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Grayscale

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Grayscale

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BY

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Emily Bowers

Critical Essay: *Grayscale*

I was on a run one day at sunset when I saw the bare branches of the tops of trees set against the gray sky. I saw that and thought, “I wonder what it would be like to see life in grayscale.” My novella emerged from that moment.

The novella falls within the realms of realism. In the broadest sense, the realist writer creates a “hypothetical version of the real world” (Levy 742). Realism in literature attempts to mirror situations in daily life, emphasizes but does not dramatize the quotidian, and highlights everyday issues. From that definition, my novella fits nicely in Auerbach’s notion of realism as mimesis (Ronen 3). However, as Ronen, Peterson, Mortimer, Barthes, Althusser and other critics have noted, realism is ambiguous beyond that singular definition. Realism could be mimetic in the use of realistic situations or descriptions or both. Or, it could, as Althusser claims, make ideology the most visible aspect of the text over social and historical concerns (Moriarty 1).

I did not originally set out to write a realist novella, but David’s story emerged as a result of my own literary influences, who are among those that built the foundation of the genre. Specifically, the novels *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo and *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas have helped my writing take on the task of capturing the complexity of a single character and situate him realistically throughout the novella. Each of those novels uses a strong main character as a platform to discuss social issues.

David Foster Wallace is “less interested in ‘self-conscious wordplay and the violation of narrative conventions’ than in ‘representing the world we all more or less share’” (364). The problem with that idea, which puts the realist novel in a difficult place according to Philip Roth, is that there is an “increasingly complex American social reality” which “outpaces the novelist’s

imagination” (369). My novella returns to the most basic idea of realism as a representation of everyday situations in one type of American reality, that is, the protagonist’s, David’s.

David’s story is conveyed through fiction not because his story is not true but because I had an idea that fit the genre. I write nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, which this novella blends. There are sections, such as one of the dream sequences and the scene with the homeless man, that are based on my real experiences. And in other areas, especially in descriptions, the novella carries an almost lyrical quality like a poem. In a Paris Review interview, James Salter calls the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction to be arbitrary (1). Salter claims that “most great novels and stories come not from things that are entirely invented, but from perfect knowledge and close observation. To say they are made up is an injustice in describing them” (1). But David’s story took the shape of a novella for a reason that was not arbitrary. While I wanted to do a novel originally, I thought back to one of the first pieces of literature I ever read at Eastern as an undergraduate, Boccaccio’s Decameron. As Tony Whedon explains, the novella originated with Boccaccio’s Decameron. The strength of this work, he notes, is that the stories “intertwine to provide color and brilliance to their design” (565). He claims, “Novellas are not so much told as dreamed aloud; they inhabit a realm of half-shapes and shadowy implication” (565). And if I look again to Joseph Conrad’s novella, *Heart of Darkness*, I hear the drum beats like the “beating of a heart--the heart of a conquering darkness ” and see the dark forests and the fog on the waters, and I am reminded of how a novella makes me feel its presence with the senses while I read the plot (204).

Milan Kundera explains that all great works achieve a “new art of novelistic counterpoint (which can blend philosophy, narrative, and dream into one music” (65). Though he’s speaking directly about the novel form, I think this also applies to a novella. The compactness of a novella

does not allow for many digressions or misappropriations of form or content. The novella is to the novel as microfiction is to the short story. However, when weaved into a unique tapestry, the art of the novella is that it blends the idea, the dream, the abstract, and the story into an almost musical composition that at the same time confronts all the senses.

While colorblindness is common, seeing life in grayscale is actually an extremely rare affectation called monochromacy. In the interest of the extended metaphor that seeing life in grayscale brings to the tragedies in this novella, the writing is infused with gray images to show the reality of living with monochromacy. David's condition takes on a wistful air, seeming more like an unfocused photograph he longs to see clearer rather than a medical condition that causes him suffering. In this way, David's focalization and vision can more seamlessly mirror the grayness of his present life, which is his reality.

I shift focus from the colorblindness to the relationships David has and doesn't have throughout the novella. He uses his colorblindness as a shield, focusing on it early in the novella as a way to hide from reality. The reality is this: His wife and unborn child died in a horrific car accident. The novella takes place approximately three years after the accident. With a reasonable amount of time already passed since the accident, I thought that a reader would expect David to have grieved long enough and, therefore, be able to move on with his life. I became interested in the topic of loss originally when I read C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, a book he wrote immediately after the loss of his wife. In my novella, I balance the tone with my serious thematic intentions, which seemed a daunting task. It was one of my biggest struggles writing this novella because I have always had a predilection for wordiness, which affects my tone at times to seem too antiquated and romantic.

Even in the novella's conception, I thought of David's story with a Wordsworthian picturesque image in mind. I imagined my novella as the ruin in "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour." In the poem, the narrator remembers and looks at a ruin he used to visit. He describes that of all the things we see in the world, "Of eye, and ear,--both what they half create,/And what perceive; well pleased to recognise/In nature and the language of the sense/ The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,/The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ Of all my moral being" (Wordsworth). The narrator completes the image of the ruin in his mind, never forgetting the joy and contentment he feels by converging the senses with the memory. Likewise, David's story begins after past events have already affected him deeply, and the dog, Woody, and his friend, Tommy, emerge as anchors. For that reason, I only provide hints of David's memories throughout, images and glimpses of the painful past that lift him from the solidity of his reality rather than act as positive anchors. David begins the novella as a sort of ruin, a half-existing outline of a man whom the reader cannot quite make out the full resolution of.

I also use flashbacks and dreams to create and illicit a combination of sensory and intellectual responses from the reader that makes them question the experience of reading as well as the validity of the narrator himself. In doing so, I complicate the narrative perspective even further, as it switches from first to third person, and emphasize David's emotional immobility. Also, the present tense is used throughout, but all of the dream sequences and flashbacks are appropriately in past tense. In Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*, which provides one of my favorite craft discussions, he explains that there is nothing more obvious and tangible than the present moment, and yet, it is also the most elusive (24). According to Kundera, "All the sadness of life lies in that fact. In the course of a single second, our senses of sight, of hearing, of smell,

register (knowingly or not) a swarm of events, and a parade of sensations and ideas passes through our heads. Each instant represents a little universe, irrevocably forgotten in the next instant” (24-5). David is consumed by memories of Catherine and the past, but he only succumbs to the effects of these memories when he focuses on the gray that exists in his vision of everyday life. For example, a memory is usually sparked by references to gray images, such as when David is walking and sees the trees against the gray sky or the gray sidewalk against the darker soil. Showing the readers David’s clouded, gray vision metaphorically while at the same time bombarding them with visually curious rhetorical effects, such as the shifts between present and past, dreams and reality, first and third person narration, monochromacy and color identifications, the reader is swarmed with a “parade of sensations and ideas” (Kundera 24-5).

Because I provide the reader with a sense of emotional heaviness, a weight on the narrator’s heart, the flashback chapter to Catherine’s and her unborn child’s death is something expected, and therefore, the reader sees it and yet is already prepared and perhaps not as affected by it. It is as Kundera relates the terminal paradox that is the end itself: “When a phenomenon announces in advance its imminent disappearance, many of us hear the news and perhaps even regret it. But when the agony draws to a close, we are already looking elsewhere. The death becomes invisible” (41-2). The death is itself fleeting throughout the novel even as David begins to find himself more alive with the dog and Tommy. And yet, because that flashback chapter does not come in the form of a smoothly transitioned vision or dream like the other flashes in the novella, it visually appears as abrupt, a shock for the readers. So, the reader will be visually conflicted with the suddenness of the change while at the same time prepared for the death of Catherine and her unborn child. However, that abruptness may serve as a barrier or delay for the

preparedness, allowing readers to feel for David while still allowing them to look elsewhere for what might be a solution to David's emotional immobility.

Narration plays such a key role in this novella, and I put so much attention into it because I've always been fascinated by the way people read a text differently. For example, as a teenager, I fell in love *The Dragonlance Chronicles* by Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman. This first trilogy, which spawned over fifty other spin-off novels and trilogies (of which I've read about thirty), was the among first set of books that some of my brothers and I read and could talk about together. I was fascinated by the fact that even though the language may explicitly describe a character, setting, or situation in one way, our readings of the world we had placed ourselves in in those novels often varied considerably.

In this novella, I switched point-of-view from first to third person several times. The prologue and first two chapters are all in first person in order to get the reader intimately connected to the narrator. However, the third chapter jolts the reader because it is in third person. After that chapter, every other chapter is in third person. According to Massimiliano Morini discussion of first person narration, "who speaks is who sees, and there is no legitimate escape from the single perspective" aside from the overdone tropes like letters and such (598). As a craft choice, it is a prison for the text. Through "homodiegetic" or "autodiegetic" perspective, as first person narration can be called, a text conflates the "experiencing self" with the "narrating," thereby allowing the narrator to also serve as a reflector for the reader (Morini 600). The fact that the narrator is also the reflector provides a double or dual perspective, which makes the text more complicated (600). When I decided to shift perspectives in the novella, I was thinking in terms of the first person perspective as both that prison for the text as well as a dualistic animal that acts as narration and reflection.

I became interested in the author as manipulator and the reader as an active presence in text. I use first and third person to complicate the narration as well as the reading experience. In Deictic Shift Theory, a reader of a narrative creates a mental model of the story world and places an image of herself somewhere in it (Cremers 448). Therefore, as Cremers explains,

The deictic center of the reader is shifted from the real-world situation to an image of himself or herself at a location within the story world. The reader experiences and interprets the story from this deictic center, which may move as the story unfolds. The author of the narrative can manipulate the deictic center of the reader by writing the story using a certain perspective (for instance, first-person narration, or represented speech) (448).

One of the ways I do this is to use spatial and time references to shift the deictic center for the reader as the story progresses. For example, from the first line of chapter one, I create a specific deictic center for the reader. The reader joins the narrator as he is “walking uphill on the sidewalk by an open area surrounded by woods.” However, I limit those references to often general terms like “by,” “near,” “top,” and “side” to force the reader to establish a more specific deictic center for themselves on their own. In this way, they are putting more work into the reading and actually become more engaged in the process. Also, they are more connected to the narrator’s psychological process in the beginning as well if they are not as secure in the descriptions of the story world.

Furthermore, if, by Cremers’ definition, the author controls the deictic center of the reader within a story or text, then suddenly shifting perspectives from first-person narration to third person narration would remove them from that deictic center momentarily. Suspension of disbelief allows a reader to experience a text as the deictic center, but what if that center not only

shifts but changes shape altogether? For this reason, the visual reading experience becomes unlike any other. I create so many perspectives for the reader that she is, as aforementioned, swarmed with a “parade of sensations and ideas” (Kundera 24-5). And in this way, the narrative point-of-view takes on that Romantic, Wordsworthian quality I was inspired by when I created David’s character.

When I first switch to third person, the reader is put in a flashback scene in which Catherine and David are happy together. The deictic shifting becomes more frequent in this chapter while it also provides deliberate clues that Catherine is moving away from David in the story, metaphorically. At the end of the first paragraph, Catherine “let go of him and walked deliberately toward the kitchen as he stood watching her walk away.” By this, the reader knows that David is not in the kitchen and that Catherine is moving away from him. The reader also is given this line as a clue that Catherine is slipping from David’s memories. With the amount of details, descriptions, and deictic shifts used in the third person narrated chapters, the reader is more immediately and clearly brought into the story as opposed to the first person narrated chapters. Through varied uses of deictic shifting in this novella, I explore and manipulate how “deeply involved in narratives” readers are (McInyre qtd. in Jeffries 71).

There are some details the reader needs, but, since the reliability of the first-person narrator is questionable, especially in light of which details are actually reflected back to the reader, the change in point-of-view to third person allows the reader necessary access to those details. In this way, the reader gets confirmation of what is true and what is not in the chapters narrated by David through the third person narration in later chapters. It is similar to how Faulkner plays with narrative perspective in “A Rose for Emily.” Faulkner’s short story shifts from first-person narration to third person plural and even to first-person collective (we). Thomas

Klein explains that this shift is necessary for the reader to have access to important details that a “real” narrator could not have reproduced” (230).

Two other specific craft choices that emphasize David’s position in the novella are the use of repetition and anaphora. Repetition is effective for remembering details in a story, but its uses in stories date back to oral storytelling. Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* uses an almost postmodern combination of written and oral storytelling, and, thereby, heavy repetition, which “disable European/European North American narratives of domination and conquest that help to enact, enhance, and enable colonialism” (Cox 6).

Anaphora is another deliberate device I employ in this novella. I’ve been fascinated by the repetition of words and phrases at the beginning of sentences since I began reading Nobel Prize speeches as a teenager. Anaphora is a speech technique that is used to make the audience remember specific points. Elie Wiesel, author of one of my favorite novellas, *Night*, used anaphora in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in such a powerful way that it absolutely inspired me. After reading the following passage, I could not imagine a more effective model for using anaphora:

One person – a Raoul Wallenberg, an Albert Schweitzer, one person of integrity, can make a difference, a difference of life and death. As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs (Wiesel 1).

Although I in no way intend to compare the tragedy David faces to the unthinkable

circumstances Wiesel faced, Wiesel's Nobel Lecture only further confirmed my thematic intents with memory and despair, something the anaphora highlights both in the process of reading and in the narrator. Wiesel uses the biblical character Job to explain, "The source of his hope was memory, as it must be ours. Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have the duty to reject despair. I remember the killers, I remember the victims, even as I struggle to invent a thousand and one reasons to hope" (Wiesel 1). My main character, David, must learn to reject despair and still remember Catherine. But even before Wiesel, anaphora was one of the oldest literary devices. It was used in the Bible, which is another of the most influential texts for me. If we look at the Psalms, for instance, phrases like "O LORD" are often repeated at the beginning of lines.

It is small details like repetition and anaphora that pull together the seams of this novella's structure. Though the alternating narrative point-of-view changes in chapters as does the shift between past and present, grayness and color, the small craft choices weave the tapestry together to help create a more unified, engaging, and complex novella centered around David's despair and emotional immobility while at the same time challenging the way in which humans idealize and hold onto memories. Memories of Catherine haunt David, but by the end of the novella, he's learned to find comfort in relationships.

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Grayscale

Prologue

I'll never forget the first time I asked my parents what color my eyes were.

A cold Sunday afternoon wind hit the station wagon with erratic, hard beats. I was three years old, and my mom was driving us home from church. Dad sat in the passenger seat recounting his favorite parts of that day's sermon, and mom just bobbed her head at the appropriate parts, glancing through her rearview mirror at me every now and then to make sure I was okay. I sat in my car seat banging dinosaur heads together like they were fighting while my mouth formed a silent roar.

As we pulled onto our street, the car grew quiet. Dad had just finished his own little sermon from what I could tell and settled into a calm soberness that signaled we were about to make it to the comfort of our home. Our house was on Monroe Avenue, and having four blocks of it to go, Dad finally turned his attention to me, grabbing the back of his seat and twisting his head to look at me just as mom glanced again in the mirror. He asked, "How was Sunday school today, Davey? Did you learn anything new?"

Looking up from my toys with eyes that must've seemed to know more than they should have, I answered, "Sam says we get to finger paint rainbows next week for Jesus. I said I don't know what a rainbow looks like, and she said that's okay, she'll help me. I got mad and she made me sit by myself."

“Oh yeah?” Dad said.

“Yeah, my friend Lucy sat with me though and she said she likes my eyes. Mommy,” I continued, this time looking directly at her eyes in the rear view mirror instead of at my dad, “What color are my eyes?”

Through the mirror, I saw something in the way she looked at me. I couldn't place it then. But now I think it could've almost been regret.

My dad yelled, “Watch out!” and the car jerked to the left as he yanked on the wheel. But my dad pulled too hard. The next thing I knew we were spinning, and if I hadn't been so scared, I would've liked it. It felt free like the merry-go-round. After a couple revolutions, Dad's side of the car smashed into a fire hydrant and we stopped.

At the hospital, they gave me a juice box while I waited to see my parents, but it was orange juice, and I wanted apple juice. They wouldn't let me stay in the room with my mom because she wasn't awake yet and the last time I was in there I touched stuff that they said I couldn't touch. I was fascinated by all the beeping machines. There was a glowing button at the top of the machine that beckoned to me. It was a different shade of light than the other fluorescent lights in the room. This light was warm and soft, pushing the darker grays to the sides but not overwhelming them. It was welcoming. I stood on a chair and pushed it. An alarm started going off and a nurse came rushing in to yell at me. I told her I just wanted to see if I could make my mom wake up faster. They said she needed her rest, so I gave her a kiss on the forehead and told her I'd be back to make her better later when the nurses weren't looking.

I wasn't worried about my parents. My dad was getting an X-ray done on his right arm and some stitches to the brow above his right eye, but they said he'd be done in a few hours and

then we could go see my mom together. When he finally came to get me, I jumped off the chair I was on and ran to him.

In my mom's room, I sat on the chair dangling my feet back and forth as I finished off a pudding cup. Mom was still drowsy, and Dad wanted to tell her something secret, so I gave him a moment. I never found out what he whispered in her ear, but she woke up almost immediately, so I figured he knew magic.

I didn't know why the doctors put her to sleep anyway because she seemed fine after the accident. She had some bruises on her stomach and forehead, but she seemed relatively intact. When my dad whispered to her, she opened her eyes and smiled. He shook his head at her as he stroked her hair, and soft tears began to run down her cheek. That's when I took my cue and hopped off my chair. "It's okay, Mommy" I said. "Dad is a magician. You'll feel better soon," I added, and patted her hair with my small hand. She tried to smile at me, but only the corners turned, so it looked more like a frown than a smile.

I didn't know it at the time, but my mom was pregnant then. She miscarried in the accident. So, I could say that everyone was "fine" after the accident, but they weren't. My parents never had another child, and God was benevolent enough to allow it.

There are so many reasons to forget that day, but I never forgot any of them. As much as that day caused so much pain for my parents, I will always remember it as my first memory, and the starting point to truth. To never knowing what my eye color really is. To knowing that I would never know color. To living in grayscale.

Chapter 1: *Standing*

Walking uphill on the sidewalk by an open area surrounded by woods, I see some deer pecking at the grass and smile at the peace they enjoy. “Must be nice,” I whisper into the evening breeze, shoving my hands into my jean pockets and turning my attention back to the reason I take walks so often. Right before the sun goes down, I like to isolate the sky and the trees only, especially during autumn after the leaves have fallen, blocking out the rest of the world. Looking at the barren trees set against the gray sky, I pretend the whole world is in black and white. When I do this, even though it only lasts a few minutes, I feel like everyone else sees and lives in black and white like I do, and for those fleeting moments, I know what it’s like to exist in the world. To be part of it rather than on the periphery. Imagining what life could be like but only living what it is for the colorless.

People always think I’m sad or something because it looks like I’m looking at my feet when I walk. I’m not sad—usually. I just like to look at the shadows that trail behind people when they walk. Shadows are more alive to me than people. They’re more real. I look at a shadow, and I don’t see black and white. I see color...or at least what I imagine color to be. I see movement and life and a soul. A shadow can move me like almost nothing else just by existing. And sure, it may seem like it’s not real, just another layer, a degree of separation from the reality of this unfair life, but I don’t see it that way. There’s something beautifully symmetrical about a shadow, about blackness set against a white surface that tells me exactly where one thing ends and another begins. You don’t get that with people. People want to step on your shadows until

everything's crowded, until everyone's eclipsed and there's no shadows at all anymore, only blackness.

So, I have to keep my hand on my right leg jean pocket where I know she's there, where I know she lives in black and white the way I remember her. And as long as she's there, I don't notice the people trying to step on my shadow. I don't even have to take it out and look at it. I can just rub my pocket and feel her there. God, I miss her so much.

"Watch it, man," I hear suddenly. The guy I bumped into knocks me out of my daydreams and back into the world. I pretend not to notice. It's just easier that way. I just keep walking like he was never there.

Looking up from my feet, I see all the people around me. They weren't there before. Mists of gray masses float by me with indeterminable faces and lives I don't care about. They don't care about mine either, and that's the way I like it. A tall, middle-aged woman with long hair that could be almost black, though I can't be sure, walks by without looking at me. She grazes my left shoulder with her purse that's clutched tightly against her bony frame.

Yeah, like I want to steal the tampons and pictures of your chubby grandkids in your purse, lady. Give me a break. I flick a glance over my shoulder to see her jerk her neck like I caught her spying. I can't keep my thoughts from wondering, even in this day and progressive age, how she would've reacted if I was a huge, black man.

That's something else I see differently than other people. Race. I don't understand it, never have. I hear dialects and languages, listening to subtle changes with an astute ear for cultural aspects of people's lives, but I don't know what people look like. I see them, but I don't see any color in them. It fascinates me to know that people have actual problems with other

people based on the color of their skin when I have no idea that each person's skin is not just a varied gray tone.

I used to know this guy in college, extremely nice--big teddy bear type--who enjoyed a good walk at night like I do. He was big, though, six foot five and upwards of three-hundred pounds. He told me he actually took up whistling at night while he walked about so that people he saw wouldn't act scared of him, like he had a gun or a knife and was about to jump them. And what's worse, he understood their reaction. He said he can't help that he's a big guy, just like they can't help being wary of big, scary strangers at night. Thinking about it now just makes me even angrier with that lady, clutching her purse like I'm a common criminal. Does everyone deserve that reaction? Does everyone deserve to be treated like you're afraid of them?

Now that I'm sufficiently in a pissed off mood, I look to the sky for some perspective. To calm down. The uncomplicated grays are soothing there. Not like the ones I see in people. Not like the skewed, metallic shades of mercury I see in their eyes. But I'm too pissed. I see a coffee shop a block and a half up the road. The gray tones mesh together in a comforting way. They remind me of the way an old, well-worn sidewalk looks against the dirt and grass that collide at its edges. Familiar and solid.

As I'm about to cross the street to get to the coffee shop, I see an old, homeless man next to a building. He's sitting upright against the building's flat, dark wall with a coffee cup in his right hand. Drawing closer, I can see the veins on his hand protruding, yet sunken as if from tiredness. They might have looked like hills once, vital and strong. Now they look desperate, like a drying stream facing a desert heat. Not like hers. She had the most beautiful, delicate hands I ever touched. They were tiny, her wrists smooth and curved gracefully like a pathway leading to

the smaller, more intricate paths of her hand. Fighting a resilient tear, I notice he wears dirty, ripped jeans and has a light gray mustache dipping into his chin that rests on his chest. I almost decide to pass him by when I see that he is asleep. Amazed that a man could fall asleep at a ninety degree angle with a cup still clutched firmly in his hand, an idea occurs to me.

Stepping lightly toward the man, I reach into my wallet and pull out a quarter. The closer I get, the more disgusting and pathetic he becomes. I reach back into my wallet and grab three more quarters. Without a second thought, I toss the quarters into the man's cup and turn around quickly, heading across the street toward the coffee shop. I laugh briefly as I think about the splash that coffee made. A faint glimmer of remorse touches the corner of my smile for a split second as I think, now that man can buy himself another cup of coffee. Well, almost.

Chapter 2: *Dreaming*

The timer on the coffee maker singles that it's time to wake up. I never use alarm clocks anymore. The noise gives me a panic attack. Instead, I let the aroma of coffee drift into my room every morning at 6:45am. It never takes me past 7:00am to smell it. I've got a keen nose.

I get up and take a shower. I think about how much work is going to suck today, suck like it sucks every day as I open my closet to get a suit and tie. My eyes melt into the ties in a blurred mass of gray hues as I think about all the sales associates that helped me buy them.

"Excuse me," they ask. "Do you need help?"

I turn the question over in my mind before sighing, "Yes. Can you just tell me what color this tie is and what button up shirt would go well with it?"

They always look the same: puzzled. Their brows contract as they realize something's wrong with me. Then the sympathetic head tilt returns. "This tie is a deep burgundy. Are you okay, sir?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just need to know what shirt matches it, thanks."

"This black one would look sharp, or if you want a trendier look for the winter, a navy blue one like this," she points to another, "would complement it nicely."

"I'll take them both, thanks," I say and always run for the register without looking at their undoubtedly curious expression.

Sooner than I'd like, I'm on my way to work, sipping coffee from a specialized travel mug Catherine and I got as part of a wedding present that included the automatic coffee maker. In the car, I can't help but get lost in the mug as I see the engraving, "Catherine and Dave Forever."

"Let's open this one next!" Catherine had said, looking like a little kid on Christmas opening presents from jolly old St. Nick. "It's from the Sams," she added matter-of-factly. Tearing through the white and metallic wrapping paper, she squealed, "Oh, these are so cute!" as she smiled widely and turned the two engraved travel mugs so I could see them. Her smile could liquefy my thoughts. She radiated life and joy, and it seeped into everything she touched.

Our friends Sam and Samantha, or the Sams as we call them, called them, since they're married, got us the coffee maker from the registry and then went above and beyond that to customize a set of mugs and travel mugs to say, "Catherine and Dave Forever" with the infinity symbol underneath our names. We always loved them. They were the only ones we ever used. They are the only ones I still use.

Work's about ten minutes away in light traffic, so I find myself already pulling into the nondescript parking lot sooner than I want.

Another day, another nickel, I think, and then shake my head. No, that one's too hard. Catherine and I had been watching a lot of Spongebob with the baby coming and no, I have to focus. I can't go there, or I'll want to stay there.

Walking onto the 9th floor of Seventh Sense, I look around at all the busy people and can't believe I'm still working here after all these years. On my way past the rows of cubicles to get to my office, everyone says hi. Jean from accounting asks how I'm doing. No one really cares about the real answer, so I say, "I'm fine, thanks. How 'bout you?" as I continue walking, not really caring about his answer either.

My office faces the north end of town with a large window view of all the hills and nearby vineyards. This is wine country after all. Vineyards are everywhere.

Taking a seat in my oversized black leather chair, I think about taking a nap on my lunch break. After working my way up in the company with a few genius marketing ideas, I now hold an executive sales position. I thought I'd like it because the pay is amazing, but it's a lot of hard work, and I am constantly badgered by people wanting something from me.

Checking some emails and wading through a stack of papers, I come across something that confuses me. "Damn it!"

Calling in my secretary, I ask her, "Connie, can you bring Tom in here immediately please?"

Connie's short blonde hair is curled all around her tiny, bouncy head. "Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

A minute later, Tom Lovitts walks in, looking disheveled with his loose tie and wrinkled white button up. "You wanted me, sir?"

“Yeah, Tom, I did. Do you have any idea why I might have called you in here?”

Looking confused, “Uhh, no.”

Hitting a piece of paper in front of me with a pen, I say, “Well, maybe you should be more on top of things. I’m looking at the stats, and you’re under your goal...by a lot.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I’m trying. Things have been hard at home with the new baby and everything, and I just...”

“I don’t want to hear it, Tom! We don’t have the resources to squander on excuses.”

“You’re right. I’m very sorry, sir. I’ll pick up the slack.”

Loosening my tone to seem friendlier, I add, “I have no doubt you will, Tom. You understand the position I’m in, though.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll work extra hours if I need to.”

“That would be great, Tom, but you know we don’t have the overtime budget for that. Just keep up your sales, okay?”

“Yes, sir. I will,” he says, and then he just stands there for a few seconds unsure what to do.

I nod towards the door. “You can go now.”

He scuffles out as quickly as he can. I feel sorry for him, but I feel even sorrier for myself...because that's the worst part. I can handle people constantly badgering me. What I still have trouble doing is having to badger people myself.

But it comes with the position. If I had known exactly how much time I'd spend harassing people about their work, I might not have taken it.

Well, I shouldn't say that's the worst part. The worst part is having to let people go. It wouldn't be so bad if everyone I fired was a huge dick. But they never are. It's always that shy, quiet guy who minds his own business and you never knew till you're in the middle of firing him that he has a wife and family, and the money he makes here is all they have to live on, and what will they do now?

Looking up at the metallic clock on the wall, I stare at it, hoping if I stare hard enough, time will fast forward. The tick of the second hand is so soothing. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. I feel like I'm being hypnotized. It doesn't take long before I drift into sleep.

My closed eyes take me to places I don't want to go. I'm standing alone in a field somewhere. There's a tree and nothing else for as far as I can see. Thunder shakes the ground. I look up to see that the sky is darker than any shade of gray I've ever seen it. The wind whips at me viscously. And then I see it. Behind me, a tornado twists the air and rages toward me. I face the wind and race to the tree. It's the only thing I can think of. I have to hold onto something. I know I'll probably die, but I have nowhere else to go. Reaching the tree, I wrap my arms around the slim trunk and hold it as tightly as I can. The tornado comes closer, and I make a decision: I

don't want to see it when I die. Turning to face the tree, I see something. My stiff hold loosens and my hand unconsciously touches the D + C wrapped in a heart that's etched into the trunk. I glance back out at the tornado. It's so close now. Only seconds away. I find myself hoping death will hurt. I clutch the tree again as tightly as possible. It's all I have left in the world to hold onto. It's all I have.

I'm drooling on my papers when a knock wakes me up. "Who is it?" I answer immediately, jumping back in the chair to wipe the drool from the desk.

"Sir, it's Donna. Your 11 o' clock is here."

"My what?"

"Sir, Ms. Garrick."

"Oh, okay, let her in," I say, preparing for a meeting I forgot I had, with a person I am not excited to see.

"Hello, Dave," a tall woman in a pencil skirt and suit jacket walks in confidently.

"Hi, Ms. Garrick," I respond, finally meeting her gaze. "Why don't you have a seat so we can get started?"

"Alright, then," she says and sits down, making herself look uncomfortable but controlled. "Let's talk numbers."

A long hour passes in negotiation and mathematical equations. I'd rather be almost anywhere else than in a prospective client meeting with a woman I especially don't like. Ms.

Garrick owns a business down the street, and I've been trying to win her business for about two years now. I don't know what it is about her--maybe it's that cocky, self-assured attitude--but every time I meet with her it ends the same way. I tell her we can't offer the kind of discount she's looking for, and she leaves looking just as stone-cold and fearless as when she walked in. Sometimes it ends in an argument; sometimes it's all passive aggressive insinuations. Every time she leaves without committing.

It's no surprise when Ms. Garrick politely says, "I'm sorry, Mr. Anderson. I don't think I can do business with such a fine company when I have just my modest business to consider. It's just that the fiscal repercussions could be irreparable. You understand?"

So, it looks like this week it's passive aggressiveness. "I understand, Ms. Garrick, but we just can't afford to reduce costs any lower than that."

"If we're done here then," she says swiftly, "I've got some work to do at the office." She picks up her bag and rises to leave.

"I'm sorry there's not something more we can do to make things work," I throw out, a little too formally so she understands that I don't actually care.

She smiles stiffly, tilting her chin in a slight nod, "Good day, Mr. Anderson."

"Goodbye, Ms. Garrick."

After she leaves, I walk after her to the door and peek around the corner at Donna. "Hold my calls, Donna."

"Yes, sir," she says, smiling politely.

I shut the door behind me and lean against it for a second. I don't like to get calls because the phone lines flash rhythmically. It's eerie, and I don't like it.

Ms. Garrick left my thoughts as soon as her heels clicked passed me out the door. The dream. I'm already thinking about the dream, already tuning it over. Already trying to figure out what it means.

Chapter 3: Stray

Her lips curved up toward him whenever she came close, and this time was no different. Her legs melted into his, and he could feel their softness glide against him as she rose onto tiptoes to kiss him. He pushed her dark hair back with his hand, a hand that always seemed too big and awkward against her small, delicate face, and then kept it there at the base of her neck and pulled her toward him. Then she did the thing that drove him crazy. She kissed him lightly for a second and then pulled away a few inches to give him her best devilish smile. She was so unbelievably cute and sexy in that moment and she had no idea. The look dissolved as she grabbed him. She wrapped both arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely, biting his lip to let him know she wanted more than a kiss goodnight tonight. And that was it. She let go of him and walked deliberately toward the kitchen as he stood watching her walk away.

It seemed like many other nights and none of them. She stole routine and mundane and created a new vision of life for David. One that made him drink the fresh air when he grabbed the morning paper from the yard. One that made his face twist into honest smiles at the most random of times just thinking about her, about them. One that made him feel alive and happy.

Catherine still made David nervous when she walked into a room. She had a magnetic presence, drawing eyes from every direction and claiming none but David's. She loved people like she loved him, with a tender fierceness that defied limitations or exceptions, and yet she only wanted him. David knew that, though he never understood why he deserved her. He never understood what he had done to deserve such beauty and warmth. It was so easy for him to get lost in her. Lost in the way the darkness of the room couldn't hide her face when she looked at him that way that night--and so many other nights.

And yet, that night stood out to him for so many reasons. Dinner was alright--Catherine wasn't much of a cook, but he always let her know he appreciated that she took time to cook him anything.

"Tastes great, sweetie," David said, taking a bite and savoring it for emphasis. "Thanks for cooking."

Catherine smiled. "Well, you know I'm no chef, but it's better than eating TV dinners or hot pockets."

David thought that over. "I don't know about that, babe. Hot pockets are pretty good."

She shot a green bean at his face with her fork. It struck his chin and fell on his mashed potatoes. "Oh, I'm sorry!" Catherine said honestly. "I didn't think it'd actually hit you. Sorry." But when she saw his face, she covered her mouth with her hand to stifle her laughter.

He was smiling. He didn't care about the green bean. "You little punk," he said, and then a diabolical grin took over his face. His hands started to slide across the oak table toward the edges, his fingertips making a deliberate swooshing against the wood. Still, his eyes never left hers. He grabbed the corners of the table like he was preparing for something.

She caught his look and stopped smiling. Suddenly, she jumped out of the chair and ran toward the kitchen, which was connected to the dining room. Over her shoulder, she yelled, "You're never going to get me!" and then let out a high-pitched squeal as arms wrapped around her waste and picked her up.

David had taken a short cut through the living room to cut Catherine off. When he had her, he threw her over his shoulder and spun her around, laughing and bragging, "I'm never going to what, now?"

Catherine kicked the air and smacked his ass in mock protest. "Let me go!" she yelled.

David grew serious suddenly. He pulled her in front of him so that he was cradling her and staring into her bright eyes. He bent his head to hers and kissed her lips. When he lifted his head back up, he said, "Never." But he did let her go.

He set her down and ran out of the room, telling her to wait there for a second. When he came back he looked nervous.

And then she saw the box.

Before she knew it, David had taken a knee. He opened the box, showing a sparkling engagement ring with a single diamond and a weaved band that resembled intertwined tree branches. Catherine couldn't breathe. Her mouth hung open as she stared from the ring back to David. "Oh, my god," she said under her breathe.

David looked into Catherine's eyes and said, "Catherine, you're the most beautiful, loving, and caring little punk I've ever met."

When he said this, Catherine covered her gaping mouth with both hands and began to cry and laugh at the same time.

David continued, "You are my best friend, and I love every second of our lives together. And if you'll let me, I'd like to keep you by my side forever." The only sound that broke the short silence that followed were Catherine's broken sobs.

“So,” he added finally, “Catherine, will you marry me?”

She moved her hands so that they only covered half her mouth and sobbed, “Yes, of course I’ll marry you!”

Then David hopped up and grabbed her around the waist, and they went spinning in their own little world of happiness together. When he put her back down, he realized he had forgotten about the ring. “Oh, yeah,” he said and put the ring on her finger while she smiled down at it. “Do you like it?” he added.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. She never took her eyes off it as she said it.

“Now,” David said, picking her up in his arms, “Where were we?”

They smiled at each other in mischievous unison.

Carrying her up the stairs, he took her to their bedroom and threw her on the bed playfully.

Laughing, Catherine remembered the food downstairs. “Hey, what about the food?” she asked. “We should put it away before it gets cold.”

“The food can wait,” David said. He wasn’t thinking about food anymore. He climbed on top of her, grazing her thighs as he pushed her skirt up. Then, moving her hair back behind her ears to look into her eyes, he stayed there for awhile. In these moments, he thought he saw color in her eyes. She wasn’t a shade of gray to him. She was color itself. All of them and none of them. He lived for these moments.

When they first started dating, their sex was frantic, passionate, and wild. Back then, they fucked. Now, they got lost, feeling the connection of their bodies as they moved with each other. David ran his hands up and down her body, noticing her softness against his rough fingers. Catherine dug her fingers into his back and kissed his neck. Now that they knew how to make a moment last, they almost always made love. They made love like it was the first time and the last time. Like it was their only time.

A sharp bark cuts through the image of them. And just like that, the memory fades into the gray it came from. David shakes off the thoughts and hears it again. Behind him, a dog barks. He turns and sees it wagging its scruffy tail, trotting after him and barking to get his attention. Lost in his thoughts, David had almost forgotten he was on a walk. Many of his walks go like that. He often gets so lost in thoughts of what his life was and could have been that he gets lost in the gray labyrinths of his mind.

“Go away, mutt!” he yells at the dog, flicking his arm at it.

The dog stops suddenly and scuttles backwards a few steps in fear. But it won't be scared away so easily. When David turns his attention back to the sidewalk, the dog keeps following him.

David doesn't notice for a few minutes because the dog stops barking. It just keeps following him at a distance. David stares at the sidewalk and zones out as he tries to figure out what color the grass and dirt are as they collide against the familiar gray sidewalk's edge. When he raises his gaze to eye level again, he hears it. Scuffling. No, claws against the sidewalk.

Annoyed, he turns and realizes the dog has dared to close the gap and now pads along only about ten feet behind him.

“I said go away ya’ dumb dog!” he yells and starts walking aggressively toward the dog to scare him.

The dog gives a frightened yelp and runs in the opposite direction.

David watches it for a second and yells after it, “And don’t come back!” Then, to himself he says, “Now, maybe I can have some peace,” and continues walking, shoving his hands in his pocket and looking down again. But for a reason he can’t identify, he can’t shake the feeling that he suddenly has: He feels ashamed.

He looks at the skyline against the trees to see that it’s getting dark. He’s already almost home, though. His normal route leads him away from people as much as he can and wraps in a circle back to his house. If he times it just right, he can get home just as the last light has left the sky. He likes to try to get the time just right so this happens. It comforts David to turn from his porch step to see the last light leave the earth for the day. To see the grays dissolve into complete darkness.

He’s close enough to his house to see the big oak tree in the front yard when he hears it again. He doesn’t even turn around this time. He just keeps walking until he’s home.

At the door, he turns to see it. Sure enough, that stray dog is there. It followed him home. David wonders why. He thought he made it clear that it was not a welcome visitor. This time, though, he decides not to yell at it. For a moment, David and the shaggy dog just stare at each other. And then, without a word, David turns and goes into the house, locking it behind him.

Chapter 4: Still Holding

David awakens the next morning to an alarm that isn't real.

He was in a hallway. The walls screamed with a white so bright they looked luminescent. Gray faces stuck out against the white costumes people wore. The faces looked out of place. There was no room for gray among all the whiteness. He stared at his hand to see if it was white too. It was gray. He didn't belong there either.

As if from the walls themselves, David heard a piercing cry. He knew that voice, but he couldn't place the person. Who was it? He knew, as if from instinct, that he had to hold on to that voice, that he couldn't bare to lose it, that the person attached to that voice was someone important to him. And yet, the name evaded him. The person evaded him. Even the voice itself seemed to be coming from everywhere at once and nowhere.

David followed the voice down the hallway as he heard its deceptive echoes dance from one edge of the wall to the next. He felt like he was being played with, and yet he couldn't stop. He wouldn't stop.

The voice began to fade, to slip from his mind like a fragile memory. He yelled after the voice, "Wait! Wait!" but the only response he heard was the faint dying of the cry he had been chasing. When the voice let out its final sound, it sounded more like the release of a sigh carried on a soft breeze than a cry. That last whisper of a cry made David immensely sad. He was

overcome with emotion so much so that he collapsed onto his knees and sunk his chin down onto his chest.

The action startled something in him. He couldn't place the feeling, but he felt it so profoundly that a debilitating, high-pitched ringing suddenly reverberated through the hall. He was deaf from the noise. He tore at his ears and screamed in soundless protest. The noise persisted, crushing his mind like an avalanche. The veins on his forehead protruded like cables on an exposed car. His body was having trouble taking the strain it felt from David combating the noise. His nose began to bleed. He became dizzy from the effort. The voice no longer mattered to him. He could no longer remember why he wanted to find the person behind the voice in the first place. The ringing grew louder. It seemed a part of him now. He welcomed it. He used it. It used him. It wasn't so painful anymore. It felt nice.

David awakens to an alarm that isn't real. He shoots up from the bed, thinking about the dream and the noise and checks the time to make sure he's not late for work. 7:00am. Turning the sheets over, he catches a glimpse of himself. He's sweating. He feels like his head's still ringing, so he tilts it and hits himself in the ear to get the noise out. It doesn't work. Instead, he decides to get up and throw some water on his face.

The bathroom seems colder than his bedroom and he likes that. The temperature change chases the chill from his mind to his body. The water feels like ice against his face, the moist droplets clashing and combining with the sweat that lingers on his forehead. David turns on the shower and listens for a minute as he clutches the sink's sides. He lets his head fall and dangle for a second, allowing it a brief reprieve from the incessant ringing.

He feels more relaxed after the shower. Grabbing his morning coffee, he checks the time again--7:35. It's not until he takes his first sip of coffee from one half of his favorite mug set that he realizes he doesn't have to work today. It's Saturday. Usually, David tries to sleep in and then watches movies, reads, and goes on a walk on Saturdays. He hadn't planned on waking up this early, but it's too late to try and go back to bed--he's already drinking his morning coffee.

David looks in refrigerator for some breakfast. He stands there for a second and takes another sip of coffee as he surveys the contents. He could make eggs--he has two eggs left--but they are a week past their expiration date. There's something in a plastic container that's clearly leftovers, so he checks that out. Spaghetti. Not his favorite breakfast food. He throws it back inside the refrigerator carelessly. Moving to the freezer, he sees nothing of interest. There's a couple of TV dinners, but he wants to save those for a rainy day.

Since nothing in the refrigerator seems appealing or edible, David slips into his tennis shoes to go to the grocery store. As he's leaving the house, he's surprised and delighted to see that the stray dog that followed him home is not still there. The stray had lingered on his mind for quite some time after he shut it out yesterday. Almost as soon as the door closed and he could no longer see it, he felt something strange rise up in him. The eyes of the animal pierced his memory. But that was it. He had let the feeling escape with no other thought as to what it was.

Time and sleep kill all his thoughts and feelings. They are fleeting vessels shadowed by the ever-moving gaze of a lighthouse, and that's all he will allow them to be. Like the light of the watchful lighthouse, they sometimes return, but they always go away again. David likes them that way. Still, constant, yet always going somewhere.

The image of the dirty homeless man he threw quarters at invades his mind as he reaches the last stoplight before the grocery store. Anxious to shift his thoughts, he refocuses on driving. David stares into the three lights above him. He looks at the different shades of gray and wonders once again what green looks like. He remembers studying for his driving test many years ago. The guidebook before him had said the well-known fact: red light means stop, yellow means slow down, and green means go. He had to memorize the images of all the lights and all the various signs because he knew he would have to identify location and shade. He knew green not for its inherent greenness. He knew green because it was a peculiar shade of gray and was located at the bottom of the three-part traffic light. He was convinced that he had to know both location and shade. If a particular traffic light somehow got hit by an aggressive storm and flipped or turned sideways, location would become irrelevant for him aside from the obvious middle light. He needed to know shades of light and color on traffic signs like he needed to know what color itself was. In this way, studying shades of colors and light helped him learn to identify similar shades and guess at colors as he grew up.

The design of the stop sign always bothered him, though. The guidebook had told him that the octagonal structure is bright red against the white lettering. It explained that red is the most prominent and easily identifiable color of all the other colors--that's why red cars are the most frequently ticketed. David does not agree. He sees stop signs and thinks the shade of gray he sees in the red sign is not so bright at all. He knows many other shades that are much brighter. Orange, for example. The first time he ever figured out what shade bright orange was, he thought it looked so peculiar. He was holding half of an orange his mother had handed to him. The tint seemed the same as what others describe as bright yellow or even close to what he's heard bright

pink looks like. Both the peel and the inside were nearly identical shades. He liked that. It was consistent, not hiding anything when sliced open to reveal its parts.

David's thoughts continue to wander as he delves into serious imaginings of the various colors that exist in the shades of gray that surround him. A horn honking behind him startles him out of his reverie. The gray that is green shines. He drives on.

Walking down the aisles, David leans into his shopping cart and eyes the produce section. He eyes a bag of oranges and smiles. He lugs them into the cart, though he doesn't eat much fresh food these days. David moves on to the frozen food section of the store and loads it with pizzas, burgers, chicken, and vegetables. Before heading to the checkout, he catches sight of bacon-wrapped filets in the deli display. He orders one and smiles at the thought of the first time Catherine "cooked" dinner for him.

She had bought pre-made food from the deli that only requires being shoved in the oven for an hour and it's done. David, the dense man he is, had no idea it was bought like that and complimented her graciously for her skills in the culinary arts.

She took them for a few minutes before she could no longer stifle the truth. Laughter erupted from her throat and nose when he said the baked potatoes tasted so good he couldn't believe she made them herself. Her cheeks emanated a soft nickel gray that offset the light gray of her face. David had smiled, imagining how beautiful that simple gesture looked to everyone but him, imagining the color pink on her light skin. He could never imagine what color her skin was exactly. It looked almost luminescent and yet it was a shade of gray no less. Other skin tones made more sense sometimes. Catherine's was too light a shade of gray to be what he knew brown skin tones to look like, but at the same time it was too dark to be white.

As a boy, when he asked his mother what color her skin was, she told him it was peach. Looking at Catherine's skin was the only way David had ever figured out how to identify or imagine the shade of gray that was supposed to be peach. But he liked that. Peach was the color of Catherine. He measured all other shades of peach against her skin. When he was just learning the color shades in gray tones, his mother grew tired of being constantly bombarded with his questions--though she never said it. He tried to find ways around that, around having to search her tired black eyes for answers.

One day, when he was about seven, David took a box of crayons and started crossing out all the funny color names like mahogany and aquamarine. He then began taking the box of crayons with him around the house and to places they went as a family. Every time he saw something that looked nearly the exact shade of gray as a crayon, he would write the name of that object on the crayon. Sometimes he'd have to ask his mother whether or not the object he saw was always that color. When he first began writing down colors, he had to ask for a new box of crayons because he started writing down all of the colors of the objects in his house, objects that his mother pointed out were not consistently one color. That first day, when he received this heartbreaking news to his efforts, David got so frustrated that he threw all the crayons at the wall and stormed upstairs to his room.

Eventually, when he was allowed another set of crayons, David began being more selective in the objects he chose. He tried to choose objects that existed naturally, such as plants, rocks, water, sand, people, and animals. People and animals became shades of gray crayons. It was the only way David felt like he was closer to controlling his life, closer to organizing the colors that overwhelmed him. He liked to think of himself as a red dot in a sea of gray. The gray sea didn't know it was gray just like he didn't know he was red.

The red dot becomes real before his eyes. Making his way through the clearance aisle, David scans dark gray dot after dark gray dot, sticker after sticker that he knows are red. A box of day old donuts ends up in his hands. He rubs the clearance dot with his thumb as he sets it down. The clearance aisle's familiar grays, consistently stuck with labels he can say for certain are red without knowing what red is, comforts him. He doesn't need his crayons here.

Before long, David starts mechanically pulling items from the cart and placing them onto the checkout counter. Without trying to be rude, David focuses on the items in his cart to distract him from the constant beep of the sliding items across the clerk's scanner. His arm is swiping in time with the clerk's. It's a careless synchronicity on both parts until David pauses mid reach for the sliced sandwich meat. An unusual buzz emanates from the machine when the donuts are scanned.

"What's wrong?" David says instinctively. His eyebrows furrow in frustration as he turns to look at the clerk. Enough noises already.

"Sorry, man, looks like these aren't on sale," the clerk responds. The small-framed clerk looks young, about twenty, and has a horseshoe-shaped septum piercing protruding from his nose. His gaze is blank as he looks at David and rolls around some gum in his mouth.

David can practically smell the man's arrogance. "What do you mean, they're not on sale?" he asks. "See this red sticker," he points at the sticker confidently, "it means they have to be on sale."

The man behind the counter rolls his eyes. "Look, man," he says. "I don't know what to tell you. They're not comin' up on sale."

“Well, maybe I don’t like your attitude, and I want to speak to your manager,” David throws out.

“Fine,” the young man says, but his eyes show some uncertainty.

In a second, the manager arrives. “What can I do for you, sir?” he says politely. The large man rocks on his heels and hugs his hands behind his back as he leans forward and smiles at David.

“This punk,” David throws an arm and finger at the young clerk, “says these aren’t on sale when I know they are because I got them from the clearance isle.” He points at the red dot again for emphasis.

“Ahh, I see,” the manager says, leaning in to look at the dot. He smiles, “No worries, I’ll get that corrected.” He rescans the donuts and the buzz goes off again.

David winces.

The manager types in some numbers and David hears a beep. “There you go,” the manager says, and claps the clerk on the back as he walks back to his other duties.

David smirks at the young man who looks back indifferently. “That’s better,” he says and returns to unloading the rest of his cart.

As he’s almost finished unloading the cart, another buzz sounds. David jerks around and yells, “Are you fucking kidding me?” in a louder voice than he realized. The other customers and clerks turn to look at him, including his own surprised clerk.

The young man's face loses all traces of arrogance. "I'm sorry, sir," he says apologetically, "It looks like this one's giving us some trouble too."

Unable to control his rising anger, David takes the bagged donuts from the cart and the cookies that just caused the buzz from the clerk's hand and tosses them back onto the conveyer belt hard. "Oh, just take your fucking donuts and cookies!" David yells at the clerk.

The clerk leans back instinctually and stares at David, his eyes wide with fear.

David just stares back in gray rage. "Well, what are you waiting for? Ring me up!"

"Right, sir," the clerk replies, cowering a bit as he deletes the donuts and finishes processing David's debit card.

As he's leaving the store, David pretends not to notice the sea of gray faces staring at the red dot walking out the automatic doors.

Chapter 5: Unexpected

Eating alone seems so familiar to me. Food looks tasteless. The green beans, well, at least that's what they're called, seem like short chopped sticks someone threw on my plate as a joke. I'm not laughing. Eating alone has become so routine that half of the time I don't even see my food before it hits my mouth. Gazing blankly toward the empty dining table, I eat at the bar stool along the marble island in my kitchen. I couldn't eat at the table anymore. It was too hard to stare at nothing when her chair loomed in front of me like an eerie presence at the head of the table. Suddenly the chicken that lingers below my thoughts seems ripe for the stabbing. My fork takes aim though my eyes are elsewhere in the distance.

It always occurs to me that I could try eating somewhere else, maybe even with people. Then I start imagining what would happen if I was eating at a restaurant. People would stare and think: either he's a sad lonely man, or he's creepy and possibly a criminal. They would toss sidelong glances at me that say how concerned or nervous they feel around me, the sad criminal. But who cares what they think really? What really keeps me in my sweats on the couch is thinking about seeing all the happy people out and about, throwing their happiness in everyone else's face. I'd walk in, take a seat, order a beer and some steak, and then it would seem safe enough until I saw them. A man kneeling before a woman, professing his undying love for her--psh, undying, that's a trip--and then proposing a life full of happiness together. Or an old couple sitting on the same side of a booth, affectionately holding hands underneath the table. Or even a middle-aged couple struggling to order and maintain sanity with their three kids constantly harassing them and asking for ice cream when they haven't even had dinner yet. Whoever they

were, I would see them. I know it. I would see them all somewhere, in someone. And then I would see her.

Imagining the possibilities is better than thinking about her. My thoughts race away from her when the sound of the fork scraping the plate breaks my reverie. I flick my wrist up and check the time. It's six thirty. Perfect time for a walk.

Shutting the door on dinner thoughts, I step into the evening breeze. As I begin my route, I take in my natural surroundings. I allow the fresh air to fill my lungs and close my eyes to absorb the silence. If there is a God, he must be in the air, I imagine. He must be like tiny particles breathed into the skin and exhaled in the same breath. Some are captured like fireflies in a jar, but most of him escapes back into the atmosphere, back into the places he wants to be. He doesn't want to be trapped in houses or contained in pockets like the image of her. He needs to be free, needs to be in the air he created.

I like to think he speaks to the animals as well. I don't really like animals, they annoy me. Catherine loved them, but I never did understand her connection with them. She was always begging me for a dog. I had planned on caving and surprising her with a puppy at Christmas. Plans change I guess.

I hope, though, if there is a God, that he communicates with the animals on land and in the water. I think the idea is kind of cool. I read a story once about a family that drifted off from the shore too far when they went swimming in the ocean. As they began to notice how far they drifted, the little girl in the family noticed a fin. A shark was lurking nearby. All of a sudden, a school of dolphins that the family had spotted earlier started circling them, preventing the shark

from coming any closer to the four family members. The dolphins stayed by them the whole time, circling them until they were rescued.

I read another similar story. A family was camping in Colorado when the young daughter began to wander into the woods without the parents noticing. She apparently got lost trying to find her way back, so she sat down by a tree and started crying. Unknown to her, a mother bear and her two cubs were catching fish at the creek near the edge of the woods, only a short distance from her. The mother bear, having heard the little girl, must have interpreted the sound as something similar to her own cubs, because, instead of leaving or hunting after the girl, the mother began pacing the edge of the woods by the creek and roaring loudly.

The girl was too scared to move, so she stayed there and cried even more. But other people heard the bear's cry and reported it. Of course, by now the family had already mounted a search party that included local park rangers and volunteers. Hearing the bear, the rangers headed toward the bear to make sure it had not found the little girl and was hurting her. As they neared where the bear was, the bear grew quiet. At the first sight of a human, the bear and its cubs took off running. When the rangers approached the creek a few seconds later, they heard the little girl's cries and found her sitting safely in the crook of a tree trunk.

It's stories like these that make me wonder if God isn't in those situations, telling the dolphins and the bear that the humans in trouble need to be protected. Thinking back now, I only ever read those stories because Catherine gave them to me to read. She told me they'd help me understand her better. I always suspected she just thought this was the best way to get me to buy her a dog--she got like that when she really wanted something.

So I suppose I only get to thinking about those stories because she's brainwashed me a little bit. It's a better alternative to other things she could have made me read, I guess. I shake my head at the thought of reading a gossip magazine about celebrities or some other trash stories about which alien planet would be the first to invade the Earth.

Looking up at the sky, I see that the sun's almost down. I should be home soon. I notice the buildings and houses have become distorted over the years. Nothing seems familiar anymore in my neighborhood. As I'm scanning the shapes of places I've been and never been, something familiar does register. A gray face appears on the left of my street, jaywalking in my direction. A hand gestures toward me and the face, dark hair matted down as if it recently had a hat on it and a compact, round face with narrow features, says, "Dave? Is that you?"

I squint to focus on the familiar image crossing the street. The pale gray eyes catch mine and I remember. "Tommy? Tommy Kino?"

"Yeah, man," he says. "I thought that was you. How you been?" As he's saying this, he closes the gap between us and reaches for my hand.

I grip his hand firmly. "Well, I'm ok," I offer, hoping it sounds convincing.

From Tommy's searching eyes, I can tell he only half bought the lie. He says, "Yeah, I heard about your wife a few years back." He shakes his head and adds, "I'm sorry, man. I can't imagine."

The thought of all the times I've heard those words over the years brings a new sting and I can feel my mouth crinkle and my right eye twitch. Without much thought, my hand finds the pocket with her picture in it and rests there. It only takes me a second to recover. It has been

quite awhile since anyone's offered their condolences, so I'm a bit out of touch with my controlled responses. "Thanks, Tommy," I say. "I appreciate it." But one trick I've learned to combat the uncomfortable feeling I get in these situations is to move on fast. "So, what have you been up to? God, I can't even remember the last time I saw you." We start to casually walk away from my house, resuming the direction Tommy was heading. Sometimes it's easier talking to someone if you don't have to look at them when you talk.

Tommy snorts. "Heck, yeah, it's been about ten years, I think. I can still probably whip your ass at poker, though," he laughs off.

I'm surprised to hear myself laugh too. Tommy and I were friends from middle school through the beginning of college. We weren't best friends, but time held onto us. He would never let me forget the time we asked our dates to play strip poker with us freshmen year of college. We were eighteen and stupid. And he and the girls kicked my ass. I was naked by the end of the night, while almost everyone else there still had several layers of clothes on. "You probably can," I say.

The laughs die off and Tommy adds, "I've been good, though. Just keeping busy with work and stuff. You know how it is."

"Yeah, I hear ya," I say. "Got to survive somehow."

"Yup," he nods. From my periphery, I catch the hint of a smile on his face. "Say," he begins, "remember that time that girl--what was her name? Kaylee?--came up to you at a football game and asked for your number for her friend, but you thought it was for her?"

I do remember, and the memories start pouring in. We go on talking and walking slowly, reminiscing about the good times and the funny times, and before I know it, it's pitch black outside and we're stopped outside of a local pub.

"Say, Dave," Tommy flicks his thumb at the bar, "You want to grab a beer?"

The thought is appealing. I've enjoyed catching up with him more than I expected. But I have work in the morning, and it's got to be getting pretty late. "I would, but I've got work early in the morning." He looks genuinely disappointed so I add, "But give me your number, and we'll have that beer next weekend sometime."

Tommy smiles. I forgot how good natured he is. "Sure," he says. He pulls out his phone and starts adding a new contact for me. "Tell me your number and I'll call you really quick so you have mine."

I give him the digits and he calls my phone. When mine rings, he hits End and slides the phone back into his pocket. When he brings his hand back out he offers it to me and says, "Hey, Dave, this has been great."

I take his hand again, and this time it feels warm. I must be smiling like an idiot because his smile only gets wider as he looks me in the eye. I agree with Tommy and add, "See you next weekend" as I turn back to walk the long distance home.

The sidewalk seems stronger beneath my feet. I probe into its grayness for answers and shove my hands into my pockets. Tommy Kino. Who would've thought I'd run into him? He was always a pretty cool guy, but we lost touch around the start of junior year of college. We started hanging out with different groups of friends, and then we sort of just became

acquaintances who waved if we saw each other on campus, though neither of us would approach the other and talk. It was nice to catch up, though. It wasn't as awkward as I'd thought it would be. Something about walking and talking with Tommy just felt right.

That notion occurs to me when I see something about twenty yards in front of me next to a tree. Removing my hands from my pockets, I squint at the black shape. I can't quite tell how big it is from this distance. It is completely cloaked in shadows. A moment of fear hits me. What if it's a mugger? Or worse, a murderer? Another thought occurs to me: I've been taking walks for years now, and I know my mind's somewhere else the whole time, so how is this the first time I've considered the prospect of being attacked? The thought makes me a little sad. Sad to know I haven't cared much about myself the past few years.

I don't have time to wallow in self-pity. The tree takes clearer shape. I'm getting closer without realizing I'm still walking toward it. Only twenty feet away now, the black mass begins to move toward me. It gets smaller as it leaves the shadow of the tree. Suddenly, a huge wave of relief floods over me. The black mass emerges from the cover of darkness and wags its tail at me. It's just a dog. I let out a quick laugh, still shaken up. "You scared me, buddy" I catch myself saying.

I don't know why, but I kneel down and start petting the dog. "What are you doing out here alone this late?" I ask the dog. I tilt my head to look at his neck--no collar or tag. The dog just stares at me. It has a weird expression on its face. It almost looks like it's smiling.

And then it hits me. Deja vu. The dog's familiar gray eyes reflect a look I've seen before. It was hard to tell from the darkness, but now I realize it's the same stray dog that followed me home. "You just can't stay away from me, can you?" I ask.

The dog lets out a short bark that I take for a yes. “Well, what am I going to do with you?” I mull over my options. I don’t want to take it to a shelter. Catherine always complained about how they euthanized the animals at shelters. There only seems like one real option at this point. “Well,” I begin, “since it seems like you just won’t leave me alone, I guess it couldn’t hurt to let you stay with me, you know, until you get back on your feet.” The dog barks a few more times and I laugh at the joke. “Alright, let’s go, mutt.” I get up to start walking the last block home, the stray dog bouncing lightly at my side.

Chapter 6: *Fading (2010)*

Catherine pulls on her dark wool coat, tossing her long dark hair out from the collar.

“Dave?” she asks loudly from the doorway of the study.

“What?” I answer, swiveling in the chair to look at her. I was hard at work researching homes. We are looking to buy a new house, a larger one to accommodate the baby.

She cocks her head and smiles at me. “Not going to say goodbye?”

“I’m sorry, love. I got caught up trying to find us a new home.” As I speak, I get up and walk to her, letting my hand rest on the bump of her stomach. “We’re going to need the extra room sooner rather than later.”

“I know. I just wanted a kiss goodbye. Is that so much to ask?”

She touches my face with one hand and makes the cutest innocent face. What can I do against such cuteness? I smile, “You’re such a punk,” and then take her face in both hands and kiss her sweetly. “There, now get going.”

“Was that so hard?” She turns on her heel to go.

I grab her arm and pull her back into me, kissing her even more deeply than before. “Not hard at all,” I say.

She laughs and smacks my ass and runs toward the door, so I don't smack her back. "Bye babe!" she yells.

"Bye! Love you!" I yell back.

"Love you too!" she throws over her shoulder as she slams the door behind her.

Getting back to work, I click on a picture of a house that's for sale a few miles away. I've been trying to find a house within Napa Valley because I really don't want to have to commute too far for work. Plus with the baby coming in a few months, I want to be close enough to be there when Catherine needs me. She's been so excited ever since we found out we were having a baby. She's only a few months into the pregnancy, about 14 weeks (she always goes by weeks), but she's got a decent baby bump showing.

I look up at the overhead clock as if it's yelling at me to hurry up and find a place before she pops. Taking a virtual tour of the house, I see it's not half bad. It has three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and one has a nice tub I know Catherine'll love—she needs her baths. It has a full kitchen with an island (I love islands), a walk-in closet in the master bedroom—another thing Catherine'll love, and the living room has hardwood floors, though it's kind of small. No ceiling fans though, which makes me laugh. We have ceiling fans now in the living room and bedroom. Catherine's always had this irrational fear that the ceiling fan in our bedroom is going to fall down on us while we're sleeping and slice us to bits and pieces. She's weird, but she's my little weirdo.

So, this house looks like a winner. I'll keep looking, but I just have to check it over with Catherine when she gets back. She's on her way to work. It's a Sunday evening, but she just got called in. They have her working some nights now at the bar. She's a bartender, which doesn't sound like much, but she works her ass off, and she loves her job. She's always been a people person, and when I ask her why she doesn't just quit and go after a better job, she says something like, "What's better than getting to help people with their problems in a place that doesn't scare them like a shrink's office would? Besides, I'm good at my job." And she is good. Always makes a lot in tips.

But I always wish she'd quit. For one thing, she gets hit on all the time. She's a good sport about it, says they never mean any harm and most of the guys are just lonely old men, but I still don't like it. I trust her; I just don't trust them. You never know. Especially now with the baby coming. As soon as we found out, I wanted her to take the time off. She told me we couldn't afford it, and she's right, but it still doesn't make me feel any better about it. They had her just working days, but after a new girl quit, they asked her if she could take on a couple night shifts to pick up the slack.

Of course, being the kind-hearted woman she is, always willing to help, she agreed without even talking to me about it. She's so independent sometimes. Sometimes I think it's sexy, how confident and motivated she can be, like when we first got married, I think it was 2004. Yeah, I think that's right because it was about six years ago.

I was 24, and she had just turned 22 a few days before the wedding. We had been dating for about two years before we got married, and we couldn't wait any longer.

Before the wedding, we argued so much about the stupidest shit. Being the narcissistic idiot I was back then, I thought I had a say in the wedding planning. I thought it would be cool if it was a black- and white-themed wedding since I can't see colors, and, at first, she liked the idea too....until it came to deciding the flowers for the center pieces. I was thinking, easy: black and white roses. She had a different idea. Her favorite flower has always been those big pink lilies, and so she wanted those for the center pieces. I'm a guy, so I should've cared less what the flowers were and let her have her way, but I didn't. For some reason, I got angry at her. It got real heated, and I ended up yelling, "What the fuck do pink lilies have to do with us when I don't even know what pink is?"

I immediately regretted it. She started crying, and I felt so bad. She just wiped her tears with a stern expression on her face and said, "And what does it matter if they're pink, if they'll be gray to you anyway?" But she wasn't done. "And for that matter, what does it matter if our wedding is black- and white-themed if you're the only one of us who sees the world that way? This wedding was never about us," she almost whispered those last words and stormed off.

The worst part was that I wasn't even the first one to apologize. She came into the living room later that night where I sat flipping through the channels on the TV, my eyebrows

seemingly permanently furrowed in stubbornness. “Baby?” she said, peaking shyly around the couch. “I’m sorry about earlier. You’re right. I was being a silly girl.”

I instantly relaxed. I still can’t resist that cute and innocent thing she does without even trying. “Oh, babe,” I said. “Get over here,” and I pulled her onto the couch next to me, squeezing her into my side. “I’m sorry too. You were right. You should have your pink lilies. I think everyone will love them. Now let’s just forget about everything for now and stop worrying about the wedding. Tomorrow will worry about its own things.” That last line was something my dad always told me growing up that I really liked. I guess it stuck with me because I say it all the time.

After the wedding, though, things got hard. We didn’t realize marriage would take real work. I had just gotten a job working as a marketing representative for a growing company called Sixth Sense. The pay was okay, but it wasn’t enough to buy a house with. We were stuck in a small apartment, trying to get used to living together for the first time—we hadn’t lived together before the wedding. We thought it’d be good to wait. It wasn’t. Living together takes so much transitioning. It took us about that entire first year to get used to each other’s habits and quirks, to consolidating responsibilities and money, and to get the hang of that son-of-a-bitch called compromise.

Catherine was working as a receptionist at the time for a company that sells knives. She hated it. Said the people that worked there wanted her to always have that “selling” voice turned on when she answered the phone and even lie to costumers if they started asking too many questions.

But one day, she did something that reminded me how sexy her independent nature could be. I came home from work mentally exhausted from a long day’s work. I grabbed a Bud Light from the fridge and sunk down hard on the couch.

We got off about the same time around five each day, so she came in shortly after. She was happier than I’d seen her since she got the receptionist job. Flinging off her coat, she walked straight over to the couch, face shining with pride, and said, “Baby, I quit my job.”

I set the beer down on the coffee table as I looked up at her, startled. “You what?”

“That’s right,” she said, crawling over the arm of the couch and pushing me gently backward, “I quit my job.”

She gave me this look I’ll never forget. It was like it read, I do what I want. You got a problem with that? I thought it was so hot. She had the balls to do something I could never do, and not only that, but she was proud of it instead of worried about what would happen next.

God was she sexy. She had this amazing ability to be insanely cute one minute, and then, just like that, it's like she could turn a switch and be incredibly sexy all of a sudden. That look was all it took for me. She had me.

She grabbed my tie and pulled me close to her as she lay on me on the couch. Leaning in close, she barely let her lips brush mine, and then she licked my upper lip ever so slightly to entice me. She knew I loved it when she did that. "You should quit more often," I said, pulling her into me as I kissed her hard. I picked her up while we were still kissing and carried her into the bedroom.

Shaking my head to stop daydreaming, I get back to looking through houses on the market. Looking up at the clock, I realize how long I've been absentmindedly zoning out and thinking about old times. "My god, it got late," I say, yawning. I must've been zoning in and out for the last few hours. I decide to call it a night and head to bed. The clock reads a little after eleven, and I know Catherine works until one, so it doesn't make sense to stay up. I've got to be at work at nine tomorrow anyway.

Putting my flannel pajamas on, I call it a night. When I go to lay down on the bed, I see a little note on my pillow. It reads,

Hey sweetie,

Good night. Sleep well. I'll most likely kill you in the morning. ;)

Sweet dreams, baby.

Love,

~Catherine

That first line makes me laugh. It's similar to a line taken from one of our favorite movies, *The Princess Bride*. When we first got married, we'd try to make a joke out of how hard it was by one of us saying that to the other every night before bed. Eventually we stopped, but we still say it occasionally.

The last line, though, that made me smile like only her never-ending sweetness can do. Sigh. I can't wait for her to be home. When she's gone it's like a part of me goes with her. She's like a body part I can't live without. Like my feet. I can't stand up without her, let alone walk. I've never been as good with the words as she is or with expressing myself to her, but God knows she deserves it.

Taking the note, I tuck it away in the drawer next to my side of the bed, shut the lamp off, and try to fall asleep as quickly as possible.

I wake up to the sound of buzzing, and it's not coming from my alarm clock, which seems a little weird. It takes me a minute to break through the grogginess and focus, but eventually I figure out what's making the noise. It's my cell phone. It's on the nightstand right next to the alarm clock, which reads a little after three in the morning. That can't be right. Who the hell would call this late? I'm going to give 'em a lesson in business hours is what I'm gonna give 'em. Assholes.

"Yeah, who is it, and do you know what time it is?" I ask.

I can hear noise in the background. "Sir, I'm sorry for waking you at this hour. May I speak to David Johnson?"

"Speaking," I reply, still half-asleep, but growing concerned. "What's going on?"

"Sir, do you know where your wife is?"

I look next to me and see empty sheets. Oh my god. Where is she? Did she ever get home? "She was working," I stammer. "She was supposed to come home after her shift at the bar. It ended at one. Is everything okay? Do you know where she is?" The air is tightening. I am starting to panic.

"Sir, please, I'm going to need you to try and calm down," he says, which isn't helping.

"My name is Officer Barbruck. I'm afraid your wife's been in an accident. I'm going to need you to come down to the hospital for more details."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. No. Catherine is fine. "No," I almost laugh. "That can't be. I just talked to her before she left. She's fine. Did you call the bar?" At this point, I know I must be sounding crazy, but I can't help it. I can't believe it. Catherine was in an accident. No, not possible.

"Sir, please," he begs, but at this point I'm barely listening. "Can you come to St. Joseph's Hospital as soon as possible?"

Suddenly, something hits me. "Wait. She's okay right? And the baby? It's okay too, isn't it?"

There's a long pause on the other end. "Mr. Johnson, I think you should just come down here as quickly as you can. I don't know how much time there is left."

I can feel my throat closing, and I'm swallowing hard to force the pain back down. "What are you saying?"

"Please, sir, she's in bad shape. I'm so sorry to have to tell you this."

"You're sorry to have to tell me this, or you're sorry she's dying?!" I scream into the receiver, slamming it shut, and running to the door, grabbing the keys from the hook next to the door on the way out.

Oh god, oh god, oh god. Please, God, if there is a God, let her be okay. She's the better one. I need her. Please, God, I beg you, let her be okay.

The drive to the hospital seems like it lasts forever. Driving as fast as possible, I think about what the fastest speed I can get away with is without getting pulled over. I settle on 80 as thoughts of what happened flood my brain.

I picture her driving on the highway around a curve, starting to nod off, and a huge F150 rams her into the guard rails. She goes through it, and her little Ford Focus goes tumbling down the ravine.

Oh, god, no! Please, God, please, let her be okay.

When I arrive at the hospital, I stop straight in front of the ER doors. I don't care what the parking rules are. Rushing to the nearest desk, I yell, "Where's my wife? Where's Catherine?"

"Sir, calm down," a large, older woman behind the desk tells me.

"I'm not going to calm down! Where is my wife? She was taken here."

"Sir, just please, calm down, and tell me what your wife's last name and condition were the last time you heard?"

"Catherine Johnson. She's..." Something catches in my throat, and it almost escapes me. I pushed it back down. No time for that. "in critical condition, I think. She's been in an accident. That's all I know. They just said she was here. Where's my wife? Please, tell me where she is?" A part of me knows I'm just rambling now, but I don't care.

“It’s okay, Sir. Take a breath. We’re going to find her.” She gets up from her chair and walks over to me with a chart in her hand. Scanning it quickly, she finds Catherine’s name I guess because she points toward a room at the end of the hall and says, “In there. You’ll have to stop at the other desk, though, first and ask the doctor’s approval to see her.”

I’m not listening anymore. I run toward the door she pointed at. In the background, I can faintly hear the woman with the chart yelling at me, saying I can’t go in there.

Bursting through the door, I see Catherine hooked up to monitors, IVs running through the veins in her arms, blood soaking the white sheets beneath her from wounds all over. But the worst part, god I hate it, is the tube coming out of her mouth supporting her breathing.

“Catherine!” I yell, running for her.

I’m instantly accosted by doctors and nurses. “Hey, you can’t be in here!”

“Sir, you have to get out of here!”

“Somebody stop him!”

The doctors and nurses who aren’t actively working at the moment grab me and try to hold me back. Fighting as hard as I can, I try using high knees to propel me forward through the throng of limbs that hold me. I’ll carry them with me if I have to. “Catherine! Please, I just want to hold her hand. Let her know I’m here. She has to know I’m here!”

One of the doctors, I'm guessing the boss, nods his head at the doctors holding me, and I take this as a good sign, but they just tighten their grips and start forcing me toward the door. Suddenly, I'm furious. "No! You bastards! I just want to see her! Please, you've got to let me see her!"

Outside the room, the doctors reassure me that she's in the best possible care and that I can't see her because the doctors are working very hard to make sure she's okay. They talk to me like I'm a fucking idiot; so, without thinking, I find my fist meeting the side of one of their faces. The nurse I hit doesn't go down. Instead, he just takes a step back, catches his balance, and continues his job like nothing happened—or, better yet, like I'm a fucking lunatic.

The wait is the worst part. I sit there for one hour, two hours, three hours, and still no news. Once, a nurse comes by to tell me she's still in surgery, but that is it. Several times I find myself cursing God, and several times I find myself praying and begging God to heal Catherine. Who knew hospitals had chapels? I didn't know until I started walking around earlier when I got bored and found one. It is quite beautiful for how small it is. I can't tell what colors coat the walls, but from the dark shades, I'm thinking something like I've heard dark blue described as maybe. Sometimes, to understand how people understand color, I compare what colors they tell me things are to other things. So, for instance, I think the room might be dark blue because I've been told the night sky is dark blue, and the walls in the chapel remind me of the same shade as

the night sky. Anyway, it's beautifully decorated with velvet-lined prayer stools, candles, and nice Bibles. I revisit it about every fifteen minutes now. It helps keep me sane.

Almost four and a half hours later, a doctor finally comes to talk to me. Rushing up to meet him, I'm trying to read his expression. His arms are wrapped behind his back, and his eyes seem stern but the kind of stern that has some sort of promise without giving too much hope, or maybe he looks the kind of stern that's apologetic? I can't tell. "Doctor, how is she?"

He holds up his right hand in front of him almost like he's going to push me back. "I'm afraid your wife's condition was very severe when she was brought in. She had a lot of internal bleeding. We did the best we could, but..."

"But?"

"She didn't make it."

"What?" I can't breathe. My hands find my hair and start to tear at my skull. "And the baby?" I manage before my knees give out.

He just looks at me with those damn stern eyes. "I'm afraid the baby was too young to survive your wife sustaining such extensive injuries."

My knees give out and sink into the cement floor, my eyes wide with shock and horror.

The doctor doesn't know what to do, so he puts a hand on my shoulder, I think. I don't really know. I don't know where I am or what's happening to me as I just let my body fall to the floor.

Chapter 7: Moving

“Have you gotten the reports, yet, Donna?” I ask my secretary on the phone.

“Yes, sir,” Donna answers, “I’ll bring them right in.”

“Excellent,” I say and hang up the phone. Two seconds later Donna knocks on the door.

“Come in, Donna.”

“The reports, sir,” she says and sets a stack of papers on my desk. Her gray pencil skirt and matching suit jacket are curious to me. I think they might be a dark green.

Realizing my gaze is too low, I look up at her eyes and smile. “Thank you very much, Donna.”

She smiles back and looks surprised at my disposition. “Of course, sir,” she says, nodding her head and turning to leave.

At the door, I catch her. “Oh, Donna?”

“Yes, sir?”

“One more thing.”

“Sir?” she asks, looking confused.

“You look lovely today.”

She hesitates at the door, unsure what to do. A second sting bites my skin at that response. She recovers and says, “Thank you, sir,” and turns to leave, looking even more confused.

As the door closes, I turn my attention to the reports. I can’t help but wonder how I must seem to people. These past few years, I know I’ve checked out, but I didn’t think it was that noticeable after the first year. I guess I haven’t put much effort into projecting kindness. Maybe some part of me thinks that if I start being nice, it means I have to start caring about everything. And if I start caring about everything, it means I have to start living again. And how can I do that to her? I rub the pocket she’s not in. I forgot that I don’t keep her picture in my suit pockets because it crinkles. Instead, I look up at the framed photo of us on our honeymoon. I can’t see it, but I know it’s there, laying face down on my book shelf next to the copy of *Les Miserables* she gave me. She always tried to get me to read her favorite book, but I made excuses not to. It is way too long. I don’t keep the photo on my desk because if I did, I’d never stop thinking about her. I need to get some work done while I’m here, and staring at her beautiful face never helps.

Shaking off the unwelcome thoughts, I focus on processing the quarterly reports. I like this kind of work. It’s tedious, but it’s easy enough. And after awhile, doing the reports takes on a rhythmic quality. There’s something about it that becomes soothing when I’ve done enough. It’s kind of nice to get lost in my work once in awhile.

Before I know it, the soothing feeling ends. I sigh at the clock and gather up my things to go home. As I’m leaving, something hits me: I hope that dog didn’t pee all over the floor.

I cross the threshold with my breath held. I exhale in one heavy motion. Of course he peed. I'm not surprised so much as relieved that he did it in such an obvious spot, not hidden somewhere for me to find later when I step into a wet shoe or something. The dog sits near me by the door, wagging his tail weakly, his head tilted slightly downward like he knows what he's done.

"Yeah, you know what you did," I say while pointing in the opposite direction at the spot on the floor. Luckily, the living room floor is wood--like all the other floors in the house. It should wash right up. He whimpers a bit and starts to back up while still wagging his tail. "I guess I can't be too mad at you," I add. "After all, I left you alone in the house all day. Guess I can't expect you to hold it in."

After cleaning up the mess, I look over at the dog. "Say, you know what I just realized? I haven't given you a name yet."

The dog just cocks his head to the side and holds one ear up toward the ceiling as if to say, "Come again?"

"Hmm...what to call you..." I say, tapping my chin. "How about Woody? Since you like to pee on my nice wood floors?" I ask, smiling down at him.

The dog barks up at me.

"So, we're in agreement," I say.

The dog barks again.

"Alright, Woody it is. Say, Woody, you want to go outside since you've been cooped up in here all day?" Grabbing a quick sandwich, I realize I probably shouldn't have let that idea out

until I was ready to leave. The dog, Woody, stands by my bar stool barking occasionally and wagging his tail so fast and hard that it looks painful.

“Alright, already,” I yell, getting up with my sandwich in hand. I stick the whole sandwich in my mouth and hold it there so I can pull on my jacket and grab a tennis ball before heading out.

The tennis ball’s a big hit. Woody goes crazy running after it and barking excitedly when I’m about to throw it. It’s kind of amusing. After a few dozen throws, my arm starts to hurt and I sit down on the steps by the door. Woody comes up to me and nudges the ball in my hand with his nose. “No, Woody. That’s enough.”

Woody calms down soon enough as I pet him. He sits in front of me and gazes out into the distance. Seeing him like that, calm and contemplative, I can’t help but think he’s nice company. We sit there a few minutes together. It’s quiet and nice. Woody nudges my chin after awhile. It’s almost like he knew it was about the time of day I usually go on a walk. I stare at him curiously. “I suppose you would know my walking schedule, wouldn’t you, ya stalker?” I smile at his expression and stand up. “Come on, Woody,” I say and head off down the sidewalk.

I look down at the scruffy gray dog bouncing along next to me. I don’t think I have much to worry about Woody running off. Though I don’t have a leash, he’s the one who’s been following me. Besides, if he does run off, he’ll probably find me before I find him anyway. He seems to have a talent for stalking me.

After walking awhile, I decide to start giving the dog the tour of my life in this neighborhood. “See that old, decaying building over there, Woody?” I ask, pointing across the street at a three-story warehouse that clearly has been closed for years. “I used to work there

when I first moved here.” I look down at Woody to make sure he’s paying attention. “You see, I couldn’t get the job I wanted when I first came here, and I needed to work to pay off my college loans. This place was the only place that would hire me.”

Woody just stares up at me, shifting his gaze back and forth from my eyes to my extended hand. He must think I’m about to play with him, maybe throw something. But I’m not done giving him the tour yet.

“And look over there, Woody,” I nod my head towards a small brick building a few spots down from the warehouse. “That’s the coffeehouse I spent so many hours in filling out job applications. In fact, I went there for part of an interview for the job I have now.” My face moves into a smile remembering how nervous I was when my interviewer told me he wanted to meet for coffee the next day to talk “realistic logistics” of the job.

I’m in the middle of explaining the significance of a nearby bench to Woody when he barks and takes off running. “Oh, come on?” I yell after him. “Ok, I guess the bench story was kind of boring, but I’ve got better stories.”

My shoulders and chest rise emphatically as I exhale a deep breath and take off running after Woody. It doesn’t take long to find him, thankfully. When I see him sniffing around a tree in the middle of the park on our right, I drop my hands to my knees and breathe heavily. After I’ve caught my breath, I start walking toward Woody and yell, “Woody, come here boy” with my hands cupped around my mouth. He hears me and looks up and starts running back toward me. I shake my finger at him and let him know I don’t appreciate having had to chase him down like that. He just wags his tail energetically and nods his head a few times to compliment the quick stamping of his feet.

I bend down and rough the fur on his head with my palm in one quick motion. “Ahh, I can’t blame you, I guess. I suppose it’s my fault for not getting you a leash,” I say.

Woody barks playfully and backs up, ready to play. “Alright, I guess you played me. You knew just where you wanted to go, didn’t you, you mangy beast?” I laugh as he barks and jumps back and forth excitedly.

I press my hands on my knees for support and rise, looking around at the park Woody brought me to. “Wow, it’s been a long time since I’ve been here,” I say to no one in particular. I look back down at Woody and start walking to find a stick to throw for him. “You see, buddy, I used to take Catherine here on dates sometimes.” Then, realizing he doesn’t know who she is, I look down and add, “She was my wife. You would’ve loved her, and she would’ve loved you.”

I find a stick and as I bend to pick it up, Woody snatches it up in his mouth first. “Hey, I was getting that for you, ya punk,” I say. For some reason, “punk” seems to be the only word that fits. Images of Catherine flicker through my mind at the sound of the word on my lips.

“As I was saying,” I begin, throwing the stick thirty feet out past a tree. “I used to bring Catherine here a lot when we were younger. But if you can keep a secret,” I pause to look down suspiciously at Woody.

He seems like he can handle it, so I continue. “At first, I only brought her here because it was a cheap date, and I was pretty broke. You saw where I worked,” I say, flipping a thumb over my shoulder. “But then, she loved the memories and the air so much that I had to bring her back sometimes. She’d go on about all the good talks we had laying on a blanket, drinking sodas or beer. When we first came here,” I say, smiling freely at the memory, “she was so curious about

how I saw the world. Not just my opinions, but what everything looked like to me.” At the end of that line, I let the stick go and Woody takes off for it again.

When he gets back, I grab the stick and walk towards the nearest bench and sit down. Woody doesn't fight my decision. Instead, he jumps up and sits next to me, calmly staring off into the distance with me. I can feel my brows meeting as my face turns serious. After a moment of silence, I add, staring at the fading sunlight, “You know, she was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

I can't say anymore. For awhile, we just sit there together, looking at the light of the sun piercing sporadically through the branches of the trees. Woody sinks down and lays his paws and head on my lap. I don't stop him.

Chapter 8: Seeing

The black tar feels cold against David's bare feet. He stares at his hands, turning them over in front of him. Though he cannot see its redness, he knows there's blood on them. He doesn't know who's it is. He thinks maybe it's his. He looks up at the darkness in front of him. The rain pours down steadily, soaking his clothes and pressing them to his wet skin. He doesn't notice the rain. He stumbles forward, looking at the light that's vastly approaching. Reaching his hand in front of his face to shield him from the brightness, he starts running towards it. The light flickers as it rounds the switchback in front of him and drives straight toward him. The car doesn't seem to see him. He doesn't care. His mouth is moving. He's trying to yell something at the driver of the car. He points behind him and then waves his arms up and down frantically. The lights come closer, so close he knows the driver can see him. He screams at the top of his lungs, but there might as well be no sound emanating from him. His eyes widen with fear. He sucks in a deep breath as the car drives straight through his transparent body without stopping. Realizing he's invisible as the car goes through him, David turns just in time to see the car head straight for the truck head on. His face contorts into a horrific scream worse than the Edvard Munch painting, and he clutches his stomach. The word "no" leaves his body in an unbearable shriek as the truck and car that Catherine's driving collide.

He sees her body fly through the car windshield and he tears at his eyes and begs the universe to make it stop. Running towards her body, he feels his body disappearing right as he's about to reach her.

Suddenly, he's in a hospital. He's walking speedily next to the gurney she's lying on. Two doctors push her towards a room and start ordering nurses to bring them fluids and type O

blood and tools for immediate surgery. There's a steady beep coming from the machine she's attached to. He stands next to the bed looking down at her. Reaching for her hand, he tries to squeeze it, but his hand closes through her hand. David keeps his hand there and covers his eyes with the other. When he moves the hand covering his eyes, he comes as close to her face as he can get. The surgeon's tools and hands go through him, but he's not looking at them.

"Catherine," he sobs, trying to move a strand of her hair back from her face. "Catherine, don't leave me."

She starts convulsing and David jumps back. "She's gone into shock," one of the doctors yells toward the beeping machine. Her body goes flaccid all of a sudden and the machine connected to her lets out a never ending wail.

"Catherine," David yells, trying to touch her face. "Catherine wake up!"

And then a hand, a real, warm hand is on his cheek. He turns slowly, and there she is, standing before him in jeans and a sweater he always liked on her. She shows no sign of injury but just stands there staring searchingly into David's eyes. Tears fall silently down David's cheeks. He closes his hand around hers on his cheek and says, "Catherine? Is it really you?"

She nods and says, "Yes, love. It's me." She smiles.

"But are you--"

"Dead? Yes," she cuts him off.

"Am I--"

"Dead?" she cuts him off again. "No, darling. You're dreaming."

“But why? How?” David asks, confused and beyond happy to see her like this.

“Come with me,” Catherine says and takes both of his hands in hers.

As soon as she grabs both of his hands, their surroundings change. The white walls of the hospital collapse into a park. He recognizes it immediately. It’s the park he used to take her to on cheap dates.

“Do you remember this place?” she asks, walking hand in hand with David through the park.

“Of course I do,” he replies.

“Then you remember when you fell off of the swing and hurt yourself?”

He nods in affirmation but lets her continue.

“You were trying so hard to impress me. For some reason,” she adds, “you thought I’d be impressed by how high you could swing.”

“Yeah, I was really stupid,” he says, showing her a half smile.

She smiles brightly in return. “You still are stupid, but there’s still time,” she says.

He furrows his brows, a bit hurt.

She kisses his cheek and says, “Oh, stop it. You know I kid.”

He melts at the real feeling that lingers on his cheek at her touch. “I wish you could stay,” he lets out.

She turns serious. "I wish you could stay," she says. "But you've got things to do still," she quickly adds, flicking her arm carelessly. "Anyway, do you remember what I told you after you broke your leg jumping off the swing?"

"You said that no matter how many times or how bad I hurt myself, you'd always be there."

Catherine's face is aglow with light. "Yes, that's right," she says. "I want you to remember that, baby."

David closes his eyes and lets a tear fall at the sound of the word "baby." He swallows and says, "I will, baby." The word cuts and he's having trouble holding himself up.

"Remember it, baby" she repeats as the light around her begins to pulsate and her face becomes less clear.

There's too much light. It's consuming her. David struggles to hang on to her hand. "But it's not enough, baby. I need you," he says, pulling her hand out from the light.

"It is enough," she says as she starts to fade. Before she lets go, she pulls herself away from the light, bends down to David, who has collapsed to his knees and buried his head in her hand, and takes his face in both of her hands. She locks eyes with him and gently kisses his lips before fading back into the light as it disappears.

David wakes up sobbing uncontrollably. The effects of the dream still linger. He feels the power of her in his room, still feels her lips against his, still hears the sound of her voice--always a bit high-pitched, but he loved it. David doesn't even sit up. He just takes his arm and covers his

eyes, trying to hold on to her. It was one of the worst nightmares and best gifts he's ever had since losing her. Remembering waving and screaming at her car, he never felt more helpless at her death. And yet, he never felt her presence more real and beautiful and alive than in the park when she held his hand and spoke to him and touched his cheeks.

After a few minutes of laying there breathing in his thoughts and memories, David moves his arm and reveals the weight on his chest. He makes Woody sleep on a makeshift bed on the floor, but Woody must have heard him crying and decided that was a good time to jump on the bed.

David looks into Woody's eyes. They seem to know more than he gives them credit for. "Thanks, Woody," he says, patting the dog on his head and smoothing his coat down. David rests his arm on the dog and relaxes back onto his pillow. "I guess you can stay," he adds, closing his eyes to try to get back to sleep. He drifts off rather quickly and peacefully, paving the way to light dreams he doesn't remember the next morning.

Chapter 9: Enough

“This is Tommy.”

“Hey, Tommy. It’s David,” I say into the receiver.

“Dave!” he says, “I’m glad you called, man.”

Smiling into the phone, I feel the sweat on my forehead cool. “Yeah, I just wanted to see if you were still up for that beer.”

“Sure, sounds good,” he says casually.

“Great, how ‘bout later tonight around seven?”

“Works for me,” he answers.

“Alright, great. See you then,” I say and hang up the phone.

As soon as I hang up, I breathe a sigh of relief and relax into my chair. I look down at Woody, who’s sitting in front of me in the kitchen just staring up expectantly. “No, you can’t come, Woody,” I say. My attempt at firmness is not well received. Woody grumbles deep in his throat.

“Sorry, buddy,” I offer.

Woody just grumbles again briefly and walks off in defeat.

The rest of the day goes by rather peacefully. Woody and I watch a movie and sit quietly together most of the day until he starts dancing around in front of me, begging me to go outside

and play. I throw around the tennis ball for him a few dozen times, and when we get back inside, it's almost time to meet Tommy.

At 6:45, I grab my coat to head out. Seeing me about to leave close to the same time I usually take a walk, Woody's eyes expand and his tongue hangs lazily out of his mouth. I parry his attempts to get between my legs and run outside with me.

Walking toward the bar alone, I catch myself feeling sorry for the dog. I shake it off and in a few minutes I'm pulling on the gray, metal doorknob, a bell chiming to announce my presence. The room is dimly lit, highlighting the bar at the center. A few round, wooden tables stand scattered next to the eastern and western walls. What's left of the ceiling is covered in leaks from the gaps in shingling on the roof. The building has clearly seen better days.

This early, I'm surprised to see quite a few people in the bar. Two men in their fifties sit sipping cheap beer from cans at the table closest to the bar. Behind their table, a man maybe my age drinks frothing beer from a glass mug. He keeps his head down when I look at him and hunches further into his beer. I can't help thinking he reminds me of me three years ago. I put a mental hand on his shoulder and shake my head, telepathically telling him it'll be okay. Somehow, I mean it when I think it.

Shaking my head, I approach the bar, gliding my hands along the cold, wooden surface and taking a seat on a dark, leather stool that makes a noise when I sit down. The bartender, a middle-aged man with gray, shortly cropped hair and arm sleeve tattoos, looks up at me and nods as he walks over. "What'll ya have?" he asks.

"Just give me a beer, whatever's on tap," I say.

“Sure, no problem,” he answers.

Before I finish getting the money out of my wallet, he’s already back with a glass full of beer. “Thanks,” I say. “How much?”

He taps a few beats on the bar and leans back, seeming eager to keep moving. “Three bucks,” he says, almost popping his lips as he continues rocking on his heels.

I hand him a five. “Keep the change,” I say, nodding at him without looking at his shifty face.

“Thanks, man,” he says and walks off to do something else, tapping a little ditty on the edge of the bar as he goes.

I take a sip of my beer, watching him find his next victim, when a hand touches my shoulder. Beer threatens to escape through my nose.

Tommy laughs. “Didn’t mean to startle you, man.” He takes off his jacket and puts it on the seat before pulling the stool under him.

Wiping the beer traces from my lips, I say, “No worries. How’s it goin’, Tommy?”

He flicks two fingers at the bartender and then turns a thumb in my direction and says, “I’ll take what he’s having.” After adjusting himself on the stool, he says to me, “Oh, I’ve been pretty good. You know, just working a lot and taking some free time to relax when I can.”

I nod in agreement. “Yeah, I hear that,” I say.

“So, how about you? What’s new since the last time I saw you?”

“Well, not too much,” I say, and then rethink the answer, nodding my head to one side, thoughtfully. “I got a dog.”

“Oh yeah? What kind?” Tommy asks, looking like this was the best news he heard all day.

“Don’t really know. He’s a stray.”

“No shit? How’d you find him?”

His natural manner relaxes me. There’s something easy about the way he leans his elbows onto the bar and sips his beer without looking at me. “He found me, actually,” I say, smirking inwardly. Tommy waits eagerly for more of the story. “He followed me home one day, and I wouldn’t let him in at first. But then--actually it was the night I ran into you--I saw him again by a tree. I thought he was a robber.”

For some reason, Tommy gets a kick out of that image and starts laughing, so I join him. “Yeah, you could say I was relieved, so I threw him a bone and let him stay with me.”

Tommy doesn’t laugh at my pun. I know it’s not funny, but Catherine would’ve laughed. She was always making terrible puns and jokes.

“So, what’s his name?” Tommy asks.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts. “His name is Woody.”

The wrinkled expression on Tommy’s face makes him look constipated. “You named your dog Woody?” he asks, pointing at his penis and flicking his head down without looking.

I laugh so hard beer comes out of my nose and it stings. Wiping the beer onto my shirt sleeve, I explain, "That never crossed my mind, honestly." He still looks concerned for my mental health, so I add, gesturing emphatically toward the wood bar floors, "It was the first thing I could think of when I came home and saw that he peed on my wood floors."

Tommy relaxes his face muscles again. "If you say so," he says, sinking his elbows further onto the bar and taking a long swig of his beer.

For a minute, we just sit there, sipping our beers, looking through the caramel liquid. I know it looks like caramel because that's how Catherine described it to me when we were on a picnic at the park. It was one of our cheap dates and she was so curious about how I saw colors that she felt the need to compare everything to another object. She thought that the more tangible things I could relate to a specific color, the more I'd grow to understand it and be able to identify it. I was so amazed by how much she already understood and could connect to how I saw the world that I couldn't take my eyes off her. Her lips moved in never-ending circles. I didn't care if she talked a lot as long as I could stare at her lips and her eyes and the strands of hair that she called "whispies" that floated in front of her eyes. The memory dissolves pleasantly and I emerge from the caramel and return to the glass.

The condensation tries to merge with the caramel. Droplets on the glass touch the clearness like they are straining to reach the beer. Or maybe the two liquids feel barred by the solid. I can't be sure, but I think I see one of Tommy's eyes reflected through the caramel. When it seems like staring at his eye in the half-full beer in front of him is beginning to hypnotize me, I shake my head free of its gaze. "So," I start up the conversation again, thinking something general is best, "What's life been like for you all these years?"

Tommy turns a glance in my direction with a quizzical brow like he was interrupted in some deep thought. “Well, after college, I looked for a job. You know how that is,” he says, flicking his wrist in my direction. “Finally found something I could sink into, but it took years.”

My head bobs freely. “Yeah, I get that. Same for me. Took me a long time to get to an executive position.”

“Oh yeah? Executive?” he tilts his head away from me, a surprised expression on his face. “Sounds fancy,” he adds relaxing his elbows back onto the bar and returning to his beer.

My laugh surprises him more. “It’s not that fancy. It’s a good job, though.” He just nods into his beer and remains silent a moment. “You ever marry?” I ask, unsure if it’s the right question.

“I almost got married once. Right after college,” Tommy answers.

I’m not sure if I’m supposed to ask the question, but I do. There’s something about Tommy, about the way he doesn’t look at me when we talk and the way his posture sinks into the moment like he’s committed to where he is right now that makes me sure I can ask him anything and he probably won’t try to punch me. “What happened?” I ask.

He shrugs and tilts his head toward me, still not looking at me. “Not much of a story. I met her after college. She was beautiful and crazy,” he says, pausing to sip his beer before adding, “and I was stupid. Got engaged after only three months. A couple months later, she called the whole thing off.” He shook his head towards his glass as he went for another big swig.

I feel my head moving too. “Man, I’m sorry. That’s rough.”

There’s that shrug again. “It’s alright. It was a long time ago.”

We both look back into the caramel, hoping to be mesmerized by it like the floating shapes in a lava lamp used to twenty years ago. He looks up at me, and his goofy, broad smile shows a set of straight, white teeth. “Hey,” he begins, “remember that girl you accidentally left at the movies?”

My face reflects his. “Hey,” I begin, throwing my hands up defensively. “In my defense, I had an emergency.”

“Oh come on, man!” he says, squinting the features of his face and waving a hand in front of him. “Your mom was in the hospital to get her appendix removed. It wasn’t a big deal.”

My shoulders lift and I smile. “I didn’t know that at the time. I was an idiot.”

“Yeah, you must’ve been,” he says into his glass as he takes another sip. “That girl probably watched an hour of the movie by herself before she realized you weren’t coming back with more popcorn.”

We both laugh. The moment seems to hang in the air. It leaves as our chests relax into sighs at the same time. I can’t help but notice it. I think it’s strange how the body echoes the feelings we’re having. It’s like our lives are visible through movements of the body.

The thought occurs to me just as Tommy interrupts with a question. “So,” he begins, “have you dated since Catherine?”

“Not really,” I lie. I grab the glass in front of me with both hands, and I can tell Tommy’s looking at me like he knows my answer really means, “No. Not at all.” The thought of trying to date again makes the hairs on my arms rise.

My nerves don't stop Tommy from pressing on. "Why not, man?" he asks. "There's this girl that I work with. She's real nice. I can fix you up if you want."

My hand extends in front of me, warding off the attempt and beating my mouth to a response. "No, no," I say. "That's alright. I'm ok."

"You sure, man?" Tommy presses.

"No, no," I repeat. "Really, I'm ok."

One side of his shoulder raises to meet his cheekbone. He lifts his glass towards me and says, "Suit yourself. Offer's still open anytime you want it."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," I say. "Maybe next month when I'm not so busy with the quarterly reports," I throw out to give him hope. It feels genuine leaving my tongue. I hear a short grunt escape my lips and add, "Besides, I'm sure 'real nice' is just a nice way of saying she's ugly."

Tommy lets out a deep laugh and says, "Good point but not true. I swear, man," rocking back and then slapping his hands on the bar.

"I'm sure she's 'real' attractive," I say. He just smiles and shakes his head. I take the opportunity to change the subject. I ask him how long he's been in town and what he does for fun. The conversation goes on effortlessly for so long that I don't realize it's already almost midnight.

"Shit," I cut into one of Tommy's stories about a female soccer coach he's been trying to get to go out with him recently. "I'm sorry, but I just realized it's almost midnight and I haven't let the dog out or anything since before I left."

“No worries, man,” Tommy says. “Yeah, I better get going too.” He raises his left arm to look at his watch.

“It’s been real cool catching up with you, Tommy,” I say, getting up from the bar stool and putting my coat on in one unified movement. “We need to do this again soon,” I add.

His warm smile confirms it. “For sure, man,” he says. “Hit me up any time.” He doesn’t get up from his stool. He just sits there finishing his beer and looking up at me. And then, as if remembering something, he adds, “Hey,” pointing a finger like a gun at me, “You wouldn’t be interested in watching a soccer game, would you? I might need a good excuse next time I’m stalking the coach.”

My response spews out in half-laughter. “Sure, man. That’d be cool.”

“Well, alright then,” he says.

“I’ll catch you later then?” I ask, not sure if he’s staying or leaving.

“Yup, sounds good. I’ll give you a call,” he says, and goes back to sipping his beer. He must want to finish enjoying it before going home. I can understand that. Sometimes it’s nice to sip a cold beer down to the drop and enjoy the silence.

When I get outside, the darkness hits me. I always wonder how people who see color see darkness because for me, it overwhelms me. It converges on my other senses and heightens them at the same time. The gray cloud that is my vision covers the darkness, somehow making it appear beyond black. I might as well have my eyes closed for all the good my eyesight does me at night. I have to squint and stare directly at the sidewalk to get a sense of place when I’m

walking this late at night. It's when I'm achieving this equilibrium that something hits me full force, almost knocking me down. I stumble back a step to gain my footing.

Before I realize it, I'm hugging a forty-pound, furry dog. He's licking my face in sloppy, long lines across my cheeks. I have to pry him from my face before setting him down. Kneeling to pet him, I ask, "What are you doing here, Woody?" He just wags his tail, soaking in the effect of my hand against his soft fur. "And how the heck did you get here?" I ask with a puzzled look as the ridiculous image of a dog prying a window open with a lead pipe takes form in my mind.

After a minute to consider the image, I shake my head and resume walking home, no longer squinting at the ground to find my place. With Woody by my side, it makes it easier to know where I'm going. The walk home is nice. My nostrils breathe in the fresh air and my eyes close every now and then to allow my body to absorb the cool breeze, to feel its fleeting permanence against my skin. Looking down at Woody, I wonder why I never considered getting a dog after Catherine died.

Around me the night is loud in its silence. The animals are asleep, and so are most of the people. Their dreams pulsate towards me, wanting me to sleep too. Home and a bed await. My body and the house have intertwined kinetic energy. I move forward as the house slides towards me. Yet, I don't feel tired. I push away the pulsations of the dreamers, enjoying the consciousness. I feel awake as I look down at Woody, wagging his tail and staring down the street in front of us. I reach down and pat him on the head. I know it won't last, but it's enough for now. It's enough.