. Her face was red from crying, but at least she wasn’t bleeding. She wet a washcloth with the icy water from the tap and



pressed it to her cheeks then her eyelids. The redness was a little better. She ran her brush through her hair. It would do.

She saw her coat peeking out from the mess on the bed and grabbed it, not worrying about a hat or gloves. She took one last look around the room, wondering if she would ever see her things again. Pulling on her coat, she hurried down the stairs, shoved her feet into her boots, let herself out the front door and ran the ten blocks to campus.

26.

August 1988 – Oberlin, Ohio

The last of the parents were clearing out. Mary had gotten one of the big singles this year. Sandra liked having a roomie so she and Penny were going to room together. Mary looked forward to living in the dorm with her friends again. She had re-taken some of her

freshman classes over the summer. She would make up a few credits this quarter then catch up the rest of them next summer before she would be on par with her classmates.

She'd flunked a full quarter after things came apart with Jack. She had slunk back to her dorm room without comment, hoping no one would remark on her absence or catch sight of the bruises on her face and midsection. But Jack had not let her go easily and finally she had gone to the resident heads for help. They in turn went to campus security and had Jack banned from the campus for life. The resident heads had wanted to call her parents, and had even suggested she move back home for a

while, but since Mary was over eighteen, it was her choice to make. For her part, Mary didn't think her mother or father would have much to offer.

She was glad for the new school year. The Jack disaster had forced her to compare her actual life to the one she'd envisioned for herself. She found her reality wanting and decided to buckle down and work hard this school year. She was lonely, and she knew she might be lonely for a long time, but she didn't want to relive another year like the last one again, ever.

She had thought that having a man would make her happy, because she thought a man was what was missing from her life. Jack had permanently

cured her of that notion. She wasn't sure what would make her happy, but hard work made her feel good about herself, and that would do for now.

27.

September 1990 – Plainview,  
Massachusetts

The wind whipped the branches against the attic dormer. The dry leaves made a scritch-scratch sound against the panes, but inside the air was stuffy. Barbara paused to wipe sweat from her

brow and cursed the decision to replace the attic windows with double-paned models that didn't open.

She had ascended the attic stairs that morning determined to finally tackle the family memorabilia. She pulled another box towards her and reached in to take a pile off the top. She expected the usual — stacks of photos representing not just the timeline of her little family, but a timeline of photographic technology; old sepia prints giving way to Brownie prints, then those weirdly bright Polaroids, and finally the drugstore Kodak prints. But instead of a sheaf of photos, her hand closed on a small leather-bound book. It seemed at once familiar and ancient. As she picked it up,

it fell open to the flyleaf. It was one of her diaries, dated 1965. The year she had gotten married.

She flipped past a few pages, and then something caught her eye: “lovemaking.” It seemed like such a foreign word. She flipped a few pages ahead — here she was telling her diary how much she loved her husband and how romantic it felt to share their small house, just the two of them. She shifted to lean against the wall and settled in to read.

As she turned the last page of the diary and let it fall closed, she felt as if she’d been up there forever, immersed in her past, so different from her present. Had they once loved each other?



Reading the diary, she remembered: yes. They had been in love. They had made love. It seemed so foreign now, as if that life had been lived by someone else, but it had been her — it was her life, and her body, and her soul, it was she who had once hoped for so much, expected so much, yearned for so much.

And now? If you had asked her if her marriage was happy, she wouldn't have known how to respond. She had always tried to be a good wife, but for so many years it had been so hard. Her husband got mad a lot, and demanded a lot. And then there was the drinking. But as far as she knew, everyone had their problems to deal with. That was just part of marriage.

But that diary. Who was that woman? How had she let herself down so? She hadn't always been willing to accept so little. Thinking back, she realized that bit by bit, over the years she had learned to expect less, until now this faded and attenuated version of her life was normal.

But reading this diary now, four years into an empty nest, Barbara had to admit: this was not the life she had envisioned. What happened to her painting? Her yearning for adventure? Her sly sense of humor, so evident in that diary?

She heard the crunch of gravel in the driveway. She got to her feet, then leaned forward to stuff the diary deep into the box it had come out of. For good

measure she put a photo album on top of it and started downstairs to make her husband his dinner.

That night, long after after he retired to the spare bedroom where he slept most nights, Barbara lay awake for what seemed like hours. She saw the future stretching before her, decades upon decades, and imagined living like this for another twenty years, or thirty. The next day, after he left for work, she let the breakfast dishes go while she sat, still and quiet, thinking. She had no money, but with Mary gone she could get a job. Would anyone hire her, at her age, with no experience? She resolved to find out.

The next day, as soon as his car left the driveway, she turned to the want ads. It was slow going, but after a month of dead-ends she landed a part-time job keeping the books for the community school system. He didn't want her working, but he was tight-fisted when it came to her expenses, so she promised that she wouldn't ask him for money for extras if she could earn her own.

Barbara had never been afraid of hard work and she learned quickly. After a few months her boss asked her to take evening classes toward her CPA. Of course her husband griped about having her gone in the evenings, but she coddled him the rest of the time and made sure he didn't have to cook for himself and that

the house was always spotless.

She saved nearly every penny. She was afraid to bank it because everyone in the small town would know she was building a nest egg, so instead she hid it in a coffee can on a high kitchen shelf. She knew her husband well enough to know that he would not spend any time investigating the kitchen cabinets.

Finally, one muggy day in May, she counted and realized she had over three thousand dollars saved up. That night she waited up until he was in bed, then she took his desk key and unlocked the file drawer where she knew he kept his tax returns and investment statements. She gathered everything up into a folder and hid it in her tote bag. In the morning

she went to the library and made copies of everything. It was Friday and she knew he would come home and drink and not think to look in his office, and she was right. When he finally stumbled off to bed, she put the files back and locked up.

On Monday she made an appointment, and, two days later, drove to the next town over to see a family lawyer. Once he saw their financial records the lawyer agreed to take her case on contingency. Her lawyer's reputation as a barracuda was equaled only by her husband's reputation as an adulterer.

She didn't want any more than her share. He was the breadwinner, but she had worked hard to make theirs a

pleasant home. He had rarely wanted for a hot meal, a clean house, laundered and pressed clothes, a tidy, attractive yard. After an initial tussle he agreed to give her half of everything. He knew he was licked; if he fought he would probably have to give her more. Judges in their small community didn't look kindly on cheating husbands.

28.

August 1991 – Oberlin, Ohio

Mary finished her bachelor's degree and was admitted to Cornell to work toward a PhD in economics. She and her friends had all stayed around for the summer, working, saving up money, and enjoying the last days of prolonged adolescence. But finally it was over. She



had been packing all week, sorting and boxing, deciding what to take with her. Sandra was coming over to pick through her rejects. She had taken a job in Chicago and would take anything she could get for her new apartment.

The doorbell rang just as Mary taped the last box. She poked her head out the window to make sure it was Sandra and then buzzed her up. Sandra came up the creaky stairs, two at a time.

“You got some STUFF for me?”

“Yeah. You know, when you have to pay to move it, somehow a lot of it doesn’t seem all that great anymore. Have at it. Whatever you don’t want can go to the Goodwill.”

Sandra’s eyes lit up when she saw the

pile. "All right! Thanks!"

"So, how are you feeling about moving on?"

"I dunno. Scared, a little, but excited. I'm going to live in a really cool neighborhood. I'll be able to walk to the coffee shop, the bar, the grocery. You? You must be really excited, Miss Ivy!"

Mary blushed. "You know, if you had asked me, three years ago, if I thought I had a shot at a life like this ... I knew I wanted it, but the reality? It always seemed like it was for someone else, you know?"

Sandra cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"Well, like getting honors. Back in high school, there were the 'good kids,'

there were the not-so-smart types, and then there were a few people like me. People knew I was smart. I knew I was smart. But it always seemed to me that other people deserved the good life, not me. Like, I thought I didn't rate, or something. That's why I got all tangled up with Jack. I felt weird about it pretty early on, but deep down I didn't think I rated a good guy. I was happy to have any guy."

"God, he was such an asshole."

"Yeah, he was. But you know, I'm not even all that angry with him anymore. I was there. I chose him. It was really hard to admit that. Even during our breakup, I didn't want to admit it. Remember how I wouldn't tell people

what had happened?”

“Yeah. You just came back to the dorm and acted like everything was normal. But you didn’t look right.”

“Yeah. But anyway, I don’t want to dwell, but I’m just saying, it seems so miraculous to me that I’m one of those people now. You know, one of the successful ones.”

“Hey, you worked really hard to be successful!”

“I know, I know. And I give myself credit. I’m just trying to say how I’m really happy, but I’m also, sometimes, a little surprised.”

“Well, congratulations baby!”

Mary grinned. “Hey, I need to finish cleaning up, but you wanna have drinks

later? I can't believe tonight will be our last as denizens of the same town."

"Yes! That sounds great. You wanna call me when you're done? I'll be home packing too."

"Okay. Sounds great."

"I'll start hauling this stuff down to my car."

"I'll help. Just let me grab my keys."

The phone rang just as Mary was carrying out the last load. It was her mom.

"Mary, are you busy?"

"Um, well, you know I'm packing and cleaning. I have to be out of here by tomorrow. What's going on?"

"Mary, I just wanted to tell you. I'm leaving your father."

Mary sat down, speechless.

“Mary, are you there?”

“Mom? Yes. I’m here. I’m just really surprised. When did you decide?”

“I guess I’ve been deciding for a while. Our divorce was final a week ago. I moved out today. I have an apartment for now, but I think I’m going to move away. Maybe to Arizona.”

“ ... ”

“Mary?”

“No, it’s just... sorry, I’m so surprised. But I’m happy for you. You’re happy, right? What did he say?”

“He was surprised too, but honestly, he didn’t seem to care much. He just goes on about his routine. He hired a housekeeper. When you think about it,

that's all I was to him anyway."

"Wow."

"Well, I don't want to keep you. I know you're busy, but I just really wanted to let you know. And to give you my new number. Do you have a pen?"

"Hang on ... okay, go ahead."

Mary wrote the new number in her address book and hung up the phone. Unbelievable. Her mother had finally gone and done it. She had left the bastard. About time, but ... She would have time to think about what it all meant on the drive tomorrow. For now she needed to finish cleaning so she could have her last hurrah with Sandra.

## 29.

After the divorce, Barbara started researching places to live. She liked sun, so she set her sights on the Southwest. With the new school year looming, her local district needed help with budgets so she booked overtime and watched her savings take off. She spent evenings at the library, checking want ads from the



papers in Phoenix, Albuquerque, and Santa Fe.

She sent out more than thirty resumes and finally got an offer to interview with the Phoenix school district. They interviewed her over the phone and hired her sight unseen. Just about a year after finding the diary, she packed her car, gave the rest of her things to Goodwill, and set out for the desert.

She worried a little that he'd try to stop her, or would follow her and try to bring her back, but in her heart she knew it wasn't likely. He had already used her up and moved on. Within a few months of their divorce, he was engaged to a new, younger woman. The engagement never came to a marriage but even so,

she found herself slightly jealous. It wasn't that she wanted him back; she just wanted him to care, at least a little bit.

Barbara used her settlement to buy a rambler near South Mountain Park. She went out to the desert almost every afternoon, drawn by the ancient and friendly-looking saguaros, their arms perpetually raised as if in greeting. On weekends she would hike for hours along the trails, exploring the creek beds, marveling at the unfamiliar flora and fauna, and soaking up the sun.

It was healing. As cheesy and New Age as that sounded to her, it was true. She felt healed by the quiet of the desert,

broken only by the buzz of insects and the dry whisper of scampering lizards. She loved the courage and stark beauty of the saguaros. They soldiered on through drought, disease, and human brutality, wounded but never beaten, to live for a century and beyond. She identified with them as friends whose courage and forbearance she could hope to emulate.

One April afternoon she saw a notice at the trailhead, advertising a nighttime naturalist trip to see the saguaros bloom. Excited to see this new aspect of her adopted community, she joined a group for the hike into the desert. It was amazing. The air had cooled with the sunset but thermal currents provided

random bursts of warmth. The desert slept under the stars, the crunch of their footsteps the only sound as they made their way along the trail. The moon was bright and almost full, the cacti, rocks, and shrubs ghostly, their shadows stark and stretched before them. The blooms hung off the saguaros like waxy white trumpets, heavy with pollen and moisture.

Barbara made her first Phoenix friend that night. While many on the hike were the sort who lived in Phoenix for the benefit of their chakras, there was one among them who shared Barbara's Yankee practicality. When another nighttime cactus-seeker started to expound on her theories of aura

coloration, Barbara glanced around for someone to smirk with, and found Teri.

## 30.

Friendship with Teri proved to be even more salutary than the desert. Barbara had believed that her years of isolation were by choice. She thought she wasn't all that interested in having friends. But when Teri would call to make plans she would agree almost in spite of herself, then look forward to

their outings with girlish excitement.

Teri had an MA in journalism and had worked for fifteen years as the editor of an academic business review. She had been married once, in her twenties, but after it ended she had thrown herself into her burgeoning career. She had no children of her own but was a devoted aunt to several. She had amassed a small fortune and retired early to the desert to start and run a shelter for battered women.

One night over margaritas they discussed their romantic histories at length; Teri had had many lovers, but she maintained that as much as she liked men, she'd never loved one enough to give up the freedom to fly to Greece on a

whim, or keep whatever crazy hours suited her at the moment.

Barbara had only one ex to discuss. As she shared her story, Teri winced at what she called abuse. Barbara had not thought of herself as a victim of abuse, because really, she had been hit only occasionally. Mostly he had pushed her around. But Teri begged to differ.

“You know, my husband hit me too.”

“You?”

“Yes, but like you, I told myself it wasn’t abuse. I thought abuse was something that happened to other people. We just had bad fights.”

“Well, yeah. Abuse: that’s like guys in tank tops – like ‘Streetcar Named Desire.’”



“You were afraid of him, yes?”

“Yes, actually I was. I didn’t think I was, but I realized later that the fear had just become background noise that I stopped noticing. It was always there, humming away. It held me down. I forgot how to want.

“At first I would want, and the fear would stop me. Then, eventually, I bypassed the fear and just stopped wanting. I wanted to paint but he didn’t want me taking time away from him. I wanted friends but he accused me of talking about him behind his back. I wanted to have nicer clothes, but when I asked him for money to go shopping he’d accuse me of trying to attract other men. The fear kept me from demanding

anything from him, even though I worked like a slave to take care of him.”

Barbara hesitated a moment before continuing. “The only thing I was not afraid to do was take care of Mary, because he allowed that. He didn’t like it, he didn’t like her, but he didn’t want to take responsibility, so he left the work to me. He let me have her to begin with because I think he thought she would bind me to him in some way. That was when he actually cared about binding me. Later he didn’t want me for anything but a cook, maid, and punching bag. But that fear, I never really acknowledged it; I just developed the habit of staying clear of him.”

“That’s one of the terrible ironies of

abuse. If people who are being abused were able to stay conscious of their fear, they would probably find it intolerable. But they don't; the relentlessness of the fear causes them to numb out and find ways to accept it in order to survive. The fear causes its own kind of paralysis and that combines with attachment, fear of poverty, and fear of the unknown, and the effect is that you stay, but also that you stop recognizing it for what it is. It's amazing that you had enough of yourself left to get out."

Barbara toyed with her margarita glass. "Thank you. What about you? Why did you stay, and then what made you leave?"

"Oh, honey, I think I'm going to need

another drink for that story.” Teri caught the server’s eye and ordered another round of margaritas, then said, “I had started to realize I wasn’t happy. My friends were all young single women. Seeing how much fun they were having, and how FREE they were, well, eventually I wanted that too.”

Teri took a sip of her drink and then continued, “It took a long time, but I started to realize that I was there only because I believed I could not leave. Have you ever heard about how elephants are trained? The trainer puts a shackle on the elephant’s leg, and ties him to a heavy post. The elephant at first tries to leave, but can’t and finally gives up.

“Once the elephant’s spirit is broken — and that’s what it is, really, very sad — the trainer needs only to put the shackle on. The elephant assumes that he can’t go anywhere, even if the shackle is not attached to anything. I was like those elephants. I had grown so used to the shackles that I accepted them as my due. But seeing my friends living their lives, well, eventually it penetrated that I could have that life too.”

“Wow.”

“But, it wasn’t quite that simple. When I told him I wanted to leave, he tried to kill me. Fortunately all he had were his bare hands and I got away before he could get ahold of a weapon. I believe he would have killed me. I kept

going and never looked back. I ran to some of my friends and told them what had happened and they were very afraid for me. They didn't want to keep me because they were sure he would find me with them, so they arranged for me to move across the country to stay with friends of theirs. After a couple of years, I picked up my education again and the rest was history."

"That makes my situation seem almost tame."

"Really? Was it? Okay, so he never tried to kill you, but didn't he take your life in other ways?"

## 31.

Barbara always looked forward to seeing Teri and loved their conversations. But as much as she liked Teri, sometimes ... Barbara had been brought up to believe that you should never think too much of yourself. If you put yourself up on a high horse, others might come along and knock you down.

Teri's horse was twenty-one hands tall, and she sat astride it wearing a ten-gallon hat and boots with heels like daggers.

With her pixie cap of curly red hair and hazel eyes that missed nothing, Teri sat up so high that Barbara wasn't sure she would ever be able to look her in the eye, so at first she tried to find ways to knock her down. When Teri showed up in a new blouse, or a gorgeous new necklace, Barbara would silently admire it but say something like, "Well, you can get away with wearing that flashy stuff."

Teri called her regularly for outings: brunches, hikes, bike rides. Sometimes they would go shopping together, although Barbara didn't really like to



buy things for herself.

Then one day at lunch they got into a fight. Teri had just been to Venice for a week, a trip she tried to take every few years. She came back with beautiful things, velvet scarves and beautiful jewelry.

Honoring Barbara's prohibition against flash (secretly, Barbara wanted some flash) Teri had brought her a scarf. But for herself, she brought back several Venetian glass pendants and a pair of glittering earrings. Consumed with envy and the blunt, quashing belief that Teri could be friends with her only out of pity, Barbara blurted out, "Oh, I'm glad you got me the scarf — I could never pull off jewelry with such interesting

colors.”

Teri gave her a beatific smile and said, “You know dear, you don’t have to fight me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t have to fight me. There’s room enough in this world for both of us to be happy.”

Barbara was taken aback. “I don’t know what you mean. Why do you say I’m fighting you?”

“Because you do it all the time. You see something you want, but you don’t believe you can have it. It could be something pretty. It could be happiness itself. But always, when this happens, you say something that, I suppose, is intended to diminish me. And I don’t

understand why. Well, I do, in a way; it's because you don't think there's enough to go around.

“But on the other hand I don't understand, because there is enough. There's plenty. I can have a nice necklace and you can have one too. I can have a happy life and you can be equally happy. I can go to Venice, and Venice will still be there for you to enjoy. It doesn't hurt my feelings when you insult me, but it does make me sad. Why do you have so little faith that you can get what you want in life?”

Barbara didn't know what to say. In her view Teri sometimes got on a high horse and Barbara wanted to bring her down a bit. That was what you were

supposed to do; everyone knew that. That her behavior might have to do with wanting for herself, well, that was just crazy.

She was so angry that she cut their lunch short and went back to the office, barely remembering to thank Teri for the scarf. She didn't understand why Teri was talking this way — what made her think she wanted her life anyway? Up on that high horse again.

Maybe they didn't need to be friends after all. Why did she need a friend who made her feel awkward and bad? Because that was how she felt after that conversation. Like she was a bad little girl and Teri was picking on her and pointing out her faults.

She ignored Teri for a few weeks, but finally called her because she really missed her. No one else got the jokes, the sly looks. No one else would discreetly roll her eyes when the Desert New Age Shamans starting talking about their colonics.

More importantly she started to understand what Teri had been trying to tell her. So what if Teri had nice jewelry and she didn't? It made Teri happy, and she realized that she liked the thought of Teri happy, because she liked Teri. And there was something else. Teri had been like her, once. She had had a husband who took away her spirit. And now she had money, freedom, and happiness. She

had the power to get for herself anything she wanted. Teri was her friend, but also, Teri was hope.

After that, Barbara and Teri spent even more time together. The further Barbara got from her marriage, the more possibility she could see for the remainder of her life. Teri encouraged her to think highly of her job skills and to ask for more responsibility and more pay. She taught Barbara to think hard about what she really enjoyed and make sure to do some of it every day.

There were times Barbara felt like Teri's charity project, so finally one day she asked her what was in it for her. The answer surprised and delighted her.

“Honey, don't you know you're

amazing? Don't you realize how funny and smart you are and how fun? Did that husband of yours beat you down so much that you forgot what you have to offer? I am your friend because I like you, not because I pity you. Think about that. If I were your friend out of pity, what would that say about me? I value my time far too much to spend it with anyone I don't like."

Barbara marveled at this. It was a secret treasure she pulled out and examined whenever her confidence started to flag. Someone wanted her around. Teri wanted her around. Of course Teri would not be friends with her out of pity. Teri didn't do anything she didn't want to do. And what Teri

wanted to do was be friends with  
Barbara.



Teri's influence continued to be salutary and Phoenix continued to treat Barbara well. CPAs were in demand in the burgeoning economy and with Teri's encouragement she built a side tax business. With money jangling in her pocket, she resolved to take up some of the hobbies she had only allowed herself

to dream about before.

She had always loved horses so she started riding lessons at one of the stables, and then arranged for a half lease on a horse, taking her out onto the trails every chance she got. She rekindled her interest in art and bought a set of watercolors and some lush sable brushes. On her own high horse! Spending money on beautiful things!

On weekends she would take an easel out to the desert to capture what she saw, experimenting with abstract and realist techniques. When she felt as if she had learned as much as she could on her own she enrolled in a painting class.

When she had first arrived in Phoenix, she had been afraid to spend money,

afraid to handle things badly and lose her new house. So to furnish it she had scrounged what she could within the tiny budget she allowed herself and wound up with an assortment of plastic lawn chairs, Goodwill rejects, and factory seconds.

She had thrown an afghan over her stained second-hand sofa and convinced herself that it looked fine, and rationalized that she shouldn't care what her bedroom looked like since she was usually asleep while she was in there. In truth she felt vaguely uneasy in her new life, as if she were waiting for the other shoe to drop, as if she was not supposed to feel such happiness and hope; as if the mistake would be discovered, then

swiftly and cruelly corrected.

But as she learned to take better care of herself she began to think herself worthy of real furniture. She gave the sofa back to the Goodwill and bought a squashy sectional and giant easy chair, both covered in a fabric so buttery smooth she wanted sit on it naked. She bought a matched suite of furniture for her bedroom and, feeling utterly decadent, Egyptian cotton sheets.

She went to a rug dealer and ordered new rugs for her living room and bedroom, picking out the colors herself and waiting eagerly while they were woven for her. Choosing the colors was hard because her first impulse was to go for a design that would not show dirt,

but in Phoenix, dark colors seemed all wrong. Finally In the end she decided she didn't care whether her rugs would show dirt or not; that's what rug cleaners were for.

And, finally, she bought herself a few pieces of "flashy" jewelry and was amazed at how good they made her feel. She was still a practical woman. She would never feel the need to pay a thousand dollars for a dress, or three hundred dollars for a set of sheets. But she felt good buying nice things for herself and didn't have that twinge of panic that someone was going to find out that SHE had gotten up on a high horse, didn't look over her shoulder all the time waiting for her ex to come along

and knock her down.

While Mary was in college she had gone back east to visit her mom a few times here and there, always first checking to make sure that her father would be away. If asked she would have said she loved her mother, but in truth the visits were born more of obligation than affection. But after Barbara left her

father, Mary warmed up to her a bit, calling her weekly and finally asking if she could come stay for spring break.

It was the first time Barbara had seen her daughter since her college graduation. While she knew that Mary had done well for herself, nothing could have prepared her for the young woman who got off the plane at Sky Harbor. She looked the same, except she didn't.

Mary had always had a very feminine body. Barbara remembered how it used to drive Mary nuts because she wanted to look like the spare-of-flesh models of the day. She had tended toward rounded hips and breasts, a full ribcage, and an hourglass waist, and had always dressed to cover it all up.



But now she carried herself differently. Former liabilities had become assets. She looked stronger somehow. She wasn't graceful exactly — she was heavy-footed like her father, but she strode forward as if this airport, and yes, the entire city of Phoenix, was hers for the taking.

Barbara felt a tug of pride followed almost immediately by a twinge of the old resentment. Mary seemed so confident, like she really thought highly of herself. Up on a high horse.

The words were almost out of her mouth, "Oh, it's such a struggle for women to keep weight off, isn't it dear?" when Teri's voice in her head stopped her. Why would she want to knock Mary

down? This was the daughter she had cherished and encouraged and coddled and loved. Mary should be up on a high horse; she had done a lot for herself. She tamped the comments back down and reached out to embrace her daughter.

When they got back to her townhouse, Mary walked through the rooms slowly, touching the soft fabrics, oohing and aahing at the vibrant colors. She assessed the squashy seating in the living room, the substantial pickled oak furniture in the bedroom, and the bright accents throughout, then hugged her mother, exclaiming, “I’m so happy for you!”

She loved the location and wanted to get out to see the desert as soon as

possible. They had a lovely time that afternoon, exploring South Mountain together, posing for pictures with the friendly saguaros, watching the sunset from the top of Telegraph Pass. And they relaxed together. Until she noticed the absence of tension Barbara hadn't realized how elaborately careful they'd been around each other for years.

Of course Mary wanted to meet Teri, so they went to Sunday brunch. Halfway through the meal, Barbara caught a glimpse of them in the mirrored wall opposite and felt her throat clutch with happiness.

They looked like people in a movie, or a magazine. There they were, sitting next to a koi pond in a beautiful

restaurant, polishing off their eggs Benedict while piano music tinkled lightly in the background. Before her divorce Barbara had barely believed that moments like this existed for anyone, and certainly not for her. But here she was, happy. And safe. Her ex couldn't possibly pull into the driveway and come crashing through the door to ruin it all.

34.

January 1998 – Bayview Prison

Tony had shown Robert how to check the callout board. This morning he finally saw his name listed to meet his caseworker, so at eleven o'clock he made his way to the common room, where a CO picked him up and took him

to the social services unit, a warren of small glassed-in rooms, each with a table and two chairs. The CO deposited him in one of the rooms and returned a moment later with the caseworker, a spindly middle-aged guy in a short-sleeved white shirt, clip-on tie, and polyester pants. The caseworker set a manila folder down on the table and took the seat across from Robert.

“Mr. Lewis, I see from your case file that you are required to attend an alcohol treatment program as part of your sentence. Have you attended any meetings yet?”

Robert shook his head. He hadn't been able to figure out where the meetings were or how to get to them, and

when he asked Tony, he had brushed him off, saying that AA was for pussies. Though Robert's terminology would have been slightly less crude, he agreed with Tony. But he didn't think the caseworker wanted to hear that.

"Your sentence dictates that you attend at least three meetings a week. I have a schedule here."

Robert wondered how he was going to get to the meetings. Was there a van?

"Where are they held?"

"They're held here, in the multipurpose room behind the main TV room in your cell block."

Robert nodded.

"We recommend that you establish a rhythm of meetings and attend the same

ones every week. People in recovery find that it's more effective if they get to know a particular cohort."

"So it's just a bunch of guys sitting around talking?"

"While meetings on the outside are unmoderated, in prison they are moderated by a social services worker. Here, you can take this schedule back to your cell with you. Do you have any further questions?"

Robert shook his head and reached forward to take the schedule. If there were any point, he would have asked where he could get a drink, because that was what he wanted, not to go sit in a room with a bunch of stupid twelve-steppers, listening to them whine about



how little control they had over their lives. He wasn't like them.

Robert decided he would attend the 7:00 p.m. meeting, Tuesday/Friday/Sunday. He could deal with that. He didn't have to talk; he just had to show up.

His new black-market watch said it was 6:45 when he left his cell that evening. The multipurpose room, or MR, was another cement room. This one had a thin coating of industrial carpet on the floor but was otherwise as charmless as the rest of the jailhouse. About twenty-five molded plastic chairs were arranged in a semi-circle three rows deep, with a single chair facing the

others. Robert chose a chair at the back on the left side.

He wished he had a book or magazine with him but he was already getting tired of the “Professor” and “Poindexter” comments and now confined his reading to his bunk. He didn’t have to wait long anyway. After a few minutes other inmates started filing in. Robert recognized some of them from the chow hall, but didn’t know any of them by name. He kept his eyes down. They could make him go to meetings, but they couldn’t make him participate in this stupid charade.

The room was almost full now. A tall guy with salt-and-pepper hair took the seat next to Robert, who tried to shift

away. The guy didn't seem to notice. He settled in with a sigh and then held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Ted. Glad you could make it tonight."

Robert preferred to ignore him, but people were very quick to take offense here in prison, so he turned slightly and extended his hand. "Robert."

The moderator had arrived. He clapped for order and spared Robert further interaction.

The moderator stood up. "Hi everybody. I'm Clint and I'm an alcoholic. I'm a volunteer moderator. It looks like we have some new faces tonight." He scanned the group and lighted on Robert. "Hi. Would you like to get up and say a few words about

yourself?”

Robert acknowledged the guy but waved him off. Clint nodded. “Sometimes it takes new members a few meetings before they’re comfortable. We’ll try you again next time.”

Yeah, and you’ll get the same reaction forever, bozo, Robert thought.

Clint ferreted out another newcomer who stood up and uttered that pathetic bromide, “I’m Jake and I’m an alcoholic.” If they expected Robert to fall for their pabulum, they were out of their minds. His business was his business. And anyway, he wasn’t an alcoholic. Sure, he liked to drink, but he had never been a daily drinker. He had saved it for the weekends when he could

enjoy it.

He watched in amusement as Clint tried to draw out other members of the group; he was mostly stonewalled. A group of three biker-looking guys on the other side of the semi-circle just sat and cracked their knuckles when Clint called on them. This almost made Robert feel sorry for him. He was starting to see why there was a CO stationed at the door; those biker guys could have eaten Clint for breakfast.

At the end of the session Ted turned to him and said, "Welcome to our group. I've been working the program for about ten years. I hope you'll be back."

"Well, it's not like I have a fucking choice."

“I hope I see you here again soon.”

35.

January 1999 – Bayview Prison

Robert had kept up the rhythm of meetings. He attended consistently and made sure Clint kept his record up to date. It was bullshit, but they said he must, so he did.

This week a lot of guys were down

with the flu, so Tuesday's meeting was only half-full. Robert took his regular chair at the back, but Clint urged him to move forward. Robert went along to shut the guy up. When his turn came he declined to speak.

After everyone else had had their turn, Clint fixed on Robert again. "Robert, you never say anything. We've got a small meeting today; maybe this would be a good time for you to talk."

Robert glared at Clint, but he got to his feet. He didn't want to get written up for non-compliance. Clint seemed like an okay guy, but you never knew when someone might go bureaucratic on you.

"My name is Robert. I'm in prison for vehicular homicide. I was driving while



intoxicated and I caused an accident that killed a young woman.” Robert sat back down, glad to have that over with. So what if he had been drunk and caused an accident? That didn’t make him an alcoholic.

He sat silent through the rest of the meeting. He was on his way out when Ted approached him. “Hey Robert, I just wanted to tell you good job, getting up and talking. I hope you’ll keep it up.”

Robert just looked at him and pushed past, eager to get back to his cell and the meager comforts of his bunk.

Robert could do the routine in his sleep: wake up, mainline for breakfast, exercise yard, shower, back to cell,

read, mainline for lunch, read some more, mainline for dinner, read some more. Some days were punctuated with his AA meetings, others with his runs to the commissary or library, but most days were the same.

Nights were another matter. The COs locked the cell doors and turned off the lights from ten at night until five in the morning. Except for Tony, there were no distractions at night, and though he and Tony had worked out a civil arrangement, the man wasn't much company, preferring his headphones to Robert's conversation. Robert would try to fall asleep as his mind played an endless loop — a round-cheeked little boy screaming for the mother he would

never see again.

36.

June 1999 – Bayview Prison

Robert was almost late to the Friday meeting. He had gone back to his cell after mainline to change his shirt, and was already cutting it close when Tony buttonholed him, wanting to know if he knew anything about some missing

Twinkies. By the time he got to meeting Clint had started and the room was almost full. Some guy was in Robert's regular chair so he had to sit closer to the front.

As they went around the room Robert waved off his turn. After breaking his silence in January, he had talked a few more times. One time he talked about his divorce and another time he mentioned his more recent roster of girlfriends, but he wasn't about to discuss his feelings. So he felt guilty about the little boy and his mom. He didn't see how talking about that was going to fix anything. And he still refused to say that stupid "I'm an alcoholic" line.

A guy named Frank had the chair in

front of him. Robert had noticed him a few times before. When Frank's turn came he looked a little pale, but he stood up and said, "I'm Frank and I'm an alcoholic." The rest of the room chorused their approval. Frank remained standing. "I am in prison because I robbed a convenience store, but that's not why I'm here in this room. I'm here because of what happened before, the stuff that made me into the kind of guy who would go to prison for robbery."

"Go on," said Clint.

"Three years ago I was a perpetual drunk. There was not a moment in the day that I wasn't either drunk or sleeping. I mixed whiskey into my morning coffee. I always had a Big Gulp

cup attached to my hand, but instead of Mountain Dew, it was full of rum and Coke, mostly rum. I unwound at night with a martini or two or three, then collapsed into bed and got up the next day to do it all again.

“Somehow I had persuaded a lovely woman to marry me, and she gave me three wonderful kids, two boys and a girl. She didn’t like my drinking, but I was a nice drunk. I didn’t hit her, I didn’t yell at her. I had a good job. I went to work every day and brought my paycheck home to her. We had a big house with a bedroom for each kid and a hot tub out back. I was never cruel to my wife or kids. I would come home from work and quietly slip into oblivion.”

The regulars nodded, almost in unison.

“Our oldest had started first grade, and my wife, she had always been the kind of person to get involved. So she joined the PTA. One night while she was out at a meeting I realized I had run out of vodka. The younger two were already in bed and my oldest was watching TV with me. All of you here probably already know this: when you’re a drunk, drinking comes first.”

Ted said, “Yeah, the addiction, it comes first.”

“I had enough brains to know that I was in no state to take those kids out of the house, but I was going to get my vodka if it killed me. So I told Jeremy,



my oldest, that I needed him to be a big guy and watch his younger brother and sister.”

Here Frank paused. He screwed his eyes shut and bowed his head. After a moment, he spoke again. “I don’t know how long I was away, but when I got home my house was gone. The fire department later said that it looked like the fire had been started in the family room. We kept those long matches and fire starters next to the fireplace.”

They think Jeremy was playing with them and set his chair on fire. My wife had just finished decorating the house. She loved the drapes she had chosen for that room. The chair was by the window and once the drapes went up, it was all

over.”

“Your poor boy. What happened to him?” asked a guy to Robert’s right.

Frank was silent for a moment. “He was permanently disfigured. He tried to run upstairs to get his brother and sister but he couldn’t get through the flames. With his clothes on fire, he ran from the house and pounded on the neighbor’s door. They rolled him on the ground to put out the fire and called 911. The fire department got my other two kids out with a ladder but the house was a total loss. My wife took the children and left, and who can blame her? I think I got off easy, but who am I to say? I’m not the one who will go through life looking I belong in a horror movie.”

From the back of the room, “They can’t put you in prison for child neglect; what are you doing here?”

“I was charged with reckless endangerment. They sentenced me to eighteen months of probation and community service. I kept drinking after the fire and throughout my sentence. I was required to attend meetings but no one could force me to stop drinking. I guess my sentence wasn’t punishment enough because nine months after I finished it I knocked over my local Seven-Eleven, and here I am.”

Ted’s head bobbed up and down in recognition.

“I didn’t stop drinking until I was locked up. The shock of detoxing almost

killed me. Now I'm trying to get better. Admitting that my life has become unmanageable is the first step, so here I am."

Robert realized that he had been sitting forward, almost out of his chair. Now he sat back, trying to corral all the thoughts that rushed through his mind at once. Frank had done a horrible thing. This was one of the worst stories he had heard in these stupid meetings. And here he was, talking about it and being heard.

Robert sensed movement to his right. He turned and caught Ted's eye. Ted nodded at him, and gestured for him to get up and talk, but Robert stayed where he was. He had nothing to say.

Back in his bunk that night, he tossed

and turned and finally fell asleep to the sound of Tony's snores. He dreamt vividly of a brown-haired woman, pinned in mangled metal, reaching for her son as her life gurgled away.

37.

October 1995 – Ithaca, New York

Mary set her tea on the side table and settled herself on the sofa. She dialed her mom's number, willing her to pick up. She didn't know who else to talk to. None of her friends had been through anything like this.

“Hello? Mary, is that you?”

“Hi Mom.”

“Is everything all right?”

Mary squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath. Her mom would understand. They were friends now. “Mom, something has happened and I’m not quite sure what to do about it.”

“Were you in an accident? Are you hurt?”

No, no, nothing like that. It’s ... I ... Mom, I’m pregnant.”

“ ... ”

“Are you there?”

“I’m here. I’m a little surprised. I didn’t even know you were seeing anyone.”

Mary took a sip of tea. “Well, I never

mentioned him because he wasn't serious."

"Serious enough to get pregnant by, I suppose."

"Mom, please. I need to figure out what to do."

"Well. What do you want to do? I know in this day and age girls don't have to have their babies."

"Yeah ... I know. But ..."

"But what?"

Mary leaned forward, twisting a lock of hair around her left forefinger. "Well, I thought I would end it. It seemed like the obvious answer. But then I started thinking. I finished my coursework last spring; I'm well into my dissertation, so I'll be able to keep my own schedule."



“Sweetie, I’ll help you, you know.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. If you want to do this, I will help you.”

“Well, that makes it easier. It’s just ... I know I could get an abortion.” She heard her mother’s sharp intake of breath at the word. “And if I’d gotten pregnant earlier, I would have. But now, I knew I wanted to become a mother at some point, so why not now?”

“When are you due?”

“I’ve only tested myself at home, so I’m not sure, but I think I’m due in May. I’m scheduled to see an ob-gyn day after tomorrow to find out for sure.”

“Oh Mary, this is going to be wonderful. I’m going to be a

grandmother! Have you told Kate? I can't wait to tell Teri. Can I tell Teri?"

"Yes, I've told Kate. And yes, you can tell Teri but let's wait until after I've seen the doctor. I know it's silly, but I don't want to jinx it."

"Mary? If this isn't too personal a question?"

"Yes?"

"What about the father? "

"He finished his coursework and went back to France. And anyway I wouldn't have expected him to be a father. He's not the type. He doesn't even know I'm pregnant."

When Mary first announced her pregnancy, Barbara was excited about the baby but dismayed by the circumstances. In her day, girls just didn't have babies on their own. They didn't make love before they got married, or if they did, they had enough sense to keep quiet about it. Not like the

single girls these days who talked openly about their sex lives. Who had sex lives instead of shamed, furtive assignations.

She was even more shocked that Mary wouldn't name the father. Barbara couldn't blame her, though. After all, what was a father to Mary?

Once she got over the shock she was thrilled about becoming a grandmother. She offered to fly out and stay with Mary in the last weeks of her pregnancy and for a couple of months after the baby was born. She had been so stingy with her time off that she had twelve weeks of vacation and eight weeks of sick leave and she could not think of a better way to use it.

Barbara was apprehensive about staying in what she assumed would be small quarters, but her excitement about the baby eclipsed her concerns about personal space.

Mary lived like a graduate student, on the top floor of an old Victorian in East Hill. The house had been converted to apartments in the late sixties. Mary's place was fairly spacious for grad student digs, and while it wasn't luxurious in the modern sense, it was not without its charm. Mary had a bedroom at the front of the house, overlooking the old elms and sycamores that lined the residential street.

Barbara's room was actually the

sitting room. So she could have some privacy, Mary had created two folding screens using scrap lumber and hinges salvaged from a renovation down the street. She had nailed together frames and stapled on some old sheets. She arranged the sofa bed on the side of the room farthest from the doors and put the screens up to turn the one room into two. This way Mary would be able to pass through her mother's room without disturbing her excessively and her mother would have some sense of privacy in the small apartment.

Barbara really liked Mary's friends. She imagined that a few of them were a bit stiff with her at first, but they did warm up, and she was glad that they

seemed to really love Mary. As much as Barbara had fallen down on the job of caring for her daughter, Mary had done a good job of taking care of herself.

## 39.

John came right on schedule on May eleventh, a classic eastern spring day. They brought him home from the hospital through streets exploding with cherry blossoms, tulips, and lilacs.

The first few months were a blur for Mary. She was overwhelmed, by her love for her baby, but also by his



endless need. He had a hard time feeding and it always seemed that the minute he got full he would be crying for a diaper change and the minute she had him cleaned up he would be nuzzling at her breast again. She couldn't get more than thirty minutes of sleep at a time and she worried that he wouldn't get enough food to grow.

She would see other parents and wonder, was it like this for everyone? And if it was, how did they survive? How did they have second, third, and fourth children?

Before she had John, Mary had never understood those women who seemed to fall apart when they became mothers. It seemed ridiculous — a baby weighs

only about eight pounds, how on earth could such a small creature throw an entire household into turmoil? Now she understood. Going to the bathroom by herself was her one luxury.

Her exhaustion was punctuated by moments of grace: his drowsy weight resting in her arms; the way he would turn to her as soon as she came into view; her always-fresh amazement when she put her finger in his palm and he gripped it and hung on tight.

And he did grow. With her mother there to help with changing, to run to the store for wipes when she ran out, and to bottle feed him while she napped, with Kate and Teri visiting as often as they could, and with her rotating crew of

helpful friends dropping off meals, doing laundry, and just providing her with adult company, she managed to get him to the three-month mark without going crazy or driving herself off a bridge due to lack of sleep.

Everyone had told her that it gets easier at three months and she discovered they were right. Suddenly he was big enough to eat several hours' worth at once, and she could sleep in five-hour chunks instead of 45-minute chunklets. She fell in love with him more every day.

Barbara had to return to Phoenix when John was four months old. Mary missed her, but she also enjoyed sharing a private world with her son. During her

pregnancy she had worried that she might not have the maternal instinct; that the experiences of her childhood would have rendered her unable to care for another human being. But it came naturally to her, and she knew she would kill anyone who tried to hurt him. She wanted everything in the world for him.

40.

Once Mary and John settled into a routine that allowed her some uninterrupted stretches between feedings, she hired an undergrad to come over every weekday afternoon while she locked herself in her bedroom to work on her dissertation. She was determined to finish and defend it before the end of

the academic year. She had dreamed of receiving her doctorate in the June ceremony and it was still going to happen.

Now that she was paying good money for her study time, she didn't give herself the luxury of procrastinating. She finished in March and defended in time to walk in June. As she walked across the stage to receive her doctorate, she remembered how she had daydreamed of this moment back when she was with Jack. How differently her life might have turned out.

Once she had her doctorate, Mary saved for a couple of months and finally had enough money to take John to her

favorite childhood beach, just the two of them. She bought him a swimsuit and a life jacket and some new rompers. On a whim she picked up a little pail and shovel set. He loved it the minute he saw it. She wondered how he would react to the ocean; after all, it was so different from the city streets and tidy parks he knew. She had taken him to the wading pool a few times and he really liked that, so she hoped he would see the ocean as just one giant, moving pool.

She couldn't wait to see sand, gulls, and waves through his eyes. She imagined them on the beach, looking for shells, making castles, marveling at the clam siphons sticking up out of the sand. She imagined him toddling in the sand,

asking, “Why, mommy? Why? Why?”

They left on the first Friday in August. That morning she dressed him in his frog romper, the one with the little lily pad on the behind. She brought him outside and let him toddle in the yard while she packed the car. Finally, at about noon, she was ready to go. She buckled him into his car seat and they were on their way. As they drove east she sang him songs and answered when he babbled back at her.

He got fussy so she pulled off the road and nursed him in the car before taking him into a diner so she could have late lunch and he could have some table food. The waitresses oohed and ahed



over his glossy brown curls and he giggled and babbled in return. They stayed a little longer than she'd planned because it was so pleasant and because the women kept bringing him more treats.

By the time they got back out to the car he was hungry again, so she nursed him, then as he drowsed she buckled him back into his car seat and got back on the road. Soon his eyelids drooped and he flopped to the side in a deep slumber.

She had hit bad traffic in Albany and now it was getting late; the sun was just about an hour over the horizon. She quickly calculated: she would hit Plainview in about 90 minutes. They could stay at the Holiday Inn on the far

end of town; they would be fresh the next day for the five hours or so it would take to get to the seashore.

By now it was dark. The roadway narrowed through a construction zone, concrete barriers funneling cars down to one lane in each direction. Mary glanced in the rear view mirror. John was still sound asleep, still slumped over, the terrycloth giraffe from her mom tucked in alongside. She hoped to get him to bed without waking him.

The Holiday Inn was just a few miles ahead. It would be good to lie down, to feel the cool sheets and let delicious slumber overtake her. They would both be in bed within the hour.

Suddenly she was blinded by

headlights coming straight at her. Instinctively she pulled the wheel to the right. Her Corolla smacked the concrete barrier and bounced back into the lane. The other car was almost on top of them now. She reached back to shield John. There was a grinding crash, and then nothing.

41.

February 2002 – Phoenix, Arizona

John really liked it when Aunt Teri came to babysit him but he didn't want his Grammy to know. He loved Grammy very much, and she was always so nice to him. She made his breakfast every morning and helped him take a bath. He

didn't like baths but she tried to make it fun by letting him bring toys into the tub. She tucked him in at night and read him stories and helped him put his toys away.

She was there, like the sun and the moon. She took him to peewee soccer, and came to watch him when he was in the preschool play. (As a turkey!)

When he went to his friend Allison's house, or his other friend Nate's house, they both had a mommy and a daddy. His Grammy already told him that his mommy died. When he asked if his daddy died too, Grammy said no. He wished he had a daddy who lived with him. But even though she wasn't a daddy, John really loved Aunt Teri.

Aunt Teri was fun. She liked to go on trips. She brought him back stuff like a dump truck from Italy that looked like his dump truck, except it had words on it that he couldn't read. And once she went to India and brought him back tin toys like the ones Indian children play with. She promised she would take him on a trip someday. He wasn't sure he wanted to leave Grammy to go on a trip, but maybe it would be okay because he would be with Aunt Teri.

When she babysat him she would let him take out all of his Duplo blocks at one time. Then she would get down on the floor with him and help him build his buildings and trucks and highways and bridges. She always had really good

ideas about how to make a better truck or a taller building, and if a piece broke she knew how to fix it with fingernail glue.

He also loved bedtime with Aunt Teri. She never made him take a bath and she would always read him two books and use voices that made her sound like the people and animals in the books.

Usually he hated to go to bed because he wanted to stay up and do whatever it was the grownups did after he was asleep. But when Aunt Teri was there he didn't mind going to bed at all. She was so boring after his bedtime. One time she let him stay up past his bedtime and it wasn't fun at all. At eight o'clock she

turned off the TV and put on some glasses. She took a big folder full of papers out of her bag and sat with them on one of the hard chairs at the dining room table. Then she read through a paper and handed that paper to him and picked up another one. She asked him to read the papers too, and although Grammy said he was pretty smart for a four-year-old, he could not make sense of these papers at all.

Teri said that they were about taxes and inchworm. His Grammy sometimes talked on the phone about inchworm for the car and the house and something called Life Inchworm, and sometimes in kindergarten they would sing a song about a busy inchworm and Mary Gold.



He didn't understand inchworm at all but he knew that he didn't want to sit on a hard chair and read about it with Aunt Teri.

42.

They had Show and Tell during kindergarten. If John had a new toy from Aunt Teri, sometimes he would bring it to show. Sometimes one of the kids would get up and talk about having their grandpa and grandma visit. He didn't know why some kids had a grandpa and he didn't. He thought it might be because

his mommy had died. Some of his friends in kindergarten even had two grandpas and grandmas. He just had his one grandma and his one mommy who died.

When he asked Grammy about grandpas, she told him it was true that some kids had two grandmas, but it was okay he had only one because she loved him twice as much to make up for being only one. But he still wanted to know why there was no grandpa.

“Grammy, why do some kids have grandpas? I only have a grandma.”

“Well, honey, sometimes grandpas die, because they’re old, and you don’t get to meet them.”

“Did my grandpa die, like my

mommy?”

“Well ... no. He didn't die. But he lives far away.”

“Allison's grandpa came to her house last week while we were on winter break. Her grandpa lives far away but he comes to stay with them sometimes. Why won't my grandpa come?”

“Well ...”

“Can you ask him to come? I want my grandpa to come and stay so I can talk about him in Show and Tell.”

“We'll see.”

After the Easter Bunny came, Grammy told John that his grandpa was going to come visit them and stay in the Holiday Inn. John might have liked having him stay at their house. Grammy said it was best to have him stay at the motel, but that she and John could go over there and play in the swimming pool if he

liked.

After two sleeps his grandpa came and John and Grammy went to pick him up at the airport. She was acting funny. She smelled really nice. She always smelled okay but today she smelled extra nice, like she was a flower. She kept patting her hair and pulling at her dress and while they were waiting she kept getting up to check the TV screen that told about the planes. Finally his grandpa's plane came and his grandpa came walking toward them, carrying a bag.

Grammy had shown John pictures, but his grandpa looked different in real life. He was bigger than he looked in

pictures, and kind of old, like those pictures of cowboys with big wrinkles around their eyes that John had seen in one of Aunt Teri's books. He was so tall that John was a little afraid, and he wore pointy-toed boots. He bent down so he was the same size as John and held out his hand.

“John, I am very pleased to finally meet you.”

John felt very big shaking this man's hand. He wasn't sure what he wanted to call him yet, so he just mumbled “hi” and looked down at the pointy boots.

“Well, have you two had lunch yet? Can I take you out?”

John looked over at his Grammy, hoping that she would say yes. She was

looking at his grandpa like she had never seen him before, but John knew that didn't make sense because they had once been together, like regular grandmas and grandpas. Suddenly his Grammy shook her head and blinked and then said that yes, his grandpa could take them to lunch.

They went to the restaurant by his grandpa's motel. It was the one with the boy holding up a big hamburger in front. It was his favorite restaurant after the pizza place, and today it was even better because Grammy let him have a chocolate milk shake to go with his grilled cheese sandwich.

Grammy sat on the same side with him



and his grandpa sat across from them. John wasn't sure what to do. If it was just him and his Grammy and Aunt Teri he would have taken one of his Hot Wheels cars out of his pocket and run it across his placemat, or maybe he would have filled in the connect-the-dots on the placemat, even though he had seen this one before and besides it was really for babies. But he wasn't sure it was okay to take out his Hot Wheels since his grandpa was company and he was never allowed to play at the table when they had company.

His grandpa noticed that he was looking at his placemat and asked him if he would play tic-tac-toe with him. He let John go first. Aunt Teri had showed

him that the secret was to start with the middle square, so he did and beat his grandpa in the first game. He felt kind of bad. He wasn't sure if it was okay to beat company, but his grandpa just laughed and said that John was a formidable opponent. John didn't know what a formidable opponent was, but his grandpa acted like it was good.

They played a few more games and John won every time. After the fourth game Grammy told him that his grandpa might be tired of being beaten and maybe they should do something else for a while. Their food had come so John ate his grilled cheese and listened to Grammy and his grandpa talk.

After the restaurant his grandpa asked

if he wanted to go to the pool at the Holiday Inn. Grammy nodded and told John that she had brought his swimming trunks.

Sometimes when they went to swimming pools Grammy would put on a swimsuit and go in the water with him. If it was a baby pool she would let him play with other kids while she sat on one of those lying-down chairs. This time Grammy and his grandpa both put on their swimsuits and got in the pool with him.

When Grammy went in the pool usually she would stand next to him and watch while he showed her how he could do a handstand or went underwater to look at people's legs. But

his grandpa liked to swim and he showed him some new tricks. First he showed him how to cannonball off the side of the pool. He could tell Grammy didn't like that very much though, so he only did it three times.

Then his grandpa showed him how to swim from one end of the pool to the other with his face in the water. He showed John how to turn so his mouth and nose would come out of the water just long enough for him to get a breath. John thought it was hard, but seeing his grandpa do it made him want to learn.

After they were done John used the shower in his grandpa's Holiday Inn room. He liked the motel bathroom because it had towels with one stripe

down the middle and a paper strip across the toilet seat to show that it was clean.

That night at home he asked Grammy if he could have some boots like the ones his grandpa wore. Grammy said they were called cowboy boots. John didn't think his Grandpa was a cowboy but he still wanted boots like his. Grammy said, "we'll see." She said, "we'll see" when he asked for a bike, then on Christmas there was a new bike under the tree. So maybe that meant he would get some boots too.

After a sleep Grammy said that his grandpa would stay for three more sleeps and then he would ride an

airplane back to where he lived. He was sad thinking that he would see his grandpa for only three more sleeps, but his Grammy said that that was a lot of time and they might be ready to get back to normal after that. John didn't think so. He thought his grandfather was so fun he could spend every day with him

School wasn't for another sleep. He wanted to go to kindergarten as fast as possible because he wanted to tell everyone about his grandpa, and the boots and the pool at the Holiday Inn. But then Grammy told him that his grandpa would be coming over to take them to the park after lunch. She told him to clean up his room and his grandpa would be there before he knew it.

He wanted to show his grandpa his room so he worked hard to put his toys away and put his clothes inside his drawers like Grammy had showed him. He took the book with pictures of his mom from the shelf and put it on his desk so he could show it to his grandpa.

It seemed like lunch took forever. He didn't even want to eat, but Grammy told him he had to, even the carrot sticks. He wished they could go to the restaurant for grilled cheese and milkshakes again, but Grammy said that was special, not for every day.

He was crunching on his carrot sticks when the doorbell rang. He jumped out of his chair and ran to the door. His Grammy came behind him and handed

him his napkin. He always forgot. He liked to wipe his mouth on his shirtsleeve, but Grammy said that shirts were for wearing and napkins were for wiping your mouth.

He peeked out the window and saw his grandpa standing on the front steps. He wanted to open the door but he wasn't allowed to. Sometimes he tried anyway but he could never figure out how to work the lock. Grammy reached over his head and let his grandpa inside. Like he did at the airport, his grandpa bent down so he was almost the same size as John. Today he was wearing the cowboy boots again and now he was wearing a hat. John thought the hat was even better than the cowboy boots and



decided that he would ask Grammy if he could have one of those too.

He took his grandpa's hand and pulled him. He wanted to show him his room.

"John! Give your poor grandfather a moment to collect himself."

"That's okay. John, let's take a look at that room of yours."

First he showed him his Duplo collection, then he showed him the Hot Wheels track that his Grammy would sometimes set up for him. He opened his closet and showed him his sleeping bag for when he was big enough to have sleepovers. He thought he would be ready for sleepovers when he grew up, maybe in second grade. He showed him the fuzzy gorilla and other baby toys that

he kept on his bookshelf. He remembered that he wanted to show his grandpa his memory book so he took it off his desk and held it out.

“Do you want to look at my memory book?”

“Oh, what’s this?”

“It’s a book with pictures from my mommy. She died when I was little.”

His grandpa took the book and sat down on John’s bed. He looked sad. John wondered if his grandpa was sad for him the way his Grammy was sad for him because his mommy died.

John pointed to pictures as his grandpa turned the pages.

“There’s my mommy and me when I was a little tiny baby. There’s my

mommy before I was borned. Grammy said she graduated.”

His grandpa nodded. Suddenly he set the memory book down and stood up. John was worried that he had said the wrong thing when he said graduated.

“Why does graduated make you and Grammy sad?”

His grandpa looked down at him and shook his head a little. “Oh, Johnny, it doesn’t make us sad. It makes us proud. You mommy worked very hard in school. You should be proud of her too. Now, I need to use your bathroom, why don’t you go see how your Grammy is doing?”

That afternoon Grammy and his

grandpa took him to the special park. It was far away so they went in the car. It was a lot bigger than the regular park and it had five slides, a big-kid swing set, a castle, and a sandbox.

When Grammy took him to the playground she would get on the slides and she would push him on the swings and sometimes she would even get on the swings with him but then she would get a funny look on her face, sort of like the time his friend Toby at preschool threw up all over the floor and Mrs. Reed had to pour kitty litter on it.

When they got to the park his grandpa ran over to the big kids' slide. John had never been on that slide because it was really high and usually there were big

boys playing rough on the ladder.

With his grandpa there, John felt safe. He went up the stairs with his grandpa following right behind him. At the top he waited. His grandpa asked him if he wanted to go down together. John thought that sounded best so he sat between his grandpa's legs and they slid down the slide. It was so fun he wanted to do it again and again. Then his grandpa asked if he would like to go on the swings. He pushed John higher than he had ever gone before.

“Grammy! Grammy! Look at me! I’m flying!”

The next day was Show and Tell day at kindergarten. John didn’t have

anything to show, but he told about his grandpa's hat and boots and about how they went on the biggest slide at the special park. And he told about how he got to have a milkshake at the restaurant and how he went to the pool at the Holiday Inn.

John couldn't wait to get home and ask Grammy and his grandfather about something he had figured out. Grandmas and Grandpas were the mom and dad of your mom or dad. Since Grandpa was his mom's dad, what about his dad's dad? Every time he asked his Grammy if he had a dad she would say that she would tell him when he was older. So he didn't even know if he had a dad, but maybe he had another grandpa.



44.

October 2002 – Phoenix, Arizona

The next time John's grandpa came to visit he took a taxi from the airport. John sat in the front room window watching for him. Finally a taxi pulled up, and John leapt off the couch and went to find Grammy.

“Grammy he's here. He's here!”



Grammy came out of her study, pushing her reading glasses to the top of her head.

“Okay, okay. Hold your horses. He’s not even to the door yet.” Grammy pulled the door open just as his grandfather came up the steps. He was pulling his suitcase behind him and had a package under his other arm.

The minute he was inside John tugged his suitcase away from him and dragged it to the spare bedroom. When he came back his grandfather was sitting in the easy chair with the package on his lap, and Grammy was sitting on the sofa.

“I have something for you.” He held the package out toward John. John took it and remembered to say ‘thank you’

before he yanked it open. Inside was a pair of boots like the ones his grandfather wore.

He put them on right away and asked if he could wear them to school Monday. Grammy said that would be okay but she said that most days he would have to wear his sneakers. The boots were for special times.

Every time his grandpa came, John told about it in Show and Tell. One time Curtis made fun of him. He said that everyone had a grandpa so why did John think his was so special? But John didn't care. He knew that no one had a grandpa quite like his.

45.

November 2003 - Phoenix, Arizona

John jumped off the school bus and ran home. Gramps was coming today. If his flight was on time he would be there by now. John had barely been able to concentrate on school all day.

As he opened the front door he heard

voices from the kitchen. Gramps! He dropped his backpack by the door and, barely remembering to take his shoes off, bolted into the kitchen. Gramps and Grammy were sitting at the table. Grammy had her hands around her coffee mug like always. Gramps was squeezing a piece of lemon into his iced tea and nearly spilled it when John hurtled into him.

“Easy there, cowboy!”

“Gramps! You’re here! Will you go swimming with me? I’m going to enter the science fair. Nate is the best speller in second grade. Allison is having a birthday party on Saturday. Grammy got me a bunk bed.”

“Hold on, hold on ... one thing at a

time. That's great about Nate. Who is Allison? We can go swimming, but I'm not sure when yet. Can I have my tea first?"

John let go of Gramps and took the chair next to him. He realized he was hungry and got up to check the cookie jar. There were some sugar wafers, so he took some and got himself a glass of milk. He sat back down, but it was hard to stay in one place. He wanted to tell Gramps everything and he wanted to take him out in the yard and show him his new swing set that he and Aunt Teri built from a kit.

He dunked his cookies and chewed on them while Gramps and Grammy talked. Something about the housing market and

interest rates. Boring. But he knew that Grammy would give him one of her looks if he interrupted, so he ate his cookies and waited for his turn to talk.

When he had finished his cookies, he realized that Grammy was saying his name.

“What?”

“John, don’t say ‘what?’ It’s rude. Say, ‘I beg your pardon.’”

“Okay. Um, I beg your pardon.”

“John, your grandfather and I have something we want to tell you.”

Uh-oh. Usually when grownups said this, it was something bad. Like she didn’t like his report card.

“John, how would you like it if I lived in Phoenix, instead of only coming

to visit?

If John still had cookie in his mouth he would have spit it out. Gramps living in Phoenix?

“Really? You might move here?”

“It’s more than might. I have an offer in on a house here. I have already sold my house in Massachusetts. If they accept my offer, I’ll go back home and pack up my house and move everything out here right away. If everything works out, I’ll be settled in here by the end of next month.”

“What if the people won’t sell the house to you?”

“I’ll still move here, but I’ll have to rent a place for a while. Either way, I’ll be living here soon.”

John couldn't speak he was so happy. He loved Grammy. He really, really did. She was so nice to him, and even though he hated some of her rules, especially the ones about vegetables and baths, he was secretly glad that she cared enough to make him eat broccoli and keep clean. And he loved Aunt Teri. She was always up for an adventure.

But he was jealous of the boys who had dads. Aunt Teri would play catch with him, and even Grammy would try to shoot baskets with him. And she signed him up for sports after school and ski lessons when they went on vacation. But they were girls and sometimes he felt like they didn't really get it.

“Wow! Where is your new house?”



Can I go see it?"

Gramps looked over at Grammy and she nodded. "I don't see why not. We'll all go. We can only look at it from the outside now, but you can see where it is, and see if you like the yard."

John ran to get his jacket, nearly knocking his milk glass over as he went. That reminded him that he was supposed to rinse his dishes and put them in the dishwasher. Another Grammy rule. He grabbed his glass and plate and, barely dampening them under the faucet, shoved them into the dishwasher on his way out of the room. Gramps was moving to town! Gramps was going to live near him!

When John came home from the first day of third grade, Gramps was in the living room with Grammy. He said he had a surprise for him at his house. No matter how many times John asked what the surprise was, Gramps wouldn't tell him. John wanted to go straight over there and see, but Grammy had just come

home from work and said she needed a few minutes to relax before they went running all over town. While she went about her business, Gramps left to get the surprise ready.

Finally, Grammy had read the paper and had her cup of coffee and said they could go to Gramps's house and see the surprise. He ran out to the car and was buckled in before she was even done locking the front door. How could anyone take so long to lock a door? And how could anyone walk so slowly? At last they were driving to Gramps's house and pulling into the driveway.

John knew he was supposed to wait for Grammy to stop the car and turn off the key before he got out, but he had the

door open before the car had stopped rolling and was at the front door while Grammy was still setting the parking brake. He pulled up short on the front steps. Gramps was kneeling down, petting a floppy-eared, spotted dog. He got down next to the dog and reached out to scratch him.

He looked up at Gramps. “Whose dog is he?”

“Why he’s yours, of course. He’s your surprise. He’ll live with me. Your grandma is allergic, and besides, he’ll be happier here where there’s someone home all day to keep him company. But we’ll take him for walks and to the park and it will be just like he’s your dog.”

A dog! A dog of his very own. He’d

had a hamster when he was little and he liked him, but he never got to play with him or anything. The hamster just stayed in his cage and ran on his wheel. He had seen other kids at the park with dogs, playing Frisbee and fetch. He couldn't wait to show his dog how to do tricks and catch a Frisbee.

“Does he have a name already?”

“No, I thought I would let you name him.”

“Can we call him Snoopy?”

Gramps laughed. “A boy after my own heart. Yes, Snoopy is the perfect name for a Beagle.”

Every day after Grammy got home from work, they went to Gramps's house

and walked Snoopy. Sometimes they would just go around the neighborhood so Snoopy could visit all his favorite trees and bushes and hydrants. But the best times were when they went to the park. John had saved his allowance to buy Snoopy some toys: a Frisbee and a ChuckIt.

Snoopy loved to run after the Frisbee. He would jump really high to catch it in his mouth. But Gramps said that too much Frisbee could hurt his back, so after a few minutes of that John would play fetch with him, throwing the ball as far away as he could with the ChuckIt. Gramps and Gram would throw the ball too.

When Gramps threw it he threw it so

far that Snoopy would get tired after only a few balls. John could always tell because he would flop down in front of him and hold the ball between his front paws, as if to say, “please don’t throw it again.” When this happened John and Gramps would play on the swings and slides and Gram would sit with Snoopy. She liked to scratch him behind the ears and call him her sweet boy.

John swung again, hard this time, from the hips like Gramps had shown him, but it didn't matter. The bat whiffed through air as the ball sailed past him. Fourth grade was the first year for real Little League, and he really wanted to be on the team. Nate would make it; he would be pitcher. Nate had an arm. John didn't



have an arm or anything else. Over and over Gramps pitched to him. Easy slow pitches, sliders, fastballs, underhand, overhand. He missed them all.

He threw his bat down. This was so stupid. He was never going to be a hitter. Nate couldn't hit but it didn't matter because Nate threw pitches that no one else could hit. John knew he would be stuck in the outfield again, probably right field. Everybody knew right field was the pity position.

Gramps disappeared into the house and came out a minute later with two cans of Pepsi. All right! Pepsi was their little secret. He hoped Grammy wouldn't come out to check on their practice. She always came over when he went to

Gramps's house. While they played in the yard, she stayed inside and read a book.

Grammy wouldn't let him have Pepsi. She said it would rot his teeth. One time when he was little she put a nail in a glass of pop, then had him check on it a week later. The nail was gone. Grammy said that the pop ate the nail away. He wasn't sure, because he thought maybe she just took the nail out, but it didn't matter. No pop at Grammy's house.

Gramps sat down on the back step and patted the space next to him. John settled in next to him and took a drink from his Pepsi.

"Do you want to keep working on your hitting?"

John reached forward and pulled a wad of grass from a crack in the sidewalk. He twisted off a piece and tossed it out into the yard. "I dunno. I kinda suck."

"Well, you're not Derek Jeter, but you could improve if you want to keep practicing."

"Do you think I could ever be good?"

"Well ..."

"You think I suck too, don't you?"

"John, look. You're not the best hitter, I'll give you that. But if you work at it, you can get better. Or you can put it aside and we can work on your fielding. I do think you should stick with the team."

"Was my mom good at sports?"

Gramps got quiet. He picked up his Pepsi and drank it all down, then set the can down and turned to John. "I never knew. When your mom was your age, I didn't believe girls should play sports so I wouldn't let her try out for any teams. I wish I had, but I didn't."

"Can we practice fielding next?"

"You bet. Finish your Pepsi and then trot on out to the fence over there. I'll hit you some flies and grounders and we can work on what you do when the ball comes to right field."

They stayed out there in Gramps's backyard until they couldn't see the ball anymore. By the time they were done, John knew how to corral grounders and had even caught a few fly balls up

against the fence, like they did in the big leagues. Maybe he would never be a great hitter but at least he wouldn't look stupid in the outfield.

48.

Grammy closed the refrigerator and heaved a sigh. “John, I told you once and I don’t want to repeat myself. I said we’ll see. You’re just going to have to accept that for now.”

John rolled his eyes, then dropped his gaze back to his dinner before Grammy could turn around and catch him being fresh. What was the big deal anyway?

Other kids went to Wet 'n Wild like normal people and it wasn't any big deal. He just wanted to go with Nate and Allison. Gram never liked swimming so he asked if Gramps could drive them. She was acting like he had asked to take a bus to Los Angeles by himself or something.

It seemed like ever since sixth grade started Gram had gotten all strict or something. She liked Allison and Nate but she was always hovering around when he played with Allison and sometimes she said that they had to hang out at home instead of going to Allison's. He liked Allison's house. Her mom wasn't home very much, so they could watch as much TV as they wanted.

He wasn't even sure he wanted Allison to go to Wet 'n Wild though. Weird things had started happening in the last month or so. She used to be a tomboy but now she always had this stupid purse with her and he had heard her talking to one of the other girls in class about needing new tops. The other girl had been all like, "Yeah, me too. My mom said I'm developing early." He didn't know what all that meant — he just wanted to be able to shoot baskets with her and hang out without her disappearing to do stuff with her purse.

And the water park ... ugh. They used to go swimming all the time at the pool. It was just a few blocks away so Gram had started letting him walk there on his



own. Nate would still go with him but Allison sometimes said she couldn't and when he asked her why she wouldn't tell him. Maybe girls were just stupid. He decided to wait until Monday and then ask Gram about the water park again; maybe she would have decided by then.

On Monday at breakfast he brought it up again. He asked if Gramps could drive him and Nate and Allison to Wet 'n Wild next week during Spring Break. Nate's parents and Allison's mom worked all day so they couldn't do it and Grammy would have to take a day off, plus she didn't even like water. And besides, Gramps was more fun. Gramps would probably ride some of the slides

with him instead of just watching from the sidelines like Grammy would.

Grammy set her coffee down and pressed her fingers against her right temple, like her head hurt, or she was trying to think. “John, I know you really want to go. I know it’s important to you, so I will try to figure out a way to make it work, but I need to go with you all, so I need to see what day I can take off work.”

John was so frustrated with waiting for an answer that he really wanted to roll his eyes, but he knew if he did there might be no water park at all, so he bit the inside of his lip and then said, “Okay. But can you please decide soon because Nate and Allison keep asking.”

He really didn't understand why Grammy was making such a big deal out of going with them, but whatever. Grownups didn't always make sense — everyone knew that.

Finally! They were on the way to Wet 'n Wild. John had started to think it was never going to happen, but finally Gram had agreed. She was up front now with Gramps, with the map unfolded over her lap. He wondered why the old folks didn't use GPS on their phones like normal humans, but whatever. Maybe maps were what they used when Gram was in college or whatever and as long as they got to the park he didn't care.

Allison was sitting right behind

Gramps. Nate was in the middle and John was behind Gram. He was glad he wasn't sitting right next to Allison because she just had on shorts pulled over her swimsuit. He could see Nate trying to look at her out of the corner of his eye. This was so stupid; Nate was acting like he wanted a stupid girlfriend or something. John reached over and punched him in the arm, hard.

"Ow! What'd you do that for, you loser?" Nate rubbed his arm and gave John a dirty look but John just looked out the window. If Nate wanted to be stupid, he wasn't going to waste his time talking to him.

"John! What do you think you're doing? If you hit Nate again, he and

Allison will go to the water park and you'll stay with your grandfather and me for the day. Now say you're sorry."

"Sry."

"I didn't quite catch that. What do you want to say to Nate?"

"I said I was sorry! Why is everyone hassling me?"

Grammy turned to face him. "John, no one is picking on you. We expect you to be civilized. Now settle down if you want to spend any time on the water slides. Agreed?"

Grammy fixed him with a look so John said, "Yes, Gram. I will be civilized." He thought it was stupid that Nate should get to look at Allison's boobs and get away with it while he was

the one who got in trouble, but he wanted to go on the slides so he kept his mouth shut.

When they got to the water park Grams parked the car, popped the trunk, and said, "I'll go get the tickets. I'll see you all at the gate." He headed off while Allison, Nate, and John unfolded themselves from the backseat. John and Nate took off their t-shirts and tossed them in the backseat. Allison looked at them for a moment, then wiggled out of her shorts and tossed them in the back too.

They waited while Gram folded her map and put on lip balm and zipped up her purse. Finally she opened the door

and got out. “Well, are you kids going to stand there or are you going to get your things out of the trunk?”

John had totally forgotten that there were towels in the trunk. He rummaged around and got one out for himself.

“John, can you get towels for your guests too?”

“I guess so.” He went back into the trunk and pulled out a large pink polka dotted towel and a blue and red striped one. He handed the pink one to Nate. “Here’s yours. It will go so nicely with your eyes.”

Nate snapped the end of the towel at him and then threw it back. “Give me the other one, you loser.”

Gram pushed between them and took

the pink towel from John and handed it to Allison. “Allison, honey, you can put this around your waist if you want.” Allison reached for the towel, and then, looking a little confused, wrapped it around her waist. John and Nate threw their towels over their shoulders and started for the gate.

When they got to the gate, Gramps was there with the tickets. He handed one to each of them without looking at them, then said something about needing to apply his sunscreen and left. Gram looked after him, then turned to John and his friends. “Okay, you three, we’ll see you at the food court at noon. Look out for each other, and no leaving one person out; you all three wanted to



come, so I expect you to play nicely.”

It was the best day of sixth grade. Even though John had hoped that Gramps would go on the slides with him and even though Nate kept talking to Allison like she was somebody new instead of the friend they had known since before kindergarten, they had fun. Allison dared them to do the Tornado, which looked to John like a big toilet bowl, but if Allison did it he wasn't about to say no. She was fun that day. Maybe she would go back to being fun Allison after this, instead of weird Allison with a purse.

It was Saturday afternoon and they were in Nate's rec room, playing Xbox. They had the shades drawn so they could see the screen better. Curtis and Nate were playing and John and Paul were sitting in front of them on the floor, leaning up against the big ottoman.

Mrs. Thompson had gotten home from

running errands, but after poking her head in to check on them she had left them alone. John knew she would probably appear at the door in about 15 minutes, carrying a tray of sandwiches, but he didn't really mind. He liked Nate's mom.

He didn't like stupid Curtis though. He didn't know why Nate invited him over when he was such a douche. Hardly anyone at school liked him, but Nate said he liked playing Xbox with him. John tried to ignore him as best he could.

Right on cue, Mrs. Thompson appeared in the doorway with her tray of sandwiches. John got up to give her a hand. After she left, Curtis paused the game and poked him with his foot. "New

girlfriend, John? Somebody hot for the cougar?”

Nate turned and punched Curtis, hard, on the upper arm. “Shut the fuck up. That’s my mom you’re talking about, ya douche.”

Curtis stared at him for a moment. He looked about ready to say something, but then he just picked up his controller and un-paused the game. John figured he didn’t want to piss Nate off — Curtis didn’t have an Xbox.

They played for a few more games, then Curtis put his controller down and poked John again with his foot. “But seriously dude, you got to get some game.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking

about.”

“Yeah, I guess you don’t. That’s your problem. Do you even know what a blowjob is? I’ve had three already and you’re still playing dolls with Allison. Dude, we’re going to be in high school next year, and you act like you’re still in first grade.”

Nate almost spit out a bite of his sandwich. “Dude, you so totally have not had three blowjobs. Who with?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out. We’re talking about your fruity friend here. Listen loser, Allison isn’t even close to hot. If you’re going to spend all that time with a girl, she has to be fuckable, see?”

John didn’t see. He didn’t want to ...

fuck Allison, he just liked to go to her house and sit in her rec room and listen to music or read comic books. He thought Katy Perry was pretty hot, and that English woman on that cooking show his Gram liked was okay for an older lady, but Allison was just a friend. She didn't really even seem like a girl. He thought about the girls in class. There was one, Sophie, who all the boys liked, but she had a boyfriend from the high school.

From Nate, "Okay, so I agree Allison's no Sophie, but you have to admit, her tits are nice."

John should have known. "Look, I don't want to talk about it. Allison's not my girlfriend. She's just a friend that's a

girl.”

“What, you’re in fourth grade now? I’m telling you, loser. Keep hanging around Allison’s doghouse and you’re never going to get a hand job, much less a blowjob.”

John looked over at Nate, but Nate just shrugged. John looked at his watch and jumped up. “I gotta go. My gram said I need to be home by five to help her with something.”

“Oh, Granny needs her little precious home. Okay, loser. Have a nice time with your granny. Tell her Curtis said hi.”

John jumped up and was ready to take a swing at Curtis but Nate cocked his thumb towards the door, where Mr.

Thompson had just appeared, so John just gathered up his stuff and said 'excuse me' to Mr. T. as he squeezed past him on the way out.

On the way home he thought about calling Gramps. He hoped he might be at home when he got there; maybe there would be time to go outside and play catch or kick a ball around before Gram dragged him off to do whatever chore she had dreamed up for him today.

Monday when he saw Allison between homeroom and first period, John tried to avoid meeting her eyes. Now that Curtis had pointed out her tits he had to admit, they did look nice. He had finally figured out what was going



on with the girls over the last few years; they almost all had tits now and he could see bra straps under their clothes. Even the girls without much in the way of tits wore bras.

Now it was like once he had started to think of Allison as having tits he couldn't unthink it, and he didn't know where to look when he saw her. What if she noticed him looking at her chest? What if, even worse, she wanted him to look at her chest? He didn't want that. Allison wore glasses and she was always reading anime comics and talking about science stuff that no one else could understand. She didn't look anything like Katy Perry or Sophie.

At lunch he slid in next to Nate then

looked up just as Allison was making her way over to them. He dropped his eyes. He didn't want her to sit with them because Curtis had the same lunch period and if Curtis saw them at lunch together he would never shut up about it. And he didn't want Curtis to say that stuff about how Allison wasn't fuckable right in front of her. Just because John didn't want her for his girlfriend didn't mean he wanted her to hear Curtis's nasty talk.

Crap, she was coming over. The other side of the table was full — the only space was next to him, but he would have to scoot over. She was standing over him now with her tray. “Hey, can you scoot over so I can squeeze in?”

John's face got hot. He felt trapped. Without looking up he said, "There's no room."

"Sure there is. If you just move over a little there's plenty of room."

"No there's not. Aren't there some girls you can sit with?"

He finally chanced a look at her. She gave him a long, unblinking look. He saw her lip tremble, just barely, and then she tossed her head. "I didn't want to sit here anyway. I'm going to go sit with Paige."

Just as she turned to go, one tear escaped; John saw it slide out of the corner of her eye and down her nose. He turned to say something to Nate but Nate was focused on his submarine sandwich

and wouldn't look up, so John picked up his pizza and took a bite.

Usually on Mondays he would go hang out at Allison's, but today he went straight home after school. When he got home his Gram was there, reading her paper and drinking her coffee at the kitchen table. She looked up when he came in, then looked at the clock.

"Aren't you home a little early? Didn't you go to Allison's today?"

John crossed to the fridge and took out the milk jug. He was about to uncap it and chug but then he remembered Gram was there and set it on the counter while he reached into the cupboard for a glass. "Um, no. I didn't feel like it."

“Is everything okay?”

John suddenly felt annoyed. Why was his grandmother so nosy all of a sudden? “Everything’s fine. Maybe I just didn’t feel like going over today. Is that okay with you?”

Gram raised her eyebrows then took a sip of coffee. “Yes John, it’s fine with me, I just thought it was unusual.”

“Well it’s not. Nothing is wrong. Everything is fine. I’m fine. I’m going to my room so I can have some privacy!”

His grandmother picked up her newspaper and rattled it to straighten a crease, then leaned forward to inspect the obituary page. “Okay then. I’ll be around. Dinner’s at 6:30.”

But John was already halfway to his

room.

50.

March 2011 – Phoenix, Arizona

Sam dribbled the ball up field. John paced him, a little behind, and just as they had practiced, Sam feinted as if he was going to pass to Eric on his other side, then passed to John. John trapped the pass then kept the ball moving up

field. He was almost in scoring distance of the goal. His defender breathed heavily right behind him, but John was a little smaller and a little quicker. Just a little farther up field and ... shoot! The goalie stepped forward as the ball did an abrupt drop, sailed a few inches below the goalie's outstretched hands, and swished into the goal.

A cheer went up from the stands. It was early season, so there weren't many people out watching them, just parents. He heard Gramps and Grammy and, louder than anybody, Aunt Teri's voice through her vintage megaphone. Some of the guys on the team teased him about the old people cheering for him, but once Grammy couldn't make it to a game and



he had really missed her. So he ignored the bullshit from that asshole Curtis and his pals. The old folks were okay with him.

He loved soccer. He had survived Little League, but he never really felt comfortable out there in right field. When they got to ninth grade they couldn't be in Little League any more. Nate went on to play on the school baseball team, but John didn't even bother to try out.

He had been in peewee soccer league back in kindergarten and first grade. He knew high school soccer was totally different but he had decided to go out for it. He figured it couldn't be any worse than baseball.

Gramps would practice in the yard with him, but he wasn't much of an opponent. When Gramps was the goalie, John always got through, but he did like it when Gramps would pass to him and help him practice dribbling. Some nights they would stay out until Grammy came to the door and said John had to come in and do his homework.

Sometimes he wondered about Grammy and Gramps. He knew they had been married once and that they must have done it back then, because they had his mom. That his existence was proof that his mom had also done it bothered him, but since he couldn't remember her, it didn't gross him out the way thinking about his grandparents did.

Gramps had been living in Phoenix for over seven years now. Sometimes he thought he saw Gramps looking at Grammy in a funny way, but Grammy was the same as ever. She still had her rules. She still made John put his dishes in the dishwasher. Now that he was old enough to use the washing machine she had him do some of his laundry too. Mostly his soccer things, because she said they were smelly (they were). He didn't mind because he was embarrassed about his cup. He didn't think Grammy should have to touch his cup. And he did his underwear too. It was too weird to have your Grammy wash your dirty drawers.

John walked into the locker room to get ready for practice, and everyone stopped talking. He looked around, but no one met his eyes. They must have been talking about him. He had heard the word “granddad,” but had not caught any of the rest of it. As his teammates looked from each other to the floor, he sought out Nate.

“What’s going on, man? Why did everyone clam up when I walked in?”

Nate looked at his feet and shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Oh c’mon Nate. Tell me what the hell is going on.”

Finally one of the other kids stepped forward; that asshole Curtis.

“We were talking about how fucked

up your grandfather is.”

“What are you talking about? My grandfather isn’t fucked up.”

“Yeah, that’s what you say.”

“What the fuck are you talking about!?”

“Oh, you want to get smart now. Well then fine, dirt bag, I’m not going to tell you. But everyone at school is going to know by tomorrow. Your grandfather is a dirt bag alkie. Your dirt bag grandfather was in prison. Bet you didn’t know that, smart boy.” Curtis pushed past him, snapping his bare leg with a towel as he exited. As the door swung shut, John looked around at the rest of his teammates, daring any of them to say anything bad about his grandfather. All

eyes were on the floor. Finally they all filed out the door to the field.

John tried to focus on the practice. He had been getting much better at passing and the coach said at the rate he was going, he would be able to make varsity as a sophomore next year.

Every time the ball came near him he pretended it had Curtis's stupid asshole face on it and it was easy to surge forward and pass it hard to his teammate up field. He would find out what they were talking about. He knew Nate knew. He would make him tell him after practice.

In the locker room, dressing after showers, Nate wouldn't meet his eyes. John was pissed off. What the hell was

going on that no one wanted to talk to him? Nate was supposed to be his best friend, but he was treating John like a leper or something.

Usually they walked home together, but today Nate got dressed in a hurry. John wasn't going to let him get away, so he threw his clothes on while he was still wet so they could leave at the same time. He walked with Nate for about a hundred yards, until they were on the other side of the soccer pitch, off school grounds. Then he tackled him, wrestled him to the ground, and sat on him.

“Tell me what the fuck is going on, asshole!”

“I'm telling you, I don't know.”

“Yes you do. You've been avoiding

me all practice. You know. What was that fuckface Curtis talking about? What were you all saying about my grandfather? I'm not letting you up until you tell me."

John brought his fist back, ready to punch his best friend right in the mouth if he didn't tell him the truth.

"Okay, okay, okay. Don't hit me. I'll tell you, but you can't blame me. I'm just telling you what I heard."

John sat back on his heels, not releasing Nate, but easing up on the pressure a bit. He waited for Nate to begin.

Nate started, between breaths. "You know ... how ... you said your mom died when you were little?"



John felt a prickle of sadness. He didn't remember his mom, but he always missed her. "Yes. What does asshole Curtis know about that?"

"How did your grandmother say she died?"

"She said she died in a car accident."

"Did she say where? Did she say how the accident happened?"

His grandmother had never really given him the details. When he was little she said she'd tell him when was older, but when he got older her answers had rambled and he thought that maybe she didn't quite remember. She was getting kind of old.

"No, she never really told me."

"Okay. Now, I don't know if this is

true or not; I'm just telling you what I heard. Curtis has an uncle who lives up in Massachusetts and used to work in the county sheriff's office where your mom was from. The uncle came to visit. They were talking in the living room while he was outside, but he heard the whole thing.

“He said that your grandfather used to live in that town, and that he used to drink, a lot. A whole lot. He said everyone in town knew he was a drunk. He said that when you were a baby, your mom was driving through town with you in the car. Your grandfather was drunk, driving home from the bar. He hit your mom's car head-on and killed her. He spent almost four years in prison.”

John was silent for a moment, and then suddenly he was all clenched, flailing fists. He reared forward and started swinging at Nate as if his life depended on it. He felt his fist make contact. Nate tried to block his windmilling arms, but John couldn't stop.

He couldn't see, he couldn't hear, he couldn't think. There was only a curtain of red and the words, "no, no, no." Suddenly he felt his jacket tighten around him as someone grabbed him by the collar and pulled him off Nate. He didn't turn to see who it was, he just twisted out of his jacket and ran like hell. He didn't want to go home yet. He needed to move. He ran until his legs were leaden,

then turned for home.

When he walked in, Gramps was sitting at the kitchen table with mug of tea. It looked gross. Milk congealed on the top. A squashed teabag sat on the table next to his cup, leaking brown water. Grammy was there too, with her mug of coffee, and for some reason she wasn't making Gramps clean up the mess from the tea bag.

Gramps looked up when John came in, then looked down again. Then he looked up again as if he suddenly noticed the blood on John's shirt, and his missing jacket. "John!"

"I got in a fight."

His grandfather didn't look surprised.

“The coach called.”

John felt his stomach lurch. His grandfather knew. But he couldn't know; it wasn't true.

“He said he had to pull you off Nate and when he asked Nate what happened he told him about the locker room. John, I'm sorry you had to find out this way. I planned to tell you, someday. I owed it to you to tell you, and I will be sorry for the rest of my life that I did what I did.”

“You mean what Curtis said is true?” John felt his face get hot. Then he was chattering cold. He felt dizzy and reached out for a chair. Grammy jumped up and helped push the chair under him as his legs gave out.

Gramps blurted, “I didn't want you to

find out this way. I wanted you to be able to grow up happy and normal. And ... I wanted you to love me. I did a terrible thing, but I paid for it, and it changed me. I'm no longer the man who caused that accident. I've learned so much, and I love you so much. I can never bring your mother back, and that's a regret that will haunt me forever. But I can love you, and I hope someday you will be able to forgive me."

John stared at Gramps, refusing to believe his ears. He sat like that for a few moments, frozen. The house was silent except for the clock ticking on the kitchen wall. In the distance he could hear a train whistle, and then closer, the sound of a screen door banging as the

wind got ahold of it. But it all seemed fake, like it was happening in another world. Gramps seemed fake too. John kept just sitting there, kept staring at Gramps and not really seeing him, until the ringing phone startled him.

No one moved to get it. Grammy sat and watched him. He couldn't look at her right now. She knew too, had known all along, and she had never told him anything, even all the times he asked her straight out about how his mom died.

So, Grammy knew and she was in on the secret too. He wanted to jump up and start hitting Gramps the way he had hit Nate. He was seeing that red haze again. He leapt forward, but instead of going for Gramps's neck, he shoved past him,

yanked open the back door and nearly fell down the steps as he bolted for the street.



51.

January 2000 – Bayview Prison

Meeting was sparse again tonight. Robert took his seat and listened to the racket around him, waiting for Clint to come in and settle everyone down. His sleep was shot to hell. He'd been thinking a lot lately about that guy Frank.

He needed someone to talk to. He could make it through his days, but the nights, the dreams, were killing him.

Clint came in clapping and shouted for everyone to take their seats and settle down. Ted came in at the last minute and slid into a chair two seats down.

When Robert's turn came he didn't have the energy to wave Clint off. Clint pressed the advantage. "Would you like to share with us tonight Robert?"

Robert looked down, examining his fingernails. He didn't want to share, but he was willing to try anything at this point, so he got to his feet.

"Hi, I'm Robert and I keep insisting I'm not an alcoholic, but maybe I am."

"Welcome, Robert."

“The first time I spoke in meeting I said I was in prison for driving drunk and killing a young woman. This is true, but I neglected to tell you that the young woman was my daughter. I ... killed my daughter. I dream about her almost every night now.”

Robert looked around the room. Some faces were blank, but Clint sat forward in his chair. Ted and Frank both nodded. Suddenly he felt embarrassed. He had said too much. He sat down and when Clint asked him if he had anything more to say he shook his head.

After meeting Ted caught up with him about halfway across the TV room. “Wow, that was a pretty heavy revelation in there. That took guts. Nice

job.”

“Yeah, nice job. I killed my child.”

“You have to talk to heal.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t heal. Maybe I don’t deserve to. Maybe my life is a waste.”

“Robert, no one’s life is a waste.”

“I would argue with you about that.”

“What I should say is that it doesn’t have to be. I’ve been there. I know.”

“You’ve been at this ‘rock bottom’ people are always talking about? What the hell is that anyway?”

“You ever wonder why I’m here? It’s not like I go home to a suburban split-level ranch house at the end of our meetings. I go back to the cellblock, just like you. I have a story, and it’s a mess,

just like yours. Stick around the program long enough and you realize we're all the same. Addicts, we're all a bunch of fucking clichés."

"Okay, I'll bite. What are you in for?"

"Being a stupid fuck."

"No, but really."

"Well, there are details, but that's gist of it. Your problem is drinking. Mine was drugs. I was coked up all the time. You know how old I am?"

Robert would have guessed sixty, sixty-five.

"Fifty. I'm fifty years old, but you probably thought I was in my sixties. It's okay; you won't offend me. I know I look like shit. I was a cokehead.

Couldn't get enough of it. I don't know if I was ever straight for the ten years I was addicted. I had a family, a little one. Wife and son. They left. And when they left, was that a wakeup call? No, I went in deeper.

“If I had been coked up all the time before, after they left I was twice as coked up, still all the time. And I was running out of money. I had been dealing for a while. That kept me above water, but eventually, you deal the drug that you're chasing and you start to take a little out here and there. You think no one will notice, which is just fucking stupid, because of course they notice.”

“Wow, you were a dealer?”

“Yep. Coke is expensive. Anyway,

like I was saying, suppliers, they count everything, they weigh everything. The first time I did it, he let me make it up, and he didn't hurt me. I was a good dealer and my users loved his stuff, so he let me off with a warning.

“That scared me, but I thought I could outsmart him. I started cutting it, selling the same weight and the same number of bags on the street, and bringing back the same cash. I was on my way up the ladder, with guys working under me.”

Robert cocked his head forward, eyebrows almost to his hairline.

“I got away with it for a little while. But suppliers, you know, they have a brand, and I was fucking up his brand. Cut it a little and no one will be the

wiser, but I started selling half-assed garbage. I knew it and the customers figured it out. They started to go elsewhere and suddenly I was on the hot seat again.

“My supplier sent a couple of his guys to rough me up, but he didn’t send enough guys. When you’re on coke, nothing scares you. I came out guns blazing and killed the first guy. The guy behind him ran, but he had seen the whole thing and he ratted me out.

“I could have rolled over on the whole lot of them, but I knew if I did, prison would be where I died and it would not be painless. So, I kept my mouth shut and took the sentence. I’m in for twenty. I did my first ten in



Supermax, but they moved me here for good behavior. So, yeah. I did hit that ‘rock bottom’ you’ve heard of.”

With that, Ted pushed past him and out of the room, putting his hand briefly on Robert’s arm as he went.

That night as Robert lay in bed he felt different. Since he first started dreaming about Mary there had been a ten thousand pound weight on his chest. It was still there but he felt the smallest hint of relief, as if someone had removed ten or twenty of the ten thousand pounds. It wasn’t much, but he would take any relief he could get.

“Robert? Robert. Do you have anything to say this evening?”

Robert started. He had been lost in thought. He realized he had no idea what the last few guys had talked about. Clint had zeroed in on him now and he felt a little guilty, like a schoolboy who has been caught woolgathering. He looked around and saw they were all looking at

him expectantly, so he stood up.

“Hi, my name is Robert and I’m an alcoholic.”

Shit, where had that come from? Maybe it was the steady pressure of the group, or maybe just the pressure of his own reality: he had been blackout drunk the night he killed Mary. There was no getting around that. And he had been drunk the weekend before that and the weekend before that, and the weekend before that.

“Welcome, Robert!”

Robert stood stunned for a moment, then sat back down. He couldn’t think of anything else to say, but Clint seemed satisfied. He looked around the room. Frank nodded at him. He looked over at

Ted, who gave him the thumbs-up. This pleased Robert much more than he wanted to admit.

After meeting, Ted caught up with him at the back of the room. "How you doing?" he asked.

"I haven't seen you in a while," Robert said. "Where have you been?"

"Infirmary. I have hepatitis. Sometimes it flares up and I'm bedridden for a while."

"I thought..."

"You thought I was a cokehead and only junkies get hepatitis?"

"Uh ..."

"I was in Supermax for ten years. Stuff happens to men in there. Stuff that gives us hepatitis."

“I’m sorry.”

“Enough about me. How are you?”

“I finally used the A-word.”

“Yeah. Good for you. How did it feel?”

“It was ... hard. I always thought I’m not like these people. I always made fun of the clichés, and thought I was above their problems. Tonight I realized that I’m not fit to look at them. How many of them have done what I did?”

“So, what are you going to do now? Me, I lost my kid, and deserved to, but I believe he’s happy now. That makes me happy. And my ex, she figured out my shit pretty quickly. I checked up on her a few years ago. She found a good man, a good father for my kid. A better father

than me. I learned. It took me a while, a long time. I was in the pen for almost two years before I was even willing to consider it might be my fault. But I did learn, and you can too. As for the clichés, recovery runs on clichés — they're our framework. You need a framework; you can't stand up on your own."

Robert shrugged and Ted patted him on the arm, then turned and walked back towards his cellblock.

Robert Lewis  
Bayview Correctional Center

February 13, 2000

Dear Barbara,

I hope I am not presuming too much in writing to you. I would understand if you hate me. I hate myself. I will understand if you throw this away and never respond and will take your silence as my answer. I know that I did something unforgivable. Most days I want to die from guilt. I just wanted to tell you that, and apologize for what happened. I know I can't take it back, but I am sorry.

I hope all is well with you.

Robert



Barbara Lewis  
2112 Pima Court  
Phoenix, Arizona 85042

Feb 27, 2000

Robert,

I debated whether I should respond to you. I am not sure I will ever forgive you, but at the very least I appreciate that you reached out. As for your wish to die, I see your solipsism is fully intact.

John is as well as can be expected, given the circumstances.

Barbara

Robert Lewis  
Bayview Correctional Center

March 13, 2000

Dear Barbara,

You're entitled to be angry with me but I don't understand the dig about solipsism. I haven't had a drink since I have been in prison. I've changed. I feel horrible about what I did.

I'm in AA and one of the steps is that I have to make amends. I know I can't make amends to Mary, but I was hoping I could make amends to you. Again, if you would rather I just go away, I will understand. I am glad to hear that John is

okay.

Robert

53.

April 2000 – Bayview Prison

Robert was so sick of looking at the inside of that multi-purpose room he didn't think he could take it anymore, but here he was again, prompt for the Tuesday night meeting. He took his usual seat as Clint called them to order. There

were some new faces in the room, maybe eight or ten new inmates, but some of the old group remained, including Ted and Frank.

Clint had the new guys introduce themselves. Around the room: “Hi, I’m Bill and I’m an alcoholic.” “I’m Jeff and I’m an alcoholic.” “I’m Jason.” “I’m Tyrone and I’m an alcoholic.” “I’m Glenn.”

Robert fidgeted in his seat. He used to hope that newcomers would take up all the time so he wouldn’t even be addressed but today he wanted to talk. He needed to talk. Finally: “Robert, do you have anything for the group?”

Robert got to his feet. He crossed his arms, but that felt confrontational, so he

let them fall to his sides. That felt awkward. He finally settled for slipping them into his pockets.

“I’m Robert and I’m an alcoholic. It has been thirty-two months since my last drink. I am here because I was driving drunk and caused an accident that killed my only child, my daughter.”

Clint nodded.

“I ... I don’t know how to deal with this. I don’t see how I can live after what I did. I tried to block it out, but that didn’t work. I guess if I were on the outside I might still be drinking, I don’t know. The guilt is killing me.”

“What do you feel guilty about?” Clint asked.

“What do you think? What is it with

you social worker types? I feel guilty because I killed someone and even worse because she was my child.”

Frank had turned. He nodded. “What about before that? What was your relationship like?”

Robert paused. He realized that they didn’t know what was completely obvious to him.

“We were estranged. For over ten years.”

“What about before? Were you married to her mom? Did she grow up with you?” Frank asked.

“Her mother and I were married until a few years after she left home.”

“Me, I lost custody of my kids when the oldest was six, but I remember their

baby years like it was yesterday. What was your daughter like back then?"

Robert was about to say fuck if he knew, when he realized he did know.

When he and Barbara were first married, he had lived like a king. When he woke up to get ready for work, his clothes were mended and pressed and laid out. She always had breakfast hot and ready. When he arrived home, she would have his first drink already waiting. She put dinner on the table at seven every single night.

She had been a perfect wife until Mary came along, then suddenly she had no time for him. She spent her time breastfeeding her, bathing her, cooing to her. She got up at night to tend to her.



Suddenly his shirts weren't ironed quite as nicely and often all he got for breakfast was a bowl of cold cereal and a cup of instant coffee that he had to fix for himself.

He resented Mary's intrusion, so he had ignored her as much as he could. But now he could remember things about her, charming things. Her toothless smile. The way she seemed to track everything going on around her. Her first steps:

She was just about a year old. He was in his den after work, planted in front of the TV, as was his habit. She came scooting in and planted herself in front of the coffee table. She had her back to him. She cast a few glances back at him

but was more interested in the table in front of her. She gripped the edge with both hands and pulled herself up. She squatted up and down a few times. Then she pulled herself up and stayed for a moment, holding on to the table, before she let go and lurched the four or five steps to him.

“And what did you do then? Were you proud of her?”

Robert sat for a moment, thinking. No, he hadn't been proud of her. Back then, he would not have thought to be proud of anything Mary did. Annoyed yes, but not proud. She had put her little sticky warm hand on his leg. Not taking his eyes off the TV, he had pushed it off, causing her to lose her balance and fall on her

diapered butt. Then he had called for her mother to come get her.

That night Robert dreamed that he was home alone with Mary. First she was in her high chair and he was feeding her some glop from a jar. Then he was sitting with her on the floor of his den. She was next to the coffee table pulling herself up. When she took her hands off, swaying, but standing tall and proud on her own, she turned and gave him a smile of such radiance that he thought he would burst.

Barbara Lewis  
2112 Pima Court  
Phoenix, Arizona 85042

April 23, 2000

Dear Robert,

I'm happy for you that you're in AA, although I have to wonder, would you have bothered if you hadn't killed our daughter?

As for my comments about solipsism – you wish you could die? Did Mary have that choice? You took that away from her, so frankly, your pity party is not all that compelling to me.

She was my child too. I will be forever haunted by the sight of her body

in the morgue. Then to find out that you –  
YOU were the cause.

I can't die. I'm raising our grandchild.  
He looks just like her.

Barbara

Next meeting Robert felt embarrassed so he sat silent when Clint called on him. Frank was there that day, sitting just in front of him and to the left. Frank's turn had already come and gone, but he raised his hand for another. When Clint nodded him on, Frank stood and faced Robert. "Look, you probably don't want

to hear this, but last week? You were honest for the first time. I know you think you'll die of guilt but I can tell you the only way out of it is through it. Tell us more about your daughter."

Robert glared at him but Frank just looked steadily back.

She had started out trusting him. He realized that now. But then he did a terrible thing. When she was three he hurt her and after that she just stayed out of his way.

"What happened?" Frank asked.

It was a Friday night. One of his drinking nights. It had been a hell week at work and he had been looking forward to the end of it. Barbara and Mary were out running errands. He was

in his den, TV blaring, working on his third glass of pinot noir when he heard Barbara's car in the driveway. A moment later they came in, Mary chattering as her mother brought in the groceries.

The chatter came down the hall and suddenly she was in the den. She ran in front of him, trailing a pink balloon behind her. He glanced over at her and she cried, "Balloon! Mary got balloon!" As she ran, she turned to look at it, fascinated by the way it followed her. She veered toward the coffee table.

The balloon veered with her, clipping his glass and knocking it to the floor. As the pinot bloomed onto the carpet he caught her by the arm, wrenching it as he



spun her around to look at him. He backhanded her hard across her left cheek then spun her out of his grip. She tumbled to the carpet and burst into tears.

“Daddy! Daddy hurt! Mommmmeeee!”

Barbara rushed into the room and pushed him aside. She scooped Mary up and cooed as Mary buried her face in her neck and sobbed, “Daddy hurt.”

Barbara reared back and looked at Mary’s face. It was red where Robert’s slap had landed.

“You hit her?”

“Look, I’m sorry. She spilled my wine.”

“You HIT her. That’s it.”

Pulling Mary close, she left the room.

He heard her upstairs opening and closing drawers. About fifteen minutes later she appeared at the door of the den, Mary on her hip and her suitcase in her other hand.

“I’m taking Mary away from you. What kind of man attacks his own child?”

“Don’t you walk out that door. You need to clean up this mess.”

Barbara just looked at him.

“You’ll be back. You don’t have anywhere to go, you bitch!”

Barbara didn’t respond, she just spun around and walked away. A moment later he heard her car start up and saw the sweep of the headlights as she turned out of the driveway and into the street.

“Then what happened?”

Robert started. He had forgotten where he was. He looked up and saw the expectant faces. He wished he could have said that he went after Barbara, apologized, and made a promise to be a better father. He wished he could have said that Mary came to trust him again. But the truth was, he had done nothing to earn back her trust. He had barely acknowledged that she was human.

That night he had attacked the pinot with renewed vigor, opening several bottles in succession, savoring the woody dryness as it slid over his tongue and down his throat, blotting out everything else as it went.

That night in prison, he dreamt about

her again. In his dream she invited him to have tea with her bears. In life she had never done this with him, though she had had countless tea parties with her mother and even once with the carpenter who came to fix the porch.

Honored to be invited, he folded himself into her tiny rocking chair, so real in his dream that he could feel the arms digging into his hipbones. She offered him a cup of tea, and with the utmost delicacy, he raised the clunky plastic cup to his lips and drank.

55.

Robert understood how alcohol numbed. He hadn't thought that alcohol numbed him but he understood how it numbed other people. He didn't know that anger numbed too.

He was steeped in anger. It was the warp and woof of his daily life. It was his staff, his sustenance, his atmosphere,

and his nourishment. It was everything about him but the actual cells of his body and it kept him from knowing about anything else.

He felt angry when he woke up, he went through his days pissed off, and he fell asleep cradling his rage like a precious pet. He hadn't seen his daughter's affection or her joy; he only saw that she got in his way. He hadn't appreciated his wife's devotion and love; he only noticed the anger he felt when she fell short and he had to get his own socks out of the drawer or pour his own cereal.

The more the anger took on a life of its own, the more he fed and coddled it. He protected it jealously from any threat.

His anger and pain at his own father were so distant that he couldn't feel them anymore. But the overflowing laundry basket, the burned toast, the child yammering in the next room: they were always right there, feeding the monster. And he was right there to make sure the monster got everything it needed.

When he first started AA, he thought they would talk about the mechanics of addiction, how much they drank or smoked or snorted, the stupid things they did while under the influence. But it wasn't the addiction they talked about. What they talked about was what failed to happen in the spaces that didn't exist because they had filled them up with wine, coke, heroin, rage.

The first time Clint asked him what he was so mad about, he snorted, as if to say, “What the hell is there to NOT be mad about?”

The second time someone asked, it was Ted.

“Isn’t everyone angry? If they’re not, they should be,” Robert said.

“Not like you. You’re a fucking rageaholic. You don’t have to be, you know.”

Robert saw a glimmer of something. Ted had lots to be angry about, but he was calm.

“What about you? Weren’t you ever angry?”

Ted nodded. “Yes, I spent the first forty-four years of my life in a rage.”



“What changed? You’re not like that now.”

“I realized that it was killing me, almost literally, but surely figuratively. Anger is an addiction, just like all those other things we do.”

“That’s crazy. Anger isn’t a substance. You can’t be addicted to it.”

“You just keep telling yourself that, Bob.”

Ted’s use of the diminutive jarred Robert. For a moment he felt a swell of rage and wanted to punch Ted. But Ted just stood there, calmly, not quite smiling, but relaxed. The urge to hit him deflated. “Okay, so supposing that, as you say, I am addicted to anger? What do you mean?”

“It’s the same thing as being addicted to booze, or blow. When you’re angry, you don’t have to see the sadness in your kid’s face or hear your wife sighing as she thinks about what a mistake it was to marry you. When you’re angry it consumes everything, just like the booze did for you or the coke did for me.”

Robert had the sense of a door cracking open, and just for a moment, a tantalizing vista beyond. “So ... how did you get past it? What is it like to be ... calm?”

“What is it like? It’s fucking peaceful is what it is. It’s like leaving stormy seas and coming into a safe harbor. The noise is gone. The red haze is gone. Even though my wife left me, she was the

catalyst. A while after she remarried she came to visit, to give us both closure, I guess. I saw something in her I barely recognized. After all the crap I did to her, she wasn't angry; she was just happy to be on to a new life. We had fed each other's rage but now she was happy. It completely threw me but it made me think.

“It was hard, because once I stopped being angry I had to learn new habits and I had to face up to everything my rage destroyed.”

“So ... why did you do it? It sounds painful.”

“It is painful, but listen, you stupid fuck. Just because it's painful doesn't mean it's not worth doing. Yes, it was

hard. It hurt to own up to what I had done to my wife and child. The reward is that I'm alive now in a way I couldn't be when I was doing coke and angry all the time."

"That's what I'm getting at. What is it like now? I feel like there's some secret life out there that other people know about, but I don't."

"Tell me about something you enjoy."

"Okay ... uh... enjoy? Well, I liked to drink. Does that count? I like to fuck."

"No, sorry. Something you really enjoy — where you're in the moment. Not when you're running away. Doesn't have to be recent. Think back to when you were small, or something. Were you ever just ... happy?"

Robert's brow furrowed as he thought. And then suddenly he was there, back in the early days with Barbara. They were in bed together; it was summer and they had only a light sheet over them. She was naked, pressed up against the length of him, her warmth coming through, but also a delightful coolness as her sweat dried on his skin. They had just finished making love and she leaned against him, sighing. He was enjoying the moment: her trust, her gratitude for the way he had just made her feel, the beauty of her young body.

His face must have betrayed his feelings because Ted exclaimed, "You have it!"

Robert blinked and shook his head.

“Yeah, I guess I do. I remember ...”

“So, imagine that you could feel like that more, that you could be that alive. And instead of calling emotion up in memory, imagine that you always feel it. You feel the bad too, but at least you’re there.”

That night, Robert lay awake for a long time, thinking about what Ted had said, trying to connect the sense of that long-ago night with the emptiness that seemed to stretch before him. His memory, of trust, and love, and pleasure, was a delicate shimmering thread leading to a world he could barely imagine but desperately wanted to find.

He collapsed into a dead slumber at about three o’clock. He didn’t dream

and he didn't wake up until Tony rolled him off his bunk and told him to get his fucking white ass to breakfast.

## 56.

Tuesday night in group Frank confronted him again. “You have to talk about this stuff, my friend. We don’t judge here. Just talk.”

Robert looked around the semi-circle, but there was just him and Frank and Ted, and four new guys who sat with their arms crossed, looking like they



would rather stab Clint than grace the room with even a word of confession. So Robert rolled his eyes at Frank but got to his feet.

“I’m Robert and I’m an alcoholic. I have also recently come to realize I’m a rageaholic.”

Frank nodded.

“When you’re angry all the time you don’t realize you’re angry, or that your state of being is unusual. I realize now that I was a raging monster for all of my daughter’s childhood. She was never around and now I see why.”

Three heads bobbed in assent. Robert didn’t know what else to say, so he sat down, thinking hard.

That night he dreamt that he was a

school-aged child, seven or eight years old. He sat on a braided rug atop an oak floor, running a battered fire truck back and forth, pretending the grooves of the rug were a road. He wore corduroy pants and a fisherman's sweater, and even in the dream, he could feel the scratchy wool and the heat of the stuffy room. As he ran the truck over the rug, a girl entered quietly, easing the door shut behind her. He was surprised to see that the girl was Mary.

As she crossed the room toward him, he felt a surge of anger and pushed the fire truck in her direction, hard. It hit her ankle with a sharp thud and he felt a jolt of satisfaction at her grimace. He waited to see what she would do, half expecting

her to pick up the truck and bash it over his head.

But she did not. Instead his daughter picked it up and, cradling it like an infant, carried it back over to him. She knelt down beside him, leaned forward so her face was only inches from his, then kissed him tenderly on the cheek. He closed his eyes and when he opened them she was the adult Mary. The Mary he had never known; the Mary he had killed.

Robert Lewis  
Bayview Correctional Center

August 12, 2000

Dear Barbara,

I hope it's okay that I am writing to you again. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since I wrote you last. I am sorry I was so hateful. I am not going to try to shove another amends down your throat right now, but I at least wanted to apologize for my earlier letters. I would really like to hear from you if you are inclined to write back.

Best,

Robert

Barbara Lewis  
2112 Pima Court  
Phoenix, Arizona 85042

August 19, 2000

Dear Robert,  
I am glad you are feeling less angry.  
What changed?  
John started preschool today.

Barbara

Robert Lewis  
Bayview Correctional Center

September 29, 2000

Dear Barbara,

You asked me what changed. There is no simple answer; it's just that I have come to realize that long before I killed Mary, I threw away her gifts. I have been thinking and talking a lot lately about her childhood. I'm seeing that I was a pretty crappy father, and sometimes worse than crappy.

When she was small, I just thought she was a burden and a pest. I couldn't see that she was a person and I couldn't see

that she was a gift. I was an idiot because I didn't even appreciate her. I'm kind of babbling now, but I just wanted to let you know that I am kind of starting to get it.

Yours,

Robert



Barbara Lewis  
2112 Pima Court  
Phoenix, Arizona 85042

October 13, 2000

Dear Robert,

I have been thinking about Mary's adolescence. I am not sure you want to dredge it up, but you have your memories and I have mine. Since Mary died, I have often wished for a do-over of those years. I hate myself for having been so petty.

Do you remember how you paid her the wrong kind of attention? I hated that. I always knew you had girlfriends. I

didn't like it, but they were so removed, I could pretend not to know.

But when you started to be attracted to Mary, I couldn't pretend any more. It killed me that you were so obsessed with her. Mary always asked me, why wouldn't I leave? Why wouldn't I protect her? I know now, and I'm ashamed. I didn't leave because Mary's pain was her punishment for stealing you.

Barbara

Robert clutched Barbara's letter to his chest. When his turn came, his courage failed. He had gripped the letter as he listened to the others, and now he looked down at it, aligned the edges of the folded sheet, ran his thumb and forefinger down the new crease, folded it again, precisely, giving all his

attention to the task. He didn't look up, but he felt Frank and Ted shift to face him, felt their eyes boring into him.

He looked up and met Ted's eyes. "You don't want to hear what I have to say today. Trust me."

Clint spoke. "Robert, we're not here to judge. You've heard some painful stories here. We have all done things we regret."

Frank nodded. "Yep. Remember, the only way out is through."

Robert looked back at Ted, who nodded. "Come on Robert. We don't judge here."

The letter was now a small rectangle. Robert remembered reading somewhere that any sheet of paper, no matter the

size, could be folded a maximum of eight times. He wondered if it were true.

“Robert, you’re stalling.”

Robert sighed and unfolded the letter. “I got a letter from my ex yesterday and it reminded me of some stuff that I had hoped to forget.” He scanned and rescanned the lines of Barbara’s looping cursive, as if the words would be changed by his repeated attentions.

“Robert, really, c’mon,” Clint said.

Now Robert’s hands were shaking as he refolded the letter and stuffed it into his chest pocket. He stood up, took a deep breath, and began.

“I don’t remember this stuff, but Mary’s mother remembers, and she said that Mary remembered too, and that it

was one of the reasons she never spoke to me again after she left home. When Mary hit puberty I ... did things I should not have done.”

He looked up at Clint, who looked back expectantly, eyebrows partially disappearing under his ball cap. “Go on.”

“I didn’t try to sleep with her or anything, but I ... well, as her mother said, I paid her the wrong kind of attention.”

“You mean you acted like a lecher?” Did he imagine it or was there a tinge of contempt in Frank’s voice?

“Yes, but maybe worse than that. Her mom accused me of grabbing her when I was drunk. A couple of times. I used to

make her say goodnight, in her nightgown, and there were other times.

“It started when she was in sixth grade, I think. She had started to develop. Women on my side of the family had always developed early and she took after them. At some point during that year, Barbara asked for money and then took her to Penney’s, so I assumed she got her fitted up with a bra or something, but even with all of that it was impossible not to notice her.”

For years his pickled brain had believed she was oblivious to his intentions. But now he remembered her baggy sweatshirts and the way her shoulders were always hitched up around her chest.

Someone shifted in his chair and the creak brought him back to the meeting. He looked up and found half the room looking at him with poorly concealed distaste and the other half staring carefully at the floor. He cleared his throat and several shifted their gazes but no one spoke.

He couldn't blame them. He knew he deserved all the contempt they could throw at him — after all, he hated himself for what he had done.

Ted caught him on the way out of the meeting. “That took guts, in there today.”

Robert stared at the floor. His insides roiled with shame. “It didn't exactly take guts to do it in the first place.”

“No, you're right, it didn't. It took



cowardice lubricated with ample portions of addiction. I know this. But you can't heal unless you can face it."

"You saw how they looked at me in there. I don't blame them, but it seems like I've lost the only friends I have."

"You haven't lost me. And unless you're ready to die today you need to find a way to make peace with this. And frankly, dying now would be a cop-out. You need to stick around so you can atone."

"Make peace with it? Are you fucking crazy? How could I make peace with the fact that I lusted after my own daughter? I don't want to make peace with it!"

"I don't mean accept it as okay. I don't mean that you should ever forget

what you're capable of. I mean that you have to find a way to accept that you did it, but that you still have to live. It's up to you to figure out how, but right now you can either find some kind of redemption or you can just go back down into the hole you've been climbing out of.

“But ...”

“Really Bob, there is no ‘but.’”

With that, Ted clapped him once on the shoulder and ran to catch up with Frank.

58.

January 2001 – Bayview Prison

Robert woke with a buzzing din just behind his eyes. He felt like he had a whole hive full of angry bees in his head. He wanted a drink.

He got up and dressed for mainline. Tony wasn't there for conversation so he

climbed back into his bunk to read until it was time to eat. He couldn't focus. He threw the book down, jumped down off the bunk and paced. He clawed at his head, willing the bees to settle down, but they buzzed even harder. He picked the book up again, but quickly tossed it aside, exasperated.

Finally the bell sounded. Robert joined the line of other inmates as they streamed toward chow hall. He had his head down and as they passed through the doorway into the common room, he bumped the guy next to him.

“Hey, asshole, watch where you’re going.”

It was Robert’s friend the shower punk. The bees buzzed louder. The punk

had his hand on Robert's arm and suddenly this was unacceptable. "Don't you fucking touch me, punk."

The punk smirked. The buzzing became a screaming din. Robert's fist shot out, connecting with the punk's jaw. The smack felt good, satisfying. The din quieted a little bit. Behind him he heard someone shout, "Fight." And then beside, him, another guy. "Fight!" The others took up the chant, "Fight, fight, fight."

A CO pushed through the knot of inmates. Robert rounded on him, flailing. The CO caught him by the upper arm and spun him around then caught his other arm and wrenched them both behind his back. Robert struggled, trying to get his

arms free. He wanted to punch the CO; wanted to feel that satisfying smack again. But the CO had him in an iron grip and he could see another CO coming his way. He kept struggling, but the more he flailed, the tighter the CO's grip became.

Suddenly the buzzing stopped. He went limp and let the CO bind his wrists with plastic handcuffs. By now the other officer had made his way over and together they marched Robert through the common room and out to the covered walkway. Robert saw himself as if from above. He was on his way to The Hole. So this is how you got yourself thrown into solitary. He wanted to care, but he couldn't. He had used up all his caring on that punk in the lunch line.

By now they had stopped in front of a cell. The CO who had cuffed him took out a tool and cut open the plastic handcuffs. The other guy unlocked the door and motioned Robert inside. Robert stepped into the cell. It was freezing cold in there and he was just about to turn and ask if his extra clothes would be brought to him, but the first CO swung the door shut and before Robert could speak he heard the key turn in the lock and then the officers' steps receding down the hallway.

He stared at the door for a moment and then crossed to the bunk and sat down. He bent over and put his head in his hands, rubbing his eyes as if he could erase his disastrous life if only he

rubbed for long enough. But when he looked up he was still alone in the tiny cell. He swung his legs up and lay back on the bunk.

He must have dozed off because now the light filtering through the window slit had changed. Darkness had fallen and the pinkish yellow sodium vapor lights had switched on. He reached up and hit the switch over his bunk. Blue light flooded the room. He turned his head toward the door and saw that his dinner tray had arrived.

He put his feet on the floor and crossed the half-stride to the tray, picking it up gingerly, trying not to touch the bottom, or the floor. Through the plastic he could see a rectangle of gray



meat, a slice of white bread and a square of green Jell-O. He didn't want to eat it, but he wouldn't see food again until morning, so he unwrapped the plastic and carried the tray to his desk and choked down what he could.

After dinner he distracted himself for a while by doing squats and lunges. At least this warmed him up a bit, but he was careful not to get sweaty, as this would make him cold again. It was probably about six-thirty by now. He settled back onto his bunk, turned off the light, and closed his eyes, hoping sleep would come.

He was awakened by the sound of his breakfast tray sliding through the slot and hitting the floor. He guessed he had

been asleep for over twelve hours. He sat up, feeling logy and dull. He was working his way through the food — gray sausage links, grayish-yellow block of scrambled eggs, sploosh of applesauce — when he flashed on the memory of Mary's last night at home.

It was the summer after her senior year of high school. She had received a full-ride scholarship to Oberlin and would be leaving in a few weeks.

She'd been packing since the start of summer. Her mother had picked up boxes at the liquor store and every time he sneaked a look into her room he saw the full boxes stacked higher. This particular evening he heard her taping away for an hour or so, then suddenly

she was in the front room with her hand on the doorknob. She had not asked if she could go out so he stopped her, wrenching her arm to yank her away from the door.

“Just because you’re leaving for college soon doesn’t mean you can flout the rules. I didn’t say you could go out tonight.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Look, old man. I’m leaving soon and I don’t have to come back if I don’t want to. Why don’t you just admit that I won?”

Robert would give back every gain he had made in life to be able to undo the next minute of that night. His daughter was dead in the ground and her last memory of him was of his fist in her

face. He remembered it too clearly: the surge of rage as she shouted at him; his fist flying out; the sickly squishing sound it made as it connected with her jaw; her look of shock as she dropped straight down in front of him.

He never saw her again. Barbara had seen the whole thing and in some too-little-too-late show of maternal protectiveness she went at him with fists flying. Sometime in the ensuing melee Mary slipped out and never came home.

He lay back down on his bed, crossed his arms over his chest, and stared at the ceiling. There was a long crack, extending to the outer wall. It shifted and blurred and he realized he was crying,

the tears spilling out of his eyes and sliding over his temples into his ears. He shifted onto his side, wishing he could fall asleep, but then his chest heaved and once the sobs started they wouldn't stop.

He cried for the chance to know Mary, now lost forever. He cried for the childhood she never had and for the future he stole from her. He cried for the legacy he had burdened her with and for the child he had orphaned. He cried as lunch and dinner trays were flung through the slot; as the light changed from lemony yellow to sodium-vapor-amber. He tried to eat but the food turned to glue in his mouth. He didn't care. His hunger seemed a small hardship when compared to Mary's fate.



59.

March 2010 – Phoenix, Arizona

He couldn't go back. That's all there was to it. How could he tolerate those liars? That's what they were. Liars. Grammy had always told him that his mom died in an accident. An accident. Like when someone's tire blows and

their car goes off the road. Or like when it's raining and a car spins out and hits another car. Those would be accidents. His grandfather getting so drunk he couldn't see straight and crashing into his own daughter, his mom. That wasn't an accident; that was just evil.

He pulled out his phone and punched in a text to Nate. Maybe he could stay there while he figured out what to do next. He didn't have any other relatives he could go to (his fucking grandfather had seen to that). Maybe he could get himself admitted to a boarding school or something. Anything would be better than dealing with those assholes.

He felt a pang about Grammy. She had been good to him, but she had been a



part of the lie. Then he remembered: Snoopy. He couldn't let Snoopy live with that asshole. For now he would have to leave him there, but later he would find a way to get him back.

His phone buzzed. It was Nate texting him back, telling him to head over, dinner was just about on the table.

That would do for now. He could stay at Nate's and think about what to do next. Maybe he could get a job and start saving money. At a store, or a restaurant. If he couldn't get into boarding school, maybe he could save up enough to get an apartment.

He would look up jobs and boarding schools tomorrow at school during free period. For now his stomach was

growling so he headed off to Nate's house.

When he got there, Nate answered the door. John caught his breath at the sight of him — he was bruised where John's punch had landed. The bruise was hard to see against Nate's burnished skin, but John knew he would feel badly about it for a long time. "Man, I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me. I was just so pissed."

"S'alright. The bruise will heal. I didn't know you had it in you. You better go check in with my mom, though. She about had a heart attack when I came home. Then I told her what the fight was about and she about had another one. She

was mad at you at first but after I explained everything she just seemed kinda sad.”

John went into the kitchen where Nate’s mom and dad were putting the finishing touches on dinner. Though he never would have admitted it to his friends, John thought it was pretty cool how Nate’s parents hung out together and cooked together and stuff. They were always smiling at each other and it would have made John puke except that Nate’s mom was actually kind of hot.

Mrs. Thompson waved him into the kitchen and pointed for him to take a seat. She pulled up the chair across from him and sat down with a sigh.

“Sweetie, Nate told me what

happened. I wish you hadn't hit him, but I understand you were overwhelmed. Did you talk to your grandfather?"

John just looked down at his hands. Mrs. Thompson was so nice, and he liked it when she called him "sweetie," but he didn't want to talk to her about this.

"John, I know it's a shock. But your grandparents love you, very, very much."

"Yeah, but not enough to tell me the truth."

"I can see you're not ready to talk now. That's okay." (What made her think he would ever be ready to talk?) "Go ahead and get washed up for dinner. I called your grandmother to tell her

you're here. You can stay with us for now if you like."

John knew she was thinking that he would stay with them a couple days, and then when he had calmed down (another stupid idea grownups had) he would go home. That was fine. He would let her think that, but he knew he was never going home again.

The next morning as John lay in Nate's extra bunk bed, he heard Grammy's voice in the living room. He pulled the pillow over his head and tried to go back to sleep.

When he got up, his suitcase and duffle bag were on the floor by his bed. She must have come to bring him his

clothes. He was glad she didn't try to talk to him.

He and Nate dressed for school. It was raining out so Nate's mom drove them. John got in the back seat and stared out the window. Nate's mom tried to talk to him, tried to catch his eye in the rear view mirror, but he just shrugged and turned more toward the window. She was probably going to tell him more crap about how he would feel differently later. She was probably going to tell him that Grammy was sorry, but he didn't want to hear it.

When she pulled up to the school he opened the door and got out, not bothering to say goodbye. He didn't want to walk in with Nate while

everyone looked at his beat-up face and gossiped behind their hands. He didn't even want to be there, but Mrs. Thompson had insisted.

He went straight to his locker and put his backpack away, got out his books for first and second periods, and went to homeroom. He took his seat and bent over his notebook, pretending to write so he wouldn't have to look at anyone when they came in the room.

Homeroom was okay because Mr. Stark never let anyone talk and everyone was afraid to pass notes in his class after he read some girl's crush note out loud to everyone on the first day of school. But for the rest of the day he heard people whisper, then when he

looked up they would stop abruptly. He knew they were talking about him and his grandfather, and about what he had done to Nate.

At lunch Nate tried to sit with him, but when he put his tray down John got up and walked away. He pretended he wasn't hungry so he wouldn't have to sit there with Nate and have people come up and ask stupid fucking questions.

Normally he'd have soccer practice after school but no way was he going into that locker room where that fucker Curtis was lurking. Maybe he would just quit the team. Maybe he would quit school until he had enough money to go to boarding school. He couldn't imagine going through another day like this one.



The B.S. about Nate was bad enough, but the worst part was that everywhere he looked, the whispers and sudden silences reminded him that his grandfather was a dickhead loser who had killed his mom. And that reminded him that he could never trust another adult as long as he lived.

The next day Mrs. Thompson dropped them off at school again. John went to homeroom so his attendance would be recorded, then, instead of heading to his locker, he went to the boys' room and into the farthest stall. He stayed there until he heard the second bell. Then he waited until he didn't hear any more

sounds from the hall.

When he was sure it was clear he sneaked out into the hall and ran for one of the back exits. He had to cross the sports fields, but there was no one out there now. He ran, and once he was on the other side, he slipped through a hole in the fence and crossed the street bordering a row of houses. On the other side of the houses he would be hidden.

Once he was sure no one could see him he felt calmer. He liked running so he picked it up to a fast jog. He didn't know where he was going, but it didn't matter; he just needed to spend the day somewhere that wasn't school. His backpack was starting to bother him. He should have left it at school because it

was hard to run with it slapping against his back.

He slowed to a walk and realized he was near the public library. He crossed the street and pulled open the door. The librarian looked up at him for a moment but he ducked his head and scurried past and she went back to what she was doing.

He wasn't really sure what he would do in the library, but he had some of his books so he figured he'd study for a little while. He found a table far in the back where no one could see him from the front desk. He put his backpack on the table, pulled up a chair, and pulled his books out. He wanted to keep up with school; he just didn't want to deal

with all those assholes.

After he finished the assigned reading for the week he looked up and noticed that it was almost two o'clock. His stomach was grumbling. He wasn't sure how long it would take to get back to school, but he had better get going. He hovered at the edge of the soccer field until the three o'clock bell rang, then loped toward the locker rooms and looked for Nate. He wanted to see Nate so he could make it look like he had been at school all day.

He saw Nate heading out to the pitch for soccer practice. He ran up and fell in beside him. Nate looked up, surprised.

"Dude, where the hell were you? I looked for you at lunch and you weren't

around.”

“I dunno. I was there.”

“Well come on — you need to get suited up for practice.”

“I’m not going. I don’t want to talk about it. I’m heading back to your house.”

When he got back to Nate’s house Mrs. T. was there. She had made him a sandwich and sat with him while he ate it. John felt bad about skipping school when she was being so nice, but he also wished she wouldn’t be so nice to him because all it did was remind him that she felt sorry for him and that reminded him of why she felt sorry for him and he didn’t want to think about that. Not then, not ever.



61.

The next day John hid in the bathroom again after homeroom and then took off for the public library as soon as the coast was clear. It felt great to ditch school: the freedom of slipping out that door, leaving the hallways behind. He imagined his classmates sitting obediently through six hours of bullshit.



He didn't need school anyway. Today he didn't even take his books with him to the library. It would be more fun to listen to his iPod and read the library's magazines. He figured he could ditch again tomorrow and the next day, then it would be the weekend and he could figure out how to deal with Monday when Monday came.

He wondered about his soccer coach. He hadn't gone to practice since the day he beat up Nate, but he figured the coach would have called his Grammy, who would have explained. They probably talked about how he needed some time to himself and that he would get past it and how he just needed space and all that bullshit people talked about when

you were a kid who wasn't acting the way they thought you should act. Fuck them all. He didn't need time. He needed a new family to replace the lying scumbags he'd been stuck with.

Monday he took off again. It was so easy to just walk out the doors of the school and start jogging. So easy and so free to be outside away from the losers. So nice to be away from everyone feeling sorry for the orphan.

He had just crossed the soccer pitch and slipped through the fence when ahead of him Mrs. Thompson's car blocked his path. He stopped. He didn't want Mrs. Thompson to be mad at him, but he didn't want to go back to school

either. She was rolling down the window.

“John? John, you can’t keep skipping school. Get in.”

Mrs. Thompson sat back and he saw Grammy in the passenger seat. They were in a cul-de-sac. She would have to turn around to get out of there. If he ran between the houses at the end of the cul-de-sac he could be several streets over before she even got turned around. He bolted, running flat-out toward the backyard of the house in front of him, his pack thumping his back with every stride. There was a low adobe fence ahead. He cursed his stupid pack weighing him down, but he put on a burst at the fence, tucked his back leg and

hurdled over.

He ran to the next street over. There was no one there. He ran between another pair of houses, no fence this time. By the time he was out of breath, he was six streets over from where Mrs. Thompson had seen him. He needed to hide. There were no cars in the driveway of the house across the street and he saw that they had one of those little three-sided sheds for their trashcans. He could hide in there behind the recycling bin.

He looked again and didn't see any cars coming so he darted across. Easing the recycling bin out of its space, he slid in behind it then pulled it toward him. Then he pushed the trashcan out a little

bit to make it even with the recycling bin. His legs burned. He didn't like to sprint like that and then just squat down, but he couldn't stand up without being seen, so he would have to tough it out.

After a few minutes he heard a car coming. He could barely see anything from behind the recycling bin but finally Mrs. Thompson's car came into view. If he could just stay quiet for a few more minutes she wouldn't see him and she would leave and then he could figure out what to do next.

She was moving slowly. He couldn't see her car anymore but he heard it pass and then the sound of it going on down the street, still slowly. He wondered how long he should wait. Ten minutes

seemed okay. He watched the second hand on his watch. It seemed to barely move and his legs were killing him all cramped up like this, but eventually the ten minutes passed. He stood up and looked up and down the street: no cars. South Mountain Park was nearby. He liked to run there. The trails were a maze so if he could get there and get off the main trail he could probably hide out overnight.

He wanted to run and get under cover soon, but he was afraid he would throw a cramp after all that squatting so he settled for a fast walk. He went out to the corner to see what street he was on. Great, he was just a couple of blocks off Central. He ran south on First Street. He

hoped he could avoid being seen until he could lose himself in the park.

The trailhead entrance was up ahead. He picked up the pace, hit the dirt road, ran about a hundred yards and then veered off and collapsed behind a rock. He sat there for a few minutes to catch his breath and think. He had a little money and food with him. He wasn't hungry yet, but he figured if he got hungry he could find a grocery store. He had his backpack and his iPod and a hoodie so he wouldn't be too bored and he wouldn't freeze. He had his phone too, but that didn't matter. He wasn't going to call anyone.

He took out his wallet and counted his money. Twenty-three bucks. He would

have to get a job at some point but this would keep him fed for a few days at least. He was getting hot and prickly sitting there. A run would be nice, work out some of the lactic acid before he cramped up.

He strapped his iPod onto his arm and put in his ear buds. He started to zip up his pack and then remembered his phone. He never ran in the park without his phone. It would suck to get hurt and not be able to call for help. Even if he wasn't going to call his family or Nate's family, he might need to call an ambulance for himself. He tucked the phone into his cargo pocket and then zipped the pack closed and stashed it behind the rock.



When he was done running he went back to his rock. It was getting a little later and the sun wasn't so high and hot. He retrieved his pack and walked a little farther off the main road. He found a bigger boulder with better screening to sit behind. He wished he had a book or something to read. Maybe he could pick up a magazine when he went to find food. For now he had his iPod, so he put his ear buds back in and leaned back against the rock.

He wondered what Nate's family would think when they noticed he was missing. He didn't care. He sure hoped that no one would tell his asshole grandfather. He didn't deserve to know a fucking thing.

He shifted. The ground, even though it was sandy, was getting kind of hard. Once it got dark he could go look for some food. He would just need to sit tight for a little while longer.

Robert picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Robert, it's Barbara. John is missing."

Robert sat down quickly. "What?"

"The school called me this morning. He'd been skipping. They didn't know he was living with the Thompsons so they called me. I called Jane and we went out looking for him. We saw him

near the school but he ran when he saw us and got away. We searched the neighborhood but we couldn't find him."

"Why didn't anyone call me? Dammit, Barbara!"

"Hold on! We didn't call you because if he saw you he would have bolted for sure. This isn't about your feelings, Robert."

"Okay, okay. Well, what do you want to do now? Can we go search for him? Can I help?"

"Well ..."

Robert balled his fists and squeezed his eyes shut. Steady on there, Bob, he told himself. Not. About. You. "Look, if you think I should stay away I will. I don't want to make things worse. But

what if I make things worse by not helping? I promise I'll stay out of the way. I'll do whatever you want."

"You can come, but if we find him, you have to make yourself scarce right away. Do you understand? You can't hang around. You have to let him handle this in his own way."

Robert breathed. "Okay. We should go in your car."

"Get over here. It's going to be dark soon."

Robert hung up the phone and bent over. He put his hands on his knees and forced himself to breathe. God, he couldn't remember wanting a drink this badly since those early days, right after the accident, when he was in jail. The

thought that John might come to harm ... Maybe he was worthless, like he told Ted all those years before. Maybe his life really was a liability.

Then he heard Ted's voice, saying 'C'mon Bob, this isn't about you. You wanna redeem yourself? Prove that you really give a shit about John. Do whatever it takes to bring him home safe, even if he still hates you.' That was enough to settle his nerves. He would call his sponsor that evening after they found John.

When he got to Barbara's she had her shoes and jacket on. She was armed with two flashlights and a bag of energy bars. "In case he's hungry when we find him."

When. When they find him. Yes.

They buckled into her car and she started the engine.

“I just thought of something. Did you call the police?”

“I did, but they said that they can’t do anything until he’s been missing for at least twenty-four hours. We’re on our own until then.”

“Any idea where he might be?”

“We saw him about a mile from South Mountain. He probably hid in the park. It’s going to take a while to search it, but we have to try.”

“Do you want to look in the neighborhood first?”

“No, I think he wouldn’t want to be where there are people. He doesn’t want

to be found. Jane and Tom are meeting us there. Nate's coming too. He's really upset about this. He thinks it's all his fault."

"Well, I can assure him it's not his fault. It's mine."

"Okay, but really, Robert? We don't have time for self-pity right now."

Robert felt stung. He felt the heat rise in his face and for a moment rage buzzed just behind his forehead, but she was right. He resolved to keep his trap shut unless he had something worthwhile to say.

There were at the park now, near the main trailhead off Central. Robert wondered how they were going to do this. Were they going to walk around



calling his name like he was a lost dog? Sneak along hoping to catch a glimpse of him?

Barbara was apparently thinking the same thing. “I’m not sure if we should split up and just look for signs of him, or what. Do you think he would run away if he heard us calling?”

Robert hesitated. He was pretty sure John would run if he knew he was looking for him. “Let’s go together and the Thompsons can go together too. We can each take a side of the main trail. I think if there are too many of us together we’re going to just scare him off.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. There’s Jane now.”

Jane, Tom, and Nate pulled up in

Jane's car. They parked next to Barbara and got out. Nate, clutching a flashlight and shivering in the evening air, looked stricken. Jane and Tom looked grim. Tom rummaged behind the passenger seat, and after a moment came up with two more flashlights. He handed one to Jane.

Barbara spoke up, "Robert and I were thinking that we should go in two groups. I'm not sure how far in he would have gone. These trails crisscross all over the place so we'll have to be methodical. I don't think he would stay on the main trail."

Jane held up a sheaf of papers. "Nate helped me print these maps. He thinks he has a pretty good idea where John might

have gone, so we highlighted the trails we should check. You and Robert check the blue ones and we'll check the yellow ones. We'll do what we can tonight and if we don't find him we'll come back in the morning so we can search in daylight."

She handed them each a copy of the map. Robert was glad that someone had been thinking clearly because he never would have thought of this. Barbara inspected hers. "Our first trail is off to the left here. You ready?"

Robert fell into step beside her. They walked in silence, playing their flashlights into the scrub alongside the trail. All he could think was find him, find him, find him, find him. He didn't

know what he would do if they could not.

John's stomach growled again. He wished he had a candy bar or something in his pack, but he hadn't expected to be out this late. He had already eaten the chips, cookies and sandwich he had packed from Nate's house that morning.

He wanted to look for food, but from his rock he was a little higher than the

trailhead and he could see the shapes of cars in the parking lot. The lot had emptied out as the sun went down but a few minutes ago two cars had pulled in. He would wait them out. He didn't want to be seen in the park. As soon as they left he would go find a Safeway and get some food.

He had just stood up to take another look at the parking lot when he heard voices and saw lights coming down the trail about fifty yards away. Fuck! He dropped back down behind his rock. Flattening himself on the ground, he squirmed around until he could just see past the rock. If they looked over, his head would look like another rock.

The lights kept bobbing along the

trail, sweeping from side to side. They weren't stopping, so maybe they hadn't seen him. He squinted, trying to figure out who it was. It was hard to see from here, but he was pretty sure it was Grammy and Asshole. Well, that settled it — if that asshole wanted to come out looking for him he could spend all year doing it. He wasn't going to be found.

He lay still until the lights bobbed out of sight, then he sat up. He was cold so he dug in his pack and pulled out his hoodie. He pulled it on, and was about to put in his ear buds when he thought better of it. What if they came close and he didn't hear them and then they found him? He was bored but he would tough it out.

After what seemed like forever, he heard voices. He flattened himself and peered around the edge of the rock. The lights were bobbing along the trail again, but this time in the other direction. It was definitely Grammy and Asshole. He held still, not breathing, until the lights bobbed on past. He lay still and listened. After about another ten minutes, he heard car doors slamming and engines starting. He would wait twenty minutes and then he would go find some food.

Once he was sure they were gone he stood up. Man, he was stiff. All the running and the immediately squishing himself into uncomfortable positions was really messing him up. He would have to remember to stretch later or he



would tear something. He remembered at least that much from Coach.

He pulled his backpack onto his shoulders and took a quick look around. He didn't see anyone or anything suspicious. But still he should lay low — it was close to curfew.

It was probably safe to go back up Central since it was dark out. He was pretty sure he could find a grocery store or at least a mini-mart there. He hoped to find a full grocery store, but he was so hungry he would settle for gas station food. He loped out to the trailhead and took the dirt road back out of the park, then started jogging up Central.

There! Lights, cars turning in, a big parking lot. It had to be a grocery store.

He sped up. He was so hungry all he could think of was getting a Snickers, chips, anything. Sure enough, it was a Safeway. He froze. What if they were there? What if they had stopped on the way home? As he turned into the parking lot, he saw that he didn't need to worry; it was late on a weeknight and the lot was almost empty. He looked over the cars and didn't see any that looked familiar.

It was nice to be inside. Not too warm but not too air-conditioned either. He had always liked going to the grocery store. Everything was all laid out in rows so you could find what you wanted. He found the candy aisle first and got two Snickers. He would

probably need something to drink too. He almost got a Pepsi, but no, asshole Gramps drank Pepsi. Pepsi was never going to taste good again.

He knew Grammy would tell him to get milk, that it had the best nutrition for the money, or something like that. O.J. would be good too. He could use some sugar after all the running. Grammy always bought frozen juice, but he didn't have any water or a pitcher. The Thompsons drank juice that came in a big jug. He found the big jugs of O.J. and smaller cartons. He decided on a skinny carton so he wouldn't have to carry so much back with him. He grabbed a couple bags of chips too.

At the checkout he suddenly wondered

if he had enough money. How much does stuff like this cost? The girl (hot) ran his stuff over the scanner and he was relieved to see it was only about eight bucks. That would leave him enough to buy more food tomorrow. After he checked out he decided to look over the videos at the front of the store. He couldn't watch anything tonight in the desert but it was fun to see what they had. Everything in the ten-dollar bin was stuff he'd already watched.

He was done looking at the videos, but he should use the bathroom before he headed back out — easier than going behind a cactus. He finished up in the bathroom and washed his hands and after one last look over the videos he

headed back out. He was halfway across the parking lot when he remembered: a magazine! He jogged back into the store and got a copy of Men's Health (Grammy never let him buy it) and a comic book. That was another six dollars.

Back at his rock he shifted around on the ground and tried to get comfortable. He realized he would have to find a way to make money soon, and a place to live. This might be all right for a few days, but he didn't really want to sleep on the ground every night.

Finally he dozed off and didn't wake until the sun hit his face. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, but quickly stopped when he realized his hands were all

sandy. It looked like it was going to be a pretty hot day for this time of year; the sun was already beating down hard and his watch said it was only eight-thirty. He wondered what he should do. Maybe go for a run, but they might be out looking for him again. He was glad he had gotten the magazines. He could sit behind his rock and read and no one would be able to see him.

He sat so the rock was hiding him but he could see a little bit of the trail. Every once in a while he saw a runner or a mountain biker go by, and a couple of times curious lizards came up and looked at him with their weird unblinking eyes, but other than that things were quiet. He had listened to a few

podcasts and looked all the way through the Men's Health and read all the articles and about half the comic book and it was only five o'clock.

Man, this running away stuff was boring. He was hungry. He had eaten his Snickers, a bag of chips and half the O.J. last night and had already eaten the rest of the chips and most of the rest of the O.J. today. He wished he had thought to buy food for more than one day, but he kind of wanted to go to the grocery store again anyway. It was nice to be where there were other people.

The sun went down at about 6:30. He read by the light of his phone for a little while, but he didn't want to run the battery all the way down. At 7:00 he

thought it looked dark enough to risk going to the store again. Maybe this time he would get something more solid than just candy bars and chips. He wondered what he could get that wouldn't need cooking. He remembered seeing some sandwiches in the deli area. Maybe a tuna sandwich and some more O.J. and another Snickers.

He had just picked out a sandwich from the deli case and was walking toward the checkout when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around and almost peed himself. It was a cop. Did they think he was stealing? He had money; he was planning to pay.

“Young man, can you come with me?”



John wasn't sure what to do. He didn't think he should argue with the cop, but what if the cop hated kids and was just picking on him or something? "Uh, yeah. Um, did I do something?"

"You're not in trouble if that's what you're worried about, but I think some people are very worried about you. "

"Huh?"

"Is your name John Lewis?"

"Um, yeah."

"Your grandmother reported you missing."

John looked around. If he made a break for it, he could be through the entrance doors and across the parking lot before the cop would even have time to react. But what if he used his gun? John

didn't want to get shot for running away. He looked down and realized he hadn't paid for his sandwich yet, but suddenly he didn't want it, didn't want to go back out to the desert, wedge himself behind a rock, and eat a sandwich by himself.

He turned to go back to the deli case. The cop followed. John put the sandwich back in the case, careful to make sure it was back with the other tuna sandwiches, so no one would get mixed up and buy the wrong sandwich. He reached back and hooked the loose strap of his backpack and pulled the pack up onto both his shoulders. Then he held his hands out, wrists together, the way he had seen criminals do on TV, when they were done running, when they

had given up.

“You can go ahead and arrest me.”

The cop let out a short laugh, like a bark, then stopped, making his face serious. “Young man, I’m not going to arrest you. I’m just going to take you home.”

“I can’t go home!”

“Well, I have to take you home. That’s the law.”

“I’m not staying at home. I live with my friend’s family.”

“Hmm. Since your grandmother is your guardian I’ll have to check with her, but if she says it’s okay then I guess I can take you there.”

John nodded. “She will. I’ve been living there since ...”

“Let’s get out to the car and I’ll give her a call.”

The cop took John’s upper arm and led him outside. His squad car was parked in the fire lane in front of the store. He hit a remote and John heard the locks pop open. The cop opened the back passenger side door with his free hand and gestured for John to get in. “Watch your head there, son.”

John had never been in a police car before. It was pretty trippy. There was a thick piece of plastic, probably Plexiglas, between him and the front. He wondered what would stop a crook from just opening the door and running away, but then he noticed that there were no door handles on the back doors. The car

smelled like BO. He wondered if it was from the cop or from crooks they had carried around. Or shit, maybe it was him. Ugh.

The cop had been mumbling into his cell and now he turned back to look at him. “Okay, son. I talked to your grandmother. She corroborates that you were living with your friend Nate’s family and that it’s okay to take you back there.

“While I have you captive, I have a few things to say to you. Your grandparents were worried sick about you. You should have seen them at the station. Your grandmother couldn’t stop crying. Your grandfather, he’s a bit more of the quiet type, but I could tell he was

really upset too.

“I know it’s hard to be a teenager. God knows I was a handful when I was your age. But you don’t solve any problem by running away from it. If you’re unhappy, talk to them. I think they’ll listen; they seemed like nice people. And keep up with your schoolwork. When you’re my age you’ll look back on this time in your life and you’ll be so surprised that you didn’t appreciate it.”

John didn’t say anything. What could he say? This cop, he was nice and all, and he probably meant well, but he didn’t get it. He was just like all the other grownups John knew, thinking he was in a “phase” or that he just needed

to “work things out for himself.” Whatever. He tried to stare the cop down, but he didn’t flinch, so finally John shifted sideways so he could look out the window.

The cop started the engine and pulled out with a quick blip of the siren. He looked back at John in the rearview mirror. “You like the siren? I could turn it on for you.”

John pictured the police car going by with him inside and the siren blaring. He pictured his Gram or kids from school seeing him, and decided he didn’t want it on. He shook his head. The cop’s eyes in the rearview crinkled into a smile. “Not up for all the attention, eh? That’s okay. Some kids think it’s fun, but some

are embarrassed.”

John fidgeted and didn't say anything as the cop changed lanes and sped up to blend with traffic.



Mrs. Thompson hugged John when he came back, and Mr. Thompson clapped him on the back and called him “son.” Nate mumbled something he couldn’t quite catch, but then said that he’d been practicing the new Halo and could totally kick his ass, so John spent the rest of the evening getting his ass kicked.

He’d missed so much schoolwork last

week that he had to stay after every day to get caught up. The guidance counselor said that if he got up-to-date within three weeks the incident would not affect his academic standing. He wasn't going to be able to pick up soccer anytime soon though; there was no way to manage it and the extra schoolwork. He was okay with that, though, since soccer included that fuckface Curtis.

Detention hall was full of burnouts. The first week they stayed on their side of the room and he stayed on his. He was in week two now and today he couldn't concentrate. He had his books open but the words swam in front of his eyes.

He heard the clock ticking and then

heard it jump forward as it synchronized on the half hour. Had it been a half hour already? He hadn't gotten any work done. If this continued he wasn't going to get caught up. He slammed his chemistry book shut and sat back in his chair.

“Dude. Chill out.”

Startled, John looked up. One of the burnouts was talking to him. Some guy named Mike or Mitch or Marcus. Mitch, he was sure the guy was named Mitch.

“Slammin’ your books on the desk. What the fuck is wrong with you, dude? It’s just detention.”

“Uh, I dunno. It just seems stupid all of a sudden. Who gives a shit if I know about the table of elements?”

“Dude, totally. We were wonderin’

what was up with you. Always got your head down, like you give a shit. Heh, I know everything I need to know about chemistry.” He patted his jeans pocket. John heard a faint crinkle. “You wanna get baked with us after detention?”

“Uh.”

“Oh sorry, your majesty. Have I caused offense? That’s okay — more for me.”

“No, it’s ... ah ... I ...”

Mitch stared him down. Suddenly John didn’t give a crap about his stupid schoolwork. If they wanted him to stay in detention like some sort of burnout because his grandparents were bullshit liars, he would show them. It wasn’t his fault he had to run away, and now he

was being treated like some sort of JD. He could be a JD if that's what they wanted.

“Yeah. I'll get ... baked.”

Mitch's eyes lit up and he waggled his eyebrows at John. “Dude, awesome. We meet under the bleachers. Just follow me when they let us out of here.”

When the bell rang Mr. Swanson, the detention supervisor, poked his head in. “All right kiddoes, you're free for the day. I'll see some of you back here tomorrow.”

John followed Mitch out to the stadium. He was nervous. He had never smoked pot before. He hadn't wanted to. He thought it might mess up his wind and slow him down. But now he didn't give

a crap since he was out of soccer for the year anyway. And it might be fun. The potheads were always giggling, so maybe they were onto something.

Some other burnouts were already waiting under the bleachers when they got there. Mitch sat down on a girder, pulled the baggie out, and balanced it on his thigh next to a small piece of paper. He sprinkled some pot onto the paper and brought it up to his mouth, his tongue flicking out to lick it while he rolled it up, all in the same motion. As he was doing this, a couple of other burnouts appeared under the bleachers, looking hungrily at the now-completed joint balanced between Mitch's fingers.

Mitch pulled a lighter out of his

hoodie pocket as the others gathered around. He paused, looking at John. “You ever smoke weed before?”

“Um, no.”

“Watch me, see how I do it. You wanna take a long drag and then hold it in your lungs for as long as you can. Don’t want to waste good weed.”

Mitch put the joint between his lips and lit the end. He inhaled deeply, closed his eyes and held his breath. He handed the joint to the kid on his right who did the same then handed it off to the next kid. When it got to John it was a tiny nubbin, but one of the kids had attached a little metal clip to it.

John took the clip and held the joint between his lips. He took a deep breath

like he had seen the rest of them do. Immediately he started coughing and spewed out a cloud of musky-smelling smoke. What was left of the joint went out. The others giggled and Mitch stepped forward.

“Dude ...’s okay. It happens everyone’s first time. Just relax and try again.”

Once John had the joint back in his mouth, Mitch relit it. John took a smaller breath this time and willed himself to relax. He didn’t cough. He held the smoke in the way he had seen the others do. He didn’t feel anything so he took another puff, and then another. That was it for that joint but Mitch nodded at him approvingly.



They all stood there with their hands stuffed in their hoodie pockets. After a few moments, one of the guys started giggling. “This is awesome bud, man. Where did you get it?”

“My brother knows a guy, brings it up from Mexico. It’s potent shit.”

John was starting to feel dizzy and lightheaded. He felt like his head was floating way above his body. Then it felt like the ground was dropping from under his feet and he was floating in space. His head felt really big, then it felt really small. He looked up and noticed that the bleachers above him seemed to be pulsating. He looked around at his new friends, who all seemed to be in a state of wonderment.

He had lost track of time, and suddenly he was so hungry that he couldn't think of anything but food. Just at that moment Mitch stirred. "Dude, I like want to eat a cow right now. Let's hit Taco Bell. They have dollar tacos this week." He cast a glance at John. "You hungry brah? The more potent the bud, the more potent the munchies. You comin' with us?"

John nodded. He found he couldn't quite remember how to talk. He fell in behind the group as they headed to the Taco Bell.

Mitch grabbed his arm as they exited the Taco Bell.

"Dude, lemme look at your eyes." He

pulled John a little closer and thrust his face into his, then shifted so John's face was in the light. "Aw, dude, you're totally bloodshot. You got some money?"

John nodded.

"Stop off at Rite Aid and get some Visine or someone is gonna know their baby got high."

"Okay. Thanks. I better go."

"You gonna be in detention tomorrow?"

"Yeah, for the next couple weeks."

"Awesome! See you later." As he said this, Mitch brought his thumb and forefinger up to his lips and inhaled deeply before bursting into giggles. Still giggling, he raised his hand to John in

farewell before turning to rejoin his friends.

There was a Rite Aid on the way back to Nate's house so John stopped and got some Visine. He caught sight of a clock and started. He hadn't realized how much time had passed while he was getting high. It seemed like they had just gone under the bleachers but it was almost seven. He broke into a trot, wanting to get back to Nate's before anyone suspected anything.

When he got there the living room was empty. He closed the front door gently and listened. Someone was in the kitchen, probably Mrs. T. getting dinner ready. He had just gorged himself on tacos but he was hungry again and dinner

smelled good. He quickly crossed the living room and into his and Nate's room before anyone could see him. Maybe they would think he'd been there all along.

The rest of detention was a blur. Every day after they were released he would go out to the bleachers with Mitch and his friends. He was out of money so he stopped going to Taco Bell, but it was okay because he could gorge himself at Nate's place. If anyone noticed that his appetite had tripled from what it had been when he was playing soccer, they didn't mention it to him. He wondered if they knew he was getting high, but even if they did, what could

they do? He wasn't theirs. He wasn't anybody's. He was an orphan.

65.

Detention was finally over, but he wasn't caught up with his work. He'd turned in the first few makeup assignments, but then it got really hard to concentrate. He'd spent most of his detention time doodling on his notebook and waiting for the supervisor to release them so he could get high with Mitch and

his friends.

Mitch was in and out of detention but he was always under the bleachers. John sought him out the first Monday after his detention was over. Mitch grinned when he saw him.

“Dude, I got some serious cannabis. My bro said he was cross-eyed from this shit.” Mitch pulled a bag from his front pocket and waved it at John. “I’m telling you, serious bud.”

They were just rounding the back of the bleachers when Mr. Spitzer, the track coach, stepped in front of them. John stopped. He felt something slide across his front just as Mitch pivoted and sprinted off in the direction they’d come from.



Coach Spitzer's hand was on John's shoulder, holding him in place. "You heading someplace, John?"

"I, uh, I ... We were just hanging out."

"What's that in your pocket?"

John looked down. Hanging about halfway out of his hoodie pocket was the bag containing Mitch's stash, the yellow zipper strip mocking him.

Coach Spitzer tugged the bag out of his pocket and held it up. "Well, well. What's this?"

John looked around, but he didn't see a way out. Coach had a grip on his upper arm now and he didn't think he would be able to get free, and even if he could, he hadn't run for weeks. His endurance was probably shot.

“It’s not mine. I don’t know how it got in there.”

“Sure, that’s what they all say. Let’s see what Principal Hopper has to say about this.”

With that, Coach spun him around and marched him back towards the school. John wanted to say something, but he didn’t know what. All he really wanted was to grab the bag of weed and go toke under the bleachers until all this crap evaporated in a haze. Or go home to the Thompsons’ and lose himself in the Xbox.

The principal called his grandmother who called Nate’s mom. They came in together to pick him up. He couldn’t look at Grammy. This was all her fault

anyway. Coach Spitzer wanted to turn him in for possession, but the principal prevailed. John thought he probably didn't want the bad publicity. He told John he was suspended for the rest of the week and sent him away with Grammy and Mrs. Thompson.

When they got outside Grammy glared at him and told him to get in the back seat. When they were all settled in, Grammy turned around so she could face him. "John, I know this has been a difficult time for you, but this is ridiculous. You're not going to be able to pass the school year at the rate things are going."

John fiddled with the door handle but didn't say anything. He wanted to open

the door and run away, but Grammy had locked the doors from the driver's seat and then set the child lock, like he was four years old again.

Grammy spoke again. "What are we going to do with you? I've been letting you stay at Nate's because I wanted to give you time to mourn and to process what you learned about your grandfather. I have been trying to go easy on you, because I know this is really painful for you. I know it was a huge blow and I'm very sorry, but honey, you can't let this ruin your life."

"Don't call me honey."

"Beg pardon?"

"I said, DON'T CALL ME HONEY. I'm not your honey. You don't give a shit

about me, so I don't give a shit about you either. You and Gramps, you're both a couple of fucking liars. All those years you lied to me but NOW suddenly you want to act like you care? FUCK YOU!"

Grammy stared at him for a moment, then turned so she was facing forward. She started the car. Mrs. Thompson hadn't said anything this whole time. They were both silent as Grammy drove toward Nate's house. When they got there she unlocked the doors, then turned to John. "Think about where you want your life to go, John. Don't do it for me, do it for you. You can come home whenever you're ready."

John got out and went up the steps to the door and waited there for Mrs.

Thompson. She and his Grandma were talking, but then the passenger side door opened and Mrs. Thompson got out. She made her way up the walk, digging in her purse for her keys as she went. John stood aside to let her get at the door. She unlocked it and held the door open so he could go in. He was going to scoot across the living room to his and Nate's room but she stopped him.

“John, you know you're welcome here, but you need to know that I'm not going to tolerate drug use in my house. We love you but we're not going to let you hurt our family. I'll be checking your backpack and room from now on and if I find any signs that you're using, I will kick you out.”

John looked at his feet. He cleared his throat, as if to say something, but then realized that he didn't have anything to say. He hoped she didn't hate him. She didn't have to worry that he was going to do drugs in house. He was done with drugs. He never wanted to see that fuckface Mitch again.

When Nate got home from practice, John was already in bed. He wondered if Nate had heard what happened. Nate had, kind of. Rumor had it that John had been caught with a shipment from Mexico and would soon be tried as a drug lord. John filled him in on what had really happened and then turned towards the wall. He really didn't want to talk any more.

But apparently Nate did. “Dude, what the fuck is up with you anyway? I mean, I know you’re not some drug kingpin, but what the fuck were you thinking, hanging out with Mitch and his crew? Everybody knows they’re a bunch of burnout losers.”

John rolled back to look at Nate. “I dunno. I don’t really want to talk about it. I was in detention. It was something to do.”

“Well, it’s fucked up. You’re not going to college if you don’t get your shit together. And Mom said she’ll throw you out if you keep smoking weed.”

“Yeah, yeah, she told me. I don’t wanna talk about it, but don’t worry, I’m through with Mitch. He’s a fucking rat.



He stuffed that bag in my pocket and ran. Don't worry, I'm not a pothead."

"All right, all right. Hey, aren't you going to do some homework — get caught up?"

"..."

"Whatever." Nate unzipped his backpack and hauled out his books. He put them on his desk and switched on his reading lamp. John turned back toward the wall, pulling the covers over his head to blot out the light, wishing he could blot out this day along with it.

The next Monday John heard the alarm go off, heard Nate get up and get ready to leave. Every minute he thought, “just one more minute,” but it was like there was a big weight on his chest, holding him to the bed. Nate came over and poked him. “Hey, loser, you getting up? Aren’t you going to school? Suspension’s over.” John didn’t say

anything, just pulled the covers tighter over himself and pretended to be asleep. He heard Nate yelling to his mom as he headed out the door. A few minutes later he heard the door to their room ease open.

“John, are you going to get up and go to school?”

“...”

“John, are you sick?”

“Not sick.”

“I know it’s been a rough time for you, but you need to get up and go to school.”

John didn’t say anything. He felt bad about everything — about yelling at Gram in front of Mrs. Thompson; about doing drugs while he was staying at her

house; about behaving like a burnout, but he didn't really want to talk to her. He wanted to just stay there in bed for as long as he could.

After she left, he rolled over on his back and stared at the underside of Nate's loft. He lay there for a long time but then he had to pee so he got up and used the bathroom and came back and lay down again. He thought about getting up for real. He imagined himself getting out of bed and putting on clothes and walking to school. He pictured an alternate day; getting up and going into the kitchen and making a sandwich, then going into the living room, flipping on the TV, and eating the sandwich while he watched Jerry Springer.

But still he lay there. He was still lying there when he heard the front door open and steps cross the living room. The steps went past to the bathroom then a few minutes later came back to the door. Nate came in and stopped as he caught sight of John still in the bed. “Dude, what the fuck you still doing in bed? Have you been there all day?”

“Yeah.”

“Must be nice to lie around all the time. You know what time it is?”

John shook his head.

“Five o’clock, loser. It’s five fucking o’clock. You think you might get your ass up?”

“I’ll try.”

“Well, try hard. I don’t wanna do my

homework with you in here snoring again.” Nate slammed back out of the room. John could hear him banging things around in the kitchen, probably making himself a sandwich. He came back in about an hour later but it was just to get his books and to throw a comment back over his shoulder about how he couldn’t even use his own fucking room anymore.

The next morning John had the same feeling of being under a heavy weight. He listened to Nate get ready, and as he lay there, he imagined it all again: getting up, dragging on his jeans, maybe changing to clean sweat socks, pulling his gray hoodie over his head, crossing toward the front door and shoving his

feet into his sneakers.

He imagined the walk to school, and the smell of the hallways when he got there, a little like floor polish and a little like sweaty socks, with an overlay of cafeteria smell. He imagined walking into homeroom and taking his seat, sliding into the desk, looking around at his classmates and wondering who knew about what happened the other day. And still he lay there.

Mrs. T. came in then. “Honey? John? I need you to get up and go to school. Promise me you’ll go to school today.”

“Okay.”

“Okay sweetie. I have to head out to work now, but I expect you to get up and go to school. And I expect you to do

your homework and start getting caught up.”

“Okay.”

She left and John imagined it yet again, putting on the jeans and hoodie and stepping into his shoes and going to school. But it was like there were the things he wanted to do and then there was what he was really doing, which was nothing. He lay on his back and drifted off to sleep. He woke up to the sound of Nate yelling at him about the time, which was, again, five fucking o'clock.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would go to school for sure. The next day Mrs. and Mr. T. came in right after Nate left.

“John, I’m sorry but Tom and I are



forcing you to go to school. This can't go on. You are getting further and further behind. You're going to have to go to summer school at the rate things are going. You might not even make it into tenth grade next year."

John looked at her for a moment and then rolled over to face the wall. He didn't want to hear it. He knew she was right, but he just couldn't get up. He didn't know why it was so hard, but it was. He felt a hand on his shoulder, and suddenly he was flipped onto his back. Mr. T. was gripping his shoulder, hard, and had bent down to put his face next to his.

"Look here, John. You're like family to us. You know that. We love you like

our own. But this can't go on. We wouldn't let Nate throw his life away like this and we're not going to let you throw yours away either. You will get up, you will get dressed, and you will go to school."

John stared at him silently for a moment. He wanted to tell him how it had been, how every morning he imagined getting on with his life and then, at the end of the day had to face the fact that again, he had failed. He wanted them to understand that he wasn't staying in bed because he wanted to; he was staying in bed because he wasn't able to do anything else. But he had no words for any of this. He looked from Mr. Thompson to Mrs. Thompson. They both

smiled at him, but in that creepy way that clueless grownups smile at little kids, like a clown with a smile painted only on the mouth.

He could see his jeans crumpled on the floor near the foot of his bed where he had left them. If he could only reach out and grab them without getting out from under the covers. He was in his underwear and didn't want Mrs. T. to see him like that. In one motion he sat up and tugged the blankets over his lap as he put his feet on the floor. He reached out for his jeans, but he couldn't reach them. Mr. T. was watching him and turned to Mrs. T. "Jane, I think I've got it from here. Can you go get some breakfast started for John? I'll be there

in a minute to help you.”

John shot him a grateful look. There were some things that only another man could understand. But then that made him think of fuckface Gramps and he didn't want to go there.

Mr. T. grabbed his jeans off the floor and tossed them over. John reached around under the blanket and got his legs into them, then stood up and pulled them on, letting the blanket fall to the floor. He picked it up and wadded it up and tossed it on his bed, then went to the dresser to rummage for a shirt. He found his gray hoodie and pulled it on.

He looked down at his feet. He was wearing sweat socks from the day he got caught with the weed. Ew. He stepped

the heel of his right foot on the toe of the left and pulled up to get the sock off then repeated it on the opposite side to get his right sock off. He reached down to pick the dirty socks off the floor.

As he straightened up he got a whiff of himself. There was no way he could go to school smelling like that. He looked up at Mr. T. “Um, I think I need to take a shower. I smell kinda bad.” He wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw Mr. T. wrinkle his nose a bit. He crossed the room to stuff the gross socks in the laundry bag that hung inside the closet door. He would do laundry later, including his nasty drawers.

“Yeah, you do need a shower. I’ll leave you to it, but if I don’t see you in

the kitchen for breakfast in ten minutes I will come looking for you.”

“Okay.”

Mr. T. left and John gathered up clean underwear and socks and headed to the bathroom. He looked in the cabinet and sure enough, his favorite red towel was there, clean. He hung it up on the bar and plucked a washcloth from the stack under the sink. He pushed the shower curtain aside and turned on the taps and shower, waiting a moment for the hot water to start flowing. Once it was hot, he stepped into the warm flow and for a moment lost himself in it.

When he got to the kitchen they had the cereal boxes out and a pitcher of juice and a carafe of coffee on the table.

Mrs. T. looked over at him and smiled, a real smile, not the creepy clown kind. “I’m glad to see you up. Eat up and I’ll take you over to school. You’ll be a little late, but I called the school and they said you can come in between periods.”

John looked at the clock. Whoops, it was almost nine already. He wolfed down his cereal and juice and stood up, ready as he was ever going to be. He entered the school during passing period and slid into second period social studies without having to talk to anyone.

67.

He had been back at school for about a week when he got a note to go see the guidance counselor. When he entered the office, the counselor was scrolling something on his computer screen. He turned when John walked in and gave him a smile and gestured for him to sit, then turned back to the screen.



John lowered himself into the chair and scootched it towards the desk. The counselor turned back to him and, putting his fingertips together in a little steeple, fixed his eyes on John and said, “Son, do you know why I called you in here?”

“Um, no.”

“You’ve missed a lot of school, John. The school year is nearly over. You were supposed to make up for your first absence by going to detention and doing your catch-up work, but your teachers say you haven’t turned any of it in. Now you have another absence to make up for. What do you propose we do about this?”

John shifted. The arm of the chair was covered in the same stuff as the rest of

the chair. The whole chair had a bunch of little fuzz balls stuck to it so he started picking them off the arms. He didn't say anything; he just kept picking fuzz balls.

“John, this is serious. You’ve been a good student but you’re foundering now. We all want to see you get into tenth grade.”

John wondered who this “we” was. Grownups all liked to talk about themselves as if they were all part of some big club. He had so many fuzz balls between his thumb and forefinger now that he couldn't pick any more off so he took a break to tuck them into his hoodie pocket before starting to pick them off again. “Okay.”

“We’re going to give you another

chance. We all know you've been through a lot lately."

At this John started. He wondered how much the counselor knew. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. He didn't want everyone in his business. At the same time, there was a part of him that wanted to just start talking and let it all out.

"Is there something you would like to say?"

"No. Yeah. Well, I dunno. It's like ...

The counselor leaned forward. "Yes?"

"Nothing. I don't wanna talk about it." What was this guy going to understand? He was just another

grownup who thought he knew what was best. John sat back in his chair and put his hands on his knees, waiting to see what would happen next.

“We still think we can get you through ninth grade if you’ll buckle down and catch up your work. You might have to go to summer school, but we can evaluate that at the end of spring semester. Do you think you can do it?”

John nodded.

“Your teachers have each agreed to give you the makeup assignments. If you get all of the makeup work in by the end of the semester and pass your finals, you will pass on to tenth grade. If you think you can’t finish it all, come back to me and we’ll figure out a plan for you to

make up the rest in summer school.

“I’ve talked to your grandmother and the Thompsons and we all think you can do it. Capisce?”

John nodded again. The only thing he hated more than “we” was the way grownups tried to sound cool. Capisce? Seriously?

“I knew I could count on you, John. We’re all rooting for you.”

“Can I go?”

“Yes, yes, you may go. I’ll check back in with you in a week or so to see how you’re progressing with the makeup work.”

With that the counselor stood up and, coming around his desk, put his arm around John’s shoulders and walked him

to the door of the counseling office. John looked at the clock; it was just about time for next period to start. If he left the office now he would be able to blend in in the hallways and maybe no one would ask him any questions.

For the rest of the day, each of his teachers called him aside as he was leaving class and handed him a list of makeup assignments. They all seemed to be in cahoots with the stupid guidance counselor with all their “son” and “we” talk, but at least they were giving him a chance, so he guessed it was all right. He really didn’t want to have to repeat ninth grade — flunking was for burnouts. If he went straight home after school

every day and did his homework he could probably get caught up. Plus that would give him an excuse not to talk to anyone.

John kept his word to the guidance counselor. Every day after school he went straight home to the Thompson's and first did his homework, then the makeup assignments. He concentrated better alone, and Nate used the bedroom for his study hall, so John asked Mrs. T. if he could set up a card table in the



garage. She seemed a little surprised by his request but said it would be okay. He liked the quiet. He felt like a little animal, burrowing away in the back of the garage amid the soccer balls and bicycles.

There was an old couch out there and a fan that Mrs. T. used when she was out there doing oil changes and stuff on the cars. Usually after he finished his homework and makeup work he would lie on the couch until Mr. or Mrs. T. came and told him to get inside and go to bed.

His grandmother came every Sunday at ten in the morning. He always stayed in the bedroom or the garage so he wouldn't have to see her. Then one

Sunday, after she had been and gone, Nate came looking for him.

“Dude, what the fuck — this is not right.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your granny. She comes every week. All she wants is to see you and all you do is hide from her. She’s a nice lady.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Well, yeah, maybe I don’t understand all of it. Your gramps, yeah, that’s raw man. But your granny, man, she cries when she comes here. She tries to hide it, but I see. How can you make her cry?”

John didn’t say anything. He didn’t know what to say. He thought about Gram crying and it made him feel

terrible. He hadn't thought about how she might feel. He just knew that he was angry at everyone every time he thought about Asshole.

He missed her. There, he admitted it. He missed his Grammy. It wasn't her fault that his mom was dead. She wasn't a part of that; she'd been living in Phoenix when it happened. But she had lied to him, hadn't she? At this he squeezed his eyes shut and tried to stop thinking. It was too hard. How could his Gram, the one who had raised him, keep that from him? All those years he had asked her about his mom, she always told him about the accident, but that was all she had said.

Then he remembered something. She

always said she would tell him when he was older. Maybe she was always planning to and didn't get a chance before asshole Curtis beat her to it. Maybe she hadn't lied to him after all.

When she showed up next Sunday, he was in the bedroom. He wanted to come out, but what if she didn't want to see him? From where he lay on his bed he could hear her in the living room talking with Mrs. T. He didn't want to see her crying, but it sounded like she was just talking, so maybe it would be okay.

He opened the door a crack and peered out. He could see the back of Mrs. Thompson's head in the wing chair, and across from her, on the couch facing him, his Gram. She was holding a coffee

cup and looked the way she always looked. He opened the door a little more and just as he did, she looked up and saw him. She didn't say anything, but she kept looking at him, until finally he opened the door all the way and, crossing the living room in a few strides, went over to give her a hug.

When he pulled away, she dabbed at her eyes. He turned around to see if Mrs. T. saw but she wasn't there anymore. He was kind of glad. His grandmother made him feel mushy and he didn't want anyone else to see that.

She took his hand and squeezed it. "Sit down, Johnny, please."

He took the place next to her on the couch, his hand still in hers. He didn't

say anything at first; he just sat there, holding her hand.

Gram turned toward him and put her other hand over his. "Sweetie, I've missed you. It's good to see you."

John still didn't say anything. He was afraid that if he tried to talk he might cry.

"Are you getting your work caught up?"

John swallowed. "Yes. They said I can probably go to tenth grade next year."

"I'm glad of that. How about soccer?"

"I'm not sure. I don't want to talk about that now."

"I got the couch recovered."

John was a little surprised to hear this. It didn't make sense, but he realized

he had envisioned Gram frozen in place, like a player in Statue. It was weird to think that she was doing things like getting the sofa reupholstered.

“That’s nice. What color is it?”

“It’s yellow. Now that you’re old enough not to spill things, I wanted a brighter color to liven things up.”

“That’s nice.”

He couldn’t think of anything else to say, but he liked sitting there with his Gram. It felt weird holding hands with her though, so he pulled away and got up. “Do you want something to drink?” Oh, duh, she already had her coffee on the table in front of them.

“I could use a warm up. And why don’t you get yourself something?”

He took her cup and went into the kitchen. Mrs. T. was sitting at the island, leafing through the Sunday paper. She looked up when he came in and gave him a smile, then went back to the paper.

“Gram wants more coffee.”

“The coffee in the carafe is still fresh, just go ahead and top off her cup. The iced tea’s fresh too.”

John set the coffee cup on the counter and got a glass from the cupboard. He opened the fridge. There was a pitcher of iced tea up front, and a jug of the creamer stuff that both his Gram and Mrs. T. liked in their coffee. He poured a dollop of creamer in Gram’s coffee and filled his glass with iced tea then topped off Gram’s coffee cup from the



carafe. He went back out to the living room and put her mug and his glass on the coffee table, remembering to put a coaster under his tea like Gram had taught him.

He sat back down and faced her. He didn't know what to say so he picked at a paint spot on his jeans. Grammy took a sip of coffee, then said, "Have you been out to South Mountain lately?"

"Um, no. I haven't been running. I guess I should start again."

"That would be a great idea, I think."

They fell silent again, but John didn't mind. It was nice just sitting here with his Gram. He leaned in toward her and she put her arm around him, just like she used to when he was a little kid.

After they'd been sitting there a while they heard a key in the lock. John looked up — it was Mr. T. coming in from his golf game. John sat up straight, embarrassed to be seen leaning against his grandmother. Gram stood up and stretched, then looked down at John and said, "Well, sweetheart, I guess I should be going. I'll be back on Sunday, okay?"

John nodded, then stood up to see her to the door. She exchanged hellos with Mr. T. then turned to John, gave him a quick hug, and was gone.

After she left, John went back into the bedroom and lay down on his bed. It was nice seeing Gram. And she didn't cry. He didn't know what he would have

done if she had.

Gram came next Sunday and the next and the next. She always sat with John on the sofa and talked about this and that and not much of anything at all. After a few Sundays she asked him if he wanted to go get brunch with her and he agreed. Away from the Thompson's house, he found it easier to talk to her. He wanted to ask her about stuff, but he didn't know how, so they talked about school and whether he would go out for soccer again next year. He had started running at South Mountain again so he might be able to get on varsity, if he kept it up.

One Sunday he blurted out, "Gram, do you think Mom suffered?"

They were sitting in IHOP. They'd

finished eating and Gram had paid the check but wanted to finish her coffee. She was silent for a moment and John worried that he had upset her, but then she took a breath and started talking.

“Sweetie, we’ll never know for sure, of course, but I think the answer is no. It all happened so fast. Are you sure you want to talk about this?”

John wasn’t sure. Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night, from dreams where a huge truck barreled down on a small car, dreams where a young woman in jeans bled and bled and bled. He wondered what it would feel like to die but he didn’t want to make Gram upset, so he shook his head and didn’t say anything. There were some

empty sugar packets in front of him and he picked one of them up and started folding it, like an accordion, seeing how many folds he could cram into it.

“Would you like to see a movie?”

That sounded nice, actually, but he couldn't go to the movies with his Gram; what if he ran into someone from school? Gram must have understood because she sat up straighter and said, “I know, how about we go back to the house and watch a video? You can go pick one up at the store or we can watch one we already have.”

“Can we watch Star Wars?”

“We sure can, which one?”

“The first one.”

Gram gathered up her purse and coat

and scooted out of her booth. “Come on. Let’s go!”

That week every time he thought about sitting there on the couch with Gram, leaning up against her, sharing a bowl of popcorn, he wanted to go back. For good. He wanted to go back and live with her. He wondered if she would let him. Maybe she was done having him live there. Maybe she was ready to be a single woman again, like she had been before he came to live with her. He would ask her. Maybe there would be a good time to ask the next Sunday.

On Sunday he woke with knots in his stomach. What if she didn't want him back? What if she was still mad at him for yelling at her that time with Mrs. T.?

When she came to pick him up, he asked if they could have lunch back at her house instead of out. So she took him home and made him a grilled cheese

sandwich with a pickle and some Fritos on the side. It made him feel like he was a little kid again, but he liked it. They sat at the kitchen table, Grammy with her coffee mug alongside her own grilled cheese.

He finished his sandwich and picked up his pickle spear. He set it back down and started dividing his Fritos into two piles. One pile was for unbroken Fritos and the other was for pieces.

“John, do you want to talk about something?”

“I dunno.”

“You’re playing with your food. You always do that when you have something you want to talk about. What’s going on?”



John pushed his plate away so he couldn't fidget with the Fritos anymore, and sat up. "I ... just wanted to ask you a favor."

"Yes?"

"Well ... you might say no. If you do, that's okay. But I wanted to ask."

"John, you can ask me anything. What is it?"

"I just ... I wanted to know ... would it be okay ... can I move back in with you?"

"I'm sorry John, I can't understand what you're saying."

"I said ... can I move back in with you?"

Grammy had been getting ready to take a sip of coffee, but now she set her mug back down on the table. "John,

sweetie, of course you can move back in here. This is your home. Did you think there was any question?”

He couldn't say anything else because there was a lump in his throat and his eyes felt all prickly. He pulled his plate back over in front of him and picked up a Frito, and, holding it between his thumb and forefinger, bent over to look at it more closely. A tear splashed on the Frito and he thought how the salt on the Frito would make the salty tear even more salty.

He heard Grammy's chair scrape on the floor and then she was kneeling next to him, her arms around him. “Oh sweetie, oh Johnny. Did you think I would ever turn you away? This is your

home. I love you. I will always love you. What happened, it doesn't change that."

John couldn't answer; he just leaned into Grammy and let the tears come.

He cried until he didn't think he could cry any more. There was so much he wanted to say. He pulled away from Grammy and looked into her face. She reached up and smoothed his hair. "I think it's time we had a talk."

John wanted to answer, but the words wouldn't come. Dammit, why couldn't he stop crying?

"Sweetheart."

John didn't know where to start. He felt so many things at once. He hated his grandfather. He missed his mother, even

though he couldn't remember her. He had missed Grammy and he was afraid she was mad at him.

“Are you mad at me? For being so mean to you?”

“It did hurt my feelings when you shouted at me. And it scared me to death when you ran away, and then when you got caught smoking marijuana. But-”

“Grammy, what do you think my mom thought, when she was in the accident? Do you think she was scared?”

“We'll never know for sure but I went to the trial and I remember that the paramedics said she would have been unconscious very quickly. Based on that, I don't think she had time to be scared.”

“When I was little, did you visit her in

Ithaca?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember how she was with me? When I was a baby?”

“Yes, I do. I stayed with her for your first four months. When you were tiny she had some trouble getting you to eat. You would eat a little and then you would fall asleep still hungry. So she didn’t sleep very much at first, but she loved you so much she didn’t care. I was there the first time you smiled at her and it was like heaven had opened for her. She was so in love with you. She always called you her miracle.”

John tried to picture this, tried to see himself as a tiny bundle in his mom’s arms.

“Did she ever get mad at me?”

“Oh no. I’m sure that if she had lived she would have had her moments. You were a handful when you were three, for example. But when you were tiny all she wanted to do was take care of you.”

“What do you think it was like the day she died? Where was she going?”

“When they were kids your Aunt Kate’s family took her on vacations to the beach. Those were very happy times for your mom and she wanted to share that with you. I’m pretty sure she was looking forward to having some uninterrupted time with you. I think she was looking forward to seeing it all again through your eyes.”

“What was she like when she was

little?”

Grammy didn't say anything at first. She was very still. Then she spoke, but her voice was a little wobbly.

“Your mother had spirit. You know now that your grandfather was an alcoholic, so I guess I won't shock you by bringing that up. It was hard for her — hard in ways that I didn't admit to myself back then. But she was so ... determined. No matter what happened she would always pick herself up and get back in the game. I see a lot of that in you.”

John thought about his mom, getting to her feet, slapping her hands together, dusting off her rear, eyes blazing. “Grammy?”

“Yes?”

“Why did you lie? Why did you always tell me she died in an accident?”

“Honey, it was an accident!”

“No, it wasn’t. Accidents are nobody’s fault, but this, it was his fault. He was driving drunk. That’s not an accident.”

“Yes ... I suppose you’re right.”

“Were you ever going to tell me the truth?”

“Yes, I planned to. It was something I thought about a lot. I knew you had a right to know but I also knew that I needed to build you up into the kind of young man who would be able to cope. I realize now that I made the mistake of thinking I would just know the right time,



but honestly, if I had to pick a time, there never would have been a right time. No matter how old you get, you will always be a little boy to me. Still, I think I would have told you when you were in college, or maybe after you had finished.”

John was quiet. He didn't know what to say; there were so many things he wanted to say, but it was all so mixed up.

“Why, if you knew that Gramps was to blame, did you let him come around? Did you think it was okay, what he did?”

“Oh, John, no. I never thought it was okay. There is a part of me that will never forgive him. Remember, Mary was my child as much as she was your

mother.”

“Then why?”

“When you came to live with me, I’d been in Phoenix for only a few years. I knew with all of my heart that I wanted you, but I worried that on my own I would not be able to provide you with a sense of family. Your Aunt Teri was a godsend. She loves you like you’re her own. But we’re women. When you were in preschool, you started asking questions; why didn’t you have a father? Why didn’t you have a grandfather? Every day you would ask and I couldn’t distract you from it.”

John sat forward. “So you thought it would be okay to bring an alkie murderer into my life? To make it easier

for you?”

“No, no, no. It wasn’t like that. John, please believe me, I always wanted what was best for you. I think you know that. I know you’re angry right now, but I think you know that.”

John leaned back, thinking. He saw his Grammy, her face sad and tired, on a plane from Massachusetts with him in her lap. He imagined her changing his diapers and picking up his toys and walking back and forth with him in the middle of the night.

“So why did you do it? How could you trust him after what he did?”

“First of all, think back over all the years since you first met him. Are you remembering?”

John nodded.

“Can you remember a time, ever, when you were alone with him?”

John squinched his eyes shut and thought: playing ball in Gramps’ backyard; visits to the park and pool and zoo; summer vacations. Always, there was Grammy, not far away, maybe sitting with a book, maybe driving while Gramps sat in back with him, but always there. “No, that’s weird. I can’t.”

Grammy took a deep breath. “Look, I don’t always know exactly what I’m doing. That might surprise you, but we’re just grownups, we’re not gods. When your grandfather was in prison, he wrote to me. At first his letters made me angry because it seemed that he was

asking me to make him feel better about himself and what he did. But over time he changed. I could hardly believe it because he had been so selfish when he and I were married. But it was true. Once he faced what he had done — and it didn't happen overnight — he stopped looking to the world to give him everything he wanted and he started trying to figure out how to give something to the world.

“You were five when he got out of prison. All you could talk about was grandfathers and fathers. When he wrote to tell me his release was coming up, he also told me that he hoped someday he might meet you. He was humble about it. He knew he was asking a lot and he

didn't push me.

"I thought about it a lot. I agonized. Teri and I discussed it endlessly. I didn't believe that he deserved to know you, despite having turned over a new leaf. But I did believe that you deserved to know him, or at least to meet him and decide for yourself.

"I had changed, too. After I divorced him I was very bitter but I didn't want to let that rule me, so I worked very hard to let go of my anger towards him. I let him visit. The idea was that he could come once and then we would see how it went. Do you remember that visit?"

John nodded.

"The whole time he was here, I watched, waiting for the old Robert to

poke through the surface, waiting to be disappointed; ready to swoop in and protect you from him. But at the end of those five days, I believed in him. I never trusted him enough to leave you alone with him, but I trusted him enough to let you love him. I hope I didn't make the wrong choice."

John was quiet. He was thinking. He remembered that first time Gramps had come to see them and how excited he'd been about the Holiday Inn, and playing on the slide, and finally having a grandfather that he could tell the other kids about. What she said made sense. But ... he shifted so he was facing her again.

"Grammy?"

“Yes dear.”

“Do I have to forgive him? Because I don’t think I can. I try to imagine not being mad at him and I just can’t.”

“Oh honey, no, you don’t have to. I hope that in time you can forgive him enough to let the anger go, because it’s only going to hurt you. But you don’t have to force yourself and you don’t have to pretend to forgive him for my sake, or his.”

“Okay. I just... it’s just that ... I think about him and I get so mad.”

“I know. It’s okay to be angry with him. I want to ask you something else though.”

“Wait, I have one more question — what about Snoopy? I miss him so much.



But your allergies...”

“I’m not sure. I might be able to get shots to help with that. I’ll schedule an appointment to talk to an allergist and we’ll see. Now ...”

“Oh, yeah. What did you want to ask me?”

“I realized after you got caught with the marijuana, I should have taken you to see someone to talk about this. A grief counselor, or a counselor of some sort.”

“Why? Don’t you want me to talk to you about stuff?”

“You can always talk to me. But I’m in the middle of it. Maybe a counselor could help you get a perspective that I don’t have. Will you at least try?”

John sat back and let out a sigh. It

would be weird going to talk to a stranger about his family. What if he cried in front of them or something? But sometimes he thought he would explode with all the thoughts in his head, so maybe it would be nice to have someone to talk to, so he wouldn't have to make Grammy sad.

It was the first home match of the season. John had made varsity this year — not bad for a sophomore. His summer had been nothing but studying and running. Once he moved back in with Grammy he realized he couldn't stand for her to see him all fucked up, so he buckled down and got his freshman year

credits and got back in shape so he could play soccer. And on the varsity team he didn't have to deal with that fuckface Curtis, who got left behind in JV.

He was the only sophomore on the team, so he was playing with an entirely new group of guys, but they'd had two months to practice together and had started to click along like a machine. They had some new moves, requiring a quickness that the JV team just didn't have. He loved it, loved the feel of the turf under his cleats and the pitch disappearing behind him as he ran.

The defender was pacing John, but he was having trouble keeping up. Here it came. Closer and closer to the goal, Jackson feinted to the left and rear and

then passed to John, to his right and forward. His defender was trying to stick him, but John put on a burst of speed and quickly closed the gap to the ball, trapped it, dribbled a few yards. With his defender gasping behind him, he kicked his favorite drop shot. The goalie lunged, but at the last second the ball dipped, just enough, and went into the goal.

A cheer went up from the stands. The early season crowd was thin, but they were frisky. It was going to be a good game.

As he jogged back into position John glanced up into the stands, looking for Grammy, and Teri with her megaphone. As he scanned the bleachers, he could

not believe what he saw. Him. Asshole. His grandfather. Up there, toward the top and off to the side, hunched over in his stupid windbreaker with his stupid travel mug on the seat beside him.

Where was Grammy? Did she know he was there? He looked around wildly now, needing to see her. There. There was Grammy, with Aunt Teri. She caught his eye and waved. He raised his hand to return the greeting, then pointed, up to where Asshole was sitting. Grammy turned and looked, saw him and then turned back to John, holding her hands up as if to say, “I don’t know any more than you do.”

John ran to the coach.

“I need to tag out. Can you put

someone in for me? My ... hamstring hurts.”

Coach grimaced. “I was counting on you John.”

“Sorry!”

“All right. Tag out for Goodman.”

John jogged to the bench and tagged Goodman, but he didn't sit down. Instead he pivoted and ran past the stands, through the tunnel under the bleachers and to the school perimeter. He got to the hole in the fence, slipped through and hit the street at a dead run. He could hear Coach shouting, but he didn't stop. He ran until his house came into view and he finally slowed to a walk. He wouldn't play if that fuckface was going to be there watching him.

That's all there was to it. He would talk to Grammy. She would tell him he couldn't come. Coach would be mad at him for running out on the game, but he could say he got sick.

He was at the front door now. He reached down to pull his key out of his jeans pocket and then realized he was still in his uniform. Grammy kept a spare key in one of those fake rocks. He retrieved it and let himself in. Grammy would be home soon and he could talk it over with her.



71.

John had bolted so fast that no one could catch him, so they continued the game without him. Barbara had come up and told Robert to go, so he left. He wasn't ready to go home yet so he walked over to the shopping center and sat in Starbucks for a while.

He read the whole newspaper and was starting on the crossword puzzle

when the barista called out, “Sir, we’re closing in ten minutes.” He gathered his things and walked slowly home through the gathering twilight and let himself in through the side gate.

He let Snoopy out. While he was scooping poop he noticed one of John’s soccer balls wedged up against the back fence, half deflated, gray and rough with age. He retrieved it and went to sit on the steps where they had shared so many afternoon Pepsis. He cradled the ball in his lap and then bent over, hugging it to him.

It was nearly dark now, and he could almost imagine that John was there, out in the yard, practicing his dribble, shooting into the fence, not wanting to

turn in until the patio furniture turned from gray shapes to black silhouettes and the ball disappeared into the murk.

Like a glowing ribbon, their years together unspooled: the feel of John's hand in his the first time they met; the warm, solid, small body in his lap at story time; five-year-old John standing in Robert's boots and hat, looking ridiculous but for the pride shining off of him. Countless card games and backyard practice sessions and secret Pepsis. His humility at John's kindness, his pride in his strength.

His daughter was gone forever. He had orphaned his only grandchild. The time he'd had with John was a grace far beyond anything he deserved. John might

never forgive him. But as he played and replayed his memories, one word resounded: enough.