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## Sometimes I Think I'm Going Crazy

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Sometimes I Think I'm Going Crazy

By  
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
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## **STORY #1: The Antelope**

### **April 4, 2020: Two Weeks After Mandatory “Stay-At-Home” Order Issued**

Tom sat at his kitchen table with a glass of gin and stared out the window. It was four o'clock in the morning and even though it was dark outside, he kept staring, wondering how many people were doing the exact same thing. He wished he could talk to them in person, but even if everyone wasn't ordered to stay inside, what would they have to say? Would they tell each other it would all work itself out? Would any of them believe it?

One week ago, in a past life, Tom had been the owner of The Antelope, a modestly successful bar started by his great grandfather in the nineteen twenties and willed to every generations first born when the previous generation passed away. The bar had survived through ninety-eight years; seventeen presidential administrations and four generations of the O'Connell family. It hadn't been easy, each generation was given its own set of unique challenges, but the restaurant had endured. Through prohibition to the 2008 recession, through the lean years and the robust, one thing in the O'Connell family could be counted on, The Antelope would be open for business. Until now.

Tom didn't usually drink, and when he did, it was never this early in the morning. But today he couldn't sleep, and needed something to calm his nerves, nerves that had been frayed seemingly beyond repair over the past week.

In the span of the last seven days, his daughter had returned home early from her sophomore year at college and his ninety-year old mother had moved in, as well. The Antelope had been closed indefinitely and now with the prospect that he wouldn't be able to reopen until summertime, or possibly even later, he was tasked with firing all his employees, some

which had been with the restaurant for decades. He'd kept them on the payroll, hopeful the current situation proved temporary, but now forced to quarantine inside his house, he knew that just wasn't sustainable anymore. He had fourteen employees whom he planned on calling throughout the morning. This is why he couldn't sleep. This is why he drank gin.

Tom knew this would probably be the first of many solo, morning drinking sessions he'd have over the coming months, but with four people now living in a two-bedroom house – Tom and his wife currently slept in the basement – he appreciated the privacy. He liked the silence. Being alone afforded him the time necessary to sort through, and hopefully come to terms with, how drastically his life had changed. The Antelope was dead, and even given the current circumstances, he couldn't help but think it was his fault. He took a sip of his drink and continued staring out the window. Periodically, his glass would become empty and he would refill it. Unconcerned with the time, Tom sat and drank and thought. And when he couldn't think anymore, he just sat and drank. When he couldn't drink anymore, he just sat. And then he fell asleep.

Tom awoke to his mother's metal cane being thrust repeatedly into his ribs. Initially, he didn't know where he was or what was happening, but opening his eyes brought him, reluctantly, back into the moment.

"Hi mom," Tom said, rubbing the now tender spot on his torso. His mother, Evelyn, dressed in a nightgown, used the cane to shuffle to the other side of the table and sat down. She remained silent, staring at Tom as if she was trying to look through him instead of at him.

"I know what you're going to say, mom, so – "

“And what’s that?” Her calm tone was almost threatening. She placed her cane casually on her lap.

Tom looked out the window. The sun was just beginning to rise.

“I shouldn’t handle my problems by drinking. I should do better. I should *be* better.”

Tom recapped the gin bottle and placed it on the floor, suddenly embarrassed by its presence.

“You should be better,” Evelyn echoed, continuing to stare through her son.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“You’re an O’Connell,” Evelyn said, as if Tom needed reminding. Her tone was a mixture of disappointment and condemnation. Tom opened his mouth to apologize again, but his mother cut him off.

“And O’Connell’s drink fucking whiskey.” Evelyn motioned for Tom to pass her his glass. He stood up and retrieved for her a glass of her own.

“O’Connell’s have *always* handled their problems by drinking,” Evelyn continued, reaching into the pocket of her nightgown and pulling out a flask. “Why do you think my father opened a fucking bar?” She poured some of the contents of the flask into her glass then slid the flask to her son, now seated once more across from her, so he could do the same. “It’s good to see you’ve finally seen the light.”

Tom smiled and poured what remained of the flask into his glass. He nodded in silent agreement then slid the flask back to the other end of the table, where it disappeared once more in the pocket of the nightgown.

“If you start your day with good Irish whiskey, that means you’re going to have yourself a good Irish day,” Tom said, repeating the refrain his father gave nearly every morning before taking a hearty swallow from a whiskey bottle then heading off to work.

“If you start your day with a cocktail, you’re an alcoholic. With whiskey, you’re just Irish,” Evelyn said, repeating her husband’s other refrain, the one he used when anyone challenged his drinking habits.

“May he rest in peace,” Tom said, raising his glass high for a toast. Evelyn echoed the sentiments and raised hers as well.

“What do you think he’d think of all of this?” Tom said, standing to retrieve the whiskey bottle from the pantry.

“He wouldn’t approve of you drinking alone.”

Tom decided against mentioning how his father died from cirrhosis of the liver. In large part, from drinking alone.

“You know what I mean,” Tom said, setting the bottle in front of his mother and reclaiming his seat.

“Right now, there are three generations of O’Connell’s under one roof. I know your Pa’d be proud of that.” She took hold of the bottle and refilled her flask first, spilling little whiskey on the ground in the process. “And I know he’d be proud of you. Your fondness of gin, notwithstanding.” She refilled her glass and took a sip.

Over the years, Tom had seen his parents drink barrelfuls of whiskey, but not once had he ever seen either of them drunk. This made Tom reluctant to complain about his hangover or

how the sunlight now streaming in through the window made his headache worse every time he turned his head.

“And The Antelope will be fine,” Evelyn continued. “It’s seen much darker days than this.” She passed him the bottle and motioned for him to drink. “Hair of the dog, me boy.”

“I don’t know about that, mom,” Tom said, leaving the bottle untouched and his glass empty. “I just...don’t know.”

“About what? Drinking or the bar? Because I’ll tell you, both will be in your life long after I’m gone.”

“Drinking...maybe,” Tom acquiesced. “But the bar’s in trouble, mom.”

“Your great grandfather opened a bar during *Prohibition*. What’s bigger trouble than that?”

“He opened a *restaurant* during Prohibition. People came for the food.”

“People came for the *booze*. They *stayed* for the food.” Evelyn punctuated her point by tapping her cane on the tabletop. She eyed his yet untouched drink.

“And now they can’t have either.” He mirrored her by knocking his knuckles on the tabletop.

“Prohibition lasted for thirteen years. This won’t even last thirteen days. And if you’re not going to drink then give me back my whiskey.” Tom reluctantly handed her the bottle.

“When optimism and sadism meet, then you get a prediction like that.” Tom rolled his eyes and shook his head.



“SARS, Ebola, West Nile, this is merely the flavor of the month.” She uncapped the whiskey, put her nose to the mouth of the bottle and inhaled through her nose as if smelling a flower. She closed her eyes and smiled. “If I wanted to go outside, would you let me?”

“We’re on lockdown, mom.” He watched as Evelyn took a sip from the bottle then gurgled the contents around in her mouth like it was mouthwash.

“So that’s a no?” She said, barely audible with her mouth still full.

“That’s a no.”

“I’ve seen much worse than this,” she said, when finally finished gurgling.

“Like what?”

“Hitler.” She casually refilled her glass.

Tom wasn’t about to sit and argue which was worse, Covid-19 or Hitler. All he could do was roll his eyes.

“The whole world’s gone crazy. You’d do well to act with a little sense,” Evelyn said, seemingly offended that Tom thought the virus was worse than Hitler.

“I should say the same to you! If you get this thing, you have a thirty percent chance of dying. Did you know that?”

“Hitler killed –“

“Hitler wasn’t invisible! Hitler wasn’t going to kill you if you walked outside this house!” He said this louder than intended.

“This virus isn’t an army of Nazi’s trying to take over the world!” Evelyn said, matching his volume.

This was one of the most pointless arguments Tom had ever had. He hated debating anything – politics and religion, in particular – where, no matter what, people weren't going to change their minds. If his mom wanted to compare and contrast Nazi's and viruses, she could have at it. Alone. Tom stood up and began to walk out of the room.

"Why is the bar called the Antelope?" Evelyn asked, stopping Tom as he reached the doorway.

Tom rolled his eyes. He hated rhetorical questions almost as much as pointless debates. If he didn't know the answer to this question, he had no business running The Antelope in the first place.

"That was the password –" Tom turned around to face his mother before getting cut off.

"To get into the bar when it was a speakeasy." Evelyn waved him back to the table. She held the bottle up, offering it as a peace offering of sorts, before setting it back down when Tom shook his head.

"So what's your point?" Tom said, reclaiming his chair.

Evelyn intentionally tipped over her full glass of whiskey so the contents poured onto the table, forming a small puddle next to her cane.

"Oops," she said and smiled.

"What are you doing?" Tom said, confused.

"When life gives you a challenge," Evelyn said, leaning over the table. "You change your strategy and handle it." She pressed her mouth to the puddle of whiskey and slurped it up off the table like a vacuum cleaner.

Exasperated, Tom exhaled deeply and set his elbows on the table, resting his chin on his hands.

“Life has given you a challenge, Tommy,” Evelyn reiterated before, predictably, refilling her glass. “So handle it.”

“How?”

“By reopening your fucking bar.”

Tom didn’t know if he was exhausted or found it genuinely funny, but he laughed.

“Why’re you laughing?” Evelyn seemed offended. “If you don’t like the idea, I’ll give it to Maggie.”

Tom kept laughing. “Maggie is twenty.”

“My mother worked at the bar when she was fourteen. Could pour a shot faster than anyone.”

Tom grew serious. “Our situations are a little different, mom.”

“You’re right. Your great grandfather didn’t feel sorry for himself.”

Tom picked the gin bottle up from off the floor and took a sip. Not because he wanted to, but because he knew it would bother his mother.

“It’s against the law for us to be open.”

“But it’s not against the law for the banks to take your house when you can’t pay for it.”

Tom knew she was right, but didn’t know what to say. He could hear footsteps walking down the stairs and knew his daughter was awake.

“I’m figuring this out.” He stood up and put his empty glass in the sink and the gin bottle back in the cabinet. The room smelled like whiskey.

"This family is counting on it."

Before he could respond, his daughter, Maggie, walked into the kitchen. She was groggy and in her pajamas.

"What are you doing up?" Tommy asked, leaning against the stove.

"I could ask the same to you," Maggie said, casually opening the fridge and taking a disinterested look inside. "If there was ever a time to sleep in, lockdown would be it."

"Have *her* reopen – "

"Nope." Tom didn't even bother facing her when he said it.

"Could you guys keep it down? I'm going back to bed." Maggie turned to walk out of the room, but Evelyn stopped her.

"Want some whiskey, Mags?"

She held out her empty glass to Maggie.

"Uhh...sure?" She seemed puzzled as to how to respond. She looked to her dad to see if he would object and when he didn't say anything she walked over and sat down next to Evelyn.

"Get us two more glasses, would you, Tom?" Evelyn said, as if Tom was their waiter. But he did as instructed, and brought two more glasses over to the table. He gave one to his daughter and kept one for himself. Though he assumed Maggie had done her fair share of drinking so far in college, until now, he'd never allowed her to have any at home.

"So why are we drinking?" Maggie said, watching as Evelyn filled each glass halfway full.

"We're celebrating," Evelyn said, making a big presentation of raising her flask.

"To what?" Maggie held her glass high, as well.

"To only having a thirty percent chance of dying today."

"I'm not drinking to that," Tom said, refusing to raise his glass.

"That's kind of morbid, grandma," Maggie agreed. She set her glass back down on the table.

"Then we're celebrating," Evelyn paused and winked at Tom. "Your father's reopening the bar." Before he had time to protest, Evelyn took a long sip from her flask, prompting Maggie to drink, as well.

"About damn time!"

Tom didn't move. He watched as both Evelyn and Maggie took another sip.

"Why aren't you celebrating, Thomas?" Evelyn smiled at her son and refilled Maggie's glass. Tom turned his chair to face both his daughter and mother.

"We are not...let me repeat, we are *not* reopening the bar." A wave of disapproval crossed both Evelyn and Maggie's faces.

"My father opened the bar during – "

"Prohibition. Yes, we know!"

"He risked being arrested for his family. Why can't you!"

"Prohibition was a law. Coronavirus is a disease." Tom didn't want to fight. He knew it wouldn't accomplish anything, anyway.

"I'll work the bar, dad. I'll do it for free, even. I just need to get out of this house."

Maggie sat up straight in her chair and stared at her dad, not so different from how Evelyn had earlier in the morning.

“Tell that to the people who are dead. I bet they wanted to get out of the house, too.”

Tom had been dreading this conversation, knowing it was only a matter of time before he had a mutiny on his hands.

“No twenty-year old is dying from this. Grandma can stay home and I’ll open the bar.”

“No one is staying home. I’m coming with you,” Evelyn said while standing up, as if the issue had been settled.

“No one is going out! No one is going anywhere!”

Evelyn sighed. “Thomas, there are two things that I will not allow to happen while I’m alive. The Antelope will not go out of business. And you will not tell me what to do.” Evelyn nodded at Maggie.

“I’ll go get dressed.” The twenty-year old ran out of the room.

Tom stared at Evelyn. He felt like he was a boy again, forced to acquiesce to his mother’s orders simply because he had no other choice.

“I’ve got a life to live and a business to maintain and so do you. So start acting like it.”

This was not meant as a suggestion.

“Thanks for your help,” Tom said, shaking his head, unsure of what else to say.

“If The Antelope closes, what are you going to do for money? What other marketable skills do you have?”

“I’ll figure something out, mom.”

“Will Maggie have to drop out of college?”

Tom fell silent. How would he pay for her tuition? This disease was so new, his situation with the restaurant so dire, he hadn't thought about the long-term implications for his daughter.

He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, anything to alleviate his growing headache. He heard his mother begin shuffling out of the room.

"Where're you going?" He said without opening his eyes. He could tell his mother hadn't stopped moving, but just continued talking as she made her way out of the kitchen.

"I'm going to go get dressed and help Maggie reopen your fucking bar."

At this, Tom stood up and followed Evelyn into the living room.

"No you're not," Tom moved to stand between Evelyn and the door to her bedroom.

Evelyn stared at her son. "This is for Maggie, Tom." Evelyn whispered. "My grandfather opened the bar so that his children could have a future. We're going to do the same now." She walked past him and into her room.

"But...how?" Tom didn't turn to face her but could hear clothes rustling in her closet.

"I have one word for you, Thomas. 'Delivery'. And I'm driving." Evelyn led the way out the door.

Evelyn put a coat on over her nightgown and Tom watched as she walked out the front door.

Maggie, now dressed, came down the stairs and stood next to him.

"She's not leaving without us, is she?"

Tom shook his head. "Just....wear a mask, okay?"

Maggie pulled two light blue linen masks out of her pocket.

“And keep your grandma company in the car while I get dressed.” Tom didn’t wait for her to respond. He headed to the basement to get his clothes.

“This isn’t worse than the Potato Famine,” Tom heard Evelyn say, as soon as he sat down in the backseat of the car.

“Oh God, not this again,” Maggie said in response, leaning her head against the steering wheel. Apparently, she had convinced Evelyn to let her drive.

“I’m serious!” Evelyn said, glancing at Tom for support.

“Why does something have to be *worse* than the Potato Famine for it to be bad? Something can still be awful, yet not quite at the level of mass starvation, you know?” Maggie was more exasperated than angry and Tom couldn’t help but silently agree.

“It keeps things in perspective,” Evelyn said, crossing her arms, becoming more defensive.

“How about last week? When I said I had nothing to wear? You said, and I quote, ‘Our countrymen had nothing to *eat* for four years and you’re complaining about clothes?’”

“I stand by that.” Evelyn kept her arms crossed but added a scowl to her face.

“I never said that was worse than the famine!”

“You were acting like it was!”

“I was going on a date!”

“Covid will be worse,” Tom said.

“Oh, c’mon!” Evelyn said.

Tom rolled his eyes and exhaled slowly, trying to gather his thoughts.



"If this virus kills more than a million people, I'll eat my shoe," Evelyn said.

"I'm going to hold you to that."

Spinning around to face the backseat with a speed Tom thought she no longer possessed, Evelyn glared at him.

"Do you know why my father had the courage to build The Antelope during the depression?"

Tom wasn't in the mood. Hadn't they just gone over this? "He needed to provide – "

"He opened a restaurant because he experienced the famine first hand. He survived by eating roots and berries for over four years. Four *years*, and he didn't want to see any of his fellow men suffering like that in a country as great as this one. So, he offered people free food who couldn't afford it. And the ones who could, tipped him extra for his troubles. And being a good Irish boy, he also offered beer to wash it down. No harm in that. And it brought in extra business."

"I already know all this. What's your point?"

"You've never faced hardship. So you don't know what hardship is. But I promise you, you don't have to worry about this *Covid*."

Tom took a deep breath to temper his annoyance. "If you act like everything is normal, mom, you're going to die."

"Oh, stop the dramatics."

"No! You stop! This virus is worldwide. Over a hundred thousand people are already dead. Most of them are your age! Maggie has asthma, you're ninety and I'm no spring chicken either so stop acting like this is all no big deal!" Unbeknownst to him, Evelyn had taken out her

cell phone and was discreetly scrawling through her contacts. "Yes, the famine was terrible," Tom continued, "But Corona will kill more people worldwide over a shorter period of time. So you better start deciding what shoe you're going to eat."

"And if the virus goes away, like all viruses do, you'll eat a shoe?"

"If you get this virus, mom, there's a very real chance that you're going to die in the hospital alone. *Alone*," Tom repeated for emphasis. "I won't be allowed to visit, and you won't be able to say goodbye. Is that what you want?"

Instead of responding, Evelyn held up her cell phone to the middle of the car and put it on speaker.

"Hello?" a shaky voice spoke from the phone's speaker.

"Hi Kevin," Evelyn said casually. Tom deduced she'd called Kevin Sullivan, a seventy-five year old regular customer of The Antelope. He'd been frequenting the bar at least four days a week for as long as Tom could remember.

"How are you?" Evelyn continued.

"I'm...okay," Kevin, who decidedly did not sound okay, said. He didn't sound sick, just sad.

"So here's the deal," Evelyn continued. "The Antelope is closed but delivery is open. We're taking orders for whatever drinks you want, plus, for an extra fee, someone to sit on your porch and drink with you. You interested?"

Tom was about to speak up to say this plan was absurd and completely out of the question when he heard what sounded like muffled crying coming from the phone.

"You okay there, Kevin?" Evelyn said.

It took a moment for Kevin to compose himself. "I...uh...That sounds.....that sounds really nice."

Evelyn smiled. "Well, that's what the whole..." she paused, thinking. "That's what the Antelope's Quarantine Drinking Program is for. Tom and I call it to AQDP for short." Evelyn gave Tom a sly smile and wink. "We don't want you drinking alone anymore."

The muffled crying from Kevin's end of the phone returned.

"So you're interested?" Evelyn said.

Kyle's response was swift and sad. "Absolutely."

"We're glad to hear that, Kevin! What can I put you down for? And just so you know, the companionship part is billed hourly." Evelyn gave Tom another wink.

'Great', Tom thought, 'Now we're running a damn prostitution ring.'

"How much per hour?"

"Fifty dollars."

'And be sure to leave the money on the dresser,' Tom thought, wondering if selling conversation for fifty dollars an hour could be considered price gouging.

"I'll take four hours," Kevin said, to the stunned reactions of everyone in the car. "And enough whiskey to last that long." Both Evelyn and Tom knew just how much the man could drink.

"So two bottles?"

"Better make it three if you're the one drinking with me." The sadness in his voice was constant.

"For company, you can have your choice of anyone who works at the bar," Evelyn said.

“I’ll choose you, if that’s alright.”

“My social calendar can accommodate,” Evelyn said. “So let’s see here, three bottles of whiskey plus four hours with yours truly plus the delivery fee, that comes out to,” Evelyn quickly did the math in her head, “three hundred and fifty dollars.”

Tom gasped and hoped Kevin couldn’t hear. Evelyn held her breath, awaiting a response.

Kevin didn’t respond.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Evelyn said. “We’ll deliver in an hour.” She hung up the phone

“Holy shit,” Maggie said, laughing. “That was incredible!”

Evelyn offered the phone to her son. “Call him back if you want to tell him we don’t need his money.” She placed the phone in his lap without any resistance from Tom. “Or that we suddenly care about his sobriety.”

Tom didn’t say anything nor did he touch the phone as it slid off his lap onto the seat beside him. He just stared at his mother, dumbstruck.

“So are we going to the bar?” Maggie said, looking to her dad.

Tom didn’t move. Evelyn held out her hand.

“Car keys, please.”

Tom reached in his pocket and placed them into her palm.

“See. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

The Antelope, over the course of the last twenty years, had accumulated approximately seven hundred customer cell phone numbers as part of its Rewards Program. Tom had no idea

why Evelyn had Kevin's phone number saved in her phone, but when they'd stopped at the bar to pick up the whiskey, he'd gone straight into his office to print out the full list of names, numbers and addresses from the Rewards Program database.

Tom sat in the back seat of the car while Maggie drove to Kevin's. He looked over the list and highlighted the customer names who were regular enough to warrant a call. There were fourteen pages in all with each page containing fifty names. Tom highlighted at least ten names on each page, took a photo of the pages individually, then sent a photo of a page, to each of his fourteen employees. One page per employee. He included a corresponding text, which read, *Will call with instructions soon*. Then followed up with them and laid out the plan with all opting to be involved. He instructed them to get in touch with all the highlighted names first, to gauge a response, and if it was positive to move on to the un-highlighted ones. When orders – hopefully a decent amount – had been placed, Tom requested they call him back and give him the customer feedback.

When this business was done and the plan was officially in motion, Tom leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. Maybe this all would amount to nothing, but for the first time in two weeks, he felt good. He'd actually done something that, hopefully, could help his employees through the uncertainty of the times and keep The Antelope solvent. As he kept his eyes closed, he began to daydream about what the world would be like when he could finally reopen his bar. But before the daydream could go very far, his concentration was broken as the car came to stop alongside Kevin Sullivan's house. Maggie handed both her dad and Evelyn a mask.

"I'll be right back," Tom told Maggie, taking the mask.

She stayed in the car as both Tom and Evelyn made their way to the front porch of the house.

“You don’t have to come with me, you know,” Evelyn said, starting to uncap the first whiskey bottle. “He’s not paying for both of us.” She took a sip.

“I just,” Tom began, “I just want to see how this goes.”

Before they climbed the porch steps, the front door opened to reveal a man who looked like he’d just returned from being lost in the woods. He was unshaven with a head of hair that looked like he’d been struck by lightning. He wore a ripped white t-shirt and frayed blue jeans rolled up to the bottom of his knees. He was barefoot, with feet dirty enough to leave footprints on the steps as he came down to greet them.

“I’m really happy to see you guys,” Kevin said, as he held out his arms for a hug.

“Six feet, Kevin,” Tom said, extending a bottle of whiskey as a peace offering of sorts, apologetic for having to be so rude right from the start.

“Sorry, I didn’t...,” Kevin trailed off, grabbing the bottle and looking at it as if it were a brick of gold. He hugged it and swayed back and forth. He looked up to Evelyn and Tom again, as tears welled in his eyes.

“Don’t cry. It’s bottom shelf whiskey,” Evelyn said.

“I’m sorry,” Kevin said.

“And stop apologizing,” Tom said, noticing the bags under Kevin’s eyes. It looked like he hadn’t slept in a very long time. It also seemed like this wasn’t the first time he’d cried today.

Kevin smiled, but tears still hovered on his eye lids. “Have I mentioned how good it is to see you?”

“It’s good to see you too! You look like you’ve been marooned on an island,” Tom said. He led them to three rocking chairs on the far side of the porch.

“I wish that were the case,” Kevin said. He poured whiskey into three paper cups and they cheers’d from six feet away.

“Tom and I disagree on the whole Covid thing and I was wondering if you could be the tiebreaker,” Evelyn said, already refilling her paper cup.

“Okay?” Kevin seemed confused.

“I think it’s all a bunch of baloney. While Tom here –“

Kevin broke out in heavy sobs. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s wrong?” Tom put his cup on the ground and tried to make eye contact.

“My kids sent me a grocery delivery a couple days ago,” Kevin said, swallowing the remaining contents of his cup and refilling it with the bottle sitting by his dirty feet. “They were worried I wasn’t getting enough fruit. Worried I wasn’t eating.”

“That was nice of them,” Evelyn said.

“Are you sure everything is okay?”

“So I get all of this fruit, and it’s just an unholy amount of produce. I mean, it’s like they went to a damn farmer’s market and just bought everything. And I don’t even like fruit, so I know I’m only going to eat a small bit of it, so...” Kevin took another big swallow of whiskey. “So I decided, I’d make new friends out of the fruit.”

Tom and Evelyn both looked at each other.

“You made friends?” Tom said.

“Want to meet them?” Kevin said, looking from one to the other.

Both remained silent, unsure what to say.

Kevin disappeared into his house and returned a couple minutes later, holding a green pepper, an apple and a lemon, all with different faces and expressions carved into them. He disappeared again and returned with a watermelon that had been hollowed out like a pumpkin with a face carving to match. Inside the watermelon-pumpkin was a large scented candle.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to hollow out a watermelon? It took me the better part of a day.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever thought about it,” Tom said.

“So this is John,” Kevin said, pointing to the watermelon. “And that’s Paul, George, and Ringo.” He pointed to the lemon, green pepper and apple, respectively.

“We are earning our money,” Evelyn leaned over and whispered to Tom.

“I tried hollowing out Ringo, make him more like John, but it’s fucking impossible to hollow out an apple. So technically, this is the second Ringo.”

Tom poured himself a full cup of whiskey and leaned forward to get a better look at the Fruity Beatles. Mold was accumulating around Paul’s eyes and mouth and George was beginning to sag inward. All of it was at least a couple days old.

“Have you ever tried hollowing out an apple?” Kevin said.

Both Evelyn and Tom shook their heads.

“It’s a lot harder than it looks. I made them all instruments out of carrots, but you leave a carrot out for a couple nights and it sags and droops and just looks like shit. So that’s why Ringo doesn’t have a drum set.” Tom silently wondered what a drum set made of carrots would even look like.



“So you said these are your *friends*?” Evelyn asked.

“I mean, they don’t talk back when I talk to them, but when I turn on *Rubber Soul*, I close my eyes and imagine they’re playing.”

“You *talk* to them?” Evelyn said.

Kevin didn’t respond.

“What happens when they rot?” Tom interjected.

“Then the band breaks up. And when my next box of groceries arrives, maybe the Rolling Stones are inside. Or Zeppelin. Who knows...” Kevin trailed off.

“Who knows indeed...” Evelyn said.

“So what else have you been up to?” Tom said, wanting to steer the conversation away from fruit. It made him uncomfortable.

Kevin remained silent. He just stared at the hollowed fruit.

“I always thought I’d be prepared if the zombie apocalypse came,” Tom said, trying to lighten the mood. “But now I know I’ll just starve to death in my kitchen.”

“My kids bought me all this food,” Kevin said, without moving his gaze from the fruit.

“And I haven’t eaten any of it.”

“You can’t eat your friends,” Evelyn said. “Hey, that deserves a toast!” She raised her cup. Tom didn’t raise his and wasn’t even sure if Kevin had even heard her. He seemed so distant.

“Is everything okay, Kevin?” Tom asked again.

He drank his cup of whiskey, threw it to the side and began drinking straight from the bottle.

Evelyn lowered her cup as she noticed the sadness covering Kevin's face.

"I'm glad you only charge fifty dollars an hour. Because, you could have fleeced me for a lot more." Kevin didn't look at either of them.

"We just want to keep the bar afloat," Tom said. "We're not looking to take advantage."

"When I told my kids about you coming by, they offered to bankroll it."

"Wow. That was nice of them," Tom said.

"Tom wouldn't do that for me," Evelyn joked.

"We can get together as often as you want."

"I know I keep on saying it, but I'm really glad you two are here," Kevin said, taking another sip of whiskey.

"Next bottle of whiskey is on the house," Evelyn said.

"It's just really nice to have someone to talk to," Kevin whispered. He began to cry.

Tom and Evelyn looked at each other. Neither knew what to say.

"Kevin...?"

"Annie...uh...my wife. You guys...you guys never met her. 'Cause she never came to the bar because, well, she wasn't much of a drinker."

"You talked about her so often I feel like I do know her," Tom said.

"Same here," Evelyn said. "Is she okay?"

"She...uhh...she died two weeks ago."

"What!" Evelyn stood up.

"Holy shit," Tom said.

“She got Covid. I couldn’t even be there for her. I couldn’t even...” Kevin trailed off as his emotions got the better of him. “She needed me and I couldn’t even...”

“I’m so sorry,” Tom said.

“Old folks are the most vulnerable. She just went grocery shopping. I’m sorry, I don’t want you to see me like this. I shouldn’t have had you two come over.”

Before either of them could say anything to protest, Kevin walked into his house and shut the door.

Tom moved to the door and began knocking on it.

“Kevin, I’m here if you want to talk. I’m right here on the porch. I’m not going anywhere.” He turned around to see Evelyn getting into the car.

“What are you doing?” He yelled over to her, as the car door slammed. He ran over to the car, opened the door and repeated the question.

“You were right, Tom. You were right. About all of it. I want to go home.”

“No, you were right, mom. The Antelope is about keeping our family together. And that family includes our customers. I’m going to stay here. Hopefully, Kevin wants to talk. But you should go home.”

Evelyn nodded.

“Maggie. Here’s my cell phone. Employees will be calling it. Tell them our plan and if they’re not okay with any of it, tell them that’s fine. Just do what they’re comfortable with. I think we can keep The Antelope afloat while also helping out those that need us. Because they need us.”

Tom closed the door and without looking back, walked towards Kevin’s house.

**STORY #2: Student Driver**

"I don't want to be here," Jordan said, staring out the car window.

"It can be a little daunting, I remember the –"

"No. Let me clarify. I don't want to be here with *you*."

"This will be fun. I promise. And if not fun then –"

"How could this *possibly* be fun?"

"Please. Could you stop cutting me off?" Andrew tapped his pen nervously against his clipboard.

Jordan rolled her eyes and rested a foot on the brake. "Mom said she'd do this with me."

"Well, I asked mom if I could help. So here we are."

"Why are you calling her *mom*? She's *my* mom. She's *your* ex-wife."

"And I'm *your* dad, so I can call her whatever I want." He said this louder than intended and so shrill, it made Jordan laugh.

"Why does she still like you?"

The pen kept tapping, like Morse code, relaying a subconscious SOS signal. He closed his eyes, privately furious at himself.

"Because she understands what forgiveness is, Jordan. I messed up. I screwed up big time. And I know that an apology isn't going to change what I did, but I hope that one day I –"

Jordan spun around and glared at him.

"You *messed* up?"

Andrew didn't know if the question was rhetorical.

“You *MESSED up?*” she repeated. “No, messing up is when you, like, forget to do something. You had a kid!” She looked towards the backseat. “You had a *KID*,” she repeated, pointing to the two-year old in the backseat.

“His name is Wally.” Andrew took a couple deep breaths, attempting to calm himself. “And please,” he whispered. He took a couple more breaths. “Don’t yell.”

“Don’t yell?” Jordan sounded offended. “You had a *KID!*”

Andrew gave Wally, who was buckled into a car seat, a weak smile. Wally, unaware of his dad’s attention and preoccupied with an iPad, wore headphones and remained silent. One of his hands held the iPad, the other was placed on top of a stuffed walrus, also named Wally. Stuffed Wally wore a sombrero.

“Three years ago, my life was fine. Everything was fine. And then you had to go and...fuck everything up.”

“Damnit, Jordan,” Andrew lost his temper again and slapped the dashboard. Wally looked up briefly to see what was going on, then back down to the screen.

Jordan stared back out the window as Andrew looked at her.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“I don’t care.” Her tone was even, soft, frozen.

The only noise was the music coming out of Wally’s headphones. It sounded like the theme from *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood*.

“I hate this. I should be able to choose who I drive with.” Jordan sounded resigned.

“We’re only doing three hours today.” Andrew was glad she had changed the subject.

“How many hours do I have to do with *you?*”

Andrew was confident his daughter already knew the answer.

“Fifteen. Then thirty-five with your mom.”

“Fifteen hours. Do you have any idea how long that is?” She looked at Andrew as if he didn’t understand the concept of time.

“It’s fifteen –”

“That’s like, forty-five episodes of *The Office*. That’s like two whole *seasons*.”

“Haven’t you already seen –”

“That’s not my point! God! You’re so frustrating!”

“What did I say?”

“I want to learn how to drive with *mom* in *my* car. Not with *you* in *yours*.”

“You don’t have a car.”

“You know what I mean”

Andrew hated how his relationship with his daughter had into a pathetic power struggle, a fruitless game in which no matter what he did, he always lost. In all of their interactions for the past three years, post-divorce, Jordan never tried to hide the fact that being his daughter had become a job she no longer wanted.

“Jor?”

“Yes, Andrew?”

Jordan still refused to look at him. He hated how small it made him feel.

“Didn’t we agreed you’d call me ‘dad’?” He put the clipboard by his feet and crossed his arms, hoping to appear confident, yet worrying Jordan would see his shaking hands.

“I don’t care.”

This had recently become Jordan's rote excuse for everything. If she was supposed to spend the weekend at his place, if they'd agreed to get dinner, if they'd arranged a time for a phone call, all could be instantly erased with those three words. Andrew would text a brief reminder, and Jordan's response was frustrating only in that it was so predictable. Plans for a fun afternoon, sometimes requiring tickets and therefore non-refundable, could be cancelled moments before they were supposed to begin. Sometimes, Jordan wouldn't even bother with *I don't care* and would just send a frowny face emoji, instead, which for Andrew, couldn't be more condescending. He *hated* the frowny face emoji. It might as well have been laughing with two middle fingers and a multi-colored *FUCK OFF* pulsing above it. It was borderline cruel in its simplicity and power. A yellow face with soulless eyes, staring out from the void, told him everything he needed to know about how his daughter regarded him.

While this upset Andrew more and more each time he'd received it, he never confronted Jordan about her favorite emoji or her callous texting habits. He knew he had to pick his battles. So he only fought the ones he knew he could win. Being allowed to be her driving instructor - while she logged the fifty hours of required road time to get her license - was one such battle. In the car, for the next fifteen hours at least, he had some leverage, and he wanted to make the most of it.

Jordan pulled her phone from her pocket, looked at the screen and began laughing softly to herself. She seemed in no rush to begin the driving lesson. Maybe she hoped if she stalled long enough, he'd give up - waive his rights to his fifteen hours and hand the task over to his ex-wife.

He pulled out his phone and sent her a text. Jordan's phone pinged moments later.

“Really?” She held the phone in front of his face, as if he wasn’t aware of the frowny face emoji he’d just sent. “You’re so immature.” She put her phone in one of the cup holders. He wished he could say that every time she’d sent him the same thing.

An uncomfortable silence filled the car.

“So.” Andrew began, hating that his daughter just called him *immature*, yet sadly aware of the fact she had called him much worse in the past. “You want to get this show on the road?” He offered an earnest smile. He’d become adept at masking his melancholy behind a myriad of smiles.

“This is *so* unfair.” Exasperated, Jordan leaned the top of her head on the seats headrest and stared up at the ceiling.

“Life is fair in that it’s unfair to everyone. Especially teenagers who don’t know how to drive.” Jordan gave him a look that rudely told him she rejected this.

“I so know how to drive. *Andrew.*”

“Then why haven’t we left the driveway?” He pointed to the slab of concrete that used to be *his* driveway.

“I want to ride in *my* car.” Jordan pointed to the house that also used to be his.

“Did mom buy you a car?” Andrew braced himself for the answer. He wasn’t paying monthly child and spousal support to be vilified. He wasn’t some benevolent private donor, giving money so his ex-wife could buy his daughter presents. Presents that Jordan would only give her credit for.

*Stay calm.*

“This car smells like sadness. And urine.”



“Did mom buy you a car?” He hoped the more he ignored Jordan’s meaner comments, the less she’d try to hurt him with them.

“Not yet.” There was an expectancy in her tone, though, that frustrated Andrew.

Now it was Andrew’s turn to stare somberly at the ceiling of the car.

“Can’t we please just,” he turned his head slowly and looked at his daughter, “Get along?” He smiled again, but in a way that didn’t attempt to mask his feelings. “I would really love that.”

“Well, I would have really loved if you never cheated on mom, but I guess we can’t always get what we want, huh?”

Andrew had already apologized every way he could imagine. He’d apologized with letters and texts, rehearsed speeches and from the heart conversations, crying and not crying. He’d even, naively in hindsight, resorted to bribery, going as far as booking his wife and daughter a five-day cruise to the Bahamas. If any of it had accomplished anything, he failed to see how. It seemed to only make matters worse, forging the bond between daughter and ex-wife at the expense of the bond they’d had with him.

“I guess not.” Andrew tried not to show weakness, tried to stay strong but was betrayed by a cracking voice.

“You’re a clown.”

“I’m sorry.” This was a genuine apology and it made him sick.

“This fucking sucks.”

“Please watch the language.” His daughter had never cursed before the divorce. Now it seemed to be an essential part of her vernacular. Andrew hated how much she’d changed.

“Can I say bullshit? Like, this is bullshit?”

Andrew wasn't going to dignify any of this with a response. He bit his lip but remained quiet. Seemingly emboldened by Andrew's silence, Jordan continued.

“Can I say “asshat”? Like, *Andrew, you're an asshat?*”

Andrew had no idea what that meant, but figured it deserved a response even less than the comment that preceded it. So he stayed silent.

“Andrew the asshat and Wally the lovechild. What a pair you make.”

“Never call him that again.” Andrew stared at his daughter even though she refused to stare back.

Jordan laughed.

“Or what?”

With this, she played her trump card. She knew Andrew no longer had jurisdiction to punish her, no longer had the right to tell her what to do. She could emasculate him at will and seemed more than happy to do it. What could he possibly say? *I'm disappointed in you? You're grounded...forever? When did you become so hateful?*

So instead of speaking, he unbuckled his seatbelt and got out of the car.

“Where're you –”

He closed the passenger side door and made his way to the front door of his former house. Arriving on his former porch, he looked back to find Jordan still in the car. He rang his former doorbell - a completely foreign, unnatural act, considering he'd lived here for over twenty years – and his ex-wife answered.

“Hi,” Andrew said.

"Is she being difficult again?" Claire said.

Andrew nodded. Claire gave a sad nod in return, and made her way resolutely to the car. Andrew waited on the porch.

Ten minutes later, Claire returned to the front door.

"She should be better now."

"I owe you one."

"You owe me more than one."

Andrew couldn't tell his wife how much he appreciated her. To say she was a saint for forgiving him would be an understatement. She was the only reason Jordan would speak to him, at all. He didn't know how to thank her. So he merely gave another somber nod and returned to the car.

In his absence, Jordan had turned on the radio, which he turned off once he sat down.

"Andrew! What are you doing! That was Lizzo!" She reached for the radio but Andrew blocked it with his hand.

"Just a minute. Lizard will understand." Whoever Lizard was, from the ten seconds he'd heard, he didn't like it.

"God! You're so lame!"

"I know. And I'm okay with it."

Andrew didn't have the spirit to argue anymore.

"Why can't we turn on the radio?"

"Because we're having a conversation instead. Just like we used to, remember?"

“Like hell we are.” Jordan put both hands on the steering wheel and rested her head on them, acting as if her dad had said something genuinely offensive. “And don’t think just because you sent mom out here, that makes a damn bit of difference to me.”

“What’s so bad about talking with Andy the Asshat?” Andrew tried humor but it came out stunted, forced and so awkward, Jordan didn’t even smile. “How’s school going?” He tried to sound casual, but that didn’t sound natural either.

“I don’t want to play this game.” Jordan’s head still rested in her hands and her answer was difficult to discern because of it. It took a moment for Andrew to understand what she said, but once he did, the frustration came fast.

“Getting to know each other is a game to you?”

“With joke questions like that? Yes.” She sat up and rolled her eyes.

“Mom tells me high school has been kind of rough?”

Jordan ignored him and once again focused her gaze out the window.

“You good back there, bud?” Andrew turned his attention to his three-year old son, who was still too enraptured with his iPad to respond. Andrew laughed. The over-the-ear headphones Wally wore were so big on his little head they seemed intended for a giant.

“Hey bud?” Andrew leaned towards the backseat and waved a hand in front of the screen. Wally looked up, smiled and slid his headphones down until they rested on his neck. Andrew gave him a thumbs-up. “You good? Do you need anything?”

“I’m okay.” He smiled a big, vulnerable, unapologetic smile that reminded Andrew of the ones Jordan used to give him. Andrew smiled too, albeit a more melancholic.

“I love you,” Andrew said, comforted to know Wally would have no reservations saying it back.

“I love you too, asshat,” Wally casually replied, then placed the headphones back on his ears.

*Wait, what?*

Andrew looked over at Jordan who could barely contain her laughter.

“What did you do?”

Jordan started laughing so hard her whole body began to shake.

“What did I do? What do you mean?”

“My son isn’t your toy!”

“You just called *yourself* ‘Andy the Asshat’, for fuck’s sake!”

“That was a joke! You started the –” Andrew stopped himself, not knowing who he should be mad at.

“Hey buddy?” Andrew looked his son, motioning for him to once again take off the headphones. Wally complied but seemed confused.

“Don’t say *asshat*, okay?” Andrew tried to sound calm and unconcerned over Jordan’s cackling coming from the driver’s seat. “That’s a bad word.”

“But you just said it.” Wally said.

“See! I told you!”

Andrew spun in his chair to face Jordan.

“Why would you do this!” Alarm and confusion came in equal measure.

“He was parroting you! Jackass.”

“Jackass,” Wally repeated, laughing.

Andrew stared back his daughter, angry. “Have you lost your mind?”

Jordan was laughing too hard to respond.

Andrew tried hard to compose himself before facing his son.

“Don’t say *asshat* or *jackass*, either. Okay, pal? Actually, don’t say anything with ‘ass’.

Lock that word up,” with this he closed his mouth and pantomimed using a key to lock together his lips. “And throw away the key! Our secret.”

“That’s fitting since Wally himself was originally a secret.”

“Shut up, Jordan!” Andrew yelled, still too stunned to believe this was actually happening.

“*Jackass. Jackass,*” Wally said, laughing, obviously thinking this was a game.

“Wally! No!” Andrew tried to remain calm with his son and reserve the hellfire churning inside him for his daughter.

Jordan kept laughing, as if this were some kind of perverse game. She covered her face in her hands as tears started streaking down her cheeks.

Bolstered by her laughter, Wally continued. “*Asshat. Jackass.*” Laughter filled the car, but none of it came from Andrew.

He was the only one paying attention, when Jordan’s phone pinged with a text. Wondering who she was texting, and knowing Jordan would never tell him if he asked, he picked up the phone to look. Too busy laughing, and with her hands now covering her face, Jordan didn’t notice.

Hoping it was, *finally*, the text he'd paid for with an extra month's spousal support, Andrew grabbed Jordan's phone from the cup holder and looked at the screen. What appeared wasn't a text from his ex-wife but one from a different contact: *ROBBIE*.

Once Andrew read the text, sent from someone named *Robbie*, he instantly wished he hadn't. He bit his lip, closed his eyes and became lightheaded. He could no longer hear Jordan's mean spirited laughter, or Wally screaming curse words. He opened his eyes and re-read the text to make sure he understood.

*When you move out, you never have to speak to him again! Fuck your old man!*

Andrew silently placed the phone back in the cup holder and glanced at Jordan out of the corner of his eye to make sure she hadn't noticed. He looked down at his feet towards his clipboard, the one that held three pages of questions he had planned on asking his daughter throughout their time together. Questions like *How's volleyball going?* and *Are your classes challenging?* and *Do you have a date for Homecoming?* All he wanted was for his daughter to forgive him, but he didn't know how.

Jordan eventually stopped laughing and rested her hands on top of the steering wheel. Out of breath, she wiped the remnants of tears from her face.

"Ten and two," Andrew whispered.

"What?" Jordan said, confused.

"Your hands," Andrew whispered a little louder. "The wheel is...it's a clock...and your hands...they should be —"

“I’m sorry, but am I driving yet?” Andrew didn’t even register the sarcasm.

He shook his head while Jordan picked up her phone. She read *ROBBIE*’s text. And smiled. Andrew felt sick.

Jordan texted a message that Andrew didn’t have to read, because he already knew what it said. He looked at Wally in an effort to stop imagining any more of their conversation.

He remembered when Jordan was Wally’s age. When she was capable of being happy without feeling vulnerable. Able to trust without cynicism. And able to be his daughter without sacrificing her pride. But those days were so unfamiliar now, that they bordered on irrelevance. Thinking about them here, put his current situation into nearly unbearable contrast. He turned back around in his seat to stop remembering any more of the past.

Looking out the windshield made him feel dizzy, so he turned on the air conditioning.

“Don’t. I’m cold,” Jordan said, turning it off without even looking up, her attention still squarely focused on *ROBBIE*.

Andrew didn’t respond. His heart was racing and he felt out of breath.

The silence prompted Jordan to look up from her phone and take stock of her dad.

“You okay?” She put her phone back in the cup holder. “You don’t look so good.”

Andrew felt nauseous, but wasn’t about to admit it. He just nodded.

“Okay, weirdo. You’re pretty pale, though.”

He was starting to get a headache.

Jordan either didn’t hear him or didn’t care, or both, and turned the radio back on.

Along with fighting only the battles he could win, Andrew only fought the battles *worth* fighting, and the radio didn’t qualify. Though, Andrew now needed to yell to be heard.



"I love you, Jordan. You know that, right?"

Jordan seemed insulted. "Okay."

"And there is *nothing* I wouldn't do for you."

"Okay." She sounded annoyed.

"And our relationship is the most important – " Andrew was interrupted by Wally.

"I have to go potty."

Andrew turned in his seat and looked at his son through the hole in the headrest. "How long can you hold it?"

"I have to go potty," Wally repeated.

"That clarifies things," Jordan said. She was back to texting on her phone.

Andrew dreaded yet craved to know what Robbie was writing.

"I have to go potty," Wally said for a third time, as if Andrew and Jordan hadn't heard him before.

"I know, bud. Can you hold it, though?"

Wally shook his head. "I have to go *now*."

*Why do kids always wait until the last minute to tell anyone?*

"Remind me *never* to have kids," Jordan said. Her phone pinged again and she smiled at whatever the text said.

Andrew wanted to ask his daughter about the text, and finally gathering the courage, he took a deep breath –

"Potty NOW!" Wally yelled from the backseat, like a war cry.

*Fuck.*

Andrew hadn't fed Wally - before they'd left to pick up Jordan - specifically to avoid this situation. Even though he and his wife still got along, he still couldn't bring Wally inside her house. He knew that bringing his illegitimate child into his wife's house just to use the bathroom would be a bridge too far. He had to think of something else.

Wally started struggling to free himself from his car seat. Jordan placed her phone back in the cup holder and leaned against the steering wheel to watch the show. Andrew unbuckled his seat belt and got out of the car.

Andrew wished Wally still wore a diaper. He unstrapped Wally from the car seat and lifted him out of the car. He held Wally aloft and smelled his crotch, hoping it wasn't already too late. He hadn't brought a change of clothes. It wasn't.

"I have to go potty, *asshat!*" Wally yelled.

Andrew heard his daughter laughing, and turned to find her standing on the hood of his car, filming him with her cell phone.

"Don't have illegitimate children, boys and girls," she said, narrating her film as if it were a nature documentary.

Andrew was too preoccupied to tell her to stop. He scanned the surrounding areas for a suitable place for Wally, but no sooner had he started then Wally began slapping him on the shoulder.

"The illegitimate boy, unsatisfied with the prospect of shitting his pants, violently looks for other options," Jordan continued.

"Now, now, now, now!" Wally said, as the slapping grew stronger.

Jordan hopped down onto the driveway and brought her phone in for a close-up.

“Much like a cheating husband, the lovechild can wait...no longer.”

*Much like what!*

The slapping continued as Andrew unzipped Wally's pants.

“No fucking way. He's not going in the front yard!” Jordan replaced narration with shrill, astonished laughter.

“I'll clean it up. It's no different than a dog,” Andrew yelled at his daughter, and consequently into the cell phone as well.

“Do you treat your son like a dog a lot?” Jordan stopped filming, now too entranced by what was happening right in front of her.

Andrew was too offended to respond. He took off Wally's pants, and looked at them. Still clean. Naked from the waist down, Wally struggled to get out of his dad's arms.

Before Andrew had the chance to respond, he felt something warm land on his knee.

“Oh my God, it's happening,” Jordan said, too stunned to be disgusted.

Wally wriggled out of his father's grasp and ran towards Jordan, poo dripping down his leg. Jordan screamed, and jumped back onto the hood of the car. Wally looked at her, then back at his dad, and squatted in the middle of the driveway.

“I don't fucking believe this.”

Andrew sat on the concrete and looked at his knee. Just as he suspected. He looked at his son, now conducting his business just feet away from the front lawn, and then to his daughter, mouth agape, speechless.

“Hey why are you guys still – “ Claire stopped when she noticed Wally.

“Andrew, what is happening?”

“Claire, I can explain.”

Jordan was doubled over on the lawn, laughing. She was laughing so hard she began coughing.

“It’s not what it looks like.”

“Oh, it’s not?” Claire and Jordan said at the same time.

Claire seemed unsurprised, instead of upset. Which hurt Andrew a lot more than if she’d been furious. He wanted her to start throwing things, but she just looked at him, silent, taking it all in. She had never previously met Wally.

“This is so going on my story,” Jordan said.

Andrew had no idea what that meant but could infer enough to reply with a stern, “It better not.” Wally finished with his business and motioned for his pants. Andrew was all too happy to oblige.

Claire couldn’t take her eyes off Wally. She approached him slowly, as if afraid he’d run away, scared, otherwise.

Wally, once again fully dressed, looked at Claire curiously and outstretched his hand.

“I’m Wally.” He smiled.

Claire knelt down at eye level to Wally but didn’t extend her hand. She regarded him silently, giving no hint of emotion other than keen fascination.

Wally took his hand back and looked at his dad for instruction. Andrew smiled at him. Wally smiled back and waved.

“I love you, dad,” Wally said.

Claire stood up.

“Mom, are you okay?” Jordan asked, concern creeping into her voice.

Claire turned to face Andrew. Tears now streaming down her face.

“It makes it a lot more real when you finally see it,” Claire said, and began walking back towards the house.

“Wait, Claire,” Andrew called after her.

Halfway to the house, she turned around and glared at Andrew.

“I don’t know if I was naïve. I don’t know if I was just stupid. I don’t know...I don’t know anything. All I know is that this hurts, Andrew. This hurts more than...everything.” She turned and disappeared into the house.

Andrew felt like crying.

“Oh, you really fucked up now,” Jordan said, her phone, again, filming the precedings.

Andrew had imagined Claire eventually meeting his son. He knew it would happen one day, but not now and never like this.

He didn’t know what to do. He stared towards the front door of his home and felt lightheaded. He sat down in the grass and pulled his knees to his chest.

“Oh, you really fucked up now,” Jordan repeated. Andrew knew she just wanted a response, but wasn’t going to dignify her with one. He rested his head on his knees. Wally, from the driveway, did the same.

No sooner than Andrew had closed his eyes, he heard the all too familiar *ping!* of a cell phone.

'What are you saying, Robbie?' Andrew thought to himself. He wanted to get up and confront the situation but he didn't yet have the strength to stand. He could hear Jordan texting.

Andrew could hear the song, "Cry Me A River," by Justin Timberlake being played through Jordan's cell phone speakers.

He wanted to take her phone and throw it into the next zip code. He looked up and saw Jordan holding the phone aloft, now taking photos.

"What?" Jordan said coyly, responding to Andrew's defeated gaze.

They both knew this to be deliberate and spiteful and mean and Andrew despised how, if he politely asked her not to post it, it only guaranteed that she would. So he remained silent but stood up and began walking towards Wally. He picked up his son, intending to put him back in his car seat, when Jordan turned the camera on herself and said, almost gleefully, "My mom finally saw what I've seen all along. A loser."

What Andrew did next was more reflex than conscious decision. He placed Wally calmly on the ground, and walked across the driveway towards his daughter. She didn't see him coming since she was too busy defaming him on video.

"So that was *my* day," Jordan said into the video, as if the events had brought her to the brink of exhaustion. Before she could react, Andrew grabbed her phone out of her hand, cocked his arm back and threw the phone as far as he could. Both he and his daughter watched the phone shatter in the middle of the street.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Claire and Jordan said in almost perfect unison.

Andrew didn't respond as he walked briskly back to his son, picked him up and put him back in the car seat.

Andrew's adrenaline was rushing, and he leaned against the car to regain his composure. He only wished his daughter would do the same.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Jordan screamed again. "You owe me a phone!"

Andrew remained leaning against the car, taking deep breaths, knowing that for now at least, driving lessons would need to be put on hold.

"It's just a phone," Andrew whispered, unsure if it was for Jordan or himself.

"I want you to go and buy me a new iPhone right now!"

"No." Andrew wasn't sure Jordan could even hear him.

"Right fucking now!"

Andrew took another deep breath and turned to face his daughter.

"I'm going home. We'll drive another day." He knew if he said more than this, he'd either start screaming or crying, or both, so he didn't wait for a response, he turned and walked towards the driver's side of the car. *Like hell we are*, was the last thing he heard before he slammed the door and turned the car on. He turned to back out, only to find he was now, suddenly, blocked in by a ratty station wagon. He rested his head on the steering wheel and heard a car door open and close.

He knew he'd have to get out of the car and tell whoever was behind that he'd have to move. He also knew that he'd be facing a scene of nearly apocalyptic fury from his daughter when he did so, so he took his time. He calmed his breathing, yet his heart was still racing as he opened the car door and made his way back towards Jordan.

Standing next to his daughter, was a small, frail boy, wearing glasses and corduroy pants. He reminded Andrew a little of Doogie Howser, without the doctors coat.

Doogie was busy consoling Jordan who had obviously been crying.

"It's just a phone," Doogie said.

Andrew had given his daughter that exact line multiple times when trying to understand the outsized importance her phone had over her life. He wondered if she'd respond to Doogie with the same vitriolic *You don't get it* as she had with him.

"It just," Jordan looked up at him, again on the verge of tears. "It just had *everything* on it." There was no doubt in Andrew's mind, if Jordan had to choose between him or her phone - the one not chosen being forced to die by literally shattering to pieces on the pavement - she'd pick her phone. Andrew just hoped Claire would have the decency, when he was gone, to collect the remains that had haphazardly scattered across the neighborhood.

"Everything is backed up. We'll go and get another one right now." Doogie said.

Doogie gave Jordan a hug, which she enthusiastically reciprocated. They turned to walk to Doogie's car but noticed Andrew, standing on the edge of the driveway.

"Hi, I just need you to - " Andrew tried sounding friendly.

"Mr. Reynolds?" Doogie said, cocking his head to the side like a confused dog. Doogie approached with his hand outstretched. Jordan was surprisingly calm.

"Yea?" Andrew, confident a stranger wasn't going to assault him - especially a stranger that looked like a teenage doctor, shook Doogie's hand.

"I'm Robbie."

"Hello."



“Jordan’s told me a lot about you. It’s so nice to finally be able to put a face with a name.” Robbie looked Andrew in the eye and smiled.

“Is this some kind of joke?”

Rattled, Robbie turned to face Jordan.

“Because it’s not funny.”

“Hey, hun?” Jordan interjected. “Let’s go?” She pointed to his car then climbed in to hopefully motivate him to do the same.

Robbie’s smile told Andrew he wasn’t threatened by him, that while he wanted to be cordial, he wasn’t striving for Andrew’s approval. Possibly emboldened by the stories that Jordan had, presumably, told him, Robbie acted as if he was the adult in the situation. That he was doing Andrew a favor by being sociable. That it was more than Andrew deserved, and strangely, Robbie acted as if Andrew believed this too.

*Fuck ur old man!* Robbie had said – a stark contrast to the seemingly friendly and polite boy introducing himself now. And with Jordan, impatiently waiting in Robbie’s car, Andrew was surprised he lingered to talk.

What Andrew conveyed with *his* smile was that he disagreed with all of this and wanted Robbie to know, without a doubt, that he understood it all to be an act.

“What has Jordan said about me?” Andrew said.

“Oh, just normal usual stuff,” Robbie said, casually crossing his arms. Andrew could tell that Robbie wanted to appear aloof but the way he anxiously shifted his weight from foot to foot - rocking his body ever so slightly from side to side – gave him away.

“And what did you say back?” Andrew yelled, pointing at Robbie as if accusing him of a crime.

Jordan began honking the horn. She started with a couple short honks, then just held her hand on the horn.

“I uhhh...” Robbie was more confused than concerned.

“What did you say about me!” Andrew was unaware that he was screaming.

“Please, Mr. Reynolds. Calm down.” Robbie took a step towards Andrew.

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Andrew screamed, immediately embarrassed at his reaction. The phrase had been relentlessly pounded into his brain from his daughter for *months*, so he privately blamed them for making him sound so immature. He pointed at Jordan in the car.

“What did he text you!” Andrew needed one of them to admit it.

“What? I didn’t text her anything!”

“No one is talking to you, Robbie!” Andrew yelled, inclining Robbie to walk even further away from Andrew and the car. “So shut up!” He pointed at the boy to accentuate his point then turned his attention to his daughter.

“What are you talking about, you jackass?” Jordan said, knocking on the window to punctuate *jackass*. She slowly raised a middle finger. “See? I told you he was crazy!” Jordan rolled her eyes and looked at Robbie.

Andrew wasn’t sure if it was because she called him a *jackass*, because she just lied straight to his face, because she called him crazy, because she’d flicked him off, or a combination of everything, but he ran to the passenger side of Robbie’s car and began

pounding on the window with his fist. He tried opening the door even though he knew it was locked and, upon being denied entry, pounded even harder on the window.

“Stop being a lunatic!” Jordan yelled. Andrew couldn’t tell if she was scared or just angry. She raised the other hand to flick him off with both middle fingers.

Andrew would have kept pounding but knew it was only a matter of time before either his hand, the passenger side window or both, would break. Instead of continuing to futilely try to open the door, Andrew directed his attention to Robbie, who was still standing on the front lawn.

“You!” Andrew again pointed at the Robbie who reacted as if Andrew was pointing a gun instead of his finger. Robbie ran to his car, jumped inside and locked the door before Andrew was able to intercept him.

“I know who you are. And I know what you’re about,” Andrew said just inches away from Robbie’s face, only the window separating them.

“Chill the fuck out, man!” Gone was Robbie’s smile, replaced by fear masked by a thin layer of indignation. He raised a middle finger, albeit reluctantly, in obvious solidarity with his girlfriend.

“Hey, fuck you too!”

Claire ran out to the driveway.

“What the hell is going on out here?”

Seeing Claire, Andrew immediately broke down in tears.

Andrew looked at her, helplessly, silently, and broke down in tears.

Before he realized it, Robbie had backed his car out of the driveway and driven away.

“Don’t you dare.” Claire was angry. Angrier than he had ever heard her.

“Why did I...” Andrew said, his voice raspy from all of the previous screaming.

“What?” The indignation in Claire’s voice was clear.

“The text. The text to Jordan. I just...Why couldn’t...” Andrew felt ashamed by how pathetic and desperate he sounded. He knew he wasn’t making any sense, but he was too upset to do anything about it.

“What did you expect, Andrew?”

Andrew wanted to argue back, to stand up for himself, to plead his case in a convincing enough way that Claire would regard him with anything other than disdain. But he just didn’t have the strength, emotionally or physically. He didn’t have the words. He didn’t have anything.

“I made a mistake,” Andrew whispered, unconcerned if Claire could even hear him, knowing it made no difference either way.

Wally began to cry from inside the car.

“What did you expect?”

Claire looked to Andrew and then to Wally in his car seat, then turned and walk into the house. Andrew couldn’t hear the deadbolt lock over Wally’s crying, but knew it had happened.

He stared at the house that used to be his, at the life that used to be his and wondered how in the world he could have ever been so stupid.

### STORY #3: The Homecoming Dance

**Monday, Sept. 3:** Since high school started a week ago, Dr. Emmerich also wants me to start *this*, as a way to get my thoughts on paper. Help me to say what I want without the pressure. I suffer from social anxiety. So basically, I overanalyze. I worry. And because of it, I don't really talk all that much. Hopefully, this journal will help. I think one of the biggest misconceptions with social anxiety is that the people who suffer from it don't have anything to say. I have a lot to say. I just can't seem to gather the confidence to say it. Dr. E says the entries don't have to be long, just a short insight into what I'm thinking about that day. So, in the spirit of brevity, I think that's enough for now.

**Tuesday, Sept. 4:** One bonus about my therapy sessions with Dr. E is that it gets me out of school once a week. I arranged it so my appointments fall directly over math and science. The government doesn't sanction torture yet allows high schools across the country to teach Honors Biology. It's difficult to reconcile.

**Wednesday, Sept. 5:** Imagine a character in a horror movie being chased by the killer. The soon-to-be victim sprints across the street to a neighbor's house - the lights are on but the door is locked. Let's say, for the sake of argument, if they get inside, they'll be safe. The camera pans slowly from our victim's face to that of the killer, methodically making their way up the driveway. Our victim is screaming and pounding on the door.

When I find myself in a social situation, *any* social situation...my heart is that door.

**Thursday, Sept. 6:** High school is like if Tough Mudder decided to get into education. I floated the idea of homeschooling by my mom and she shot it down like a clay pigeon. Sometimes she's the only thing standing between me and my desire to lock myself in my room until I'm forty-five.

**Friday, Sept 7:** Up until middle school, my anxiety issues were a real pain in the ass, but ultimately, manageable. I wanted to be ignored and through the sixth grade, I more or less, was. But when middle school started, the social dynamic shifted. I still wanted to be ignored, but I suddenly *hated* being ignored by girls. And this, predictably, created quite the personal dilemma.

**Monday, Sept 10:** Other than Dr. E and my mom, no one knows I deal with anxiety. Would they think I was less weird if they knew why? Should I tell them? Or would that backfire? I don't know. Maybe one day. When I'm not so damn scared all the time.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, aka exposure therapy, is the real reason I see Dr E. Obviously, it's nice to have someone other than my mom to talk to about anxiety, but Dr. E also really helps me to confront it.

Exposure therapy is not something I'd do on my own. It is as terrifying as it is straightforward. *Do what makes you afraid.* For instance, if someone is afraid of dogs, exposure therapy will

encourage them to go and pet a dog. By doing that (the idea is, hopefully, over time) that they'll become less afraid of dogs. Obviously, being scared of people, I need to put myself in a position where I'm with people. But, unfortunately, unlike dogs, I can't just go up and pet them. I have to start conversations, ask questions, be *involved*.

It should go without saying that I absolutely hate this type of therapy, but here's the rub - social interactions make me withdraw, yet the only thing that will ultimately save me from becoming a total reclusive mole-person are social interactions. And the last time I checked, total reclusive mole-people almost never get kissed by girls.

So why do I bring this all up? Because, apparently, now that I'm in high school, the stakes have risen. In middle school, it was enough to just try to talk to people. And because I never really succeeded, I thought this would be the goal for high school (at least ninth grade) too.

Unfortunately, Dr. E has something else in mind. Talking isn't enough anymore, apparently. She wants me to go on a date. (My complaining over never having kissed a girl, in hindsight, must have killed her support for my "Avoid All People Forever" campaign) But she doesn't want me to just go on *any* date. She wants me to go on a *homecoming* date. And homecoming is September 29<sup>th</sup>. I haven't agreed to do it, yet. But, well, I just – shit.

**Tuesday, Sept 11:** *There is somebody out there for everyone.* At least that's what Dr. E tells me any time I worry aloud about dying alone. I don't know if it's meant to be reassuring or a call to

resign myself to the fact that (since life can utterly break people) someone will almost assuredly settle for me just like I'll reluctantly settle for them. Who says romance is dead?

**Wednesday, Sept. 12:** Maybe I'll just tell my mom and Dr. E that I did it and say the girl said no. Who's going to think I'm lying? Because if I ask a girl to the dance and for whatever reason she says yes, then I'm like the dog who caught the car. Or the person who's afraid of dogs, who's suddenly forced to live at the Humane Society.

**Thursday, Sept. 13:** Okay. I've decided. I'm going to the dance. I've thought about this a lot. And that's what I've decided. It might not be a good decision but it is a final decision. I think. Probably. I don't know. I've spent so much energy worrying about this today, I'm almost too tired to go to bed.

**Friday, Sept 14:** I made a Venn diagram, with the people I want to go to homecoming with on one side and the girls who could maybe-possibly-it's-not-insane-to-think-they-could-actually-say yes, on the other. Emma Jacobson was the only girl in the middle.

**Monday, Sept 17:** Asking a girl out is actually pretty straightforward. It's nerve wracking and *exceedingly* unpleasant, but really, it's just a simple yes or no question. *Emma, will you go to homecoming with me?* It's eight words that take 2.77 seconds to say. (I practiced it in front of my mirror) It's unintelligible if said faster than 1.46 seconds and guaranteed to get awkward if



any slower than 7.29. Fun fact: If done correctly, it takes 3.81 seconds to say, “*Emma, you look amazing*”. Maybe I’ll ask her tomorrow. 2.77 seconds, right?

**Tuesday, Sept 18:** I didn’t ask her today, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a *little* excited. I mean, in a very masochistic way, like Evel Knievel, sitting on a motorcycle, staring out at the Caesar Palace Fountains knowing he’s about to jump them. I’m excited in *that* kind of way. I know there’s no guarantee of success. Actually, there’s a much bigger chance that I crash and burn. And because of that, I’m absolutely terrified. And yet. Still a *little* excited.

It should be noted, Knievel was in the hospital for twenty-nine days after that crash. It fucked him up.

**Wednesday, Sept 19:** I want to be the guy that gets the girl. Or the guy who talks to the girl. But I’ve resigned myself to be the guy who the girl occasionally looks at. I set the bar low because big expectations lead to big disappointments, and I’m tired of letting myself down. I’m tired of letting my mom down. And that’s why I’m asking Emma Jacobson to Homecoming. Tomorrow.

*Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.* If it’s good enough for Shakespeare, it’s good enough for me. Was Macbeth talking about asking girls on dates? He probably was. If I’m going to ask, I’m asking tomorrow. Tomorrow. And tomorrow.

*[Life] is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.* William knew what he was talking about.

**Thursday, Sept 20:** I owe it to my mom to ask Emma. I owe her for the Herculean effort she's given me over the years. I've dealt with anxiety every single day and that means she's had to deal with it, too. It's something that, while I never take it for granted, I don't acknowledge it nearly as often as I should. So I want to ask Emma, in a sense, to say thank you. Show her and Dr. E that I'm trying.

Now, all I have to do is actually *ask* Emma...And then maybe, go to dinner before the dance with Emma...and then go to the actual dance with Emma...Maybe I should just get my mom a card, instead.

**Friday, Sept 21:** I did it! I asked! I did it! And she said yes. Holy shit.

When I was asking her, my heart felt like a bouncy castle at a six-year-olds birthday party, where there're forty kids inside a space designed for ten. And they're all jumping.

My mom started to cry when I told her about Emma. Apparently, she's never been prouder of me. I'm not sure if that's a compliment, though.

**Monday, Sept 24:** It looks like I'm going to dinner with Emma and "around six" of her friends and their dates. She doesn't know exactly who the six friends are, yet, though. It's still getting arranged. The jury is out on if this is a good or bad thing. I guess the conversation doesn't

depend on me anymore. So that's good. And I'm now one of fourteen instead of one of two. Those are numbers I can get behind. I just don't like not knowing who we're going with. But it can't be that bad. Just as long as we're not going with Aaron Conway or Jack Sapp. But those guys don't even know Emma. So. Eh, I guess  $14 > 2$ .

**Tuesday, Sept 25:** The jury is back. It's a win. (We're going to Sharkee's, aka the greatest restaurant of all time) Still a mystery who will be joining us, though.

**Wednesday, Sept 26:** My mom rented me a tuxedo. Do people wear tuxedos to homecoming? She didn't know but said it was better to be overdressed than underdressed. (I guess?) I wish there was a homecoming run through before the actual dance. What do fourteen people sitting at the same table talk about? Should I make a list of topics? I should definitely make a list of topics. But what should they be? What does Emma like? Damn it...I don't even know what she likes. She plays softball. I know nothing about softball. I should ask her about famous softball players. *Are there famous softball players?* I wish I could have a homecoming dry run. Like a dress rehearsal. It would be nice to have some idea what I'm doing.

*Possible Topics For Dinner:*

1. *Who's your favorite famous softball player?*
2. *It's nice that it's so warm today. (Use only if it's warm)*
3. *Yes. I am wearing a tuxedo. Because I like my women like I like my martinis...(come up with an ending for this)*

*Possible Topics for the Dance:*

1. *You're a really great dancer.* (Wait, shit. What kind of dancing do they do at these things? I hope I don't have to waltz)
2. *These decorations are really cool. Which is your favorite?* (Note: Change from "cool" to "lame" if decorations are lame)
3. *Oh, I love this song! Did you know Stairway to Heaven is the thirty-first best song of all time according to Rolling Stone magazine?* (I figure this will be the last song, right? But what if it's not? What should I say then? Though, if we're waltzing I guess it doesn't really matter. Is it even possible to waltz to *Stairway to Heaven*?)

**Thursday, Sept 27:** My mom bought a corsage for me to give her. I didn't even know that was a thing. What is Emma supposed to do with it? Just wear it? Such a waste of money. But...if she likes it, then...money well spent!

However this goes, I'm glad I asked her. Hindsight could make that statement a complete joke but if I don't stand up to anxiety, then I'm not really living, am I? I'm basically just surviving if every decision I make is either to avoid anxiety or acquiesce to every one of its demands. And I've been *just surviving* for way too long now. Asking Emma is a step I needed to take. So I'm glad I asked her. And I will stay glad even if things go bad. I think. No. Actually. No. That's a lie. I won't. Things could go very bad.

**Friday, Sept 28:** Homecoming is tomorrow. In less than twenty-four hours I am picking Emma up. (Well, my mom is driving since neither Emma nor I have our license) My mom also bought me flowers to give to her. So I have my tuxedo, the corsage and flowers. Pictures are at her place with all the other couples.

I wish I lived in the town from *Footloose*...before Kevin Bacon screwed it up.

*Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.* Macbeth dies at the end. Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

Evel Kneivel landed most of his jumps. He jumped over fourteen Greyhound Buses once.

I'm not nervous. I'm too scared to be nervous.

*Emma, you look incredible. \_\_\_\_\_ is my favorite famous softball player too.*

This was a terrible idea.

**Saturday, Sept 29:**

"Ok, so when you see her, what're you going to say?" my mom asks. She seems optimistic, yet I know she feels far more apprehensive than she lets on. Her grip on the steering wheel gives her away. She isn't driving the car, so much as strangling it.

“I’m going to mention how great she looks and give her the flowers.”

“Perfect! Yes. Exactly.” My mom reacts like I’m a toddler who finally grasps the concept of toilet training. Yet, it’s too genuine to be condescending, and isn’t completely undeserved.

“You’ll give her the flowers and then what?”

“I’ll give her the corsage. Tell her again how pretty she looks and mention how much fun we’re going to have tonight.”

Though it’s impossible to calculate, I bet I’m one of the five most nervous people to ever pick up a homecoming date. Ever. I feel like I’m about to have a heart attack. Has a fifteen-year-old ever had a heart attack?

The problem is that I don’t trust my judgment. If it’s up to me, I’d be wearing an earpiece throughout the night with my mom telling me what to say. That’s how little confidence I have in myself. I believe my forty-year-old mother, currently wearing Crocs, can hold a conversation with high schoolers better than I can.

“Yes! You are going to do great! And if you’re feeling anxious or have trouble thinking of something to say, what do you do?” If my mom squeezes any tighter, a piece of the steering wheel is bound to break off in her hand.

“I’m going to go to the bathroom. Do my breathing exercises, calm down, think of something to say, then go back to Emma and say it.”

“No one has ever been more prepared for homecoming than you.”

When we get to Emma’s driveway, though, I don’t feel prepared, at all. Even though I’ve run through this scenario countless times with my mom, I feel utterly unprepared. There are

only a few things I can think of, right now, that I want to do less than go and ring her doorbell, and they all involve spiders.

When I asked Emma to the dance, I felt like an actor with only one line. I knew what I needed to say and I knew how I wanted to say it, so when the proverbial curtain went up – when I was standing in front of Emma – I said my line with as much confidence as I could, *Emma, will you go to Homecoming with me?* And ultimately, my performance was met with a positive review. But now, I feel like I'm in the actor's nightmare. The curtain is about to rise and I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know my lines. (I assume there's a lot) I don't know my blocking. (I assume there's a lot) I don't even know what kind of play this is!

"Emma, you look amazing. I got you these flowers," my mom instructs, sensing she needs to better prepare her actor for opening night. "You say that and she'll take it from there." I doubt this, but it bolsters me enough to at least get out of the car.

*Emma, you look amazing. Emma, you look amazing. Emma, you look amazing.* I repeat this refrain softly as I walk up the driveway. I glance back at the car and my mom looks at me like she'll never see me again. Is she crying? This doesn't help my nerves. I try not to think about it as I walk to the door.

*Amazing.* That's the word that really has to land. I emphasize it one last time in my mind before I close my eyes and ring the doorbell. *Deep breaths. Deep breaths. I got this. Be calm. Just breathe. I got this. I say my line and Emma will take it from there. Worst case scenario is,*

*this night is so apocalyptically bad, I never date again. Best case scenario is...anything better than that.*

When I hear the door open, I hold out the flowers, smile in a way I hope looks casual, yet confident and deliver my line better than any of my previous run-throughs with my mom. “Emma, you look *AMAZING!*”

I open my eyes and see a woman who resembles Emma, but is at least thirty years older. She laughs and takes my flowers.

“How charming!” the woman says, smiling. I feel like a dancing bear, appreciated for the novelty, not the performance. “You must be Danny. Please come in. Emma’s still getting ready but she should be down any minute.” She waves me inside and sets the flowers, indifferently, on the hallway table. *I’m the first one here?* I want to ask – I wasn’t expecting this – but instead I just nod and close the door behind me.

I brought Emma tulips on my mom’s recommendation. She says they’re the “perfect, unassuming flower.” They’ll tell Emma, “I like you, but not too much.” Apparently, carnations are too casual and roses too serious. “Could scare her.” Up until yesterday, I had no idea flowers could scare people. Different flowers mean different things? (What would it mean if I brought her a sunflower?) Privately, I thought it best to scrap the whole idea, better not risk sending the wrong message, but my mom had already purchased the tulips before I was given a chance to protest.



“Oh, just look at you!” the woman, who I assume to be Mrs. Jacobson, says, turning to face me. “Allan. Come in here. Hey, Allen!” Before I know it, a man, who I assume to be Allen, who I also assume to be Mr. Jacobson, comes into the hallway. He smiles and crosses his arms, looking as if we are both in on a joke, while the woman regards the dancing bear like he just climbed atop a unicycle.

“He’s wearing a *tuxedo*,” the woman says, as if this concept was not thought possible until I arrived.

“He’s wearing a tuxedo,” the man repeats, the apparent novelty not lost on him either. I can feel sweat pooling in my shirt, which I attribute directly to the stares my tuxedo elicits, instead of the cummerbund it requires. I don’t have a back-up outfit. I hear someone walking around upstairs. I have gym clothes in my locker at school. I hear a door open and close. I think I’ll change into those when I get to school. Mrs. Jacobson starts speaking, probably to reiterate again, the fact that I’m clearly wearing something I shouldn’t, but I cut her off.

“I – I have to go to the bathroom.” I’m completely embarrassed. I don’t want to use the bathroom excuse this early. After all, there’ll be only so many times I can use it tonight before the people I’m with start thinking I’m weird or need to get my bladder checked. At least Emma’s not downstairs yet. But it’s still unorthodox, at best, to walk into someone’s home and *immediately* request to use the bathroom.

Emma’s mom and I stare at each other for a moment. She’s probably wondering why I didn’t use the bathroom earlier, but she doesn’t say anything. Neither does Allen. The silence continues. Too anxious to wait for a response, I begin walking down the hallway, acting as if I know where I’m going. I’m not sure why, but Emma’s parents remain silent.

I turn the corner at the end of the hall and disappear further into the house, scanning the rooms I pass for any sign of a toilet. (Their house didn't look this big from the driveway) The only thing that would make this situation worse is if I actually had to use the bathroom.

In the past, my anxiety has made me do some objectively odd things; act in ways that, at best, can be described as rude, like covering my ears and blatantly ignoring someone who says hello. Or, at worst, downright dangerous, like closing my eyes when I'm walking (I've even done this a couple times when crossing the street). I do these things – among many, many others – for one of two reasons. Either to avoid provoking my anxiety or to calm it down once it gets riled up. I'm walking around the Jacobson's house, because of the former. And, growing increasingly anxious at my inability to find a bathroom, I shuffle inside the walk-in pantry in their kitchen, due to the latter.

I just need someplace private to calm down, and while this is far from ideal, it'll do the trick. I can't find a light switch, though, so I'm standing in the dark. I put the corsage in my pocket and begin nervously needling it with my fingers. I slowly go through my breathing progressions – breathe in through my nose, hold it, exhale slowly through my mouth – and begin to silently reassure myself. *It's okay. I'm okay.* I only wish I can believe it. *I'm okay. It's okay.*

I hear people talking in the hallway but I can't make out what they're saying. I close my eyes. When I get done with one set of breathing exercises, I start another. In through my nose for four counts, out through my mouth for eight. Repeat four times. When I'm done with the

second set, I start a third. I'm beginning to calm down. It feels like my head is defrosting. (Which is a good thing) And I start feeling like myself again. But just when my heart no longer feels like a tambourine being wielded by an eight-year-old; just when my mind is an ice cube instead of an iceberg; just when I feel ready to go back to the foyer and face Emma's parents, I hear voices entering the kitchen, and my anxiety is back.

"I have no idea where he went. He's not in the bathroom. Danny?" Mrs. Jacobson says. I don't know how long I've been in here, but it's obviously long enough for the family to worry and start looking for me. My anxiety is now worse than at any point since I knocked on the front door. I find myself playing an unwitting game of hide and go seek. I pace back and forth in the dark, using the corsage as a makeshift stress ball.

I never should have asked Emma out. This was such a dumb idea. A stupid idea. A horrible idea with no chance of ever working out. How could I have been such an idiot? Even though this homecoming date was literally the only thing I thought about for the past two weeks, I obviously didn't give it enough thought. If I had, I wouldn't be pacing and silently cursing myself in Emma's pantry.

"He couldn't have left? Could he have left?" Mr. Jacobson says.

Obviously, I haven't left, but now I'm thinking about it. If I can get out into the back yard without anybody noticing, then I can run around to the front of the house, get in my mom's car and beg her to drive me home. Granted, she's expecting me to come out the front door with Emma, instead of running out the backyard, alone, but such details, I can explain later. And I'd much rather explain things to her than to Mrs. Jacobson or Allen. If I can pull that off, I figure, I

could potentially be back home before Emma even comes downstairs, or ever even knows I was here. Once her parents get out of the kitchen, I'll –

“Why would he leave?” Emma says.

Shit.

My emotions begin having a wrestling match in my head. Anxiety, guilt, shame, embarrassment, fear, all of the heavy hitters show up. I sit on the ground, pull my legs to my chest and rest my head on my knees. I would cry if I wasn't so nervous about someone opening the door.

“Maybe he just went outside. Danny!” Mrs. Jacobson calls my name again. “Danny?” Her voice gets softer as she makes her way down the hallway towards the front of the house.

“He's not in the backyard,” Allen says.

When I was a kid, my mom would pretend she couldn't see me when I covered my eyes. She'd walk around the living room as if I'd disappeared – calling out *Danny? Where'd you go? Danny?* – as I laughed and laughed on the couch. I've wished many times for that game to be real. But never more so than right now.

“Why would he leave?” Emma repeats. She sounds sad and it makes me feel even worse. I want to tell her I'm sorry. And I promise myself I will. On Monday. At school.

“Where could he have gotten off to?” I hear Allen walk into the next room. I hear someone run upstairs.

I stand up and place my ear against the door.

“Maybe he just went out to his car?” I hear Mrs. Jacobson say. The front door opens and closes.

There are footsteps above me, but no other sounds close by. I listen for a couple more seconds to make sure, and when I still don’t hear anything, I know now is the time to make my move.

I take a couple deep breaths to try and keep my nerves in check, grasp the handle and slowly open the door. I slip quietly back into the kitchen and shut the door without making a sound. But none of that matters, because Allen’s sitting at the kitchen table, staring at me.

“What in the world were you doing in *there*?” If I fell through the ceiling, I don’t think he could be any more perplexed.

“Who? Me?” I’m so startled, I’m amazed to even get that out.

“Emma. I found him,” he yells towards the hallway. I feel like a prison escapee who’s been caught at the border. I was so close.

“Why were you in the pantry, of all places?”

“I, uhh...” I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what he *expects* me to say. I spent my time thinking about my getaway, not how to explain myself if I got caught. My anxiety reaches new levels. All I want is to go back into the pantry and disappear.

“I uhh...” I’m not a quick thinker when I’m nervous, and I’m an even worse liar. I can’t tell him the truth. I can’t think of a lie. But I have to say *something*.

“I couldn’t find the bathroom so I went in there.”

The look on Mr. Jacobson’s face when he thought I took a crap in his pantry will likely be with me for a very long time.

“You...you...what?” he says, walking past me, and opening the pantry door. He disappears inside as Emma walks into the room.

“Hi, Danny.” She smiles and gives me a hug. I wish I can react faster and hug her back. I wish I can appreciate the moment or even register how incredible it feels to have a girl – other than my mom – give me a hug. But my mind is ten feet away. With Allen. In the pantry.

“Where were you?” she asks. She’s far more curious than angry.

What’s Allen going to say when he comes out? How should I explain my disappearance? Why is he *still* in there?

“Danny?” She senses my distraction. “Are you okay?”

I wish I could say, *yes*, in a way that would make her believe it. In a way that would make *me* believe it.

“I’m doing – I think I – It’s just – ” I have no idea what I’m saying.

“And also, what are you wearing?” She laughs while I die a little on the inside. I look at her and force a smile.

Anxiety is unsettling, in part, because it makes me miss very obvious things. As my anxiety builds, my mind starts whirling and before I know it, I get so distracted, I can’t even concentrate on things that are literally right in front of me. Which is why I don’t notice Emma’s outfit. I’m so preoccupied with Allen and his pending reemergence from the pantry, that it’s only when she mentions mine that I finally take stock of hers. And it’s much stranger than a tuxedo.

She's dressed like a hippie, denim bellbottoms over platform shoes and a bright blue ruffled blouse under an even brighter tie-dyed vest with tassels. She has a matching scarf that's wrapped around her forehead, and heart shaped sunglasses shading her eyes blue.

"What are *you* wearing?" I say, taking in the whole ensemble.

"The theme is the Sixties," she says, giving me a warm, yet sympathetic smile.

Theme? Homecoming has a *theme*? What? Why?

"It was on all the posters. Didn't you see them?" Her smile is still warm but the sympathy now feels dangerously close to pity. Of course, I didn't see the posters.

I feel like an even bigger dumbass than before. My tuxedo is going to be more conspicuous than ever. The only thing worse than wearing the wrong outfit on purpose, is wearing the wrong outfit by accident. At least the former is a conscious decision, which, if ridiculed, can be played off as a joke. Then again, Emma doesn't know my outfit *isn't* a joke...

"I like your bow tie," she says. The sympathy is gone. It's only pity now.

"My outfit is...It's...It's a joke." I hope she believes me, even though I clearly don't believe myself. "It's a commentary on...capitalism and...how much...I...hate it?"

Emma starts laughing, and I'm positive I'm more caught off guard by this than Allen was when I walked out the pantry. What I said is *funny*?

"That's hilarious!" Apparently so. "It's *so* hippy."

She slaps me lightly on the arm. It's the first time a girl has ever laughed at something I said. It's one of the greatest sounds I've ever heard.

I can't remember the last time anxiety didn't have, at least, some influence over my thoughts. But in this moment, where Emma's laughing at my 'joke', my anxiety suddenly

doesn't matter. Nothing does. Not my tuxedo, Allen in the pantry, not even the fact that Homecoming is going to last for, at least, another five hours. Nothing. I'm floating. I laugh with her. Just a hippie and her anti-capitalist hippie date, standing in a kitchen, laughing. What an incredible feeling. So of course, now is when Mr. Jacobson decides to finally come out of the pantry and join us. And our moment ends as abruptly as it began.

"What were you doing in *there*?" Emma says to her dad.

He looks at me but says nothing in response, only smiles. He puts his arm around his daughter and kisses her on the top of the head.

"You're so weird. How long were you in there?" Allen ignores her.

"You look sharp, Danny," he says. "And I failed to introduce myself earlier. Allen." He extends his hand and I shake it. I wish I could privately thank him for not telling Emma where I'd been, and for also not mentioning the reason *he* was in the pantry, but all I can offer is a limp handshake. Hopefully, that's thanks enough.

"A tuxedo is a bold choice," he says, somewhere in between admiration and sarcasm.

"He's an anti-capitalist hippie," Emma clarifies.

"Oh," Allen says, thinking about this. "But aren't all hippies – "

"And I'm flower power Emma." Emma extends two peace signs into the air.

I like her outfit. It's quirky and fun. Most importantly, though, it gives me something to talk about. I make a mental note: *Talk more about hippies. Joke more about capitalism.*

"I like your vest." I offer an awkward thumbs up.

She twirls around, the tassels on her vest fly into the air. "Why thank you."



Homecoming creates a pretense where: asking someone out, dressing like a hippie, giving flowers, going to dinner, and dancing (hopefully not waltzing) are not only acceptable things to do but expected. It gives its participants an acceptable reason to act like someone they aren't. And while this frightens me, I feel emboldened by it, as well. Can this night actually be *fun*? I don't want to get my hopes up, but my fortunes have definitely shifted in the last couple minutes. Unfolding right in front of me, is something that wouldn't have happened in even my most optimistic fantasies. I'm standing in Emma Jacobson's kitchen; she's laughing at my jokes, and all of us – her, me, Allen – are acting like this situation is completely normal, acting like I'm funny and my tuxedo is a clever fashion choice, and it's all *completely normal*. This is surreal. I wish I could bottle this feeling and keep it in my pocket for later tonight – when I know my anxiety will, inevitably, return – because, right now, I feel amazing. And feeling amazing feels *amazing*. But then my mom walks into the kitchen, with Mrs. Jacobson following behind, and I don't feel so amazing anymore.

"Oh, there he is! You found him," Mrs. Jacobson says, unnecessarily reminding everyone of my earlier absence. Both women walk towards Mr. Jacobson, who introduces himself to my mom.

"Where'd you get off to? I was worried. I recruited your mom into the search party," Mrs. Jacobson continues. I recognize that she means this as a joke, but it doesn't feel like one. My mom gives me a sad smile and a look that says, 'I'm sorry. She asked me to come in and I couldn't say no. Are you okay?' (My mom can say *a lot* with just a look)

“He was in the kitchen. I think he just couldn’t find the bathroom,” Allen says. God bless this man.

“I got lost,” I say, confirming our lie.

Mrs. Jacobson nods, effectively closing the matter, and taps her daughter on the shoulder. She hands Emma a small plastic box and points to me.

“Oh, yea. This is for you,” Emma says, opening the box, she takes out a small, stemless rose. “It’s a boot-a-knee.”

“A boutonnière,” her dad corrects. “Here, I’ll help you put it on.”

Before I know what’s happening, Mr. Jacobson grabs the lapel of my coat and awkwardly tries to stab a rose into it with a tiny needle. Emma rolls her eyes, and I’m comforted by the fact that she seems as unenthused with this ritual as I am.

When Allen finishes, he steps back and admires his handiwork.

“Screw capitalism, am I right?” he says, and laughs.

I nod, while my mom and Mrs. Jacobson exchange puzzled glances.

Remembering the corsage, I reach in my pocket and pull out my contribution to this weird tradition.

“This is for you,” I say, holding it out to Emma, but by her expression, I can tell something’s wrong. Her look merely confirms a fear that has been percolating in my mind ever since I came out of the pantry. I don’t even need to look down to see what the problem is. I can feel it now. I know the corsage is destroyed. But I look down to survey the wreckage, anyways.

The corsage looks like it’s been hit – more than once – with a hammer. There are no petals intact. Every part of the flower is either torn, smashed or squeezed in a way that if Emma

doesn't know what it's *supposed* to be, she'll have no idea what it *is*. It comes with a ring of elastic, so it can be worn around the wrist, and I succeeded in snapping and fraying that, too.

Tears well in my eyes from nerves and disappointment. I want to crawl back into the pantry and lock the door. I don't care if everyone sees me do it. The corsage was one of the easiest parts of the night. Literally, all I had to do was give it to her. And I couldn't even do that. I hope this isn't a sign of things to come.

But then Emma starts laughing. Louder than before. I'm stunned. It's beautiful. And, even better, it's contagious. Before I know it, everyone is laughing. And Emma is laughing the hardest.

If different flowers actually do mean different things, and actually do send different messages, I hope my decimated corsage says, *I'm not perfect, but I'm trying. I hope that's okay.* Based on Emma's laughter, she seems to understand. We laugh with each other and my anxiety fades to the background.

My mom is the last to stop laughing as she wipes a tear from her cheek. "If you want a corsage you can actually wear, Emma. I have another in the car." She leans over and takes the ruined rose from my hand.

Who else other than a mom brings an *extra* corsage because she knows her son will nervously and absentmindedly destroy the first? At times, I believe my mom knows me better than I know myself.

"And I also found this on the hallway table." She pulls my tulips from behind her back and hands them to me. I quickly give them to Emma who smiles and thanks me.

"They're beautiful," she says.

I'm so caught up in the moment, so energized by the laughing, so completely relieved at how well everything is going, I speak, without thinking.

"And so are you." The instant I say it, I recoil as if touching something hot. What have I just done? What did I just say? Did I just ruin *everything*? I'm mortified.

But then she smiles. And I smile, too. And everything is...okay.

"So where is everyone else?" my mom says. She looks at the empty backyard through the window.

"We're taking pictures at Aaron's." Emma says this matter-of-factly, as if she'd mentioned this to me before and I'm supposed to know which Aaron she's talking about. She hadn't and I don't. She senses my confusion.

"Aaron Conway? Sarah's boyfriend?" she clarifies.

Shit.

"And we're late," she says, checking her watch. "Let's go."

She leads the way out of the room. She's so sure of herself, so confident, bounding down the hallway like she's been going to '60's themed dances for years. I bet she never has to spend time in dark pantries, rocking back and forth, hoping no one sees, trying to gain just enough confidence to be able to walk back into a strange room, full of strange people, and face the world.

My anxiety is back. And it's bad.

**To Be Continued...**