

5-12-2017

Beyond Concrete Walls

Katelin Leahy
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

ScholarWorks Citation

Leahy, Katelin, "Beyond Concrete Walls" (2017). *Honors Projects*. 597.
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects/597>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research and Creative Practice at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Katelin Leahy
Honors Oproject, Winter 2017
Advisor: Todd Kaneko (Writing)

BEYOND CONCRETE WALLS

Adam

The grass in our neighborhood never stayed as green as it did in the fall. Summer grass was patched with a soft hay color, crab grass, and light green. Winter grass was cloudy and matted, holly trees dusted with snow. The winding street down the cul-de-sac, lined with boring trees, loosely alternating red and yellow had become a predictable pattern for me. The shushing of leaves across the pavement brandished my neighborhood quiet and banally suburban. My mother always said the move from New York to Delaware was hard on her and Dad, but the fall was a good reminder of what they had arrived for. All I knew was Delaware. It wasn't magical for me.

"I need to get outta here someday," I mumbled to myself, spinning the volume button. Nearly blasting was something 90s and grunge. I hummed along, wishing I was still 19.

I pulled into the driveway and was surprised to find mom's Buick there. She always worked Saturdays at the restaurant. Tanner was wrapped around her finger so she was probably still on the clock. I waited until the end of the song and killed the ignition.

I leaned on the steering wheel and looked out into the empty garage. Dad's blue Craftsman tool chest had been in the garage for years. It still looked new from lack of use. Mom tries to sell it every summer, and I practically beg her not to. I guess it's not really begging. But

it sure feels like it. I tell her I need it for the car. I keep all his stuff in there. In case he comes back.

Following a whimpering squeak, the front screen slammed behind me. I walked down our narrow hallway to the kitchen. Flipping through bills. Humming still.

Our house was modest and plain, but the open floorplan was great for inviting over guests. If we were to ever invite over guests. I looked up at the splintering cabinet door above the garbage can. The hinge was loose and rusty. Needed fixing. I tucked the mail under my arm and leaned against the wall spread across the kitchen and living room. Mom was in the kitchen trying to figure something out on her cellphone. She had her reading glasses perched on the end of her nose with her head slightly tilted back. Her hair in a loose bun as always, dingy blue apron still taut around her small waist. She pressed a few more buttons before she looked up and saw me leaning nearby. She shifted her gaze back to the phone.

“I can’t get those pictures Aunt Tilly sent me out of the dang envelope,” she grumbled.

“You mean your text messages?” I asked setting my keys and the mail onto the counter.

She fumbled over the buttons on her pink Razr before handing it over to me. She crossed her arms.

“See, you just have to press options and then save image. That will save it to your pictures. You can see that when you press media,” I told her.

I turned the slim phone back to her. She shrugged and flipped it shut. She leaned against the counter rubbing her neck.

“I hate these phones. They’re so hard to use. It’s 2007, can’t they come up with something easier?” she grumbled.

I felt old hearing that. I couldn't imagine how she felt. A waitress at 52. Son, 33, still at home, working the job he got after he dropped out of college. Her potential was greater than mine and I still managed to fail out. I tried not to focus on it.

Mom was irritated about something and I wasn't sure what. If Tanner let her home early, she must have forgotten something. She didn't look like she had been home for long. Her shoes were still on and Rennie our boxer mix was still sleeping in his bed. He flopped onto his back, legs kicking out as if to jump over something. I flipped through the mail until I saw a white envelope with the Delaware state emblem on it. It was navy and speckled with metallic across the calligraphy and dorky looking settlers. They seemed to look less charming each time I got one of these letters. I sighed loudly as I opened it and began reading.

"I knew you were getting it today," she told me. "Figured you'd be home after restocking."

She was right. I had slept in after my double, made coffee, and left the house quickly for my weekly managerial restocking duties. I looked at her. She was focused on me now. Arms still crossed. Head tilted to the right. Mom was never one for being soft about things and I couldn't blame her. She grew up smack dab in the middle of seven siblings in a small apartment in the Bronx. After dad got convicted it only seemed to amplify her coarse nature. But even without words she was still my mother and she didn't let me forget that she would always be there for me. *I'm all about action*, she'd remind me. *I ain't much for words, but you's always know where you stand with me*. That didn't make these conversations easy.

"What do you want me to say?" I said a little too tersely.

"It's his last chance, Adam," she said barely above a whisper.

"I know," I said softer, pulling back my tone.

“Are you going to talk to him?”

“Eventually, yeah,”

“Waste of time,” she breathed.

We stared at each other in silence. Each of us waited for the other to speak. In the beginning, it was mom. She always “went above her better judgment” to speak first. I knew it was hard for her. So, in the last seven years, I was the one to speak first. Hoping that might calm her nerves, ablaze with anger and appalled I could have any desire to still speak to him. But in the last three years, we both said nothing at all.

“I should be going. I told Tanner I left my Newports on the counter,” she said pulling one from the pack in her apron. She lit it and inhaled deeply.

“Yeah, whatever,” I said turning away.

I threw the letter onto the counter and kicked the trashcan. The tin crashed against the linoleum.

“Don’t you do that to me,” she said raising her voice.

I felt a drop of guilt seep into my throat. I picked up the can. I could feel the heat radiating off her body. Six years after my father’s B&E conviction, she sat me down and explained that in a year, my father was eligible for parole. She said we would get a letter in the mail explaining the date and time of his parole hearing, and that with good behavior and a clean pee test, he’d be out. The first time the letter came I was ecstatic. But he failed that hearing because of an altercation with a guard. *Don’t get’cher hopes up, kiddo*, she’d say each year the new letter came. But I did anyway.

“I just don’t want to talk about it,” I growled.

She sighed and took off her glasses. She itched her eyebrow with the hand that held her cigarette. Another few inhales. I knew she was trying, but she hadn't seen him in over a decade. How would she know how he's changed? After I got my own car, I could visit him on my own without her taking me. Since then, I had closed her out of this part of my life, for her sake and mine. She wished I could just let him go and I couldn't do that. And that drove her crazy because she could. And she had years ago.

"Of course you don't. Don't fill me in on how he lets you down this time," she said, finishing the last drag and crushing it into the nearby ashtray.

"I'll make grilled cheese for dinner," I said attempting a truce.

"Yeah, whatever," she said, heading for the door.

She kicked the trashcan across the clear across the kitchen. Rennie stopped kicking his legs.

Caroline

Crows circled the 4-way stop down the road. They squawked plans to trap the poor little mice that scurried across the road. Go little guys! You gross me out, but I would hate to see you suffer! The forest edge ran alongside the country road. It looked like my backyard as a kid. Reds, oranges, yellows filled my heart up and crunched underneath my feet. Fall in Delaware is beautiful. It's the high queen of seasons, my aunt used to say, reigning over the court of the Earth. The air is so clear and the sky a benevolent gray. It was quiet and calm, and I loved it that way.

My ears began to ring as the mechanical work echoed through the smudged plate glass window and permeated the small, stuffy waiting room. I shifted in my seat and cringed at it, the walls were a horrid gray-white that reminded me of wet cement. Corny red painting stripes along the walls reminded me of my little cousin's room when he was three. Julien loved fast cars and by golly, he was going to have racing stripes on his walls.

Hissing compressed tanks, industrial drills and metal against metal always had irked me unless I knew it was just my dad fixing something at home or working at the base. Oh, Dad. He would be livid if he knew I went to Martin's instead of coming to him first. But, he also didn't need to know I had jumped a curb backing out of a spot because I was on my phone trying to wire money to Stephanie. While I found myself a much more distracted driver in the fall, this minor incident had nothing to do with my affinity for gazing at scenery versus the road. When I reminded myself of that, my stomach churned the guilt that had settled nicely at the top of my stomach. Still, he had worked as an airplane mechanic for the better part of his career in the Airforce and it felt wrong to take Stacy to anyone else but him. Dad did work for Marvin a few times out of the year on his C208, so Martin had promised not to say anything. I felt like I was

sixteen again, worried about Dad's approval and his imminent feelings of betrayal. I reminded myself that I had a master's degree now. It was a marker of my adulthood, and that I shouldn't allow myself to feel so caught up in my dad's well-meaning insistence on helping me with this damn car. I scolded myself for being dramatic. I loved my parents, but I was ready move out. Twenty-four years is enough time with them. Curse you, student loans.

I sighed and continued to flip through the *Dover Post*. A woman from Wilmington had just won the Pulitzer Prize for an investigative piece on the treatment of dairy cows in Wisconsin. She smiled brightly for the camera in a pin-striped blue suit, shaking hands with some guy. Her locs hugged her suit along the curvature of her spine. I wondered where she got that necklace.

"Uh, miss," said a dark-haired mechanic, nervously raking his fingers through his greasy hair. "We got a problem,"

"Lovely," I said looking up. "What's wrong?"

"You're the one with the Malibu, right?" he asked, shifting his weight and looking at me nervously. "Well, the tire got fixed no problem, but your axel is bent a little bit and, well, have you heard any rattling coming from the engine?"

It made sense that this would happen now. I was supposed to go to Newark for a conference over the weekend and help Mom on Thursday deliver cakes to the benefit dinner at the university. I sighed and called Noam.

"Hey gorgeous! I can't talk long, but how are you? Little Tabitha just threw up again and she wants more ice chips and crayons," he said, exhausted, but trying to be cheery.

“Not so good. It wasn’t just the tire. The axel is bent beyond repair and now apparently, my timing chain is going. The guy said they’re closing tomorrow for a company anniversary party and that a new axel and timing will take some time to come in,”

“Oh geez, Caroline, that really sucks,” he said hushed. “Well, my shift ends in about an hour. I can come by to pick you up after that and we could grab sushi after?”

“I’m really not feeling up for raw fish,” I sighed. “Could we do takeout?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll call you when I’m leaving the hospital. I love you,”

“Love you, too,”

I clicked end and sat back in the uncomfortable chair. *Now* how was I going to explain this to Dad? I was used to lying to help Stephanie, but I didn’t even want to think about it right now. I got towed? No, he’d think I did something heinous like hit another car. I hadn’t briefed Martin on a story like that either. I didn’t want to bother him? Now even I wouldn’t believe that. He never had a problem helping me. I knew his grumbling was just a way of giving me a hard time. He’d always fixed my cars, but just this once I’d wished I’d listened to Mom about car advice over Dad. I went between a Camry and a Malibu for weeks, test driving each car and weighing my options. But, my dad eventually swayed me. *I ran my Chevy into the ground!*, *Caroline!*, he’d say, *You’re getting a good American car, Caroline!* What Dad often neglected in his tale about running his Chevy into the ground was that when he helped my cousin Rupert move to college, he drove the car into a ditch to avoid a deer, thereby *literally* running it into the ground. I found that detail out a week after he came home. He and mom were whispering at the dinner table over beer and tea, respectively. Now, I replay the moment in my head when Dad came home that day. Eyes and face drooping. My father wasn’t always an emotional man, but he

did love that truck. My phone buzzed, a text from Noam saying he was outside. I walked to the counter before heading out.

“Hey, my ride is here. Am I all set to leave?” I asked the woman at the counter.

“Yeah, just about” she said. “I need you to initial here, sign here,”

I pulled a pen from my purse and scratched my signature across the order form for the parts.

“Do I want to know how much this will cost?” I asked begrudgingly.

“Hope you have a better Tuesday,” she said, half-smiling, handing me my receipt.

I thanked her and walked to Noam’s car. I shoved the receipt into my purse without a glance. He kissed my cheek as I got in.

“So will it be Thai or burgers?” he asked pushing some stray brown hairs out of my face.

“Oh, and do you need to stop at home for anything? I figured we’d go back to my place,”

There was no way I was going home to face my father at this point. I would text m om after dinner to let her know what happened. She’d understand. It would be better if she told him anyway. Give him time to cool down. I loved the man, but I was not feeling equipped to deal with the way his mustache drooped in disappointment. Even a Daddy’s girl can be disappointing.

“No, I’m good. I left some clothes on your dresser last week, I think,” I told him. “I can take a taxi early in the morning to get some work clothes from home,”

“Mkay,” he said backing out of the spot.

We were silent for a few minutes and I watched the trees whiz by as we headed to the burger joint.

“You know...” Noam began. “Sunday will be my only 3rd shift for a while. So, I can take you to work until your car gets fixed,”

“That’d be great!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, but it’d be kinda a lot to drive from my place, to your parent’s house, to your work...” he trailed off.

I got a pit in my stomach. I knew where he was going. He did that trailing off thing every time he wanted to move our relationship forward in some way. He did that when invited back to his place for the first time after our seventh date. He did that when he wanted me to go to Vietnam with him and his parents to meet his extended family over New Year’s. And now, he was doing it to ask me to move in with him. I wonder if the Pulitzer Prize winning woman in the *Dover Post* is seeing anyone.

Marcy

The alarm blared through my left ear and I jumped awake. A bolt of pain shot through my skull as I ripped the phone off my face. I clicked off the alarm and shut it. I must have fallen asleep listening to his voicemails. The clock on my nightstand said 6:43 but I couldn't bring myself to get up just yet. The sun cut through a narrow slit in my blackout curtains such that my favorite sleeping position was always disturbed by morning. I lazily rolled over, grabbing the edge of the curtain so the autumn morning could cast into my bedroom more evenly. Orange had begun to paint itself onto the large white ash tree in the front yard. The wind picked up, intermittently carrying the soft leaves to the dewy grass below. I never liked autumn. Its change was swift and inconspicuous, colluding with the rhythms of earth, bringing about winter: the season that stands so cold and still. Julien loved autumn. He crunched every leaf he could find at the park. He looked up at the trees eagerly as they fell from their branches delicately into his eight-year-old arms. I began to play back last autumn and it was hard to find something concrete.

The light continued to cut through my small window onto the faded mauve duvet. I ought to buy a new one, I thought to myself. I got lost in the idea of down feathers and polka dot schemes when I remembered that one of Julien's oxygen bills had come in the day before. This brought me back to reality. I clicked one and reentered my voicemail password. Might as well start where I left off.

Hi Mom! Piano lessons got done early, can you pick me up now? And, uh – hey shush Nick, I'm asking – can, uh, Nick sleep over this weekend? He got the new Tomb Raider: Legend game for XBOX and I really want to play it!

I clicked "9" to save the message and tucked the phone up to my left ear again.

Mom, it's Julien. I'm calling from school. I accidentally dropped my phone outside when I was walking into s-school. The screen broke. I'm s-so sorry, Mom..."

I clicked "9" to save the message as tears welled in my eyes. I'd gotten so mad at him for that. But that prepaid Firefly gadget was not cheap, and the clinic had cut back on my hours that month to balance some of the budget. I pushed the phone against my temple and turned up the volume. This message was particularly quiet from his whispering.

Mom! Mom! I know I'm not supposed to call you during school but you'll never guess! Mr. Chapin chose me to score the chase scene in community theatre play at the end of the summer. He says if I get really good, I can do the whole show! He's gonna have me learn Arabesque No. 2 to start out with! I'll tell you more when I get home... I love you!

I stared in the mirror. Just make a list, Marcy. It'll make things easier for yourself. I looked down at the stack of paperwork, intimidated. I pressed 9 again to save Julien's message. The automated voicemail woman began to play the next message from the hospital: *You have one unheard message. First unheard message sent yesterday at 3:46p.m....*

... Your son, Julien, is ready to be transferred to Nemours. Please review the documents we have mailed to you. It is imperative his care be left in the hands of Dr. Truman Hassin. Dr. Hassin has personally offered to provide your son's care for as long as needed...

I stared at the mirror. Behind me I saw the seashell printed shower curtain and scoffed. I hated my bathroom scheme. The wallpaper was a tacky blue with sailboats and oars and lures. The plush of the bathmat had been matted and seen better days. I never read the magazines I had stacked up in the corner; 90s Cosmopolitans. But Julien had the ingenious idea to use them as a step stool when he was potty training, so I kept them. God, he was such a smart kid. *Is*, I reminded myself. He *is* a smart kid. The bags under my eyes were more pronounced. So, I began

to do what the burnout-looking woman at the makeup counter told me to do in the morning. I held the half-moon cucumber slices underneath my eyes. After about 10 minutes, I rinsed my face and rubbed in the cream. I still looked 43. I dabbed on foundation, concealer, rouge, and waterproof mascara. Always waterproof. I stared back at myself. I ran the too-expensive tube of coral pink across my lips. I still looked 43. I clicked end on the voicemail call and tossed the Nokia through the door onto my bed. There wasn't any noise in the bathroom. But it didn't feel silent. Silence wasn't silent anymore. It felt like static echoing down an endless wind tunnel. No matter how hard I tried, I began to hear the message play back in my head.

... *Nemours*...

I stared at the mirror. My roots were atrocious. My dyed blonde hair was tangled and uncooperative. Steam was rising off the curlers on the rack leaning on the sea green porcelain sink. I yanked the pieces of hair that really needed to be combed. Probably a little too hard, as I thought about the possibility of them transferring Julien again. The last time we had been to Nemours was the day after he fell into the coma. Once there was nothing they could do, doctors airlifted him to Nemours and left him in the ICU for a week. I remember driving the thirty-minute stretch, wondering what his teachers might say, or if he'd miss much more school. I remember keeping the plans at the end of the month to visit my father in South Bethany, thinking it would all be over soon. We were going to have lunch and help him put siding on the house and get the gutters ready for the contractors to install. I remember going over everything he had eaten, touched, every place he had been, who he had been with, and wondered if I had just protected him a little more he might be awake right now.

... *Please review the following documents*...

I stared at the mirror. Today I had to choose from pastel blue cardigan, or a pastel peach blouse with lavender embroidery. I hated pastels. They accentuated the fact that my baby weight had become a life sentence. But mom wore pastels well.

All that document talk was red tape that meant was ‘call your insurance company to double check the heart-breaking reality that your HMO will not cover the majority of the medical tests your son needs to advance his care.’

It is imperative his care be left in the hands of Dr. Truman Hassin. Dr. Hassin has personally offered to provide your son’s care....

I stared at the mirror. I fluffed my hair back with more spray and a few spritzes of Chanel No. 5. I remembered Dr. Hassin from the initial visit. He was a kind, well-spoken doctor. His wife worked as his biller, and she helped me find affordable ways to keep Julien in the ICU when he needed it most. Dr. Hassin also was the one who had recommended Noam to me when Julien was transferred back to Bayhealth Medical Center. And indeed, Noam was a good nurse to Julien. He made sure Julien was always washed and his feeding tube was working properly and the oxygen was at the right levels. Hourly he checked on Julien, and even read him stories on his lunch break. So, going back to Nemours straight into the hands of a kind and determined pediatric neurologist was comforting. At least, as comforting as it can be.

...for as long as needed.

“For as long as needed,” I said to no one.

I stared at the mirror. I let the words hang in the air. They dangled to my shreds of hope like a pathetic ribbon across a chair after a balloon has been popped.

Adam

I came in through the garage with Rennie quietly and shut the door behind me. It was late, but I could hear *The Sopranos* on in the living room and smoke hanging around the dim hanging light. I let him off his leash and he scampered across the tile into his bed. Mom was on the couch with a smoke and an iced tea watching intently. She always fell asleep on the couch after about a half hour, but somehow this time she was still awake. There were half a dozen butts in the ashtray. I watched her take another drag and lean her arm lazily over the side. Because she fell asleep so often, I was always worried that the cigarette would fall onto the carpet, ignite the living room, and kill us both. She lazily took another drag and chuckled at the TV through her exhale.

I set my keys down and looked at the envelope. Nearly a week in that spot, and it had collected a decent amount of dust. I still had no answers. I walked to the sink to wash my hands.

“I thought you had a double tomorrow,” I called to her.

“Can’t sleep,” she said robotically. “I’ll probably call in at seven,”

“Is that what these muffins are for?” I asked.

My mother never baked. It wasn’t that she couldn’t. She knew all her family’s Italian recipes. She just didn’t bake unless she need to anymore.

“Yeah,” she said, sitting up and crushing her cigarette in the tray. “Tanner’ll forget he’s mad at me once he tries those,”

I grabbed a beer from the fridge and sat at the table. I pulled a cigarette from my back pocket and reread the letter. I rubbed my forehead and tried to find a good way to approach this. The holidays were coming up, so I knew that a guilt trip might be successful. But that was worst case scenario, right? He didn’t deserve to feel like that was his only motive. Our relationship was

rocky through the years because of these hearings. He'd be doing great, I'd see him every week, we'd catch up. You know, normal father son stuff behind plate glass in a prison visiting center. But every time he failed, it was the same thing over and over. He would apologize incessantly. Every time. Over and over. Each visit more pathetic than the last. Until I finally forgave him. Usually, I didn't mean it the first time I said it. But those were the magic words because instantly visits would get better after that. He'd petition for more time in visitation. Use his commissary more wisely. He'd done that so many times. But I had to hand it to him. Each time he failed he got better, so I'd eventually mean it when I said I'd forgiven him. Only difference now was that this time around was his last chance.

I sighed audibly and somewhat loud. I looked over at my mother, tired, but clearly restless. I don't think she'd slept much more than a wink in the past few days. But that's how it is. The letter gets here and she crashes. Then, no sleep till I come home with promises from dear old dad. This was his last chance. I didn't care what she thought. I owed it to the both of us to make this attempt count.

"I think I want to talk about it," I said out loud.

She didn't move at first. Tony Soprano kept blabbing and suddenly she pressed record and shut off the television. Her walk to the kitchen table was labored, but she sat next to me and stared at my face. She looked confused and numb.

"I know you hate him, but I want him in my life, mom," I pleaded softly.

She could tell I was trying my best. She untucked her reading glasses from her collar and reread the letter.

"How many times has he failed the test?" she asked.

"Six, I think," I told her.

“God, why do they keep offering him parole, then?”

“He has ‘good behavior’. I guess that trumps the tainted pee. Plus, I heard from Sam he’s good with the guards. Let’s ‘em know when something gonna go down, or if a guy in the block’s got it out for ‘em,”

She blew air out her mouth in condescension. She reread the letter intently.

“You have the money for this?” she asked, still looking at the paper.

“Yes, it’s only \$65 bucks,”

“That’s \$65 of *your* money, Adam. Don’t play trivialities with it,”

“God, mom, I just... what do I do? I can’t do it after this. If he fails, I’m done,”

She looked at me and dropped the letter. She tipped her head down and looked at me over her reading glasses. Her look said, *you said that last time*.

“Stay firm,” she began. “Don’t let him know you’re willing to compromise. If he tries to guilt trip you, or appeal to some connection he has with you that ‘no one else understands’, tell him to save it. I know you love him, but he can be a...”

She closed her eyes and bit her lip.

This was more emotion I had from seen from her in years. I hesitated to ask what their marriage was like, but it was clear he had done a number on her. Her motherly instinct came out in odd ways. I appreciated it now. More than I had in a while.

“I hope you mean it. I hope you mean it’s your last,” she whispered. “I can’t do this for you anymore. I can’t watch this happen. You’ll need to move out or something, I don’t fucking know,”

She began to shake as she lit up another cigarette. I sat quietly hoping she would stop. Stop smoking. Stop hinting how horrible she thought he was. She never understood how much I

loved him. She never understood how much of a bond we shared, and her advice made it seem like she was trying to get me to once and for all shut him out. She buried her face in the crook of her arm that held the cigarette. It was poised delicately between her two fingers. I got up to get a muffin.

I read and reread the letter, coming up with a plan. She laid still for a while, not moving. I carefully pulled the cigarette from her hand. It had burned slowly. Now it had gotten dangerously close to the filter. I plucked it from her fingers and ashed it in the tray. She didn't need any more scars. I carried her to her room and laid her on the tangle of blankets. I pulled a thin wool sheet over her body and she stirred. She pulled me close to her. I could feel the tears on her face.

"I love you, Adam," she said. "I always will."

I squeezed her arm and shut the door behind me quietly as I left. I decided to take her advice: be firm. Because this time, it was for all the marbles.

Caroline

Breakfast in our household had never changed. The bay window facing our backyard cast a nice view of the sunset across the scuffed maple table. I stabbed my Eggo waffle with a fork and a plate full of too much syrup, as my mom lovingly slid a banana across the table, never taking her eyes off her Sudoku puzzle. Dad cleared his throat. I drank a few sips of my orange juice and bit off a piece of the banana.

“What do you think of used car dealerships?” I asked mom.

My dad fluffed his newspaper and cleared his throat. She looked over at him and rolled her eyes.

“They’re... just fine? I mean, I don’t know what you’re getting at, dear?” she began.

Truth be told, I didn’t either. But I was mulling over the pamphlet I had received from Stephanie in the mail. I remember it looked cut and pasted together from old magazines, but still it was eye catching. I couldn’t escape the fact that it looked like a killer’s ransom note, with all its neatly cut out letters. But you do with what you have in while in jail, I suppose. I couldn’t tell them that I had gotten it from Stephanie.

“Why do you ask?” my mother pried. “Is the Malibu really in that bad of shape?”

Dad coughed and put down his newspaper.

“You know, I’m still disappointed that you felt like you couldn’t come to me for your repairs,” he said in his Disappointed Dad voice.

“Dad, you know that hasn’t worked in like two years,” I lied.

I felt some minor guilt sink in. He looked at me puzzled but then gave a quick wink. He sipped his coffee and sat up.

“I know, I know,” he chuckled. “But really, that could have happened to any car, a bent axel. And a timing chain? Psshhh piece of cake. I can put half a C-130 together with my damn eyes closed. Besides, how’d that axel thing happen anyway?”

It had been a week, and he had cooled down from my daughter-ly betrayal. But he was definitely not ready to hear the real reason why my car broke down. Thankfully, I was saved by the bell. His watch began to beep.

“0700 hours, time for work,” he said clicking off the beeping.

He kissed my mother and gave me a brief side hug and went out the door. My mother went back to her Sudoku. I contemplated telling her about Stephanie’s business idea. But I wasn’t sure how to approach it.

“I probably won’t be home until later tonight. My last patient is at six and I’m helping Noam pick out a new desk,” I said into my plate of syrup.

“Mmm, sounds good,” Mom said back, scratching down a four. “You two have been spending a lot of time together,”

“Yeah, he, uh...”

“Honey, I’m old, not dumb. You know Dad would help you move stuff over there. With his big man Chevy truck,” she said, trying to lighten it up. “I’m happy things are movin’ along with you two,”

I didn’t say anything. It wasn’t because I wasn’t ready to move out. It was a lot of things. Things I wasn’t ready for. Now was a time as any to change the subject.

“Hey, have you talked to Steph lately?” I asked meekly.

She wrote down a few more numbers and took a sip of her tea.

“Well, I got a letter from her. Wants to start a used car dealership when she gets out. She thinks her lawyer is really gonna pull through, and I gotta say, mom, this is really looking like –”

“Stop,” she said, holding up her hand.

There was tension between us now. The vein in her neck started pulsing. She put down her puzzle book and slid her tea mug over to rest her elbows on the table. She looked forward at me and began to speak.

“You and I both know where this is going, honey. She’s not the person you think that she is. And I really hate for you to go down this road again, you know, with everything that’s happened –”

“What does that mean?!” I said, voice cracking wildly.

She leaned back in horror and I apologized.

“It just... you and dad have been telling me that for years. If she’s not my sister for Christ’s sake, then who is she? I know she isn’t perfect but she’s still my sister, right?”

My mom looked up at the ceiling glassy eyed. She tucked her fist underneath her chin to cover her quivering lip. She sighed and put down her arms again. She stared ahead of me intently.

“Do you remember when you were eight and Stephanie was eleven and she came home with a bunny rabbit for you?” she asked me.

“Yeah, Mr. Carrots,” I said.

“Why did Mr. Carrots die?” she asked me.

A cold chill ran down my spine.

“Stephanie told me when I was away at summer camp Dad forgot to feed him,” I said shakily. “That’s what you told me, too,”

She turned her head sideways and squinted. I could feel daggers poking my sides and my heart leaping into my throat. I could feel the truth spilling out of her.

“Stephanie took him out to play in the garage,” she began, leaning forward. “And when we came out to check on her, there was a pool of blood around the rabbit...”

She looked away from me and shuddered. I could feel the waffles swimming around in my stomach acid. She kept her eyes closed and took a few deep breaths. She looked up again, eyes locked on mine.

“... She walked toward us and said, ‘Look, mommy. I made you and Carrie a lucky rabbit’s foot keychain. Oh, and I’m *so* sorry about Mr. Carrots,’”

I was horrified. I couldn’t even speak. A cold chill splintered from the top of my neck down to my abdomen. It curled around and I started chewing my cheek. I began to perspire. I tasted metal in my mouth. Noam’s knock on the door made me jump violently. My mother’s eyes were still locked on me.

“The next time you see her. Ask her about Mr. Carrots,”

Marcy

I dipped my hand back into the tub of warm water and slid the sponge down Julien's arm. The tub was that pale hospital room pink. I dipped the sponge back into the water and wringed it out. I wiped my forehead, scanning his body for any more dried soap.

"Do you want some help Marcy?" asked Noam poking his head in the room.

I put the sponge back in the tub and kept my eyes on Julien. He looked peaceful. But he always looked like that.

"No," I told him. "I'm just about done. I was gonna read him a *Captain Underpants* book before I tucked him in."

We both looked down on him, laying there in his sterile, cold hospital bed. The room he was in at Bayhealth Medical was nice enough. Some of the nurses picked daisies from the garden in the late summer to put in his room. They were dried up now. He had a nice view of the central circle outside the hospital. It wasn't the greatest, but it was better than some of the rooms overlooking the generators or the industrial laundry service checkpoint. I kept a chest of his toys in the corner, with his XBOX and a few games, in case he woke up. Kids at school drew him pictures and cards and those were still hanging on the wall near his bedside. It felt like home. Or at least, when he woke up, I wanted him to feel that way.

Noam walked to his bedside table.

"*Wicked Wedgie Woman* again?"

I looked back at him, "Yeah, it's his favorite. He says I'm the Wicked Wedgie Woman when I tell him to go to bed instead of letting him play video games. It's never mean, more joking than anything."

"Well, I'm sure that was still a challenge for you,"

“It *is*,” I said tersely, glaring at him.

“Past tense, I’m sorry, Marcy,” he whispered.

I turned back to Julien and said, “You can get me another towel.

I looked back after a few seconds and he had already left.

I pulled up a chair and stroked his damp hair. Noam came back in quietly and handed me what I’d asked for, and the good the electric blanket. The mint green one. It had five heat settings, a token of his apologies. One of my rules with Julien’s nurses was using present tense when we talked about him. It was hard enough taking care of my comatose son without remembering that our memories existed in the past, and that I faced the possible reality that we might not make new ones any time soon. Noam handed me a pillow and blanket, figuring I would stay the night on the pullout couch; he was right. Before he left, he helped me drape the electric blanket over Julien and reached around the respirator to plug it in.

“You think he’ll ever be off oxygen?” I asked.

“Dunno,” said Noam. “That’s the doctor’s call not mine, and while normally I could give you an educated and probably accurate guess, comas are tricky.”

I sighed.

Noam left the room again. I tossed the pillow and blanket on the chair I kept beside Julien’s bed. I tossed the cushions off the pullout couch just as Noam came back into the room with tea.

“You are the sweetest,” I told him.

“Chamomile and lemon, just how you like it,” he said smiling.

“You’re a nurse on one of the biggest floors in this hospital. You have the second biggest patient load of all the nurses. How do you have time for all of this?”

“I don’t. My shift ended a half hour ago. I’m here for you now,”

I could have cried, but I held it in. Coma or no coma, I was not going to cry in front of my son. I set the tea on the window ledge as Noam helped me get the sheets fitted on the couch.

“You both will get through this. He’ll be in good hands at Nemours. Dr. Hassin really is incredible,”

I smiled reassuringly to him as I sat on the end of the bed, “I’m just worried about the timeline. It’s been two months and we’ve already had so many tests done. I’m doing less of that whole wracking my brain, trying to think what I did, or what I could have done. But even more pressing is moving, and my house. I need to rent it out since my job at Wilmington Correctional doesn’t start for a nearly another month.”

“You got a job at Wilmington Correctional?” he asked surprised.

He sat on the edge of the bed with me.

“Yeah, I went to college up there,” I began. “Got some of my clinical hours done there. One of my advisors from the social work program put in a good word for me, but they’re still working on finding a place for me. Even if they find a place for me, paying for an apartment and the mortgage will bleed me dry.”

“You know...” Noam began, standing to grab the pillows. “I, uh, was looking to find a new place myself. Harrington is nice and all, but being closer to the hospital would really help me out on those later nights. M-maybe I could take a look? Y’know, so you wouldn’t have to go through a realtor or nothing?”

I looked over at him. He had a small pleading look on his face.

“Things moving along with Caroline, huh?” I said smiling.

“Well, I sure hope so. She’s been staying at my place pretty often in the last few weeks. Car trouble and stuff. It’s been hard to bring it up, but maybe if I show her a place we could have of our own, she’d go for it. My roommates have been pretty bad lately, too. And my lease is almost up. Hell, I’d love to rent out your place!”

I wondered if this bordered on any weird professional boundaries for Noam. Probably not. He was already dating my niece. He looked giddy, and suddenly his phone rang. He excused himself and waved goodbye. I could tell his offer was sincere, and I knew how well he had cared for Julien these past months. Still, I was a little wary about Noam accepting my offer. The house was a simple ranch, partially finished basement, two bed, one and a half bath. To keep up with mortgage payments, I’d need at least \$1,100 a month not including utilities. I looked over at Julien, soundless, motionless, but thankfully not breathless. At least I had that.

Caroline

I pulled off the road and just sat for a while. I flipped open my phone, no calls from mom or dad or Noam. I pressed end until the phone screen went black. I pressed a few more buttons to be sure. Before sliding my phone into the glove compartment, I remembered to take out the battery. Something Stephanie taught me when she wanted to be invisible.

I squinted ahead of me. In the distance, I could see what looked like a shack with neon signs. The sky was still gray, but less benevolent. The clouds swept across the sky in haphazard formation. Long and thin, they were covering the sun and the sky. I put Stacy in drive and pulled back onto the gravel stretch.

Visiting Stephanie was going to be a challenge. I wanted to help so much, but with my car and the idea of commitment, driving to Sussex Correctional was going to require a break. I hoped the shack would be a nice diner. I could sip some chamomile tea over a short stack of fluffy pancakes.

The shack was actually a bar, built with now worn redwood and gimmicky neon. It seemed fitting to sit along the beach littered with cigarette butts and long forgotten beach umbrellas. A chill crept down my neck as I closed the car door and stared out at the Atlantic. The waves crashed in the distance and I felt the ocean air rush rhythmically across the sand. Clouds rolled in slow formation as the storm began to brew. I pulled the cashmere closer to my chin; it would have to do. Quickly, I ducked into the building

The bar held a timey, but sophisticated charm about it. There were framed newspapers from the fisherman who caught a shark off the edge of the bay in the sixties and other memorabilia.

I picked a seat at the bar next to tap and waited for service.

“What’s your drink?” the man mumbled as he walked out from the kitchen door, not bothering with eye contact.

“Can I have a menu?” I asked.

The man looked at me intently, a curious glance in his eye. He shuffled his feet and the corner of his lip turned up to reveal a small smile. I felt my cheeks go hot. I knew how I looked. A woman, in a bar off the beach. With no one in it. In January. And, I was asking for a menu.

“I’ll just have a rusty nail,” I blurted, recalling my father’s drink.

His eyes widened and he pursed his lips in what looked like surprise. He turned around to make it.

“What brings you to Slaughter Beach?” he asked.

“Errands,” I lied.

I couldn’t tell a stranger about Stephanie. It was shame enough to people who knew me. He placed a napkin down and set the small glass atop it. To my surprise, he grabbed an identical drink and sat on the stool behind the counter.

“I manage this place,” he said. “Plus, I haven’t had one in a few hours. I’m Adam, by the way,”

I thought that was a cue for a chuckle, so I did. He half smiled again and we sat silently for a few minutes sipping our drinks. When he turned to grab the bottle again, I studied his face. He had an interesting profile. Strong jaw, but low cheekbones. A slight under bite? Blazing green eyes. I couldn’t tell if I was attracted to him, or the whiskey was getting the better of me very quickly. That made me feel uneasy. I did my best to mask my discomfort as the whiskey blazed a trail of hot tar my throat. I set the glass down as gently as I could.

“Don’t see much business?” I asked, attempting to make conversation.

“Not usually on a Wednesday afternoon, no,” he said with a flare in his voice.

I couldn’t tell if he was being facetious or just an asshole. His features seemed less desirable now. Again, who was thinking here? Me, or the whiskey?

I smiled, “Yes, I see. Perhaps weekends are a better time for this sort of occasion. Another?”

“What do you do that you get to leave work so early and hit the bars?” he asked, sliding my glass back to me.

“I’m a speech language pathologist. I work out of an office that specializes in working with people with social communication disorders and autism. I make my own hours,” I said.

Talking about work was sobering. I knew that was definitely me talking and not the whiskey.

He stood and began cleaning glasses. “Huh, sounds interesting. And you said you come this way to run some errands?”

“Y-yeah, you know grocery shopping,” I mumbled. “Another? But just the whiskey this time. No Drambuie.”

He slid the glass back and I took it like a shot. A little dribbled down my mouth and I wiped it away.

“You sure, just errands?” he chuckled. “I mean, I hate to pry, but you’re really puttin’ ‘em away right now,”

I could start to feel the buzz and it was working. It felt good, like a metaphor for all of those days I came home and ripped out my French twist and flopped onto the bed.

“I guess since you won’t tell me why you’re *really* in Slaughter Beach, why did you pick this bar in particular?”

I cocked my head to one side. I was feeling a bit looser.

“Honestly? I thought it might be a coffee shop, or-or a cute little diner,” I said.

He laughed really hard and poured me another whiskey without me having to ask.

“Sorry, that’s just really funny. A lot of patrons think that when they see this place from down the road. Must be something traveler thing,”

He took another swig and I matched him.

“Got any family in the area?”

“Actually, my sister’s in jail right now. At Sussex,” 3-drinks-in-Caroline said. “She’s waiting for her trial. One charge of shoplifting, Class G felony. She could spend up to three years in prison if she’s convicted. But there’s still good in her, I see it. She’s my sister. I wish my family felt the same way,”

“I’m sorry, that must be hard,” the bartender said, sliding a glass into the crate.

“Yeah,” I said, taking another swig. “She’s a bit of a nymphomaniac,”

He smiled, “That’s not usually punishable... by law,”

“Oh wait, no, I mean klepto – kleptomaniac!” I blurted, slightly slurred. I burped, and held my chest. I took a deep breath and said slowly, “I think you overserved me, sir,”

“No, I just think that you’re not the type of girl used to whiskey at four in the afternoon,” he chuckled, polishing off his fourth glass. “I’ll grab you some water,”

He was right. He reached behind the counter and poured me a glass of lemon water with the soda gun. He slid the jar of pretzel sticks towards me.

“Here, to soak up the regret,” he said gently.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, gulping the water.

I felt him watching me intently.

“I never do this by the way,” I said, crunching down on a pretzel.

“I know,” he chuckled. “I never asked – what’s your name?”

“Caroline,” I said. “Right now, Drunk Caroline”

He blew a soft laugh with his nose and turned up his lip. He sat down again and pulled the stool closer to the bar.

“My dad was in Sussex for a while. Since I was fourteen, actually. He was addicted to coke and got caught breaking and entering. He’s tried for parole a few times, but always manages to get hooked on the stuff these guys bring in, you know how,” he began.

“Ugh,” I groaned. “That’s terrible,”

Adam began wiping down the bar. His demeanor started to change. It was almost like there were two Adams: bartender Adam and real Adam. I’m not sure if he noticed the quick switch. He polished off his fourth glass. I don’t think it had affected him one bit. He flipped a tall glass in his hand and began polishing it.

“He got transferred to Wilmington a few years back. For his protection. There was a lot of bureaucratic stuff to work through,”

I stayed quiet.

“Anyways,” he said, slamming the glass into the crate.

We stayed silent and stared at each other. I had just told him things about myself. About Stephanie. I wasn’t sure if this was how one should talk to a bar keep, but if stereotypes meant anything, I was doing it right.

“Another?” he asked instinctively.

I slid my water glass toward him. It tipped over and shattered. Ice and glass scattered across the polished counter top.

“I’m a bit of a mess,” I admitted.

“Me too, Drunk Caroline. I understand,” he said, picking up the pieces.

Adam

The early January wind began to pick up as I fumbled with my keys. My eyes felt glassy and a razor-sharp pain blasted through my temple. I always regretted volunteering for doubles in the morning. It was a chance to make more money at least. I never sleep the night before a visit anyway.

The car was doing something rickety again. I fumbled with the knobs on the heat and the radio button backlights shut off. I slammed my hands on the dash of my shitty S-10.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit!” I roared.

I swerved a little and put a cigarette between my lips. Then, I remembered my resolution. I flicked the death stick out the window and sighed. I hadn’t even made it to my exit and I was feeling ready to light up. Cold turkey didn’t work. Those cassettes of subliminal messaging didn’t work. I rammed my knee underneath the steering wheel. Reaching across the seat I grabbed the small box and slapped a patch onto my forearm. I waited about five minutes and I began to relax again. I turned off the road when I saw my exit. I was in the parking lot before I knew it.

I sat in the truck for a few minutes longer. I flipped down the mirror.

“Dad, I –” I began.

This was stupid. I was gonna just sit here and practice what to say? The nicotine was pouring through my body. This dependence had to stop but damn if it didn’t feel good. I sat for a few more minutes running my options. I could give up. Turn around and get some extra sleep before work. Treat him like the adult he is and hope he does the right thing. But I knew my dad. Slowly I got out of the truck.

Inside, I paid the woman and walked through the metal detector.

“Hey Sam,” I said in a low voice.

Sam set down his crossword. He grabbed the metal detector and scanned it over me somewhat haphazardly. No beeps. He waved me through.

“Good luck, I hear it was rough back there today,” Sam said.

I nodded. I was pretty sure I had forgotten to take off my money clip, but somehow it didn’t go off.

I was thankful he had been moved to a lower security section in Wilmington for the last five years. But I knew him. Hearing something went wrong was nothing new. I hoped he wasn’t the cause. It always made things harder. I sat down at the stall in the row of relatives talking to their folks.

I picked up the receiver, “Hi Dad. Merry Christmas,”

“Hey, son,” he said back. “And Happy New Year,”

He put his hand against the glass and waited for me to return the gesture. He looked at me with hopeful eyes. They looked droopier than usual. Bloodshot. His lip quivered. The tufts of his hair looked mangled. At least what little of it was left. He looked older all of a sudden. Much, much older.

I used to do it as a kid. Put my hand on the glass. When I wanted to have a real connection with him beyond the glass. That nostalgia made it weak point for me during my visits. But I knew I had to stay strong. He knew this was an especially vulnerable time for me. I knew he knew the weight of our conversation. I compromised. I pressed my knuckles against the glass. He smiled in a tiny way and did it back. He dropped his hand quickly.

“So what’d you and your mom do for Christmas?” he asked. “How’s she doing?”

He knew not to ask about her. He knew I wasn't going to talk about mom. That was one thing she and I did agree on about dad. But he still asked. Every time.

"We saw grandma. Aunt Tilly picked her up from the home at noon. Ronny and I shot a few games of pool before Grandpa Harold got there. He said he saw you too," I told him.

He looked down at his hands.

"Yeah, he, uh, came to tell me about, you know, the business, this and that,"

We sat for a few more minutes and I pretended like I believed him. I knew they hadn't spoken in months. Grandpa Harold liked to piss off mom sometimes by telling her he visited dad in prison. It worked every year for at least three seconds before she'd laugh and say, *Harry you old bastard, he's just like you and that's why I ain't with him no more.*

He stayed looking at his knuckles the whole time. There was a new tattoo. A spade on his right middle finger. He was rubbing it.

"So, uh, what'd you get me, son? Heheh," he began with feigned enthusiasm.

I paused for a moment and pondered his selfishness and the awkward dynamic. I pulled out a laminated 3 panel pamphlet with horrible font and slid it under the two-centimeter gap in the glass. Dad always chose the visiting booth that was second most to the far left after we discovered the carpenter's error. We took advantage of it when we didn't want something in our conversation to be recorded. He began to flip through it and sighed.

"I... I don't know if I can do this son..." he mumbled as he began to slip it back underneath my side of the gap.

I stopped him and said, "Are you kidding me? This is your ticket out. Dad, I got your parole letter three weeks ago. Do you think I'm stupid? That's your last chance until your official release date in three years. It's your ticket *out!*"

He gave me a pained look, “Look, Adam, it’s just I got a lot going on and –”

“And what, Dad, are you too busy in here? Do you not have enough *time*?”

He looked at me and his eyes fell and his entire expression was vanilla. His smile lines drooped and made no sound. I was doing my best not to lunge through the glass. I held the receiver tight to my cheek.

“Now, son, if you would just understand that – “

“God dammit, Dad. You need this!” I said spitting and heaving.

I wiped the spit off my chin and whispered, “I need this.”

He tucked his head to his chest and ran his palms across his balding head. We didn’t say anything for a while. I had done what I set out to do. I made it clear that this was important to him and important to me. I was as clear as I could be. I thought I’d feel settled but I felt the opposite. It was all out of my hands now. But I didn’t want to leave yet.

“I started school again,” I said.

“That’s great, oh Adam I’m so proud of you,” he exclaimed.

“There’s a new regular at the bar. Her name is Caroline. Her sister is in the women’s section here,”

He looked up and smiled. He put his hand back on the glass. I didn’t move. He lowered his hand and rubbed his tattoo again. I knew he was waiting for me to say something reassuring. But I knew better this time.

“Go to at least the first meeting, Dad,” I said standing to leave. “Do you promise?”

Marcy

My too-tight-pre-Julien interview dress pants were proving to be especially tight on me today. As if I needed another reminder of my failing New Year's Resolution. I went for the brown skirt and pastel blue blouse instead. It made me look like a retired school teacher, but at least I'd be comfortable on my first day at Wilmington Correctional and for my presentation in front of the board. I decided to try and turn a new leaf at this place. The clinic I had been at for years was failed program after failed program, through no fault entirely of the patients'. I knew it was time to start doing something new.

The room was small. Very small, no more than 12x12. I suspected the walls were thin drywall when I heard the microwave next door. The carpet was an ugly gray, but it would have to do. It was weird being in front of a board of people. The projector had no hiccups, yet, and with the long table of constituents in front of me, I knew I need not be distracted by the ugly blue walls and lack luster lighting.

I clicked to the next slide.

“Essentially, I would call the program ‘Beyond Concrete Walls’, or BCW for short. Research suggests that prisoners who actively engage in reflection and processing of their actions better understand their incarceration patterns. Additionally, the effectiveness of group therapy has been widely established in programs like these in correctional facilities across the country. We aim to facilitate the understanding of their patterns in group and use some motivational interviewing techniques to help prisoners change their behavior. And because at this stage the program would be optional, this would look like any other program has already established within the mental health resources of Wilmington,”

I rolled back on my feet and stared out at the board. They were meticulously reviewing my documents and then checking my graphs and slides. I could feel the heat blowing out of the projector. I wondered if anyone else felt it, considering our tight quarters.

“Do you expect to be paid extra for this, Ms. Clore?” asked a stuffy, balding board member.

“Well, actually sir I would like to integrate this with my current responsibilities conducting assessments and individual therapy sessions,”

“How do you expect to recruit people to write to criminals?” asked an uptight, heavily rouged board member.

“Fliers, ads in the paper, something very low budget. I think it’s important that inmates feel like they have a chance to reenter society without blanket negative stigma”

“What about the lifers?” asked a greasy comb-over board member. “How do you expect them to make progress in your program?”

“Their components of therapy will look a little different, that’s true, but I don’t expect it will be to the detriment of other members or themselves. Instead, we’ll focus on developing healthy coping strategies to deal with the reality of their sentence, and for those on death row, the permanence of death,”

“Why do you think this program will benefit us running this institution?” asked a board member with a gold ring and Rolex watch.

Choking back my disdain for the prison system, I said, “I think it will significantly reduce violence. If prisoners learn impulse control and healthy ways to deal with their anger, then that’s also less physical strain and stress on the guards. And, well, more ‘order’ in the law and order system.”

“Do you really think you can teach lifers about the permanence of death?” asked the stuffy, balding board member.

I learned the permanence of death when my goldfish died at age seven, and when my mother died at age eight. She perished in a house fire when I was away at summer camp. I was numb for the first six months. My father’s guilt allowed him to give in to my anhedonia. I wouldn’t eat, so he got me fitted with a feeding tube, which stayed in me until next Memorial Day weekend when I smelled the hamburgers on the grill. I wouldn’t sleep, so every night my father crushed melatonin in my warm milk, poured it gently down my feeding tube, and stroked my hair until I could fall asleep. I couldn’t focus in school, so instead he read me books and tried to teach me to play piano. He said I wasn’t allowed to go back to school until he heard me laugh again. He homeschooled me until fifth grade.

“P-permanence of death?” I asked.

I was thrown off by his question. Thankfully, I was able to come up with something quick. Thankfully, that was the last question before the quintessential, “We will let you know when we have our decision,”

After they all left, I sat in the room gathering my things, stalling, waiting for Noam to call me about some tests results from Julien’s EKG.

When Julien didn’t wake up that morning, I felt numb as the ambulance wailed down my street toward the hospital. The tape in my head kept playing back me, staring back at the ruins of my house, and then looking down at my sweet, unconscious little boy. I knew all too well that eight was too young to die inside.

Marcy

I woke up with a slight spring in my step, climbing the stairs to my office at Wilmington Correctional. A few days ago I had an excellent meeting with Dr. Hassin about Julien's condition. He said Julien's brain activity was increasing. I didn't understand all the brain wave information and EKG test results he was describing to me. But all that mattered was that he was going to take Julien off the respirator for a while to see how strong his lungs were. I liked Dr. Hassin because he was a motivator. His expertise allowed him to form flexible plans from well-educated conclusions. His treatment plan so far had clearly gotten results. He said he would be running another battery of tests related to motor function. Julien waking up felt like a greater possibility.

I spent more time at the hospital, perched at the end of my chair. I wanted to be there the moment he woke up. I wanted to be the first person he saw when he woke up. I pictured this moment in my head for so long. His eyes slam open, glassy disoriented. He sits up fast, whips his head over to me and lunges for my arms. He asks how long he's been sleeping for and as he sobs into my pastel blouse, I coo to him that everything will be okay and that mom is here now. We go through weeks of therapy learning how to walk again, and we're able to go to Chile like he wanted, and walk along the sandy shores of the Pacific. I stroke his hair and his tiny hands at the thought. I sat at the desk, almost happy to be alive.

Then, the telephone rang.

Caroline

I dreaded making this phone call. Not this one in particular, because there were all sorts of phone calls like this one. The last one was about Stephanie needing more money in her account for tampons. I had begged mom to send her money. It was tampons for Christ's sake. She sent nothing but a look of contempt at me for even asking. I sent Stephanie the money the following day. The call before that was money for blankets. The laundry company had gotten to be lazy about getting the inmates their sheets back ever since Sussex switched from the state program to a contracted laundry service. It was near the end of December. The weather was getting cold. It made sense. I had begged Dad to send her money for blankets. I was strapped with car payments and student loans that I just couldn't make up the money in time. He had scoffed at me and said, "Today it's 'blankets', Caroline. Weeks ago, it was 'vitamins'. I know you love her, and you know I love her, but when will you learn?"

I sat in my room staring out the window, short and wide, perched high towards the roof. Sometimes, I was a little embarrassed to be in my childhood bedroom at 25. I painted the walls a soft tan color last summer. I added a cherry redwood accent color on my closet wall. Noam had helped me pick out a mahogany bed frame with a matching dresser and bedside table. The carpet was the same as it's always been, off white, stained with everything imaginable. The leftover butterfly stickers above my door and a few glow-in-the-dark stars were still on the ceiling. I left them there, perhaps as a reminder that even with a new paint job and furniture, I was still right where I started. Only now, the bedroom was all mine. Part of me felt guilty for moving all of Stephanie's things into storage. I could still feel the shadows from my childhood, cast in painted over pinholes and scuffy molding.

Now that I was working, the room felt less lived in, save for a pile of clothes or two. I got up and looked in my closet. Behind the blazers were fraying magazine pictures of Reese Witherspoon. I ran my finger across her face and it sent a shiver down my spine. Then, Noam came to my mind and my stomach flipped immediately. I wasn't particularly ashamed of my sexuality anymore, a decade and a half of diaries had carefully documented me wrestling with the fact that I really, really liked girls AND boys, and I was gonna find some way to be okay with that. My longstanding celebrity crush had helped me figure out I was usually partial to women, and my family never questioned my obsession with her because of her presence in romantic comedies, feel good movies, and other heteronormative roles for teen girls. But even still, after all this time, only Stephanie knew my secret.

I looked down at my phone again and sat over on the bed. I sank into the down comforter and nearly closed my eyes, but the anxiety of the call woke me out of that sleepiness. I dialed again.

"Hello?"

"Hey Aunt Marcy! How's it going?"

"Oh, you know, just another day in prison," she sighed. "Sorry I missed your call earlier, just been away from the desk,"

I heard papers shuffling and a knock at the door.

"Are you busy right now?" I asked.

She paused for a bit and then replied, "No, n-no, just getting some things together for group today. Did your mom tell you I started a new program? Beyond Concrete Walls it's called. You know, it was slow to start, but everyone's making really good progress,"

"So you're liking the new job? I'm sure it must be nice to be back in Wilmington!"

“Uh huh,” she said distantly. “What did you call to talk about?”

The long and short of it was that Sussex correctional was going to be moving Stephanie to Wilmington correctional. Something about overflow and she was low risk enough to be moved. I’m sure it also helped that her court date was at the end of next month. I wasn’t sure which reason Stephanie had given me, but I remember it was different from the letter that I received from the state. But I didn’t know how much I should tell Aunt Marcy. It was always my instinct to only tell the sunnier side of the truth to my family about Stephanie’s situation because they doubted her so feverishly.

“W-well, Stephanie, she’s...”

“I know, I heard,” she said tersely.

“I know this is a lot to ask,” I confessed. “But I really need your help here. I think Stephanie has a really good chance of winning her case. I visited her last week, she showed me all the letters to the lawyer she’s been corresponding with, and he’s got a lot of evidence that casts *reasonable* doubt, and really, I – “

“Stop,” Aunt Marcy said harshly.

I liked my lips and pressed them together hard. Tears began to form behind my eyes, pressing forward onto my face. I remained silent. I tried to listen for her on the other line. Breathing. A pen fall onto her desk. Anything, anything that might indicate that she was distracted, that she might have something that would change her mind. I heard her take a breath and a door shut in the background.

“Let’s just say she got off, let’s just say she decided to turn her life around. Why do I have to be part of this equation, Caroline?”

I didn't want to answer right away. Aunt Marcy was one of the smartest people I knew, next to my mother. She knew how to ask pointed questions and accepted nothing but a precise answer.

"You don't," I began slowly. "You *don't* have to be a part of this. But you know better than anyone that Stephanie might benefit from this. Mom and Dad won't pay for any more of what she needs and she has a real shot at a career comeback. Please, Aunt Marcy. Please,"

She didn't respond for a while. I hung on the line, quite literally, white-knuckled with the phone against my face.

"I'll make some space in the women's group for her. I'll talk to the warden at Sussex and ask him to write a letter that recommends she be placed,"

"Oh my God, thank you, Aunt Marcy," I breathed.

"Just know I can't make her come to group. I can't make her stay. I can't make her change. I know you want this for her, Carrie. But you need to realize you can't want it more than her,"

Marcy

I sipped my chamomile tea aggressively in the little diner I'd made my prime after dinner spot. The fluorescent lights were a bit much, but the subtle 1950's look was an appropriate aesthetic for this spot in Wilmington. College kids walked by, laughing and complaining about the most trivial things. Oh, how I wished that term paper would be the hardest thing you ever have to deal with, kids.

I wanted to feel hungry. I wanted to feel happier than I was in this moment. Julien was improving. Whatever that meant, it was something. But Caroline... she was such a sweetheart, to a fault, too. So many times, Stephanie has let her down. And now I've roped myself into another helpful scheme of hers to try to get her callous, unemotional sister to "get better."

"Need a fill up?" asked a waitress. "Something to eat?"

"No, I'm not hungry," I said.

Then, a waiter passed by. He was holding a tray of three cheeseburgers and fries. The smell wafted over to me and beckoned my taste buds to follow.

"Actually, I'll take a burger please,"

I stared into my tea and drummed my fingers on the table, waiting for my burger.

I called it before the doctors did, Antisocial Personality Disorder, that is. She was just an odd kid. Her first big incident, at least the one we knew about was with Mr. Carrots. God, Caroline was devastated when she found out that little rabbit had died. But we had to lie to her. There was no way Donna or I were going to tell her. Scott had just been promoted and his

company was leaving for a short tour in Kuwait. He didn't even acknowledge his daughter was sick for six months after he got back. But can you blame him? They had worked so hard to provide the best for the girls, and everything had been going smoothly until then.

It didn't all fall apart at once. It happened slowly. There were signs we didn't notice. Mr. Carrots was just the catalyst. Two summers before, when Stephanie was nine and Caroline was six, I used to let them play in my yard. I always kept a close eye on them while I gardened, but Stephanie was a slippery kid. She would be gone for hours at a time, and I didn't have the heart to call Donna to tell her I'd lost one of the girls. Most of the time, I didn't have to worry. Stephanie came back. Always an hour before sundown. Where did you go, Stephy? I would ask her. To play with the critters, she'd say. Six year later, a contractor from a land development firm was taking samples of the open land in the brush. They found a dozen buried squirrels and a few birds, preserved and mummified. That was the extent of the animal mutilation, though. In grade school, Stephanie caused all sorts of interpersonal problems. She'd sit behind girl classmates, pull out their hair, strand by strand. She chased one boy into a corner, took the picture he carried of his dead cat and ripped it in two. She lit it on fire in front of a crowd of students and the boy had to switch school districts. We still don't even know how she got a hold of those matches.

As she got older, Stephanie was less overt in her interpersonal functioning deficits. She never kept a healthy relationship. She convinced her mother, Donna, to put her on birth control for her acne. Really, this was an excuse to fuck anyone who looked at her. She'd dump them soon after. A few boys got attached to her, though. One wanted her so bad, she feigned abuse to get him off her back. He's sitting in prison an innocent man right now. He's got another year or two. The bullying and delinquency grew more calculated and callous. Her subtlety allowed Caroline to not only keep on her rose-colored glasses, but hide behind thicker frames too. It was

true, she was very kind to Caroline, or at least was good at spinning excuses of love and sisterly devotion to her.

It's pretty obvious I only decided to help Stephanie for Caroline's sake. Still, a sickening feeling grew in the pit of my stomach as my plate arrived at the table.

Adam

When I was twelve, I found an eight ball of cocaine. It was August and the pavement was so hot the soles of my feet felt like lava was peeling off my skin. My bike was rusted and creaky from all the times Sarah left it out in the rain. There was a block party near the end of the street happening in a few hours, a cul-de-sac of frantic mothers with clipboards and vendors hustling about. Our street was filled with off white, split level homes and a few empty plots, but it never felt quite like home until that summer.

The eight ball was shoved in the back of a drawer in the garage. Dad's blue tool shelves were neat, undusted and unsuspecting. When I went to the third drawer to find the wrench set, the bag fell quietly to the floor. I picked it up and it felt like a mixture of flour and cornstarch. Thankfully, it was tightly sealed. I tried to look where it had been hidden, but just then Dad burst through the side door on the garage. We locked eyes and my lip quivered. I'll never forget the look of panic he gave me. The gleam in the lower left corner of his eye, for me, having found his darkest secret. I apologized profusely for touching his things, and dared not ask him what I had found. He told me it was just chalk from the mill, and not to worry about it. I got a new bike the next week.

"Hey Sam, how was it this week?" I asked, walking through the metal detector.

"Dunno, I took off most of last week. Jeanie's sister is in town," he grumbled.

I sat down hard on the plastic chair. The visiting room was particularly empty for this week in February. Less dingy from the leftover Valentine's decorations, but still the same white pine stalls and blue plastic chairs of the outside world. I wondered if even this barren room gave dad any lust for freedom over his addictions.

It was quiet, and I was alone, save for a few honeys in tracksuits. Ears pressed to the receivers. Listening to their boyfriends sweet talk them into sending them more commissary. Mom used to send him an extra twenty in the beginning. Then, one day he spent it on some toilet bowl brew, or whatever homemade alcohol in prison is called. She was livid. And now here I was to do the same thing.

“Did you put the check in the account?” Dad said as I pulled out my wallet to put the receipt in the flap.

“Really,” I breathed.

I had barely sat down and he was already asking about the money. He didn’t look up at me. He seemed earnestly focused on his knuckles. He rubbed the spade tattoo on his middle finger. I thought twice about asking him about it, remembering it was probably still healing.

“How is group?” I asked staring at the wood peeling back on the side panel.

“You know, fine,” he said. “Marcy has us journaling now. She thinks it will help channel some of our ‘triggers’...”

He trailed off and began fidgeting harder, rubbing his tattoo violently. His forehead began to pool with sweat, mumbling about some breakthrough an inmate had during group who was doing a dime for killing his sister’s dogs. He didn’t seem to notice he wasn’t speaking clearly.

“Dad?” I asked.

He wouldn’t make eye contact with me. He just stared at the ground.

“W-what’s going on, Dad?” I asked quietly. “Is someone trying to hurt you?”

He opened his mouth to reveal yellowing teeth. His gums looked almost gray and the sweat trailed down the back of his ear. He had deteriorated, yet somehow the color in his face and the palpable emotion made him look the healthiest I'd seen him in years.

"God dammit, Dad! Are you clean?"

He put his head in his hands and began to shake violently. I stood and turned to the door.

"I think they're serving the bad meat again," he said with gritted teeth.

I turned back slowly. That was one of our many code phrases. *Don't leave, it's something else*, it meant. His shaky hand slid a note underneath the narrow slit between the glass and the wood. I sat in the chair as inconspicuously as possible. I grabbed the gum wrapper note and opened it. *Withdrawal is a bitch*.

I looked up at him. His eyes welled, accentuating that gleam in the lower left corner. I smiled and crumpled the wrapper into my pocket. I wanted to believe it.

"Marcy, she-she's doing great. I really think I can make it out of here at the next hearing. Even some of the guys don't mess with me like they used to, which is good, you know, considering,"

I was aware how he could be playing me, like mom had warned. But the sweat had started to soak back into his large forehead pores and he'd wiped the side of his neck a few times to soak up the rest. He looked at me with so much on his mind. In this moment he was completely vulnerable. I had never seen him like this before. Almost a loss of pride.

"I'm really proud of you, Dad," I said. "I'm finishing up my classes at DCAD. Maybe when you get out I could help you start doing your electrician stuff again,"

He ran his fingers through his hair and flicked his nose a few times. Tears welled like I had never seen before. I believed him. I believed in him.

“Yeah, son, that, uh, sounds great,” he breathed. “What with your designing... it could really attract business,”

I smiled and put my hand on the glass. He put his hand on the glass. Our hands were the same size. Overlapping. Only a half inch of glass between us.

Caroline

I sat in the car sobbing. The tears fell from the sides of my cheek and down the letter. They pooled in the center. The pencil scratches faded and mixed to form a goopy mess. I put the car into gear and drove out east.

The bar was empty again.

“What’s up,” asked Adam, wiping down the bar.

“She’s gonna tell Noam,” I whimpered. “I trusted her and she’s gonna tell him,”

“Tell him what?” he asked.

Steph was the only one I came out to. It was four years ago. I had just graduated. I told her about the girl I had met, Cynthia. She was smart and funny and I hoped we would go somewhere. But, she dumped me the same week, claiming her astrologist told her to try guys again for a while. I didn’t have the heart to tell Adam. He had been weirdly supportive as my bartender, and we had this rapport I didn’t want to shake. I trusted him to not be a closeminded dick or a slimy perv who relished in serving drinks to woman who had been in the throes of romance with another woman. I had come to terms with my sexuality on my own and in my own time, yet I was still disturbed by the stigma that surrounded my sexuality. The truth of it was I just wanted someone to love, who was whole. My sister felt whole compared to the fragments of my relationship with my parents and the shattered glass of my Aunt Marcy. But Stephanie wasn’t enough, my love for her was a sisterly bond that apparently had conditions. My frustrations with Noam’s quirks left me feeling a platonic comfortability and a short sputtering engine-like I love you.

I realized I had been dozing off in my thoughts when Adam reached out for my wrist. He squeezed it, coughed and went back to polishing a glass. He looked away from me, seemingly putting his own emotional walls back up. I appreciated that.

“What are you gonna do?” he asked.

“Well, for starters, I might as well order a drink,” I said.

“Are you sure you want to do that right now?” he asked, concerned.

After my second whiskey sour the back of the bar started to melt. The lights blended into the voluptuously shaped vodka bottles and the square bottles of scotch and looked like the dark redwood paneling. I shifted and the leather on my seat was warm and I could feel the metal studs sinking into the floor. It creaked as I shifted again and I stared up at the mirror. My gut felt malignant and I could feel the consequences of my existence being called into question.

One night my freshman year when I came home for the weekend, Dad decided to watch TV with me. It was the pivotal scene in Dawson’s Creek where Jack and Tobey kiss on the bow of the boat. I remember how disgusted he was, and how thankful, he’d said, that he had sweet girls. He’d kissed me and walked out the back door to find my mother.

“How late are you open?” I asked, slurring.

“Caroline, it’s a bar,” he said plainly.

I rolled my eyes so hard at him I leaned back, lost my balance, and fell off my stool. Adam helped me stand. I felt noodly.

“H-here you go, floppy,” he said.

He threw my arm around his shoulder and walked me carefully to the break room area behind the kitchen.

“I’m not allowed to be back here,” I slurred, pointing to the sign. “This is for
‘EMPLOYEES ONLY’”

He smiled, I think.

“Sleep it off, dude. I’ll come get you in an hour,” he said.

Marcy

“Marcy? Marcy?” a voice echoed.

I couldn’t move. My vision blurred. I couldn’t tell if I was standing or if my feet were even on the ground. I could feel the world collapsing around me.

“Marcy?”

Finally, the voice sounded clear. The room came back into focus and the small pinging in my ear silenced. Before me sat the hospital director, Dr. Hassin, and a few other doctors, and the parents of another child. They all looked at me earnestly, with eyes of sympathy and concern, and I wanted none of it.

The room felt dark, despite the fluorescent lights beaming over the white papers and the white lab coats of Dr. Hassin and the hospital director, Chris Tomatulin. Mr. Tomatulin had been part of the Nemours board for years. I remembered him from my time during my internship with the NICU detox unit. He reminded me of Stephanie, not because of his propensity for callous unemotionality, but just the eyes. Some dead eyed stare he’d developed trying to cope with the moral responsibility of telling patient’s loved ones about how they need to take their children home to die. I could hear them whispering across the table, exchanging glances and waiting for me to respond. I stared into the delicate folds of Dr. Hassin’s Yakima, a gorgeous midnight blue I could have gotten lost in. It reminded me of the lake house with Dad in South Bethany. He always told me the ocean was more dangerous than the land, and yet it was the most familiar to us. When the police informed me I needed to identify his body, the first thing I remember after that was seeing his pale blue face caked in sand on one side. It was two weeks after Julien was initially admitted. The police officer standing next to me at the morgue slab told me his heart must have given out on the beach one night. It was an insulting romanticizing of his death,

especially when they found the small hole once centimeter under his daith in his ear and the nine-millimeter bullet in lodged in his hippocampus a few days later. They never found the gun.

“Tell me again. I’m sorry, I, uh, I blanked out there for a minute,” I said, shaking.

The hospital director shot Dr. Hassin a look and he began again.

“Julien’s test are coming back with no changes,” Dr. Hassin began. “We’re barely getting readings on his brain activity, and I’m not sure that our IV treatments are working anymore to his benefit. We had to put him back on oxygen last week. He responded well initially to everything, but he’s plateaued.”

“And the bills have been coming in the mail, Marcy, I know they send,” said Dr. Hassin’s wife, Georgina. “I checked with the post office. We haven’t received anything from you for weeks. We can’t move forward if we don’t get anything from you,”

The couple sitting next to Mr. Tomatulin looked at me the way the mothers in the support group used to looked at me, helpless and desperately hoping I would send back some facial expression or nonverbal sign to make them feel good about trying to make me feel better. It was especially insulting to know that they were the ones who had requested to meet me, requested *my* son’s room, *my* son’s doctor.

“And, if I could weigh in here,” chimed the director. “Mr. and Mrs. Yamen have been waiting to see Dr. Hassin for nearly a month. Their son is, well, he-he’s got a better chance of...”

“Chris!” said Georgina.

Mr. and Mrs. Yamen looked in their laps simultaneously. Mrs. Yamen burst into tears. Georgina took my hand, and I let her because she looked at me dead in the eye and said the most honest thing anyone had ever told me.

“They’ll never know what you’re going through, Marcy. But you can’t hold forever.”

Caroline

“Caroline, mail’s for you!” called Dad from the living room.

I pressed pause on my DVD player and walked out of my room.

“It’s a postcard. From your good friend Ramona!” he said, handing it to me.

I met Ramona at a party my sophomore year. She, like me, was a timid friend of a friend of a girl who was on the rugby team. The house we partied in was built in the 1890s. The window panes were pale white and the once crisp wood architecture around the rooms was now milky, covered in layers of paint to cover up the once lead ridden original layers. I saw her from across the room, hiding under her bangs, sipping keg beer from a solo cup. She had square shoulders and a muffin top she was trying to hide with a baby pink blouse that fell delicately over her summery, blue skirt. She shivered next to an old book case, turning her feet in together. Messy pale pink socks fell around her white Keds at her ankles. It was late September and I just remember feeling electric knowing she was probably cold and that I had brought a hoodie with me. I walked over to her and offered it up with a smile. She took it and introduced herself. I was always nervous because I never knew what to do; my liquid courage in the form of jello shots emboldened my repressed attraction to women like her. At first, we just talked about foreign languages, music, and Virginia Woolf.

We snuck off during the climax of the party during which the head rugby girl picked a poor sap to drink from her sweaty rugby cleat. Ramona whispered something to me, grabbed my hand, and took me upstairs. Her curls fell against the pillow like a mermaid on a rock and when she pulled off her blouse we giggled incessantly. Her thighs were warm and weak and she wrapped the blanket around us for what felt like days. When we came up for air, I hugged my hands around her shoulder blade and felt her warm breath on my chest. For months, she never

silenced me when I cried out in the dark and she never left without saying goodbye. When she decided to go to Portland for poetry, we said we'd keep in touch and that she'd always love me. But when she sends me postcards every few months she writes, "Always, Ramona".

And this one was no different. I slid it into the drawer where I kept all her letters and postcards.

"Hey, what'd she say? Anything new happening? Will she come visit soon?" asked Dad, standing in the doorway.

Dad had never met her, but I showed him some of her poetry. He said he never understood it, but I think it had made his mark on him. But that was something that Ramona did. I wondered if I could ever tell Dad the truth about Ramona. About me.

"Well, not much, really. It's just a postcard,"

Adam – graduation

“Wear the red tie, Adam. The green one makes you look like a nerdy professor,” said my mother, clearly lovingly.

I looked over at her with a soft pleading face and she smiled. Things had been better between us lately. April was her favorite month and the Delaware weather had graciously warmed up earlier in the season than expected. We spent our Wednesdays and Saturdays together gardening vegetables and azaleas for the Farmer’s market in June. Mom smoked less in the summer months too. Something about the warmer air heating her lungs better than Newports, she’d tell me. I think she was happier too because Dad hadn’t been so shitty to me lately. I was taking her advice, and had decided to only visit him once a week. I told her about the girl at the bar, Caroline, who used to have a family member in Sussex too.

We stood in the seashell blue bathroom together. She stood on her tiptoes trying to fix my poorly tied Winsor square knot. The tile was cold and smooth and a beautiful sea green blue. Mom always loved how gaudy it looked, and had amplified it with a fluffy blue rug, toilet seat cover, and hand towels. She wasn’t much of a decorator but I appreciated her eccentric taste.

“There,” she said exhaling hard. “See, I told you the maroon one looked better with the gray shirt,”

I shrugged in agreement. She turned me around to look at her. She smiled hard and her crow’s feet ridges got thinner. She wore her age well still and I loved her quiet beauty.

“Ready to do this?” she asked anxiously.

“I am,” I tried to push out confidently, like I had rehearsed. “Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

She looked down and her smile fell out of her lips. The crow's feet relaxed into a delicate line pattern.

"Yeah," she said quietly. "I gotta cover Tammy's shift tonight and Tanner's still mad that I couldn't come in today until 3. He's got me bussing tables and even if I could, I look like hell today,"

She had used her three classic mom-excuses-for-not-seeing-dad in a row. Either there was something she wasn't telling me, or she really did feel tired. I hugged her tightly and she melted into my arms. It was hard to be mad at her for not going when I knew today was about staying focused on dad.

"Be safe, hon. I hope it all goes well."

Marcy – graduation

I flicked on the light switch and the drone of the fluorescent lights in the multipurpose room went on sequentially. The room felt like a bland kindergarten classroom, white walls, old spotty gray carpets, but very open with bookshelves and room for all kinds of activities. For a multipurpose room in a prison, it was nothing to complain about. I had the podium arranged on a riser we borrowed from the choir program at the middle school down the street. It was arranged on the south side of the room. There were about six rows of four chairs in each row with some extras stacked against the back wall. A long table along the east wall was set for the refreshments. I knew it would look pathetic to see bottled water and a few cheese and cracker platters on an eight-foot table, but we had spent the majority of our budgeted money on the program and that was what mattered. I was especially nervous for the board to be back and watch the inmates “graduate” from the program. They would all receive certificates, and those who were to be paroled would get their papers to sign. Thankfully, it was a Friday so all of the parolees would be let out today.

I sat on a chair next to the window and watched sun finish clearing the overcast sky. I opened my phone and looked at the picture. It was Julien and me. He took it while I carried him piggy-back home from the ice cream shop two summers ago. He had a wide squinty grin covered in blue ice cream. It looked probably like his father's. I hadn't thought to contact the clinic about Julien's condition because the donor I chose had a condition in the contract for non-disclosure. I wondered if the man was rich, or would have been willing to help. Guilt crept up my spine for just thinking of this now. Had this man had some genetic defect that didn't come up during the genetic counseling appointment? Could this have been avoided if I'd just been appealing enough

to attract a partner instead of a Petri dish? I sat mulling things like this over. Then, I jumped when the phone began to vibrate. Without looking, I pressed send.

“Hello?” I said.

“Hi Marcy, it’s Georgina. How are you feeling about today? she asked.

“I... I said I’d let them know by five,” I repeated as tersely as I had rehearsed it.

I felt guilty for the position Georgina was put in. But Mr. Tomatulin was too much of a coward to call me himself, and Georgina was a sweetheart and nearly the only person who had been there in this process who I hadn’t wanted to strangle at one point or another.

“You don’t have to worry about the bill for the last 15 days,” she told me. “Pascal talked to some of the administrators and we’re waiving the costs. You’re really going to be helping that other boy’s family,”

I slumped back into my seat. Great. I was doing them a favor by letting my son leave intensive care and the best doctor I’ve ever met. How selfless of me, I scoffed. It didn’t feel like a favor, especially after the way Dr. Tomatulin looked at me when I told them I would wait until the last possible round of tests came back. I felt the tears fall onto my ugly pastel purple blouse. It felt frumpy and unflattering and my tears weren’t helping lay any nicer across my lumpy stomach folds.

“Please tell Dr. Hassin I am so grateful and thankful. And thanks to you too, Georgina. You’ve been such a big help. I’ll be there as soon as possible after the ceremony today – to sign the papers,”

She gasped, “You’re really taking him home? You won’t transfer him somewhere close to home?”

“What else can I do?” I told her, nearly blubbering. “He’ll stay a vegetable for the rest of his life. And apparently, I can’t even know why. God couldn’t even grant me that. I’d rather him home in his last weeks,”

“Sometimes God knows truths He knows we can’t bear,” Georgina consoled. “Come to Beth Shalom on Friday night. We can pray over him,”

I heard some rustling near the front of the room. I thanked her again and hung up quickly.

Adam – graduation

I walked back into the prison after a few too many cigarettes. My mind was a bit cloudy from the unusual surge of nicotine; I had been trying to quit for a few weeks. But the thought of my father actually getting out of prison when he had a chance, and in such a landmark way, was enough to have any casual smoker choke down a few extra cancer sticks. I walked through the door and waited for Sam to run the detector over me. But he didn't. He just looked up at me from his Sudoku. He rose slowly, putting down the puzzle book.

"This might be your last time here, kid," he told me. "You're a good man to your father. I'm not sure he always deserves it, but I wish you both the best."

He stuck out his hand and I shook it with pride.

"That girl out there was foxy," he told me wincing back into his chair. "Do you know her? You should hit that,"

I chuckled, "Yeah, I know her. But she's just a friend. Pretty sure she's got a boyfriend anyhow,"

I walked into the room where Dad was "graduating." A woman briskly walked past me. She was older, looked kind, and wore a quite lovely pastel blouse. I hated the word lovely, but that's what she looked like.

"Scuse me, ma'am," I called. "Uhh, am I early?"

She turned back to me, "Yes a little bit, but more people should be getting here soon! Who are you here to see?"

"Lester,"

"Ahhh, yes! You must be Adam! It's so great to finally meet you!"

She shook my hand enthusiastically.

“Please, sit wherever you like!”

Caroline – graduation

It's really hard for me to talk about my emotions. I only saw Dr. Fusioni for a few months after Stephanie's first 72 hour watch, and then for another year after her second 48 hour watch. I knew she wasn't crazy. I'd heard him talk to my parents and explicitly use the words "antisocial", but it had no meaning for me at the time. It still doesn't. It's almost coy.

I stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom examining my lingering freckles. Noam would need to get into the bathroom soon. I looked out at his sleepy face, mouth half open. I loved him. I loved his caring heart and finicky way about sushi and household plants. I loved his amber colored, almond shaped eyes and his solid build. I appreciated his tenacity for college football and the way he cooked risotto. But I wasn't sure if I was the one for him. My heart wasn't really in it anymore, and I could feel him pulling away too. He wanted to leave Delaware in the next five years, and I couldn't imagine going beyond the Atlantic shoreline. I turned back to my reflection and decided today would be best spent rehearsing a way to convey my emotions about Stephanie's graduation from the Beyond Concrete Walls program. Not figuring out a way to break up with my wonderful boyfriend who I didn't deserve.

Moments later I heard Noam stir. He stretched and looked over at me in the bathroom. I smiled at him. I walked back into the room and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Hey there, pretty birdy," he whispered, kissing my nose. "Are you ready for today?"

"I-I think so. I have to be," I told him.

We sat together motionless in the car staring out at the prison. I could feel his urge to look at me, but he was as uncomfortable as I was, for different reasons. He'd never met Stephanie before.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

I took a deep breath.

In eighth grade, I had the flu for a week. Since I was going to be missing five days of school, my parents had arranged for Stephanie to bring me home my homework every day. But naturally, Stephanie forgot. She would pick it up from the teachers and apparently just leave it in her backpack. I missed three math assignments, a lab report, a book report, and a history paper. When I asked her that Sunday why I hadn’t gotten any homework, I found out she had forgotten. She begged me not to tell our parents. She handed over the stack of papers and books and pleaded to let her off the hook. I stayed up all night on Sunday, finishing everything, and doing a terrible job of it. I never said a word to anyone.

I should have known then. That night, when she rummaged through the closet, probably to steal something of mine, I remember her sliding the closet door shut. She must have been in there a while because in the dead of night, when I had fallen asleep on my algebra, I heard a voice coming from the closet. A guttural, low register cry. I was afraid of the dark, always had been. I looked over at the closet and saw a glowing eye piercing out of the crack in the closet door, half of a small grin of white teeth. We had mirror sliding doors, so I could see the terror on my own face. Ice ran throughout my body and crystalized. My stomach ruptured with searing pain and I could feel my lungs fill with fire. Suddenly, the door slid back and the figure jumped out of the closet. I couldn’t scream, I just whimpered softly, shaking violently on the floor. I felt the warm dribble of urine course down my perspiring legs. Stephanie whipped her head back and chuckled softly. You should have seen your face, she told me.

“And that fear is exactly what I feel now, sitting in this car waiting to go into that prison,” I told him.

Caroline – graduation

I gripped Noam's hand like I was ready to fall off a cliff as we walked into the graduation ceremony room.

"Ow, Jesus, Caroline, you tryin' to kill the circulation over here?" Noam hissed pulling on my hand.

I released my titan grip and rubbed his arm, "Sorry, Noam, I'm just nervous,"

"It's okay," he said softer. "I know, just remember I know I look like a big muscle man, but I need that hand for work and it does me no good when it's purple,"

I wiggled my nose at him and he rubbed my back. I looked around for anyone I knew and then I spotted my aunt.

"Hey Carrie!" Aunt Marcy said, shuffling over.

She was wearing black slacks and a beautiful lilac blouse. Pastels were always her thing and it softened her beautifully. She wore the broach I had bought her for mother's day in 11th grade, and there were some drying tears near it. I pretended not to notice for her sake.

"Hey Noam! Hey, Carrie!" exclaimed Aunt Marcy.

"When will the inmates arrive?" I asked.

"Soon, I hope. I asked that all the inmates in the program be schedules for the second lunch block. Graduation begins at 1:45," she said.

We nodded and Aunt Marcy slowly weaved her way through the crowd. Suddenly, I saw an orange jumpsuit fitted a little too perfectly flash by and I realized it was Stephanie. Her chestnut hair fell just below her shoulders. Curiously, it had streaks of red and sapphire tips. I knew that would be quite the story. My stomach flashed back to the crippling nervousness I was harboring this morning. But Stephanie didn't run over to me right away. She made a point of

introducing herself to a few of the family members and casually gloating about their progress and how they had helped her become a better inmate. She trailed over and when she saw me, made a big show of it so everyone could see what a “good relationship” we had.

“Little sis Caroline!” she exclaimed.

She ran over and gave me a barrel hug. I remained rigid, but wrapped my arms around her limply. I couldn’t tell if she was acting like this for her own sake, or to simply send the message that she had me by the balls right now. I didn’t have the courage to tell Noam that she was blackmailing me to invest in her car flipping/minor dealership idea, much less come out to him. And that’s exactly what she had over me. The only difference now was that I was doing my best to not show my fear. I did not want to live inside of her lurking shadow anymore. I was tired of making excuses. I may not have had the courage to tell Noam either of the two things Stephanie was using to suck money and resources from me, but at least I knew in the end I’d have my parents and Aunt Marcy to thank for warning me. The hug was especially long as I mulled all of this over in my head. She pulled back suddenly and stared at me with glassy eyes. A smile that looked so real peeled across her face. To an untrained eye, it was a genuine smile. To me, she was showing her teeth to me.

“It’s so *good* to see you, Car,” said Stephanie in her soft sister voice.

“Good to see you too, Steph,” I said quietly.

We got silent. Noam rocked back and forth on his feet and coughed.

“Well, aren’t you going to introduce me to this strapping young lad. Something like soil right? Loam?” she asked.

“Noam,” said Noam clearing his throat. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Stephanie. Caroline’s told me so much about you!”

“Has she now?” Stephanie said, shooting me a look.

My stomach leapt up through my esophagus. I could feel the burn of stomach acid disintegrating my courage.

“H-how did you do your hair like that, Steph? It looks awesome!” I said automatically.

“Oh this?” she asked sweetly, sweeping her straight locks to the front. “Jolly ranchers and a first aid kit. I used the peroxide packets to lighten it and then mixed water with some crushed up jolly ranchers and left it in overnight. Looks good doesn’t it? I thought I’d do something fun for my graduation,”

There was no doubt that Stephanie was ingenious about some things. When Aunt Marcy was in graduate school, she practiced administering intelligence tests with us, specifically the WISC. She told us we were both very smart girls, but Stephanie asked for numbers. She pulled us aside separately and told us, but Stephanie bragged to me later about her score. I got a 100, average. She scored a 135.

“It looks great,” Noam echoed.

I wondered if he felt her charmed. She tipped her head back for a chuckle.

“Noam, would you mind if I pulled my sister aside for a second? You know, girl talk,” she winked.

“Not at all, I was going to find the bathroom anyhow. See you in a bit, hon,” he said, giving me a quick side hug,

She waved him off and turned back to me. We stood at nearly the same height, but I could feel her cunning, scheming intellect tower over me still. I stood my ground, like mom always used to, but I still couldn’t help feeling small.

“I’m gonna make the announcement during my graduation speech,” she said robotically.

“No, Steph, please! I gave you the money!” I yelled.

“Shhh!” she hissed violently. “You know not everything is about you, Caroline! God, after everything I’ve done for you, you want me talk about how glad I am that you’re a closeted gay? Don’t take this away from me! No, I’m going to be announcing my business venture alright. You held up your end of the deal, but I’m sorry I have to go back on mine. I need to show them I’m ready to get out – “

“Are you fucking real?” I screeched.

Thankfully, the ambient elevator music and cheese and cracker table was enough to keep the rest of the room distracted from my outburst.

“You’re so fucking selfish you know that? I’m sick of backing you and trying to convince everyone you’re not a tiring, hopeless maniac. I’m done, Stephanie. I’ll sit here for your goddamn ceremony but then I’m done,”

I tried to push past her and walk out of the room, but she grabbed my shoulder and spun me around.

“I’ll tell your little dicktwat of a boyfriend that you like girls, too, then. I’ll tell him about Ramona and maybe even throw a few three ways in there that never happened. He’ll never know the difference, you slut,” she growled.

“You wouldn’t dare,” I said through my teeth, tears pushing against my eye sockets.

“Watch me,” she said smiling.

I shoved her hand off my shoulder and was nanoseconds away from spitting in her face. But I swallowed hard and turned towards the door. I ran out of the room past Aunt Marcy to find Noam.

“Hey, hey, hey, where are you going? The ceremony starts in five minutes?” Noam said, catching me near the metal detectors.

“Noam, I can’t do this. She’s a monster,” I said as tears streamed down my cheeks.

He looked at me confused. I understood his confusion. I just couldn’t handle filling him in on it all.

“I thought you said that everyone was wrong about your sister? That she still had some good left in her? Didn’t she have a big announcement to make about her case?” asked Noam.

“Yeah, and a few others that I wasn’t ready to hear about,” I told him. “I want to go home. I can’t do this,”

I wiped my eyes.

“I was wrong about her. I don’t want to waste anymore of my time here,”

Noam sighed frustrated.

“I skipped a big shift for this, Caroline. What are we gonna do now?”

“Let’s go home. We can order sushi and I’ll finish that load of scrubs you left in the washer this morning. I’ll even buy,”

He squeezed my shoulder, still frustrated but a little more understanding.

“I had to park pretty far away. Would you mind waiting outside for me while I pull the car up?”

“Not at all,” I said sniffing.

He turned and I grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

“Thank you, Noam,”

He smiled and squeezed back.

I knew I didn't have to come out to him. We could get engaged, married, travel like Noam wants for a few years, settle down, have our 2.4 kids and find a reasonable place in the country to call home. Retire somewhere in South Bethany. But when I closed my eyes and tried to picture married life with him, I just couldn't do it. I didn't see my life with Noam like I had with Ramona. But today was not the day to tell him we shouldn't live together anymore.

Marcy – graduation

I stood up at the podium. I moved the microphone a bit to reduce the feedback. The room felt bigger from up here, even though the riser only gave me about a foot of room to rise above the crowd. I looked down at my notes. They felt like mush in my head when I looked back at the clock and was reminded that in three short hours I was going to be taking my comatose son home to die. The original board members from my proposal were there, seated tersely at a table with legal pads in the back of the room. It was hard to enjoy this moment as a highlight in my career when I knew where I would end up after work. But still, this had been my life's work outside of caring for Julien, so I did my best to buck up and iron out each word carefully. I cleared my throat once and began to speak.

"Hello everyone," I started. "Thank you all for gathering here today,"

I looked out in the audience and didn't see Caroline or Noam. Had they left? If so, why? The greasy comb-over board member brought me back into my speech giving bubble and I glanced back at my notes.

"I know that prison affects more than just the inmates inside of these concrete walls. I designed this program to truly reflect its name because beyond these concrete walls are families with who struggle with so much more than having their brothers, sisters, daughters, and sons in prison. They also have to carry the burden of helping their family member reintegrate into the arms of an often unwelcoming and cold society. Stigma affects you as much as it does the inmates sitting here today, so the first thing I would like to do is express my gratitude for all who have made this possible."

The heavily roughed board member pursed her lips in surprise and jotted down a few notes. I felt like I was getting my groove back a little.

“First, I would like to thank the four people in the back of the room. This woman and these gentlemen are the Delaware representatives from the Monetary Commissioner’s Board for all of the prison systems in the northeastern region. They approved this program and a budget plan for each annual cohort for the next three years!”

I paused for applause. There was modest applause, and the board member with the gold ring and Rolex watch smiled a bit while the stuffy, balding board member took more notes.

“Next, I would like to thank the three pen pal volunteers. Your commitment to the inmates serving life sentences has been astronomical, and later today they will have the opportunity to express their gratitude to you,”

There was less clapping after this pause, perhaps because most of the family members felt less obligated to clap for these individuals. But, I clapped the loudest for them because they had made me very proud.

“And finally, I would like to thank all of you who are sitting out here in our modest audience. There may be fewer than thirty of you in this room, but just know that the people sitting behind me are as happy and thankful as I am that you are sitting here waiting to support them. Give your folks a hand!”

The audience of family members clapped for each other and a few inmates did as well. Stephanie clapped along with everyone else begrudgingly. I noticed her visibly upset moments before the ceremony, but I made no connection to her unpleasantness until I saw Caroline and Noam’s seats empty. Perhaps Caroline had finally wised up. Either way, it didn’t matter now, and I took some small pleasure in Stephanie’s pouting that the ceremony now could not be all about her. I would select her name last from my list to give a speech in the hopes I might have to cut her off. She wouldn’t even look at me.

“And now I would like to share some hard numbers for you, just to show you some proven successes of the Beyond Concrete Walls program. Five out of the eight members are eligible for parole. All five members will be signing their papers and coming home with you today! Three out of the eight members are serving life sentences. We worked on coping mechanisms for their sentences and exercises to facilitate better communication among prison staff and fellow inmates. We measured their happiness and affect before and after our program. Because of this program, all three individuals sitting behind me have shown great strides in many areas. But, I won’t need you all to take my word for it!

“Without further adue, one by one, each inmate will come up to the podi – “

My phone started to buzz in my pocket. I knew it had to be the hospital or Caroline telling me why she left. Either way, it was important and I had a crowd of people who were waiting for me to finish my speech and a board of directors waiting to congratulate me or shut me down.

“Uh, here’s Lester everyone!” I said, handing off the podium to the inmate in the seat closest to me. He gave his hearty ‘heheh’ chuckle and jogged up. I took leave as quickly as I could and dashed into the hallway. I answered the call on the last buzz.

“Hello?” I said.

“Marcy, it’s Julien,” said Georgina.

I swore I felt my heart stop. My fingers went cold and my legs went numb.

“He’s failing, and fast. Pascal overestimated the amount of time he has left. His oxygen is slowly rising, but he probably only has a few days out of hospital, even if he stays on a tank. I think he’s trying to tell you something, Marcy, I – “

“Just stop!” I tried screeching, but no words would form audible syllables. They just tumbled out of my mouth, floated down to the floor and disappeared. The ringing in my ear the day Julien got transported began to crescendo in my ears. I wasn’t sure if words would be heard if I tried again, but I had to try. For Julien.

“Does he think we can make it to South Bethany?” I tried saying. “That was the most important stop,”

“I don’t know, Marcy. Pascal will though. Get down here quickly,”

I slammed the phone shut and walked over to one of the assistants from the office who had volunteered for set up and clean up. I explained to her I had a family emergency, handed her my talking points and explained how the handing of certificates and parole papers worked. She said she would alert the parole officer when the time came and would make sure it all went smoothly. I nearly hugged her, and thanked her incessantly before nearly sprinting to my car.

Caroline – graduation

I stood on the steps of the prison entrance. I rummaged through my purse for the pack when I heard a voice.

“Need a light?”

I looked over and it was Adam, in a gray collared shirt and lovely maroon tie.

“Yeah, actually,” I said smiling widely. “Nice tie,”

“Damn, my mom was right. I almost wore this greenish one,”

He looked a little more put together than the days I had seen him at the bar. Or perhaps with the addition of a tie and some hair gel, that’s what his look was exactly feigning for. He took such a long drag on his cigarette and slowly exhaled it. I never noticed how sharp his cheekbones cut into his perpetual five o’clock shadow. He had a modest build for someone who chain-smoked and worked into the witching hour. His hands were hard at the knuckles, but his skin looked soft and well maintained. He was just that with everything, though, subtle and kind. I could tell from the bags under his eyes that he’d seen a lot of shit, so even though he was eight years my senior, it felt appropriate he’d called me kid a few times. His presence reminded me of, well, me a gentle soul hanging by a worn, splintering thread.

I smiled. “What are you doing here?”

“I didn’t know you smoked,” he avoided.

“I-I don’t. I was kidding. Just looking for my chapstick,” I lied, releasing the pack of Newports from my hidden grasp.

I didn’t smoke, but I’d bought the pack a week ago for him to thank him for listening to me at the bar. He mentioned they were his favorite, so I tried one. After a short coughing fit, the

nicotine high felt relaxing and the anxiety buzzing in my cerebral cortex had silenced for a few breathtaking moments. I hadn't touched it since.

"I'm a good girl, remember?" I teased.

"Who gets drunk frequently at 3 in the afternoon on Wednesdays," he added coyly.

"Shhhh, it's my only vice, and it only happened a handful of times. Plus, you're avoiding my question," I said, looking around to make sure no one could hear us, especially Noam.

He looked down, finished the last pull on the cigarette. He flicked the nearly finished butt onto the pavement and crushed it with the heel of his converse. Our dynamic had changed. I felt a little shame for saying "good girl". That had connotations, didn't it? It felt weird to say, here, on the steps outside of a prison. We only talked when I came to the bar to drink. Anything he told me now, I would remember clearly. Anything I told him now I would remember telling him.

"At least, we'll find out today," he said, guarded.

"What do you mean," I asked. "All parolees are officially graduating?"

"That's just it," said Adam, lighting up again. "Since each inmate gets a chance to speak for a few minutes, dear ol' Dad decided to read his test results aloud during the ceremony. Probably to bribe my mom into coming since he hasn't seen her since I was 17, but to no avail 'cause I know she ain't comin' 'cause each time he's been offered parole in the past, he hasn't been able to pass the drug test. I hope he didn't drag me down here for nothing,"

"Will it be all for nothing if he doesn't pass?" I asked.

"Psssh, yeah. We been through this four times. I told him it's his last chance,"

"I don't think your father would do that, especially if he's held off on telling you,"

"You don't know my father,"

I nodded and looked at the ground. He was right. I was fortunate enough to have good parents who I could trust. In fact, for years I had taken advantage of the fact that I could trust them by going against it and putting the trust into my sister who clearly didn't deserve it.

"I really hope everything goes well for you today, Adam,"

"Thanks, you too. How come you're leaving so early? Did you even get to see your sister?"

Just then Noam pulled up and honked gently. I turned to the car and held my hand out in acknowledgement.

"That's my ride actually," I said a little too relieved to not be sharing my story with him.

"Good luck, kid," he said.

"Aren't you like 35?" I said.

"Thirty-three, thank you," he said.

"Either way, you have no liberty to be calling me a kid," I said heading down the steps.

I turned back to look at him for a moment.

"Do you work next Wednesday?" I asked.

"Always," he said smiling.

"I'll come in for a drink then," I told him as I turned and headed for Noam's car.

Adam – graduation

When Dad walked up to the podium, he was shaking. He adjusted the microphone to his own height. He had combed his thinning hair back a little before just like he had done for my birthday and Christmas visits.

“Heheh, well thanks, Marcy for that lovely introduction,”

A few clapped, I stayed silent.

“I, uh, kinda wanted to be the one to tell you all and most especially my son that I would be eligible to leave today, so, uh you really stole my thunder there, heheh,”

Dad was not a subtle human being. The tone in the air grew heavier and weighed upon the small crowd heavily. I nearly facepalmed.

“Heh, so anyways!” he exclaimed. “Marcy gave us each a few minutes to come up and speak about our experiences in this program, and I gotta tell you all its been a hell of a ride. I know that ain’t politically correct an’ all, but this woman is a saint. I mean, she just, whew. I learned more about myself and why I made the decision to use drugs than I ever thought I would. I won’t lie to ya, I was a bit of a hard ass at first, you know, heheh, I – “

Marcy cleared her throat and tilted her head toward the audience.

“Oh, right. ‘Political correctness’ is polite,” he air-quoted.

I rolled my eyes and willed it to be over.

“Anyways, I’d like to thank my son for being my biggest supporters while I sat in that cell to rot. He visited me even when it totally sucked for him, yo,”

I could feel his native New Yorker rhetoric bleeding through again, but still, I stayed quiet and hoped the dad embarrassment.

Dad requested a sandwich shop as his first meal outside of prison. I couldn't really argue with him. I just wished he hadn't picked the same place I went to lunch to every day of the week.

"Mmm, mmmm, *mmmm*! I haven't had pastrami like that since, well, you know. It's been a long time. Thanks, son," he said patting me on the back.

"You're welcome, Dad, I'm glad we can finally start doing things like this," I said as we climbed into the car.

"Well, where's your place?" he asked me. "Over on Cedar Beach?"

I felt my small intestine twist into a tight pretzel. I forgot I had lied to him a while back about getting an apartment.

"Couldn't keep up with the payments after I started my online classes at DCAD," I came up with quickly. "But I'm sure we could find you a motel to stay at or something?"

"Yeah, that sounds great! Actually..." Dad said, a little too relieved. "Ricky's got me a hookup... you know, if anything was gonna fall through with you, heheh.

"Okay," I said.

I felt a little suspicious about the whole thing, but shifted the conversation to something about getting his electrician business back up, so I dropped it.

Adam

Dad wasn't answering his phone. I made sure to go with him to the Cingular store so he'd find something easy to use since his memory of cell phones was frankly prehistoric. Tomorrow he was supposed to be meeting with Ann from the bank at noon about a business loan. Then at 2:15 he was meeting with Lou Graves at his office, the landlord who managed the rundown shop spaces in downtown Dover. It had only been six weeks since he'd gotten home, but we already had so much in the works together. I had just received the official papers that Father and Son Electric was incorporated. He was meeting about a loan and an office space. I finished up my last few classes at DCAD. Although I still wasn't ready to get my degree because of a few minor classes left, Dad and I had decided it was best to just dropout again. I was uneasy about it at first, but I had all the skills I needed to make stellar advertisements for the business. Dad said he wanted to take me on as his apprentice which was a pleasant surprise and made my decision to drop out again a little easier.

I could hear a belt squeaking as I turned into the motel parking lot. I turned off the ignition and waited. The sun was setting over the top of the worn, burnt orange roof shingles of the motel. The charming sea green siding and rusted second story rails made it the second most seedy-looking motel near Slaughter beach. I sent Dad a text an hour earlier: where r u? ready for dinner yet? It had no response. When I tried calling it went to voicemail. I debated just walking up to the door and knocking, but Dad was funny about that. He always wanted me to wait in the car. It was odd, but he said years of no privacy had forced him into a new recluse habit of feeling intruded upon when he heard knocking. It sounded weird, but Dad was a quirky guy sometimes. And this relationship outside of prison was about me trusting him 100%. He had proven finally

that he could be trusted with something and I knew I needed to give him that space to do that.

But it was nearly dusk on a cool June evening. Where the hell was he?

Caroline

“I’ll kick ‘im in the kiester for you, Carrie, you know I will,” Dad said, squinting towards Noam’s front door. “I’m a military man. I know how to leave no marks,”

It had been about a week since we’d broken up. Noam was more shaken up about it than I originally thought he might be. He said he needed some time to gather his thoughts about the whole thing, but he called me three days later asking me to come get my stuff from his damn house. My aunt’s damn house I reminded him. He hung up on me after that. His anger felt feminine and familiar to my own after a breakup, so his abrasiveness felt less hurtful. And here I sat, at the end of my aunt’s driveway where my boyfriend lived, coming to gather my things and move on.

I had decided not to tell Noam I was bi. It just didn’t come up naturally in the reasons I wanted to break things off because my sexuality wasn’t one of those reasons. We wanted different things, with this relationship, with our lives, with, well, nearly everything. I wanted to stay serious and exclusive for a while and play it by ear, he wanted to move in and get married in the next two years. He wanted to move to New Mexico, I wanted to stay in Delaware. I wanted to lay on the beach in Cabo and see the sea turtles, he wanted to backpack the Appalachian trail for two weeks. Tea, coffee. Green Party, Libertarian. Books, Movies. Ice cream, sherbet. Aunt Marcy was sad to see us breakup, but she said we were good bookends for each other, and our new chapters were beginning to write each other out of the other’s story. Part of me knew he wouldn’t be mature enough to be my friend after we broke up. I no longer felt that he was entitled to my coming out.

Dad and I sat for a long time in the driveway. His truck engine was off and both of us waited for the other to get out of the truck and walk to the door. Noam was inside, probably

training for some crossfit competition. He blasted music usually, so there was no way he would have heard the Silverado pull up.

“Dad,” I said staring out the windshield.

“Hmm?” he asked.

“Do you remember when Stephanie went to the hospital the first time a week before you went to Kuwait for six months?”

“Yeah, honey, I do. Why?”

“Something changed between us when you got back. I won’t pretend to know what it was like to travel to a foreign country during unrest, or have a high-pressure military career, or daughter sick in the hospital, but you came back a harder man that day when we picked you up from the airport. From then on you looked at me like some potential ticking time bomb. I don’t know what it was exactly, just some look on your face,”

Dad squirmed. Feelings. It was hard for him to be vulnerable around anyone but my mother. Once, when I was thirteen I got up to get water from the bathroom faucet in the middle of the night and I could hear my Dad sobbing softly, mom whispering something sweet to him in their bedroom. His eyes were red and swollen in the morning. He took an allergy pill to keep the façade going the next morning.

He looked out the window and shoved his fist under his chin.

“I didn’t understand her, Caroline. Still don’t. I saw potential in her, like I see it in you now,”

I didn’t know how to react. He didn’t say what I thought I wanted to hear. But he was trying, so I stayed quiet and let him finish.

“And I was afraid – concerned – you might be like her one day. The more she grew up and her pathology worsened, the more she slipped from my grasp. I couldn’t control her. I couldn’t put her on the map like I could with even the worst recruits starting out. She challenged my sense of control and decency, not just as a father, but as a man,”

He paused to rake his fingers through his buzz cut down onto the back of his neck.

“As a human being”

“I’m sorry, Dad,”

“No, I’m sorry, Caroline. For not seeing it sooner,”

He looked at me with warm pleading eyes. They began to get glassy but he blinked it away quickly.

“Seeing what?” I asked.

“That you, in even your darkest moments, could never be like her. Ever,”

I grabbed his arm and leaned onto his shoulder. I closed my eyes tight. He kissed the top of my head and leaned his head on mine.

“I was too hard on you. You’re a kind soul, like your mother, and a hell of a fighter like me. You tried hard for Stephanie and she didn’t deserve it. I wish there was something I could have told you, done for you, to avoid her exploitation. Still, there’s nothing I would change about you,”

“Really?”

“Really, Car,”

“Dad,” I said sitting up. “There’s something I want to tell you,”

“What’s that?”

My hands began to shake violently. I picked at the hangnail on my thumb and stared out the windshield, gulping excessively. I could feel my eyes throbbing in their sockets, terrified of what might happen after the words come tumbling out of my mouth.

“I-I like girls, Dad” I told him, just loud enough to be heard.

He looked at me, brows furrowed.

“Like, in a gay way?” he asked confused.

I burst into laughter, “Y-yeah, Dad, in a gay way,”

He looked even more confused. Innocent. Like a toddler just learning he could count on his fingers. He pointed out the windshield towards the house.

“B-but, what about Noam?” he asked slowly.

“I like guys too,” I said, a little more defensive than I had intended.

“Does he know? Is that why you broke up?”

“No,” I pushed out. “We just weren’t compatible as I had originally thought,”

I immediately regretted being so reserved with that answer. Oh, Dad. There was no turning back now. He knew. Maybe telling him this was a mistake.

“Look, this has nothing to do with Noam. I’ve always been this way, Dad. It’s who I am,”

He sighed and stuck his fist under his cheek. He leaned against the arm rest on the door staring out the windshield. I continued to pick my hang nail. I wasn’t sure if this was going well or not.

We didn’t say anything for a while. I was surprised Noam never came to the window to see if we had arrived at the house yet. Dusk had begun to settle in. The street lights on Aunt Marcy’s road went on preemptively. The pinks began to fade into the pale blue sky like cotton candy. It reminded me of Ramona’s aesthetic the first night we met.

“You know,” Dad began, after what felt like hours. “When I was an E-1, there was a Staff Sergeant who oversaw an entire hangar at the base in Massachusetts where I did my basic training. Sergeant Hayes. Boy, he was a real hard-ass. Perfection was the name of his game. He wanted you to learn fast, execute your tasks with precision, and completed on time. Not early, on time. He thought that being early meant you’d pissed all over his instructions, and done a shit job.”

He sniffed sharply and scratched his head.

“Yeaap, he was tough one. He taught me everything I know about fixing an American aircraft. He wrote excellent reports about me. Helped me rise through the ranks quickly. He was with me in Kuwait,”

He pressed the button, and hocked a loogie out the window.

“But when we were there... well, there was a day I was in the ATC room when we lost power. We couldn’t communicate with any of the planes in the air. We had six men in four corners of this damn country and they were lame friggin’ ducks until we could get back into contact with them. I ran to Sergeant Hayes’ private quarters and knocked furiously. He didn’t respond right away. When the door opened, a Persian man stepped out of the room fixing his buttons. He looked at me for a second and I looked back at Hayes,”

He paused and changed his posture, as if he was re-experiencing it all over again. I was frozen. I had no idea where this was going.

“The messy sheets. The tissues on the floor. The way he straightened his collar. The way he picked up his jacket and put on the blues, brushing dust from the cuffs... I knew. He knew that I knew,”

He sat up and cleared his throat.

“We got the connection reestablished between us and the planes and made sure the men in the air were safe and ready to land. We never talked about that moment. He never punished me for what I knew. He treated me the same, and I to him. It never affected our working rapport, not even when he followed my company to Delaware. Not even when I rose to NCO myself. He left Kuwait early on orders, or something. After I got back, I found out he had transferred to another base in Utah. I haven’t seen him since.”

We were learning a lot about each other in this moment. Dad had never told me about Sergeant Hayes. His tone implied that this was a story only mom had heard.

“He was a good soldier. A better man,”

Silence again. I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Why didn’t you –”

“I don’t get this gay stuff,” he said tersely. “I guess it’s a little different for you because you’re straight AND gay –”

“Bisexual, Dad,” I blurted.

He waved his hands in apology.

“Bisexual, yeah. It’s just all weird for me,”

He put a hand on my shoulder.

“But you’re my daughter. I love you. More importantly, I respect the decisions you make with your life. I can’t say I’m gonna always say the right things. That’s what we’ve got your mother for, keep me in check,”

I smiled. For a moment, I forgot we were in the car. I was still buckled. I looked out the windshield again at the sky. It turned a lovely sherbet color, sun barely peeking behind the tree in the front yard.

“I hope that’s the answer you wanted from me,” he said, exasperated. “Let’s pick up your stuff tomorrow. Marcy left the keys with your mom. Up for ice cream?”

I nodded and smiled.

He put the car reverse and backed out of the driveway.

The gravel kicked up under the fenders as we drove home. Part of me felt sick. Would Dad have accepted me so easily if Sargent “Don’t-Ask-Don’t-Tell” hadn’t been such an influential part of his military career? I wanted to tell him more, I wanted to make him understand me.

We sat in the parking lot of Kings Homemade, licking the ice cream off our waffle cones. I’m glad we took the drive there.

“You know, Sergeant Hayes loved Neil Diamond?” Dad asked.

“Hmmm?” I said, mouth full of mint chocolate chip.

“That’s how we got your name,” he said.

I smiled widely.

“Sweet Caroline...” he sang, surprisingly in tune.

“Bum, bum, bum,” I replied.

We smiled together and stared out at the sunset. A crescent of moon had peaked in the sky over us. Stars

“Dad?” I asked.

“Hmmm?” he said, Moosetracks dripping down his cone.

“We should take a road trip this summer. I would like to meet Sergeant Hayes,”

Adam

Days went by and nothing from Dad. I considered calling the police ironically enough. I wasn't sure about it all. I checked with the motel manager and he said dad had paid him quite nicely. When I asked what he meant by this, he just chuckled, *he's here. He'll be here for a while too, kid*. I didn't know what that meant but I went with it.

I felt high on white-hot rage. Three days. No call. I can't knock on the door because, *privacy please, Adam*. The words rang in my head like tinnitus. I slammed open the front door and Rennie yelped. He clumsily scampered across the kitchen linoleum into the living room by where I thought mom was. There was a cigarette dangling over our dingy couch. Ash fell to the floor and thankfully left the carpet unignited. She must have fallen asleep on the couch watching The Sopranos again. But as I got closer, she wasn't on the couch. When I picked up the cigarette it felt cool. Like it had been there for a while.

Standing in center of the living room I never realized how small our house really was. Dull olive walls lined with pictures from old times were slowly creeping closer toward me. School photos, family photos; no dad, sister's graduation, school photos, family photos; no dad. I couldn't feel anything and the room was spinning. I can't explain the frustration I was feeling, except that it was morphing into guttural explosive anger.

I sat down to try to piece these last few days together. That lady from the bank whose name was escaping me. I had had called three times about the loan. Her voicemail rung out a distinct tone: *we don't loan money to coke heads*. We lost the space in downtown Dover because the guy who was there before use decided to renew the lease. We were back to square one in less than a week. I tried to reason with it, figure out how it all went wrong, and then I found myself

here. In the middle of my living room on a Tuesday night. The room spun harder and faster the more I stood still and the shadows from the slits in the blinds screeched into my muscles. The echoing sound of Rennie slurping at his water bowl tasted like childhood in my cheeks. Tears welled in my hollow sockets. Where was he? Who cares. I didn't believe him anymore. I dropped the empty whiskey bottle and headed for the garage.

I knew I stunk of Evan Williams so I took the back roads to the Delaware Inn. I killed the engine and stared up at his room. It was just after ten and street lamps struggled to flicker against the sea green siding. The lights were off and the blinds were pulled shut in his room.

Just then I realized that Dad's room was on the second floor.

I put the wrench and the flat head in the hook of my workman jeans and started clumsily scaling the rusty gutters. There was a considerably sized ledge underneath each window on the second floor and after some adrenaline-fueled drunk-strength I hoisted myself onto the dangling concrete slab. I took out my wrench and yanked out the bolts to remove the screen. I let it fall to the ground with a soft clatter. Carefully sliding the vinyl panel left, I slipped into the dark room. It was musty and the floor was black. The double bed looked cramp and lumpy, but it was too hard to focus on. Paperwork scattered the TV table. The light from a street pole poured in and shone in onto the back of his head, motionless. I gazed around the room. Not really sure what I was looking for. I walked to the splintering dresser first. I pulled back a drawer and I found bags of tightly sealed white powder. I rolled it in my hand and it felt like flour and cornstarch. There was a black spade stamped on each dime bag. I grabbed two rubber banded wads of twenty's and

threw them in my pocket. I wouldn't even spend it. The thought of his paranoia that it had gone missing would be enough.

I finally remembered to breathe as I dropped to the dingy motel room floor. Weak. He only went clean to get his new product on the outside sooner. To prove he was no longer a threat he had become a Kingpin in the shadows of the prison. Let the others do his bidding. The spade was his mark. My head fell and I looked down at the floor. My eyes had finally adjusted to the darkness. That's when I saw the pistol, a 357 magnum, catching the light from the streetlamp onto its four inch barrel. It peeked out from under the corner of his pillow. I could feel the whiskey coming back up. I swallowed a lump of vomit as I stood. I carefully slid the gun out from under the pillow. My hand shaking, I pointed it at his head. He didn't move.

"You lied to me, you used me!" I hissed barely above a whisper.

My hands were violently shaking. I could hear a pin or something inside the gun rattling. I brought the barrel slowly up to my chin. I could feel the hot tears searing my face. Why was I here? Why couldn't I just have listened to mom? Mom mom mom mom mom I dug the barrel into my cranium as hard as I could muster. I cocked it. But then I saw the woman.

A thin, petit woman was curled up facing the window. She must have stirred from the noise. She pulled the fraying duvet up to her shoulder. Her back nestled against his meaty arm. She had messy brown hair. Maybe in a bun. I was too drunk to focus on her face. There was a pack of cigarettes on the side table. My heart sunk. I couldn't bring myself to walk around the bed to see who it was.

I dropped the gun and looked at my hands. My blistered, scarred, thirty-three-year-old hands. I wondered if that's what his looked like. I had driven drunk to a seedy motel looking for

what I wanted. An explanation. At any cost. Willing to do anything to get it. I scaled a gutter, pried open the windows with a wrench. The same wrench I had looked for twenty years earlier to fix my bike with. I climbed in and opened yet another drawer only to find my father's cocaine. Again. I stole his money and put a gun to his head. I couldn't see my reflection anymore in the mirror on the wall. I wasn't me anymore.

Dawn broke and I awoke leaning against the wall. My legs sprawled, numb from the floor. I must have passed out from the alcohol. My head was throbbing but it was clearer now. I felt the wad of cash in my jeans and the cold metal of the magnum still in my right hand. Oranges and pinks bled into the blue sky. It was time to go.

I slipped the magnum in my pocket instead of returning it to its place underneath the pillow. He wasn't going to destroy any more lives. I didn't return the money either. Not even on principle. It didn't matter. I had already become him and there was no turning back.

I shut and locked the door quietly behind me and took the rickety staircase down to the parking lot. I didn't bother wiping off my fingerprints. No way he'd call the cops.

I pulled the car around the cul-de-sac. Some stupidly sentimental song was playing on the early morning radio. Probably something like Cold Play, or Dave Matthews Band from the early 90s.

If mom wasn't home when I got there, I would know who was in that bed with him. I rounded the corner and drove down my street. My gut twisted. I pulled over. Not ready to drive down my street. Not ready to find mom home. Not ready to find mom *not* home. Either way, I was leaving Delaware. Before I left the motel, I wrote a note and placed it on the TV stand:

"When you find me, I'll be waiting,"

Marcy

I carried him down the sand in my bare feet. The sand was warm from the sun peeking through the clouds. The horizon seemed less abysmal in June. The reddening sunset bled into the yellows and met the clouds with deafening beauty. The waves broke on the shore.

We sat on a towel close to the shoreline and I held him like a baby. He was lanky and tangled in my arms, and I could feel his breath growing weaker. I grunted as I threw down the portable oxygen tank from my sore shoulder. I stroked his face and looked out into the ocean. He didn't look like the vivacious boy he had grown up to be. All that was left was a gray mess of hair and limbs.

The waves crashed in rhythmic whooshing and the whole world had stopped at once. My entire life I had waited for a moment like this with my son. A beautiful sunset and a quiet moment in time to show him that this is what it truly means to live. As I held him dying in my arms I began to imagine that this is what it must feel like to be engulfed in flames. My mother who had died so young many years ago was here with me, I knew it, my father too. I looked down the beach at the lighthouse and across the water to a stray buoy that had been there for nearly a decade. I remember triangulating this point after the police officer who found my father took me back to the place he died. I could hear them whispering to me. My mother was reading me a story, a story I had heard many times. My father told me he loved me. Julien's brow had been furrowing for the past few weeks, a muscle spasm that had given me nanoseconds of relief from this nightmare. I did not wish it away, such a fragile movement.

The sun sank over the banks far in the distance as the seagulls circled the distant shoreline across the harbor. It was time for me to say goodbye.

His body was growing tepid, his face a pale shade of blue, a sign the oxygen was not reaching his brain any longer. It was hard to romanticize this, holding my son suffocating on the beach.

I began to hyperventilate as I sobbed.

Carefully, I whispered, “I don’t think two people could have been happier than we have been.”