

DIG A LITTLE DEEPER

by

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ABSTRACT

‘Dig a little deeper’ is the teasing mantra for opponents in the card game, Crazy Eights. You know Crazy Eights, don’t you? With the cards in your hand, you either match the number or suit of whatever card is face up on the pile, or you play an eight and call your own suit. When you don’t have a matching number, matching suit, or an eight, you have to rifle through the draw pile until you find one, adding the cards to your ever-growing hand. Meanwhile, the other participants chant, ‘dig a little deeper, dig a little deeper.’ And that brings me to the title of this story collection.

I consider these stories an excavation of human behavior. Why do people act the way they do? I don’t profess to know the answers. All I know is that everybody has a story; sometimes it takes digging to uncover it. Everybody has needs; sometimes you accumulate things you don’t need on the way to getting what you do need. Luck, both good and bad, is fleeting, but it exists as long as there are four crazy eights floating around.

The characters that live in these pages work, play, think, obsess, love. Some of their stories are being uncovered; some are already on display. They don’t always find what they’re looking for, and believe me—they’re flawed. But by the end of the story, I think you’ll find that you know who they are, even if they don’t.

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THE GEOMETRY LESSON

Fingerprints smudged the floor-to-ceiling library windows. Tyler got up from the table and walked over to the window where he could see both the parking lot and the creek beyond. He recognized the silver car and he recognized the head pressed against the phone inside the silver car. What was she doing? Didn't she know she was already late? The parent-teacher conferences revealed a need for him to be challenged more, so his mom had hired a college girl, the daughter of one of her book club friends, to tutor him in math once a week after school. But she wouldn't be very happy when he told her his tutor was—he glanced at the clock perched on the wall above the information desk—going to be late if she didn't get here in about two minutes. Maybe she didn't realize he was already in the library waiting for her. He rapped on the glass until the librarian shushed him. Out in the car, Catherine didn't look up. He leaned his face toward the glass, breathed heavily a few times and then wrote, 'Help!' backwards in the condensation. His fingers squeaked against the glass. Behind him, the librarian cleared her throat and when he turned around, her crossed arms and vicious glare deterred him from anymore fog messages.

“Hi there, Tyler,” said Catherine as she approached. “You ready?” She led the way back to the four-person table and sat down next to Tyler's unzipped book bag. He wriggled out his green math workbook from in between two other books.

“So what are you working on in math this week?”

He thumbed through the pages until he found the right place and then read the chapter heading. “An introduction to geometry.” He looked over. Catherine had her cell phone flipped open between her hands and her thumbs furiously worked the buttons. Tyler tried to read the text message. She pressed the ringer volume button on the side, closed the phone, and stuck it in her jacket pocket.

“Fourth grade and you’re already learning geometry?”

“Yup.”

“Okay, well good. I love geometry.”

A circle has no beginning and no end and there’s no such thing as a perfect one. Not even a computer can generate a perfect circle. To the untrained, human eye it may look perfect, but believe me, it’s not.

What about when I use a compass?

Do you have one? Okay, let me show you. You’re right. Its purpose is to help us make a more accurate circle since a good freehand one is basically impossible. But sometimes this pointy end can slide just a fraction of a millimeter off the center. Or if this thing in the middle of the compass isn’t tight, the arm with the pencil can wobble. And look at this little pencil nub. See how dull it is? As the pencil spins around the midpoint, some parts of the line may be thicker than others. And you know what that means.

It’s not perfect.

Never is.

Catherine scooted the chair back from the table and stood up. “Why don’t you work on those practice exercises and I’ll be right back to look over your answers.”

Tyler watched her walk away then turned back to the math book on the table. He zipped through the exercises, labeling the midpoint, chord, radius, diameter, and circumference of the circle in his book, and then he drew his own circles with the compass. He looked back at the lobby where Catherine had been headed but didn’t see her. He loosened the stubby yellow pencil from the grips of the compass and approached the librarian at the main desk.

“Where’s the pencil sharpener?”

As he glanced to the right, he caught sight of Catherine outside the main door of the library. She was on the phone, pacing in a very controlled fashion, the way Tyler sometimes did when his mother made him call his great aunt. The door flew open and Catherine, red-faced, strode through and walked right past him toward their table, stopping when she must have realized he wasn’t sitting where she’d left him. Tyler watched her scan the library until she saw him. He headed back to the table, showing her his newly sharpened pencil and she nodded.

“Did you finish those exercises?”

“Yeah, they were easy. Are you fighting with your boyfriend?”

“Oh. Well, not exactly. Just a guy who’s a friend and we’re not really fighting.”

“Do you wish he was your boyfriend?”

She sighed. “Tyler. Let’s get back to geometry.”

When a line has two distinct endpoints, it's called a line segment. There is a definite beginning and a definite end. See here in your book, this would be line segment AB.

Couldn't it be line segment BA?

Yes, it could be either one. And then a ray is when there is one distinct endpoint but the line can go on infinitely. Do you know what infinitely means?

It means forever.

Right. A ray has a definite beginning but it goes on forever. It's like the endpoint is forever chasing something it'll never catch.

So then what's the point of chasing it?

Oh! Touché!

Huh?

Nevermind. And then an angle is an endpoint with two rays sprouting from it. Except the endpoint is called the vertex. So this would be angle ABC or angle CBA and you write it with this backwards, upside-down 7 in front of the ABC or CBA. What point is the vertex in this angle?

B.

Yep, good.

So the vertex is chasing two things it can't catch?

Yeah... I guess it is.

Tyler heard her phone vibrating as he worked out the practice exercises on angles and line segments and rays.

“I’ll be right back, okay?”

Tyler didn’t look up from his work but nodded, and once she began walking away, he swiveled in his seat and watched her walk out of the library’s main doors and put her phone to her ear. If his mom drove up right now, she wouldn’t be very happy to see the math tutor not tutoring him. He’d stick up for her though. He’d tell his mom Catherine was also having issues with the male department, which is something he’d overheard his mom say once. Tyler had asked if that’s why his *Odyssey Science* magazine hadn’t come yet and his mom got a big kick out of that before explaining she meant male and not mail. He finished the few problems that were left and then watched a little girl at the apple-shaped kids’ table picking her nose with one hand while she flipped through a book with the other. He was tempted to see if he was that coordinated but didn’t want Catherine to see him.

“Wow. You’re done with those already?” Catherine, standing behind him now, peered down at his workbook. “Looks good. You’re really getting the hang of this stuff.”

“Yeah, maybe I love geometry like you do.”

Catherine laughed. Tyler hadn’t meant to say anything funny but he laughed, too.

There are three different kinds of triangles. An equilateral is like how it sounds. All three sides are equal. An isosceles triangle has two sides that are the same length. I used to remember it by saying that the one side of the triangle was isolated because it wasn’t the same size as the other two. Isosceles—*isolated*. Get it? And then in a scalene triangle, none of the side lengths are the same. I don’t know how I used to remember that one.

Snakes have scales and I bet the scales are all different. Like snowflakes and fingerprints.

Okay. Good idea.

Know what else snakes do?

No, what?

They dislocate their bottom jaw so they can swallow their prey whole.

Having finished the math lesson for the day, Tyler and Catherine took turns opening their mouths as wide as they could.

“Tyler! You could swallow a whole rat with that big yapper.”

“Did you know rats spread the bubonic plague back in the old days?”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, and fleas, too.”

She seemed to consider this for a moment. “I wonder if the rats gave it to the fleas or if the fleas gave it to the rats.”

“I think both.”

“Maybe. But it’s more helpful to narrow it down. If it was the fleas that started it, then you know you need to do something about the fleas. But if it was the rats, then fixing the rat problem should be your first priority.” Her phone buzzed.

“Speaking of rats...”

Catherine burst out in laughter and Tyler didn’t get to finish his thought about their class pet.

“Oh, Tyler. That just made my day.”

The familiar car pulled into the library parking lot right at five o'clock.

"Here's my mom."

They walked out to the Buick. Tyler opened the front door, threw his book bag inside and hopped in the front seat. Catherine walked around to the driver's side where Tyler's mom had the window rolled down and envelope ready for her.

"Hi, Mrs. Deagan."

"Hi, Catherine. Everything go okay?"

"Sure did. Tyler's such a great kid. Really smart and funny." She leaned down and peered across at Tyler. "Hey buddy, your homework is to tell me what parallel lines are."

"Two lines that go on forever but never cross paths."

FLAGRANT FOUL

Dennis Schiavone rocked back and forth in his polished black shoes, straddling the gym's blue sideline next to the scorer's table. He winced when the static recording of the national anthem began. The gym lacked any formal sound system, so the volume of the stereo speaker had to be amplified with a microphone. As a result, those close to the scorer's table might as well have been listening to bombs bursting in the air.

Two little black kids in the bleacher row behind Trinity's bench covered their ears, their bony elbows sticking out through oversized white Tiger Basketball t-shirts. Dennis first noticed them during warm-ups, racing after rebounds while the players took their final pre-game shots. They weren't very effective ball kids, preferring to keep the basketballs to themselves instead of passing it back to the players, but they were cute and he didn't blame them for covering their ears. A large, bosomy black woman with reddish streaks in her hair and long, claw-like nails stood between the two kids and gave the boy's arm a quick tug. He reluctantly put his hand over his heart and then draped his left arm over the top of his head to try to cover both ears with one arm. Dennis figured it would only be a matter of time before the same boy would be blaring his rap music enough to rattle the tinted windows of his car. Today, Dennis had been stopped at a light next to one such thug. Each thunder of bass coming from the long black Lincoln with spinning rims volted through his body so that even the steering wheel of his Intrepid shook under his hands.

Standing at attention while the anthem played on, he squeezed his hands, recalling how tense they'd been on the wheel. They were tense now too, and damp. Having them clasped behind his back forced his stomach to protrude more than usual and he could barely see the tips of his shoes over the black and white striped bulge, but the association stressed professionalism and uniformity. The official in front of him, Joe Maloney, had his hands behind his back. Taller and trimmer than Dennis with black hair slicked back, he was one of the big wigs officiating high school basketball. During the '05 season, the committee selected Maloney to be an alternate official for the Regional Finals. It was as far into the postseason as any official from District 17 had ever gone. Behind Dennis, Reggie Bonnewell, the new black guy who Dennis had first seen at the rules interpretation meeting earlier this year, kept sniffing and clearing his throat. His hands probably weren't behind his back. He probably wasn't even standing up straight. 'Homeboy better not bring us down,' Dennis thought to himself.

This was a big game. With only three losses between them, Trinity and Fairview would each make a case for their postseason brackets with a win tonight. From what he'd heard, Trinity had lots of fast, athletic kids who liked to run and gun and pressure all over the court. He'd already done a game of Fairview's and they were the opposite of Trinity with their deliberate motion offense that worked hard to get a high percentage shot every time, and they played a less aggressive half court defense. Of the two styles, he preferred the mechanics of the precise Fairview. They played the game the way basketball was meant to be played. Not like the rough and tumble showboating trash-talking chest bumping that he was prepared to see from Trinity.

Because tonight's game was so important, it wouldn't surprise him if the association heads were here scouting the crew of officials. He scanned the crowd as best he could without turning his head, looking for yellow legal pads within the realm of his peripheral vision. They were the typical giveaway of opposing high school coaches, recruiting college coaches, and the rare but dangerous officiating scout. The scouts, usually retired officials themselves, were like mystery shoppers except that they were rating how well the officials performed instead of rating a salesperson's customer service skills.

Dennis knew all about mystery shoppers from his day job. They came into his store at least once every quarter. As the manager of the locally owned and operated Second Sole shoe store, he had dealt with many of them, and almost always received perfects in attitude, service and upselling. It was part of the reason he'd moved up to Manager. Dennis did his job well. When customers came into the store, he greeted them with a handshake and introduced himself. If the parent's kid had on a blue bulldog shirt, Dennis made it a point to small talk about those Berkley Bulldogs and offer the team discount. Second Sole wasn't your run of the mill athletic shoe store. He and his associates prided themselves on personal customer attention. It was all part of the process. One of his frequent customers told him he should run for public office. It wasn't a bad idea.

When Dicks Sporting Goods and other retail stores started sprouting up in the area, Second Sole lost almost fifty percent of their quarter profits. There was talk of closing down. But Dennis single-handedly brought the little store back to life by traveling to area high schools to secure team shoe deals. It kept him busy all year. He negotiated

with basketball coaches either in the summer at camps or as soon as school started. Since he personally knew most of them, they were eager to buy from him—who wouldn't want the chance to get on an official's good side? Dennis never accepted a bribe; but there was that close East-JFK game, and it just so happened that he called a questionable foul on an East kid with less than five seconds left in regulation weeks after the East coach refused to meet with him about team shoes. Of course that wasn't why Dennis had called the foul. Mere coincidence.

Dennis had a great schedule lined up for this season. Two Fridays ago when conference play started, he officiated a game between two of the premier Division I's in the district. Louie was looking out for him, he was certain of that. The current peer-appointed president of the association, Louie Bartos was an important man for Dennis to know—for any official with lofty goals to know. This past summer he'd found out which camps Louie was attending and signed up for every single one. So what if it had required driving all over the state each weekend of the summer? It was worth it. They were buddies now because of it.

"Dennis, buddy," Louie had told him over lunch during the fifth weekend, "you know you only need to ref three camps each summer to renew your certification, right?"

"Well, sure, but you know what they say about the six P's, Lou. Proper preparation prevents piss poor performance."

Dennis was determined to officiate the state tournament this year and he needed Louie Bartos to recommend him. It would be the perfect culmination to his career as a high school official. He'd had a good run; this was his twentieth year patrolling the sidelines, and the past five years he'd reffed the local district tournaments. But so far, he

hadn't made it out of the district. So many never got the chance. They didn't put in the effort to improve—the camps, the roundtables, the trainings, even the subscription to *Official Trends*. Dennis couldn't be content with mediocrity like all these other guys. It wasn't just a hobby for him. He deserved the state tournament and he needed it this year while he still had legs enough to keep up with the high schoolers. Old farts past their prime got demoted to junior varsity ball, or worse—junior high ball—and he'd promised himself he wouldn't ever let that happen. He'd rather go out on a good note on his own terms. But before retiring the whistle and stripes, he wanted a chance at the state tournament.

Dennis rolled his neck, pretending to crack it in order to gain a better glimpse of the attendees. If Louie or another referee scout were there, they'd need to sit close enough to the floor to hear the audibles. No scouts or legal pads that he could see, but his glance reminded him of years past when his daughter used to come to games and mouth the words, 'good luck' to him before the tip. He twisted the corners of his otherwise stern referee mouth into the slightest half smile before returning his attention to the court. The applause in the crowded gymnasium drowned out the last line of the national anthem. The two teams gathered at their respective benches. Microphone in hand, the high school girl garbled through the good sportsmanship announcement and player introductions in her predictable up and down intonation.

It used to be challenging for his daughter to witness the harsh treatment fans bestowed upon him. One time after a game in Hanover—she must have been nine or ten at the time because it was right after the divorce—he exited the locker room showered and back in his street clothes. Families milled around, waiting for players to come out,

and he had a hard time finding Lisa, who usually waited right inside the gym for him. He remembered spotting her up near the top of the bleachers, looking upset. She eased her way down the clunky wooden steps, two feet on each step like he taught her, and he noticed the red eyes and blotchy cheeks.

“Lisa honey, is something wrong?”

“They were saying mean things about you and it made me so mad.”

“Well, did you stick up for me?” he laughed.

“Dad, it’s not funny.”

“That’s what I do to keep it from getting to me. I just laugh it off. They’re not saying those things to me as a person, they’re saying them to me as an official.”

“An official is a person.”

“I’m glad you realize that, honey. But to them I’m just a moron with zebra stripes. I don’t take it seriously. They’re just words.”

“But they said you were fat and out of shape and that you blew the whistle all the time so you could catch your breath.”

“That’s it? Well hon, that’s pretty much true.”

She looked up at him, startled.

“Except for the fat part.” He had turned toward her, sucked in his stomach, and flexed his arms. She smirked and elbowed him in the gut.

Dennis smiled inwardly at the memory. So much time had elapsed since then. The fat part was truer now, but Lisa wouldn’t know that since she wasn’t coming home for the holidays this year.

Every Friday during basketball season for those first couple of years following the divorce, his ex-wife would drop Lisa off at Second Sole after school and she and Dennis would drive to a game together. She'd seen probably 200 basketball games and had to withstand all the name-calling, harassing telephone calls, even an effigy in the likeness of a referee hanging from the branch of the maple out front. Dennis always maintained that she'd become tougher because of it. But not coming home for Christmas? That wasn't tough; that was callous.

He cast aside the issue as the fans began cheering and stomping in a crescendo that made his heart race, the way it did before every tip-off. So far, it was a great atmosphere for a weeknight game. He grabbed the Wilson basketball off the scorer's table, held it out in front of him at shoulder level, and let it bounce. As expected, it peaked at his elbow.

"Let's call a good one, boys."

He sidled the ball against his right hip and strode out to center court. Both teams' starting five huddled in front of their benches and Dennis lifted the Fox40 to his lips and blew a short burst of air through the familiar, tooth-marked whistle. Across the gym, a tall guy in a dark colored trench coat entered the gym and took off his hat, revealing a bald head. Louie Bartos. Dennis wanted to watch him sit down but the players were approaching center court for the tip. Showtime.

"Blue, you're going this way," he gestured Trinity toward the basket opposite their bench.

"White, that way. Let's keep it clean, gentlemen."

He blew his whistle again, kept it clenched in his teeth this time, and positioned himself in a slight crouch inside the center circle. The ball sat steady on top of his right hand, which hovered directly above the half court line, everything according to procedure. He bent his knees further, dropped his arm, and then stood and tossed the ball up in a straight trajectory for the centers to jump after. Good toss.

At halftime, Dennis and the other two officials jogged off the court to the men's faculty restroom. Dennis sat down on the locker room bench and grabbed his towel and a bottled water out of his tote. He patted the sweat from his face and draped the towel around his neck.

“Good half, boys.” He twisted the cap from his bottled water and drank. Joe went to relieve himself. Reggie squirted some water into his mouth from the school's green Gatorade water bottle and then pulled up the neck of his shirt to wipe his face.

“Ow know, man. We're not lettin' 'em play.”

Reggie had a point. Fairview had been in the bonus early in the second quarter and most of the last few minutes consisted of foul shots. But Dennis didn't like his tone of voice.

“You want us to let Trinity play street ball?”

Reggie drew back and scrunched up his face. “All I'm sayin' is you could swallow your whistle on some of those hand checks, man.”

“Maybe you're not familiar with the rules there, boy, but you can't impede the player's path like that.”

“What about maintaining the flow of the game? You’re killin it. Gotta let em play, man.”

“No. We gotta show em who’s boss from the start so they know this crew’s not gonna put up with their street ball.”

“Why you keep sayin street ball?”

“I call it like I see it, Reggie.”

“Yeah, an I’m startin to think you see the black ones first.” Reggie stood, took one more swig of water, then tossed the Gatorade bottle at a seething Dennis. Instead of catching it, Dennis leaned out of the way and the bottle skidded across the tile.

Reggie shook his head and scoffed. “Don’t worry, man. It’s not contagious.” He left the locker room. Dennis stared after him at the door, his anger intensifying.

Joe Maloney returned from the urinal part of the locker room and picked the water bottle up from the floor. “You have a problem with blacks, Dennis?”

“Jesus Christ, Maloney. Don’t tell me you’re on his side, too.”

“Cool it, Schiavone. I’m not accusing you of anything.”

“I call em like I see em—white, black, green or purple.”

“I know, I know. Listen, I’m just warning you—Bartos thinks the world of this Bonnewell guy. I heard he’s been at all his games, taking him under his wing.”

“What?”

“Yep. I heard he’s probably going to recommend *him* from our district this year.”

Joe left the locker room. Dennis glanced up at the clock on the wall and knew he had to get back to the gym for the second half. He yanked the towel off his neck and whipped it onto the floor, then slammed the door of an open locker with such force that it

didn't click shut but instead popped open further. He'd prove he wasn't a goddamned racist.

Trinity took over the game in the second half. Numb and hesitant, Dennis flubbed his positioning, he flubbed several out of bounds calls, he ignored a blatant lane violation and he hardly called any fouls. At several points during the course of the action, he looked over to find Lou Bartos either scribbling in his legal pad or looking agitated. Dennis knew he needed something big to happen. Something that could salvage his piss poor performance. And then a breakthrough. With the game clearly in hand, Trinity stole the ball again doing the lazy, reach from behind poke that Dennis would normally call a foul. As soon as the kid poked it, he took off down the court, received a long pass from his teammate who'd gathered the loose ball and got ready to lay it up. The frustrated Fairview guard pursued him and fouled him. Hard. Reggie, who Dennis didn't think had perfect positioning, blew his whistle and called a flagrant foul. Dennis thought that was a little extreme since the Fairview kid had gone for the ball, but he didn't dare reverse the call. The Fairview coach also thought the flagrant was uncalled for and threw his arms up and began a mounting tantrum. Recognizing his opportunity to win over Reggie and maybe Lou in the process, he called a technical foul on the coach.

In the faculty locker room after the game, neither Joe nor Reggie said a word. Dennis had hoped that Reggie would thank him for coming to his aid and teeing up the coach that gave him a hard time.

Dennis rifled through his bag and didn't look up as he addressed his nemesis. "Hope you didn't think I was overstepping my boundaries or anything on that 'T'. Just wanted to defend your call. You gotta protect your own, you know?"

There was a long pause. "You're not my own. Let me fight my own battles."

Now Dennis faced Reggie. "What is it about you people? You whine when everyone's against you but as soon as someone stands up for you, you don't want our help."

Reggie looked sideways at Joe Maloney and shook his head. "Gotta luh that, man. Twenty-first century and my man's talking 'street ball' and 'you people.'" He hoisted his backpack onto one shoulder and started out. "S'been real, ya'll." Then, in mocking uppity Anglo-Saxon English, "I certainly hope to work another extracurricular event with you jolly good fellows. Cheerio."

Joe Maloney left shortly afterwards, and in the locker room, quiet except for the hum of the fluorescent lights, Dennis replayed tonight's debacle. He couldn't be racist. No more racist than anyone else at least. And wasn't Reggie just as bad the other way? Calling an unwarranted flagrant foul on the white kid of the predominantly white team and then mocking white people's talk when Dennis tried to help him? The janitor at Second Sole was black. Dennis would ask his opinion. But he was just a janitor. Probably didn't even have his GED. "Shit." He couldn't stop thinking these callous thoughts. At least his daughter came by it naturally. His saving grace was that there was no way Reggie would get picked for the postseason. He was too inexperienced, too immature. Really hadn't impressed Dennis at all.

Outside, most of the cars were already gone and the lights in the parking lot illuminated the tiny speckles of snow that fell. Over in the corner of the lot, a heavysset woman was muttering and shining a flashlight under the hood of her car. Dennis recognized her as the mother of the two ball kids. He looked back inside the school and spotted Lou's familiar dark trench coat down the hall but heading towards the parking lot. He must have stuck around to talk to the coaches and athletic director about the quality of tonight's officiating. Dennis shivered.

He approached the woman, glancing back every few steps to see if Louie'd come out yet. Maybe Dennis could remind him that they were buddies. The woman had tried again to start her car.

“Car trouble?”

“Yeah, I musta left my lights on. Can you give me a jump?”

“You got cables?”

She retreated to the back of the Buick. Dennis saw the outline of the pigtailed girl's head in the front seat and the little boy peeked at him from behind the driver's side headrest.

“Your kids the ball boy and ball girl for Trinity?”

The woman laughed. “Yeah. It's about past their bedtime but they don't got school tomorrow anyway.” She returned to the front of the car with her jumper cables.

“You the ref? Mmm, them folks was angry with you tonight.”

Dennis heard dress shoes clicking on the pavement behind him. “It's all part of the job. Can't try to please people. Just call 'em like I see 'em.” He started to back away.

“Let me go get my car so you can get these kids to bed.”

By this time, Louie Bartos was halfway to his SUV at the far edge of the parking lot.

“That’s what happens when you show up right before tip,” Dennis called to him.

Louie turned and peered in his direction.

“Oh. Hey there, Dennis. Yeah, good turnout for a weeknight. What are you still doing here?”

“Woman with car trouble needed some help.” He was standing a few feet from Lou now and their breath escaped in foggy clouds. “Maybe you saw her kids running around at halftime—the ball boy and ball girl for Trinity? Cute kids.”

“Didn’t see ‘em, Dennis. I was working during halftime. That’s good of you, though.” He turned and began to walk away. “Take care.”

“You too, Lou. See you next Friday at Garfield?”

Bartos acknowledged this last question with a half wave which Dennis thought meant yes. Relieved that he’d have a chance to prove himself again next week, he jogged to his car, hopped in, and drove over to the woman and her kids. Still, he wished Lou would drive this way to see that he was helping a black family. She held the flashlight while he connected the cables to the batteries. The stalled car revved back to life and the kids cheered. She got out of the car and Dennis handed her the cables.

“Thanks a lot, mister. Lord knows how long it would have took Triple A to get out here.” She looked into her car at the kids. “What do you tell this nice man?”

“Thanks, mister,” they responded in unison, as if rehearsed.

Dennis laughed and stuck out his hand.

“No problem at all. Dennis Schiavone from over at Second Sole.”

“I’m Loretta Burns.” She returned the handshake daintily, teasing Dennis to kiss the back of her hand. Headlights from an approaching car illuminated their figures in the same instant. Dennis’ glance at the SUV confirmed that it had indeed been Louie to witness this display of affection. Perfect.

Now in front of the school, the exhaust from Louie’s idling SUV swirled along the pavement then disappeared. Dennis knew he hadn’t come in with anyone else, so who was he picking up? A shoulder-hunched figure emerged from the school, peered in their direction, then swung himself into the passenger seat of the vehicle. Reggie. Red flashed bright and the two drove off.

So that’s how it was going to be. Joe Maloney was right. Reggie would go to the tournament this year. Dennis remembered he was still holding Loretta’s hand. His own felt clammy. “Why don’t you all stop in the next time you’re shopping for shoes and I’ll get you a discount.”

“We sure will. Thank you very much.”

Her long fingernails grazed his hand as they finally released their grasp and in that moment, in that dainty handshake and in his self-imposed servitude, he felt repulsion.

He turned to leave, acutely aware of acid in his stomach. “Please,” he said, then reached into his duffel bag on his front seat and pulled out the whistle he’d used for the game, “take this for your kids. Wait, here, I have another one. A back-up whistle. Ever since that Coover game when my whistle malfunctioned. I carry two now.” He held them out to her but she stepped back and shook her head.

“Naw, listen, that’s real nice of you. But they make enough noise already.” She started to get into her car. “Thanks again for the jump.” She slammed the door and it

startled him when she clicked the automatic locks down. He watched her until she hit the main road. Until her headlights and taillights merged with everyone else's. The whistles dangled down at his side. He chuckled them as far as he could. Two black buzzards with dangling lanyard tails pitched out into the void. He got in his car, revved the engine, then crunched over the plastic.

CIRCUS IN A DAY

“We assimilate information unconsciously all the time; at any given moment, we process thousands of stimuli, of which we pay attention to only a few.” – Jerome Groopman

“In the observation of human behavior, one will notice every human act is a response to a personal need.” – Sidney Madwed

I must be really shit-faced. There's no car in the rearview mirror. Cars don't just disappear. Maybe I should go back and make sure. Shit. I should not be driving. Just have to make it home and sleep this off. Please tell me I was just imagining that or something. Shit, I should go back. No. I'm almost home. Just have to make it home and sleep this off. Pretend like nothing's wrong and maybe nothing will be wrong...

I don't even bother screaming. It's a terrifying calm. A split-second whirlwind that takes an eternity. Scenes and names and images flip through my head like flashcards I'm not expected to answer. I'm tense. Eyes clenched. Hold on to something. Brace yourself. Here we go... waiting, waiting...

“Davenport to Central...”

“Go ahead.”

“Serious one-car MVA. Over the guardrail at Yellowcreek Bridge. Plates delta-gamma-alpha-four-two-eight-one. We need a bus down here—it's messy.”

As Officer Davenport awaited the response from his dispatcher, he and his partner struggled to find a pulse on the victim. The eerie silence of her argument with death was interrupted by the howl of the distant ambulance. A howl like a wounded creature caught between life and what's beyond.

There is a whole group of us getting the Grand Canyon tour from the guide who resembles Bob Newhart with wings. I've always had a secret thing for Bob Newhart. That subtle humor I guess. But the scene is fading in and out or maybe it's me who's fading in and out. I don't want to be distracting to the people who are committed to seeing the Grand Canyon so I hover near the outskirts. Bob Newhart doesn't seem to be paying any attention to me as he continues jabbering away about natural beauty and inner peace and I feel like I'm not supposed to be here. Sure enough, that creepy guy in the top hat sees me. He storms over and gets right in my face and screams at me to get off his train. "Wait. No," I tell him. "That's the movie, Ghost." He apologizes and suddenly he's sitting behind me as we make pottery. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. What's going on here?" I turn to look at him and it's not scary top hat guy anymore but Jake wearing a top hat. "You did this to me, asshole," I scream at him. Then I apologize for swearing in pseudo-Heaven which is I think where I am.

News in a small town, especially bad news, spreads like an epidemic. Thriving in any environment, the gossip looms in the air, leaking into conversations or hovering just beyond the conversation, waiting for the right moment to strike. Small town bad news also has a gathering quality inherent to it. People flock to it—almost revel in it, and

tonight was one of those nights Vince Davenport realized, getting ready to take statements from the neighborhood congregation assembled up on the road. Even the cold night couldn't keep away the handful of pathetic onlookers, looking themselves like accident victims with their mussed hair and clothes. Not surprisingly, they were all men, but Davenport was sure the women were either peeking out the window or sitting awake, waiting to hear the word when their men came back in, and the contagion would begin.

Didn't they realize this was more than just something to talk about at the goddamn grocery store tomorrow? This was somebody's daughter. And maybe somebody's wife, although she hadn't been wearing a ring. She had looked vaguely familiar but they were out of county plates. And in truth he hadn't wanted to look at her closely. This was one of the more horrific accidents Davenport had seen during his three years of service in his hometown of Rockford. The last fatality had been two years ago when an older man suffered a heart attack while driving and crashed into a mailbox. But these folks couldn't know the extent of tonight's accident from their perch near the busted guardrail on the bridge. All they saw was an ambulance speeding away. They hadn't seen the inside of the totaled SUV: the shattered glass, the disengaged airbag splattered with blood. Shoving his own thoughts aside, he propelled himself into his questioning of the nosy gawkers—more a formality than a chance to glean any useful information.

“I was up in bed when I heard the crash. Well, the two crashes. It was loud. Ran out but didn't see any wrecked cars anywhere. Couple of these other guys heard it too and finally someone, I don't remember who, saw the guardrail.” Echoing bursts of clashing metal and grinding noises floated up to them as the towing company attempted

to retrieve the vehicle from the ravine. The man paused briefly then continued his statement. “And it was just this sinking feeling coming over here to look down and see a car at the bottom ‘cause that’s what, ‘bout a two-story drop. We called 911 and you fellows showed up before any of us even had a chance to climb down the embankment. None of us recognize the vehicle. Course, hard to tell with it flipped like that.”

Davenport nodded and jotted down a few notes. “Thanks for your help, folks. Not much more we can do here tonight.” The image of the overturned car burned into his brain. There wasn’t anything else they could do here tonight, was there? The barrage of questions fired at him like a post-game press conference interrupted his second-guessing, and Davenport held out his hand to quiet them.

“The investigation is ongoing. I don’t know anymore than you do, and I’m not at liberty to divulge any details at this time.” Blood-thirsty vultures.

Hi, Grandpa. I’ve missed you. Want to sit on the front stoop with me for a minute?

Would like to, sugar, but you can’t stay long.

Grandpa, there are so many things I’ve been wanting to tell you but now you’re here and I can’t think of any of them.

“Let’s go! Get her in! We don’t have all day.”

What? Grandpa, I’m sorry. I don’t think well under pressure. Remember that time you and Grandma took me to the toy store and I couldn’t decide what I wanted?

So finally we talked you into a baby doll and come to find out you didn’t even like baby dolls. Yeah, I remember. Your Grandma’s here, too, you know.

No she's not. She's not dead, Grandpa. I just saw her a couple weeks ago over at the nursing home.

You don't say. Well, I guess that's why she's only with me sometimes. I just thought the rest of the time she was shacking up with some other fellow or something.

Eww, that's gross. No, she's not dead. She has Alzheimer's so she doesn't recognize any of us. Does she recognize you?

"Does she have any identification on her?"

Huh? Yeah, I guess so. She has one of those pink hospital bracelets on her wrist.

Why do you ask, Grandpa?

I didn't ask you anything. I said of course she recognizes me.

Oh. That must have been someone else. Grandpa, am I dead?

You're here, aren't you?

Davenport collapsed into the passenger seat of the squad car and sighed.

"Copy that. We'll head over." His partner clicked off his radio and started up the car. "Base called back. Her parents live over on Davis Street."

The dome light illuminated the notes he had just scrawled onto his yellow legal pad and Davenport glanced down at it.

"God, I hate this part. Shit, Chuck. Does that say Culver?"

"Yep. Melissa Culver, 22. Ran her plates. She lives out in Hickory Township.

Why, Vince, you know her?"

Davenport thought back to the body in the driver's seat of the wrecked SUV—the brown curls matted with blood and the familiar face. It was Melissa, albeit a much thinner version of Melissa. “I graduated high school with her.”

The short trip to Davis Street was made in silence. The squad car pulled up to a quaint cape cod that, like the other houses on the street, was dark and quiet. Separate from the house, the garage with the chipping paint still supported a crooked, netless basketball hoop.

“This is it.”

Vince held down on the doorbell and heard it buzz inside the house. Moments later, a porch light flicked on, a side curtain next to the door peeked open and shut, the deadbolt clicked, and the door opened.

“Mr. and Mrs. Culver? I'm afraid we have some bad news.”

I guess I'm here but where is here?

Well, sugar, there are different levels you pass through. I think maybe you're still in the transitioning level, which would explain all the excess hubbub you might be experiencing.

What level are you in?

“Seventy over forty—that's too low!”

Grandpa. What did you say?

I said I'm in the seventh level: we call it Focus 7.

What happens once you get through all the levels?

If you have more to learn, you'll come back as someone else.

Are you coming back, Grandpa? Will I know it's you?

There's always more to learn. But once you're here you can go at your own speed. So I'm waiting. Waiting for my woman to be with me all the time.

Will I know it's you when you come back? Who are you going to come back as?

"White female, date of birth: five, thirteen, eighty-five..."

Grandpa, you're still full of jokes you big teaser. That would be me if you were a white female born on May 13, 1985. Grandpa? Where'd you go? What's that beeping?

"We're losing her!"

I'm losing you, too. I don't see you anymore. And it's cold and fuzzy.

"Clear!"

No, fuzzy. I wish it were clear. Ouch! Grandpa, did you just buzz me with a giant hand buzzer? I'm sorry, but that wasn't very funny.

"She's back. That was a close one."

"If she keeps flat-lining we'll need to intubate."

Incubate? I hope that means a warm light over me like that chick egg we hatched back in grade school because wherever I am, it's cold. And speaking of things cracking, wow, do I have a headache.

On their way to the hospital, Melissa's father George thought of all the reasons why God would want to punish him. He did this while his wife, Diane, repeated the Lord's Prayer over and over again. It was either the only prayer she knew or the only one she could think of under the circumstances. He realized that he'd never heard her pray before and it sounded foreign, forced. He thought of all fights he'd had with his daughter

and he thought of all the fights he'd had with his wife about his daughter. 'You're going to regret this one day,' Melissa had told him.

What about flying?

What do you mean, sugar?

I don't know. I just always thought flying would be part of the deal. Bob Newhart had wings but you don't.

Bob Newhart? You mean that short, bald guy from the "this is my brother, Daryl and this is my other brother, Daryl" show? He's your tour guide?

Weird because he's not dead yet, is he?

No, I don't think so.

Well, who was your tour guide?

Marilyn Monroe.

She made it to Heaven?

Not sure if it was really her. I think the way it works is your tour guide is just an attractive presence that's comforting to you. Bob Newhart's a new one though, honey. I guess you always have been imaginative though.

There were other people getting the tour at the same time as me so other people besides me have a thing for Bob Newhart.

No, they all saw whoever they wanted to see.

Oh. Shoot. Hey, who's that frightening, creepy guy in the top hat?

Where? Do you see him now? Stay away from him, Melissa. If he's not a comforting presence to you then you're not ready. It won't be a smooth transition if he takes you before you're ready.

Wow. I don't usually dream in such detail. And I haven't dreamt about Grandpa in years. I wonder if I'll still remember that dream when I wake up. I wonder what time it is. Is it my day to drive? I'll have to wake up a little earlier if it is. Not yet though. I'm not done sleeping yet. My head feels heavy and floaty from all this thinking. Let me stop thinking and go back to sleep. No more dreams. I'll just sleep without dreams until the alarm goes off. I bet I still have another hour or so.

“Mr. and Mrs. Culver. I'm sure you want to see your daughter. Shall we walk while I talk?” The doctor, immense like a former linebacker, held the door to the emergency wing open for them as George guided his stuttering wife alongside him. Tucked under his arm, she kept her hands up near her face, constantly swiping at the tears. He wondered if he should cry but he didn't think he could. What had she been doing driving out this way so late at night?

“I'm Richard Galbreath, the physician on call here this evening and I'm sorry to have to meet you under these circumstances. Your daughter is very lucky to be alive. Her heart stopped beating on the way over in the ambulance and the EMTs had to use a defibrillator to revive her. We have her on a ventilator to help her breathe and she has not yet regained consciousness. At this point, it's impossible to know if she will. The lack of oxygen to her brain during the flat-line could possibly have permanent effects. Not to

mention that sustaining a head injury of this severity is cause enough for concern. Our number one priority is a preliminary CAT scan imaging of her brain to determine if it's hemorrhaging and if emergency surgery needs to be performed. Her vitals seem to be steady now, which leads me to believe she will not need brain surgery, but the possibility is still there. Our team here will be monitoring your daughter throughout the night. She is in good hands, Mr. and Mrs. Culver, but she's far from being out of the woods." He reached down to check his buzzing pager, then clipped it back on his pant's waistline. "I'm sorry. I need to take this. Nurse Patty will be in directly to answer any questions you might have and to show you to her room."

He left them in the waiting room, where George could no longer stand the incessant mumbling of "Thy will be done," but needed to be tactful about it.

"Oh, Di," he interrupted. "I can't believe this is happening." He buried his head into the groove of her fleshy neck and finally the tears came. After a few moments, he straightened up, took a step back and put his hands on his wife's shoulders.

"She's a fighter, Di. She always has been, okay?" Two defiant tears streamed down her cheeks and George wiped them away with his thumbs. She started to say something but then the nurse walked over to them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Culver? Right this way, please." Patty led them through another set of swinging doors and down the bright, sterile corridor. She stopped outside the door to Room 315 and motioned for them to enter. The open shades of the window revealed a moonless night, and the darkness that flooded the room a striking contrast from the hallway. The nurse, perhaps realizing how menacing the glow of the hospital equipment must look, flicked on the lights.

Who turned on my bedroom light? Who's in my apartment? Oh my God. Did I sleep in again? Shit—I'm going to get fired. Oh well. I'm already late. I'm not even going to look at the clock. I'm not even going to open my eyes because that'll wake me up too much. In fact I should really just call in sick. I want to sleep some more and my head feels like a train wreck. Get off my train. I'll call in sick when I wake up. I'm losing it.

As George and Diane approached the bedside of their only child, a gasp escaped and they froze, horrified. George felt his wife tense and her hand clenched tight to his.

“Melissa is hooked up to a ventilator which is regulating her breathing. That noise you hear is the machine making Melissa inhale.” The nurse explained the numbers she recorded from each of the different machines and George tried to focus on her routine and what she was saying. He nodded, pretending to comprehend, but he was really just grateful for an excuse to postpone looking at the contents of the hospital bed. This body with the tubes and needles and bandages was a stranger. Where was his little five-year old that pried her tooth out the day she discovered it was a little bit loose? The ten-year old that wouldn't put Neosporin on her cuts because she wanted to have scars? His daughter was a fighter—he knew from her first day of preschool when that boy bit her finger and instead of crying or tattling, she bit him back—but whoever was in that hospital bed didn't look like she could fight anything. He felt faint and had to walk over to the window and put his forehead on the cool glass. Still resting on it, he glanced over at Di.

His wife grabbed Melissa's hand, bent over and kissed her forehead, and caressed her sunken cheek. The only sounds in the room were the steady rhythms of the machines. After a few moments of silence, Diane looked at the nurse, standing by the foot of the bed. "Can she hear us?"

"We don't know. She hasn't given us any indication that she can hear or understand. But it's really too soon to tell. It's best to assume the patient can hear every word you're saying. And sometimes talking to them helps, Mrs. Culver. Maybe she didn't respond to us because she didn't recognize our voices. But if you talk to her... she still may not respond but it can't hurt." Another nurse entered the room and got a sharp needle ready to stick into his daughter's arm. George turned his head away from the bed.

Owww! Was that a bee or a wasp or something? Whatever it was got me good right on the arm. Feels like its stinger got stuck in there. Ouch. Dad always used to tell me that it hurt the bee worse than it hurt me because bees die when they lose their stingers. I sure hope he's dead after that one.

"You're going to be just fine, OK? You hang in there baby, you hear me?"

Who's that? Mom? I'm fine. Don't overreact; it was just a little bee sting.

"Sorry for the interruption, folks. Just needed a sample for some blood work."

No way. Is that the bumblebee's voice? Maybe it didn't die since it's a female bee. I think only the males die when they sting.

Both nurses started towards the door. "Please call me if you need anything at all."

Okay. Do I have your number?

George waited until the nurse pulled the door nearly shut behind her then slid a heavy, orange-cushioned chair over to his wife. She leaned over the tubes and wires and kissed her daughter's forehead again before sitting. He found a similar chair for himself and plopped down opposite his wife, exhausted and all but defeated. It seemed he and his wife had switched roles. Wanting to be as strong and confident as Diane, he very gently placed his hand down on top of his daughter's fingers, being careful not to jostle the plunged IV. When had she gotten so skinny? When had he even seen her last? He curled his fingers under hers and looked from his daughter's face to his wife's, and wished he could get the Lord's Prayer back. At least it was a distraction from the machine noise and from these weighted regrets.

I'm walking down a crowded street from the olden days. It looks like Main Street but everyone's wearing old-fashioned clothing and there are those old-fashioned cars on the cobblestone. I keep turning around to see if I'm still being followed. Oh no! There he is. That evil man with the top hat. I'll walk a few steps, and maybe he'll think I'm just going to keep walking. I swivel my neck around to try to catch him in the act of following me. Each time I turn my back I don't see him at first and then he becomes visible, slowly peering out from behind a corner, with his beady, glaring eyes fixed on mine. I know he's after me but I can't look away from those eyes. I start walking again, faster and then I turn. There he is again, this time hiding behind a streetlamp and then coming into view. He knows I'm terrified. I try to start running and I hear his footprints pursuing me but I don't dare look. Must keep running. But I'm so slow. Go faster! I hear him breathing right next to me. He must be close. Or is that my breathing?

Whoosh... whoosh... whoosh.

“Melissa, honey. It’s Mom. And Dad’s here, too.”

“Hi, sweetie.”

“Melissa, can you hear us? Honey wake up. It’s okay.”

“Melissa, it’s Daddy. Honey, squeeze my hand if you can hear me.”

“We love you so much, Melissa. These doctors are going to take good care of you and...” Di’s voice started wavering and broke off.

“And get you all better. We’re going to stay right here with you, okay? Now honey, can you blink your eyes? Squeeze mommy’s hand, hon.”

“George! Did you see her blink? She blinked!”

“She did? Are you sure?”

“I think so. Ask her to do it again.”

“Melissa, honey. Blink your eyes if you can hear us.” They both stared at her pale face, the veins made her eyelids blue and the circles under her eyes were so prominent that they looked like bruises.

Hey, sugar. You can’t stay here much longer.

I thought you said people can stay here as long as they like. Go at their own speed.

That’s only once you’ve passed through the transition level.

Oh. I guess that makes sense. How do I do that?

Come here and I’ll show you, Melissa.

Hey. You're not my grandpa. You're that scary top hat guy! Help, Grandpa! Get me out of here.

Sugar? Are you in there? Can you hear me? Follow the sound of my knocking.

George and Diane turned their heads toward the door. Dr. Galbreath didn't wait for a reply and entered the room. A dark figure against the blinding background of the hallway, his presence created an escalation of tension. George tried to read the doctor's face before he heard the words. Would his daughter need emergency brain surgery? Would she be forced to live like a vegetable for the rest of her life? Would they be able to afford it? He hated himself for even thinking about money. He focused on the doctor then looked at his daughter and did his best to block the rest out.

"Well, folks. It's promising so far. Nothing on the preliminary findings has given us any indication that surgery is needed right away, and we won't find out anything more tonight. Best thing you can do is go home and try to get some sleep. Come back first thing in the morning. We'll continue to run her through some tests and hopefully be able to tell you a little bit more."

George looked at his daughter but spoke to the doctor. "You have kids, Dr. Galbreath?"

"Yes, I do..."

"We'll stay here."

The doctor nodded, checked the readings on each of the monitors, and jotted a few things down on the Melissa's chart. He walked over to Diane and put his giant hand on her shoulder.

“The first twenty-four hours are the most critical. Try to get some rest. She’ll need your positive energy. Good night, Mr. and Mrs. Culver.”

He started to leave but paused on the doorway with his hand on the light switch.

“Can I turn this out for you?”

George said, “Sure” at the same time as Diane said, “That’s okay.” Then they looked at each other with furrowed brows.

“I hate seeing her like this, Di. Can’t we turn it off?”

“Then we won’t see if she’s trying to open her eyes.”

“Thanks, Doctor,” said George. “We’ll get it later.”

These nightmares are terrible. God, that last one was scary. It almost makes me want to wake up. Maybe watch television or something until I fall back asleep. But then I’ll be tired all day. Go back to sleep. It was just a nightmare. What did I eat before I went to bed last night? Let’s see... last night... God, I can’t remember. Well, I am lying on my back. Sometimes that makes me have bad dreams. I guess I could roll onto my side but my head feels like it’s being tightened in a metal vise and I think any movement would set it off. What’s wrong with me?

“Melissa.”

Mom? Is that you? What are you doing here?

“Hey there, Missy. Wake up.”

Dad? Why aren’t you at work?

“Melissa, we’re right here, hon.”

Okay, Mom, but why? What time is it?

“Why don’t you go to sleep for a little bit, George? I’ll watch her for awhile.”

Watch me do what? Not a whole lot going on here, Mom.

Richard Galbreath retreated to the confines of his office and gathered his belongings without so much as a glance at the paperwork he’d been neglecting. It had been a long, demanding shift and he was eager to leave it all behind him. He grabbed his long overcoat from its hook on the back of the door and put it on. Remembering how cold it had been earlier, he reached for the keys in his coat pocket and walked over to the window. From his office on the second story, he looked out into the employee lot and watched with repressed glee as his Mercedes revved to life at the touch of the button in his hands. He didn’t think he’d ever tire of that feature. On his way out, he kept his eyes focused on the door at the end of the hall, hoping his pager would stay silent, and hoping no one would dart out of the doors to hold him up any longer. He’d actually been on his way out earlier until he heard the sirens approaching. No sirens this time as he entered the warm, waiting car.

Am I dreaming still? I have to be. It doesn’t make sense for my mom and dad to be in my apartment—in my bedroom—sitting Indian style at the foot of my bed. That’s just bizarre. But I can’t get over how real it seems. I should keep a dream journal. I wonder if Becca remembers that psychic we saw on campus that one semester. He was amazing and he said he kept a journal of all his dreams. God, I should call Becca. I don’t think I’ve talked to her since her birthday last year. Oh no. What’s today? I hope I didn’t forget it. Let’s see... I know her birthday is November 11 because it’s 11/11, make a

wish, and that's how I've always been able to remember it. Speaking of wishes, I wish my brain would stop pulsing against my skull. Maybe it's growing. No but wait. What month is it? This is weird. I should be able to remember what month it is. I can tell I'm done sleeping so why can't I open my eyes and wake up? My body must be completely exhausted. I think I read about that before where your mind is aware but your body just isn't ready to wake up yet. It's called an out-of-body experience and when you have one, it's like a transparent version of yourself floating up in the air looking down at your body. I wonder if that happens when you die, too. That makes more sense than a tour of the Grand Canyon. I can't see myself anywhere so I don't think I'm having an out-of-body experience. But what did I do yesterday that wore me out so much? Yesterday... yesterday... yesterday... Hell, I can't remember but all this thinking is setting off the mallet in my head again.

Richard Galbreath didn't understand why they called it a gated community if they were going to keep the gates open all the time. He made a mental note to complain to the community liaison. Two o'clock in the morning and the goddamn gate was wide open to anyone who wanted to stroll around. Sure enough, there were remnants of pumpkins strewn across his road. He had half a mind to call the developer tonight and wake him up. The Mercedes accelerated past the manicured lawns coated with a frost film. He swung up the stone driveway and pulled into the three-car garage before the door even opened all the way. His wife and son had learned to leave the space nearest the inside door vacant for him and the idiots who owned the estates would learn to shut the gate.

He navigated through the big, dark master bedroom and flicked on the light of the bathroom to change out of his clothes. He heard the mattress creak.

“Is that you, Richard?”

He shut the light off. “Were you expecting someone else?” He turned back the down comforter, crawled into bed and rolled over so that his back was to his wife. She stirred.

“I’m worried about Brian.”

“Can we talk about it in the morning, Nina? I’m just a little bit tired.” He knew she didn’t do anything to deserve his sarcasm but he wasn’t in the mood to apologize. She rolled over and he felt her pull the covers tight to her body.

Whoa. I sure feel loopy. That pain from before is gone. Even if I wanted to open my eyes they’d be rolled back in my head I bet. I feel numb all over. “I have become comf-ter-bly numb.” How’s the rest of that song go? I think that’s all maybe. Was I out drinking last night? Did someone slip me something? I don’t ever go out on weeknights. What day of the week is it? I feel drugged. I feel Darvocetted. Darvosat is more grammatical I guess. I hope I remember that when I wake up. That’s kind of funny. It’s so dark and warm and cozy and... fuzzy... darvosat.

The cold fog from the previous night transformed into a gray, overcast morning, but the sun refused to give up, fighting for attention through the breaks in the clouds. George carried two cups of coffee and had a newspaper tucked under his arm as he returned to Room 315 after a brisk walk to knock out the kinks. Diane had taken no

notice of his leaving or returning, her eyes plastered to Melissa's face. 'She already looks dead,' he thought to himself. Some of the coffee sloshed onto his hand. He handed his wife the unspilled cup; she looked like she needed the caffeine more than he did. Diane shifted her focus into the styrofoam cup for a few moments and then cleared her throat the way she did when she had been considering something.

"We have to get a hold of Jake, you know."

George sputtered, "I thought they were broken up. She told us she would never see him again. You think that's where she was going last night, don't you? Do you know something I don't know?"

"He should know what happened."

"And what do you think he'll do? Bring her some goddamn flowers then tell her all the fluids they're giving her are making her look fat and swollen?"

"I don't like him either, George, but we have to tell him."

"Bullshit we do." George stood and walked over to the window. The cars scattering the parking lot started to add splashes of color to the otherwise bleak surroundings. He didn't want to fight with her about this. Not now. But that pompous asshole was not welcome here.

I smell coffee. Maybe that's Jake. He can be so sweet sometimes, like when he makes me coffee in the morning and brings it up to my room. I like mine with hazelnut creamer and lots of sugar, but he always gives it to me black, no matter how many times I remind him. I wonder if he's been up here yet to see me in bed still. Wait. Are Mom and Dad still sitting on my bed? Or was that a dream? They're not going to like that Jake's

here. I promised them no more Jake. Wait. Yeah. Mom and Dad were here and I asked Mom why she had to watch me. Did that really happen? Wow, this is messed up. I need to pinch myself and open my eyes so I can figure out what's going on here. I've had enough sleep. Why won't my eyes open? Am I blind? Eww. Maybe I have an eye infection and they're crusted shut. I'll just reach up and pry them open... I can't move my arms either. I can't move my fingers! Oh my God. What's wrong with me? I can't move!

“Whoa. Her heart rate's jumping all over the place suddenly.”

“Why is it doing that, Patty? Is she okay? Should we get a doctor in here?”

Mom! Help me! I can't move! I can't open my eyes!

“There's nothing to be alarmed about, Mr. and Mrs. Culver. This might actually be a good sign.”

“Di, why don't you talk to her and see if you can calm her down a little.”

“Melissa? Baby, you're in the hospital but you're going to be fine. The doctors and nurses are taking good care of you, and daddy and I are here, okay?”

Oh my God... the hospital... what happened?

Vince Davenport lay in bed with his hands folded behind his neck, staring up at the watermark that resembled a koala bear. Every morning that bear reminded him that he'd better tell his landlord about the potential leak. Sunlight taunted him through the slits of the miniblinds. He hadn't slept well. Mangled, bloody classmates would do that to a person.

He trudged downstairs and heard the leather couch's sigh of gratitude as Gerty decided to get up, too. The monstrous Newfoundland took two steps, shook herself,

almost lost her balance, and trotted over to greet her owner. He didn't even need to bend down as he scratched her big, black head with both hands. He slipped on his grass cutting shoes, let her out the sliding door into the fenced backyard, and went back through the townhouse to the garage. Rubbing his arms to stay warm in his worn, gray Cubs t-shirt, he scanned the row of cardboard boxes along the far wall. He was looking for the box with his mom's handwriting scribbled across it in black marker. She was so overjoyed when he moved out of the house three years ago that she packed up his whole bedroom for him. He had a feeling the yearbook was in there.

A call to the hospital confirmed that Melissa remained in serious condition. Vince was relieved that she was still alive after the mess he'd seen last night. On a bar stool at the kitchen counter, he hunched over his bowl of Crunch Berries and some heavily sugared coffee in his police-themed Far Side mug. The cartoon depicted a skyscraper, and on the street below were police officers investigating the chalk outline of what appeared to have been King Kong. It was only a cartoon, but every time he drank from the mug, Vince was annoyed that he couldn't tell whether King Kong had fallen or had jumped on purpose. Also on the kitchen counter lay his Rockford High School yearbook.

After finishing the last soggy Crunch Berry, he pushed the bowl aside and flipped open his yearbook. Band, ski club, library helper, yearbook staff—big-framed glasses, a bad perm in her long, dark hair, pudgy. Nothing remarkable. Vince scanned his own pictures, too—the little dark-featured twerp with the not-amused look. Even back then he took himself too seriously.

He wasn't quite sure what he was looking for as he flipped through the stiff pages. As juniors, Vince and Melissa ended up in the same introductory level art class and, as

the only upperclassmen enrolled, they associated by default. Shamefully, he recalled what a jerk he'd been to Melissa outside of art class. What he couldn't admit to himself or to any of his popular friends was how much he looked forward to being in her company. She was witty and smart and made him laugh. Thinking of her lying in the hospital bed thrust him back to the present and he packed away his yearbook.

Richard could tell it was going to be a bad day. Instead of his soothing aromatherapy gradual awakening system easing him out of slumber, he awoke to the shrillness of the telephone ringing and his wife's voice clambering up from the kitchen. "Hi, Liz dear. You and Frank are still coming tonight aren't you?" Why did she insist on talking three times louder than was necessary?

His shift began in twenty minutes, but considering how late he'd been at the hospital last night, he could afford some extra sleep. Besides, these were just overtime hours he'd picked up earlier in the week when she'd mentioned that a few people were coming over tonight for cocktails. His wife was fond of parties and entertaining. This meant that even on his days off, he had to put on his attentive, doctor persona and parade around the house, asking if anyone needed topped off and providing medical opinions about post-nasal drip and hemorrhoids. His son was probably sleeping off a hangover and he remembered the exchange he'd had with his wife about Brian. Well, Christ, if she didn't set such a bad example maybe he wouldn't drink so much.

Vince fastened the leash to Gerty's collar for good measure as they headed out the door down the driveway. A good jog might clear his head, and the dog could stand to

benefit from the exercise. Something about Melissa Culver stirred up a deep sense of regret. There had been a sudden awkwardness between them near the end of the year when he had asked if she had a date to the prom. She had given him an inquisitive look when she said that she didn't have a date yet. He remembered his sudden horror at realizing she thought he was about to ask her. But Vince had just been making conversation. He couldn't take fat, frumpy Melissa Culver to the prom. "Oh, well I'm sure someone will ask you. I think I'm going with Jessie Lepore." She had smiled and nodded at him and their art class friendship was never quite the same.

Vince spat. Hell, it had probably been five years ago and he was still embarrassed by his high school ego. What harm would it have done to just ask the girl to prom? He clenched his teeth. She had gone to the local community college after high school and he sometimes saw her running around town on the arm of some guy he didn't know. He heard rumors that the guy would only be with her if she lost weight. Vince hadn't seen her back in Rockford again until last night. Meanwhile, his own shallow self was left with plenty of time to date shallow girls like Jessie Lepore. Sure, they were hot, but they didn't get him like Melissa did. She used to rip on him for being so serious all the time and around her, he was actually able to lighten up. He couldn't help smiling as he recalled one of her smartass remarks during class. The art teacher had asked her to explain what a relief was, expecting her to say something about sculptures. But Melissa just wiped her hand across her forehead and said, "phew."

The cold air tightened his chest. Even if she recovered, she probably wouldn't want to remember him and he didn't blame her. Vince couldn't help wondering at her tiny, unhealthy-looking frame. Did it mean the rumors were true? Were they still

together? He dabbed at the beads of sweat on his face with the bottom of his long-sleeved t-shirt. His townhouse came into view at the top of the street and Gerty picked up the pace. He'd have to head over to the hospital today to ask the Culvers some routine questions.

“Please let her be okay.”

“I’ll be late tonight,” Richard mumbled as he grabbed his hat and overcoat and stepped out into the garage. Nina’s answer was her aggressive slam of the dishwasher. She could take it out on the appliances all she wanted. Her bitch session about Brian would have to wait until later.

“Jesus Christ,” he hissed. Down at the end of the garage, his son’s truck was parked so far forward that it had knocked Richard’s thousand dollar racing bike over. “I’m going to kill that kid.”

He threw back open the door and was already up the steps but still heard Nina scoff into the phone, “I’ll have to call you back. Suddenly he cares.”

“Brian, unlock this door now.” His deep voice shook the house. “I swear to God, Brian, if you don’t open the door this instant...” He didn’t have to finish his threat because the lock clicked.

His wife had wandered up to witness the rage and she stood behind Richard with her arms crossed and her ‘I told you so’ air. He glanced at her blankly then turned the knob and flung open the door.

The tall, muscular, curly-haired kid sat defeated on the side of his bed, elbows propped on his thighs, his hands supporting the forehead and masking the eyes of his bowed head.

“Dad, I’m sorry. I really messed up this time.”

Everything is always dark. It doesn’t matter if I’m awake and thinking logically or if I’m drugged up and asleep. Constant darkness. Is it morning? Is it midnight? I don’t know. Does it even matter? I can’t tell whether I’m dreaming or listening in on people or if I’m even alive. Maybe this is what death feels like. You’re aware of life going on around you, but there’s nothing you can do about it since it’s always dark. Will I go on in darkness for the rest of eternity?

I think I feel sleep coming on again. Maybe I won’t wake up this time. I’m not scared of Death anymore. In fact, I might even welcome Death in his charming top hat.

“Your daughter looks better than she did earlier this morning. More color to her.”

Patty slipped the blood pressure cuff around Melissa’s limp arm and began squeezing. George looked up from his paper. Diane nodded and smiled meekly.

“Are you two holding up okay?”

Diane answered for both of them. “We are, considering. There’s no doubt in my mind that she’ll come out of this.” George bit the side of his cheek and returned to the paper.

“Optimism is contagious. Is there anything I can get for either of you?”

“I don’t think so. But when should we expect Dr. Galbreath?”

The nurse tilted her head and wrinkled her forehead. "I'm surprised he hasn't been in to see her yet this morning. I'll go check as soon as we're done here." Moments later she slipped out to summon Dr. Galbreath.

"I don't know how you can stand to be in here, Di. She looks awful."

"George!" she hissed at her husband and then turned back to her daughter.

"You don't look awful, sweetie. You look terrific. The color's coming back to your cheeks and your hands aren't as cold and clammy as they were last night. These doctors really know what they're doing, Mel. I wouldn't be surprised if you woke up right now. Can you blink your eyes or squeeze my hand? Go on. Give it a squeeze."

George hovered between the room and the hallway.

"Anything?"

"Not yet."

Jake and I are strolling arm in arm through the park. I gaze up at him and he looks down at me, smiles, and kisses my forehead. The scenery has a cartoon quality about it. Big, blossomy trees and flowers, a little brick path and a gazebo up ahead. For some reason, I tell Jake that I don't want to go to the gazebo. But he pulls my arm, tighter and tighter and I go sit on the bench just inside the gazebo and he slowly releases his grip on my arm. Bopping in time to the song in his head, he struts into the middle of the gazebo with his back to me and stops, striking a pose. He has on coat tails and a top hat and suddenly a spotlight beams down on him. I laugh. He's so goofy.

He takes off the top hat and spins it around in his hands and over his arms and rolls it down his leg and then flips it up and catches it with the top of the hat face down in

his palm. Then he spins around and around like a figure skater and places the hat back on his head and then he lunges at me and his face is right in front of my face only it's not Jake. It's a hairy, gray face and the mouth is open just a little bit revealing two rows of sharp yellow teeth, like a dog's. The eyes are red and terrifying but I can't turn away. His shoulders heave up and down as he breathes his hot, stinking breath right in my face. His nose starts to extend into a snout. As I stare horrified, he leans closer and closer. Then he licks my face. I jump back and so does he. He laughs and reaches under the bench I'm sitting on and pulls out what looks like a picnic basket but the baby doll from my grandma and grandpa is inside. I am frozen to the bench as he slides the basket onto his arm and skips away down the brick path singing, "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf, big bad wolf, big bad wolf? Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? Tra la la la la."

Surprised at how remorseful his son was about the overturned bicycle, Richard glared down at the boy, who appeared to be rehearsing his explanation.

"Okay. Well, I was at a Halloween party at Smitty's. And then Lou comes through the door and said the cops were coming to bust up the party so I took off and ran to my truck and drove away. I don't know why I did that. It probably made me look guilty but I wasn't doing anything wrong. So I was driving across the bridge and then, I like, lost control of the truck and think I hit the guardrail. I was freaking out but my truck was drive-able so I just drove the rest of the way home. But now my truck's all scratched up."

"Brian. Were you speeding?"

"I don't know, Mom. I might have been going like 5 over or something."

“Were you drunk?”

“What? Mom, no. I mean—I had maybe two beers or something.”

“Brian! You’re 18 years old. You’re not old enough to drink yet. And then to drive on top of it? My God. I thought you were smarter than that.”

“But Mom, I—”

“I heard you come in last night, Brian. Banging things all over the house and being obnoxious. You were wasted. What if someone had been in the car with you? What if you had gone over the guardrail? God, Brian. You could have been seriously hurt or you could have hurt someone else. What the hell is the matter with you?”

For once, Richard was thankful for his wife’s outburst.

“Mom, I messed up. I’m sorry—“

“Sorry isn’t going to help you this time, Brian. Someone could’ve been hurt. I have half a mind to call the police and get your license revoked.”

Richard answered quickly. “You know what? You’re right.” He glared at his son. “Get dressed, we’re taking a ride.”

Richard slammed the door behind him and his wife as they left his room. Nina whispered to Richard, “You’re just scaring him, right? We don’t want this to go on his permanent record, and I certainly don’t plan on driving him around if he gets his license suspended.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

As he sat in the garage waiting for his son to come out, he called down at the auto body shop to see if they could get Brian’s truck in immediately. He gave the dash a swift punch. His son wasn’t kidding: he really messed up this time.

I don't feel like I'm dead yet but I'm really starting to freak out. Maybe I started hallucinating and that's why I'm in the hospital. Like that man in my apartment complex who took his sleeping pills on an empty stomach and started muttering nonsense. They thought he was having a stroke. Maybe I had a stroke. Or a brain aneurism. Yeah, I'm too young for a stroke but those aneurisms can hit you anytime. And my head has never ached like this before. That must be it. A brain aneurism.

When Brian mentioned the impact on the bridge, an uneasy, nagging thought crept into Richard's head. There was only one bridge in Rockford and the guardrail was not blue like the paint scratches on his truck. Could his son have been involved in his comatose patient's accident? She had flipped over the guardrail of the bridge. His son was 18. He'd be thrown in jail, convicted and probably charged with vehicular homicide.

Richard had taken great pains to keep his face emotionless while Brian continued his story and his wife chewed him out. He hoped he hadn't seemed too eager to take care of the situation himself. But they couldn't get the police involved. Even his wife knew that and she didn't even know the extent of the situation. This wasn't an innocent guardrail-bumping like his son was trying to make it seem. If the police traced the accident to his truck, Brian's life was over. No high school graduation this spring, no Notre Dame next fall... over. And not only that, but Nina's social life would be ruined and Richard's professional career would be tarnished indefinitely.

When Brian had come out to the car, Richard told him to get in his truck and follow him to Jimmy's Autobody. After they dropped off the truck, he drove his son

home in silence. Richard pulled into his neighborhood envying his frame of mind last night when his biggest problem was the open gate. Before his son had a chance to get out of the Mercedes, Richard clicked the childproof lock on. His own eyes were fixed straight ahead but he saw his son glance over at him. In a menacing, deliberate way, Richard turned his head to glare at his son.

“Dad. What? Can you let me out?”

“Do *not* tell another soul about the bridge.”

Brian blinked hard and he stammered, “Uh, okay. I won’t say anything to anyone. What about Mom?”

“I’ll take care of your mother.”

“What should I say happened if anybody asks me?”

“You accidentally hit your mother’s car pulling into the driveway.” Brian nodded and several seconds passed.

“Did anyone get hurt? No one died, did they?”

Richard didn’t answer but clicked the childproof lock again and his son got out of the car. He sped along his route to the hospital, oblivious of everything around him except for the upheaval of his life as it erupted before him. He pulled into his reserved spot in the employee lot and rested his forehead on the leather steering wheel. Now he had to find out how much the authorities knew about the girl’s accident.

Vince wasn’t scheduled to work until later in the evening, but he wanted to get to the hospital during visiting hours, and while he knew she was still alive. He swallowed hard and then knocked on his head three times in an attempt to reverse his bad thoughts.

He made the last-second decision, “Flowers. I should bring flowers,” and swung a wide right into the parking lot of the shopping center. The grocery store was at the far end of the plaza and he pulled his personal vehicle into a spot and hopped out. He glanced downhill at one of the local car shops that sat in the adjacent lot to see if the towing company had brought Melissa’s SUV there by chance. It wouldn’t hurt to poke around her car a little in the hopes of finding some clue as to why she had wrecked. He called his partner’s cell.

“Chuck. It’s Davenport. I’m heading to the hospital to ask her family some questions. Can you find out where they took the Envoy?”

“Yeah, I can do that. You want me to come with you for questioning?”

“No, that’s okay. We’ll cover more ground if we split up. I’ll call you when I’m done there.”

“Alright. And hey, Vinny? Stay straight, man. I know you knew her and stuff, but you can’t let that get in the way of you doing your job. This is a big case for you. You sure you don’t want me to come?”

“No, I’m good. It’s just another case as far as I’m concerned.”

They hung up and Vince scanned the flower wing of the grocery store, settling on a get well soon potted plant assortment of white and yellow daisies.

“It’s a good thing she dumped that scumbag Jake. Could you imagine if they had been married when this all happened? I could just see him coming in here like that Michael Schiavo did and telling the doctors to stop feeding her so he could go on with his

life.” Diane was up now, pacing back and forth the length of the bed, and her musings were barely audible.

George had moved his chair over to the window and was using the sill as the flat surface to work on the USA Today crossword puzzle. He stopped and looked over at her.

“Honey,” he retorted in a low, disapproving tone, “Terri Schiavo was no more alive than a sponge. You know that. They had teams of researchers—”

“A sponge?” Her voice was no longer barely audible. “My God, George. How completely insensitive are you? That poor child’s parents were willing to take care of her until the end and they were forced to watch her starve to death. They were helpless.”

“But what if she was in pain? And who in their right mind would want to live like that? I mean, the only way they could keep her alive was with the feeding tubes and the machines—”

A whoosh escaped from the ventilator. George and Diane both fell silent and looked at their daughter. George was the first to speak.

“Honey, I know it’s early, but maybe we do need to start thinking about the big picture and what could happen down the road.”

Diane’s eyes were brimming with anger tears. She glared at him.

“George Culver. I will not put up with your negative thinking another second. What we *need* is that goddamn doctor to get in here and examine her.”

“I want to be as positive as you are, Di, but we have to be realistic. She might not come out of this.”

“Dammit, George! How can you sit here and talk like that? I *am* being realistic. She *is* going to come out of this. So don’t you dare tell me we need to start thinking about that.”

“Don’t make me out to be the bad guy, Diane. You’re the one who started talking about Terri Schiavo.”

In the long silence that followed, George watched Diane’s face change from anger to something he didn’t recognize.

“I’m scared, George.”

He walked over and hugged her. “I am, too.”

They think they’re scared. Jesus. If that nurse hadn’t come in here and morphinated my veins, I’d be having another panic attack. Am I going to be a vegetable? Am I a vegetable already? I wonder what vegetable I would be. I’ve always liked tomatoes but they’re not really vegetables at all. Plus they’re awfully round. Maybe an ear of corn. Oh, how I’d love to crunch into a buttery, crisp ear of corn. I’d let the butter and those little corn remnants get all over my chin and I wouldn’t wipe my face until I ate the whole thing, a row at a time and left to right like a typewriter.

Just to be able to crunch into anything would be satisfying. Like an ice cube. A couple of the semi-melted ice cubes at the bottom of a glass of soda. My teeth need exercise. They have these nurses come in and move my arms and legs around but my mouth needs a good workout. Three little ice cubes would do the trick.

They say that people who like to chomp ice cubes are sexually frustrated. I never understood that theory. And what does sexually frustrated mean anyways? Frustrated that you’re not getting any, or frustrated that what you’re getting isn’t good? Either way

I don't see what ice cubes have to do with it. I say the people who are sexually frustrated are the people who pay twenty-five cents at the adult video store to get a sneak peak at a porn. Although I guess twenty-five cents is a pretty good deal. I bet the owners can get away with a bargain like that because they figure the people are going to end up buying the whole movie for twenty bucks.

It's actually a pretty good strategy. I wonder if something like that would work at work. Yeah! We could have our clients pay twenty-five percent of the cost of a regular ad. And then if they were satisfied with the business derived from the ad, they'd pay full price to keep it running. If they weren't satisfied, we still get their money from the trial ad, and we'd have a new name to add to our customer database. Hey. These drugs make me smarter. I can't believe I'm thinking this but I'm actually eager to get back to work to tell them my idea. I hope I don't forget it. I wish I could write it down. Aww, poor Catherine's probably going crazy without me there to help tame all those male egos. I had fun going out with her the other night. When was that? How long have I been in the hospital? Seems like an eternity...

Richard was standing at his desk practicing breathing exercises, still in his coat and hat, when there was a knock at his door.

“Dr. Galbreath? The Culvers are waiting for you in 315.”

“Thanks, Patty.” He glanced at his watch. “We'll need to do a more thorough CT scan this morning and an EEG.” He took off the long coat and hung it on the hook on the back of his door. “If you'll explain the procedures to Mr. and Mrs. Culver, I'll be right

down.” She nodded and went scuttling away, her sneakers squeaking down the freshly mopped linoleum.

He stuck his hat on the hook and grabbed his white doctor’s coat from the back of his chair. On the wall hung his various diplomas. He had worked too hard to let his son’s colossal mistake ruin his career. His wife had wanted him to scare Brian but not really do anything. But after the exchange he’d had with Brian, he wasn’t convinced that his son had learned his lesson about driving under the influence. Would he if the Culvers pressed charges and he was thrown in jail? If the girl ended up dying? Turning away from the wall, his focus caught for an instant on his son’s senior picture; Brian’s intense green eyes seemed to be pleading.

George couldn’t believe it. The clue for nine down was a ten-letter word for physician-assisted suicide. His eyes bulged and he sucked in his breath as he stared down at the crossword puzzle. This couldn’t be happening. He flipped it over, checking the date, frantically skimming the articles. Was he delusional? No. Everything else seemed accurate. He turned to the crossword again. There it was, jumping off the page, a cruel, sick joke. He crumpled the newspaper and forced it into the wastebasket, which was already filled to capacity with coffee cups, paper bags, and wrappers from the vending machine. He packed the garbage down with his bare hands, almost feverishly, as if he were giving the can chest compressions. The sound of styrofoam rubbing against styrofoam, plastic snapping, cardboard containers collapsing and newspapers rustling filled the room in short, loud bursts.

What—is—that—noise? What—is—that—noise?

“Let me empty that for you, Mr. Culver.” Patty’s return startled George and he stood up with a sheepish look on his face.

“Yeah, I, they don’t give you very big garbage cans in here. Thanks.” He handed it over to her with the dissonant threat of the word euthanasia still haunting his thoughts. His wife gave a slight, questioning tilt of her head and he shook his own in response.

“Dr. Galbreath should be here any minute now. We’re going to run Melissa through several more tests this morning, including another CT scan and the EEG. Both are safe, painless procedures. The CT scan will take a number of X-ray images of your daughter’s brain. Being able to see a three-dimensional cross-section of her brain will show us whether she has any hemorrhaging, blood clots, or skull fractures.”

Aha... it is my brain.

“The electroencephalogram monitors and records the electrical activity of her brain so we can determine if her brain is functioning normally.”

So they can tell I’m not a vegetable... that would be helpful. I’ll have to make sure I stay overly conscious and smart when they do that test.

“Is there any chance that your daughter may be pregnant?”

Where are those ice cubes?

George, with arms crossed, raised his eyebrows and faced his wife, also curious to know the answer to this question.

“I don’t think so, but we don’t really keep tabs on her. She’s an adult; she makes her own...stop looking at me like that, George.”

“Okay, no problem,” the nurse said, intercepting the daggers. “Do you have any questions about either of the procedures?”

George and Diane looked at each other, shrugged, and shook their heads.

Let me make sure I heard you correctly. You said painless, right?

“Okay then. Let’s head down to the testing area.”

Vince reached over and grabbed the plant from his passenger seat and stepped out of his car. He stuck the daisies on the Honda’s roof while he tucked his kelly-green collared shirt into his Dockers, smoothed out the wrinkles as best he could, and then checked his hair in the tinted glass of the window. Scolding himself for being such a pansy, he headed toward the main entrance of Rockford Community Hospital and approached the receptionist in the ICU.

“Hi. Can you tell me what room number Melissa Culver is in?”

A part of Vince hoped she’d be sleeping so he wouldn’t have to worry about an awkward reunion. But it would make his investigation a lot easier if he found her awake, attentive, and able to provide some answers. Up ahead, the door to Room 315 was wide open. Vince took a deep breath and poked his head into the room, getting ready to muster a cheerful, “knock-knock.” But the room was empty. His heart sank. She was gone and he’d never get the chance to apologize for the prom. Heavy footsteps grew louder in the hall and seemed to stop behind Vince. He looked back and a tall, solid man in a white coat scanned the room quickly.

“They must already be down in the testing room. Follow me, that’s where I’m headed. Doctor Richard Galbreath.” The doctor stuck out a giant hand in greeting and Vince shifted the plant to his left hand and shook. “Are you the boyfriend?”

“No, no. I’m just a friend. Well, um, we used to be friends. Sort of. I’m Vince Davenport, the police officer investigating her accident.”

“Oh?” The doctor seemed confused by the plain clothes and stuttering.

“Yeah, I wanted to get over here before my shift started. Maybe ask her family some questions. I’m sorry I’m a little shaken up. I thought she had passed when I saw the empty room.”

“I see.” The doctor stared at him for several long seconds. “Well, she’s very fortunate to be alive. Based on the swelling and bruising of her face, there’s a good chance she’s suffered some serious head trauma. We’re about to administer a CT scan and an EEG. See if we can determine the extent of her injuries.” He gestured down the hall and they began walking. “Any leads on what caused the accident?”

“Nothing yet. Some neighbors called when they heard the impact on the bridge. Haven’t been back there in daylight to see if there’s any sign of foul play. You wouldn’t happen to know if there was alcohol in her blood or any other abnormal finding that might have led to her driving impairment?”

“No trace of any intoxicants in her bloodstream. Besides a low potassium level, nothing else unusual has come up yet. But, as I’m sure you know, all it takes is that split-second bad decision on her part.”

Vince nodded. They entered a set of double swinging doors, passed a small waiting room, and turned down a short hallway. Doctor Galbreath held the door to the testing room open for Vince and they both entered.

Vince glanced at the body on the examination table and recognized a skeletal version of his old classmate.

“She sure looks better.” He turned to face her parents. “Good morning Mr. and Mrs. Culver. I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself last night, but I’m Vince Davenport of the Rockford Police Department. How are you doing?” He shook each of their hands and handed over the pot of daisies.

Vince Davenport? Am I dreaming? How did he—

“Thanks, Officer. That was very kind of you to bring these,” Mrs. Culver accepted the flowers. “Melissa loves daisies. I’ll stick them on the bedside table right next to her head when we get back up to the room so she can smell them. She needs sensory stimulation.” She looked back at Vince. “Officer Davenport. Your name sounds familiar but I can’t place it. Did you work with a Davenport, George?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“I actually went to school with your daughter. We were in the same grade.”

Oh my God. What is Vince Davenport doing here?

“Oh, Vince Davenport... that’s right. I knew your name sounded familiar.”

Mom, don’t embarrass me, please don’t—

“I remember Melissa had quite a crush on you back in high school.”

Mother!

Vince could feel the flush creeping up to the tips of his ears. “We had some good times in art class together. She’s a sweet girl.”

But too fat to hang out with outside of art class, isn’t that right, Vince? Am I still too fat to take to the prom?

“She is sweet. Our only child, you know.” Mrs. Culver returned her attention to her daughter and Mr. Culver put a protective arm around his wife’s shoulder. They looked tired.

“I was hoping I could ask you a few questions about the accident whenever it’s convenient for you.”

Accident? Oh my God... I was in a car accident. I was falling. I remember falling.

The doctor’s deep voice intervened. “I’d like to begin testing now, so if you could all move your conversation into this room...”

The doctor motioned for Vince and the Culvers to enter the dark, adjacent room with the monitors and control screens with green, backlit keys and buttons. Inside the room, the Culvers sat motionless at the windowed wall looking out at their daughter, and Vince understood that this was not a convenient time to ask questions.

“That shield you see the nurse putting on your daughter’s upper body is merely a precaution against the X-rays.” Dr. Galbreath explained the CT scan and what they would be looking for and Vince took out his pocket-sized notebook and began taking notes. This wasn’t exactly the kind of information that would help his investigation, but it gave him a valid excuse to stay close to Melissa. Out in the testing room, the nurse was guiding a circular machine toward her head. Once everything appeared to be in place, she joined the others in the control room and the testing began.

Was I wearing my seatbelt? I had to have been; I always do. Where was I going? God, I can’t remember. I remember it was dark outside. Dark and foggy. And those headlights came up right behind me out of nowhere. They were so bright. I reached up to

flick the night mirrors on. It was hurting my eyes. Those headlights. Then he started passing me. He was passing me on the bridge! I looked over to see who was stupid enough to be passing someone on the bridge and it was like he didn't even see me. He cut too close in front of me and knocked me into the rail of the bridge and I fell.

Richard talked the family through the medical procedures as they watched the machine circle Melissa's head. He was very conscious of not making the prognosis sound too positive. If no witnesses had spoken up about another car being involved, then it was likely that she was the only witness—besides his son. Assuming the cops couldn't come up with anything, which was also likely given the state of this bumbling Davenport fellow who looked about the same age as his son, she was the only person standing in the way of his son's innocence. If she were to die, or if her parents were to agree to take her off life support down the road, then there would be no one to testify against Brian. A tiny pebble of guilt worked its way into his consciousness as he recalled swearing on oath to keep his patients from harm and injustice. But this was his son. His only son. And family was more important than work; Hippocrates would agree with that.

He reassured himself about the peril of sustaining a head injury severe enough to result in consecutive hours of unconsciousness. There was indisputable evidence of brain swelling and a dangerous-looking contusion. She'd been comatose for nearly twelve hours. The longer she stayed in the coma, the more likely she was to stay in it indefinitely. Even if by some miracle the young woman did come out, she would almost certainly have brain damage. Right? Whether or not it was irreversible brain damage was impossible to tell. He sensed a rift between the parents, and he could use that to his

advantage, saying things like bed-ridden, vegetative, not functional, and other words that weren't very positive. For now, he related stories of patients that had been in comas for decades. Some never came out. Some did but were never the same. If the girl did have anything going for her, it was that her brain waves periodically showed signs of normalcy. They were brief but evident, and the doctor had to be careful in relating this information.

“According to the EEG, Melissa’s brain waves are abnormal. But there are brief moments when it seems to almost be functioning normally. As you can see on this readout, these lines that are peaked close to each other resemble the patterns of a healthy, functioning brain. But the majority of the lines are skewed and abnormal. It may almost be worse for her if she’s going in and out of awareness. Of course, I have no way of knowing whether or not she can hear or understand what’s going on around her. Most likely, she cannot. But her confusion during those moments of normal brain functioning would explain why she seems to panic herself into those life-threatening states.”

“Poor thing. She’s terrified, Di.” Mr. Culver directed this towards Mrs. Culver and Richard sensed he might be able get the father to cave and agree to take his daughter off life support.

“George, we want her brain to be functioning normally. Even if it is for only an instant at a time—that’s much better than the alternative.” She was right. Richard could tell Mrs. Culver wasn’t about to budge.

I remember falling. Falling off a bridge. So it had to be Rockford. What was I doing there? Down in the hollow, playing a new gig. Oh, that’s right... Jake’s band. They

were playing at Rusty's. Jake called me; he was so excited to finally be playing somewhere big. He wanted me to come so we could celebrate afterwards. And I went like a stupid, pathetic, little groupie. Sat by myself at the bar the whole night while they played, watching him do his cheesy cover songs. Pretended like he was singing it for me but I don't even have brown eyes, fucker. I ordered some barbeque wings for us and they came out at the same time Jake came over. I was only planning on eating the celery anyways—just the celery and not even the bleu cheese—but then he gave me that look. He said he'd be right back and I ate the whole plate myself, threw it all up in the bathroom and left.

“Melissa, come back.”

No, Jake. I'm never coming back. I mean it this time.

“You were starting to scare us there for a minute, honey.”

Wait. Is that you, Grandpa? What's this tunnel thing? What are you doing way down there at the end of it? Can you hear me? Who's with you? Is that Grandma?

“Melissa honey, don't be scared. Your heart rate is going through the roof. Everything's going to be okay, sweetie. Just calm down.”

Grandma? Is that you? You sound so far away.

“Nothing to be worried about, Melissa. Everything is okay. You're going to be fine.”

Grandpa—what do you mean, 'fine'? Am I going to die?

“We're going back up now, honey.”

Grandma, Grandpa, wait! Up where?

Once the Culvers settled back into the hospital room, Vince cleared his throat, eager to continue his investigation, and he needed whatever information the Culvers could provide him with. Even before he began his questioning, Mr. Culver interjected.

“Jake Schroeder. You can write that name down in your notebook there. I’d bet my own life that good-for-nothing weasel had something to do with this.”

Okay. Now that’s definitely Daddy’s voice. Better brace myself. This could get ugly.

“George, you don’t know that.”

“Dammit, Di. What else would she have been doing in Rockford? She certainly wasn’t there to see us.”

“You don’t know that either. Maybe she was on her way to the house for something.”

Thanks, Mom. I appreciate the vote of confidence.

“At twelve-thirty in the morning? Bullshit. She was out with that sack of shit she promised us she was never going to see again.”

I promised I wouldn’t date him again. Seeing each other and dating each other are two very different things.

“George! Language!”

“I’m sorry. But just look at what he did to her, Di. She was a healthy, happy girl and now look at her.”

Dad. We’ve been over this before. I wasn’t happy when I was fat. I lost the weight for me. Because I wanted to.

“So, Mr. Culver. You think this Jake Schroeder could be responsible for some sort of foul play that resulted in your daughter’s accident?”

Melissa’s father sighed. “Listen, Officer—as far as the accident, I don’t know. I have no proof beyond that skeleton of my daughter in the hospital bed. We don’t know what she was doing out this way so late last night. And obviously no one else was in the car with her...”

What about that other car? The pickup?

“...But the kid abused her. Verbally, physically. Just look at her. You knew her in high school. She was healthy, happy. Then she goes and falls for the first boy to ever pay attention to her. If there were any justice in this world, he’d be locked up for the way he treated her.”

“Treats her. She’s not dead, George.”

“So they are still seeing each other then? You’ve been keeping it from me. My own wife.”

“George, that’s not what I—”

“Mr. Culver, I understand your frustrations. I’ll certainly look into the possibility of foul play with respect to this Jake Schroeder. But unless he somehow tampered with her vehicle, I doubt we’ll be able to convict him. Even malicious intent would be a stretch without concrete evidence.”

Melissa’s mother reached out and grabbed her daughter’s hand. “Come out of this, Melissa. Tell us what happened last night.”

As much as I’d like to blame this on the sack of shit, it wasn’t him. It was that truck that ran me off the road. Didn’t you see another vehicle, people? What the hell?

The doctor, who had been idling in Melissa's room recording numbers, spoke up. "I don't mean to be the cynic, but I feel that I should warn you that most victims don't remember anything about what happened to them when they come out of their comas. And even if they say they do, you can't put too much stock in their testimonies. The brain and consciousness in general are so vastly intricate; who knows what's going on up there right now...if anything."

Hey now...

Mrs. Culver flashed a dirty look at the doctor that Davenport thought Melissa would have found humorous and the doctor continued, "I'm not a police officer and I won't tell you how to do your job, son. But I am a father. And I'm a firm believer in a mother and father's intuition."

"Right. Like I said, I'll certainly look into her relationship with this guy as an underlying factor in the crash; I'm just not hopeful that we'd be able to charge him with anything. Does she have a cell phone that she could have been talking on? Maybe arguing with her boyfriend?"

"Ex-boyfriend," the father corrected.

"She does, but she has that hands free contraption." Melissa's mother smoothed her daughter's hair off her forehead.

"And you saw her at the accident. Wouldn't you have noticed if she had an earpiece in or not?"

"Actually, Mr. Culver, at the time I was more concerned with seeing whether or not your daughter was alive and needing CPR. So no, I didn't notice if she had her earpiece in."

“Well how do you know she was even on her phone? Maybe you should be checking her phone records before you go making assumptions that it was her fault.”

Vince, I swerved and flipped because he hit me. I can't believe you think it was my fault.

“Mr. Culver, I'm sorry if you think I'm implying that your daughter was at fault. I certainly don't think that. Like you said, I knew her. I know her.” He wondered if he sounded as defensive as he felt. “Being as this accident happened less than twelve hours ago, I wanted to get some statements from her family first.”

Maybe they can't get a statement from the truck driver because he's dead. God, forgive me for thinking that it would serve him right. What a horrible thing to think.

“We want answers, too, Officer. And all you have for us are questions. We've already told you that we don't know what happened last night. How long have you been doing this? This your first time investigating an accident?”

Jesus, Daddy. Lay off of him. And you wonder why Jake and I stopped coming over.

“Mr. and Mrs. Culver. I understand this is a stressful time for you. I want you to know that we'll be doing everything we can. Nothing else about her driving habits that you can attest to?”

“Check your records on that, too. My daughter's a good driver. Never even had a speeding ticket.”

Oh yeah... About that...

“Yes, of course. Okay, then. If you don't have anything else for me I think we're done here. Thank you both for the information. We still haven't ruled out the possibility

that her vehicle had some type of malfunction—a brake failure or locked up steering column. We’ll also be reinvestigating the scene of the accident and I’d like to speak with this Jake Schroeder.” He started to leave but instead walked to the bedside and gave Melissa’s hand a quick squeeze. “You hang in there, Miss. We have some catching up to do.”

Vince Davenport. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were flirting with a girl in a coma. Things that desperate for you, huh? God, I bet you look good. Those big, dark eyes with lashes that would rival any woman’s. That tan, muscular body. Ice cubes! I need ice cubes!

“Here’s my number if you think of anything else that might be useful in the investigation and I’ll get a hold of you as soon as something turns up.” He handed it to Melissa’s mother as she walked him from the hospital room and out into the hallway.

Her voice was low and sincere. “I’m sorry about my husband, Vince—Officer Davenport. He doesn’t deal well with things like this. I’m sure you understand. But we appreciate you going out of your way to come here. Melissa would be comforted to know you’re on her case and doing everything you can.”

Before Vince had a chance to respond, the doctor appeared in the doorway, requesting both of them to return to the hospital room.

Richard’s remarkable foresight had prompted him to linger, engaged in tasks normally assigned to the nursing staff. Absorbing the Culver family drama that had just unfolded could perhaps salvage his own family’s drama. For the first time that day, he

felt like he had an upper hand in how this would play out that didn't involve a breach of his role as a doctor. Was it a stretch though? Absolutely.

“Officer? Mr. and Mrs. Culver?” The room harbored silent anticipation but for the hum and faint beeping of equipment. “Now, I’ll need to do a little more research, but after listening to what you’ve said, I’m reminded of a similar high profile case.” Richard held Melissa’s medical file, his fingers marking the appropriate pages. “I’m sure you’ve heard of Terri Schiavo?”

Chaos erupted as all three simultaneously expressed their disdain with the comparison.

“If you even think you’re going to use my daughter for some political agenda...”

“That feeding tube is coming out over my dead body and I mean that...”

“Terri Schiavo was in a coma for fifteen years. How does that...”

They better not film me looking like a drunk cabbage patch doll with greasy...

Richard held his hands up to try to calm them down. “Please, please. Now of course what we most remember is the political circus, the feeding tubes, the debate about vegetative states. But that’s not what we’re talking about here.” The grumbling softened a little bit. “The reason your daughter’s condition is relevant to Terri Schiavo’s is the manner in which Terri Schiavo became comatose.” He had their attention now. “Terri was a healthy young woman... except for a suspected eating disorder. Some doctors believe her collapse and subsequent coma could possibly have been triggered by her bulimia. You remember the low potassium levels I mentioned that we found in Melissa’s test results?” He flipped open the file folder, and jabbed his finger on the sheet for emphasis. “Terri Schiavo also had abnormnally low potassium levels. It can be an

indicator of people who repeatedly force themselves to purge. Now, I know this seems far-fetched, but what if Melissa's car crash was caused by an internal crash of her system? I'm not an expert in the law, but if our officer here can prove that this abusive boyfriend led her to be bulimic—and if I can prove that her bulimia led her to crash—I think we may be able to give your hurting family a sense of justice, however small it is compared to your daughter's health. And then, of course, we hope for a better outcome than what transpired in the Schiavo case and get her the best neuro staff, the best pulmonary staff, the best cardio staff, all the best doctors and when she comes out of the coma, the best counseling.”

Richard half-expected a round of applause but the expressions on the three faces were just as telling. They had bought into it. ‘This just might work,’ he thought to himself. However, if this Jake or his family had any kind of resources to obtain a good attorney... Richard didn't want to think that far ahead. He'd done what he intended to do—take the focus away from any incendiary evidence that might expose his son. And he'd done it so well that even he almost believed the bulimia explanation.

The tangled webs we weave. I'm so confused. Did I just imagine the truck that ran me off the road? And what that man is saying about my throwing up... can I in good conscience blame Jake for something I did to myself? I mean, yes, he made comments sometimes, and he would give me looks sometimes, but he didn't stick his finger down my throat. Did Jake really do this to me? Grandpa told me in my dream not to go with the top hat guy unless I wanted to. The top hat guy turned into Jake. I didn't go with Jake in

my dream. I don't want to go anywhere with Jake ever again. But can I let them blame Jake for this while some pickup truck driver out there is guilty?

If there's one thing I've learned from my dad, it's to take responsibility for your actions. I don't know what he thought he was protecting me from by not telling me if anyone had died or not. Not that it matters because any way you look at it I fucked up big time. But I have to know for myself, and he hasn't answered any of my calls. Mom's so pissed she won't talk to me, and she doesn't even know how bad it really is. I've let so many people down. And worse—I hurt somebody, maybe even killed somebody. So I had to come find out. Rode my bike down to the auto shop, picked up my truck, and drove right here to the hospital. This isn't some little white lie. It's only been a few hours since I lied to him about only hitting the guardrail. But he knew. He knew I was lying then. What if he hadn't called me out when we got home from dropping off my truck? I hope that I would've been man enough to come clean. But I honestly don't know if I would have. I'm so scared. This knot in my stomach is a million times worse than the time I got caught cheating on a Spanish test. I didn't think I'd ever be able to look at my parents again after that. But this... Oh shit. I have to throw up again.

Vince wanted to be able to blame this asshole Jake guy. He really did. Arresting the guy who made Melissa bulimic would redeem Vince from his own high school shallowness. And even if they couldn't arrest him, if they could just get this case to trial, it had the potential to be a landmark decision. So what if they couldn't prove Jake's guilt. It could raise awareness and, like the doctor said, it could hopefully bring some

semblance of justice to the Culvers. He needed to make amends with Melissa, and if she didn't come out of the coma, this was the only way.

George knew he'd been right all along about that sack of shit. And finally people were listening to him. She said he'd regret it one day—the way he treated Jake. But, no. Jake Schroeder had put his daughter into a coma and it wasn't regret he felt. It was rage. He knew he was yelling and he knew his wife was embarrassed, but he didn't care.

“What that monster did to our family is inexcusable. Officer, I hope you arrest him and throw him in jail. And then I hope they prosecute him to the full extent of the law. And, God help me, if my daughter doesn't come out of this coma, I hope that lying coward suffers every day for the rest of his pathetic life. ‘Thy will be done.’”

My goodness. This three-ring circus has gone on long enough.

Hey, sugar, speaking of circus, do you remember when your grandma and I took you that one year?

You know, I remember the car ride more than I remember the circus itself. And how I kept making you sing that Clementine song.

Oh my darling, oh my darling, oh my darling, Clementine. You are lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry, Clementine...

“Here I am. You can arrest me. I am so sorry. You're right—I'm a lying coward. I'm a monster. I wish I could go back in time and—”

“Jake did this to me.”

THE FIRST YEAR

The office is decorated in soothing tones of neutrals and greens; nothing loud or overindulgent. Psychology and counseling books inhabit the shelves behind the desk, the titles about failing marriages perhaps the most threatening material in the room. A few conversation pieces adorn other nooks. Two khaki colored microfiber plush chairs face the dark walnut-stained desk, and a coffee table of the same color base with a glass top rests between the chairs and desk on a sage colored shag with tan flecks. A big window on the wall accounts for the generous influx of natural light.

On the desk, the black multi-line phone blinks red and the administrative assistant announces the arrival of the 1 o'clock appointment. Crumbs from the hurried lunch taken at the desk are ushered into the wastepaper basket just as the couple enters the office.

The wife, early to mid-twenties, is plus-sized model attractive. Perfectly made up and well dressed in her pinstriped suit, she carries a Gucci tote and appears a bit frazzled. Her full, reddish-brown hair is cropped close to her oval face, and trendy glasses frame blue eyes, almost turquoise, the same color as the camisole beneath her suit. Directly behind her, either attempting to hide or content to make his wife lead, is the husband, twenty-seven. Tall and broad-shouldered with a long forehead made longer by slight receding hairlines above the temples, he is also good looking—intense brown eyes and gelled brown hair, shorter in the back and on the sides and a little longer on top. His work clothes consist of a short-sleeved white polo over a neck stretched white t-shirt, both

tucked neatly into morning-pressed khakis still devoid of any major wrinkles. The wife is smiling, though it's the hurried smile of building nerves, and the husband, not smiling, feigns deep interest in a beach scene wall hanging as he tries to decipher the artist's signature. She absently picks at the skin around her thumbnail while he kicks the heel of his right boot against the steel toe of his left.

After hand shaking and introductions, Leah and Warner accept the invitation to sit. Leah makes a startled wooOO sound when she sinks deeper into the plush than she imagined she would and for a brief moment, the uncomfortable edge to the counseling session dissipates in a shared laugh.

“I might need help getting out of this chair.”

Warner settles in so that the back of his head is resting near the top of the chair. His hands smooth the material on the arm. “Well, I think it's comfortable.” A prominent overbite becomes visible. “This is that microfiber that I wanted to get for our living room furniture.”

“I didn't say it wasn't comfortable,” and then turning away from him, “He always does that. Tries to imply that I was complaining about something,” and then turning back towards him in the midst of his eye roll and head shake, “and you were the one who said the sofa from my old place was fine for now while we save up for that bedroom set, so don't act like I don't let you get what you want.”

He scoffs. “Oh really. And what about a certain Land Rover that you won't let me get?”

“Right. Like we have enough money to buy you a Land Rover.”

Warner leans forward and peers over toward the floor next to Leah's chair, where the Gucci is poking out.

"Warner! I told you not to buy me a Gucci purse."

"You don't like it. I knew you didn't like it."

"I like it, I just didn't need it. And you told me you got a good deal on it."

"Well I like Land Rovers and I can get a good deal on one."

"But you don't need one."

"You didn't need a Gucci purse but I knew how much you wanted one so I got it for you."

"Warner, a truck is a little bit more expensive than a purse."

"You drive a Lexus."

"And you drive a BMW."

"It's an '86 BMW that's in the shop half the time. Plus I can't haul stuff with it."

"What on God's green earth do you need to haul?"

"The puppies when we get our pugs."

At this, they look lovingly at each other. Leah reaches over and entwines her nail-bitten fingers with Warner's ready hand. After a full five seconds, Warner looks away and Leah breaks the silence.

"So as you can see, we usually fight about money."

"That wasn't fighting; that was discussing."

Leah guffaws. "And also as you can see, Warner doesn't think we need counseling."

"Leah!"

“What? You don’t.”

“You always have to make me out to be the bad guy.”

“No, you do a pretty good job of that yourself.”

“I’m not a bad guy and you know it. Every couple fights.”

“See? You admitted it’s fighting.”

“I’m just saying I don’t see why we need to spend \$100 an hour for a shrink to listen to us bicker.” He faces forward. “No offense. I’m sure you’re very good at what you do.” Then turns back to Leah. “But seriously, we’ve been here—what—like ten minutes and we haven’t even given the counselor a chance to talk yet. If we’re just going to talk to each other, we might as well go home and talk there.”

“That’s just it. You say we’re going to fix things and then we go home and what do we do? We sit in front of the TV and watch Law and Order and then go to bed.”

“Don’t take this out on Jerry Orbach, bless his soul. You love Law and Order.”

“I know I do. The point is that we never talk to each other when we get home. We’re tired. You’ve been working all day. I’ve been working all day. We’re hungry and grumpy and nothing gets fixed. That’s why we’re giving this counseling thing a try.”

Warner sighs. “We’re giving this counseling thing a try because your mother convinced you that we need it. But whatever makes you happy, dear. We always do what *you* want to do.”

There is a long pause while Leah deliberates her next move. She reaches down and unzips her purse to extract a bottled water and mutters seemingly to herself but audibly enough for the room, “If you really meant that I wouldn’t need to stop and get 9-volt batteries on my way home.”

“Leah!” He hisses and sits up in the chair so that he can face her. “I can’t believe you just said that! You promised we wouldn’t talk about any of that stuff today.”

“I know, I’m sorry. It just slipped out.” She giggles at the innuendo and her cheeks redden.

“It did not. You thought about it before you said it.” He slumps back in the chair. “I’m sorry about my crazy wife. I think it’s nerves making us act like this. We’re not really this dysfunctional.”

“I hate when you apologize for me, Warner. Yes, I’m nervous, ok? And I’m sorry I said that about the battery.”

“Please change the subject.”

“I’m trying to if you’d stop interrupting me. Now I’m all flustered and I forget what I was going to say. What were you just talking about? Dis-something. Distracting, disturbing...dysfunctional. Yeah, I don’t know how you get off saying we’re dysfunctional compared to some of the families I know.”

“Who, yours?” He faces forward and scoots to the edge of the seat. “Her dad just had a baby about a year ago. Man’s what, like 60 or something. And it’s not like it was an accident. He had a reverse vasectomy operation done just so he’d be able to—well, you know. So Leah’s twenty-five and has a baby sister. Now that’s dysfunctional.” He turns to face his jaw-clenching wife as she shakes her head at the ceiling. “And you know Theresa wants another baby so her kids can own fifty percent of the company and you and your sister only get twenty-five each.” He faces forward again. “Lee and I have talked about it before. She treats that baby like an accessory and not a child. Right, pig?”

“Thank you for sharing that personal information about my family with our counselor, ass.”

“Oh and you talking about that last thing wasn’t at all personal?”

She lowers her voice. “For as much as you didn’t want to talk about it you sure keep bringing it up a lot, don’t you think?”

“It’s because I’m embarrassed and the only way I know how to feel better is by making a joke about it. See? I don’t need any counseling. I already know all about myself.”

“A joke is supposed to be funny. Like me talking about a vibrator in the first place was a joke.”

“That wasn’t funny either. That was embarrassing.”

“Why should you be embarrassed? It’s my vibrator.”

“Can you please stop saying that word? It’s embarrassing because you’re implying that I can’t, you know, satisfy you or something.”

“Whatever. It’s not that you can’t. It’s that we don’t...” the pause in her admonition is just long enough for awkwardness to bombard the room. “Okay, you’re right. This conversation has suddenly turned embarrassing. So, yeah. Speaking of families, whose family was it that bought us Tickle Me Elmo for our *wedding* present?”

He reaches over and takes a swig of her water then returns the bottle to her lap. “So we’re changing the topic from things that vibrate to things that vibrate and giggle. Real smooth.”

“No, we’re going from my dysfunctional family to yours.”

“Well, haven’t you ever heard of a gag gift? They also got us a Dyson vacuum cleaner.”

“That was an engagement present. And you try thinking of something to write in the thank you card. ‘Thank you so much for the Tickle Me Elmo wedding present...’”

“His contagious laughter fills our apartment with joy...”

“Hey, that’s good. Why didn’t you think of that when I was actually writing out thank yous? Oh, I know. Because you were too busy watching Law and Order.”

It is decided that Warner will loiter outside the office to give Leah some time of her own to be counseled and then they’ll switch. Warner has been given the task of thinking about what they can each do to improve their marriage and he asks to borrow paper and a pencil to jot down his ideas.

From the desk, a yellow legal pad and black fountain pen are retrieved.

“You don’t have a pencil? Pen is so permanent.”

Leah digs around in her tote and announces the discovery of a clicky pencil or the white out, whichever he prefers. If it were yellow out he reasons that he might have considered it, but since the white would stand out on the yellow paper he opts for the pencil. He then ponders the invention of clear out that would erase one’s mistake and blend in with whatever color paper one was using. Pad and pencil in hand, he gives his wife a quick peck on the lips.

“Good luck, pig. I love you. Think of the pugs.”

They both smile and Warner exits the office, but not before turning back one last time to glance at Leah with a smile and a wave. She cheeks a grin, scrunching up her

face and shoulders and does a cutesy finger flutter. Both the smile and wave stop abruptly as soon as the door clicks shut.

“Everybody told me the first year of marriage was the hardest. I love my husband, I really do. I can’t even imagine my life without him. But I sometimes tell him I hate him. Is that normal to hate my husband? I mean, he instigates me, and doesn’t think the things that are important to me are important, and I hate that I feel like he doesn’t want me. And I know that’s my own fault because I’m fat. He’s never told me I was fat or anything. But if you saw a picture of me from high school or even from my freshman year of college when we met, I was a lot skinnier back then. I complain that we never go out, but then I hate being in public with him because I know people are looking at us and wondering what he’s doing with someone like me. But those are my own insecurities and if he didn’t like the way I looked he wouldn’t have married me, right?”

“We dated for seven years before we finally got married, since my freshman year of college. And then after college we lived together for two. You wouldn’t think wedding vows and rings would change people who were already living together but they did. The wedding and honeymoon were great. Best time of my life. But then the excitement wore off and it was constant stress and bickering. We were both in the middle of a career change, so as soon as we got back from Hawaii we had to find jobs and use our wedding money to pay bills.

“I’d never tell him this, but sometimes his lack of ambition bothers me. I mean, he has a degree in elementary education but he never got his certification, which means he can’t get a teaching job so he’s working at Sears as a warehouse manager. Which is fine. I’m not ripping on Sears. But number one, he hates it and he’s always in a bad mood and

number two, I know he could be doing better. But for as much as he says he hates his job, he won't look for a new one. We have a friend who was making sixty thousand selling cell phones for Verizon. Yeah, I know. Pretty good money, right? And she found a store in Columbus that was hiring and basically told him that all he had to do was fill out the application and she could get him a job. I don't think he even looked at it, saying he wasn't interested in retail and all this stuff. I don't know. I guess I don't have room to talk. I mean, I double majored in International Business and Japanese and what am I doing? Customer service for Saks Fifth Avenue. Not exactly a job that's making my dad feel justified in paying \$90,000 for my college education.

“And that's another thing. My father. I guess you could say he's pretty well off. He's the president and CEO of an Italian foods company. I'll have to bring you a basket of stuff to try next time we come. Alla vodka sauce, a jar of tomato basil, some tri-colored tortellini, balsamic glaze, olives if you like olives...”

There is a quick knock on the door and Warner pokes his head in.

“Hey, Lee. Let me borrow that white out after all. I want to see what's in it.”

Leah reaches into the bag, muttering. “It's not like it's going to have a list of ingredients on the back. It's white out.” She tosses him the bottle. He bobbles it once but holds onto it, thanks her, apologizes for the interruption, and again leaves the room.

She sighs before continuing. “Warner was on this invention kick a few years ago, too. He made me ask my dad to fund his idea for a TV remote that had a pager system so that if you lost it somewhere, you just hit the button on the home base and the remote makes noise so you can find it. The thing is, I *hate* asking my dad for anything because he just hangs it over my head. I would be so happy if I could completely cut my financial

ties to him but I can't yet, and that really bothers me. So anyway, of course it all fell through and my dad thinks Warner is just a get-rich-quick kind of guy who doesn't want to work hard. And the worst part is I sometimes don't blame him for thinking that. Isn't that terrible? I mean, it's not like he's unemployed or anything, but it's hard going to family functions and telling everyone my husband still works at Sears.

“He's persistent about this Land Rover. Test drove it and everything, has the guy's card in his wallet. I think we could probably do it but it's scary spending that much on a used car—especially when we wanted to be saving our money for a house. His car really is in the shop all the time though.

“I think he has a car fetish. When we go home to visit with my dad and stepmom, he goes straight to work washing their cars. Inside and out. Detailing, Armor All, the whole shebang. My dad used to have a Z3. One of those 2-seater BMW sports cars, you know? He let Warner borrow it for an entire weekend once when we had a formal or something to go to up at school. I honestly don't know if I've ever seen him that happy—even at our wedding. I swear to you, he cried real tears when my dad sold it.” An exasperated laugh escapes. “If getting a Land Rover would make him that happy, maybe it's worth it. I don't know.”

She sighs and pauses to pick imaginary lint off her suit. “The year he borrowed the Z3 brings back bad memories. It was the same year he found out his dad had cancer and the same year he cheated on me. I know it's not fair of me to lump those two things together. But they really did happen within a few months of each other. And maybe it's easier for me to accept the cheating if I can blame it on his stress during that time. I had my friends telling me to dump him. Once a cheater, always a cheater, they said. But I had

my mom telling me to forgive him. My mom. She sure as hell didn't forgive my dad when he cheated on her. She took a knife out of the drawer and told him to get out. That same woman told me to forgive him. I mean, I'm glad I listened to her. But part of me thinks she didn't think I'd ever find anyone else, and that's why she wanted me to take him back." She looks down into her lap. "I've never told anyone that. I pretend the whole thing doesn't bother me anymore but I guess deep down it really does.

"I think we both have issues about stuff from the past. Because deep down I think Warner's still upset that I wasn't here when his dad died. When the doctors told him he had cancer, they gave him a year to live. Said it already started spreading. That was October 2001, my junior year. The following fall, though, I had to study abroad as part of my major. I *had* to—otherwise I couldn't get my degree. His dad died two weeks before I was scheduled to come home. The weekend after Thanksgiving. And it wasn't like I could just fly home. It would have cost me \$1400 and I would've missed all my finals and there was just no way I could do it. God, I still feel guilty. I've never cried so much in my life.

"Okay. Let's talk about something happy. How about pugs? My birthday's in a month and we're thinking we'll finally get our pugs. We've wanted them for as long as I can remember. I want two puppies but Warner wants to rescue an adult pug. And I know that would be the nice thing to do, and that commercial with the unwanted dogs at the pound saying, 'what did I do wrong?' makes me cry every time I see it. Shoot. I'm getting teary-eyed just thinking about it. But I've always had this vision in my head about my two puppies. So who knows what we're going to do. Marriage is all about compromise, right?

“I really do love him so much. I would die without him, I really would. I want to make our marriage work and I’m sure we’ll be fine, but I just thought it wouldn’t hurt to talk to someone who can help us before it gets bad.” She looks at her watch. “I should send Warner in. We both have to get back to work. I don’t know how I’ll be able to concentrate with all these thoughts bouncing around up there. But thank you for listening to me ramble. Sometimes I feel like that’s all I need. I have friends and stuff but we all have our own lives now.”

Leah checks that the lid to her bottled water is secure, sticks the bottle in the purse, and agrees to consider things they can each do to improve their marriage. She exits the office and starts off down the hall toward the reception area as Warner comes plodding from the reception area to the office and they meet in the middle.

“You were in there for a long time. Can we go now?”

“Get in there, Warner. It’ll do you good to talk about things. Just let it all out. Oh, but hey. Let me see that notebook real quick.” She reaches for the legal pad.

“No!” Warner clasps the pad to his chest.

“Fine, ass. Then just give me a piece of paper. I have homework, too.”

He is careful to keep the top page concealed while he tears out a sheet from the back of the notebook. It is not a clean tear.

“Warner. You know I hate jagged edges. Do it nice or let me do it.”

A neatly torn piece of yellow paper is ripped out and handed to her.

“Thank you. And thanks for doing this.” She gives him a peck on the lips and continues on down the hall as he enters the office and closes the door.

“I gotta tell you, I’m curious to know what you guys talked about that whole time. If I know my wife as well as I think I do, it was probably her talking while you listened.”

He smiles, absently twisting the platinum band around his ring finger.

“I hated this thing at first. Wait, that sounds bad. I don’t hate what it symbolizes or anything, I just didn’t like having jewelry on all the time. But now that it’s been on my finger every day for the past ten months, I’m starting to get used to it. I even have a callus forming around it.

“I love that girl. She’s one hundred percent the love of my life. But there’s always something wrong with her. Right now she has psoriasis all over her scalp, a fractured left pinky from a sledding accident, her allergies are bothering her because of the weather so she’s got a runny nose and sinus pressure, and I think she has a bladder infection. I hope you don’t think I’m heartless or anything, she just has issues all the time. But I complain too. My job involves a lot of manual labor and heavy lifting so my back’s been bothering me.

“God, I don’t want to have to go back there today. She talk about our jobs at all? Yeah, I work at Sears. I was top sales performer the first three months I started working there and just got promoted. I don’t like it and I don’t go around bragging that I work at Sears. But it’s a job and I’m biding my time and saving up money until we can do what we really want to do, which is own an animal grooming, boarding, cremating company. Did she tell you about that? Yeah, I was in the funeral home business for about five years. I worked there during college, and then after college I was hired by the biggest funeral home in Cleveland. I liked it except that I hated being on call and having to go pick up bodies in the middle of the night. Since I was the low man on the totem pole, I

really got screwed a lot with having to do the crap jobs. I remember this one night, it was like two in the morning, but I got paged and had to go help the guys pick up a body. Ended up being this huge guy, like 500 pounds, that had been bedridden for the past, I don't know, year or something, so he had these bedsores all over him. I didn't know how the hell we were going to move this guy but the four of us just kind of hoisted the sheet he was on from his bed to our gurney. But somehow the grip I had on the sheet was really close to one of his sores and my finger slipped right into the sore in this dead guy's flesh and body fluid leaked all over me. I wanted to react, you know? Scream and douse my hand with scalding water and bleach but you can't do that because the family's there, so I just had to pretend like nothing was wrong. It was a nightmare.

“That's why when Leah freaks out about the tiniest things, like a spider in the shower, I get annoyed. And it's not just spiders—she stresses out about ridiculous things all the time. She freaks out if I drop something heavy because the neighbors downstairs are going to be mad. She freaks out if I pour a lot of soy sauce into my dish and then I don't eat it all. But it's easier to dip the sushi in soy sauce if the dish is full, you know? I don't think I've ever known her to be one hundred percent healthy and happy and content with the world. Except maybe on our honeymoon. And this whole counseling thing. I'm sorry, but we don't need counseling, we need puppies.”

“I do love that we have so much in common. We both love dogs, we love TV, we like to eat good food, we like sleeping in, and I guess you could say we like having nice things. We're not stuck up about it though. We both just feel like you get what you pay for. It's like choosing between a Cavalier and a Jag. You're going to spend a lot of money on a car no matter what you get, so you might as well spend a little bit more on a

nice car that you really like and that won't have as many problems. Like a Land Rover that can drive through water as deep as the windows and sustain a 35 degree tilt that also happens to be big enough for two dogs in the back.

“We haven't been able to get our dogs yet because of apartment living, but now that our lease is almost up, we need to find a new place anyway so we're looking for a place that allows small dogs. I know it might seem weird to other people, but I really think the dogs would bring us closer. We would be so happy coming home to that tail wagging and face licking. We've both decided that there's nothing we like better than the smell of puppy breath. If they made it into an air freshener I'd buy it for my Land Rover. You probably think we're lunatics don't you?

“If anyone's crazy, it's definitely my wife. Okay, not crazy, just quirky. She carries Shout Wipes and anti-bacterial hand gel around with her everywhere. She still sleeps with her blanky and has thirty-one of the same stuffed bulldogs that she can identify by name just by looking at them. When she puts dishes in the dishwasher, she washes them first. It may not seem like a big deal. But think about it. You're putting them in the dishwasher for a reason: because it washes the dishes for you. Why do you have to wash the dish first? You don't. Hell, they put a plate with an entire cake on it in the dishwasher on that one commercial and the plate comes out crystal clean. Plus I never know if the stuff in there is clean or dirty.

“And you should see her doing laundry. The clothes or towels or whatever have to come out of the dryer the second the buzzer goes off because she hates wrinkles. And then folding. My God. She has to fold things completely perfectly. I wish I could show you her t-shirt drawer. They're just t-shirts, but they're all evenly stacked with perfect

symmetrical creases. I offer to help but I don't do a good enough job. She doesn't even let me ball up the socks because she wants them to be long and flat-shaped and I make them too bally.

“Sometimes I think she might really have obsessive compulsive disorder or whatever it's called. She tries to say she's just detail-oriented. Like when we worked at the restaurant and she did the books at night and it would take her at least an hour because she had to double and triple check everything. Did she tell you about the restaurant at all? Yeah, we entered the restaurant business with one of her dad's corporate partners. What a nightmare. They had us brainwashed. Said if we moved to Columbus we could be part owners and make six figures so we said okay. The place was nice, a good restaurant, but severely understaffed and not a lot of business. So Leah and I were the owners, managers, cookstaff, waitstaff, bookkeepers, cashiers, advertisers, everything. We were there seven days a week from open to close. I respect anyone who can do it; it just wasn't for us. So after about eight months of that, we gave up our share of the restaurant, wiped the slate clean, and got our current jobs. And in between all that we got married. Not exactly a smooth ride to the start of our marriage, but that's okay. I think it's proven that since we've been through so much together, we can make it through anything.

“And that brings me to the assignment you gave me. You asked me to list things we can do to improve our marriage. Number one, talk more. We both bottle stuff in. It probably doesn't seem like it based on our session today, but we do. So I definitely think we should talk to each other more. I think we're used to the restaurant still and seeing each other all day and we didn't have to talk about our day then because we were both

there. So that's the main thing. And also I have on here exercise more and eat better. We're both lazy. We like to sleep in until we absolutely have to wake up. And when we get home we're exhausted and we don't feel like cooking so we'll eat fast food or dine out a lot. So I'm going to try to do my best to be a better influence on Leah. It's a fine line though. I don't want her to think I'm criticizing her, you know? And then the rest of my scribbling on here is about Land Rovers, puppies and my new invention called clear out."

Leah is invited to return to the office for a very brief wrap up, during which they decide to come back in a month after putting some of their suggestions into place. The sunlight streaming through the big window on the wall causes Leah to remark about how much brighter it seems in the office now.

Drippy, sniffy, and embarrassed by her less than healthy state, Leah wipes discreetly at her raw, crusty nose with the mound of tissues in her hand as she enters the office. She's a stickler about keeping appointments, but her husband, Warner, misses, skips, forgets, and cancels virtually all appointments, which resulted in the follow-up marriage counseling session five months later instead of one month later.

She exchanges the tissues for some antibacterial hand gel in her purse. "Hi there!" she announces with a pleasant smile. "It's so nice to see you again. We almost had to cancel—my allergies are killing me. Anyways, sorry for looking like a train wreck."

Her husband, a step behind her with one affectionate hand at the base of her neck and the other hand carrying a wicker basket filled with pastas and sauces and biscotti, wipes some of Leah's psoriasis flakes from her cranberry colored dress shirt.

She gestures her head in his direction. “I especially didn’t want to cancel since this one finally agreed to come, and getting that to happen again a month from now or whenever you have another opening probably wouldn’t happen.” She squirts some gel into her hands and rubs the bacteria away.

He glances down at his brushing hand, wrinkles his nose, and wipes the stubborn flakes onto his khakis. “That’s not true. I was just saying on the way over here that our last session wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be.” He crosses over to the desk. “I’ll just put this basket on your desk here. That’s my wife for you. Always promoting Daddy’s business.” He says the word ‘Daddy’ in a mocking voice.

“He makes fun of my sister and me for calling him ‘Daddy.’”

“No, but I do think it was good for us to verbalize some of our issues. Didn’t I just say that, pig?”

“And you also said...” She speaks deliberately, smirking, and waits for him to complete the sentence while he looks down in a sheepish pretense.

“And I also said that we didn’t do as well as we could have in terms of putting our marriage improvement plans into place.”

She continues chiding him in her ‘wife knows best’ voice. “And why didn’t we put our marriage improvement plans into place?”

He continues to enjoy the scolded puppy act. “Because I balled up my piece of yellow paper and threw it in the trash.”

Now she faces forward and the cutesy play-acting is abruptly over. “Rat bastard threw his page of suggestions away before we even left the building last time. I was pissed, but I wasn’t about to go digging in the garbage to get it back.”

“Oh really?” It’s Warner’s turn to tease his wife.

“Okay, okay. So maybe I did try to fish it out of the garbage, but the wad of gum stuck to it grossed me out. So now I’ll never know what was on that paper. Do you have any idea how irritating that is?”

“I told you what was on it. The same stuff that was on yours: talk about our feelings more, blah, blah, blah.” He faces forward. “So anyways, Leah came across her sheet from the notepad that you had us jot our marriage improvement ideas down on, and that kind of triggered our coming back. So thanks for agreeing to see us again. Especially after last time when we didn’t let you get a word in edgewise.”

Once they’ve shaken hands and plopped into the same two comfortable plush chairs as last time, Warner immediately glances over at his wife and raises his eyebrows.

“I know, I know. We still haven’t gotten our new couch yet.” She faces forward. “But we did get him his Land Rover and...” She wriggles with excitement as she pulls her cell phone out of the battered looking Gucci purse, pushes a few buttons, cocks her head and smiles at whatever she’s looking at on the phone. Then she hands it forward. “...we got our pugs!”

“Ooh. I have a good picture on my phone too.” Warner scoots forward in the seat and leans back so he can reach into the front pocket of his khakis. He slides open the phone, pushes a few buttons, chuckles at the picture he’s looking at, and hands it over. “This is Winston and that’s Hamlet. Winston’s the fat meat cub and Hamlet’s nuzzling his back.”

“His mom and stepdad came down to Columbus the weekend before Easter and the three of them convinced me we were just gonna go look at this breeder’s place to check out the pugs.”

He sticks the returned phone back into his pocket. “But we knew deep down Leah couldn’t just go *look* at pug puppies. That’d be like telling a starving person they were only allowed to smell the corned beef cabbage stew.”

“Yeah, they triple teamed me. I mean, of course I *wanted* them; I just wasn’t expecting to be so, what’s the word, spontaneous. So the pugs are our Easter fellas.”

“And they were an early 26th birthday present for Leah.”

“Best birthday present ever.” She smiles at him and reaches her hand over. He takes it and gives it an affectionate squeeze. “Warner and I both picked out Mr. Winston right away. He’s got that perfect little face. And he’s so stout and compact.”

“And my mom and Paul picked out Hamlet for us because he was the cuddly, energetic one.”

“He also happens to be the one who’s going to need cosmetic surgery when he gets bigger. They have to widen his nostrils so he can breathe easier. So Hammy’s our needy little cuddle bear. We got pet insurance for them but it won’t cover the surgery because I guess it’s kind of common in pugs, so that’s a risk you take when you get one.”

Warner flicks at his wedding band with his thumb. “The insurance also didn’t cover the GPS tracking chips we had put in them in case they’re ever lost or stolen.”

“No, it covered part of that. But that’s something we didn’t mind paying for, of course.” She looks her husband straight in the face, daring him to contradict her.

“Especially since our house is right next to the library parking lot and if the fellas are in the backyard and we’re not watching them, someone can just come snatch them.”

“Warner! Don’t say that.”

“Well, they could. That’s why we can’t just leave them out there by themselves. Even when you’re right inside doing dishes or whatever. You should keep them in the house with you.”

“I almost always do. It’s just when I’m doing laundry and going up and down all the time that it’s easier on me if they’re outside.” She faces forward. “He came home for lunch one time and I didn’t know he was home. It was my day off so I was in the basement doing laundry and the pugs were out back. He played a mean trick on me and put them in the Land Rover and then waited with them on the street in front of our place. When I came up from the basement and didn’t see the pugs out back I flipped. Rat bastard.”

“I wanted to teach you a lesson.”

She glares at her husband. “Rat bastard.” Then faces forward. “I started having a panic attack until I saw him in the truck out front.” She glares at him again. “That was mean.”

“Well, you learned your lesson, didn’t you? Just because we have a house doesn’t mean it’s private. All kinds of people come in and out of that parking lot and you can see right into our backyard from there.”

She changes the subject and clarifies her husband’s word choice. “We call it our house, but it’s really a duplex. Last time we were here, I think we were still in the apartment. We like this new place so much better than the apartment except for the teeny

tiny kitchen and bathroom. We have to keep our microwave on the kitchen table because there's like, no counter space, and the bathroom's not big enough for all my products. But we love the area and it's an equal drive to both Saks and Sears, not like our last place which was only two minutes away for you but like twenty-five for me."

"And it's basically like having our own house since we never see our neighbors."

"Yeah, they've lived in the same building as us for almost three months I think, right? June, July, August... yeah. Three months and I still haven't met them. Warner's gone out to say hi to them once. Or maybe more than once? I don't know."

"Yeah, our front door is on the side of the house and theirs is in the front and since they usually just park on the street, we don't really see them coming in and out. I told them we'd share the driveway because it's not really fair that Leah and I get both parking spaces, but they haven't said anything."

"It is too bad though. I was thinking that with people kind of close to us in age maybe we'd be friends or something. We don't really have much of a social life."

"We're not in college anymore, Leah. Besides, the pugs have helped us meet people. We met Max and Erma and their owners, and that couple with Roy Allen the pug. And we joined the Pug Association of Greater Columbus."

"In July, we had a meet and greet picnic in the park and there's going to be that Halloween dress up party. People couldn't believe our fellas were only seven months old. Our big boys love their kibble."

"They take after their mommy and daddy."

"They do take after us, don't they? Hamlet's the needy, sickly, cuddle bear and before we bought them, the breeder had been Winston Corner because he always sat in

the corner I guess. I'm like Hamlet because I'm needy and sickly and love to cuddle. And you're like Winston."

"Oh, thanks for making *me* be the fat one."

"No, because his name used to be Corner."

"What does that mean? I don't sit in the corner."

"Yeah, you sit in the corner when you're watching TV and when you're upstairs on the computer." He makes a huffing sound and she ignores him. "Anyways, it's so fun to see their personalities developing. They're like little people."

"They're our kids."

"Oh my God, yeah. I love them so much. What if we have kids and I don't love them as much as I love the puppies?"

"Leah!" He glances up. "She's kidding." Then he grabs her hand and pats the top of it playfully. "Not everyone appreciates your sense of humor, so you probably shouldn't say something like that in the counselor's office."

Leah laughs. "I know, I know. I'm kidding. Kids are a long way off still."

"Oh, they are?" Warner feigns surprise.

"Not everyone appreciates your humor either, honey. We don't want our counselor to think we've never talked about when we're having kids. Besides, I have a hard enough time with puppies."

He settles his gaze on the arm of the chair and scratches the fabric with his stubby nails, leaving jagged marks in the pattern, then pops his head up and looks at his wife.

"Hey, you know what I just thought of? Remember how you said the puppies were the

best birthday present ever?” She smiles and nods. “ Well, what about your present two years ago?”

The smile vanishes as she tries to concentrate. “Shoot. You know I have a bad memory. Hold on, let me think...”

Warner doesn't give her time to think. “We were at the Ritz in Cleveland and I asked you to marry me?”

“Yes, that was also the best birthday present ever. You know that.”

“You didn't remember.”

“I was on the spot. You know I can't think fast under pressure. Of course I remember. We were at that table back in the corner and you secretly called ahead and had them put the two dozen red roses on it, and then you were acting all nervous until you finally got down on one knee, and all the people in the restaurant clapped when I said yes.”

Warner's pout and crossed arms prompt his wife to lean over and reach for his hands and speak in a voice that resembles baby talk. “Come on, Mr. Pouty Bear.” As she leans, the other side of the chair suddenly starts to lift off the ground. Wide-eyed and frantic, Leah scoots back to the middle and the chair returning to the ground creates a loud thud. They both erupt in laughter.

Her cheeks redden in symmetric embarrassment circles. “Sorry about that. Guess I shouldn't try that anymore.”

Once Warner controls his bursts of high-pitched, hardly breathing laughter, he sighs. “It's times like that when I love you more than ever.” He shakes his head then faces forward. “But that actually reminds me, I was wondering why there would be two

chairs instead of one couch in a counselor's office. I would think it would be helpful to see how couples behave when they're forced to sit on the same couch. Like whether or not they sit at opposite ends or if they're always touching or something."

Enamored by him loving her more than ever, she says sweetly, "I would be touching you if we were on the same couch."

"And I would be trying to scoot away from you because your body heat radiates onto my skin." They laugh again.

"At least the pugs will snuggle with me on the couch. At first, they used to wake us up at six a.m. every morning with their whining. But they'd take lots of naps throughout the day."

"Now they're sleeping til, what, at least eight or so."

"Yeah. I get up a little before eight to let them out of their crates. And then they're ready to take a nap around ten. I love my days off and when I don't go into the mall until the afternoon because then I can take naps with them. I love taking naps with them."

"I love how their feet smell like fritos and their ears smell like maple syrup."

"Yeah, he's serious. They really do. Oh my God—the one day when Warner pulled into the drive after work and went to say hi to the fellas in the backyard, he knew I was making BLTs because of the way the puppies smelled."

They both giggle and Warner happens to look down at his watch. "Wow. We've been here a half hour already. I hadn't planned on staying this long to tell you the truth." He faces forward. "As you can tell, the pugs have really brought us closer; just like I

knew they would.” He grabs his wife’s hand and looks at her. “I had ‘get pugs’ down on my yellow paper. I never told you that but I did.”

He stands to leave and Leah reaches out her hands for him to help her out of the chair. “Oh, really?”

“Mmm hmm,” he grunts as he hoists her from the chair.

“Let’s go home and see those fellas.” She faces forward. “So I guess this is it, then. Thanks a lot for everything. We couldn’t be happier.”

CONFESSIONS OF THE MIDDLE CHILD

My dad fainted, knocked out his front teeth, and broke his nose the instant I popped out of the womb. The nurse called my grandma and I was introduced to the world as good news and bad news.

They tell me that my dad's fainting had nothing to do with my alien-like resemblance. Big, bald head. Abnormally large, round saucer eyes... I'll show you pictures if you don't believe me. They say he fainted because he'd been awake for such a long time, waiting for my not-so-grand entrance as it were. The thing is, I've known my dad for my whole life now, and the man can sleep anywhere. Sitting, standing, in the middle of talking, doesn't matter. He sleeps if he's tired. So I don't know that I completely buy the whole not enough sleep excuse. Maybe that had something to do with it, but I'd be willing to wager that his first glimpse at the creature just birthed from his wife also factored into the faint.

Regardless of why it happened, the bottom line is that it happened, and that it didn't happen when either of my other sisters was born. They were both just good news. They were both born cute. Again, I have Polaroid proof. Actually by the time Steffi came into being, we weren't still using Polaroids so hers is Kodak proof instead. I've spent some time pondering this most remarkable birth of mine, and what it all means compared to the less remarkable births of my sisters.

I bet they all thought I was going to be the difficult one. But I proved them wrong, at least for a little while, as I was credited with being the most good-natured baby of the three of us. I wonder if I was good-natured because I felt bad about that whole fainting ordeal. Except I don't think guilt develops until a little later in childhood... like when I was six and Kim was eleven and I pretended to rip her homework to which she replied, 'you wouldn't dare' and I did dare. I remember feeling guilty that she had to redo all of her cursively written vocabulary sentences for Mrs. Dragoman.

Good-natured implies a pleasant, obliging disposition and really, I think all three of us fit the mold—most of the time. "I don't think I've ever seen her that mad. She was mad at me. Don't you think, Mom?" Kim was troubled by a Sunday night phone conversation she'd had with Steffi. A conversation meant to impose guilt on our younger sister and a conversation that I was glad not to have witnessed.

The importance of this particular exchange between my sisters will, I fear, be lost on any family besides ours without a brief family biography. We're sports freaks. Kim earned sixteen varsity letters in high school, broke all the records of her college basketball team, was named an All-American, and had her jersey retired. I earned eleven varsity letters in high school, was the conference player of the year in basketball, was named to the All-State team in two sports, and broke a record or two in college. Steffi earned nine varsity letters and we're still waiting to see what she accomplishes in college.

She plays intercollegiate volleyball and basketball and the problem with those two sports is that the seasons overlap. Basketball practice is allowed to start at the same time of the year that volleyball games are in full swing, pardon the pun. And the confrontation they had that Sunday night consisted of Kim not comprehending why Steffi had made no

attempt to attend any basketball practices even though, in Steffi's defense, she was in the heart of her volleyball season. Having been a college player and coach, Kim realized it could be an invaluable move on Steffi's part to, at the very least, sit on the sidelines and watch basketball practice. That way, she wouldn't be behind in learning the drills once she did start going to practice, and it would prove to her teammates and coaches how eager she was to play. In Kim's defense, she believed Steffi would get more playing time if she made that extra effort. Steffi didn't think it was practical to spend four hours at the gym every day when she had other things to do, like schoolwork. Kim continued to plead her case, laying on the emotion, while Steffi kept firing back with logic.

I'd been dealing with those same opposing mental faculties that Sunday, but at a somewhat different venue: the horse races. Choosing a horse by logic required careful analysis. For a dollar and a half investment, the program listed all the data I would need to decipher each horse: where they'd raced, what the weather conditions were like the last time they raced, how much the jockey weighed, anything I ever wanted to know about all ten horses in all ten races that might give me the upper hand. All that analyzing would become tiresome, especially when it wasn't working. So instead of using my head, I'd go out to the paddock before the race and be drawn to a beautiful gray mare. Or I would discover that the horse's name was Lucille and remember that just the other day my three-year old niece had been dancing to "Lucille" in our living room. The very nature of gambling prevents any method from actually being effective, but I've found the most satisfaction from using a combination of logic and emotion, juggling reason with intuition.

To be sure, I have an innate knack for seeing all sides of an argument. Usually, I'll never pick a side, even when it comes to voicing my own opinions—I've yet to vote in a presidential election, I don't have favorite foods or music or books or movies, and I don't feel strongly about, well, anything. Some people consider it indifference, my lack of opinion, but maybe I could have been a pretty good lawyer if I didn't hate confrontation so much.

Confrontation rarely happens at our house because it's just my parents and me and, as my sisters will tell you, I've always gotten my way with them. Steffi's up at school and Kim has her own family a minute down the road, but when those two are in the same room and the conversation turns to sports, it can get ugly. Fortunately, I wasn't forced to pick a side in their little tiff because I'd been losing money at the racetrack. When Kim replayed the scene for me the next day, seeking my mindless head-bobbing, I consented.

“Wow, really? What is she thinking?” I offered.

“I know. I think you should talk to her. She likes you better anyway.”

“Kim, no she doesn't.”

“It's okay. I've known that for a long time now.”

Then, of course, I felt bad so I agreed to email Steffi that night. What Kim didn't know is that I wrote it taking a completely different stance than the one I'd assumed only hours before with her.

“I know what you must be thinking, Stef, but Kim just doesn't want you to have regrets.”

I couldn't help it. They both had a point. Steffi probably was overwhelmed with sports and schoolwork right now, but Kim knew how quickly Steffi's sports career would end, and didn't want her to have to endure another year of sitting the bench in basketball.

"Hey, Al. I knew you'd understand. Tell Kim I have it all figured out. I'm not going to have regrets because our basketball coach is going to do mass substitutions this year so I'll definitely get playing time."

She hadn't let Kim's attempt to appeal to her emotions stand in the way of her logic, so as it turned out, she never went to any basketball practices until volleyball was over.

We have such different personalities that I often wonder how we all emerged from the same gene pool. I voiced this concern to Kim recently and she explained the experiment theory of one of my dad's friends, John Garver.

"So John Garver goes, 'I can't believe your parents never told you that! Well, sure, you're each an experiment. Why do you think they spaced you out so far apart? It's so they could make adjustments.'"

He went on to tell her about the elaborate plan to observe educationally, emotionally, and physically how they did with Kim. Then they altered features in me by altering their methods for raising me, and my faults were fixed in Steffi.

I tried to confront my parents about the experiment.

"My lips are sealed," was my dad's response while my mom dried dishes in the background, smirking and shaking her head.

“You have to tell me! I need it for my memoir.” See? I told you I knew how to get my way.

“Oh, that John Garver. He invents the wildest things.” My dad had a point, John Garver was, by profession, an inventor, travelling across the country selling his ‘Air Flight Gun,’ which I guess is a kind of pitching machine.

But the experiment theory, even if it was a hoax, got me thinking about our drastically different personalities.

Kim has an intense, almost unhealthy desire to make other people happy. She bases all of her decisions on the needs and wants of others. We found out Kim was pregnant a few years back and I’ll never forget one of her reasons for deciding to have a baby. “We knew that with Allie out of the house and Steffi soon to be, you guys would need something to do.” So Kim made the most important decision of her life because she didn’t want my mom and dad to get bored. I wanted to ask her if she’d considered a challenging thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle first.

Steffi, as witnessed by the basketball-volleyball conflict, makes her decisions according to what she wants. She is, after all, the baby of the family.

And me? I try not to make decisions at all. I’ll do whatever the majority wants to do. If everyone jumped off a cliff, yeah, I probably would, too.

In terms of showing emotion, Kim wins, hands down. Have I mentioned that she cries during “Honey, I Shrank the Kids”? (The ant that loses its life after fending off the scorpion gets her every time.) But that also explains her willingness to cast her own wants aside to please others; she just feels so deeply.

I haven't seen Steffi cry in over two years, except when she was laughing so hard she had tears. But what she lacks in emotion, she makes up for in logic and smarts. When I was ten, my friend and I didn't want a stupid six-year old following us around all the time. Giggling at our cleverness, we locked her out of the bathroom so we could resume playing without her bothering us. Instead of throwing a tantrum, she decided that if she couldn't get in, we wouldn't get out, and, without making a sound, proceeded to rig a pulley system using shoelaces and bungee cords to trap us in the bathroom until my mom heard our cries for help.

Now, please understand, I don't mean to imply that Kim doesn't ever use her head just as I don't mean to imply that Steffi is insensitive. Quite the contrary in fact, Kim earned a full-academic scholarship to a prestigious private school and without her tutelage, I never would have passed high school calculus. And Steffi is so friendly and sweet that her best friend growing up was Mrs. Berlinbach, the little old lady that lived next door. They just seem to hover on opposite ends of the spectrum, while I am content with being average, the innocent observer.

My grandpa died fifteen years ago, and he was the first person really close to us that we ever lost. I found it enlightening to compare our memories of him. Kim remembers being scolded by him for not watching me as closely as she should have been when I got my foot stuck in between the banister and the wall. Steffi remembers how he hated when peanut butter remnants got into his Smuckers black-raspberry jam. I remember how he used to sit at that same spot on the couch with his elbow propped on the end table and his fingers tap-tap-tapping the lamp.

Even the way we play basketball is indicative of our personalities. Kim didn't want to disappoint anyone, ever, so she steadfastly succumbed to my dad's training regimen. To this day, she is the most accurate, fluent shooter out of all of us. She's also willing to do all the dirty work that most players don't bother to do—box out, crash the offensive glass, set screens, pass up her own shots to get her teammates looks. Steffi is a whiz for knowing how to guard people and how to beat people. She'll figure out her opponents' tendencies right away and use them to her advantage. She is a very conscientious player who doesn't usually make mistakes. I always liked the way players looked when they could dribble the ball with ease and do fancy between the leg dribbles. I wanted to look that smooth on the court, so I became a great ball-handler. I'm also the only one who can spin the basketball on my finger—a skill that is entirely unnecessary to the game but I thought it looked cool. The beauty of our differences is that we make a killer three-on-three team.

I know this piece includes the word, “confessions” in the title, and as of yet, I haven't confessed to anything besides gambling and indecision. So here it is: I'm a hypocrite. I can't stand when people compare the three of us, yet it seems to be all I ever do, or at least all I've done up to this point in my memoir.

But it's impossible for me not to compare the three of us—we're all quiet and reserved, athletic and studious. I scold myself when I realize I'm doing it, but it still happens instinctively every hour of every day. I'll daydream about having a family of my own like Kim does, or I'll wish I could be as witty and clever as Steffi.

After years of denial, I'm finally able to stand up and confess. “Hi. My name is Allie. And I'm jealous of my sisters. I've been jealous now for eleven years.” Like

alcoholism, there is no cure for sibling rivalry. There are small victories: mine was the only basketball team in the state tournament; and there are also minor setbacks: the lowest placement test scores, not being a valedictorian like they both were, acquiring significantly more speeding tickets...

Studying Alfred Adler's theories on birth order is the closest I've ever come to an epiphany. It finally occurred to me that my feelings of inferiority and jealousy were normal, and my sisters' personality traits were also the prototype for their order of birth. Kim was the first to receive the expectations of my parents, disposing her to perfectionist, people-pleasing behaviors. The first-born often tends to be diligent, mature, and clearly guided by a need to do the right thing. Kim is so responsible she puts Super Nanny to shame. The baby of the family, Steffi is supposed to be the entertainer and the party animal. She was the only one to participate in gymnastics, an individual sport that demands showmanship and flaunting, and let's just say I've seen her spring break pictures.

A lot of my inner conflict and adolescent outbursts stemmed from my unhealthy need to compare. During that stage of my life, me being the difficult one was certainly valid. My biggest regret is that I used Kim's achievements as excuses for my own shortcomings. The one thing I've learned from comparing us is that it's better drawing our three lives separately than connecting dots that shouldn't exist.

Teachers always used to ask me, "So, are you going to be a star like your big sister when you get to high school?" At the beginning of every school year, I knew that my name was going to be 'Kim' until they figured out that I most certainly was not Kim. When Kim's sports seasons started, I would bring home all the newspaper clippings that

my teachers had cut out for her. I put a lot of pressure on myself in trying to be as good as Kim. That pressure was probably doubled for Steffi. Kim paved the way for me, but I took a bunch of short cuts and ventured off-course a few times. Steffi is forging her own path, being her own star.

Speaking of stars, I had the notion to look up our astrological signs once. Kim is a Cancer—a sensitive type, prone to nurturing and catering to the needs of the public. Steffi, the Capricorn, respects authority but may not be willing to listen to others' opinions on things she is directly responsible for. My sign? Libra, of course: the balancer.

DOUBLE DOWN

Propped on the rung of the stool was a four-inch heel that belonged to a black, sling-back platform shoe, approximate size seven, with a curved front but for the exposed toe opening. Only the big toe and sometimes the second toe were visible. The red-polished nail peeping out of the shoe belonged to a slender, veiny left foot that—judging by the bulge of heel under the strap and the big toe’s slight overhang—would have been better equipped in a seven and a half, or even an eight. The opposite foot, hanging down from the crossed right leg, jounced through the air in a controlled, rhythmic fashion, rather like a band conductor. The foot stopped conducting when the dealer flipped the first card face up in front of her. Ten of diamonds.

The flexed foot, crammed into that little shoe, started up again, only twitching in a limited range of motion, but gathering speed. This movement of the foot caused the mound of calf, already somewhat unflattering mashed up against the left leg, to jiggle. The dealer’s first card was a six of spades.

Resting atop the foot tapper’s jean-skirted lap was her narrow black purse that snapped shut via a magnet in the sequined flap. The restless fingers of her left hand, with matching red nails and adorned with modest jewelry, snapped and unsnapped the purse as she waited for her second card. Despite all the action going on below the table, she was calm and collected above. It reminded me of two things. One, the motivational quote about trying to be like a duck; calm on the surface but paddling like the dickens

underneath. Two, that Hemingway theory about only the tip of the iceberg being revealed, while everything else happened below the surface. She had reason to be fidgety, upping her bet this hand to \$50 instead of the \$10 she'd been wagering in prior hands.

Looking at her, I purported that she even displayed features of both a duck and an iceberg. The silhouette of her head, with her straight brown hair pulled into a low ponytail, resembled the female mallard's head shape and color, and her sharp nose, pointy chin, and high cheekbones were like juts on an iceberg. She was neither gorgeous nor unattractive; she was common. Her heel slipped from the rung, sending both her feet thudding to the floor, causing her purse to fall off her lap, and simultaneously her surprised upper body jolted forward, nearly spilling her Corona but for her impressive reaction time in catching it. A few of the table's occupants glanced at her. She played it off with a quick laugh at herself and a sigh of relief. She was no longer common.

The dealer, a middle-aged Syrian woman named Lonna, dealt the players their second cards. As usual for a Friday night, it was a packed blackjack table. Ten-dollar minimums, but likely switching to twenty-fives at the top of the hour. The older gentleman in position one, who looked like an overweight Clint Eastwood, showed a seventeen. He was drinking something clear with ice—maybe vodkas and tonic water, the glass garnished with a lime wedge. Next to him sat his wife or his girlfriend, impossibly bronzed and bleached blond and wrinkled, in less than modest attire. She was rather loud and seemed more to enjoy the flirting banter with the young fellow to her immediate left than she was interested in her hand, a twelve. The fellow wore a fitted red sox hat, had neatly kept sideburns and longish curls kept tamed by the hat. The sleeves of his navy

pullover sweater were pushed up just below his elbows. He slid his Budweiser bottle back and forth in front of him, and occasionally regarded the older woman next to him—I surmised it was Clint’s wife rather than girlfriend based on her blatant disinterest in Clint—with polite smiles and chuckles. He showed a nine. In the spot at the middle of the table, directly across from Lonna, a bald black man with a goatee, dressed in a gray button down and tie, shuffled his stack of black chips, repeatedly picking them up from the stack and letting them fall back into place. His fingernails were longer than most men’s and he was dealt a queen to go along with the king he already had and then thanked God for royalty. Occupying the next two seats and displaying a soft seventeen and double nines was a young oriental couple. The guy had little rectangle-framed glasses and thick, crazy hair resembling a lion’s mane. The girl, very tan with lots of makeup on but easily able to pass for a teenager, was petite and had on a spaghetti strapped tank with short shorts and khaki-colored wedge sandals with ties that wound up to her calves. She reached up and undid the butterfly clip from her shiny, black hair and it spilled down her back like a shampoo commercial before she twisted it back up and reclipped it, garnishing attention from several pairs of eyes at the table, and at least one pair of eyes not at the table. Her boyfriend spoke quietly to her in a different language, I thought Japanese, perhaps either telling her to split the nines or to stop drawing attention to herself. The uncommon girl in the third base position, the foot tapper, was dealt a jack for her second card; she now showed a twenty.

These details I observed from a few paces behind Lonna, and I feigned interest in surrounding games, waiting for her to finish out this deal before I started my forty-five minute shift as the table’s next blackjack dealer. I liked getting a feel for the atmosphere

before jumping in. Knowing ahead of time who to pal around with and who to leave alone seemed to increase my likelihood of getting tips. Tips were also contingent on the gamblers winning money. Ultimately, there wasn't much I could do to increase that likelihood.

According to the Book of Hoyle, Lonna's six plus the unknown hole card was supposed to be considered a sixteen, since in most cases, you're supposed to automatically assume that the hole card has a value of ten. Problem is, that's a lot of supposing. But, like dutiful disciples of basic strategy, appropriately acronymed B.S., Clint held his seventeen, Clint told Wifey to stand at twelve and she agreed once Boston also told her she should, Boston doubled down and ended up with a seventeen, Fingernails stood on twenty, Lion doubled down and ended up with an eighteen, Pantene split her nines and got a nineteen and a seventeen, and the foot tapper stood with twenty. Everybody was feeling pretty good about their hands based on their loose body language and banter. Then Lonna revealed her hole card. A five. The table gave a collective groan. And sure enough, her next card was a jack. A twenty-one the hard way. All hands lost. An ideal time to make my entrance.

"Get out of here before you steal anymore of these poor people's money," I joked, sidling in next to Lonna.

She playfully punched my arm. "Oh, you bad boy. I wanted them to win." As she separated the losing chips from the last hand into the table's bank, she addressed the seven players. "This boy, you watch out for him. Can you believe his name is Jack Spade? Isn't that something?" She laughed, displayed her empty hands to the eye in the

sky in a sort of ‘I wash my hands of you’ gesture, and reported her leave to the pit boss.
“I wish you all luck. Goodnight.”

I chuckled and shook my head as I prepared the table, swiping my employee card in the slot underneath, counting and recording the bank, breaking down dollars for the oriental couple, scanning the table to see that all bets were placed for the next pitch, and sliding the would-be next card into the discard shoe—a rule mandated when a new dealer comes on. We’re told in training not to reveal our last names as a safety precaution. My name wasn’t Jack Spade, it was Jack Hart, and I didn’t know if Lonna was cleverly protecting my identity or if she really thought I was Jack Spade.

It takes a certain kind of swagger to play table games. That swagger, in my estimation, is made up of confidence, arrogance, and understanding that the success in a table game is correlative to the depth one is willing to venture in one’s pockets. Put simpler, you gotta spend money to make money.

Twenty minutes in, the folks at my table were spending money all right. And for the most part, their winnings fluctuated, save for Wifey, who had stormed off in a public rage when Clint refused to give her anymore allowance. No one had yet occupied the seat left vacant by her departure, though some bystanders milled around, trying to determine which table was the hottest. Fingernails was doing well, roughly \$3,000, and he was certainly not discreet about it as he filled and perhaps welcomed the role of being the new center of attention. Every time a cocktail waitress came to the table with drinks or taking orders, he’d raise his bet and ask her to stand close to him for the hand. This superstition

led to a number of cocktail waitresses securing some rather hefty tips, which, truth be told, I felt I should be sharing in, so I semi-jokingly clucked my teeth at him.

“I see how it is,” I said in mock hurt tone. “No love for the brother pitching you these aces.”

“Aw, come on man. You know you ain’t as pretty as them good luck charms. Tell you what though.” He placed the green \$25 chip on the upper edge of his betting circle. “Serve me up a little love this round and you’ll get yours.”

Sure enough, my hit on fourteen busted and all six of them won the round. I got my \$50 tip from Fingernails and that perfectly timed bust triggered the rest of them to start loosening their wallets in my favor. The episode loosened up their attitudes a little, too, as the joking and small talk increased from that point.

A dealer really isn’t supposed to be too friendly with the gamblers because that can slow things down. If less hands are played, the casino isn’t making as much money, and the casino managers frown on less money. What did I care about the casino though? The need for money was exponentially greater for a twenty-two year old, six months out of college, with student loans looming, car payments to make, and innumerable other bills, including rent which was due by the beginning of next week. So I was friendly as long as the pit boss lingered elsewhere.

Boston was actually a student at Michigan, and since I had roots in Ohio, I’d chalk one up for the Buckeyes when he lost a hand. Clint was also from the Midwest, but he and his wife lived in Florida now, and to hear that man rip on Hildy in his perfect comedic timing, one time predicting that he smelled Satan right before she walked over to get money from him, was priceless. Fingernails didn’t talk much about himself, only

saying that he was there on business and having a helluva time, but he continued his raucous, good-natured arrogance. The couple, from Japan, also didn't talk much besides telling us they were from Japan, but seemed to understand enough to laugh at the back and forth teasing. The foot tapper pretended to be embarrassed when I called her out on her nervous habit. She had come to Vegas a year ago to try out for a reality show aimed at finding the next 'coyote' bartender at Coyote Ugly. She didn't make the cut but loved Vegas so much that she got a job bartending at the Fontana Bar instead, which, touristy as it was to sit and sip champagne on a balcony overlooking the dancing water fountains of the Bellagio, still happened to be one of my favorite places on the strip. Later, she let it casually slip into the table talk that she'd be working there tomorrow night and later still, I casually let it slip into the table talk that this was my last shift of the night.

Both of my assumptions about the foot tapper were confirmed when I announced my final deal before Julio would replace me as the next dealer. She wagered \$100 for that hand, something she hadn't done all night. This climactic move was typical of bettors who were ready to end their night—either with a big win or a big loss. And the fact that she was ending her night at the blackjack table at the same time I was ending my night at the blackjack table made me think it was more than coincidence. Then, an unwarranted double down, (her two cards totaling ten against my exposed ten of clubs plus hole card), validated my earliest premonition about her blackjack strategy.

She hurried to catch up to me outside the Tropicana.

“Jack Spade!”

“Don’t rush in those dangerous shoes. I’m happy to wait.”

“That’s not really your name is it?”

“Who wants to know?” I teased.

“I’m Courtney,” she stuck out her hand and we shook.

“How does it feel to be four-hundred dollars richer after that last hand, Courtney, my dear?”

“You still haven’t answered my first question.”

I laughed. “My name’s really Jack. But I prefer hearts to spades.”

She tilted her head and nodded. “Yeah, it feels good to win by accident the way I did. I didn’t mean to double down. It wasn’t a very smart move.”

“It’s very smart when you know what’s coming up.”

“What are you implying, Jack?” she smiled coyly.

“You’re good, but I knew as soon as you picked up your fallen purse with your foot instead of bending down to grab it that you had to keep watching the cards for the count.”

“Maybe I wanted to make sure no one stole my chips.”

“The double down was risky because the high count meant it was more likely that I had something high too.”

“Yeah, I owe you one for the front-loading. You let me see it on purpose though, didn’t you?”

“You want to come back to my place with me?”

“You think we can team up again more often?”

We looked at each other a full moment before leaning in, and the tips of our iceberg tongues revealed the passion and the greed through the language and swagger of blackjack.

CLUB STROKES

The club strokes and irregular right margins stood out right away as indicators of a cruel, impulsive person. He sat with his lawyer, both of them looking smug, while I continued to present my findings on the piece of evidence, a note the accused had written inside a Valentine's Day card to his recently deceased girlfriend. I glanced at the jurors. They seemed unconvinced by my testimony, and the prosecution didn't have a terribly strong case against him otherwise, so I wasn't surprised when the not guilty verdict was announced. What did surprise me was the letter tucked under my windshield wiper with the words, "nice try" scrawled on it in that same, club-stroked handwriting.

I plucked the note, written on a torn manila folder, from under the wiper and tossed it into my car nonchalantly, just in case the sender was waiting and watching my reaction. I tried to recall who had been in the courtroom that would know my silver Sebring sedan, hoping that I'd be able to pin this note on someone else, maybe even a friend who was being sincere about the inspiration. But ink doesn't lie: it was from him.

My career in graphology, the science of handwriting, started with a brief couple of sentences in an intro to psych book back in my undergrad days at Ohio University. I remember graphology being lumped in as an afterthought behind the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventories and Rorschach inkblot tests. Fascinated that handwriting could reveal personality, I soaked up everything I could on the subject and then enrolled in an overseas exchange program, focusing on graphology in western

European countries where they take the practice seriously. Eight years of extensive education both at home and abroad helped me land a job as an adjunct psychology professor back in Ohio at a small, commuter state school in the northeast part of the state. As an expert in graphology, I also had a consulting firm, and I'd been asked to testify against forgers, embezzlers, molesters, assaulters, etc., all based on aspects of their handwriting. The States still don't give graphology the credit it deserves, but the field is making progress; I can tell from my busy workload and even from the increasing number of students that enroll in my special topics class on the subject. Unfortunately, the bad guys don't always get caught.

Sitting at my kitchen table waiting for the day old hamburger helper casserole to heat up in the microwave, I pulled out my notes on the Miles Ringwald case, a moderately high profile one for this rural area. His girlfriend had been found dead out in the barn, and the woman's parents suspected foul play. The autopsy had revealed an accidental horse hoof to the head as the cause of death however, and the prosecution couldn't convince the jury that Miles Ringwald had any part in the accident. He had, in fact, looked sullen and depressed for the duration of the trial. He cried when he was up on the witness stand and I might have believed his innocence if it weren't for his revealing handwriting.

There are several main criteria to look for when first analyzing someone's handwriting. Is it legible or illegible? Big or small? Slanted to the right or left? If the writing is on unlined paper, does the baseline slope up, down, or remain steady? What do the margins look like? Is sizing and spacing proportionate? These are the kinds of visual clues that can immediately reveal whether a person is honest or dishonest, an introvert or

extrovert, happy or depressed. The pressure of the writing can reveal if a person is feeling intense or concentrated at that particular moment. And when people attempt to overly control their handwriting, like the too perfect, manufactured script of Miles Ringwald, it is indicative of a calculating person who is ready to snap.

“I truly love you with all of my heart. Nothing will ever come between us. I can't imagine my life without you in it. Love, Miles Ringwald.”

The misspelling hinted at his education level. The word ‘love’ was printed in capital letters instead of in his typical cursive script, highlighting an overcompensation in that word, probably a blatant lie. The heavy pressure of the word ‘nothing’ was almost like a threat. How a person writes his personal pronoun is demonstrative of how he views himself, so the slightly larger ‘I’ in this note proved that Miles really thought he was something else. And the downstrokes of almost every letter were adorned with the dreaded club stroke, a heavy thickening of the line that means violence and cruelty. His signature was larger and loopier than the writing in his letter, which can be translated as a desire for his public persona to be larger and more obnoxious than his private self. And the fact that he signed his entire name in a love letter further illustrated his pride and his desire to be noticed.

I flipped between his writing and his mug shots. Thirty-one, he'd stated for the record, light colored eyes, high cheekbones, crew cut, no facial hair, a better than average-looking guy—the neighbor you wave to but don't talk to type. I recalled his smirk and intent focus as he listened to my testimony about his writing. People don't always like to hear the truth. I knew this guy was bad news, but I wasn't sure if he was really capable of murder—probably just a possessive jerk with a temper. Plus he'd been

found not guilty. Witnesses confirmed that his truck hadn't been in the driveway at all the day his girlfriend was killed and his alibi seemed intact. He hadn't even been the one to find her. A neighbor stumbled on the body when he found his runaway dog lapping up the blood on her crushed skull. I shuddered and took my plate to the sink, dumped most of the casserole into the garbage disposal, then refilled my glass of merlot and headed to the family room to unwind in front of the television.

I must have fallen asleep for an hour or two—heated massage chairs and wine will do that to a person. I awoke to a muted Wheel of Fortune and the sound of someone rummaging through my kitchen.

Panicked, I couldn't remember where I'd left the cordless and my cell was still in my purse all the way across the house in the bedroom. The family room had a door leading to the garage so I thought I could jump in my car and hightail it to my parents' house ten minutes away and call the police from there. But the car keys were also in my purse. I scanned the room for a weapon and decided on the fire poker instead of the lamp as it was less awkward to wield.

I crept towards the kitchen and then heard the incessant mumbling. It sounded like the intruder was saying, "scissors, scissors, scissors," and I nearly gagged at the thought of having my fingers or any other extremities snipped off.

"Angela, where do you keep your scissors?" the familiar voice yelled.

"Mother!" I sank down onto the step leading from the kitchen to the family room. "What are you doing here? I almost stabbed you with a poker."

She continued opening drawers. "Here they are. Well, that's silly. Why do you keep them with your silverware? I left a message that I was stopping by to drop off these

flowers. Didn't you get my message?" My silence gave her pause only briefly. "Then I came in and saw you passed out so I was just going to cut the stems and stick them in a vase for you."

"A knife actually works better for that because scissors squeeze the stem and restrict the ability for the flower to absorb water. And I wasn't passed out from one glass of wine. I was just taking a nap after a rough day. Wait. Why did you get me flowers?"

"I'll never be able to find a knife in this kitchen. Corkscrews though, sure. I'll just use scissors. Don't you check your voicemail? We found them on the doorstep and the card had your name on it. You didn't tell me you were seeing anybody."

"Mom. I'm not seeing anybody and even if I was, why would they take flowers to your house?"

"Well, I don't know. You're the psychologist, not me."

She continued cutting away at the fall-colored arrangement of carnations and I made my way over to the counter to read the card, already dreading its contents. The "Angela McNeal" was all I needed to verify my suspicion. Same handwriting as the love letter inside the Valentine's Day card. Same handwriting as the "nice try" note tucked under my wiper. Miles Ringwald wanted something from me and maybe this note would shed light on his twisted plans: "I'd like to hear more about your analysis on Miles Ringwald. I think you may be right about his strokes."

"Well? Who's it from?"

"You know the Miles Ringwald case that I was summoned to?"

“Yes, it said on the news he was found not guilty. I thought I saw the back of your head when the camera panned into the courtroom. I don’t know why you insist on wearing it in a ponytail all the time.”

“I think the flowers and card are from him.”

“Well that was nice of him. He’s a nice-looking man, too. And I guess he’s single now.”

“Mom, I was testifying against him.” It took her a minute for this new detail to register.

“You testified against him. So you think he killed that woman?”

“I can’t tell if he’s a murderer, but he’s definitely dangerous.”

A loud three knocks on my front door interrupted us.

“Please tell me you locked it when you came in,” I whispered.

“I don’t remember,” she whispered back. “Should we answer it?”

We huddled in the kitchen and waited until ten minutes had passed without another sound. My mom stood poised with phone in one hand, fire poker in the other. I peeked out the front window and didn’t see anyone on the stoop, then I unlocked the door and threw it open in one motion, attempting to startle anyone that might be lurking there. A loud thud rang out as something heavy and wooden that had been propped against the door fell partway into the foyer.

“Mom, call 911.”

The police arrived and after scouring the property, found Miles several blocks away sitting in his truck and working on another note. They took the murder weapon, a

club-like wooden beam with a horseshoe attached to it, into evidence. I asked to see the final note he had written: “The End.”

ON THE VERSATILITY OF HAIRSPRAY

I don't even use hairspray. It just came in the package along with the travel-sized shampoo and conditioner. I especially don't approve of aerosol hairspray, but it was a good bargain, so I cast my environmental consciousness aside to make room for the miniature bottle in my purse.

Even the purse was a commodity I'd never used until my newly acquired post-college working life. More a satchel with cargo-type pockets, it had just enough room for my wallet, cell phone, compact, chapstick and hairspray. I wore it slung across my chest to deter purse-snatchers and on a hot day like today, I could, if need be, manipulate the strap to dab at the ticklish sweat beads between my boobs.

On this particular morning, I plod along my eight-block jaunt to the subway station, counting the sidewalk cracks and strap-dabbing. The girls at the office were definitely going to need my hairspray today. I don't know why they neglect to stock their own purses. Maybe they don't abandon their inconvenient beliefs about aerosol cans. Still, it seems like they use it more often than I do.

The one time Angela had a run in her hose, she engaged in her own jaunt around the office to find someone with hairspray. My little aerosol companion stopped the run and saved the day. And who could forget Beth's ink explosion on her blouse? The all-powerful hairspray was summoned to prevent staining. Of course, today would be

Molly's usual, "This humidity just wrecks my hair! Do you see this frizz?" And my hairspray will tame down the frizz everyone pretends not to see.

In fact, had I ever even used it myself? My head tilts and eyebrows wrinkle as I try to remember. Oops. Shouldn't make faces while walking alone. People are going to think I'm talking to myself. I position my head properly and return my face to normal. Years and years ago the talk was that TV advertisers would spray produce with hairspray to make it look shinier. Who had been at my house? I think Emily. We experimented spraying a red delicious apple. Shiny, yes, but also a sticky magnet for crumbs and cat hair as I recall. More recently there had been that baby tarantula in the bathroom. It figured there were no shoes handy—and even if there were I certainly didn't want them splattered with tarantula guts—but I did have my trusty hairspray and I sprayed it to death. Looking back, I suppose that wasn't the most humane way to go about it. It scampered at first, but I just kept spraying, spraying, spraying and soon it stopped scampering with its legs kind of curled under its body. I shudder. Shoot. Now people will really think I'm weird, shuddering in seventy-degree heat.

I'm a block away from the station, and I've spent the entire journey to work thinking about hairspray. What made me even start thinking about hairspray in the first place? Oh yeah. As I left my building, I'd accidentally made eye contact with that punky-looking kid. He was leaning against a parked Beemer, trying to light his cigarette. His hair was completely shaved except for the tall, colorful spikes and I remember wondering if he used hairspray, gel or a combination to make it stand straight up like that.

I imagine his hair catching up in flames from the lighting of his cigarette and my shoulders shake as a quick laugh escapes. I look around to make sure nobody had seen me.

Someone had seen me. The same spikey punk. He was a block behind me now, and again we make eye contact. He was following me. He was going to mug me and steal my purse and maybe rape me. My heart races. The intensity of my plodding increases but now I'm stuck at the intersection. What should I do?

As I wait for the traffic signal hand to wave me across, I engage in the old, I-have-to-crack-my-back-while-I'm-standing-here maneuver. Just as I suspected... he's within striking distance. Trying to remain calm, I unzip the main pouch of my purse and search for the hairspray, intending to use it as mace if the need arises. It's small enough to conceal in my hand and I fight the urge to turn around again. But now a new terror consumes me. The bottle is remarkably light. Am I out of hairspray? It's almost impossible to tell when aerosol cans are empty. You just go to use it one day and nothing squirts out except a stream of air. I hold the can in front of my face and try to casually test its availability. Just as I suspected: air with the faintest trace of apple blossoms.

"Oh, dude! I was wondering why you was all twitching and shit while you was walking. Daaaamn... chick like you sniffs hairspray? Shit, I could use a good high... is that cool?"

"Oh. Yeah. That's cool. There's not much left, though." I place the can into his black fingernail-polished hand and cross the street to the safety of the station, counting the stripes in the crosswalk.

A GUIDE TO THE PREDATORY INSTINCT

Crowds of fleshy vacationers, fully clad in skimpy suits, swarm the oceanfront like gulls to a Cheeto. They mark their territory with brightly colored umbrellas and beach towels, set up their folding chairs, dump out their shovels, buckets and frisbees, and lather each others' backs with the sweet scent of coconut. Precious summer has finally returned to me and I am brimming with lust.

I watch them with unblinking eyes and I fantasize about their voluptuous bodies. But who doesn't? All that skin. That glorious, glistening, bare skin crisping under the giant heat lamp in the sky. No, I'm not the only one at the beach with impure thoughts. It's just that very few of us actually have what it takes to act out our fantasies.

It takes instincts—a few adrenaline-filled seconds of cold-blooded killer instincts. It takes quick decisions and rapid movements to manipulate the victim's body into an appealing position. It takes precision. One wrong snap, crackle, or pop and things can get messy, even painful. And it takes patience, sometimes years of patience for the perfect opportunity to present itself—the circumstances have to be just so. But I always know when the time is right. Like a sixth sense, I can feel the electricity tingling through my ravenous body.

That's how I felt with you, love. You sent your electromagnetic voltage right through to my very core and I knew I had to have you. Your young, tender skin—still salty from the ocean water. Your eyes—terrified and open. You watched what I did to

you. And still they are open, glazed over with that murky, bluish tinge and rolled up into what's left of your pretty head. Ahh, love. You tried to fight back but I was too much for you. Did you like the struggle? I did.

I won't lie. I am a predator. A great, white predator. Call me conceited, but it's true. Today is especially rewarding as my efforts propelled me to a new level of greatness, and I have you to thank for that, love. You see, I have been promoted from a predator to a serial killer and three was the magic number that boosted my stock. Criminal profiling experts define a serial killer as someone who has murdered on at least three occasions, (and I can now check that off the list), with an emotional cooling-off period between the killings (check). Statistics show that many of us are white, middle-aged males (check) and that our motivations for killing are oftentimes sexual...NO! I am not a sexual predator. Like most of my breed, I can't deny craving some good head every once in a while, but I've never once attacked to fulfill a sexual desire. For me, killing is not emotional gratification or sexual gratification. It's more like survival. Does that make you feel any better, love? You helped save my life *and* you helped me get a promotion.

I don't blame you for giving me the silent treatment, but just remember that you were a predator once, too. Any creature at the top of the food chain is considered a predator, you know—from young, strapping lads like yourself to brown, wrinkled grannies with skirted bathing suits. Some of us are just more aggressive than others.

You may be wondering how I became a predator. In the developmental process of those who end up being violent or antisocial, the 'homicidal triad'—bed-wetting at an

inappropriate age, cruelty to children and small animals, and starting fires—is often apparent. These three triggers, or a combination of the three, suggest an underlying frustration with lack of control. In my case, the triad is only accurate to an extent. Cruelty to children and animals? Guilty. But fire starting? Not a chance. As far as wetting the bed is concerned, I've always been restless at night—I feel like I'm constantly moving, even when I'm sleeping. This is embarrassing love, and I'm only telling you this because I'm confident you're not about to tell anyone else, but in the past, I do recall just going whenever nature called without regard to where I was. Gross and uncivilized, I know.

Familial abuse or lack of family also tends to play a major role in predatory behavior. Like most of my type, I don't know my father and my mother abandoned me at birth. For as long as I can remember, I've had to fend for myself. I'm sure there are others like me. And our stories are all too familiar. We are loners—hapless stragglers shunned by a paranoid society.

It's hard for me to get close to people. Growing up near the beach, I always craved human interaction, but I led such a solitary life that I didn't know how to associate with them. I needed to watch them... to study them. Luckily, it's easy to go unnoticed in this environment. I observed their tendencies from a safe distance, lurking deep under the radar. What especially intrigued me in my rudimentary observations was movement. How they moved in the water and how water, in turn, moved them. Some people inched out slowly; the break of each wave introduced a new part of their flesh to the water. Some didn't believe in gradual submersion. They raced clumsily from sand to water, high-stepping the waves, and when they lost their footing or couldn't leap high enough to hurdle the oncoming swell, they dove under. Some didn't enter the water at all—they

were content to sweat it out in the scorching heat. And some were noncommittal, perched right on the edge of sand and water, letting their feet sink further into the wet sand as each exhausted wave pushed the ocean water up the shore in graceful peaks and valleys, outlined briefly by sea foam until the next surge created its own design.

I think many people are fascinated by the water. I tend to take the water for granted. It's the people that fascinate me. But I guess I understand why they flock here in droves, summer after summer. After all, I couldn't possibly live away from the ocean. It draws me in, and I am meaningless and ordinary in that overwhelming expanse. The water doesn't pay attention to anyone. Its only concern is to hammer away at the shore, swallowing the sand a fraction of an inch at a time in a never-ending grudge. Of course water will prevail, but every twelve hours or so, it teases the gullible sand. Thinking it's finally starting to gain ground, the sand stretches out, confident in its self-defense. But then water comes raging back against the sand like a woman, nagging and teasing and, over the long haul, prevailing.

These are some of the tendencies I observed over the course of many years, trying to understand these curious beach-goers and their fascination with the oceanfront, while trying to understand my own desire to steal the life from their nourishing bodies—to slash into their flesh, their organs, their tendons—to rip apart their flailing limbs, their torsos, their heads...

Oh, love, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said all that. Forgive me for getting a little bit carried away. You probably think I'm a monster. A brute. A psychotic killer who needs to be locked up for life. That's what the media has conditioned you to think about killers like me—that we are nothing more than animals. You can't possibly understand

what it's like to be treated that way. So I apologize for attacking you with a vengeance usually reserved for corny slasher movies, but I have a lot of pent up aggression. You don't see things the way I do...especially now I daresay. We sense the world differently, love, and I just had to have you. But I'm not a monster. I'm a product of my environment, forced to feed off the flesh of an unfortunate target. You happened to be my target. If I were more chivalrous, perhaps I should have asked for your digits before just diving in and eating them.

I divide my predatory behavior into five stages: detection, identification, approach, subjugation, and, as a reward for all my hard work, consumption. There are too many predators out there today that are only interested in sex with children. Sex is so vain and fleeting and call me a hypocrite, but cruel. A victim of sexual abuse has to face a lifetime of pained memories. I put my victims out of their misery almost immediately. And really... children? How weak those predators are that they only prey on small, helpless, innocent children. Truth be told, I started with the small ones when I was first learning. But the thrill of the chase is going after bigger game.

I know a killer who only attacks bad people. I wish I had noble motives like that, just like I wish I were a vegetarian... (That was a joke, love. Believe me, you'd be laughing if you were alive.) My desire stems from carnal instinct. I am drawn to certain behaviors and stimuli. Sometimes I notice splashing or horseplay. Sometimes it's a piece of shiny jewelry. Quite often it's the colors or patterns that catch my eye and solicit my attention.

Once I've detected something that piques my interest and arouses my senses, I will identify the source to see if it's worth my time. I have an ideal body type that I tend to go after. You should feel honored that you fit my criteria, love. You had that perfect bronze skin, very little hair, and a nice blend of fat and muscle. Call me crazy, but I prefer fat to muscle. It's much more satisfying. In fact, I can sometimes last three months from the blubber of one person if he's fat enough. No, no, my dear. You weren't *that* fat. I'll have to make another killing in a few weeks probably. I bet you worked out, love, didn't you? I could tell.

The approach is the most important part. When I was first getting started, I didn't care who or what surrounded my prey. I just honed in on the target and got there as fast as I could. The problem with that technique was that I was usually spotted before I had a chance to snatch the little ones. I learned to steer clear of the crowds and the whistle-blowing lifeguards with the bright red bathing suits. I learned to stay hidden until I got within striking distance. Trial and error proved to be a tedious, gradual process and I didn't become proficient at my approach overnight. I'd say it took four or five summers until I was confident enough to approach a youngster and then another five summers before I moved on to bigger and better rewards.

Subjugation is another critical stage. I am able to tell within the first thirty seconds of the attack whether or not I'll be able to bring the victim under my control, and if I think it's too risky, I feel no shame in a tactical retreat. The problem with so many amateurs is that their egos get in the way of their heads and they end up getting caught or killed. In fact, you wouldn't believe the disparity between the pathetic number of fatalities *we* are responsible for versus the number of *us* who are tracked down and

tagged. It's quite discouraging. Technology is becoming such that the authorities are able to pinpoint our exact location all the time. And I can't speak for all of us, but to me, the satisfaction of one successful attack is simply not worth a lifetime of impaired freedom. So if it's risky, retreat. That's my motto anyway. And that's why I'm great at what I do. I may have only made three successful killings, but you won't find me beeping on their monitors the second I wander outside of my domain.

The culmination of the first four stages leads to the ultimate reward: consumption. Part of my method may have seemed unorthodox compared to what you're used to seeing in the movies. But like the stereotypical victim, you were alone, in hot water, with nowhere to turn—no one to call for help. Cue the scary-movie theme music. I snuck up and grabbed you, slashing through your skin effortlessly. Our imaginary audience would have jumped out of their seats even though the music warned them it was coming. But then I released you, bleeding and probably in shock. Did you think for that fleeting instant that you would be saved? That your weak punches to my nose and eyes were enough to send me reeling? Oh, love. If you could see me now. Just thinking about your adorable arm flailing made me break out into a big, toothy grin. You may have thought you were safe. But I was just toying with you, love. Determining your palatability. And as I circled you, letting your taste linger in my mouth, I thought to myself, ah, love, you're so cute I could just eat you up. And well? I did.

Maybe someday they'll find your remains. You're probably wishing you hadn't come out here by yourself, but I'm so glad you did. I have thoroughly enjoyed your company and won't soon forget this pleasant afternoon we've shared. As your carcass

sinks down to the bottom of the ocean floor, other predators may be inclined to nibble on your entrails. Be forewarned, they're not nearly as articulate, nor as keen on explaining the predatory instinct. Indeed, you might be hard-pressed to find anyone willing to chew the fat with you. A majority of these wretched creatures are downright imbeciles. They're the reason scientists claim our brain capacity compares to that of a rat. But love, nature is constantly evolving and adapting. This vicious cycle known as the food chain is just another example of survival of the fittest. I plan to be around for many summers to come while suddenly, your existence is limited to memory, and soon even that will fade away. And now, if you'll excuse me, I do believe I smell the blood of another fleshy stranded in the water. Duty calls, my love. Au revoir.