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### Evading OblivionLand

Caitlin Faria

*Bridgewater State University*

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*Evading Oblivion*Land

Caitlin Faria

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Sarah Fawn Montgomery, Thesis Advisor

Date: 4/25/22

Dr. James P. Crowley, Committee Member

Date: 4/26/22

Dr. Benjamin D. Carson, Committee Member

Date: 4/29/22

## Critical Introduction

When I initially set out to work on this thesis project, I knew that I wanted to use it as an opportunity to not only hone my talents but to also feel more connected to my father for the first time in a while. My dad had coached me in soccer from the age of two up until I went into high school and joined the team there. We still watched games on TV together here and there, but it became clear that without that time together on the pitch we were beginning to drift into our own separate worlds. I was excited to bring him to life on the page and understand who he is in a more layered and empathetic way. He has been one of the most prominent storytellers in my life to the point where I place him right alongside people like Shirley Jackson, Stephen King, and Stephen Spielberg. When he's not warning us about the different weather patterns he's seen approaching on the news, my dad is telling stories filled with tension and suspense about even the most mundane things he experiences while delivering packages at work. As I studied the craft of writing more, I realized that my dad has abilities equal to some of the best horror authors of all time when it comes to telling a story. He can build suspense and catch people on the edge of their seat before releasing all the tension at just the right moment to create shock. In my thesis, I write a series of essays about my father that mimic his ability to build tension as well as act as a tribute to his wonderful influence on my life.

In addition to the nonfiction essays in this collection, I have included an equal amount of fiction stories that were inspired by my dad and feature fatherhood as a prominent theme throughout. As much as this thesis is an homage to my dad, this is also a testament to my love of imaginative storytelling and fiction writing. Fiction has always been my literature type of choice to write in as I find it thrilling and entertaining to create stories out of thin air that can impact readers. Each story featured in this collection is inspired by my dad and this especially can be

seen in “Wine Day Without Mr. Alva” which was the product of hearing childhood stories from him about making wine and jam at his grandmother’s house with all his cousins in Peabody, Massachusetts. All three fictional pieces fall into the horror category as my father and I share a love of this genre and bond over films such as the *Halloween* series. With stories revolving around murder, bombings, and haunted woods, this series of fictional tales explores themes of fatherhood, childhood, regret, friendship, and so much more.

This collection is comprised of three fiction stories and three nonfiction essays. Starting with the fiction piece “All the Way Down,” the thesis project switches back and forth between these two literary types concluding with the nonfiction flash piece “Driving Alone.” This jump between fiction and nonfiction is not done often and I have never seen it done with pieces all relating to one central theme. In addition to all these pieces being about fatherhood, they all focus on the fear of losing people. The realization made throughout is that writing stories can give anyone an infinite legacy because putting them to paper (whether in a realistic or imaginative sense) ensures they live on by impacting anyone who reads the piece. I chose to switch between fiction and nonfiction because I could tackle my fear of my dad eventually passing away in the latter while building his legacy with the former. The goal of this thesis project is to express how stories are powerful enough to defeat mortality as I write essays introducing the foundations of the fictional pieces that all relate to my dad and the ways he has actively and passively impacted my life.

The first work featured in this collection is “All the Way Down” which employs the use of first-person plural narration to follow a group of middle school boys after a dare goes horribly wrong. When they send their friend Keegan down a haunted road, the boy returns in a catatonic state repeating “Sister Dolores was outside of the house yelling . . . and then she was on the oak

tree” (4). After an incident where the school bully picks on Keegan, the group of boys realize that their actions caused their friend to lose what would have been a future filled with love and happiness. After the group travels to the end of the haunted road in hopes of being able to help Keegan out of his trance, they realize that they can never truly be a collective “we” as they continue to lose each other when they change.

This piece was initially inspired by my evolving dynamic with my dad. Keegan’s father reminds me a lot of mine—trying to remain calm outwardly even though the situation is grounds for much concern. He tries to protect and save his son as he changes into this strange new person. While writing, I frequently wondered if my dad gets scared and overwhelmed when he sees who I have become and remembers who I used to be. In addition to my father, I was inspired to write in first-person plural by William Faulkner’s seminal short story “A Rose for Emily.” One of my personal favorites, it tells the story of a woman who refuses to change despite the community around her doing so. I knew I wanted to explore a story about changes in relationships and wanted to challenge myself with writing from a perspective I had not experimented with before. One of my favorite coming-of-age novels is Stephen King’s *The Body* about a group of boys who venture out into the woods to find the body of a teenager that was hit by the train out there. This novel was a big influence in crafting a tone that felt nostalgic and realistic to that specific age group which was another challenge I desperately wanted to overcome. With all these components wrapped together, I was able to craft a story that explores themes related to growing up, friendship, separation, and more.

This first piece was also influenced by the style of writing that Agatha Christie displays in her novels *And Then There Were None* and *Murder on the Orient Express*. In both books, I noticed that Christie focuses her description in certain areas and then her dialogue in others and

uses these as ways to control pacing. I realized how effective this is in compartmentalizing the story and making what could be confusing and congested scenes into something easy to follow as well as suspenseful. I used this technique in the opening of this story particularly. The opening four paragraphs rely heavily on description and lean the reader into the catalyst event of Keegan walking down the haunted road. Then following it is a series of dialogue that is rarely interrupted to provide description which increases the pacing and makes the reappearance of Keegan after he has lost his mind feel more nerve wracking.

The second piece of this collection and the work I began this thesis project writing is an essay entitled “From A Nightmare to OblivionLand.” This nonfiction work explores my fears of my father passing away someday and begins with the analysis of a recurring childhood nightmare. Then, it continues to examine a time when my father experienced health issues and I went through periods of anxiety and guilt that only were quelled with the understanding that writing about my father will keep him alive forever. With the opportunity to mix the events of the real world with my young imagination of the time, I could create what is my most vulnerable piece to date. As a long-time fan of the television series *The Twilight Zone* and particularly its beautiful episode “One For the Angels,” I was confident in traversing the topic of death. That particular episode depicts a salesman who distracts the personified character of death from taking the life of a young girl and sacrifices himself in her place. After hearing Death speak the line “I just never will understand you people. You get this idiotic notion that life goes on forever, and of course it doesn’t. Everyone has to go sometime,” I understood how valuable a story about eventually losing someone could be and set to work (Serling).

Out of all the nonfiction essays in this piece, “From A Nightmare to OblivionLand” is my favorite. It became a culmination of my experiences in the past as well as the ones of today. The

essay explores my fear of an imaginary place I created as a child. As a little kid, the understanding of death evaded me the same way it did most people my age. I assumed that if my father died he would go someplace horrible because it was away from those he loved the most and settled on a place every adrenaline-seeking child would find misery in—a shut-down amusement park, a place filled with the potential for fun only to be utterly disappointing at every turn. The name of this place and the sentiments of the story only came to me later in life while studying British literature in a course taught by Dr. James Crowley of Bridgewater State University. Dr. Crowley often described the place after death as an “oblivion-land” where everyone will be forgotten. Inspired by this analogy, I was able to place the final pieces of my story together and craft an essay that I am incredibly proud of and which will hopefully avoid OblivionLand.

Another source of inspiration for this piece is the scene “Vaughn’s Basement” from Jamie Vanderbilt’s 2007 film *Zodiac*. In this scene, a journalist investigating the Zodiac Killer is led down into the basement of a man whose handwriting suspiciously matches that of the serial murderer and fears that he is going to be attacked after hearing footsteps and being locked in the house (Vanderbilt 174). Using what I consider to be the most suspenseful scene in film history, I attempted to recreate that tactic of building and releasing tension to create a scene that sticks with audiences long after their initial reading. In “From A Nightmare to OblivionLand,” I attempted to recreate a scene that builds tension similarly when I described an experience of losing track of time while shoveling snow. In this section, I focused first on the realistic stressor of feeling disconnected from my dad while he was sick. Then, the piece progresses to focus on a more psychological experience as I, similar to the journalist in *Zodiac*, become more panicked and aware of the reality of my situation. To pick up the pace of the scene, I used repetition to

force the reader into a faster rhythm which can be seen in the lines “as I shoveled and shoveled and the snow fell and fell I became more sure that this was true. I finished up the driveway and went to do the walkway only to see that the driveway was covered once again when I returned. That I had made no change in the world” (9). By setting this quicker pace right before I release the tension, I was able to make the reveal that I had been outside for eight hours feel like an escape. With the scene “Vaughn’s Basement” as a guide, I was able to tell this experience in the most impactful and resonating manner despite the scene being about something as mundane as shoveling snow during a blizzard.

The premise of the third piece of this collection, the fiction story “Before Check Out,” had been stirring for several years. I knew that I wanted to write a story where the ending is obvious from the beginning but remains compelling throughout. This story begins and ends with a bomb; however, it is interlaced with the devastating story of a father who wants nothing more than to express his love for his family. After having a revelation where he realizes that his withholding of love is pointless, the narrator states “maybe I’ll be met with annoyance and anger, or maybe one of us will say those three words that we never do” (8). This piece explores themes of regret and the horror of being too late. The hope of this piece is to encourage audiences to love openly while they still can by telling the story of a man who wasted his whole short life wanting to do so. The man never leaves the grocery store that he is in, which is similar to some of the characters in one of my favorite Stephen King novels. In *Cujo*, a mother and son are trapped in an overheating car as the rabid dog stalks them, attacking viciously each time they attempt to escape (King 149). Much like in the novel, the main character of “Before Check Out” spends his time in this one setting reminiscing about the past and dreaming about his future that he fears will never occur.



“Before Check Out,” similar to “All the Way Down,” was experimental in the sense that I made the story repeatedly switch back and forth between first-person singular and third-person omniscient narration. Not only had I never used this style before, but I have also never seen it in literature before. Lately, it has become popular for fiction writing to employ the use of perspective changes among characters. An example of this can be seen in Hank Green’s recent two book series that includes the novels *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing* and *A Beautifully Foolish Endeavor*. These tell the story of a young woman who becomes a famous internet personality overnight after she reports a spectacular global news story before anyone else in the world (H. Green). These novels switch from the perspective of one character to another each chapter. This requires Green to alter writing style and narrative voice constantly throughout the books. With “Before Check Out,” I wanted to push this tactic to a new level by jumping back and forth between a human character and a fly-on-the-wall narrator. This gave me the unexpected opportunity to demonstrate my ability to tell a story from both an emotional point-of-view and a completely detached being. This new take on a popular style will hopefully encourage other writers to take the next step in creatively evolving literature.

The second essay and fourth piece of this collection, “Passing On,” explores the legacies father’s pass on to their children by analyzing the lessons my father has taught me and how my grandmother remembers her dad as a gentle man despite his violent, mysterious past as a rogue member of the Irish Republican Army. This essay required multiple edits as I had difficulty managing a well-defined outline. My base inspiration for this piece stemmed from the line “If humanity is one long epic poem, most people get to throw in a letter. Some are lucky enough to get a word in. The best of us contribute a whole line. Well, I want a stanza. I want my life to be impactful, poetic, and impossible to miss while reading through (6)” which is featured towards

the end of this piece. With this line, I knew I wanted to craft an essay that focuses on the way I hope to be remembered, how my father will be remembered, and how the generations before me are remembered.

Although this collection aims to explore my father and how he inspires the stories I write, “Passing On” is meant to focus more on myself as an author and how I hope to impact the world. The idea for this was brought on after reading John Green’s beautiful nonfiction collection *The Anthropocene Reviewed*. While analyzing the era of today by going in-depth about things such as the QWERTY keyboard, scratch ‘n sniff stickers, and diet Dr. Pepper soda, Green writes that “we are so small, and so frail, so gloriously and terrifyingly temporary” (273). I admired how Green was able to discuss his own feelings of morality while discussing all the components that make up the modern day. With this inspiration, I wanted to contribute my own goals to the literary world and put into writing how I perceive my hopes for the future.

The closing essay to this collection, the flash nonfiction piece “Driving Alone,” explores my experiences driving to morning hockey practice without my father after years of doing that with him. My goal for this essay was to describe the world through the senses. An example of this is writing “I’ve gotten used to driving while sitting forward to keep as much of my body off the cold black leather seats as possible” as a way to describe the weather (1). For guidance on this method, I referenced SJ Sindu’s collection of essays *I Once Met You But You Were Dead*, specifically her piece “SR-9.” The author opens the story with the lines “it stings the back of your throat, something sweet on the top of your mouth, the underbelly of your tongue . . . this is gunpowder, invading your lungs, combusting into starchy smoke” (Sindu 3). To make the experience of driving early in the morning during winter unique to myself, I worked to emulate

Sindu's descriptions in hopes that it would individualize the experience while also giving the reader understandable sensations.

The goal of this piece was to convey the revelation I had that my dad will never be gone as long as I can hold his stories close to me. Early in the story, I turn the radio onto my dad's favorite station and explain that "it feels wrong to listen to it without Dad in the car with me" (1). I intentionally refer to my father as "Dad" instead of as "my dad" in a lot of the pieces in this collection. This makes him a universal character—he's not just my dad, he's everyone's Dad. Additionally, I play with flashbacks throughout this essay to reference some of his childhood stories. Doing this makes the conclusion feel earned and complete because it not only provides reference to these past stories within "Driving Alone" but also echoes details brought up in earlier pieces of the collection. A short essay with a strong message, "Driving Alone" brings this collection to a beautiful and resonating close.

The experience of composing this thesis was rewarding, challenging, and well worth the time and effort. It felt clear that my skills as a writer have advanced because of this process and I could see this mainly in the editing process. In October when I first attempted to edit a piece, I found that it took a substantial amount of time to understand how to improve the structure of the essay and make the characters more interesting. By the end of the year, the editing process was simple and quick as I honed my abilities and developed a strong understanding of how to tell a story well. In addition to editing better, this process has shown me how to endure throughout a long-term project. As someone who hopes to continue writing as a career, this thesis was a necessary step in the right direction for my future goals. Not only was I able to create this collection successfully, but I was also able to develop the confidence that I could do projects of this caliber and higher on my own in the future.

With that being said, I did have to overcome some struggles throughout this thesis composition. The biggest source of difficulty was having to abandon some stories that I thought were interesting and would have fit in well because they weren't developed enough. Originally, the stories "All the Way Down" and "Before Check Out" were not included in the thesis and replaced two other stories that I was not prepared to create yet at this point in my career as a writer. It was difficult to abandon these storylines but doing so led to these two new stories being made. Hopefully in my future I will be able to write those stories that I abandoned, but if I were to fight through and write them for this project I don't feel they would have been delivered as well as they will be. This was really frustrating for me, but learning to be flexible and to let stories breathe if they aren't developed enough has been one of the biggest lessons this thesis has forced me to understand.

My future goals for this project are to get these pieces individually published or expand them into larger works. For the nonfiction pieces, I plan to submit them to different literary magazines. I will also do that with some of the fictional pieces including "Before Check Out." As for "All the Way Down" and "Wine Day Without Mr. Alva," however, I hope to put my film degree to use alongside my writing skills to convert them into screenplays. My goal is to keep "Wine Day Without Mr. Alva" as a short piece, but to expand "All the Way Down" into a feature-length film. As mentioned before, this project began with two alternative story ideas that are not included in this collection that I will turn into feature-length screenplays as well. All these scripts will be submitted to hopefully see the light of day on the big screen.

When I initially started this project, I hoped to tell stories in genres that I love while exploring the impact my father has had on my life. Although I prefer to write fiction, the nonfiction essays of this piece show who my father is through my eyes as well as provide me

with the space to explore and find words for my own fears of losing him one day. The fictional stories interwoven throughout also show how my father inspires my writing even when it does not directly involve him or a character exactly like him. For example, my dad is not much like Mick in “Before Check Out,” but I see my father in the setting, the way the main character talks, and some of the desires that the characters have. This project forced me to confront many fears that I have avoided for a long time about losing my father. He is someone I have looked up to my whole life because of the generosity, kindness, and patience he treats everyone with. My dad always taught me to leave the world a brighter place than when I entered it—to have a legacy that I can be proud of. I believe that this thesis project is composed of impactful essays and stories, but, more importantly, this unique collection brings to life an amazing person and carves his legacy on the walls of literary history for future generations to discover.

## All the Way Down

Keegan Hinney was one of the smallest kids in our middle school and he looked even smaller walking down haunted Dudley Road with only the gigantic pine trees at his side. When he lost eeny-meeny-miney-mo, his nervous smile got replaced by clenched teeth and darting eyes. He tried to convince us to let him out of the dare saying he had hurt his ankle in gym class that week and wouldn't be able to make the quarter mile walk to the end of the road and back, but we wouldn't let him get away with wussing out. We basically shoved him to start the walk to the Witch-Nun House.

It was right off the dead end of the road in this big clearing surrounded by trees. The house had sunken down into the ground so much that only the second story windows and up could be seen. Any paint that had been on it flaked away a long time ago leaving the outside a shabby gray mess of rotten wood. The legend said that back in the late 1600s a nun was accused of witchcraft and hid out in that sunken old house until the community found her and strung her up on the giant oak tree nearby. It was the only tree that stuck out into the clearing and had a large branch arching out in the direction of the Witch-Nun House. Rumor has it that a bit of rope from the noose can still be seen up on the branch, but not many have gone out to check out of fear that they may see more. We all believed it was true. Even some of the grownups in town believed it was true, but they told everyone they didn't. We knew they did though because they were all too scared to tear down the house.

Keegan looked scared, too. His thin shoulders were tensed all the way up to his ears scrunching the hood of his sweatshirt into the crook of his neck. He balled his hands up in fists and kept them up near his chest that was heaving with labored breaths. The left sole of his red and white Adidas had broken during a game of baseball a few weeks ago and it dragged along

the cracked pavement while he shuffled farther and farther away from us until he eventually vanished down the hill.

We waited for a long time, grateful every minute that it was an unusually warm November day and we didn't have to shiver. We expected it to take a while, but it had been an hour by then and the sun had completely set. All of us sat in a circle under the Dudley Road sign where the only streetlight was. At first, we all were slumped in our own unique ways and joked about what Keegan might see down there on his own, but as time went on everyone fell into a cross-legged position with our backs hunched over and our chins in our hands. Occasional glances down the road turned to expectant stares as we fell to tense silence.

"Maybe we should, like, go find him," one of us said.

It was quiet again. No one wanted to go walking all the way down to the dead end while it was that dark out.

"It's been, like, an hour guys," he insisted, "what if, like, he got, like, taken or something?"

"He didn't get taken, man," said Declan, the oldest and tallest of us all.

"He could've. I mean, that car went down, like, half an hour ago."

"He didn't get taken. Shut up. He'll be back," said Declan.

We all sunk back into the quiet, waiting. Another five minutes passed before Keegan trudged himself back up the hill. His shoulders had slumped down like normal again and his arms swung at his side. He walked as relaxed and casual as he would going down the school hallways, but his face was pale and his eyes looked like brown and white tennis balls on his face from being so wide. We scrambled to our feet so quickly that we scraped our knees and palms against the road while getting up.

“Keegan, Declan shouted, “what took you so long?”

Declan slung his arm around his friend’s bony shoulder. Keegan was a whole head shorter than him and seemed to have just half the body mass. The rest of us circled around to pat Keegan on the back or punch him in the arm, but he didn’t seem to even notice we were there.

“You alright, Keeg?” someone asked.

He let in a hiccupping breath that easily could have tumbled into a cry but didn’t. He stared ahead blankly.

“I saw Sister Dolores,” Keegan said, “she was at the house.”

“You only had to touch it” one of us said, “you actually went in the house?”

“No, no. She was outside for a while yelling and then she was on the oak tree.”

“There’s no way,” someone said, “you’re messing with us.”

Keegan shook his head slowly. “She was yelling and then she was on the oak tree.”

He kept saying the same thing over and over, and he wouldn’t look at any of us. Even when we moved his head so he was staring right at us, it didn’t feel like he was actually seeing us. When we walked him back to his house, he looked at his dad the same way. Declan was the one to knock on the screen door. We had spent so many days after school at Keegan’s house and always felt free to just wander in at any time, but that night we knocked. His dad opened the door wearing faded blue jeans and a stained teal t-shirt.

“Boys, I’ve been waiting for you since the streetlights came on,” he said, “y’all know better. Come on, get in.”

No one moved. Mr. Hinney’s eyes landed on Keegan.

“You okay, bud?” he asked.



Keegan said nothing. We passed the boy forward to his father who pulled him into their home. He whispered to him, trying to keep us from hearing his words.

“Keegee, what happened? Are you alright?”

“Sister Dolores was outside of the house yelling,” Keegan repeated, “and then she was on the oak tree.”

Mr. Hinney tried a few times to get a different answer out, but nothing changed. We could tell he was starting to panic. His words were coming out quicker, but he was stuttering more the same way Keegan did when he got nervous. He grabbed his son’s hands and started rubbing them frantically. We didn’t know if he believed or not, but he certainly believed something bad happened to his boy.

“Keegee, buddy, can you hear me?” Mr. Hinney asked.

He gripped him by the arm and shook him. Tears were starting to well up in his eyes and we could hear the phlegm building up in his voice. He moved his hands to Keegan’s cheeks and ran his thumbs over the boy’s eyebrows and forehead. Mr. Hinney was a big man, and his beefy hands made his little son’s face look as small as it was in the family photos that hung on the wall nearby.

Mr. Hinney picked Keegan up and held him close to his chest. He ran through us to his car where he fumbled to buckle Keegan into the front seat before getting behind the wheel. Keegan had always told us how much he loved driving in the front seat of the car. His dad didn’t let him sit up front until seventh grade because of how small he was, so the experience still felt new and exciting to him. Watching them drive away though, he didn’t look enthusiastic like usual to be up front. Keegan looked empty, or maybe confused or scared. Maybe he wasn’t feeling anything at all. It was clear Mr. Hinney was filled with emotion though. We were able to

catch a glimpse of him as he gassed it down the street. He never stopped talking to Keegan, pleading with him to say anything. He gripped the wheel so hard with one hand that his knuckles were turning white. He held both of his son's hands in his free one constantly shaking them in hope that he may snap out of his trance. Keegan kept staring forward though, blinking only when his eyes were painfully dried out.

They drove off down the road faster than any car any of us had ever seen. In just a few seconds, the taillights disappeared from the neighborhood and onto the main road.

\* \* \*

Keegan didn't come to school for a few days after that. He missed almost a whole week. By day three, rumors had started to fly.

"Keegan Hinney went down Dudley Road and the evil Witch-Nun kidnapped him and he's trapped in the sunken house."

"Keegan Hinney looked the Witch-Nun in her eyes and she melted part of his brain and he went crazy."

"Keegan Hinney lost his mind after going to the end of Dudley Road and he had to go to the mental hospital where he constantly takes these pills to keep him sedated so he doesn't become a serial murderer."

No matter how confident everyone seemed with what they were saying, nobody really knew what happened to Keegan. Some of our parents had sat us down and told us that he had to go see a doctor because he "wasn't feeling well." We tried to get them to tell us more, but they said that was all that Mr. Hinney had told them. There was more to what was going on than just "not feeling well" though, we all could tell. It was like Keegan had walked down that road, but it

wasn't really him that came back. His body was the same but something in his brain was different.

When he did come back to school, it seemed like everyone could feel that difference and used it as an excuse to always keep a ten-foot radius around Keegan that no one would step in, not even us. He was still in that weird catatonic state, only now instead of repeating that line he just resorted to saying no words at all.

At lunch Keegan sat in his usual seat at our table staring with his head down not touching the homemade lunch of soup and soda bread that his father must have put a lot of care into. For a moment, we followed our instincts and walked a few feet over towards Keegan. Declan was the first one to freeze, then the rest of us followed when we realized that sitting with him was a different thing now. It wouldn't be just having lunch with our friend anymore; it would be associating ourselves with Crazy Keegan. We found an empty table and sat down.

We could see Keegan from behind at our new table, and within a few minutes we could also see Caleb Mannion leaning against the table talking to him. Caleb was a big kid, even bigger than Declan. If you played football with him, you knew him as the best linebacker in our county. The rest of us just knew him as the kid who got held back twice and broke Gerry Joyce's arm and nose when he beat him up during recess in the fourth grade. None of us would have blamed Keegan if he ran away or started crying for help the minute he saw Caleb walk over, but he didn't do any of that. He just kept his eyes fixated forward and his brain occupied with whatever he saw down at the end of Dudley Road.

Caleb tried mocking Keegan, but he didn't respond. He tried again, smiling at the end of his sentence like a cat looking at a dying bird writhing on the ground. He looked over his shoulder at his table of friends to make sure they were watching. Caleb scanned the room quickly

to make sure no teachers were looking. Then he swiped the mini carton of chocolate milk from the table in front of Keegan and smashed it against the top of the smaller boy's head. The cafeteria went silent. Only the dripping of chocolate milk could be heard as it fell from Keegan's face and hair onto the table. Keegan didn't look up. None of us were even sure he blinked.

Caleb was the first one to laugh, then his table of football friends, and then everyone in the cafeteria except for us. We didn't have the courage to walk over and defend Keegan, but we at least didn't join in on his humiliation. We couldn't see his face, but we all knew it remained unchanged in that blank stare he had kept ever since his walk. He might not even be able to feel the cold milk seeping through his shirt, but watching the darkness spread along his shoulders and back made us all sick to our stomach.

A breeze whisked by our table along with a small girl named Winnie O'Sullivan. She had on the same pink backpack that she had worn every school day since the third grade. Winnie was wearing a green Redford Middle School hoodie that was so big she could swim in it. Her jeans were rolled up at her ankles like always and her mismatched socks stuck out of her pale yellow Reeboks. She was just as skinny as Keegan and maybe an inch taller. None of us had ever seen anyone walking with such intent, right in the direction of Caleb.

She solved him with all of her might pushing with both arms right against his chest. He didn't move much and most of it was probably out of surprise than actual force.

"What is wrong with you?" she shouted.

Caleb didn't say anything. He didn't even laugh or smile. It was the first time anyone had ever stood up to him, and no one expected it to be tiny Winnie to do it. She turned her back to Caleb and pulled a pack of tissues out of her pocket to help Keegan clean his face.

She held one of the tissues close to his face, but didn't touch him. She paused with her hand just a hair from his cheek where a streak of chocolate milk had streamed down. She must have been shocked seeing him for the first time without his face being beet red. Keegan had the biggest crush on Winnie. Ever since second grade when she moved to town and won the Four Square championship, he couldn't talk to her without stuttering. His face would explode into a bright pink and he would scratch at the back of his neck to try and contain his nerves. Every first day of school he would race to the seat next to Winnie just to get a few minutes with her before the teachers assigned seating for the year.

At that moment, we all remembered that Keegan had a poster rolled up in his locker. He had spent weeks trying to push past his lack of artistic talent to draw little pictures and get the bubble letters just right. It read "Winnie, it would be a real win if we went to the dance together." He was going to ask her the day after the Dudley Road incident. He had told us how he thought the dance was going to be their big start. That he was going to ask her out during the slow dance. Then, at the annual end-of-the-school-year fireworks show, he was going to kiss her. She was going to be his first kiss. Keegan had never talked about any other girl. The rest of us always jumped from crush to crush, but he was always into Winnie. If he was with us right then, he would've gotten that dopey smile on his face that he always got when he saw her—the kind of smile that was just a little too hard because everything in him felt too intense to contain. He wasn't with us though, not at that moment. Keegan was in his own little world with Sister Dolores and whatever else he saw down at the end of that road.

Winnie looked towards our table. She wanted us to help, pushing her eyebrows together and up pleading for us to come over. It felt like ants were crawling under the skin of our legs. We all were pivoting our feet on our heels and toes, itching to race over. We wanted to grab Keegan,

our friend, and shake him awake. Our fingertips rushed with cold that radiated through our chests and up to our foreheads. It was us who sent that little boy down that haunted road. He didn't want to go. It was all our fault. Winnie O'Sullivan was showing him that she liked him back, that she would have gone with him to the dance, and that she would have kissed him at the fireworks, and he didn't even realize it was happening because of what we did to him. Winnie had been waiting for him to say what he never will, because of us.

We all averted our eyes and she understood that she was on her own. It was her and catatonic Keegan at a table all alone, being stared at like zoo animals by the rest of the cafeteria. Winnie pulled her hand down from next to his face without wiping any of the milk away. She pulled his hand close to her, extending his arm. She opened his fingers up to lay his palm facing toward the ceiling and placed the clean tissue in his hand. She didn't pull her hand back after though. She left hers in his and placed her other hand on top. We could see her rubbing her thumb along the edge of his palm. Winnie sat there with him, holding his hand, for the rest of the lunch period. She talked to him quietly so that nobody could hear what she was saying to him. By the time the bell rang, her cheeks were blotchy from tears.

\* \* \*

After school got out, we all walked the mile and a half in silence until we reached the top of Dudley Road. It was the last place we had seen Keegan as himself. He hadn't laughed since he was in that spot. We had all become horrible people in that spot. There was an overwhelming urge to build some sort of memorial grave for the old Keegan, the one who would have been there with us if it wasn't for what we did. Declan, the oldest of us, took the first few steps towards the dead end.

“Wait,” said Sean. He had become the smallest of us after losing Keegan. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

Declan didn’t turn around and said, “we made Keegan do it.”

It was quiet for a moment before Sean replied, “what if whatever happened to him—”

“We need to go down and see what he saw,” Declan interrupted. His voice started cracking a bit. “If we know what’s down there then we can help him. We can get him back.”

He turned away from us and began to walk alone. Declan was going to the Witch-Nun House whether we were behind him or not. The sight of another one of us walking down that road alone made us sick to our stomach. It was the same feeling as when Winnie looked at all of us in the cafeteria, fingertips going cold, feet tingling, legs itching. We followed behind Declan towards the dead end, aware that each step we took could be another step towards losing everything.

\* \* \*

The field was only supposed to have the Witch-Nun House and the big oak tree in it, but when we looked out at the clearing we saw a person. For a brief instant, we were all sure that it was Sister Dolores’s ghost standing in front of that decrepit house looking out to the tree. We all believed completely for a half-second that we were seeing what little Keegan saw and that we were about to lose our minds just like him. Then we realized that it wasn’t a nun we were looking at, it was a father. Mr. Hinney, looking as much like a ghost as a living human could, was standing out in that field with his hand on the haunted house the same as how his son was only a few nights ago.

He was so pale, like someone dipped him in bleach and sent him out into the world. His hair hadn't been brushed in what seemed like a week. We were sure his legs were going to give out on him because of how much they were shaking. He kept his head down and his eyes closed.

None of us really understood what he was doing right away, but then we figured it out. Mr. Hinney was trying to see, trying to believe. He desperately wanted to see what Keegan had seen that night. Every few seconds, he would pull his head up and look towards the side of the house. Each time, he would see nothing and drop his head back down. His face would tense and twist in all different ways, but never break. Mr. Hinney was more determined than anyone we had ever seen before.

After a few moments, we couldn't keep looking. Instead, we all chose to look at one another. Everyone locked eyes and then quickly diverted to jump to another one of us. The only one who kept staring forward was Declan. He wasn't looking at any of us. His eyes were glued to the house and beginning to well up with tears. We could see his eyelids twitching and his breathing pick up. Then we watched him slowly turn his head to look over to the oak tree.

He was seeing what Keegan saw, and we all understood what it was. Declan was watching Sister Dolores in her final moments of life. He was watching her get beaten as close to death as they could beat her before dragging her limp body to the oak tree. In his eyes, she was laying under that branch as the community tied the noose above her. When her neck snapped, he let out a sharp breath and a tear dropped down from his eye. It was the first time any of us ever saw Declan cry.

That was it. That was when we lost Declan, too. He stopped being one of us at that moment. He started seeing what we couldn't, and just like that he and Keegan became "them"



and Mr. Hinney wanted more than anything to be with them—to see what they saw and what we never did.

## From A Nightmare to OblivionLand

Dad is so healthy and strong at this moment. Usually when he scoops the heavy piles of slush and snow from the sidewalk he grunts, and then grunts again when he dumps it into the front yard, and then grunts again when he realizes he must do that another time. At this moment, there are no grunts but there is his loud laughter where he crinkles his nose up and squints his eyes as his face turns red from having so much joy build up inside. This time, he doesn't struggle to lift the snow and dump it over the peak of the snowbanks nearby. He launches the piles ten, thirty, one-hundred feet into the air with ease. Normally, he has to give his used-to-be-a-marathon-runner-but-now-has-three-kids body a break but today it seems like the burdens of forty-eight years have not weighed themselves on him. He tilts his head back and pulls off his winter hat so that he can feel the snowflakes fall and melt on his face and in his dark brown hair.

I stand at the front door holding my shovel surrounded by mountains of snow as I watch Dad just thirty feet away dancing while he clears the sidewalk. As he starts telling me his favorite childhood stories, I bask in the comfort of knowing that Dad will never die and that he will always be here to reminisce over burying fig trees with his cousins, causing trouble in high school, and making wine at Vovo's house.

He turns and looks at me with his mustache turned upward because of the big goofy smile shining underneath. Orange and yellow lights from further down Bellflower Road illuminate the right side of his body and become more and more encompassing as I watch from my safe front door. He raises his right hand—the same right hand that he threw a glove onto to teach me how to play softball, the same right hand he uses to shake the frying pan while making his famous Sloppy Egg Sandwiches on Saturday mornings, the same right hand he used to cradle my head the first day we met—and waves to me. Slowly, rhythmically, relaxingly to the beat of the

flashing lights. Closer and closer and closer those lights approach with their reflection growing bigger on his face. A snowplow comes barreling down my street and—

*Wham!*

Dad is flattened to the ground behind a pile of snow. There is no blood or corpse that I can see, just absence. The plow moves on its own merry way without so much as a pause as I stand petrified waiting for Dad to get back up. I wait for hours in the same spot too petrified to go to the sidewalk and see him lying there alone and old and cold as the snowflakes continue to fall on his face and in his dark brown hair.

This is the twelfth time this has happened.

\* \* \*

The SnowPlow Monster Nightmare was the worst of them all. I could make it through the rest of the night on my own after the Scary Evil Clown Dream or the Giant Little-Kid-Eating Spider Dream, but not that one. Whenever the SnowPlow Monster slammed its way into my sleep, I had to go to my parent's bedroom for refuge. Logically I knew I could go in and the small box TV would be playing reruns of *George Lopez* which would be illuminating the whole room and keeping the Boogeyman of the Dark cowering in the shadows. Logically I knew it was just a dream and that Dad would be snoring under the covers. Logically I knew these things, but logic means shit when you're seven years old.

*What if Dad's not in bed? What if the SnowPlow Monster did get him? Even if Dad is there, what can I do to keep the Monster away from him? How can I save him from my biggest enemy that I know will eventually come?*

My only solution was to stay awake forever—I was dealing with my own Freddy Krueger, and I refused to let him slip into the real world. After building up some courage, I

peeked my head through the bedroom door. I shuffled over to the lump on the right side of the bed and looked at Dad's face. He didn't look like he got hit by any snowplow and I thought I could hear a faint snore, but just to make sure he was still alive I gave him a good strong shake.

He jumped a bit when he woke up. Dad had been used to getting a tug on the sleeve or even a little hand poking his forehead in the middle of the night, but never the life-or-death shake I had given him.

"What's the matter?" he said, still trying to get his bearings.

"I'm not falling asleep anymore Dad."

"Alright," he grumbled and scooped me up like I was snow on the sidewalk to lay me between him and Mom in their ginormous bed. "Goodnight, Caitlin."

He fell asleep on his side facing me with his warm hand holding mine. I was not going to let the SnowPlow Monster get him a thirteenth time. I stayed up watching *George Lopez* and then *Fresh Prince* and then *Full House* until finally the sun peaked and the house was alive. And thanks to me, Dad was too.

\* \* \*

Seven years have passed since I vowed to never fall asleep again. At fourteen years old, I am still as stubborn as I was when I forced myself to stay up all night watching TV next to Dad.

The Christmas Tree is in the corner of our family room downstairs and as I pace around trying to keep my aching body upright, I take moments to stop and look at all the homemade ornaments and glowing lights. I haven't slept in about eighty hours and in a moment of forgetfulness—of weakness—I listen to my exhausted body and lay down on the couch. I want to keep my eyes open; I need to keep them open, but it feels like elephants are swinging on strings attached to them. They go down and I am plunged into darkness.

The tension leaves my forehead as I drift away. My nose and ears finally relax, and my jaw unclenches as I fall unconscious. Guilt presses itself onto my body and sinks me into the couch deeper and deeper as each individual limb loses any remaining rigidity.

There's Dad. We're outside with our shovels as the snowflakes land on us. I stand at the front door watching him laugh and launch the piles of snow into the front yard from the sidewalk as he dances and tells stories of his childhood.

Fig trees, high school, Vovo's house.

He raises his right hand to me.

Softball gloves, Sloppy Egg Sandwiches, the first day we met.

He waves to the rhythm of the orange and yellow lights flashing in the distance.

Closer, and closer, and closer.

*Wham!*

My eyes shoot open as I fling myself off the couch and race through the house. My bare feet slap on the cold tile before lunging for the stairs. I slip on the first step but force myself to keep moving up and up and up until I reach the front door. Looking out the glass with my hand on the cold metal doorknob, I watch the snowflakes trickle down from the sky reminding me that the world will never stop even if mine freezes.

I twist the doorknob and prepare my feet for the inevitable frostbite they will face and my heart for the inevitable drop it will experience. The knob in my hand is already cold and I'm sure this run out into the winter New England air will—

“You alright, Cait?”

The ice freezing my world melts away when I hear Dad's voice from the kitchen confirming that he is safe, inside, and alive. I make my way up the smaller staircase into the

kitchen to where Dad was sitting at the table with the visiting nurse to his left. Sitting down, I watch as the nurse methodically does her job. She cautiously and expertly maneuvers the PICC line that had to be put in his arm after he got some sort of bone infection. Honestly, I don't know what the medical name is of his problem. All I know is that every once in a while a nurse comes into our home and does something with the long plastic tube that is stuck in Dad's arm leading to his heart. I hope that if I never remember the medical name for what he has or what the PICC line is supposed to do that the illness itself will just float away to whatever mysterious land everything goes to that is supposed to be forgotten.

Watching the nurse adjust the tube, I feel the powerful swirl of anger start in my toes like a tornado and move up all the way to my forehead. My temples pound as if someone's playing bongos on them. I want the nurse gone. Sure, she seems nice while she jokes with Dad and compliments out kitchen decorations, but I know she must be doing something wrong. How is she making it that Dad feels so distant when he is home so much more now without work to go to? He is right there every single day when I come home from school or practice now telling the contestants on *The Price Is Right* what their guesses should be. He is right there tapping along to the concerts being aired on TV and reliving his younger days when he had long hair and was the drummer in a band. He is right there goofing around like he always does to lighten the mood and make sure the nurse laughs today. I can see him and if I reach out, I could feel him. He is right there; I know he is!

So why does this stupid fucking tube make him feel so far away?

Why can't the nurse just leave? Pull the tube out and go to the next person's house and let us go back to normal. Every second she's in our home is another moment fearing she'll notice

the dirty dishes in the sink or the magnet from Hershey Park that fell from the refrigerator and think of us as not capable of taking care of Dad.

I can picture a big, tall doctor with blood splatter all over his scrubs and gloves and his stethoscope hanging around his neck walking in through the back door. “Sorry, kiddo. Clearly, you’re not fit enough to take care of a sick man if you can’t even keep the magnets sticky. Dad is gonna have to come with us.”

I can imagine them ushering him out the door while he gives his signature smile to calm our nerves and quench our terror. His eyes though. I can see in his eyes that he is horrified. He doesn’t want to leave, and we don’t want him to go. There he is—being forced out the door and taken to whatever mysterious land everything goes to that is supposed to be forgotten.

I don’t want him to go. I don’t want to forget him. I want Dad to be here forever to see me graduate high school and college, to watch the first movie I direct, to read the first story I publish, to walk me down the aisle at my wedding, to hold my children, to tell stories to my grandchildren, to fight my kids when they consider sending me to a nursing home, to visit me when I’m old and spend my days knitting on the couch, and on and on. I don’t want a world without him. I just want him here. Just right here.

And there he is, sitting at the table next to me as the nurse packs up her things and says goodbye. No evil doctor coming in after her to take him away. Just him and I hanging out in the kitchen.

He’s not gone. I just always think he’s going to be.

\* \* \*

The nightmare came back. The SnowPlow Monster had caused me to revert back to my childhood habit of avoiding sleep. Late nights filled with delirium and creativity led to my

invention of OblivionLand. It was this place I thought up where people go when they are forgotten—when no one tells any more stories about them and their faces fade from memories. If someone was to find a picture of them now, they would ponder for a moment what significance this stranger may have had in their life before tossing it to the side in hopes of maybe returning to it later when they might remember.

OblivionLand was this giant amusement park filled with tons of rollercoasters and Ferris wheels. It should have been a place of pure joy and excitement, but when you go there you're alone. When you hop on a rollercoaster for an adrenaline rush to help get your mind off your loneliness, you forget that every ride goes slow and is painstakingly boring. You can't get off though because you're strapped in with the pull bar down. The Ferris wheels should at least provide a beautiful look of the whole park, but fog always surrounds them. When you get to the top you can try as hard as you can to focus on anything through the cloud of gray, but you can't, and it makes you dizzy trying to force your mind through the never-ending nothingness.

Dad always loved amusement parks. When I was little, he would bring the family to Canobie Lake Park in New Hampshire every summer and we would go on the Dragon Coaster over and over and over. It was the smallest ride at the park, but parents could fit into it. He would get into the dragon-shaped cart with me and scream and yell and laugh along as if it was as intense a ride for him as it was for me.

The Dragon Coaster is always at OblivionLand, but it never runs.

\* \* \*

While Dad was sick, he couldn't lift anything over twenty-five pounds. It was up to me at fourteen to take care of shoveling most of the snow in the driveway, along the walkway, around



the side of the house, at the back door, and on the sidewalk—the point of attack for the SnowPlow Monster.

There was a blizzard, and I went out early alone to shovel. Knowing Dad would be inside and I wouldn't have anyone to talk to while I worked, I decided to put my headphones in. Everything had felt so far away and so up close at the same time. The bottom of the porch steps looked to be miles away, but when I was inside the ceiling felt like it was so close to me that if I jumped my skull would crack open.

Dad sat inside wearing his worn navy-blue Polo shirt and green and red pajama pants. He had his tube socks on along with his Adidas sandals that he always wears around the house. His dark brown and gray hair was tousled while his hands fiddled with his hat and watched a soccer game that originally aired months before. The only difference between how he looked in that moment and how he looked every other lazy day was the plastic tube that ran out from under the sleeve of his shirt and down his arm. The PICC line was a constant reminder that he wasn't healthy and strong like I had always seen him—like how he was in the SnowPlow Monster nightmare right before everything goes wrong. I knew that one day the flashing lights could come in and he could be taken down behind the pile of snow. I was sure that one morning I would wake up and he would be gone and on his way to OblivionLand. He was right there, but like the bottom of the porch, he felt miles away.

The music felt the same way coming out of my headphones. The sound was so loud and present in my head, but it felt separated from me. It took me out of my world and made me feel like my environment wasn't something I could interact with but instead some kind of movie with a soundtrack playing in the background. As I shoveled and shoveled and the snow fell and fell I became more sure that this was true. I finished up the driveway and went to do the walkway only

to see that the driveway was covered once again when I returned. That I had made no change in the world.

I moved from the driveway to the side of the house, then back to the driveway, then to the walkway. After doing the sidewalk for a little while, those flashing lights appeared down the street and I retreated to the side of the house leaving piles of unshoveled snow out front.

After what I thought had been maybe an hour, my mom opened the door and yelled for me to come in for dinner.

It was five in the evening.

I had been shoveling for eight hours straight.

When I paused to take in this information, my senses came back in full gear—the movie was over, and I no longer was some fictional character who never got tired. My back and legs ached after lifting those piles of wet and heavy snow. I could finally hear the music correctly. Elton John was singing “Tiny Dancer.” My hands were red all over with a little bit of blue on my fingertips. I never wore gloves even though Dad always said I would get frostbite. When I reached to wipe my nose with the back of my hand, I couldn’t feel anything. All the numbness I had been feeling mentally was manifesting itself in my body physically.

After going inside and hiding my hands from my parents, I ran them under some warm water in the bathroom which made them sting painfully but got rid of the blue. My cheeks had gone red and my hair was molded to my head after wearing my pom-pom hat from hockey for so long. I hadn’t realized how heavy I had begun breathing and had to sit on the toilet for a few moments and get my heartbeat to slow down before going out to eat.

I wondered if maybe I had OblivionLand wrong. Maybe it isn’t a big amusement park with rollercoasters that go too slow or Ferris wheels that are surrounded by fog or a Dragon

Coaster that doesn't work. What if it's shoveling outside for so long that you forget to go inside for eight hours and forget that you are a part of the world and forget to listen to every song that came on before "Tiny Dancer" and forget to wear gloves? But on top of all that, what if in OblivionLand my mom isn't there to call you inside? To remember you're out in the freezing cold even though you have forgotten.

\* \* \*

After months of Dad being sick and months of me sleeping three hours a week, the PICC line finally came out and the visiting nurses finally stopped coming by. Dad went back to delivering packages for FedEx without any help and the house went back to being empty after school. The world kept moving and the snowflakes began falling again the next winter. Snowplows drove by the house and Dad never paid them much attention, but I always did to make sure that they never got too close to him. Even now, my heart still freezes when I see the orange and yellow flashing lights passing along through the window. It's been six years since I last saw the SnowPlow Monster, but when Dad shovels the snow on the sidewalk each winter, I can't help but have a flashback to the

*Wham!*

And to the snowflakes that didn't care,  
to the cold doorknob,  
to staying awake while my parents snored beside me,  
to Dad disappearing behind that giant pile of snow.

I can live with knowing that one day Dad will be gone. That I'll have to go visit a cemetery to talk to him instead of the house. That I'll one day cry as I feel his name etched into the stone. That I'll feel guilty and sad if I can't make it to check on the flowers at his grave for a

while. I can live with that, and be sad with that, but ultimately be okay with that. It's the fear of one day not feeling guilty or sad about it that scares me. That I will go to his grave one day and it will feel like a chore. That it will fit into my schedule and become part of the monotonous drab that fills every other Tuesday. That I'll get old and have kids of my own who I know he'll adore and tell so many of his stories to but that I won't teach my children enough about the power of storytelling to get them to pass these stories on to the generation after.

That I'll be the one to send Dad to OblivionLand.

\* \* \*

When I wonder about what the future might hold for me and Dad, I try to think about what parts of him I will carry on forever. At first, it's sad and difficult because I struggle to remember all the stories Dad has told me and every moment of my life with him. I worry that if I am forgetting stuff now while he's still here, then how much will I forget once he's gone?

As this anxiety swells in my head, I become sure that I am going to be the reason Dad goes to OblivionLand. That is until I see a stereo on the entertainment center by the window. When I look at it, I can walk down the winding road of memories about Dad that are linked to that stereo. He always sticks it in the window facing the backyard while he's outside raking leaves or working on the pool. I can picture him dancing along to Elvis with his arms in the air to make me forget how much I hate raking leaves. I think about painting the pool with him while The Eagle's "Hotel California" plays in the background. He tells me stories while we sit drinking water with our feet dangling over the edge of the empty pool. When I tell him about making the dean's list, he tells me how he started a snowball fight in his mechanics class once. I remember him peacefully and mindlessly humming along to Lynyrd Skynyrd as the sun burned the back of his neck. I don't think I've ever been in a car with him without listening to at least one Lynyrd

Skynyrd song playing during the ride. After years of listening while Dad drummed along on the steering wheel, I've learned all the lyrics to their hits. And all these memories come from looking at one stereo on a shelf.

As I look around the room more and more, the fear starts to fade away because I keep remembering. So many things bring up so many memories—trying to install the air conditioners while the dog keeps stealing pieces, going to Fenway Park and eating sausages with onions, peppers, and mustard on Yawkey Way, playing card games with all his friends, throwing spare coins in the Cool-Whip container he keeps his quarters in for gambling, assembling the dining table chairs and screwing the legs on backward, and on and on.

I don't know what will happen in the end, but I do know that when good people go away, we do everything we can to hold on to them. We play some Lynyrd Skynyrd here and there and dance to Elvis once in a while. We rake leaves while we hum to the radio and imagine how crazy a classroom must be when the students erupt in an indoor snowball fight.

I may not be able to control if the SnowPlow Monster may take Dad away one day, but I know that writing things like this will keep him safe from OblivionLand. You can't stop the *wham!* from happening, and you can't stop the snowflakes from falling, but you can call people in from the blizzard and tell them to grab some dinner and take a break from shoveling. If I can tell his stories and write them down so they can live on paper for the rest of forever, then I can ensure that he will never be forgotten after he's gone, after I'm gone, after my kids are gone, and on and on.

It's important to remember those you love, but there's nothing more comforting than knowing that person will always be a part of people's lives. Stories are more than just stories.

They are how you escape OblivionLand. If you want to be remembered forever, you write. If you want to keep someone around forever, you tell their story.

## Before Check Out

One of the nails jabs into a half-gallon of two-percent milk. The drops of liquid land on the metal shelf and splatter out, reaching the sides of the pressure cooker bomb leaving little white speckles against the black metal. The spiky dark incendiary wrapped in nails hides behind the sea of pure white milk jugs tucked beneath the shelf above.

Someone walks by and reaches out for one of the cartons. They turn the half-gallon around in their hands searching for an expiration date before putting it back down and reaching further back for a newer jug. The chill of the refrigeration eats at their fingertips as they reach around the handle to pull out the milk—their wrist just barely safe from grazing a protruding nail. After checking the date on the carton, they squeeze the milk into their cart between a box of crackers and some soup cans. Then they rest their forearms against the cart handle and scoot away while mindlessly bobbing their head to the soft rock playing over the grocery store's speaker system.

\* \* \*

It's my kid's birthday today. Fourteen years ago, I stood in the hospital next to my wife and couldn't take my eyes off my little girl. She was so tiny and was crying and all. Now that same baby doesn't even want to look at me. I remember holding her little head the day she was born, making promises I swore I would keep and so far pretty much haven't. Now, I'm holding an onion in the same hand while standing in the produce aisle. My palm is sweating so much it might slip from my grasp. If I mess up this birthday dinner it might be my daughter's last straw with me—there may be a point of no return here. My breathing is picking up and my throat burns. My face is twitching and I need to relax before this gets any worse. I count the onions to get my mind straight and take a deep breath.

Three days ago, she had her big talent show and I knew it was that day and time. I was in the parking lot. I *was* there. I just couldn't go in. Jess and I had just gotten into it real bad the night before and I walked out, slept in my car for the night. It wasn't the first time and it probably won't be the last, but my little girl was standing right there when I went out the front door. She looked me in the eye, and I said nothing. She heard me call Jess "crazy" and heard Jess call me a "dick" and then she looked at me while I had one foot out the door. I looked at my kid, right in the eyes, and then I was gone. Dumbest thing I could've done, but I did it.

At the talent show I was in the same clothes as the night before since I didn't have a change of clothes in my car, so it's not like I was dressed to even go into the auditorium in front of people. Honestly, I just couldn't be with Jess. I didn't want my little girl to see us sitting in the crowd pissed at each other but pretending we weren't while she was up on stage singing her song—that could've made her choke and forget her words and I couldn't do that to her. So, I just sat in the parking lot and waited until it was over. Then I went home, she went to her room without saying anything to me, and Jess said plenty for both of them.

I know my daughter wants me gone. I know she would rather Jess and I would split finally instead of trying and failing to keep making things work. At least that's what she told me yesterday before she slammed her bedroom door in my face. I've thought about it a million times, just packing my stuff up in the car and waiting until Jess makes me sleep on the couch one night to take off. I could move out somewhere like Montana or something. Far away. I could do that for my little girl. I could give her everything she wants—which is every father's dream after all—if I just disappeared and never came back. She might cry if I did that, though.

I wish I could just run home right now. One foot after the other as fast as I can until I get to her room where I know she's laying in her bed reading some celebrity memoir because she



loves those and just hug her. I just want to hug my little girl. Just hug her and tell her she's the best part of my world. I want to leave this grocery store and run to her and hold her and rock her and apologize for throwing out her toys when she was six because she wouldn't eat her green beans for the third night in a row and say how sorry I am for telling her mother that I loved her when we were too young.

I can't do that though. I just put the onion in my basket and walk over to the pasta aisle.

\* \* \*

A grandparent walks past the milk section with the little child skipping along next to them. Each tug of their hand sends the bright white curls on the old person's head bouncing. They notice that one of the milk jugs has less liquid in it than the others surrounding it. This bothers them for a moment, but the grandchild's giggle reels them away from the curiosity. They walk to the checkout counter, pay with cash, and leave the building with the little child's hand squeezed tightly in their own.

\* \* \*

Every box of spaghetti is blue. Jess told me it was "the blue box of spaghetti." Now, I'm standing in front of a towering wall of blue boxes of spaghetti with a phone to my ear.

"Hey, you on your way back?" she asks.

"Which pasta is it?"

"You're still there? I only need four things, Mick."

"Which pasta?" I ask.

"The blue one."

"No shit, Jess. They're all blue."

"Knock it off. Pick whichever works. I don't have time for this."

The phone beeps and I imagine being able to throw it down the aisle against the floor, shattering it to pieces. What's she so busy with? She doesn't have the pasta to make dinner with yet. She has time to help me out for once.

I know Jess is at home pretending to not have time to be here with me. She's probably pulling out pot after pot trying to find the perfect sized one for dinner even though she already knows which to pick or asking our daughter questions about school and getting frustrated that she just keeps saying "fine" and "okay." Jess used to love going to the grocery store with me. Every Sunday we took the long way listening to a CD with all the same songs on it and singing along as if we never heard them before. My fingers would be drumming along on the steering wheel while she would tap along on my thigh, unless there was a big guitar solo where she would need both hands to play in the air. When we approached the automatic doors, I would stick my palms out and move them at the same time as they opened, pretending I had superpowers. Then she would wrap her hands around my outstretched arm and we would walk the aisles like that for a while. Sometimes we would even get through the whole store with our arms linked until we realized we hadn't gotten a cart and couldn't pick anything out. She would giggle and go take off for one always saying, "wait here, I'll be right back" and I would wait there and she would be right back.

I'm not doing the spaghetti today. I hate spaghetti. My kid hates spaghetti and it's my kid's birthday. We're not having spaghetti. I swat down a box of rigatoni and let it chip into the onion when it falls into the basket. My little girl used to sit in her highchair and slide the rigatoni noodles on her nubby fingers when we would pretend to be monsters during dinner. The only thing that disrupted our growls and howls are our laughs and Jess. She would stand up with her

hands slapping next to her plate and say “enough” before prying the noodles off my baby’s hands and wiping them clean with a napkin.

I would give anything to be back in that kitchen right now making my little girl snort up pasta sauce in laughter while I try to juggle rigatoni noodles. I’d like to think she’d laugh at that still, but I know it’s hard for her to muster up a smile at home now. She used to smile every morning at least. I would be getting all my stuff together for the day and she would be racing out to the school bus and at the sound of the screen door opening I would call out “have a good day, don’t get into trouble.” Without any hesitation she would yell back “you too” before the door would swing shut and she would be gone.

About a month ago, we were getting ready to leave in the morning again. The middle school starts later than the elementary school so usually I’m gone for work before she gets on the bus. I had the day off though. It was the start to my vacation week. I hadn’t told Jess or my little girl about the week off though, I don’t know why. I just didn’t. They just knew I had that Monday off. So, when she was walking out the door into the morning fog and I heard the screen door creak open, I let my instincts take charge.

“Have a good day,” I called from the other room, “don’t get into trouble.”

There was a long pause. At least three seconds. She stood there in the doorway. I think she wanted to say her line back. She couldn’t have forgotten. It was our thing every single morning for six years. She still had it in her, I know she did. She could still say it, it was just a matter of if she would.

Then the screen door clanged shut and she was gone without a word. The rest of the week I pretended to go in to work in the mornings before she left for school just so I wouldn’t have to try again.

\* \* \*

The employee carries three half-gallon cartons of milk towards the hidden bomb. They should be yanking all the jugs forward and sliding the new ones in the back, but instead they take a quick look over their shoulders and squish them into the front row. Noticing the half empty carton among the sea of full milks, the employee drops their head and mouths a few expletives. They yank the jug from the shelf and walk away trying to cover the hole the milk is leaking out of. The metal of the bomb clangs against the steel shelf and little rings of loosened nails twitter along after it, but the employee is already stomping off to the back room and doesn't hear.

\* \* \*

Jess said she needed four things. Onion, pasta, milk, . . . and something. I should have listened to her better. She told me a million times. Onion, pasta, milk, . . . and the other thing. What was the other thing? I should have listened, I should have not started a fight over the pasta, I should have rolled over and put my arm around her last night when we went to bed with our backs to each other, I should have opened the door again after our daughters slammed it instead of walking away pretending I couldn't hear her crying, I should have, I should have, I should have.

I take a deep breath in, the smell of yogurt and cheese and milk waft through the air. My little girl used to love string cheese; I should get her some. Maybe she still likes it. No. That's stupid. String cheese isn't gonna fix everything. Neither is walking home with a bag filled with the strawberry Go-Gurt she used to run through the house with all the time. She would race around with the thin plastic tube dangling in between her teeth so it would swing all around while I chased her and tried to clean any stray yogurt that splattered onto the ground. I leave those things behind me and stand in front of the wall of milk jugs.

I reach my hand to the back where all the newer jugs of milk always are. My hand navigates around the handle of a half-gallon of two-percent and I pull the carton out. A sharp cut streaks along the back of my hand and I drop the jug. Right below my knuckles a long scratch burns and bleeds. My skin starts to pulse as if a heart lays underneath the cut. It must have been a bent piece of shelf. Bending down, I look towards the back of the shelf but can only see the two milk jugs I knocked over. I rip one of the older cartons from the front out of its spot and drop it into the basket. It doesn't matter if I get a newer one as long as I make it home with a jug of milk. No matter what Jess is gonna be mad because I forget whatever that last thing is.

I turn my back to the milk section, the dropped jug still on the ground by my feet and my hand still bleeding and burning. The section of the aisle right in front of me is covered in birthday candles and a ring of heat grows around my temples. There's a green 6, a couple of red 2s, and an entire row of blue 8s, but my hand wraps around a pink 1 and 4 that were hanging next to each other. That's right. It was onion, pasta, milk, and candles. I did it. I got everything we needed.

I feel accomplished, but empty. My legs feel lifeless, and I worry if I look down I would see my lower half made of wood instead of flesh and bone. I rub my hand against my chest, sure that I would feel a big gaping hole right in the middle but there is nothing missing.

I'm so sick of this empty feeling. I'm so sick of wishing and "I should have"-ing and "I just want"-ing. There's no reason for me to force myself into suffering and to force all the people around me into suffering. String cheese and Go-Gurt won't fix everything, but maybe bringing them home will get a smile from my little girl as she remembers running through the house with me. Maybe she won't say "you too" back when I call out for her to "have a good day and don't get into trouble" every morning, but she'll know I want her to be happy. She might even think

about playing rigatoni monster while on the bus to school in the morning. Going on another grocery store trip won't reverse years of backs to each other and name-calling and fights and walk-outs, but it could remind Jess that I love when she holds my arm.

I'm never walking out again. I'm never missing another talent show or leaving my little girl to cry on the other side of the door. No more yelling, no more crying, no more wishing. I'm gonna go to the check out, get in my car, listen to our CD, and go home to my girls. I'll walk through the door singing and dancing to the songs that we used to listen to every Sunday. Maybe I'll be met with annoyance and anger, or maybe one of us will say those three words that we never do. And maybe someone will say "you too" again.

\* \* \*

The jugs burst as the bomb goes off. The man standing by the candles looking to the check-out lines gets blasted by the eruption of milk. The nails that had been wrapped around the bomb shoot out into the air. Many find their home in his legs, back, arms, and skull. He feels each individual nail tear into him. One stabs right into his spine, paralyzing him from the waist down. Before he can even collapse to the ground, the explosion burns into his back and he is sent flying into the shelving unit filled with birthday candles. Everything is launched forward, away from the dairy section that has now been obliterated. The man's body lays amongst a sea of debris and rubble.

He is given a funeral a week and a half later. The mortician had to pry each nail out of the body and stitch up every hole they left. His wife says goodbye to him by squeezing his bicep the way she used to when they would walk these aisles as young newlyweds. His daughter, with her head down unable to look at his face, whispered to him the words he wished she would have said to him every day, "I love you too."

## Passing On

A tiny bit of wind managed to cut its way through the cracks in the car. Even with the heat blasting on my face, little goosebumps crawled up the back of my neck radiating from the cold breeze brushing up against my ankle. A faint whistle rang through the car.

I listed off major after major as my dad listened from the driver's seat.

"Creative writing, film, secondary education, criminal justice, geology, history, psychology, theater."

I didn't know which college I was going to go to yet, but I knew I wanted to do one of those things. Maybe two if I had the—

"Not art?" Dad asked.

"What?"

"I don't know. You just were always doing all those doodles and drawings and stuff. I just always thought you were gonna do something with your art."

It's possible that I have the one father in the world who would be disappointed that his child doesn't want to be an artist. I never realized how many times he would linger around the room while I had my sketchbook out, but thinking back there aren't many moments where I had a colored pencil in hand without Dad nearby.

Sitting in the whistling car with him, I thought back to a story my nana had told me about my great grandfather Patrick Joe. She had to strike a deal with him where she couldn't get in any trouble and had to keep good grades in nursing school, otherwise, he wouldn't pay her tuition and she would have to leave. He wanted her to become a teacher, but she worked in hospitals until the age of seventy-five when she retired—long after Patrick Joe had passed.

“You’ll be good at all those things, too,” Dad said interrupting the whistling car, “I just always saw that being the thing you would take into the world.”

\* \* \*

The two dogs catch a glimpse of the cat and take off after her. They rampage through the kitchen and through the legs of all the family members. Nana’s eightieth birthday decorations are knocked to the floor from the shaking and people groan as they bend down to pick them up. The dogs scuttle through the hallway while loud voices echo after calling for them to stop. They slam into the door as they make the sharp turn into the living room, their paws sliding over the hardwood floor. A long tail swings and smacks against a stack of photos sitting on the floor toppling them over.

I reach down and grab handfuls of the fallen pictures. Sitting back up next to Nana, I hand her photo after photo for her to consider putting out for the party. She takes a long look at each one before saying “oh no, no, no” and dropping them into the discard pile. She doesn’t like pictures of herself, and I’m sure if it was up to her she would rather have pictures of us grandchildren all around the house for the partygoers to look at. I make sure to sneak a couple of my favorites into the “yes” pile while Nana turns around to pull more stacks out of the bins to make sure she can’t veto them.

Many of the photos we are wading through are familiar favorites: my cousin Zach and I at seven-years-old flipped upside-down doing headstands on the family room couch with our Scooby-Doo shirts falling down exposing our stomachs, my siblings and I covered in flour while making pie dough from scratch in the kitchen before Thanksgiving, my grandfather’s high school picture where he looks like a young Dick Van Dyke.



Among the sea of familiar photos, I pull out one that I have never seen before. I can't tell if it is meant to be sepia or if the black and white print has yellowed over time. It feels like my thumb is running over tiny mountains because of how crinkled it is and the edges have a soft fuzz along them. In front of a brick building standing next to a white door stands a little girl about five-years-old. She wears a light dress with flowers running along the hem and her backpack straps hanging on her tiny shoulders. A man stands to her side gripping her small hand. Even though he is short enough so the little girl almost reaches waist height, he comes across as a toweringly tall man. He wears a long coat that reaches down to his knees with his free hand shoved in the pocket. His dark brimmed hat casts a shadow on his face so that only his chin could be seen. I can't make much of the girl's face either because of the decades of fading the photo has endured.

Aunty Mo walks in and sees the picture over my shoulder.

"Do you know who that is?" she asks.

I shake my head.

"That's Nana," she says, "I think in the forties."

"And my father," Nana adds.

Every muscle in my face loses its tension instantly and the photo gains about five pounds in my hands. It's the first time I have ever seen my great-grandfather, Patrick Joe. His shadowed face feels less like an accident now and more like an intentional attempt at hiding his face. This is the man who spread violence across Ireland with the Irish Republican Army. The stories I've heard span from blowing up statues to burning down Protestant churches and getting our family name cursed by a priest. I'm sure there are even more stories that I have never and will never

hear about him—ones that he probably hid away because he wanted them to slip into the graves of history to be buried forever.

I can only imagine the simultaneous guilt and pride he felt when the photo was taken. He valued education above almost all else and his one little girl was about to be off to what seems to be her first day of school. At the same time, he's hiding everything he used to be. His memories of fighting and war and escaping Ireland as a wanted man to start a family in America were a burden he and only he wanted to live with. He would be distraught knowing that his daughter learned about many of these stories and passed them on to her children and grandchildren.

"I didn't know he did any of that stuff until after he died," she would say, "blowing up statues, bridges, burning churches . . . I can't even picture him hurting a fly. He never even raised his voice at anyone. He was just a nice man. That's how I remember him."

\* \* \*

My head pounded and a bead of sweat dripped down my temple, inching further with each throb. The summer heat felt like it was infecting my body and turning my legs into jelly. We were only a few steps from the car, but I wasn't sure I could listen to the rattling shopping cart wheels chipping against the parking lot pavement for much longer. I was carrying a paper bag and could feel the cold popsicles melting into my hand while a can pressed into my ribcage.

Dad pushed the cart while humming along to an Eagles song that was playing on the radio before we went into the grocery store. His humming had been the soundtrack of my family life, but on that day I couldn't help but wince at the noise as it reverberated against my skull.

The cashier was one of the boys I recognized from my brother's Little League team pictures. He was about sixteen-years-old now with a face as equally covered with acne as it was with freckles. Dad went back and forth with him for much longer than it took the boy to scan and

bag all our groceries. They chummed on about old memories about league championship games and team dinners while I waited to the side with a hand massaging my pounding forehead. Only after I quietly groaned and rolled my eyes a few times did Dad understand my cues and parted ways with the cashier.

While packing the groceries in the car, Dad started telling me about how talented the boy used to be at second base and how nice his father was. I wasn't paying much attention to him until we got into the air-conditioned car and my headache finally began to cease. With the cool air circulating, I could make out the tunes of "Bad Company" coming from the speakers. Dad typically hums along to this song, but instead he was talking and I hadn't been listening. I hadn't been listening to him much in a long while by that day, but I decided to try doing it more.

"I know you want to be important," he said, "and it's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice."

That was my senior yearbook quote when I graduated from high school—a record of something he passed on to me that I hope will carry me into adulthood with grace and humility.

\* \* \*

One thousand years from now, just about everyone walking around on this planet will be forgotten—even our families will only remember our names as some letters on a family tree. Patrick Joe will be lost to history where he will meet all the stories he never told. Dad hopefully will be remembered for a long time as someone who always went the extra mile for everyone, but a long time still has an end.

There's a freedom in knowing that all we do will likely be left in a void. The mentality that comes along with that understanding makes taking risks and embarrassing yourself seem like one tiny grain of sand in the world's largest beach. For the vast majority of people, we can

go about the world doing great things and they won't matter. We can go about doing insignificant things and those won't matter either in the long run. We can get a degree from the best university and spend our lives doing good deeds for everyone we come across or we can jump into a van and live out our remaining years alone in a desert. History remembers most of us the same in the sense that it won't remember us at all.

A few of us sneak through the cracks though—a few get remembered for eternity because of what they gave to the world. These people were the same as those who don't get visited at their gravesites anymore. They ate food they thought was bad but pretended it was good to make their friend feel better. They felt that tingling sensations in their stomachs when they realized they were falling in love. They got frustrated. They got sad. They screamed. They wanted what all of us do—to be remembered. The only difference between them and most of us is that they got what they wanted.

I want to be remembered. I want my great-great-grandchildren to be asked if they are related to me when their last name is called out. I want to be important and loved and for my death to send the world into fits of toasts in my honor. If humanity is one long epic poem, most people get to throw in a letter. Some are lucky enough to get a word in. The best of us contribute a whole line. Well, I want a stanza. I want my life to be impactful, poetic, and impossible to miss while reading through.

How do I want to be remembered? I don't know entirely. Maybe writing will work out and my passages will be included in future history books. Maybe I'll direct one of the greatest movies of all time and change cinematic history. Maybe I'll create the most influential television show ever and have my work watched in reruns for centuries. Maybe I'll have a drawing end up being put in a museum forever.

More than anything though, I want my stanza to say that I was a nice person. That I wasn't a nice *important* person but that I was an important *nice* person. I want to be remembered the same way as my dad does—as a person who left everyone a little happier than they were before. It's scary to think that my legacy might change after I die like how Patrick Joe's did when his daughter found out about his violent past. It's downright terrifying to think that everything everyone knows about me could flip like a switch and I wouldn't be able to do anything about it because I'll be six feet under.

That's okay. I can only do my best. I just need to remember what was passed on to me and keep my eyes on the future that will come one thousand years from now—the future I want to be a part of in the nicest way possible.

## Wine Day Without Mr. Alva

When Vovo passed away, my brother Tony took over her and Vou Frank's old house across the street from where the Alva's used to live. Now on Wine Day my kids race through the same yard I did when I was their age. My youngest, Vinny, is turning around one of my old matchbox cars in his hands while sitting in the same giant green recliner that I used to sit in. Watching him, I can't believe how small he seems and can't imagine that I must have looked the same to my dad when I was little. His body looks so tiny and breakable surrounded by all those puffy cushions and I have an instinctual urge to pick him up and hold him tight against my chest and never let anything hurt him. I know I can't do that though. I have to let him be his own boy and eventually grow up to be his own man.

I leave the living room and weave through the swarms of little children screaming and racing through the kitchen. Their Uncle Tony is calling for everyone to quiet down and have all the kids meet in the kitchen to begin the festivities. I open the front door and feel smacked by the heavy late-summer air. Behind me, all the children, including Vinny, have clustered in front of Tony who is trying to be animated with his Wine Day lecture about pulling the grapes off the vine. Ahead of me on the front lawn, my dad stands there alone. His hands rest in his pockets and he keeps his thin shoulders slumped forward. His thick white hair is starting to slick back from all the sweat and his white polo is beginning to get see-through. He stares off at the house across the street, mourning for his old friend—Mr. Alva.

\* \* \*

On August 23rd, 1975, my family packed ourselves into our brown and cream Buick Estate so Dad could drive us the thirty minutes to Vou Frank and Vovo's house in Peabody for Wine Day. It was that awful time of year where the mornings were a little cold but once you got wherever

you were going there would be a sweat stain on the back of your shirt. Dad had put the windows down and Mom's long blonde hair was flying all over the place. For the longest time, she tried to get it to stay put but gave up when she heard The Beach Boys on the radio and let herself relax and listen to Dad's off-key singing and off-beat drumming on the steering wheel. Even at six years old, I recognized how much love they had between them and how much they loved us kids. I couldn't wait to grow up and be like Dad—when I could let my son sit on the sink and watch me shave away the beard that grew around my big bushy mustache like how he lets me every morning.

The backseat was filled with excitement. My older brother Tony was teaching me how to play the license plate game. Wine Day was one of the few occasions when he transformed from the “too cool for you” twelve-year-old into the model big brother, but that didn't mean he didn't flick the back of my neck every time he spotted his next plate. I was still looking for Alabama when Tony flicked my already burning neck to tell me he was starting to look for Connecticut. I know now that he had been cheating the whole time, but back then I thought he was just good at the game the way every big brother seemed to be better at everything.

I grabbed the leather-coated cushions of the front seats and pulled my body forward so that I was in between Mom and Dad. Her hair flew in my face while I asked Dad my question.

“How much longer?” I said.

“Sit back, bud. Patience makes a good man.”

He always said that. By six, I had learned that a good man was made of patience, kindness, true love, and honesty. Even now when I'm in my fifties he likes to remind me of the concoction of manhood.

I had given up on looking for plates by the time we pulled into my grandparent's neighborhood. We drove past the block where all the Brazilian kids lived, and then past the Greek kid's section, and then finally turned the left down Aberdeen Street to the place where we belonged—the Portuguese block. The pastel and white triple-decker houses lined the thin street. Many had the Portuguese flag flying next to their front doors or plaques in their small gardens with the coat of arms on them. We were a very proud community. Many of us, like Mom and Dad, had come from Europe to America and found a home in the neighborhood with others who spoke the language of the mainland and would walk a few blocks down to the Portuguese church with you on Sunday mornings.

Wine Day had become a staple of the community. Vou Frank used to say he had been the brains behind the tradition, but every year Vovo would lean over to me and whisper that she was the one who brought it up to all the ladies in her crocheting group. Every year, right before the kids all went back to school, every house on the block would get a case of grapes from the grocery store delivered to their doorsteps. Then, the adults would send the children out to the cramped backyards to pick as many grapes from the grapevines as possible. The best part was after this when all the kids would come racing inside and dump all of the bitter backyard grapes into these big buckets and take turns mashing them with the sweet grocery store grapes. When the kids were all finished making the grape juice, the adults would take over and turn it into wine while we all played in the street with every other kid on Aberdeen who also had their hands turned purple from the day's work. It was the best way to end every summer. It still is now when I get to watch my kids pick the grapes off their Uncle Tony's grapevines.



Like every other year, my family was the first to pull up to Vou Frank and Vovo's on Wine Day in 1975 at six in the morning. A few other families a little way down the street were also starting to show up, but in the Silva clan we were always the earliest.

Vovo came racing out of the house towards our car with a big smile and her arms open wide. Dad went right up to her and gave her thin, lanky body a squeeze.

"Hi, Mom. Como vai?"

"So good. Happy Wine Day!"

She threw her arms up in the air with her usual bright enthusiasm before making her way to Mom. Vou Frank made his way out of the house and over to Dad and placed an arm around his shoulders. He had his other hand pressed against his own lower back.

"You alright, old man?" Dad asked him.

Vou Frank pulled in a big breath and said, "yeah. You know they make those crates heavier every year."

"You should have waited for me. I would have—"

"No, no Inacio." He waved his finger at Dad. "I'm not some dying man. You and I have the same aches."

Dad wanted to say more, but we all knew there was no fighting with Vou Frank when it came to him doing things on his own. He valued his independence almost as much as he valued his family.

Vovo had made her way to me and cupped my cheeks.

"How is my little Miguel today?" she asked.

"Happy!" I shouted

"And full of energy, too. Let's get inside."

She grabbed mine and Tony's hands and we began to make our way to the steps of the front door. As we passed Dad and Vou Frank, I heard more of their conversation.

"You think Mr. Alva needs help with his? He usually gets it inside right away."

"I'm sure he's fine," Vou Frank said. "Probably just overslept. His family gets here a little later anyway."

By seven in the morning, every Silva relative was crammed into the tiny house and Aberdeen Street was buzzing with families. Almost every house had cars lined along the sidewalk or smushed in the driveway—Mr. Alva's house and a few others were still quiet and wouldn't have family showing up for another few minutes.

Vovo stood up on a chair and clacked two wooden spoons against each other. Everyone, even the smallest children, stopped and listened to the family matriarch.

"Okay. Okay. Little ones, all of you, get outside to the grapevines and get to picking."

Tony opened the front door and led the race to the backyard. Although we had some older cousins, he was twelve and considered to be the oldest younger kid, so we all listened to him. I, on the other hand, was bringing up the rear. The group began curving around to the side of the house and pushing through the gate. I had turned a bit and caught a glimpse of Mr. Alva's house across the street. It was almost identical to Vou Frank and Vovo's but instead of being white it was a pale blue. His front door usually has a hanging of the Galo de Barcelos hanging from it, but the pendent wasn't there.

It was one of my favorite things as a child. The big black metal rooster caught the sun right where it had hearts on its wings and fluffy tail. The hearts were the same bright red as the comb on top of the bird's head. Vou Frank used to love telling me the story about the traveling Spaniard and how the roasted chicken came to life in front of the judge to prove the man's

innocence. I loved that door ornament and now keep a statue of the Galo de Barcelos in my kitchen. The perfect symbol of trust and honor and a bringer of good fortune. That day though, it was gone from the door and was no longer protecting Mr. Alva's home.

I walked down towards the sidewalk trying to get a closer look. It was possible that maybe the metal hanging had blown off and fallen into the yard somewhere if there was some wind the night before. The crate of sweet grocery store grapes still sat untouched in front of his empty door giving the illusion that nothing was wrong. I had gone about three steps before a navy-blue Ford pulled up across the street. Mr. Alva's daughter Melina was the first to show up out of their family. She was the same height as Mom but had shorter brown hair that she kept bouncy and full.

When she saw me staring from the yard, she waved and gave a big shining smile. In a polite but shy manner, I waved back and watched her walk towards the crate.

"Mikey, get back here. Come on." I heard Tony yell from the backyard.

I gave one last look to the Alva home before racing off to be with the other kids at the grapevine. Something felt very off about this Wine Day and Mr. Alva's Galos de Barcelos pendant.

I found my spot among the group circling the grapevine. I was trying to find any purple underneath the big green leaves but struggled because my mind was fixated on the rooster and the crate. Tony was next to me and had the bottom of his shirt curled up so he could use it to hold all his grapes. He looked at my empty shirt and then to his own which was overflowing with grapes. Since he was the tallest, he could pick from higher on the vine and get grapes that no one else could even see. He leaned down and grabbed the bottom of my shirt to pull it up like his and placed six of the ones he had picked in my shirt pouch.

“Don’t drop ‘em. It’s hard when you’re the shortest,” he said.

I nodded and started looking all over. Every once in a while, Tony would drop an extra grape or two in my shirt. About three minutes had gone by when the happy energy of Wine Day was slashed by an ear-piercing scream coming from across the street. Every kid paused and turned towards the side of the house. Tony balled up his shirt so none of his grapes would fall before jogging over to the gate. Everyone else followed and we were soon standing in the front yard. I was standing next to Tony and using both arms to cup my small collection of grapes. The grown-ups had all come running out of the house. Vovo made her way across the street while the others stood with their children. Mom stood next to Tony and wrapped her arm around his shoulders. She whispered something to him that I couldn’t make out fully but could hear her say “...—brother.” He nodded but his eyes stayed fixed forward on the Alva’s house. Dad was behind me with his beefy hands squeezing my shoulders.

It had probably been only a few moments of everyone watching from the yard while Vovo and the other neighborhood matriarchs met in front of Mr. Alva’s. Melina came out from the front door quietly. The metal rooster wasn’t there to clang against the door whenever it opened like it always was before.

Melina’s face was bright red and looked like it could burn you. She had her arms crossed across her body hugging herself. She was crying and groaning as she stumbled her way past the unmoved crate of grapes and stood crying for a moment. She pressed her hand up against her face to try and stifle her wails, but it didn’t work.

Vovo slowly made her way over to the woman and offered Melina her hand. She led her over to a stump in the yard and sat her down. The women of the neighborhood wrapped around

Melina while Vovo crouched in front. Every resident of Aberdeen was now in the street watching the events slowly unfolding on Mr. Alva's front lawn.

Vovo listened to Melina talk and encouraged her to keep it down so the whole block wouldn't know her business as it was happening. None of us could make out what she was saying in the moments she did get loud anyway. Her words came out choked and in shrieks that sounded more like the cry of a banshee than of a woman. Vovo pointed to Mrs. Ramiro and sent her running to her home next door. Then, she called over to us.

"Frank! Get over here."

Vou Frank calmly walked away from our family and over to the stump. Vovo stood up and held him by his arm. They spoke very briefly before she held the back of her hand to her mouth and tried to keep tears back. Vou Frank gave her a tight hug, pulled her back, said something, kissed her cheek, and then went up to the open front door of the Alva home. I did ask him a while later what he said to Vovo that day, but all he said in reply was "some words men are meant to take to the grave, Mike." And he did just that with them.

Before entering the front door, Vou Frank took his right hand and pressed his fingertips to his forehead, then the middle of his chest, then his left shoulder, then right to make the sign of the cross. He stepped past the threshold and disappeared down the hall towards the basement. Police cruisers were now making their way through the swarms of people and the dozens of cars that had filled up the street. Vou Frank had returned to the entryway and waved for the police officers to follow him inside. He looked deflated and unfocused. A few weeks later, he had said that it was one of the worst moments of his life.

Dad turned Tony and me away from the scene and looked to Mom.

"We should go inside. All of us," he said.

Mom nodded and patted Tony on the chest before turning him with her to go back into the kitchen. Dad looked at the rest of the Silva family littered in the front yard.

“Let’s go. Inside. Come on.”

Everyone followed without question. The adults had no idea what might be pulled out of the house and figured it would be better if the kids didn’t have to see. Before we went inside, I turned back to look at Mr. Alva’s house.

I finally saw the Galo de Barcelos shining in the light. It was laying in the bushes next to the front door upside down. The red hearts were still catching the sunlight, but it felt so much less spectacular now that I could see that it had flung off the door from someone opening it too fast.

It was sad to see something so important to my family just thrown in the bushes. I didn’t fully understand the importance of it at the time, but I knew it didn’t belong there. My stomach felt like it had sunk to my toes and my throat was tight. If I had something to say, I don’t think I would’ve been able to say it.

Once the police and Melina left, everyone in the neighborhood filed out in their cars and began to go home. It was the shortest Wine Day in the history of Aberdeen Street with all visitors being gone by ten in the morning. Dad, Mom, Tony, and I were the last of the Silva’s to leave and some of the last to leave the neighborhood. They sent Tony and I out to the car while they talked to Vou Frank and Vovo. I tried my best to read their lips but quickly figured out that I didn’t know how to do that very well. It was clear that something was really wrong though. Vovo wasn’t being her bubbly outgoing self and Vou Frank looked more shaken and nervous than I’d ever seen him. I turned to Tony and saw him staring out the window at the Alva’s house. It took me a few seconds to figure out what I wanted to ask him.

“Is Mr. Alva gonna be okay?” I said.

He took in a slow breath before saying back, “I don’t think so.”

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know.”

“But the—”

“Mike. Just shut up for a while.”

We sat in silence until Mom and Dad got in the car. They both turned around to face us as soon as they shut the door. The afternoon sun shone through the windshield behind them creating a beautiful halo around their heads. My perfect parents—they could do no wrong in my eyes.

“Boys, you okay?” Mom asked.

We both nodded quietly.

Mom tucked a loose string of blonde hair behind her ear. “Next year Wine Day will be longer like usual.”

“Why do we have to leave early?” I asked.

Mom looked over at Dad. He was lightly biting his bottom lip.

“Well,” he said, “Vou Frank said he just wasn’t feeling too great. He thinks he’s getting a cold and didn’t want to get anyone else sick.”

“But what about Mr. Alva?” I said.

“He’s fine. Don’t worry Mikey.”

Dad looked over at Tony. My brother pursed his lips together before looking at the ground then out the window again at the house across the street.

“Why were the police here then?”

Dad was starting to look frustrated. “They were just helping him, Mike. We’ll talk about it later.”

“But I think something went wrong because the roos—”

“Micheal,” Dad said in the firm voice he rarely ever used, “no more. Everything’s fine.”

He turned away and started the car. Mom reached her hand out and squeezed my knee before turning around as well. Tony was still looking out the window with all the muscles in his face tensed. We didn’t play the license plate game going home and Dad and I never talked later about Mr. Alva. I knew everything was not fine, but I went to bed that night trusting that Dad would never lie to me.

\* \* \*

Today, forty-six years later, my dad stands on the front lawn looking across the street at that pale blue house. Since 1975, I’ve learned snippets of information at a time about what happened that day. Mr. Alva had passed away and his body was taken by the undertaker while we were in the house after my dad had everyone go inside. Melina was the first one to find her father in the basement after his passing, but she didn’t find him collapsed from a heart attack or stroke or anything. He had been stabbed by his son after an argument about money. It happened the night before at a very late hour—or at least later than eight o’clock when Vovo and Vou Frank went to bed. His son had barged into Mr. Alva’s home sending the Galo de Barcelos flying into the bushes and began yelling before plunging a kitchen knife into his father’s torso twice. Everything was not fine that night.

My dad pulls in a deep breath of the stale summer air and rolls his shoulders back. Looking at him now, I can see how old he is. I want to protect him the same way he tried to protect me, but I also have too much respect for him to lie the way he did—so directly and



intentionally without a moment of remorse or concern as to whether he was making the right decision.

My son Vinny comes barreling out the door with all the other children following behind him. He bounds halfway through the yard before stopping and jogging over to his grandfather. With a big smile on his face, he approaches my dad.

“Vou Cio, come pick grapes with us,” he says, “I’m gonna pick more than all of the other kids combined.”

My dad smiles at him and chuckles. “Oh, is that so?”

“Yes, sir.” My boy’s smile is so perfectly big that I can’t keep a grin suppressed.

“You shouldn’t exaggerate, Vincenzo.” My dad is beaming at him with the pride and love that he saves for when he is about to teach a good lesson.

“Honesty,” he says, “makes a good man.”

## Driving Alone

I'm wearing a long-sleeve shirt, a heavy sweatshirt, and a jacket but am still freezing while I drive the roads of my hometown on my way to an early-morning hockey practice. The heat in my car only works to defrost the windshield and even that doesn't clear up completely. I've gotten used to driving while sitting forward to keep as much of my body off the cold black leather seats as possible. One hand stays on the wheel while the other warms up under my thigh and they switch when the exposed one starts to go numb. My teeth clatter against each other and my shoulders shiver while I try to focus my groggy eyes on the icy streets. Cold and alone, I listen to the radio playing Bob Seger and the Silverbullet Band.

It feels wrong listening to it without Dad in the car with me. Before I got my license a few months ago, he would be the one to drive me to 5am practices. Even on the days when the temperature was in the negatives, he never looked cold. Layered in his FedEx clothes for work, Dad always had his dark hair and mustache smoothed enough so it seemed like he brushed it. We would have the radio playing his favorite rock and roll station and anytime "Night Moves" or "Against the Wind" came on he'd shout, "you know who this is?" and begin drumming on the steering wheel and singing along. He would always extend every note out longer than it was meant to be and looked like he was having the time of his life while doing it.

"I used to be in a band, you know?" he would say every time.

I knew all about his band. I also knew every other story he would tell on our drives to the rink, but I would listen along as if I had never heard them before.

"All of us cousins were in Vovo's little house getting the grapes from the grapevines out back and making wine and jams all day."

“It would take eight of us to dig out the holes for the fig trees and I was the smallest guy, so I had to climb up to the top while they pushed it over.”

“The door to the mechanics classroom was open and the snow was blowing in so of course we were gonna have a snowball fight. I almost got expelled.”

Now that I have my license, I drive alone to hockey practices and he drives alone to work. I miss his car not just because he has a working heating system but also because it’s too quiet without him next to me. The music feels empty and incomplete without his steering wheel drumming and stretched-out notes.

He’s only a couple of miles away in his own car driving to work. It’s not like he’s gone forever. I was with him this morning. He stood in my bedroom doorway calling for me to wake up. I saw him in his green and red plaid pajama pants that were pulled up too high like they always are and that bright orange polo shirt he wears almost every night to bed even though it has a hole in the armpit. He had on his white tube socks with his beaten-up Adidas sandals for slippers. Just thirty minutes ago he was asking me if I wanted an English muffin before practice even though he knows the answer is always no.

He’s gone now though, and he will be gone forever one day. If I feel this cold and lonely without him now, what will happen when the real thing happens? Will I forget him? Will he drift off into the world where no one remembers you and your gravestone becomes overgrown with moss and mold to the point where your name is unreadable? How can I save Dad? How do I keep him around forever? How do I keep the music from feeling empty, the car from feeling cold, the world from feeling lonely?

*Vovo’s house, grapevines, wine and jams, fig trees, mechanics class, snowball fight.*

He’s still here. He’s in the car with me right now. As long as I remember his stories, I’ll remember him. I’ll remember his love for Bob Seger and his old band. I’ll remember his plaid

pajama pants and bright orange polo shirt. I may forget some things, but I will remember who he was and the stories he gave me.

I'm not shivering anymore and my teeth have stopped clattering. My car feels infinitely warmer.

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