

SPENCER LOUGH

Homecoming

If Collin could have slept for even the last five minutes of the trip, he would have. He actually wondered if doing so could be used as an excuse to miss his stop completely. But the bus lumbered and shook at every nook in the road, as if it were too large for the tires that kept it moving. The commotion robbed him of any rest. He turned to see a gaunt young woman in the seat across the aisle, sleeping like a baby. Whatever she's hooked on, Collin thought, I'd kill for some right now. Then, her eyes shot open as the bus came squealing to a halt.

The whistle of the air brakes was enough to tell Collin where he was, though he still looked out the window to confirm the world outside. Sure enough, there was the station greeting him with its sunken canopy and rusty columns, all visible due to a flickering bulb hanging overhead. Had he been back since last Christmas? Or had he neglected coming home

for last year's holidays? He contemplated doing the same this year, hoping that he could skip Christmas like one of his early morning classes. But Collin had received his father's phone call to news of another kind—news of his sister's hospitalization.

There was no panic in the voice on the other end. Still hungover, Collin had answered, but was prepared to combat homecoming requests with a lie about a research program that would keep him over break. Then he heard his father say that Lilah had overdosed, and he realized that bad news cured a night of drinking better than a cold shower and a pot of coffee. He became alert—perhaps to his detriment; so focused on the totality of this information, he couldn't make out its components. He could only catch echoes of the words: "OxyContin," "3:00 A.M.," "ambulance," "stomach pump." Then, his father's "I need you here." And that snapped him back to life.

Collin stayed in his bus seat for as long as he could. But even the strung-out woman next to him shook herself awake and left. He could hesitate no longer. Hoisting his Ohio State travel bag over his shoulder, he trudged towards the bus door. Neither he nor the driver acknowledged each other.

There wasn't much hustle or bustle in the terminal—just a few solitary folks hunched on separate benches. The building itself had a stylized architecture that Collin couldn't name. All he knew was that it appeared to him like the '50s diners he'd seen in movies, with a rounded façade and chrome trimming. Its claustrophobic size and the stench of leather upholstery caused Collin to sweat through the blustery weather. What a perfect introduction, he thought, to visitors of this town. He checked his watch: 7:30 PM. His bus had arrived early, but he figured that his father had too. So he passed through the turnstiles and headed for the parking lot where he knew that he'd be waiting.

Sure enough, his father's GMC Sonoma was parked right next to the front entrance. It was running, and the old truck's engine could be felt even from the lobby. Snow had begun

to fall, and the headlights made the flakes appear like ghostly dust. Collin pushed through the revolving door, but hesitated while still insulated between its glassy frames. Reaching into his coat pocket, he fumbled around for his stocking cap. He pulled it over his ears, took a deep breath, and rotated through to the other side. Four quick bounds, and then he leapt into the passenger seat. Slamming the door behind him, he was greeted with the blast of the truck's furnace and a smile from his dad.

"Hey," his father said, in his usual, offhanded way. It's been a year, Collin thought, and it's as if he last saw me at lunch. It's as if we're going to a football game, instead of Franciscan Hospital.

"Hey," Collin responded, gritting his teeth while doing so.

"How was the ride?"

"Just as long as always."

"Of course. There aren't any shortcuts between here and Columbus." With that, he backed out of his parking spot and headed for the highway.

Collin turned to his father, and saw that he was wearing denim coveralls under his unzipped, Carhartt jacket.

"Another uniform," Collin said. "Where are you working now?"

"Travis Bannon had something for me at his auto shop. I hated to ask, but he told me years ago that his door was always open."

"You actually went to work today?"

"Okay, listen: Travis is doing me a favor with this. He's paying me well, and he expects me to be there every day. Lilah wouldn't get to spend one night there without him. Trust me, I stayed with her as long as I could. And I intend to spend tonight with her."

Collin turned his gaze out his window and let out a small chuckle. What a coincidence, he thought as they passed the shuttered landscape of what had been XYZ Steel. His father

had once called the depths of the furnace his office before they shut their doors. When it occurred, Collin was only as fluent in finance as a middle schooler could be. To him, he had imagined the worst case scenario to be his father potentially having to work behind the deep fryer at the local Burger King. But such never came to pass. Apart from muffled arguments coming from the kitchen late at night, he and Lilah never felt the full sting of the effects. Collin's family had spent two years relying on his mother, who had to acquire a second job during the worst of the economic malaise. Second grade teacher by day, waitress by night. His father never found steady employment, but was fluent in enough trades that he could bounce from one job to another should one go under. The family stayed afloat, and he and Lilah never saw the violent, cresting waves. That was, until their mother died of cancer.

It started with the phrase "high-grade serious carcinoma," which Collin didn't recognize. He only had rudimentary knowledge when his mother laid it out as "ovarian cancer." But he knew what "chemotherapy" was, and he understood it even better when he caught glimpses of his mother staring at her bare scalp in the bathroom mirror. His father tried to keep up with the bills, but his efforts could not prevent a "For Sale" sign appearing in their front lawn. They became lessees of a farmhouse far from town. The chaos framed Collin's time at high school, and it fueled his furious scramble to the top of his class. College visits, acceptance letters, scholarship applications—all in the months of his mother's most anguished emergency room visits. It culminated in his speech at graduation, which he dedicated to the mother who could not be there. At completion, the auditorium erupted in applause. By the next week, she was gone.

And Collin left as well, leaving his father and sister on the farmhouse while he headed for Columbus.

"The Buckeyes have looked good this season," his father said. "I wanted to get down there for a game, but I've been working Saturdays at the shop. I don't suppose you can get

tickets for a bowl game, can you?"

"No. They're too expensive, even at the student discount rate." Why am I engaging? Collin thought. Why *this* conversation on the way to the emergency room? Is this really better than sitting in silence until we get there?

Then, as his father took a sharp turn onto the exit ramp, a thin object tumbled across the dashboard to the passenger side of the truck. His father stuck a hand out to keep it in place, but it had already landed in Collin's lap. Though he couldn't see well in the dark cab, Collin was struck by its texture: strange, but familiar, and similar to that of the duller of sandpapers. He flipped on the dome light, which revealed a glittering silver toy wand in his hands.

"What's this?"

"About that," his father said, with a tone of slight embarrassment. "You remember that Disney Princess wand we got Lilah for Christmas way back when?"

"Oh my God, is this it? How could I forget? She took this stupid thing everywhere."

"I know!" His father broke into a laugh. "I once had to come into a conference with her kindergarten teacher because she whacked a kid on the back of the head with this thing. Of course, Lilah said that she did it to 'banish him from her kingdom.' I thought it was a perfectly good excuse. Unfortunately, her teacher didn't. So the wand ended up getting banned from school."

"I can't believe you've actually kept this for so long."

"Your mother used to hang onto all this kind of stuff. I've got totes and totes of everything from handmade pencil holders to spelling quizzes. Believe it or not, she used to get so excited whenever we reorganized the attic; it gave her an excuse to sift through all those dusty totes. Before I came over to pick you up, I stopped at home and... I don't know... I just found myself up there doing the same thing. And when I found that old wand, I couldn't help but laugh. I guess it's just one of your mother's habits that rubbed off on me."

Collin tried to doze off, but failed to do so under the intense scream of the waiting room lights. He had been at the hospital for an hour, patiently waiting for his father to end his visit so that he could begin his. Both wanted to speak with Lilah, but Collin thought they should do it separately. He sold his father on the idea that he didn't want some kind of gushy group hug that occurred at the end of sitcoms. It was enough to convince him. So Collin let his father present her with the wand, while he tortured his ass on a dingy tweed sofa in the corner of the waiting room.

He was the only one there—except, of course, for the receptionist behind her tiny glass window. Old copies of *Time* and *Reader's Digest* littered the faux-wood table in front of him. A half-hour earlier, in fidgety desperation, he had snatched a magazine up to thumb through; the constant scrolling his phone required had begun to force his thumb to jitter, and he thought the pages might provide a respite. However, when he had broken away to delve into a 9-month-old copy of *National Geographic*, he flipped the pages incessantly, only able to read the captions beneath photos of Tibetan vistas and the planet Mars. By the time he reached the cigarette ad on the inside of the back cover, only five minutes had passed. So he tossed the tattered reading down and dug into his pocket for another dose of Snapchat stories.

Finally, the creaking of the door hinge broke the monotonous buzz of the fluorescent bulbs. Collin craned his neck up, relieved to see that his father had emerged. But even for a man his age, he looked weathered. Maybe it's the harsh light, Collin thought, throwing shadows in his face's craters.

"You're next," his father said, looking at Collin while pointing to the doorway with his thumb. Collin shoved his phone into his pocket and was about to ask how their visit went. But before he could even open his mouth to form the words, he watched his father turn away from him and toward

the bathroom. He sauntered over there and submerged himself in its confines, leaving the heavy door to slam under its own weight. And once more, Collin was alone in the waiting room.

Room 4-D. The last one on the right. Collin opened the door to the cavernous, linoleum hallway. More fluorescent lights buzzing, but they spotlighted a different scene. He passed nurses rolling gurneys and IVs to rooms in hallways far beyond. Doctors hustled, then halted. Looking down, checking clipboards, and physician's assistants standing at attention--then, off again to fight another battle. Electrons zipping wildly, out of sight and back again, where bewilderment hides the pattern that lies underneath. Collin couldn't help but think that he was standing in the way. But he made it to Lilah's room, turning around to see the chaos from behind. Then, he opened the door.

"Collin?" Her voice was raspy, and she had to lean forward when he walked in. She may have recognized him, but he was looking at someone who did not correlate with memory. Collin remembered Lilah's light-brown, wavy hair that used to stream around her full face. Now, however, her eyes sunk back into their sockets, and her cheekbones were visible. They were framed by jet black hair trimmed with streaks of red. An IV tube snaked its way into her vein.

"Hey," Collin said, doing his best to sound offhanded. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm doing alright, I guess." A smile flashed across her face. "I'm still a little groggy, though."

"You don't mind me visiting, do you? I don't want to keep you up if you'd rather rest." Collin would have turned around right then had he been given permission.

"No, it's fine. I've been getting plenty of rest all day. There's a chair over here if you'd rather sit down."

Collin meandered over to the leather chair at the left side of her bed. He placed his elbows on his knees and looked up at the television. It was playing a *Seinfeld* rerun that he

instantly recognized. "So, have you seen this episode? It's the one where they get lost in the parking garage."

"Collin, cut the bullshit." He turned to see her staring right at him. "I know why you're here."

"Alright, fine." Collin returned her gaze and stuck his jaw out. No use keeping a poker face when someone's seen your cards. "How did you find that bottle?"

"I moved into your old room after you left," Lilah said rather flippantly. "It always was the bigger of the two. Since Dad was at work that summer, it was up to me to do it all--to find everything you hid. And, lo and behold, a tiny orange bottle just so happened to tumble out of the same shoebox where you stashed your porn. Jesus, you might've just as well left it out in the middle of the living room."

Fuck, Collin thought. *If only I flushed them down the toilet when I had the chance.* "So why even bother touching the stuff, then? I figured you knew better than that."

"I'm sorry? Is the kid who used to steal Mom's painkillers chastising *me* about immorality?"

"I'm chastising you about stupidity," he returned, without missing a beat. She had thrown the bait, but Collin swam right by it; he had accepted that Lilah must've read the name on the side of the bottle long ago. "My friends and I did dumb shit in high school, but we never ended up in the emergency room."

"Of course! The high and mighty prodigy returns to share his wisdom. Y'know, you may think you've got everything figured out, but you're more clueless than me."

"Really? At least I wasn't so clueless as to accidentally overdose on OxyContin while trying to impress my friends."

"You're just proving my point! I wasn't even with them last night."

"So who, then?" Collin's hands were clutching his knee caps, his face coming closer to the bed. "Some older guys you wanted to fuck?"

"No!" Lilah leaned forward as well.

“Or maybe it’s a popular group of whores who you desperately wanted to impress.”

“NO!”

“Well then who were you with, goddammit?” Collin rose to his feet and slammed his palms on her mattress. “Who?!”

“No one!” she screamed at him, revealing an anger in her eyes that was behind wells of tears. “I was by myself, locked in my room. I wasn’t trying to impress anyone.”

“Why did you do it, then?” Collin asked. At that, Lilah slowly sunk back into her bed sheets. Her expression was that of a physicist watching a mushroom cloud. She put her head on her pillow and turned her face away. “Lilah...” No acknowledgement. “Why did you do it?” Only her heavy breathing seemed able to respond.

“You were able to run away,” she finally said. “Mom was able to run away. I wanted to run away, too.”



The leather of the steering wheel felt cold in Collin’s grip. He looked over at his father in the passenger seat, whose wrinkled face was turned toward the window. Collin couldn’t tell if he was asleep or awake, and could barely tell when he had walked into the waiting room to tell him he had finished. His father hadn’t said a word, just got up and followed. When they reached the Sonoma, his father handed the keys to him despite Collin’s protest; it’d been a year since he’d last driven on that gravel, and he was unsure if he could remember the way to the farmhouse. It’d been a year since he’d driven anything at all. And the snow was coming down harder, and the night was darker than before. But his father hadn’t said a word, his lips pierced tightly so that his skin stretched over his sunken cheeks. Even in the dim twilight, Collin could see the capillaries branching over his father’s temples.

He looked down at the digital clock on the dashboard: 10:00 PM. Its neon glow was practically the only light this far from town—that and the headlights, which rushed toward

falling snow like the truck was blasting off through space. But each pothole and snowdrift that shook the truck reminded Collin that the tires were on the ground. At those times, he turned to his father and was amazed to find him still.

After a few accidental detours, Collin came to County Road 100 North. That was the right one, wasn't it? Or was it 150 North? He turned left down 100, sticking to his gut. The snow was slowing in intensity, which came as a relief as Collin scoured the left side of the road for the farmhouse. Or was it the right side? Left, he thought. It has to be.

After driving until the clock read 10:30, Collin decided that he'd exhausted 100 North, and turned around so that he could head to 150. Shit, he thought to himself, I could've sworn this was the one. While driving back, the clouds broke apart, and moonlight illuminated Collin's previously shrouded surroundings. For the first time on that drive, he noticed the expanse of harvested fields in all directions. Endless frozen husks surrounded his tiny strip of road. Only on the horizon did he see the silhouettes of skeletal trees.