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ROOMS IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE
SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

“Small-town America” has become a familiar trope in contemporary American culture, often viewed through a romanticized or warm filter. While this collection does not aim to rake up muck to shatter common social impressions thereof, it does investigate the underpinnings and operations of such communities, and it explores their scaffolding to show how “small-town America” has evolved to the present day. Through five stories in the northeastern town of Woodbridge, town residents deal with influxes of previously known outsiders who, like it or not, have come to be included in the demographic makeup of the town that was once uniquely their own. Citizens of all ages navigate traditional rites of passage, expectations thereof, and what happens when those rituals do not go exactly as planned. The faces of youth and old age have changed considerably from the glitzy Technicolor motifs still freshly in our memories, and *Rooms in My Father’s House* shows how we operate within those motifs and how we vary from them, and the implications of both sticking with and departing from tradition. In short, *Rooms in My Father’s House* sets out to answer the question of what small-town America has become, what it means to live under its auspices today, how much of the past remains with us, and how much it has been buried.

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This work is dedicated to the memory of my wonderful grandparents, whose constant loving presence helped me through childhood and college, and whose colorful hometown provided the inspiration for this collection.

Spitting Image

Mark Hatton rested his arm on the driver's side door, guiding the wheel down the highway with his two left forefingers. Impatience and a lazy foot inched the gas up to seventy-five, but he didn't feel like passing the plodding car in front of him so he coasted down to a cool sixty-two and let the Knievels in the left lane risk their insurance surcharges. NPR played quietly in the background, mumbling some business about the Middle East or cat allergies. Sun beaming on slick, after-rain pavement and the muffled radio tried to convince him to give his sleep deprivation a reprieve, but he was almost home. Down the twenty-nine-mile drive on the Expressway southbound from the city, Mark made sure to take the hidden offramp where the Expressway dovetailed the Turnpike. This errant branch from the helix led to Woodbridge after it had been forgotten when the highways were built. This spillway sent hundreds of lost travelers into the town, comprising nearly all the outside money spent within its borders. A bylaw banned gas stations and convenience stores anywhere between the town center and the highways for this reason.

Deposited now on Wendell Avenue, he passed the hospital where his son had been born three weeks before on March 21, the first day of spring. The season had had a delayed arrival, however, as warm damp air was just beginning to seep through the austere remnants of winter. A mile down the road, he turned onto Main Street and parked on the side of the street and under the branches of a budding maple tree. He went across the street and into the fixture of Italian cuisine in town, Persona Non Grata, to pick up a pizza for dinner. A few regulars, mainly couples, were seated around the bar drinking wine and various pasta dishes. Mark's pizza would be a minute, so

he sat down and talked to Frank Lemanski, who owned the place and got stuck tending bar on Thursdays. He'd opened the restaurant the same year Mark was born, thirty-two years earlier.

"Heya, Marco!" said Frank, and the regulars smiled and waved in lockstep with him, more energetically than usual. "How's your old man?"

Frank and Mark's father had both grown up in town together. His father used to drink here while Mark and the rest of the fathers' kids ran around the bar, playing pool and shoveling coins in the jukebox.

"He's good," said Mark. "You know, trying to find any way to get that early retirement."

Frank snapped his head back and laughed. "Ah, Phil, he's always been a lazy bastard. Not like you though," he pointed. "Making us all proud with a big city job!"

Mark smiled politely.

Mary Ann Connors leaned over the barstool that separated them as if it were a secret. "Congratulations on the baby, Mark," she said to him. "You and Heather must be so excited." Her husband nodded behind her.

"Thanks," he said. "But you know how it goes. I may never sleep again."

"You must be up all night," said Frank. "Tell Heather that we're all pulling for her." Frank's daughter, a few years younger than Mark, brought out his pizza. He got up and made his way back out.

"What a nice kid," Mary Ann said to Frank.

"Yes," said Frank. "And what a damn shame."

The house was built in the '20s, and it fell ambivalently somewhere between Victorian and Colonial, on the other side of town from where Mark had grown up on Hammond Hill. Heather had wanted a house in the newer subdivision further north from the center of town, and Mark had his eye on a beautiful little number from 1892 with a nice porch two blocks from his

parents' house on Hammond Hill, but Heather was uncomfortable living so close. She'd said their gaze reached too far, but she really thought that she might lose her maiden name altogether and end up having to forge her birth certificate to make herself a lifelong resident of Woodbridge. So they compromised and moved into 43 Juniper Street, still in walking distance from the center, still in reasonable shape structurally. Heather put her mark on it with blue clapboards with a white trim skeleton, black shutters, and some window boxes, exotic for the neighborhood, in front of the house. The previous owner, another one of Mark's father's sundry acquaintances, had painted the house the school colors of red and orange, which showed both a preposterous sense of misplaced pride and a heinous clash of colors.

When he parked in the garage under the house, Mark fixed his hair for an entrance and balanced the pizza box on his hand. He would pretend that he was a fancy French waiter in tails and a thin mustache and declare *le repas servi* for Madame, and could he fetch some *purée de carotte* for le petit Monsieur? Bounding up the last step, he opened the door to the front hall and strutted to the kitchen. He couldn't see Heather, but he did hear the baby crying somewhere, loud enough for the sound to bend around the staircase shafts. Exhaling, his shoulders fell forward and he set the pizza box on the kitchen counter. His son lay in his swinging chair, whose lull had long lost its charm to him. Mark picked him up and bounced him against his shoulder, his eyes shut at the feeling of his son's skin against the side of his head. Five minutes of hushing and a few laps around the house settled him. Mark kissed his forehead.

After changing the baby's diaper, Mark went into the bedroom lit only by the flickering blue light of the television. Heather lay on top of the bed in a seeming trance from the zingers and laugh tracks. Her hair fell at all angles and she squirmed on the bed, audibly comfortable.

"Are you drunk?"

"No," she mouthed, still looking at the TV.

Archie Bunker regurgitated something about queers and Heather moaned and turned on her side, palming her face like a dog pawing at an itch.

“There’s a bottle of pinot grigio in the trash.”

She crawled on her side some more and hid her face in the pillow.

“How long had he been crying for before I got home?”

“Not sure.”

The baby had fallen asleep in his arms, so he went to put him down in his crib for a while. He came back in and sat down next to her on the bed.

“Heather,” he said, half whispering. “What’s wrong?”

“You didn’t ask how long I was crying for.”

“How long?”

“Only a few minutes,” she said into the pillow, “but you didn’t ask.”

He sighed and made a mental note to look for the Prozac bottle later and count how many were left. She would say she’d taken them, but he could never know for sure.

“I’m not pregnant anymore. It’s nice to have a glass of wine when I want to now.”

“That’s not it,” he said, careful to temper his voice, “and you know it.”

She shrugged.

He stood up. “Like it or not—”

“Don’t shout.”

“Fuck you.” He turned and pointed at her. “Like it or not, you are his mother. He depends on you. He is an infant. He *cannot* physically survive without you.”

Anger didn’t work well on her. It tended to form a foundation she could build a fort on and settle within. “You being condescending doesn’t help anything,” she said. “And guilt is a bad motivator.”

“Oh, go take another pill. I’ve got a job to do, and so do you. I take care of him when I’m home, and you take care of him when you are. We made a deal, remember?”

“The game’s changed.”

“I’ll say it has!” he paced around the room and couldn’t stop. “How do I know you weren’t sneaking booze the whole damn time?”

“That’s fetal alcohol syndrome, you idiot. Different disease. This is genetic, which means it’s no one’s fault.”

Crying came through on the monitor.

Heather looked back at the TV. “You’d better go see what he wants,” she said.

Heather had had the bag packed just in case, but was confident that the time of C-section for the following Thursday morning would be obeyed by her infant. Dr. Garrison in Lenoxville had said that everything would be all set, quipping that she would hardly remember a thing.

She was the one who’d wanted the baby. Three years of marriage by themselves stretched her to her end. They never took any big trips; they just sat in the house and saved money. She, through her first trimester, had worked processing claims for Blue Cross Blue shield, memorizing the loopholes, roadblocks, and stopgaps of the insurance racket. For the headaches they dealt with and dealt out, her coworkers were so pleasant. Their interest in one another’s lives was bounded on strict propriety, dictated by Heather’s supervisor, who hailed from Minnesota, so that life’s biggest annoyances amounted to a heck of a problem. The office had thrown her a nice party, though quaint, with cake and juice to thank her and wish her well, and she handed in her resignation amid the incessant irony that she would be on the other end of her own job without the inside connection to pull the illicit strings. She never thought she’d be filing so much. Mark’s insurance was good, but it wasn’t that good. So she read books and bought old punk records,

wondering if her baby might grow up to wear torn tight jeans and chains, and how old he might be when he tried his first joint.

Sometimes she would go to the supermarket or the coffee shop, but she never felt well received unless Mark was with her. They came right up and said hello or would give her an extra coupon they weren't using, but Heather never felt that they opened up and that she could see who they were; in her presence, everyone had a role and a front. There was no connection. They should have gotten that nicer house in the development; it would have been all the same. She didn't go as far back in this town as he did; just for as long as they were married. It wasn't the same where she'd grown up, in Lenoxville, twenty miles up the Turnpike, just outside the city. Maybe because it was because they had more restaurants than you could count on one hand, and a rail line into the city. Civilization, she'd joke. Something to occupy their time other than dead nostalgia and paltry gossip. If that was what it entailed, she wasn't sure she wanted a real connection. Mark was mostly immune to that trait, but she wondered if he hadn't always been. Four years in college out of town, where they'd met, had done him a lot of good. Probably just as well that he didn't work in town either.

But when they wanted to, they could make her feel sacred. When her father died the year before, Mark's brothers, their wives, and their kids all came to the wake and the funeral—it seemed like everyone who'd ever talked to him was there. They were in the funeral parlor doors right at the crack of five and stayed until they'd passed every last bead on the rosary after the sun had set and they were ready to lock up. She stood in the receiving line shielding her mother from the casket, but keeping her own back to it as best she could. They cracked jokes and hugged her, and kept the chatter in the room going to a sufficiently distracting level. She always heard them thanks to their gratuitous use of the letter R. When she heard it, she felt safe. "I'm sorry about your farther," they said, and she felt all right. The Rs would take care of her.

If she had the baby in her own Lenoxville, though, he had a better chance at avoiding that affliction. It didn't matter how long he would live here; without being born in Woodbridge, he couldn't have it in his blood and soul—only his soul. And maybe he would be someone different, hopefully someone like Mark, but even he couldn't find it in him to get away from here.

The baby wouldn't wait, though. Mark was at work when she started to go into labor, and she called him and told him that she could wait until he got home, but he needed to come fast. She didn't call the ambulance, knowing that she'd end up in Fairley Hospital on the other side of town and not with Dr. Garrison in Lenoxville. She had the bag waiting by the door and struggled into her big black overcoat and sat on the bottom stair. She heard the engine coming down the street and went out into the driveway to meet him. He helped her in the car and tossed the bag in the back, burning rubber up the hill to the end of the street.

“Just make sure we all get there alive,” she found the humor to say.

“Keep...doing your breathing...or something,” Mark stammered and worked his lead feet to try and get to the Turnpike.

They were caught at a red light on Wendell Avenue about a mile before the highway. Heather had read all kinds of books and watched documentaries about pregnancy and parenting; it was how she entertained herself when she didn't want to get up. She had rehearsed the procedure, but she could never guess how quickly labor would come or how bitterly the pain would bite her.

“Turn left,” she winced. Mark was too scared to think to disagree, and ran the rest of the red lights all the way to Fairley Hospital.

He brought her through the sliding doors, piercing the wall of smoke outside brought on by bored paramedics waiting for a bar fight or a car accident. Heather coughed and almost lost her balance. The receptionist had gone to school with Mark, and worked the same job since they'd known each other.

The walls of the delivery room were gray, as if every other color labeled “institutional” couldn’t adequately do the job. They pumped Heather full of good drugs. The obstetrician came in, took a quick look at the scene, and said with a curt nod, “Let’s get to work.” The yellow fluorescent lights mixed with the gray walls and beamed a pall over the birth. It looked like a rainy twilight.

The doctor said nothing when she pulled the baby out of Heather. She turned around to present him to Mark, who would cut the cord with Heather’s gasps in the background. Mark’s beaming grin fell when he saw his son’s face, like a lost coin off a skyscraper, and pinpricks seized his body. Hands trembling, he handed the scissors back over to the doctor who did the honors. The baby’s face was flat, the bridge of his nose buried in his head, and his eyes, when they opened fully after the effort of crying, revealed themselves to be too circular, too geometric. He looked confused. The doctor motioned for a couple of nurses and they sent him down the hall. Mark couldn’t move his legs.

“I’m sorry,” said the doctor.

Mark went to hold Heather’s hand. His throat was trembling and he forced out what he thought he needed to say, mumbling, “About what? We have a family now.”

“Congratulations, Mark. You too, Heather.” She followed the nurses out, leaving one to supervise their recovery.

Heather was still drugged up, so Mark saved his breath. He sat next to her bed, hunched over his lap, hands folded. His eyesight was a blur from the white lights and mental haze, and he staggered out to find his parents in the waiting room. They stood when they saw him. His father had his hand in his pocket, trying to contain the teeth in his smile. His mother’s hands were clasped together and she cried out in excitement. They’d seen the nurses come out of the delivery room with the newest Hatton, though their backs obscured their line of sight as they brought him down the hall. Mark embraced his mother and then sobbed audibly into her shoulder.

“You’ll remember this as one of the best days of your life,” she whispered.

When he was still crying after a couple of minutes, she pulled away from him, and realized when she saw the twists of pain in his face that she understood. “Oh, honey,” she tried to soothe him and stifle her own grief. She let go of him and looked back at her husband. With their eyes, they asked each other who was going to make the phone calls.

When Heather came to, Mark couldn’t bring himself to tell her that she’d given birth to a child with Down syndrome, so he deferred to the doctor when she came back in. She handed down the official diagnosis but otherwise cleared the baby of any other health concerns, but said that they were going to keep him here for at least a few days.

In the clear, though, the nurse brought the baby in and Mark held him for the first time. He felt as if he were fused to him, welded to his arms. The baby’s arms and legs squirmed, and the movement made him realize that he was holding a live human being. His infant son who had once been a part of him and a part of his wife.

The baby’s eyes were captivating as they were distracting, and they were drawn to him. They needed him, they craved him, and he was pretty sure they loved him, that his son loved him.

“Hello,” he said.

The words still echoed in Heather’s head the same way they had at her father’s wake. “I’m sorry, your son has Down syndrome.” “I’m sorry for your loss.” Congratulations and condolences, apogee and perigee. Her son had been born and died at the same time. She had called Garrison at home once she’d sobered up, demanding an explanation. He congratulated her and told her that the ultrasound tests had a 15-20% chance of failing to detect the disorder, and even combined with the other tests they’d run, there was still ultimately a 5% chance that they would miss it completely, and Mrs. Hatton, unfortunately, that’s what happened. He called it a perfect storm, conveniently; he’d never called her Mrs. Hatton. She briefly thought about asking

for her money back, but she hung up, looking at her son to make sure one more time that it was all real.

They'd decided on Thomas Michael Hatton from the day they found out the sex about four months in. It had been her father's name, and they'd gotten the OK from her mother to go ahead with it. Mark didn't think they needed permission, but Heather insisted they ask her at brunch. When they did, she smiled, said of course, and dropped a few tears, but she assured them that it was because she was happy for them.

She didn't want to think about why this had happened. She knew. It was genetic. They knew this; they'd gone over all the family history paperwork, medical history paperwork, anything history paperwork. Clean on both sides. No one had tried to say which parent Mark, Jr. looked like more; the blunt disparity prevented such conjecture. How could he look like either of them when he looked hardly like anyone? At least when his hair grew in, they'd have something to work with.

She was terrified to look at him. His head always seemed to inch toward her, and he cried out for her constantly. When she held him, she did so with clumsy gentleness as if he might at any moment turn to sand and slip through her arms. She tiptoed through the hall to see him and slept as often as she could, complaining of pain so she might get another drip. When she finally faced him head-on, the sight of her son walloped her, pinned her where she lay. She saw him clearly for the first time.

"We're not naming him after my father," she said, fussing with the IV in her arm.

Mark stopped himself short of a rhetorical *why*. He knew why. "That's ridiculous. This is our son. He's a part of you just like you're a part of your father."

"We are *not* naming him after my father."

"I wish your mother could hear you."

“She can’t. Tough shit.”

“Well, we can’t leave until we fill out the form for a birth certificate, so what are we going to name him?”

She turned her head and said to the wall, “You can name him whatever you want, but if you write down Thomas Michael, I swear to God I will leave you right now.”

Mark picked up the clipboard and walked out of the room. He went and paced up and down the hall, and came back to examine his son once more. A feeling of nobility came over him. He looked at the baby and then back at the paper, taking a breath. Someone had to have this kid’s back, so he scribbled in the name on the paper: Mark Philip Hatton, Jr.

“We can leave now.”

They called for a nurse to bring a wheelchair for Heather, and Mark carried out Mark, Jr. At the desk, he gave him to Heather to hold while he returned the papers, shuffling them on the desk. Taking one last look, he took the pen and crossed out Philip on the birth certificate form, and on top of it, wrote Louis, a name of no relation to anyone on either side of the family.

She briefly wanted to know why. There was no why. She imagined school children of every age: first, the grade-school kids pointed and laughed as they watched the retard get on the special bus to go to his special classes. The thunderous applause as Mark, Jr. shuffled to the podium at his high school graduation. How nice of them to let him walk, and what a great job his mother has done raising him. The consciousness of it would follow him every day of his life, from the constant hospital visits to the insurance claims to the compliments. He would never simply be Mark, Jr.; the epithet would be complementary and obligatory. He would never be her child; he would always be her retarded child, or special or disabled as he and his peers matured. They both were marked with something that wasn’t supposed to happen: a tragedy, a curiosity. She didn’t know who to hate.

Heather napped when she could during the day. She had to have the baby monitor up on full volume sometimes to pierce her sleep and go see what was the matter this time. Her mother and her in-laws visited occasionally, but she hardly ever saw anyone else. No one knew if it was OK to visit, if the mourning period had ended. She had prepared for this routine since she knew she was pregnant, crafting what her baby's day in her house would be like. When he was born, she threw out the breast pump, making the routine easier and more mechanical because she wanted to scream most of the time anyway. Not just because her son would always be the retarded kid or the special one, the one who would always be tiptoed around, that he would never fully appreciate her or she him. He would never know what appreciate meant, or what love meant the same way as she did.

She had done this. It had to be a punishment, a compounding punishment that her son's presence announced at all times, and none of the Prozac or the booze or the clothes she tried to dress him in could ever wipe the indelible marks off him. God willing, she might outlive him. She suffocated under all the support; she wanted someone to call her a liar, a whore, a bad mother, anything: to pass a judgment, some finite label.

But her son's cries couldn't take shape yet; they could only tell her what she already knew. Something was wrong, but they would never say what. They just begged her to look at him. And she could look at him with eyes up and down in anger, frustration, desperation, or hope. It would still be the same.

Mark heard Mark, Jr. crying on the baby monitor at about eight on a Saturday morning. He rubbed his eyes and got to the bedroom door before he realized Heather wasn't in bed. He checked the bathroom, not there either. Looking out the window, he found what he'd been expecting any day: only one car in the driveway—his. He paced around the house and went onto

the front porch for some fresh air. Breathing in the damp morning, he sat in the rocking chair and stared at the post before noticing Heather's station wagon parked on the street.

He found her in the backyard leaning against the chimney. She was smoking a cigarette with a fresh pack in her free hand, looking fazed by what she faced.

"Where've you been?" He stood far enough away so the baby wouldn't inhale the smoke. "I got worried."

She started to speak, but he stopped her.

"I really could hit you right now," he said. "I really feel like it. You haven't been all in with this, and now here you are sneaking smokes. I don't need to tell you how good that is for a child and—" he stopped. "Heather, I have never thought any of this about you before."

"I had a bad dream," she exhaled. "Bizarre."

"What happened?"

"It was like in the Bible." She took a drag. "Everyone up and down the street was painting their doorframes red. Geraldine over there had a can of paint and a roller and left it perfect—you know how their house is beige, she didn't let any of it bleed over into the main wall. Other people had streaks, but I asked Geraldine, I asked her what was going on and she said that everyone's first-born son was going to be taken away—those were the words she used—taken away unless they painted their doorframes red, and it had to be a special kind of red. She wouldn't say who was coming to take them. And everyone had them done up, even the houses with no kids or just girls.

"So I ran down cellar to check if we had any paint, from anywhere, even though we've never painted anything red. And we didn't have any except this tiny sample can of pastel red we were thinking of for the baby's room. I took a tiny brush and was scrubbing away at the frame, but another one of the neighbors walked by, I forget his name, and said, 'Oh, no, that's not going to work.'

“What do you mean?” I said.

“But he just said it again, ‘Oh, no,’ he said, and I asked him if he had any of his red paint left over that I can use. But all he did was laugh walk on down the street. So I ran up to everyone in their front yards, asking for paint, and no one would give it to me. And every doorbell I rang, no one answered.

“So finally I’m sitting on the couch in the living room with the windows open and a breeze starts to blow. The baby’s asleep in the crib upstairs. The sky turns gray and I hear the door open and slow footsteps coming down the hall. And this guy in a gray suit comes in, real clean-cut and straight, and he just says, ‘We’re here for him now.’

“I breathe out slowly, just like I’m exhaling smoke, and I don’t say anything. I just sat there and watched him turn around to go upstairs. I knew without even trying that I was glued to the couch, so I just stared ahead. So when he came down with Mark in his arms, he didn’t cry; he just gurgled loud enough for me to hear him and for me to hear that he was being taken away, to God knows where. Away from here. And then I heard the door close. And I couldn’t get up off the couch.”

Mark stood, still holding the silent baby, and saw his wife framed by the yard and the garden and the bushes. Birds were chirping and the heat tickled his nerves as spring rounded the corner into summer. He looked at her, at how the sun shone and highlighted the tips of her brown hair, how it belied the distress of her frown.

“It was just a dream,” he said. “It’s OK.”

Heather stamped out the cigarette and Mark hugged her, the baby splitting their embrace. She pressed tight into Mark’s chest and he tucked her head under his chin, rocking her back and forth. He kissed her cheek.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” he said.

She pulled back from his chest, looked up at him. “I’m so afraid,” she said.

“I haven’t seen you afraid since before he was born.”

Mark knew it was foolish to think they could completely refocus their marriage, that they couldn’t let the baby change it. Healthy or not, it would have changed it entirely.

Heather’s mother came to pick up Mark, Jr. for the night. She held him cautiously, with his weight balanced on her fingertips rather than gripping him with her palms—just the way she’d held Heather a long time ago. Her daughter loaded up the supplies into her mother’s car, armed with diaper bag, a selection of outfits, a whole case of formula, and phone numbers of Dr. Garrison, the hospital in Lenoxville, and the claims person at their insurance company.

“You sure?” Heather asked.

“Yes,” her mother said. “I’m ready.”

“We’ll come pick him up in the morning. It’s just for a little while.”

“Heather,” she said, “it’s OK. I’m happy to help give you a break.”

Heather gave Mark, Jr. a convincing kiss and strapped him into his grandmother’s car. She waved as she drove away.

They both went upstairs and fell into bed, exhaling their stress into the sheets and springs. Mark reached over and slung his arm over Heather’s stomach, and they fell asleep almost immediately.

When Heather woke up, she went into the kitchen to find a box of pizza from Persona Non Grata and two forty-ounce bottles of Olde English on the counter.

“Peace offering,” said Mark. “I’m really glad you seem to be getting more on board. I think that nightmare you had shows that you do really, you know, care.”

She blushed. It was what they used to drink in college when they had no money. Mark would often trade her one for an article of clothing or a night under the stars or, eventually, a key to her apartment.

She beamed at the golden, foul-tasting stuff and unscrewed its cap. “I don’t think I can drink as much of this as I used to,” she said, and took a swig. “But I’ll try.”

“Just like old times.”

“There is no ‘just like old times’ anymore.”

Mark took a big drink.

“Think of it this way,” she said. “Think of everything you were most excited about with being a father. Maybe it was teaching him to play catch or hearing him cry out and knowing he needs you.”

“He does. I told you that.”

“So think of how what you were aiming for in fatherhood measures up to the real thing now. Think of everything you’ll gain, and think of everything you’ll miss. You have some of all that—day to day, you’re doing just fine. You can try to press on all you want, but in the long run, there’s no doubt that something is missing.”

He stared at the bottle and kept a firm grip on its neck.

“Now think of it this way, and think of the big pictures. Over 90% of pregnancies where they find Down syndrome in the fetus are aborted. If it were you, would you really have kept it?”

Mark’s throat tightened and his palms clamped down on the counter. He was frozen. He couldn’t look up at her because he knew she was right.

“There is no more ‘just like old times.’” She finished the forty and slammed the bottle down.

Homecoming

A car with out-of-state plates sat intruding in the parking lot of Logan's Tavern. It was parked in Jim Redding's spot, an old soft-top '91 Chrysler LeBaron the color of cardboard. Inside, Jim found its owner: a new mouth on a glass of old wine.

"Hey, buddy," Jim said and patted the stranger's shoulder. "You gotta move your car." He took a seat next to him and ordered his usual. "It's parked in a handicapped spot."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry," he replied. "I'll go and move it." He was a short beetle of a man, with dark hair that began to reveal a bald spot on his crown. His face seemed, by default, to be somewhat dumbfounded, and he wore plastic-framed glasses whose thick lenses magnified his eyes and cast a jaundiced filter over them. He scurried out the front door and came back in, having moved the car, with a touch of red in his cheeks.

"Where ya from, Mack?" replied Jim. "Definitely not from around here with all that twang. Hold on—let me guess—Alabama?"

"Buckhannon, West Virginia, actually. Not too far from Pittsburgh."

"Ah, I wouldn't have guessed," said Jim. "See, us Yankee folk can't tell the difference sometimes. What brings you up all this way?"

"I just moved into a house on Birch Street."

"Oh, Buddy Carr's old place!" said Jim. "Well, I guess we're neighbors then, as luck would have it. What's your name? I'm Jim Redding."

"Andrew McAdams." They shook hands.

“That’s a nice place,” said Jim. Buddy was a good guy. Lived his whole life here.” Jim raised his glass to make a tacit toast and drank.

The regulars had moved to surround Andrew and Jim, and the semi-regulars failed to pretend they weren’t listening.

“Taken a job at Fairley Hospital,” said Andrew. “And I’ve always wanted to live in another part of the country.”

“And what, exactly, there?”

“ER physician. So hopefully y’all won’t be visiting me at work.” He deadpanned the tired joke, which was met with some nervous chuckling and raised eyebrows. The semi-regulars picked their heads up and the rest uttered their ums and ahs, most at a licensed physician who would even think to say “y’all.”

“No coal mining, then?”

“Nope. My grandpa worked in the mine but my mom was a teacher and my old man worked for the county.”

“Ah.”

“You married? Kids?”

“I’m recently divorced from my wife,” he said with a measured flatness.

“Sorry to hear it,” said the bartender. “This one’s on me.”

Andrew looked around the bar. The floor was mostly concrete with a bit of linoleum near the bar, which was an island in the center of the room. Timbers ran through the ceiling and zigged and zagged the walls. The posts were decorated with strands of white lights from floor to ceiling. It could have been an Oktoberfest or colonial setting if not for the pale gray light that pervaded the place.

“So what do you do, Jim?” Andrew asked.

The regulars laughed. “He drinks at this place,” one offered.

“Ah, shut up.” Jim waved him off. “Construction, insurance, mainly—when I’m not here, that is.” He smiled. The regulars laughed again.

“This,” said Andrew, “is the first time in a long while I’ve been in a bar didn’t have any deer heads hanging up on the walls. Other than that, it isn’t too different than back home.”

“You a big hunter?” Jim asked.

“Hm,” Andrew chuckled, bemused. He swirled his glass. “No.”

“So you don’t hunt and you don’t mine coal. Doesn’t that shit get you disowned in West Virginia?”

“No, just rooting for Pitt.” He looked down at the bar. No one laughed at the joke like he’d hoped. “Y’know, we do have hospitals and doctors and medicine and telephones in West Virginia.”

“Hey, man, I’m just trying to be friendly. Only kidding.”

Dr. McAdams looked around the bar, trying to parse the looks that were being aimed at him. They were all some form of quizzical, but he couldn’t quite tell which looks were curtains cloaking hostility. Back home, you smiled at strangers, with the understanding that they were just visiting. Once they broke that plane, though, fences went up quickly.

“I’m sorry, I’m just on edge trying to settle in. I should be getting back, though. It’s been a long day. Nice to meet you all.” He finished his drink and got off the barstool.

Jim looked over his shoulder until Andrew was just on the border of earshot, right by the front door. He surveyed the crowd and said, “What’s the difference between a tornado and divorce in the South?” He paused for a second. “Nothing! Someone’s losing a trailer!”

The laughter covered the sound of the door closing.

Andrew was wearing a red tank top and jean shorts when he answered the door the next morning. Amy Redding, Jim’s wife, had come over with a tray of brownies.

“I know how it can be,” she said. “I’ve only lived in Woodbridge since I’ve been married to Jim, so that’s eighteen years.”

“That’s a mighty long time,” said Andrew. “Congratulations.”

“You wouldn’t know it,” Amy said. “I wasn’t born here, so I’m always one degree removed. I’m always Jim’s wife. I’m always just on the fringe, but I’m still a settler.”

“You know, it’s a beautiful town, though. I was looking for something a little busier than my own small hometown, something closer to the city, but with a lot of green space, too. I need to breathe a bit.” He let out a terse laugh.

“Well, there is that,” she said. “It’s a nice little town, I guess. Been growing a lot in the past fifteen years or so, but it tends to look inward. And they talk a lot.” She paused. “But it’s been good to me and my daughter, so that’s all that really counts when you get down to it.”

“Haven’t had any problems to speak of,” Andrew smiled, and finished the last of his brownie.

“Jim mentioned your divorce,” Amy said. “I’m sorry to hear it.”

Andrew pursed his lips and gave a slow nod. “I appreciate that,” he said. “It hasn’t been easy.”

“So, where are you from?” asked Amy. “Let me guess,” she added quickly. “I want to say—Tennessee? No?”

“No, ma’am, West Virginia,” he replied. “I sure hope I don’t talk like someone from Tennessee.”

Amy giggled. “Well, ‘y’all’ would be a dead giveaway. I honestly can’t tell the difference. I don’t want to trample on any rivalries or anything, though.”

Andrew got home from work at 4:30 in the morning, slammed the front door shut, and went straight for the liquor cabinet. It wasn’t as fully stocked as it had been in Buckhannon, what

with court and custody and all, but he had brought as much of his good stock with him as he could. Fuming at the glass, he dispensed with the ice and dumped in some Canadian Club. Andrew eyeballed it at about four fingers. He fished out his pack of cigarettes from the back of the liquor cabinet and plopped down in the rocking chair on the back deck, simmering. A bit of whiskey spilled over the side of his glass and the excess made a half-ring on the arm of the chair.

A few stars made pale dots in the sky, the light pollution from town interfering. The orange ember at the tip of Andrew's cigarette glowed against the dark backdrop. He stared straight ahead and took a long, slow drag.

That guy could've died.

Maybe he should have. And then Clancy would have had to take the blame. They all would have had to, but he wouldn't have been able to take the credit. He hadn't read the goddamn chart.

"Andy, I've known this man for years. Trust me on this."

"Dr. Clancy, my name is Dr. McAdams. And failing that, I prefer to be called Andrew."

"As the ranking surgeon in this ER, Andy, I don't like your fucking tone."

Maybe Clancy missed it or maybe he didn't remember. After all, years pile up at the expense of clarity. Details get lost when all goes well. Oversight is the key to amity, and fixation to animosity. But if he'd known the patient was allergic to penicillin, Andrew wouldn't have had to come rushing at him with the epi-pen like a murderer. But trust him on it. Andrew had known for a long time that trust cost a lot more than it was worth.

Andrew exhaled, sighing, and sank into the chair, fixed on the horizon at the end of his small, fenced-in yard. In a couple of hours, his kids would be waking up. Back home the yard was endless. No fences, nothing to denote where playtime ended and the drab world began.

Lindsay would holler and holler but never got the first shower in the morning. That honor would always go to Roy or Pat—whichever could slink into the bathroom just in time to thwart

his sister's rank and incite her rage: fifteen, at the peak of teenage angst, in all its meanings: fear, anger, confusion. The boys were bright. They had their mother's hair and her slender build. They played in the yard or in the woods across the road—army and pioneers and hunters. They never kept score but always imagined, just like he had. Andrew had spent his days on the football team at Buckhannon High with divided investment between who he was supposed to block and what lay beyond Upshur County, equal parts curiosity and hopefulness.

But there were no mountains here, nowhere to steal away to. No scenes, no surprises. Maybe there were the standard nooks and crannies populated by foggy cars and teenagers, but it was no secret. Here it was all packaged, all planned out, scripted, uniform. Like a résumé checklist. It really hadn't been like he'd imagined—not the landscape, certainly not the people.

Andrew thought back to the first time with Julie. Darting between mountains, they were alone for hours in the woods propped against a tree. She sat in his lap and they looked out at vertical slopes and ridgetops and the changing leaves while the sun went down. He led her into the old springhouse and when they emerged it was pitch black. It was all different. They were so different then.

He reached into the pack for another cigarette, but it was empty.

With a finger tracing the page, he pored over every line of the divorce decree, looking for some oversight, some ambiguity that might let him off the hook. Andrew D. McAdams shall, it said, be responsible for medical insurance and medical costs incurred by Julie and the kids. "Any and all," it so decreed. So when the 400-dollar bill came for acupuncture, Andrew went straight for the filing cabinet via the fridge to crack open a beer. The receipts for the homeopathic remedies had recently been coming, now in addition to the prescription receipts for the kids. "Trying an alternative approach," her notes always said.

She was just doing it to piss him off; herbs and Chinese voodoo wouldn't clear balance out her lungs when they gave out from her Camel pack-a-day habit. He was surprised there was no receipt for those. She knew exactly where the line was, and how to let her toe slip over just a little bit, not enough to warrant a real fuss.

She had all the momentum from the real fuss, anyway, the one that had gotten him a night in jail.

They had started fighting when the kids were young; Julie didn't like Andrew's hours at the hospital, and she didn't like how even when he was home, he couldn't seem to muster up the energy to be the presence she needed. If he came home from work while she was asleep, he'd usually give her a peck on the cheek before going to sleep. He never kissed her before he left for work, and when he stopped kissing her hello and goodnight, she lay awake until sunrise, staring at the shrouded edge of the nightstand. When there was a full moon, she could see out into the front yard, and she would watch the shadows of the branches lay on the grass.

It had been almost a full year when she finally told him.

"I'm seeing someone else."

Something in Andrew's eyes twitched and his head snapped to attention. "You what?" he fired back.

"I can't do this anymore."

His lips pursed. "Who is it?"

"Promise you won't hurt him."

"I ain't promising shit."

When he heard the name, his jaw tightened. He pictured Tim McDonough's stupid long hair and beer gut, the mechanic who had changed his oil just last month, and swore that he would wring his neck.

Julie's grievances passed through his ears without registering, and while she was saying something he couldn't quite make out through his anger, Andrew smacked her face.

Her expression mirrored his, only with a few silent tears falling on her face.

He looked at her cheek, which started to turn red, and covered his mouth. Pinpricks ran through his temples as he went out on the front porch, sweating, hearing the screen door slam behind him. He leaned over the railing and pressed his palms into his face, as hard as he could.

So Andrew pulled out his checkbook and paid for the acupuncture, remembering what his lawyer and his ex-wife had both told him: that in the state of West Virginia, there was no statute of limitations for felonies.

A few weeks later was homecoming for Woodbridge. Andrew had sat on the front porch and watched the parade go by with thinly veiled obscenities and slurs of how they would beat the old rival their grandparents had beaten. Less of a production but a bigger, sharper-looking finished product, the floats and uniforms looked flashy but Woodbridge couldn't draw the *entire* town like Buckhannon did. Or maybe it just looked that way being a bigger town. It was the exact same drill, but still so warped; it was as if Andrew's vision was out of whack. He sized it up, it looked stretched too long, then the plane of his vision narrowed and heightened. The football team walked by and the girls in jerseys on the sidewalk blushed, honored. And their parents stood behind them, remembering when they were in their places.

Andrew left at 7:30 for his shift at Fairley, just as the game was starting. For him, it was a surprisingly quiet night; there were the occasional public drunkenness cases for those unlucky teenagers who strayed into police sight, the occasional elderly fall at home, but he had some occasional time to walk around the halls and stand under the fluorescent light, introduce himself to the new patients.

Around midnight, Andrew was finishing up signing some papers when the paramedics rushed in. They had a stretcher coming through, the patient covered with an oxygen mask and bleeding heavily from the leg. Andrew put the papers down and followed. Clancy wasn't working that night.

"Motorcycle crash," one of the paramedics said. "Colleen Redding, sixteen-year-old female. Drunk with her boyfriend. Linebacker. Homecoming party. Bad when they lose, worse when they win. They were going real fast down that hill on Greeley Ave. by the church, kid dumped the bike. He got cuts and bruises, she got thrown clean off."

Andrew clapped his hands together. "OK," he said, "let's go to work." He scanned Colleen's record, nothing abnormal, but he did find what he really had been looking for—her address: 177 Birch Street. Jim and Amy's daughter. Andrew called over to the nurse to see about notifying them.

Colleen Redding: five-foot-five, 120 pounds. She had suffered multiple lacerations as well as a fractured rib and a fractured tibia. Her brain was hemorrhaging as well; the only reason she was alive at all was that she had landed on soft ground rather than hard asphalt; neither one of them had been wearing a helmet. Her blood alcohol was measured at .22 percent.

They called in Clancy but the operation was well under way by the time he got there.

Andrew took his time. He didn't like to rush too much, just like he never thought about any one thing more than three times.

The eyes on Amy's contorted face widened when she saw the doctor emerge from the operating room. Andrew knew the faces well; he could read them before they even surfaced. Amy's face expanded in surprise and adrenaline filled in the spaces in her body, expanding it into a fearful state, which, once subsided, mingled with something Andrew had never seen at this stage: anger.

"Hi, Amy," he said, enunciating to hide his drawl.

Amy let out a stifled breath she couldn't stop her vocal cords from backing. "So?" she said at last.

"She'll be OK."

Her shoulders rolled back and she fell down into her chair.

"It wasn't good, though. She'll be laid up for a while, and she's lucky to be alive, to be completely honest." He sat down next to her.

She buried her face in her hands.

"She is stable, though."

Amy let out an exasperated sob and turned to look at Andrew. "Thank you," she mouthed, her voice failing her.

Jim came into the emergency room, his fists clenched. "Where is she?" he shouted to the receptionist. She motioned around the corner to where Amy was still balled up next to Andrew.

"Where's Clancy?" he asked.

"Your daughter is stable." Andrew stood up. "She'll be out of it for a while, but she's going to be OK."

"Where's Clancy?"

Andrew didn't answer and Jim brushed past him shoulder to shoulder down the hall where he found Clancy talking to a nurse about some other patient. Andrew followed him down the corridor at a distance, though access was technically restricted.

"Dr. McAdams was on duty." Clancy spoke softly. "He managed to stop the bleeding, and by the time I got here, everything was under control."

Jim pressed his palm against his forehead and brushed his hair back, taking a seat next to his wife. She noticed the bruised knuckle and didn't ask him where he got it. She'd gone to the hospital after they got the call, and he'd said he was handling it. She leaned into him and closed her eyes. The sun was coming up.

Andrew came back after letting them alone for a few minutes. “She’s still recovering and she’ll be unresponsive for a while yet. Take a quick peek, but y’all can go back home for now. I’ll call when you can come back and see her.”

Amy started to stand but Jim grabbed her wrist. “Hang on,” he said.

“It’s OK,” she said. “He’s gotten us this far.”

Jim pushed himself up out of the chair and offered it to Andrew. They shook.

“Try to get some sleep,” said Andrew.

Jim gave a curt nod and started with Amy out of the emergency room.

Andrew leaned in the doorway and saw the girl sleeping; she would be out for a few more hours at least. The corners of his lips folded up in a half-smile. He shut the door and sat down at the edge of the room. He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. She was pretty—soft blonde hair that framed her lovely round face, blessed with beautiful curves and a figure he hoped his daughter would grow into. And she was lucky. She wouldn’t have any lasting damage, no disfiguration. That was the thing; death and loss were what they were, but being mangled beyond recognition, and then having to look at it every day. That was worse, somehow. What she’d done wasn’t too out of the ordinary. Except if the kid had been driving a car she probably would have only had bruises and a stern talking-to. The linebacker was in jail now, though not before Jim and a couple of others had gotten to him. Despite the stitches and the cast, the scabs and bandages, she looked like what she was doing: sleeping in on a Saturday morning.

Andrew moved over to the monitors and unplugged the one that would call for the nurse if she moved or got up. Unnecessary. He stood over her, next to the bed, tapped the wheels with his foot to check that the brakes were on, and took hold of her hand. Letting go after a brief moment, he kicked off his shoes and held the bed steady, climbing on and straddling her with his knees, resting her elevated leg on his left shoulder. It took hard concentration and energy to keep

from making any noise. Luckily the bed was new and didn't squeak. He ran his hand up and down her side, moving closer and closer to her middle, feeling the bumps and cuts, and the rest of her soft skin against his heavy palms. With the sides of his hands, he pushed the waist of his scrubs down to his knees and stopped to glance behind him. Turning back around, he took her other leg that lay flat and hoisted it onto his free shoulder. He breathed, hunched his upper body, dived down close and slid in. She was tight but she'd definitely been here before. His arms held her legs in place and he rocked back and forth feeling an electric surge flow through him. He allowed himself a little more expression after a bit, but still cautiously. After a few minutes he finished and let go; he didn't want to give more than what was fair.

“Thanks, beautiful,” he said, and kissed her thigh before tucking her gown back over it.

Colleen was released on a Wednesday and they all met up at Logan's the following Sunday. She still walked on crutches—badly—and kept a few stitches and scabs, and she carried a guilty depression with her, but she was in good shape, and would be back to full health before too long. She'd missed a period but she thought for sure it was the crash that had screwed that up.

Jim refused to let Andrew leave without tasting steamers, and refused even more to allow him to so much as glance at his wallet. The four of them sat together at a table away from Jim's regular seat at the bar. The regulars and semi-regulars all came by with drinks for Andrew. Jim drank what he couldn't finish and they tossed down the steamers.

“I just want to apologize,” he said, “for how I treated you. There's jokes, there's ballbusting like we all do around here and then there's what I, what we, did to you. It wasn't fair for me to judge you, and I was wrong.”

Andrew nodded a bit. “Thank you,” he said, “I appreciate that.”

Jim looked at Colleen, his face wrinkled, and a drop escaped his eye. He sniffled. “You saved my daughter's life. You're a kind soul, and you're a good man.”

This made Colleen look down and away.

“Aw, don’t be like that,” Andrew said. “Chin up, Miss. What I do is my job. Don’t feel guilty for any kind of burden.” He smiled, showing his crooked teeth. “Nothing a miner’s grandson couldn’t fix, anyhow.”

“I saw you put your house on the market,” Amy said. “Such a shame—you only just got here.” Amy said. “Is there anything we can do to make you change your mind?”

“No, but thanks. I appreciate the sentiment,” Andrew said, looking at his glass.

“I really hope you’re not leaving just because of the townie politics and all that. It’s all just stupid games, really. You know you’re always welcome here. I think everyone here knows they messed up, that they had no right. It’ll be much better if you stay.”

“I know,” Andrew said. “I just need to come home.”

My Father's House

Dorothy, head of the parish council, kept St. Mark's alive. I mean, we were completely screwed without her. She'd been to the Vatican three times, having led group trips from the parish there twice. Once, she had enough good fortune to be blocking the way of John Paul II blessing some old man in a wheelchair behind her. So she was the only one in Dorchester County who could say she'd been personally blessed by the Pope without lying about it. She enjoyed several titles, including "Ambassador," "Miracle Worker," and "Saint Dorothy the Tireless." I had my own for her that I kept to myself.

Now, I would rather have been in the city or on mission, but when so many of the churches were being shuttered by the diocese, I was just thankful that I purportedly did a good enough job to be spared, to still provide a place for people to come to pray, to break down, to build up hope. I realized that God gave me that mission, as much as I would have preferred another, I knew that this was meant for me, at least at the time. God gives you challenges because he knows you can handle them. A challenge is an encouragement, and God gave me, for whatever reason, in his infinite wisdom, Dorothy Fitch.

Dorothy Fitch was fired from Lewis's Pharmacy for refusing to sell a morning-after pill to a seventeen-year-old girl. She would have been OK if the girl had been just a year younger—she had her ID down on the counter, and when Dorothy turned to go to the back, she turned to glimpse the girl, Bridget Gallagher, whose name would be plastered all over town in a matter of hours that day. Dorothy spied the dollop of makeup she'd put on as if this were any other day. And then the girl's torso stood straight up, but she was still looking at the gray carpeted floor, and Dorothy thought she saw her shiver.

“Darling, I’m not going to give this to you,” she said.

Bridget’s face bloomed and was now really shaking. “What?” she coughed. “I turned seventeen in February.”

“I cannot allow you to take this step down that dark road. Not in good conscience I can’t.”

Bridget recoiled, her shoulders slumped forward, and she looked away to plan her exit. She started down the vitamin aisle, but then came storming back to Dorothy.

She slammed her hands down on the counter. “They changed the law last year. Why are you doing this?”

“Sweetheart, I understand you’re very confused right now.” She put her hand on the girl’s shoulder and gave her a reassuring smile. “But God will get you through this. It will be OK. I promise you.”

Bridget’s lips quivered and she pulled back from Dorothy’s grip. “God?” She clenched her fists and tears splattered the counter. She heaved a sigh. “I was just trying to be careful.”

“Oh, honey,” Dorothy’s eyes shut and she shook her head in sympathy, “I’ll have Father Riley say a prayer for you.”

Bridget threw up her hands and walked out of the store. Dorothy lunged for the phone and called 411, connected to the Gallaghers’ house during Saturday morning brunch, and expressed “grave concern” for their daughter.

The assistant pharmacist was also a parishioner who, curiously, wouldn’t question Dorothy and stop her, but apparently had no problem throwing HIPAA policy out the window and tell all her friends. Gene Lewis, who at the time was in the back room compounding medications, not only had to issue a statement to the *Woodbridge Item* stating that the pharmacy still carried contraception of all sorts and would gladly sell them to anyone who was legally able to purchase them, but he also had to spend money on a campaign dialing every phone in town and

apologizing, adding the inadvertent advertisement at the end. Some recognized it as cowering at his potential ruin from lack of business, or at least paranoia, while some, without naming any names, recognized it as callous financial ass-covering. He was lucky he didn't get sued, but the Gallaghers probably didn't have enough money for it anyway. They seemed content that the source of distress would no longer be interfering with their private medical lives, and they were probably already mortified to the point of paralysis.

When Lewis found out, he axed Dorothy on the spot—loudly and publicly—and she came straight to me. Her fur pillbox hat flew off when she swung open the door to the parish office. Through tears, she told me that she'd lost her job, and I really felt sorry for her.

But then she told me why. "I stood up for God today, Father," she said.

She always called me Father, even though I'd known and worked with her for years. Not even Fr. Paul. She may as well have just called me sir.

"Dorothy," I said, "you've worked there for seven years now. You knew that they were selling birth control. Is this really the first time that someone came to you to fill a birth control order?"

She shook her head.

"Why the big objection now? All of a sudden?"

She stared into my desk with a stupid look on her face. She drew in a deep breath and sighed back out that she had no idea.

"I guess," she started, "that I just accepted that I'd be providing people with the regular pill, but this is different. This is an abortion pill." She practically whispered it.

I didn't bother engaging her with the finer biological points of Plan B. As a pharmacist, she shouldn't have let her perception of those be warped, but I had her in a corner anyway. And she was probably an ex-pharmacist for good now.

"Dorothy, if you knew that the pharmacy carried birth control and you were so against it,

you should never have been working there.”

“I just looked at this girl, so young, and already so lost. But then I thought of my four kids, and what if something had happened to them, if they’d never had a chance. And the joy of being a new mother! I couldn’t put myself in the middle.”

She confessed to me that she had a hysterectomy two years ago, the fucking hypocrite. Always couched in compassion too. The worst.

My cousin Kevin left the priesthood last week. I’m really proud of him; he joined for the wrong reason. Despite stepping down on good terms, he is not ready yet to go back to his parents’ house and swim in disappointment, so I go to pick him up from the bus station at eleven o’ clock in morning. We pick up his favorite, KFC, on the ride back to the rectory.

“I dipped into my grocery budget a little bit, saved from last week,” I tell him. “Courtesy of Saint Mark himself.”

His laugh turns into a yawn and he scratches his beard. I’m not supposed to let Kevin stay at the rectory, but he’s family, and this is my house when I need it to not be God’s house for a little while. Kevin sleeps in my bed, and when I come back from a meeting four hours later, he is still asleep.

We eat dinner together, a simple recipe for pasta with meat sauce, and then I pour out the Glenfiddich and Kevin produces the joint I’ve been waiting for. Maybe four or times a year, I allow myself to chalk up a few big sins—not necessarily severe, but glaring—to human weakness that just can’t be helped. This is the first free pass of the year.

We almost always get stoned when Kevin comes to town, this time for good. Usually this is a time to listen to *Led Zeppelin II* on vinyl and talk about how good they were, or mindlessly watch football and talk about how, as much as we hated to admit it, Peyton Manning was really a good quarterback. Usually it’s a time to forget about religion and our jobs and just submerge fully

into sweet, soothing vice.

But when Kevin's made just the decision that he has, which already has a lot of people ashamed of him, God is the only topic on the table.

"Pope Francis took your side," I say, exhaling. "No sanctioned judgment for gay priests, at least not in this lifetime."

"It's still not right," Kevin says, "pissing all over the priesthood like that, picking up tricks in clubs all over Denver, then turning around to everyone on Sunday and telling them who to fuck. As if it was OK if I did it? Every second I stayed in made me more of a hypocrite." He takes a swig of scotch. "I hid there for as long as I could."

"Could you have just stopped?"

He smiles and sinks back into the couch. "Nah," he says, giggling. "I like the sex too much."

We clink glasses. I've had sex five times in my life, all of them in college. I renounced each one of them *ad nauseam* before my ordination. I trembled crossing the altar to meet the bishop, wanting to cut myself in half as my punishment for fraud. No matter how severe, it always seemed better if the punishment came from myself. But I confessed, went through penance, and the bishop spotted my guilt as I processed across the altar and embraced him. "Smile," he said.

"You're very brave," I tell Kevin.

His smile vanishes. "I'm too weak to fight it."

I turn on the TV and flip to the hockey game. I don't mean to say it, but I'm still pretty high and it slips out: "Do you believe in God?"

Kevin's cocks his head at me, glaring.

"You know," I add quickly, "to make sense of all this bullshit."

"None of us knows if there is one." He scratches his head and looks up at the ceiling.

“But I’m not going to get through life in one piece if I can’t believe that there’s anyone up there rooting for me.”

“I’ll drink to that.” We clink again.

For someone who’s studied it so much, I have trouble wrapping my head around hell. I could cite a million passages from scripture and Aquinas and papal documents, but I try to be as much of a layman as I can. I do it to understand my clientele, but also because I feel uncomfortable when the closest thing to a canonical text is almost a thousand years old. I subscribe to some of the new-age hippie crap—if God is love, and loves all of us, then who goes to hell? Or is it just everyone who goes to confession, everyone who repents? There are many rooms in my Father’s house, but just how many? And are they building an addition?

With Kevin gone, I have no one to confess this to.

“Attendance is way down,” Dorothy says as the first order of new business at the parish council meeting. “Donations are down, too.”

“People still mad after the scandal?” offers Karen Whitcomb. “A lot of people I know still haven’t come back.”

Dorothy doesn’t look up, keeping her reading glasses trained on the stack of papers in front of her. “That is not our problem,” she says, shuffling the papers. “It is their obligation. And the old ladies need to start giving more than a dollar. Someone should tell them about inflation.” Her auburn hair is clearly dyed, but curled like Jackie Kennedy’s. Her scarlet turtleneck matches her lipstick, and at fifty-two, her skin sits tight on her face and neck, and probably on her flat stomach underneath her shirt. Her smile is the least genuine I have ever seen, brimming with condescension, broadcasting her place on the food chain. To everyone but me, her smile quietly but firmly announces, “Cross me and I will ruin you.”

I suggest that we might want to rethink our ministry and our demeanor some, to attract

new parishioners, or to bring back the old ones we lost, whom Dorothy calls lapsed and the bishop calls fallen away.

Dorothy straightens her back and scribbles something down, her jaw clenched in a huff. She looks up at me as if she's about to cry and says, "I don't understand, Father. What is so wrong with us? Are we really that bad?"

One of the councilors asks for clarification.

"We try to make as welcoming an environment as we can. I think we're more friendly than Fr. Jerry over in Greenmere. But nobody shows up." She throws her hand up. "Don't they know what dangerous ground they're treading on?"

I try to think of an explanation that doesn't involve me jumping out of my chair and clocking her in the fucking neck. "Well," I make a point of looking around at the entire council, "I know a lot of people still feel betrayed. It's difficult for these people to forgive the Church when it's what was supposed to be the most moral, innocent place on earth, a place they could turn to for all that, and then to find what horrible, horrible things—what *evil* was going on."

"But it's the Church!" she protested. "It *is* all of those things. This is our lifeline."

"You're exactly right," I told her. "The divine church, the connection between God and ourselves, is all of those things. And in everyone who may not be physically present at our church, a connection to the divine church still exists. But it's the human church, the one made up of imperfect, weak men, which has failed these people so tragically. They're hurt. Badly."

Dorothy focuses on the agenda. "I'll have lunch with Jack Denfield to see about upping his gift this year."

I have to be at a funeral in the town next door in a half-hour. I slink out of the room.

While I'm away, Dorothy and her dipshit cronies make sure to vote unanimously on aggressively adopting the diocese's "come home" campaign to recruit, or shame (I'm not sure

which), our old long-lost friends. Later, she'll make sure to use words like "quorum" and "Saint Jeremiah's," the church in Leeston that closed last month. They also vote to make Fuller Field, where the high school football team plays, the epicenter of their efforts. It is right across the street from the Gallaghers' house on Falls Street, and I know this because Dorothy had to check her license for the morning-after pill, and she must have memorized the address. Bridget hasn't left the house in days to begin with. They are putting up signs and looking for stray teens to accost. REPENT, the signs say, and HE IS RISEN. WILL YOU BE? COME HOME. Come home. Bridget's just a pawn in their game now.

They have the good sense not to give the police any shit when they show up, but I have to endure lectures from Dorothy about the sin spread so thick throughout the world now, and I have to apologize to all the angry callers in town calling up to complain. I try to explain to Dorothy, and to the rest of the council, that this kind of shit does not work, and I tell them in so many words. I'd thought the human/divine distinction would have had them eating out of my hand, but it turns out they're thicker than I give them credit for. They learned the definition of compassion before Vatican II.

I hold confession in the mornings after daily mass for the regulars, and for everyone on Saturday mornings and Friday nights. Saturday mornings feature lots of hangovers and alcohol-related sins, housewives with nothing to do but blame themselves, those poor, trapped women. My favorite is the Friday night crowd who came after work, forearms rubbing foreheads in distress: the poor man's therapy, the ashamed man's therapy. These people burn on the car ride home from work or on the way out at night, stopping by because they have to. Even at the trough of winter, the penitents sweat, blow out their knees pressed against the front of their pews. They wait for me to give them a sentence. It is usually a light one with a get-out-of-jail free card, an absolution. Sometimes, they are so relieved that they stroll out of the church having forgotten to

pray whatever paltry amount I've told them to. Of course, the sum of the parts is troubling—I see the best and worst of attitudes within a matter of minutes—but each individual case can just be so *interesting*. Saturday morning hangover sins are fucked up but boring; I'd heard them all before, or at least some variation on them, in one issue or another of *Rolling Stone*. With some guilt, I look forward to Friday nights every week: sins grievous enough to warrant space on a busy Friday night schedule, but somehow mundane enough to act as a pit stop on the way home. *I left my son home alone on purpose to teach him a lesson. I stole my mom's car and sold it because she's always drunk. I don't want to go home to my wife and kids. I hate them. My lover is waiting in the car outside. She's sixteen. He's sixteen.* I don't prod; they tell me what they can stand to, and I make sure to include, “May the Lord God forgive you of all your sins.”

I love it when they bypass the screen to face me directly and make their confessions. It makes me look more human than that awful screen. They think they're protected by the screen. Dorothy would say that it's me, behind it, that protects them. In reality, though, it's they who protect themselves by exposing themselves to whatever degree they can. Plus the imagery is just creepy and mystical and long outdated. I like having civilized conversations, but I love it even more when they swear—that takes either some serious defiance or disregard, both of which mean they're not bullshitting me.

The door opens one Friday night and a teenage girl sits down in the chair across from me. Her amber waves twirl as she cocks her head back, folds her hands, and looks at me without hesitation. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” she says.

I give a bit of a nod to scan her up and down. She's not wearing makeup today, but because I'm on Facebook too, I recognize that this girl is Bridget Gallagher. She knows that I know who she is.

“You know what I did,” she said.

The first thought that popped into my head was that she didn't look like a slut, and then I

put the brakes on. I was conditioned to think she was one of the bad ones. Like the volleyball players I knew in high school—all the guys wanted to jump at their legs—but I thought she was rather plain, just a normal girl who became known as a whore, a murderer, and everything equally as ugly.

“It’s all true?”

She purses her lips and nods.

“Dorothy Fitch,” she stumbles, “told me that you would pray for me. Did you?”

This time, I prod. “What brought you here? Based on what happened, I thought this would be the last place I’d see you.”

“To be honest,” she says, “I came here to call you out. That lady acts on behalf of you, and she goes and makes me the most hated person in town.” She raises her voice. “How can you—”

I put up my hand. “Whoa, hang on. I never endorsed what she did. She may think that you did something wrong, and I may or may not think you did something wrong, but I never told anyone to go antagonize a seventeen-year-old.”

“Forget just about everything you’ve been taught,” I half whisper. “There’s a lot of bullshit involved in being a Catholic.”

“How is this bullshit?”

“No matter what I tell you, what the Bible tells you, or the Pope tells you, in the end it’s up to you. Your conscience is your direct line to God. If you have a clear conscience, if you know in your heart of hearts that what you did was the right thing to do, then amen. God wills it so.”

But her face has soured, and her lip starts to quiver.

“Think about it,” I tell her. “But, since you asked, I did pray for you. And I will continue to.”

“Listen,” I stop myself from saying her name, “Jesus said, ‘In my father’s house, there

are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you.””

She half-smiles and I tell her to pray three Hail Marys outside.

“Maybe I’ll see you around here sometime,” I say.

Dorothy comes in next, and apart from a quick glance, she doesn’t seem to notice who’s just walked out, doesn’t even mention it to me. Usually she spills her guts in the morning after daily mass when she doesn’t have an impromptu session with me, the most inconsequential shit, or insufferable martyrdom: the most consequential *shit*. She drank to the point of drunkenness at her nephew’s wedding. She missed Tuesday morning mass. She was jealous of her neighbors’ peonies. She stole her kids’ rap CDs and threw them in the trash. Give me a fucking break. I want to go home and have a scotch.

“Father, I did something really bad.”

I don’t know if she can hear me groan in anticipation.

She hesitates for a moment and I can see her mouth open, trying to push out the words, achieving, “I slept with one of the police officers to get them to let us back on the field.”

I sit up, dumbstruck. If I’d known any better, I’d say she was playing a prank on me, but I don’t think Dorothy has told a joke in her life. I collect myself and speak slowly, trying to keep a lid on my emotions. Mine don’t belong in the confessional, but I’m going to have a hard time with this one.

“Dorothy, this, as you know, is a mortal sin.”

I’m surprised she’s not crying. She’s kneeling, and her hands folded, shaking, obscure her face. I walk around to where she’s kneeling and look at her bowed head.

She doesn’t look up. “I thought it was a good idea. I thought it would help us bring people back.” She presses her forehead against her hands. “Please forgive me, Father.”

I decide to deliver my verdict in words she knows well. “Darling, I’m not going to give this to you.”

Now she's crying.

"Oh, honey." I put my hand on her shoulder. "God will get you through this. It will be OK. I promise you."

Second free pass of the year. It can't be helped.

Carrying the Team

There hadn't been a freshman on the varsity team in seven years: Pat Miles had made it as a safety, toyed with a year of college ball, and then dropped out his sophomore year. But freshmen still tried out every year; the college recruits went to the same practice as the barely fourteen-year-olds.

Coach Pete, a thirty-year veteran, called out names to line up on offense. Sam jogged out to the huddle, mishearing the call; the coach had called for Jeff Lowell, a senior tackle, but decided to keep Sam on the field.

"Let's see what happens," he snickered to Jeff.

The lineman opposite Sam had an advantage of nearly half a foot and at least twenty-five pounds. The call was a trap block: the running back would run an off-tackle to the left through a hole cleared up by the tackle from the other side. Sam lined up at right tackle, staring down Ryan Leonard, whose mouth angled up to betray a smirk where his mouthguard would allow it. When the ball snapped, Sam sprang up and took off to his left, down the line of scrimmage to surprise the unsuspecting defensive tackle, who had been left unblocked until Sam railroaded him, sent him barreling to the ground. The tailback broke free and the result of the play was a fifteen-yard gain and a first down.

"Same teams!" Coach Pete called over the quarterback, Teddy Arnold, and called for a pull block this time. The ball snapped and Sam ran again, digging into the grass to make a path for the running back, leaning into the circle he ran around the end of the defensive line. An outside linebacker came in to make the tackle, but Sam sensed it and sidestepped to the right,

away from his momentum, to make the block. He lacked force, but he managed to get in the linebacker's way and trip him up, and the running back got upfield. Sam lay leveled on the ground, hobbling on his right leg a bit, but he got back to his feet and Coach Pete called for a new set of players.

Sam went back and stood with the other freshmen, panting. He took his helmet off and took a big drink of water. Teddy Arnold walked by, didn't look at Sam, but gave his shoulder pad a light tap of the fist. Sam smiled.

Coach Pete forbade fighting at practice or games. He always insisted that his players channel their rage and settle their differences on the field, where the insult of yardage would add to physical injury and earn the player a sticker on his helmet—a great honor.

The Highlanders had made it to the state championship six out of the last eight years, bringing home four titles and three undefeated seasons. During the regular season, they drew crowds five thousand to watch them play—more on Thanksgiving and in the playoffs—collared into the rickety old bleachers or swelling along the sidelines. Some kids on the team were third-generation players and still wore their fathers' and grandfathers' jersey numbers, which was why Teddy Arnold wore number 37. The uniforms, red with orange shoulder stripes, had remained unchanged since they added the stripes in 1954.

The players were known by name at the North Street Diner, and rumor had it they were occasionally allowed to drink in the basement at Logan's Tavern. Team pictures hung in every bar in town. From the first days of September to the last days of fall, Woodbridge Highlander football ruled everything. The term "finest" was freely thrown around.

"You're a smart player," Coach Pete told him after tryouts. "I get guys who can't remember a trap from a pull to save their own lives, but you've got a mind for the Xs and Os." He stopped for a moment to think. "I don't normally do this. You're not particularly big, so you

probably won't get a whole lot of playing time. But you are pretty quick for a tackle and you know how to think. You'll get a lot more snaps on JV, but I'll give you the choice."

Sam didn't waste an instant. "I want to play varsity, Coach."

Teddy Arnold came to congratulate Sam as he was waiting for his ride after tryouts. Sam pretended not to hear him coming over.

"He's just a freshman," he could hear one of the seniors say.

"The first varsity freshman in years," Teddy said so they both could hear. "Not everyone can knock Johnny on his ass like that. We're going to have to keep an eye on you."

Sam kept his head at a respectful height and muttered a nervous thank you.

"Oh, cheer up!" Teddy clapped him on the back. "You're on the team!"

As a captain, Teddy had a key to the weight room.

"You come lift with me, and we'll work on getting you big enough to start," he said.

"Just as long as you stay quick, too."

Sam agreed because he thought he had no other choice. Refuse to work out with the starting quarterback? That wasn't just disrespectful; it was downright crazy. Besides, he could use it. He had the natural skill to be a lineman; after playing his first year in eighth grade, his number became feared throughout the conference. Football camp over that summer helped to cement and fine-tune his technique, reinventing himself from the shy middle-school bass clarinetist. And while he was big for a freshman—5-foot-9 and 194 pounds, his arms could have used some work and his stomach was by no means flat.

Teddy agreed to pick him up to work out the next night, two nights before the beginning of school. Sam thought it was a prank at first. He was sure that he would end up thrown in the trunk of some senior's car and left out on the edge of town only to walk—or worse, hitchhike—home with his pants around his ankles, or just gone.

But they pulled up to the high school gym just around sunset, as promised.

They broke sweats and, satisfied, went back into the locker room. Teddy told Sam not to change, but to sit on the bench in front of the lockers. “I’ve got something I think you’re going to like.”

Sam may have been an elite freshman player, but he was still a freshman. He sat trying to think of why he deserved all this, sweat still coating his face. He wanted to close his eyes.

Teddy came back holding hands with Macey Burke, a junior. She wore a blue striped tank top with short yellow shorts that her hips filled in quite nicely. Her hair fell in pretty blond waves, tucked for now behind her head, showing off her stud earrings. Teddy let go of her hand and grinned.

She kissed him and they undressed each other. Sam sank back and pressed his head against the locker. Macey’s head bobbed up and down in his lap. He felt her wet, sliding grip, punctuated by her breasts hitting his groin with each motion. Reaching out his arm, he stroked her hair, careful not to catch a knot in it, and ran his hand down the side of her naked body. He heard the shower running in the background, a constant stream with a few splashes of water hitting the floor while Teddy was washing himself. As he closed his eyes, he felt the fluorescent ceiling lights press against his eyelids, making spectacular images against the insides of them. He could feel the pressure building inside him and, for a second, didn’t know what to do. Relaxing his legs, he came without warning except for a quick moan barely audible over the shower. Macey didn’t seem to mind. She swallowed it and flashed a half-smile. Sam closed his eyes and beamed back.

Macey went to find Teddy in the shower. Sam saw her come back out after a minute. He stood up to meet her, but she didn’t want to kiss him. She put her clothes back on and hurried out.

They sat in Teddy’s car in the parking lot, passing a flask back and forth. Sam coughed on the booze but stayed determined to force it down.

“You ever had one of those before?”

Sam’s face turned red. “No.”

Teddy laughed and cocked his head back. “Which one? The vodka or the blowjob?”

“Both.”

“Well, get used to it. Welcome aboard. Now, remember to do that lift program at least four times a week. You’ve got to be able to push back against more weight or else you’ll never be able to hold B-gap.”

“What about hazing?” Sam asked.

Teddy hesitated a bit, keeping his eyes on the road. “What about it?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m kind of anxious about it.”

“I can’t tell you.” He wiped his brow with his forearm. “Yet. We do have certain traditions that have been going on for a long time, but they’re really not that bad. They help make the team stronger.”

Sam looked at his feet.

“You’ll be glad you did it after it’s done. Everyone goes through it. I went through it. It’s worth it.”

He’d called them traditions. That made Sam feel warmer.

When he got home, Sam went straight past his parents and up to his bedroom to hide the alcohol on his breath and his red cheeks. He fished a tape measure out of a drawer measured his chest—forty-two inches—he knew he would need the measurements for when he got his letter jacket.

Teddy and the three other captains walked into the locker room after practice. One of the other three took a piece of a two-by-four and slipped it through the door handle, barricading the

room shut. The four captains wore only their jockstraps, and Teddy wore a whistle around his neck. Locker doors clanked shut as the four cornered the eighteen rookies, who had to stay late.

Teddy blew the whistle. “Strip down,” he said.

Sam finished the knot in his shoelaces and lifted his head up, his mouth dropped open, his heart racing. A stream of scenarios from humiliation to mutilation ran through his mind, but he knew that he would survive. The four of them were still here with no obvious signs of damage. He grabbed tentatively at his waistband.

Teddy looked right at him. “You heard me.”

Kevin Costello finished and stood, his back to his locker, in his boxers. He shifted his legs slightly apart and put his hands behind his back.

“All the way, faggot,” Teddy said to him.

Kevin took off his boxers and the rest followed suit, still taking their time with the rest of their clothes.

Sam didn’t feel exactly safe, but to take this chance would be worth it, like Teddy had said. If he was going to make a trust call, though, and bare his body for judgment, it would be for his teammates.

The four of them were holding brown leather belts, thick ones, worn by age, but the grips the captains held them in showed that they could do the job just fine. Next to the notches was a W cut out of the leather.

The rookies, one freshman, five sophomores, and fourteen juniors, stood straight up with their hands instinctively cupped around their groins. All of them stared at the floor. Standing in the center, Sam picked his head up and leveled his eyes at Teddy.

“Take your fucking hands off your balls,” barked one of the captains.

“Don’t worry,” Teddy chuckled. “We’re not going to hit you there.”

They obeyed. Sam felt a chill in the room and goosebumps on his skin. Straining, he fought off the urge to shiver.

Teddy paced back and forth in front of the others. “Now that you’re all on the team,” he said, “it’s time to prove your commitment and your loyalty—to each other, and to us.” He wrapped his hand around the belt and slid it through his palm. “The letter W,” he held it out to them, “stands for Woodbridge. And if you’re going to play for the Woodbridge Highlanders, you will wear the team’s mark on you, just as we all did when we were rookies, and just as your fathers did when they played. This symbolizes your bond with the team, your physical endurance, and your obedience to us. And don’t you so much as think about breathing a word of this to anyone, or you will never show your face again, because there will be nothing left of it.”

They ordered them into two lines in the center of the room and told them to face each other and touch their toes. The captains fanned out into pairs and stood behind each line, each one brandishing his belt.

Teddy gave one more warning. “If anyone wants to back out now, you can quit the team and we’ll forget about all of this. We’ll just say you got cut. But speak up now.”

Heads turned to each other, but bewilderment won out over fear, and the eighteen stayed in place. Seeing no objections, Teddy blew the whistle again and the captains delivered a lash on the backside of each player. The first two winced silently, but the third shouted in pain, clearing the way for more cries, a few laughs from the captains, stifled by Teddy, who wanted to keep the tone reverent.

After they had all taken a lick from every captain, Teddy gave the whistle another tweet for a free-for-all, and they chased the rookies through the locker room, laughing and swinging freely. A small amount of blood surfaced, but the school colors were red and orange.

Sam stood in front of the bathroom mirror, bending this way and that to try and make out the marks on his body. A solid W-shaped welt had lingered on his lower back, though at a bit of an angle. He wondered if it would bruise evenly so he could wear it like a tattoo under his shirt.

It had hurt. A lot, at first. But he had to show only the right amount of pain. Too much and they would think he was weak, that he belonged with the other fourteen-year-olds on the JV team. Too little and they'd think they weren't hitting him hard enough, or that he'd be betraying the rest of the rookies. If it hurt for them, he should feel it, too. Unless the others were getting head hand-delivered from the quarterback, he knew there was something special about himself, but he also knew that he couldn't blatantly overstep his bounds as a freshman, which didn't include a lot of territory to begin with. So, with martyrly sacrifice, he forewent his pride, tangled up in honor to be in such elite company.

Some part of it had felt good, though. It was something he'd never come close to doing before, something none of them would ever speak about. But as much emotional anxiety and physical pain as there was, Sam had all but forgotten about it. It was maybe a rude welcome, but it was a welcome all the same. It had brought them closer, strutting out of the school together, complaining about it in the parking lot, discreetly passing around cream for the sores in the locker room the next day. Reciting audibles and past captains' names. What was even more, it had brought Sam to the top of his class in fame, something he'd never before experienced. And a record-holder, too! He couldn't let it go. He belonged.

They hadn't even played a game yet when the captains were quietly hauled out of practice by the police. The officer apologized to Coach Pete, saying there was nothing they could do; a formal complaint had been filed and they had to take them in.

“The new D.A. up in Hampton is a Democrat. Real pain in the ass, you know.”

The four were spread across two cruisers, which left in different directions to avoid attracting attention.

As a condition of the charges being dropped, Coach Pete kicked the four captains off the team. He also quickly decided to retire, making the school scramble to find another before the start of the season.

The belts never resurfaced. Sam walked through the locker room, glares piercing his body back and front. They were all too scared to take care of it the old-fashioned way, and the new coach never let them alone for ten seconds anyway. No one had come forward as the culprit, but the players knew who the outlier was.

They hadn't even taken a team picture yet.

Last Day at Home

It was an unseasonably warm Thanksgiving Day when Mrs. McNally entered her house for the last time. Air was scarce and tight with people filling the house until one expected to see its sides bowing out, exacerbated by the fact that everyone from the most obscure branches of the family had come for the last Thanksgiving at 41 Pine Street, and the last day that any of them would set foot in it.

She was attended by her two daughters—her oldest, Lorraine, and youngest, Elise. Her cane cast aside, she mounted the brick steps to the front door, on the shoulders of her daughters that somehow evoked a perverse image of a bride being given away, or of a queen processing through Westminster Abbey.

Mrs. Mary McNally had lived at 41 Pine Street for fifty-five years. Her husband had only made it fifty-four, until he was accepted into a long-term Alzheimer's home in Ashford, a city of decay fifteen miles to the southwest. She, too, would be going to Ashford, permanently, after pumpkin pie was served and the conversations stemming from intended goodbyes had whiled away the night, and her hopes of staying.

She had already been for two months living in her own assisted living facility—a term insultingly clunky and euphemistic; it had no semblance of any kind of home. This holiday was an artificial creation, as the middle generation, Mrs. McNally's children, reluctantly agreed to have Thanksgiving there to give the house one last hurrah, and as a side-effect, their mother one last taste of home.

“Hi, Nana!” shouted Jack, her great-grandson, as his mother held him out. She gave him a warm kiss on the cheek. “Oh, hello, sweetie!” she cooed, hobbling into the front hall.

Lorraine and Elise stood on the porch, their mother safely inside. “So far, so good,” said Elise.

Lorraine sat down. “I’m already exhausted.”

“I really hope we don’t end up regretting this,” said Elise.

“She’s already got her next month’s rent down on the place.”

Lorraine was Mrs. McNally’s oldest daughter and oldest child. She’d been a nurse for almost forty years, and lived a couple of miles away. She went over to the house for some time at least five days a week, often more. She had a husband, worked long hours in the emergency room, and had two grandchildren of her own.

Lorraine would find a mess of pills on the floor when she went to take care of her mother. She’d wait until she woke up from her nap, and ask, simply, “Did you take your medicine this morning?”

“Yes, I did.”

She would open her palm to show her the oblong tablets. “I found these on the floor.”

“Well, I—” she began indignantly.

“*Listen*, Ma,” she stopped herself from shouting. “You have to take your medicine.”

She looked at the floor.

“Did you eat? How’s your sugar?”

Nothing.

“You know,” said Lorraine, “I try really hard to help you. I do. But if you don’t do these things, I can’t help you at all. I know you don’t want to, but that’s just how it is now.”

“It might not matter,” said Elise. “You know how she gets an idea in her head and doesn’t stop with it.”

Lorraine sighed. “I’ve done all I can do. Tim’s retiring, I’m still working, and even if I was here for twenty-three hours, something would have to go wrong in the one hour I wasn’t. By rule.”

Lorraine looked out into the yard. “This is so sad.”

Mrs. McNally listened for voices because she could see very little, her eyes well faded, legally blind, but they still worked well enough to give her an idea of who she was talking to in her house, where she knew all the corners and creaks. As she ran the gauntlet saying hello to six children, spouses, seventeen grandchildren, and assorted others who’d come for dinner, she stumbled on a few faces, but she still did extremely well for eighty-four years of age, and the multitude who didn’t take care of her every day made sure to remark on this.

She fancied herself an underdog. She couldn’t understand why everyone would count her out so quickly, after what a strong woman she had been. Moreover, knowing what she’d been able to do every day for so many years, she just couldn’t understand why she couldn’t do it now. At first she didn’t notice it enough to acknowledge it, but now she had to relearn her world. Lenses, magnifying glasses, and calling for favors gradually, usually well after she really needed them, became part of the life she knew. How could she not overcome being tired? Decline didn’t enter into it for her; she had been too happy in aging, seeing her children grow up, get married, wrangle with raising their own children. To her, aging didn’t mean just doctors’ appointments and watching QVC or the stock ticker.

She was smart and she was tough—she knew that. And she knew that with a few adjustments, and with a little help from God, she could get things closely back to the way they were before. She knew she could only hope that she kept her mind long enough to die at home.

And if that should happen sooner, rather than hanging her head all the way to one of those awful *facilities*, then so be it.

She'd fought to stay at home, but her children had told her that she was still well enough to make the decision to move out on her own. If she got worse, they said, a decision would have to be made for her. So she started to make decisions. She deigned to actually push the emergency call button if she fell down. She would use, and admit to using, the nine-thousand-dollar stairlift, which had been installed not only to for her safety and ease, but also to drain a little of her bank account so the Medicare would work out.

As much as she hated the way it made her feel, she would take her medication. And even if it was counterintuitive, she resolved to eat at meal times if she wasn't hungry. She was just a bit stubborn about getting old, but she knew what she had to do to make it easier on her, and on her family.

Maureen was leaning in the kitchen doorway, frowning conspicuously. She lifted her lips into a sad smile as she saw Mrs. McNally come through the front door. "Hi, Mum," she said, and stepped over to embrace her.

"Hello, honey," replied Mrs. McNally, and moved to make it through everyone else as long as her legs would let her. Maureen firmed her grip on her shoulder, stopping her. She looked at partly at her and at the ground, as her face cramped up and tears began to form. Her mother's eyes couldn't make out any of the detail.

Maureen looked at her for another moment and found her composure. "Happy Thanksgiving," she said.

Maureen had dated a boy in high school who she shouldn't have. He was well known to the family. One day they stood in the driveway arguing, and Maureen's boyfriend wound up to hit her, but stopped when he saw Mrs. McNally staring out the window of the house, not anger in her

expression but certainty. He let his hand fall and stomped away. Maureen went back inside to see her mother knitting a purple scarf—Maureen’s favorite color. Neither said a word and Maureen ended the relationship the next day.

Her ex-boyfriend started to park across the street waiting for Maureen to come out, even using different cars so she didn’t know. He followed her everywhere, and Maureen had to climb over a fence in the backyard to go to school and come home. Finally, one day, he came to the front door of 41 Pine Street.

“Come in,” said Mrs. McNally.

She sat him down at the kitchen table. The purple scarf sat finished on the counter as she spoke to him. He had been terrorizing the family and Maureen’s brothers were about ready to run him over, but their mother knew he was just a kid who was clueless.

“I’m not going to make threats or scold you about what you already know you did,” she said. “I don’t think I need to. And I think you know that you don’t want to, but you need to let her go.”

He never came back.

The grandchildren ranged from ages thirty-six to fourteen. If not for them, the house would have already been packed up and not even thought of for hosting the holiday. For them, especially, it was a viewing; they’d come from distances to pay the respects, except that the casket had a roof over it. In the hallway, they took turns riding Mrs. McNally’s stairlift, laughing, cruising up the stairs by the wall covered in family photographs. They measured each other’s heights against the cellar door, littered with old lines, and dates. At six-feet-two, the tallest mark was still their grandfather, who hadn’t been able to leave the third floor of his new home for a year, and who never would be able to.

The house was old, and every event and imprint on it would stay engraved in its history. Countless entrances and exits through the years, from when Mrs. McNally and her husband carried their children across the threshold in 1958, to six brides out the door and into limousines and then new homes, to the men in black suits bearing her son's body into a hearse, and the one today where her children carried her across the threshold. There was only one exit left to be made.

The warm weather had thrown everyone off. The leaves were dying, but sixty degrees and a tinge of humidity were just enough to suggest spring. Even the sunlight shone like May and framed the whole light of the day in a different setting. They were supposed to come to say goodbye. A gray, foreboding sky would have best subdued the family, but for the time being, the warm spring weather, sparked memories of cookouts and hide-and-seek games, made them forget that this would be the last time they'd descend on 41 Pine Street. It was as any other happy reunion. And Mrs. McNally thought of it in the same way; she couldn't say goodbye after how nice the day had been. She couldn't let this one be the last.

She sat in the living room, talking to her grandson who was at Boston College, where she'd always wanted to go to school, before it became coed. She showed him the board where she'd tacked up all his postcards from Europe.

"I'm so impressed, Matt," she said, "That you wrote 'United States' in Czech."

He chuckled. "It's actually more complicated in Gaelic."

"Well, you're so good with languages, I'm sure you'd figure it out."

"If they didn't speak English in Ireland, I'd be totally lost, so thank God."

He took out a picture. "I wanted to give this to you," he said. He was leaning on Westminster Bridge, in front of Big Ben. The cut of his jacket and the smirk on his face seemed to convey that, after a semester, he did belong there.

“Well!” she beamed. “You look like you’re on your way to back to your flat in Kensington!”

She loved London. She’d taken a trip there ten years ago. When she got his box of tea in the mail, she could smell the dining room at Browns. She was the only one in town who could say that she’d had tea at Brown’s in London.

Matt got up for a drink, and Maureen came back and sat down. “How are you holding up, Mum?”

“Good,” she judged. “My sugar might get low in a bit but it’s all right now.”

“Did you take your medicine this morning?”

“Yes, I did.”

Even Maureen knew she was lying. “Good,” she said softly. “Mum?”

“What is it, honey?”

“Just don’t feel like you have to make any decisions today.”

Maureen found Lorraine and Elise on the porch. Her face was red. Her emotion wouldn’t let her think out what she wanted to say; it dictated itself. “We’re not trying hard enough,” she said. “Why shouldn’t she have a little more time here?”

Lorraine pressed her hand against her forehead. “Oh my God, Maureen, *please* do not fuck this up right now.”

“Why?” Maureen demanded. “So you don’t have to take care of her? So we can live in vacationland while she gets carted off to a home?”

“First of all,” said Elise, “she’s already there. The rent’s paid and she’s more or less settled. Second of all, look at the size of her apartment. Everyone else in that building has one room to themselves, and here she is with ten-foot ceilings and a kitchen, living room, bedroom. It’s half the size of this house! She’s got a goddamn mansion compared to the rest of the place.”

“Maybe,” said Maureen, “but it’s not *her* house. It’s not the family house. The McNallys have been living here forever. I just can’t bear to see her reduced to this.” She felt her face tighten and walked toward the front door.

Lorraine followed after her. “Maureen.” She put her arm around her. “I can’t bear to see her reduced to what she was *here*. It’s not that we don’t want to take care of her. We *can’t*.”

“This,” she gestured with her arm, “this belongs to us. “Who says we can’t?”

“Do you want to force-feed her pills?”

Maureen shivered.

The cooking operation went on in spite of itself. The daughters and daughters-in-law and anyone who had a hand free scurried about the matchbox kitchen, ricocheting off each other and trying not to spill any gravy. Desserts lined the counters; the platters were placed in a complex geometry that was really just putting anything where it could go. Mrs. McNally knew her recipes by heart, and they had to keep running back into the other room to ask her if it was a quarter- or a half-cup of flour.

The family, all thirty or so of them, took their places at the dinner table that extended through the dining room to the living room, and some even in standing room only corners of each. But the routine was familiar, classic. You almost wanted to stand and eat for the experience.

“Where’s Ma?” asked Lorraine.

Nobody had seen her for about half an hour, but had distracted themselves by cooking or drinking or by sealing up their memories. No matter who you were, it was just easy to be trampled by the frenzy of activity.

Half alarmed, half bemused, Lorraine stood up. “I’ll go look.”

After a quick tour of the kitchen and the porch, she went upstairs. The good news about her mother losing the ability to get around was that she could never stray far.

Lorraine knocked on the bathroom door, which was the only one closed.

“Hello?” crackled a voice from inside.

“Ma, how long you been up here?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She was dejected, embarrassed. “I can’t get the door to open.”

Lorraine jimmied the doorknob open and her mother was free. She shuffled out, stone-faced, mechanical. She knew she was hurting her chances.

Lorraine sensed this. “Ma, we don’t care. It’s O.K.,” she said. “So you had a little trouble with the lock—it’s really not that big a deal.” No answer. “Mom, it’s O.K.,” she laughed. “We were just wondering where you were. Never mind how you got there; we just want you to be down there with us.”

The stairlift took her back downstairs and Mrs. McNally was seated at the head of the table. Grace was said, food was eaten. The end of the gathering looming, the end of the homestead looming, drinks were filled up quite a bit as well. But Mrs. McNally looked around her and saw what she always did: a room filled with her wonderful family, whom she loved, who loved her, and who loved each other. She saw her grandchildren laughing at the other end of the table, and her children at her end. They wore visible marks of stress, but they were still pleasant and happy enough.

She saw Matt turn to his mother, her daughter, in a fit of laughter and put his arm around her. She was laughing too. Mrs. McNally fixed upon their faces: mouths wide open, eyebrows reaching up in jovial arches. There was nothing but warmth in the room, and she aimed to keep it. No one had brought up the point that was begging to be made, that was screaming for attention, that somehow they’d managed to ignore.

Mrs. McNally considered her dignity and stepped back to look at herself. She saw herself sitting at that table under the pink pallor of the lights. She was playing rummy with Edward. She panned her mental frame to focus on him. She was too polite to say so, but she knew Edward was

a fool. Panning the frame to herself, she saw what lay ahead. She felt embarrassed, sorry for herself. *That poor sap*, she thought.

Her mind was still sharp, and the mortgage had been paid off ten years ago. While the house was still in her name, she knew they couldn't force her out—not legally, anyway. What she didn't know was for how much longer that would be the case. They could wait until her senility made the law side against her, or they could fight her until time saw to the same result. She could afford to hire help to move back home if they refused to help her, but she didn't think her children would be so predatory.

All of them were gathered there at the table; how badly could she have raised them? She hated mudslinging—that was for weakness. She would know when to move out, when she was slipping. She wouldn't fight them if it made the situation ugly, if her dignity was bleeding out. But she hoped that her children would respect her decision; she thought they owed her that much.

She tapped her glass with her spoon. The hum and din continued. "I'd like to say something," she announced, and the room went quiet immediately. "This is really very special. I'm so happy and thankful that you all came. These past couple of months haven't been easy to say the least, and you've all been so patient with me." She sniffled. "In the end, I'm so glad that we could get together where we have for so long, doing what we always do. Not much has changed." She paused. The air got heavier and she bowed her head a bit. "It's always great," she affirmed, "to have a room full of people who like each other." She looked back up. "And that's why I'd like to have things like this more often. I think I'd like to move back here."

Anxious pangs rose up. Everyone seemed to be waiting for some kind of cue.

Lorraine took up the task. "Mum," she said, "you know we've talked about this. You can't stay here. None of us *want* to see you leave either, but you know you're not strong enough to stay here by yourself."

“I know,” said Mrs. McNally, “I haven’t been as aware as I could be. Like today, when I locked myself in the bathroom by mistake. If I had had a cell phone, there would’ve been no problem. So I’ll get a cell phone.”

“It’s not just that,” Elise said.

Maureen felt her cheeks flush with adrenaline. She knew her sister was right, but she couldn’t deal with the fact that her mother had to lose her home. And that *she* had to lose where she’d grown up. “No,” she said firmly, “let her finish.”

“I’ll get a cell phone and...”

“She can’t even get up the front *steps*, Maureen,” Lorraine shot back. “Her kids are holding her up, and soon that’s not even going to be enough.”

“Why can’t we make the effort?”

“There’s no effort to make!” she exclaimed. “She can’t get up stairs, what happens when she can’t move around even on one floor? And then what happens when she can’t get into any good homes?”

“This isn’t about her!” Maureen shouted and stood up. The husbands and in-laws looked around uneasily. “This is about us!”

“*Us?*” Lorraine joined Maureen on her feet. “Maureen, where the hell have you been throughout any of this? Elise and I are up here all the time running errands and giving her meds, and you’re one town over!”

“You’re a goddamn *nurse*, Lorraine...”

“For Christ’s sake, I am worn out! Nonstop! I’m going to run myself into the ground if I keep up with this.”

“Well,” she stalled. “If she can’t be alone, why doesn’t she move in with one of us?” said Maureen. “What, what does it say about us that none of us can find it in us to take care of her

ourselves?” The table stopped with a collective pang of guilt, and reflected for a moment. Was it just careers and money getting in the way of family?

“Look at *yourself!*” shouted Elise. “Maureen, you live in a big house in the next town, and you have a job you don’t need. Your kids are grown, married, and moved out. If she has to stay in the family, why couldn’t it be with you?”

She was at a loss. “*I can’t; I don’t know the first thing about how to deal with any kind of medical problem that might come up.*”

“Honest to *God.*” Lorraine buried her head in her hand.

Mrs. McNally’s sepia-toned finale for her house, that she’d hoped to preserve, shattered. Pent-up tension and stress from her caretakers had finally boiled over, and while their rage wasn’t directed at her, they were resentful that she’d backpedaled on her agreement and caused the argument, especially after all the legwork they’d done to get her accepted into her apartment. Mrs. McNally was ashamed that she’d spoiled her idyllic scene, and she felt guilty to see her whole family bitterly arguing over her. But what outweighed her guilt was the awful realization that after tonight, her house, the only place that belonged to her, would belong to someone else, someone who she didn’t even know.

It pained her to think that she couldn’t live like any other person on Pine Street, like any of her children on their streets, or like anyone else. She pictured herself at the trivia game, and she remembered the last dinner party at her house, just before her husband wandered out into the road and almost got hit by a car. He was safe now, but. She never allowed anyone visiting her at the home to take pictures. She cringed at the mental image of herself in the activities hall. Nursing homes weren’t real homes; they were fake existences set up for convenience, like strip malls and office parks. Full of fluorescent lights and linoleum floors and other mass-produced décors. Everything was manufactured. She was willing to make some concessions, but she had to stay.

“If it’s what it takes,” she cut in, “I’m willing to hire a visiting nurse.”

This annoyed Lorraine more than ever. Maureen had worn down her patience and sympathy for her mother, but this was just inconsiderate to the point of insulting. It was as if she’d been completely unaware of just who had been taking care of her all this time. “No, mom,” she said, “your insurance doesn’t cover long-term care because Dad didn’t set it up the right way—” The phone rang in the kitchen. “—and the only way you’d be able to afford that is to sell the house which would defeat the whole purpose anyway. Which also doesn’t respect the fact that *I have* been your visiting nurse, literally, and been here each day for about the same amount of time. Same goes for Elise.” She collected herself and let the steam she’d built up subside. The phone stopped, and then rang again. “Ignore it. The point is, you need someone to be down the hall at any given moment. If you won’t call for a ride to the hospital because you think it’s an imposition, you need to be somewhere where a *ride to the hospital* isn’t an imposition, even by your terms, and they can just come get you.”

“That’s just it!” shouted Maureen. “Each of us can be here in five, maybe ten minutes. We owe it to her to let her have as much dignity as we can.”

“You’re telling me,” Lorraine scoffed.

The phone rang again.

“What kind of a life is it if we’re up here babysitting...” said Lorraine. “Hang on. This is bugging me.” She downed her drink and went to answer the phone. The room murmured in disorganization. The family was divided in terms of who had seen to their mother’s care personally. And it had boiled over, but those who had been her nurses couldn’t handle it any more.

Lorraine picked up the phone. “Hello?”

Mrs. McNally heard her slam down the phone. Lorraine lumbered back into the dining room and finished the rest of her drink. “Anyway, that’s all I’m saying. You do whatever you want.” She summoned her husband and left without saying goodbye.

After all her children and grandchildren had gone, Mrs. McNally sat on the sofa she had fed them on many years ago. Maureen would come pick her up in the morning to go for coffee, but after that she wasn’t sure where they would go.

The house was silent, full of a thick silence that she’d never felt before. With so many kids running around, it had always been full of noises—of cries, shouts, sobs, and now for the first time, murmurs that lodged themselves in the corners like cobwebs, embedded in the woodwork. She ran her hand over the fraying arm of the sofa and watched the house go dark with the sky.

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Professional Experience

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