

Spring 2017

Undertow - A Collection of Short Stories

Phoebe Tess Present
Bard College, pp3965@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2017

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Present, Phoebe Tess, "Undertow - A Collection of Short Stories" (2017). *Senior Projects Spring 2017*. 362.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2017/362

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Undertow
A Collection of Short Stories

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

Phoebe Tess Present

Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

May 2017

To my parents, for being my biggest supporters since day one.

Contents

Welcome Back	1
Amanda C.	11
I've Got so Much to Tell You	19
Since Mrs. Bowen	31

Welcome Back

Up until the moment Jillian stood outside the entrance to her old high school, she had been calm. She woke up that morning feeling confident, not a taint of anxiety. She was going to don her new dress and wear eyeliner for the first time in over a month. Maybe also wear lipstick, she thought in the shower as she rinsed shampoo out of her hair.

Once clean and dressed, she went to the kitchen to fry some eggs. Jillian loved the crackling sound eggs made when being fried. She watched the egg whites drown and bubble in the olive oil, waiting for them to solidify. They were consumed in no less than five minutes, after which Jillian went back to her room to do her makeup.

The most makeup she ever wore to work was a thin layer of foundation and some mascara and lip-gloss. Eyeliner was for special occasions. Jillian painted a thin black strip along each lash line with as much delicacy as a baker decorating an intricate wedding cake. Her eyes instantly looked greener, which led her to wonder why she didn't wear eyeliner more often. Jillian admired herself in the mirror. She never saw herself as an exceptional beauty, but usually felt content with the way she looked. Her confidence this morning encouraged her to think she looked especially good today, something she needed for an occasion such as this one.

The subway ride was nostalgic for Jillian. She had taken this route thousands of times since high school, but she had only gotten off at the 50th street station a handful of them. It felt as if she were on her way to school again, sans the morning rush-hour crowd pressed up against her and bumping into her stuffed backpack. She proceeded to take the

same walk from the subway station and two blocks later Jillian was standing right before the large ugly green doors she had gone through every morning and afternoon for four years. A large white banner draped above read in large sparkly bubble letters: “Welcome Back, Class of 2007!” A small group of men passed her and entered the building as she stared at the banner. She looked over at them and instantly recognized the profile of a boy she had taken tenth grade chemistry with talking to another boy she remembered from one of her English classes.

A sudden lump rose in Jillian’s throat. It had never occurred to her that some of her classmates would still be friends and attend the reunion together. Since the last day of twelfth grade, she never had another meal, movie, or shopping trip with any of the girls she was friends with. Jillian wasn’t even sure if she could call those girls her friends now; she’d never refer to them as her high school friends to her college and post-grad friends, but rather the girls she got lunch with in high school. Even then, a decade ago, she wasn’t sure if they were really friends. She had let herself believe that these girls were her friends to avoid being seen as a loner. She got along fine with all of them, but Jillian had never felt she could go to them for anything, nor did they ever come to her.

Lunches with them usually consisted of the six of them sitting at a table, with five of them chatting about boys they had kissed over the weekend or something funny a younger sibling had done the night before. Jillian, having had no experience with boys and being the only child of career-driven parents who came home late from work most nights, felt as if she could never contribute. She resorted to sitting in silence and listening to their stories, laughing when everyone else did and exclaiming “Oh my god!” when appropriate. Most days Jillian felt as if she were nothing but a collection of atoms sitting

at the edge of the table. She was an afterthought, someone whose presence or lack thereof would not have made a difference.

For the first time since hearing of the reunion, Jillian worried over seeing those girls. Sasha, Claire, Elena, Andie, and Jenny. Since deactivating her Facebook halfway through college, she had no idea if any of them still kept in touch. She mulled over all the possibilities: Claire and Jenny went to college together, so it was safe to assume that they were still friends. Elena and Andie lived only a block away from each other in high school, so getting together was always convenient. Sasha and Elena had a massive drunken fight at their after prom (Jillian never learned what it was about) and it seemed as if the friendship was over, but the next Monday at school Jillian saw them writing page-long notes in each others yearbooks – something you only did when you were really close.

The longest note in Jillian’s notebook came from her eleventh grade Spanish partner, Lauren, who wrote that she was a “solid” partner and she enjoyed going over conjugations together. She signed the note with: “¡Hasta la vista, Jillian!”

Jillian came home from school that afternoon and cried on the couch. All of her ongoing insecurities about her friends had been confirmed through the simple presence of five lousy yearbook letters. By the time her parents came home that night, Jillian had washed her face and harnessed her attention on preparing for college.

A voice calling out Jillian’s name from behind interrupted her thoughts. She spun around to see Elena smiling at her. She hasn’t changed a bit, Jillian thought as she said hello. It was true; Jillian would later quickly realize that Elena changed the least physically out of almost everyone. Her thin blonde hair was cut at the same exact length

as it was at graduation, and she still wore her makeup the same: thin cat eye with a little too much blush. Her slim figure looked as if it hadn't gained a single pound, which annoyed Jillian.

“Wow Jilly, you look great!” Elena exclaimed. She had never once called her “Jilly” all throughout high school. They were never close enough to be on a nickname basis. Jillian dwelled on that thought for too long, forgetting to thank her and return the compliment. She did so once she remembered, and Elena reached in for a light hug. Even her hugs felt the same: weak and unaffectionate. After they pulled out of the hug, Elena beckoned for Jillian to follow her inside.

Except for a fresher coat of white paint on the walls, the school lobby looked the same. The security desk was still stationed just to the side of the front doors, the floors black and tan checkered linoleum, and the ceiling lights were still too bright. Jillian and Elena headed down the right side hall until they came to the gym entrance. There were already over a hundred people inside, holding plastic champagne flutes and paper plates filled with fruits and pastries. The pile of echoing voices was overwhelming. Jillian tensed up at the sight of some more familiar faces. Most of these faces she had known well enough to smile at in the halls back in high school, but she wasn't sure if she should approach them now. Were they friendly enough for a hello and a hug?

A tall redheaded woman in dark jeans and a blouse smiled at Jillian and Elena from several feet away and approached them. It took Jillian several moments to realize that the woman was Claire. She looked way better when blonde in high school; the red hair looked as artificial as the food coloring in Froot Loops. Elena wrapped her arms fully

around Claire's torso and squeezed her in, opposite to how she hugged Jillian. Claire did the same and pecked Elena on the cheek, saying how great it was to see her.

"Jillian! Hi!" she then squealed too enthusiastically, seemingly desperate to appear excited. Jillian, choosing to ignore the blatant fakeness in Claire's address, hugged her and asked her how she's been.

"I've been great!" she started. "I just passed the three year mark at my job and I just love it. I couldn't have asked for a better boss, my co-workers are the nicest, AND not to be too optimistic or anything, but I'm pretty sure I'm about to get a big promotion. It's about time though, I work so hard there."

It amazed Jillian at how Claire's ego and energy had not deflated. If their clique in high school had labels, Claire would have been the outgoing one. She had the most friends outside of their circle, was adored by every teacher, and every word she spoke was paired with an exuberant smile. Her new red hair now seemed fitting, as Jillian remembered more and more of Claire's character. Jillian got along with her the best, but she sometimes suspected that Claire's buoyancy was disingenuous. Her words and behavior felt scripted, as if she rehearsed her conversations with people in the mirror the mornings before leaving for school. She always knew what to say and how to say it. Nonetheless, Jillian always liked Claire. She talked to Jillian the most; she'd ask her questions such as how her day has been or what she did over the weekend – something the other girls rarely did. If they ever spoke to Jillian, it was in response to a question she'd asked. They'd never talk to her first.

Before Jillian had the chance to respond to her boast, Claire shouted out Jenny's name. A thin woman with dark straight hair emerged from a small crowd of people

several feet away and joined the other women. If Claire hadn't said Jenny's name, Jillian might not have even realized it was her. Known amongst their grade as the skinny girl with black nail polish and a septum piercing, Jenny now looked...average. She still had her long dark hair, but her nails were now light blue and she wore a green day dress with no traces of black to be seen. Her figure had filled out a little bit and the only piercings Jillian could see were the thin gold hoops hanging from either ear.

It never occurred to Jillian that any of these girls would change that much. The biggest change she had been expecting was a different haircut or color, like Claire. She had not anticipated any of them, especially Jenny, who had the most distinctive look in the group, to show up to the reunion as a completely different person. Ten years suddenly felt like thirty.

Jenny hugged Jillian and Elena at the same time. She told them how great it was to see them, especially Jillian, whom she hadn't seen in "ages." "You were at my birthday last year, right?" she asked Elena, who replied yes. So Jillian now knew that at least most of the group was still friends. She then learned several minutes later that they all still spoke to Sasha and Andie as well.

"It's too bad they're in California now," Claire mentioned in passing. Elena and Jenny sighed and nodded in agreement. Jillian didn't even know that either of them moved. It was not worth asking why – she did not want to know if she was the only one who hadn't known. That situation had happened way too many times in high school. Jenny then suggested getting drinks, to which all the women agreed.

On their way to the drinks table, Elena, Claire, and Jenny all stopped several times to say hi to more people. Most of these people Jillian recognized, but she was never

friends with any of them. They were either students she had classes with or faces she vaguely remembered from the halls. She recognized one man Elena had stopped to talk to, Dylan, and said hi to him. He looked at her curiously, his eyes tracing every inch of her face in attempt to recognize her.

“It’s Jillian, Jillian Weber,” she said hesitantly, trying her best not to panic. Jillian could feel her limbs begin to tremble, but she tightened up and kept them from doing so. Dylan’s gaze then finally relaxed.

“Ah yeah, Jillian. It’s nice to see you,” he said with a forced smile, looking back at Elena to talk to her more.

Jillian continued on to the drinks table on her own, feeling the need to down a glass of champagne. She filled her plastic flute almost to the brim and took three large sips. The cold and bubbly alcohol froze her gums and stunned her throat as it slithered down. If only this was a college reunion, she thought to herself. Her eyes traveled around the entire gym, looking at all her former classmates conversing. They all seemed happy. People looked at each other intently and spoke effortlessly, as if today was just another day of high school and it hadn’t been ten years. The wall that Jillian had hid behind all four years in this building began to solidify once more. She knocked it down that last day of twelfth grade and hadn’t seen it since, until now. She felt eighteen again.

The thought of leaving seemed so appealing. None of these people mattered to her any more – they were all just familiar faces with ten years added to them. Jillian couldn’t fathom why she thought she’d have fun at this. When she told her parents a month ago of her plans on going, they laughed, thinking it was a joke. Once they realized she was serious, the laughs stopped and there was silence.

“Why would you want to go? Didn’t you hate everyone there?” her dad eventually asked.

Jillian said it was because she thought it’d be interesting to see how everyone’s changed, but that was not the only reason why. She was a different person now. Her teen years felt like a screenplay in perpetual revision. Jillian could never say or do anything at ease; everything had to be written out in her head beforehand, in fear that she’d say something weird or do something awkward. By halfway through her first year in college, she wasn’t doing that anymore. Not only was she happier and more confident, but she also looked healthier. One Saturday afternoon the summer after her freshman year, while Jillian and her mom were on a walk in the park with their dog, her mom pointed out how much better she looked. “That school was no good for you. You wore your insecurities on your sleeve and your face always seemed clenched. Now you’re always smiling.” Jillian now wanted to prove to her classmates that she was no longer that quiet, uncomfortable-looking girl. She envisioned people being amazed over how much Jillian Weber had changed. People would finally notice her in a good way.

As she continued to stand alone with her champagne, Jillian began to worry if this fantasy was ever truly plausible. She didn’t want these people to have such an impact on her, but she couldn’t help but feel more and more like that clenched-face girl.

Elena, Claire, and Jenny finally made it to the drinks table, just in time to keep Jillian from leaving in that moment. “You didn’t have to wait for us to get drinks,” Claire told her as she filled her flute.

“I wasn’t waiting,” was all Jillian could think to say, and she regretted it the instant it slipped out.

Claire raised her brow. “If you say so.”

The three women then resumed the conversation they had started before coming to get drinks, leaving Jillian unable to contribute once again. She took one last sip of her champagne before filling up her flute again, but not to the top like last time. I’ll leave after this drink, she told herself, then wondering if people would notice if she chugged the whole thing in one breath. No, they’ll think I’m some alcoholic, she told herself. Why was she dwelling over what everyone thought again? Jillian’s own thoughts began to pile up with past memories as her confidence shriveled up. She needed to hide. The bathroom would work. She excused herself and made her way to the girl’s locker room.

The locker room also hadn’t changed. The walls were still bubble-gum pink with green trim, and the lockers dark blue. Jillian made a left into the bathroom area and propped her palms against the rim of one of the sinks. She looked at herself in the old, scratched-up mirror, now not liking what she saw. Her new dress was too formal and her lipstick was too bright underneath the harsh fluorescent lights. She licked her lips, trying to get it off, but it didn’t change anything. Feeling the urge to rub her eyes to keep herself from crying, Jillian brought her knuckle up to her eye right before realizing she couldn’t because she was wearing eyeliner. She moaned and then, not able to think of anything else to do, washed her hands. The water was ice cold, even when she shut the cold water off.

After drying her hands, she felt her phone vibrate from inside her bag. Jillian took it out to find a text from her friend, Amy, asking her if she wanted to grab dinner.

“Apparently the new Thai restaurant around the corner from my place is really good,” she

said. Jillian had forgotten to tell Amy about the reunion, and she was now so glad she did. Thai food with Amy sounded like the perfect remedy.

Jillian straightened her posture and marched out of the locker room as she accepted her friend's lunch offer. She turned immediately for the gym's exit, not planning on saying goodbye to anybody. Claire's voice then called out her name from behind her. Jillian turned around to find her and another woman she vaguely recognized from some of her classes looking at her.

"Are you leaving?" Claire asked, her voice completely void of any sadness or urgency. Jillian answered yes, smiling. Claire raised her brow again, telling her she had just arrived, as if she didn't already know.

"Yeah, but I forgot I already made plans to see one of my friends." Claire was about to respond when Jillian interrupted: "It was nice seeing you. Tell Elena and Jenny I wish them well." She turned back around and left the gym. Once outside the school building, Jillian took her phone out again. "I'll be there in twenty," she texted Amy.

Amanda C.

I first saw her on the subway on my way to work one morning. She got on the train at 59th street and sat down across from me. The first thing I noticed were her electric blue pumps poking out from under her narrow pinstripe work pants. Then I saw her large dark leather bag propped on her lap, hugged between her arms and chest. Her auburn hair was perfectly blown out and just enough light from the subway car shone off it. A dusty rose-colored gloss tinted her lips and dark eyeliner trimmed her small brown eyes. Sitting with perfect posture, her right leg was delicately draped over her left knee. She looked no older than forty.

I didn't know what it was about this woman that made me so enthralled – I see sophisticated women on the train all the time. Perhaps it was her perfect hair and her vibrant shoes, or maybe it was the way she walked into the subway car as if it had been waiting for her. She eyed the open seat immediately and sat down without hesitation, her heels clinking against the floor. She so swiftly put her bag in her lap and readjusted her posture as if she were at a conference table.

I looked down at my flats, just realizing how tattered they were. I should get shoes like this woman, I thought. And a leather bag instead of a canvas one. I reached for my ponytail and pulled the band out. My hair spilled out across my shoulders and I began to twirl it, hoping it'd look remotely similar to the woman sitting across from me.

I hoped she'd also get off at 14th, so I was rather disappointed when she stood to get off at 23rd. I imagined her working on the same block as I, or even in the same building. We'd walk in together and share the same elevator. I'd let her go in first and

then she'd ask what floor I'm getting off at. I'd answer her and then tell her to have a nice day as she exits the elevator. Whichever floor she'd get off at would tell me what office she worked at, and then I could narrow down what her job is. She must have an amazing job. Way better than my lousy front desk one. I hoped that one day I'd have a job like hers, whatever it was.

The train then reached my stop. I forced myself out of my seat and slung my dull canvas bag over my shoulder before exiting the car. I walked to my office as slow as possible in attempts to prolong the start to my day. As I entered the lobby, a gust of cold air punched me, making me inadvertently groan and wrap my arms around myself. The air conditioning's growl echoed against the tiled floor and walls. It wasn't nearly hot enough for it to be on so high, which annoyed me.

I eventually found myself sitting back at that semi-circular front desk. "Greenberg and Associates" read on the wall behind me in large bronze letters. One of the firm's lawyers walked in as I was turning on the computer and wished me a good morning. I wished him back without moving my eyes from the screen, feeling bad about it afterwards.

Most of the attorneys in the office knew that I had no aspiration of becoming one myself and was rather miserable in the office. Sure I did all my work efficiently, and was usually friendly enough, but they just knew. Even if they hadn't known that my dad got me this job, the way I spoke and even sat at the desk just read pure misery.

Of course I knew that I'd get a better job one day. That's how the adult world works: you start from the bottom and work your way up. Or least that's what all my professors, advisers, and family members told me. I was just a year out of college and

had been beginning to fear that I'd always be stuck at the bottom. The woman on the subway probably never felt that way. I could just imagine her having gotten an incredible job after only one or two years as a post-grad.

I couldn't go an hour that day without thinking about her. As I answered some phone calls that morning, I envisioned how her electric blue heels would look on me. They wouldn't look as good. On my lunch break I browsed for leather shoulder bags on the computer. The first thing I did when I got home was edit my resume and search for more jobs online. I didn't realize how long I had been doing it until my roommate came back from work at 1am. She still had her waitress uniform on.

"You're still up?" she asked as she closed the door.

I considered telling her about the woman on the subway. I really wanted to tell someone, but feared that no one would understand. One would had to have seen her in person to remotely get it, so I decided to ask her how work was instead.

Just like me, Lola was unhappy with her current situation. The difference between us however is that she knew where she wanted to be, whereas I was just as clueless as I was my first year of college. Lola had moved to New York to act on Broadway, and just like any other struggling actress, paid her share of the rent by waiting tables. She told me she had been dreaming of Broadway ever since seeing *Wicked* when she was little. I wished I were that passionate about something.

A few days later I saw the woman on the subway again, and then again a week later. I soon began to see her two to three mornings a week, always in the third car from the back, on the left side. Her hair was always blown out into a different style and she

wore a different shade of lipstick and a different pair of shoes every time. The only thing that remained consistent was the large leather bag.

It was no easier trying to figure out what her job was each time I saw her. Sometimes you can just tell what someone does. I personally have a very good eye for identifying lawyers, having grown up with two of them and now working with a whole lot more. My curiosity over this woman's job grew more and more frustrating until one morning, without fully realizing what I was doing, I got off at 23rd street with her.

She wore dark pencil skirt and a crisp blush-colored blouse that day, making it one of the more luxurious looks I'd seen. It was also the first time since that first morning that she wore the blue pumps. The leather bag hung from her narrow shoulders and her arm snaked around a subway pole. I considered offering her my seat but thankfully realized how weird I'd seem if I did that.

As 23rd street came closer and closer, I got more anxious. I so badly, for reasons beyond my knowing, wanted to interact with this woman beyond saying, "excuse me" in a crowded subway car. It was as if knowing her would solve my problems, which is absurd in retrospect. But in that moment, learning more about that woman was all I wanted. I'd go back to the firm and sit back in that semi-circular front desk later that day more content than normal. I just had to know.

I remained a solid ten to fifteen feet away from her as we exited the station and walked down the street. She walked in those pumps as if there weren't four inches of hard plastic pushing her foot at a 60-degree angle. She must be so used to wearing heels – something I never succeeded in. Not even halfway through my high school prom I had

had enough of my stilettos and went the rest of the night barefoot. My feet had never looked dirtier by the time I came home.

We had been walking for over five minutes now. I assumed her office wasn't much further, making me more impatient. She then began to gain more speed, which I thought impossible considering the pace she was already going in those shoes. I began to scurry after her in attempts to maintain my fifteen-foot distance. We walked at this speed for another three blocks. I felt a little out of breath and knew how ridiculous I must look to everyone else walking by, but I didn't care.

The woman eventually turned and went into a café. I stopped several feet away from the windows and contemplated whether I should go in or not. If I went in, the chances of her noticing me would increase a ton and then it'd be harder to follow her after. However if I stayed outside, what would I do? I'd have to keep my eye out for when she leaves and then run ahead to start following her again, and what if someone realized what I was doing and then called the cops? The panic felt suffocating. Unable to bear it any longer, I decided to go inside the café.

I was both relieved and horrified to see that the woman was still last in line. My stomach tightened as I walked up behind her. A faint scent of roses filled the small gap of air between us. I longed to know what perfume that was.

To keep myself from staring at her, I scrolled through my email and all my social media accounts on my phone. It took no more than ten seconds to go through each one, leaving me to re-check all of them several times before the woman reached the cashier to place her order.

“Hi, may I get a small coffee and a blueberry scone, please?” she asked.

“Sure thing,” the cashier replied as he typed in the order. “And what’s your name?”

“Louisa.”

It seemed fitting that her name would be Louisa, a classic but not common name. I always wished my name were more special or unique. I was one of four Amanda’s in my grade in high school and one of my close friends from college was also an Amanda. My peers have always known me as Amanda C. It would’ve been nice if I could just be referred to by my first name and people would immediately know who I was.

After ordering a chai, I took a seat two tables down from where Louisa was. I allowed myself to look over at her once before returning to my phone. From the corner of my eye I could see that she was also on her phone. She seemed to be typing something out, with her thumbs poking all around the bottom half of the screen. A voice soon after shouted her name. I didn’t want to watch her as she got her drink in case she saw me when she returned to her seat, so I proceeded to aimlessly look through old pictures on my phone. I had gone through all my social media accounts too many times already to look again. I must have zoned out while doing so because someone eventually shouted my name and I flinched in reaction.

After picking up my chai, I allowed myself to look back over at Louisa. She now had a folder out on the table with two pieces of papers resting on top. After taking a sip of her coffee, she picked up the top piece of paper and began to read it, mouthing out the words as she went. Once Louisa finished, she put the paper back down and took a large breath. I could see her rubbing her knuckles from under the table. Her eyes circled the

café, as if she was trying to find someone. When they turned in my direction I gasped and looked away, taking a huge sip of my drink afterwards. That was close, I thought.

A few more minutes went by where I tried my best to keep my gaze on my phone or drink, relying on my peripherals to watch Louisa. From what I could see, she was still reading whatever was in that folder while taking breaks to look around the room. It was now past 9am; I only had half an hour left before I'd be late to work. I should've cared more, but I knew I was going to stay in that café for as long as Louisa was, so I didn't dwell over it.

I soon after needed to pee, but I feared she'd leave while I was in the bathroom. I fidgeted in my seat and scrolled through more pictures on my phone to distract myself. It had been almost twenty minutes since we both got our drinks – Louisa had finished hers and I only had a few sips left. What was she still doing here?

The next time I glanced over at her, she was looking towards the front entrance and nodded her head and smiled at something she saw. I followed her gaze and saw a middle-aged man in a suit smiling back at Louisa as he approached her table. He took the seat across from her and shook her hand. I could just hear what they were saying.

“It's nice to meet you,” they said to one another, before the man spoke again.

“So, I've had a chance to look over your resume and cover letter earlier, so all I have left for you are a couple of questions.”

Louisa was on a job interview? I couldn't believe it. There was no way, she seemed so poised and professional, as if she had everything figured out. She did not look like someone who was unemployed.

I felt angry, but I didn't know whom I was angry with. Louisa deceived me with her perfect hair and sophisticated clothes and that leather bag. She was so embarrassed about being unemployed that she had to make herself up to look like some powerful CEO. I should then be angry with her.

As I began settle down on this conclusion, I checked the time again. I was definitely going to be late to work by this point. I was about to reassure myself to not worry, when I realized something: I had a job and Louisa didn't.

I felt numb upon this realization before feeling angry again. But this time, I was angry with myself. After guzzling the last several sips of my chai, I got up and raced out of the café, without taking a final look at Louisa. As I made my way back to the subway, I decided I was going to browse through clothing stores on my lunch break. It was about time I had some nice, legitimate work clothes in my closet. Maybe even a pair of blue pumps too.

I've Got so Much to Tell You

Anne had been stirring in bed for hours by the time the sun began to spill in between the cracks of her window shades. She didn't see any point in trying to sleep now that it was light out, so she got up and went to the kitchen to make some coffee. Once the coffee maker stopped growling and the coffee was poured into her oversized mug, she sat down at her kitchen table with a notepad and pen. There were still several things Anne needed to buy for the upcoming afternoon, and she'd certainly forget what they were unless she made a list.

The plates and glasses were washed overnight, the new placemats came in the mail two days ago, and the tea, fruit, and cheeses had been purchased yesterday. All that was left to get were the bagels, orange juice, and perhaps a desert. Anne couldn't remember if Colin was sugar-free. He had too many dietary restrictions for her to remember all of them. Stella had called her a week ago to let her know that he wasn't gluten-free anymore, so she could now get bread. "Is he still vegetarian?" Anne had asked her. He was.

It was only 6:30am, so Anne would have to wait just a little longer before she could go to the store. She traced over her shopping list with her pen, thinking about what she should do now. Noon felt like a day away rather than five and a half hours. In three hours, Stella and Colin will be leaving their country house in the Berkshires to drive over to Anne in New York. Anne hadn't even known that they got a country house – Stella mentioned it to her in passing when telling her their itinerary for the weekend. "We're

going to spend Saturday in the Berkshires then drive over to the city. Colin's got some college friends there that he wants to catch-up with so we'll be here for a couple of days."

"The Berkshires?" Anne asked. "You live in Boston."

"Oh right, I forgot to tell you," Stella responded, then went on to explain Colin's big promotion at the office and how they now had enough money for the "finer luxuries." "That's what Colin calls them."

A townhouse in Beacon Hill wasn't already a "finer luxury?" Anne asked herself. Plus of course Colin was going to get a good promotion, seeing that he works for his father. Anne would never share these thoughts with her daughter though, she knew better than that by now.

She rested her pen back down on the table and re-read the shopping list. If Stella knew that she was still writing all her lists down on paper rather than the iPad she had gotten her for her birthday, she'd be upset. She had once caught Anne writing in her journal and made it a point to tell her that it was much better and easier to use a computer. "It's not nearly as hard on your hand," she explained. "Plus there's spell-check and you won't run out of pages." Anne had always written her books in journals, usually three to four per book. When Stella was just learning to read, she'd sneak into Anne's dresser and try to read whichever journal she was currently working on. The writing was obviously too advanced for a five-year-old, but Anne adored her daughter's efforts nonetheless. She had once explained to Stella how one day she'd be old enough to read her books. "And they'll be typed up and actually be in a book format. You won't have to deal with my messy handwriting," she added.

Every time Anne published a new book, Stella was the first person (after her editors and publishers) to see the cover. Since she was too young to read them, she took solace in studying the covers. Once she was older, Stella was the first person outside the publishing house to read the manuscript. She however hadn't read Anne's last manuscript, and didn't even read the book once it was published, until Anne practically begged her. Stella claimed that it was because she didn't have much time to read these days, but Anne knew it was because Colin didn't read that much. One of the first times they met, he told her that he thought novels were uninformative and didn't provide any "real world insight." Following those words, Anne looked over at her daughter, hoping to see her eyes read as much disappointment as she was feeling inside, but Stella gazed at Colin as if he were the most brilliant person. Her hand rubbed his knee from under the kitchen table and she looked at Anne perplexed, oblivious to why her mother was staring at her as if she smelled something foul.

The clock on the microwave now read 7:05; the bagel shop had just opened. Anne went back to her room and threw on a pair of jeans and a sweater before grabbing her bag and leaving the apartment. It was one of the first mornings where autumn's imminent arrival felt present. A crisp and mild breeze sailed in between buildings and through pedestrians' hair and jackets, picking up a couple stray leaves along the way. Anne could hear it whistling as it passed her.

Two blocks later she arrived at the bagel shop and purchased five bagels: two plain, one everything, a sesame, and a pumpernickel. "Perfect timing," the cashier told her. "They all just came out of the oven." The large paper bag felt warm in her hands when he gave it to her. Anne thanked him once she paid and then headed for her next

destination. She bought orange juice and iced tea at the supermarket just in case her guests didn't want hot tea, and decided last-minute to throw in a bottle of pomegranate juice. She thought she remembered Stella once commenting on how much she liked it.

The final stop was the bakery a block away from home. Anne studied the array of treats on display at the counter long enough for the cashier to ask her if she needed any help deciding. She declined, her eyes not straying from the deserts. She still couldn't remember if Colin ate sugar, but she didn't care. He didn't have to have desert. Anne finally settled on a small round chocolate cake with chocolate frosting and strawberries circled around the rim.

It was a little past 8 by the time Anne got back to the apartment. Stella would be on her way in an hour and a half. Anne hoped that Stella would update her when she woke up and left, but she knew she wouldn't. If she wanted to hear from her daughter, she would have to speak first. Once the cake, iced tea, and juices were put away in the fridge, she texted Stella to call her when she was on her way. Her phone vibrated almost immediately after she slipped it back into her pocket. "*Will do,*" was all Stella replied.

Anne began listing off things she could do now: she could shower, clean the apartment again, make breakfast, watch some television, or work on her current novel. She was too anxious to write, and wasn't in the mood to watch anything, which left showering and cleaning as her final two options. I suppose the living room could use some more straightening up, she thought to herself. The couch cushions and pillows were already vacuumed and fluffed-up and the floors already mopped, but the shelves and tables could use some dusting.

Stella was the neat one in the household; she'd make her bed every morning before school, always neatly folded away her clothes before going to sleep, and kept her shoes upright along the wall inside her closet. She'd volunteer to clean the whole apartment almost weekly, which Anne never objected to. She'd sometimes call her daughter Monica, after Monica from *Friends*. Stella wrinkled her nose every time that happened, upset that the Friend she was most similar to was her least favorite.

Anne never adopted her cleaning habits after she moved out, but she'd been feeling like a Monica for the past week. She didn't want Stella's first words upon arriving to be how messy the place was. Colin would then suggest she get a cleaning service to come in every week, and then Anne would have to explain to him again that it was too expensive, while trying her best to not sound irritated with him. Withholding her true sentiments towards Colin was always a challenge for Anne whenever she saw him.

The first time Stella brought Colin home, he wore a navy blazer and chinos with a red tie. His blonde hair was slicked to the side with gel and not a speck of stubble spotted his plain pale face. Anne appreciated the tulips he brought for her, but she couldn't comprehend why and how this man wound up in her living room, cupping her daughter's knee while pressed against her on the couch. None of Stella's past boyfriends were like this one. In fact, Stella normally made fun of men like Colin. She'd roll her eyes if she saw someone like him on the street and comment on his polo or loafers as if they were a fungus.

At one point between dinner and desert, Anne had a moment alone with her while Colin was in the bathroom. She was about to ask her, in the nicest way possible, what she

liked so much about him. Perhaps she'd warm up to him after knowing that. Stella however spoke first. "So, what do you think?"

Anne hesitated, unsure how to answer. She couldn't tell her that he was nothing like she had expected, and not in a good way. "He seems nice," she finally said.

"Oh Mom, he's so amazing. You'll see soon." Stella blushed. It was that moment when Anne realized the intensity of her daughter's relationship with Colin. The pink hue that dabbed her cheeks had never appeared before whenever she spoke of her former boyfriends.

Once the living room was dusted to her satisfaction, Anne decided it was time to shower. She mulled over what she should wear as she combed conditioner through her hair and rinsed the vanilla soap off her body. Her wardrobe mostly consisted of jeans, work pants, and blouses. There was one old blue dress somewhere in the back of the closet that could make a rare appearance, but Anne decided to stick with her normal ensemble by the time she had finished showering. She worried that Stella would comment on how long she'd had that dress for and then urge her to go shopping – something that Stella herself had been doing too often, in Anne's opinion.

Stella would now be calling in only thirty minutes. Anne sat upright in bed with her towel still wrapped around herself, holding her phone in between her fingers. She knew it was pointless to stare at the phone for half an hour and it would give her a headache, but she couldn't help it. She flipped on the television as a distraction, but Anne couldn't help but peer over at the phone, which was now lying beside her, every other minute. The next thirty minutes went by very slow because of this, and when it was

finally 9:30 Anne moved the phone to her lap so she could answer it upon the first vibration.

Five more minutes passed without a word from Stella. Anne told herself five minutes was nothing and she'd call soon. Ten more minutes then went by, and still nothing. Anne could feel an anxious flutter start to tingle in her arms and chest, something she always felt when she was nervous. She so badly wanted to call her daughter, but knew Stella would get annoyed if she did. Five more minutes and then I'll text her, she compromised. The moment the clock hit 9:50, Anne opened her phone and wrote out her message. She stared at her conversation with Stella, waiting for the small gray typing bubble to appear on the bottom-left corner of the screen. Several more minutes passed and the bubble never appeared. Feeling more and more restless and anxious, Anne finally decided to put clothes on and brush out her mostly-dried hair. The phone was left resting on the dresser, where its vibrations could be heard the loudest.

Anne had just buttoned her jeans when a loud buzz sounded from the dresser. She rushed over to it and snatched her phone. *"Yeah. We left around forty five minutes ago,"* the text from Stella read.

Anne's thumbs responded faster than her brain could register. *"I thought you were going to call once you left."*

"Oh right. Sorry about that." There was a pause before the gray bubble appeared again. *"Colin didn't get much sleep last night so I'm going to drive the rest of the way. Text him if you want anything."*

Anne snorted. She'd never text Colin for anything. One of the only times she ever spoke to him alone was when he called her for advice on what to get Stella for her first

birthday as a couple. Anne was shocked he even thought to ask her. She even liked him a little for it, but that quickly passed once Colin laid out his options: a new laptop, a Louis Vuitton shoulder bag, or a tennis bracelet. Suddenly the \$100 pair of boots she had gotten Stella felt trivial, even though she knew Stella had wanted them. She had showed her the boots online the last time she came over.

“Oh wow, umm, I don’t know, Colin,” she told him. “They all seem a little much.” She was about to add that he didn’t need to spend nearly that much money, but decided not to at the last moment.

“Yeah I know, but I want this to be special. It’s the first present I’m giving her since we’ve been dating and I want her to remember it.”

Oh she’ll remember a tennis bracelet, but not in a good way, Anne thought to herself. Not wanting to continue the conversation for any longer, she told Colin to just go with his instinct. “She’ll love any of those three.” This was a lie. Anne knew Stella would hate any of those gifts. She hated the idea of a bag or a piece of jewelry costing more than \$100. Sometimes if Anne got her a more expensive gift, for any occasion, Stella would make her return it and get her something cheaper. Anne would then worry she raised her daughter to be too frugal.

However, the first time she saw Stella after her birthday, she immediately noticed the thin diamond band dangling from her wrist. “Colin got it for me. He shouldn’t have but there was no way he was going to return it,” she told her, while gazing down at the bracelet as if it was her newborn baby. Anne could clearly tell that Stella hadn’t asked Colin to return it.

Texting Stella back seemed pointless, so Anne tossed her phone onto her bed and continued getting ready. Leaning her head forward as close to the vanity mirror as possible, she dusted a thin layer of foundation over her face and lightly coated her eyelashes with some mascara, before blotting on some natural-colored lip-gloss. It didn't make sense to prepare the food and drinks this early, so Anne sat back down in bed with her journal, in the hopes of writing a couple pages in the next hour.

The first few paragraphs flowed from her with ease, her pen gliding across the page with only a couple of pauses. It was always such a satisfying feeling to be in a good writing zone. Anne had been struggling with writer's block more and more over the years and hadn't been publishing as frequently as she used to. When Stella was younger, she could finish a new novel every couple of years. She now hadn't published anything new in over six years. There were a couple of short stories put in magazines and journals here and there, but Anne hated all of them. She was honestly surprised these publications even wanted them.

However, after those first few paragraphs, Anne could feel her mind begin to clog up like it's done so many times before. She could no longer find words to match her thoughts, and stared at the journal for over twenty minutes. She re read what she had written so far, but it didn't help. It was now past eleven – Stella and Colin would be here in around an hour. Anne surrendered and put the journal back in her nightstand drawer and went to the kitchen.

She dug out an old china platter from the back of one of the cabinets and rinsed it with soap and water before drying it and neatly assorting the bagels on it in a straight line. The cream cheese was scooped out of its container and put in a bowl alongside the

platter. The premade assortment of fruit was taken out of the fridge but the saran wrap was kept on in fear of it getting too warm by the time Stella and Colin arrived. Anne decided it was best to keep the juice and iced tea in the fridge for the same reason. She however filled the teakettle and placed it on the stove, ready to be boiled the moment someone asks for hot tea. The mugs and tea bags were left on the counter beside the kettle. Everything looked orderly and Anne hoped that Stella would notice and appreciate it.

Since the start of her new luxurious lifestyle, Stella had become much more critical and opinionated – usually on the minutest things. When preparing for her wedding, she had to make sure every aspect was just how she had envisioned, much to Anne’s surprise. Stella had always been very neat and organized, but never meticulous and controlling. Everything down to the napkins and seating cards had to fit exactly to her vision, or else she’d become passive aggressive. Anne thought she was more of a Monica then compared to when she was younger, and made the mistake of telling her that one afternoon around a week away from the wedding. Stella had been upset over the table centerpieces because the flowers weren’t the exact colors she had wanted. Anne couldn’t tell the difference and insisted they looked great, but Stella wouldn’t listen. After she called her a Monica, Stella refused to speak to her until she apologized.

About five months later, Anne went to Boston to visit the newlyweds. The first night she was there, the three of them went to dinner at a new restaurant several blocks from Stella and Colin’s townhouse. Within the first five minutes of arriving, Stella had managed to criticize several of the restaurant’s aspects. “The walls should be a darker cream-color.” “Why is the bar so far away from the front entrance?” “They should really

play better music in here.” “These seats are uncomfortable.” Anne kept silent, too baffled over her daughter’s behavior to speak. Stella was never like that, and it made Anne feel hollow. Colin however agreed with everything she said, and added some complaints of his own.

“We shouldn’t have come here,” he said in between bites of the homemade bread served before the appetizers.

Anne went back to the bedroom to find a text from Colin. “*Just got to the city. We’ll be there soon.*” The anxious flutter returned to her arms and chest as she headed back to the living room and laid down on the couch. She breathed slowly while closing her eyes. Anne couldn’t tell if she was feeling this way because she was excited or nervous. The two emotions worked mutually when it came to Stella nowadays.

Anne wondered if she should tell her about the book she’s working on. She knew Stella would ask about it, but not express interest in reading what she has so far. Perhaps it was best to lie and say she hadn’t been working on it much as of late.

The new country house would definitely be a huge conversation. Anne would ask them one specific question about it, such as its size or location, and Colin will answer with a ten minute tale about how they found and bought the house, where they got all the furniture, who they hired to paint the walls, how big the yard is, and how deep the swimming pool is. Anne didn’t even know if the house came with a pool, but she wouldn’t put it past Colin to make sure his country house had one. She’d definitely be invited to come visit any time she wants, but then they’d never follow up on the invitation and Anne will feel too self-conscious to bring it up again. Colin’s parents will visit all the time though – they live in Boston too.

Once she calmed down, Anne got up from the couch and went to the kitchen to take out the juice and iced tea from the fridge. Both drinks were strategically placed next to the bagels and fruit on the kitchen table. She peeled the saran wrap off the fruit platter and crumpled it in a ball before throwing it away. Before she had time to step back and look over everything, the downstairs buzzer sounded from the foyer. “It’s us!” Stella’s muffled voice echoed.

Anne stood a foot away from the door, waiting to hear the sound of the elevator opening. The silence dragged for what felt like several minutes. Finally, she could hear the elevator creak open and two pairs of feet clatter on the hallway floor. Too anxious to wait for the doorbell, Anne swung the door open. Stella and Colin stood side-by-side two feet from the doorway, both smiling. Stella looked great; she seemed to have just gotten a haircut and wore a nice red jacket over jeans and a light cream sweater. Her high cheekbones were tinted the perfect shade of pink and her large blue eyes looked even bluer against the red in her jacket.

“Hi, Mom,” she said, wrapping her arms around Anne. “How are you? I’ve got so much to tell you.”

Since Mrs. Bowen

I was in ninth grade when the Bowens first moved across the street from us. It was the day after a huge snowstorm, leaving the yards and streets coated in a fresh, three-foot layer of snow. My suburban town had transformed overnight, with children building snowmen in their front yards and chasing each other down the streets with snowballs in hand. The smaller children squealed with glee as their parents hauled them down the sidewalks on their sleds. One family a few houses down even set up a hot cider stand outside their garage. The neighborhood turned into a parallel universe; a place where people normally avoided talking to their neighbors and only left the house at night to walk their dogs, had become the type of suburbs that one would see in a Christmas commercial. Perhaps that should have been the first sign of the Bowen's impending presence.

I first caught sight of the Bowens that morning through my frosted bedroom window. The moving truck had already arrived and was being unloaded when their black minivan pulled into the driveway. Two younger kids leaped out of the backseat the moment the van was put into park and preceded to leap into an untouched dune of snow. The snow swallowed their little bodies in one gulp, leaving me unable to see them until they popped their heads back out like prairie dogs. I reverted my gaze back to the minivan just in time to see the parents step out.

Even from a far away and elevated viewpoint, I could tell that Mr. Bowen was exceptionally large. Well over six feet and 200-something pounds, he towered over the minivan. He reached into the back seat and yanked out a large duffel. Well, next to

anyone else the duffel would be large, but with Mr. Bowen, it looked no larger than an average-sized backpack. He effortlessly hoisted it onto one of his shoulders and slid the door closed with the opposite hand. Then I saw Mrs. Bowen. At first I thought there was a third kid in the family, until she pecked Mr. Bowen on the lips, standing on her toes. He bent down almost half a body length to reach her.

My dirty fourteen-year-old-boy mind then began pondering over how the two of them could possibly have sex. “How is she not broken?” I thought to myself.

Mrs. Bowen trudged to where her kids were still playing. The lower half of her legs disappeared all together as she lugged them through the thick sparkling marsh. As she approached the kids, they suddenly stopped playing and planted their bottoms into the white snow in submission. She was talking to them, motioning her gloved hands in a way that made me think she was angry. But soon enough the two kids were back to shoving handfuls of snow into each other’s faces. Their mother plowed back through the snow towards the car and started directing the movers.

Later that afternoon, Mom decided to play Good Neighbors and bring over a plate of cookies. The Bowens were the first new family on our block in over ten years, leaving me uneducated in what Mom called “new neighbor protocol.”

Twenty minutes later, she and my little sister went to the super market to get the ingredients. I avoided the trip by playing computer games in my bedroom upstairs, occasionally glancing out the window to watch the Bowens and their movers continue to carry boxes into the house. It seemed as if the Bowens had an infinite number of boxes;

the movers, obscured by their thick black coats, heaved more boxes into the house for at least another hour.

Mrs. Bowen came back outside at one point. She hadn't bothered putting her coat on and strut out to her the front lawn sporting a thick gray sweater and light blue jeans tucked into snow boots. Her gold earrings were large enough and her red lipstick was bright enough for me to see. She looked like she was vacationing at a lavish snow lodge rather than moving into a new house. Mrs. Bowen, with her arms wrapped around her waist, peered into the moving truck and spoke to the movers. The movers nodded in response to whatever she was saying. Mrs. Bowen paused before going back into the house, unraveling her arms out to either side of her. She faced her palms to the sky and watched stray snowflakes melt at the touch of her skin. She then quickly rewrapped her arms around herself and hurried into the house.

"Connor, come help us!" Mom's voice echoed from downstairs. I pretended to not hear her and looked back at my computer. She shouted once more before I heard footsteps making their way upstairs.

"Mom I'm busy," I groaned, not turning around to face her.

"It's me," my sister responded.

I didn't move. "Tell Mom I'm busy."

"She's mad you haven't helped," her little voice whispered. I then finally swirled my chair around. She was back in her red snowman pajamas and sucking cookie dough off her fingers. There were a couple of dough crumbs smudged along the trim and corners of her mouth. Gracie had never looked so young to me. Despite being four years younger, she was just as mature as I was, if not more. She'd constantly badger me about how girls

matured faster than boys and that my brain wasn't as developed as hers. Twenty-four years later and I'm just starting to wonder if she had been right all along.

I trudged downstairs a few steps behind her, dragging my hand along the rail to make that screeching sound that she hated. She hunched her shoulders, whipped her head back, and glared me. Gracie cupped her hands over her ears and sped down the remaining few stairs.

As we reached the kitchen, Dad came in through the garage door, threw his brief case over the counter and let out a sigh before saying hi to us. His face was pink from the cold. Mom came over to peck him on the cheek and then gave him her daily mini-lecture about how he should get a scarf. "Then you wouldn't look like a strawberry every time you went outside," she said. As usual, he shrugged his shoulders. Mom shook her head and went back to scraping cookies off the baking tray.

"What're those for?" Dad asked her.

"Seriously? I told you earlier on the phone," she slurred as she struggled getting a cookie off the tray. She readjusted the spatula in her hand and wedged it between the cookie and wax paper. The cookie wouldn't budge, causing my mom to shove the spatula harder. An instant later, crumbs shot off the counter and spilled onto the floor. Mom cursed before grabbing a paper towel and scooping them up. Dad's eyes darted to mine and we exchanged our shared and unspoken expression whenever we thought Mom was being weird.

"For the new neighbors, right?" he finally asked, looking back at her. Mom scowled. He shrugged his shoulders again and left, patting me on the shoulder. Mom glanced at me and tried to make eye contact. I avoided her and went back upstairs.

The four of us rang the Bowens' doorbell after dinner. Mom stood in the front, balancing the plate of cookies that she had carefully covered with saran wrap on her palms. Dad, Gracie, and I were right behind her.

Mr. Bowen answered the door. His frame engulfed the entire doorway, causing all of us to significantly tilt our heads upwards to see his face. It was a good face. A salt and pepper five o'clock shadow sprinkled his cheeks and jaw, with a matching full head of hair to accompany it.

Mom introduced the four of us. Mr. Bowen smiled and thanked us for our hospitality. A woman's voice then called out to him from another room. "Mark, who's at the door?" it asked.

"Neighbors from across the street," he shouted back.

Mrs. Bowen then appeared. She had switched out her light jeans for a darker pair and her gray sweater for a blue cardigan with a blouse underneath. The red lipstick was still perfectly painted on her thin delicate lips and the large gold earrings still dangled on either side of her face. She smiled to reveal a set of perfectly straight white teeth.

At the sight of Mrs. Bowen, Mom instantly looked down at her old sweater and jeans. She swept her hand through her hair and readjusted her sleeves.

"Hi, I'm Evelyn. Nice to meet you all," said Mrs. Bowen as she reached out to shake Mom's hand. She then eagerly shook the rest of ours. Her shake was fast and firm, something I hadn't expected from a woman as petite as she.

We were invited inside. Their foyer was not much different from our own, as were most houses on our street. Stacks of moving boxes snaked up the walls, towering

over all of us. She brought us to the den, the one room that was unpacked to some degree. A large sectional couch laid in the further most corner of the room with a simple dark wooden coffee table in front of it. A couple of empty bookshelves lined one of the larger walls and a massive television stood opposite to the couch.

“Please, sit down,” said Mrs. Bowen. The four of us sat down in one section of the couch, while our hosts sat down in the other. Mom was still holding the plate of cookies.

Mrs. Bowen, sitting upright with her legs crossed, began asking my parents about themselves. Their jobs, where they’re from, the usual stuff. I noticed Mom’s eyes traveling in every direction in Mrs. Bowen’s general proximity. Mrs. Bowen caught her gaze almost immediately.

“You like these?” she asked, stroking her large gold earrings with her fingertips.

“Oh...yes I do,” Mom coughed. “They’re lovely. Where did you get them?”

“I actually designed them myself. I run a small jewelry design company,” said Mrs. Bowen ever so casually, as if my mom’s compliment was just one of many she’s received. “See, I made this too,” she added, extending her delicate wrist out for Mom to see. A silver bracelet hung from it. “We make everything. Bracelets, necklaces, earrings, rings. We just released our first line of watches.”

Mom was in awe with Mrs. Bowen. She looked at her as if she were the Queen or better yet Julia Roberts: her eyes avid and mystified, and her mouth lightly hanging open, ready to smile when the moment called. She leaned forward in attempts to absorb every word that floated out of those bright red lips. I thought she looked ridiculous, like a dog

waiting to be given a treat. All she needed was a tail and some drool dripping off her tongue.

Mrs. Bowen basked in Mom's admiration, continuing to talk about her jewelry company and all the people she's acquainted with in the jewelry and fashion industries. "I've had a few pieces photographed in a couple magazines here and there," she said, not mentioning which ones to maintain some degree of modesty.

The room had transformed into a show with Mom and Mrs. Bowen as the lead actresses. The rest of us remained silent and stationary. Mr. Bowen sat next to his wife, seemingly staring at nothing. Gracie squirmed next to me on the couch and played with the hem of her corduroy skirt while I looked down at my lap, occasionally glancing over at Mom drooling over Mrs. Bowen. Dad was the only other person who seemed remotely engaged. He never said anything, but looked at Mrs. Bowen with some attentiveness. Like Mom, he kept his gaze at her and nodded once or twice in reaction to something she said.

I considered trying to pay more attention to her since Dad was. My critical persona in my youth was much like my father's, both of us reluctant to get to know people until we found enough redeeming qualities in them. If my dad saw something admirable in her, then perhaps I should try to as well. I, however, was too preoccupied with watching my mother making a fool of herself to do so.

The spotlight dimmed on Mrs. Bowen when one of her kids poked her head out from the entranceway of the living room. She appeared a few years younger than Gracie, wearing purple silk pajamas. Her hair was mildly disheveled and faint bags appeared under her tired eyes. She softly called out for her parents. "I can't sleep," she whimpered.

Mr. Bowen sprung up from the couch, eager to escape the conversation. He took his daughters small hand in his giant one, and walked her out of the living room.

“I suppose I should check in on our other child,” Mrs. Bowen began. “Both our kids tend to have trouble sleeping in new places.” She thanked all of us once again for the cookies and escorted us to the door. Gracie and I sped out of the house, relieved to finally be leaving. But Mom and Dad continued to linger, talking to our new neighbor for as long as possible. Mrs. Bowen pressed her powdered cheek to Mom’s and let out a kissing sound before shaking hers and Dad’s hands once again. They both finally joined us outside as Mrs. Bowen closed the door in front of her.

My family soon became regular dinner guests at the Bowens’. About once every other week, our doorbell would ring and one of us would open it to find Mrs. Bowen on our front step. Sometimes she had her kids with her, but usually she came alone. She’d always start with asking how we all were and then transition to inviting us to dinner the next night. We almost always accepted.

When we did go, we’d always enter their house to the soft purr of jazz or classical music coming from the dining room. Mrs. Bowen would once again beam her perfect smile and take our coats, then lead us to the living room where Mr. Bowen and their kids, Victoria and Emmett, would be waiting for us.

Victoria and Emmett Bowen, nine and six at the time, were more similar to their father than their mother, both of them preferring to sit quietly in their seats at the dinner table. I hadn’t even heard Emmett speak until the third time meeting him. Our first few interactions involved Gracie and I saying hello to him and he dashing behind one of his

parent's legs while sucking his thumb. Victoria was slightly more talkative, but I'd really only ever hear her talk at length to her brother. The two of them were close. Much closer than Gracie and I ever were as children. When we were younger, most of our interactions entailed shouting, poking, and hair pulling. With the Bowen children, hugs and civil playing were normal and fights were rare. If they ever did fight, it was usually over who had control over the TV remote in the den after dinner. Our parents at that time would be finishing off another bottle of wine in the dining room.

I often reveled in their little tussles. They actually seemed like normal children when they fought. It reminded me of my relationship with Gracie and reassured me that it was no different than most brother-sister relationships. Whenever Victoria and Emmett weren't fighting, I often had an underlying desire for one of them to get mad at the other, because they almost had too perfect of a relationship for me to be comfortable with. Watching them cuddle on the couch with a picture book or seeing Victoria try to teach Emmet how to ride a bike from outside my window made me all the more tempted to pick a fight with my own sister.

While the children's perfection irked me, I rather enjoyed their parents', especially their mother's. At first I disliked Mrs. Bowen because of the way my mom behaved around her. My dad of course picked up on my reluctance towards her, as he once confronted me in the car on the way to school, saying that she was a nice woman with good intentions. "Being too critical will do you no good, Connor. Trust me," he continued. "Try to be a bit more accepting of others."

A few days later, my childhood best friend, Jackson, and I ran into Mrs. Bowen on our way home from school. She was unloading groceries from the minivan as we were approaching my house.

“Hey, Connor!” she shouted from across the street.

Jackson and I spun around to find her waving at us. She beckoned for us to come over to her.

“You’re just the person I was hoping to run into,” she started. “An uncle of mine sent Emmett a skateboard for his birthday a few days ago, but he’s way too small for it. Would you like to take a look at it?”

“Dude...” Jackson gasped under his breath.

I had suddenly forgotten all of my negative sentiments for Mrs. Bowen. I no longer cared that she made my mother look like an idiot or that she was too polished and smiley. The woman was offering me a skateboard. For free. It was a belated-Christmas miracle.

Jackson and I spent the rest of the afternoon taking turns down the street on my new skateboard. “If I gave you a hundred bucks, would you give it to me?” Jackson asked.

It was already dark out when Mom came home from work. Jackson and I were practicing some tricks in the driveway when her car pulled in. She eyeballed the board immediately.

“Where did you get that?” she asked me as she got out of the car, Gracie following shortly after in her ballet clothes. “So she just gave it to you?” she asked after I explained.

“Yes, I just told you that,” I whined.

Mom sucked in her lips and crossed her arms. She looked down at her shoes in deep contemplation. When she finally brought her head back up, her eyes seemed a little wet. “You need to give it back,” she finally said.

I was baffled. How could she say that? She knew I had wanted a skateboard for ages and now she didn’t need to buy one herself. She got to save money and see her kid happy, it didn’t make any sense.

“What? No,” I protested.

“Yes, Connor. It’s too generous of them. Too nice a gift.”

She wasn’t making any more sense to me. My palms started to sweat like they normally did whenever I got angry. I just couldn’t understand her. The anger kept boiling up until I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“Well you never got one for me because you never listen to what I want!” I exploded. “I’m keeping it whether you like it or not.” I grabbed Jackson by the sleeve and pulled him into the house. I could hear Mom sniffing from behind. I pretended she was just cold to keep me from feeling bad.

Dad came home from work shortly after. Their voices argued over one another and echoed from downstairs. I lay on my bed with the skateboard next to me while Jackson sat at my desk trying to find cool stickers in a skating magazine.

“Alice, I really don’t see what the big deal is,” I heard Dad say.

“The big deal here is that that boards a lot of money and it’s not something you randomly give to someone else’s child,” Mom shouted. “She’s not family.”

I tried to block out their voices by tapping my knuckle against the skateboard to the rhythm of a jingle for a cereal commercial. Jackson began to mumble the lyrics to himself while still studying his magazine. I almost couldn't hear the knock at my door due to our little jam session. Before I had the chance to keep the person from coming in, the door opened to reveal my father.

“Can I speak with you downstairs?”

I followed him to the kitchen to find Mom sitting at our small table. Her face was flushed and puffy. Dad sat down next to her and I sat across. The two of them sat in silence, waiting for the other to speak first. Mom tried to discretely nudge Dad in the arm with her elbow. He cleared his throat and began.

“You can keep the board, but your mom and I agree that you need to write out a thank you card to Evelyn and Mark. They did a very nice thing for you.”

I didn't need to hear anything else. “So is that it? That's what you sat me down for?”

Mom looked down at her lap and sighed. Dad rubbed his eyebrow and said that was it.

While we were still eager and regular guests at the Bowen's for dinner, I began to notice a change in my mother's behavior towards Mrs. Bowen. She was still polite, but she never fixated on her the way she used to. Whenever they spoke directly to one another, Mrs. Bowen was the one to initiate the conversation. Often times, Mom would just sit in her seat and pretend to seem as if she were interested in what Mrs. Bowen had to say. She was no longer in awe with her, but rather more passive and critical.

One time at dinner Mrs. Bowen showed off to her a new pair of boots she was wearing. She was excited because she had gotten them for over half off at a department store sale. The next morning at breakfast, Mom found the boots in the store's magazine to find that they were never actually on sale, but still selling for \$400.

"Who does she think she is? Like she thinks she needs to slum down to us," she scoffed as she threw the magazine down on the counter. Dad tried to reason with her, suggesting that she could have been embarrassed to have spent that much money, but Mom didn't want to hear it.

"Since when are you so accepting of her? You always complain about people like her." Not letting him respond, she snatched her thermos and briefcase and sped for the garage entrance.

Dad looked over at me and shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I'll be taking you and Gracie to school today," he said.

The next time the Bowens invited us to dinner, Mom went so far as to feign a bad cold to keep us from going. She forced the coughs out of her once Dad got off the phone with them to tell her they invited us to dinner. He looked at her as if she were a little kid who had done something wrong.

I spent the remainder of that night once again listening to my parents argue from inside my bedroom. At one point I peered out my window to the Bowen's. I could see the four of them at the dinner table, with the parents at opposite ends and the kids on either side. The lights were dimmed like they are whenever we came over, and three tall white candlesticks sat in the middle of the table. I couldn't remember the last time my family had a proper sit-down dinner, just the four of us. I realized in that moment how jealous I

was of them. It took me several more years however to realize that Mom was even more so.

By late spring that year, we were only going to the Bowen's every once in awhile. Mom had made us turn down their invitations enough for them to start reaching out less and less. I didn't care that much, since whenever we did go as of late, all I'd think about is how jealous I was of them. Mr. and Mrs. Bowen could look at each other and not seem as if one was about to be down the other's throat. Victoria and Emmett were still the quintessential sunshine siblings that read together, played together, and watched TV together without bruising one another.

One afternoon I biked home from school with Jackson to find my father's car parked in our driveway. I was confused; he never came home from work early.

"He's probably just sick," said Jackson, as he dismounted his bike. "I'm so hungry, man. Got any food?"

"No we live off the neighbors' trash."

Jackson snapped and pointed his fingers back at me. "You're the man," he winked. He hurried straight to the kitchen upon entering the house, tossing his book bag on the floor by the front door. I trailed behind him, wondering if I should go upstairs to check in on Dad.

"Nah man," said Jackson after I asked him. "He could be in bed with the plague. You wouldn't wanna catch that." He pulled out several random foods from the fridge and laid them out on the counter, before piling them onto a slice of bread. I rolled my eyes

and laughed at him as I sat down at the kitchen table. Jackson soon after joined and began to eat his concoction.

“So, you wanna chill tonight?” he asked as crumbs fell out of his mouth.

“I don’t know. My dad and I were supposed to watch Star Wars tonight but if he’s sick...”

“Yes he’s sick!” he interrupted. “So there’s no reason for you not to chill tonight.”

I was about to respond when I suddenly heard Dad laughing from upstairs. It wasn’t the kind of laugh he did when he saw something funny on TV; I had never heard him laugh like this before. It was a giggle, almost playful in a way. I shouted out to him but he didn’t respond. A few moments later he laughed again. I looked over at Jackson who appeared just as confused as I was. He stood still with his mouth full of food.

“That’s odd,” he finally said after swallowing.

The two of us left the kitchen and headed for the stairs. As we approached them, we could hear another person laughing. It was a woman’s and it wasn’t Mom’s. My stomach suddenly started to hurt.

“Dude...” Jackson whispered.

I shushed him and told him to stay there. I crept up the stairs, careful not to make any noise. The wood lightly creaked underneath my weight but I moved slowly enough to where only I could hear it. Once I came to the upstairs hall I could see a thin bright ribbon of light leaking out from underneath my parents’ bedroom door. The sound of sheets ruffling and voices giggling were muffled from behind it.

“Mom? Dad?” I shouted.

Then there was silence. It was as if everything completely froze and all I could feel was my stomachache. I lost my balance and tipped to my side, bumping against the wall nearby. I stayed put as I heard footsteps scurrying around the carpeted floor of the bedroom. I couldn't move.

"So what's going on?" Jackson then whispered, reappearing at the foot of the stairs with the last bit of his sandwich in his hand.

"You should go. I'll call later," I responded, not turning around to face him. He wished me luck before grabbing his bag and closing the front door behind him.

I remained where I was for several more minutes with my eyes glued to my parents' door. My heartbeat was now starting to pick up, making my stomach feel queasier than it did before. Feeling the desperate need to sit down, I dragged myself back to the stairwell and sat down at the top step. I leaned my side against the wall, curled my knees into my chest, and continued to wait.

I finally heard the door open and spun around to see Dad and Mrs. Bowen at the end of the hall. Her normally pristine hair was disheveled and his button down was poorly tucked into his pants. The three of us froze at our respective ends of the hall. Dad and Mrs. Bowen could not have looked more terrified if they tried. I held my breath as Mrs. Bowen took one in, preparing to speak.

"Hey, Connor," she croaked. Embarrassed, she quickly cleared her throat as she covered her mouth with her small hand. "How are you?" she asked, much clearer.

I didn't answer her. My joints started to sweat and tears tried to fight their way out, but I held them in, clenching every muscle possible. Dad and Mrs. Bowen exchanged a quick glance before she straightened her posture and started down the hall. She forced

out a smile as she passed me, but I didn't look at her. I didn't want to see those perfect white teeth. Mrs. Bowen continued down the stairs and then left.

Dad and I stared at each other from opposite ends of the hall as he slowly started to walk over to me. "I know what you're thinking," he said. I turned my back to him as he spoke. I couldn't look at him. The terror and humiliation in his face made me want to punch my sweaty fist through the wall. "Just let me explain. Will you do that?" he continued. I squeezed my knees deeper into my chest and sunk my head to rest in between them. His shadow was starting to emerge before me and drape over my curled up body.

Keys then began to rattle from the other end of the front door. It opened to reveal Mom and Gracie in her ballet clothes. Mom cocked her head at the sight of Dad standing over me and asked if everything was okay.

"Ask Dad, he's got all the answers," I choked. I shot up to run back to my room. My shoulder bumped into Dad's as I passed him. I slammed the door behind me as I went inside and threw myself facedown onto the bed, screaming into my pillow as I burrowed my face into it. The pillow was soon damp with tears.

Once I felt as if I had cried all the tears out of me, I reached for the phone and began to dial Jackson's number. A sudden cry flooded the house as I punched in the numbers. It was Mom. She had just found out. She then shouted something I couldn't fully make out, followed by a glass shattering. I hung up the phone and chucked it at my wall. Tears began to pool again in my eyes as I dropped back into a fetal position on my bed.

A soft knock on the door woke me up an hour later. Without answering, I rolled to my side so my back was to the door. It creaked open and heavy footsteps patted against my carpeted floor. My legs curled into my chest again at the sound of my father's breath as he took a seat at my desk chair.

"Listen, I know I'm the last person you want to see right now, but just hear me out. Will you do that for me?" he said calmly.

"I don't have to do anything for you," I grumbled with my eyes glued to the wall. They squeezed shut as I sniffled in attempts to keep the tears from running again, but it was no use. My body was crumbling. "Just get the hell out of here, okay? I don't want to talk to you!" I cried out.

"Connor, please –."

"Get out!"

Dad sat there in silence. I could hear his fingertips massaging his eyebrows as he huffed. "I'm so sorry," he whispered. He then sat up and closed my bedroom door behind him.

The divorce and custody agreement was settled a few months later; Gracie and I were to stay at the house with our mother during the week and spend every other weekend with our father, who had bought a small apartment just outside the city.

Since the day I discovered Dad and Mrs. Bowen, both of my parents were shells of their former selves. Dad was perpetually sore with guilt and Mom heartbroken and betrayed. There were several nights the first year where I'd wake up to Mom's sobs from down the hall. Whenever Gracie and I were at Dad's he'd ask at least once how she was

doing, usually at the dinner table. Gracie always tried to play down her current state to keep him from feeling worse than he already did, but I wasn't as generous.

“Awful. She cries in her sleep almost every night,” I'd say as I looked down at my plate, avoiding eye contact with him.

I frequently avoided eye contact with my father. I didn't want to look at the face that many friends and relatives pointed out that I was looking more and more alike. It was true, as I got older, the more my face began to take shape similar to that of my dad's. We always had the same wavy brown hair and brown eyes, but I was beginning to mature almost into a mini-him, and I hated it. Gracie was lucky, she didn't look much like either of our parents but she had Mom's thick blonde hair, so if anything she looked more like her.

Despite all of his attempts to be close again, those weekends were the only times I spent with my father up until I was eighteen. He offered to host birthday parties, take me to school on days Mom was away on business, and take Gracie and I on trips and college tours, but I always declined. I struggled disassociating him with Mrs. Bowen, who moved back into the city with her family only a month after I caught the two of them.

Mom often tried to persuade me to give him another chance, which would always end in a fight. “How could you want me to forgive him? After what he did?” I'd yell at her.

She'd argue the same thing each time: that he was my dad and that his issues with her should not keep me from having a relationship with him, which I found to be bullshit. I had overheard her talking about him to her friends and parents dozens of times where

‘asshole’ was the nicest name she’d give him. It didn’t make sense that she’d push for me to warm up to him when she was as enraged and devastated as I was.

Gracie was a bit more sympathetic, but it bothered me that she was not as detached from Dad as I was. She let him take her on a few college tours and brought friends over to his place to hang out. Jackson never once came to his apartment. She’d hug him when we came over, and ask him how he’s doing when we sat at his small dining room table with our takeout dinner.

“I think Mom’s got a point,” she once said to me after I confronted her about it, five or so years after the incident. “He’s clearly trying to make it up to us. It shows that he cares. Why spend so much energy hating him when he’s owned up to his mistakes and is trying to improve himself?”

My sister sounded too grown-up and it upset me even more. Why did she always have to try to be more adult than she actually was? I was the older sibling; Gracie should have been following my example. I said all of this to her in a much angrier and nastier tone, which led to another one of our many fights. After I felt we breathed our last screams, she shot back at me: “For Christ’s sake, Connor, just grow up and stop being mad at everything!”

My parents never meet face-to-face after the divorce until my college graduation. I hadn’t allowed my dad to come to my high school graduation and was planning on doing the same this time, but he begged me. My girlfriend at the time was really the one who convinced me. She said that if I let him come, he would not have anything to hold

against me and I can continue to resent him without feeling bad about doing anything hurtful to him. It was brilliant. I thought I was going to marry this girl after she said that.

Once the ceremony concluded and Mom had taken enough pictures of me in my cap and gown, Dad appeared from behind a snack table. As he approached us, he extended his arms out in attempts to hug me. I stiffened and backed up, offering him my hand instead. He weakly shook it.

“I’m so proud of you,” he said.

Dad and Mom then finally spoke. After shaking my hand, he looked at her and told her she looked great. She half-smiled and thanked him without returning the compliment. Nobody spoke again for a while, until Gracie came to the rescue and suggested we leave for dinner.

As we headed for the car, we bumped into my girlfriend and her family. Her parents hugged me and my mom hugged her. Dad stood several feet away, trying to look at anything else but our families greeting one another. Feeling a brief surge of guilt, I beckoned him over and introduced him to my girlfriend and her family. He was polite and charming to them, a side of his that I hadn’t seen in eight years. For a moment then, I wanted to forgive him for everything and go back to the way things were. I was seeing the old him, not the depressed, awkward, cheating Dad that I had grown accustomed to. Mrs. Bowen and her perfect teeth then crept back into my thoughts, and the feeling passed. I was back to hating my father.

The next day I helped my girlfriend pack up her dorm room. As I handed her clothes from her closet to fold, she said: “Your dad seemed really nice yesterday. I know

you've got issues with him and everything, but maybe he's gotten better. The way he talked and carried himself, it reminded me a lot of you."

We broke up a week later.

The woman I did end up marrying I met five years later at a mutual friend's birthday party. I dragged myself to the event with my only motivation for going was so I could say I went out that week. After spending the first hour of the party in a corner with a drink in one hand and my phone in the other, I decided it was time to start talking to people. But first I had to use the bathroom, or at least I told myself I did.

I reached the bathroom to find a woman around my age waiting outside the door. She was mid-height, with curly brown hair cut at her shoulders. Dark skinny jeans hugged her narrow hips and a silk blue top hung from her shoulders. She leaned her shoulder against the wall adjacent to the bathroom door with a beer in hand, looking restless. I asked her if she was in line for the bathroom. She nodded.

"The person before me has been in there for almost ten minutes," she sighed. Not knowing how to respond, I nodded my head.

Another five minutes passed and the bathroom was still in use. The woman ahead of me kicked the door with her foot and shouted at them to hurry up. A muffled shout told her to "fuck off" from the other end. The woman groaned and thrust her back against the wall. "This is ridiculous," she said.

There was something about this woman that intrigued me, although I couldn't specify what it was at the time. She seemed like someone I'd get along with and I wanted

to converse with her. “My place is only around the corner if you want to use my bathroom,” I offered, feeling embarrassed immediately after.

“Oh that’d be amazing, thank you so much,” she answered to my astonishment.

We grabbed our jackets and made our way to my apartment. Neither of us spoke the whole walk. I kept my hands in my pockets and listened to her heels click on the sidewalk. I enjoyed the sound, and was almost disappointed when it stopped as we got to my building.

I stayed in the kitchen off the front entrance of my apartment as the woman was in the bathroom. As I waited, I aimlessly searched through my fridge and cabinets without actually wanting anything. I didn’t want to just be standing there when she got back. My head was halfway in the freezer when I heard her heels click onto the kitchen tile. I closed the freezer door to find her only a few feet away from me. Her face was fully visible for the first time. With a delicate round face, her eyes were big and dark chocolate colored with thin lips and blushed cheeks.

“Looking for anything?” she asked, nodding to the freezer.

“Oh,” I started. “No, I umm, was just checking to see how much ice I had left.”

She smirked. “So how much do you have?”

“Enough.”

She laughed in response. “I don’t really know if I want to go back to the party,” she confessed. She began to walk in my direction and passed me to open the fridge. “Ah,” she said as she pulled out something. “How about we open this up?” It was a bottle of wine. The idea thrilled me and I agreed, taking the bottle from her to pull out the cork.

“I’m Maggie by the way,” she said as I twisted in the corkscrew.

Maggie and I were engaged three years later. I proposed to her in her kitchen while the two of us cooked dinner one night. I thought asking her in a kitchen was suiting, considering how we met. She said yes instantly and nearly knocked a frying pan off the stove as she threw herself onto me.

The following six months were drowned in wedding plans in addition to work. If Maggie and I weren't working, we were either picking flowers or organizing seating arrangements or something else wedding related. Mom and Gracie were huge helps and would stand in whenever one of us was too busy to meet with the caterer or florist or anyone else. They both went with Maggie and her mother to pick out her dress.

Up until the wedding, I made a habit of trying to get details from them about it, but they never complied. Gracie would huff and punch me in the arm or throw a small object such as a pen at me whenever I asked. "Like I'm going to tell you anything," she'd say. I knew better not to ask Maggie, who didn't even tell me when she was going to try on dresses; Mom accidentally mentioned it to me in passing a week after they went.

I knew I was going to have to invite my dad to the wedding, despite the fact that I had only seen him a few times since my college graduation. He was one of the first RSVP's we received. Maggie was filled in on our relationship, but like every one else, insisted that I tried to reconcile with him. When we opened up his RSVP, she was thrilled.

"This is great!" she said. "He's probably so excited."

I tried to mimic her excitement, mostly for her sake. I didn't want any reasons to not look forward to our big day, and for a few weeks I was actually able to anticipate my

father's presence without feeling too upset or angry. I then received a phone call from him about a month and a half before the wedding.

"I was wondering if I could have a plus one to your wedding," he asked.

A stomach pain similar to the one I experienced when I caught him with Mrs. Bowen began to stir. The thought of seeing him with any other woman still, after sixteen years, enraged me. I wanted him to be alone; he didn't deserve the pleasure of a woman's affections. I so badly wanted to tell him no, but the words refused to surface.

"I'll talk it over with Maggie," I finally said. It was all I could say.

My dad thanked me and then tried to make small talk by asking how I was. I shot down his attempts right away and told him I was about to go to bed, forgetting that it was only eight at night.

"Hi, I'm Sheila," the woman said, extending her hand out for me to shake.

"Congratulations!"

I thanked her and weakly shook her hand. Sheila was no Mrs. Bowen; she was tall, medium build, with plain dark straight hair with graying roots and no striking physical features. She wore a simple black dress and I could barely even tell if she was wearing make-up. She was modest, not elegant. Her arm was snaked in between the crease of my father's elbow and his torso. That was the one thing I could find to criticize about her.

I approached Gracie at the cocktail hour and asked her what she thought of Sheila. She glared at me. "She seems really nice."

"Was she clinging onto Dad when you met her?"

“Yeah? So what? They’re together.”

“You don’t think that’s weird of her to do? When she’s meeting us for the first time?”

Gracie placed her glass of champagne down at a table nearby and sighed. “Just enjoy the night, Connor. Okay? Dad’s girlfriend is the last thing I want to talk about right now, and it should be for you too.”

Once again, my sister was trying to avoid conflict by pretending to be the bigger person. Gracie, who didn’t even have a date to her brother’s wedding and had been bouncing from job to job since she graduated, thought she was the more adult out of the two of us. She picked up her champagne and started to walk away from me. I grabbed her by the shoulder and spun her back around, asking her how she could be so apathetic. She pulled her shoulder away from me and backed up.

“Connor, I can’t keep having this conversation with you. Don’t think for a minute that I was less hurt and upset over what he did to us. But I’m sick of being angry, so I’m going to finish my drink, maybe have another two or three, talk to some more people, and have a good time at my brother’s wedding, whether or not he does.” She then turned around and headed for the other end of the room.

As I watched Gracie leave, I noticed Mom talking to someone obscured by other people standing nearby. She was smiling and laughing and her face was a little flushed, as it always was when she had a few too many drinks. I was glad to see that she was having fun. She was the only person in the family I could excuse for not dwelling over Dad and Sheila. I felt protective; I didn’t want her to feel the way I was currently feeling. She’d felt that way for too long already.

The other people nearby started to clear out, allowing me to see who my mother was talking to all this time. My body froze at the sight of Sheila standing before her. She was also laughing and seemed to be enjoying the conversation as much as Mom was.

Once I was able to move again, I sped off to the bathroom and closed the door behind me. I hurled my wine glass against the tiled walls and watched it shatter. The red wine dripped to the floor and puddled by my feet. A stall door swung open to reveal my mom's boyfriend. "Are you alright?" he asked, panicked. I nodded as I rubbed my eyebrows. I looked in the mirror and checked my tux for any stains, wiped the sweat off my palms with a paper towel, and then left the bathroom without a word.

I never told Maggie about my episode in the bathroom. I didn't want her to think I had a bad time at our wedding, because I didn't for the most part. I was able to carry on the rest of the night and not think about my dad and his bland girlfriend thanks to all the wine, scotch, and whiskey I consumed over the course of the reception. Everything was too blurred and muzzy for me to even look at Dad and Sheila and realize who they were.

However, once Maggie and I came back from our honeymoon, my mother approached me about the incident. She called me my first day back at work to ask about the trip. After answering all her questions, she paused before changing the subject.

"So...I umm heard about what happened at the wedding," she began, waiting for me to say something. My silence propelled her to keep going. "Ron told me. What did you break a glass for?"

"I just dropped it, I was a little drunk." It was the first excuse to pop into my head.

“So you dropped it on the wall?” she answered in a condescending tone. “Ron told me there was wine on the wall.” I didn’t answer her. “Why did you throw a glass, Connor?”

I couldn’t tell her. I hated mentioning Dad around her and she had just been starting to move on over the past few years. To tell her how I hated that Sheila was there and how I saw the two of them talking would turn into another lecture similar to the ones Gracie had made a habit of giving. It was always clear that my mother and sister spoke about Dad a lot more than I ever did to either of them. They seemed to have a shared understanding of him that I apparently refused to partake in. “It was nothing,” I finally said. “Don’t worry about it.”

Mom didn’t try to push the conversation any further. She said all right and that she’d call in a few days. I hung up the phone and sunk into my desk chair. The sound of my wine glass hitting the tile replayed in my head over and over again until I began to sweat. I decided then that it was a good time to go on my lunch break.

All I could see as Sheila bounced my baby son on her knee was the diamond on her left ring finger. Aaron’s round cheeks, little squeal, and big brown eyes that were identical to Maggie’s were all a blur. She and my father had already been engaged for almost a year, but I hadn’t seen either of them until that day. I persuaded Maggie to not invite Sheila to her baby shower several months ago, and for the first month following Aaron’s birth, I told Dad that we were too busy to have visitors. I didn’t want him to be one of the first people my son met. So after a month went by, I called him up and said he and Sheila could come over any weekend afternoon they’d like. A week later they were

on our new couch in our new home, and Aaron was passed around the room like a puppy for sale at a pet store.

Once my father had his turn to hold the baby, he didn't let him go. He held onto him, cradled him, kissed his nose, and made animal sounds for over thirty minutes. "You loved it when I made animal sounds to you," he told me as he smiled down at his grandson.

Maggie sat in an armchair nearby. This was one of the first times since giving birth that she put on real clothes and combed her hair out. She looked beautiful, but drained. She smiled weakly as she watched my dad and Sheila take turns holding Aaron. I had spoken to her about them visiting before I called my dad and she had no issue with it, but I could tell that she wasn't in a social mood that day. Or any day since the baby was born.

Since Maggie was too tired to make lunch that day and I could barely cook at all, we ordered in. I let Dad and Sheila pick the restaurant out of politeness, and they picked Greek. The food was good, and the wine they brought over was even better. Maggie refused to have any however, claiming that she didn't want to have to pump out all the alcoholic milk later.

For the first time since I was fourteen, I enjoyed my father's company that afternoon. Perhaps it was because he was there for Aaron as well and didn't hone all his attention onto me for once. While I was asked countless questions about him, Aaron stole Dad and Sheila's gaze. I only had to look my father in the eye a couple of times; his were usually transfixed on the baby.

Maggie could almost sense my content with the situation, as she squeezed my knee repeatedly that afternoon every time my dad cooed at Aaron. “Maybe you two will now finally start to get along again,” she mentioned as we got ready for bed later that night, and for once, that all too familiar stomach pain didn’t stir inside me as I thought of that idea.

“Can you take Aaron to school today?” Maggie asked as she hurried around the kitchen looking for her keys. “I’m already running late for my class.” The bag carrying her yoga mat dropped from her shoulder as she bent down to open a bottom drawer, causing her to groan.

“You know how my boss gets when I’m late,” I answered as I took the last sip of my coffee. “We would’ve had to leave fifteen minutes ago for that to work.”

Maggie slammed the drawer and straightened her back. Strands of hair stuck to her flushed face, as if she had just worked out. “I had to miss the last two classes because you couldn’t take him,” she whined.

She was right, I hadn’t been able to take Aaron to school the past two weeks. But Maggie knew that my new boss was a stickler for punctuality and had already threatened to fire a co-worker for being late twice in a row. I pressed my situation again, but she couldn’t be convinced. I huffed as I put my mug in the sink and went to grab my coat. Aaron stood by the front door already bundled up with his Spiderman backpack hanging off his small shoulders, not making a sound. “Let’s go,” I said to him as I led him out of the house.

I was able to drop Aaron off and only be five minutes late to work. My boss did glare at me as I passed his office on the way to mine, but it was only my first lateness so I wasn't too concerned. To be safe however, I worked nonstop the whole morning, thinking that my efficiency would compensate for my tardiness. I sat glued to my desk for four hours straight, not even going to the bathroom.

At one point Tara, a co-worker of mine, came into my office to ask if I wanted to grab lunch. The two of us had gotten friendlier as of late over our shared frustration towards our new boss. I had always wanted to get to know her better ever since she started working at the office about a year ago, but was always reluctant to start a conversation. It wasn't until a month ago when our new boss started that Tara first reached out to me.

"It's not just me right?" she asked. "He's difficult with everyone?"

She looked scared, as if she were being watched. She walked all the way up to my desk and leaned over so she could whisper to me, as she cupped her elbows with opposite hands. Tara held her breath in as she waited for me to answer. I thought she looked beautifully terrified in that moment, which made me want to embrace her. Thankfully I came to my senses quick enough to not do it.

I reassured Tara that our boss was this way to all of us and that she wasn't singled out. She sighed in relief and then asked if I wanted to get coffee during lunch. "I feel like I don't really know anyone in the office," she added. I agreed and we had been getting lunch several times a week since then.

I couldn't eat with her today though, as I explained to her how I was late this morning. She looked disappointed, but then offered to grab food for me while she's out.

“That’s alright,” I answered. “I’ll find time to get a small something eventually.”

My phone began to buzz once Tara had left my office. Assuming it was Maggie, I was tempted to let it go to voicemail. I had spoken to her already today and I didn’t want to waste more time going over what she and I had been up to the past hour. I then realized upon seeing my phone that it was Gracie who was calling me.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” she told me after our hellos. “Dad called earlier. He and Sheila are separating. He said he was going to call you later but I thought you should be prepared.”

“What why?” I asked.

“The most I got out of him was that they just weren’t happy any more.”

I snorted. I had received that exact explanation from him one time back when he groveled for my forgiveness as a teenager. “Yeah I’m sure that’s why they’re divorcing.”

“Connor...”

“Come on Gracie you can’t say the thought didn’t occur to you. Why would he give you such a vague explanation?”

I could almost feel her eyes roll from the other end of the phone as she started to try to convince me I was wrong. Soon our conversation fell back into our familiar pattern. There was no way my sister was going to succeed; my mind was set. Our father had once again failed another wife and to doubt his intentions would allow him to continue his bad habits. I hung up on her in the middle of one of her lectures and threw my coat on as I texted Tara to see if she had already left for lunch.

I told Maggie about my phone call later that night after we put Aaron to bed. She was sprawled across the couch watching a show as I sat in one of our armchairs, pretending to read the newspaper. I could tell she was sleepy, but I couldn't wait to tell her another time.

“So I spoke to my sister today,” I began. Maggie hummed while she kept her eyes on the television. Her knees curled in as she quietly asked how it went. After I explained everything, her positioning remained as it was and her eyes began to flicker. “Maggie!” I shouted.

She jerked as if she had been shocked and spun her head towards me. “Jesus, Connor!” she gasped.

“Did you hear what I said?”

Maggie paused before shaking her head. “Sorry, I spaced out. I'm really tired tonight for some reason.”

I huffed and began to re-explain everything. By the time I reached the point where I was about to express my doubts about my dad and Sheila's divorce, Maggie interrupted me.

“Please don't tell me you think he cheated on her.”

I froze, shocked that she knew what I was going to say. “Well, yes, I do actually,” I finally answered.

Maggie shook her head. “Come on Connor, I thought you got over all of that cheating stuff with your father. They probably just weren't happy, like what Gracie said.”

I couldn't believe what she was saying. She didn't know my father like I did – I never let him hang out with us enough for her to. It angered me that Maggie would be so fast to doubt my suspicions. I could feel my hands start to sweat.

“Well they seemed perfectly happy when we saw them at Christmas,” I began. “This is what he does: pretends that everything is fine and he's happy and then right when you think nothings going wrong, he turns around and stabs you in the gut.” I knew this wasn't true, but I couldn't think of anything else to say in that instant. I just had to be right, no matter how logical Maggie was being.

She rolled her eyes at me. “Okay, Connor. If you don't want to hear what I have to say then I'm just going to go to bed. I'm too tired to get into this with you right now and I think you should just call your dad before you jump to more conclusions.”

Before I had a chance to respond to her, she leapt up from the couch and made her way to the bedroom. I remained in the armchair with the newspaper still in my lap. I didn't know what to do – should I go and apologize to Maggie? While that seemed like the right thing to do, I couldn't. At that time I didn't think I had to; she was the one who upset me. The thought of going to our bedroom and apologizing to her made my hands even sweatier.

I put the newspaper down on the coffee table and rest my elbows on my knees as I rubbed my eyebrows. The need to have a drink began to consume my thoughts. I groaned upon remembering that I had our last beer at dinner earlier, meaning I'd have to go out to get something. I also didn't want to drink alone; I needed to be with someone to distract me from everything that had happened that day.

As I grabbed my coat and car keys, I scrolled through the contacts list on my phone to see who I could text. I didn't have to think twice about texting her when her name appeared on my screen.

Tara suggested a bar in a neighboring town. It was nearly empty inside when I arrived and she hadn't shown up yet. Positive that she wouldn't mind if I got a drink before she arrived, I ordered a bourbon before finding an empty booth to sit at. As I downed my drink, I began to second-guess my plans for the night. I'm just getting drinks with a friend from work, I told myself. There's nothing wrong with that. The reassurance didn't do much.

I took out my phone and went to Maggie's number in my contact list. It took me several minutes of staring at my screen to decide not to call her, at least not yet. I still wasn't ready to talk to her and admit that she was right, right about my dad.

Dad, I thought. Dad, a man who can never break old habits. Why did he have to rub his eyebrows every time he was frustrated or confused? Why did he cheat on another wife? Why did he still try so hard to earn my respect?

"Connor?" said a voice, interrupting my meditation. I looked up to see Tara standing before me, in a black tight-fitted dress. "Are you okay? You were muttering to yourself," she continued. "Rubbing your forehead like you were in a lot of pain."

I hadn't realized until right then that I had my fingers over my eyebrows. I hid my hands in my lap. "Oh yeah, I'm fine," I answered.

Tara smirked. "If you say so," she said as she sat down across from me.

Three bourbons later, I had told Tara everything: My father and Mrs. Bowen, the divorce, my struggle to forgive him, my incident in the bathroom at my wedding, my near reconciliation with my father after Aaron was born, and then his separating with Sheila and the fights it started with Maggie and Gracie.

The entire time I spoke, Tara looked at me right in the eye and listened. I could tell because her head would sometimes tilt if I said anything surprising, or the corner of her mouth would curl up if I said anything funny. I watched her lips each time she took a sip of her drink. Her tongue would slide across them to clean any off any excess beer whenever she finished. Her lips reminded me of Maggie's.

"I'm sorry you're going through all of this," she told me. Her hand slid across the table and took hold of mine. I knew I should have pulled it away but I didn't. Instead I insisted I was fine and took another sip of my drink with my free hand. Some of it spilled onto my pants due to my hand being shaky. Tara tried to hold in a laugh as I clumsily wiped my lap with a wet napkin.

"You shouldn't be driving tonight," she said after swallowing it in. "Let me take you home."

"I don't want to go home," I muttered, still determined to clean my pants.

Tara paused before speaking again. "Do you...you could come back with me."

Twenty minutes later I was on her couch with a glass of wine in my hand. Tara sat beside me with her legs curled up underneath and her arm resting on the back of the couch. Her hand crept onto my knee and wandered its way up my leg. I grabbed it to make her stop and looked at her.

“I, I don’t know if I can do this,” I told her. I had just remembered Maggie for the first time since explaining our fight to Tara. What am I doing? I love my wife, I told myself. I love my wife. It didn’t make a difference. I felt as detached from her as I did earlier that night. I still couldn’t go back home and clear things up with her.

Suddenly my dad came back to mind, and my struggle to clear things up with him. The thought of him with Mrs. Bowen began to poke at my stomach. I rubbed my eyebrows to wipe the memory out of my head, but it was hopeless.

I looked back at Tara. Her hand was still on my leg and she gazed at me the way Maggie gazes at me. I closed my eyes to avoid looking at her. An instant later I felt her soft lips blanketing mine, and I didn’t stop her.