

Supermarket Baptism

Research Thesis

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by

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## Marilee

Marilee didn't want to show Bill the new napkin rings she'd bought for the party. They were brushed silver, a string of too-yellow gold snaking around like ribbon on a cheap Christmas wreath. She didn't usually mix metals, as it reminded her of her late grandmother's cheap costume jewelry. When she saw the combination, she imagined her Nana stooping down to kiss her, both a heavy amulet and a medicinal odor smacking young Marilee in the face.

Bill wouldn't like them. If he were there, he would tell her she was wasting money. But he wasn't there, and the red "clearance" sticker had given her silent permission. Anyway, for that price, maybe cheap Christmas wreaths and gaudy metal combinations weren't so bad.

She never bought anything that wasn't on sale, a rule she'd set for herself partially to save money, but mostly so that she could talk about it.

"I never buy anything that hasn't been marked down at least twenty percent," she'd tell whoever would listen.

"What's the rush? I'd rather have it later for 50 than now for 100. That's what I always say." She practiced the routine as she approached the register, imagining the delighted reactions she would get from shopping attendants and penny pinching moms.

"Boy, what a deal," said the cashier, both her tumbleweed perm and her purple vest dancing in the gust of an industrial fan. "I like the colors."

"Oh, yes," Marilee said, eyeing the woman's gold and silver wedding band. "They're very pretty."

"What's the occasion for these fancy pieces?" A sweat-eyeshadow cocktail collected on the cashier's lids and migrated to the channels of her crows feet.

“I’m having a dinner party on Friday.” Marilee took pride in her social life. “You know, just a few close friends.”

“Well, I hope it’s not too cold. You wouldn’t know it was in the forties the way they’ve got the heat blasting in here.”

“They should really get you a fan”

Mixed metals and 40 percent price cuts and Suze Orman-style success stories didn’t matter to Bill. \$300 napkin rings made of human hair would have roused him equally.

“Okay.”

“What do you mean, ‘Okay?’ Do you like them or not?”

He turned away. If he didn’t look at them, he wouldn’t have to pass real judgement. The only things that mattered were that they did not have a necessary function and that they existed in his house in exchange for his money. Appearance was not an issue.

“Well, we don’t need them, so I guess the answer is ‘no,” he switched on the TV, signaling both that he was right and that the conversation was over.

Marilee turned them over in her hands. She thought about the cashier at the store who had complimented her taste and thrift. Bill didn’t understand the value of a good deal.

“They’re for the dinner party, Bill. I thought they’d bring the settings together.”

“No use in strangling up napkins in those things if they’re just gonna get dirty and thrown on the floor anyway.” She cringed at the violence of his words. Only he could make dinner sound like aggravated assault.

She put the rings on the table on top of his newspapers in their black, velveteen case and walked away. Once his mind was made up, it wasn’t going to change, but she didn’t want to let him forget how difficult he had been with her. But then, lots of things were difficult. It didn’t

matter if it was about who they were purchasing insurance from or what she was making him for dinner. It was difficult.

She went upstairs to turn on her own television in the bedroom.

“Next up, a New Jersey woman bakes her 3-year-old son into a birthday cake.”

She could hear Nancy Grace echo downstairs on Bill’s TV. Same channel, different TVs. She turned up the volume, hoping the slight jump her set had on his would spoil any surprises.

“She claims that he fell into the batter and she didn’t notice.”

It was just the two of them in the big four bedroom. They were childless, a circumstance that Marilee had learned to live with. It was nights like this, nights when her and Bill retreated to their separate corners of the house, that it weighed heavy on her mind.

She rolled over on to her back and studied the textured ceiling. Laying with her head at the foot of the bed gave her a new perspective. She searched the cottage cheese stucco for familiar shapes, constellations, characters. On her usual side of the queen she could see the stretched out, deformed outline of Mickey Mouse. She and Mickey had spent many nights together, staring each other down with dry, heavy eyes while Bill slept next to them.

“You awake?”

“Yeah.”

“Me, too.”

They read each other’s cottage cheese minds. She bounced ideas off of him.

“Do *you* think I should join that book club? There’s a waiting list, but if I sign up now I might get in by the spring.”

“Do you like the books they’re reading?”

“Well, their pick this month is a Jodi Piccoult novel.”

“Jodi Piccoult? Psh. Spare me.”

Mickey Mouse gave Marilee more nighttime attention than Bill ever did. That kind of attention from him was reserved for anniversaries, birthdays, and eight years ago when they bought the place.

When they had moved into the house, Marilee wanted to redo the master bedroom.

“Popcorned ceilings are out.”

But Bill convinced her that fixing the ceiling would be a lot of work. He suggested she redo the wallpaper instead. Bright flower baskets and popcorned ceilings may clash, but Bill had compromised with her and both of them were satisfied with the results. The ceiling reminded her of his more thoughtful days.

She hadn't really thought about him when she planned the dinner party. They were his friends, too. She'd assumed he would be just fine with it. She'd thought she was dealing with popcorned ceiling Bill and not passive aggressive television Bill when she sent out the invitations without talking to him. Maybe she should have asked him first.

She couldn't see Mickey Mouse or old Bill from the foot of the bed, just more cottage cheese and woman who turned her son into a Boston Cream Pie.

“It was his own birthday cake.”

She resolved to go back downstairs and hoisted herself off of the sinking mattress. Talking it out seemed like the right thing to do.

From the top of the steps, she could see the lights were off.

“Bill?”

When she got to the den she was greeted by an empty couch and a blank television screen. It was 8 PM on a Tuesday. Poker night. She'd forgotten and he didn't seem to think it

important to remind her. No “Goodbye.” No “See you later, honey.” No “Did I upset you earlier? I’m sorry.”

She trudged back upstairs and wondered why she thought, for even a moment, that he cared about this party. But, that was no matter to Marilee. If he wasn’t around to plan it, then it wasn’t his party, and if it wasn’t his party, then he didn’t have any say in the decor. The fine china, which he said they should sell, would come out. The linen table cloth that they had a huge Christmas fight over would drape the dining room set. And those napkin rings would be there. They would garnish his plate.

She put on her shapeless nightgown and got into bed. Mickey Mouse was there to greet her with his deformed but welcome face.

“Well, *I* like the napkin rings.”

At the grocery store Marilee was in her element. She floated up and down the aisles, weaving through congested cart traffic and displays for 50 cent candy bars. Her coupon book was out and filled with clippings she’d spent the afternoon scanning the papers for. She didn’t consider herself a “couponer” persay. That title was reserved for those who stock piled their basements with generic shampoo and boxes of melba toast. But whether it was napkin rings or bandaids, she took pride in her ability to find the best deals.

Rosemary Lemon Chicken was on the menu. It wasn’t messy, it wasn’t fatty, and it made a good center piece. Lumpy, formless foods like lasagna or stew were reserved for lesser dinner parties. To Marilee, nothing said “expert hostess” better than serving something you have to disembowel yourself. She headed for the produce aisles to scope out the green beans. They had to be fresh. Frozen was out of the question; the precise, measured segments were a dead give

away that they came from a bag. She pushed her cart past the dull, out of season pineapples and rock-hard avocados, worried someone else might have snatched up all the best beans. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a familiar blonde head bobbing between the cucumbers and zucchini. It was Jennifer Greene.

Marilee readjusted her wiry ponytail and smoothed any fly aways behind her ears.

*“I wish I’d put on real pants today,”* She thought as she approached her neighbor. She pulled her cart up next to the bell peppers, squinting at the prices and catching a sidelong glance at the put together, satisfied woman next to her. She wanted Jennifer to notice her, but she seemed too busy deciding between a large cucumber and a larger cucumber.

“Oh, Jennifer, hi!” she said, clutching the breast of her denim jacket in forced surprise.

“Marilee.” Jennifer smiled, unfazed by the encounter. “How are you?”

The vegetable sprinkler came on just as she turned to acknowledge Marilee, but instead of retreating from the mist, she let it fall on her smooth, silky flip like a super market baptism. Marilee could sense her thick ponytail sucking in the moisture and stepped away, fearing the frizz she had just smoothed down would spring back to life.

“I’m fine. Just fine. How’s the family?”

“They’re *great*.” The apples of Jennifer’s pink cheeks scrunched in delight. “Don just finished the back deck, Jules started applying to colleges... Oh, and Winnie’s in this new art class. You know, I can’t complain.”

“Me neither.” Marilee tried to imitate Jennifer’s effortless glee, but knew the strain showed in the sagging corners of her mouth.

“Bill’s job still going well? Is he still at uh... the plant?” She said it like he was putting together cardboard boxes, not building cars.



“Oh yes. Very.” Marilee didn’t really know the answer to that question. Bill never talked about work. “He’s a supervisor now, actually,” a promotion that happened over a year ago.

“Good for him.” Jennifer turned her attention toward a head of cabbage. She pulled back the leaves and checked the integrity of the bottom, as if she was afraid the whole thing might fall apart. It was clear that she wasn’t going to bring up the dinner party on her own accord.

“I almost forgot to ask,” Marilee began scooping green beans into a bag. “Did you get my invitation?” If Jennifer and her husband came it would make a nice even eight for the party.

“Oh shoot, that’s tonight, isn’t it? We’ll be going to the Christmas pageant. I’m so sorry.” The wheels of her cart squealed against the dirty tile as she swung around toward the check out lines, her escape effort obvious.

“I’m sure everything will be delicious. Maybe next time!” She was already making her way past the winter squash. Marilee watched her perfect blonde head dance away on her coat hanger shoulders. She imagined her getting to the lanes just in time for a new one to open up. She would get the perfect bag boy who used paper when you asked him to and never put the orange juice on top of the eggs. She would pull out her completely paid off platinum rewards card and swipe it through the reader with her once a week manicured fingers. She would sign “Jennifer Greene” in long, loopy letters and tell the cashier to have a “terrific evening” before she strolled out to her three-month-old SUV and loaded her equally weighted grocery bags with the considerate bag boy’s help. She would hit only green lights on the way home, and round the corner on Brigadier Street just as the delivery man was dropping off her new tennis rackets for her Sunday game with the meteorologist from Channel 6. Her daughters would greet her at the door with a warm hug and her husband would have started dinner already. They would discuss what terrific days they’d all had and congratulate each other on all of the completely expected

awards and honors that were received that week. Julia would head up to her room where she would finish all of her homework and be in bed and asleep by 10:00 PM, while Jennifer and her husband would read Winnie a book before tucking her in. Then the two of them would retire to their immaculate, modern master bedroom and have eight minutes of satisfying sex before settling into nine hours of uninterrupted sleep.

Marilee began tossing fistfuls of green beans back into the bin.

*“I guess we’ll have six then,”* She thought as she frowned at the dried-up pods. She sifted through her bag and extracted beans that were bug-bitten or ripped clean in half.

*“Who goes to a Christmas pageant in November anyway?”*

She dumped the rest of the bag and resolved to use frozen.

Marilee topped the chicken with a smattering of lemon slices. She’d already covered the thing in a heavy mixture of lemon juice and butter, but this gave it a put together, cover-photo look. The slick, bumpy skin would soon crinkle and brown, and the fruit would shrivel, soaking everything with tartness.

*“This looks lovely, Marilee.”* She imagined her guests marveling in the expert way that she had arranged the yellow pinwheels in a zig-zag pattern up the back of the bird.

*“Where did you learn to cook like this?”* they would ask.

She put the roasting pan in the oven and set the timer. The potatoes still needed to be done, but she slinked into the dining room to admire her set-up one more time before attending to them. The table cloth was draped evenly on all sides. The china plates were just so at every place, each with a polished set of utensils. And there were the cloth napkins, tucked into the gold

and silver rings. Secure in the knowledge that everything was as perfect as it was thirty minutes ago, she went back into the kitchen to attend to those potatoes.

They were golden russets, and they were to be sliced, placed in a pie pan, and drizzled in butter and spices. It was an easy hit. She dumped the bag in one side of the stainless steel basin sink and began rinsing them.

“Need any help in here?” Bill asked, appearing at the counter next to Marilee. She jumped, dropping a potato on the checkered floor.

“You startled me.”

“Sorry.”

She thought he would be on the couch watching TV until the guests came, but here he was, vertical and asking for work to do. She wanted to turn him away, but she knew she could use the help. And this was such a rare moment.

“Well, you can help me with these.” She handed him a peeler. Without hesitation, he grabbed a potato and started skinning it.

“Here, do it over this side of the sink.” She grabbed his arms and guided him toward her. They shared a moment of unexpected eye contact. He seemed more startled by her touch than annoyed by her peeling preferences. Items passed between their hands, a newspaper, a tax form, the TV remote; these were their channels of connection. A hug, a pat on the back, or even a warm glance was rare. She pulled away and went back to rinsing, a strange anxiety filling her chest. She was relieved when the moment had passed.

They worked in silence with a system that was understood. He peeled and handed her the naked spuds. She second rinsed and sliced them into their old, ceramic mixing bowl Bill’s mother had given it to them shortly after they got married. It served them well for birthday cakes,

Labor Day cookout fruit salads, and Christmas cookie preparation. But now the glaze was worn away from the base and the edges were chipped. Marilee had to be mindful of bits of ceramic chunking off into her recipes, but continued to use it in favor of the set of plastic mixing bowls she'd gotten on clearance. The thin potato slices pancaked to the bottom where a delicate, green vine pattern was once vibrant.

When Bill finished, he watched her slice the remainder of the potatoes.

"I think I'm all right in here," she said, knowing he was waiting for some kind of dismissal.

"Oh, okay." He gave the counter a deft smack. "Let me know if anything else needs done." He left the kitchen and soon Marilee heard the familiar din of football chatter. She felt more at ease alone in the kitchen.

The guests arrived at seven. Their coats were folded and put in the spare bedroom, they were offered their choice of Cabernet or Riesling, and were served promptly. There may have only been three couples, but they created enough chatter between them to make everyone forget about the two empty chairs at the end of the table.

"Great chicken, Marilee. My compliments to the chief," said Jeff Hobson as he shoveled a fatty piece into his mouth. Jeff was one of Bill's old college friends. Marilee wasn't fond of him, but he had been around longer than she had.

"Jeff, chew," said Kaye. She was embarrassed by her husband, and made up for it by picking apart her chicken in tiny, careful pieces. Her slight frame suggested she'd been embarrassed by him for several years.

"Anyone need anymore potatoes?" Marilee waved the serving spoon.

“Oh, no, I’m nearly stuffed,” said Kaye, who had eaten half a breast and maybe five green beans.

“You first, Mari,” said Jill Saperstein.

“You should be eating more of these,” said Brent. “And more green beans.” He motioned for Marilee to shovel more potatoes on to his pregnant wife’s plate.

“Brent, I can’t eat THAT much.” Jill giggled. Her stomach was already swollen with seven months of childbearing. She was thirty-nine and finally having her first child, not because she’d had difficulties, but because she “didn’t want to rush it.” When she broke the news in the break room at the library, Marilee had to hide her disappointment. She had always felt her and Jill shared that childless connection. Now she was joining the ever popular club of suburban moms— a club Marilee wished to be in.

“You look like you’re ready to pop any day now,” said Jeff. “I remember when Kaye was like that. Man, would she make the house shake.” Bill, who had been silent for most of dinner, chuckled at his irreverence.

“Oh, stop it,” Kaye smacked his arm playfully, but she gave an uncomfortable, shaky smile. It wasn’t such a fond memory for her.

“Only seven more weeks!” Brent said, rubbing his wife’s belly with a gentle affection.

“You two must be so excited,” Marilee said. “Now, who’s ready for dessert?” She didn’t want to talk about Jill’s baby anymore.

“Oh, let me help you get it ready,” said Kaye, shooting out of her seat and heading for the kitchen.

“And I’m gonna take a quick bathroom break,” said Jill, who hoisted herself out of her chair. “Brent, I think I left the lemon bars in the van. Can you go get them?”

In the kitchen, Kaye had already retrieved her pineapple upside down cake from the fridge. She was peering around the appliances on the counter.

“Where’s your knife block?”

“Oh, they’re right here.” Marilee pulled out a long chef’s knife from the island drawer. “Hold on, I’ll get a spatula, too,” she went over to the edge of the kitchen where she kept the grill supplies and stooped down to open the bottom drawer. She heard Jeff and Bill talking in hushed voices.

“Hey, how come you two never had kids?” Jeff said. Her stomach dropped.

“I mean, Kaye and I’ve got two rotten teenagers, these kids have got one on the way, but you two are riding easy. What’s the deal?” Marilee saw the spatula she wanted in plain view, but pretended to rifle through the drawer looking for it.

“Level with me, Billy boy, do you need pills? Because I’ve got a friend down at the pharmacy who could hook you *riiiight up*.”

“I promise you Jeff, everything’s just on fine my end. It’s the oven that’s broken, if you know what I mean.”

It took a moment for Marilee to register the awful, crushing weight of what he had just implicated. Heat flushed through her belly and welled up in her chest. It was as if all the snide comments, the harsh criticism, and the silent ridicule had balled themselves together in a tight, merciless fist and walloped her.

Jeff laughed. He laughed long and hard. She grabbed the spatula and slammed the drawer closed. Kaye spun around at the sound, clutching the knife in her hand.

“You all right?”

“What? Yeah, I’m fine.” She joined Kaye at the counter, and motioned with the spatula for her to start cutting.

“You’re better at these things than I am,” Kaye said. “Here, I’ll take the spatula.”

Marilee grabbed the knife and began cutting. Halves. Fourths. Eighths. She gripped the knife tight, the heel of her hand aching and cramping with the force of her hold. Bill hadn’t just insulted her, he had taken her deepest insecurity and shook it out in the front yard like dirty laundry, and then hung it to dry so that no one would miss it. He had taken a struggle that they had shared, and agreed upon sharing, and pushed it on her, made the struggle her own.

*“Keep it together,”* she thought to herself as Kaye began scooping the pieces on to dessert plates.

*“Just a little longer.”*

She marched back out into the dining room, a serving plate full of cake in one hand and six small dishes in the other.

“And here’s the main event!” Marilee said with as much fake enthusiasm as she could muster. They “ooh-ed” and “ahhh-ed” and smiled, but she felt mocked. She wanted to drop the cake on the table and walk out of that dining room. She wanted all of them to leave.

Everyone began shoveling the cake in their mouth. The chatter that once filled the dining room was replaced with muffled chewing and tines clanging against the china. Marilee didn’t eat any dessert.

“Well, I’m stuffed,” said Brent, after finishing his cake. He yawned and stretched. “I’ve got an early day tomorrow, so I think Jill and I are gonna take off.”

“We had such a nice time,” Jill said, grabbing Marilee’s hand under the table. “We’ll host the next one.”

“I think we’re gonna head out, too,” Kaye said. Marilee knew she was dying for a cigarette.

“Fine by me,” said Jeff. “I recorded the game tonight.”

The guests left and Marilee began bringing dishes into the kitchen, trying to ignore Bill’s presence. But he joined in, stacking the plates more carefully than usual on the counter next to the sink. Each time he came in from the dining room, Marilee’s anger bubbled closer and closer to the surface.

“Why did you have to say that?” she asked him, scrubbing a serving dish.

“What?” He scratched his eyebrow like he always did when he lied or got nervous. She knew he knew what she was talking about.

“You think I couldn’t hear you and Jeff talking about me? About my ‘broken oven’? What the hell, Bill?”

“I don’t know,” he said, trying to keep a salad bowl from sliding off the impossible pile he was making. Marilee grabbed the dishes from him and began putting them in smaller stacks.

“It’s none of Jeff’s business whether I can have babies or not.” Tears were welling up in her eyes. Bill was silent.

“It’s not something you can just joke about. Why would you ever think that’s funny?”

“It’s not,” he said, rinsing the wine glasses. “It’s not.”

“What do you want me to do? It’s already hard enough with you...” she felt the bite of her words. They felt good. He was silent again.

“Put those over here.” She motioned for the silver. He left the kitchen. She thought he was coming back with more dishes, but minutes passed and she was still alone.



After she was done with the dishes, she wiped up the counters. She ran the garbage disposal. She set the timer on the coffee maker. She did all the things she did each and every night for her and Bill before they went to bed. She wanted there to be residual grease on the counter, so when he rested his cuffs on them to eat his toast, his sleeves would become stained. She wanted to leave the sink drain full over night, so that in the morning it would stink like rotting compost. She wanted to forget to set the coffee timer, so that he would be late to Saturday golf, or so that he would have a headache for the rest of the day. She wanted to pour salt in his creamer and crush his bananas. She wanted to do unspeakable things, but she didn't. She made the kitchen pristine, just as she did every night.

She flipped off the lights and walked out of the kitchen, wondering if she should slink into the other side of their shared bed or curl up on the twin in the guest room. She knew the dining room wasn't done, but she was too exhausted, emotionally and physically, to care. She flipped off the lights in the kitchen and headed for upstairs, but stopped when she got into the dining room.

The table cloth was folded, and draped over the chair at the head of the table. The chairs were all tucked in just so. The place mats were stacked in the middle of the table. The wax droplets were shaved off of the sides of the candles, just as Bill had seen Marilee do many times before, and criticized her for. The napkins were folded neatly at the end of the table, waiting to be washed. And there, on the hutch against the far wall, were the napkin rings, placed gently in their velveteen display case.

## Jennifer

Jennifer and her family took their seats stage right in the church. Julia sat between her mother and father, still huffing and puffing about their verdict on her weekend plans.

“I don’t get why it’s such a big deal,” she had said at dinner. “Jenna’s aunt is totally cool with us using the lake house this weekend.”

“Julia, it’s November,” Jennifer argued.

“And I don’t want you going to that house unsupervised,” Don cut in. His word was usually the last.

“Dad, I’m seventeen,” she said, as if that would sway him, “and Byron is going.”

“Ooooh Byron’s going,” said Winnie, pretending to gag on her chili. She was only ten and found the idea of teenaged boys disgusting, just as Jennifer wanted.

“The answer is no, Jules.”

And now they were at the church pageant, waiting to see Winnie make her debut as a Christmas angel. Julia’s festering scowl was putting a damper on the holiday cheer.

“Why are we even at this stupid pageant?” She kicked the wooden shelf that hung on the bottom of the bench in front of her. The hymnals, which were long neglected in favor of an oversized screen that displayed lyrics, bounced from the impact.

“Because your sister is in it,” said Don, putting a firm hand on her knee. “And it’s an important story.”

Jennifer watched as people filled the auditorium, which was more like an amphitheater. The ceiling arched high over row upon row of padded pews, creating a shell that sent the gospel bouncing back into the congregations ears, lest they forget what they just heard. She liked being

in the church, and took pride in the size and wealth of it. She liked the fifteen entrances and the mall-sized parking lot. She liked that they had Ogleman's Donuts and four different types of coffee in the gathering area every Sunday. She liked that they sold "Christ's Kingdom Fellowship" t-shirts in the gift shop. Most of all, she liked that it was full of people like her and Don: well-kept and strong-valued.

She thought about the alternative, which was far more uncomfortable. She could be at Marilee Small's dinner party, surrounded by people who were jealous of her and her lifestyle. The food would be basic and predictable, probably some kind of chicken, and Marilee would have just spent the entire night ogling Don from across the table. Jennifer had seen the way she watched him when he cut the grass or worked on his car in the driveway. She felt bad for Marilee, really, all alone in that house with Bill, who was such a lout. But she wasn't generous enough in her pity to stand idly by while the neighbor mentally seduced her husband. She hoped for Marilee's sake that her other guests had come to dinner, and that Mrs. Brightman hadn't decided to let the air out of any of their tires for parking too close to her driveway.

And she was glad that her daughter was here, and not at some party in the woods with nine other teenagers and nine cases of beer, and her boyfriend, whom Jennifer had caught naked and trying to climb out the basement just yesterday when she had come home from the grocery store. She hadn't told Don, who would likely never let Julia breathe fresh air again if he knew a penis had touched any square inch of her body.

The remaining ticket holders trickled in and took their seats just as the orchestra finished playing their prelude. The senior pastor, Mike House, took the stage, a tiny, barely distinguishable microphone looped around his ear.

“Hello, friends,” he said in a warm, hushed tone. “Thank you all so much for joining us at Christ’s Kingdom Fellowship for our eighteenth annual Christmas pageant.” The wireless mike allowed him to clasp his hands together in earnest.

“We look forward to sharing this important piece of history with you, and we hope that the Lord, and Jesus himself, will smile on this performance.” Jennifer watched as the people sitting around her nodded their heads in encouragement and agreement.

“Remember, we have two more shows next weekend. Tickets are only \$20 apiece and they’re going fast. We’re already almost all sold out for Saturday!” Don had been selling tickets to his co-workers and his friends on the intramural basketball team. Jennifer and her family didn’t even have to pay for their tickets, a perk of Don’s booming sales.

“I hope you enjoy our rendition of the most important story ever told. God bless.” The lights started dimming before he could make it halfway across the stage, and one of the stagehands had to help him navigate down the steps. A blue night haze fell over the auditorium and the audience fell silent.

Julia whipped out her phone and began texting. Jennifer snuck a peek.

*“can’t go. see you sunday? ;)”*

“Put your phone away,” Don hissed.

A lone oboe note sounded just as a languid Mary came into view on the crest of a hill constructed out of fiberglass rocks and styrofoam. Jennifer saw that it was Allison Wheeler, one of Julia’s classmates and old friends.

“I didn’t know Allison was in this,” she whispered to her daughter.

“Yep,” she said, clenching her lips.

An angel appeared from stage right, flying high above Mary and circling around the the artificial mountain. She shot up from her seat, bewildered by the giant feathery wings, which were covered in sparkles and blinking lights.

“Do not be afraid, Mary!” he shouted, landing close to her. She covered her mouth in horror and shied away from the angel, who Jennifer recognized as John Lucy, the choir director who had never married and still used too much hair gel well into his fifties.

“I am Gabriel,” he said, putting his arms around Mary’s trembling shoulders.

“You have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.” He touched Mary’s belly.

“How will this be, since I am a virgin?” She asked, tearing away from the angel’s straying hand.

“The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” The angel gave her a complacent smile, and flew backwards off of the hill, striking a Peter Pan pose and swooping around the stage once more before disappearing behind a foam pillar. Mary was left to contemplate her impossible situation and, naturally, broke out into song about it.

Jennifer thought about when she had become pregnant with Julia. She was young like Mary— just eighteen years old. She was just as shocked and terrified, but instead of getting the news from an angel, she had gotten it from a home pregnancy test. And her baby was not the result of divine intervention, but one night without protection.

Mary clutched her stomach and sang to the blue filtered lights above her, begging to God to help her through the pregnancy. How would she tell Joseph, who believed she was pure? How

would she face those who doubted her story? She was about to become a teen mother before epidurals and disposable diapers, and before stoning people to death was frowned upon.

Jennifer thought about Julia, who was only seventeen and already hiding naked boys in the basement. She was grateful Don put such a definite end to the conversation about the lake house.

Mary finished her melodic plea with no answer from God, just a whirr from the fog machine. The thick mist covered her up so that she could slink away, as if she were some lonely, misunderstood swamp monster from a horror movie and not a young mother.

The stage hands moved in to change the scene. The rocky hill was replaced with the facade of a home made of crude bricks and a stable filled with hay. Mary, exhausted and now bursting with pregnancy, stumbled back on to the stage. A long, brown robe draped over her fake baby bump. The screens to the left and right of the stage allowed a close-up of the sweat beading on her forehead.

When Jennifer was pregnant, her parents were embarrassed, and implored her to hide the secret until she graduated. But by the time June came around, she was six months, and concealing her protruding stomach was difficult. She didn't have a long robe to cover up her pregnancy, and instead walked down the halls of her high school in her father's oversized sweatshirts, inciting stares and whispers from her classmates.

Behind Mary was a frantic Joseph, one hand bracing his wife's strained back and the other holding a large wooden staff. He was Ron Foote, captain of the high school basketball team. Since they had been in the same eighth grade Sunday school class, Jennifer had hoped he would date Julia. He was always polite and seemed so well put together. He combed his hair and wore collared shirts. Byron washed his hair twice a week and wore t-shirts that pictured heavy

metal bands or cereal mascots. Jennifer looked at her daughter, who had forgotten that she was supposed to be pouting and started picking off her nail polish. The last thing she wanted for her 3.7 GPA'd, tennis star daughter was the same experience she'd had. When Jennifer broke the news to her high school boyfriend, Rob, she wanted him to be concerned, to offer to help her. She wanted him to tell her that he would stay with her, that they would raise their child together. He did none of those things, and instead refused to acknowledge her for the rest of the year. Julia had never known her biological father. How would a kid like Byron take on that kind of responsibility?

It seemed that Ron Foote would be a Joseph. Byron seemed like more of a Rob, or a Judas.

An inn keeper, played by a rotund 13-year-old with crooked bangs, entered stage left and began sweeping the hay on the floor.

“Sir, help us,” said Joseph, leaving his wife to address him. “My wife is with child. Do you have a room?”

The innkeeper looked up from his work, the camera trained on his fuzzy upper lip.

“No more rooms, but I have a stable.”

“Oh, please, can we stay there?” Mary started advancing toward them, clutching her belly and shuffling in pain. She almost slipped on the hay.

The innkeeper took one look at her crazed eyes and frazzled hair and said, “Come with me.”

He lead them into the small stable, where Mary collapsed in the hay, straining against her contractions. The stage went black again. Silent Night rose from the pit, and the sounds of a baby's cry played over the speakers. Children donning wings and silky white robes filed on to the

stage, carrying candles and singing along with the orchestra. A dim light illuminated the stable where Mary and Joseph now held their son— a real baby. Parents all around brought out their phones to record the children on stage, not realizing that the tiny, inefficient cameras would pick up nothing but the pinpoint lights of the candles. They didn't care— these were their kids. The children they had with their husbands and wives, and probably had baptized on the very stage in front of them. Winnie was one of those children, but Julia was not. She had been baptized in the small presbyterian church her grandmother worked in— one with an out of service bell tower filled with bird droppings and termites threatening to send the choir loft crashing down on to the organ. The baptismal font was old and worn, and had to be carried up to the altar by the ushers. Here it rose out of the floor on a mechanized platform.

The orchestra kicked up and the lights brightened in an instant. The angels on stage blew out their candles and held them behind their backs as more paraded on to the scene, Winnie among them. They began “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” as trumpeters appeared over the innkeeper's house and the Three Wise Men came on to the scene, carrying ornate glass boxes.

“Look, there's Winnie.” Jennifer pointed her out to Julia, who afforded her little sister a half smile.

“I see her.”

Baby Jesus shrieked and cried at the crash of the tympani and the loud blasts from the trumpets. Mary cradled him, and smiled out to the audience. The crowd around Jennifer beamed, admiring the young mother and her brand new child. The wise men offered the baby extravagant gifts and stroked his hair in adoration, one of them trying to get a singing angel to stop picking her nose. Jennifer watched the beaming crowd around her admiring the young mother and her brand new child and snapping pictures of the screaming baby and the singing angels. And she



felt alone. She remembered the day she had Julia; it was only her and her mother in the delivery room. Her father came in after she was born, and both he and her mother held their first grandchild. They smiled and pulled back the swaddling blanket to kiss her down covered head, a joy for the baby and a sadness for Jennifer showing in their dewy eyes. There was just one photo from that day that her mother had taken with an instant camera. It pictured a red-nosed Jennifer in her hospital bed holding her new baby girl, shadowed by the brilliant light streaming through the window in the background.

Julia pulled out her phone again, the bright light of the screen illuminating the pew around them.

“Put that thing away. Don’t make me tell you again.” Don was right in her ear.

“Don, let her be,” Jennifer said.

“Her little sister is on stage.” He looked at her as if she had personally victimized Winnie by defending Julia. He’d always been a bit hard on Julia, but Jennifer had chalked it up to her being the oldest.

Don pulled out his own phone to capture Winnie on stage. He always said he didn’t care that Jennifer had been a young mom, that he would raise Julia as his own. She was only five when he came into the picture and there was a fast connection between them. He was the only father she’d ever known. But he was here, sitting in this sea of people with 1.5 children by their husband or wife, car magnets that said “Jesus is Lord,” and books about the importance of a Christian lifestyle on their shelves. These people who could do math, who knew that Jennifer was 36 and her daughter was about to graduate high school. Don was one of these people, and he liked it. She wondered if he would have been there in the hospital that day, if he would have been

in that picture, leaning over the bed and adoring his child as these people were adoring the one on stage.

She looked at Ron Foote in his long, fake beard. He had likely never put his hands down a girls pants. She looked at Allison Wheeler, who had probably never been caught with a naked boy in her basement. And the baby Jesus, who had no idea that the people in the audience would some day try to dictate his sex life. Jennifer felt flawed. She felt flawed in her congregation, and flawed next to her husband, admiring the child he had made in wedlock. She looked at Julia, who probably knew she was flawed and didn't care.

The fanfare boiled to a dramatic finish and a bright spot light shone on Jesus, who was red in the face from screaming for five straight minutes. The crowd erupted into applause, a wave of motion moving through each section of the auditorium as everyone stood up to cheer. Even Julia got up to clap for her little sister. Don whooped and hollered. After everyone on stage took their bow and exited, the floor lights came back on, and the process of filing out the huge crowd began.

"I'm gonna run to the bathroom," Jennifer told Don.

"Wasn't she great? She was great!" he said, beaming. "C'mon, Jules, let's go get your sister."

Jennifer dodged through the packs of slow-moving church ladies and families trying to decide where to get ice cream, holding her breath until she could get to the cool, open air of the outer hallway. She made it out unscathed, but saw that the line for the ladies room wrapped around the corner. She didn't know how long Don would want to stay and brag about Winnie's performance, and didn't want to hold it. She remembered the small bathroom next to the spare

kitchen in the basement and headed for the stairs— the elevators would be packed with people trying to get to the post-pageant bake sale on the second floor.

She scuttled down the concrete stairwell, the only part of the building that wasn't all carpeted floors and laminate walls, and pushed through the heavy metal door. The hallway to the bathroom was narrow, the floor checkered red and white. It guided her almost jogging feet to the private pee sanctuary where she could relieve her aching bladder. She rounded the corner, but was disappointed to hear voices coming from the ladies' restroom. Needing to go too badly to care, she headed in.

Moans echoed against the tiled walls of the restroom, stopping Jennifer in her tracks. When the door clicked shut behind her, there was silence. She saw two pairs of feet under the stall, one sandaled and hairy, and one almost covered by the bottom of a brown robe. A wooden staff leaned against the corner next to the hand dryers, a head covering perched on its handle. She wanted to leave, but she wasn't sure that her bladder would make it back up the concrete steps. It was now or never.

She rushed to a toilet two stalls down from them and sat down. The couple could have taken the chance to escape, but stayed through the spray of her urine against the bowl and the thudding of the toilet paper holder. Jennifer washed her hands, feeling too uncomfortable to notice that the water was frigid and the pink soap was almost out, all the while watching the feet under the stall door shift in discomfort. She dried her hands on her pants in favor of spending another awkward 30 seconds in the bathroom.

“Nice performance, guys,” she said, and went back to join her family.

## Byron

Byron rolled over. The muscles of his stomach clenched in protest, forcing a nauseous, toxic belch from his dry lips.

“Unggggghh.”

He opened his eyes, but regretted it as soon as he saw the Saturday afternoon sun beaming through the dusty mini blinds. He recoiled, pulling the pillow over his head without noticing the crusted vomit that stuck to both the fabric and his hair. His ceiling fan, which needed tightening for some years now, spun above his head. The lopsided revolutions made a consistent pattern of clicks, a familiar waking sound for Byron.

*Whopita-clack... whopita-clack... whopita-clack...*

His head shot out from beneath the pillow. This bed, his own, was not the one he'd fallen asleep in the night before. He was supposed to be at Jenna's lake house, but couldn't remember ever being there, or ever getting back to his bed at home.

He was relieved to find his cellphone, drained of battery but intact, in the pocket of the jeans he was still wearing. His shoes were untied and placed in the corner by the laundry hamper. Someone must have carried him in. He texted Frankie, who was supposed to stay sober for the night to keep watch.

*“What happened last night?”*

He sat up in bed, and the sudden full body motion pushed bile up into his throat, forcing him to hold his head in his hands for a moment. He swallowed hard, but knew he wouldn't keep it down. The trashcan next to his bed was full of tissues and he smashed them down with the heel of his fist to make room for the contents of his stomach. He coughed and sputtered, his

diaphragm straining to get rid of what was left of the night before. Hardly anything came up, but he tied off the bag anyway to stifle the smell.

He could feel dried vomit caked on his cheek from the night before, and for the first time saw the dribbles smeared across his pillow. His phone buzzed on the nightstand next to him, but he wasn't sure he was ready to find out what he'd done to land himself back in his own bed. Last time this happened he ended up passed out on a balcony naked with an inbox full of angry texts from Julia.

“Shit.”

He picked up his phone and flipped it open.

*“We had to take you home. You scared us dude.”*

He scrolled through his inbox, making sure he hadn't said anything to Julia. Instead he found a string of texts from Abby Ferling.

*“You look goood tonight.”*

*“Thnnks babt. Your sexxxuu”*

*“Talk later?”*

*“Ojk”*

He deleted the messages, knowing Julia would demand to look through his phone later. It was hard enough to get her back after she found out he'd hooked up with Allison Wheeler at a birthday party. But Julia could wait; the real issue at hand was his parents, who expected him to be at Steve Beardman's house for the night. Steve's was always a safe lie because his parents never knew or cared who was in their house half the time anyway. Byron and his friends had snuck out of the sliding door in the back of the split level to smoke cigarettes on the roof of the

elementary school for hours countless times without Mr. or Mrs. Beardman ever noticing they were gone.

Byron got out of bed and went for the window that faced the front of the house, tripping over piles of dirty clothes and sliding on unfinished homework assignments. He parted the blinds and looked out on to Brigadier Street. His mother's car was gone, but his father's green truck was parked under the crabapple. Facing him couldn't be avoided.

He gathered up his sheets, bundling the soiled pillow case in the middle, and picked up the pukey trash bag. The laundry room and bathroom were side by side, so he knew he could sneak his dirty sheets and t-shirt into the wash and hop in the shower before his dad saw him. He opened the door, only pulling it ajar until just before the point of resistance when it would groan and creak. There wasn't a sound in the house, which meant his dad was either in the garage, or sitting on the couch reading the paper, waiting for him to come out. He tip-toed down the hall and side stepped into the laundry room, pulling open the door and starting the hot water in one movement. He stuffed his dirty bedding into the wash and pulled off the rest of his clothes to pile on top. The bottle of liquid detergent recommended six pumps for a "heavily soiled load." Figuring that his clothes were "beyond soiled," he gave the heap nine squirts and shut the door. He spun around the small median between the laundry room and bathroom, cupping his nakedness from the striped wallpaper of the hallway.

The hot water of the shower opened his sinuses and relieved some of the pressure from his hangover. He looked down at himself, regretting that he hadn't stayed sober long enough to get Abby alone. No one at the party would've told Julia; they didn't like her anyway. She was stuck up for caring about school and a bitch for not drinking. In their eyes, she thought she was better than them, no matter how much she tried to convince them otherwise. But Byron liked her.

She was smart, and she wasn't sleeping with anyone else. And he kind of enjoyed sneaking around behind her parents' backs, especially since they were so anal about checking in on what she was doing every minute of every day. He wanted to be with Julia, but he wanted to sleep with Abby and Allison and Becca. So, he compromised and did both.

When he was dressed and washed of the sin and vomit of the night before, he prepared himself for the coming confrontation. He practiced his relaxed, carefree "I'm definitely not hungover" smile in the bathroom mirror, hoping his father would believe he'd slipped in early that morning.

"Yeah, I got in around 9AM. Oh, I don't know, I just couldn't sleep, I guess. Steve's parents were loud this morning." He knew he couldn't kid himself or his father; there was no way he'd believe that Byron woke up before noon on a Saturday and walked all the way home. Byron thought maybe it was better to keep his mouth shut and let his father do the asking. He studied his well-partied face in the mirror. It was pallid and gaunt, his cheeks tinged with yellow, most likely an S.O.S. from his damaged liver. Perhaps his father would believe he left Steve's early with a case of mild jaundice.

Not wanting to avoid the inevitable anymore, he made his way toward the living room. His feet padded on the hardwood, barely making a sound. He hoped that he could catch his father off guard, or that he was busy with something when he found him, and not sitting at the dining room table, hands folded like the disciplinarian on an after school TV special. Anything but that.

But his father was not at the table, or making lunch, or reading the paper, which meant that he was in the garage working on something. This was the perfect scenario; Byron could engage him in conversation about whatever he was tinkering with, and get him so caught up in teaching his son how to rewire a smoke alarm or change the spark plug in a car that his cares

about the previous night's details would fall away. Yes, this was an excellent scenario. Byron strode toward the garage door, putting back on that casual smile he'd practiced in the mirror to cover up the sickly feeling deep in the pit of his stomach.

His father was sitting at his work bench, which stretched along the back wall of the garage. Tools of every kind hung from the brown corked wall behind it, and even more were stashed in the cupboards on the counter. The tiny drawers filled with nails, screws, and gaskets reminded Byron of an elaborate jewelry box.

"Morning, Byron. Actually, I guess 2:00 PM is in the afternoon." He peered at his son over the reading glasses perched at the end of his nose. It was clear he knew Byron didn't spend the night at Steve Beardman's.

"What are you doing?" Byron stepped down from the kitchen threshold, making a feeble attempt to change the subject and test his father's mood.

"Oh, the chain on the half bath toilet is going bad." He maneuvered his rusted pliers around a tiny metal link. "I was hoping I could fix it so we wouldn't have to buy a new one."

"Aren't those pretty cheap?" Byron asked. He was hoping that he never knew about Steve's at all, that his mother neglected to tell him in her rush to get ready for her late shift at the hospital.

"A couple bucks is a couple bucks," he said.

Ever since his father lost his job at the auto plant a few weeks back, he'd been eager to save money anywhere he could. After 22 years of service, the best they could offer him was 2 month's severance and a pat on the back, which wasn't enough to keep up with the mortgage and worry about sending a son to college the next year. Byron felt bad for his dad, but wasn't fond of his nagging over using too much shampoo or the switch from quilted toilet paper to 2-ply.



“So, how was Steve’s?” His dad wasn’t going to let it slip by.

“Uhhh.” The lies he had conjured up all seemed implausible in the moment, and Byron didn’t even know where to begin. “It was good.”

“Yeah? Did you have fun? Seems like you did.”

Bang. The lies were dead in the water.

“You know, having your friends knock on the door at 2AM was really just the highlight of an already wonderful month.” He put down the pliers and pulled on the chain a few times.

If his father had yelled at him he might have known how to react. He might have stormed back down the hallway to his room, cursing his parents for suffocating him. But he wasn’t yelling. He was using the reasonable tone that was so disarming to teenagers.

“Sorry” was the only safe word Byron knew.

“Before I had all this free time to spend at the house, I liked to think that you made good choices. I figured when Mom and I were at work, you were playing video games or running around with your friends.” He hung the pliers back in their rightful place on the tool wall. “Or, God forbid, doing some homework.”

The garage was cold, and Byron’s wet hair was soaking the shoulders of his t-shirt, but he stayed put. He knew better than to walk away from a conversation like this.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t be here all the time, or half the time, but I thought it was okay because we could trust you.”

“Sorry, Dad,” Byron said, staring down at the cracked garage floor, wishing his father would just ground him so he could go back inside.

“And I seriously doubt the Beardman’s would let that go on in their house knowingly. You need to call and apologize to them this afternoon.” He slipped off his glasses and stuck them in his shirt pocket, next to a pen and a crumpled straw wrapper that was poking out.

Byron weighed his options. If he pretended to call the Beardman’s, he would get caught; his father would pick up the phone to talk to Mr. Beardman, who ran his favorite hardware store. If he really called the Beardman’s and pretended to have drunk in their house, it would be would be off limits forever as a refuge. The lie was flimsy, and if he kept with it, there was a good chance it would collapse under him and he would be sent plummeting into a deep pile of shit. Or, he could tell the truth and hop into the pile of shit on his own accord, allowing for a better chance to land on his feet. Either way he was going to be in deep shit. He thought the honest shit pile might have been smaller, though.

“Actually.” He shifted his feet further apart, bracing himself. “I wasn’t at Steve’s.”

His father didn’t follow his lines and demand to know where he had been, or even ask where he had been, or say anything at all. He sat, arms folded, legs planted on the rung of his 4-legged stool, waiting for his son to explain.

“I was at the lake house. Jenna’s lake house. Actually, Jenna’s aunt’s lake house.”

He didn’t say anything.

“She said we could use it. Frank drove me. He was sober, I think.”

Byron heard the slam of a car door outside and the gears of the heavy metal garage door creaked to life. He could see the shadow of his mother’s legs against the sun soaked driveway as the door came up, and he realized the pile of shit he was standing in was at least up to his waist, if not his chest.

“Hi guys,” she greeted them and ran her hand through her short, greying hair. She looked exhausted in her rumpled scrubs.

“Blech. I need a shower.”

Byron’s father looked at his son and then back at his wife with an expression that begged her to ask what was going on.

“What’s going on? Is something the matter?” She looked bewildered, panicked. It was her nurse instinct to assume death or serious injury when something was awry.

“Why don’t you tell her, By.” His father put him on the spot and then left his stool, heading toward the squat mini fridge in the corner. He grabbed a beer and leaned up against the wall next to the leaf blower, as if he was settling in to watch the show.

“What’s wrong?” The line between her eyebrows that he was so used to seeing when she was distressed created a deep channel on her forehead.

“Mom, I- I didn’t stay at Steve’s last night. I uh... I went to a party.”

The line disappeared instantly.

“A party,” she said. The concern that once filled her voice gave way to a flat, suspicious tone.

“Where?”

“Jenna’s lake house. Her aunt’s lake house.”

“Tell her what else happened,” his father chimed in. His mother’s eyes narrowed and she cocked her head, looking at him out of the corner of her eye. Byron imagined she was already mentally dismembering him.

“I, uh, got drunk and... They had to take me home.”

She closed her eyes and took a long, deep breath. He was up to his neck in it now.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” She didn’t yell. She didn’t even sound angry. She was tired and defeated, like she had just missed the last parking spot at the grocery store. It was bad enough when his father didn’t yell at him, but his mother’s quiet disappointment was much harder to get around.

“Who brought you home? Were they drinking? That’s really dangerous, Byron. And incredibly stupid.”

“Frank was supposed to be the DD.”

“And he wasn’t?”

“I don’t remember.” The shame weighed him down and he imagined himself sinking into the shit until he was consumed by it. Until the top of his head disappeared and he ceased to exist as a teenager and a son.

“What do you mean, you don’t remember? You were there.”

“His friends carried him up to the house. I’m the one who answered the door at 2 o’clock in the morning and carried him to bed,” his father said, coming over to stand next to his wife and face Byron with her. He put a hand on her shoulder.

“You were passed out? Oh God…” She rubbed her temples. Byron wondered if her headache could be worse than his, which was throbbing more than ever now between the cold and the stress of the situation.

“Do I have to tell you about all the stomachs I pump every year? Some of those kids are older than you, Byron. Their bodies still can’t take it.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, meaning it much more now than he had ten minutes ago.

“Are your other friends okay? Was Julia there?”

“No. She doesn’t drink.” He knew his mother would be pleased to hear that.

“Oh, good girl. She’s a keeper.” She smiled for the first time since the conversation began.

“Yeah,” he said. He thought about Abby. And Allison. And Becca. “She is.”

The smile faded from his mother’s face and she just looked at him. Her eyes were so dim and weary from an exhausting night at work and this exhausting conversation with him, that Byron could not look at them, and he dropped his gaze back to the floor. She didn’t even have to say “I’m just glad you’re safe” or “But you know I love you,” because he knew both of those things. They were unspoken and unquestionable. It made him feel guilty.

“I didn’t think we would have to have this conversation with you and yet, here we are,” she said, letting her hands fall to her sides. “I just don’t know what to do with you.”

“Sal, why don’t you go inside and get some rest. By and I will talk some more,” his father said, grabbing her hand and shaking it lightly. Byron was usually alarmed and disgusted by his parents’ sentimentality. When they kissed in front of him while making dinner, or cuddled up together on the couch to watch the news, he protested, finding their 20 year romance unnatural. But in this moment, he was grateful for it, for his father being so sweet to his mother. Sally kissed Paul on the head and walked into the house without saying another word, clearly grateful for the dismissal.

“You know we have to punish you, right?” He said, sitting back down on the four-legged stool. Byron didn’t think that he had to, but knew arguing about it would make for a longer, more painful sentence.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Well, first off, you’re grounded for a month.” Byron nodded in agreement, knowing he could renegotiate later.

“And I was thinking, maybe you could help Mrs. Brightman clean up her yard or something.”

Byron couldn't hide the bewildered look on his face. Inside he was screaming in protest. Mrs. Brightman was an awful old woman. Once, when he was eleven, he had accidentally thrown a frisbee into her backyard. He knocked on her door, but she didn't answer, so he climbed over the high fence around the back of her house. She spotted him and tore out of her backdoor screaming like a banshee for him to get off of her property, that she would call the police. His life had flashed before his eyes. She was like every horrible witch from the fairy tales crossed with a miserable old vulture, waiting for her prey to wither and die so she could pick at its carcass.

“Dad, please no. Please.”

“Oh, she's not so bad,” he said. He'd never thrown a frisbee in to her backyard.

“Dad, I'll do anything else. Just not that. Please.” He was begging now. He never begged for anything, but his life was at stake.

“Alright. Ummm... Oh, I know; Mr. Powell is moving out of his house. Why don't you see if he needs any help?”

“Fine. Okay. Good.” He was relieved. Mr. Powell fell into the grumpy old person category, too, but he was far less of a threat. Byron had tramped through his flowerbeds a couple times on accident, probably once on the same day that he'd thrown the frisbee into Mrs. Brightman's yard. Mr. Powell pulled him aside and gave him a stern, 10-minute talk about respecting others' property, but Byron would take that any day over having Mrs. Brightman and her sweated Yorkie peck at his corpse.

“It won't be so bad. Now get back inside, it's cold out here.” His father turned to the work bench. Byron mouthed a “thank you” at the back of his head for sparing him before

heading back inside, intent on collapsing on to his naked mattress. Maybe he would call Julia and tell her what happened after a recovery nap.

He passed the laundry room and noticed the dryer was running. His mother must have put his sheets in there. She hated when wet clothes were left in the wash too long, complaining that they smelled musty. The door to his parents' bedroom was ajar, so he poked his head in to thank her, but she was out cold on top of the bedspread, still in her scrubs. He felt bad for worrying her, exhausted as she was. He wanted to wake her up and apologize, and tell her that he wouldn't do it again. But he knew he would, and he knew he couldn't take back the disappointment and stress he'd caused her. Instead he grabbed the throw that rested on the back of the armchair in the corner of her room, and tossed it over her before slipping out and shutting the door gently behind him. He headed toward his room, and heard the sounds of the wobbling ceiling fan as he approached.

*“Whopita-clack... whopita-clack... whopita-clack...”*

## Sam

Sam Powell opened his barren refrigerator. Milk, expired eggs, a handful of oranges, and some leftover fettucini from dinner with the Kean's were all that remained. His stomach growled. He wanted to make a warm breakfast as he always had, but he couldn't rationalize restocking when he would be out of the house by the end of the week. He grabbed the box of donut holes perched above the freezer and took one of the oranges, and sat down at the small alcove table that would no doubt be loaded on to some truck later that afternoon.

He peeled the orange. The skin was dry and stuck to the fruit so that he had to pry it off with his fingernails. He picked at the white fibers clinging in between the segments and cleaned off all the unwanted plaque before tearing it in half and popping a piece in his mouth. It was dry and tasteless, sweet but not tart in the least, the citrus sucked away by the parched climate of the refrigerator. But then, fruit was never as good as it used to be. Apples were mealy and weak, blueberries mushy. No one took good care of anything anymore. Produce was grown to four times its natural size and torn from the plant when it was still green, starving it of the flavor and nutrients that the earth could give it, so that when it got to the supermarket it was little more than a glorified lump of roughage.

But Sam's garden was different. Sam's garden was full of vegetables. Red tomatoes, crisp lettuce, meaty eggplants, all of it rich and ripe and nutritious when he harvested it. He took pride in his yard, which was smattered with azaleas, snap dragons, rose bushes, and ferns of every kind, countless plants that he and Dina had picked out together. He'd enjoyed pulling weeds in the sticky summer mornings and spreading new mulch in the springtime with his wife by his side.



Sam looked out the sliding glass door at his garden, which was barren now. There'd already been several frosts and the plants were brown and disintegrating, but he still found them beautiful. This was just another thing he would have to give up. At the retirement home he might be able to have a sad houseplant, or worse, a window box full of marigolds. He might as well get used to ugly, rectangular bushes and sickly looking tulips, because he had a feeling that the people at Golden Heights knew nothing about landscaping.

He heard a knock at the door, and thought maybe the delivery man had come with the replacement light fixture for the kitchen. He swept the powdered sugar off of the table and dumped it in the sink before heading for the front door.

"Hello?" It wasn't the delivery man. It was that boy across the street. The one who used to tramp through his gardens.

"Uh, hi, Mr. Powell." He was sheepish. Sam suspected he'd come to apologize for messing up something else in his yard.

"Yes? What do you want?"

"I was wondering if I could help you with anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're moving out." The boy pointed to the "sold" sign erected in the middle of the lawn. "So, I figured I could help you."

"Why would you want to do that? Who put you up to this?" Sam had never known this boy to be charitable, or really known anything about him at all. But no teenager he'd ever encountered would wake up at 9 AM on a Sunday and offer to move boxes out of the goodness of his heart.

"Uh... My dad."

“Well, tell him I don’t need any help.” Sam tried to close the door, but the boy kept talking to him.

“Please. I really have to help you.”

“I don’t see a gun at your back, so I think you’re fine to leave, kid.”

“If I don’t help you, I have to help Mrs. Brightman.” An alarm went off in Sam’s head. No matter how many seedlings this kid had trampled, he didn’t deserve to spend the afternoon under the tutelage of May Brightman. This was the woman who allowed her awful little dog to poo on his rosebushes.

“Ah, I see now. What’d you do? Get in some type of trouble?”

“Yeah, I-”

“I don’t want to know. Just come in.” He opened the glass door wider so that the boy could slip in.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“It’s Byron. I’ve lived across the street from you for ten years.”

“Oh. Right, right.” Sam didn’t feel the need to exchange niceties with his neighbors. They lived their lives, he lived his. Except Mrs. Brightman, of course, who tried to live her own life and everyone else’s, too.

“I guess you can work in the basement.” Sam didn’t trust him up in the bedrooms, where Dina’s jewelry and all his spare cash were. The basement had little more than shelves full of tools and old board games from when the kids were around. Those things were going to Kate’s house, and if a game of Yahtzee turned up missing it wouldn’t kill him. He pointed Byron in the direction of the brown carpeted stairs, crunchy from months without a good vacuuming. It was too difficult for Sam to carry a sweeper on the staircase, anymore.

“I want you to pack up the stuff down there carefully,” Sam looked the boy in the eye. “Don’t just throw it all in one box. I want the gardening equipment in one box, and the puzzles in another-”

“Yeah, I got it.” The kid started down the stairs.

“Hey, did you hear me?” Sam shouted.

“Yeah, put the stuff with the other stuff. It’s not that hard,” Byron’s voice trailed off. He would check on the boy later.

Sam headed upstairs. He still needed to pack up much of his own room, and didn’t feeling like making small talk with the neighbor boy. He slid his loafers on to each step, careful not to slip on the slick wood. Kate had tried to convince him to put in a carpet runner some years earlier, but he insisted on keeping the stairs bare. He’d lived in the house 45 years, after all, and it hadn’t needed a carpet runner before. He clutched the wood railing, which was worn from four pairs of hands sliding up and down it over the years. He’d meant to put a new coat of finish on it before the new owners moved in; he took pride in the house and wanted it to show. But he just hadn’t had the time— or the energy. Kate told him there was no point in doing any final touch-ups, that the house was sold and he was doing work on a home that was not his anymore. He didn’t listen. It was his home as long as he lived in it, and he would treat it as such.

His clothes were nearly packed up, besides the things he’d set aside to wear for the week. Dina’s clothes were left untouched, as they had been for two years. The clothes she wore to the hospital were still in her day bag, sitting on the floor on her side of the closet. Her jewelry was still in its box on the dresser, her favorite pair of jade earrings sitting on top of everything else. She’d worn them to John’s birthday dinner the week before it happened, one of the last times

he'd been in town. He missed his son, but Sam understood why he stayed away. Texas was a far trip, his mother was gone now, and his dad was old and grouchy.

He slid open the closet doors, knowing he had to start boxing up her things. Each shirt and dress hung just so on her side. He thumbed one of her nightgowns. It was baby blue, with tiny, purple violets raining down the flannel fabric, which was pilling from all the times he'd accidentally thrown it in the wash with the towels. One of her few pet peeves was how completely incompetent he was at laundry, even after 51 years of marriage. The gown had seen many early morning breakfasts and late night TV specials, and a few sick days at home. He didn't want someone else wearing it to fetch the morning paper or water the plants on the back porch, but he couldn't hold on to it. His closet at the home would hardly be big enough to fit his slacks and button-ups, let alone his late wife's pajama collection.

He began pulling down clothing in the closet. A mint green jacket that she was fond of wearing to church, a tiny dragonfly pin still attached to the shoulder. The floral dress she'd bought in the Bahamas when they went on a cruise. A sweater she'd received for Christmas the year before she passed that she never got to wear. The price tag was still on it. Sam folded each of these things and placed them in one of his many packing boxes. Everything seemed so small, with narrow shoulders and sleeves that would probably only come to his elbow.

She'd always been a petite woman. She was 5 foot 1 and 120 pounds the day he married her and 5 foot 1 and 120 pounds as a 75-year-old. He was only 5 foot 11, but seemed giant next to her, especially after years of her cooking had given him a sizable belly. But now he was thin again, as he had been before he met her. Friends and family complimented him on the weight loss, and he knew he was healthier for it, but the gut had never felt like baggage to him; it was a sign of his wife's good graces. Even though Dina ate her own cooking and loved a good double

cheeseburger, her waistline never suffered. The biggest she'd ever been was when she was pregnant with John, who was a whopping 9 pounds and 4 ounces when he was born. The smallest she'd ever seemed was the day she died, her tiny frame swallowed up by the huge, white hospital bed.

He thought about that day all the time. She'd been fine the evening before. They'd gone to a cook-out at the Fink's house. She made her famous hot wings for the occasion, and they sat in their backyard late into the night playing round after round of Hearts, laughing so long and hard that Dina almost wet her pants. But the next day there was something different about her. She moved around much slower than usual, and wasn't her typical bubbly self. She said she didn't feel well and complained of a headache. Sam offered to take her to the doctor, but she said she was fine, and laid down to take a nap on the couch. A few hours later when he tried to wake up for dinner, she wouldn't come to. Panicked, he called an ambulance.

The doctor told him she'd suffered a severe stroke, and she would be lucky to make it through the night. Sam was in shock. His wife had a clean bill of health, and was seldom sick. The only medication she was on was for her blood pressure. She was not the type to suffer from a stroke. Sam wasn't even entirely sure that was his wife lying in the hospital bed. She was pale and shriveled, and looked almost alien hooked up to all those tubes and IV's. But it was Dina, and she had had a stroke. And she was dying. He and Kate said goodbye to her that night around 1:30 in the morning, each of them holding a cold, white hand.

And now here he was, packing up her clothes and moving out of the house they'd picked out 45 years ago. They'd put down the blue and grey tiles in the half bath and ripped out the carpet in the living room together. They'd put in the extra window in John's room so that he could play on the floor in the sunlight. They picked out the wallpaper that surrounded Sam now

in the bedroom, all white with green vines reaching up toward the ceiling. None of these things would be with him in the retirement home. And Dina wouldn't be with him, either.

He wanted to keep a few of her things, but he knew he wouldn't do anything with a nightgown or a sweater. They would sit at the bottom of his closet and collect dust. As much as it pained him to do it, he knew donating the clothes was the right thing to do. He filled the box to the brim, and on top he placed the mint green jacket. There was the little dragonfly pin, still glimmering on the padded shoulder. This was something that wouldn't take up room in his closet. He plucked it off and dropped it into his shirt pocket before sealing up the box.

He headed down stairs to check on the boy, worried that he may have ransacked the basement or made off with some of his silverware. He teetered down the basement stairs, which had no railing. He had to brace himself on the wood paneled walls on either side of him. When he reached the bottom, he caught Byron squatting on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, crap. Sorry.” He stood up, shutting the large book he'd been looking at and sticking it in the box next to him.

“Hold on, what's that?” Sam peered in the box and saw one of his family photo albums. “Oh, I was wondering where that was.” He stooped down to pick it up.

“This is from our trip to the Grand Canyon four years ago,” he said, leafing through the pictures.

“Looks kind of boring,” said Byron.

“You don't know what you're talking about, kid. It's magnificent.” Sam showed him a picture of him and his family standing in front of the canyon.

“See? It's beautiful.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s pretty cool. Is that your wife?” He said, pointing to Dina in the oversized, bug-eyed sunglasses she had been so fond of. She was standing next to a much heftier Sam.

“Yes. She passed away a couple years ago.”

“I know. I remember her.”

“You do?” Sam was surprised. He wondered if Dina knew who Byron was, if they’d ever had a conversation, or if she’d ever yelled at him for messing up the flower beds.

“Yeah. She used to give me lemonade sometimes when I was playing outside” he said.

“Oh, okay.” He didn’t know that about his wife.

“Are these your kids?” Byron pointed.

“Well, that there’s my son, John. He lives in Texas,” he explained. “And that’s my daughter, Kate. And that’s her partner, Nicki.” He was always wary about telling people his daughter was gay. It didn’t bother him, but it bothered some other people quite a lot. And it bothered him that it bothered them.

“Oh, that’s cool,” Byron said. He turned back to the shelves, not seeming to care either way about this stranger’s sexual preferences. Sam liked him a little more for it.

“She should be stopping by here shortly,” he said. “Maybe you’ll run into each other.”

“Okay. Cool,” Byron said, tossing some yard gloves into the box behind him. Sam picked up a few trowels, wondering if he should take one with him just in case he got the chance to do a little gardening in the retirement home. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the boy frisbee something big into the box.

“Hey, wait a minute,” he said as Byron threw half a bag of potting soil behind him. It thumped into the box, and Sam heard the sound of tiny grains rushing out and pattering on the cardboard.

“Oops.”

Sam lifted the bag before it could spill anymore, and found his wife’s old gardening hat underneath it, the top of it smashed from the weight of the potting soil.

“Damn it.” He brushed off the hat and pushed out the dent, attempting to reshape it.

“Watch what you’re doing.”

“Sorry,” Byron said.

“Carelessness, that’s what it is.” Her initials were written on the inside, almost worn off from the sweat of her forehead. She had worn it almost everyday in the warm seasons.

“I’m sorry, man.”

Sam placed the hat back on the shelf, and began unpacking things from the box that was now filled with dirt.

“It’s almost 10:30. I think you should go.”

“But I’ve only been here an hour.”

“Tell your dad I didn’t need anymore help.”

“Okay, okay. Jeez. I said I was sorry.” Byron jogged up the stairs.

Sam pulled out toys, Easter baskets, old books, and countless other things from the box, brushing dirt away from each item. None of it was important, but he still didn’t want the boy treating it like garbage. An old Etch-A-Sketch that the kids had drawn pictures on, a bag of yarn from when Dina had taken up crocheting one winter, the jump rope that Kate liked to tie her little brother up with. These had been their things.



He heard the front door open upstairs, but instead of hearing the thud of the boy leaving, he heard conversation. Sam figured Kate had arrived, and hobbled up the stairs to shoo the boy away and greet his daughter.

“Hey, Dad.” She kissed him on the cheek. “I was just meeting your neighbor, Byron.”

“Oh. Yeah,” he said. “Did you have an okay drive over?”

“The drive was fine,” she said, but she looked a little uncomfortable. She had always been terrible at hiding her emotions and Sam could tell when something was on her mind.

“Is something wrong?”

“I ran into Mrs. Brightman on my way in here,” she said. “But it’s alright, don’t worry about it.” Mrs. Brightman had given his daughter trouble before.

“Did she say anything to you?”

“Not outright, but she was pretty rude.” Kate usually took things like this in stride and brushed them off, but, like any father, Sam was bothered when someone picked on his little girl. Especially someone like Mrs. Brightman.

“I’m sorry, honey.” He offered what sympathy he could.

“Wait, why was she rude? Is it because you’re gay?” Byron asked. Kate gave her father a bewildered look.

“I told him about you,” said Sam. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Well, yes, Byron,” Kate said. “Mrs. Brightman isn’t very... open minded. I guess.” She was understanding. Byron looked offended.

“Are you kidding me? She’s such a bitch.”

“You’ve got to understand that-” Kate started, but she never got to finish.

“No. She’s a bigot. A homophobic bigot.” He was angry. “She has no right to judge you or anyone else.”

Sam tried to hide a smile that was growing on his face. He may have been upset with the boy for doing a half-assed packing job, but he appreciated his spunk, and he was delighted to hear such words used against his neighbor.

“She’s definitely ornery,” Kate agreed. “But there’s really no use in trying to reason with someone like that. Anyway, I won’t keep you any longer.” She reached out for Byron’s hand. “It was nice to meet you, Byron.”

“Nice to meet you, too.” He returned the handshake. “And hey, if you want me to go piss on her front porch or something, I’d be happy to.” He turned to Sam.

“That won’t be necessary,” Kate cut in before Sam could take him up on the offer. He himself had thought about peeing on her porch many different times.

“Alright, but you know it’d be pretty awesome.” Byron started out the door, but Sam stopped him. He wasn’t done with him.

“Hey, kid. Wait.”

“Yeah?”

Sam retrieved his wallet from his back pocket and pulled out a twenty dollar bill.

“Here, for your all the trouble you went to.” He offered it to him. Byron looked at it like it was some kind of trick.

“But, I hardly did anything.”

“Sure you did. You earned it.” He pushed it toward him. “Just don’t tell your old man, all right?”

The boy smiled and took the bill.

“Okay,” he said. “Thanks, man.” He gave Sam a little tip of the head before pushing out the door and returning to his own house.

Sam smiled, and reached up to feel the little dragon fly pin in his front pocket.

## May

May Brightman called to her 6 pound Yorkie.

“Bits! Bitsy! Time for your walk!” The little dog scuttled out from the dining room, her tags jingling and stumpy tail wagging. May pulled open the drawer of her 18th century antique hutch, the one she’d won at an auction when she outbid a slippery young businessman. She loved the hutch, but she loved how red his face had become when she swiped it out from under him more.

“Which one should we wear today?” She shuffled through a pile of tiny dog jackets in an array of colors. There was a white one dotted with little red hearts just for Valentine’s Day. There was one that looked like a Christmas tree, with tiny bulbs that lit up. She even had a little dog poncho for rainy spring days.

“Ah, this one is perfect,” she said, pulling out one covered in brilliant orange and yellow foliage. She enveloped the little dog in the sweater, pulling each of her legs out and fluffing her ears when she was done. Bitsy yapped and pranced as May unfurled her tiny pink leash. She was impatient to get outside and do her business.

“Hold on, hold on. Mama’s almost ready.” May grabbed her own jacket, an old, knee-length parka in cornflower blue, her favorite color. She checked the thermometer outside the front window.

“42,” she said to Bitsy. “Better take a scarf.”

She selected her old favorite, a short grey one. It was 100% wool and terribly itchy, but it wrapped around her tiny neck exactly twice, and tucked into the front of her coat just as she liked it. When she felt she and Bitsy were dressed in accordance with the weather, she hooked the leash on her little dog and they made their way down the hallway.

“Oh! We almost forgot George,” she said, producing a wooden yardstick from behind the front door.

“There, now we’re ready.”

“The three of them set out in the cold, clear morning on Brigadier Street, just as they did everyday. May toted George like a cane while Bitsy struck out ahead of them on her long, pink leash.

“Which way should we go today, Bits?” This was the decision that faced the little dog on a daily basis: go straight up the street, or walk around the bulbous end of the cul-de-sac and take the other side. Bitsy chose the longer route, pulling May around the loop. May let her choose where she wanted to do her business; she felt it was a common courtesy.

The Small’s house sat right across the street from the Brightman’s, and the two buildings stared each other down across the expanse of concrete. The Small’s had white siding that had grown dirty and dull over the years, and black, utilitarian shutters. Decor was sparse, save a pair of little cement bunnies in the barren mulch and a pathetic set of wind chimes on the front porch. The Brightman house, on the other hand, was painted in a delightful pastel yellow and donned cornflower blue shutters, May’s favorite color. She felt her home screamed of sunshine and gentility and good taste. The Small’s on the other hand, looked like a tired, puritanical hell hole.

By the time they made their way around the bottom cul-de-sac, Bitsy had started to slow down, sniffing around for somewhere to relieve herself. May was pleased to watch her pick a spot right in the middle of the Small’s front lawn, which was already speckled with patches of brown, dead grass.

“Good girl,” May murmured as she watched her dog squat down. She didn’t pull a bag out of her pocket or get a shovel ready. She didn’t even bring poop extracting supplies. She never

had. Bitsy could poop wherever she wanted, but May Brightman was not, under any circumstances, going to pick it up.

Bitsy finished and kicked up the grass behind her as if she were a race car burning rubber at the starting line. The Small's front door burst open, startling both of them.

"C'mon, Bits. Let's go." The little dog had not finished anointing her poo, but May pulled her away from the scene of the crime. Bill small lumbered out on to the front porch, his great belly jiggling at them in protest.

"Hey!" he shouted. "You gonna clean that up?"

"Clean what up?" May thought Bill Small was a class A idiot and figured she could get out of the situation without having to touch poop.

"The shit that little shit just took in my front yard, that's what." He started down the driveway toward them.

"You can't prove that it's Bitsy's," she said. "It's probably some other dog's poop." She motioned at the dog pile with George as if he were an oversized wand and she could cast a spell to make the feces disappear.

"What do you think I am, an idiot? I watched it do that." May smirked at him. He'd taken the words right out of her mouth.

"It's a *she*. Bitsy is a *she*."

"I don't care what the hell *she* is. She's *your* dog and she crapped in *my* yard. So, clean it up." He was but ten feet away from them now, and Bitsy started to bark in protest.

"Shut up." Bill pointed at the dog, which just made her yaps and snarls more furious and high pitched.

“You’re scaring her,” May said, bending down to scratch her ears. “There there, Bitsy. It’s okay.”

“Mark my words, woman. You clean up that poop or so help me God... You know what? I’ll go get you a bag. That’s what I’ll do.” He marched back up the drive way and into the house, shutting the door behind him. May turned on her heel and continued her walk up the street. No one made May Brightman clean up poop.

She passed the Greene’s house, which was always well kept in May’s opinion. The lawn was thick and lush, the hedges always had fresh mulch, and Don Greene made an excellent lawn ornament in the summer months. She knew Jennifer had been one of the “anonymous” persons that filed a complaint to the police department at May’s expense. She knew because she’d caught Jennifer watching her when she was borrowing flowers from Sam Powell’s garden. And she always had such a guilty face.

May didn’t mind Jennifer, though. She was one of the only neighbors to even attempt politeness with May. And she sort of felt bad for her. Both her and Don had their heads so far up their own asses that they failed to notice what was going on with their own kid. Countless times May had watched their older daughter sneak out of the house to meet up with the punk kid who lived up the street. She didn’t think it could possibly be a secret to anyone else living on the street either, as the two of them usually just had sex in her little sports car, parked right in front of her mother and father’s house. It was a shame, really. Those Greene’s were such Bible thumpers, and here their daughter was running around like a little tramp.

She moved on, but not before letting Bitsy christen their perfect grass.

“This is for that daughter of yours,” she snickered. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Bill Small come back out of his house. Before he could even address her, she started up the street.

“Hey, come back here,” he said. “You’re gonna pick this up.” She could hear the rustle of the plastic bags he carried, but she kept walking, ignoring his demands.

“I know you can hear me, you rotten old bitch.”

May Brightman had developed a thick skin over the years, and vile, crude insults from pathetic men like Bill Small no longer fazed her. It was really just another strike against him in her book. Engaging in a screaming match with him would have put her down at his level, and she preferred to take the high road. Instead she held up her middle finger, signaling to her neighbor that she was done with the conversation, and that he could pick up the poop himself if he so desired.

“Goddamnit.” She heard the slam of his front door echo between the houses. He didn’t have a thick skin like her. She would have never given up that easily.

May, Bitsy, and George continued their stroll up the street, the chilly air biting at them. Even though Bitsy was bundled up in a sweater, May could tell she was still cold by the stiff movements of her joints. She wasn’t the young pup she once was, and often only wanted to take a short spin around the block when the weather was bad.

“Don’t worry, Bits. We’ll be home soon.”

A little ways up the street was the Roy’s house, home of a family that she had little opinion about. As far as she could tell, the mother worked in the medical field and the father did some kind of demanding 9 to 5, though she’d seen his truck in the driveway quite often in recent



weeks. And their rotten son liked to screw the girl down the street. They weren't a very interesting family.

But, their yard was looking a little on the neglected side. The grass was tall and overgrown compared to the neat and trimmed yards around it. It was moments like these when George had his spot in the limelight. City code dictated specific standards on grass height, and May and George made the perfect team policing this rule in the spring and summer. She'd reported more than a few violations in her time on the street.

"You know George, he can't tell a lie," she'd say to whichever outraged offender had gotten a call or visit from the city workers. They may have been angry with her, but she was doing them a favor. And their sloppy yards made the neighborhood look tacky and brought down property values.

But, alas, it was November, and the frost had already halted the growth of the Roy's front yard. She would be lucky if it was 6 inches tall, let alone the 10 she needed to raise alarm with the city. Maybe when the spring came Mr. Roy would forget that his grass was no longer frozen and May would get a chance to measure it again.

Bitsy was shivering, and no longer struck out ahead of May, but instead hobbled behind her, using her owner as a shield from the November wind.

"Alright, Bits. Let's head home." She started to cross the street, but was bypassed by a little hatchback pulling into Sam Powell's driveway. It had a "Pride" sticker displayed on the bumper, sticking out like a sore, rainbow thumb on an otherwise muted gray car.

"Oh, terrific." She'd met Kate before. She hated Sam; he was a grumpy, crusty old curmudgeon. But she hadn't thought twice about his daughter, whom she found mildly pleasant,

until she mentioned her “girlfriend.” May didn’t understand it. Kate didn’t look like that type of woman at all.

May reached the other side of the street as Kate was getting out of her car. She opened her backdoor and began pulling out flattened cardboard boxes.

“Hello, Mrs. Brightman.” She waved.

“Hello.”

“How are you today?”

May stopped and picked up a cold Bitsy to keep her warm.

“I’m fine,” she said. She didn’t return the polite sentiment and ask Kate how she was. Kate could tell her if she felt like it.

“Oh, that’s good to hear. I’m doing well myself.” She pulled out more boxes. “Just helping Dad move out.

“Is he moving in with you and that girlfriend of yours?” The Powell’s had always seemed a little strange themselves, so it didn’t surprise May that their daughter turned out the way she was. She wondered if that dead wife of his had known what her daughter had become before she passed.

“No.” She looked put off by the question. “He’s moving into a retirement community. And she’s my partner, not my girlfriend.”

“What’s the difference?” She scowled.

“I’m committed to her,” she said. “We can’t get married yet, but we want to someday, when it becomes legal in Ohio.”

“Hmm,” May said. “I think we’re a long way down the road from that.” She put down Bitsy and started to walk away. There was nothing left to say to this woman.

“Hopefully not,” Kate said. “Bye, Mrs. Brightman!” She shouted after her.

“Bye,” she said in a curt tone, probably not loud enough for Kate to hear. It was hard to be rude to her when she insisted on being so polite.

May and Bitsy and George made it back to the house and took solace in the warmth. May always kept the heat on 80 degrees, making the house seem like a tropical paradise next to the cold November outdoors.

“Oh, it’s almost 11,” she said to Bitsy as she consulted her old grandfather clock. “I’d better get moving.” Without taking off her coat, she went to the kitchen, retrieving a container of her world famous tomato soup from the refrigerator. She’d made it just the day before, so it was still fresh. She popped it in the microwave and gathered a few more things: a banana, just ripe, but still a little green; a sleeve of salty crackers, a thermos full of two percent milk. These were the essentials, the things that she always brought. She packed all of it in a cooler, and waited for the soup to finish in the microwave. The timer sounded three short beeps, and May pulled out the container of warm soup, the inside dripping with condensation.

“Ooh, that’s hot,” she said to Bitsy, who was at her heels everywhere she went in the house. She nestled the soup in the cooler next to the thermos and shut the lid.

“Alright, Bits. Mama will be back soon. Be a good girl.” May headed out the front door with the cooler, the little terrier following her to the threshold.

“No, stay here.” She blocked Bitsy from leaving and shut the door behind her. Bitsy began to yap. May felt bad for her dog, who had pretty severe separation anxiety, but she didn’t regret all the years of spoiling that caused it. She got into her old black Cadillac and strapped a seatbelt around the cooler in the passenger’s seat next to her, not wanting to risk a spill. She backed out of the driveway and sputtered up the street. The old car had a hard time getting up the

hill, especially when it was cold. She was lucky the hospice center was so close to her neighborhood.

After a stressful drive across Jones street where a van almost broadsided her when *she* had the right of way at the left turn, and a close call with a pedestrian who started crossing the street too soon after the light had turned red, she made it to the hospice parking lot. She parallel parked across two spaces, not wanting to risk having someone else park too close for her to get back into her car comfortably. She made her way to the front door, cooler in hand.

“Hello, Mrs. Brightman,” one of the nurses greeted her when she arrived. “How are you today?”

“Oh, I’m just fine, deary. How are you today?”

“I’m doing good.” She waved her through the security check. May headed down the hall, waving at all the staff that she recognized. There was Janet and Rita and Dean, all nurses, and Vern the janitor, and Whitney, who brought around lunch.

“Herb’s lucky to have you,” Whitney said, looking down at the tray she was carrying. “The cooks said this was meat loaf, but I’m not convinced. I’ll bet you’ve got something delicious in there,” she said, eyeing the cooler.

“Oh, just something I whipped up,” May said, beaming. “You have a good rest of your day now.”

May turned the corner into room 142.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Herb Brightman said when he saw his wife. “I’m so glad to see you.” His voice was weak and hoarse. He tried to sit up, but she stopped him.

“Don’t strain yourself,” she said. “Here.” She fiddled with the controls next to him and folded the bed into a sitting position like an expert.

“Thank you.” He smiled at her. He treated everyday that she brought him lunch like a special occasion, even though she hadn’t missed a day in four months. She tucked a napkin into the collar of his hospital gown and took the soup out of the cooler.

“Let me know if this is too hot,” she said, spooning him a mouthful.

“It’s just fine. It’s delicious. Did you bring-”

“Of course,” she said. She crumbled a few of the crackers into the soup, making sure the pieces were tiny and soft. “How are you feeling today?”

“I’ve been better,” he chuckled. “How are you? How’s Bits?”

“Bitsy is fine, but I think her arthritis is getting worse. I’ll get her into the vet soon,” she said, offering him more soup.

“How are you?”

“I’m okay.” A lump formed in her throat. She wanted so much to see a new vitality in her husband every time she rounded the corner into his room. Some days he did look better, but most days he looked worse. His skin had become gray and clammy and he only stayed awake for a few hours at a time. After this meal she would sit with him until he fell asleep, and the next day she would come back, hoping to see some new sign of recovery in him. But she knew she wouldn’t. He would die here.

“Oh, I do have some good news,” she said, blinking back her tears. “The kids are all coming for Thanksgiving this year.”

“All of them?”

“Yep, it’ll be a full house,” she said, smiling.

“See? They may have been a handful when they were little, but I knew having four would pay off when they started making us grandkids.” His eyes brightened.

“I think you’re right about that.” She fed him more soup. “I’m so glad we could get you a nurse so you could come home for the day.” She feared that this would be the last Thanksgiving he would spend with them. She’d wanted to take Herb home and take care of him herself for the day, even offering to buy a hospital bed just for the occasion. The doctors told her it wasn’t possible, that he needed constant monitoring. So, a nurse was joining them for Thanksgiving dinner. It wasn’t ideal, but it put Herb where he belonged, surrounded by his family. Sophie, the youngest granddaughter, was only two years old, and May wanted her to have some memories with her grandfather.

“I’m glad, too, sweetheart.”

He finished eating and May cleaned him up, wiping soup from his withered lips and readjusting his pillows so he could have a comfortable afternoon nap. The nurses had learned that when May was there, she would be the one to take care of him.

“Will you sit with me awhile?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said, grabbing his hand. They turned their attention to the television. Some terrible soap opera about a beach house was playing.

“Do you have the remote? This is dreadful,” she said. The woman on screen was crying about her broken engagement.

“No. He has it.” Herb pointed to the curtain next to him. “He’ll never give it to me.”

“We’ll see about that.” May got up and peered around the curtain. His roommate was sound asleep, the remote for the television nestled between his chest and his folded hands. He was guarding the television programming with his life.

May crept over and began wiggling the controller, watching the slumbering man’s breathing for signs of disturbance.

“Don’t wake him up,” Herb said. “You’ll be sorry if you wake him up.”

“Shhh. I won’t.” She continued to pull on the remote. His grip on it was tight and she wasn’t making much progress.

“Well, it’s not or never.” In one swift movement, she yanked the remote away from him, just missing his chin by inches. He grumbled and smacked his lips, but otherwise stayed asleep. May came out from behind the curtain waving the remote.

“That’s my girl,” Herb said. May handed the controls off to him and sat down in the armchair next to his bed. He chose an afternoon news program, and the two of them sat together until he drifted off to sleep.

