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### Roams

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**ROAMS**

**Brittany Temple**

M. A. Seton Hall University, December 2020

A Thesis  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts  
In

The Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THE MASTERS THESIS

This Thesis, "Roams," by Brittany Temple, has been approved for submission  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English (Creative Writing) by:

Approved by:

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Nathan Oates, Second Reader

## Introduction: “Roams”

As individuals, our choices and the subsequent consequences of those choices can seem isolated to our own bubble of existence. In this thesis, “Roams,” a novel about Beck, the adult daughter of an alcoholic mother who disappears, and Jim, her mother’s boyfriend, the chapters seek to challenge that comfortable idea, showing two characters whose lives are only tangentially connected by a single person in common, but who nonetheless each leave an unintentional mark on the other’s life.

But this was not the book that I initially planned to write. When I set out to write this thesis, I had the intention of creating a collection of short stories because of my love and admiration for the craft. Throughout my graduate studies, I was introduced to short stories that gifted me with unforgettable prose—words that deeply affected me as both a reader and writer. As Peter Ho Davies describes in his essay “Only Collect,” a successful short story “should suspend you, hold you, satisfy you to such an extent that you don’t want to turn the page, read another story immediately” (52). When I read Davies’ description of that specific feeling, knowing I had experienced it when reading stories like Laura van den Berg’s “I Looked for You, I Called Your Name” or Jhumpa Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter,” it spawned my desire to create something of that nature. I wanted to suspend a reader in a literary moment that demanded attention, even though the story had ended. With this in mind, I began to write “Something to Remember It By,” the story that would become the first chapter in my novel.

As I developed the arc of this story, I focused on the pressure on the main character, Beck. Though the story begins with her losing her full-time job, the real pressure in her life is applied by her relationship with her mother, which became contentious after her father died and her mother succumbed to alcoholism. At the end of the story, Beck’s mom, Elaine, is nowhere to

be found, which pushes Beck to the edge. As I wrote what I believed was the ending to a short story, I realized I was not actually creating a story collection, because Elaine's disappearance should not be contained to this first section; I chose to stretch her disappearance over the course of what was now becoming a novel. Channeling Joan Silber's novel-in-stories *Improvement*, I decided to rotate through the perspectives of the people involved in the search for Elaine, bringing to the surface the accidental network that humans create through seemingly disconnected actions.

In "Something to Remember Me By," Beck, who has much more clarity than her mother, but who is still plagued in her own ways by doubts about her ability to find stability, begins her first day of unemployment with a cold feeling in her heart; after working for a popular internet publication and experiencing measurable success as a wellness writer, she has been unceremoniously eliminated from her position in a blindsiding conversation led by her direct-report boss—someone she has considered a mentor and friend. This is where the novel opens. Through Beck's firing by this character, Tim, a painful truth is presented that recurs in this thesis: the people these characters choose to rely on are capable of betraying that trust. In this moment, as Beck bitterly reflects on her firing, she receives a startling text message from her mother, and that relationship is immediately called into question. The foundation of Beck's story is both her self-sufficiency and the continual reminders that anyone and everyone in her life can and will disappoint her. The cracks in Beck's façade are apparent from the beginning—she is human, flawed and filled with emotion.

Beck's imperfections are her most accessible points; her honesty is unfiltered and relatable. As I developed Beck, wanting the reader to both root for and identify with her, I considered Melissa Bank's character Jane in *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*. Jane has

wicked humor, often saying what others might be thinking but aren't bold enough to say out loud. In "The Floating House," when Jane meets her current boyfriend's ex-girlfriend, a glowing French goddess named Bella, the ex playfully calls her "Janie"; Jane responds, "I am so thrown by her warmth that I say 'Belly'" (51). There is a sincerity in Jane's snarky nature. As the story plays out, she comes up with all sorts of childish but hilarious ways to discuss Bella, adding "Boom-Boom" to her list of nicknames (63) and mocking her accent and the way she pronounces "Jamie," referring to the former lovers as "Belly and Gems" (52). It is her honesty, which vacillates without notice between crass and careful, that makes her so appealing. As Robert, the man with whom Jane ends up with, says to Jane in the book's final chapter, he fell in love with Jane because she is open (272). That is why I loved Jane too—her openness puts her right on the couch beside you, laughing about Belly and Gems. I kept this vulnerability in mind as I created both Beck and Jim. Though Beck is extroverted and Jim is more cautious, they are ruled by their internalized truths, making their undeniable flaws a major, and hopefully interesting, part of their characters.

While Beck's short-term problem is her job loss, the larger issue is her relationship with her mother; both situations test how she will respond to crushing disappointment delivered by someone she counted on. In "Something to Remember Me By," as Beck lingers on the memory of losing her father, she is aware that she lost her mom that day too, as it was the turning point where her mother began to drink heavily. These losses push her to outsource her deeper connections both to and through her work, as seen in her friendships with Tim, her boss, and another character, Larry, also a coworker. Beck trusted Tim to nurture her career and in a way, it created a dependence that was not apparent until he played a part in her firing. She also leans on her friendship with Larry for advice instead of her own mother—she doesn't even know how to

tell her mom she was fired, let alone solicit advice from her on how to handle the situation. The swift kick to the curb from Tim was a reminder that she is flying through the world without a safety net, and will need to take control of all that is unraveling. This is the part of Beck that will develop later in the novel as she grapples with a missing mother, the lingering pressure of unemployment, and a limited list of options.

Jim is also facing limited options in the second chapter, titled “Someone Else’s Chaos.” Jim and Elaine have a simple arrangement: booze and companionship. Elaine is the most constant figure in his life, and now she has gone out roaming without telling anyone where she’s gone. Though Jim has dealt with Elaine running off before, an impatience lingers at the back of his mind as he worries something serious will happen to her. Similar to Beck, Jim also lost someone he thought he had more time with, his wife, Jan, who overdosed on pills in their home. I choose not specify if the death were an accident or suicide because that distinction isn’t clear to and ultimately doesn’t matter to Jim; he feels he failed his wife and that is the reason she is dead, whether it was intentional or not. While Beck feels victimized by those who disappoint her, Jim sits on the other end of the spectrum, plagued by the haunting possibility that he could have done more to save his wife’s life. As he tours the town looking for Elaine, and thinks back on memories of Jan, his fear begins to strengthen, and he worries he has failed again to keep someone safe.

In creating and assessing Jim’s character and the world he lives in, while keeping the warmth of Melissa Bank’s Jane nearby, I looked for inspiration that was more salt of the earth. I wanted to hit on the same raw honesty but dull the blade a bit, turn the character inward, and show a person who is more reflective than reactive. This brought me to Elizabeth Strout’s novel-in-stories *Olive Kitteridge*, but not for the brash Olive—Jim is closer to her soft-spoken husband



Henry, as they are both the kind of characters who struggle to express what they really feel. For characters like Henry and Jim, drama plays out in their minds, and they don't often put their feelings into action.

In Strout's first chapter, titled "Pharmacy," Henry quietly falls in love with his young employee, and when her husband dies tragically, he finds himself baffled by the sheer weight of the emotions that now surround the two of them in their workspace. Strout writes, "In the pharmacy he saw that she walked around in a state of unreality; he found his own life felt unbearable in a way he would never have expected. The force of this made no sense. But it alarmed him; mistakes could be made" (22). Jim is similarly overwhelmed when presented with other people's emotions: he didn't know how to approach his wife, Jan, as she struggled in the aftermath of several miscarriages, and he has no words to offer Beck when they find that Elaine is gone. Jim is never able to set down the uneasiness that comes with the sense that he has disappointed someone. This is a big part of his draw to Elaine: he sees a woman who has struggled, just as he has, losing her spouse and watching her life crumble around her. If he can help her, in whatever small way, he thinks, then maybe he is doing something right. They connect through their despair: they both feel responsible for the death of their loved one, and they react to this despair in similar ways. Jim and Elaine's pain haunts them; they respond with alcoholism and denial.

Moving out of Beck's perspective and into Jim's is an important element of this thesis, because the novel sets out to create a community. Peter Ho Davies touches on this type of literary experience in his essay "Only Collect," saying that some collections create communities that are linked by shared events, including "characters who appear as minor figures in one story, part of the background community, recur as major players in another, or vice versa" (59).

Davies' description calls to mind both Strout's and Silber's novels; they each create a web of connectivity that surprises the reader with each new character's story while maintaining similar faces, places, and details. My hope is to do the same.

The choice to create a rotating cast of characters, combined with the decision to make this project not a story collection but a novel, left me to decide how I would use time and pacing. I had to tend to the larger story arc of Elaine's disappearance, as well as the smaller plot arcs, including Beck's unemployment and Jim's alcoholism and widowhood. Jane Alison provided crucial perspective on creating a rhythm between summary, scene, and stillness that, when drawn out with symbols, becomes an intentional design. In *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*, she is analyzing Vikram Chandra's "Shakti" when she observes "an incident happens and then it's pondered, its deeper sense revealed... This pairing of drama with stillness soon happens again, and here the story's flow is not reflective so much as compressed, an inward rage that would look motionless from the outside" (55). Alison goes on to explain that summary runs the risk of dullness, but focusing on the sensory is what can pull the reader in. Both Beck and Jim spend a lot of time on their own and inside their heads. As I reworked the early drafts of these stories, I paid close attention to the pattern I created between summary and dialogue, seeking a stability that keeps the story moving forward while adding backstory. Using symbols to diagram passages in Chandra's novel, Alison shows how the balance between summary, scene, and stillness "feels like a river—yet looks like a design" (57). I applied Alison's method by examining the length of sections of dialogue, backstory, and inner-thoughts; from there, I created a balance between the characters experiencing thoughts and conversations in their present, while flashing back to the experiences that now inform their reactions.

I considered Alison's lesson on pacing in regard to balancing dialogue with summarized time that is largely interior, through which backstory is provided—Jim and Beck are often on their own in their respective chapters, thinking back on lives they once knew and believed would last, wondering when death would come around again, and struggling to surrender to the circumstances of their lives. They are thinking through their past and present, and also making choices, seemingly small, but often in hopes of protecting themselves and those they care for, which reveals much about what they value and who they are.

As "Roams" continues, Elaine's disappearance will ripple out into the town, extending beyond her daughter and her friend as they contend with family, mortality, and the illusion of privacy in a small town. The quiet, contained nature of the town is deceptive; it is discreet, but the residents, tucked away in their own corners, are screaming beneath the serene surface, and Elaine's disappearance will ultimately pull back unexpected curtains. As Beck and Jim seek solutions, grapple with truth, and try to save a life, the reader is asked to contemplate death and dependency in the context of family and community. As Peter Ho Davies says, community can hold a collection together; the same is true for a novel. Beck and Jim will come to realize that, like the root system of a forest, the hidden ties that bind them to each other and to others in the town are stronger and more far-reaching than they originally appear. Their actions, which might seem to affect only them, in fact affect others. In learning this, they will learn that they are not as free, nor as alone, as they had imagined.

## Something to Remember It By

The cold kitchen floor doesn't register against the bottoms of my feet as I stand here, brain dead. I can't seem to feel anything on this first day of unemployment. Today is the first day of unemployment because yesterday is the day I lost my job. I guess I didn't technically "lose" it—I know exactly where it is. It's back with my company, getting assigned to someone new. Probably some bouncy assistant they'll only have to pay half my salary.

The word "unemployment" boils in my brain. Staring at my calendar, looking at yesterday's date, it used to just be "the 6th." On the 6th, I woke up as a wellness writer and editor for one of the most popular sites on the web; today, I'm just unemployed. I drew a tiny axe in the blank square under yesterday's date. "Something to remember it by," I say aloud to no one. Talking to myself fits nicely with my unemployed persona.

To say that my firing surprised me is an understatement. First of all, I thought companies were supposed to fire people on Fridays. The point is to give jilted employees the weekend to chill out and binge drink, and hopefully prevent them from returning the next day with a loaded shotgun and no will to live. Second of all, my job was what I considered to be "safe." My articles drove hundreds of thousands of unique views to the site. I was reliable to a fault. I said yes to absolutely every assignment and opportunity. I did all the foolish, personal-life-surrendering things that Forbes tells you to do in order to excel at your career. So yesterday, when my editor, Tim, called me at my desk just after 9 a.m., and asked me to come by in fifteen minutes, my

suspicion was not even remotely piqued. When I walked into his office and saw a woman I didn't recognize sitting next to him who smiled at me as she extended her hand and introduced herself as Monica Chan from Human Resources, I figured I was getting interviewed about some recent #MeToo exposure—or better yet, I was getting a raise. Not only was I unfazed, I was intrigued.

When Monica Chan delivered the news, it felt like I was suddenly underwater. Muffled phrases like “position eliminated,” “severance package,” and “business decision” floated like jellyfish around me, moving with a slow potency through dark water. I drowned in disbelief until finally, I gasped. Seriously – I gasped. Out loud. “Rebecca, are you okay?” Monica Chan had asked, her face moving from shock into a concerned crinkle. It pleased me to have startled her. “It’s Beck,” I said, darting my eyes toward Tim, who was staring at the carpet. “If I say no, do I get to keep my job?” It was a half-joke, and I silently wished she would say yes and I could go back to my desk, continue working on my piece about intermittent fasting, and pretend this conversation never happened. Instead, she laughed nervously and said that we could go over the severance package together. It seemed like she might reach out and touch my hand. I remember preemptively recoiling as I said, “How kind of you.” Missing the sarcasm in my voice, she smiled.

Monica freaking Chan. I didn't know her before yesterday, and now I'll probably never see her again. But it's the thought of Tim that burns a hole in my head today. A few days ago, he was someone who fostered my career, took me out for lunch, let me linger on the couch in his office when I was feeling particularly unproductive, even when he had things to get done. When

I lost my dad, he told me to take all the time I needed, company policy be damned. And when I finally dragged myself back to the office, withered and worn, he was the first to come by my desk. “Glad to have you back, kid. Let me know what you need.”

“How about a lobotomy?”

He smiled. “How about a drink? Happy hour on me today.”

“As long as I don’t have to be happy.”

“Then we’ll take care of the lobotomy first.”

That evening we sat at the bar, mostly silent as we sipped our drinks. Every movement felt like a labor, and Tim wasn’t asking anything of me. It was more comfort than my own mother had provided. “I’m no stranger to what you’re going through. I’ve lost people suddenly. I’ve been so shocked that it took me weeks to realize what had happened. You’re out of sync with reality. It takes time.”

I inhaled his words deeply. Mom had been drunk since the day they pronounced dad dead, and I had spent the majority of the time since trying to keep her upright, a blur of funeral arrangements and vodka bottles. Had I even cried? In that moment, I couldn’t identify the answer, and when I exhaled, the tears cascaded into my vodka.

Tim put his hand on my forearm. “Hey. You’re going to make it to the other side of this. We’ve got your back, me and the rest of the team. We’ve got you.” I believed him.

But the curtain fell and the wizard was revealed when he looked me in the eye and said over and over again, “this is a business decision.” I shudder to think of the blankness on his face when I asked, with a desperation in my voice I hadn’t heard in years, why it was happening to

me and not someone else. “It’s a business decision.” I asked him why he didn’t warn me. “It’s a business decision.” I asked him why he let me think I was safe. “It’s a business decision.”

I left Tim’s office with a company-branded tote bag, which he handed to me with eyes still glued to the rug, so that I could carry my belongings home. I thought about vomiting in it and leaving it in his locker. A parting gift.

Snapping out of my revenge fantasy, still unemployed, I hear my phone vibrating across the kitchen counter behind me. “Mommy” stared at me from the screen and my adrenaline spiked — I still have to break the news to mom, and I’m not ready to do that. When there is potential to disappoint or upset her, I do Olympic-level backflips to avoid it. Pain had been an amateur experience before we lost dad, and just about anything — no matter how small the impact — had the potential to send our lives into another tailspin.

“Hi honey did u get my message yesterday?”

“Yes, sorry, it ended up being a busy day. I’ll call the insurance company in a little while. How are you doing on groceries?”

“Fine. Jim is coming by tomorrow will bring stuff for me”

She usually sticks to booze when she’s hanging out with Jim, he never brings hard drugs. That buys me some time — time to consult with Larry.

Tim had guided me, but Larry kept me sane. He was my work husband. He knew my secret history of fireable offenses, like when I slept at the office after a night of heavy drinking, or the intern I made out with at the holiday party. These things were not included in Tim’s “business decision,” because Larry is my steel-trap confidante. He was fifty-five and had more

experience in life and business than Tim and Monica Chan combined, seeing people like them come and go during his 15-year tenure at the company. He's also gay, which allows me to capitalize on his male gaze without the sexual undertones. I wrote him a text with the gist of my hellish situation, and said we needed drinks A.S.A.P. He replied immediately, "I've been wondering where you were! Holy shit!"

"I know, can you believe what a fucking traitor Tim is? Dead to me. Anyway, drinks on Thurs?"

"Of course, honey. Kiki at our spot."

"Kiki" meant we were going to drink too many Moscow Mules and talk a whole lot of smack. I took a breath, and told myself that Larry would know what to do.

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I sat waiting at a sidewalk table, the sun hot on my face, September is just another month of summer in this part of the northeast. I willed the sun to heal me, to make me grow. It's my third day of unemployment and I'm scattered—somber but erratic, moving but not forward, just sort of quivering in place. I also have yet to start searching for a new job. Instead, I had been doing the work of a private investigator, stalking Tim into the depths of his online presence. Yesterday, he posted a picture to his Instagram that showed my former team out for mid-week drinks, their heads sloppily leaning towards each other, glassy eyes and flushed grins, and a sharp pain hit my chest.



Just as I was opening my phone to torture myself with another look at my previous life, Larry comes bursting through the crowded patio and drops down in the seat across from me. “It’s too hot for this big body to be hauling ass. Why are we meeting early?”

“Sorry, I know. I have to drive up to my mom’s later to check on her. A neighbor called and said her car has been sitting in the Shop Rite parking lot for at least a day. So, you know.”

He wiped the sweat from his mustache and softened. It was nice to be looked at with sincerity. “Oh honey, I’m sorry. You’re so good to her.”

“Yeah, well, someone has to clean up the mess. Anyway.”

“Anyway...should we get right to the full story of what happened with Tim?”

I walk him through the scene that left me with nothing but HR-approved statements and a company tote bag.

“And then, I’m walking out, holding my breath, just trying to get far enough from the building before I burst, and I hear someone calling after me. I turned around and he was actually running after me. I was stunned, I mean, what could he possibly have to say? My first thought was that I hope he gets hit by a cab.”

Larry let out a hearty chuckle. “You’re so bad.”

“When he caught up to me, he attempted sincerity, but it was an absolute joke. He took me by the arm and said, ‘but now you’re free! You can do whatever you want! You aren’t tied down anymore! Isn’t that exciting, that you’re free to choose?’ And you know what? He was right about that. I am free to choose. Free to choose how I will get revenge on his pathetic soul,” I stabbed at the lime in my drink.

He laughed, then narrowed his eyes at me. “Beck, my love, what’s hatching in that brain of yours? I can’t tell if you’re kidding anymore.”

“I don’t know, Lar. I’m spinning out. I just feel like I need to do something. Maybe I just want to scream into his face. I don’t know how to let it go without *doing* something.” Larry exhaled, shifting back in his seat. I wasn’t sure if he was about to talk me off the ledge or give me a nudge.

“Well, what about those glitter bomb letters?”

“What glitter bomb letters?”

“I remember seeing something on the news about this company that mails your chosen enemy a letter filled with a pile of glitter. When the dumb sucker opens it, glitter explodes everywhere. They’re finding it in their shit for weeks!” He let out another Larry-sized laugh. “And it comes with this anonymous letter that basically says, someone hates you enough to spend money on a letter filled with glitter. It’s delicious.” It wasn’t a bad idea, but not exactly my brand, either.

“I like the direction you’re heading in, but, maybe something a little less Lisa Frank, a little more Patrick Bateman.” I gave him a look that he’d know was intended for friendly manipulation. “Having his home address wouldn’t hurt, in case I find some inspiration.”

“Say no more, sweetie. I’ll take care of that,” he said with a wink.

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Larry had lifted my spirits so high that it took me forever to leave—I was also putting off whatever was about to unfold with mom. It seems like most kids get to slowly ease their way

into the inevitable swap of becoming the caretaker. They watch their parents age, gradually forget things, move less, get sick more. They wade peacefully into the sea of despair that is caring for a dying parent. And while mom had no detectable ailments, no doctor predicting how many months remained, her boozing and pill-popping would probably send her driving off a cliff before old-age pneumonia would catch her.

I drove through the dark, windows open to the cooled September night, pitch-black all around me. The outstretched lawns and darkened streets might lead someone passing through to believe this town was afforded a level of privacy, the residents tucked away in their cozy wooded corners, but reality proved to be the opposite. No one has a damn thing to do but talk to each other about what everybody else is up to, and if there's nothing good, they make it up.

I headed to my house knowing that mom might not even be there. The car in the parking lot at Shop Rite can mean a lot of things. She probably got drunk at the movie theater, or the bowling alley, and maybe someone drove her home. Maybe Jim picked her up. These are best case scenarios. The worst-case scenario is that she's dead in one of the town's lakes.

As I neared home, I started thinking about dad, the way I always did when I went home. Four years feels like a long time to be without him, but it stings like it happened yesterday, still blurring my eyes whenever I think about it. Before he died, I had never lost someone close to me and I hadn't worried that I would. It left me with something deeper than heartache; it was a physical pain that filled all the negative space between my organs, dark clusters that controlled me.

When I was twelve and trying to survive middle school, there was a pair of girls who gave me a particularly hard time for no reason at all, making fun of everything I wore, everything I said. On one occasion, they had rattled me so deeply that I skipped out on lunch and snuck to the school's payphone to call the house and plead for an early pick-up. Dad was a technician and sometimes worked weekends, leaving him home on random weekdays. He answered the phone when I called that day, and heard my voice quivering on the other end. "Sweetie, what's wrong?"

I explained how the girls had dumped the contents of my backpack in the garbage and begged him to come get me. I didn't care if they had won whatever pre-teen battle this was; I had a white-knuckle grasp on my flag and I was ready to surrender.

"I'm not going to come pick you up, Beck, because we don't back down when faced with a challenge. They want to tear you down and you're not going to let them do that." I nodded silently, but he knew I was listening.

"I want you to go to the bathroom, splash some cool water on your face, take a few deep breaths. Give yourself a minute, and then you're going to get back to your day. If you see them, you lift that chin, you don't look away. You hear me, sweetie? You're not backing down, and they're going to know it."

He was the foundation for which mom and I built everything. Mom and I frazzled easily—stress did not become us—and he was always solid, a devoted bellwether.

Ultimately, it was his stubbornness that killed him. His aorta burst open and he fought the pain for hours, resisting my mom who thought they should go to the hospital, assuring her that it was not that serious. By the time they realized how grave the situation had become, it was too

late. Mom and I sat holding each other in the waiting room, my head on her shoulder and her head on top of mine, her tears running with my own. “It was a cardiac event,” the man in the white coat told me as I gripped the wall. The words floated around me as I drowned in that bleached hospital hallway.

Soon after he died, mom started drinking harder, longer, more often; she began to drown, too.

As I reached the house, I let out of a sigh of relief when I noticed shadowy figures moving around on the screened-in front porch. It couldn’t be thieves, we’ve got nothing of value left in there, so it must be mom and Jim. They’re likely too drunk to pick up her car — or, more likely, too drunk to remember where she left it. I parked in the driveway and headed up the path.

“It’s my BABY!” My mom screeched. It was loud and slurred and I braced myself.

“Hi mom. Jim, that you too?”

“Yeah baby girl, Jim’s here! We’re just enjoying this beautiful night. Isn’t this just the most beautiful fucking weather? Damn, can you even believe how gorgeous this night is? Come have a drink with us, baby!”

Mom always called me baby when she’s drunk. It had been her telltale sign, back when drunkenness was occasional as opposed to daily.

“Jim, move your ass over! My baby girl is gonna sit up right here next to her mommy. Come on, do you want some vodka? I’ll make you a drinky. Are you staying over? I can clear off your bed for you, just have some old stuff I was organizing last week laid out on it. What’s that you’re wearing, baby? All black makes you look like some kind of grim reaper! You look so much better in pink and purple, it makes your eyes look so pretty. She’s so dark and gloomy, in

her all-black all the damn time. Look at her little sour puss, so serious in her black clothes. Isn't she freakin' gorgeous though, Jim? Look at those green eyes. Just like her mommy. What do you want to drink, baby? Gin? Vodka?"

"Mom, why is your car at Shop Rite?"

"Oh, shit!" She leaned back, mouth gaping, tilting her head to the sky and slapping her leg. She's cracking up. "Jim, it's at the damn Shop Rite! I knew it. Jim picked me up walking on Lakeside, I had been down at the bowling alley but I just felt like walking home. You know I'm resourceful as hell. Jim saw me on his way here, so it was perfect. And then I just fucking forgot about that stupid car. Do you want a vodka, baby?"

She popped up from her seat with too much force and immediately stumbled, kicking the bottles arranged on the floor near her feet. Gin, vodka, tonic water, grape juice, Sprite, brown liquid in a bottle with no label. Her loyal subjects placed within reach of her drunken throne.

"Shit!" She squatted on the floor like a kid in a sandbox, not wanting to touch her butt to the grit, but needing to reach her toys.

"So you forgot it was at the Shop Rite again."

"Oh, baby, don't get all parental on me. I forget sometimes! I had some drinks and I didn't drive. Aren't you proud of me? Don't get all serious about it, just have a drink with your mommy."

The past few days had felt like a battle, one that left me shriveled and ill. I looked at my mom, a shadow of who she once was. Once upon a time she wouldn't leave the house without applying lipstick, and now she can be found in the same outfit from last week, roaming the winding streets of this tiny town. My dad had been our strength, but she was once our spirit. I loved watching her at her vanity, mouth slightly parted as she applied mascara above her bright

green eyes. I'd stand there at her side, and she'd eventually turn to me and say, "pucker up, sweetie," before applying a touch of her favorite shade to my tiny mouth. "Never too young to start," she'd say with a smirk. She had all the animation of someone who grew up in Manhattan but never grew cynical about the city or its people; she might be the only New Yorker who loved the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree. Could she remember how incredible she had been? Did she remember all the things she loved so fiercely, or did the booze make her forget every ounce of our former life?

I wanted to forget like her. "I'll have vodka. Splash some of the grape too."

"That's my girl! See Jim? Just like her mommy."

Still squatting amongst her loyal bottles, she reached behind her to grab a plastic cup and quickly mixed my cocktail with her pointer finger. She then stood, wobbling, and handed it to me, before falling back into her chair.

"We can have fun tonight but in the morning we're going to get your car and bring it back to the house. I can't afford to have it towed for you again."

"Ohhh, sure you can, my big business baby! My little writer girl. So freakin' smart, this one. Never lets her mommy down."

I inhaled deeply, and chugged the contents of my cup. "Another."

"See," she said, nodding toward Jim, "never lets her mommy down."

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I had forgotten how bright my old bedroom can be in the morning, with an unobstructed view of the sunrise and no curtains to block out the light because at some point, some blurry day,

mom decided she was going to redecorate, so she took the old ones down. Needless to say, the project was left incomplete. I rubbed my eyes, noticing my dry mouth and pounding head.

I got pretty drunk last night, and at some point, made my way to this room that used to be mine, once so familiar but now just looked random, with someone else's crap strewn about. I pushed myself upright and scanned my surroundings. A plate with bread crust, some cups with liquids of varying colors, and papers, papers, papers; what could all these papers possibly be for? Some were folded like old mail, some blank, some scribbled on. Clothes were on the floor of the open closet but nothing hung from the rack. My heart ached, and I began to sweat. A churning in my stomach let me know I was about to throw up.

I sprinted down the hall to the bathroom and made it to the toilet just in time. After I was empty, pulling myself up, I saw my frightening reflection. A ghost. I looked as dead as I felt. My job is gone, my dad is gone, my mom is on her way, soon I wouldn't have an apartment. Would I have to move back in here? What will happen to us? Grey Gardens without the family fortune or engaging personalities. No one would watch our movie.

Before I returned to my own life's mess, I had to at least take care of mom's car situation and get her back on track, whatever track that was. My head throbbed, the uncertainty of it all spinning around me, making it impossible to focus. Deep in thought and full of conflicting emotions, I emerged from the bathroom to find Jim standing before me in the hallway, and I jumped.

“Jim, you scared me.”

“You okay Beck?”



“Oh, yeah. Just had a little too much to drink on an empty stomach. Can’t knock them back like mom can. I have to get her up so we can go get her car. Does she have the keys?”

“I hope not, because she’s gone.”

It took me a beat to respond “What?”

“She’s gone. We went to bed last night, I slept in the living room, but I just checked her room. The bed is a mess but she’s gone. I looked around outside already. Her purse is gone too, I think. She went somewhere.”

“Somewhere? Where the fuck is a drunk lady with no car going to go in a town like this? The bowling alley isn’t even open yet!”

“I’m not sure. She likes Bingo Fridays at Tiff’s Corner, but that’s not until three. She’ll probably appear before then, but I just don’t know.”

“Does she do this to you often? Just leave? Just go walking somewhere in town without a *fucking* word?!” My mouth began to water, and I thought I might throw up again.

“We’ll find her. She does go walking sometimes, but she always comes back. We can go look for her, I can drive us.”

“No. You’ve done enough, Jim, really. Your job here is done. Thanks a-fucking-lot for enabling a woman who is probably going to walk her drunk ass straight off a mountain.”

My anger toward Jim was displaced, but I was without options. I couldn’t tell the difference between my hangover and my rage. I turned my back on him to return to the bathroom and clean myself up; I would have to go and look for her, I thought, as that familiar desperate helplessness hatched inside my gut. Just then I heard my phone *\*ding\** from back in my bedroom, and I sprinted, hoping it was mom, wherever she was.

It was Larry, who had been busy back at the office. “Hi sweetie. It was so great seeing you yesterday. I hope your mom is okay. Just wanted you to know I got Tim’s address. Do with it what you will, I won’t tell ;) 425 Washington Boulevard, Jersey City. Let’s make another plan to meet soon.”

I stood there with my phone in my hand, staring at the address, and my face began to burn, thinking about all we take for granted. I took my job for granted, Tim’s friendship, too. I took my dad’s life for granted, so had mom. Mom took me for granted. Who are we without these things, these people — things and people that we rely on? There’s no telling what we’ll do, who we’ll become, when those blessings dissolve, and there’s nothing left to lose.

I punched Tim’s address into my GPS app — 56 minutes away. I grabbed my keys, walked out of my dirty, disheveled home, a home I had once adored, and into the morning sunlight. It’s a new day, and I have work to do.

## Someone Else's Chaos

I woke with the familiar neck pain of a night spent on the couch. The sun was pouring into the living room so I knew we were well past dawn, but I hadn't heard anyone moving around the house. Boy did we drink last night, boy did we drink. Elaine can drink more than almost anyone I know, aside from me, and I can drink a lot. On a normal Thursday we usually conquer a couple bottles, but her kid was here, or is here, not sure if she's run off yet, but either way, it put us in celebration mode. That's what Elaine was calling it, anyway. It was really no different than any other night on her porch, we just killed off an extra bottle.

This couch is comfortable, I like it here in this house. It's messy, really messy. Elaine can't keep up with any of it. I try to help where I can, pay some bills if it's going to keep the electricity on, stuff like that. My house is empty, basically. After Jan died, I had to clear all that stuff out. Couldn't look at a damn thing without thinking of her face, the last time I saw her face, Jesus, that face haunts me. So I basically had to clear out the whole damn place, and now there's just empty rooms, for the most part. I'd move if I could, but I can't. So I just sleep here a lot. The couch is nice, and I don't mind a little crick in the neck. At my age, I've got all sorts of aches and pains, so it's just one more on the old list.

We'll have to get Elaine's car today; she's always leaving that damn car somewhere. I'm glad she doesn't drive home, but she can't just go wandering around all the time. This town, it's so dark on every street, not a single street light, no sidewalks. She just roams and roams, and I'm not sure if she's looking for something, or if she just needs to go, needs to move. Maybe she

wants a car to just take her out, quick and painless. I understand it. But she could also end up in the hospital for a few months in a full body cast. Boy, she'd love those pain pills.

Swinging my feet around, I come to sit and face the sun coming through the window. No curtains, another one of Elaine's unfinished projects. The woman, bless her damn heart, but she always thinks the next project is going to be the answer. She doesn't know what I already learned about these things: nothing makes it home again, once they're dead. It's always the home you lived in with them, the home you lost them in, their life and death in every room, every corner. You can change the sheets, the curtains, the paintings on the wall. They're in the structure, they're part of it. Every night you'll go to sleep knowing they're gone; but in the morning, for just one slice of a second, when your eyes are still adjusting to the light, you'll think they're asleep on the other side of the bed. You turn, and remember they're gone, and you're back at the beginning.

I hope Elaine made it to her room, I don't want her kid seeing her in the hallway or, God forbid, the kitchen floor again. That time she left the oven on all night, boy was it hot in that kitchen. I don't always see Elaine to her room at night, and most of the time I just sleep out here. Her kid probably thinks I'm using her for something. She probably thinks I'm weird, quiet. I get it. It's okay. It takes a long time to learn another person's stories. Lord knows I've got a lot of my own. She probably has a few, too. She is Elaine's kid, after all.

I've got to figure out what the scene is. Pretty sure the kid went to her room, hopefully Elaine did the same. But as I'm making my way down the hall, seeing that her door's open, that's not a good sign. Elaine prefers to close herself in. This room doesn't get the morning sun,

and it's the only room where she's got blankets pinned up over the windows, since she took all the curtains down. She makes this room dark as a bear's den in order to sleep, or try, at least. It doesn't come easy for her. She said she hears her husband calling for her at night. I get it. It happens for me too, different but the same. We carry that responsibility. We both know it's our fault. Can't shake that fact from our brains, can't convince us otherwise. Just have to figure out how to live with it.

Elaine's bed is mussed, so she slept here, or she tried to. The bathroom door is open, but it's empty, so it's time to search the grounds.

The porch, the backyard, the side yard. The pond, the crawl space under the porch, the field just beyond the property line. God, where did that woman go. Not today. Her kid is going to wake up and freak out. I'm worried, of course, but this is par for the course with Elaine. I'm used to it, in a way, that I hardly wonder when she'll be back, because she always returns. But her kid doesn't know that, how she disappears, even without her car. I don't blame Beck for keeping her distance, but because she doesn't know what happens around here, she won't understand that her mom is probably going to return in a few hours, likely unscathed. She'll worry anyway. I get it. If I had a kid, I'd hope she'd love me enough to care that much. It's none of my business, but I always wonder why Elaine doesn't quit drinking because of her kid. Doesn't she know how lucky she is, to have that remaining piece of her old life? It's enough, I'd think. It's none of my business, though.

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When Beck woke up, I tried to talk to her. I thought we'd go out and look for Elaine together. I didn't want to tell her that I don't usually wander far from the house when Elaine is off on one of her little excursions. I didn't want her thinking I didn't go out looking because I don't care. In my experience, it's better to be here when she gets back, God forbid she's hurt, or disoriented. It has happened. Nothing too serious, but it's been a blessing that I've been here. I help her get cleaned up, help her get back to baseline. But her kid was freaked, I knew that would happen. I said we could go out and look for her, but boy, did she blow me off. It's okay. I didn't take it personally. She went out looking, I guess, or maybe she just went home. I wouldn't blame her. It's hard to love people like me and Elaine. It's part of why we stick together.

Looking around at this mess and I'm not quite sure what my next move should be. I cleaned one time, while Elaine was out roaming, boy did she lose it on me when she got back. She said it made her feel out of sorts. "You can't just go around organizing someone else's chaos," I think that's what she said. It sounds strange, I know, but I knew what she meant. You don't want someone else sticking their hands in your mess. It's one thing to invite them in as a spectator, but that's not permission to go and try sorting it out.

I felt a restlessness growing inside me, the kind that usually didn't take hold until later in the afternoon, when it's time for the day's first drink. I was in no mood to sit still, so I figure the only thing to do is go out looking.

I decide it's best to drive towards the center of town, Elaine might be headed that way. Winding through the heavily wooded streets, I'm thinking about my own house. It's in an extra quiet corner of the town, set high up on a hill, the driveway winds up the side of it like something from a story book. Jan loved that house, loved how high up it sat, she said climbing the driveway

felt like a ride at an amusement park. I would watch her face light up as we'd drive towards the sky, in those early days when we just moved in, everything was sweet back then.

The bowling alley, the rec field, several parking lots, and nothing, no Elaine. After checking the bathrooms at the Burger King I realize I'm hungry as can be, and get myself some food to-go. I'm heading back to my car when I see a familiar face—not the one I was hoping for, but friendly nonetheless.

A short but stocky police officer approached me. "Jimmy Goodacre! Hey, buddy." It was Mouse; Jeff "Mouse" Connolly, to be exact. Known this guy since we were just kids, running around this town, making all sorts of trouble. Boy, was he a small kid in high school, after everybody else sprang up, for the most part. I often felt bad for him, always getting picked on. He fared better once he embraced the whole thing about his size, didn't bristle at the nickname. Now he teaches the local D.A.R.E. program and the kids love him, call him Officer Mouse, boy do they get a kick out of that nickname. Seems a little strange, if you ask me, though I guess it's working for him. But that's none of my business.

"Well, Mouse Connolly, it's been a long time."

"That just means you're staying out of trouble, right?" He pat me on the arm. "How's it going Jimmy?"

"Oh, you know, just trying to guarantee another scolding from my doctor, can't stay away from this stuff," I said, shrugging with the bag of fast food in my hand. "What's happening on the streets today, Mouse?" The town knows I spend a lot of my time with Elaine, and if I approach from a soft angle, he might help me out.

“Nothing new out here, same old shenanigans. You heard about that accident last weekend? I was on scene for that wreck, couldn’t believe the kids survived that one.” He paused—there was something else he wanted to say, but he was hesitating.

“Hey, have you seen Elaine lately? Her car’s in the parking lot at the Shop Rite and they’re going to tow it again if she doesn’t pick it up today.”

“Well, I’m actually glad you brought that up. I’m having a little trouble getting a location on Elaine, right now. I know it’s not technically a missing person yet, but if you’re out cruising today, wouldn’t mind it if you kept your eye out for her.” He stared at me for a few seconds, and I recognized the look on his face, because I saw it a lot after Jan died: it was pity. I don’t mind. If the worst someone does to you is feel sorry for you, that’s not so bad.

“Sure, Jimmy. I’ll keep an eye out for her and I’ll give you a call, I’ve still got your cell number, so I’ll call you if anything comes up. But hey, take care of yourself, okay? There aren’t enough Jimmy Goodacres in the world. You’re a good one, buddy.” He grasped my arm again, and gave it a couple firm pats before walking off.

They think that, just because I don’t wear it on my sleeve like Elaine, that I’m not a pressure cooker, letting all the worst things build up inside me.

Back in the car, I head over to the Shop Rite to check on Elaine’s car and scope out a couple spots in the strip mall. I pull into the lot and head to the back, and sure enough, there sits her car. I park next to it, now facing the row of stores connected to the supermarket, and my eyes settle on the blue lights of the Ice Box. I took Jan there a thousand times, boy, did she love ice cream. When she got pregnant the first time, she said she was going to make me take her down



here every night. We had a laugh, and compromised on every other. She always ordered the same thing: hot fudge sundae with walnuts, whipped cream, and an extra cherry. She experienced joy like a child, big and romantic. It was part of why I loved her so much, how she beamed without trying.

The fries now gone, I lick my salty fingers, remembering how Jan would squeal when I'd do that, lick my hands after eating anything that left it's seasoning behind. It's a different kind of pain, to miss someone like Jan.

It was pure luck and surprise to come into so much money the way that I did, with my mean old grandpa leaving his entire fortune to me, and boy was it a fortune. Jan and I were living in our little split-level back then, on the other side of town, and we didn't mind at all, but boy, were we excited to come into all that money. We could send our kids—the kids we hadn't yet tried to have—to college, and graduate school, and law school, and ten trips around the world, if they wanted. I decided to keep working, just to keep my sanity, but that was when Jan decided she'd quit her job and stay home, just take care of the house, get pregnant. We'd have kids soon enough, we thought.

The miscarriages were harder on her, that much I know. They were hard on me too, but for her, it was different. After the third, she just seemed to drift. Eyes didn't focus on much at all. Couldn't get her to eat. I'd find her upstairs, on the floor of her closet, that big closet that she loved so much. She'd be curled in a ball, sometimes asleep, sometimes crying. I can't say for sure, because I was out of the house during the day, but that's probably when she started spending most of her time in there, taking more pills each day, pushing her body to its limit, whether she knew it or not.

I don't know if I could have made a difference, but I know I wasn't looking closely enough. It's the only reason why, like silk, she slipped through my fingers.

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We still have the benefit of long days, this early in September, but it will be dark eventually, and there was no sign of Elaine at her house, no sign she had been there at all. I turned the porch light on, and sat out there for a little while, surrounded by empty bottles, thinking about the first time I met her, the first night I sat on that porch.

I knew of Elaine for years, just seeing her with her family around town, you recognize most people in a town this size. And of course, I had heard when her husband died. But we didn't speak until a couple years ago, when she was getting loud with someone at the bowling alley. I heard the commotion and saw that she was poking Rosco in the chest, a big guy, manager of the joint. I'm not sure why I got involved, I hardly ever get mixed up in other people's business, but I've known Rosco for years, so I stepped in and said I'd get her out of there.

Once outside, we leaned against my car, smoked a couple cigarettes, shared my flask.

"So you've got a dead wife, right Jim?" Her bluntness caught me off guard, but the honesty was disarming. It didn't surprise me that she'd heard some version of my story.

"Well, if you want to be crass about it, sure. She passed away some time ago."

"I've got a dead husband, you know. Died right there in front of me. Dead, dead, dead, right there in front of me," she said, pointing down at the ground to the rhythm of her words. "It was my fault, you know."

"Me too."

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I was the one who found her, but I was too late. She wanted out, I think. Wanted out from this life. Couldn’t take the pain of living anymore. I get that.”

I remember that moment because her eyes filled with tears, and I had forgotten what it was like, for someone to trust you like that, to talk about how they felt.

We went back to her house that night, drank on the porch until sunrise, actually had ourselves a good time. It was the only time we were ever intimate, actually. In the morning, we knew that’s not really what we wanted from each other. For us, a friendship looked like a shot at survival.

In this town where we’re all spread out, but also stuck together, intertwined, really, you can see and hear for miles. As I sat on Elaine’s porch, still as a statue, listening in the distance, I willed her to come back to her home. Maybe I’d hear the leaves rustling, or feet shuffling on the paved road, and she’d appear. I don’t like to worry, but a fear was growing in my chest.

After some time at Elaine’s, I felt restless enough to head back into town for one last loop, and this time decided to circle through my own neighborhood, which I had avoided earlier. I try to stay away when I can, but the sun going down felt like a call to action, and I couldn’t sit still. Now, sitting at the bottom of my driveway, unable to go inside, looking up at my house on the hill, the house Jan loved so much, I can see her face: lidded eyes, still warm to the touch. I had pulled her in, I begged for her to say something, to wake up. I yelled louder, thinking she just couldn’t hear me. I’d never begged for anything like that, there on my knees in the closet, holding my wife, her body slack in my arms.

When the EMTs arrived, they tried to resuscitate her, there on her closet floor. They pumped her chest, and I couldn't look away, her body had never looked so small as it did beneath their hands.

The sound of my phone ringing startled me deeply; I don't get many calls. I looked down to see a number I didn't recognize, and hoped it'd be Mouse with some news. "Hello?"

"Is this Jim?" It was a young woman's voice that sounded familiar. "Yes, who's this?"

"It's Beck, Elaine's daughter." I puzzled over how she might have gotten my phone number, but held on for good news.

"Oh, hello there. Has your mom returned?"

"No. Look, Jim. Do you know about any of this business of my mom and the cops in this town?"

"What do you mean? How they're always picking her up and what not?"

"No...well, that's part of it. Look, I can't really explain right now. Are you at the house?" I suddenly realized how desperate she sounded, the urgency in her voice. My heartbeat quickened.

"No, but I can head that way, if you need me to." "I do. I'll be there in ten."

She hung up and I started my car. It scared me, to think about other messes Elaine might have made outside her home, ones I didn't know about. It scared me more to think that I would be the one to try and clean them up.

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