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# Paper or Plastic: Recycled Stories

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Recycled Stories

Deanna M. Mulye

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## Providence

“Well, fancy-dancy this,” she says, and kneeling down he says, “Hey little guy.”

They watch the microscopic turtle cross their path in the middle of the woods and neither of them wonders where it’s going. There were a million paths they could have taken this day, and a million more for the turtle. *But for the grace of god*, all three thought at once, *this must be the right one*.

## An Abandoned Lot

I'd rather hate a person than love them to death. If you want to make someone happy, what are you supposed to do? I can't even make a fucking goldfish happy, how am I supposed to aspire to higher forms of life when I can't even get the *basics* down? The basics - *oh yes, that's a happy look, and there's a grumpy one, it's not quite mad but...*

Anything *but* hate is a compliment; that's what no one else realizes.

I sneered at a woman in the grocery store, Thomas said. I argued with him. "Oh, yes you did," he said.

I shriveled inside. *Oh high authority, forgive me. All knowing one, overlook my transgressions!* "I didn't," I said, "I was sneering at the applesauce." Thomas rolled his eyes and that was the end of the conversation. He's just the opposite of me and that's probably why I can't stand him. So if I can't stand him, why do I let him keep on sleeping with me?

I want to look around for a new apartment and I tell him so. "So go ahead," he says, and he keeps on reading the newspaper, sitting in his – wait, not his, *my* - recliner chair that I rescued from bulk trash pick-up day. I tell him that the one year lease is up next month and he just shrugs like it's no big deal. "Okay," I say after two long minutes, and leave with my jacket hanging over my shoulder. *Follow me, this way, come on, move your feet,* I think as I walk to the stairwell. I can see him still sitting there in my

chair in the apartment in my mind and by the time I'm out on the street, he's asleep and not behind me like I hoped. "Fucker," I mutter. I forgot to make the bed.

I take the bus around the neighborhood and write a list on the back of my hand of all of the "for rent" signs I see. I pass through Oakland and Squirrel Hill, Garfield, Friendship, and am turned around by the driver when the surroundings become too dilapidated. I double check my list on the way back. I notice that the further away you travel, the cheaper the places. The poorer the siding, more cracks in the windows and crab grass in the yards, the less you have to pay for the privilege of living.

The day gets brighter as we head back into Pittsburgh. "Don't break your legs," a blind man says to me as we near my neighborhood. I want to say something but he turns away from me and leans his greasy hair against the window. He gets off at the next stop and a woman with a baby gets on in his place. The baby pats the glass where the man's head rested and then puts her hands into her mouth.

Thomas waits for me at the door when I finally get back up to the fourth floor. "C'mon," he says, pulling me back from where I came. I fight him for a moment but he turns be around and we head back to the ground floor. "I've got a surprise for you," he says.

He takes me to the restaurant where we went on our first date. We order smoothies at the take-out counter and walk around the neighborhood instead of eating dinner. "You know," he says, "I've been thinking."

"I found some apartments," I say, thinking about the run-down edges of town where the bus turned around.

"How would you like to get married?" he asks.

"What," I say just to make sure I'm not hearing things. "You don't want to get married," I say.

He doesn't hear me. "I got offered a job in Portland," he says. "What do you think about that?"

"Portland?"

"Oregon. Way over there."

"Oh," I say, and we keep walking and sipping and walking and breathing. I break into a run, pushing through the warm spring air, wishing I was barefoot on the beach in Maine, not sneakered on the sidewalk in Pittsburgh. Barefoot running on the beach in Maine, on the cold wet sand where land and the ocean battle for territory. No neon signs in sight, no cars ten feet away.

He catches up, smiling, laughing, out of breath, "What was that for, little miss energy?"

"Just trying to get away for a bit," I say, wishing he was a lamppost I could leave behind. "Sounds good, Portland." I smile at him. *Are you happy now, soldier? Is that wrinkle near your eye a good sign, or a stress mark?* I hate him. *Mind reader.* He doesn't

really love me. *I guess I'll see you after I die or something.* I don't know what I'm thinking.

I start to walk away again.

"Want to go home? Slow down." He grabs my arm. "Want to go home?" he asks again.

I just nod, because that's too hard of a question to really *answer*. I let him lead, because when it comes right down to it, I can't stop thinking about the depressed lot with the abandoned houses all around, the weeds posing as flowers making it all seem like a place that once had been loved. That's all the home I've ever known.

He tussles my hair and soon we're back here, up on the fourth floor, slipping into bed like nine hundred times before.

## The East Coast

Jain meets me at the corner of Fifth and Bigelow. She's tall and skinny and wears a black leather jacket. I was once in love with Jain - unreciprocated, of course. Jain is nothing without her badass attitude and feminism. She's stuck in 1991. It was the attitude that got in my way.

Jain looks me up and down with clear blue eyes. Her hair is black and cut severely at the chin. She starts to sing in a smoker's voice. "I've seen better days..."

"Thanks, Jain," I say. She shuts up and we start to walk down the street. The pawn shop is several blocks away. My apartment is in that kind of neighborhood, the kind with cheap pizza shops that look dirty but probably aren't that bad. The kind where you *can* walk around at night, you *might* come back home alive.

I called Jain last night and asked her to meet me. Thanks to the gossip of mutual friends, I know that she is in the midst of an existential phase and that the prospect of me killing myself will be great fodder for her. She's a renaissance artist. She writes, paints pictures, makes up songs, plays strange stringed instruments. Wears a lot of black. I think Jain is talented, and if anyone deserves inspiration, it's her. We haven't seen each other in two years, but to me it feels as though no time has passed at all.

We walk. She doesn't step on any cracks in the pavement and I admire her for that. "How much money do you have?" she asks me.

“Five hundred.”

“Buy a cheap gun,” she says. “Give me the rest.”

“What if I can think of something better to do with it?” I tease.

She smiles. “You won’t.” She winks.

The day is cold and the wind is cutting right through my jacket. Jain doesn’t say anything for a few steps and I can’t think of anything either, though I’m trying... oh God, am I trying. “Are you actually going to do this?” she asks, touching my arm, stopping me there in the middle of the block. Perfect.

“What do you think?” A crow caws overhead.

She raises one eyebrow. She’s good at playing skeptical. Another admirable trait. “Yep,” she says finally.

I stare at her for a moment. I almost ask her what she’s talking about, but then I remember. She’s just sealed my fate. There is no turning back now. No turning back.

We walk the rest of the way in silence. Jain goes out of her way to step on crunchy leaves and the sound is irritating. It’s fall, nearing Halloween. I haven’t decided whether this holiday will be my last or the first one I miss. No matter which it is, I don’t intend to spend it alone, be my company Jain or my relatives in Hell.

A little bell rings as we enter the pawn shop. The store is gray and lit by unstable fluorescent lights. Guns are in the first glass case to the left. Jain leans her elbows on the glass and inspects them. “Gunmetal,” she says. “It’s a good color, don’t you think?”

“Oh, sure.”

The man behind the counter comes over to keep an eye on us. “See anything you like?” he asks. “Personal safety is very important these days. Very important.” He’s balding and wearing a plaid shirt. His teeth are yellow and chipped.

“Isn’t it, though?” agrees Jain, smiling at the man winningly. I notice for the first time, the millionth time, that her skin is the color of an orchid.

My eyes wander to the case. What else have these guns been used for over the years? How many deaths are held responsible by this display? The little black one, the larger grey. The small silver colored gun that looks older than all of us combined. “That one,” Jain says, pointing.

The clerk hands it to her and she examines it, turning it around in her hands. “What do you think,” she says, casually pointing it at me. “Does that look about right?”

“Good enough,” I say, glancing into the barrel, forcing a grin.

Jain and I say goodbye shortly after that, somewhere on the street between the shop and my building. “Come to my Halloween party,” she says. “Come as anything you want. But you have to come as something.” She pauses, standing still. “You will still be around for it, won’t you?” She smiles a little. I think.

“Maybe,” I tell her and we say goodbye. I think that this might be the last time Jain and I are alone together. I want to give her a hug, but I don’t. Is it even proper for

twenty-five year olds to hug? I doubt she thinks of things like that. If I had touched her, she would have taken it the wrong way.

I've decided on the time and place for departure, killing two birds with one stone. Jain's party is the day before Halloween. I don't intend upon doing this in front of other people - that would be disturbing, disruptive to what should be a joyful time. However, what better way to commemorate the darkest holiday than to actually have a real, live, dead person at your party? Jain's got a lot of artsy friends. They'll "get" it. Jain definitely will. And if they don't, fuck them.

Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do, and deciding what to do in the first place is half the battle.

After marking my calendar with the party date, I realize that I only have a few things left to do, one of which is to feed my cat. The other is a broad stroke. Tie up loose ends. I sit in my favorite spot - a bare patch of hardwood in front of the boarded up fireplace in the living room, right where a draft blows in from some hidden crack. Loose ends. Loose... ends.

I call Jain up about a week after we pick up the gun. In the meantime, I've been spending most of my time trying to finish playing all of my videogames. I'm stuck on Zelda for Super Nintendo. I can't get the last amulet and it's killing me. So I call her.

“Wes,” she says into the phone. “I’m glad you’re still around.” I can’t tell if is she’s joking or not.

We meet up and go to the park for a walk. It’s an unsafe place to walk after dark, but neither of us care enough to remember. We don’t talk. The sky is the color of gunmetal and soon the moon will appear, if it appears at all. There is just enough light emanating from the city to see. As we walk, I imagine her hand slipping into mine. I ignore the fact that my left hand is really being held by my right hand, inside of my hoodie’s kangaroo pouch.

Jain becomes suddenly light on her feet and floats over to a tree, a large hickory, and plops down beneath it, stretching her long legs out in front of her. “Come sit,” she says. I do. “Tell me about California.”

“I barely remember it,” I tell her. A lie.

“You’ve only been back for two months.” She’s rolling her eyes. “What about your job? How was that?”

“I hated it. I looked at computers all day, every day, and I hated it.”

Jain starts picking up dead leaves and rips them on their seams. I follow suit. “Can’t say I blame you,” she says. She waits for a while, and I know what she’s going to ask next. “How did Carrie like it there, do you think?”

Carrie is my ex-wife. Carrie was a mistake. “She liked it. The weather’s always

nice there and that made her happy." Carrie is a money grubbing bitch and I'm not afraid to admit it. Silently, at least.

"So she stayed by herself?"

"Yes."

We both take a long pause. Too long.

Jain hugs herself. "Shit, it's cold. Want to get going?"

I do. We stand and start to walk back towards our part of the city. It's a small city. We don't say much till we get to my apartment. "Do you want to come up?" I ask. I don't want to ask it, but I do. It's out of my mouth before I realize it, but honestly, I know it's the only thing I've wanted to say all night. I like Jain and Jain likes me, but we've never talked or thought about it too much. Jain knows what this question means, and if ever there was a time for her to say yes, this would be it. There's nothing left to lose, and, by my word, this will be the last time I ask it.

Jain smiles and doesn't look at me. "I should get home," she says.

"This is the last time," I say. I'm a little angry. Angry with potential. It grows exponentially.

She looks at me with innocent eyes. "I just can't."

"Why?" I know I sound like I'm accusing her of something. I don't mean to sound that way. Not really.

Jain's eyes narrow and her face reminds me of an angry Siamese cat. "Darling," she says, and she uses the word in the most sarcastic way. Such a talent. "You tell me that you want to die - fuck, you have me come with you to pick out the *gun*, even - and you think I should *care* about you?" She turns and takes a step away. "You're crazy."

"I'm not," I say. I'm gripping my keys too tightly. "You should *want* to say goodbye." I close my eyes and bounce on my heels and think to myself, *I'm right, I'm right, I'm right*. "You should *want* to."

"Well, I don't." Her tone is too cheerful. She's a performance artist on top of everything else. I already knew that, of course. "Goodbye, then." She turns away.

"I want to say goodbye to *you*," I say. I know I sound a little desperate. Perhaps the time has come to change tactics. "This isn't about you!" I say a bit louder. "Don't you care that you're the only person I've even talked to since I've been back? Doesn't that mean *anything*?"

She looks me straight in the eyes, calm as can be. "No."

"You're bad for me," I stutter. I want to say it's a life-changing epiphany, but it's not. I'm just not very good at thinking up come-backs on the spot.

"Wes, I didn't mean -."

"You're a bad person!" I sputter. I don't really think that, but maybe she is. Maybe she's changed. I haven't. I feel like an ass.

"Don't say things like that." She almost laughs.

"Don't touch me."

She steps back and looks at me inquisitively. "So what are you doing to do? Keep wallowing?" I think she's making fun of me. How kind. How *kind*.

"You know what I'm going to do, Jain," I say patiently. "In fact, you're the *only* one who does."

"And I bet you want me to stop you," she snaps.

"Yes!"

"You can't put that one me," she hisses. She takes a step back. "I'm not coming up."

"I don't want you to," I say, opening the door. I take a step inside. Dear God, I wish she'd follow me. I imagine that she takes three steps forward. I can feel her breath on my neck. I turn back to kiss her.

Cold air. She's already yards away, walking at a steady clip. I'll never talk to her again. That's fine.

I take a moment to steady my heart. I think I may have a murmur.

I resolve to stick to my plan. Or maybe I need a new plan. Maybe I'll move back to California. I'll move to wine country. To Mexico. To Europe Somewhere else. Somewhere new. I don't know. I only know where I will not be going. The Halloween party. No way. No how.

I play Zelda consistently through the next three days. I finally get the amulet, and I feel that my life is complete. There is nothing left for me to do. Fuck Mexico. I have nothing to gain and nothing to lose. *I am complete.*

Jain calls just as I'm about to fall asleep. "Party's tomorrow," she says in a voice that is both warning and apologetic.

I'm half asleep, so I mumble something incoherent.

"Yeah, okay, well, just come. It will be fun, okay?"

"Mmyeahkay."

"Go to sleep, James." She hangs up.

Tomorrow comes and I don't have a costume. I try on different combinations of clothes I already own, but nothing stands out in the mirror as being clever. And clever is the only way to go on Halloween, unless you're a girl with a rack. Then, no matter how you're dressed, your costume is "slut," and no one minds.

I go online and search for "clever Halloween costumes" like the lame-ass that I am, and decide on one that may pass for being clever and unique if I arrive late and the party is drunk enough. This is the last Halloween, so it has to be good. I hop a bus to JoAnn's Fabrics and pick out a yard of ribbon – gaudy shit, pink and rough, edged in a opalescent paint that changes colors according to the angle of light. From the clearance bin. I'm set. I'm ready.

“What *are* you?” A woman dressed as a sexy lady bug – slut – grabs me drunkenly by the elbow and leans in, too close for comfort. Her breath reeks of fake strawberries and cheap liquor.

I’ve tied a ribbon around my neck in a big bow. “God’s gift to man,” I say.

She raises an eyebrow and takes a good five seconds to let this sink in. Then she laughs, bending over, wailing like a drunken monkey. I walk away from her.

Jain’s apartment is already trashed. I arrived late, so I don’t know if it was like this before the party started or not, although I suspect it was. I thought perhaps her roommate was a cancer patient until I realized that all of the hair on the floor had fallen out of all of the cheap costume wigs in the room.

I feel drunk, but I haven’t yet had a drop.

I see Jain from across the room. She’s dressed like a flapper. She doesn’t have much of a rack, to be honest, but the dress is short, so she is riding the fine line between classy and slut. She gets up on a table to replace a burnt out light bulb and shows no reservation about the fact that all of the men on the ground can see right up her skirt, so she falls off of the line rather quickly. She comes up to me after the light bulb incident and smiles. Her lipstick is smudged.

“Glad you came,” she shouts over the din. “What are you?”

I tug on the bow dryly. “Guess.”

She takes a drunken moment, stepping back to look me up and down. "I have no fucking clue," she says. "You didn't really *try* very hard, did you?" She laughs.

"I'm God's gift to man," I shout as she looks in the direction of the door.

"What?"

"God's gift –."

Her eyes start to bug out. She's not looking at me. "*Patrick!*" She shoots to my left and my mouth is left hanging open. There's no one left to listen. Not even a body to turn to.

"To man," I finish.

I'm not drunk. The beer is already gone. I weave my way through the crowded living room towards the sliding balcony doors, towards the cool night air, towards a little peace and quiet, which is all I need at this point. Just a little moment.

I slip out onto the balcony and put my hands on the short stucco wall. The door slides shut behind me. I turn around and look in at the mass of bodies filling the room, sweating and drinking and completely unaware of the world. I lift my self up and sit on the railing, watching the slutty ladybug laugh at another bad joke. I see Jain pour herself another drink, then kiss someone on the cheek. A bass beat vibrates the little balcony and I try to focus on the sounds of the cars ten stories below.

## Time Warp (Again)

The heated arguments weren't getting them anywhere. The angry glares that she sent his way only further confused him. "What do you want me to do?" he asked, enraging her even further.

"You should know," she snapped back.

And she was right. He should have known by now.

Easter was nothing short of disaster each year. It was at the first breaking point of the year, the moment when the sluggish winter stopped and spring answered every question that winter left lingering in the air. All winter, she, Ana, bemoaned the monotony of their lives - "I just want to know, one way or the other," she'd say. Would they be able to pay the bills? Would he get the promotion he'd be promised last year? Would great things finally happen?

With spring those answers came all at once, and it was simply too much for her. "Things are changing too fast," she'd say. "I need some time - where did all of the time go?" She suddenly found herself tired and frustrated, and there was no one to blame but life, so she blamed him instead. Only a child should be allowed to get away with such a thing, and Ana was certainly not a child. Yet he couldn't punish her for it. That was just the way she was. And that was all he knew.

## Seoul

I sit and begin to type: *It all starts in a family restaurant in Korea.*

No, not a family restaurant. That's too American, too at-home-diner style in the good ol' USA. I need to get away from the Applebee's vibe. Let's try again.

*It all starts in a night club. A Korean night club...*

Okay. Here's how I envision it. It will be dark and hot, several floors in each direction, dancing on every one. There will be tiny black-haired girls wearing tight clothes and sparkling makeup above their eyes - blue, pink, silver, purple. All are size two, all popped out from the same mold and then each individually sculpted by a patient loving father. They will dance like this is the last night of their lives. All eyes are on them. The eyes belong to tall men with model bodies and perfectly groomed hair, the men that lean against the bars that glow with neon. The men only go out and dance when they know they will be able to procure what they are here for. Sex. Girls rub on guys, a sea of black below a haze of light, all pulsating to the same rhythm, music that is felt rather than heard, felt in vibrations and heat and sweat and youth... And among the black-lit din, there will be a stranger, one with light brown hair and...

*...eyes the color of furious waters. His skin is pale and jaw well defined.*

He will be our hero.

I've been mapping the story out for an hour. I think I'm on to something here, something... good? Interesting. Something good. Anyway. I've been trying to loosen up like Sarah told me to, way back whenever that was, years ago. And I think I've been doing a good job of it, and she knows it, but she'll be damned to admit it. Later, I tell her that I'm going to write something, write a story or a play, about an American man who meets an American girl in a Korean night club, and together they go out and face life together as runaways who find themselves in the midst of budding civil war. "I mean, I have nothing but time on my hands," I say. "I might as well do something with it."

"Sounds tragic," she says. "How will it start?"

I tell her that it starts in a nightclub, the hottest place in Seoul, and over crackling telephone wires she replies, "Oh, that's nice. But have you even *been* to a nightclub?"

"Well, not in Seoul."

"Anywhere?"

I don't honor her question with a reply and instead try to change the topic. "It's been so cold over here," I say. The static from the phone gets louder and it begins to sound more like a plastic bag than actual static. I wouldn't put such a play past her. On the other hand, trans-continental calls are tricky.

"It's breaking up," I hear her say. "I'll talk to you later. Don't forget, the next call is on me." She hangs up. She means that she'll call me next time, instead of me calling her, as has been the case since my arrival in Korea three months ago.

I suddenly remember that I'm sitting in a restaurant, a family restaurant, and I look down at the menu that's been staring at me for the past half hour. I close my eyes, put my index finger down on the laminated page and show my finger to the waitress. She smiles and nods and hurries away. Sometimes I embarrass myself. Imagine doing such a thing stateside. But I don't read or speak Korean, though I've been here for so long. I'm an oddity here, whether I'm rude by my own cultural standards or not. I have no idea what's really on the menu, or what's typically served at a family restaurant in Korea. Furthermore, I wouldn't know a nightclub even if I was staring at a sign for one with my jaw hanging open.

I'm upset about my conversation with Sarah. The part that I didn't convey very well to her, and now I'll clarify the point to you, is that the story I'm writing isn't tragic. David, the stormy-eyed hero as previously mentioned, and Evelyn, the girl - you'll know more about her in a moment - get out alive and I'm quite sure that they end up living on a tropical island somewhere in the South Pacific. The island is deserted, of course, but they live on to repopulate and create a utopia, the likes of which have never before been seen. But the story ends before that, way before that, so I'm not going to

worry about the problems of incest and sustenance and so on. The point is that they live happily ever after.

The waitress comes back to my table and puts a plate in front of me. A plate full of tentacles. She's a pretty girl, pink lips, cute smile. I watch her walk away.

I'm 24 years old. I have had very little life experience. I grew up in a small town, a middle-of-nowhere town. I came to Korea because the spiders in my parent's basement were getting too large for me to handle. I came here because Sarah refused to kiss me after I brought her a flower at work. I came here because I suspected she might kiss me if I were leaving for a foreign country for an undetermined period of time, seeing how my plane could crash into the Pacific and she might never see me again. But she didn't kiss me. Of course she didn't. And so I'm sure you can understand that the spectacle of apparently edible tentacles staring me in the face is not something that I've been properly prepared for, or even deserve, really.

Instead of eating the dish, I get up and continue my week-long search for a store that sells boxer shorts.

*David walks along the sidewalk. It's the night after meeting Evelyn.*

I should mention, briefly, that they didn't technically meet, but rather shared a long and complicated gaze across the dance floor that night in the club...

*...two pairs of blue eyes connected in a sort of chemical lightning that only they could see. David soon lost sight of her in the crowded room and went home alone and cold, but not without feeling as though something had happened.*

I can't write anymore.

Instead of waiting for Sarah to call - which, if patiently waited for, is something that I've learned may never happen at all - I write her a letter. An email, if you want to be technical about things. "Email" isn't as romantic as "letter." But in terms of efficiency, the winner is clear. *Dear Sarah*, I begin, because I believe formality is a form that can be appreciated no matter what medium is being used to communicate. I'm not a square. I'm a traditionalist. *Dear Sarah. After our conversation the other night, I realized that you have a point. So last night, I went out and found a nightclub to visit. It was an eye opening experience. The story is still forthcoming.*

I scratch my head and thank god that I'm good with words. If Sarah knew what actually happened - but no. She never will. No point in even thinking about it.

But I'm sure you're curious.

What happened last night was this. Two days ago, I ended up asking one of the other teachers - did I mention that I teach English? That's technically why I'm here in the first place. I teach five days a week, ten hours a day. My students are all younger

than twelve. I enjoy the work. Word has it that I'm the "cool" teacher to have. However, after a great deal of research and cultural analysis, I realized that the nickname given to me by a couple of my favorite students translates to "shithead" in English. I'm not really sure how to respond to that.

As I was saying, I asked one of the other teachers if he knew of a place I could go to, a "nightclub," specifically. He's been here for almost a year, and so I figured he'd have a suggestion or two. And he did. He gave me two addresses. I should have been alerted to their legitimacy by the smirk on his face, but I'm a small-town kind of guy. I have faith in my fellow man. *Had* faith.

That night, I went to find the first address, but got hopelessly lost. The next night, last night, I tried the second address, which I found with no trouble whatsoever, but only because of a very helpful woman I met along the way. I must have been walking down the sidewalk looking like a lost puppy. "American?" she asked, stepping out from a doorway. I jumped a little, but was calmed by her eyes. Dark, pretty. I was sure she was just trying to be helpful.

"English?" I asked eagerly, and she nodded.

"What are you looking for?" she asked. I showed her the address and she got a huge smile on her face. "Oh yeah," she said. "I will come with you, show you the way." She winked at me. Perhaps you can tell where this is going. I couldn't. I'm not that open minded yet, although I'm getting better. Getting better by the day. Sarah would be

proud, but I'm not going to give her all of the details. ~~In other news, I made a new friend.~~

~~Her name is Jenny.~~ In other news, the weather has been getting a lot nicer lately.

Jenny led me through some alleyways, "shortcuts," she claimed. I barely knew left from right. I could feel my blood pressure rising. I tried to calm down by reminding myself that it didn't really matter where she led me, since she had taken the slip of paper with the address on it, and I'll be damned if I can remember anything useful in a time of crises. Then my adrenaline kicked in. I trudged on.

We ended up in front of a normal looking building, one with no sign or indication of what might be inside. Jenny expertly led me to a door at the side of the building, down another dark little alley. The normalcy disappeared at this point and I felt my shoulders tensing. Was this how it happened? Was this how lonely bachelors disappear abroad and end up being inadvertently eaten by other tourists in fancy restaurants, completely oblivious to the fact that the special they are paying for could not nearly cover the cost of my funeral?

Jenny knocked on the door three times and it opened. I peered inside and could see what amounted to a drug-den-torture-chamber-Disney-movie-piano-bar, minus the piano and plus a host a scantily clad Korean girls with a few equally clad men thrown in for good measure. Their bodies did not nearly match up to those in my imagination. I didn't stay for long.

How I got home is a haze. I think my natural instincts kicked in and took over, leading me brain dead through the foreign maze which Jenny had so helpfully led me. The point is, I arrived home sometime late and awoke the next morning with a headache.

I figure that, if nothing else, all of this is excellent fodder for my story. Play. Whatever it is that I'm going to write. It's too much for me not to tell Sarah any more, since it was such an odd night, and since I feel like, in spite of feeling on the brink of death, I haven't taken proper advantage of my situation. What if I had stayed? What kind of inspiration might have been garnered?

I simplify things. *I made a new friend, her name is Jenny. She introduced me to a number of her friends as well.* I write a little bit more about what I did yesterday and today, and what I plan to do tomorrow - largely uninteresting stuff, make some rice, do my laundry - and send the letter off with an innocuous "Take care!" preceding my name.

I look at the "Take care!" on the screen and cringe. We used to sign all of our letters "Love," but that ended when Sarah's eighteen-year-old cat died and, in mourning, she took on a boyfriend to pass the time. She stopped talking to me for about six months. I'll admit that I didn't handle it very well. I kept trying to write, tried to get her to come around in different ways. For example, I took on a girlfriend of my own.

Insinuated that I was gay. But she didn't care. After all, her cat had just died. And she *really* loved that cat.

*David started off that day in hopes of purchasing a loaf of bread. He had no inkling of what awaited him just a few blocks away...*

After running into each other in the street and going for a walk in the park together, David and Evelyn fall madly in love - *madly*. And after a few short weeks of passion and doing all of the things that people in love do, the war breaks out.

*"...Darling," Evelyn said, eyes wide at the sound of warning sirens in the distance. "Don't leave my side, not for a moment!" David put his strong arm around her as a young man ran by them, screaming frantically in a language neither of them could understand...*

David puts his arm around her shoulders and together they run, holding a newspaper above their heads to keep the dust from raining down on them. The city has been bombed. Everything is in shambles. Together they run, arm in arm. They pass a bloody body in the street.

*...A tear sprang into Evelyn's eye. "Don't worry," he said to her. "I'll take care of you."*

I've decided to make it a story instead of a play. A nightclub would be hard enough to stage, but concrete buildings being blasted to the ground? I know my limits. I also know that I have a tendency towards melodramatic and sentimental writing. Don't

worry, it won't become a steamy romance novel. There's always rewriting. Editing. Always a second chance. If I keep trying, odds are decent that I'll get it done properly sometime before I die.

I sent Sarah's letter yesterday, but have yet to get a response. The whole day passes by and I teach my classes, thinking not of Sarah or the story, or English, but rather about Jenny. This surprises me. After being introduced to the den of sin, I recall shaking my head violently and crossing my arms saying, "No, no, no." Jenny looked a little confused, and paused. Then she grinned. She handed me a homemade business card. *Jenny*, it read, followed by a phone number. I pocketed it. She kissed me and disappeared into another dark alleyway. She left red lipstick on my cheek. I stared at myself in the mirror upon arriving home. "What have I done," I wanted to ask myself, but I knew I'd be ashamed upon hearing my voice. So why I've been thinking about Jenny all day is a mystery to me.

Tonight, I've set aside time to write. I make some rice, which is all I can stand to eat these days, and set myself up at my little desk. I put the desk in front of the largest and only window in the apartment. It has a view of the north side of the city, and I enjoy looking out at the lights in the evening. I try to write a scene in which Evelyn is sent a plane ticket from a mysterious benefactor, unbeknownst to David. This is her ticket to safety, and of course it's a difficult situation for them both. She breaks down and shows him the ticket. He wants her to use it, to be safe and live out a full life. On

the other hand, he's been alone for so long, and a person can only tolerate being alone for, well, so long.

They have a bitter argument about what Evelyn should do...

*"I think I'm in love with you," they both blurted out in the same breath. They stared at each other for a moment, stunned and overjoyed. Evelyn suddenly grabbed the ticket from the counter and ran to the broken window, reaching into her pocket. "I won't leave you!" she proclaimed.*

Evelyn sets the ticket on fire and throws it out of the window, letting it float down to the ground in a little orange blaze.

I'm not sure what happens next. The sky outside of my apartment is getting dark and the lights of the city turn on one by one. I can't stop glancing at my phone, which I've set on the desk beside me. I keep thinking that it's going to ring, but it doesn't. I hope Sarah calls. She ought to, she said she would. But when she doesn't, I'll understand. Transcontinental calls are expensive.

A few minutes have passed, and I've decided to bite the bullet. I'll call her. Just to check up. Maybe something happened. Maybe she lost my number. It's quite possible.

I pull my wallet out of my pants and rifle through it. Several slips of paper fall out onto my desk, most with phone numbers or addresses scribbled on them. Of course

I know Sarah's number by heart. But I do have trouble remembering all of the extra numbers I have to dial for America.

No one is perfect.

I find the slip of paper and punch in the numbers. It rings. "Hello?" Her voice is cheerful. She's in a good mood.

"Hi Sarah," I reply.

I have a sixth sense. Maybe it isn't a sense. Maybe it's heightened perception, or the ability to feel changes in air pressure when the mood of a person suddenly changes. I'm not a mystic or a religious person. I'm one of those faux-Catholics who claims not to believe in anything but goes to church occasionally, *just in case*. But that doesn't matter. What does matter is that I pay attention to everything - the way other people breathe, the color of the sky, which way the wind is blowing, and how loud my ears are ringing. So after I say hello, I already know what's going on. It's something bad. Not for Sarah, but most certainly for me.

"Oh, hi," she replies in a flat voice. "What's up?"

"Well, I just wanted to see how you were."

"Uh huh..."

"Hey, do you want to hear more about the story? I think I'm almost done and I'd love..."

"I'm sorry," she interrupts. She talks like cashier who is fed up with underage kids trying to buy cigarettes. "I can't really talk right now."

I hear something in the background. Breathing. *Male* breathing. The tension gives it all away. She's with another man, and they're probably in the midst of a passionate fuck - not that I'd know what that's like.

"Okay," I stammer. "I'm sorry, how about tomor-." The phone begins to hum. She's already gone.

David and Evelyn think they are doomed, and with good reason. The burning ticket landed in the rubble of a bombed restaurant. The fire latched on to the splintered beams of the building and quickly spread down into the ruins, eventually finding its way to a line of gas ovens, professional grade. Luckily, the gas lines had been traumatized already during the bombing, so the explosion that resulted was not quite as large as it could have been. Nevertheless, David and Evelyn find themselves trapped on the sixth floor of a burning building. Your guess is as good as mine as to how they're going to get out of this one.

Sarah sent me an email this morning apologizing for her shortness on the phone. *I know how much calling costs, she writes. I didn't mean to make you feel bad, but James had just arrived and I haven't seen him for almost a year and he was only in town on a layover for a*

*couple of hours. I hope you understand.* Oh lovely. A run-on sentence. How carefully thought out. It gives the air of rushing, letting off steam, relief. The subtext is clearly, "I'm so sorry, this has been eating at me all day, oh God, please forgive me!" Or she just hadn't enough time to fix it. Or just didn't care.

James is the boyfriend she picked up after the cat died. They broke up a while ago, but as far as I've been able to tell, it's been off-again, on-again. I guess it must be on-again again.

It's the weekend. Two days with no classes to teach, not that I care much about them anyway. Two days to spend exploring the city, making new friends, learning Korean, finding a *real* nightclub, hanging out with the other teachers from the school, people I can actually communicate with. I know where they hang out - an apartment just a couple of blocks from mine. They play board games and drink themselves under the coffee table every weekend. It sounds like a good time. But they stopped inviting me after I turned down their invitation for what must have been the fifth time, just so I could be home in case Sarah might call or write.

I sit down at my desk and reach for my phone. I have the numbers of the other teachers, but I call Jenny instead. I programmed her number into my address book because I've spent more time with her than I have with any of the teachers, a sad commentary on my social skills. A Korean woman answers - not Jenny. "Is Jenny

there?" I ask. The woman screams something at me in Korean. Of course I can't understand it, so I repeat the question. More screaming. I get a strange feeling in my stomach. Could something be wrong? Could she be in trouble, and this woman actually be screaming for help? "Are you okay? Where's Jenny?"

"No Jenny!" I hear, and the phone goes dead.

It's fine. I didn't really want to talk to her anyway. I call Sarah instead. I imagine her picking up the phone, riding James like a pony and rolling her eyes. "*Oh, not now,*" imaginary Sarah groans, and she tosses the phone across the room.

I'm sent to her voicemail. I don't leave a message.

You must wonder why I keep doing this. I'll tell you. I'm not ashamed. I'm in *love* with Sarah. I've been in love with her since we met, and she's been avoiding me ever since. But my sixth sense tells me not to give up. She's the one. The One.

Think of it this way. Opposites attract. She's in a relationship with a guy who doesn't really love her and they have sex. She's not quite sure what she wants. I'm in a relationship with Korea and we don't have sex. I know exactly what I want. Opposites attract, and everyone knows it. We're both growing up, and when she finally sees the light - when we finally come together - it's going to be perfect. It's going to be everything we ever wanted.

I spend the rest of the night sitting at my desk. I pull the shades shut so I can't see the city lights and try to focus on the story. The escape from the burning building.

David and Evelyn are trapped. They can hear bombs going off across the city...

*...Suddenly, David spotted a man coming up the stairwell. "He seems to know where he's going," David murmured, and Evelyn nodded. Together they followed the man up into the stairwell, climbing to the roof of the building.*

They watch as the man runs and, with a wild yell, leaps through the air and lands on the roof of the next building. David grabs Evelyn's hand.

*"It's not that far! Do you think you can make it?" Evelyn nodded, staring into his eyes. Suddenly, the man yelled, grabbing David and Evelyn's attention. They watched in horror as the building below the man began to shake violently and crumble. In an explosion of dust, the building collapsed, and the man with it. Evelyn turned to David, eyes wide with shock. "Now what?"*

I've already told you what happens to David and Evelyn. About the tropical island. Trust me, it will happen. That's simply the way the story ends.

## Samson

Daniel Pelhan went to Swarthmore College, class of eighty-eight, cum laude. He spent the next two years in Houston, teaching inner city students how to succeed in math and English. After that came Yale Law, a master's degree, and a cozy job in a well established law firm. Once he made enough money and owned enough nice suits, cashmere turtlenecks in black, charcoal, *and* burgundy, he realized that he needed something more. His own practice. A Life Practice.

He's happier now, he says. His closet has tripled in size. The man knows how to accessorize. His watch is Movado; his glasses are Calvin Klein. He helps people succeed, helps them to get out of shitty situations and back into life.

"I've got skills," he told me the first time we met. "I've got skills that *you don't have*. But *I* am going to give them to *you*. To *you*, Mister Edwards. To *you*." And he poked me on the chest. He was wearing a turtleneck in charcoal. He was clean shaven and blue-eyed.

I have to admit, I was fucking blown away.

We began to meet regularly at a coffee shop on Brewer Street almost nine weeks ago. He has a comfortable office on the other side of town - that's where we first met - with leather couches and fake plants, but he says that it's better to be out in public. It

makes a person self-aware, "... and that's what we need to *be*. In order to feel *better*, we have to *self aware*."

The man is a genius.

"When we eat, we eat in public. When we piss, we use the urinal, *side by side* with our fellow *men*. It's not disgusting. I'm not being crass. That's what we *do*. When we dress, we leave the curtains *open*. When we shower, we *crack the window*. You know *why* we do that, Frank?" At that I shook my head. At the time, I was still a wide eyed beginner. That's just the way we all start out. "We do that so we're *self aware*. You don't know who might glance up and see your shit in the window. You don't know who might walk past and notice you. You've got to keep track of *yourself*. First. And. Foremost." That was the first time we met.

I've prescribed to Daniel's words. We meet regularly on Tuesdays. I've taken my curtains down all together - the light helps me wake up in the morning and anyone walking on the sidewalk outside need only to look up to see my naked ass glowing the morning light. Not that I'd want them to, or that they'd want to, but because Daniel's right. It makes me self aware.

Today is Tuesday. I got dressed and brushed my hair straight through, spruced myself up just for him, as best I could. The hair falls halfway down my back. It's a point of contention between Daniel and I. He wants it gone, but I'm not ready to let it go. Not yet. Not quite yet.

## Hold On

Water is running down the windowpanes and I wonder if it'll snow sometime. Sometime sure, but tonight? I'm not sure and the weather report is indecisive. They know there's a temperature at which water freezes but they don't know much more than that. It's okay. I like things to be unpredictable. Unreliable. Fuck the weather report, though. Fuck it.

Carrie's getting home in a couple of hours and the living room is still a mess. We got into another goddamn argument last night, and fuck. It's kind of a shame that she'll be home in a couple of hours. Sometimes I hope for a freak snowstorm. Sometimes I wish the brakes would go out on her car. Sometimes I wonder how things like that happen in the first place. The world is full of happy little accidents.

I got one of those happy little accidents sleeping on the couch in his underoos. Sandy blonde hair. Yes, he's mine. And Carrie's. He's into trucks right now, things that go "vroom," which is to say he's not brilliant. But I wouldn't want a brilliant kid anyway, one who could play the piano or some shit. I'm not too good to admit that the status quo is appealing to me. It is.

Carrie's not going to be pleased with the mess in the living room. Most of it is her shit, anyway, but she thinks I'm the one who's supposed to be in charge of putting her shit into neat little piles.

My other son is named Jamie. Not Carrie's. He's an effeminate little fuck, if nothing else. Thirteen and into drama club and band. He wears his t-shirts too tight and I'm not sure whether it's because that's the style or because I should give him money to go shopping or something. Should I *take* him shopping? Should Carrie? Let him order stuff online, or just order it myself and hope it fits? What's the protocol for that?

Last week Carrie and Jamie got into it. I mean, Carrie's got claws and Jamie's got a pre-pubescent chip on his shoulder, so of course they clash. "Take out the garbage after you eat dinner," was how it started. But Jamie doesn't *do* garbage, or at least that's what he thinks. Of course he didn't say "I don't *do* garbage," with a sassy little hand motion and leaning heavy on one leg, but that's more or less what his side of the argument boiled down to. I don't know where he gets that. Carrie says it must have been my ex-wife, but I just don't know. Odds are that he didn't get it from either of us and there's some other guy out there wearing tight t-shirts and making someone else take out his garbage, or maybe he's in the bathroom of some slag bar letting another guy fuck him in the ass. My ex had a knack for turning guys gay. I think I was the only one who survived, but then again, our marriage didn't survive, and that's probably because I wasn't gay.

Funny how things work out like that.

Not really funny.

I married Carrie because we were both in a bar one night and she wrapped her legs around me and said she wanted a man, a *man*, and I figured that would work out well for me. And the sex is great, good to the last drop, and that's all that matters. For all of us. Except maybe Jamie. He's extraneous. Congratulations, Jamie. It doesn't matter what you wear. You don't really matter at all.

Carrie came home as expected just a couple of hours ago. The happy little accident, whose name is actually Harold, Harry, what have you, woke up around six and started making more of a mess in the living room so I went in to play with him and somehow ended up putting all of Carrie's shit into piles, just the way she wanted. I'd say she made me do it, but really, I don't know how she did.

"James, where is my Cosmopolitan?"

I'm standing in the kitchen making some toast. Cosmopolitan. I get the round glass from the cabinet, pour in some vodka from the counter, cranberry juice from the fridge --

"James?"

"We don't have any limes!" My head is in the fridge and it's full of boxes of baking soda. You could probably derive the whole history of the fridge in terms of baking soda boxes. It's a pretty old fridge.

"James, you're an idiot."

She's standing in the doorway and now my head hurts from hitting it on the freezer door, which somehow fell open. I know. It's a pretty old fridge. Pick up the glass, hand it to the pretty lady in the doorway. "Cosmo."

She rolls her eyes and doesn't take it. She saunters back into the living room. "Idiot." She's got a rolled up magazine in her hand and she flops down on the couch, so I down her drink in one gulp. Weak. "I should have gone to bartending school," I say. The glass goes in the sink on top of the dishes from dinner. Dinner. Dinner two nights ago. Jamie was at his mom's. Harry was asleep. Dinner ended up in our asses but not in the conventional sort of way. We had sex on the table and I got a fork in my shoulder. We get along sometimes. We get along really well.

"Hey, you wanna hear a good joke?" I'm leaning in the doorway.

A little figure shoots across the room like a short character in a horror film.

"Joooooke," it croons, hugging my knees. Harry.

I shake him off. "Mommy, wanna hear a joke?"

She cuts my throat with her eyes -- nonchalantly. Her magazine must be interesting, fucking revolutionary. "No."

Okay, so the joke goes like this. A grasshopper walks into a bar and sits down at the counter. The bartender looks up and says, Oh hey, we have a drink named after you.

It's really not that clever. It's just that I have a shitty memory and this is, for some reason, one of the only jokes I have been able to commit to memory. God *damn*, speaking of that, I have no idea where I put my shoes. Maybe they're in the bedroom. I'll go check in a second.

And the grasshopper kind of laughs a little bit and says, That's funny, why would anybody name a drink Edgar?

It snowed. Of course I came out to the bar after Harry started crying, of *course* I did. Carrie's daggers started showing so I hauled my ass out to the car and drove on over here and got lost in whiskey, because what else am I going to do about anything? What else? The Lumina, Carrie's Lumina, is rusting, I noticed it earlier, and I should really get that taken care of, but what -- what, I don't know. Who cares if the car is rusty. Shouldn't have gotten a white car.

Sage was working the bar tonight and we're both waiting for the snow to die down. She turned all of the lights on in the place to get the rest of the assholes out. I was out but I came back in because I got lost in the snow on the way to the car. "Shouldn'ta got a white car," I say again, leaning against the bar, staring out the front windows.

She shakes her head. "Guess not." Her rag makes a squeaking sound against the wooden bar. "Where's Carrie?" She knows Carrie from school or something. I don't remember exactly. They might have been on the cheerleading team together. It's so cold

in here the glass might as well not be in the window, and now that I think about it, is there glass on the window? The lights should be reflecting. There are no bright spots. What the fuck? Did someone smash the glass and I didn't notice?

"Jesus, James, are you okay?" Sage is holding my arm and pulling me to a barstool, the same one I sat on the night Carrie announced why she was so damn pretty, "glowing," because of a happy little accident. "You okay?"

My hand has a stamp of blood on its palm. I don't know how the fuck that happened. "Yah," I say.

Her eyes are big in front of mine and she uses the cleaning rag to dab at my head, I think it's the cleaning rag, it's in her hand. "Jesus, you need coffee or -- glad you couldn't find your car, now that I think about it." She looks unhappy. She's tired. It's late. "You should call your wife."

So I do.

Carrie is groggy. "What do you want, where are you?"

I tell her where I am.

"What?"

I say it again. I tell her I'm at the bar. I tell her I'm with Sage.

"Get the fucking marbles out of your mouth, now, *what?*"

I tell her that I'm probably going to kiss Sage and I'll be home in the morning.

Don't worry, I won't drink and drive. Don't worry about the car.

“James, I can’t understand a goddamned word you’re saying. Don’t drive home. Goodnight.”

I yell into the phone and I tell her that I hate her, Fuck your piles, I say, but she’s already gone.

Sage is behind the counter closing bottles and laughing like a wicked little child. “She must really love being with you, James. She must just love it to death.”

Oh sure she does. “Sure she does.”

There’s a mirror behind the bar, behind the bottles, and Sage looks at me in it. “I was kidding.”

“Kidding, why kid,” I say, leaning against the bar and it’s cool like fresh sheets and I think it would be nice to slide on in there.

“If you were mine, I’d kick your ass,” she says.

The lights go off and I’m laid out on the floor. “I need to find my sea-legs.” There’s dirt on the floor, shit on the floor. “Aren’t you going to sweep this up?”

Light floods in from the door and Sage is the one holding it open. Lights from the parking lot. “Dan takes care of it in the morning.” She kicks my foot but I don’t really feel it. “Get your ass up.”

I drink too much. Drank too much. Make mistakes now and I have an excuse.

I'm sitting in the front seat of Sage's car and we're driving but we can't see a damn thing, which is to say that it was snowing like the dickens. That's a grandfather phrase, "like the dickens." Except all of our grandfathers are dying off and who's going to say it any other way besides sarcastically other than our dead grandfathers? Tell me the answer to that one and I'll forget what you say, I'm no linguist, I don't really care. Sage was telling me about the kind of music she listens to, but I don't care about that either. I wonder if the happy little accident is sleeping on his stomach or on his back, and I wonder if Jamie's ever been with a another guy. He's only thirteen, sure, but kids mature fast these days.

Have I ever been with another guy? Fuck no. I say that without any confidence. There are too many nights I don't remember, and even more that I don't *care* to remember, so I figure -- it's likely. That's all I'll say.

Sage likes rap. "It's like poetry," she says. The stereo's blasting. "My glock burst leaving a hearse, I did worse--." She's singing along. I don't know how the fuck to respond to that. How do you respond to a skinny little white girl rapping? I don't even know if this is what's happening, hell, fuck Johnny Walker, I fucking love him. "Nah, I'm just kidding," she says and the radio turns into a miniature symphony and I think I might be asleep at this point.

She wasn't kidding, she knew all the lyrics.

Suddenly we're pulled up and stopped in front of my house, the one with Carrie in it, where accidents happen. Sage bites her lip, looking at the house. "So this is it." She pauses. "I live in an apartment, you know. In Greenfield. It fucking sucks."

I'd rather die than have to walk in there. The snow is too deep. I'm wearing canvas shoes. I don't want to wake Carrie up, or what's his name. Harry. That's his name. "I got a kid," I tell Sage. This is confidential.

"I know. How many times have I been over to visit Carrie? Jesus." She looks out the window. "I know."

I'm grinning. Can't help it. "I got *two* kids."

I feel Sage looking at me but I don't look at her because I know she already knew that and I'm just talking because I can't control my fucking face. "Harry and..."

"Jamie," I tell her. "Jamie is a fag." I didn't mean to say that.

She shakes her head. "God, James. He's your son."

"He's more like Martha Stewart." I don't even know what I mean by that.

"That's not very nice."

"He's thirteen. I fucked him." My tongue is knotted. Sage is completely silent.

Wait. No. What the fuck? "I didn't fuck him." Time to recoup. "I mean, I think someone's fucked him -- no, he's just fucked!" I punch myself on the cheek. "What the fuck. I'm done. I'm gone. I'm drunk." I'm also a bad father, but that goes without saying.

Sage is smiling again, maybe she thinks I'm trying to be funny. "Are you gonna go in there?" She's looking at the house again. I shake my head. "Open the glove box, would you?" I do, and there's a little flask inside. "Don't drink and drive." She winks at me and takes a swig.

"Don't *think* and drive," I retort. I'm fucking retarded. I think I'm calming down. At least I can tell when I'm being an ass.

"Yeah, whatever," she says, and she wipes her mouth and starts the car. We're on our way to her house. I've never been there before, though Carrie thinks I have. She says I have, that we were there together. Do I remember the dinner party Sage threw when she graduated? Do I? No. Carrie is two years older than Sage, we weren't married at the time, I think Carrie probably brought someone else, but I don't care. I don't remember the party, and I don't remember if we were even seeing each other, so it's not a big deal. But Carrie thinks it is.

Greenfield does indeed suck. Sage's apartment building is dark and small and not the kind of place I want to be. It's an architectural representation of my entire life. I don't like moments of clarity like this. I squeeze my eyes shut and let her pull me up the stairs, into the apartment that Carrie swears I've been to. But I open my eyes and no, no, I haven't.

Sage thinks I've been there too, apparently, because when I ask to use the bathroom, she says "Sure," and walks into another room and I don't know where she or

the bathroom is, but I know I'm in the den and that isn't an appropriate place to take a dump. I consider the potted plants, the aquarium. I didn't know Sage likes fish. Maybe she doesn't, they appear to be dead, but still, not the right place to shit. Wouldn't want to be blamed for the death of aquatic life.

Sage comes back in the room and wonders aloud why I'm standing there with my pants unbuttoned. She gets a gleam in her eye which tells me that she's got the wrong idea, wait, what -- I said I'm in Sage's apartment, and I am. I shouldn't be here. I still need to shit. "It's that way," she says, her hand wandering down to my ass and I bolt towards the door, the bathroom door. Thank god she has a lot of toilet paper. I wonder what that's indicative of.

There are tampon wrappers in the trash. Normally I wouldn't care or notice, but now I know for sure -- it's all about me tonight.

I dream about Carrie and I wake up in the middle of the night, sweating, and Sage rolls over and groans. I go back to sleep and dream about nothing. The second time I wake up, Carrie is chattering in my ear and Sage is holding the phone up against my ear. "Jamie's mother called, you need to pick him up from school today, he might be bringing a friend over this weekend or something, that's *your* responsibility, I'm not looking after another little brat, I have enough on my hands with Harry. I might go shopping with a friend on Saturday. That's tomorrow, James, by the way. And it

doesn't matter who I'm going with, so don't bother asking. And thank Sage for me.

Glad you didn't smash the shit out of my car. See you tonight." And that's that.

Sage is already dressed and is smirking at me. "I have to go to work," she says. We're in the car within five minutes and traffic is bad. I don't even know what time it is and it probably doesn't matter. "So is Jamie really gay?" she asks when a song comes on, sung by George Michael or someone equally suited to bring such a question to mind. She's being sarcastic. I think. "Isn't he too -- uh, *young* or something?" Maybe not.

"Oh, I don't know," I say. "I only see him a few times a month anyway." Traffic is almost at a stand still. A semi is in front of us, loaded with long plastic tubes and their ends make a hive in front of us. It pains me to look at it. Like a pattern in nature that's so close to being perfect, but it isn't, and it's enough to make a person sick. "Did I actually *say* that last night?"

"You said a lot last night," she says. More than I remember, I'm sure. More than I even knew I was saying at the time, most likely. Another night to add to the list of nights I might like to forget. At least Sage really is a woman.

No one else is at the bar when we arrive. It's alarming. "Why's nobody here?" I ask, and Sage rolls her eyes like I ought to know.

"We don't open till three."

"I don't even know what time it is."

She hits the dash and suddenly a world of buttons and electronic characters appears before me on the dash. The LCD clock reads "2:00." PM, I'm sure, I know I'm not in Iceland. "School gets out at two forty-five," she says.

"Sure."

She starts to get out of the car and gives me a look. I know I'm pathetic, Sage. You don't need to remind me, or maybe you do. Sometimes I forget. But it's one of those things that I've always known. "Don't forget to pick up your son."

The Lumina smells stale from an empty fast-food bag that's been sitting in the back seat for too long. All of the snow from last night melted and the world is too bright and cold for me to embrace. The ground is not quite frozen, wet as all hell, and my shoes are soaked. I have leather shoes, big boy shoes, but fuck them. They don't lace tight enough and you never know when you might have to go running. And you're fucked if they get scuffed up, which always happens. Leather shoes are a liability. Do you go to a store to buy shoes these days, or do you order them online? I don't even know what my size is. Let's move to China. Let's become fucking Communists. My high school history teacher said that workers just make whatever is easiest over there, they don't give a shit about sizes. I don't know if that's true, but that's a situation I could live in. No choices.

I get back home and now the car needs gas. I'll get it later. The living room is littered again, waiting for me to do my pile-making job. So Jamie might be bringing a

friend over this weekend. Don't know where the kid is going to sleep. Jamie sleeps on the pull out. I guess they could sleep together, but what if something happened? Things like that shouldn't happen on pull-outs, at least not my pull-out. Or maybe that's the best place for them to happen -- put the bed away and the whole thing never happened. Jamie's got to do what he has to do. I'm his father. Whatever. They'll both sleep on the pull-out.

Two forty-five arrives faster than I thought it would and by three ten I'm sitting outside of Foster Middle School (for gifted and talented children) wondering how Jamie will exit the school. Fly down the steps in a giddy run, *Oh daddy, I'm so glad to see you*, limp wrists, little lisp, maybe that's how they do it these days. Or sulky-like, a stalk down the steps, throws the backpack into the back of the car and sits heavily in the passenger seat, *Hey*, and he doesn't say another word all weekend.

Neither happens. I sit there till three thirty and Jamie is nowhere to be found. Then I realize that my cell phone is blinking and someone must have called -- called when I was driving? I don't remember hearing it, or Sage must have put it on silent in the night because I can see from the call history that Carrie called twelve times between four in the morning and seven. I was out, out like a fucking light at that point. I think.

The message says, "Hi, it's Jamie, I walked to your house and you're not here, so I guess I'll just hang out on the porch till you get home. Bye." No lisp. He must have

stalked down the stairs, the depressed little fellow. No mention of a friend. The date must have fallen through.

I hate to see a kid down on his luck, so I go to the grocery store and pick up a comic book and stand in a line that is too long to wait to be checked out. While I'm waiting I pick up some breath mints and little bottle of hand lotion -- why not, they're there, they're cheap. The clerk checking people out isn't saying a word to anyone but the bagger is fucking taking his time and talking too much. He's asking everyone whether they want paper or plastic and I think, *Goddamn, kid, it doesn't matter*, and I pass judgment on the ones who ask for paper, and then I change my mind and pass judgment on the ones who ask for plastic, then it's my turn and I panic and say, "Both."

## Diary

January 14, 1985

Bill Retson finally kissed me. Took him long enough! We ended up going to the top of the hill near the football field and talked for a LONG time. I was getting so bored but then he finally did it. He asked me out and I said, "I'll think about it."

Yeah, right.

Like, he's nice and all, and hot, but his father is a pastor. There is just no way I'm getting into that situation.

February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

Retson sucks. He told Jeannie that I had SEX with him. Fucker. And today. It just had to be today.

I hate all of them! Jeannie and all of her friends. They're just ganging up on me or something. All of a sudden they just love Bill because I broke his heart. What a fucking liar. Fuck Bill. Fuck them all.

March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

The senior spring break trip starts tomorrow. I'm so pissed that I can't go, but whatever. Jeannie hates me now, it's all Bill's fault. I wouldn't want to be around them for a week anyway.

I would have liked to have gone to Paris, though. I'm trying not to think about it. Instead, Laura and I are going to Virginia Beach together. It's so lame, but it's cheap and maybe I'll get a tan. Whatever. There are no hot guys in VA anyway. Or here. I can't wait to fucking graduate.

April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

I miss James! Oh my god! WHY DOES HE HAVE TO LIVE SO FAR AWAY?!?

He wrote me a LETTER and sent some sand from the beach in the envelope!

How sweet is that?

I just can't stand it anymore!

Mom says maybe I'm getting a car for my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. I kind of didn't want her to do that, because, like, I know she doesn't have enough money to get a good one. But then - if it runs, it'll still get me to James. And that's all that matters. I can't believe I actually want to go to Virginia right now. How messed up!

May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

Ten more days of school.

June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

Way too much has happened. I haven't written in forever.

Mom kicked me out last night. Bitch! I feel bad about saying that, but... She said I was free-loading, or whatever. I guess I was, but Jesus! This is my last free summer to just hang out. And it hasn't been that long, only a couple of weeks since school ended and everything. I'm pissed.

This all started when James came to visit last week. Mom hated him. "He doesn't have a job and he smells like piss!" I could have killed her right then. But then I said something like, "I seem to recall you telling me that my father wasn't even half the man that I know James is." She shut her mouth. And then she kicked me out. I think she's just jealous.

I don't regret it.

James is coming to pick me up tomorrow. He's going to bring me back to VA and we're going to live together. He says that his roommate - Chuckie? - has been looking for a new place anyway, so he'll be happy to let me take his place.

I'm so excited! This is kind of like a dream come true.

Virginia still kind of sucks. But I'll give up Philly if it means that I can have sex every day. Or at least every other day. Ha. I hope James will be up for it. He's perfect. He will be.

July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

I got a job at Wendy's. I'm working the register mostly, so it isn't that bad. And the food is free.

James is still looking for work. The thing at the lifeguard station didn't work out - apparently to have be able to swim like a fucking dolphin or something in order for them to hire you. So he went through all of that training for nothing. He's skinny, there's no way he could ever swim that far. The only way to fix that would be to hire him so we'd be able to buy groceries and then I could quit Wendy's and cook for him all day.

But no.

Oh, and Chuckie is STILL living on the couch. And he's STILL not paying rent. But James just keeps on letting him because he brings in weed every once in a while and he shares it. I don't even like weed. But whatever, their names are on the lease, not mine. And at least that's going to change in a couple of weeks. Then maybe he'll get the hell out of here.

I bought a new shirt. I found it at the Goodwill. It's LaCoste. There's this little stain on one of the sides that won't come out, but I'm going to try to fix it somehow.

August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

The fan broke. It's too fucking hot in this apartment.

September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

James threatened to quit his job again. I know being a janitor isn't glamorous or anything, but Jesus! It pays more than Wendy's! And he doesn't have to breathe in greased air all day.

I swear this place is killing me. My arteries clog a little more each time I walk in the door. I wanted to quit so bad last week. ~~I didn't tell James, but the lead manager—Mike something, he's been there since I started—well, this guy suddenly decided that I'm the hottest worker he's got, so he's been...~~

Never mind. I don't want to talk about it.

On that note, James, if you ever read this, I'll fucking kill you.

I think I might try to visit Mom this weekend. James doesn't want to come, obviously, but I want to try to surprise her or something. Her birthday's coming up.

October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

The car is STILL broken. James won't get off of his lazy ass and look for a new job, and god knows I'll never get a good reference from Mike after all of that shit. And all of the tourists have flown the coop, so there is nothing else for us to do. I tried to get

the janitor job after James, but just yesterday they called and told me “no.” Said they were looking for a guy. I’m not even going to try to fight with them.

I wish I could go back home. But there is just no way. Mom won’t even answer my calls anymore, not since she got with that dirt bag Randy or whatever his name is. She’s an asshole magnet. I guess I’m glad I’m not like her. I mean, James isn’t Superman or anything, but at least he’s good in the sack. And he loves me. And that means everything. It’s all I really need.

Chuckie stopped by the other night. I wanted to just tell him to get the hell out of here, but James heard his voice and they went into the spare room. They’re friends, what can you do?

Anyway, I’m worried about the usual. The rent, money, all of that shit. And then there’s the thing...

The thing.

I’m not going to get sad over it. I know it’s for the best. I wish I could have had James come with me, but... he probably would have made me change my mind. I would have liked Mom around. But then she’d give me a guilt trip or some shit.

I’m glad I’m okay with being alone.

November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

I hate this. I can’t do it anymore.

December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985

Haven't written in a long time again. I'm back in Philly. Jeannie's letting me crash at her place. Surprise, surprise. Apparently Bill died in a car accident last summer! I can't believe it! How did I not know about that?! And Jeannie has a baby. Bill's baby. It's so weird. He cries so much, I don't envy her AT ALL. I thought I might, but I totally don't.

James has been trying to call. Jeannie tells him I'm not here, and I just don't answer the phone when she's not around, so it's okay. I think he'll get the hint and stop soon. He clearly doesn't care that much about me, or else... well, I wouldn't be here, would I?

I fucking hate the winter. All of the schools were cancelled today and there were kids screaming all day in the street. You know, having fun. Sometimes I just want to slap them all and tell them the truth - life sucks, kids!

Life just sucks.

I'm working at Wendy's again. Ten cent raise from VA. So I guess not everything is bad. Just most of it.

*Thirteen years later.*

January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

Sometimes I can't believe I work at Chanel. Sometimes it hits me, when I have to go find gloves for some rich elderly woman, for a charity benefit or something... Sure, I wish I was on the other side of the counter. But I guess this side is the next best thing. But I need to get shoes that don't pinch! Major blister today. Maybe I should quit.

I ran into a ghost last night. James, from VA. I barely recognized him - he's gotten thicker, I think. He's not like some kind of Greek god now, but he definitely could be a lifeguard. Ha! Anyway, we're having coffee later this week. I've got this nervous twitch thing happening. Customers probably think there's something wrong with me.

Only kidding. I am nervous, though. We only talked for a minute in the street yesterday - that wasn't too awkward, but coffee... Shit. Coffee is always awkward.

Peter, the guy I went on a date with two weeks ago, came into the store today. He didn't even say hello. And get this - he was wearing a wedding band. And he bought a necklace. What does that tell you?

So I didn't say hi either, and he didn't come to my register.

Men are disgusting.

February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

James got me a Valentine. He took me out to dinner last night, because he has to work all day today. It was a pretty fancy place. I mean, by James standards. Mildly fancy restaurant for the mildly successful realtor.

I still can't believe he wears a suit almost every day. He looks good in it, too. Hell, I can't believe he makes more money than me! I mean, if you'd have placed a bet thirteen years ago on who would be the successful one, who would you've chosen? Not him, that's for goddamned sure.

March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

Well, I told Jeannie. Holy shit. I haven't seen her that pissed since the cat peed on her couch. She said I shouldn't do it. That I can't do it. "You can do so much better than that!" So much better?

Maybe she's just jealous because now I can actually afford to pay the employee discount prices at Chanel.

Whatever. Jealous! That's what that lady is. So fuck her.

James is coming to help me move my things tomorrow. I helped him clean up the house over the weekend... There's still a lot of work to do, but it's going to be so nice once we're settled in and shit.

Speaking of shit, it was Jamie's weekend, and guess who ended up spending all of her time trying to entertain an incredibly needy eight-year-old? Yeah. He's cute and

all, but shit! I didn't ask for that. Two weeks until we have to deal with that again, though. Maybe this weekend James and I will go out of town or something. Maybe go on down to VA. Paint the beaches red.

April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

Notes:

- Call Jeannie. Get dress measurement.
- Photos. Disposable cameras? Cheap photog?
- Call WingZone. Place order.
- RSVPS: no extra chairs!
- Mom's urn. Bring to ceremony?
- Burn Cds for reception. Jamie will press play?
- PICK UP DRESS.
- PICK UP TUX.
- Rental car - ~~Lexus? Mercedes?~~ Check prices.
- Haircut for James.
- Get waxed.

May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

There's a problem with the latest sale. James came home pissed off last night, completely off his rocker. Apparently George got on his case about not pushing the house hard enough. There was also something about a bad foundation? I'm not sure, but James says he's on probation and needs to sell something big by the end of the month. He can do it, it's just a matter of how much bitching I can put up with.

Is it just me, or is he getting... fat?

Jamie came last weekend. He had me read this book to him, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, over and over again. I just about lost my voice.

June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

No use hiding it this time.

Things are just going so well. I take this as some kind of sign. It's about time, I guess! And I told James last night, so really, there's no going back. He was going to start to notice anyway. And I'm glad we're having a winter baby. Mom used to say that they have the best temperaments.

And to add to that, James sold three lots over the weekend. He's on such a winning streak. I love him. And I got us both gym memberships, so even that is going to get better.

I don't know who to thank for all of this. I'm just so happy! God, I guess, is the one I should talk to. So - Thanks!

I'm going to be taking major advantage of my discount this week. Next week, I'm finished for good. No more heels from 9 to 5! My credit card is burning a hole in my purse. Tomorrow is going to be a good day.

July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

Still on vacation.

Thank god for time shares.

August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

If I throw up tomorrow morning, I just might have to kill myself. On the other hand, I've already gained so much weight... Maybe I should put up with it.

James has been in quite the mood lately.

September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

James spent last night on the couch. Again. Jamie's coming over tomorrow, so that will have to stop... God damn it.

October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

Jamie was in the school play. I feel like a goddamned housewife. Oh wait - that's what I am. Fucking hell.

James says he wants to quit the realty. I tell him I want to quit life, and he gets all defensive... He hasn't made a sale in a long time, but it's the winter. What does he expect? People don't buy houses or land in the winter.

I'm just doing everything I can to keep his head in the game. And he keeps getting out of it with all of his beer and liquor and shit... Maybe it's that seasonal disorder. Maybe we should get some Prozac. I don't know what else to do.

November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

I don't want to talk about it.

December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998

We've named him Harold, after the book that Jamie brought over last fall. I've got to say, it's not the best name I've ever heard. But whatever, it's just a name. Right now we call him Harry.

I've never been so tired in my life.

There is something James won't tell me. I don't know what it is - probably something about the job. I'd like to say that I'm too tired to care whether he quits or not, but I don't think I could stand to have him around the house all day. And now with this new mouth to feed...

So James isn't the ideal parent. Neither am I. But we'll learn, I'm sure.

## After All

My father went down in a blaze of glory. Drunken, pathetic, lonely glory, but glory nonetheless. Max expected me to celebrate when he died - "Great! So now we can go visit your mom."

Max sometimes forgets who I am. "Stepmother, Max. You don't want to meet her, trust me."

"But, no --" he says. "Okay, well, what about your brother?"

"Half-brother," I say. "He's a teenage delinquent. We already went through that phase and really, I don't want to revisit it. Do you?"

"But remember how we --"

"Remember how pathetic we were? How egotistical and stupid, so fucking stupid."

"Remember all of the hearts we broke?" He winks.

"Yeah, I say. Hearts." I stifle a laugh.

"Jesus Christ. You don't need to be so negative," he says, and then, quietly, "It was fun."

"My father just died, I think I have the right to be negative." I swallow. "And me, no, I wouldn't call it fun."

“Okay. A, you’re a stick in the mud. B, go ahead and be negative, what’s it going to fix? And C, of course, your father killed himself, not died. Killed himself.”

“That’s even worse! God, you’re so supportive.” I say it like I’m being sarcastic, but I actually mean it. I know he won’t get the joke.

“He didn’t love you anyway,” he says huffily, getting upset. Unlike my father, Max does love me - all of the time - but he only *likes* me when I’m happy. “And don’t even try to tell me that you loved him or some bullshit like that.”

Max stands and walks out of the room. I hear the front door slam and hear his petulant footsteps marching down the drive. *Max, I don’t even know what love is.*

I haven’t been to Ross Park in at least ten years. I try not to keep track of numbers because they make me feel old - older than I am. The arthritis in my back has the same effect – I don’t mind it, but it makes me feel old. I try not to drink because that makes me feel old too, and alcoholism is the only inheritance I got from my old man. Daddy. Father. The dick to rule all dicks. And now I’m on a plane back to see him one last time. *Ross Park, I hope you’ve changed.*

A few minutes ago, the stewardess stopped by and said something about “cash bar, mixed drinks,” or something to that effect, and I smiled and nodded, mostly because I couldn’t hear a thing that she said over the hum of the engines. She’s put

something, a drink, in front of me and raises five fingers, five dollars, and I oblige.

Stewarding just might be the ideal occupation for a mute.

“What are you doing? Don’t drink that.” Max whispers when he returns from the lavatory, the first class lavatory. “Posh,” he says, handing me an individually wrapped moist towelette.

“What’s this for?” I ask, holding the little package. He holds open his coat pocket and leans over me, showing ten more packs. Max, the complimentary amenity kleptomaniac. I briefly flashed back to the Chateau d’Moor, a little ski lodge we’d visited last year at this time. They had a bowl of Ghiradelli chocolate mints at the reception desk - Max had cleaned the bowl out three times by the time we left. He didn’t even like the mints, because “Ghiradelli’s no Godiva,” because “it’s the poor man’s fancy chocolate.”

“You goof,” I say to him, grinning. He sits down beside me in his own uncomfortable coach seat and I raise my glass. Before it reaches my lips, it’s in his hand and he’s sniffing it.

“Ugh,” he says, handing it back to me. “Good luck.”

I take a sip. “James LeMane died on Saturday, June 19<sup>th</sup>. His death has been deemed a suicide, as James was found hung by the neck by his wife of 17 years, Carrie LeMane. James is survived by two sons, Harry, 13, and Jaymie, 23.” The drink is

disgusting and I can't help but grimace. "They couldn't even get the spelling right," I say.

Max is incredulous. "That's what is says in the *paper*?"

I hand him the obituary.

"Services will be held at Mount Sinai Parish in Ross Park," he reads. "Saturday, June 26<sup>th</sup>. Visitors are asked to bring..." His voice trails off. I know he's feeling faint.

"Can you believe it?" I ask, taking another sip. It's getting better.

"Not really," he says, handing the folded newspaper back to me as if it were a used tissue. "Crass," he says.

"I told you," I say. "I wouldn't be surprised if she already has an engagement ring on for some old geezer with a million in the bank." I clear my throat and finish the page. "Visitors are asked to bring money in the form of cash or checks. Proceeds will go towards the adjacent burial plot to the James LeMane plot so that he and Mrs. LeMane may one day rest together in peace."

"She'll be *dead*, why does she even *care*? God that's morbid!"

"Yeah," I say, polishing off the paper cup and crumpling it into a ball. Max comes from a different sort of family. Abnormal enough to produce a gay son perhaps, but still upper middle class, well educated, fairly well adjusted, not particularly religious. Even though he's in love with me, he's not used to the crazies. Not yet. But that will certainly change.

Max will meet my mother. Little Harry. Witness fights and awkward pauses. He'll wonder how I turned out so well, so normal. He'll see my father lying in his casket and wonder if this is just a big hoax, if we're even related at all. After this, we'll return to California, then part ways for good. Max will start to fear that I'll turn out like all of them, that someday I won't make any sense at all.

My father went down in a blaze of glory, and he's taken me with him.

## A Simple Solution

“Lola and I used to take walks in the woods. Especially in the fall, when the leaves were crunchy. I can just see her now, jumping into a pile of them and smiling so big. She was such a good little girl.”

“Did Bette ever go with you?”

“Oh no. She liked to stay indoors. We’d come back and she’d have a pie ready for us, or hot chocolate. Lemonade in the summertime. It sounds so sweet, doesn’t it?”

“It does.”

“It was.”

“Did you take Sam walking in the same woods?”

“I did. We took the same paths and everything. They’re quite a bit overgrown now, but that happens. Things change.”

“Did you have a good time together?”

“I think he liked it. I never really could tell with that kid. He didn’t seem to like it as much as his mother did, though. Lola was such a good little girl.”

“And Sam wasn’t good?”

“Oh Sam. You *know* what he was like. It’s not the same. You can’t compare them.”

“Why not?”

"Lola -- Lola was such a *smart* little girl. Smart as a whip. She loved those walks, she could appreciate things like that. Birds. Leaves. Being young."

"Hm."

"But Sam, he just wasn't there. He was a boy. You know how boys are. And that on top of everything else. He was just... never there."

-

I taught Sam how to shoot a bow and arrow two summers ago, when he was thirteen. He was big for a thirteen year old. He had no trouble holding that bow up and pulling back the arrow and letting it fly. I only let him use blunt arrows. There was no point in taking a risk with real ones. It was just a hobby, a sport. And Sam couldn't tell the difference.

"This sure is cool, isn't it, Grandpa?" he said the first time I let him shoot. He bit his lower lip, fighting a huge grin. "*Isn't* it, Grandpa?" he insisted.

"Sure is, kiddo."

We went through the same conversation every time we practiced. I couldn't understand the excitement, but then again, perhaps I could. I'd been a legitimate archer in my younger days, much younger days, just as this, as a hobby. I'd been in

competitions and won medals. Bette, my wife, put them on display on top of the piano and kept them there for years. When she died, they retired into a box as well.

Sam and I spent that summer shooting at bottles and cans leaned up against old trees at the edge of my yard. Occasionally I'd get one to stick, which was quite an accomplishment considering that the arrows had no points. My arm was still in the game. Too bad there's no one left to play against.

Sam was mystified by my shot. "How'd you do that, Grandpa?"

"Magic," I'd say.

He'd laugh in a halting way, like it was really funny. "Yeah, yeah *right*."

I'd smile in spite of wishing we could use real arrows. The trees would've looked as if their bark was made of porcupine pelts. "Yeah, that *is* right, kiddo." And I'd wink.

"Oh yeah, well, shoot that branch!" And he'd point to nothing in particular, and I'd shoot. "That one!" I'd shoot. "That one! And that one! And that! That!"

We'd practice till the arrows ran dry and it was time for Sam to go home.

This summer things have been a little bit different. I guess shooting sticks around can only keep a person entertained for so long, no matter how simple minded they may be. Sam and I spent most of June in our usual routine, which involved Lola dropping him off at about ten or so in the morning. Sam and I would make lunch together and watch sports on television. Around two or three we'd go out to the yard and rake or mow. Later, if I could convince him, we'd get out the bows and practice.

He seemed distracted, more than usual. "What's on your mind, kiddo?"

He shrugged. "Nothin'."

"Ah, come on," I said, aiming for a knot on a maple tree.

He laughed, watching me. "Yeah, you're gonna get that, aren't you?" he said, his eyes waving between the tree and myself.

"Sure am."

"I don't want to go to school."

"School, eh," I said. "You're going to the high school now, that's a pretty big deal. You have to act like an adult."

His eyes squinted and he cocked his head to the side. "No I don't," he said, like it was a point of great contention.

"Oh, yes you do." I let the arrow fly and it bounced off of the knot. I barely remember high school myself, but I know the feeling of being in a big place and not knowing where anything is, who is nice and who is mean, not knowing exactly what's right and what's wrong. It was a complicated matter. I'm sure it's still the same today. Worse, maybe.

"Mom says I'm going to be in shop class," he said, letting the "p" of "shop" pop like a bubble. "Shop, shop, shop."

"You're going to have a good time with that, aren't you?"

He rolled his eyes and sat down heavily on the ground, picking at a bit of grass, holding his bow in his lap. "And then I have *maaath* class," he said, baaing like a sheep.

"*Maaath, maaath.*"

I kneeled beside him, my knees cracking loudly. "That isn't so bad."

"I *hate* math."

"It'll be fine. You'll learn new things."

"I *hate* learning."

"You'll learn things in shop," I said.

He stared at his hands blankly, toe absently tapping on the soft ground. "Is it almost time to go home?" he asked. "You have any cookies?"

I nodded and we got up from the ground and headed towards the house.

-

"You mentioned Bette."

"I did."

"Do you miss her?"

"You're damned right I miss her. I'd be a fool if I didn't."

"When did she die?"

"1998. She had a heart attack. I wasn't expecting that one, let me tell you. Her

knees were always bad, she had them replaced back in -- oh, eighty-seven, eighty-eight. I was always worried that she'd fall down some stairs or something. But she never did."

"How did Bette get along with Sam?"

"Oh, she was a patient one. You have to be patient if your knees are bad and all you do for fun is cook. Cooking is a stressful business. I never appreciated that till I had to do it myself. Do you know how to make chicken thermadore?"

"No, I don't."

"It's tricky, let me tell you. You've got to get the chicken just right, or else it'll disintegrate in the dish, turn to mush with the peas and the soup. Cream of mushroom, she used."

"What were you saying about Bette and Sam?"

"I don't think I was saying anything about Bette and Sam. She put up with him. She was a patient one. But she couldn't do much, because of her knees."

-

Lola had a house in town, only two blocks away from the high school. "He's got homework," she reported to me with a shade of resentment. "I'm going to make him do it, but he can't come visit today. I know you won't mind; I just wanted to let you know."

I took to filling my afternoons with target practice, taking out my good arrows, ones with real points, and setting up a bull's eye near the trees at the edge of the yard. My aim was still decent, better than the average man you'd meet on the street, but it was hard to hold the bow so still. When Sam would wildly point out targets in the trees, it didn't matter how precise I shot. But it mattered when I was alone. I was improving.

Lola called me almost every day with updates. "How is he?" I asked.

"Doing fine," she said. She sounded tired. "He's working on something now, in the kitchen." I heard her voice become distant as she set the phone down. "Get out of that!" I heard her yell. "Sam, you put that down right this instant. Put it *down!*"

"*Fine!*" I heard him scream, and the sound of something breaking on the floor.

Lola picked the phone back up. "I'm sorry Dad, I've got to go."

"Is everything alright?" I stood next to the phone, next to the front door. I knew exactly where my jacket was, and that my car keys were in the left pocket. "I can come over."

"No," she said quickly, her voice high and fast. "It's fine, but I need to pick something up off the floor, so I have to go. Goodnight, Dad," she said, and put the phone down.

I stood there for a moment, envisioning driving down the road ten miles over the speed limit. Sam was a good boy when I was around, but that was just for my sake. It

was better than nothing. I called Lola back an hour later, when I was sure the mess would be cleaned and things might be calm again for a moment.

“Lola?”

“Hi Dad.”

“Do you want me to pick Sam up from school tomorrow?”

I could hear her relax. “That would be wonderful,” she said, relief in her voice. “I need to get some cleaning down around here, and -- that would be perfect.”

“I will then.”

“Thank you.”

“Three o’clock?”

“Yes.”

“And how are things now?”

“Things,” I heard her pause, looking around. “Things are fine.”

We said goodnight.

-

“Did you fully understand his disability?”

“I am not going to wax poetic over Sam.”

“But did you *understand* it?”

“What was there to understand? It’s a mess. The hospital system, they’re a mess. Nothing but doctors who don’t give a damn about their patients. I’m not saying that it was their fault. I don’t know. I don’t know what happened, and no one does, so how could I understand it?”

“You could see what he could do and what he couldn’t do.”

“What’s the point of all of this anyway? What’s the *point*?”

“The point is that we’re trying to resolve an issue, John.”

“Doesn’t seem like there’s much to resolve.”

“Did you --.”

“I understood it. But that doesn’t mean I could accept it. Is that what you’re looking for?”

“I’m not looking for anything.”

“You’re the one asking the questions. Ask another.”

“How do you feel now?”

“I feel fine. I feel -- I feel better.”

“Are you sad?”

“Sad? No. I was sad -- the last time I was sad was when Bette died. I was sad then. I didn’t know what to do with myself. But I figured it out. I figured out what to do, and I did it.”

“What exactly?”

“Make my own meals. Find other people to take care of.”

“Sam?”

“Sam, sure, Sam. And Lola. I’ll always take care of my little girl.”

-

I got to the school ten minutes early and Sam was already waiting on the sidewalk. “You’re out early,” I said, rolling down the window as he approached the car.

“Your mom tell you that I was picking you up today?”

He shook his head, squinting the bright fall sunlight.

“I got something special to show you, so come on, get on in the car.”

He opened the passenger door and got in without saying anything, just grunting slightly as he hefted his backpack into the backseat. “What do you have in there, bricks?”

“Books,” he said. He paused a moment, watching the school pass by as we drove away. He raised his voice. “Don’t know why they make me take ‘em.”

“So you can learn.”

He crossed his arms defiantly. He was getting fatter. “I can’t read *anyway*.”

It’s true.

The radio played softly, tuned into the oldies station and we drove in what would have otherwise been silence. As we approached the house, he finally spoke up again. "What do you have to show me?"

"A surprise."

"Oh, *yeah right.*"

"That's right, kiddo," I said, parking the car and opening my door. "You think your old pa can't surprise you anymore?"

Sam hopped out of the car and looked around. I'd let the yard get away from me a bit. The grass was a bit too tall and there were piles of browning leaves tucked into corners of the yard, moved nightly by the wind. The bull's eye was still set up at the edge of the woods, and his eye was drawn to it immediately. "What's that?" He pointed eagerly, his face contorting in grotesque excitement.

"Guess," I said, and we walked towards it, leaves crunching occasionally underfoot.

"Mmmmm," he hummed, staring at it intently. "Dunno."

We reached the patch of grass where we stood to shoot, facing the target and the woods beyond. "Bull's eye," I said.

"Ah," he said, nodding as if it had been on the tip of his tongue all along. "Bull's eye."

I'd been practicing earlier that day and had left my bow beneath the target stand. I bent to retrieve it. Also stored was a case of arrows. Real arrows with sharp points. For the first time.

"Watch me," I said, stepping back and aligning myself, preparing to strike the center. I steadied myself on both feet, finding the little divots I'd made in the ground from standing there so often and intently. I brought the bow up in front of me, balancing the arrow with my fingers and putting it in exactly the right spot. I bent my neck and stared at the red with one eye, then two, then one. I let it fly.

The arrow stuck directly in the middle, just where I told it to go. It was a beautiful shot. The kind of shot that would win a tournament.

"Gosh," Sam said, staring. "Can I try?"

"Not yet," I said. "Go get your bow from the house and practice with yours for a few minutes."

"Maybe later then, huh?"

"Later."

Sam ran into the house and I noticed that he'd gained quite a bit of weight. It was unbecoming, but I suppose that teenagers are bound to change a little bit. The same thing happened to me after Bette left, except I went in the other direction - until I learned how to cook. Lola had helped me. She was almost as good of a cook as her mother.

"You know what kids are doing in school now," he said, fumbling with his bow. His skills degraded quickly; I'd had to teach him how to shoot every June, as if he had never done it before at all.

"What's that?" I asked, watching him stand with poor posture.

"They're getting ready," he said, blinking hard, staring at his target, presumably a Coke can sitting on a tree branch. "Gettin' ready to go hunting."

"Hunting, eh."

"Deer hunting. With guns. They all got guns." He paused and turned to me, squinting his eyes. "You think that's a good idea?"

"That's how people hunt these days."

"No, a good idea for *me*," he said, lowering the bow. "I gotta get a gun."

"Oh no you don't," I said, standing taller.

"Yeah-huh."

I raised my eyebrows and sent him a stern look. He rolled his eyes. "Everybody goes to -- everybody goes to *hunter's training, duh.*"

My arm twitched and I got the impulse to smack him. There was only a certain level of insolence and belligerence that I could stand from anyone, including Sam, and he was approaching ground zero. "Well, you haven't gone to hunter's training, so I guess that counts you out."

“Yeah,” he said, looking at the ground, kicking at a rock. “Guess.” He lifted his bow quickly and set the arrow in place, letting it fly. The arrow hit the Coke can with a pop, a surprisingly clean shot. I stood, looking at the arrow stuck in the can. He was still using the dull arrows, and I have to admit that I was impressed.

“Good job,” I said, making sure not let on. I walked over and picked the can up from the ground, pulling the arrow out of it. The kid wasn’t good at much. “You want to try mine?” I asked.

I set him up, showing him how to stand in my footsteps, turned a bit away from the bull’s eye to twist and get the right angle to shoot. “This is *hard*,” he said, standing awkwardly.

“Just try it,” I told him, and he did.

I fed him several arrows. None of them stuck the center, and one flew off into the woods and stuck into a rotting log. The others hit the target, one on white and two on blue. In the old days, we would call this beginner’s luck, even though he wasn’t much of a beginner when it came to the bow. Beginner’s luck all the same, because it’s different when there’s something to aim for. Different incentive, different pressures. And the kid did well.

I swallowed twice before I said this. I gave it a good hard thought, and let it fly. “You ever heard of bow hunting?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Hunting!”

“Deer hunting. With bows and arrows.”

His eyes grew wide and he looked at the bow that he still held in his hand. “Does that *work*?”

I nodded. I’d done it for sport, myself. Never ended up hitting anything, though, in spite of the fact that I was the best aim in the county. None of us hit much of anything. This was back when bow hunting was a bigger deal. I doubted that anyone did it much anymore, if at all.

“Can we do that?” he asked excitedly.

“Maybe,” I replied. I regretted it almost immediately.

-

“John, I’m going to ask Lola to come in now.”

“Lola? I didn’t know she was here.”

“Lola, have a seat, right here.”

“Thank you.”

“I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Well, why wouldn’t I?”

“Now, I’d like to have you two talk about --.”

"I don't know what to say to you. I don't know what to say!"

"Please stay calm."

"You don't have to say anything, I just think that we need to talk about some things before -- well, you know."

"Lola, let's start with you. How have you been feeling these past few weeks?"

"I'm not sure how I should be feeling."

"Relieved."

"Well, I'm not."

"Let's not think about how we *should* be feeling, let's focus on how we *are* feeling.

Lola? Or John? John, why don't you start."

...

"Dad?"

"You go."

"This was a mistake, I think."

"I have to go."

"John, sit down."

"This was a mistake."

I talked to Lola about it that night, calling after Sam should have been in bed. "He's in the garage, taking something apart," she told me. "He threw a fit when I asked him to take a shower." Her voice was dull, far away. "I'm reaching the end of my rope, I think."

"How would you like it if I took him for a couple of days? Over the weekend?" I asked, and I could imagine her standing up straighter and running her hand through her hair. "I could take him out to the old cabin on Clear Lake."

She might have been smiling. "That would be fantastic, Dad, but I don't want you to overdo yourself."

"Heck, I won't overdo myself. Going to the cabin is like taking a vacation."

"You know what I mean," she said.

I wanted to nudge the next point gently, but decided that it would be better to get straight to the heart of the matter. "Lola, now, I know you're probably going to be against this, but hear me out. Sam and I have been practicing with the bows quite a bit, and I think it might be nice if we did a little hunting while we're out there." I was standing in the living room next to Bette's old piano, the one Lola learned to play on. I played with the corner, the lacquer chipping off of the old, dry wood. Lola's breath caught in her throat.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," she said coolly.

"Sam was telling me today --," I began.

"It's all he can talk about, I know, I know. I wouldn't be surprised if he was trying to make a gun out in the garage with a piece of pipe and a firecracker."

"I think it would be a good release for him, something exciting," I said.

"I don't," she said.

"That's fine," I said, sitting down on the piano bench. "We'll go fishing, maybe."

She relaxed. "He likes fishing."

"Me too," I said.

We said our goodnights and through the phone wires I heard the front door of Lola's house slam. It could only be one person - husband long gone, no boyfriend or friends to speak of. Lola lived a lonely life, but not without tension and drama. "Hold on, Dad," Lola said, and her voice became faint as she turned away from the receiver. "Sam, go get your shower now, please."

"*What,*" I heard him yell with a rasp that could only mean that he'd been doing a fair share of yelling earlier as well. Loud thuds as he walked across the living room floor with heavy heels. He was a big boy.

"Come on," Lola said, her voice retaining sweetness. "Then you can watch tv."

"No," he said with dry stubbornness. Pure ignorance.

I heard Lola set down the phone and walk to wherever he was. "Let's go," I heard her say with a strain, and Sam must have jumped to his feet in a rage.

"No, fuck you, bitch. Fuck! Fuck you!" he screamed, feet stomping up the stairs. A door somewhere in the house clapped shut.

It was not typical teenage rage. It was frightening, unfamiliar rage. Rage that no one can qualify, no one can locate. It's the result of a lack of oxygen at birth, the result of the inability to read and write. It's the result of having no father to speak of, no medications that work any wonders, a dead grandmother who loved you more than anyone else, and not enough money. The result of being teased mercilessly, the result of not enough time. It's the result of frailty. The result of mistakes.

Lola came back on the line and sounded tired, defeated. "Goodnight Dad, sorry you had to hear that," she said. I asked her if she wanted me to come over to help, to which she replied, "Help with what? This is just the way things are." And we hung up.

-

"I wanted you to be happy again."

"Jesus Christ."

"Is that so wrong?"

"You did it on purpose!"

"On my life, I swear I didn't. On your mother's *grave*, I swear I didn't."

"Calm down, now, or else, Lola? You'll have to leave."

"What the hell do you mean, you wanted me to be happy again?"

"That's why I took him in the first place."

"Oh, fuck."

"Lola, I --."

"This isn't some kind of *solution*, Dad! Oh my -- oh my god."

"Don't cry, please, don't now..."

"Here are some tissues."

"God *damn* it."

"Lola, I love you."

"*Fuck*."

"Come, come on now, just... good. Wait out here, I'll be out in just a minute."

"Lola --."

"John, I think it's best if we give her a minute or two."

"But I --."

"Really."

"And what now?"

It had been at least six or seven years since I'd last been out at the cabin. A bunch of us had chipped in on it back in the sixties, all of us hunting and camping enthusiasts. It was a get-away place for the guys, but when Lola was little, the three of us - Bette, Lola, and I - would go out on weekends and enjoy ourselves. Lola loved running through the trails around the lake, gathering berries in her pocket if it was the right time of year. Bette loved to watch her. We took albums upon albums of snapshots out there. I think they're still in the attic.

I picked up Sam on Saturday morning, taking my old beater truck with rust on the doors. "Careful," Lola called after us as we pulled out of her driveway. "Love you, Sam." She said it in an impassionate way, the only way she could manage to say it. I watched her wave as Sam and I rumbled off down the road. Sam didn't look back.

"We're gonna have a good time, aren't we, Grandpa? Aren't we?" he insisted, staring out of the passenger window and gawking at the trees flying past.

"Sure are kiddo," I said.

We drove for two and a half hours towards the middle of nowhere, listening to oldies on the radio. "This sure is good music, isn't Grandpa?" I nodded, and he went to bobbing his head awkwardly, a half-beat out of step with the music. "One!" he announced a few moments later. "I saw one?"

"One what?" I asked, heart beating a bit faster than it had been.

"A deer, duh," he replied. "We're going to shoot some deer, aren't we, Grandpa?"

I nodded again.

-

"Let's start at the beginning, John. What happened that day?"

"What day?"

"You know --."

"I know, I know. We drove out to the camp in the morning. Listened to the radio.

It was a nice day, sunny as could be. It felt like summer, and I remember thinking that I should have invited to Lola to come along."

"To make it a family trip?"

"Because I knew she would have loved it."

-

Sam counted out five more deer before we got to the lake, none of which I caught sight of. "I think you might be seeing things, kiddo," I said after he yelled "Six!"

"Am *not*," he replied defensively, and I knew it wasn't worth fighting.

I turned the truck onto an unmarked dirt road that wound its way through the woods. After being jostled for ten minutes or so and noting that the shocks on my truck had seen better days, we arrived at the cabin.

-

"Let's just go through a chronology of the events. You arrived at the cabin."

"Yes."

"And?"

"We set up camp for the night. Cleaned the place up a bit. There was dust everywhere, and some animal made a nest under one of the beds."

"And that night? How did you sleep?"

"Well as I could. The wind was kicking up quite a racket."

"And Sam?"

"Out like a light."

-

The next morning came quickly. I got up just as the sun did, woken by Sam's impressive snoring. I shook him awake. "Go brush your teeth," I said. He groaned and

rolled over. "Come on, come on." I slapped him on the back gently, like a coach. But what I really wanted to do was beat him. My face flushed. "Get up!" I slapped a little harder.

"Ow, Grandpa, whaaat?"

"Time to get up."

He sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Is it time to go hunting now?"

"Sure is, kiddo."

-

"And then what?"

"Well, we set off on the old trails. We both had our gear on, bows, arrows, that whole bit."

"And how did you get separated?"

"You know, I - I'm not quite sure. The trails were grown over. Sam kept saying he thought he saw something, and I told him to be quiet. I didn't believe him. Then he was quiet."

"And?"

"I thought he was behind me, quiet, following. And I saw something move out of the corner of my eye."

"A deer."

"A deer!"

"And you shot."

"I shot. And I heard him scream. And I shot again. And then twice more. I heard him groan. I turned around and - he wasn't there. I called for him. 'Sam! Where'd you go? I got something! Sam!' Sam - I just - I called for him."

-

By the time I reached him, he was already gone. Blood was pouring all over the dead leaves. He landed near the foot of a big pine tree. And I was suddenly so - so happy. It was Lola's pine. The pine I'd nailed boards into so she could climb up. I'd always meant to build a house up there, but just never got around to it.

-

"I'd carved our names in the trunk - Bette, John, and Lola."

"That's quite the coincidence."

"I know. I *know*. That's why I think this was all *meant to be*. You see, don't you?

Why can't Lola? Maybe you should talk to her."

“Then what happened, John?”

“Well, I climbed the tree. And I sat on a limb and looked around for a while.

Stared down at him. Enjoyed the quiet. I was so thankful for it. Finally, it was so quiet.”

## Nine Reasons

0.

I applied to a fine arts boarding school when I was a freshman in high school. At the time, I wanted nothing else than to one day be a professional, classical musician. When the business sized envelope arrived at my home, my mother wrote on it with a marker: "When God closes a door, he always opens a window." I smiled at her note, opened the letter, and bawled for the rest of the night. I would not be going to boarding school, and even though I didn't and don't believe in God, I spent the next five years looking for the window. I recognized it only when I'd moved a thousand miles away, when I finally realized that I'd been looking out of the window for all of my life.

Writing is my window.

1.

I spent more time in church during the first eleven years of my life than the average Christian spends in church throughout a lifetime. My mother was a Jehovah's Witness, as was my father, but to a lesser degree. We'd spend more than ten hours a week in church, sitting in uncomfortable chairs with aluminum frames and scratchy pink upholstery. Bibles in hand, backs straight. There was no special service for children – all Witnesses sat together, the young and old, in the same room listening to old men

pick apart biblical scriptures or give speeches on the importance of spreading the word of God, turning away from Satan, and so on and so forth. I never bought any of it – not for a moment. But I sat there in silence all the same.

My only solace in these dark times – the hours of sitting with nothing to do but stare up at windows placed too high on the walls to see anything but the sky – came when I was very young, approximately three years old. My parents allowed me to have a notebook in church, in which I was to take notes on what the old men on the stage were saying. At first I resorted to drawing pictures of angels, which eventually evolved into pictures of trees and people and unicorns. When I began to read and write, the pictures were replaced or appropriately complimented with words – sentences – stories. That's how it began.

I didn't write stories about angels or God, or Jesus or Noah, although I certainly had enough knowledge on such characters. Instead, I wrote about things I didn't know. I wrote about babysitting, traveling in airplanes, shopping for diamonds. I wrote about the friends I didn't have, the friends my parents wouldn't allow me to have, the friends the church instructed I was not to have. I wrote about having brothers and sisters. About Hawaii. About the secret lives of cats and horses and snowmen. I wrote about everything I wanted that I was then denied. Writing was my escape from the cage of faith into which I was born. Since then, I've broken through those bars, and I'm happy to report that many of my stories have come true.

2.

I have memories of sitting in my bedroom at home, in Michigan, hugging my knees, rocking back and forth, crying and whispering to myself. *I want to home, I want to go home.* I could imagine what home ought to feel like, and mourned its absence. I still do. I write because I still want to go home.

3.

I was excited to have a little brother. I was four years old, and the anticipation was great. We held a baby shower. His name was going to be Andrew. And then one day, my mother went into labor and I spent the night at my Grandma's house – the first night I slept away from home by myself. It was May eleventh, and I cried myself to sleep. Since my birthday wasn't until June, I was quite sure that this "Andrew" was going to be older than me, and that I couldn't handle.

I woke up to find a t-shirt at the end of my bed. On the front it read "I'm the Big Sister." My grandmother explained that he would not be older than me, and my joyful anticipation returned, but not for long.

The first book I ever wrote was for Andrew. It was entitled "Things I See," and consisted of twenty-some pages of household drawings accompanied by captions and simple sentences. "This is a book. This is a plate." I figured it might be appropriate for a

four-year-old. I bound the pages with poster-board and staples. At the time, I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to help him learn. I had not yet come to terms with the fact that he was mentally retarded, and didn't realize that even thirteen years later, at age 17, he would still be unable to read that book, and that at age 21, I would still want to be a teacher.

4.

For a substantial part of my youth, I lived with my family in a mobile home. We had a lot in a trailer park in a tiny town called Christmas. Our road sign read "Jingle Bell Lane." Each day on the way to school, I'd see gigantic plywood statues of Santa and Mrs. Claus – they were at least thirty feet high. Christmas lights hung all year round, and in the winter time, the little post office would be flooded with letters from around the world, just to be authentically postmarked "Christmas."

Contrary to popular belief, it was not a healthy environment for a young person to grow up in. Particularly a young person whose family did not celebrate Christmas, or any holiday, for that matter. Living in Christmas made me bitter - as though it wasn't enough to hear my classmates talk about their presents and Christmas dinners, I had to be reminded of my deprivation daily, twice daily, every time I looked out the window or wrote down my address.

I remain bitter today. It's not because I mourn all of the presents that I might have received throughout my childhood. It's because other people don't understand why I truly love Christmas carols and seeing families eat dinner together. Storytelling is one method that I have for conveying to others this unique and yet what I suspect is a universal feeling of loss. I know of no other way to explain it.

5.

I was an overachiever. I was told that I could do anything, be anything I wanted to be. I was valedictorian of my high school class. I have two school letters and countless medals, some for science, others for acting, and others for math and music. I had potential, but never much direction. I went through phases. First, I wanted to be a princess. Then a schoolteacher. Then, a musician, followed by an engineer. Not to mention the hundreds of occupations that I fancied in between.

I write because there are too many things that I want to do, and I know that I do not enough time to get everything in. I write not only to imagine that I've become all of these things, but in hopes of inspiring someone else to do what I was not able to.

6.

The first short story that I was ever assigned to write was for my seventh grade English class. I wrote a story about a small group of kids on a dogsled team. In the

story, something goes wrong and the kids begin to plummet down a hill. That was the extent of the narrative, and the only criticism that my teacher gave me was this. One of the characters is scared as she plummets down the hill, and at the height of her terror she yells, "Oh God!" "You shouldn't use the word 'God,'" my teacher said to me quietly after calling me to her desk. "It might make some people uncomfortable." I blushed and told her that I would change the phrase to "Oh my goodness!" or something similar, and I did. This was my first brush with an editor. This was also the first story I got published.

7.

I find it incredibly difficult to write about things that have happened to me personally - making a narrative from the reality that I'm so familiar with. Yet there are so many things that have happened in my short life that would make for great stories, or so I've been told. There was the time I plummeted into a river in the middle of winter. One summer, I nearly died on the Fourth of July due to a soapbox derby gone awry. I stopped my father from shooting himself in the head with a shotgun, and stopped him from shooting my mother later that same night. I once had a dream that my father bought me a pony, and the dream was so real that I woke up and began to cry. I thought I was going to go to Hell because I ate a piece of Jello shaped like a dinosaur when I was in Kindergarten. I've seen Mars thanks to a boy I thought I was

falling in love with. I've danced the night away and cruelly, intentionally broke several hearts in the process. I've been unable to leave my apartment because, though I'd checked it more than twenty times, I couldn't convince myself that the stove was actually off. That's a long story. They all are. But they remain unwritten.

These are the stories that define my life, and the things I write come from the emotional resonance that these experiences have left in me. I write because I want to create a story, not to reveal the actual things that have happened to me, but to show my readers that I, too, know what "this" feels like. "This" being loneliness, or fear, or strangulation, appreciation, despair, desire. I have felt this way, and that is what connects me to everyone else in the world.

8.

Connection is one of the things I have longed for most in my life. Throughout my childhood, I was encouraged not to make any friends outside of the congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. Living in a town of less than 3,000, and in a congregation of less than 100, it's needless to say that my circle of friends was severely limited. My only friends growing up were my three older cousins - Adriana, Sarah, and Heather, two, four, and six years older than me, respectively. When the other girls in my grade were getting together on the weekends for birthday pool parties, I was usually at home, calling my cousins' house, hoping against hope that their mother would be willing to

drive them over to mine. I was terrified of their mother - my aunt Sandy - and so the thought of being invited to their home to play was comparable to calling the wrong number and blubbering apologies to a stranger.

9.

In first grade, one of our weekly assignments was to write sentences containing each of the words on our spelling list. One week, late in the fall, the most difficult word we'd ever encountered appeared on the list. The word was "because." It was mysterious. It was not a noun. It contained too many vowels. The class was all abuzz - the rebellious students complained more loudly than usual, and the perfectionists, a small group into which I fell, quietly discussed how we were going to face this demon of a word. Write it on our hands. On the desktops. On the back of each other's necks. The final decision was that we couldn't cheat, we knew it was wrong, and we would have to rely on brute memorization - an almost Herculean task.

When it came time to write sentences, in the middle of the week, everyone took longer than usual, and we all knew it was because of the Word. We wrote on manila paper, printed in the "two-solid lines, one-dotted" pattern for our capital and lower-case enjoyment. "Because" was the last word on the list. I saw that I had two lines remaining on my paper, and, without giving it much direct thought, I wrote the sentence that I will remember for the rest of my life. "I," it began, "will not go in the

water because it is too deep." The sentence took up both remaining lines, and I was embarrassed and worried that I would get in trouble because of it. Yet I handed the paper forward when time was up, carefully letting the sentence dissolve from my mind, reassuring myself that it was not a big deal.

The following day, our papers were to be handed back. Our teacher, Mrs. Erickson, held up one of the papers and began to read. "I," she began, "will not go in the water because it is too deep." She stared at us for a moment, unsmiling.

My heart broke. I used two lines. I was going down in history as the worst sentence-writer Central Elementary School had ever seen. She was about to crush me. Kill me. I should have known better.

Then she spoke. "This," she said, "is a terrific sentence." She handed back the papers, and I began to work on restoring my heart.

## Christmas

Growing up in Christmas made me bitter. I felt like a diabetic in a candy store. A homeless man in the middle of Macy's. The only boy in a home economics class.

It was almost like that.

Christmas was, and still is, a tiny town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, twenty minutes away from the nearest grocery store and bank; an hour away from the nearest movie theater; eight hours away from the nearest building over ten stories tall. And in between these landmarks were not endless rows of identical houses, interstate highways, or cultivated farming land. The space between these landmarks was untamed, wild and protected national forest. Trees and swamps filled with white tailed deer, raccoons, squirrels, birds, and other sundries not often seen in most other areas of the state, and for that matter, the entire country.

There were two different ways of living in Christmas. Surrounded by forest, some residents opted to live in modest homes built in the woods within a few acres of the highway. These homes, usually split level and always well-insulated, were all difficult to reach.

One of the requirements of having one of these homes was having a long driveway. A long driveway, in Christmas, required a snowplow which, in turn, required money to purchase and maintain. Which required work, specifically a job that

paid more than minimum wage, which required at least a moderately successful business to own or be employed by. This required people – customers, entrepreneurs, workers - people who are generally best procured from a larger population, as not everyone wants to do the same things, so let's say, a population of more than 1000 for a fairly well balanced local economy, which is a number far larger than that of the population of Christmas.

In absence of all of these necessities, most people chose to live in the Christmas trailer park. The city took care of plowing the roads, and so the rest were non-issues.

At Christmas time, thousands of people from around the world would send their mail to the little town in order to get their letters officially postmarked "Christmas." Many letters arrived simply addressed to Santa himself, for obvious reasons. Christmas time was also tourist season, and naturally the town filled not only with relatives and friends from afar, but complete strangers who were trying to capture a sense of authentic small-town Christmas charm. Most visitors didn't realize until arrival that, in some ways, Christmas did indeed live up to its festive name. All of the streets are named after reindeer and carols, my own being Jingle Bell Lane, right off of Santa Way. All of the town buildings are painted red and green. But this is where the festivity stopped, which was a shock to foreign systems.

Where were the people dressed as elves?

Where are the endless rows of carolers? The figgy pudding?

Why is there *nothing* to do in this *wonderful* little town?

What was one to do for an entire week in a town which offered no more entertainment than a trip to the mini-mall - a convenience store with an ice cream counter that was, of course, closed in the winter?

Fortunately or un, these were questions that only needed to be addressed after the fact, after arrival. The town's lack of entertainment was often baffling to visitors. The town needed nothing more than its name to attract volumes of tourists – so why not *capitalize* on it even further? Why not tout a Christmas festival, a celebration, a parade? Why not make it a place *really* worth coming to?

The questions for residents, however, were quite different. Why *bother* investing in appealing to tourists when it was so much easier to sit back and do *nothing* and have a satisfactory result? And why attract more people than a little community could handle? There were only so many hotel rooms, parking spots, and only so much food that could be contained within the city limits.

Citizens of Christmas didn't think about expansion. How could anyone think about expansion when cuddled up beside the world largest lake - Lake Superior - on one side, and nestled next to protected national forest on all of the others? Christmas had actually been declining in population since it's founding in the early 1900's as a mill town. In fact, by the 1980's, the only thing keeping the town alive was its name. When people spoke of "the good old days," they really meant it.

Children passing through or living in Christmas are forever enchanted by the sights. Huge billboards stand along the main road, shaped, respectively, like Santa, Mrs. Claus, a shoe filled with Elves, and an ice cream cone. One of the most common trees in the area is the traditional pine, which covers the thought of the Christmas tree nicely. Many houses keep their holiday decorations up all year, as well as all of the businesses. Behind the post office? A talking statue of a snowman. And a black bear. In a cage. Named Ebony. Quite the attraction.

Christmas was all encompassing. To further bolster this, *everyone* could relate to these characters and images. There were no Jews, no Muslims, no practitioners of Eastern religions. Everyone believed in Jesus. Everyone read the Bible. There was variation, of course, between Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, and so on, but still - everyone knew what Christmas was and what it meant. Everyone who lived in Christmas truly belonged. Almost.

Surprisingly, Christmas had no churches, but almost all of its residents were churchgoers. Most took the fifteen minute drive to the next city, Munising, to attend services.

Munising had it all - a Catholic church, a Baptist church, Protestant, Seventh Day Adventist, Lutheran. And then there was a Kingdom Hall - the term used by Jehovah's

Witnesses to refer to their “church,” their place of worship. The Kingdom Hall, not church, where “meeting,” not services, were held more than four times each week. This was the place where I spent some of the most dull moments of my childhood – far more than any other child in the area.

Contrary to common belief, Jehovah’s Witnesses are, in fact, Christian. They are literalists, taking the Bible for face value, attempting to preserve the literal meaning of each phrase, each word. They believe in Jesus. “Jehovah” is simply used as another word for “God.” They are quite decidedly Christian.

Normal? Not exactly.

Christian? Yes.

One key oddity of the Jehovah’s Witnesses belief system is holiday abstinence. There is a rule against each holiday, a specific reason for which each celebration should be ignored. There are reasons in the Bible why Jehovah Witness children do not wake up to presents on Christmas morning, or eggs on Easter, valentines on February 14<sup>th</sup>, or even gifts on their own birthdays. There are reasons, but they are not always entirely clear.

Thanks to the Christmas billboards, I knew what Santa looked like before I had any concept of what he was or how he was related to Christmas, or even more abstractly, Christianity, or the town of Christmas, or my own life.

Pro-tip: there's no point in telling your child that Santa Claus doesn't exist if you haven't in fact explained who the hell Santa is in the first place.

"Deanna, Santa Claus isn't real."

"Okay, Mom."

"Even if the other kids say he is."

"Okay..."

"He's like a fairy tale."

"Mom, I have to go to the bathroom."

"There is no such thing as Santa."

"Okay!"

"Is Santa real?"

"Noooo..."

"Why are you crossing your legs?"

"I have to go!"

"Just remember..."

"Santa isn't real!"

"Right. He's like a fairy tale. Okay, go pee."

Jesus, they told me, wasn't born on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Rather, judging by expert map and climate research, and the oh-so-reliable text of the Bible, I was told that it can be scientifically concluded that Jesus was born sometime in the spring. And that is why,

in spite of being a child living in a town *called* Christmas, in spite of being a Christian, I never had a Christmas tree. I never woke up early on December 25<sup>th</sup>. I never woke up to opening gifts, period. I was not allowed to sing Christmas carols in school or participate in the Christmas pageant. I was sent home on the day of the class Christmas party and gift exchange. I never even had an excuse to wear red and green simultaneously - and therefore, neither did I have a reason to avoid it.

Pro-tip: If you want your kid to understand exactly *why* they she is being denied seemingly innocuous traditions, traditions that every other single child she knows is *encouraged* to participate in, well - you're going to have to give her a better reason than "Well, Jesus was actually born in the spring."

As I got older, I began to find more and more wrong with what I was being taught as a Jehovah's Witness. The skepticism that was instilled upon me in order to see the fault in holidays quickly turned to focus elsewhere. I began to believe that God could be no more real than Santa, and Jesus could be no more of a story than, say, Rudolph. Satan might synonymous with Frosty the Snowman, or maybe more appropriately, the Grinch. At the tender age of ten, I was thoroughly disillusioned - there was no magic in my world, no mystery, and no faith. Just an overwhelming sense of loss.

By the time I entered high school, I had completely detached myself from the religion I'd been prescribed. I'd stopped attending church at age eleven, my rebellion

overlooked in the midst of a family war, and by the time I was fourteen, I openly told my mother that I was an atheist. By this time, my family had long moved away from the trailer park in Christmas, to the nearby town of Munising, the town of many churches. I found myself much happier than I'd ever been in the past.

My rejection of faith did not come without a cost, nor did it come with any instant gratification. I found myself ignored by members of my former church, including some of my relatives, first aunts and uncles. And, of course, just because I decided to let myself celebrate Christmas and the other holidays didn't mean that I had anyone to celebrate them with.

Even worse than my isolation, my rejection of faith wasn't a change that I could wear on my sleeve. Even now and then I come across former acquaintances and classmates whose eyes grow wide when they hear me swear, who are quite surprised to find that I don't attend church at all, and much more surprised that I haven't been to a "meeting" in more than ten years.

In spite of my continued and increased sense of isolation, now coming from both the Witness and non-Witness halves of my world, I began to make my peace with Christmas.

In high school, I was a member of the choir. Caroling around town with the choir as a fundraiser in ninth grade was my debut into the secular world. While many of my peers expressed their distaste and tire of traditional Christmas songs, songs they'd been

singing year after year since early childhood, I could hardly handle the excitement of *finally* learning the words and melodies to the songs that had been purposefully blocked out of my life. Others found it hard to believe that I had no idea what the words to “The First Noel” or even “We Wish You A Merry Christmas” were. And yet it was true. I needed a cue sheet.

Caroling was followed up by giving small gifts to my friends, usually handmade books and cards. Still living under my mother’s roof and off of her money, I felt a moral obligation not to spend money directly on the holiday, and so gift making was my compromise. The first year, I did not receive any gifts myself. Instead I confirmed what I had suspected all along - Christmas was not about the trees and Santa suits and presents. It was a time to show appreciation toward and bring joy to others. Giving gifts was a thrill. A high. I immediately loved.

My first “real” Christmas didn’t find me until college, when I was invited by my boyfriend to join his family in Maine for two weeks. It was a season of firsts - hanging my first ornament, eating my first Christmas dinner, waking up early for the first time on Christmas day, and attending my first Christmas mass. His family took me in as naturally as possible, including me in every facet of their traditions, including putting presents under the tree with my name written on them.

Opening Christmas presents for the first time was arguably one of the most awkward situations of my life. I’ve received many gifts throughout the years, but not

formally, and very few of them have been wrapped. As I held my first gift in my hands with a circle of eyes staring at me, hoping that I would like whatever was inside, I felt panicked. What was I supposed to do? Eagerly rip the paper, or carefully unwrap the box? What if it was something I already had, or something that didn't fit? What is the graceful way of showing appreciation and excitement without exuding an air of greed?

I opened the first gift carefully, being urged by the others to "just go for it!" I did the same for the second gift, and opened the third a bit faster. By the fifteenth gift, I had finally reached the point that everyone else had arrived at long ago - it's just wrapping paper - it's meant to be ripped! As I tore the paper, however, I had to force myself to stay calm. No one was thinking of my greedy ways. No one wanted to save the paper or thought that their wrapping job should be expressly admired. No one was judging me but myself, but that was enough to make this particular part of Christmas so much less enjoyable. I daresay that I would have had a much better time had gifts not been involved. However, I know that you must take the good with the bad. And of course I was happy that they had thought of me. I, of course, had also thought of them.

My first Christmas was magical. I was with a family, the rituals were mysterious to me, and there was a sense of good will that can only be described as idealistic – it was what I had dreamed of. I felt like a child.

Why people from all over the country are willing to visit a tiny town in the middle of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, one that has no particular attractions or nice places to stay - why people would travel so far to spend time in Christmas regularly baffled me as child. That is, until I experienced Christmas for myself.

I can understand how the luster of Christmas can be lost over time. The giving of gifts can seem obligatory, the carols can become just nagging melodies that never end. Anything can become dull and unappreciated if it's experienced often enough. My first Christmas, though, was special - I was old and inexperienced enough to realize that gifts are not obligatory, carols are not just annoying ditties. Celebrating Christmas could bring out the best in people, the best in myself, the best in relationships.

There is a magic in Christmas, simply by virtue of its name. Even if the town doesn't live up to the expectations of most visitors' imaginations, it still provides hope. The town must be called Christmas for a reason, even if the reason can no longer be identified.

I do not know the history of the naming of my hometown. But I do know what that tiny town in the middle of no man's land represents. It represents nostalgia, a longing for the feeling that can only be felt in childhood, a feeling that most people will spend the rest of their lives searching for, if just for one more fleeting moment. I was lucky enough to capture this feeling at the last possible moment. Perhaps someday I will live in Christmas again.

## Obligation

Dysfunction in the modern family is not tragic. Every family claims to be “weird,” every child thinks their parents’ quirks are unique and barely believable. There are dark family secrets in every house, skeletons in every closet, ranging in size from embryonic to gigantic. No family is perfect; no family is easily defined. There are and always will be relationships that are strained, that fail, that disappoint, that bind. “Family” is often a loaded gun - family means devotion, caring, love, connection, reliance. But even in its simplest form - biological connection - “family” cannot be perfect. We are family because we are related. Our family is imperfect because we, as people, are imperfect - and imperfection certainly isn’t tragic. It’s common.

The tragedy of family can be found in the facts that we are forced to wear on our sleeves, information like yellow Stars of David that we simply cannot hide. There are things about my parents that I wish I didn’t know, that I wish I could be oblivious to. And there are similar things about myself. I cannot deny them.

My father is mostly Indian - from India. His father is dark skinned, dark featured, dark haired. His mother, on the other hand, is blonde and tan only on account of her life spent in the Florida sun. My father has a broad nose, stocky but lean build, large brown eyes. False teeth. Developing glaucoma. He has a history and a mind that

wanders from continent to continent, wave to wave. Having grown up in Daytona and then in Key West, his heart is stuck on warm weather and sailing; as a teen he swore that he'd never move north of Tallahassee, and as an old man he still swears that he doesn't know how he came to live in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. "How in the *hell* did I end up here?"

It's obvious, at least to me, as to how he came to the North. He spent most of his life as a nomad, living on a sailboat, finding work when there was work and going from place to place, searching for contentment and happiness, but never quite finding it. By his late twenties, he needed a change. He needed to see if there really was something he was missing - and so he found his way to Michigan, and, of course, to my mother.

My mother is pale as candle wax. Her roots lie in Switzerland and Great Britain - she has a pointy, ski-slope nose and wide hips. She embodies a kind of quiet Midwest hospitality and care that can make even the most sordid fellow feel cared for and thought of. It would be different if this was a *talent* of hers, but as it happens, it is more of a fault. She is not a martyr or a pushover - she is simply too kind for her own good, and she knows it - but she'll never change. She was born and bred in Michigan and will never leave.

Opposites attract, and so it's not completely unbelievable that these two characters, so different in heritage and attitude and climate preferences, would end up together. One likes seafood, the other likes steak. One likes action movies, the other

British romances. One reads novels, the other doesn't. These are things that can be reconciled.

Unfortunately, my father and my mother were destined to be unhappy together, unhappy apart, and seem to be on a set course to be unhappy for the rest of their lives. The marriage was not to blame for their unhappiness. It was there before, in both of them. Life was to blame. What resulted from this rocky union is our now unstable family tree. A family that doesn't know what it means to love unconditionally - unless that love is for a pet. A family comprised of individuals who feel that they are perpetually missing "something," individuals who will spend the rest of their lives searching for it.

As the eldest child, I have had the honor of being the first to discover that something was missing. Had I had an older brother or sister, perhaps it would have been a comfort to seem them struggle as well. Maybe we could have been there for each other, maybe the loss would have been so great. However, this was not to be the case. Compounded by being a member of an isolated religion and by being an introvert from day one, I spent the first five years of my life talking to myself, putting on plays in front of my mirror, dancing on coffee tables in front of an invisible audience, and comforting myself with myself.

In those early years, my father worked for a construction company and was rarely home, and when he was, he was tired and full of splinters. My mother worked

during the day as well, at a saw mill, the job she had begun to loathe long before I was born. Their absences led me to be babysat by my grandmother Rita, my mother's mother on a daily basis. She was a wonderful companion, but I was young and preferred to let my imagination run wild - but *only* under the required conditions. Alone. In a room. Unheard, unseen. Unembarrassed to talk to myself and be carefree.

At so young an age, it would be hard to say what I was feeling and thinking as I engaged myself in long drawn out conversations. Many typical childhood elements were missing from my life. At the time, I didn't know that there was such a thing as a department store, much less one that carried colorful toys. I didn't even know that I could spend my time *playing* with toys. I didn't know why I wanted so desperately to be alone, though in retrospect it seems clear. I was lonely, and the only companion I could depend on was myself. My parents weren't there. I had no older siblings. My grandmother was simply too old. I resented all of them for not being "just right." This was the beginning of a cycle that I still cannot break.

It wasn't that my parents didn't love me. I think they were enchanted by their first and only daughter. They probably wished I had been more outgoing, more of a child than what most would describe "an old soul." I was embarrassed about taking everything so seriously, and yet, there was no other way I could approach the world. If

I was capable of sensing that something was wrong, then I certainly sensed it from the very beginning, and perhaps that is where all of this started.

From what I can tell, my parents were never in love. They didn't kiss one another good morning. They didn't long to spend time alone. They might as well have been stepsiblings thrown into the same household against their wills. My mother hated sex all of her life, a Catholic-like guilt attached to the act, though she was not and never had been Catholic. My father wanted sex - he wanted impulsivity, lightness, adventure. Perhaps he thought that everyone was just like him, maybe he thought that he could bring out these things in my mother and that, in time, everything would change and they'd both be happy. Of course, this wasn't the case. Their love was obligatory - my mother married the man, so of course she had to love him, and my father moved across the entire country to be with this woman he barely knew, so of course he had to love her too. And I was their daughter, their first child - so I *must* have been loved. It was obligatory.

But how can love thrive, especially thin love, when the conditions surrounding it are so hostile? My father moved from Key West to the Upper Peninsula for no other reason than to be with my mother. The winters were hard on him and he never grew to like the snow, an appreciation which is essential to surviving somewhat happily in the far North. He made no effort to come to terms with the precipitation - he had no need to. He knew he wasn't capable of it.

My mother didn't mind the climate, but it was a challenge for her nonetheless - waking up to fresh snow three feet deep that she was often left to shovel alone, facing biting winds daily, and in the summer, dealing with an almost intolerable humid heat that even my father, the sun lover, could not enjoy. If he saw Michigan as a fresh start, an option, a chance to find what he truly wanted, it must have only taken him an instant to realize that Michigan certainly wasn't what he wanted, if only because of the weather.

But, of course, it wasn't only because of the weather. If that were the source of all of our troubles, it would have been so easily resolved. Our one and only family vacation - to Florida, when I was seven - might have actually been enjoyable. But it wasn't.

Why didn't we just move? We did for a month when I was four years old - to Rochester, New York. But my father, the man with the moving plan, hated his job there, and my mother could not stand living in such a busy place, a place with traffic lights and light pollution. We moved back to Michigan in what seemed like an instant later, and though there was talk of leaving again, it was only a pipe dream on my father's part. Moving solved nothing. Unlike the weather, some problems cannot be run away from.

There was the issue of money, or the lack thereof. The issue of religion. Depression. Wanderlust. The thought of the grass always being greener on the other side. There were plenty of problems that couldn't be solved.

The lives my parents now lead are not the ones they dreamed of – I suspect that even their nightmares couldn't have produced such results. My father is a janitor for the local high school and has found himself in a tumultuous second marriage. He still lives in Munising, the place he hates so openly. I can only say that I do not know what is keeping him there.

My mother, on the other hand, is impossibly lonely, constantly bombarded with the demands of two teenage boys, one mentally retarded, the other already depressed. My parents seemed to have tried so hard to find something to love, but both have come up short. I want to go to them, show them how much I care, how much they mean to me, to show them that at least I love them – but I can't. I don't know how. They never taught me how. The well is already dry.

All of this has brought me to the conclusion that one shouldn't look for love. If love is the one thing in life that I want, I must put it in the back of my mind. I mustn't read into people and relationships and "signs" - these will only disappoint. I cannot move across the country on a whim.

My father and mother were both desperate when they found one another, and took the plunge. I sometimes wonder when they realized that they didn't actually love each other, that their relationship alone could not create a "family," that it simply wasn't going to work. Perhaps it happened in the first instant that they met, or perhaps

only after the wedding vows had been uttered. In either case, it took them twelve years to admit to themselves - themselves, not even one another - that it simply wasn't going to work. It wasn't what they wanted. Love couldn't be created in such harsh conditions. Love was nowhere to be found.

And so, just like love, a *family* can't be created when all of the members of it are desperately seeking a loving family. Just as two wrongs don't make a right, two people who don't know what love is cannot join forces to create it.

Love just happens. *Families* happen.

I feel that, if nothing else – and there is nothing else - there are lessons that I can take from my parent's mistakes. I should know better than to try to force love into my life, my brain, my heart. It will happen one day when I am not thinking about it, or so I suspect. I can't obsess over my loneliness and expect it to disappear.

But I do. I can't help it.

It's a catch-22. I'm watching the pot, and it hasn't yet begun to boil. I'm not sure if the stovetop is even on, but I can't pull my eyes away.

I want nothing more out of life than to have love, to have a family, to have the very things my parents failed to find and provide in my youth. These things are always on my mind. I don't know if my preconceptions even come close to reality, whether or not these things – love, family – exist at all, but my course has already been set. I must try to find them. My parents created me. This is who I am, and this is what I want.

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EXT. PITTSBURGH SUBURB - MORNING

A crisp winter morning. A bus stop stands on the side of the street - a three sided glass structure adorned with smudges, bus schedules, apartment listings.

In the center, a large yellow NOTICE with block letters reads: "ALL BUSES WILL BE OUT OF SERVICE ON SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18th DUE TO..."

Before we can read the rest of the notice a bright POSTER is pasted over the notice. The poster features a dashing man in a pale suit with a comic grin.

A bleary WORKMAN smooths the poster into place. He coughs and think steam swirls out of his mouth. He gathers his things and walks away.

We hear the workman's car throttle up the snow-covered street as the poster comes into focus. It reads: "It's your city and Rory Markov is your host on Pittsburgh's #1 Variety Show. RORY'S VARIETY HOUR!, Saturdays at 7."

We move up the street to find rows of IDENTICAL HOUSES. Cars in trucks in various states of disrepair line both sides of cracked, salted pavement.

One HOUSE catches our attention - A house unlike the others with a small greenhouse in the front yard.

#### DOOR OF HOUSE

BORIS ROMENSKY, 40, weathered and gruff with a thick build, steps out of the front door. He wears a white shirt and black slacks and a heavy black winter jacket, unzipped. Around his waist is a thick BELT with a red leather pouch attached.

In his left arm he cradles an oddly shaped gray PLANT SUIT. He zips his heavy parka up with his other arm. He surveys the yard, appearing very serious.

A gust of wind blows across the yard and his distinguished gray hair swirls wildly. He shields the plant suit from the wind until it subsides. He sternly descends the steps to the sidewalk and heads toward the bus stop.

His determination is that of a man who fights chronic constipation.

#### BUS STOP

OTTO, 55, lean and eccentric, wearing a colorful jacket and beanie, examines the poster for RORY'S VARIETY HOUR. His hands are clasped behind his back. He confidently nods at the poster and paces the bus stop with a spring in his step. He peers around the wall of the shelter and sees Boris approaching, plant suit in arm.

Boris appears to be murmuring things to the plant, oblivious to the passing traffic. Otto's face lights up as Boris approaches the shelter.

OTTO

(ligh  
t  
Euro  
pean  
acce  
nt)

Boris, my  
friend! Good  
morning! Have  
a seat!

He holds out his hand and gestures to the bench in the shelter. Boris nods to Otto briefly and continues whispering to the plant in RUSSIAN. Boris dismisses Otto's handshake.

EXT. BUS STOP - MOMENTS LATER

The bus approaches the men and grinds to a halt in front of them. Boris boards first nodding at the driver and flashing his commuter pass.

Otto follows and feeds a ten dollar bill into the machine, disregarding the change.

As the bus begins to pull away, two women come running after it. JANET, 45, with her arms out stretched for balance, rushes along side the bus slapping the windows. Her daughter BREE, 14, walks quickly behind her mother as the bus SLOWS. Bree covers her face with her hand, mortified.

The bus stops and the two women board in a hurry. JANET awkwardly pours change into the machine.

INT. BUS - CONTINUOUS

Janet moves awkwardly up the aisle past Boris and Otto. Otto smiles at Janet, but she gives no response. Bree follows.

OTTO

Now look  
there. Looks  
lonely,  
probably just  
divorced. Find  
her something,  
eh? Maybe  
she's nice  
too.

(beat  
)

Maybe you talk  
to her, eh?

Boris twists his mouth at Otto.

OTTO

Maybe you talk  
to me at  
least, eh?

BORIS

She seems more  
your type. And  
that is not  
what I do.

OTTO

(coy)  
But it's the  
only thing to  
do.

Otto goes back to admiring Janet as the  
bus joins a highway headed downtown.

We see a series of quick cuts as the  
bus maneuvers through various streets  
of Pittsburgh.

Back in the bus, Bree stares out the  
window. Janet takes her nose out of her  
magazine and looks at her daughter.

JANET

What is it  
now?

BREE

Nothing.

JANET

What do you  
mean nothing?

(beat  
)

I took you out  
of school for  
the day and  
you're having  
a nothing?  
Well that's  
your problem  
because I'm  
having the  
time of my  
life.

Bree turns and glares at Janet,  
unamused. Janet smiles back  
insincerely.

EXT. DOWNTOWN BUS STOP - CONTINUOUS

The bus careens into the downtown  
pittsburgh and navigates a few lights  
before coming to a stop in front of a  
tall Hotel.

Bus riders come pouring off, among them  
Janet rushes and drags Bree along  
behind her. Janet avoids touching  
people like they have the plague.

When they hit the street Janet shivers.

JANET

Why must we  
take that  
dreadful bus.  
Hideous word -  
BUS.

Janet hands Bree her large HANDBAG and  
Bree falters under the weight of the  
bag.

Janet proceeds to pull a large map out of her jacket pocket. As Janet examines the map, Bree looks around, embarrassed, seeing if anyone notices.

BREE

This is  
ridiculous.  
It's freezing.  
(beat  
)  
Don't you know  
where we're  
going?

Otto and Boris come off the bus. Otto sees Janet having difficulties with the map and takes his first chance.

OTTO

(to  
Bori  
s)  
I'll see you  
later.

Boris nods and walks off with his plant suit. Otto approaches Janet and Bree, smiling. Bree sees him and wears a puzzled look. Otto bows forward, pandering.

OTTO

Can I help you  
find  
something,  
madam?

Janet is caught off guard and reacts loudly, startled.

OTTO

Don't get  
excited, I  
only see you  
appear to be  
lost.

Otto points to the map. Janet looks at it and then back at Otto. She laughs.

JANET

Yes, sorry.

(beat

)

We're looking  
for the  
Goldman  
Building,  
where WQED has  
its studios.

Otto smiles and gestures as he speaks.

OTTO

Simple - Two  
blocks down  
Fifth and then  
a left at  
Union. You'll  
see a big  
picture of  
rory Markov  
out front.

(beat

)

Are you trying  
out for the  
show?

JANET

Yes, well, she  
is.

Janet motions to Bree.

OTTO

Break a leg,  
yes?

Bree does not respond.

OTTO

Best of luck?

Nothing.

JANET

(anxious)

Thanks all the same.

(beat)

Come along, Bree.

Janet takes Bree by the arm and they move off. Otto looks satisfied.

EXT. BORIS' FLOWER SHOP - MORNING

Situated between a Western Union and a Gyro shop, Boris' shop is modest with a large YELLOW sign above the door that reads: "BORIS THE BOTANIST" in both English and Russian.

Balancing the plant suit in one arm, Boris jangles his keys loose and opens the door. He flicks the light from the doorway and enters.

INT. BORIS' FLOWER SHOP - CONTINUOUS

The fluorescent lights flicker as the door shuts. We hear a distinctive DING-DING of the bell attached to the door.

Boris unzips his jacket and tosses it behind the counter. He walks to a pedestal near the register and places the plant suit on top of it. He carefully unzips it and reveals the luminous flowering PLANT X.

Boris removes the suit and stands back smiling at his plant. He focuses a sun lamp on it and the plant becomes even brighter. Boris adjusts a few branches so the whole plant is getting the warm light.

Satisfied with PLANT X, Boris busies himself opening up the shop. He turns on the lights to the other display cases, puts on gypsy folk music, feeds and waters a few plants. He checks the health of the 'problem plants' and documents things on a clip board. Finally, he checks his watch - 9:00AM on the dot.

EXT. BORIS' FLOWER SHOP - CONTINUOUS

We see Boris through the window. He reaches for a light switch on the wall. He flips it and the YELLOW sign over the door lights up - open for business.

INT. BORIS' FLOWER SHOP - MORNING

Boris stands behind the counter musing over gardening books.

We see a montage of customers rushing in, demanding plants for selfish reasons, quickly paying, and leaving:

BEGIN MONTAGE:

DING-DING

A frantic young man in a business suit rushes up: "It's my anniversary!"

DING-DING

A pudgy young girl weeping: "My gerbils ate each other!"

DING-DING

A teenage boy, nervously: "I'm having dinner with my girlfriend's parents!"

DING-DING

A stuffy middle-aged woman: "My daughter's fiance is coming for dinner!"

DING-DING

An old man with a moustache bellowing:  
"GREAT AUNT ESTHER!" and burying his  
head in his hands.

Boris stares bored and unresponsive  
from behind his counter.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. WQED STUDIOS - MORNING

Janet and Bree arrive at the studios.  
Out front is a large billboard hanging  
over the entrance of the sleek  
skyscraper. On it is the charming Rory  
Markov, another ad for his hit show.  
Janet stops to behold him.

JANET

(brea  
thy)  
Isn't he  
adorable?

BREE

He's an idiot.

Janet snaps an angry glance at Bree.

JANET

Bree!

BREE

He'll  
humiliate me!

Janet ignores this. Instead she reaches  
into her purse and produces a CD in a  
jewel case. She puts it into Bree's  
hands.

Holding the CD, Bree looks nervous.  
Janet strokes her face.

JANET

Oh, honey. You  
can only

humiliate  
yourself.

Bree frowns. The two women head into  
the building.

INT. RORY'S VARIETY HOUR OFFICE -  
MOMENTS LATER

The office is sleek, but spare. Only a  
reception desk, a couple waiting  
chairs, and numerous TV's all showing  
Rory Markov clips in a loop fill the  
space.

Janet walks proudly through the glass  
doors and right up to the receptionist.  
Bree stays close.

JANET

(beam  
ing)

Look no  
further - here  
she is.

The RECEPTIONIST, wearing severe  
lipstick and a tight, face stretching  
bun in her hair, looks at Janet over  
her half glasses.

Janet stands there presenting Bree.  
Bree sways bashfully, looking for an  
exit. She manages a half smile and the  
receptionist looks back to Janet.

RECEPTIONIST

We're not  
doing  
auditions for  
this week's  
show. Sorry.

Janet's mouth turns upside down. Bree  
looks relieved.

JANET

Maybe you  
could just  
tape her now  
and if you  
like her  
better than  
one of the  
others, just  
slide her in,  
eh?

RECEPTIONIST

Nothing I can  
do. Rory's  
shooting live  
tomorrow at  
some diner  
down the  
street.

Janet makes a start, but the phone  
rings and the receptionist answers it  
waving Janet away.

Janet turns away, beaten. She sulks out  
of the office while Bree trails with a  
half-smile. Bree hands Janet the CD who  
replaces it in her purse. They say  
nothing and leave.

EXT. WQED STUDIOS - MOMENTS LATER

Janet is crestfallen, nearly weeping.  
Bree smiles.

JANET

Of course  
you're happy.

Bree rolls her eyes at her mother's  
dramatics.

BREE

It's not the  
end of the  
world.

(beat  
)

I'm hungry.  
Let's get some  
breakfast.

The two walk down the street.

INT. BORIS' FLOWER SHOP - MORNING

Boris is mixing plant food in a spray bottle. His shop is now empty. There is a half eaten apple and a cup of coffee on the counter.

DING-DING

Boris turns around, ready to deal with another selfish, lousy customer.

NATASHA DOVLATOVA, 33, is at the door. She is attractive and slim. She removes her heavy winter coat revealing a waitress uniform. She wears big heavy rubber boots on her feet. She smiles to Boris.

NATASHA

Good morning,  
Boris.

Boris' grimace melts and looks like a child, happy.

BORIS

Natasha, good  
morning!

He quickly moves from behind the counter, forgetting the water that is filling up his spray bottle. He bumps his hip on the edge of the counter, but keeps moving to NATASHA and politely takes her coat, hanging it on a hook.

NATASHA

Your - thing.

She points back at the sink where the full bottle is spraying water all over the place. Boris' eyes go wide and he

rushes back to turn off the water.  
Natasha stifles a laugh, then takes a  
beat.

NATASHA

How is she?

Boris finishes mixing the plant food,  
screws the bottle together and walks to  
Plant X. Natasha approaches the  
counter, enamored with Plant X.

BORIS

Moody. She is  
usually so  
much brighter  
this time of  
year.

NATASHA

I don't think  
I've ever seen  
a more  
beautiful  
flower.

BORIS

That would not  
be possible.

Boris proceeds to spray the plant down.  
He then produces a thermometer and  
places it in the soil.

NATASHA

I remember my  
mother used to  
keep one in  
our home in  
Russia.

Suddenly, Natasha's mood drops.

NATASHA

(wist  
ful)  
It was much  
smaller  
though, but it

was always so  
bright and  
happy.

Natasha moves around the counter to  
come closer to Plant X. Boris notices  
her moving closer and becomes nervous.

Natasha reaches to touch the plant, but  
stops.

NATASHA

May I?

Boris nods and Natasha grasps the  
plant's soft felt leaves.

BORIS

You miss home  
very much,  
yes?

Natasha sighs, letting go of Plant X.  
She steps back. She nods and takes a  
beat.

NATASHA

It seems so  
long since  
I've seen my  
family. Years.

Boris replaces Plant X on its pedestal  
and washes his hands in the sink.  
Natasha bends down to see the small  
potted plants in the glass display case  
underneath the counter.

BORIS

It has been  
almost fifteen  
years since I  
left Russia.  
It has gone by  
so quickly I  
can barely  
remember my  
life there.

Boris turns the water off and stares off into space.

BORIS

(to  
hims  
elf)

I can barely  
remember.

Boris snaps out of it and turns around, surprised when he does not see Natasha.

BORIS

Natasha?

NATASHA (O.S.)

Down here.

Boris looks down through the glass counter to see Natasha smiling back. He squats down and peers through the glass. The potted plants inside are just babies, recently grafted or clipped from larger specimens.

BORIS

Would you like  
one of these?

Boris points to three little pots that resemble Plant X.

BORIS

I just cut  
them last  
week.

Natasha bites her lip and then shakes her head.

NATASHA

I can't. I've  
got to save  
money, you  
know?

BORIS

Well of course  
it would be a  
gift.

NATASHA

Boris, I  
couldn't.

BORIS

Please it is  
nothing.

They both stand up. Natasha notices the  
clock on the wall and her eyes go wide.

NATASHA

Damn, I'm  
late.

Natasha rushes to the door and in her  
haste to grab her coat knocks down a  
display. Boris rushes to help her.

NATASHA

I'm so sorry.

BORIS

It is okay, do  
not worry.

As they pick up the display they share  
a beat. Boris breaks the silence.

BORIS

What is wrong?

Natasha stops picking things up. She  
takes another beat.

NATASHA

Nothing.  
(beat  
)  
I'll see you  
at lunch, yes?

Boris nods, solemnly. Natasha exits.  
Boris is left standing at the door  
alone.

EXT. BORIS' FLOWER SHOP - NOON

Boris closes and locks the door. The lighted sign is off and a placard on the door reads: "Out for Lunch. Back at 1."

Boris zips up his coat picks Plant X in its plant suit up off the ground. He carries it to the corner where he carefully checks the traffic. He crosses toward "Timothy's Blues," a diner across the street.

INT. TIMOTHY'S BLUES DINER - CONTINUOUS

The diner is busy with the regular lunch crowd. Waitresses rush about, we can see a busy grease kitchen with fry cooks calling orders out.

Natasha is clearing a table as Boris comes in. She smiles at him and he smiles back. He removes his coat and looks around the diner. He spies Otto sitting at a booth, waving.

Boris approaches Otto and gingerly sets Plant X down on the long booth table. He hangs his coat on a hook and takes a seat.

OTTO

How's  
business?

Boris removes Plant X from its suit and places the thermometer in the soil again.

BORIS

Same.

Otto nods.

OTTO

Natasha looks  
lovely today,

don't you  
think?

Boris does not respond, but Otto eggs  
him on.

OTTO

If you gave  
her a tenth of  
the attention  
you give that  
plant.

Boris shakes his head.

BORIS

She is too  
young for me.

Otto laughs at Boris' reticence.

Natasha walks by their table, bussing a  
serving tray.

NATASHA

(to  
Bori  
s)  
I'll be with  
you in a  
moment.

She smiles and walks away. Otto raises  
his eyebrow to Boris as if to say: "I  
told you so." Boris shakes his head,  
blushing slightly.

Otto checks his watch.

OTTO

Just about  
time for our  
local  
superstar.

Otto is right. At that moment, RORY  
MARKOV, 28, and his entourage enter the  
diner.

Rory, tall and well groomed, is wearing a loud leather jacket. He laughs with his pals.

Most of the diners pay no attention to him. The regulars are used to him. The non-regulars, however, stare and whisper - shocked to see the celebrity.

From the kitchen, TIMOTHY, the owner of the dinner, sees Rory and sticks arm out, greeting Rory.

RORY

Timothy, my  
friend. A  
pleasure as  
always.

TIMOTHY

Ready for  
tomorrow, Mr.  
Markov?

RORY

Of course. The  
crew will show  
up around  
nine.

Rory walks into the dining area and his entourage follows behind him. As he heads for a table he shakes hands and slaps backs with a few people. The regulars (including Boris and Otto) dismiss his insincerity while others are left dumbstruck.

Rory grabs a BUSBOY and slips him a bill.

RORY

(quietly)  
Send out the  
cute one.

The Busboy nods and walks into the kitchen. Rory and his crew settle into

a large booth two down from Boris and Otto.

One of Rory's gang is his PUBLICIST. He seems anxious and speaks with a serious tone.

PUBLICIST

Rory, listen  
to me. If  
tomorrow night  
doesn't go  
well it will  
ruin you.

Rory waves him off.

RORY

Please, these  
people love  
me.

He waves to no one in particular.

PUBLICIST

Her husband in  
threatening to  
release the  
photographs.  
The rumors are  
bad enough,  
but the last  
thing the  
public needs  
to see is  
their favorite  
son's holiday  
frolic. You've  
got an image  
to uphold -

The Publicist trails off as Natasha quickly approaches their table. Rory holds up a hand to his Publicist.

RORY

I know how to  
uphold my  
image!

Natasha passes by Boris and Otto's table. As she passes she mouths "sorry" to Boris. Boris looks confused.

Natasha stops in front of Rory's table and pulls out her order slip and pen.

NATASHA

Good  
afternoon, Mr.  
Markov.

RORY

It most  
certainly is.  
What's your  
name?

NATASHA

(dism  
issi  
ve)  
Natasha. Can I  
bring you some  
coffee?

RORY

What an  
accent!  
Russian?

Natasha nods, her pen ready to take the order. The Publicist puts his hand up to his forehead. Rory smiles.

Rory speaks an UNINTELLIGIBLE MIX OF RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH.

Natasha stares at him, not understanding. Rory's confidence wavers and he laughs uncomfortably.

NATASHA

Our special  
today is a  
salmon burger  
and our soup  
is Minestrone.

BORIS AND OTTO'S TABLE

Boris and Otto are both obviously eavesdropping on Rory's table. CHERYL, Natasha's coworker approaches.

CHERYL

Don't look so  
glum, Boris.  
She just needs  
the money,  
nothing  
personal.

(beat  
)

Now what'll  
you boys have?

Otto is about to order, but Boris, preoccupied, butts in.

BORIS

Why does she  
need money?

CHERYL

She didn't  
tell you? Her  
mother's sick.  
She needs to  
home.

OTTO

I'll have the  
salmon burger  
and a cup of  
tea.

Cheryl writes this down and looks to Boris.

BORIS

Natasha is  
leaving.

CHERYL

Yup. You  
missed your  
chance.

(beat  
)  
The usual  
then?

Boris doesn't react to this. Cheryl  
takes their menus and leaves the table.

Boris looks at Otto.

BORIS  
What does she  
mean "missed  
my chance?"

OTTO  
Everybody can  
see it, man.  
Too bad. Maybe  
she'll come  
back after her  
mother dies.

Otto shrugs and starts munching on a  
pickle

OTTO  
(mouth  
full  
of  
food  
)  
I've gotta hit  
the head.

Otto gets up and walks off to the  
bathroom.

RORY'S TABLE

The Publicist is going off again.

PUBLICIST  
What about  
settling down?  
A romance.  
(beat  
)

A serious one.

Rory scoffs and stuffs his face with some fries.

Natasha walks to their table to refill coffees. Rory watches her approach.

RORY

How about  
making some  
poor girls  
dream come  
true? A  
Cinderella  
story. Rags to  
riches.

He snaps his fingers.

RORY

Like that!

PUBLICIST

Exactly. And  
make it  
public.  
Wholesome, but  
public.

The go quiet as Natasha arrives. She pours coffee. Rory smiles at her.

RORY

Thank you, my  
dear.

Natasha smiles back faintly and leaves.

RORY

What about  
her?

PUBLICIST

The waitress?

RORY

She's perfect.

PUBLICIST

Please, Rory.  
Somebody  
you've known  
for more than  
ten minutes.

RORY

What  
difference  
does it make?  
(beat  
)  
We're already  
shooting here  
tomorrow.  
We'll get  
Natasha into a  
few shots,  
give her some  
exposure. When  
their acts are  
doing their  
thing - I'll  
strike it up  
with her.  
(to  
ento  
urag  
e)  
What do you  
say?

His entourage nods yes-man style. Rory gets up, catches eyes with Timothy and walks over to him.

As he is walking he BUMPS into OTTO, who is returning from the bathroom.

Otto quickly brushes his shoulder off. They both give each other sour looks.

BORIS AND OTTO'S TABLE

Otto returns and sits, glancing over his shoulder back at rory. Otto sits.

Boris ignores Otto's return. He check on Plant X, teasing the leaves with his hand.

Cheryl returns with their food and places it in front of them.

OTTO

(re:  
Rory  
)

What's the  
superstar so  
excited about?

Before Cheryl can answer, Rory jumps up on a nearby table and addresses the crowd.

RORY

Good  
afternoon,  
fair Yinzers!

The docile diners are startled by the spectacle and all eyes are on Rory.

RORY

As you know,  
tomorrow show  
will be  
broadcast live  
from our very  
own "Timothy's  
Blues"

The diners keep chewing their food, listening to the TV star. Boris is irritated by Rory's theatrics.

RORY

But - As an  
added bonus.  
(beat  
)  
Our very own  
Miss Natasha  
will be *my*

guest of  
honor.

Natasha is shocked and confused. The crowd cheers for her now and she looks completely embarrassed.

Boris has gone furious.

Rory finishes his scene and steps down to take his seat again.

RORY

(to  
Publ  
icis  
t)

How's that for  
pleasing the  
public?

His table of yes-men nod and murmur in approval.

Boris is unable to eat his food. He pushes the plate forward in disgust. He looks to Plant X. Even the plant's brilliance seems dimmer.

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EXT. BORIS' FLOWER SHOP - EVENING

Boris closes up shop, turning out the light and locking the door. He brings the plant suit close to his body and walks off to the bus stop.

EXT. DOWNTOWN BUS STOP - EVENING

Boris is waiting briefly for the bus. His eyes show that he is busy in

thought. The bus arrives and he boards.

INT. PAT BUS - EVENING

We see a series of quick cuts as Boris stares out the window on the way home.

EXT. BORIS' BUS STOP - EVENING

Boris gets off the bus. It pulls away with a cloud of exhaust in the cold air. Boris walks slowly home. Up his stairs and inside.

INT. BORIS' HOUSE - EVENING

The front door creaks open. Boris walks in, flicking the lights on. Several lamps turn on and the room glows. It is sparsely furnished - there is a shabby couch in front of a TV. A closed off fireplace with no mantle decorations occupies one wall.

Boris, Plant X still in hand, trudges into the kitchen. The floorboards creak. Boris hums a Russian to himself. He places Plant X on the table and fills a bucket with water at the sink. He takes Plant X and the bucket and heads outside to the greenhouse.

INT. GREENHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The walls of the green house are lined with plants. A single bulb in the ceiling illuminates the room. A table stands in the middle.

Boris, still humming, carefully sets the plant down on the table and carefully removes the suit. He adds some water to the soil. He picks up a small pair of shears from the table and begins pruning with utter delicacy.

His face gets darker and darker as he prunes. His motions slow down. So does his humming. He grinds to a silent halt. Suddenly he breaks the silence.

BORIS

She is going  
away!

(to  
Plant  
t X)

Did you hear  
that? Natasha  
is leaving us.

He sets down his shears carelessly,  
directly addressing Plant X.

BORIS

How could she  
do this? We  
need her! How  
would you feel  
if she did not  
visit you  
every day? How  
would you feel  
if she did not  
pat your  
leaves or - or  
see if you  
were dry? You  
need her!

He gestures widely to Plant X.

BORIS

What was that?

He leans in closer to Plant X,  
listening.

BORIS

Yes, yes I  
know you will  
miss her  
greatly.

(list  
ens)

Of course I  
will too!  
    (list  
      ens)  
Yes, I know.  
    (list  
      ens)  
WHAT?

He leaps back from Plant X in surprise.  
He takes a beat.

                  BORIS  
That is a  
wonderful  
idea. You are  
brilliant! You  
will go with  
her, keep her  
company! Then  
you will both  
be happy.

He leans in to Plant X again.

                  BORIS  
    (quietly)  
Oh, shush,  
don't worry  
about me, I  
have all of  
your brothers  
and sisters to  
keep my  
company.

He stands up straight and speaks to  
himself.

                  BORIS  
I will be  
fine.  
    (beat  
      )  
But you! You  
must get ready  
for your  
journey. I

will bring you  
to her  
tomorrow, yes,  
and then  
perhaps -  
perhaps  
everything  
will be better  
then.

He picks Plant X up like a child and  
walks back into the house.

INT. BORIS' HOUSE. LIVING ROOM - LATER

Boris sits on the couch in front of the  
glowing television. Plant X sits beside  
him. Boris slowly flips through the  
channels, half watching.

BORIS

(to  
Plant  
X)  
Not much on  
tonight.

He flips the channel again and Rory  
Markov fills the screen. Boris  
shudders, glaring at the television  
with malice.

BORIS

What a  
terrible,  
terrible man.

He shakes his head angrily and flips  
the channel. It is the Home and Garden  
Network's special on botany for the  
home.

BORIS

That's better.

He yawns and leans back, relaxing.;

INT. BORIS' HOUSE. LIVING ROOM - LATER

The television plays static, filling the room is light.

Boris is passed out on the couch, remote still in hand. Plant X remains faithfully beside him.

EXT. BORIS' HOUSE - MORNING

The front door opens and Boris steps out. He is slightly gussied up - his hair is neat, his pants are pressed, and shoes are shiny. He holds the plant suit in his arms. There is a large red bow around it.

He takes a deep breath then strides towards the bus stop.

EXT. BUS STOP - MORNING

Otto stands at the bus stop, watching his breath float in the cold morning air. He catches a glimpse of Boris approaching and smiles.

OTTO

Boris, what's  
the occasion!

Boris shoots Otto a "back off" sort of look. Otto continues to grin.

OTTO

Even the  
plant's  
dressed up!  
Must be  
something big.

Boris snatches the bow off of Plant X and stuffs it in his pocket.

BORIS

Never mind.

Otto shrugs, turning to sit down on the bench. He sees Janet and Bree

approaching from the other direction.  
Otto perks up and turns back to Boris.

OTTO

What luck, eh?  
Two days in a  
row. You  
really should  
talk to her,  
she's a fine  
looking lady.

BORIS

(scof  
fing  
)

Perhaps you  
should talk to  
her, hm?

Otto's eye's widen. He nods.

OTTO

Man, you're  
right!

Janet and Bree arrive. They are  
arguing.

JANET

That is no way  
to talk to me!

Bree sits down huffily on the bench.  
She folds her arms defiantly and looks  
away. Janet shakes her head,  
frustrated. She makes eye contact with  
Otto and shrugs.

JANET

Kids. What can  
you do?

Otto smiles winningly.

OTTO

Throw them in  
a sack and

drag them  
around!

Janet gives Otto a slightly frightened  
look.

JANET

Right...

Otto steps over to Janet, extending his  
hand.

OTTO

I was just  
kidding! My  
name is Otto.

Janet carefully takes his hand, smiling  
warily.

JANET

Janet. And  
that -

She motions to Bree over her shoulder.

JANET

(cont  
inui  
ng)  
Is my  
daughter.

BREE

(obno  
xiou  
sly)  
I have a name,  
mom.

Janet gives Otto a pained look.

JANET

Her name is  
Bree.

Otto still holds Janet's hand. He  
shakes it emphatically

OTTO

Nice to meet  
you both!

Janet peers over Otto's shoulder at  
Boris, who avoids looking at her. He  
holds Plant X tightly.

JANET

And who is  
that?

Otto smiles.

OTTO

That is my  
dear friend  
Boris.  
(to  
Bori  
s)  
Boris, come  
here and say  
hello.

Boris regards Janet briefly.

BORIS

Hello.

He turns back to watching for the bus,  
peering down the road.

JANET

Friendly.

Otto smiles broadly. Janet nervously  
pulls her hand away from his and checks  
her watch.

JANET

The bus  
certainly is  
late today -  
Bree, honey.  
What time did  
the schedule  
say?

Bree glowers darkly on her bench. She shrugs.

BORIS

(piping  
up)

8:32. It is  
scheduled for  
8:32.

He nervously taps his foot.

JANET

It's already  
8:45.

OTTO

Well, that is  
strange.

They fall into silence. They all look down the road.

EXT. BUS STOP - MOMENTS LATER

Boris remains in the same position. Otto leans against the signpost. Janet sits beside Bree, who is now reading THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO.

EXT. BUS STOP - MOMENTS LATER

Boris still remains in the same position. Bree has dozed off on Janet's shoulder. Otto is crunched onto the bench beside Janet, who is dozing off on his shoulder.

EXT. BUS STOP - MOMENTS LATER

Boris paces in front of the stop. A large vehicle appears in the distance. They all stand.

BORIS

Finally!

JANET

You can say  
that again.

The vehicle approaches and speeds by.  
It was a large truck.

Boris begins pacing again, swearing  
under his breath in Russian. The others  
watch him.

OTTO

Boris, perhaps  
you should  
sit.

BORIS

I will not  
sit! The bus  
must come!  
Now!

BREE

(under  
her  
breath)  
Psycho.

OTTO

I really think  
you should  
sit.

Boris stomps over to the stop. He sees  
the poster of Rory Markov and sneers.  
He storms off down the side walk.

Janet looks distraught. She turns to  
Otto.

JANET

(re:  
Boris)  
Now what?

Otto scratches his head. Otto jogs to catch up with Boris.

OTTO

Boris! Boris,  
stop!

Janet grabs Bree's arm and pulls her along after Otto and Boris. Otto catches up with Boris and grabs his arm, pulling him to a stop.

OTTO

What are you  
doing?

BORIS

(calm  
ly)  
I am walking  
to work.

Janet and Bree catch up to the men, breathless. Boris turns and continues marching away.

JANET

Wait up!

Janet pulls Bree along after Boris. Otto quickly picks up behind Janet. They silently walk.

EXT. STREET - MOMENTS LATER

The group walks in single file - Boris, Janet, and Otto, with Bree trudging along behind them all. Janet looks back and motions for Bree to hurry up.

EXT. STREET - MOMENTS LATER

The group walks down a steep hill. Boris walks confidently. Bree, Janet, and Otto hold hands to support each other.

EXT. STREET - MOMENTS LATER

The walk down a street in a group,  
silent. Boris suddenly stops and turns  
around to face them all.

BORIS

Why are you  
all following  
me?

They all look intimidated. Finally  
Janet steps up.

JANET

Well, where  
exactly are we  
going?

BORIS

I am going to  
work. I do not  
know what the  
rest of you  
are doing.

JANET

We're going to  
meet Rory  
Markov!

Boris is enraged.

BORIS

Rory! That  
fool? Why?

Bree rolls her eyes and pipes up.

BREE

(sarc  
asti  
call  
y)

My mom is  
delusional.  
She thinks I'm  
going to be a  
star.

BORIS

A star?

Janet beams.

JANET

Bree here is a  
wonderful  
singer!  
Probably the  
best singer in  
the whole  
city. And we  
want everyone  
to know it!

BREE

You mean YOU  
want everyone  
to know it.  
And I am not  
the best  
singer, mom, I  
suck.

JANET

Oh shush, you  
know you don't  
suck.

(to  
the  
men)

She knows  
she's  
talented,  
she's just  
modest.

Bree rolls her eyes and sits down on  
the curb.

BORIS

Yes, yes,  
fine. But why  
are you  
following ME?

JANET

Well, you seem  
to know your  
way.

OTTO  
You do, Boris.

Boris shoots Otto an annoyed look.

BORIS  
I do not know  
where I am  
going. I am  
just following  
the bus route.

He points to a bus stop sign.

BORIS  
(cont  
inui  
ng)  
See?

Janet and Otto look up at the sign.  
Bree sighs loudly.

BREE  
See, mom. He  
doesn't know  
where he's  
going.

JANET  
Well, it makes  
sense.

BORIS  
I am not  
responsible or  
you people. I  
do not want  
you to follow  
me.

OTTO  
Oh, come on  
Boris. You  
shouldn't be

out here  
alone.

As the group is in deep conversation, a MUGGER sneaks up behind Janet. He makes faces at the absurdity of their conversation. Slyly, he puts his hand around the strap of her purse and runs.

Janet swivels around as the mugger runs off, purse in hand.

JANET

HEY!

The mugger looks back over his shoulder as he runs.

OTTO

HEY!

Otto takes off after him. They are both surprisingly fast.

OTTO

(betw  
een  
brea  
ths)  
Stop! Stop  
now!

MUGGER

No way, old  
man!

Otto gets another burst of speed, gaining on the Mugger.

OTTO

I warn you! I  
used to catch  
chickens! In  
Moscow!

MUGGER

Oh yeah? Catch  
this?

OTTO

Catch what?

With that, the Mugger pulls away at a stunning speed and disappears around a corner. Otto tries to run after him, but trips on the curb and careens to the sidewalk. He sits there, rocking back and forth, holding his ankle.

Janet runs up to Otto followed closely by Bree and Boris.

JANET

Are you okay?

OTTO

(out  
of  
brea  
th)

Yes - fine.

BREE

God, you  
didn't even  
get the purse  
back.

JANET

Shh!

Janet tries to help Otto stand. He stumbles and nearly falls again, but Boris helps and lifts him up.

BORIS

You can run  
very fast!

OTTO

(weak  
ly  
grin  
ning  
)

Thanks.

JANET

How is your  
ankle?

He gingerly tries to step on it. He  
winces.

OTTO  
It - It will  
be alright.

BORIS  
(rush  
ed)  
Fine. Let us  
go.

He starts off down the street. Otto  
doesn't move and calls after him.

OTTO  
Wait, my  
friend, wait -

Boris stops. Otto hobbles over to him.

OTTO  
(cont  
inui  
ng)  
We must report  
this to the  
police.

Boris takes a beat, then nods.

BORIS  
You are right.

Otto pulls a cell phone out of his  
jacket pocket and dials 911.

EXT. STREET - LATER

A police cruiser has pulled up and one  
officer speaks with Janet, the other  
tends to Otto's ankle. Boris sits with  
Otto.

OFFICER

Was there  
anything of  
value in your  
purse?

Janet hesitates.

JANET

My wallet, my  
make-up, my  
house-keys.  
(beat  
)  
My ex-husbands  
house-keys.

BREE

(happ  
y)  
My CD!

OFFICER

We're going to  
have to notify  
your ex-  
husband that  
his keys have  
been stolen.

Janet gets defensive. She pleads.

JANET

Please, don't  
call him.

BREE

He's going to  
find out  
sooner or  
later.

The officer looks at Janet's face and  
takes a beat.

OFFICER

Alright. We'll  
let you tell  
him, but

promise me you  
will.

Janet nods.

The officer working on Otto finishes.  
Otto gets up and tests his ankle.  
Satisfied, he suddenly claps his hands  
together.

OTTO  
Who's hungry?

EXT. HOT DOG STAND - NOON

The gang stands at a Hot Dog stand. The  
VENDOR is preparing 4 hot dogs for  
them.

JANET  
(to  
Bree  
)  
What are we  
going to do  
about your CD?

BREE  
(smil  
es)  
I guess I  
can't perform  
then.

OTTO  
You can  
replace this  
CD, no?

BREE  
What are you  
doing?

JANET  
All my money  
was in my  
purse.

OTTO

Nonsense! Otto  
will pay!

Otto removes a large roll of bills from  
his coat pocket and starts counting  
them out.

OTTO  
How much does  
this CD cost?  
20? 40? 60?

Janet and the vendor stare wide-eyed at  
the bills. So do Boris and Bree.

JANET  
\$15.

Otto stops counting bills and realizes  
he is now holding way too much money.  
He hands Janet a \$20 bill.

Bree shoots an evil look at Otto.

BREE  
(sarc  
asti  
c)  
Now I can  
perform in  
front of all  
those people.  
We're saved.

JANET  
Bree! Don't  
take that tone  
with Otto.

BORIS  
Where did you  
get that  
money?

Otto tries to dodge the question. He  
puts another \$20 down on the hot dog  
cart.

OTTO

Lunch is on  
me.

They all grab their hot dogs and take  
large bites.

EXT. BORIS' FLOWER SHOP - AFTERNOON

Natasha is standing outside Boris'  
flower-shop, which is still locked up.  
She has her arms crossed and holds her  
sides, trying to stay as warm as  
possible. The bottom of her waitress  
uniform is visible under her coat.

She tries to see into the store, but  
the lights are off. She paces for a  
moment and then with a sad look, checks  
her watch. She sighs and heads back  
across the street back to Timothy's  
Diner.

INT. TIMOTHY'S DINER - MOMENTS LATER

Natasha enters the diner and removes  
her coat, shaking off a chill. There  
are almost no customers in the diner,  
but there are a dozen people rushing  
around setting up for Rory's broadcast.

Cheryl is waiting on one of the few  
tables with patrons and she catches  
Natasha's arm as she walks by. They  
walk back to the kitchen together.

KITCHEN

CHERYL

Back so soon?

NATASHA

(sad)

He wasn't  
there.

CHERYL

That's  
strange.

Natasha motions to the set being built.

NATASHA

So is this.  
Why is Rory  
doing this  
anyway? It's  
bad enough he  
comes in all  
the time and  
treats us like  
dirt.

CHERYL

And he doesn't  
even tip well.

Natasha smiles, but then her expression  
falls again.

NATASHA

I'd take today  
off if I  
didn't need  
the money.

CHERYL

You going to  
come back  
after she -  
(beat  
)  
Afterwards.

NATASHA

I don't know.

TIMOTHY (O.S.)

Order up.

CHERYL

That's my  
table.

NATASHA

I hope Boris  
comes today. I  
would hate to  
miss my chance

to say  
goodbye.

Cheryl balances the plates on her arms.

CHERYL

I bet he's on  
his way right  
now.

Natasha grabs her order pad and a pen.  
She puts on her apron.

NATASHA

You're  
probably  
right.

C  
U  
T  
  
T  
O  
:

EXT. ELECTRONICS SHOP - AFTERNOON

Boris and Otto look through the window  
at a TV playing a commercial for Rory's  
Variety Hour.

COMMERCIAL

That's right,  
Yinzers!  
Tonight  
everyone's  
favorite local  
celebrity,  
Rory Markov,  
will be  
broadcasting  
LIVE from  
Timothy's  
Blues Diner  
downtown.

Boris sneers at the TV and turns away.

EXT. STREET - AFTERNOON

Janet and Bree are on their way to replace the CD. They walk and finish the last bits of hot dog. They are silent until

BREE

(beat  
)

We should call  
dad.

JANET

We are NOT  
calling your  
father.

(beat  
)

Let's just go  
replace your  
CD. I think  
there's a  
store in the  
mall up the  
road.

Janet takes Bree by the arm and leads her up the road.

JANET

I just don't  
want your  
father to  
think that I  
can't take  
care of you.

BREE

I'm supposed  
to be with him  
this weekend,  
anyway.

JANET

He doesn't  
have time to  
take you to  
the taping. We

both agreed I  
would take  
you.

BREE  
I don't even  
want to go to  
the taping!

Janet looks surprised.

JANET  
You have such  
a beautiful  
voice.

BREE  
What do you  
know? You  
listen to  
Celine Deon.

JANET  
That's harsh.

BREE  
Why is this  
such a big  
deal?

JANET  
Because it's a  
great  
opportunity.  
You'll be  
famous.

BREE  
(to  
hers  
elf)  
I don't want  
to be famous.

Janet's mood drops at this and Bree  
takes a beat.

BREE

Let's just get  
the CD and get  
back.

They walk up to the entrance of the  
mall and disappear inside.

INT. BAR - AFTERNOON

Boris and Otto still sit at the bar.  
Otto nurses a bottle of local  
Pittsburgh beer. Boris absently sips on  
a glass of water.

BORIS

(re:  
Plan  
t X)  
I have to get  
this to her,  
Otto.

OTTO

We'll make it.  
Don't worry  
about a thing.

BORIS

How can you  
say that? We  
are still so  
far away.  
(beat  
)  
That Rory  
Markov -

He spits.

BARTENDER (O.S.)

No spitting!

BORIS

Apologies.  
(quie  
ter)  
Markov is a -

(in  
Russ  
ian)  
Bastard.  
(in  
Engl  
ish)  
He will ruin  
the diner.

OTTO  
Is that what  
you're worried  
about?

Boris takes a beat.

BORIS  
I am worried  
about Natasha.

Otto smiles at this.

OTTO  
That is more  
like it.  
(beat  
)  
Well, what are  
you going to  
do about it?

BORIS  
I'm going to  
give Natasha  
this plant and  
she'll

Boris silences himself and looks  
embarrassed.

OTTO  
(fini  
shin  
g  
the  
sent  
ence  
for

Bori  
s)  
Decide to stay  
and marry you  
and have many  
average  
looking  
babies?

Otto finishes his beer.

BORIS  
What are you  
talking about?  
(beat  
)  
Average  
looking?

OTTO  
I am sorry, my  
friend. But  
you are not  
the most  
attractive man  
in the world.  
She, on the  
other hand, is  
very  
beautiful. I  
think between  
you two you  
will manage  
plain looking  
children.

BORIS  
It does not  
matter. She  
will never  
feel that way  
about me.

Otto notices Janet and Bree walk by the  
bar outside. He gets up.

OTTO  
The women!

Otto tosses too much money down and  
rushes out of the bar.

EXT. BAR - CONTINUOUS

Otto comes outside to see Janet and  
Bree down the sidewalk. He calls out to  
them.

OTTO

Janet!

No response.

OTTO

Janet!

Janet swings around. Boris pokes his  
head outside.

EXT. STREET - MOMENTS LATER

The group is walking again. Janet is  
talking with Otto. Boris and Bree trail  
behind in silence.

JANET

Having a  
couple drinks?

OTTO

Me and my  
friend Boris  
just needed to  
talk about  
something. You  
know, man  
stuff.

Janet is excited by this.

JANET

Tell me!

Otto shakes his head.

JANET

Please.

Otto takes a beat and smiles.

OTTO

Okay.

INT. TIMOTHY'S DINER - AFTERNOON

Natasha looks disheveled. She takes a tip off of a table and slides the change into her apron. She picks up the dirty dishes and cups and balances it all in her arms.

RORY (O.S.)

Don't you have  
busboys?

Natasha, startled, drops a cup, but luckily it is plastic. She turns to face Rory, who can now be seen. He looks as smug as ever.

NATASHA

If I bus my  
own tables I  
get all of the  
tips. Now out  
of my way.

RORY

You need  
money?

Natasha walks away from him. Rory follows.

NATASHA

I don't need  
*your* money.

RORY

(char  
isma  
tic)  
Ouch, you're a  
feisty one. I  
like that.

Natasha turns around as if she were going to slap Rory, but cannot with the dishes in her arms. Rory stops dead in his tracks and actually looks scared for a moment.

RORY

Why are you so  
upset?

NATASHA

Are you  
serious?

Rory looks confused. Natasha motions to the set being built.

NATASHA

This.  
(beat  
)  
You.

RORY

Me? I'm doing  
this for you.

NATASHA

*For me?* Who do  
you think you  
are?

Rory starts to speak, but Natasha interrupts him.

NATASHA

Don't answer  
that! I can't  
even deal with  
you right now.

She walks off to the kitchen leaving Rory looking like a fool in front of his crew members, who stare at him.

RORY

(angr  
y)

Get back to  
work!

They swing back around to their tasks  
and Rory walks outside to his trailer.

EXT. STREET - AFTERNOON

Otto and Janet walk in the background.  
Bree is walking with Boris and is  
questioning him. He tries to pick up  
his pace to pull ahead of her, but she  
keeps up with him easily.

BREE  
Are we lost?

BORIS  
We are not  
lost.

BREE  
How do you  
know?

BORIS  
I don't.

Boris speeds up a bit. Bree lags behind  
for a second or two, but catches up  
again. She smiles. She is enjoying  
this.

BREE  
Where is your  
wife?

BORIS  
I do not have  
a wife.

BREE  
Girlfriend?

No answer.

BREE  
Boyfriend?

Boris stops.

BORIS

Are you always  
this annoying?

BREE

Yes.

(beat  
)

What's with  
the weird  
plant suit?

Boris sighs. He starts walking again.  
He and Bree are side by side now.

BORIS

It is to keep  
the plant  
safe.

(beat

,

re:

Nata

sha)

It is a very  
delicate  
flower and  
much be  
treated with  
respect and  
decency. You  
cannot parade  
it around like  
it were a  
sunflower.

BREE

I think I know  
what you mean.

BORIS

You could not  
possibly.

Bree looks sullen. She slows her pace  
and begin to lag behind Boris, who does

not miss a step. She starts to speak,  
but decides against it.

BREE

It was nice  
talking with  
you.

Boris does not look back. Bree falls  
back to her mother and Otto.

Boris sneaks a quick look back at her,  
but her back is to him now.

EXT. STREET - AFTERNOON

Bree is back with Otto and Janet now.  
Otto, seeing Bree, speaks up.

OTTO

Did you  
replace the -

JANET

(inte  
rrup  
ting  
)

CD? Yes.

(beat  
)

Thank you for  
the money.  
That was very  
kind of you. I  
will of course  
pay you back  
as soon as I  
can.

OTTO

Nonsense. It  
is my gift to  
you.

(beat  
)

And your  
lovely  
daughter.

BREE

(to  
hers  
elf)  
Lovely?

Janet smiles.

JANET

Of course. My  
lovely  
daughter.

There is an almost adorable amount of romantic tension between Otto and Janet as they walk. Their hands swing precariously close, but never quite touch. They walk with their eyes forward and quickly avert their gaze when their eyes catch.

Bree notices this and takes a long beat.

BREE

(sudd  
enly  
)  
I need to go  
to the  
bathroom.

Janet snaps out of her Otto daze.

JANET

Why didn't you  
go at the  
mall?

BREE

I didn't have  
to go then.

Otto steps in again.

OTTO

There should  
be a restroom  
in one of the  
stores over  
there.

He points to a small strip mall with a  
few family owned businesses.

BREE

Great. I'll be  
right back.

JANET

Wait!

BREE

I'm 14, mom.  
I'll be fine.

She walks off and Janet takes a beat.  
She turns to Otto then.

JANET

How much  
trouble could  
she get in?

OTTO

Oh, plenty.

JANET

What?

OTTO

Sorry. She  
will be fine.

Boris has stopped walking and Otto and  
Janet catch up to him. Boris watches  
Bree walk off and turns to them.

BORIS

What is this?

JANET

Bathroom.

Boris nods.

INT. FAMILY OWNED STORE - AFTERNOON

Bree enters a small family owned store (hardware, pets, general, trinkets or something similar). She enters with a ding-ding of a door bell like in Boris' shop.

STORE OWNER

Can I help  
you?

BREE

Do you have a  
phone I could  
use?

STORE OWNER

Local call?

Bree nods.

STORE OWNER

In the back.

He points behind his counter and Bree scurries off to the phone.

INT. FAMILY OWNED STORE. BACKROOM -  
CONTINUOUS

Bree enters and finds the phone. She quickly lifts the receiver and dials a number quickly, from memory. It rings a couple times and Bree anxiously looks around. A man answers. We do not see him during the scene.

STEPHEN

(on  
phon  
e)  
Hello.

BREE

Dad. It's me.

STEPHEN

(on  
phon  
e)  
How is the  
show going?

BREE

Mom was  
mugged.

STEPHEN

(on  
phon  
e)  
Are you  
alright?

BREE

Yes, I'm fine,  
but

Bree pauses and twirls the phone cord  
in her finger.

STEPHEN

Are you there?

BREE

(beat  
)

I want you to  
come get me.

Stephen pauses and stammers a bit.

STEPHEN

Where are you?

BREE

I'm at a store  
using their  
phone.

STEPHEN

Well, what's  
close by?

Bree pauses, thinks.

BREE

I think I saw  
the flower  
place that you  
took me to.

STEPHEN

The  
conservatory?  
Alright,  
honey. I'll be  
there in a  
little bit.  
Wait for me  
there.

Bree smiles and looks more relaxed.

BREE

Thanks, dad.

She hangs up and heads out of the  
store.

EXT. TIMOTHY'S BLUES - AFTERNOON

The diner is filled with balloons,  
streamers, and people rushing around.  
Many regular customers sit at tables,  
confused and annoyed by Rory's  
entourage. The sounds of hammering,  
balloons being filled, and talking  
fills the crowded diner.

Natasha swoops in on a table of  
regulars and takes away their plates  
with graceful expertise. She moves to  
leave for the kitchen, but one of the  
customers taps her on the arm.

CUSTOMER

What is  
happening?  
Remodeling?

NATASHA

More like a  
communist take  
over.

A bell rings from the kitchen. Natasha looks up, rushed.

NATASHA

(cont  
inui  
ng)

I'm sorry.  
This won't  
happen again.  
Have a nice  
day.

The customer nods and Natasha rushes back toward the kitchen.

KITCHEN

Natasha sets her dishes down in the sink and walks over to Cheryl, who is peeping through a window into the dining room.

NATASHA

Still no sign  
of him.

CHERYL

I'm sorry,  
honey - Maybe  
he got caught  
up in traffic.

Natasha nods sadly.

NATASHA

I will never  
see him  
again...

CHERYL

Oh, don't say  
that...

She puts her arm around Natasha's shoulders.

In the dining room, they see Rory re-enter the diner and march over to a

chair. He steps up on the chair and begins to talk, holding his arms wide. All of the workers stop and listen.

Cheryl shakes her head, disgusted.

CHERYL

Well, maybe  
there's one  
good thing  
about your  
leaving...

Natasha shoots her a sad look.

NATASHA

What do you  
mean?

CHERYL

Maybe once  
you're gone,  
he'll -

She jerks a thumb at Rory.

CHERYL

(cont  
inui  
ng)  
Quit coming in  
here!

The bell rings again.

CHERYL

I got it.

She picks up several plates full of food and prepares to enter the dining room.

CHERYL

(roll  
ing  
her  
eyes  
)  
Wish me luck!

Natasha smiles as Cheryl barges into the dining room. She bumps a man putting up balloons with her hip, causing several balloons to deflate.

Natasha appears misty-eyed. The bell rings again and she slowly turns to return to work.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Boris leads the way once again back on the sidewalk. Bree walks next to him, just as stern and determined looking. Otto and Janet lag behind, whispering to each other and giggling.

Otto reaches into his jacket and pulls out a fancy silver flask. Janet giggles like a school girl. Otto puts his finger up to his lips

OTTO

Shhhh!

Boris looks at them out of the corner of his eye. Otto passes the flask to Janet and she takes a sip, giggling loudly.

Bree looks back, rolls her eyes dramatically and looks at Boris. He shrugs helplessly.

EXT. STREET - MOMENTS LATER

PHIPP'S CONSERVATORY comes into view. Bree eyes it gratefully. She clears her throat.

BREE

(urge  
ntly  
)

Boris, look!

The whole group stops. Boris looks around, freaked out.

BORIS

What? What!

Bree rolls her eyes. She points.

BREE

Loo-ok.

Boris gasps in excitement.

BORIS

I have heard  
about this  
place, but I  
have never had  
to pleasure to  
visit.

He starts to march quickly toward  
Phipp's. Bree follows on his heels.  
Otto calls after him.

OTTO

What about  
downtown? What  
about Natasha?

BORIS

(over  
shou  
lder  
)

Just one  
moment! I must  
see!

Otto gives a start, but Janet  
interrupts him.

JANET

(gigg  
ling  
)

Let's go in.

(beat  
)

Could be fun.

Otto takes his own beat and smiles at this. They charge after Boris.

INT. PHIPP'S - DAY

The four travelers stand in the middle of a huge room, filled with exotic plants and trees. They all look around in awe.

BREE

(to  
Boris)  
What do you  
think?

Boris looks straight up at the trees, eyes wide.

BORIS

It is amazing!

BREE

I can't  
believe you've  
never been  
here.

She grabs his hand

BREE

(continuing)  
C'mon! There's  
so much more!

She pulls him into the other room. Otto moves to follow them, but realizes that Janet is not beside him. He turns around to see Janet standing in a different doorway.

JANET

(whispering)

This way!

She gives him a "come hither" stare. He giddily walks towards her and they vanish through a doorway.

INT. FLOWER GARDEN - CONTINUOUS

Boris stares around the room in absolute awe. He shuffles his feet like a child. Bree follows him slowly, unamused.

BORIS

(whis  
peri  
ng  
to  
self  
)

Amazing...

Bree gives the room a serious once-over. No other men are in the room besides Boris. She quietly slips out the way they came in.

INT. ANOTHER ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Bree walks through a room filled with lush greenery, looking around urgently, ignoring the plants.

She catches sight of a head bobbing on the other side of the room. She rushes around the path and hurries up to the back of a TALL MAN.

BREE

Dad!

The Tall Man turns around. Bree takes a step back.

BREE

Sorry...

She walks away purposefully, still scanning for her father.

INT. OTHER ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Janet and Otto sit on a bench in a picturesque room filled with flowers. They lean cutely on each other. Otto is showing Janet pictures from his wallet.

OTTO

(pointing  
)

...and this is last Christmas when I went to visit my family back in Russia... And this is little Jack... And this is Nikolai...

Janet nods with extreme interest. The flask is still in her hand and she takes sips from it every couple of pictures.

OTTO

... And this is my dog...

Janet holds the flask up to his lips. He grins, putting away the pictures and taking a big sip from the flask.

INT. BONSAI ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Boris sits on a bench in the middle of the Bonsai room. Tiny trees line the room. It is serene. The plant suit held tightly in his arms, Boris looks happy to sit and stare at the beauty around him.

Behind Boris, Bree appears in a doorway looking utterly discouraged. She shuffles in slowly. Boris hears her and turns around.

BORIS

(whispering)

Hello Bree.

She sits down heavily beside him.

BREE

Hi.

BORIS

(still whispering)

Isn't it beautiful?

BREE

You don't have to whisper, this isn't, like, a funeral or something.

Boris smiles broadly.

BORIS

Of course!  
Isn't it beautiful?

BREE

(unenthusiastic)

Yeah.

Only now Boris realizes that something isn't right.

BORIS

What is wrong?

She shifts to face him. A large window is directly behind Boris, showing an adjacent room.

BREE

Like you care.

BORIS

(slight  
frown  
)

I- I care!

BREE

No you don't,  
all you care  
about are your  
stupid plants.

Boris gives her a stern look.

BREE

I mean, your  
plants.

BORIS

Look at it  
this way - I  
haven't much  
else to care  
about. You are  
lucky.

BREE

No I'm not.

BORIS

Yes! You have  
your mother.

Bree rolls her eyes.

BORIS

I mean it. She  
is a wonderful  
woman.

BREE

You don't even  
*know* her.

BORIS

You are right.  
But you are a  
wonderful  
girl, so I  
figure it runs  
in the family.

Bree blushes, smiling slightly. Her smile is halted by what she sees through the window behind Boris.

Otto and Janet are serenely framed between two flowering bushes. Janet's arms are around Otto's neck, Otto's hand at her waist. They smile romantically (drunkenly) at one another. Suddenly, they kiss.

Bree's face turns to stone.

She stands up and walks out. Boris looks after her, concerned, but stays on his bench.

INT. PHIPP'S LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

Bree runs through the lobby and out the front doors.

INT. BONSAI ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Otto and Janet waltz drunkenly into the bonsai room. Boris looks at them critically.

JANET

(gigg  
ling  
)

Boris... Have  
you seen my  
little girl?

BORIS  
She was here a  
moment ago.

JANET  
Oh good!

BORIS  
She did not  
seem very  
happy.

Janet sobers up a bit.

JANET  
Not happy?

OTTO  
(to  
Jane  
t)  
I'm sure she's  
fine.

Janet shrugs off Otto.

JANET  
(to  
Bori  
s)  
What do you  
mean, not  
happy?

BORIS  
I mean just  
that. That is  
all.

He shrugs.

Janet turns back to Otto, grinning  
sloppily.

JANET  
Let's go back  
to the  
waterfall.  
Bree likes

waterfalls,  
maybe she's  
there...

OTTO

And you know  
what they say  
about  
waterfalls...

He winks. Janet laughs. They walk out.

Boris stands, frowning. A light goes  
off in his head. He calls after them.

BORIS

Wait! Wait, I  
think she has  
run away!

He hurries after them, but they have  
vanished.

BORIS

Otto? Janet?

There is no response. Boris turns and  
rushes toward the lobby.

INT. LOBBY - MOMENTS LATER

Boris rushes through the lobby. He  
stops at the front doors and approaches  
a GUARD.

BORIS

(breathless)  
Have you seen  
a little girl  
come through  
here?

GUARD

(suspiciously)  
)

No, sir.

BORIS

Well. Perhaps  
she is not  
that little.  
14? Black  
clothing -  
Sulky?

GUARD

(unen  
thus  
iast  
ic)  
Oh. She left  
about ten  
minutes ago.  
Headed toward  
the  
university.

BORIS

Thank you!

The guard raises and eyebrow as Boris  
rushes out of the conservatory.

EXT. BENTLEY DILWORTH UNIVERSITY - DAY

Bree stands shivering at a pay-phone  
outside of a large brick building. The  
phone rings and rings. Finally Stephen  
answers. Again, we do not see him in  
the scene.

STEPHEN

(on  
phon  
e)  
Hello.

BREE

Dad, where are  
you?

STEPHEN

(on  
phon  
e)  
Bree! Is  
everything  
okay?

BREE  
Where are you?  
(beat  
)  
You said you'd  
come.

STEPHEN  
(on  
phon  
e)  
Oh honey -

In the background over the phone we can  
here muffled talking - a young woman's  
voice.

STEPHEN  
(cont  
inui  
ng)  
Hon, I'm  
sorry, but the  
traffic here  
is awful. I'll  
be there in -  
Uh -

There is muffled giggling now.  
Stephen's voice speeds up.

STEPHEN  
(cont  
inui  
ng)  
Twenty  
minutes. Can  
you just hold  
on?

BREE  
Dad -

STEPHEN

(hurry  
iedly)  
I gotta go.

WOMAN

(background,  
on phone)  
Steve, we're  
going to be  
late!

STEPHEN

(to Bree)  
Will you be  
okay? I'll be  
there as soon  
as I -

Bree hangs up the phone before he can finish. She leans her head against the brick wall and looks like she is going to cry.

A figure approaches slowly in the background, walking towards her. Boris. He stops just as she sees his shadow on the wall. Bree whips around.

BREE

Ugh, what do  
you want!?

BORIS

What are you  
doing here?

BREE

Leave me  
alone.

She starts to walk away huffily. Boris follows after her.

BORIS

Please stop, I  
want to talk  
to you.

BREE

No.

BORIS

Your mother is  
very worried.  
Please?

Bree stops and turns around suddenly,  
tears streaming down her face.

BREE

She doesn't  
give a shit  
about me! All  
she cares  
about is men  
and money! I  
bet she  
doesn't even  
know I'm  
missing!

BORIS

(seri  
ousl  
y)

You are not  
missing, you  
are right  
here.

Bree breaks into a sob and throws  
herself at Boris. Boris doesn't know  
what to do and looks around, panicked.  
He sees a bench and leads her over to  
it.

BORIS

Here - Sit.

Bree sits, sniffing. Boris sits beside her.

BORIS

Now, why are  
you crying?

BREE

I want to go  
home! My dad  
said -

(beat  
)

I just don't  
want to be  
here!

BORIS

Is it so bad?

BREE

Yes!

BORIS

It has been a  
long day, yes?

Bree nods. She looks at him tearfully,  
trying to compose herself.

BREE

I don't even  
want to do  
this stupid  
show. It was  
all her idea.

BORIS

But she says  
you are very  
talented. You  
should not  
keep that to  
yourself.

BREE

I am NOT  
talented! I  
just write

songs  
sometimes.  
She's never  
even really  
heard me.

BORIS

Are you as  
good as she  
thinks?

BREE

No!  
(beat  
)  
I don't know!

Boris stands up.

BORIS

Well, there is  
only one way  
to find out.

Bree glares at him coldly.

BREE

I am *not* going  
on the show.

BORIS

Oh no, I would  
not want you  
to do that.

BREE

But you don't  
even know if  
I'm any good!

BORIS

Neither do  
you, you say.  
But I know how  
to fix it.

Bree looks at him quizzically. Boris  
opens his arms wide, smiling.

BORIS

Show me!

Bree looks shocked. She blushes.

BREE

I - I can't.

She shakes her head.

BREE

(cont  
inui  
ng)

No way.

Boris sits back down beside her.

BORIS

Yes way. You  
will sing for  
me, and I will  
tell you how  
good you are.

Bree rolls her eyes, turning away.

BREE

You'll just  
say that I'm  
good just to  
be nice.

BORIS

I would never  
do that. I am  
an honest man.  
That is the  
way I was  
brought up.

Bree turns to face him.

BORIS

(cont  
inui  
ng)

I will tell  
you the truth.

Bree takes a beat. She then takes a deep breath and carefully stands up. She stands up straight and takes another breath, preparing to sing. Her breath catches and she stops.

BREE

I don't have  
my music.

BORIS

That is even  
better. This  
way we will  
really hear  
what you sound  
like.

She repositions herself and takes a deep breath.

Bree sings a verse of a VERY GOOD ORIGINAL SONG.

Her voice is mature and charming. Boris listens, a smile growing across his face. By the time she is done, he is beaming. He claps.

BORIS

You *are* very  
talented!

BREE

Oh, shut up.

He puts his hands on her shoulders.

BORIS

I am serious!  
I have not  
heard a voice  
like yours in  
a long, long  
time! You have  
another you  
could sing?

She shakes her head and sits back down.

BREE  
That's enough.  
(beat  
)  
You really  
think I'm  
good?

Boris nods.

BORIS  
You are  
brilliant. I  
would not lie.

Bree smiles slightly, nodding. Suddenly she throws her arms around him in a hug.

BREE  
Thanks.

Boris looks shocked at first, but then smiles. He breaks the hug.

BORIS  
We must go!

They stand up and walk cheerfully back toward Phipp's.

EXT. PHIPP'S - MOMENTS LATER

Janet and Otto stumble out of the front doors of Phipp's followed closely by the guard.

GUARD  
...And stay  
out!

He goes back inside, making sure the doors are closed. Janet and Otto burst into laughter.

OTTO  
Did you see  
the look on

that kid's  
face?

Janet buckles over in laughter.

Bree and Boris approach the drunken duo. They eye Janet and Otto at first curiously, then slightly disgusted. Janet and Otto latch on to one another and smooch.

BREE

Mom, what are  
you doing!?

They both come up for air.

JANET

Bree!

OTTO

Boris! My  
friend!

BORIS

Come along, we  
must get  
downtown!

He grabs Otto's arms and straightens him out. Bree does the same for Janet.

BREE

(disg  
uste  
dly,  
to  
Jane  
t)  
I can't  
believe you...

JANET

Oh Bree, we  
were just  
having fun.

OTTO

Boris! Today  
has been such  
an adventure!

BORIS

Keep  
walking...

The quartet walks along the sidewalk  
silently for a time. Suddenly, Janet  
stops.

JANET

Stop! I have  
and  
announcement.

Everyone halts and stares at her.

JANET

I have decided  
- That we  
should all go  
home.

Otto nods eagerly, but Boris and Bree  
look horrified.

BORIS

We must keep  
going!

BREE

Mom, what  
about the  
show?

JANET

Pbbt. Forget  
the show.  
Let's go home  
and I'll make  
dinner. We'll  
- Rent a  
movie.

OTTO

Can I come?

JANET

(to  
Otto  
)  
Of course!

BREE

That's crazy!  
(to  
Jane  
t)  
We've come all  
this way, and  
I *want* to go  
on the show!

JANET

(stil  
l a  
litt  
le  
tips  
y)  
Oh honey, do  
you really  
think it'd be  
worth it?  
After all,  
there will be  
so many  
singers...

BREE

(defe  
nsiv  
e)  
So you don't  
think I can do  
it?

JANET

Well...

BREE

I am a good  
singer mom!  
You've just  
never heard  
me.

JANET

I most  
certainly  
have.

BREE

No, you  
*haven't!*

Janet grabs Bree's arm and starts to pull her in the opposite direction. Boris approaches and is about to speak when Bree rips out of her mother's grasp and runs right into Boris.

The plant falls from Boris' arms and crashes on the ground.

There is a long beat as everyone looks down at the fallen plant.

Boris slowly kneels down in horror and puts his hands up to his head.

BORIS

What have you  
done!

BREE

I'm sorry...

Boris looks up at Bree. They both look terrified. Boris' face softens.

BORIS

It is not your  
fault.

Hurriedly, he starts to pull things like SPRAY BOTTLES and plastic BAGGIES out of his coat pockets. The others circle around him.

BORIS

I need room!

Kneeling in the middle of the circle, Boris works like a battlefield medic.

BORIS

I need water!

Bree rushes into a nearby building and reappears with a bottle of water. She hands it to Boris and he takes a big swig, testing the water in his mouth. Satisfied, he pours the water over the leaves and into the soil.

BORIS

(to  
Plan  
t X)  
It will be  
okay.

He replaces soil that has been dumped, digs out soil that has been contaminated, prunes the damaged leaves, splints the broken stalks, sprays down the flower buds with a soap shield, and finally produces a small heat lamp to warm the Plant X.

After the adrenaline fueled emergency surgery is complete and PLANT X is stable, Boris leans back and wipes his brow. Otto, Janet and Bree stare at him amazed and impressed.

BREE

(timid)  
Will it be  
okay?

Boris dabs at the sweat on his forehead with a small rag.

BORIS

We will see.

Janet, sobered by the experience, turns to Bree.

JANET

Do you really  
want to do the  
show?

BREE

(brigh  
t)

Yes!

JANET

What made you  
change your  
mind?

Bree doesn't answer, but looks at  
Boris, who is putting the suit back on  
Plant X.

JANET

(continui  
ng)

You know I  
only want  
what's best  
for you.

BREE

I know, Mom.

JANET

And I don't  
want you to do  
anything that  
you really  
don't want to  
do...

BREE

(resolute  
ly)

Well, I want  
to do this.

Janet looks nervously at her watch.

JANET

Well then, we  
better get  
going.

Boris sits on the curb. He takes the bow out of his pocket and reattaches it. It won't sit straight, so he finally rips it off and tosses it off to the side. Otto watches and comes to sit beside him.

OTTO

Ready to get  
on the road?

BORIS

It is no use.  
Her shift is  
over.

(beat  
)

It is all  
over.

OTTO

No, man! The  
show!  
Remember?

Boris perks up for a moment, but then sinks again.

BORIS

We still will  
not make it in  
time! And that  
Rory Markov  
will be there  
- It is no  
use.

Otto stands up, looking down. He reaches into his pocket, retrieving his cell phone.

OTTO

Well, I did  
not think it  
would come to  
this.

Janet walks over to Otto.

JANET

Come to what?

Otto presses a button and a number is speed dialed.

OTTO

Hello, James?  
- Would you  
send a car  
over to Henry  
and Fifth? -  
There will be  
four of us -  
Yes, thank  
you.

He snaps the phone shut.

OTTO

(to  
the  
group)  
We'll have a  
car in just a  
moment.

The others stare at him, bewildered.

BREE

A *car*?

Otto smiles sweetly.

OTTO

Yes, I am the  
owner of  
Otto's Autos.  
(beat  
)  
You did not  
know?

They shake their heads in unison.

JANET

Why didn't you  
do that in the  
first place?!

OTTO

(grin  
ning  
shee  
pish  
ly)

I thought it  
would be nice  
if we could  
all have an  
adventure  
together.

BORIS

(angr  
y)

An adventure?

OTTO

Yes, you know?  
As friends do.

BREE

You mean we  
could have  
driven  
downtown this  
whole time?

OTTO

Well.

JANET

My purse.

OTTO

I am sorry  
about your  
purse, but  
(beat

)

Hasn't  
everyone  
gotten  
something out

of this  
journey?

Everyone takes a long beat. Otto looks at them one-by-one. To Bree, she nods sheepishly. To Janet, she does the same. To Boris, after a pause.

BORIS

Yes, you are  
right.

The NICE CAR pulls up behind them and the driver gets out. He hurries around to open the passenger side doors. The group looks on in amazement.

DRIVER

Sir.

OTTO

Thank you.  
(to  
group)  
Please.

The group does not take a step forward. Otto looks upset.

OTTO

Be mad at me  
if you want,  
but this is  
the only way  
we'll make it  
Downtown in  
time.

The Driver opens the rear door for the group as they approach to enter, wearing scowls. Otto takes out his flask and takes a sip.

As Janet walks by she snatches the flask from Otto. Boris pauses before getting in the car.

BORIS

You continue  
to surprise  
me.

OTTO

It's what I  
do.

They share a smile and Boris gets in.  
Otto gets in.

DRIVER

Where to?

OTTO

Timothy's  
Blues Diner,  
Downtown.

The Driver nods and shuts Otto's door.  
He rushes around the driver side door  
and quickly gets in.

EXT. STREET - EVENING

The car drives off toward Downtown  
Pittsburgh.

INT. TIMOTHY'S BLUES - EVENING

The set is complete and instead of the  
regular customers we have seen in the  
diner thus far, the crowd is comprised  
of Rory fans. They wear custom-made  
shirts that say things like, "Marry me  
Rory!" and "I Love you Rory!".

Rory is "backstage" with his publicist.  
Rory is all smiles and sneaks peeks at  
the turnout. His Publicist is not as  
enthused.

PUBLICIST

Are you sure  
you want to go  
through with  
this?

RORY

It was your  
idea! Besides,  
she's perfect.

PUBLICIST

(beat  
)

What if she  
says no?

Rory swings around to face him, about  
to explode, but thinks better on it and  
whispers instead.

RORY

I'm Rory  
Markov. And my  
show is  
starting.

KITCHEN

Natasha, Cheryl, and Timothy are in the  
kitchen. Natasha paces.

NATASHA

Why am I still  
here?

TIMOTHY

If you left,  
it would look  
bad for the  
diner. I need  
the publicity,  
Natasha.

NATASHA

You don't want  
*his* publicity.

CHERYL

He's an idiot.

Timothy puts his hands on Natasha  
shoulders to stop her pacing. He speaks  
almost as a father to her.

TIMOTHY

Natasha, just  
do this for  
me, please.  
It's a half  
hour and it's  
over. You will  
never have to  
see Rory  
Markov again.

CHERYL

(to  
hers  
elf)  
Or any of us.

Natasha shoots a quick frown at Cheryl  
and takes a beat.

NATASHA

Alright, I'll  
do my best.

Timothy smiles.

TIMOTHY

Thank you.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

Ladies and  
Gentlemen.

Natasha, Cheryl, and Timothy all swing  
around to look out toward the stage.  
Natasha sighs.

INT. TIMOTHY'S BLUES. STAGE -  
CONTINUOUS

The announcer stands on the stage and a  
SMALL CROWD has formed right under the  
stage. There are lights and speakers  
set up and a banner for Rory's show  
hangs behind.

ANNOUNCER

Welcome to  
Timothy's  
Blues Diner in  
Downtown,  
Pittsburgh  
where we are  
broadcasting  
LIVE for the  
first time  
ever!

The crowd cheers at this. Timothy peeks out from the kitchen and smiles. The announcer waits for the cheers to die down before continuing.

ANNOUNCER

So without  
further ado,  
here's

(exte  
ndin  
g  
each  
syll  
able  
)

RORY MARKOV!

The crowd goes wild and Rory rushes out onto the stage looking ever charismatic. He grabs the mic aggressively from the Announcer and throws his hands up. Cheesy 80's pop music plays from the speaker system.

RORY

Are you ready?

The crowd cheers. Rory is not satisfied with their volume.

RORY

I said - Are  
you ready!

The cheers grow louder. Rory dances around like an idiot. He looks stupid, but the crowd is into it.

RORY  
LET'S GET IT  
ROLLING!

Natasha stands off to the side of the crowd, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. Cheryl is next to her, doing the same.

NATASHA  
What an idiot.

Cheryl nods.

EXT. OTTO'S CAR - EVENING

Otto's car is still on the way downtown, dealing with traffic.

INT. OTTO'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Otto looks worried in the front seat. The Driver taps nervously on the wheel.

Bree looks worried in the back seat. She anxiously fiddles with her guitar pick.

Janet is all smiles and still holds Otto's flask.

Boris leans up to Otto.

BORIS  
We are not  
going to make  
it.

OTTO  
(very  
seri  
ous)  
We will make  
it.  
(to  
Driv  
er)

Turn right,  
here.

EXT. OTTO'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

The car takes a hard right down a side street.

INT. TIMOTHY'S BLUES DINER - EVENING

There is an act up on the stage that crowd isn't into. A YOUNG BOY is trying to juggle three bright, red balls and is failing miserably.

The crowd is blank-faced and bored.

The Young Boy drops the balls and they go bouncing every which way.

BACKSTAGE

Rory looks on in horror with his Publicist.

RORY  
We're losing  
the crowd. I'm  
bringing  
Natasha up.

PUBLICIST  
Wait!

Rory ignores him and walks on stage.

STAGE

The Young Boy frantically tries to gather the balls, but Rory takes the mic off the stand and intervenes.

RORY  
Let's give  
Ricky a hand.

The crowd obediently gives a half-hearted round of applause. Ricky walks off stage, sullen.

RORY

Well, he  
tried. We  
can't all be  
winners, can  
we?

The crowd laughs. Natasha sneers.

RORY

(cont  
inui  
ng)  
But now, I  
want to do  
something  
special.

Rory begins to walk around the stage.

RORY

(cont  
inui  
ng)  
I've been  
coming into  
this diner for  
a long time  
now.

Rory looks directly at Natasha and smiles. She turns and starts walking off.

RORY

I'd like to  
talk to you  
about the  
woman I love.

Natasha stops dead in her tracks. The crowd gasps.

NATASHA

What!

CHERYL

What!

TIMOTHY

What!

Rory turns back to the crowd.

RORY

I want to talk  
to you about -

(beat

)

Natasha.

EXT. TIMOTHY'S BLUES DINER - CONTINUOUS

Otto's car pulls up and the group piles out. Boris clutches Plant X tight to his chest. Janet stumbles and Otto rushes to give her his arm.

Boris doesn't break his stride and heads straight for the door.

BORIS

We must find  
Natasha

BREE

I've got to  
get on stage.

Bree follows Boris, humming to herself and clearing her throat.

JANET

I need another  
drink!

Janet goes to unscrew the flask, but Otto snatches it and takes what is left for himself.

OTTO

No more booze,  
it makes you  
sloppy.

Janet looks hurt, but Otto smiles. He leans close and kisses her on the mouth. He takes Janet by the hand and leads her into the diner.

INT. TIMOTHY'S BLUES DINER - CONTINUOUS

Boris pushes his way through the crowd at the door and gazes around the dimly lit diner looking for Natasha. Bree stumbles up behind him.

Across the room on the lighted stage Rory is gesturing to Natasha who is held captive in a spotlight.

Boris sees her and moves a half step forward but falters when Rory begins to speak.

RORY

Fellow  
Yinzers,  
please welcome  
the lovely  
Natasha  
(misp  
rono  
unce  
s)  
Dovlatova  
(cont  
inui  
ng)  
To the stage.

Boris is aghast, stunned. No movement.

To the side of the stage Rory's Publicist cringes as the expectant crowd waits for Natasha to take the stage.

Rory stands arms open with a shit-eating grin trying to coax her with his undeniable presence.

The audience is eating it up, clapping, whispering, wondering who Natasha is.

Boris begins to stagger forward, his eyes fixed on Natasha. Janet and Otto make it through the crowd to Bree. The three watch Boris. Otto asks Bree what is going on, she tells him and motions towards Natasha in the spotlight, covering her mouth.

The applause begins to die down and Rory tries to cover.

RORY

Natasha will  
you come up  
here? I've  
something I've  
been wanting  
to say for a  
long time.

Rory eyes his Publicist. The Publicist buries his head in his hands. Rory turns back toward Natasha and begins walking to her. Their respective spotlights meet at the end of the stage.

RORY

How would you  
like to be  
Mrs. Rory's  
Variety Hour?

The crowd gasps.

Janet laughs drunkenly. Otto nudges her

At the edge of the stage Rory gets on his knee.

Mortified, Natasha turns and runs into the kitchen. Rory tries to give chase, but Cheryl blocks the entry way. Rory's Publicist and other associates rush over to calm him down.

Some of the crowd stands to see what is happening, Rory's camera crew turns to see as well.

In the commotion and confusion Otto leads Bree and Janet to through the crowd and to the stage. Janet digs through her purse for Bree's CD. She hands the CD to a PA.

Otto casually walks onto the stage like a conspirator and grins. He claps his hands together and gets everyone's attention.

OTTO

Well now,  
desperate  
isn't he?

The camera turns and finds Otto. He laughs to himself and relishes his time in the spotlight.

OTTO

I'm sorry for  
the delay,  
ladies and  
gentlemen. I'm  
sure you've  
all been  
sitting  
through a  
bunch of crap  
tonight, but  
this next  
performer is  
going to knock  
your socks  
off. Please  
welcome, BREE!

Otto leads the audience in applause and waves Bree to come to the stage. She takes a deep breath and walks into the lights on the stage. She looks back at the PA, who presses 'Play' on a stereo system.

Bree's music filters through the speakers and the audience dies down.

Bree sings the SONG that she sang before from the beginning, not just the first verse.

Soon, the audience is captivated.

Janet is brought to tears by her daughters singing.

Otto smiles, arm over Janet's shoulder.

Boris too is overcome by the song. Hearing Bree sing, we see him revitalized. He sees that Rory has been subdued, an idea flashes in his head and he turns, rushing out the door into the street.

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EXT. TIMOTHY'S BLUES DINER - CONTINUOUS

Boris comes tearing out of the diner. He looks right and left - sees nothing. He dashes up the street towards his shop.

INT. TIMOTHY'S BLUES DINER - CONTINUOUS

Back inside, the crowd is now nodding and clapping along to Bree's music. They are really into it and as we move over the crowd we see the Publicist talking with a few associates, admiring Bree's performance. We move through the crowd some more and find Janet and Otto to the side of the stage making out.

On stage Bree is in her element and a broad smile- perhaps the first genuine joy we've seen - creeps across her face.

In the corner near the kitchen door we find a sullen and beaten Rory Markov, weeping on Cheryl's shoulder.

RORY

How could she  
deny *me*?

CHERYL

It's not you,  
babe - it's  
just the way  
you are.

Rory looks at her quizzically.

Bree comes to the climax of her song, and ends with a roaring round of applause from the crowd.

EXT. BORIS' FLOWER SHOP - NIGHT

Boris pants as he turns up the street towards his shop. Out front we can see a silhouette in the street lights. Boris slows his pace and adjusts the plant on his side, offering it ahead of him.

As we reach the store front, Boris finds Natasha pacing in front of his store. She looks up, startled at first, but then goes soft when she sees it is Boris.

Natasha rushes towards him and they embrace.

NATASHA

Boris!  
(beat  
)

What are you  
doing here?

BORIS

Here, please -  
*rayevaia*  
*ptitsa* - Bird  
of Paradise.

Boris hands over the plant. Natasha takes it and Boris unzips and removes the suit.

In the street light the plant appears pallid, sad, and injured. It's flowers wilting, splints and bandages holding it together. It is not quite what either Boris intends to give or Natasha expects to receive.

Still, Natasha looks at the plant as a thing of beauty, turning it and smiling to herself. She shakes her head.

NATASHA

Why are you  
doing this?

BORIS

It is a long  
journey back  
home, but this  
will keep your  
heart in one  
place.

Natasha tries to hand the plant back, but Boris won't have it.

BORIS

No, she and I  
- we are tired  
of each other.

Boris looks at the plant - the plant appears to be looking back at Boris. A smile crosses Boris' face, a burden lifted.

NATASHA

But I can't -  
it will never  
survive, I  
don't know how  
to -

Boris puts up his hand and shakes his  
head. Natasha goes silent and they  
share a look.

BORIS

Let me show  
you.

He motions toward the shop. We pull  
back as Boris leads Natasha to the  
door, unlocks it, and flips on the  
light. They enter. The door shuts -  
DING-DING.

F  
A  
D  
E  
  
O  
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