

Marquette Literary Review



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The Late Worm

Katelyn Bishop

He has
out-waited
the Early Bird,
and heard
his brothers' screams,
being feasted
upon.
He is sitting
in his self-
made, dirt cave
when it begins
to rain---
Torrents flooding
his existence---
Drowning.
Spending eternity
in a muddy grave.
The survivors
laying on
the sidewalk
exposed.

Leroy Brown

N. Searles

That was his name.
They say he was
the nastiest rooster





south of Detroit,
and yet mamma and papa kept him.

All he did was terrorize,
he chased Mary-Anne
every time she went for eggs.

I would stand watch on top of the coop,
looking for the old mean cock.
Watching for my sister and signaling her on in.

I don't know how he'd do it,
we were always quiet, always quick,
he was quicker.

He would see Mary-Anne
and off their chase would go.
Around the house
for what almost seemed like hours,

He left a bruise on my leg, once.
It was even larger than my knee
and took up half my leg.

I still won't forget him,
even as we said goodbye to him.
His meat was still the harshest chicken I've ever met.

County Line Road, Indiana
N. Searles

“When I dream about the moonlight on the Wabash, then I long for my Indiana home.” –Jim

Nabors

I look for the path I used to take,
to walk to the tiny town of LaOtto.

All I need is the narrow dirt path through all the fields





and in 10 minutes I will be right by the Sit n' Bull,
the only bar in the practically empty town.
There is nothing I can recognize on my search,
Miss Jetmore's driveway is entirely overgrown,
her mailbox only shows the '3' of her 5310 address.
The birds are still acting the same as they did before I left,
their voices gawking at me like I am still 7.
The trees still dance with my movement, as if we are partners in step.
The street still has as little traffic as it did before.
I wonder "am I still the same?" or have I too become overgrown and hidden.
I hope to be as constant and full of chaos,
as the cities I dream of residing.
Just like their streets are overcrowded with mobs of people,
full of constant honking at all hours.
Not covered in debris like my shoes are now,
from the road I currently walk on.
I had lost my focus for too long.
Swoosh! A branch slaps my face.
"Que diabos!"
I don't even know what it means,
I just know it's profane
and it's the little Portuguese I recall.
It was here however, my isolated home,
separated away from human contact.
My hidden paradise of open space, of endless fields and back roads





draped in branches aligning the dirt road.

Though appearing grim,

It was peaceful,

and it was home.

Despite all my best efforts to hate it,

it was where my heart would always reside.

We Don't Even Have an Interstate Exit

Katelyn Bishop

“The people feel and look the same, like they've settled here even though they know there's something more-something better-just beyond where they are.” --- Courtney Summers

I kick a stone along the tar and gravel road, hoping it will lead me to the house that I once threw it at. Making that house cry out shards of glass instead of tears. Leaving holes in place of my presence.

There is a female cardinal. Grey and tan. Why does her mate get to be such a brilliant red? Shouldn't a woman be colorful and beautiful and the one to be looked at and admired? Instead her guy friend gets all the attention, but I follow her. We make our way along Springfield st. We soar pass a masked face raccoon smashed into the street.

I imagine what his life was like. Him washing his hands in the puddle that is normally a pothole. Looking behind him and saying to his wife “what are we bringing the kids for dinner?” but now he is a speed bump next to the pothole. Flattening out with each car.

The Virden bump doesn't do that. It doesn't flatten, it just gets more dangerous and bigger with each ride. Tanner, Matt, and I went over it. Matt pushing down on the gas pedal as hard as he could. Our Red bulls flying out of their cans onto the ceiling with our bodies in the air.

This town is a mess, like we were, like I still am. I wish I could be closer to my lady cardinal and fly away from this town. Our lives are in the same place. Not content, stuck. Sitting in our gray coats probably being the only ones who have ever used this decrepit old bench on our town square.





Lawyers Don't Ride Buses

Erin McKay

“If this bus doesn't come soon, I'm going to fucking stab someone.” That's never something you want to hear muttered from behind you from a woman wearing nine coats and smelling of cabbage. I decided it would be judicious to fake a phone call and move away slowly. “No, I don't care if his mother is on her death bed, he promised me that brief this morning and if it's not on my desk by 10:00am he will be the one needing medical attention” I snapped into my phone and I quietly slid down the bench, away from Cabbage Lady. This was my “go to” fake phone conversation. It made me seem like the high powered lawyer I knew in my heart that I should be rather than the lowly paralegal I am. I took a deep breath and looked down at my shoes. I'm proud of these shoes. They are nice black patent Steven Madden pumps that I bought on clearance. No one knew they were from a sale bin of course. I work really hard to look presentable at work. I have to. I work at Smith and Carlson, the most prestigious law firm in Portland. It's hard to fit in with that level of power when you are operating on a paralegal's salary, a sad fraction of what the lawyers are paid. I should be a lawyer. Is it my fault that I have test anxiety? I mean, I went to law school. I use words like “habeas corpus” in everyday cadence. Okay maybe not every day, but I can still use it in a sentence. That more than I can say of Cabbage Lady over there.

God, public transportation is so degrading. I mean, really. Having to sit in a filthy, awful smelling metal oven while the dregs of society wrinkle my Ann Taylor blouse is what Dante must have been referring to when he wrote *Inferno*. But the brakes on my car had started to squeak and what if someone from works heard me pulling into the parking garage? That would have been mortifying. So Bus 45 into downtown Portland was the only alternative. The bus swings around the corner just as I was giving up hope of any justice. It's too bad for the knife wielding Cabbage Lady though, she won't get to stab anyone today. Maybe tomorrow Cabbage Lady, maybe tomorrow.

The doors swing open with a hiss and I stepped up the muddy steps of the bus and handed the obese man at the wheel my \$1.25. I turned down the aisle and began to survey my seat choices. On my left were two apparently homeless men holding a heated debate about the merits of living under overpasses or stoops. As I had no definitive opinion either way I decided not to subject myself into that conversation by sitting too close. Further down on the left side was a teenage girl sobbing into the phone at someone named Robby who “totally likes Jessica even if you say you don't, I saw you hold that door open for her.” As I hated teenage girls when I was a teenage girl, I decided to try my chances farther back in the bus. I turn to my right and saw a newspaper in a suit jacket next to an open seat. The cuffs on the suit jacket looks nice and even had cuff links. I believe I have just found my new seatmate. I slide into the seat beside the suit and he puts his newspaper down. I was pleasantly surprised with what I found. The suit that was smiling at me was in his late 20's with thick dark hair, olive skin, and kind brown eyes.

Well, hello there.” he smiled. What a stroke of luck! How often are there handsome, nice smelling, mentally stable men on public transportation? “Hello to you too, How's the economy?” I replied with my witty reference to the article on the front page of the newspaper he was reading. “Going to hell in a hand basket, I'm afraid.” he laughed back. Wow, funny and attractive. I found my white whale, perhaps his name is Moby. “I'm Jessica Swanson” I said as I stuck my hand out for my well-practiced delicate yet firm handshake. He grasped my hand with surprisingly callused fingers and responded with “Pleasure to meet you, Miss Swanson, you can call me Jack.” Jack. What a beautifully white collared name. I bet he's a lawyer at one of the other firms downtown. He was wearing a well cut blue suit with a paisley tie. He carried a black leather





briefcase that matched his perfectly shined black dress shoes. I wonder if I should tell him where I work; Smith and Carlson meant something to anyone who mattered. I mean I could imply that I was a lawyer. It's not a lie if you don't say it outright. But what if he was a lawyer and asked about someone in the office? I don't know many people beside the ones in close proximity to my cubicle. Perhaps he's at the big accounting firm downtown? I bet he is. Lawyers don't ride public transportation.

We talked for the rest of the 20 minutes ride into the city. We discussed music and the news and even how we both love the smell of the city after it rained. I decided he had to be a lawyer because there was no way an accountant could have been half as articulate. I don't know what stopped me from flat out asking what he did for a living. I think I was scared that if I asked him, he would ask what I did and I didn't want the first interaction I had with my future husband to be a downright lie. I was about half way through mentally naming our three future children when the bus pulled into my stop. I began gathering my stuff and was thrilled when he started packing up to. He works near me? Fantastic! He really must be someone of consequence. We filed down the aisle and as he got off the bus he turned around and smiled at me. "Miss Swanson, I hope you don't think me to forward but I have a question for you." Finally, he was going to ask for my number and we can date and get married and have out beautiful 2.5 children in a house with a white picket fence.

"Of course, Jack, what is it?" I replied with my most coy and adorably confused smile. Instead of answering he opened his briefcase and went to grab something. Oh perfect, he's going to give me his business card. He's saving me the trouble of googling every Jack in the Portland Metropolitan Area. I look up and in his hand is a leather bound book with a cross on it. Is that a Bible? Why is Jack handing me a Bible? He smiles at me and in a well-rehearsed tone he asks "Miss Swanson, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your lord and savior?" Wait what? Dear God. I think Jack's a Bible salesman. I was mentally married to a Bible peddler? In my state of utter shot, the heel of my Steve Madden clearance pump caught on the final step of the bus. As tumbled down onto the wet pavement, my final thought before my head hit the concrete was "Well, I should have known. Lawyers don't ride buses."

Ghosts of Our Own Making

Erin McKay

The broken ones are the writers.
The ones who are driven to create,
because they themselves are destroyed.
Destroyed on some deep

fundamental
level,

that makes repairs unlikely.
The ones with the "CAUTION: Construction Ahead" signs covered in dust and cobwebs from a time when the workers packed up and moved on,
recognizing a lost cause when the saw one.
Leaving behind half-ruined,
haunted places,
where the phantom pains of what used to be still ache.

Writers write to combat that ache.
They write to shake the cobwebs from abandoned fractures,





and attempt to rebuild.
They write to fill those haunted places with
ghosts of their own making
and chase away the ones that were there before.

Proving to themselves.
Proving to others.
That broken things have the beautiful potential
to become whole again.

Unnecessary Roughness

Erin McKay

Why do I still break for things that will never be mine?
I fear this one sided passion will bleed me dry
That the callousness of you,
will turn my skin to sand paper.
If you can't love me as I am now;
a blood pumping,
air breathing,
vacancy of a girl.
How will you love the corpse
you are turning me into?

Rip Tide

Erin McKay

It's traumatic.
The constant comings and goings-
that draw me in deep like the tide.
The farther I wade into you
the more your current threatens
to wreck me.
before you,
I hadn't realized
that I could drown in anything but water.

Untitled

Ivana Osmanovic

I'm giving her reason to live.
I strive to find it myself these days.
I cannot ball together the unsymmetrical flakes of myself to make others
gawk

I told her that if I could,
I would take all the flakes I've patted together,
and give them to her.

She must learn how conflicted happiness and sadness are the greatest paradox to live





inside your soul.

The pitiful moments through the blizzard are worth it to see the sunshine windy days that spring brings.

To know the tingling sensation in your fingertips.
When your nerve endings are no longer dead at the pedestal where you feel life's every painstaking, throbbing moment.

This life is worth the pity that crawls up into the weaves of your skull
late at night as the luminescence from the computer
screen
is screaming for you to keep your eyes glued on it
because if you close your eyes you are not sure whether or not they will open again.

The sensation of waking up is every first breath of life every morning.

Spring isn't here yet-
the groundhog said it might not come this year.

I'll keep treading through this powder white with her heart in my hand until I reach the sun.

The Prayer

Taylor Gall

Grant me the steady hand
to twist my door knob at two in the morning,
and give me the words to
pray that it's unlocked.
Drown me in being twenty;
let me swim through the smoke painted
air and feel
dangerous and unforgettable in the suburbs.

Give my memories away to the wind:
remind me of sitting on the carpet
while my friends talk about their





scraped knee third grade portraits,
and not of heart break
or the town too small to contain me.
Overflow me into a shallow basin
so that I can walk on water
and still feel hellish.

1973-Now
Mary Klauer

My grandpa says that
only bodies came back from

Vietnam.
That their souls stayed

trapped and mangled in the punji sticks
that killed their own brothers.

“We won the battles,” he says,
“but they took our life.”

They took their lives,
and now the souls of

536,100 men remain
deep in the jungle,

restless and strong,
looking for a way out.

What Happened When You Left Me
Mary Klauer

I still get up every day and smile
to strangers, to friends, to kids.
I wear my long, black coat and
put up the hood like always to
block out all of the snow that I still hate.

I wear my glasses that you always liked,
I chew on my nails in public and still look forward
to sitting on the bench and watching
strangers trickle by me and move on.
I bite my lip. Drink Mountain Dew.





Microwave chicken nuggets, laugh a lot,
and exercise never.

I always watch Boy Meets World.
Heater still isn't fixed. Fan, still too loud.
I wear my hair in a loose bun, hum along to the radio,
and paint my nails black.
My bed is still comfy and my
mittens are still warm. But then
I lay on my pillow at night,
and everything, everything
is different.

Weighted Wings

Mary Klauer

I walk along Grandview Avenue
wondering how to get back to
my old elementary school.

Cardinals circle above me,
then land in the oak trees that line
the worn down pavement.

Their melodies haunt me with the life I once knew.
"Put the sky in your pocket," they sing.
"The shadows are making you scream."

The Mississippi flows through me.
I think of the time I spent with John,
the days we threw rocks at the ice,
trying to break the winter inside our souls.

God, am I always going to be here?
I could travel the world, but still find
myself in this exact same spot

trapped.

The cardinal chirps.
Red wings fly her back to
the sturdy tree she has sat on
her whole life.





Nostalgia's Bliss

Shannon Cassells

It feels that you have been gone forever.
Of course this cannot be true, even the earth hasn't been here that long.
Yet, somehow between the space of the mind and in my heart
Is the knowledge of your eternal absence.

Part of me questions, were you ever here?
I remember the sweet scent of the hot sun coating our backs,
The laughs and smiles shared across footsteps,
Melting into the ground, because I knew I was safe wherever we walked.

But the forts we built were only made of pillows,
And the swings we swung from only fit a size small.
Now life is set to a permanent snooze waiting to wake up.
These nights are all the same smeared with different walls and different towns.

I keep catching glimpses, in the puddles after a deep rain,
In the reflection of mirrors of the cars passing by,
In the doorknobs before each entrance,
I keep hoping you'll return.

But I know I've lost it-- I've lost you.
Wrinkles now show where once smooth innocence prevailed,
And the happiness so pure has melted like the snow into spring.
Lost so early on, lost completely.

The pieces are long since gone. You took them with you.
These holes gaping inside cannot be filled by minutes.
Memories capsulated, buried for years and years.
Every inch of my body falls off each day, waiting.

I will continue to search the rains that drop from the sky,
I will continue to bare my soul to the sun, daring to feel its warmth,
I will continue to walk until the blisters beg me to give up,
I will continue on, knowing you are long gone.





On the Rocks

Brian Torbik

My drink
tastes like orange, cherry,
and residue from beer
and I fear the tequila is
making me, no, taking me
to a place I'm not sure I want to go,
with all the fears and tears,
where there is no grenadine to sweeten a moment
and there is no moment sweet enough
to stop the solitary drunken thoughts
of a sad, solitary drunk

Where I want to go is the corner
a quarter past five minutes ago,
where I was and Hannah was,
where we were,
just us and no one else.
To that place of giggling
and wanting to touch
and she did touch
and did she mean to touch?
But it doesn't matter
because now he's there
and I'm here.

Now our corner is their corner
and our laughter has faded
and I'm jaded,
hating the way Connor's making her elated
because I imagine
how the sound would sound
of the two of them
in his room,
next to my room.
No longer in a corner,
but in each other's arms,
while I stare at the ceiling,
reeling, feeling intoxicated
as I stagger around my room
looking for something, anything
to block the noise
of my heart breaking.
My best friend with her, making
love, no, merely making
thrusting motions and heavy breaths.

But it's just my imagination,
no.





Because the entire time
I saw the signs,
but kept on moving,
knowing it was possible,
hoping it wasn't
because how could it be?
Because she wasn't his.
She was mine,
well, she was going to be
and he said that to me
and helped bring her to me,
but in helping me, he
helped himself
without telling me.

"Your girl,"
that's what he said.
Right?

Right, because soon she leaves
and the corner is no longer theirs
just a corner for friends
and so another friend corners him
just as I turn to,
I don't know,
be anywhere
away from stupid, jealous thoughts
about my girl
and my friend,
except suddenly her name is whispered:
Hannah

So I freeze,
overhearing the whispers,
the drunken loud whispers.
Then try to be quiet;
instead they bounce off red plastic cups
and dance through streamers,
an attempt to find the ears
of whomever wants to hear them least.
And so we meet
and I hear
and my face turns red,
just like the plastic cups,
just like her lips,
and his lips,
where they supposedly met
yesterday,
when I left them alone together.
Two pairs of lips,





neither of them mine

So then I'm here,
the place of fears and tears,
but I can't let them hear
or see or know
because,
well, because I don't know why,
but I just can't be here.
So I disappear
out into the night,
the cold, damp night,
damp like my socks
because I left without shoes
without a coat, money.
I have my phone
because it starts to ring.
I see his name and feel the sting.
It no longer means trust
and honesty and really anything
because it means nothing.
So the response to a text saying,
"What's wrong?"
is "nothing."
and "where are you?"
is "gone," just like our friendship.

In the midst of misery,
I'm lying on the ground
Laying?
No, Lying.
Fuck it,
I'm on my back on the ground
The asphalt burns my nose
and my lungs as I take deep breaths
My head is pounding
and my breaths start to sound
shallow, quick, and wet with tears.
"Stop it, stop crying," I say
but I don't.

I could stay here until morning
mourning the loss of
Connor or Hannah.
Hannah, I forgot about her.
That sounds silly but,
it's true,
because what did she do
I never told her I wanted her to want me.
I only told him.





Fifteen messages,
six missed calls,
I guess that doesn't seem like the death of a friendship,
but
I don't know.

"We need to talk."
Four words
that would make anyone's stomach drop
and I would have dropped
if I hadn't already been laying,
shit, lying on the ground.
We do need to talk.
"Tomorrow," I saw
because,
I don't know,
I need time
to be ready for the talk.
Right now, I'm only ready
to let my liver process alcohol,
and to fall into the night
that escalated from
regretful romantic revelations
and a very strong tequila sunrise.

Good Girls Jared Golub

Sylvia found a nice spot of grass to leave her business, and I did my best to give her some privacy. I looked at the fire hydrant across the street and, for just a moment, admired Sylvia for not being such a stereotype. I put my hair in a ponytail and readjusted my top. When she was done, I tugged on the leash and we walked another five feet until she found a bush that demanded further investigation. She drove her pug nose into the centermost region of the plant and audibly sniffed every square inch. A bright pink hair tie poked through the damp soil.

Mr. Cushman's Firebird was in the driveway. I gave Sylvia another firm tug. It was time to go.

"Come on, Sylvia, it's time to go."

She ignored me, intent on her analysis. All I could smell was wet grass and recently digested dog food. The front door opened. I pulled hard on the leash and ended up dragging Sylvia backwards a couple inches, but by then it was too late.

"Deborah? Is that you?"

Sylvia shot her head up at the sound of Mr. Cushman's loud, nasally voice. He put a muddy shovel against the door frame, waddled across his lawn, and squinted at me from behind his thick glasses.

"Deborah?"

I slowly raised my hand. "It's just 'Deb' now."

"My goodness, look at you," he said as he reached the curb. "A fully-grown woman!"

"Yeah. Tada."





I dragged Sylvia another inch, and she drove us four inches back to Mr. Cushman's red-speckled boots. It had rained the night before, and two thin tracks in the lawn leading to the back yard had filled with water, resembling moats.
"Your parents tell me you're studying English up at AU?"

"Yeah. Just graduated."

I glanced down the block for other neighbors who could provide alternate banter. Mr. Cushman put his hands in his pockets and smiled.

"Boy, that's swell. Any ideas on what you're gonna do now?"

"Yeah. I'm doing a little freelance work. Still a tough economy, I guess."

Sylvia did a full circle around his left boot, her eyes as big as golf balls.

"Oh, don't I know it. The whole world's going crazy. Did you hear about little Maria Gonzalez?"

"My mom said they think she was kidnapped."

"Poor girl. *Cute* girl. She used to go down the street all the time in her little fairy costume and her Radio Flyer full of rocks. You ever have a Radio Flyer?"

"Mm-hmm."

I yanked Sylvia so hard she gave a short yelp.

"And who's this little guy?" Mr. Cushman bent over and extended his hand.

"Sylvia Plath."

"She looks like a Sylvia Plath. Are you a good girl?"

She inspected his fingers, twitching her eyes and her nose for a full five seconds before finally giving in and licking each one. He rubbed underneath her neck and she had as close to an orgasm as a spayed dog could get.

"Good girl. Good *girl*. You gonna be in town long?"

"Probably not. Hoping to get my own place soon."

"Well, we sure miss you around here." He put his hands on his hips. "Hey, if you ever get bored, you can always stop by for some rhubarb pie. There was a sale at Hennigan's, and now I have more rhubarb pie than I know what to do with. You like rhubarb pie?"

I caught Sylvia at an unsuspecting moment and got us moving back towards my house.

"I'm on a diet. Oh, looks like she wants to go."

"A diet? With that body?"

We walked faster than most joggers as I called over my shoulder, "It was great seeing you, Mr. Cushman."

He smiled and yelled back at me, "Please, we're both adults now. Call me 'Terrence.'"

Birthday Stroganoff

Meredith Augspurgen

"Jim's birthday is coming up, right?" Suzanne asked Marie over the whistling of the teakettle. Marie turned off the burner, poured the water into two white ceramic mugs, and placed a bag of store-brand Earl Grey tea in each.

"Yes, Thursday," Marie replied, flinching at the sound of her husband's name coming from Suzanne's mouth. As Suzanne reached for the mug, Marie noticed, for the thousandth time, her massive, glittering three-carat diamond ring. She'd heard Suzanne's soliloquy, always the same, at least once a month for the six years the two women had lived next door to one another.

Allowing your eyes to linger on Suzanne's ring finger for just a moment was enough of an invitation for her.





“Three-carats, can you believe it?” Suzanne would say. “It’s embarrassing, really. And it’s one of those African diamonds, you know, like that movie? I’ve never seen it, of course. I couldn’t bring myself to wear it if I did, and what a shame that would be. ‘Princess-cut for my princess,’ Paul always says. My husband, my prince, is too good to me.” To this, Marie would roll her eyes so far into her head she’d induce a genuine, albeit short-lived, migraine. The only thing this woman knew about love and marriage was what finger to put that ridiculous ring on.

It was true, though. Suzanne was a modern-day princess. Wanting for nothing, she made others want for everything. Marie wished she could classify Suzanne as the “fake” kind of beautiful. Plastic pretty, she called it – large, fake breasts, lips like a picture cut out of a fishing magazine and brought it to a plastic surgeon to use as a reference, and blonde hair so reminiscent of straw, Marie felt mock anxiety when they were around an open flame.

Suzanne was not plastic, though. She was organic. She was classic. She was Raquel Welch circa 1966, and it made Marie feel like Susan Boyle circa 2009. Suzanne was one of few women their age that could still wear her hair long, waves of copper falling and settling at her shoulders. Marie had hacked off her hair years ago, severing her youth, and fashioned it into a short “style” which really just meant she didn’t have to comb it in the morning.

“You’ll be making your world-famous beef stroganoff, no doubt?” Suzanne sitting at Marie’s table, flawless, looked out of place in her disheveled kitchen. Suzanne had once called it “lived-in”, but she knew that meant her dishes didn’t match, her dingy sponges were out in the open, and her idea of décor was Bella’s construction paper clown hanging on the fridge.

“Yes, I picked up the tenderloin from the butcher this morning. I don’t know why Jim loves it so much. It will never make sense to me.”

“You are too modest. I’ve tasted it and know exactly why he can’t get enough of it. Well, not exactly why since you always refuse to give me your recipe. Marie,” she looked at me like a child preparing to argue in favor of cupcakes for dinner, “We tell each other everything. Please?”

Marie wanted to laugh at this level of transparency she was suggesting, but she assessed Suzanne’s smile instead, watching the corners of her mouth twitch with irritation. Marie looked down at her cup, shaking her head, dismissing Suzanne’s plea.

“Oh, come on. I do so much for you. Remember that trip to New York I sent you on last month when I couldn’t go? You had a great time. Can’t you just do this one thing for me?” Marie revealed in this exceptional moment, in watching Suzanne vie for something she didn’t have and that she would never have.

“Suzanne, you know I’d do anything for you, but my grandmother’s recipe is off-limits.” Unless Martha Stewart gave birth to Marie’s mother, it wasn’t her grandmother’s recipe, but Suzanne was too stupid, no, too entitled to discover this on her own. Marie wasn’t going to indulge her. “As a woman, I’m entitled to a secret every once in awhile, aren’t I?”

Marie found out about the affair two years ago on Jim’s birthday. She made the beef stroganoff like she’d done every year on his birthday since they were married nine years ago. Jim told her he had to work late. His firm had a huge client pitch the following morning, he’d said, and his boss wanted those spreadsheets rock-solid before midnight. And the graphs, the graphs were killing him. He just couldn’t get that format right.

Her plan was to bring the dish to his office so he could at least enjoy that small tradition. As she pulled into the parking lot, Marie noticed Suzanne’s Lexus – instantly identifiable by the “My dog is an honor’s student” bumper sticker from K9 Obedience School - parked in the row farthest from the building. Marie didn’t need to go inside to confirm that the glances Jim and Suzanne exchanged, the frequent business trips, all the late nights were not just a product of Marie’s imagination, twisted and warped by envy for the woman who had it all. Now, that included her





husband.

But she did go inside, and she did confirm it. As quietly and as unnoticed as she came, Marie drove away from Jim's office building, the Tupperware container of beef stroganoff still warm in her lap.

Sunny Days of Solitude

Meredith Augspurger

"Oh, look Abe. Here comes the sunset. Not long now!" Bev said, relieved as the subdued orange and pink hues crept through the glass and into small living room. She watched the setting sun transform the little farm, her small piece of the earth. The falling evening temperature ushered in a bitter layer of frost on the long dormant corn and soybean fields. Near the leaning barn with the chipping red paint, the cattle huddled in a circle in an attempt to fight the chill. A light snow dusted their matted chocolate coats – Bev thought of sprinkling the cracked surfaces of her husband William's favorite molasses cookies with sweet powdered sugar. A doe and her two fawns investigated the 1958 John Deere combine – William's proudest purchase – in its permanent parking spot on the gravel driveway. Many idling years stripped the machine of its signature rich green color, replacing it with an oxidizing veil of metallic grime.

Abe, sitting on the fraying cushion of the windowsill, became more of a silhouette as the seconds passed. "Oh Abe, don't look at me like that. It's a perfectly acceptable bedtime and, besides, we ate supper over two hours ago."

Bev never allowed herself to go to bed when it was light out. There was something so sad about closing her eyes only to have the brightness of a still developing day shine through her tightly shut lids. Doing so was plain acknowledgment that she had given up on living. This didn't stop her from wishing for darkness all throughout the day. Sleeping was the only activity that felt natural at this point. Drained from 92 years on this planet and seven years of carrying a heart burdened by brokenness, Bev only ever felt tired. Never great joy or great sadness, just exhaustion.

As Bev gazed out the window, watching the sun collapse into the snowy horizon line, her mind, as it always did, defaulted to 1961. She remembers watching William drive the combine from this window. He rolled steadily up and down, back and forth across the fields. The farm was fruitful, prosperous, productive – just like William. Even after 20 years of marriage, Bev's heart jumped every time she saw William hop down from the massive machine some time near sunset. It meant he was done with his grueling workday and their nightly ritual could begin. "Hello darling," Bev would say as she took William's hat.

"How did this day treat you, my little bird?" He'd always say. William's blue eyes, emitting tenderness, were the softest part of her man hardened by years of farm labor. His hands were calloused, his face worn by the blistering sun and wind, his muscles were strong and defined from mucking stalls and hauling feed, even William's sandy hair seemed fatigued and thinned by the daily weight of his hat.

"Oh, just fine. The evening will treat me better now that you're here." They'd had this same exchange hundreds of times, but it hadn't lost any of its gentleness. "How were things around the farm today?"

"Mighty fine. We're going to have a great year. I can feel it." William said this every year even when it rained too little, even when it rained too much, and even when the frost came too early. William always believed in himself and, despite having a job where most factors were out of his control, William was steady and sure. Bev trusted him and, in all 65 years of their marriage, he never once let her down.

Everything on the farm declined along with William's mind. At first, he experienced episodes of confusion – small moments of forgetfulness. He'd forget to feed the cattle or to turn





off the combine after he was finished harvesting for the day.

The perplexed states lasted longer and longer, until the word “episode” did not fit so well as the word “norm.” One day, William forgot to shut the gate that led to the cattle’s grazing pasture. Bev, watching from the window, ran out to fasten the chain but not before two heifers escaped and took off down the dirt road. William, unable to grasp the problem at hand and unsure of how to help, became frustrated and went inside. It took Bev over an hour to collect the two runaways.

“It took a bit of convincing, but I got the girls back in the pasture, dear,” Bev said to William, still out of breath.

“Girls? I thought we had a son. Don’t we have a son? You are my wife aren’t you?” William said, his confusion turning those soft eyes to stone.

“Yes, love, it’s Bev. You’re right we have a son, Charles. I was talking about the cattle. Two heifers got out, but it’s fine now. It’s all okay, darling.” He nodded but did not look convinced.

It became clear to Bev even the small moments of lucidity were soon to be over, and Bev’s husband, her strong and loving sweetheart, would be gone forever. Trapped in a mind obliterated by disease, William, as she knew him, died that day, and Bev’s will to participate in life died along with the essence of her dearest. So, yes, she’d given up. But she couldn’t let Abe know that.

“Let’s go inspect the kitchen, Abe,” Bev said as she shuffled on slippered feet into the other room while Abe followed closely behind. “Alrighty, the burners are off, oven is set to 0 degrees, and the back door is – there we go – locked.” William had always locked up the house in this exact way each evening. When he passed, Bev took comfort in mimicking his ritual of security. It made her feel safe. Bev took one last look around before turning off the overhead light, hands on her hips as if proud of the fine work she’d done in closing up her home for the evening.

“Now, for the front room. Okay, we’re all locked up for the night. Safe and sound, right Abe?” The rising harvest moon’s chased the sun’s last rosy light to the far corners of the living room. Bev drew the curtains, grabbed her pillow and blanket from the coat closet and settled into the orange recliner, pulling the wooden lever to release the footrest. Bev ran her hand over the rust-colored fabric.

“The velour does just fine. I told you we didn’t need the velvet, Abe. Or, good heavens, that suede one you liked. Well, are you going to join me or not?” Abe, who had been keeping diligent watch of a spider crafting a web, answered with an abbreviated meow. He seemed irritated that Bev had disrupted his mission. He reluctantly left his post and crawled into her lap. Bev ran a fragile, transparent hand along Abe’s black fur. Abe, satisfied with her apology, forgot about the spider and arched his back in gratitude for her touch.

“I’ll have to remember to put the bedding away before Charles visits us tomorrow. We don’t want him worrying about his mother, do we?” It had been four months since Bev had been able to make it up the stairs to her bedroom. The pain in her hip came on gradually in the form of brief spasms every few days - infrequent enough she didn’t want to tell her son and risk being a bother. The pangs grew more regular until it became one dull, steady, relentless ache – frequent enough that she didn’t want to tell her son and risk being an even larger bother.

“Maybe Charles will bring us Pepsi and pepperoni pizza. Wouldn’t that be nice, Abe?” Charles would, of course, bring Pepsi and a pepperoni pizza from Pizza Hut. He’d picked it up on his way to his weekly Sunday visits with his mother. Charles lived alone in Bloomdale, a town a little less than an hour north. Since he wanted nothing to do with the farm, Charles worked at Bank of the West as a credit counselor.

“I just don’t understand why you wouldn’t want to take over our family business,” William said to Charles one Christmas 30-some years ago. “It’s successful. It’s stable. You get the satisfaction of knowing you did an actual hard day’s work.

Not like one of those desk jobs where everyone is the same. You’re a cog in the wheel there. Replaceable.”





“Because I’m not a farmer. I’m not good at it. Why can’t you just accept that I’m not you?” said Charles, 25 and ambitious, reeling to get as far away from the farm, from his father, as possible.

“For once in your life, could you just be a man? Do the right thing here, Charles.” Charles just shook his head, pushing a pea back and forth across his plate. “Fine, turn your back on your family. Give up everything that made you who you are. Waste everything I built for you.” William said, his voice dripping with disappointment. Bev placed the dessert on the solid wooden table William had crafted, hoping mouths’ full of her homemade peach pie might make the silence less conspicuous.

When William passed away and the fate of the 200-acre farm was in Charles’ unbroken hands, he fulfilled his father’s disappointment and sold it to Kip, the agriculturalist from Iowa State University. He had big plans to revive the corn and soybean crops, make this farm what it used to be, he said. Kip was kind enough to let Bev continue to live in her home, the home William built for her. He was also kind enough to check in with Bev once a day and, she was sure, to relay her status back to Charles.

Despite Charles’ differences with his father, Bev loved her son and only child and appreciated the time he devoted to her. Charles hadn’t missed a visit, not one Sunday, in the four years since William had been gone. But Bev wished these meetings could end. They were pleasant, to be sure, but Bev had lived too long, loved too deeply and lost too much to continue on with life in the same way she once had. Maybe Charles sensed this hopelessness because one Sunday, in addition to the pop and pizza, he was carrying a shoebox. When he opened it, an impossibly small kitten –all black except for a small white patch on his back right paw and another on his nose - poked its head out, taking in the new surroundings with eager curiosity.

“His name is Abe,” Charles had told her. “He’s going to keep you company when I’m not here. Isn’t he sweet?” She looked at her son and, for the first time, noticed he’d aged. His blonde full head of hair had thinned and turned entirely grey. Even his eyebrows were grey. Wrinkles and lines framed the corners of his mouth. Smile lines? Frown lines? Bev wasn’t sure. His eyes - Charles used to have William’s eyes - lacking the sheen attached to a smile, were a dim and murky blue. Charles was exhausted. He gave her Abe, hoping it would give Bev something to live for. A cat was not a doting husband, but it was a responsibility, her responsibility now, and it would be enough while she waited for the inevitable.

Charles lifted Abe out of the box and placed him on Bev’s lap. Abe rubbed his head against her forearm and started to purr. “Oh, he is just a dear,” Bev said. “Thank you Charles. Abe and I are going to be fast friends.”

As she lay in her chair in the darkened living room, that same purr, Abe’s familiar cadence, cast a heavy calm that began to weigh on Bev’s eyelids. She felt herself surrendering to the promise of another night’s sleep. Seven to eight hours in which she could escape this reality where she is a burden to her aging son and where her only friend and confidant is a cat the burdened son bought to pacify the loneliness of a widow. These hours, all hours, were better spent dreaming of her darling.

At first, she felt guilty wishing for a permanent slumber, leaving Abe behind, but she knew Kip would be around to check on her. He would see to it that Abe was taken care of. Bev had imagined that scene so many times:

Kip, using the key Charles gave him, entering the house through the kitchen some time late in the afternoon, calling out to Bev, only to find her lifeless in her chair - finally at peace - and Abe, surely hungry, looking at Kip as if to say, “What took you so long?” Smiling at this familiar fantasy, Bev closed her eyes, hoping and praying, as she did every night, she’d never open them again. Praying she’d never have to face another sunny day of solitude.

Bev dreamed of William that night. He didn’t say anything, but his silent, stable presence and the feeling of his rough farmer’s hand against her palm was all she needed. Bev was drawn





from his company by a crawling golden light and the meow of an impatient cat. She slowly, unwillingly opened her eyes to the living room now pooling with the yellow radiance of a clear and splendid morning.

“Another beautiful day,” Bev said with a disappointed sigh. “Well Abe, should we get you some breakfast?”

Rotten

Haley Hendrick

A tomato in the garden,
it didn't shine bright red,
so it changed its body green
and ate its neighbors dead.
neighbors wailed so loud
the lumpy, dirty ground
and all the children sang
“I'm lost and now I'm found.”

A worm, forgotten in the ground
it didn't stand a chance
so it crawled into the fruit
and danced a slimy dance
dancing lasted long.
tomato sang a song
and all the children asked,
“but, what did we do wrong?”

A green vine on the broken house
It didn't grow up high
so it strangled all the children
and listened to them die
children, six feet deep
,they didn't even weep,
so the vine asked the worm,
“Can they be ours to keep?”

The mother in the paisley dress,
she didn't understand
so she ran out to the garden
and lay upon the land.
ground began to flood.
tomato in the mud
looked up to the mother
and gleamed bright red with blood.

Colorblind

Haley Hendrick

It began with a bike.
The red Schwinn that I rode around the cul-de-sac
where I first saw the woman in white.





She called me to the window at 11 p.m.
I was seven-years-old and swelling with intrigue.
My parents didn't believe me.

The night I saw the man in grey was the same night
I saw my father cry for the first time.
His hand brushed my cheek,
just as he did weeks before his 76th birthday
when he left us abruptly.
My mother told me it was my medication.

It continued with the woman
and her three children in the corner of my orange bedroom.
They didn't stay long,
but the image still burns behind my eyes.
My sister thinks I'm full of shit.

It ended with an earache.
The throbbing pain that woke me up
to see the little girl in black.
I asked her who she was this time
and where she was going.
She left me
and my eyes glassed over,
staring at the two lining
the back wall.

Red Wine
Haley Hendrick

I enter into the granite vastness they call home.
The holidays are over
But the parties are not.

As she cascades down the staircase in heels, she's careful not to trip.
Propping innocence on her hip, red wine in hand,
she greets me.
I'm met by dark pin curls and a tight black dress.

Her angular figure tosses me the child as she yells,
"Put the hors d'Oeuvres in the kitchen"
to the leathery skinned woman with bad teeth,
clad in dress slacks and a white button down shirt
and a nametag that reads, "Sherri".

I interject, "I would have dressed up if I had known you were having a party!"

She reassures me
"No one will see you."
The pounding of her heels on the hardwood floors fades





until I can't hear it anymore.

The child clings to me.
With two tiny teeth centered in her mouth,
she smiles as I blow wind in her face.
She started walking today.

Hours pass, people come, people go.
I can still smell the red wine from the upstairs
where I've been instructed to remain with the children until it's over.

I have stifled their crying sounds all night with Dr. Seuss rhymes and silly faces.
It's bedtime.
As I tuck in the oldest
she asks if I will rub her back.

I watch her, as she lies in bed still, staring numbly toward the far wall,
hoping she will find a round and selfless mother
in the pink Barbie Dreamhouse
she got last Christmas.

Half-Full
Haley Hendrick

He carried the emptiness since 1928.

It started in his stomach at seven
when he would open the ice box and find
a half-eaten jar of mustard.
just enough to slather between two slices of old bread.

It took his seat in class at fifteen
When he would self-declare every Friday
"his day off,"
always making it to the basketball game
later in the night.

It filled his pockets at eighteen
when he was so desperate to go to war
that he memorized the Snellen Eye Chart
in order to pass
blindly.

It made promises at twenty-two
when he wrote letters home to her
reassuring that everything was
just fine.

It lay at the bottom of a bottle at twenty-eight
when the shakes would start as he sat behind





his desk for 8 hours
in the old General Motors plant.

The emptiness never left him.
But he left it—
in the hearts of three
blonde-haired girls fighting for a chance
to make something of themselves
on W. Reppuhn Drive.

Him and Her Taylor Levicki

She hated her own birthday.
She always thought Jack would live at the end
of Titanic. She liked biting her nails, couldn't keep her own
secrets and constantly second guessed her
self. She always had something to say but was only quiet around him.
Her biggest fear was time.

She saw herself in a different place at this age in time.
She was never in the present and was always
daydreaming of a glamorized future.
She dressed nice for him and wore sweatpants for herself. She would end
each day alone thinking about how she viewed her
independence as an asset, but had outgrown being on her own.

She was undeniably happy but timid.
Her own future terrified her because the meticulous time
line she created was flawed. She saw her
self in a city, but with him in a small town. She always
put others first and wanted to be more than someone's bookend.
She worried about her future with him.

He hated his own birthday, crowds suffocated him,
and he would Irish exit parties to be on his own.
His laugh was contagious and he would be living in a suit by yearend.
He liked bad sports teams, only read the Sunday newspaper, and spent summertime
in California. He dressed nice for himself, never had much to say but always
seemed to be more talkative around her.

He wasn't afraid of the future and thought she rolled her
eyes at him too much. He didn't have a picture of where he saw him
self at this age. He loved his family and always
made it home for Sunday dinner. His own
ambitions were scrapped together plans that had time
to grow. He hadn't seen the start, while she was focused on the end.

He wished she didn't view failure as the end
of the world. She wished her





motivation would make him to think about the time
he was wasting. She wanted him to see the potential she saw in him.
He thought she romanticized her own
future. She left the conversation unresolved as always.

She could love herself without him,
He could always stand on his own,
They knew this is how their time would end.

Skinny Love

Alexandra Othman

Scraping teeth as we scraped by,
the motions that used to leave us breathless
now just the air we breathed.
One more day.
We would make it.
But we became I and I
couldn't have my ribs continue to sway with ache,
already too far buried beneath our skinny love.

Drag On

Stephanie Dlobik

Matte rouged prints
Decorating the paper- nude and thin
Littering the cylindrical lust
And its solitary warmth in the icy dusk
Fingers numb and clumsy
Trace the edges coming within me
Pressed to my cracked lips
My faculties voluntarily stripped
Surely mandatory and bland





This false high, hand in hand

Inhale the bittersweet sting

Feel the scent unswervingly cling

Let the taste linger and burn

It out. Rhythmic drag after drag firm

Corroding each mundane pant

More thoroughly than the last

Smoke from my mouth furls

Clouding my vision to an acceptable blur

In an erotic and supposedly natural state

It rides, but always dissipates

Funeral Potatoes

Colleen Daw

I walk down the dairy aisle filling my basket. I stop in front of the cheese section. I need cheddar cheese, but – crap – how much? It has been ages since I made these by myself. Mom normally helps me, buys the ingredients. I pull out my phone and flip to the notes section. *2 cans cream of chicken, check. 16 oz. sour cream, Got it. 1 small onion, Uh-huh. 1 T. minced chives, yep. ¼ stick of butter, check and...10 oz. grated cheddar cheese. I scan the piles of cheese. Why do we need 6 different kinds of cheddar cheese in a grocery store? No damn 10 oz. Oh screw it, we'll go with 12. Now I just need the hash browns, I start towards the frozen food aisle and suddenly stop. Grandpa hates...hated the frozen version, he always said nothing compared to the taste of real potatoes. I look down at my phone, 9:00. I still have time. Just as I turn to head back towards the produce section I nearly run into a woman steering her cart right towards me. As I open my mouth to apologize she stops me.*

“Mary?” The woman asks, “Mary Burke?”

“Uh, yes.”

“You’re back from SLU! It’s been so long!” She comes around to hug me. As we pull apart I realize I have no idea who this woman is.

“I heard about your grandfather. How is everyone doing?” So, she knows my family.

“As good as you can expect.” Should I mention that the wake is today?

The woman shakes her head. She is nearly a head shorter than me, no symbols or schools printed on her shirt to help me out, the clothes were a few years out of style, and her hair was





touched with a few gray hairs. “Your grandfather helped so much on the Committee, it’s a great loss to the community.”

Committee? He was a part of a couple of church committees, and the Town Development Committee but he had been off of those for years. “That’s so sweet.”

“Kenzie always loved when he dressed up as Santa Claus for the fundraisers.” Wait ok that’s the Respond Now fundraiser, he was on that committee for years, up until Grandma died. This woman is probably on that committee. Actually yeah, she normally hands out raffle tickets with other volunteers. Kenzie...McKenzie? course! Mrs. Ryan. “She was so upset when I called with the news.”

“Oh really? How’s she liking New York?”

“She loves it. It’s so good you came home from St. Louis for this. Your mom must love having you here.”

“Yeah I guess.” I actually haven’t seen mom smile in the past two days I have been home. When I walked in the door and hugged her she just seemed to crumple, but no tears. She was definitely different from a month ago; when Brendan died David told me she cried for weeks after. She has been a little crazed the past few days, rushing around preparing for Grandpa’s funeral and wake, it seemed if she stopped she wouldn’t be able to start again. The work is what is holding her together. She has taken on so many responsibilities, I’m the one left to make the potatoes.

“Well I guess I’ll see you at the wake later today,” Mrs. Ryan says. Did I just start zoning? She opens her arms for another hug I awkwardly move into her arms. She pats my back and sighs, “This is a hard time but you will all make it through.”

I slowly pull back, “Thank you Mrs. Ryan, I’ll see you then.”

I quickly step around her and instead of heading straight for the produce section; make a detour down the liquor aisle. Two bottles of chardonnay, Two Cabarnets. We are all going to need drinks after 7 hours of those types of conversations.

I was visiting Grandma and Grandpa. I remember there was some Irish record in the background playing fiddles and flutes. It was all Grandpa liked to listen to. Mom was in the kitchen with them. Grandpa was cutting up potatoes and Granma was pulling out a shiny pan.

“Whatcha making?”

Grandpa looked over his shoulder and smiled, “Hello darlin. We’re making funeral potatoes.”

Mom hit Grandpa with a dish towel “Dad!”

“It’s what they’re called!”

“Really, Patrick. She’s only five.” Grandma smiled over at me, “These are the cheesy potatoes you like so much at Christmas.”

“But why are they called funeral potatoes?”

Grandma looked over at mom. “Well, I make them for funerals. Me and a group of ladies make lunch for the families, I’m always responsible for the potatoes. It’s a way of helping out.”

“What’s a funeral?”

Mom’s eyes got really big, she was probably terrified of having the conversation about death in her parents’ kitchen. Grandpa was chuckling in the corner. He turned around and gave me a big smile, his blue eyes flashing with laughter.

“A funeral is a special mass at church just for someone who died. It’s to help their family and friends remember them.”

“And you’re making them for someone’s funeral?”

He nodded. “Our neighbor Mrs. Robertson died.”

I looked from one adult to another; I still didn’t really get it. But there was one thing on my mind.

“Can I help?”





“That would be great, David, can you carry this tray into the basement kitchen?” My little brother, well not so little anymore, balances a large casserole tray as we walk into the funeral home. I go to college, and in the blink of an eye my brother is eighteen. We head downstairs where the caterers have already dropped off sandwich fixings and other side dishes.

“So why are we cooking these potatoes?”

“Because they’re Grandpa’s favorite. And it wouldn’t be an O’Connell wake without them. Put yours in the refrigerator. I’ll cook them later so they’re hot out of the oven.”

“Yes, Rachel Ray. What I meant is why are WE? Y’know, not mom?”

“She’s already doing enough, this is one less thing she had to worry about.”

“Yeah you’re right, she is been involved in every part of this. You playing the violin tomorrow?”

“Yeah, ‘Danny Boy.’ As if we weren’t Irish enough to begin with.”

“As if we didn’t hear it last month.” I look over my shoulder, David is staring at the fridge door he just closed. I quickly set the oven to the right temperature and start taking the tin foil off the first batch of uncooked potatoes when David clears his throat.

In a raspy voice he says. “Well, Grandpa loved Irish music, and you guys talked so much about music it makes sense. You’ll do great.” David nods and starts to turn towards the stairs.

“Dave wait.” I grab his arm.

He turns back and I see his face. His jaw clenched, face red, his harsh breath coming in and out of his nose. What tears me apart is David’s eyes. His eyes are swimming, filled to near bursting with tears, an invisible barrier holding them in. Once they move to meet mine, that barrier breaks. I wrap him in my arms and feel his tears hit my cheeks.

“Mar, it’s only been a month. Why now?”

“I don’t know.” I pull back and cup his face, “I don’t know, Dave...but I guess you could say they’re together now?”

“Mar, I’m not 6.” He rolls his eyes, and his hand comes up to wipe away his eyes. “It’s just – I guess – I feel like an ass for saying this but we knew Grandpa was going. Brendan...A heart attack? I mean...”

“I know. None of us saw that coming.” I push his blonde hair out of his eyes like when he was little. “Today is not gonna be easy, we’re gonna be mourning him again, and grandpa.”

David steps back and looks up the stairs, when he looks back he’s more worried than sad. “How do you think mom is going to be?”

I swallow, I had been thinking about this all morning, What was gonna happen? I turn back to throw away the tin foil. “Honestly? I think it’s finally gonna hit her. Up until today she’s been doing so much she hasn’t had time to – “

“Time to what?”

I spin around, there’s mom standing on the stairs. Crap. “To breathe.”

Mom looks behind me, “the potatoes aren’t done?”

“We just put them in.”

“People are –“

“Not due here for another hour, Mom we have plenty of time.”

Mom nods and looks to David. “Did you-“

“Called the florists the arrangement for the front is on its way. They are giving us a 20% discount for the inconvenience.”

“Ok...Ok Good.” Mom was looking around the basement, lost. She was running out of things to do. I could already see her cool façade cracking. Her eyes darted between us, playing with her wedding band, her classic tells. I step towards her when we hear the door upstairs. We hear more footsteps upstairs and the echo of familiar voices. David leans against the fridge. “And the O’Connell invasion begins.”





Right now I'd welcome the chaos.

Few events brought the entire O'Connell clan together, the main one always has been the annual family reunion. For the first full one we had to rent out a ballroom at a country club just to fit everyone. I remember thinking "All of these people are my family?" 300 people! We all had to wear nametags each with different colors saying which of the "Original Eight" O'Connells we were from. I belonged to the Patrick O'Connell branch. There were 26 of us. Grandpa and Grandma had had 5 kids: Kevin, Brendan, James, my mom Laura, and Kathleen (Katie as we all called her). All five of them married and gave Grandma and Grandpa 16 grandkids. We were considered the small branch of the family.

My mom kept pointing extended family members out to me but I only recognized the ones who lived in town. All of these grown-ups kept coming up to me, introducing themselves and expecting me to know them at the same time. Most of the time I would stay in the corner playing with my cousin Grace, or Riley, or Connor and Liam. At one point I was in the corner. No cousin to play with, or younger brother to mess with. I decided to go look for Grace, my go-to playmate when I heard a sing-song voice, "Mary, Mary quite contrary." I looked up and a pair of bright blue eyes was staring at me. "What are you doing over there alone?" Grandpa was looking over the back of a chair at me. On either side of him were more family members I didn't recognize.

"Hi Grandpa. I was looking for Grace."

"I think she's with her mom."

"Is this Laura's Mary?" A pretty woman with a glittery brooch was looking over at me. Her smile was so wide it sent wrinkles across her entire face. She was about the same age as Grandpa.

"Mary this is my younger sister Sinead. Mary here is a violinist. She just had her first concert."

"Really? That's wonderful. You'll have to play something for us."

My face completely drained of color. I was just learning my scales, I didn't know any songs. I couldn't play anything that my family would want to hear. I tried to say something, but luckily Grandpa was there.

"Well she didn't bring it with her, Naddy. Maybe next year."

Someone must have told them there was going to be a group picture because the next thing I remember Grandpa was easing his way out of the chair. As he headed towards his siblings he put a hand on my shoulder and winked. And I realized, he knew. He had put me on the spot and could tell I had started to freak out. He gave me an excuse not to play, a way out. I smiled up at him. I promised myself I would learn a song for next year. Little did I know that playing the violin for Grandpa would become our own little tradition.

"Patrick? Are you coming?"

"Yes, yes hang on." He made his way to the row of chairs.

All of the "Original Eight" lined up in sibling order. Grandpa smack dab in the middle. The picture was part of a board of photos. A sort of photo mosaic, pieces of a life taped together. There were hundreds of pictures and memories on that board but I keep coming back to that one picture 10 years ago. "The Original Eight" they were all gone now.

"Figured you'd be over here."

I look over, caught up in skinny arms, burying my face in black hair. Grace. I pull back and look at her perfectly made-up face. Her O'Connell blue eyes staring back at me. Last time we saw each other was a month ago at Uncle Brendan's wake.

Grace shakes her head, "Sweetie we have got to stop meeting like this."

"You're telling me. Did you just get in town?"

"Last night. Liam came and picked me, Owen and Christy up."

"How are Owen and the fiancée doing?"





Grace's gaze flicks to the photo board, where next to the "Original Eight" there is a picture of Grace, her older brothers: Brian, Owen and Liam, and her parents Kevin and Nora surrounding Grandpa. "Owen said he was happy that they had gotten engaged before Grandpa passed, Brian said the same thing about Eileen being born." Brian and his wife Fiona had just started the new generation with Eileen at the beginning of this year.

Grace glanced around the lobby where we were standing, "Where are the parents?" I looked towards the main room. "Having a private moment with Grandpa before everyone gets here."

Grace leaned against the wall, "How bad do you think today is going to be?" "We'll just have to see, but after the first few hours wakes are more awkward then they are depressing."

"I can vouch for that."

I look over my shoulder to see two of Brendan's kids Riley and Connor heading over with Liam. Riley came and threw his arm over my shoulders. "I could not help but overhear you lovely ladies talking about wakes. Thought me and Connor could give you some first-hand advice, since we were recently on the receiving end of all of this."

Grace goes to hug Connor and then Riley. Liam holds open his arms only to get passed over. "I hugged you this morning," she says, waving him off.

Liam steps back looking offended "Well fine, see if I try to share my brotherly love with you."

"Oh shut up." Grace and Liam have bickered ever since they were little. Why would a wake stop them? I looked over at Connor and Riley and try to tamp down a sympathetic smile, they've gotten too many of those this past month. If David is having a rough time, I can't imagine what they are going through.

"This is probably the last place you guys want to be. A month after your dad?"

Connor shrugs, "We all expected Grandpa to go soon. Just happens to be close to another wake." No joke, or sarcasm. Brendan's kids were always the comic relief of the family, just like their dad. It was so terrible to see Connor like this.

Riley seems to be trying to make up for his brother though. With a half-smile he picks up the conversation. "And now we're prepared! I discovered that wakes tend to have cycles. In the first hour you cry a lot, then slowly as time goes on you get less emotional til by the end you're just tired, have seen so many people you're running on autopilot and never want to say 'Thanks for coming.' Ever again."

I laugh, "Grandpa had a similar theory. He used to say wakes are like high school reunions. You get the same groups of people. You have the few friends you are happy to see, acquaintances from this club or that class, people you recognize but don't know exactly who they are, and finally people you've never seen in your life but claim to have gone to school with you."

Connor cocks his head, "I could have sworn Dad said that."

Liam nudges him, "Are you surprised they said the same thing? Your dad and Grandpa had the same sense of humor. I remember Grandpa telling us how he caught your dad farting on Aunt Katie's face while she slept! Apparently she bit his butt so hard she broke skin!"

Everyone in our circle started cracking up, even Connor. Grace sucked in a breath "My favorite story is the one where Uncle Brendan and Grandpa dragged aunt Laura from her room when she was studying for a final her second semester senior year. Apparently, Laura was freaking out and Brendan and Grandpa kidnapped her and force fed her ice cream."

"To be fair," I jump in, "The way my mom tells she had the worst teacher in the world and was convinced she would fail."

"Did she?" Liam asked.

"A freaking plus!"

Riley was about to open his mouth when Uncle James breaks into our circle. His eyes were





red, and he was finishing buttoning his suit. “Hey guys...um, me and your parents just finished up in there – I’d suggest going in and seeing Grandpa before everyone shows up.”

James pats Connor on the shoulder and turns away. I look around at all of us. We had all been putting off going in the main room. No one wants to see someone they love in a coffin. But it was time. I’m the first to head into the room. As I turn towards the front I’m overwhelmed by the smell of flowers. Extravagant displays of bouquets and wreaths lined the room up to the coffin. The smell is strong but reminds me of Grandpa and Grandma’s house. Grandma use to cut flowers from her garden ever yday during the summer, even in winter she had potpourri all over the house. Whenever I smelled flowers I thought of that cottage-like house. Eventually I’m facing the coffin. There he is. I kneel at the side of the coffin and try to think of a prayer, but really I just stare at him. It’s him, it definitely is Grandpa, but at the same time it isn’t. His skin is frozen, and a weird color just slightly off. It wasn’t ruddy from one too many vodkas or wrinkled in his mischievous grin. His hands are clasped over his best suit. I had seen it pulled out for holidays, weddings and for all of the funerals. You couldn’t see his eyes. Those spectacularly blue eyes that by some genetic miracle every grandkid got, the O’Connell eyes. His eyes told you volumes even though he probably spoke that much anyways.

The more I stare at the expressionless face, the more I wished he would suddenly wake up. That I could see those eyes again.

I stared at Grandma’s face, her blue eyeliner, perfectly painted lips and her silver hair put on so well, you wouldn’t realize it was a wig. This had to have been my twelfth wake and I still thought every time the person would just jump up and shout, “Kidding, you guys!” I stared at her face and just thought; at least you’re at peace. No more chemo, no more surgeries. I made a sign of the cross and headed down the receiving line. Suddenly I felt like something had just rammed into my chest. Grandpa was sitting at the receiving couch staring at his feet, seemingly lost. In the sixteen years I had known him I had never seen him so defeated. David came up next to me, “Go on, Mar.”

I bent down and mumbled “Grandpa?”

He slowly raised his head and his normally sparkling blue eyes seemed clouded. He stared at me and slowly, syllable by syllable in a whispery singing voice began my rhyme. “Mary, Mary.”

I wrapped my arms around him before he could finish and felt him pat my back. I swallowed down a few tears and managed to whisper, “I am so sorry, Grandpa.” I stare at Grandpa’s face and think, I’m so sorry Grandpa. Hopefully you found the peace you needed. His face starts to blur and I have to get up. I make a quick sign of the cross only to turn and see my Mom and her siblings crying in the back of the room. She finally sat down. Mom is surrounded by James, Kevin and Katie, all of them are shaking and red faced. Dad, and the other in-laws are rubbing backs and holding hands just trying to be there for them. I let a few tears fall, but bottle the rest up. The last thing I was going to do was lose it in front of Mom. It would just give her something else to worry about. As I get closer to the group I realize why they look so odd. They are each sobbing and sniveling, but they seem to have made a space. There is just a big enough gap between Mom and Kevin, for Brendan to fit. If he was here he’d have tears caught in his mustache and making bad jokes to try and lighten the mood. But he wasn’t there, I could see that, feel the missing part, and I am sure they could too. Mom catches me looking, and her tears just start falling harder. Her face crumpling as she did when I came home. I rush to her and engulf her in a hug. I hear the cooing of the relatives around me, a few sniffles, wobbly words. I pull back and look at my mom. She frames my face in her hands

“You’re such a good girl.”

Somehow I end up in the kitchen in the basement of the funeral home pulling out the potatoes. I set them on the rack and check over the rest of the buffet everything was ready.

“You’d think we’re feeding an army and not just one family.”





Grandpa was sitting at the kitchen table as I cut up veggies. My Mom shouts from the kitchen "It's an O'Connell Christmas! Did you expect anything else? You created this madness!"

"Yes but you were the ones who continued it!" Grandpa laughed from his seat. If he had his way he would've been in the kitchen pestering Mom and the others but ever since Grandma died, he hadn't been doing so well. He'd just got over a broken hip and was forced to stay sitting most of the day. The aunts and uncles were all over the place cooking, drinking, telling stories, and watching the football game. The junior division of cousins was in the basement playing with their new toys and the senior division all over like the adults. I decided to help out and spend time with Grandpa.

"Mary, your mother told me you got a solo in the winter concert?"

"Yeah I get to play the violin solo of 'Carol of the Bells' I start the whole concert."

"Well you'll have to play it later. I always knew you'd be the fiddler, every good Irish family needs one."

"You also say every good Irish family needs a singer, writer, a drinker, and a soccer player."

"Add in a dash of sarcasm and you got it. I'm still waiting on that soccer player but most of you can carry a tune, several of us can write, and well we all know we can drink. Some of us better than others." He winked at me.

"Do I need to stop slipping you vodka behind mom's back?" Grandpa laughed as I picked up the veggie tray and put it at the end of the buffet. "I think we're all set mom."

Mom looked past me to the door and shouted "Brendan will you do the honors?"

Suddenly we heard, "Kids! Dinner!" Uncle Brendan's mustached face came around the corner, "INCOMING!" We braced ourselves for the stampede.

It has only been three hours. Three hours of greeting distant family, strangers and a few neighborhood friends. I ran from here to there fetching photos, keeping people company, even grabbing a set of flats from home for Aunt Katie. And we still had four more hours to go. I stop to catch a breath in the back of the room and see the sea of people here. I should be so happy that so many people loved him. But I just feel so suffocated I can barely breathe. All these people wanted to share their support, their thoughts, their memories. It's just all too much. I have to get out of here. For one second I have to be alone, no family, no meaningless conversations, not constantly seeing my mom in pain. Just one minute. Without thinking I turn and find the door leading to the handicap ramp. I shut the door behind me and head down away from the whispered din. I followed Katie down the ramp. She was pushing Grandpa in his wheelchair. I could still hear the voices from Brendan's wake. Unlike Grandma or the great aunts and uncles, none of us saw this coming. Cathy was a wreck, I heard her telling mom how she just wanted one more day with her husband. Karen, Melissa, Riley and Connor weren't doing any better. Grandpa was the one who scared me the most though.

I cut ahead of Katie to open the door. The burst of cold air came through and Annie started to adjust Grandpa's coat. Grandpa looked at me, "Laura where is your coat."

"That's Mary, Dad. Laura's daughter, you know 'Mary Mary quite contrary?'"

He stared at me blankly, "Oh right." But he didn't know me. I could see it in his eyes, he was still trying to place me. He looked around the parking lot as if searching for something. Katie started to wheel him away.

"So sad what happened to Marty's boy. So young."

Marty's boy? Katie stopped by her car and looked at him. She took a shaky breath.

"Dad, This was Brendan's wake. Your son."

Grandpa stared at Katie. He was stunned, eyes unmoving, his eyebrows came together and he stared at the car's front wheel. He blinked a few times. Finally his eyes came to me still





standing by the door.

“Does Margaret know?”

Katie closed her eyes and I could tell she was fighting tears. Grandpa didn't remember Grandma was dead.

I sit on the sidewalk against the funeral home. Curled up into a ball, the tears won't stop. I can't let my family see me or they would hover and worry. Just like Brendan's wake, every parent was flitting from one kid to another checking on each other, then double checking, then triple checking. Then the kids did it to the parents. It was stifling, drowning in a sea of people. I hate seeing everyone like this. I can't stop shaking, granted I ran out here in the middle of December without a coat.

I can't imagine a world without Grandpa. I have been to a lot of funerals and wakes, we may make jokes but seriously, couldn't we get a break? Why just one month since Brendan? Why so soon? More importantly, why did Grandpa have to die like that? Why did he have to die forgetting everything that made him who he was? Forgetting us? Forgetting me? Maybe someday just like Grandpa, I am going to forget everything, memories, people, my family. And that terrifies me. I don't want to forget. I definitely don't want to forget him. And why is it that the only person I want to comfort me like when I was little is now gone? I am gasping for air, I came out here to breathe and here I am choking on the cold air.

“Mary!”

I jerk my head up, and look to the side. Grace is standing there holding open the door. Riley's head pokes over Grace's shoulder.

“Jesus Christ Mary!” he says.

“There's some Catholic joke in there.” I snicker.

Grace rolls her eyes, *“I'm ready to be the comforting cousin and all but you gotta come back in here first.”*

“There's a reason I came out here, Grace.”

I look from my cousins out to the parking lot. I hear the door click close. I close my eyes, peace. I hear the door click again and I hear footsteps coming towards me.

“Grace I – “Except it isn't Grace. I look up to see Riley's brown curly hair and blue eyes staring down at me.

“If you're gonna stay out here at least put this on.” He holds out his overcoat, about three sizes too big for me. I hold out a hand, and Riley pulls me up off the ground, I slide on the coat. “So what's the reason?”

My eyes jerk up to meet his identical blue ones. “What do you –“

“You said there's a reason you came out here.”

“I don't know I wanted to –“ What did I want to do? Why did I run from those rooms filled with loving but, perhaps overwhelming family?

“Maybe, you wanted to breakdown in peace without a hundred eyes staring at you, someone rushing to see if you're ok, what they can get you.”

I look at Riley. The joking tone he had had earlier when he was talking about wakes was gone. He was staring out at the parked cars. *“You can be crying, even a little hysterical for the first few hours, but after that you feel responsible to put on a brave face. Cause a part of you is sick of crying and the other knows that if you keep going like that, you'll never make it through the day. Then halfway through the day when you just want to go home and forget about all of those sympathetic tears and sighs, you realize you have to keep that brave face on because these people are grieving just like you. For them to see you cry, it will only give them more pain. Wakes are for everyone who comes, not for you or the family. So you go find a secluded corner and break down where no one can see you.”*

His eyes finally meet mine. His eyes are sincere, there's no blankness, no curtain of jokes or





teasing. He is being completely open with me.

“Is that how you felt at your dad’s?”

He nods. “Am I right? That’s why?”

“Sort of. You’re right I needed to lose it in peace. I was more worried about other people taking care of me. My job right now is to help the aunts and uncles, to help my mom. They just lost their freaking dad. The last thing I wanted was for my mom to feel like she has to take care of me. She has enough to worry about.”

Riley puts his arm around me, not slinging it jokingly as before, but in a kind of half hug. “Why don’t we try taking care of each other? Instead of y’know one person being allowed to grieve and the other having to save face.”

I giggle through some last tears. “Sounds like a plan.” I suck in some breath and look back at him. His smile is comforting, genuine. I can’t help but ask, “How are you doing, Riley? Not just with today but this month?”

Riley looks down at his shoes. “Some days are better than others. Some I can function like he’s not gone, others I don’t want to get out of bed. What helps is what Grandpa use to call my little trick.”

“Little trick?”

“Remember when Grandpa use to list off the different types of people that make up a good Irish family? How with a dash of sarcasm you have the perfect family? He used to say sarcasm was my first language. He said I had a gift for making people laugh, kinda like your music. I make a joke and make people feel better.”

I smiled and looked up at him. “It definitely worked earlier.”

“If I keep making jokes, kinda like how Dad did, it feels like he’s here. And if I can get a chuckle out of my sisters, my mom, Connor, it’s worth it.”

I lean against Riley and his half hug becomes a real hug. “Maybe playing the violin tomorrow will help.”

“You’re playing ‘Danny Boy’ like at dad’s funeral?”

“Of course. Wouldn’t be a proper funeral without it.”

“Why don’t you play it today?”

I pull away to look at him. “‘Danny Boy’ two days in a row? Aren’t people depressed enough?”

“Ok then don’t play ‘Danny Boy.’ The priest will be here in a bit and will want to do a group prayer, you can play a song then.”

“I don’t have my violin.”

“Send David for it. You live five minutes away.”

“What am I gonna play?”

Riley smiles, “Play something that reminds you of Grandpa. You shared enough songs you gotta have one that’s him.”

And suddenly the notes rush into my head. I know the song.

“Sweetie, he may not know any of the songs you play.”

Mom was holding open the door to the nursing home as I walked through with my violin.

“I know you both use to trade songs and sing to each other, but he’s getting much worse. Most of the time he doesn’t even remember who you are.”

I stopped and turned to Mom. She seemed more tired recently. She and the siblings rotate coming to the hospital, a chore no one liked doing since he started slipping away.

“Mom, I get it but this is our thing. I need to at least try and make some kind of connection. He’s in there somewhere. I just – I need to try.”

Mom sighs and grabs my free hand. “I just don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“Believe me I know how slim the odds are.”





"Then let's go."

We sign in and weave through the halls to Grandpa's ward. The nurses smile at the sight of my mom, one in pink scrubs stands up. "Hey Mrs. Burke. Looking for Mr. O'Connell?"

My mom smiles back, "Of course. My daughter is home for break and wanted to see her grandpa."

"Great! Well, he's right in the sitting room." The nurse's eyes drop to the violin case. "Are you going play something for him?"

"Hopefully. Is that ok?"

"Absolutely! I'm sure our other residents would enjoy it as well. He's right through here."

Grandpa was sitting in his wheelchair staring out the window. His skin looked looser now, as if he was shrinking, he probably was. A symptom of Alzheimer's is loss of appetite.

"Patrick, your family is here to see you." Grandpa's head swivels from the window to use. But the vacant, zoned-out look doesn't leave, we could have been a blank wall he was staring at.

"Hi, Dad." My mom walks over and sits in a chair next to him. I pull a chair across from him and start unbuckling my case.

"Dad, you remember Mary, my daughter. The fiddler."

Grandpa nods but the vacant look stays, he was probably playing along, he always hated not knowing what was going on.

"Well she wanted to play for you, like she did when she was younger. Y'know practicing different songs with you?"

Grandpa's eyes darted from Mom to me, starting to look confused. I had just put a new layer of resin on my bow, I had tuned it back at home so I would be ready to play.

"Grandpa. You may not know me, but can I still play you a song?"

Grandpa just nodded, my fingers found this first note and I started playing. As the intro played out I slowly saw a little light spread through his eyes. Suddenly a smile broke out on his face. "I know this song." He gasped.

I smiled back, "Sing it with me?"

*I stood towards the back of the room holding my violin and bow as the priest finished. "As I understand it, one of Patrick's grandkids would like to play a song in his memory. At this time I would like Mary to come forward. The people parted before me as I wove to the front. I looked at the priest and he smiled encouragingly. Before I turned to look at the crowd of family and friends I looked at Grandpa in his casket. *One more song Grandpa.* I turned around and hundreds of eyes were staring at me.*

"Hi everyone. You all knew my Grandpa and if you know me, you know we shared a love of music. I would play songs for him and he would give me requests of songs to play or learn. I'm gonna miss that the most of all." My eyes meet my mom's and she nods at me, the way she use to at my recitals. "Even though me and my grandpa shared probably hundreds of songs, there was one that was his favorite. Probably because it sums him up so well." I fit my violin under my chin and find the starting note. "I encourage everyone here to sing along if you know it."

My bow begins to move over the strings and after the first notes, I hear a few gasps I look up and Riley is beaming at me. I start to sing as best I can.

"There's a tear in your eye and I'm wondering why,

For it never should be there at all.

With such power in your smile, sure a stone you'd beguile,

So there's never a teardrop should fall,

When your sweet lilting laughter's like some fairy song

And your eyes twinkle bright as can be."

Suddenly I hear my Mom's voice join mine. "You should laugh all the while and all other times





smile,

And now smile a smile for me.”

Grandpa tapped his foot and hummed along through the verse. He could never remember the words to the verses. But he remembered the chorus. Suddenly he let his tenor voice go, and joined mine.

“When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, sure 'tis like a morn in spring.

In the lilt of Irish laughter, you can hear the angels sing.”

He reached out his hand and took Mom’s he started swinging them back and forth to the rhythm of the song. Mom started laughing and singing along.

“When Irish hearts are happy, all the world seems bright and gay,

And When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, sure, they steal your heart away.”

Slowly a crowd started to gather around the sitting room. Watching this merry old man sing his favorite song, dancing as best he could in his wheelchair.

The crowd hums along to the second verse, as some of my family and me sing it. We had all heard it enough times we can recite it from memory. But then we get to the big moment the last chorus. Everyone even those who couldn’t carry a note started singing.

“When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, sure 'tis like a morn in spring.”

Grace has her arm around Uncle Kevin. I see my mom, her eyes filled with tears but a smile spread across her face. Aunt Cathy is swaying back and forth in the back with her kids, Riley, Connor, Karen and Melissa.

“In the lilt of Irish laughter, you can hear the angels sing.”

My uncle James sings the last note in an exaggerated opera voice, causing everyone around him to laugh, and Aunt Katie to remark “Let the angels sing Jim!” David is crying but because he’s laughing too hard.

“When Irish hearts are happy, all the world seems bright and gay,”

In this place, of all places, people are laughing and crying tears of joy. You wouldn’t know we were at a wake. Arms are slung around people, little kids dancing in the aisles between chairs. This is Grandpa’s kind of wake, utter chaos, but a happy chaos. Typical O’Connells. All of the sudden as my bow starts to hit the last few notes. I feel him. For the first time today, I feel Grandpa. I’m back in the nursing home, at Christmas, at a recital, in His and Grandma’s living room. Playing this song. Those blue eyes dancing, watching me.

“And When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, sure, they steal your heart away.”

Peter

Morgan Ludington

It was 2am. He was lying on his mattress, upper body supported by the only pillow he owned. The glow of the streetlamp filled the room with an orange, eerie light. It made Peter’s pale skin look extra sickly. He was throwing a dirty and tattered baseball against the ceiling, skillfully aiming between the spiraling fan blades. The couple upstairs was at it again. Not that Peter cared, he had become accustomed to it and the sounds always signaled him to practice his throwing skills. The couple either didn’t notice or didn’t care about the thumping coming from the floor. Maybe they thought it was their own bed rocking.

They’ve gotta be done soon. Jesus. It’s almost morning he thought as the couple enjoyed their late night affair. But what did he expect from this building? He had first come here for a drug deal, over two years ago. The seller had a naked hooker waiting in the room. It was just that kind of place. Peter was only twenty something, and hadn’t gotten into the sex part of “sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll”. He still hadn’t. It didn’t appeal to him. He liked his solitary life style. It also made him think that his parents would have less to be ashamed about. Drugs,





yea, that was bad. But at least he didn't have a kid.

The argument that happened three years ago played in his head again, imagining the bits that he had been unconscious for. It was the night his parents had keyed into his old, nicer apartment and had found him lying on the floor soaked in his own vomit and piss with a needle still sticking out of his arm.

"Oh, Christ" his mother whimpered.

She had been dreading this since she had smelled marijuana on his clothes when he was still in high school. She had kept it a secret, knowing her husband would have exploded and kicked Peter out then and there. But she couldn't hide it forever, Bill wasn't stupid. He had smelled the weed and alcohol on Peter before Nancy had, in fact. He couldn't bear to do anything about it because he thought it was a phase and that Peter would snap out of it. He was a smart kid, just experimenting, that was how Bill convinced himself to keep quiet. He knew his wife would have been broken hearted to know what her son was doing to his body.

"I...I'm pretty sure he's breathing, Nanc," said her husband, "he'll be ok."

And sure enough, Peter had just taken a deep breath and attempted to twist himself into a more comfortable position.

Nancy's legs gave up and she wobbled to the floor.

"Look at what he's done to himself! How could he?! How could he?!" she said, starting to cry.

"We'll wait for him to wake up and then figure out how to get him help and make him stop" said Bill to his now sobbing wife. He crouched down to cradle her body. "I've seen much, much worse in the ER." Bill had been an EMT for five years and just switched to a full time ER tech job. "He just needs to ride it out."

At least this is what Peter imagined had happened. When he had come to, his parents had moved to the couch to watch him. Things were hazy. He wasn't even sure what he was waking up from, much less to.

"Hey Pete. Are ya with us yet?" his dad said.

Peter raised his head and opened his mouth to respond, but the rush of blood to his brain caused him to stop and nothing came out.

Surprisingly, the day resulted in his parents helping him clean up and taking him to dinner. They discussed their "options".

A few months later, Peter was kicked out of his place and told to not contact his parents unless he was clean. He never shot up again, but he couldn't quit smoking. Cigarettes, weed, and meth. Those were his vices, the things that got him through the day. The only things that mattered anymore. They didn't always make him feel good, but they always took away the bad.

And that's what led him to this shitty apartment building. His normal dealer was given up by the guy who sold to him, and was now in jail. Rick was a good guy though; he didn't give any names to the police. Or at least he didn't give Peter's. Peter didn't really talk to anyone except his new dealer now. He didn't keep in touch with anyone from high school, and didn't like the other druggies that he met. Even the other people in the apartment building bothered him. His door had locks from floor to ceiling. Some of them were broken, but Peter always made sure that the ones that locked were locked. At all times. He didn't like having people over. Sometimes, when he got high, he would stand in front of his door re-locking every one of them. The satisfying thunk of a bolt fitting into its slot, the rattle of the chains as they stretched





the gap, that's what Peter liked. Other times, he would sit in the corner of his room facing the blindless window. There was a hole starting to form there, a hole that he would pick at for hours, days, after smoking meth, just watching the world go by outside his apartment. Dry wall powdered the floor and had invaded every crack and fold of everything Peter owned.

The couple on the floor above finally finished. Peter threw the ball a few more times before allowing it to tumble out of his grasp and roll onto the floor. He rolled onto his side and looked out his window. The dank smell of the river wafted in and made the air seem dirty. The floor was dark from years of muddy feet neglecting to take off shoes by the door and the waste of smoked drugs. The walls were grimy with the grease off of stumbling hands trying to steady a hazed Peter and smeared nicotine from cigarette butts being put out. Peter pulled the stolen hotel blanket over his body and closed his eyes. Nothing happened. He didn't fall asleep. He almost never fell asleep on his own anymore. He didn't want to smoke though, the shame from the night three years ago had seeped back into his veins. More potent than the meth he had once injected. Just that once. If he smoked it though...just a little bit...enough to make the shame go away. All the feelings would go away. And then he could sleep.

He stumbled out of bed and started looking for his piece. The orange glow from the streetlamp was enough to not necessitate turning on his only lamp. Right next to what he needed, was a bag of half eaten Cheetos. Perfect. I'll eat, smoke, and go to bed. After piling what he needed onto his bed, he walked into the kitchen and grabbed a Mountain Dew from the half empty box by the cooler. The white lighter by the sink caught his eye, still sitting on top of an alcohol soaked rag. He had thought about starting the building on fire last time he was high, earlier today. Now he was glad he didn't, so he could enjoy smoking at least one more time. Who knew what would happen tomorrow?

He sat on his bed and lit the bowl. After a few deep inhales, he settled back into the wall. Closed his eyes and waited for the feelings to leave. They crawled out of him and left nothing, just open space. That's what he wanted, to feel nothing. He popped open the Mountain Dew and took a swig before starting on the Cheetos. As he rode out the high, everything was silent. It was that perfect time of between night and day. People were sleeping, and the birds wouldn't start chirping for another few hours. It was just Peter coasting.

He decided to play some Angry Birds after a few minutes of solitude as the high set in. After wiping his Cheetos stained hands on the side of his mattress, he reached over to his plugged in phone. He never called anyone and no one ever called him. The phone was solely for Angry Birds. It was almost as addicting as meth. He was amazing at it when he was high. His reflexes were superhuman, or so he thought. His brain was able to think at crazy fast speeds when meth helped; it made him feel good, even though it was a meaningless game. He was good at it.

After a while, the high wore off and the game got too hard. He just stared at the phone for a bit before deciding to go to sleep. He pushed the empty Cheetos bag off the bed and finished the soda before pushing that off too. As he lay back, he felt his tongue moving around his mouth. The combined taste of chemicals, Cheetos, and Mountain Dew was toxic, but a welcome toxic for him. He owned a toothbrush out of habit, but it hadn't seen the inside of a mouth for months. His teeth were ground down and slowing being eaten away by all of his habits. But he didn't smile and didn't care.

Oh shit. Shit shit shit. Peter had just remembered that he was buying tomorrow. He wasn't sure if he had the money though. Fuck. He bolted out of bed and towards his dresser. As he rummaged through his top drawer, his mind raced at impossible speeds. He needed more meth. And he couldn't afford to stand his dealer up. He had to find the money.





Both of his parents secretly sent him money every few weeks. It wasn't much, but combined, it was enough to feed him and his addiction. The place he lived in was just an abandoned hotel essentially, no landlord, no rent. Just sad prostitutes and druggies who had absolutely nowhere else to go. For some reason it still had the water and electricity working though, like the city had just forgotten it existed and didn't realize it should be turned off. His dad had started sending money first, maybe a good \$75 spread out over the month. An amount that his mom wouldn't notice. But she was doing the same thing, sending a small enough amount that Bill wouldn't notice, but enough to help her son. They didn't know what Peter did with the money and never asked. They felt less guilty about kicking out their remaining son. Nancy had written letters along with the money at first, but over time she stopped. Now Peter would only get a small note on holidays and his birthday. He never replied. He couldn't.

Peter, 4 years previously

I could smell the freshly cut grass, the tang hit my nostrils in such a way that it reminded me of what it was like to be a school. It was the smell of finally being released from the monotony of school for the three long, but not long enough months of summer. As I scanned the crowd of black-clad mourners that consisted of family, friends, and teachers, I noticed all the flowers at the other gravestones. Lilacs, lilies, roses, tulips, and more that I didn't recognize or know the names. My favorites were white daisies. If I had brought flowers for my brother, I would have brought daisies.

I remember helping him pick out a corsage for his date for their first school dance when he was in eighth grade. He knew she was going to wear an orange dress, so he wanted to match it. We looked at three different places in town for orange roses. He wanted roses because he thought they were more mature and romantic. And of course, in our small town, there were no orange roses to be found. At the last store, I pointed out a nice corsage with white and orange daisies.

"Matt, look, this has orange. This is just the homecoming dance. Save roses for your first real date, you don't want to scare her off."

"But Pete, what if she thinks that I'm not serious about her then? What if she thinks I'm cheap for buying the same kind of flower that grows on the side of the road?"

"She won't. Most girls are more worried about matching colors, and red roses would definitely clash with an orange dress."

Matt considered this and then asked, "What kind of a corsage did you buy for your first homecoming?"

My eyes started to sting and I felt a tear forming. It was strange though, I didn't feel any emotions. It seemed like my body realized how it should be reacting in this situation though. I looked around after the coffin settled in its hole and saw tears silently running down my mother's cheeks. My dad's entire face was contorted in pain and sorrow. I had never seen him cry. He looked up at me, and I formed a small smile with my face, as if to convey "I'm sorry, but at least it's done now. He's not in pain anymore, it's better for him." Then the tears broke through his crunched eyes and he started weeping into my mother's shoulder.

I couldn't watch him, so I looked around again. A breeze rippled through the group, throwing the scent of freshly cut grass and recently dug-up soil. The rustle of the leaves on the tree nearby brought me back to those summers again, summers that I spent teaching Matt how to play baseball and giving him tips on how to act around girls. I was an expert at one and was able to fake enough knowledge about the other.





For me, summer was the best part of the year. You get a chance to recover from the school year and prepare for the next. It was a time for me to be alive, a time when I could play baseball as much as I wanted.

I tried to refocus as the eulogy began. I closed my eyes and focused on the sunlight shining through my lids, feeling at peace. It didn't seem like the right time or place to say goodbye. The whole world seemed energetic and welcoming and alive. It was like Matt's death didn't affect anything. But it did. Everything was different. I opened my eyes at the sound of someone hiccupping.

Since the funeral, I've found myself wondering around town a lot. Today I ended up at my usual spot, at the trunk of the big oak tree halfway between the pond and the road in Riverside Park. This is the spot I read. This is the spot where we used to practice baseball. Now it's the spot I come to think. Sometimes about Matt, most of the time about nothing. How so much of my life has changed, but there's no visible change in the world. There should be a whole part of the world that just disappeared with him, but it didn't. The park is still here. People are still playing baseball. It's just not us.

Across the park, there was a father teaching his daughter how to fly a kite. It was a reasonably windy day, so there was a good chance of successful flight, but the daughter was having trouble.

"Sweetie, you just have to run a bit faster! That way the wind will catch under the kite and it'll just float, I promise."

"But daddy, I'm running as fast as I can. This kite is stupid. It doesn't work."

"Here, I'll show you. Just hold it up as high as you can while I run. Ok?"

The father started running, but the daughter held onto the kite for just a second too long. The string tightened, the kite was pulled out of her outstretched arms, and promptly crashed into the ground.

"See daddy? It's broken."

"We'll try a few more times. Can't give up too early! And once we get it to fly for a little bit, we'll get ice cream, sound good?"

With the promise of ice cream, the daughter was much more enthusiastic.

I usually have to readjust for a good minute or so to become comfortable against the rough bark of the oak tree. This time, though, I welcomed the distraction of the sharp stinging of the weathered bark through my t-shirt. A spider started to crawl down my shoulder, it was annoyed that I had disrupted its downward journey. Instead of brushing it off in somewhat contained fear, I just watched it. As I watched it I began a narration about it in my head, as if I was commentating on a documentary. "The lone spider boldly uses the insolent human as part of its new path to a safer, more horizontal hunting ground." It was so little. So little in this big world. Nothing would happen if I crushed it with my shoe. Nothing would change.

The spider wandered off into the grass and I gazed around the rest of the park again. Everything seemed bright, almost a glazed over appearance of perfection. The little girl in the pink dress had finally gotten her kite into the air. After a few minutes of watching it dip around the park, she lost interest and asked if was time for ice cream. Everything except the spot I was in was the picture of weekend bliss. It was more than the shade of the oak leaves, more than the slight chill from the breeze. It was me. There was a constant cloud of despair that drained me everywhere I went and always. My eyes had started to water, I didn't realize until the first drop





burned my shallow skin. It stung my hand from the heat and concentrated salt. Quickly, I rubbed away the rest of the moisture from my eyes and took a deep breath. I opened my book so I could escape. Reading was the only thing that distracted me for a substantial period of time. The flipping of the pages, the descriptions of other people and other worlds, was enough to make me forget about my life and my world. I sank into the trunk of the tree as I got through the first page, numb to the ache settling into my back.

I had gotten through a few chapters before Rick came up to me. He was sucking on a Marlboro Red and tapped the butt out right next to my foot. I looked up in annoyance.

“Hey man. There’s a party tonight just outside of town. You in?” Rick asked

“Uh, yea, maybe. Who’s party is it?”

“It’s my, uh, friend,” Rick began, looked around, and then finished with, “my dealer, man. He’s got a new batch, and said he’d give some to me for free. I’m gonna start selling for him.”

Rick looked proud, there was a spark in his usually glazed over bloodshot eyes. I was still slightly annoyed that he had interrupted my reading, but he was the only friend that hadn’t gotten weird since Matt died. The only friend that didn’t act like I was dead too.

“Ok, yea I’m in. What time?”

Peter’s Present

He found some crumpled bills and threw them to the bed as he continued searching. This happened every time he had to buy. He somehow let it slip his mind until the last minute. It was a cycle of drug induced haze and drug induced mania, until he found the money to get back to the haze. He couldn’t find any more money. Shit. He turned to his bed and started counting the bills. As he counted, one hand started to pull through his grown-out curly hair, making it stand almost on end. He didn’t have enough. How did this happen. I have to have more money somewhere. I had enough earlier this week. I made sure I did. Then it hit him, he had stuffed the twenty dollar bill from his dad in his jeans a few days earlier. He scampered to the floor and turned out the pockets. He only had two pairs of jeans, and they were always thrown into the same corner after he took them off. He clutched the bill and carried it to the bed. Then he counted again. And again. Thank God. I have enough. Not enough to eat too, but that doesn’t matter. I have enough.

Peter carefully rolled up the bills and placed them back in his drawer. He lit a cigarette on the way back to bed to help him relax. As he smoked it, he stared at the fan, still turning, in the orange glow that flooded his room every night.

Tomorrow would carry on as normal. He would meet his dealer at the normal spot at the normal time. The conversation would be the same as all the times before.

“Hey man.”

“Yea, hey, what’s up?”

“Not much, man.”

They would both take a quick look around to make sure no one else was there.

Peter would hand over the bundle of bills.

It would be glanced at quickly before being stuffed in a jacket pocket, while a package was pulled out of another pocket and handed back to Peter.

“Same time, two weeks?”





“Yea.”

And they would take another glance around and part ways. Peter would walk along the river back to his apartment. He didn't know where his dealer went. That's what he liked. There was no small talk. Rick had been a good guy, but Peter didn't want to be friends with this new dealer. He just wanted to get on with his day. Waiting for the shame to come back until he couldn't bear it and then make it go away with the chemical smoke.

He used to be certain that he could quit whenever he wanted, but now he wasn't. He had stopped using for a little bit, once. Like he wrote down the date, marked as the day he quit, but after two hours of imagining what life would be like sober, he used again. I'm useless. Couldn't even go for a whole day. Fuck me. But those thoughts faded away with everything else as he started to haze over.

The fan seemed to slow down as Peter finally relaxed enough to begin to fall asleep. He came down before he actually fell asleep though, and the thoughts started to creep back into his mind. He tried to figure out what he did to make him such a loser. What choice did he make in high school that lead him here. Maybe it was some Freudian shit, his dad didn't love him enough, didn't teach him how to tie a tie or something. Maybe it was because Jessica asked him if he was gay after kissing him under the bleachers in middle school. He wasn't, but he also didn't know how to kiss properly, that being the first one. After the time, he was too self-conscious to try again. Now the only females he saw were the weird hookers that brought clients to this hotel. He had enough drama with drugs, he didn't want girl drama and STD's too.

He knew what it was that had catalyzed his spin of catastrophe, knew exactly. But he didn't want to think about it. And he sure as hell didn't want to even get close to blaming his brother for his bad decisions. No. It was his own damn fault and no one else's. Fuck. He lit up another bowl.

But then his phone buzzed.

