Upon the Threshold

By

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My mother said to me once, “Just make something of yourself.”

This advice, while unclear and even puzzling, has been the driving force behind all that I have accomplished in life. From my degrees, to my career, to my travels around the world. And now, with my second Masters, my MFA.

This book is for my mother. Without her love, guidance and dream for me to be more than she could be in life, I would not be here.
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Jane’s Malaise

My mother asked me once if I knew where her legs were. We were in the kitchen, about to eat a simple breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon. A dish she used to love but could no longer perceive. She ate because she mimicked my motions while we sat across from each other, but she couldn’t taste the food anymore. Just another step in her slow but steady decline away from all of her senses.

“Kate, where are my legs?” Some eggs fell from her mouth as she said this because she chewed with her mouth open. Something the old her, before the dementia set in, would never have done. My mother was no longer the mother I knew.

I responded with more of a statement than a question. “Your legs.” I wanted to burn the phrase into her so she’d somehow remember, and the line of questioning would stop before it got into its maddening start. I was fatigued of having to debrief her in order to understand her. After all, in her head she understood what she was trying to say. I was the one that didn’t know. She was stubborn and inflexible, just like she was in real life. It was the summer of 2008, and she was living with us by then. The dementia had deprived her of her independence and me of mine. For the next year I would have her before she would need 24-hour permanent care.

“Yes, yes, my legs, my legs!” she shouted adamantly. “I remember I left them in the closet and now they’re not there!” She stamped her foot for emphasis, and plodded off to our spare bedroom. Grumpy and peevish, like a petulant child. This brought back the dull, steady thump in my head that I’d thought I left behind the day before. My mother was no longer my mother. I repressed the inspiration to grab the nearest pillow and smother
this new woman until her harassment subsided. Not to kill her of course, but to quiet her long enough so I could at the very least, finish my coffee. She had become too easily upset and impossible to please.

I heard a clump in the bedroom and walked towards the doorway, braced myself along the way. It used to be our guest bedroom but when my husband and I moved her in with us, we made it hers. Most of the contents from her old house had been sold and she had been downsized; reduced to a small room next to our den where she now stood defiant and imperious. Almost admirable in her preposterous conviction that her legs indeed were missing. She glowered at me, so I pretended to try to find them. I moved around the room and tried to quell the beating in my brain.

“Well, let’s see, they’re not under the bed . . . Hmmmm . . . just where could they be?” I looked under the bed and in the dressers before I went back out to the kitchen to look under the table and score a nip of coffee. She followed me and watched me work. I felt the knot in my stomach form. After five minutes of pretend hunting through a hall closet, I thought, shoes! She wants her shoes. The relief was such that the pounding in my head ceased and my stomach settled. I stuck my head out of the closet and there she stood in the hallway, waiting for her legs.

“You mean your shoes, Mom, you want your shoes?”

“Yes, that’s right, my shoes!” she barked back as if I was the one with the problem. I made a mental note that she now saw shoes as legs, just as chocolate had become little brown things, and scissors had become cutters. I grabbed a pair of sneakers and handed them over with an abruptness that still makes me cringe, “Here.” I’ll admit I wasn’t very patient with her at times.
“No, not those, the blue ones!” she shouted as she slapped the sneakers away. She went from being syrupy and tender to cross rather easily. I called the doctor later that day and he said it was time to up her dosage of medication. At first I refused to give her the anti-psychotic meds that the doctor had first prescribed. My mother had been slightly crazy in her life but never psychotic. But when her episodes escalated to screaming and pulling at her hair, I happily crushed up the tablets and mixed them into her rice pudding.

I distracted myself with a daydream of taking her for a long ride in the country and deserting her in a flowery field so she could be entertained by butterflies and the feel of the sun. I practiced my dumbfounded face for the police officers, “Oh my God, you found her where?!” And then I felt a tenacious rush of guilt, the reliable feeling that crept in every time after I lost my cool. The feeling that has not gone away since. The drug commercials always had a caring daughter going for a walk with a feeble but well-dressed mother, or a scene with the both of them doing arts and crafts together. I had only that to go by and to live up to.

A few months after the morning she misplaced her legs, her breasts went missing. She tested me over dinner in an impromptu manner. We were at the dinner table, just me and her. My husband had just taken on the night shift. She was eating a grilled cheese sandwich. “Kate, what happened to my breasts? I could have sworn I had them last night. Did you take them?” I looked up from the book I was skimming through, took a deep breath and stared at her. I knew exactly where her breasts went.

“Well?” she demanded an answer. Her eyes swelled with tears. She used obstinacy to hide the fear that she lost something.
I kept my voice nonchalant. “You didn’t want them anymore so we went to the doctor and he removed them. You said they were getting in your way.” My stock story offered for the hundredth time. My mother’s memory of a double mastectomy, two rounds of radiation, six months of chemotherapy, phantom itches and adjusting to prosthetic bras, had been bleached from her memory. Dementia does have its saving graces. There are certain things in life you just don’t need to remember.

“Oh yeah, that’s right, now I remember!” she shook her head in agreement and went back to eating.

I looked at her. What did you do with my real mother, you hopeless imposter?

Later that winter, one Saturday afternoon, she offered to help me clean by waking me from a medicated nap. “Kate! Where’s the thing?” she yelled as she hovered over me. I was about to lose the luxury of a midday snooze, for she would soon need my constant care. I blinked my eyelids open to find her in a bright yellow rain coat. My mind was mired in a chemical fog. I pushed myself up from the couch, “What thing, Ma?”

She rolled her eyes shouted, “You know, the thing that goes Vroom Vroom,” She completed the request with hand motions, stance and movement necessary to move a vacuum. “Give me a minute, Ma.” As I rummaged through the hall closet in search of the Vroom Vroom, I thought about the word confabulation and how the doctor said she would do this to make up for the words she forgot. I ruminated over leaving her medication out and telling her it was candy, knowing she’d eat them all and go to sleep forever. I practiced my panic-stricken face for the police, “Oh my God, I can’t believe she ate the whole bottle!” The groundswell of guilt pulled me back to my senses. I brought the vacuum over to her and she smiled in approval, “That’s my girl!”
When her sister died, I told my mother she went on vacation. Even though she didn’t remember her anymore, I felt that for some reason my mother was owed some news about her sister, which has been added to my list of mistakes in life that tend to haunt me every now and then.

“Vacation? You mean she gets to go on vacation and I have to stay here? Why couldn’t I go too? Where did she go? Boy, she’s got some nerve going without me!” she complained with resentment.

She stomped off again and yelled, “When’s my sister coming home?! I want to go too!” My mind battled through the many ideas. I thought, you want a vacation? I saw it in my head. A cruise. A slip. A fall overboard. I practiced my shocked face for the authorities, “I don’t know what could have happened, she was here with me on the deck and then she just disappeared!”

I moved swiftly to the bathroom and shut the door behind me. I gripped the edges of the sink to keep from falling. That’s when I put myself on stronger medication to keep the anxiety at bay. My therapist said to me, “You have this thing. It’s called Elder Care Anger.” The pills steadied my nerves, but not the shame I felt for wanting the woman dead. I practiced a hymn in my head, It’s-not-her-it’s the disease, it’s-not-her-it’s the disease, it’s-not her-it’s-the-disease. She eventually mellowed that day because I gave her a tiny sleeping pill with her little brown thing.

When the pills didn’t stop her from wandering out my front door, we had to downsize her again. That time to a small room in a locked hospital ward. When she protested, I lied to her again, and told her that she had to be admitted for a heart operation. She believed in me when I lost faith in myself to take care of her.
Tracks

Charlie

Charlie Viton was driving the passenger train from Albany to Poughkeepsie on a curiously warm early spring afternoon. Singing and humming his way through an old Tom Jones song, he crooned as he maneuvered the train effortlessly through the many bends and curves along the route. It had been his route for the past six years and he knew every arch, turn and curl of the track. Passengers commuting to work swayed in their seats to the sashay of the train, and many fell asleep within ten minutes into his even ride.

Charlie had a scheduled stop in Hudson, but right after he passed the town of Allandale, he saw something on the tracks up ahead. He had seen dogs, deer and the occasional bear on the tracks before, and they were likely to bolt from the train’s path when the vibration of the rails purred underneath their feet. But as the train barreled closer, Charlie squinted his eyes to narrow his vision. He realized that it wasn’t an animal that wandered onto the middle of his path, but rather a man and a woman who stood in the tracks in an embrace.

Charlie, in a torrent of adrenalin, went into emergency mode. He slammed his hand once, and then frantically over and over on the emergency brake button, pulled the train’s horn, and screamed frantically for them to get the fuck out of the way. The lights of the train flashed intensely and the wheels of the train strived to stop, streaked hard against the iron rails, but the train was too close to the couple. The resounding screech and sudden braking of the train woke the sleeping passengers from their silent reverie. Later, many would report feeling the train hit something with a thud.
According to the official report, the train continued on its course another 1500 feet or so, before coming to a complete stop. Charlie defied protocol and union rules when he jumped from the train (the only thing he did wrong that day) and sprinted back down the tracks towards the spot where he hit them. The conductor jumped too, and ran after Charlie, shouted after him to get back on the fucking train. They both came upon a dismembered body part at the same time. It was in a yellow pant leg with a black orthopedic shoe on its foot. “Holy Shit” and “Oh, Jesus!” they said together, almost in unison.

“Charlie, get back in the goddamn cab!” Charlie saw passengers descending the stairs and broke into a jog, yelled at them to get them back on the train. They covered their hands to their mouths and pointed towards Charlie as he made his way towards him. On his way over, he spotted the woman’s severed head. Awash in shock, he took off his New York Department of Transportation company-issued jacket and covered her up. “Jesus H. Christ!” he muttered under his breath.

When the investigating DOT supervisor arrived, he found Charlie in the driver’s seat, with his head in his hands. Charlie, in an incantation, almost like he had put himself in a trance, said over and over, “I tried to stop. I tried to. I really did.” Charlie’s drug test later came back negative, but he got written up for leaving the engineer’s cab of the train when he should have stayed and let the conductors handle the accident.

The investigating officer on the scene, Officer Teoni, found a car with the engine still running near the carnage and an envelope addressed to a Thaddeus Wyatt on the front seat. Teoni shut the car off, pocketed the note and then supervised the transfer of passengers from the out of service train to the busses that were called to the scene. While the coroner’s office surveyed the surrounding area, checking off parts of bodies as they
located them, Teoni used the cruiser’s computer to research a next of kin. Within a couple of hours after the elderly couple were mowed down by Charlie, a Tom Jones singing engineer from Canarsie, Brooklyn, Thaddeus Wyatt, the couple’s son, was located.

Charlie took the mandatory three days off that the employee handbook required. He spent much of his time home alone and watched old Twilight Zone episodes with a bottle of Jack Daniels on the side table next to his worn couch. Friends called to check up on him from time to time. He told them, “It’s not the kind of sight you get out of your head right away. There was like a landscape of body parts. They were everywhere. Know what I mean?”

*Tad*

Officer Teoni found me at work. I still appreciate that he came to tell me what happened, rather than place a call. He was led to my office by the company receptionist, Gayle. My desk faced the door and outside a long hallway stretched towards the other side of the floor. I watched them as they walked towards me; he with a grim, uninviting face and Gayle, who strode beside him with a look of question and concern.

When you first spot a police officer outside your door, with a confused receptionist you think of what you might have done wrong, even if you didn’t. You silently panic and try not to make it apparent that your nerves are tingling and you think of the pot you have in your sock drawer at home, the tickets you haven’t paid, the money from your kid’s scholarship fund that you used for a new roof. You think of your kids, and then you think your wife. Are they missing? Dead? But not your parents, you don’t think about your
parents. And then Teoni uses your full name, “Are you Thadeus Wyatt?” I stood up at my desk and said that I was.

Teoni looked around at the people who had gathered outside their offices and stood up in their cubicles to rubberneck the scene. He looked at me and said with a somber face, “Can we speak in private?”

My office was all windows and it looked out onto half the employees in the company so I said of course, and I led him to a conference room. I shut the door and when I turned to face him, he had taken his hat off and held it close to his chest.

“Mr. Wyatt, There’s been an incident today involving two people. Can you identify your parents’ names for me?”

Ok, I thought, I can handle a little accident. Probably a fender bender and I was needed at the station, or hospital. They were brought there for observation and I’d have to pick them up. The HIPAA laws required him to ask me first. I got it. I recall feeling so relieved that I relaxed and remembered my manners, “Please, have a seat. And you can call me Tad.” I sat down at the conference table and waved my hand toward a chair for him to sit in one too. “My parents’ names are Jon and Emily Wyatt.”

He declined my offer and stood standing. “Ok, thanks. Well, Tad, I’m really sorry to have to tell you this. But they were struck by a train.” He pulled out an envelope from his jacket. “I found this on the front seat of his car. It’s addressed to you.”

Things are fuzzy after that. I do remember standing straight up and then sinking back down into the chair and Teoni asking me if I was alright. Was I ok to drive? I must have nodded yes because then I went back to my office, with Teoni behind me and people
asking me if I was alright. Was there anything they could do? Then the elevator down, the walk to my car and Teoni asking me again if I was alright. I asked him where I should go and he said the mortuary. The mortuary! I was still stunned that I wasn’t going to the hospital. The morgue? Yes, the morgue. I had to identify their bodies.

On the way to the county morgue, I pulled over and had a fissured this-can’t-be-happening moment and thought I had just imagined everything. I dialed my father’s number and it went to his straightforward yet subdued voice mail message: Hi, this is Jonathan Wyatt, please leave a message. “Hi Dad, it’s me Tad. Give me a call, ok?” The ridiculous thought to try my mother’s phone entered my mind too, but the stroke had left her with the mind of a child. She had stopped using the phone months ago.

Then I called my wife, Maria. We had just celebrated our fifteenth wedding anniversary with a party that my father held at his house. Maria and I look a lot alike, and my brother and I are twins, so our family Christmas portrait needed to be explained to some (“No, that’s his wife and that’s his brother!”). Maria’s parents had died when she was really young. My mother loved Maria, christened her the daughter that she never had. My father adored her, walked her down the aisle at our wedding. My brother sometimes held her too long in a good-bye hug.

At first Maria was quiet. Then she took in a big gasp and let out a muffled “NO!”, and the gust of her pain reached my stomach. “But howww?” I closed my eyes tight, dropped my head on the steering wheel. Her voice made me more alert, more aware of the circumstances.
“When did this happen?” she said between heavy breaths. “I just talked to your father this morning.” Maria checked in with my parents every day.

“What did he say?” My father had taken to telling things to Maria that he chose not to share with me first. He said to me once that he knew she’d tell me anyway so it was easier for him to just tell one of us.

“He said that your mom was ok and that he was going to take her for a drive. That was it, really.” She paused. “You know how much they loved to drive.”

I was seven when my parents took us on our first car trip. We went over the southern part of the country for historical monuments with stops at beaches my mother had made a list of. Then, when my brother and I turned 14, before we went off to high school, my father insisted we had to see Mount Rushmore. So we took the northern route and detoured into Canada for a few days. Then for our 18th birthday, the last time we would make such a trip, we went straight across the middle and that time both me and my brother got to drive. It was cool for about two states but then it got tedious. My brother and I chose California as our favorite and both swore to move out there someday. After college, my brother made it as far as Chicago and I ended up staying behind in New York.

Maria lowered her voice and asked me the question that had been dormant in my mind. “Tad, was it an accident?”

“I guess. I don’t know. The cop was just in my office. He said they were hit by a train.” I still hadn’t opened the envelope. I mean, I knew it was probably a letter explaining, perhaps even justifying, what happened but I just didn’t want to know.
“A train? Her voice rose and she elongated the word again, as if I was hard of hearing. “Like how? In their car? Were they walking on the tracks? You know how your mother used to love train trips. Maybe the car got stuck on the tracks?”

I couldn’t remember clearly. Or I did remember what Teoni said, and I didn’t want to think about it. Her questions made me feel as if I was being interrogated. I needed to end the call. “Maria, they weren’t in their car. I’m not even sure what happened but I’m headed to the morgue now.”

“The morgue?” she asked. She too, expected hospital.

“Maria, THEY’RE DEAD!” My voice rose and resounded in the car. I was surprised at how loutish I sounded. I then droned softly, “My parents are dead.”

She went quiet and I heard her choke back her cries. “Ok, I’m sorry. This is all such a shock. What can I do? Ok look, I’ll start calling the family. I’ll let your brother know first so he can get a flight out in time.”

“In time for what?” I wasn’t thinking beyond the trip to the morgue that I had just calculated the directions to in the GPS.

“Funeral, Tadd. For the funeral.”

Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Wyatt

The young woman perused through the mail and looked admiringly at the names on the cards, letters and bills. “Jonathon and Emily Wyatt. It has a nice sound, don’t you think?” She looked over at her husband with a broad, happy smile that lit up her eyes. It
was the smile that got him to take his date home early, to return to the diner where Emily used to work.

“Yes, I love it. What I don’t love is that Sears catalogue you have in your hands.”
The young man playfully chided her but hoped that she would soon ease up on ordering from the book.

The young couple stood in the living room of their new home and surveyed what they had just signed over 30 years of their life to paying for. All the carpets needed to be ripped up, the floors needed sanding. The wallpaper that plagued like an epidemic, needed to be removed, in some cases chiseled off. Walls needed to be plastered, primed and painted. The man looked around and thought of the time, the money he’d have to spend. But she wanted an old Victorian and they got it for a good price because the roof would need replacing soon. She wanted to fill the house with kids and have a Christmas party every year. She asked him about putting in a new pool as they signed the mortgage papers.

“Jon, I was thinking, since the bedrooms are so close to each other, what if we put the baby’s room right next to ours instead of having the crib in our room? I will be sure to hear him when he cries. The walls are thin enough.”

“Baby? Him? Is there something you haven’t told me, Mrs. Wyatt?” He smiled at her and thought of her round with his baby.

Emily laughed. Secretly she had wanted to have his baby right after their first date together. She knew he was the one at dessert. Now, two years into the marriage and still she did not have the last part of her dream to make it all so complete. She laughed off his jest, “No, I’m just saying that when we have…”
“And we’ll have them Em, don’t worry.” The man knew of her apprehension. “But, seriously, have you seen this bill? We have to slow down a little, ok? Hand over that catalogue.” He chuckled at her as she took the book and hid it in a kitchen drawer.

“And two, I say we stop at two. I want to be able to live a good life too, Em.”

“Oh, we will. I’m sure of it. Besides, the gypsy psychic at that carnival said we would. She kidded him but then she looked at him with a serious gaze. “I’d like to have two sons.”

“I’d like to have whatever God is going to give us. But sons would be nice.”

Tad

The coroner had me look through a box of personal effects taken from the crash site. He told me that as long as I could identify them as their belongings, there was no need to see the bodies. But I pressed him. There was still something about the whole event that made it seem unreal. A mistake.

The coroner pulled back the white sheet that covered them and I recognized my father’s arm. He had been in a skiing accident when he was young and he sported a full length scar from his shoulder to his elbow. I wanted to reach out and hold it, touch him one last time but I just nodded and the man covered them back up. I signed the papers to release their bodies to the funeral home.

The decision to have a closed casket funeral was obvious. The funeral director told me that the conditions of their faces was a cause for concern. “Well, surely you know what I mean,” he said.
At the funeral, I stood between my brother and Maria next to the coffins. Two for show but only one would be used for the burial. My father had left instructions behind in his suicide note that I eventually got around to reading. He said he couldn’t go on watching her in the state she was in and that she wouldn’t have wanted to live life like she was. And, they were to be buried in the same coffin. Even after death he demanded things. Maria had stiffened at the directive, but she would never have gone against my father’s wishes. Besides, she didn’t see the body parts laid out on the gurney in the morgue. They would easily fit into one casket.

My father was the County Clerk and a member of the Elks, my mother was a schoolteacher in town for over 40 years. Both my parents were members of the Fair Garden Country Club since we were kids. The line of people who came to offer their support, and ogle at the family whose parents died in an “accident” was long and it stretched outside the parlor and out the front door. My parents had made the papers, Elderly couple hit and die in front of train. Many people from my office came, which made for awkward moments of introductions and condolences. Maria, my brother, and I, stood for hours as municipal employees, my dad’s drinking buddies and my mother’s former students and teacher friends all passed their coffins and shook our hands, embraced us. They comforted, sympathized and pitied. They fumbled for words. “I’m so sorry for your loss” was replaced by “I can’t imagine what you are going through,” and “Did you see any signs?”

I don’t care how far we’ve come as a society, suicide is still a blight on the family. A sign of weakness, my dad would have said.

A few days after the funeral it all came out. The local newspaper ran a second story, Police rule couple’s death by train a murder-suicide. The police, led by Officer Teoni,
had been by the house the day before the article. He told me, “We are ruling it a murder suicide, but we are not releasing this to the press until after the funeral. I’m sure you understand.” I asked him how he knew for sure and he said they looked at all the cameras in the area and their reports would indicate that my mother wasn’t what they call, a *willing participant*.

My cousin from Pennsylvania called, said she had read the article. “I think what your father did was so romantic.”

“Romantic?” I said into the phone as I went through my father’s things. My brother flew back to Chicago and I went to work cleaning out their house. I had started to pack up their lives in boxes, most of which I was going to leave on the curb at the end of their driveway.

“They were married for so long, and they loved each other so much. I can understand why he did it. Larry is losing his memory and it’s getting to be a bit of a struggle to have to remind him all the time that I’m his wife.”

“I’m sorry about Larry. Look I gotta go.”

“Call me if you need anything.”

Everyone says that. Futile, pointless but what else is there to say. How would I need her exactly? She was two states away and the last time I saw her she was in the midst of her second divorce.

It all hit me the day I went to buy more boxes at Home Depot. Like when your nose suddenly unclogs and your sinuses clear up. Like the realization that I sucked at
basketball, and that the promotion I wanted at work would require more kiss ass. The realization that brother was probably just a little bit in love with my wife.

My father had committed suicide. My mother did not.

I wanted to believe that my parents were walking on the track and my mother’s shoelaces of her sneakers got stuck and my father had bent down to untie her, but could not do it fast enough and rather than let her die there, he gallantly died with her.

Well, given the state my mother had been in, just one suicide. But I didn’t know how to properly catalogue my mother’s death in my mind. Didn’t know how to feel about my father. I thought more about what Teoni had told me before the funeral. He said, “They stood in wait for the train and the conductor said, well he thinks he saw, your mother trying to push away from him. I’m sorry to be the one to have to tell you this.”

And I think he really was.

Then I thought, for the first time too, about the guy behind the wheel of the train. I ran over a squirrel once and the thought of the dead animal stayed with me for a few blocks. I wondered how the train guy felt. I also had to know what he saw and I guessed too, the proper thing to do, was to apologize. My good-mannered mother, in her zeal for propriety, would have done the same thing.

I got in touch with Teoni, who told me to call the union for the department. The union rep seemed annoyed at the whole thing. “Why don’t you just let this settle for a while? These situations are not as clear-cut as they seem.” Look guy, I wanted to tell him, I had no idea my parents were going to do this.
But Charlie agreed to speak with me, even gave out his number, and I called him a few nights later. He picked up on the third ring.

“Hi this is…”

“I know who you are. You’re that guy’s son.” I heard a Tom Jones song in the background as he chomped through his food while he spoke.

“Yes, I’m Tad Wyatt, Jon’s son.” I waited for a response but he just kept chewing. “Listen,” I told him, “I’m not sure of the best way to go about doing this but I have to say that I’m sorry for what happened. I had no idea my parents were going to do this. Trust me, had I known, I would have tried to stop them somehow.”

“Well, I’m not sure if you should be saying sorry, buddy, but thanks anyway.” Charlie sounded thankful, but accusatory at the same time. The words came out biting, snapping at me through the phone. We both went quiet.

He continued to chew what sounded like a big bite of meat, his mouth worked feverishly. “You have any idea why he did it?” he asked.

I was expecting that one. “Well, my mother had a stroke a few months ago. She was in bad shape. Like a little child again. We had to feed her, dress her. She lost the ability to talk normally. It was hard….” My voice trailed off when I thought about what I was saying. Who was I defending?

“That’s a shame, really it is.” Charlie swallowed and although he sounded sorry, I could tell he was still perturbed by the call. I wanted to hang up.
But then Charlie surprised me with candor. “If you want to know if they suffered, I don’t think they did.”

When I thought about them on the tracks, I just assumed instant death. I’m sure my father probably felt a few terrifying moments, but my mother had no idea of who she was and I wanted to think she undoubtedly stared lazily at the oncoming train. That’s how I left in my head, even after Teoni came to see me.

“No, I wasn’t going to ask you anything, really.” Really, I wasn’t.

“But you want to know, right? This isn’t the first strike I’ve had to deal with, you know. The last time too, the family wanted to know if they suffered. I think it ended their suffering. I mean, am I right or what?”

“Strike?” Up until that point I didn’t think about train by suicide as a “thing.”

“Well, we call them Steppers. Had a stepper back in ‘82. But that time it was a teenage girl. That one, I had no time to try to stop. She just stepped out from behind a bush and right in front of my train. Wham! She had drug issues though. Depression. At least that’s what her parents told me. This time though, this time it was different. Are you sure you didn’t think your parents talked about it over once or that your dad was going to do it?”

I let that one simmer for a few seconds. My mother was his life and her stroke had changed a lot of their retirement plans. “Yes, as sure as I can be.”

“Well, its quick for them but not for me.” I heard Charlie crack open a beer. The snap and fizzle made my mouth water. I walked to the kitchen to grab another beer for
myself too. I drank one quick, before I called him. Since the “accident” it became time for a second and a third in less time than it used to.

“Did they find everything?”

“Everything?” I asked numbly.

Charlie paused then sounded troubled that he had to ask. “The body parts. Did they get all the body parts?”

“I, well, I’m not sure, really.” I hate to be reminded of all the questions I should have asked. All the things I should have been thinking about. But why Charlie cared, I couldn’t understand. He seemed like the type who would scold someone he didn’t know, regardless of the circumstances. But Charlie didn’t reprimand me for not knowing.

“You know, the first time this happened to me, they made me finish my shift? It was my last run and they couldn’t get anyone in and the train had to go. Said it be good for me to get back up on the horse. Imagine that? Now, I get three days off.” He said it like he was proud, like it was a company perk. Then he got quiet and remorseful, “I tried to stop the train but you gotta understand, once I put the emergency brake on, the machine takes over. It just focuses on stopping. But your parents were too close to the train. “

My father was all about exactitude. He demanded accuracy. His hangers in his clothes closet were all evenly spaced next to each other and he once used a leveler to hang a wind chime on his front porch.

“Well, I just wanted to let you know I was sorry.” Tom Jones crooned in the background, ‘Just help yourself to my lips, to my arms....’
“Is there anything I can do?” I hoped I could send him some money, a case of beer, anything to ease the weight of my shame.

“Nah, I’ll be alright.” He paused and then as if on second thought he told me, “The sound. I can’t get rid of the sound in my head.”

“Sounds?”

“Are you sure you want to hear this?” He continued before I had a chance to object. “I had the side window open. The breeze helps to keep me awake and I like the air on my face. Well, there’s a heavy thump and then the sound of bones being crushed, like a cracking or like when you chew up a hard candy in your mouth. It’s a sickening crunch. It’s the cracking sound that wakes me up in the middle of the night.

Jon and Em

Tad watched through the window as his parents danced. The other parents seemed only to pretend to dance while his parents loved each other out there for all to see. In a few years Tad would become downright embarrassed about their open hugging and kissing. Other parents just didn’t seem to be so open about it all.

Jon and Emily Wyatt held each other closely, the length of their bodies touched as they moved with poise on the dance floor of the country club. It was the end of the night and the hired orchestra played melodic, bluesy music while the couple moved in time over the hard wood flooring. They took each other into their nervous system, into their hearts, into their skin as they held hands and Jon hummed the music into Emily’s ear. They blocked out the few remaining couples on the dance floor and bathed in their sole existence as a couple. The children ran around outside and played on the lawn with sparklers left
over from the July 4th celebration held the night before. They frolicked under the cover of night, illuminated only by the stars and candles from the tables that surrounded the dance floor.

Tad’s brother came up from behind him “Where’s Mom and Dad?” Tad didn’t answer his brother, only pointed towards the dance floor.

“C’mon I want to ask them if we could do that hike in the morning.”

Tad didn’t want to disturb them. They had kept their dates nights and bedroom door closed to them for a reason. But his brother pulled him away from the window and the boys went inside.

“Mom? Dad? Can we go with the Willis group for that hike tomorrow?”

The boys’ parents let go of their embrace and looked down at their young men.

“Sure guys, you can both go if you like. Mom and I are going to work on the food for the afternoon barbeque.”

Tad wanted his father to go, like the other fathers did. “You’re not coming dad?”

“No, son. Your mother is going to need help with all the meat and you know I’m not one for hiking in the woods. Mr. Willis is taking you guys up.”

The boys ran off the dance floor in search of the sign-up sheet that was being passed around. Tad turned to watch his mother and father as they went back to their slow movement on the floor.

Tad and Charlie
I called Charlie a few nights later. “Did my father hold her there?” I heard his television in the background. It was dinner time and I thought about how I probably interrupted him with a TV tray in front of him as he ate take-out.

Charlie knew what I was upset about. Didn’t even ask me. “What was I supposed to say? That the last thing I saw was your mother trying to break free of your father’s arms? I wasn’t even sure I saw it after a while. It all happened so fast. I figured let the police handle it after they saw the cameras.”

“You could have told me.”

“No, not really, Tad. Or is it Thaddeus? I’ve been reading the papers.”

“Yes, Tad is fine.” Only my mother called me Thaddeus. I think she liked the way it sounded as she said it. She told me once she chose the name because it seemed like it was for someone who was destined to do great things.

“Well, Tad, remember the girl I told you about? How she just walked in front of my train? I get it now. She wanted out and I’m not the type of person to judge. There but for the grace of God, go I. Right? But your dad, well, the way it looked like to me, your dad made the choice for both him and your mom.” He stopped, cleared his throat of phlegm and swallowed. “Now, I don’t want to judge, but….”

“Ok, fine, Charlie. Thanks.” It wasn’t cool where he was going. I hung up.

I met my wife in a train station. She was running for a train to Baltimore and I had just gotten back from DC. I was rushing through the station to make the shuttle and we ran into each other. I mean, we literally ran into each other. We spent the next couple of
minutes helping each other pick up papers and all the stuff that spilled out of her bag. She missed her train and I stayed with her, eventually catching the last shuttle that night. Our marriage has been like any other, but we never danced like my parents used to.

When I finally went back at work, people left me alone. Maria had taken over the packing up of the house and we contemplated a “For Sale” sign on my parents’ front lawn. My brother checked in from Chicago every so often, and Maria gave him updates on how we were doing, how the insurance and other issues were being worked out.

I was inside my office staring at a computer screen, listening to Nan in the cubicle outside my door bitch about a homemade porn she left for her husband that apparently he didn’t watch. And then Charlie called.

“Hey, Tad, it’s me, Charlie Viton. I hope you don’t mind. I got your work number from my union rep.”

Actually, I was pleased to hear from him. I didn’t like how things went the last time we talked and I had more questions for him. “Hey, Charlie.”

“I just wanted to say sorry for how rude I was. I just want to let you know I’m ok. I’m going back to work tomorrow. I took more than the three days. I just couldn’t get back in that cab. They gave me a different route too.”

“That’s good Charlie. I’m glad you were able to make it back to work. This is my first week too. Lots to catch up on.”
“Ok, I won’t keep you. But hey, you know, I’ve been thinking. Let’s say I was driving a car and they stood in front of me, I could have swerved, you know? I could have tried.”

His inability to stop the train didn’t even enter my radar. But, I understood Charlie feeling guilty. He did kill my parents after all. “Well, you didn’t do it on purpose, Charlie. I understand.”

“No, you don’t understand. I know you just lost your parents and all, but imagine being the one that killed them.” This time Tom Jones wasn’t playing in the background and there wasn’t a television blaring. Charlie’s house was disconcertingly quiet.

“Have you read today’s paper? The headline reads: _The love that led a couple to stand in front of a train._ You are in the article too. You said, and I quote, ‘She was his world.’

I wasn’t expecting a follow-up story to what my father did, but I have to admit it helped to see it as a love story. Romantic, as my cousin said.

“A love like that, well, makes me feel not so bad about what happened, you know? Sometimes, I just wanted him to repeat it.

“Aaah, forget it. But I was just wondering, too. If you wondered, you know? Your father must have loved your mother a lot to do that. Or am I missing something? I mean, I know I don’t know everything. But I’m divorced.” Charlie let out a chuckle at that.
But I thought about my father and mother. “They loved each other very much. My parents were great to us but they also had a life they led on their own.” My parents loved us, but there were times I used to think they loved each other more.

“You don’t say?” Charlie’s interest in the love made me think more about how rare it actually was.

“It was devastating when my father got the news that my mother would never be the same. He was going to surprise her with a cruise for her 65th birthday, but then she had a stroke.”

Charlie asked me a question I didn’t expect. “Did you ever wonder if you could do it for your wife?” He blurted out into the phone.

“What?” My voice rose and outside, some people stood up and looked over toward my office.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong. Like I said, I’m divorced, so apparently I don’t know much in the relationship department. But to say that their love was so everlasting, that they couldn’t be without each other. That’s something, ya know? Like, did you ever think you could do that with your wife? I mean to ask is, do you love your wife enough to hold her in front of a train if she ever, you know, became like your mom?”

A heavy quiet came over the phone. Charlie actually wanted an answer.

“I got to go Charlie. I’ll talk to you soon.” It wasn’t a conversation I wanted with people around, who hovered outside my door.

*Tad and Maria*
That night, I poured myself four fingers of whisky and watched as Maria cleaned up the kitchen after dinner. The kids had a sleepover and it was just us, alone. I watched her move, her ass jiggled underneath her sweats. I had been thinking about Charlie’s question all day.

“Maria.” I called to her, wanted her to turn around and I’d see her at 23 again. Our days had turned into days of do-overs, our lives comfortable but frozen in place. I couldn’t recall the last time we had sex that wasn’t planned in advance on a calendar. The only thing it seemed we had in common were my parents. And the kids, of course. At least we still had the kids.

She looked over at me and waited for me to continue. Her face flexed into an expression, What? What did I expect? For her to come to me, kneel by my side and just ask me how I was holding up?

“I don’t think I could ever do that to you.”

“Do what, Hon?” She turned her back to me again and continued her work at the dishes.

“Hold you in front of a train.”

*Jon and Emily Wyatt*

The elderly couple sat together, side by side, in two chairs that faced the doctor at his desk. The man held his wife’s hand and waited expectantly while the doctor looked through a folder on his desk. His wife stared down at her feet and marveled at the color of her new sneakers.
“Well, Doctor, what do you think?” The man looked to the figure in the white coat as not the fourth doctor he had seen, but rather the one who would tell him something different. Something he didn’t already know and hadn’t heard yet.

The doctor looked up into the man’s face. The doctor had seen too many like him over the years and it was that hope in the face of the medical misfortunes that would eventually cause him to retire early. The doctor had grown weary of giving bad news. “I’ve looked through the reports and I’ve examined your wife.”

“Do you have to do any more tests?”

“No, there isn’t a need for any more tests. Your wife, as you know Mr. Wyatt, has suffered a debilitating stroke. If she wasn’t brought to the hospital as quick as she was, she’d probably be dead. But as it stands now, her thinking and awareness processes, her ability to judge and memory have been impaired. I’m afraid to say, irreversibly. She will also have difficulty in controlling her emotions.”

“I know about that. I tried to take her to the mall but she has become terribly frightened of crowds and she has a tendency to cry for no reason.” He looked over at his wife and his eyes became glossy. “She used to love to go the mall.”

“She will eventually need constant care.” The doctor waited for the news to sink in properly. “Do you still work, Mr. Wyatt? Do you have people at home to help?

“I just retired, actually. We were about to take a cruise together.”

“Is it time to go home yet?” Emily Wyatt lost interest in her shoes and wanted to be home, the only place she felt at ease, the only place she remembered.
“Yes, honey, we’ll go home soon.” Jon Wyatt patted his wife hands and caressed her back, leaned over to kiss her head. He looked at the doctor head-on, “What about therapy? I’ve been reading about some studies about a new drug.”

The doctor thought that in retrospect while the internet brought us out of the information Dark Ages, the internet also was a place of misleading and false information. There were no drugs to help the woman. “I’m sorry Mr. Wyatt, but your wife has suffered such damage that there isn’t a pill now, nor will there be in our futures, that will help her. But, she has a strong heart, and with proper care, she can go on to live for many years.” The doctor didn’t know if that was such a good thing. “Mr. Wyatt I would like to see Emily again in another month. We can keep track of her condition together. I’m sorry I can’t be of any more help to you. “

Jon helped his wife up from the chair and nodded a somber good-bye to the doctor.

“Where are we going now?” Emily asked.

“Home, honey, its time go.”

“Oh good. Please take me home.”

“Yes, Emily, I’ll take you home. We’ll both go together.”
Te Gusta?

Today, the sun will reach its greatest height all year. It will also become the longest day of the year. It is a day marked by celebrations – drinking and dancing around bonfires. Norwegians will rejoice with all night celebrations and thousands will gather at England’s Stonehenge, to herald in the day like the Druids did thousands of years ago. New Age pagans in California will gather on top of Mount Shasta to reflect, meditate, share love and generate hope.

At a beach, a modest one on the east coast of the United States, there is no celebration. There is a man who wildly digs holes in the sand. There is however, a pearl morning haze that mantles the horizon, like a touch of a fire. As the sun comes up over the ocean, it breaks through in slithers until it pulls away from where the water meets the sky. It broadens and widens until it arrives, a big flushing yellow ball. Streaks of reflected light glisten on the dark blue water and tiny sun sparkles hop like crickets on the waves. As the sun moves higher, the sky turns amber then lightens to a delicious summer-ripe peach. The man becomes perturbed by the sun; he wanted the night to go on without stop.

The day is longer because the sun does not rise exactly in the east, but rises slightly to the north of east and sets to the north of west allowing it to be in the sky for a longer period of time. If you happen to be in the Bahamas, or anywhere else roughly on the tropic of Cancer, prop a broomstick into the ground, directly upright. At noon, with the sun straight overhead, that broomstick will cast no shadow.

But the man does not concern himself with these things. Really, none of what I just told you would even enter his mind. He does not know about longest days and
celebrations in far off places. He only knows that he has lost something, and he is anxious to find it.

He is on his knees with his legs tucked underneath him as he scoops out handfuls of sand. He stares into his freshly made holes, and sees nothing but scuttling sand crabs, broken seashells, and an occasional bottle cap or candy wrapper. He abandons his search after each hole is mined and crawls a few feet away where he digs at the seashore again. The tide approaches and he scrambles away sideways, like a startled crab, to avoid the water. The seawater fills the holes and he sits up and bangs his fists to his sides in frustration every time. But he does not find what he is looking for. The man has been at it most through most of the early morning hours and now in his agitation he swelters from the heat of the mushrooming sun. The kicked up sand sticks to the film of sweat on his body like glitter glue and he shines. Like a gold plated statue.

Somewhere on the other side of the world, a reveler drinks an herb-infused mead and sings along in an hourly chant to herald in the end of the day. The summer solstice will end in fireworks and more drinking, while the man on this beach remains as he was, harried.

From a distance, where they first arrived at a pre-dawn hour and deposited their bags, the Cuban observes the man as he searches the shoreline. They came to the beach to round out a night of partying. He is a handsome man with arresting features and long dark curly hair that sits just on the edge of his shoulders. He appears tall, but that is due the aggressive way he pushes his body, erect but leaned forward, as if expecting a fight. Even the blotchy birthmark that stretches down from his neck and rests at the base of back does not mar his hypnotic splendor. He wears a gold chain with a medal of a crucified Jesus,
like a protective amulet. He sits upright on the sheet they grabbed from the hotel bed and nurses a warm beer while he laughs quietly, as if the man by the water puts on a show explicitly for him. His eyes, dark and luminous, are steady and attentive as they follow the desperate man’s movements. The sun blinds him and temporarily he sees in negative exposure. The Cuban knows he has a problem and must deal with the man, but he has learned the value of contemplation and of thinking things over before he makes his moves. It has served him well in the most appropriate times.

The young girl on the sheet beside the Cuban rouses to the feel of the empty space next to her; awakens to his laughter, and sits up to look at what the Cuban watches. Her hair has come loose from the elaborate bun she had styled by herself the night before. She had spent a lot of time on her face and hair hoping to look older, something she will think about decades from now when she really is old. Her hair falls around her, long and wavy from the curvature of the bun. The natural caramel colored highlights glimmer under the rays of the sun. She had wanted to cut it short, but he told her not to. He liked the way it hung on her naked back.

They were all at a party to celebrate someone’s birthday, and she had spent hours trying to look and fit the part of being the younger girlfriend of this very popular and older Cuban man. When they got to the beach in the middle of the night, she shed her silver cocktail dress and hastily changed into her bathing suit in the dark. Now, her alabaster skin is flushed from the heat that radiates down on her bikini-clad body. She, like the Cuban and the man on the beach is unaware that it is the solstice. That there are places where day and weeklong parties are about to take place, all in the name of the fertility of the season.
“What’s he looking for?” she asks the Cuban. She touches him lightly on his arm. The movement causes her skin to tickle and she feels the sting of the beginning of a sunburn. She is so fair that even the weak early morning light burns her. She is a descendant of an Irish maid and a Dutch sailor. Her skin will always be white. But she wants a tan so will suffer through the heat. A few days of redness and then her skin will brown. This is the Italian in her. The highlights of her hair will brighten and her eyes will glow. This is when she feels the prettiest. Summer is her time.

“The coke,” the Cuban replies. His bronze skin will brown under the rays, while hers burns. He stretches his arms, wide and alluring, and pulls her close to him and they lay down. The sun roasts the smell of him, and it runs thrillingly across her arms in waves. He turns her thin body over to her side and pushes close to her. They lay spooned together, his legs wrapped around her thighs. He murmurs words in Spanish into her hair, moves the caramel strands aside and kisses her neck. He moves his lips down to her shoulder, kisses the freckles that pepper her arms and then bites her lightly on her wrist.

“The coke?” the girl says and holds her breath instinctually to slow the quickening of her heart. She could feel it beat faster and stronger as he moved his fingers slowly across her legs. The first time she took a hit, he had put a little aside for her and told her to go slowly, one nostril, then the other. She had sneezed and her eyes welled, and he had laughed at her as if she was a child who falls down when first beginning to walk. She felt it almost immediately and smiled and laughed at the euphoric energy that coursed through her veins. But eventually, when the stream slowed, she asked him for another hit but he refused her. A little at a time, he told her. He was teaching her how to control the drug, so
it would not control her. Her attraction for the illicit substance was not unlike the feelings she felt for him.

The Cuban looks back down at the man. “He hid the bag in the sand last night,” he says in unaccented English. He was a baby when his parents left Cuba, and while he knew how to speak Spanish, he sounded like anyone else born in the States. “You know how crazy he gets. He’s paranoid. Always thinks someone is going to steal his shit. Now he can’t find it.” The Cuban shakes his head laughing. “Fucking idiot. I just sold him a gram, too.”

He traces the curve of her hip with his fingers, moves up to her chest, and slips his hand under her bikini top and cups her breast possessively. “You like the ring I got for you?” It is a small stone, but he bought it to match her eyes, not to impress her.

She holds her right hand up so they can both look at how the emerald shines. “Yes, it’s beautiful.” She shifts her body closer to his and listens to the sound of her heart as it beats inside her ears. She is hooked. Years later, in her middle age, her daughter will ask about her past and she won’t really remember much of the details. Not this far back anyway. She will recall brief moments and places, but she will not remember making choices. She let life just happen. And yet, some day she will celebrate the solstice in Norway, yet never connect it to falling on the day she watched a man look for his coke on the beach. But for now she does know that whatever happens between the two of them, the feel of his mouth will haunt her whenever another mouth on her skin will fail to excite her the way his does.

What do you remember of your first?
The Cuban had commandeered her very simple life at seventeen, and she had let him. His first words to her were in Spanish and she had to ask him to repeat them in English. He had replied to her with a soft smile and supernaturally strong stare, “I just said that you are very beautiful and that I wish I could paint you.” A silly line, yes. But it got her. His gaze alone was the flame that she fluttered to.

He honeyed her life with a spice the captain of the football team, who had asked her out the same week, could never have given her. A flavor that her upper middle class white background had not prepared her for. She was a good girl, the kind that kept quiet in the back, never looked for trouble or got into any. But now at twenty-three she feels worn. So many late nights followed by narcotized days of frivolity. The years she should have spent in college in preparation for the life she was told she should pursue, just tripped away. This, she will remember. At first with regret, and then when responsibilities will have a stranglehold upon her, with sentimental longing. And yet now, the doubts that creep into her mind are still only slight buzzes in her brain. She will leave when they reverberate with a boom.

The day brightens to a clear summer morning and people start to arrive at the beach. It is a Saturday, a day for families. Suddenly, the beach is full with mothers and fathers. Children and babies. They swarm the expanse with their coolers, blankets, towels and umbrellas. It’s why the Cuban wanted them to come early. To see the beach while it was empty. The Cuban watches the influx and sees some of their attention shift to the man who mercilessly digs into their sucrose beach. He moves his body away from hers and the young girl shudders again from the empty space. He stands up next to her and his tan body reflected against the white sheet makes him look imperial, like a Caribbean noble.
“Boriqua!” he yells down to the man at the water. “Estúpido, dejar de hacer eso.” It troubles him that he has to watch his friend, and command him to stop his search, all in an effort to safeguard them all. He had a reputation to maintain and ten grams of coke in his bag.

The young girl translates in her head and the Cuban has told him to leave it alone. Leave it alone. She learned Spanish from them in ways a book could never teach her. She has become almost fluent from the many quips and jabs the two men have over the years shared between each other. But she rarely speaks their language. She could never get the pronunciation correct, never roll the r’s long enough or let the a’s last long enough in her mouth. Her words came out like they did when she spoke English, clipped and tight. She’d forget that words had genders and c’s and z’s had the same sound. He called her Gringa when she tried, so she stopped and learned to participate just by listening.

There is the sound of hearty, loud laughter from the sheet next to theirs. It is the paranoid man’s girlfriend and her throaty laugh spills out and ripples away from her. She is voluptuous, her skin incandescent and dark. Her black bra straps drape alongside the shoulder straps of her tank top. She has long red fingernails that match her brightly painted toes. Her rotund stomach protrudes out from under the shirt. The man on the beach, his baby. She carries her pregnancy like an award she has attained. She is smug, as pregnant women can be, but this woman was born haughty.

The young girl turns and smiles at her, an overture of friendship. A friendly, innocent smile. The woman smiles back, a smile that does not reach her eyes, and looks away. The young girl will never figure out what she had done wrong, why the woman would never be welcoming to her.
The man hears the command of his friend. He looks up from his hunt and runs with anxious feet toward them. They dig into the sand as he sprints towards them in his unpracticed run. He propels himself to the laughing woman. His face is clammy and he is covered in sand. His eyes are bloodshot, his nose, red. The exhilaration he felt only hours ago has drained from his body. He flops on the blanket next to her, wraps his sandpaper arms around her, and burrows his face into her breasts. They laugh together as he tickles her with his grainy face.

Her voice is husky and uninhibited. Sexy. The young girl tried to mimic it once by making herself cough to make her voice sound just as throaty. She had seen the way men responded to her words and wanted to be like her in this way. But the Cuban just kept asking the young girl if she had a cold.

“C’mon, get off me! You’re full of sand. Mierde, man. You lost it.” She pushes him away roughly and he lays back down on the blanket. She reaches into her bag and pulls out a bottle of baby oil, squirts some into her hand and lathers her stomach and legs while the Cuban and the young girl watch her. She smiles dazedly back at the Cuban.

The man’s breathing is erratic and his jaw clenches and twists. Sweat from his forehead continues to drip down his face. He is coming down from the high of a coke infused night. In his life he has killed half of himself before he is 30. His speech is excited, exuberant, but there is panic in his voice. A come down from a cocaine high is akin to falling. “Flaco.” The man, with an edge to his voice, questions the Cuban, “You fucking Rafter, did you see where I left it, man? And you’re not telling me?”
They have been friends since they were kids and their banter is harmless but the Cuban retorts with an underlying command that is deftly hidden behind his broad smile. The message is made clear nonetheless. “Oye, stop calling me a Rafter, man. I came here on a fucking plane. I keep telling you that, you dumb Puerto Rican.” He is annoyed that the man can’t handle himself better. Coke is for the night. When you find yourself doing it at 10:00 in the morning, well, you have a problem. The Cuban reaches into the cooler and tosses the man a can. “Have a beer. That will chill you out.”

The man sits up to catch the beer and the opening crack resonates around them. He lifts the can to his mouth, gulps, and spits the warm beer out onto the sand. “Estupido, its hot, bro!”

The Cuban laughs. The young girl looks at the ocean, fascinated by nothing.

The man’s girlfriend runs her hand through his short black hair “Mijo.” She says the term with love and her voice purrs. It helps to soothe him if only for a little while. “You forgot where you put it, Papi. Go to sleep. You’ll remember where it is when you wake up.” She leans over and he caresses her glossy, burgeoning belly.

“Idiota,” she chides him. They whisper to each other together, words of love. It is a romantic scene if anyone happened to be just walking by. They resembled a few friends out to enjoy the beach for the day.

The night before, the young girl walked into the bathroom of the hotel and had seen the pregnant woman do a hit of the white powder that was lined up on the tiled counter. The woman looked up and had said roguishly, “It’s just a little. It won’t hurt the baby.”
The beach now bustles as more people start to arrive. Lifeguards take up their posts and young girls check for beach tags. Families with even larger umbrellas and plastic coolers and special beach blankets with matching towels and toys to play with in the sand. It’s not the domestic family theatre the young girl had seen in the bathroom the night before. People plant picnic baskets and radios into the sand, and begin to lather up. The smell of suntan lotion drifts towards them, and they wrinkle their noses, turn their heads.

A young man in a lifeguard shirt surveys the beach.

The man takes a long look around him, then looks over at the Cuban. “Hey, let me get some of yours.”

The Cuban considers the man’s face and how much time he still wants to enjoy the beach with his girlfriend. He will have to supply him with something, or he will be back looking for the bag he hid. He reaches into a gym bag and pulls out a small clear bag. He hands it over to his friend. The tedious seal, tiny snapping sounds open, the man fishes around with his finger, looks around and snorts it quickly, one shot to each nostril and then he locks it. The man hands it back to the Cuban’s waiting hand, finishes the warm beer and lays back down, careful not to brush his grimy body against the sleeping mother of his child.

Before the Cuban puts the coke away, he offers some to the young girl, “Anna, you want some?” When he says her name, it is like a secret that only he knows. She shakes her head and the Cuban smiles his approval. He quickly stuffs it away, careful to keep the bag close to him. He knows how habits can ruin a relationship. The young girl has learned how to pace herself and as long as she stays careful, she will not end up foraging in the
sand, while a much younger woman watches her from the beach. She will survive this time with him, whole. But one day, she will say good-bye to him with dismay.

The Cuban looks down at her, winks, and blows her a light air kiss. “We have to get you out of the sun soon, mi preciosa. Back to the hotel. You are really pink.” Breathless smile with tempestuous eyes. He lies down and pulls her close, but continues to watch the horizon. Young children have now gathered next to it, and have begun to dig out sand, to pour it into their plastic buckets. The Cuban figures some kid will find his friend’s stash. He can only hope it will end up buried inside a castle wall, or better yet, buried so deep, that no one will ever find it.

The day turns into a prematurely sultry June afternoon. They open their Styrofoam cooler and take out cold chicken, rice and beans. More beer is passed around. They are careful to open the cans quietly. The beach guard will investigate if he hears the pop of the cans.

Children play around them while mothers make lunch and fathers lounge with careful eyes on their kids. The young girl watches the beach production and wonders if she’ll ever be like them. When she is older, and life will become just a series of scenes, flashes that sometimes come in waves, other times all lined up in the order she lived them, she will forget that she even once wished to be like them.

The Cuban caresses the curve of her hip possessively. “Te gusta?” he asks her.

“Si’,” she says dreamily. “Me gusta.” She likes. His caress lulls her into a shadowy sleep. She quivers with bliss as he nuzzles his head next to hers and closes his eyes. The sun that throbs malevolently over them. It is at its zenith, but it certainly won’t be the
hottest day of the year. That will come later, in July. But for now, it appears to have stood still in the sky. It is celebrated for its purity and strength, but for the young girl it is an enemy to her skin. But she likes to slow feel of the burn.

Summer solstice was often regaled with torchlight processions with flaming tar barrels with wheels made of straw that were set afire and rolled down hillsides. People would gather together and parade through the countryside to a celebration site where more fires were lit. The fire was used to drive out evil and bring fertility and prosperity to men, women, crops and herds. People would dance around and through the fires to gain strength from the heat and light.

Later, after the sun moves across them to settle on the horizon of the bay behind them, the young girl wakes. The Cuban is asleep next to her, soundly. She takes him in and considers the man. He is the stock of heavy swelter, a mythical being. If he had been condemned to die at dawn, he probably could stop the sun.

The pregnant woman is gone. Bathroom, the young girl supposes. She sits up and reaches in her bag and puts the Cuban’s shirt on and looks down by the water. What she sees is what it feels like when something shows up at your door, twice, telling you what you should already know. Now and again, what looks like disaster, is disaster. But what is there to be afraid of when you’ve eaten of the edge? For now, it is not, nor will it be for a few years to come, too much.

The beach has emptied and a covenant of sandpipers slope and twitter on the coast line in search of food. The earth rotates. Somewhere, another celebration has ended. The
dark comes passively, but night will arrive, signifying withdrawal and rest. From here, until next summer solstice, the days will become shorter, and the nights longer.

And the man on the beach, continues to dig at his holes.
The In Between

Janet Natovich is a spirit communicator. She is so lauded that I came here to see her, fastened to the hope that Janet will help me contact my dead mother. But there is an absurd ping-pong of confidence, fear and doubt that plays in my mind as I sit and wait for her to emerge. I try to keep myself from leaving. I had seen the subtle coaxing that the television mediums did to their on-air clients. Saw the con for what it was. I could go before she realizes I’m here. But then a door opens.

Janet emerges from a darkened room and shuffles over to me, extends her burly hand as she makes her way closer. I rise from the chair to greet her. “You must be Kate,” she beams and takes my hand in both of hers, enfolded it firmly, cocooning it in a warm welcome. A brief spark of hope breaths through me and I believe she has a premonition about my name and I delight at the apparent competence of her clairvoyance. And then I catch myself and remember that my name is probably in an appointment book, and my shoulders sink a little because she goes from soothsayer to average person in an instant.

I confirm that I am Kate and she lets out a spirited, “Oh good! I’m Reverend Natovich. But you can just call me Janet. It’s so very nice to meet you.” She holds on to my hand, still smiling.

Janet is a plump woman dressed in what my mother would have called a “moo-moo” which is really a large piece of purple paisley drop cloth that offers both coverage and obviously, comfort. She looks relaxed and at ease as her body is free underneath her large smock. I was told that the popular psychic was a large woman, but still, I am surprised how fleshy Janet is. She has a homemade haircut and her too-short bangs sit slapdash on her forehead. She has a lazy eye that glides to the left, and I find myself gawking at her
nomadic eye as it drifts. She closes and opens her eyes and they are brought together to move in unison, but the lazy eye is stubborn and moseys away again.

She releases my hand but guides me by the elbow. She moves her body close to mine and we walk together down a long hallway that leads towards her a large room with pews. “I have one more thing to do before we begin. Would you mind waiting in the chapel? It’s just down up ahead. Can’t miss it! I’ll just be a few minutes more.” Janet manages to do a jaunty half pirouette with her thick body and makes her way toward a side door. She maneuvers her way through it, shuts it on her dress and is yanked backwards. She opens the door to release the fabric, waves at me with a self-conscious giggle and shuts the door.

I am left alone in the hallway and the thought of a stealthy exit again skips through my mind again, but the notion of seeing a Medium’s chapel beckon’s me in.

A poppy red carpet leads to the end of the foyer and I follow it to a large room with a high ceiling, ablaze in faux celestial. The walls and ceiling are powder blue with light lines of lavender that streak from various corners to the middle and bounce off the sides and up to the ceiling, like orbs flashing through the sky. Milk-white clouds adorn the ceiling and tiny angels, with plump bodies of babies adorned with adult faces, ride the clouds or flutter nearby. Some are bald and others have ash blond curly hair yet they all seem to glide in movement as they hover over a chapel with enough pews set up to host hundreds of people. There are several alcoves in the back and a cleaning lady mulls about as she dusts the statues of saints that line the side aisles. She smiles in greeting but tends to her work. I walk down the center aisle to the altar and investigate the alcoves, one of which houses a gift shop, overstocked that with statues of angels, boxes of incense, religious cards and
jewelry. There are hundreds of statues of the Virgin Mary, all in various sizes, from small plastic five inch versions to large three feet plaster ones. There is an advertisement stand with free pamphlets on psychic classes, aura artists and spiritual massages. There is a Wednesday night Healing Service and on Thursday, Healing and Massage Services.

The place that I had put so much stock in loses its dignity with its false luxury and private enterprise. But the place and its carnivalesque appearance allures me.

“Pretty, isn’t it? Her voice from behind me shocks me into a turn and I face her. “It took us awhile to get it right, but I think it’s a little slice of heaven, don’t you?” She toddles over to me and hands me some pamphlets and directs me to follow her to her office. My time in wait had me in a state of restless jitters, but now I am more at ease in the wake of her jollity.

As I follow her, we pass by a small side table and I chuck the brochures on the top, and some slide to the floor. Her body rocks from side to side as she ambles to her office. I give into being foolish and mimic her prance, and follow her in and shut the door. Eyes of more angels assault me from their command positions from every point in the room. They stare back at me with sad faces and sympathetic eyes. She moseys over toward a cluttered desk and motions me to sit in a blue velvet chair that has been placed in front of it. She falls into her chair with a plop, adjusts her body to get herself comfortable and lights an incense stick, waving the smoke up towards the ceiling. I take out $125 and hand it over to her. She quickly puts the money in a front pocket of her oversized dress.

“Do you want to tape the session, dear? Or I can tape it for you, but it will be $10 extra for the cassette.”
I shake my head and consider for a moment her outdated use of cassettes. I didn’t even own a tape recorder anymore. I prefer to write, anyway. I take out my notepad and balance it on my leg while I rummage through my bag for a pen.

She has an extra-large iced coffee in her hand and takes a few slurps from the oversized red straw, swallows and smacks her lips with satisfaction. Coffee trickles down her chin and she wipes it from her face with the side with her hand which she then rubs clean on her tent dress. She lets loose a stifled burp and my faith in her ability to help me declines.

Some days I am disabled by the guilt of my mother having to have to die in a strange bed, a stranger to herself, in a small room in a hospice. And here I was placing hope in a medium to rid myself of this guilt.

“Ok, what’s your full name?” she emphasizes full with a penetrating smile that does helps to detract from her one lazy eye that I continue to find so remarkable. It moves and keeps in time with the other eye, but then it goes off again like a detached balloon. “Kate.” But then I relent. “Well, my full name is Katelynn.” She nods in confirmation like she agrees with me, that indeed, I am Katelynn.

She takes another slurp from the straw and blinks her eyes. “Who do you want to talk to tonight?”

I smile back and shrug, “Anyone.”

“Fair enough. Ok, let’s see who’s here what they want to tell me.” She closes her eyes and I watch as underneath they move from side to side and I wonder if she sees disembodied spirits flit by. The rest of her is motionless, until her head jerks a little to the left. And then it twitches a little to the right. Her hair moves in time with her head but her
bangs stay flat on her forehead. She murmurs in between breaths, and then whispers incoherent words. I am half caught into believing this is some sort of joke and I contemplate another evacuation plan but she utters an articulate “OK” and smiles. I wait, my pen in hand poised over the clean page of my notebook.

She breaks away from her otherworldly tête-à-tête and opens her eyes. “A few spirits are here. There’s a short woman, Anna? Olga? I can’t quite understand her because she has a thick accent. Like Russian or German. Something like that.” A search of Anna and Olga goes through my head and nothing comes up. I reveal nothing and wait. Janet closes her eyes and continues to spasm but yet I’m not interested why all the twitching around is necessary. She continues to tap her head lightly. I’m entranced by the spectacle she has become. “Someone else is here with us, honey, and she’s pointing to her head – did you know someone who had something wrong with their head before they passed?”

My mother definitely had something wrong with her head. “My mother had dementia.” I repeat for her and for myself. “She had dementia.”

Janet nods to confirm she is right about my mother’s head and fizzes up a grin with eyes wide. The insubordinate one drifts to the right and then moves back to center. My mother had one just like it. Janet offers condolences. “Oh, I’m sorry, that’s too bad. Well, not to worry. They don’t bring their ailments to the afterlife. All of the pain and suffering, it’s really only a part of this life. There, it’s quite different. Someone tells me here that you are pretty good in the kitchen. Are you?”

I stare back at her noncommitally. She smiles at me in encouragement and she seems so sure of herself as if she had been there and came back to report her findings. She takes another long guzzle from her coffee and closes her eyes. I ache to know more about
what “there” looks like. While I wait for this mystic to make more connections I cannot see, I think of the person I came here for.

My mother resisted cooking. She looked at is as uninteresting and oppressing. Her distaste for cooking was coupled with the reality that we had very little money to live on. This would go on for many years and it seemed that it was to be an irreversible reality for us. My mother developed some stock recipes that were not by any means gourmand, but had their origins in sheer desperation. Shopping for food was a reminder to her of what she didn’t have or couldn’t have, but for those fifteen minutes in the kitchen, my mother was actually quite the creative cook when it came to canned and packaged goods, cheap cuts of meat and mozzarella cheese.

The dishes my mother invented were often high in fat and sodium and low in any worthwhile nutritional value. They did not correspond to the major food groups and were put together without regard to vitamins, minerals or fiber content. But being the wiry kid I was, I never put on the weight, so she kept trying to feed me. Her meager funds didn’t allow for frivolous items – her chief concerns were breakfast and dinner. When I got older, I took over our kitchen. By then she was making more money, but longer hours. My current hobby as a gourmet cook got its start in that small kitchen of our one bedroom apartment.

Janet brings me back from the reoccurring stills that are the backdrop in my mind. “Alright, I’m acknowledging she had cancer. Cancer once and then it came back.” She breaks the silence with more knowledge that sides with the cynic in me. Who didn’t know someone with cancer? I shake my head and offer a Gotcha. “My mother had cancer, but only once.”
“Well, she is telling me twice.”

Janet opens her eyes and they both look at me with such potency that I think maybe I’m the one who is wrong. “When did your mother die, honey?” She slips into a syrupy, almost southern drawl and I wonder if she’s being possessed. I force myself to focus on her and less on my silly thoughts.

“She died a year ago.”

“Oh well that should be enough time. I think your grief is more under control and not so raw anymore. Right?”

I still visit Dollar Stores, walk around and pretend my mother is with me as she picks out little ceramic statues and dollar soaps. But Janet seems certain that I am not as badly off as I think I am.

“You’re a strong woman I can tell. Wouldn’t be a good time to come to see me if you weren’t. It helps when I’m dialing in to the other side, I mean. I need your strength to get to them. Without you, I couldn’t do this as well as I am right now.” She stops her lesson on Mediumship to take a swig of coffee. “She’s coming in strong now, honey. She’s playing country music for me. Did she like country?”

I didn’t know many people who liked country music. I grew up in the northeast. I think about it. Janet didn’t ask me what type of music my mother liked. She knows. But it’s absurd to think, to try to believe even, that my mother is playing it for her. I nod in agreement and shrug my shoulders in a combination of yes-I-don’t-know. It’s true because I grew up with Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash and Loretta Lynn. Dolly Parton, too. My mother listened to them every day. She even listened to k.d lang until she found out she was a
lesbian. My mother’s traditions and deep faith in the Catholic religion could never allow her to accept a woman loving another woman.

“Oh honey, it is so gooooood you’re here. She’s awfully glad. Has she been trying to get in touch with you? She says she’s been sending you signs but you haven’t been listening.”

“Signs? What signs?” I ask Janet. Have I failed my mother again?

“They try to get your attention the only way they know how, sugar. They may knock down photos, send a scent into the air, maybe stop your clock at a certain time or come to you in in dreams. Ever find a coin in an odd place?”

“I don’t think so, but I guess I haven’t been listening.” My mother accused me of not listening to her when she was alive, why would it change once she passed on. I slink down in the chair. I’m being chastised by a woman I just met through someone I used to know.

“Well, Kate, when you start getting signs, it’s a good bet a Medium will be able to reach the deceased person. Death is just a doorway to a greater experience of life. I’m just here to help you have the two worlds meet.” She slurps more coffee. “She’s coming in real strong, so my guess is she’s been trying to tell you something. Some people believe they become your guardian angels but I’m not too sure about that. I think they just follow you around to stay in your life.”

I look down at the angels on her desk and their eyes seem to flicker. Janet continues with her questioning. “So, are you sure your mother didn’t have cancer twice? She’s telling me about issues with her stomach. Keeps pointing to her abdomen area.”
My mother drank dish detergent once. She thought that the lemon scented bottle of soap was lemonade. I came home from and she complained to me of stomach pains and pointed to the bottle, “It’s the lemonade!” I rushed her to the hospital where they kept asking me how much I thought she swallowed as she vomited all over the bed.

I tell Janet that my mother only had cancer once but she doesn’t believe me because she tilts her head to the side a little and twists her lips skeptically. She closes her eyes and taps her head again. I watch her and try to remember if there were people in my family with a recurrence of cancer. I can’t focus. Her head keeps jerking to the left.

Janet speaks after a long silence. “Now she’s pointing to the statue over there and wants me to acknowledge it. Do you know what that means?” I turn in the chair and rest my eyes on a four foot statue of a saint holding roses and a crucifix. Her face is cast down and her eyes look off to the side. She watches over hundreds of small statues of angels that adorn her feet. There was a smaller one like it next to my mother’s hospital bed. It is St. Teresa – my mother’s patron saint and the reason for her middle name. Jane Teresa Kallert.

“No, I….” I falter but then concede. “Yes, her middle name was, I mean is, Teresa.”

The Medium is right again and she cackles with contentment, “Oh ok, good, that’s what she’s telling me.”

I feel lightheaded and look at my watch and see our time together is coming to an end. I scratch a few notes on my pad, Olga, Russian, country music, watch for signs. I wait for more and watch as she closes her eyes again and continues to have a one- sided conversation with my mother. I want to reach in her head and be a part of it. This isn’t the show it started out to be.
Janet nods her head as if she is in conversation with someone and then she says, “I see.” She looks over at me and lets me in on their exchange, “She tells me you weren’t with her when she died but that you were there that day. She wants me to acknowledge that she knew you were there. I have to tell you this because this is how it is being presented to me.”

I let myself drift backward and succumb to the remorse over my decision of whether or not to leave my mother’s bedside that night. My shoulders sag in defeat over having made the wrong one. I thought the labored breathing was nothing to worry about, she had been through it before, and she’d be alive in the morning when I returned. I got the call in the middle of the night from the nurse. She must have been new because she struggled with how to tell me that my mother had died. Finally, she settled on the word, “expired.”

“She’s showing me a home. It’s in a suburban town but I’m not sure where but she wants me to see it. She’s asking me what I think of it and I’m telling her it’s quite nice.”

We had a small backyard with one lone magnolia tree but lots of squirrels used to gather and wait because my mother used to leave bread and nuts for them. She loved to watch them from the sunroom as they scrambled down the tree to feed on her bounty. My husband didn’t like that a family had settled in our backyard and hung around waiting for food, but I was able to make him see thing in favor of the squirrels. But after my mother moved in with us, she just stopped feeding them and wouldn’t tell me why. Until one day, as the squirrels rustled around the yard, she shrieked, “Kate! Kate!” “There are rats in the yard! There are rats in the yard! Come see!”
The Medium closes her eyes, and continues her dialogue with my dead. “Your mom is telling me you have a ring of hers. A gold one with a ruby? Oh wait, there are two rings, right? One not so expensive but the other one, the ruby one, she said that was her favorite.” Tears that almost fracture my resolve verify the truth of her reading. Undoubtedly, my mother is here with us. The rings sit at home in my jewelry box. I see them every time I go in the drawer.

At times I wished I still had more of her things, but I know deep in my heart that it was good I didn’t. Things made you think they were still alive – like, they misplaced them and were coming back to get them. But she wore a red fleece jacket for a long time – loved the way the color looked on her. That jacket, I wished I had.

The last summer I had my mother, before she deteriorated and could no longer recognize everything and everyone she had once known, before the missing legs and breasts and the marathon vacuuming sessions, and just before she could no longer distinguish me as her daughter, we spent our Sundays in the park. One Sunday she watched people walk their dogs which prompted, “Ooh, what pretty horses.” In an authoritarian voice I had corrected, “They are not horses, Ma, what are they?” She giggled coquettishly. The giggles would later become livid screams of frustration that required pills to quell. That was when the truth of her disease reeled me to the point where I too became angry, because I could no longer care for her on my own.

“Well, if they aren’t cats they are . . . ?” I wanted her delirium to make sense to me. I thought, if I could just keep teaching her the right words, she’d stop forgetting. She thought for a minute and then shouted happily, “Dogs, those are dogs!”
“Right!” I exclaimed with happiness and relief. The disease was still manageable then. On that day too, there were white, swollen clouds in the sky that took on different dimensions as they glided over us. “Oh it’s just heavenly,” she said as she looked up at them with a wistful smile. And she was right. That day had been a divine gift.

“Wait, slow down…” Janet opens her eyes to me and says, “Sometimes they throw a lot of things at me all at once! I still hear the country music too.” A recollection of my mother ironing and singing Patsy Cline in her Pennsylvania kitchen comes to me.

“There’s a Joe or a John or a James here. Do you know him?” I had an Uncle George and there was an aunt who married a guy named John. He was so cold I could never think of him as an uncle. I stay quiet.

Janet continues. “I see a city too – did they live in the city?” Yes, yes, I reply before I can stop myself. “Hell’s Kitchen.” She smiles again, “Oh yes, that’s it.”

“She’s showing me a very rural place. Pennsylvania? Did she live close to her sister? Her sister is here too – feisty little one she is. She keeps trying to talk over your mother.” I half nod in affirmation, push back the inner critic. My mother and aunt lived in Pennsylvania and they lived next door to each other almost their entire lives.

I have moments left. I ask her if my mother is happy and I want to know that she’s not mad at me for missing her final day. The Medium is artistic with her answer, “Oh honey, she’s happy now. She’s in a great place. Give me your hand.”

I give over my hand and she examines it. “You’re married?” I relinquish a kneejerk reaction of “Yes.” She chuckles, “Your husband is sticking to you like Velcro, honey. He loves you.” The southern drawl is more noticeable and loves slides out luuuuuuuuuuuvve.
The Medium stops and listens some more. She put up her hand as if telling someone to stay back. “Your mother says that she’s sorry. I’m seeing yelling, fighting. Did you guys fight a lot?”

I disregard the question and reply with one of my own. “I have her ashes and I think I’m ready to let them go. Should I, I mean, would she be ok with that?”

Janet stays quiet while she asks the question in her mind. She nods, “uh huh, uh huh. You also have some in a locket too, right? Look, there is no rush what you do with them but keep a little no matter what you do. And maybe you should let them go with someone? Do you have a sibling? Your mother seems worried about someone close to you. Someone who lives by the beach, perhaps? Your mother is showing me an ocean.”

I look down at my notepad and I realize I’ve been scribbling words. They are all over the page. The paper is riddled with snippets of our time together. Later, it will take some deciphering to understand. Janet makes me look up. “You are also to watch for butterflies, sweetie. It’s your mom talking to you.” Butterflies.

At the very end of her life, the doctor who had been in charge of the floor my mother wasted away on, tried to explain to me that my mother was shutting down. But to make me see it as less tragic and more of a transitional stage, he said she was like a caterpillar in a cocoon. When she was ready to die she would pass on and be like a butterfly. Free to fly away.

Janet is fatigued. She leans back in her chair and rubs her eyes and yawns. She leans forward and sucks up the last of the coffee. Talking through worlds is thirsty work. She chucks the empty container in the wastebasket near her desk. It is filled with coffee containers. She looks up at me and asks, “Do you have any more questions?”
I look at the time. I have very little left.

I lose patience with her ambivalent answer. I demand, “Can you ask my mother if….”

“I’m sorry honey but I have to end our session. I have another client waiting and time is up.” Janet points to the clock on her desk and I picture my mother as she fades into black waving her hand good-bye and I am overcome. It’s not like I lived my entire life with practicality as my driver, but really, how could Janet be able to talk to my mother, and I could not?

I reach into my bag for more money. “Perhaps I can get another hour?”

Janet reasons, “Come back honey, some other time. See Carol outside. She will set you up again.” Janet is used to borderline but checked hysteria and knows how to talk people away from the ledge.

“Join us for a circle dedicated to your own psychic and mediumistic development. Then you can talk to your mom yourself. Beginners as well as advanced students are always welcome and you can come as often as you would like. Sit in the power of a home circle for your own development!”

I stammer in more protest and she stabilizes her eyes so they both focus in on me. She reaches over the desk and takes my hand again. She holds my hand with both of hers and a tingling current circulates from our clasp and mingles up my arm. It is a steady, natural flow of her vitality that I find calming, until the sensation is broken when she lets my hand go. It is like a parlor trick and I don’t really believe the sensation is real, until it is gone.

“You’re time is up with your mother, honey. You need to understand that.”
Dead Weight

Harold Plotkin could only romanticize about what his life could have become. He spent most of his days slightly detached and his sensibilities, passed down to him from generations of hard-working practical men, kept him grounded. Yet unfortunately, still. Harold was immovable, his body and mind prone to learned, engraved actions established by his father, and his father before him. Harold had foreclosed on his identity before he had a chance to find one.

But Harold still dreamed. He imagined a life of gallant rescues and covert detective work. His furtive wish of travel to places he could only touch on a map, of women he would only kiss and hold in his mind, stayed locked down deep. The disappointment brought brief but strong periods of unhappiness. Harold used to hope there was a parallel universe and that the Harold in that world was living a more interesting life.

And it was at these times, only the thought of losing his father’s funeral business kept him from a total loss of himself.

Harold’s father, Dominic Plotkin, opened up the family business after the Second World War. With a central location, the promise of mortality and inexpensive caskets, Dominic Plotkin never had a slow start or a soft opening. His business was successful from the start of his first week. He was a likeable man, the kind that could fit in the same way he could in a bar as he could in any church. He belonged to the Elks Club, the Moose Lodge and always had a few beers on Thursday evenings at Tinny’s Pub on Main. He made connections everywhere he went. His friends became his clients and the business prospered, because in the end, everyone dies. And almost everyone gets a funeral.
Dominic’s amiable personality, installment payments and a stocked bar in the basement helped to still the rattled nerves of those who had to deal with life’s most difficult moment; the end of it. His ambitious attitude towards death led Harold to grow up believing of dying as a very sad thing, but also very much a business opportunity.

When Dominic died, Harold tended to his father’s body. Other morticians in the area offered, but Harold declined their generosity. He didn’t think his father would like it if a competitor worked on his corpse.

It was the biggest funeral the home had ever held. With the ceremonial closing of the casket, an indication of the final good-bye, Harold became the sole proprietor of Plotkin Funeral Parlor. He grew up to the refrain, “When you take over the business,” and when the day arrived, Harold had a momentary realization that he didn’t really want it. But the observation was fleeting. The responsibility had been too ingrained and it would have been very difficult to change his life’s trajectory after it had been etched in him for so long.

Harold was ten when his father called him down to the basement and taught him about embalming. At first, a fascinated silence fell upon Harold as he watched the blood leave the body in a plastic tube that went from the cadaver to the small drain in the floor. His father explained it as a basic process to restore the body to “memory picture” for the grieving family. But then Harold got violently sick and ran up the stairs before his father saw him vomit. Harold deposited his lunch into the kitchen sink. He heard his father chuckle from the basement and he yelled up to the sick boy that he needn’t worry, it gets easier to watch with every time.
When he returned to the playground after his lessons, the kids would clamor up to him and question about his bodywork. “Did you touch it?” “Does it smell?” “What’s a dead body look like, huh?” “Do you see them naked, Harry, huh, naked?” Harold shrugged off the questions because he was taught to never defile the memory of what could have been someone’s aunt, or cousin, or friend.

Although that happened over 30 years ago, the memory of his first time. Harold learned early that it wasn’t easy working with dead weight. Now, almost 40 and taking care of the dead was most of what Harold knew about life.

Harold looked down at the gaunt woman who lay before him and assessed her tiny figure. She looked asleep but her mouth was tightly set into a sneer, like she dreamed of things that made her mad. Even though she had been dead for two days, there was a tenseness in her every fiber. Her hardened, annoyed face the old woman had been wheeled in with had been difficult to work with. However her life was towards the end, she left it very angry, and her last moments on earth were not peaceful ones. The best Harold could do was to fashion her face into a stiff, albeit ceremonial, mask. She had been given the front viewing room where a small gathering of flowers surrounded her in a semi-circle. Harold hoped the dead woman’s son would be pleased.

With care, he brushed a few more light strokes of blush upon her face, but there was far more color than was needed on her pallid lifeless skin. She appeared undeniably brassy. Harold never could avoid the slight clownish look that he fashioned his dead with. He moved her body down a little, deeper into the cushioning of the casket. He remembered his father’s eyes when he told him, at 12, that, “A body can’t be too upright, Harry, because
then they look like they still might be alive in the hospital bed. Never make the body look too alive. Don’t want to confuse these folks. Ok, son?”

For a final touch he prudently applied an extra coat of glue around her eyelids to avoid accidental opening during viewing. Only once in the ten years since he took over the business after his father died did Harold have to deal with a loose lid. The stunned mourner’s shriek that kept blaring: ‘She’s alive, she’s alive, she winked at me, she opened her eyes!!’ traumatized him to an obsessive application of glue to every cadaver thereafter. He narrowly avoided a lawsuit, but it was his father’s probable mortification over such an improper mistake that really haunted him. Harold believed that had he been alive, his old man would have slapped him.

Harold, as a part of a Funeral Director’s routine, asked for personal effects in a sympathetic yet an almost undetectable perfunctory manner. Families often provided pictures, jewelry, and little odds and ends to include in the coffin. But this family was light on sentimental trinkets. They sent over a pink dress, rosary beads and the pictures for the photo board for viewing. Oftentimes Harold put the photo board together himself when it was too painful for the family to do so. Other funeral homes put together elaborate videos of the deceased’s life but Harold drew the line at pictures. His father wouldn’t have approved of contrasting such a vivid portrayal of life with the absoluteness of death.

Engulfed by the quietude of the room, he awaited the scheduled arrival of the family. He ruminated over the figures that consumed his head. Plotkin and Sons now coasted on the inevitable influx of business of the dying grandparents who knew Harold’s father well, and because of tradition wanted to be waked in his home. But what had kept
him in business, was now his problem. Everyone was dying and he was losing his customer base.

Harold looked around. When Dominic Plotkin first opened up the business, he created an atmosphere of peace and beauty with soft lighting, quality furniture, tapestries, potted palms and art objects. Yet the faux wood paneling had warped with age. The walls bemoaned their weathered, faded look and the distorted color, a dismal dull brown with hints of flat gray, grumbled to be changed. The wooden floors creaked from the weight of mourners that had shuffled over them all the many years the home had offered its services up to the grieving. The rose colored carpeting had long since faded to a leaden shade of pink. Over the years the furniture was jockeyed into position to cover the more heavily worn spots. The velvet fabric on the antique couches had become threadbare in places and Harold hid them with ill-fitting, standard manufactured covers. The various curios that were in style when his grandfather bought them to create an appearance of a parlor-like atmosphere in the 1940’s, now made the funerals appear as if they took place inside a set of an old black and white movie.

Harold could turn the place into an antique shop if he really wanted to.

At around 6:00 in the early evening when the dead woman’s immediate family arrived, Harold ushered them in to the hallway to get them out of the solid rain. It had picked up steadily since that morning and some of the streets quickly turned into shallow streams. Although they hurried in to the funeral home, they trickled slowly in to the room where the lifeless woman lay in wait. Unsure of where to move or sit, they meandered cautiously about before they wordlessly looked to the eldest. He inspected the body closely
and his face crinkled into a slight smile and he nodded to Harold in approval. Harold let
loose an inward sigh of relief.

The family peeked over from a distance and although there were several of them
they moved as if one. They murmured in agreement that yes, she did look good. The son
took a seat closest to the casket and the others lumbered around and greeted each other.

The tedium he experienced while nursing a funeral fostered a routine in Harold and
he matched up those pictured with the actual attendees. Some hadn’t seen each other in
years. Others drifted past people without acknowledging their presence. The pain was
seeped into their bones, permeated in their flesh and stood almost triumphantly in the air.

Harold suddenly felt dizzy, their palpable pain dazed him. He was accustomed to
keeping an emotional distance, but their discomfort assaulted him. Small chatter erupted
and talk of the weather, baseball and other trivial matters filled the room and diverted their
attention from the dead woman who lay twenty feet away.

Harold recovered and moved smoothly around the room, attending to chairs and
boxes of tissues and then standing at the back and watched as they struggled to pay their
final respects. They ogled the photo board and hushed chuckles of laughter mingled with
quiet moans of sadness emerged from the corner where it stood. Their aggrieved faces
deepened with sadness. They took turns and kneeled at the dais, crossed their hands in
prayer and quickly stood upright only to shuffle slowly back to their seats. Others, who
knelt at the dead in reverence mostly for the living, seemed to blast away from the coffin
once their obligatory prayer was through.
Harold was always somewhat taken aback by those who chose to linger and ogle the corpse, the “dearly departed” he was trained to say. He imagined they had silent exchanges with the decomposing body, perhaps hoping for a response in return. He did not need to know what the internal conversations were, for over the years whispered words had drifted over to him—*I’m sorry, I Love You, I’ll Miss You.* And others, *Please Forgive Me.* Some leaned over to offer one last kiss good-bye which distressed Harold as he worried about the make-up. People had no idea how heavy it was, nor how easily it came off. Harold also had difficulty with covering up some of her face. By the time her body was delivered to him, her skin had already started to blister.

The chairs were arranged to allow for the closest family members to sit nearest to the coffin and in an historic tradition, essentially guard the body. Other family members such as cousins and friends, again by tradition, sat in the back. But this family had trouble finding their places and continued to move around aimlessly not wanting to claim a spot. Voices drifted around Harold as they mused over their lives.

“Wow, remember *that* wedding? She got so drunk, we had to carry her to the car,” a young man remarked.

“Yeah, Grandma was so mad she yelled at her all the next morning.”

“Hey, c’mere. See what she’s wearing in that picture? Whatever happened to that cameo broach? Remember when she bought it for herself and everyone was wondering where she got the money for it and then it just disappeared? Uncle Henry accused her of stealing his money for it, remember? I think she put it away in a box somewhere. She would have wanted you to have it, you know. I hope he didn’t find it before you, Clara.”
Harold looked at the time and made a general announcement that guided people that he knew to be brothers and sisters to sit near the eldest, and while Harold felt their reluctance, they obliged him nonetheless. He glanced towards the back. An old man sat there, alone. Soft buzzes of conversation continued and then Harold heard the shift from trivial conversations to deeper musings and the more painful reminiscing began. Harold’s grandfather taught him that public grieving usually came in waves but once the mourners started with the memories, and the shroud of sorrow could no longer be talked around, he was to have more tissues readily available.

Harold was coached to be in tune to the mourners’ needs and to offer an equal balance of compassion and reserved strength. Harold could never quite manage both. The face he had practiced over the years had become a permanent part of his middle-aged look – clear and seemingly sympathetic without trying to look overly emotional. He stood as an objective witness to their grief but heard them nonetheless.

“Remember how she made those chocolate chip cookies…she always made them to be just enough of crispy on the bottom without burning them. Then she’d give you a big glass of milk with them.”

“Yeah, right, and she always made a lot of them, enough for everyone…God they were good.”

Another voice Harold had his back to, drifted in to the conversation

“I didn’t see any of my pictures on the board, you know that? That bastard is still mad at me for something that happened years ago. I should be up there along with the rest of them!”
“Hey, calm down Nick. It’s just a board of pictures. What do you care? You never went to see her when she was in the nursing home and you know that. Forget it.”

“But the chocolate cake was the best…she put nuts on top, remember”

“But really. She never really made stuff when we came over. Always those boxed cookies. I don’t think she liked us much…”

Harold liked to think of his clients when they were alive. He pictured her hands, that just that morning he had folded over in soundless everlasting prayer, and imagined them kneading dough with a smile. But her image in an apron soon melted into a dead woman in a pink dress stiffly removing burnt cookies from a smoky oven. He continued standing by his post while the conversing mourners reminisced and he tuned his ear to listen more closely. Yet he was mindful of his role that his father had bestowed upon him, and that was to be a shepherd of solace.

“Has anyone seen Sara?”

Sara. Harold made a mental note of her name and then moved around more conversations and discreetly arranged pillows on couches, while trying to get everyone seated. He moved wordlessly and drifted like a spectral amongst the mourners and he caught more scraps of muted conversation as he glided by inconspicuously. Over the years he took on people’s lives as he prepared them for death – the only way he got to know anybody really. He sensed the pain of the people gathered in his funeral parlor tonight, but instinctively judged that their collective sadness went beyond the loss of the woman in the coffin.
Harold looked at his watch and realized the hired reverend was late. The woman could not have a priest at the home because she had not attended church while alive. But there was always a reverend willing to make some extra money on the side. Some did so with the silent approval of the church, others came to officiate on the sly. Harry continued to listen in.

“They shoot a needle through her mouth to get it stay shut.”

“What the hell are you talking about now?”

“I read it somewhere. You wouldn’t believe what they have to do,”

“Don’t tell Dad any of this, ok? He doesn’t need to know that!”

“What does he care? He has her in a pink dress. She hated pink! When did you ever see her in pink? And these flowers? They’ll donate them to the nursing home when they’re done. Yeah, that’s what you want when you’re dying, flowers from somebody else’s wake to remind you that you’ll be dead. You know, back in the day they only sent flowers to cover the smell of the decomposing body. Now that they have that embalming stuff…”

“Enough, I’ve had enough - be quiet! That is your grandmother over there. Now, shut up and go pray or something.”

The back doorbell rang silently and a small light lit up in the corner of the room alerting Harold to someone at the door. Harold slipped soundlessly out of the room and went to greet the very late Reverend Thomas. Once Harold opened the door, the impatient man moved quickly past Harold, brushing him aside urgently. He brought in with him the rain that had escalated to a hard drive with such force that Harold felt the beat upon the
roof. He worried about the carpet and thought of the drain in the basement and hoped it wouldn’t back up like it did the last time the rain had come down as hard. God, what a horror that had been.

“Reverend, we were worried that perhaps you weren’t….”

“So sorry, you wouldn’t believe the traffic outside and I had a wedding to prepare for and with all this rain, I just….please forgive this oversight. I had a baptism then a wedding…well you understand how busy my life can be I’m sure.”

“Of course, but now that you are here, can we get started?”

“Yes, yes, of course…if you would get everyone seated?”

Harold saw the perturbed look on his client’s face and he inwardly wished he could avoid hiring this reverend again. The grieving did not want to hear about busy reverends but he, like Harold, was inexpensive for what he provided. The front doors came open and the wind pushed in the person he immediately knew to be Carl. He had been warned of his arrival and the description given to him was quite accurate. Except real Carl in the flesh looked more damaged than Harold was led to believe. Although scrawny, he was tall. If he stood upright he would read over six feet. But life weighed on him. Harold wondered how much longer before Carl would need his services.

“Hey, is that Carl?”

“Oh yeah, I think so. Wow, I’m surprised he came.”

“He was close with Grandma, don’t you remember?”

“Really?”
Carl stepped in quietly, cautiously reaching his hands out to shake the others as if he wasn’t sure if they’d accept his greeting in return. He looked undyingly sad, like no amount of therapy could shield and heal him from his wounds. Harold scanned the room and made a mental note that all the purses had been hidden protectively under chairs or wrapped securely under arms. Harold was not the only one to have been warned.

He watched as Carl gave up soliciting handshakes and went straight to the woman in the casket and kneeled by her side and reached in to hold her dead, cold hand. Harold had seen mourners recoil in shock to feel such coldness but Carl held on. He had touched a dead person before, Harold thought. The mourners picked up their chatter.

“18 gauge silver casket with velvet interior…I think they got her the deluxe model.”

“Really, how much did THAT cost?!”

“I’m not sure; Dad took care of it all.”

“No, that’s not the deluxe; no way would he pay for that.”

“I thought she wanted to be cremated…”

“She can’t be cremated, we’re Catholic!”

“Oh yeah…but she never went to church.”

The reverend began his service and offered a stumbled, awkward delivery of stories that were told to him about the woman, but he could not quite remember correctly. Some stories brought small chuckles while others were answered in silence. After the reverend led them in a final prayer, some of the bereaved ambled up to the front to deliver their own tribute to the woman. Some were heartfelt yet others were gauche, hastily started and
hurriedly done. They spoke a few words detailing a distant memory or blurted out mechanical sympathetic words of false comfort.

Harold stood to the side and he too waited for it to be over. He had seen families in pain before but never with this many levels, these many secrets. The biting, backstabbing and confused thoughts about the dead woman made him wonder why they were there in the first place when a simple cremation would have saved them this agonizing get together.

“Who will get the house now?”

“I’ve been planning this death for weeks; I’m ready for this to be over.”

“Have you heard from Sara? I heard she lives in out in Oregon somewhere.”

“Did anyone tell her?”

“Tell her? They don’t even know if she’s alive!”

As 9:00 approached and the official mourning time drew to an end, the family gathered their coats. Harold stood by the door compliantly and shook hands and patted backs needlessly until he came to who he thought was the last to leave.

“We’ll be by tomorrow at 9:30 and I hope the Reverend Thomas will be on time to lead us in the final prayer, okay?” the eldest confirmed, requested and ordered of Harold in one sentence.

Echoes of his father’s words rang in Harold’s head. People all handle grief differently Harold, you have to be prepared for that. Not everyone is sad.

Harold turned on his smile and focused his eyes into his. He wasn’t the best funeral director, but he did want to stop being a pushover for this man. Harold shook his hand
firmly and used his height to intimidate the man into silence. “Not to worry, we have it all under control here. Get some rest and I’ll see you in the morning,”

“I can’t believe that guy lives upstairs. Creepy.”

“I think we’ve had everyone come but if you should get a call from anyone, anyone at all asking about my mother, you’ll let me know, won’t you?” the man ordered again. Harold nodded but didn’t reply. At this point, less was more. He watched them all leave and saw how some of their faces were finally able to relax.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“I don’t know what you do, so I’m going to do everything!”

Laughter erupted as they all got into their cars and left. Harold thought that conversations are really a lot of thinking out loud and people take turns. They don’t really talk, just bounce their thoughts back and forth. Once Harold closed and locked the door, he moved past the deceased woman to his back office to pour himself a drink, gave the reverend a warning call and completed his work. He fought back the invading thoughts that presented the futility of working at the ritual which had become artificial to him yet had sustained him over the years. His enduring thoughts that battled with his loyalty to his father were interrupted by a banging at the front door.

Harold promptly moved back past the reposed and dutifully scanned the room for a probable purse or coat left behind. Seeing nothing, he opened to the inclement night and was greeted by a tall woman drenched from the storm. The overhead light above the door illuminated her face and Harold was stirred by a brilliant intensity that the previous guests he had monitored that evening lacked.
“Hi, I’m sorry to bother you, and I know it’s late…” The woman struggled with what to say. “Umm…but I think you have my aunt here?” she inquired. Harold looked eye to eye with her and struggled with how to answer. It was late; his fatigue had developed into a headache that nestled in his head in a constant hum. Viewing time was over but he sensed she needed to come in. Harold’s only move was to step aside and once he did, she moved past him with the obligatory, “May I come in?” trailing from her lips. Her body strutted past him with a practiced firmness and she shrugged off his attempt to remove her raincoat. When she made it a few steps from him into the hallway, she turned and cocked her head in a question. She sparkled with self-assurance.

Harold shut the door and turned and the two faced each other. He had just looked eye to eye with her, and he himself was six foot one. She had Nordic features with a slightly crooked nose but her pale pink lips were as translucent as her lightly colored brown eyes and he inwardly swore he had never seen anyone quite as beautiful, dead or alive. His thoughts then streamlined to business - Her feet would reach the end of the gurney and he thought one day she may need a casket in extra long. He had grown naturally accustomed to looking at life as just a precursor to death and when he could catch it, he would mentally chastise himself for always thinking in terms of death. It had made dating virtually impossible.

“She’s in the first room on the left…ummm….here. Let me find something to help you dry off. You’re tracking in water and the carpet was just beginning to dry….,” His voice trailed off for he hoped she would understand before he had to explain more.

She, unperturbed by his distress over the water, interrupted his request and hurriedly bent down, shucked off her shiny slick boots and jettisoned them to the side of
the entranceway. She reached up her hands and unbuttoned her coat and he moved closer
to her to remove it. She held no expression as she gave him her coat and glanced down at
her bootless feet. He was beguiled by her mild demeanor. He hung the coat in the closet,
all the while both of them quiet, and turned to find her still standing in the hallway with a
surety that indicated she waited for him to direct her when to go.

“Could you tell me who you are? I mean, the family has all left and they don’t know
you are here and I’m not even sure if you should be here.” Harold waited for her to respond
but she said nothing in reply but continued to eye him. Harold relented. She took his breath
away with her rosiness. The woman simply glowed from the inside. “But I guess it will be
alright if you wanted to pay your respects for a little while.” He rambled as he
simultaneously grappled with long forgotten images of actually holding a live woman in
his arms. He watched her face change and uncontained anger speeded through her and
Harry soon realized his mistake. Uncontainable and therefore dangerous.

“I’m her family. I’m here,” she retorted. She moved from him and stepped into
the room where her aunt lay. He followed her in, watched her move steadily up to the
coffin and gaze down at the woman. The blurred line between instinct and paranoia
surfaced and while he knew one thing, training taught him to think otherwise. He was still,
after all, keeper of the body. He recalled the woman had no jewelry to steal so he needed
not fear that anything would go missing.

“She’s waxy. Glowing even. And you got make up on her collar,” she blurted out
her observations as she took them in, “And why does she look so…so…surprised?” No
one who had viewed the body earlier had taken such a close look.
“I’ll take care of this before the morning.” Harold promised.

“Do you know how she died?” the woman asked without looking over at him. “I was away for awhile but then I got a call from the home. I would go see her when I could get in there – I had to pay an orderly extra money to keep in touch with me. But then he got fired and I lost touch.” His duty was to usher her out but he stayed quiet to allow her to talk even more. He grappled with a question in his head. He decided against telling her that she probably wasted away in the bed of her nursing home. He had seen it before. People just stop wanting to live when they are in conditions like that.

“Was my uncle here? I mean, her husband?” she interrogated him before he could query her.

“Yes, I believe he was here.” Harold caught the words in his mouth before he revealed that the man sat in the back for most of the time and that he wasn’t sure how he was related at first.

“Figures. All those years, she didn’t want him near her in life, and he couldn’t be near her in death.” Harold watched as the woman reached in and put her hand over the permanently folded ones. She hesitated but didn’t recoil either.

“What time will the priest be arriving tomorrow?” she questioned. “They got a priest, right? Or a reverend? Not sure…I saw him stock car race into the parking lot around 7:30 – I betcha Tom was real mad to see him so late,” she said. And then after a moment of silence, “What time is service tomorrow? You know, my aunt hated church.”

“9:30,” He offered this too easily and ignored the church comment. All the dead got a usual sendoff from a member of the clergy – it was just done. He knew he had to get
a grip on the situation but he was flustered by the lavender smell of her. He needed, but didn’t want her to leave. She had bit into his life and her vitality took up the room. But there was a lot to think of and surely her sleeping over violated some code. And if the papers ever found out that he let someone sleep over, Plotkin and Sons that would be dead. But he continued to stare at her. Up until this point Harold didn’t realize that he was waiting for at least one experience that would redeem his otherwise humdrum life.

“Well, ok then. I am going to stay here with her until then. I’m sure you won’t mind.” Harold had to deal with the art of negotiation for years and the tactic was not new to him – telling a person how they are expected to feel or what they are supposed to do, put them in the direction you wanted them to be in. But all he could do was to ask a simple question.

“Are you Sara?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m Sara. How do you know who I am? Were they talking about me?” she asked suspiciously and suddenly he was the one on trial.

“They spoke of you, they thought you wouldn’t come. I think they thought you weren’t.”

“Well, I’m here. I can only imagine what you heard.” She sighed and looked back down at her aunt. “Do they still think I live in Oregon?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Do you have a blanket or something? It’s kind of cold in here. But I can probably guess why. Hey, who picked the pink dress?”

He mulled that one over. “The family - someone came to drop it off. Look, I’m not really sure about this.” His obligation to Plotkin and Sons suddenly came into focus. But
her skin was so luminous, like she had just dusted herself with a light, shimmery powder before she came. For Harold, she also gleamed with strength.

“Look, it is bad enough they are putting her in the ground. Please let me stay so she’s not alone. I mean, I know she’s not really here but I haven’t seen her in so long. Wow, that sounded weird.” She paused and realigned her argument. “Look, she would have hated this….she wanted to be cremated, you know. None of this grandstanding she would have called it. Who decided this for her?”

Harold answered her. It went against all his training, his commitment to his family, his loyalty to his way of life, Christ, even his oath to the Funeral Directors Code of Ethics. “Her son,” he replied. “It’s not a pretty dress, and it didn’t fit her properly at all. But he bought it two months before she passed. I think she lost a lot of weight right before she died.”

Her eyes welled up in tears and she nodded in understanding. “No, he probably just didn’t know what size she was. He believes more in tradition than any of us ever did, and that’s the real reason she’s here, but he couldn’t wait for her to die. She had become a burden with her dementia. Her husband probably has a new girlfriend already. Why not? He had them when she was alive.”

He thought of a lie to try to make her feel better. “She had a nice turn out,” he offered. “A lot of people came.” His first lie to her. He offered this as a comforting gesture. Even in death people wanted to feel like people liked them.
She replied with a sardonic chuckle, “You’re lying. I watched from the diner across the street. I know who was here and who was not. She had no friends. She lost the ability to make them when she went deaf.

*Harold, she’s got to go son. She doesn’t know what she’s asking for. Think about who is the paying client here!* Harold could not put out of his mind what he had been fixed with for so very long. “Perhaps you’d like to come back tomorrow,” he offered as a desperate suggestion. His decision to let her in was quickly relegated to Things I Should Have Thought Twice About.

“Look, the more distance I put between myself and them, the better off I’ll be. No, I’m fine with this. I’ll be gone in the morning,” she said. She walked over to the photo board and spent time studying it while Harold studied her.

“I’m not on here. I kind of knew I wouldn’t have been.” She moved away from the board and took a look at the room for the first time.

“This place needs a decorator. Did you do this on purpose or is everything really this old?” She didn’t wait for an answer but stepped closer to the case of curios that lined the room and ran her finger along a shelf. “Dusty. Are you really a Plotkin?”

Harold nodded dumbly. He was under a spell she did not know she cast.

“So, you do all the embalming? Wow. That must be weird. Well for me, not for you, I guess,” her voice dawdled off. She waited and then secured her position for the night. “Hey, thanks for letting me stay. I couldn’t stand the thought of her being alone. You probably see a lot of dysfunction in your line of work, I’m sorry your first name is
Harold, right? I saw it on the outside door.” She looked back at the photos. “We should get an award for our brand of dysfunction,” she murmured despondently.

When Harold was sixteen, his father had embalmed Harold’s mother. She had died in a car crash while driving home from a business trip. Harold worked on and attended to his own mother’s funeral. He understood a different type of dysfunction.

“Did you always want to do this?” she asked as she moved back over to be close to her aunt again. She looked over to Harold and noted his delayed reaction. There was a lag and a moment of silence before he spoke.

“This business has been in my family for generations,” Harold repeated for possibly the thousandth time.

“Yeah, but did you want to do this?” she asked of him again. Harold thought on that even though it bothered him to go to that place in his brain. The sad part of it was that he couldn’t really remember.

Harold wondered how he could tell her about the tingle that felt like voltage in his veins that became more charged the closer he would get to her. He went back to the thought of questioning her. “So, wanna tell me why you have to come in the middle of the night and have to pay an orderly money so you could keep track of your own aunt?”

Sara smiled and sighed heavily. “Well, she’s my aunt, sure, but she was more like my mom. I grew up in her home mostly because my mother was sick a lot. In the head, I mean. And my father left as soon as she got pregnant with me. I guess he was done dealing with her. Anyway, my aunt didn’t work and relied on my uncle for money. But he was stingy with it and used it to control her. But he was pretty dumb at times too. She used to
steal money from my uncle’s pants. He’d come home drunk and leave them wherever he took them off and she’d get up in the morning and take some bills, and whatever change he had sitting at the bottom of the pockets. He wouldn’t remember how much he spent, and she scored some extra money for the week until the next time he came home drunk, which was often. One morning I got up early and caught her in the act of taking his money. She looked over at me, grabbed my arm hard and whispered strongly, ‘Don’t ever tell your uncle about this and don’t you ever, ever, find yourself in this position I’m in now. Ever!’

Harold watched her as she told the story and he could see she was that little girl again, watching her aunt rummage through her husband’s pants.

Sara continued. “I listened and I got the hell out and I never looked back except to check on her. I drifted in confusion for years but it was like being in recovery. I found out what was making me sick. And it was them. You know, I sent her money over the years and then one day I got a box in the mail from her. She took that money and bought me a necklace with a cameo broach on it. She never could keep nice things because her husband would have pawned them on her.” She took out the necklace from inside her shirt. “See, this one.” Harold looked at the broach and remembered where he had seen it before.

He left the room and went upstairs to get them two blankets. He felt a shift. He had broken a rule or two and he decided he liked the feel of it. When he made it back to the room he found Sara crying by the casket. He moved to her and gently led her back to the couch and covered her with the blanket he took from his bed. He sat in the chair beside her and watched her guard her dead.
In the morning, Harold awoke in the chair and Sara and her dauntless fortitude were gone. He got up from the couch and looked at the picture board for her photo but she was right, she wasn’t there. He went to the window to check for cars and the lot was empty.

He unlocked the doors and swung them open to the dazzle of the sun’s beams reigning over the back parking lot. The clouds moved onward in the middle of the night, the wind settled, and room was made for what turned out to be a bright, sunlit day. He smiled to himself, pleased with the sun for people tend to feel better burying their dead under warm rays of sunlight than the harshness of bitter rain. He wondered if he could still get a good price for the place.

Later in the morning, they filed in and averted their eyes from the casket. Their community pall enveloped them as they slumped spiritless in their respective chairs, chosen from the night before. They watched the dead woman unemotionally. He heard leftovers of conversations that began on the ride over.

The eldest son walked toward him, his face grimly steadfast and Harold hastily ran through a series of running lists he kept in his head. He mentally checked off all of the final preparations for the day and braced himself for the grieving man’s needs.

“I believe everyone is here now, so once the priest, I mean the reverend arrives, we can start,” he stated with impatience as he adjusted his tie.

“Of course, he should be on his way, but I’ll check for you. If you’ll excuse me….”

“Wait, one more thing,” the man’s voice stopped him. The tone was unassailable, the request almost physical in the directness of his command.
“Did anyone else come last night? I mean, after we all left?” His face was devoid of sadness. This morning, the man just looked mean.

The third generation proprietor didn’t have enough time to offer a reasonable explanation for the harried man, and a freshly pinched Harry did what everyone else did in times of trouble— he lied.

“No,” he replied noncommittally. “It was pretty quiet here last night, an uneventful evening I guess you could say.”

*Oh Harry, now you’ve gone and lost the business!*

He quickly added, “Were you expecting someone else?”

The man’s expression remained guarded, he veiled the truth and lied back, “No, I…no, the family is all here.”

Harold took the man’s lie and excused himself for one last look at the coffin before the ceremonial closing of the casket. Harold looked down at the woman’s hands and underneath the rosary beads there lay intertwined a chain and the cameo broach Sara had worn and given back to the dead woman. He tucked it under her hands so no one would find it and turned to the family and said, “Ok, let us begin.”
The Caretaker

Josephine O’Reilly grew up to the faint but constant nicotine-like smell of thousands of tomatoes on her family’s heirloom farm in California. The air was always thick with the rich sweet smell of tomato must, and full of light green pollen that hovered over their property like fairy dust. The tomatoes had ungainly bulges, and some were the colors of a bad leg bruise, but they were huge and meaty. Their bewitching quirky red and purple hues created a kaleidoscopic panoply of baseball-sized orbs.

Josephine’s mother’s love for the tomatoes is what grew the farm. She loved the strangely shaped tomatoes so much that her husband kept planting patch after patch until they had an acre. She told him of her love for the tomato smell that lingered on her hands hours after she touched them. Josephine’s father happily paid the high cost for some of the rarer heirloom seeds and the family watched the plants grow and take on their beautiful hues and funny shapes. Josephine’s mother filled her days and her kitchen with tomato sandwiches, tomato pies, tomato chutney and a tomato sauce she became famous for in their little town just south of Los Angeles. Extra bounty was sold on the side of the road to passersby.

One year, the last year they would have together as a family, they enjoyed a premature summer and the tomatoes ripened early. In the early morning summer hours, they’d walk the rows, just as the sun hit the horizon, and Josephine’s mother shook the leaves on the vines and a light gold sprinkled the air. Her mother carried a salt shaker and when they reached the Super Sweets or Yellow Pears, she’d pluck some and shake a small dash of salt on a handful. Josephine’s favorite tomatoes were the Cherokees, the ones that were a deep burgundy purple with a green body. They could be eaten like apples.
Once bitten, they revealed a glowing hue because the seeds were surrounded by a lime-green gel. The tomatoes appeared to light up in her little hand. Josephine and her mother would eat the fresh tomatoes on the way back to the house while her father lightly teased her mother about her passion for the fruit.

When Josephine was seven, her mother died and her father turned his grief to his growing pasture of tomatoes. A full acre turned to two, and then finally, thirty. What began as a small garden that Josephine’s father planted for his wife, turned into one of the biggest heirloom farms in the state. When he thought about the money he would need one day in the future for Josephine’s wedding, he started growing hybrid tomatoes. The heirlooms were lovely, but the real money was in the Romas and the Pretty Boys.

Across the road from their tomato farm lived her mother’s aunt, Sasha. Sasha was a solitary woman who had made a decision to live her life alone. Josephine had felt sorry for her aunt until Josephine was in her mid-30’s. It was then that the pressure of being a wife and mother weighed upon Josephine in a way she had not been ready for. At that moment in Josephine’s life, being able to do ‘whatever the hell I want’ as Sasha always used to say when people asked her why she didn’t get married, made perfect sense to Josephine.

Aunt Sasha started a mushroom farm because she liked making something grow from decay and death. She also loved the aroma of her mushrooms mixed with the bouquet from the tomatoes. There was a mildewed yet sweet scent that loitered around both farms. It made people slow their cars and roll down their windows, to breathe in the peculiar yet intoxicating air.
Sasha had mounds of compost on her property and dead logs in rows that went on for acres. The shitakes grew on top of the compost and her portabellas, large as Josephine’s head grew on the all the dead wood. The mushrooms brought in enough money to keep Sasha financially comfortable. Independence came with the money. She was often quiet, but very direct in what she said when she felt like saying it. She didn’t worry what people thought about the truth, and never made excuses. She was a small, thin woman and she often smelled of lavender and cloves and there was always an elixir of sorts cooking on the stove.

After a mushroom harvest, Sasha would leave, each time returning from a new place. Sasha brought Josephine gifts: orange and green bangle bracelets from India, wooden dolls from Russia, gold earrings from Capri, scarves made from indigenous South American women.

Sasha the mushroom farmer also served as a medieval chemist and part-time philosopher, with her collage of potions for a patchwork of ailments. Josephine used to sit on a stool in Sasha’s kitchen and watch her mend burns, sprains, headaches and stomach aches with simple herbs. Her prescriptions were renowned for being fail-proof as well as cheap. Sasha baffled all with her abilities to use the earth’s natural substances to make people well; many in the small California town went to her instead of the doctor. People consulted her for predictions about the future. Sasha’s predilection for knowing and telling what she called the, what cannot be seen yet, set people on courses they weren’t planning on but went anyway just on the basis of Sasha’s reputation alone.

A year before Josephine’s mother died, Aunt Sasha, who was normally a loving yet brusque woman, had been inordinately kind, and didn’t tell Josephine’s mother that she
was not long for the earth. Josephine’s mother used to drink a tea made of shiitake mushrooms and garlic, but the cancer was too strong for Sasha’s remedy.

Josephine, now a much heavier and wrinkly woman, a mother and wife living in Ohio, sat at her kitchen table and idly stirred her coffee. She thought about the rows of tomato vines, could even smell them. Her thoughts were on her mother and how right after her mother died, as a little, lonely girl, she walked through the rows of tomatoes with her left arm outstretched, her hand nestled in what she imagined was her mother’s hand. Josephine actually felt her hand in her ghost mother’s, smelled her mother’s rosewater perfume, felt her mother’s bracelets hit up against her hand. She could still hear the jingle of the metal and her mother’s beautiful humming. They used to walk through the same rows together in search of yellow swallowtail butterflies and purple dragonflies that circled the tomatoes. A strong memory she had of the woman; the only one she could still hold on to. Other moments faded away.

Josephine grew used to sleeping in now that she didn’t have to rise at 4:00 A.M. to make breakfast and coffee for her husband before he headed off to his shop. Just the other morning she’d slept until 8:12. There was nothing more splendid in the world than to wake up after the rising of the sun. Her long, thick sleeps left her a little muzzy in the morning and it took her until her second cup of coffee to feel alert, but still she rejoiced in the extra hours of rest.

Josephine stirred her coffee, her eyes fixated on the window that looked out on her lawn. She didn’t like the flowers that used to be there, the ones that everyone would admire and compliment her about. She had wanted a hardy perennial so that the outside of her kitchen window would always be green. But Frank, her husband, liked how they made the
house look. “Josie, why do want holly bushes there? They are not as pretty to look at! Look at how nice the flowers make the yard look!” Now it was her yard and there were seven gaping holes three feet deep where Frank’s flowers used to be. The evening before, in a rare sleepless stupor, she had torn out all of the hydrangea bushes in the middle of the cold night under a crescent moon. The lights went on next door because the shoveling woke up her neighbor, who just stared in amazement as dirt flew into the air.

Josephine thought about losing weight as she wriggled from her chair to get more coffee. Now that she didn’t have to cook as much anymore, she made a pledge to work on it. She made other promises to herself; had a list of them. She wanted to travel, paint the kitchen, cut her hair. Lose the weight she had packed on. She wanted see more of northern California, Alaska even. She wanted the avocado green kitchen to be painted a pale yellow with grey trim, a combination Frank had told her, didn’t go.

Josephine held up her hand in the light and inspected the brown spots and tiny wrinkles that gathered at the crevices of her fingers as she poured her coffee. They were Sasha’s hands. She remembered holding them as her aunt died; alone, as she had lived her life. She moved her hands around and then rested them in her lap. When did she get this old?

Josephine heard the phone ring and it jolted her out of her morning reverie. Only her son, Patrick, would call her this early. She picked up the phone on the sixth ring, “Hold on, Patty.” She put the phone down, gathered her thoughts, and then put it back to her ear.

“Hey Ma, are you going up to see Dad today?” Patrick shouted into the phone.
Just like his father, Josephine mused as she held the phone away from her ear. She thought about her son’s roundabout attempt at a command. She couldn’t tell him that the funeral had been enough of a farewell between her and Frank. She resented the authority her son tried to exercise over her but didn’t want to offend him; she’d dragged her feet about visiting Frank’s gravesite. Her son was a good man and she knew he didn’t want to burden her and gave her time before he beckoned to her that a visit to his father’s grave was due.

Frank had been dead for almost three months and the last time Josephine had seen the grave was when they first lowered him in. As the coffin sank into the hole, thoughts of when they first met flooded her and she remembered how when she had first met him, the sheer carnality of their first kiss was like an undying promise of a life of passion and excitement. For Josephine, her wedding day had been the most important day of her life.

Josephine and Frank met when Frank pulled over to the side of the road to ask Josephine’s father for directions and he was then invited in for coffee. Six months later, Josephine was in love and Josephine’s father approved. Frank was a sensible man, with goals for the future. Frank laid out all the plans to Josephine and her father and they all nodded together in unison, yes, this is the man to marry. The conventional picture of them as a couple with a house and kids allowed Josephine to feel secure. Her father grew to trust the man to take care of his only daughter. Josephine’s father was also ready to sell the farm. He was getting old and he had grown tired of chasing after his wife’s ghost amongst the rows of red fruit.

Josephine and Frank’s marriage started out like most, happy. Then, over the years it took a slow decade’s long retreat into a crushing, bitter silence after their only son left
the house for a life of his own. The love that Josephine and Frank had at the beginning of their marriage was no match for its long but slow drift apart.

Right before Aunt Sasha died, when she was on her death bed, she opened her eyes and rose up, rather gracefully, until she was in a fully erect position as if ready to receive members of her court. Josephine, about to be married to Frank with a plan to move to Ohio, had been seated by the side of her bed when Aunt Sasha looked directly into her eyes. Then Sasha’s gaze floated away from Josephine and she stared at something beyond as she seemed to have floated back down to the bed.

Josephine had never seen anyone go from living to dying before and the way Sasha’s body rested back on the pillow it looked like she was ready to take a nice long nap. Josephine later thought that she too could do this one day. Piece of cake to actually die, it’s the leaving part that she was afraid of. It made Josephine less afraid of death. She had seen how cancer bequeathed a slow agonizing a death to her own mother. Unfortunately for Josephine though, Sasha’s last words to her were “Josephine, don’t marry Frank.”

But Josephine did. When Josephine thinks about it, she wonders just who that young woman was who made that decision. She thought that if she had her here now, she’d literally shake her. Sasha told her she’d never become the woman she was meant to be if she married Frank. “He likes everything too perfect, Josephine. He has all these goals all mapped out, Jo. The journey is the adventure. He doesn’t see that,” Sasha had told her.

Years later, when Josephine grew to really know herself, and know what she wanted from life, she finally saw the wisdom in her aunt’s advice. But by then it was too late. Married, a husband, a business, a house; Patrick only six at the time. She loved her boy
too much to make a mess of his life. Josephine had given Frank 42 years of her life and now she was alone; but a different type of alone than Sasha’s. Josephine still hadn’t figured out what to do with it.

“I’m not hard of hearing, Patrick. Just, old. Don’t worry so much. You got enough to think about with Daddy’s business. I’ll go, soon. Today, even. Ok?” Josephine had to be careful not to let her son control her. She hoped he would finally decide to think for himself and stop wracking his nerves over what a dead man might think or want he should do.

“I’m gonna go, I’m gonna go,” she repeated twice to him after a dry spell on the phone. “Is the stone up yet?” she asked roughly but evenly, trying to assert control back in her favor. The drive to the cemetery took an hour one way and for Josephine, who still walked to the store in town; this was tantamount to driving to another country.

So the bereaved widow was allowed to bide her time until the tombstone was up.

“Yeah, Ma, it’s up. The tombstone is up. You’ll like it.” Patrick turned his mouth away from the phone and let out an exasperated sigh. He counted to three like his therapist taught him to do. Then he softened when he thought of his mother alone in her kitchen staring at the empty seat in front of her. “Just go Ma, ok? You can make the drive. Make sure the flowers are cleared off the grave. If the people at the place didn’t do it, they’re probably all dead by now and Dad would hate an unclean grave.”

Frank O’Reilly had died of a massive heart attack when he was just 63 years old. The coroner established that he was dead before his rotund body crashed to the bathroom floor. Mr. O’Reilly, the report read, appeared about to enter the shower when a massive
pulmonary rendered him incapable of calling out for help. Josephine was listed as the person who found him. She’d ambled upstairs to check on him after repeatedly calling his name. Why was he taking so long? The coroner, who was also Frank’s drinking buddy at the Moose lodge, added an unwarranted confirmation that the victim probably didn’t feel the loss of his two front teeth when his face hit the side of the sink on the way down. Frank left his wife, Josephine and their only son, Patrick, a lucrative auto-body business and a fully paid off house, which Frank had worked ten hours a day, six days a week and 40 years for.

The funeral home was quite busy for the two days Frank lay in state while his wife and son greeted, hugged and even consoled some of the mourners who filed by the casket. Men who looked just like Frank, with toughened faces and rough, calloused hands, rotund bellies and receding hairlines, took turns making the sign of the cross as they prayed (Please, God, don’t take me yet) over his coffin. They silently promised themselves to stop eating and drinking as much when as they viewed Frank’s plump face in the casket, resolutely and unexpectedly, dead.

Josephine stood in a confused state next to the coffin because she knew she didn’t feel as sad as she should have. At first she was troubled at the loss of a man with whom she had spent most of her life. Josephine also felt a chaotic rush of emotions similar to winning the lottery. What was she to do now? Everything.

She hoped that the feeling of relief was not apparent to the mourners who idled up to her side and offered their heartfelt sympathies.
After the funeral, nurturing wives, as expected, provided Josephine with enough food to last her for a month. Josephine ate innumerable casseroles over the weeks that followed, and spent her mourning period productively, cleaning out Frank’s closets and returning squeaky clean dishes to their rightful owners.

Josephine said good-by to her son, but not before she told him she loved him, and hung up the phone. She read the morning paper that she no longer had to share. She could read any section first. Frank had been a good man, a good provider and most of the time, a good father too. He had been attentive in bed, intent on making Josephine happy, before the monotony of a long marriage stopped all that. Josephine offered to sleep in the spare bedroom, told him they could both sleep a lot easier, what with Frank’s snoring and all. But Frank wouldn’t concede to such a departure from convention. Overall, the eulogies were right, Frank was a great man. But in return, he expected his house and his family to be supportive of his need to be the boss, the conductor of their lives.

On the way to the cemetery, Josephine let herself think about what she’d want done with her body when it was her time. The ground was cold and hard on the day her husband was buried. They had to chop at the dirt with a tiny bulldozer. She lingered enough to watch the men work until Patrick gently pulled her away. Her son thought his mother couldn’t bear to walk away from her husband but the thought that flashed in Josephine’s mind was like a Broadway marquee: I don’t want to go in there when I die. Josephine wanted was to be cremated and have her ashes spread somewhere nice. She imagined her son spreading them over flowers somewhere on a hill overlooking the small town in County Cork, where she’d lived until she was six, before her family left Ireland for California. She made a mental note to tell Patrick when she got home. He could keep the stone and
let people think she was buried there, but when her time came, she really wanted to go back to California. A place she had not seen since she her father’s funeral. He had died a few years after she married Frank. Frank liked to escape their Ohio winters by traveling only as far south as the Florida Keys. “California is real nice, Josephine, but I’d miss the Ohio winters.”

When Josephine pulled her husband’s Chevrolet into the driveway of the Home of Peace Cemetery, menacing layers of blackish clouds hovered above her. The encumbered clouds sped by and she glanced up at them through the windshield and loosed one of her tightly gripped hands from the steering wheel, made the sign of the cross and kissed her fingers to her lips. What a day to come to the graveyard.

The breeze became a strong wind as the car moved down the winding paths of the burial ground. Finally she got to the cedar tree. She threw a mute thanks to her dead husband in for the navigable plot he chose. She shifted the car into park, swung the door open and pushed herself up and out of the seat. Josephine wobbled her way over to the tombstone and leaned in close to read the granite slab in front of her, and stood up in shock. If someone were watching her, they’d swear she had been goosed from behind, she had uncurled that fast.

Josephine reached into her handbag and in agitation, searched for her phone. She gave up pushing around the contents, and shook her purse out on the grave. She fell to her knees searching through handkerchiefs, coupons, pins, buttons and mass notices that all lay scattered across the freshly turned dirt. Once she found what she was looking for, she called her son. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.
Her son picked up on the second ring. “Hey Ma! Did you get there ok?” Patrick had asked his mother to call him before she left the house, and had calculated her time of arrival to the cemetery. By his estimation she was 15 minutes behind.

“I’m here, Patty, Oh, I’m here alright! I got a question for you – WHY is my name on the stone too? You got me dead already, Pat, huh?” Josephine’s weight and the stressful drive had her out of breath and her name on the death stone put her out of sorts. She breathed heavily into the phone as she waited for an answer from her only child.

“Mom, hold on, relax! Dad said he wanted to be buried next to you and it was easier to have both of your names engraved at the same time,” Patrick’s voice rose to a pitch. It was lunch time at the auto body shop and most of the workers were on break. Patrick sat at his father’s old desk, beholden to his father’s dream, and looked out at the grimy though profitable garage that was his life. He was grateful for his father’s business acumen but he’d also learned to be prudent with money, no matter how much the business brought in. He didn’t want to tell his mother and why have the stone-cutters come out to do it all over again once she was dead? All they would have to do was chisel in the year of her death. Easy. It was the practical thing to do.

Josephine couldn’t be calmed. “EASIER?! You mean CHEAPER! I know about this Patrick, I know about this! Aunt Claretta had the same thing done when Uncle Paulie passed away. They had no money left after Paulie spent it all. Your father had to help with that one, so I know Patrick, I KNOW! Easier, ha! Well, Patrick, I’m waiting. Easier or cheaper?”

“I was just following Dad’s wish, that’s all.”
A terrible silence filled their connection.

“Mom? Did you tear out some bushes last night? Carl passed by the house on the way to the shop this morning and he said the front of the house is a mess. Everything, ok?”

Josephine looked at the dirt underneath her fingernails and ignored his last question. “Dad’s wishes?! DAD’s wishes?! What about mine, Patrick? I don’t want to be put in there. I was going to tell you that today. Don’t put me in there after I go. Ok, Patrick? I gotta go, I’ll call you later.” She looked at the phone and searched for the END button and pushed it forcibly and dropped the phone to the ground. She looked over at the tombstone and knelt down on to the mound. The ornate concrete slab that bore Frank’s name and the very few words they used to sum up his life. Her eyes brimmed with tears and she rubbed them back with her hands.

Her husband’s name was emblazoned on the top with the phrases “Proud Father” and “We will miss you always” carved in large, elegant script beneath. Josephine’s name and birth date along with the chiseled legends, “Devoted Wife” and “Loving Mother” sat next to Frank O’Reilly’s name. Under the lamentations of grief, spanning the bottom of the entire stone, another phrase confirmed: “Together forever in life and the hereafter.” All very nice distinctions indeed. Josephine and Frank were very careful not to show the public their disintegrating relationship. It would have been bad for the business and they didn’t want Patrick to get upset, even though the he was getting to be an old man himself.

Josephine looked down at the dirt mound that covered her dead husband. She thought about her mother’s death and how fortunate Frank was to go so quickly, and not waste away slowly. She swayed in the wind as she stood on her husband’s grave. “So you
did it, didn’t you? You said we’d always be together and here you went and did it. You arranged for my body to lie next to you for all eternity! You just couldn’t let me go, could you? I should have worn RED to your funeral!” Josephine stopped herself, took a deep breath and her shoulders sank. He never could come to realistic terms when it came to her needs. Frank always undervalued the frequency of her compromises. “Date night, Josephine? What’s a date night? We’ve been married for 37 years!”

Sometimes the greatest griefs are the ones we cause ourselves.

Josephine noticed a man in blue coveralls, watching her since her flailing attempt to find her phone. He walked away from the plot he was tending and moved to put his arm around her back and gently held her and help her to a standing position.

“Hey lady, easy, hey take it easy.” He spoke softly into her ear.

Soothed by the comfort of a stranger, Josephine allowed herself to be maneuvered and stood to and move back from the mound. She rubbed the dirt off of her legs and fixed her skirt. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me” she said absently. She ran through the thoughts in her head, like she was a fly on the wall of her mind. The stranger just looked at her and gave her a compassionate smile. He made sure she was steady and bent down to retrieve the items that lay strewn across the grave. He found her bag and dusted off the items before he put all of them back inside. Josephine watched impassively as he gently replaced all of her belongings.

He stood up and handed her the bag. “Aaah, don’t worry about it. I’ve seen lots of crazy stuff here. Lots of heartache. The dead can enslave us, that’s for sure.” The man laughed. “I should write a book. I’d call it The Caretaker, because that’s what I do here, I
take care. The dead can keep hurting. Lotta these mourners can’t seem to let go. I don’t know, but it seems to me that cemeteries work better for the dead than the living. Yep, I think I’d rather be cremated than have some nice woman like you yelling at me.”

The storm clouds rambled on and moved southward, ushering in smaller, whiter clouds.

Josephine looked at him and felt such an overwhelming relief she almost lost her balance. What she felt was liberation, but she didn’t know it. To meet a person who thought like she did when everyone else thought differently. Years ago, this might have changed her life. Her son would want her to visit this slab every week. She told the stranger, “It was supposed to say, ‘Until death do us part’ but my son changed it without telling me,” she said in a haze.

He returned her comment with the silence that she needed. The quiet calmed her. She knew he was not going to judge her. She took in a deep breath of the Ohio air and realized suddenly what had troubled her about it all these years. It was a stale air, without personality. Without the tang of tomatoes and fragrance of mushrooms. Without a woman who shook fruit for dust and a woman who told the future with tea.

Josephine didn’t want to say anything else that might expose the feelings she’d held onto for so long. This freedom was too new and underused. She still had her allegiances and her pride. She looked up and over at a small gray dilapidated house perched at the end of the log row of tombstones. “Do you live there?”

“Yep, part of my keep. Room and board. Not a bad gig. It’s a pretty cool house and all. It gets real quiet here at night, as I’m sure you can imagine.” He shuffled his feet as he
explained his living situation. Lots of people didn’t understand, but for him it was probably
the best place he had ever lived in all of his 33 years of life.

Josephine was not fazed by his home next to the dead. She looked over at the
motorcycle parked next to the home. “That yours?” She inquired with curiosity that went
deeper than just wanting to know the ownership of the bike.

“Yeah, that’s mine, but that I own. The only thing I do own, really. I love it. Saved
me from a lot of bad choices in life.” He chuckled and Josephine looked at him, waited
for more of the answer.

He picked up her cue and continued. “Look, when you’re on that thing, the past and
the future mean nothing. The present are all that matters. One wrong move if you’re not
paying attention and Whammo! You’re a goner. I ride it when I can and when I need to.
It gives me peace, in a way, and if I got a problem, I just get on that thing and my mind,
my mind is like suspende, you know?” He watched her face as he talked. He continued
when he saw she was still open to listening. “It’s different when you’re on the back though.
If you feel safe with the driver, you can lose total control and think about just anything as
long as you hold on tight – at least that’s what my girlfriend said.”

Josephine thought about that for a moment. “You have a girlfriend.” She said this
not with contentment, for every woman she knew seemed to want young people in
relationships and marriages, with kids. Rather, she said it with a hunger to just purely be
someone’s girlfriend again. To be that age again, in those years that were still full of
promise, hope and the possibility for exploration. Before she became entrenched in the
security and responsibility of her life. The security that grew from everyone wanting what
everyone else had, generally lead to monotony. Josephine spent most of her life longing for an exhaustive experience that could have redeemed an otherwise humdrum existence.

The young man stared at Josephine’s face. “Hey, I get off in a half hour, and I got an extra helmet. Wanna go for a spin? We’ll take a ride. Who knows? You might like it.” He smiled at the thought of driving an old lady around on his bike while she let go of whatever it was that was bugging her.

Josephine let out a small, coquettish giggle, and the sound of it surprised her. She hadn’t heard that laugh in years. “Me, no. Oh no, I couldn’t really.” Her voice trailed off. She heard Frank in her head, “What you gonna do that for, Josephine? C’mon you gonna get killed on that thing. Look at that boy, he don’t know what he’s doing. Just get back in the car, Jo. Go home, ok?”

“No, I’m too old to get on that thing. But thank you. You are a kind boy.”

“Well, if you change your mind…” His voice dawdled off and he looked down at the tombstone. He remembered the mourners who’d gathered at this one. A large crowd had congregated as they lowered the casket.

Josephine looked down at the tombstone and saw the empty space next to the dash that came after her year of birth. She thought about the little time she had left, even if she lived to her 90’s, more than half of her life was gone. She wanted to savor it, not get on the back of that bike and risk certain death.

“I’m going to get on home.” Josephine thanked the young man again for his offer and he smiled at her kindly, then turned to go back up the hill. There were two graves to be unearthed that day and he was behind schedule.
Josephine started the car and made her way around the whole cemetery before she found the exit. At the exit gate, she paused. She should have turned right to go back to her home. She recalled Aunt Sasha teaching her once that some flowers only bloom for an hour, and then they die. She made a left turn, over a double lane road, and drove another three miles outside of town to a garden store. There, Josephine O’Reilly, a recently widowed senior citizen, bought two dozen tomato plants.
Sifting Through the Ash

I used to lie in bed at night and count the opening snaps from the beer cans my brother had smuggled into his room. I liked to hear the *tsst* that came before the crack, and then the gurgle as he pumped back the liquid down his throat. Some nights I counted up to eight. When I was nine, he offered me a sip, said it was about time I tried it because it was in our blood anyway, but the smell of it on him made me gag, and I smacked away the warm can he held to my lips. He was fifteen when he began drinking. He hasn’t had a dry day since, and he’s almost sixty now. I called him when I finally felt it was time.

He answered after many rings He only uses a landline – a grace that he has no idea the benefits of – I could think of no better greeting than, “Hey it’s me.”

“Kate? That you?” His voice was wary. The last time I called was to tell him that our mother died. That was over two years ago.

“Yes, it’s me.” I paused to give myself a chance to hang up, back out. “I’m coming down.”

“Coming down? Like, you mean, today?” He struggled with words as if part of his tongue had been cut off. Years of alcohol abuse spoiled a part of his brain and he couldn’t talk or walk as well as he used to. His questions really sounded like this, “Cming own ike innaday?”

“No. Like, in tomorrow.” I thought I heard a mute sigh of relief. He needed a day to brace for the visit just as much as I.

I looked out the window and up at the steely winter sky, but no storms were forecasted to cause a reasonable cancellation. My brother’s eagerness to see me cemented me to my decision. “Yes, tomorrow is Christmas, isn’t it?”

“Great! This is excellent,” he said as if with marbles in his mouth. “What time?”

“I’ll be there about 2ish. What do you want me to bring?” I knew what he wanted but I wondered if he would set up as an afterthought or would it be the first thing that he asked for. But he seemed to have had a list because he answered quickly and I had to keep up in order to translate his slurred words.

“Well, I need a new pair of sneakers.” He rushed through the rest of his request. “Get me size 9 if you get a cheap pair, but if you go to, like, the sneaker store for the good ones, get me 9 ½. I could use some more paint too.” He was pleased to report, “I’ve been painting angels again. You gotta see them Kate, one is a masterpiece.”

“Really, Paul? A masterpiece?” I said with disparagement, questioning and correcting him. A part of me wanted to be nice to him, but I ended up making fun of him. My mockery was ignored, or he just didn’t care. He was more excited about the angel he had painted.

“Yes, a maserpeece!” I could hear the smile in his voice, the sense of pride about his work. He considered for a moment, or at least I want to think he did, and then asked me quietly in a shy way, “And could you bring some beer?”

My brother was fully employed until he fell off of a roof back in ’86 and broke his pelvis, both legs and his left arm. This left him with a permanent limp and an inability to
get up on a roof ever again. A smart compensation lawyer got my brother set up on a small monetary settlement and monthly disability checks for the rest of his life.

But he made himself fall. At least that’s what I suspect. Stood at the edge with his back to ground and just let go. My brother’s idea of living didn’t include hard work for the rest of his life, so he made it happen that he would never have to. He bought a small, one bedroom cabin close to the beach, when small one bedroom cabins one block from the beach could be had for cheap, and has since been living his version of the dream. He rarely leaves his house. He just stays home – drinks and paints. He thinks he is a contemporary folk artist that hasn’t been discovered yet and he will spend the rest of his life recuperating from very little toil. He hasn’t left his home in about two years, the same amount of time I haven’t spoken to him. My brother’s continued survival is a source of bafflement to my family.

The next day I retrieved the box of ashes from the hall closet. I let my husband know that I wouldn’t be having Christmas dinner with him. He was used to me waiting until the very last minute to let him know certain things, like the dishwasher being broke or a letter from the IRS, but I know he forgot I still had my mother’s ashes. He looked at the box in my hands and registered a slight shock when he realized what it was.

“You still have your mom? I could have sworn that…”

“ Nope, never did.” I might have lied and told him I did but I couldn’t remember.

He looked at my face and then down at the box in my hands. “Where are you going with them?”
“Here’s the double whammy – I’m going to my brother’s house…”

“Paul’s? You’re going to see Paul?”

“… and I, we, are going to release her into the ocean. But he doesn’t know that part yet. He just thinks I’m coming down for a visit.”

My husband removed the box from my arms and embraced me, held me like he does when he knows that opening up is hard for me. “Do you want me to go with you?”

My husband had seen me through a lot when it came to my family, but for this one, I had decided to fly solo. “No, but thanks. I’ll be fine. I’d rather see my brother on my own.” I left, put the box of my mother’s ashes on the passenger seat and started off on the drive to my brother’s house.

When my mother was alive she used to like it when I took her for long drives. I talked to her on the way down, as if she were really there beside me. I pointed out the birds, made comments about the weather, the roads. I told her I missed her. On the way down, I scheduled the day in my head. An hour or so in the house, a drive to the beach, a ceremonial releasing of the ashes, a drive back to his house and if I left within an hour, I’d be home by 8:00.

My brother called but I didn’t pick up. He left a message for me and I listened to him through the speakers of my car. His warbled words came out in a swift current. “I wenoo beacsh dis mornin. Is friggin cold! You gotta see dis paining I’m doin’. Issnot ike anying youn ever see before. I’m agonna pain anudder one. Itsongtakeme a day or two. Itbedone. Thankyouloveyou bye.”
He stood at his front window as I pulled into his driveway. I waved to him as I pulled up close to the house but he continued to stare, as if what he saw wasn’t real. My brother left home when he was eighteen and I was eleven. He disappeared for almost a year and then he called my mother from Colorado to tell her he had married and that his new wife was about to have a baby. My mother hung up on him. But not before she told him what a waste he had made of his life. I would not see him again for another three years. And when I did, I probably looked the way he did while he watched me from the window.

He opened the door for me though and I hauled in packages of food and a few gifts I was able to get on Christmas Eve at 2:00 in the afternoon. I made another trip to the car and returned with a couple of cases of domestic canned beer for him and an imported bottled six pack for me.

He put out his arms for an embrace and before I had a chance to really look at him, I felt his frail body. He was so skinny and the potbelly I remember from the last time I saw him was gone. I squeezed together a parcel of bones when I hugged him back. He took a small step back, looked at me. He had on a blue baseball cap, the same kind, maybe even the same one, that he wore the last time I saw him. He had taken to wearing a hat once he started to lose his hair. His clothes, red flannel shirt and faded blue jeans, hung on him. His face was blotchy, but clean shaven. When I looked into his face, I saw some of mine. He had tiny cuts from his razor all over his face. The whites of his eyes had yellowed, and he had a gentle, bewildered look about him.
I filled his refrigerator with the beer and tossed him one because he could seldom be entirely sober. I grabbed my own and went over to move his gifts closer to his chair so he could open them. He opened the box of sneakers first.

“Thanks for coming Kate,” he said as he ripped through the box like a voracious child. After such shuffling and shakiness, it amazed me that he still could move so quickly. “It’s really great to see you. I was going to forget about Christmas this year. C’mere, let me show you.”

He first broke open the beer can and slurped back the fizz that had bubbled up from the shake of the throw. “I miss the beer tabs,” he said in passing. “I used to collect them in a jar. Do you remember those jars?”

I remember my mother finding them after he moved out. He left them under the bed and my mother made me squirm underneath to get at the ones in the back. She had shaken her head in defeat, “If only your father was alive.”

My brother pushed himself up from the chair and with a beer in one hand and his cane in the other, we teetered together over to his desk in the front hall and pointed out his calendar. He had a big red X through the small square marked for the 25th. Underneath there had been a clear, empty space but he drew in a replacement box and put in red letters CHRISTMAS KATE COMING DOWN. “I crossed it out but then you called and I had to draw it back in the calendar. See?” I leaned in close and see too that he had doodled little swirls of circles around my name. I walked him back to his seat and he continued to open his presents, flannel shirts, a new Yankee hat and some books.

“So, Paul. How have you been?” I settled in to the couch next to him.
“I’ve been ok.” He opened the box and pulled out the sneakers. “Hey, these are great! I love them!” He tore off his worn black sneakers and put the new ones on.

“Do the sneakers fit?” I didn’t think they did, but it could have just been his shaky gait.

“Yeah, they’re perfect! They feel great! He moved around the living room to prove to me. “Hey, I want to show you something. Get up and bring your beer.”

He led me to a small room off in the back of the house that he made it into his workspace. On the floor were pieces of driftwood, boxes of seashells, containers of bottle caps, ripped brown paper shopping bags, old newspapers, and torn pages from old books. My brother will paint on anything flat and his work was often multi-dimensional. The walls were covered with paintings. Mountain scenes from every season, ocean landscapes, crashed cars, burning buildings, serene sunrises and apocalyptic sunsets. His mountains were asymmetrical with large tree-height flowers towering over small wooden cabins. A random whale has made it into many of his forest scenes and there are many paintings of planes crashing into buildings. They were from his post 9/11 period. My brother thinks that what he produces is offbeat and fun, but his work is unsettling. He is the only one that thinks he is destined for greatness and that one day his genius will be revealed to the world. He has told me that once his work is discovered, he will buy me whatever I want. I’ve seen modern art that I can’t explain and I think maybe he has something. He doesn’t use traditional rules of proportion and perspective in his work, and his paintings are sometimes so inexplicable they need his interpretation to be understood. But I look at most modern art this way, and I figure every disaster has a reason, so I have kept all his paintings he has
given me over the years. One day they will either be in auction house or in a pile of curbside rubble once I am dead. I’ve been to enough garage and estate sales to know that many of my things will be sold once I am gone.

There was a period where all he did was portraits. He used to set up a chair and easel and wait outside bars at night. Some people would be drunk enough to want a painting of themselves, painted by a drunk guy with an easel. They could not judge with such inebriation. A few of the portraits he didn’t, or wouldn’t sell – my brother could be funny that way - are leaned up against a side wall. There’s one of a man. His face is wide and dark with bulging eyes held in place by swollen eyelids. They protrude like the eyes of a frog, each separated from the other in a most unusual way.

There was also a painting of an ocean that I had seen years ago. A large ocean with flocks of birds flying over it and a blazing sunset over the horizon. There is an angel off in the corner of the sky with long blonde hair and large, pendulous breasts, and she hovers over the scene. There’s a tiny toy log cabin in her hand.

“What would give an angel such large breasts?” I had asked him after he painted it.

“What can I say? I like breasts!”

Each painting had his signature little quarter-sized brown cabin with smoke coming from the chimney. He painted them in every piece he makes. When questioned about it once he proudly replied, “It’s what the museums will be looking for. My iconic signature. It will be how they know it’s mine when my work goes big!”

“I think you watch too much Antique Road Show.”
He was hurt. “Don’t be that way. You never know.” He straightened a painting that was slightly slanted too much to the left. “Come on, my beer is empty.”

I went to the fridge to get us two more and he scuffled back to the chair. He caught me staring at his legs. “You know I had another stroke, right?”

I saw his attempt at a cover up and raised him with the truth at the risk of a fight, and my mother taking the long ride back with me. “You didn’t have another stroke. You are getting worse. Your brain’s f*cked up from all the beer. You have what Uncle Tommy had. It’s what they used to call wet brain, but it’s not too bad yet. It’s why you walk like you do, too.” With that being said, I finished it with a small laugh because I didn’t want it to be a day of defensive arguments, regrets and blame.

He is adamant though, stubborn, like his mother used to be. “Nah, I don haf wet bain, dat’s rot it. I’m tellin you I had a soke. What? Are you saying I’m an Alcoholic?”

I let the question dissolve and reversed the direction our talk could have went. We talked football, books and about family he hasn’t seen, while I made us two turkey sandwiches. I listened to him ramble about his paintings and how he felt he was entering a different period and might do more self-portraits. All of a sudden it felt genuinely good to see him. He was after all, my brother. “It’s good to see you Paul, what’s it been two years?

“No, it’s been two years and two months.” My brother keeps all of his old calendars.
He got up again and gave his sneakers another try. He walked up and down in front of me as I drank the last of my beer. He teetered into the kitchen and grabbed another beer. *Tssst Snap!* He made it back to the living room and sunk back in his chair.

I looked up from the turkey sandwiches I had just made. “So, um, I brought Mom’s ashes down.” He stopped in the middle of a swig and his face registered slight shock. He recovered and swallowed back his beer.

“Yeah? No kidding? Where is she?” He lit a cigarette and took a deep inhale and flicked the ashes into the empty beer can. My mother smoked too. I have this memory as a kid of waking up in the middle of the night and knowing my mother was watching over me because I could see the end of her lit cigarette.

“She’s in the car. Look, I was wondering if you want to release her ashes in the ocean with me. She would have liked that. Remember how much she loved the ocean? Would you be ok with that?” My questions came out in a pleading rush. I didn’t think he’d deny me, but there was that chance he’d let me down yet again.

He laughed. “You’re kidding. Today? You mean you really brought her ashes here with you? Ha!” His guffaw was followed by a coughing fit. It was as if he just saw a funny scene in a movie. My brother, fan of the absurd. This may end up in a future painting. He pushed himself up from the chair and went to his front window to look at my car in his driveway. “I can hear her screaming from here, ‘Kate! Let me out!’.” I didn’t laugh and he realized I was serious, and apologized. “I’m sorry, that was in bad taste. But, oh Jeez…is she in a container or something?”
“She’s in a plastic box.” I watched the humor wear off his face. “Is this too much? If you can’t, I understand.” My words gave him an out, the tone of my voice did not.

He was wary, perplexed. “What makes you want to do this now? Today? On Christmas?”

“Let’s just say I didn’t feel like going to my in-laws house. Will you do it with me or not? Too much, or what?” I pressed him.

He was quick to answer; quick to let me know that he was going to be able to help and this annoyed me while it gave me a sense of relief. I had needed him so many times before this time that his willingness to help now highlighted all the times he didn’t, or couldn’t. “No, it’s not too much. But are you sure? I mean, I don’t know, it’s just that…” He trailed off and then came back. “Yes, let’s do it.”

I got him another beer and grabbed another for me. “So, she’s really in the car?” My brother asked like there was an actual person in the passenger seat, and I wondered if I had to remind him that it wasn’t really her, just an element of what she once was.

“She would have liked this,” I said to him as I handed him his beer. We open them at the same time. “I mean, us doing it together.”

He looked away and then down at his new sneakers. “Well one of the things I think about is that I wasn’t there for her, for you I mean too, when she was dying.”
“Well you can be here for us today.” I was there to release her and me. I was there to put the memory of what I wasn’t to her at the end of her life, to rest. There was no time for could have beens.

“Alrighty then. We’ll do it! Cheers!” I walked over to him and we clanked our beers together in agreement. “This will be some kind of closure for me.”

I nodded to his self-centered comment. I wasn’t concerned with him closing a door because it wasn’t as big as mine or as hard to push shut. “I think it would be appropriate,” I said instead.

We were silent for a while calmly eating our roast turkey sandwiches, me thinking about what lay ahead. Until my brother broke. “How was she like in the end?” He asked for himself as well as her. He knew he faced the same end.

I thought it was better told with a story. “Well one time, right after I moved her in with us, we went away for the weekend. We thought she’d be ok. Saturday afternoon I got a call from the police and they told me she had been wandering around the neighborhood and could I please come and pick her up at the station. So we get there, talk to the police and then take her back to the house.” I stopped here for a swig of beer and I watched as my brother stayed quiet, committed to the story. I continued, “So I asked her, ‘Mom, why were you goose stepping down our block today?’” Really, I yelled at her as soon as we got in the house but I couldn’t repeat such callousness.

“Goose step?!” my brother yelled with a laugh.
“Yeah, the goose step. So, she walked towards the kitchen and turned to me with this confused expression and asked me what a goose step was. So I told her, you know? I had to show her. I imitated her and marched around my dining room table and raised my legs up high and straight out with each step. I traveled around the table, felt the burn in my thighs. I got winded real quickly, too. And then you know what she said to me? She said, ‘Oh that? I was doing my exercises. I do it like this.’

“Oh God Paul, and then she showed me. She goose stepped around the living room for about five minutes until I finally had to stop her. I told her, “Ok, ok, ma, I get it. But you can’t do that kind of exercise down the streets. Mrs. Kravitz practically had a heart attack. She called the police on you. You just can’t do that down the street.”

And then mom said, ‘Who’s Mrs. Kravitz? What does she care anyway? Well, Mrs. Kravitz ought to try it out. It feels good, Watch me.’ And she started up again and I let her because I had already shut the shades to my nosy neighbors and Mike was in the garage doing God knows what.” It kept her busy and the humor of it all kept me from throttling her.

My brother is hysterical as I finish the story. His laughter cascaded into coughing fits that came out of him in a torrent of spittle and his eyes watered. “Wow, where did she get that from? I can’t believe she did that,” he said between breaths. He picked up a beer to rinse away the cough and I took a swig from my own to wash away the pain of the memory.

“She was really hard to deal with a lot of the times, Paul.” My brother’s smile deflated to a slight grimace and we were both suddenly quiet again. I got up and got us two
more beers. “Thank you for coming,” he said as he opened up the beer and I told him it was his last one until after we let her go.

On the ride over my brother stared out the window while he held the box of our mother on his lap. “What was it like at the very end?” he asked, his face turned away from mine as we drove past empty hotels and boarded up summer homes.

“When she died you mean or when she stopped knowing who I was?” I didn’t wait for an answer. “Well she died two years before she really died, died. I read that people who survive the experience of taking care of someone with dementia really experience two deaths. I don’t know. I guess that’s how it was.” I know my answer didn’t satisfy his question but I wanted him to know my side of the story. He could take guesses as to how it was for her.

I got out of the car and walked over to the passenger side and my brother handed me the box which I then put in a backpack. I took his arm and we made a slow walk to the path that led to the beach. He was fine until we moved from the pavement to the sand. I noticed his trouble navigating the unpredictability of the sand’s surface. I asked him if he thought he can make it to the water.

“Well I’ll be honest Kate, I can probably do this but you might have to consider carrying me on the way back.” I stopped and give him a look. “Ha! Just kidding!” He chuckled.

“C’mon, you can do this.” We walked slowly and I held on to his arm the entire way.
The beach was desolate. An empty and frigidly cold Christmas day, free of droves of people. The beach was peaceful and solitary but I scanned it up and down for any rogue guy with a metal detector or a family out for a post-Christmas dinner walk. We were all alone. The waves broke on the shoreline. Angry, winter water, full of vinegar, as mother used to say. A dozen or so seagulls hovered together in a dense area of the sand. My brother reminisced of when were kids. “Remember when we could climb the sand dunes? Now they give you a fucking ticket for it. Bastards.” He stopped to pick up some clam shells to be used later for ash trays. Or art.

We made it to the water and I tried to gauge how close we could stand to the encroaching tide without getting wet. I removed the box from the backpack and read the label for the first time. **Deceased: Jane Theresa Kallert.** The plastic box was difficult to open so I grabbed my car key and pried open the lid. Inside was a plastic Zyploc bag full of ash that looked like the sand that we stood on. I thought they would be gray and pasty like the remnants of a wood fire, but they were a tan color. Like the color of skin. This made me shudder. I didn’t want to stare too long for fear of seeing the bone fragments that I had been told might be in the remains.

I held the bag up and opened it at the top. I looked at my brother and he gave me a _go ahead, do it_ face. I recited the Hail Mary prayer and my brother joined in. Then, right before I turn the bag over I said “Here is Jane. May she go with the water and the wind, and finally be free.”

The wind blew some of my mother’s remains back on my brother. He screamed, “That was her! That was her! She kissed me or hugged me or something.” I continued to
shake her free and I looked down at his sneakers and saw speckles of the bag’s contents and reached down to brush them off. My brother dropped his cane and took the bag from me and waited for the tide to come in again and continued to spread my mother into the sea. I looked up and watched as the wind lifted the ash and spread it out on to the water. I whispered *I’m sorry* low enough so my brother couldn’t hear me. The tide came in and swallowed my mother up and we jumped back, laughed like kids at the thought of getting our feet wet. We moved back far enough so the icy water wouldn’t get us and my brother emptied the rest of her into the sea. Then he put the empty bag in his pocket. Then I said, “May she live in everlasting peace.”

My brother corrected me, “Rest, Kate. May she *rest* in everlasting peace.”

“Oh yeah, rest.”

We lingered on the beach a little longer until the wind became too much for him. I picked up the cane and we headed back to the car. On the way, he removed a beer from the pocket of his coat and cracked it open and offered me the first drink, which I took eagerly.

We made it back to the house and shared a piece of store bought cheesecake. As I cleaned up the kitchen and psyched myself up for the three hour ride back, I yelled from my dish washing at the sink, “You know you might be able to reverse this a little if you’d just stop drinking.” I heard the snap of another can being opened. And then the chug and the aaaah the respite a cold beer can bring. I walked to the living room and looked over at him and he smiled and gave me a what-can-I-say-I’m-a-lost-cause shrug. I finished the dishes and went to get my coat.
“Wait, before you go. I made you something.” He shuffled off to his art room and came back with a painting. “Here, Merry Christmas.”

It was a painting of my mother. We didn’t have many photos of her when she was little but there were a few. My brother had taken her favorite, a close up of her when she was a young woman. She is blowing a kiss at the camera. She had just had her hair done and she had red lipstick on with a grey sweater. The red and grey up against her black hair and green eyes made for a stunning shot. My mother had been a beautiful woman. My brother managed to capture her in a manner uncharacteristic of his curious approach to portraits. It was like nothing else he had ever done and certainly different than what I was used to seeing from him. The painting was an exact replica of the photo. With a little log cabin in the corner.

I thanked him and hugged him good-bye and as I held him in a hug he asked “Are you coming back?”

Thinking of what lay before him, knowing that he was on the precipice of the abyss that will eventually consume him. Being unsure the I could handle another dementia thing again, I said, “I’ll see you soon.”

I left him with that and got in the car, and put the painting of my mother on the front seat. As I backed out of the driveway, I looked back towards the house and saw him wave good-bye. I steered the car to the end of the block and pulled over to the side. I looked at the empty seat next to me and reached into the pocket of my coat and let my fingers sift through the ash.
“But there's a beginning in an end, you know? It's true that you can't reclaim what you had, but you can lock it up behind you. Start fresh.”

— Alexandra Bracken, The Darkest Minds