

Words of Wonder

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Rick

The annual beach day reunion with his college friends and their spouses was an event that Rick usually looked forward to, but getting through the event this year was a grind. It was a beautiful August day on Zuma Beach in Malibu and the hot, sunny weather had led people from all over the greater Los Angeles area to Pacific Coast Highway in search of some open sand along the coast. Since Rick and his friends were veterans at establishing beach space on crowded summer days, they knew the best strategy was to send out scouts early in the morning to establish their territory with beach chairs, tents, and canopies. The scouts changed from year to year and enough time had passed since graduation so that everyone had taken at least one turn with early arrival and set up. As the intense sunshine baked the beachgoers, Rick considered where he was in life and his thought process brought in waves of depression.

After taking a break from playing volleyball, Rick stood on the beach with a beer in his hand and thought about how one year earlier, at this same reunion, he'd felt like he was on top of the world. He had been working as an account executive with a major marketing firm in downtown Los Angeles and his wife, Chloe, was established in her career as a prosecutor in the L.A. County District Attorney's Office. Their combined income provided for an abundant lifestyle and they had been talking about starting a family. As the sun threatened to burn his face and chest, Rick remembered having feelings of superiority because most of his friends were not as well advanced in their careers, or as well off financially, as he and Chloe were. Over the course of the next few months he would learn that his solid foundation, which supported his ego and self-esteem, was actually a sandcastle and the rising tide of life was slowly washing it away.

Just prior to Christmas of the previous year, Rick had been notified that he was being let go by his firm. The news that the company was going through whole scale changes, that were being brought on by a sluggish economy, came as a surprise to everyone but those at the top. Most of the junior marketing executives were laid off as a part of restructuring measures. Once the initial shock wore off, Rick realized that he been following an impressive career path and it would likely be a short period of time before he landed something new. Chloe was supportive and she encouraged her husband to be proactive about getting his resume to as many potential employers as possible. It seemed to be a minor bump in the road and they both believed they would be starting a family after this brief delay.

Rick did not want an extended period of unemployment even though they had enough savings to maintain their current lifestyle for at least a year. Chloe made an excellent salary but they had grown accustomed to their two incomes and they did not want to make major adjustments. The first few days after being let go, Rick spent his time tweaking his resume, search for opportunities online, contacting head hunters, and doing everything he could think of to let the world know that the world's greatest account executive was available and ready to roll. After he started to run out of steam, and he'd felt like he'd done all that he could do, Rick became obsessive about checking his phone for text messages, emails, or voicemails from prospective employers. He would occasionally get a bite, but in most cases the positions involved relocating and Chloe's position at the District

Attorney's Office made that impossible. They were also very fond of their home in Santa Clarita and they didn't want to move.

The few interviews that Rick went on locally didn't result in success because he either didn't have the specific experience they were looking for or he would have been starting at an entry level position. During those first few months he'd felt that it was better to wait for the right opportunity rather than accept anything that came along. As a cool wave washed over his feet, Rick wished that he had taken one of those entry level positions when he'd had the opportunity. Anything would have been better than keeping his life in limbo and he would have been able to stay in the game. Now, as his buddies called him back to rotate into the volleyball game, he wondered if he would ever return to marketing, have an office, or be able to stand proud in front of his wife.

The reunion continued along as it typically did but Rick felt an increasing distance from his friends. It was as though he no longer belonged. These were the best friends he'd ever had and now the friendships seemed predicated on one's status in life. They all knew that Rick had been unemployed for seven months but they assumed he had something going on and was working towards a goal; his own marketing firm perhaps. The fact that he was extremely vague when questioned about his prospects led to further speculation that he had some big plans, which were being kept secret for the time being. Only Chloe knew that he had been working as a rideshare driver.

After the first few months of unemployment, Chloe told Rick that he needed to do something or they would have to move. In a worst-case scenario she could support them, but it would mean relocating somewhere with a smaller mortgage and delaying, indefinitely, their plans to have children. Rick knew she was right and he didn't take her comments as insulting, or degrading, because their sense of frustration was shared. The entry level positions were no longer being offered and it was understood that he needed to put a band aid on the problem until a long-term solution could be worked out. His prospects for short-term, stop-the-bleeding employment weren't much better than his chances for immediately stepping back into an account executive position, but after discussing it with Chloe, he decided to sign up with Uber and Lyft and become a rideshare driver. The money wouldn't be great but along with their savings, it would help keep them in their house for at least a few years. It was decided that the baby should wait until the situation was resolved. From Rick's perspective, the best thing about being a rideshare driver was that he wouldn't have to follow a schedule and he could take time for interviews whenever he needed to.

Through the spring and into the summer Rick drove 10-12 hours per day, Monday through Saturday, and he spent his Sundays searching online for employment opportunities. Life had become difficult and exhausting. His neck and shoulders were sore at the end of every driving day and he felt irritable most of the time. His low self-esteem, anger, and entry into depression were having a negative impact on his marriage as well. Chloe tried to be supportive but as her future rolled out in ways she hadn't expected, or wanted, she had a tendency to snap. It was a difficult situation and his feelings of unworthiness led him to dread the possibility of picking up someone he knew in his capacity as a rideshare driver.

Prior to his time as a driver, Rick had been focused on nutrition and exercise so he had always felt healthy and vibrant, but due to all the hours on the road, his feelings of overall well-being suffered. His eating habits fell into a downward spiral as he lacked the incentive to make nutritional smoothies or prepare healthy meals. Fast

food became his cuisine of choice since it was easy to pick up while driving and the more junk food he ate, the more he became addicted to it.

Chloe tried to keep the fruits, veg, and whole grains on their dinner plates but she often worked late and didn't always have time to prepare nutritious meals. Over a period of less than three months, Rick's emotional and physical condition had deteriorated and it was placing a great strain on his body and his marriage. He knew that the only solution would be to get back into his chosen profession as quickly as possible, in whatever capacity would get him in the door. While he spent his Sundays searching for opportunities online, and sending resumes for any positions that were even remotely related to his area of expertise, he drank coffee all day and crashed hard in the late afternoon. Sunday was the one day when they were both home and Chloe wanted their evenings to be romantic, but the caffeine hangover usually led Rick into an even greater sense of despair. He felt doomed, unworthy of love, overweight, and sluggish, so he wasn't in the best frame of mind for romance or long walks with his wife.

As much as Rick disliked working almost twice as many hours, for much less than half the pay of his previous job, the thing that grated on him about being a rideshare driver was the monotony of it. Every day he hoped that he would be able to stay near his home turf of Santa Clarita but at some point, he always ended up taking a rider to Hollywood, downtown L.A., or Santa Monica, and then he would be stuck there for the rest of the day. The traffic was always unbearable and every time he spent twenty minutes taking a passenger on a two-mile ride down Sunset Blvd., for a \$3 payoff, he felt his soul disintegrate a little bit more. But he fought on with the belief that his time would come and he was just riding out a bad stretch. Someday soon he would be hired by a marketing firm, put a tie on, take the rideshare stickers off his car, and continue on with his life. He would resume exercising, eating properly, and be attentive to his wife and future children. It had to happen.

As the sun was setting over the ocean, the college reunion mercifully came to end. After saying their goodbyes, Chloe offered to drive home since her husband had been drinking beer. Rick gratefully accepted. Not because he thought he was over the limit, which he wasn't, but rather because he was sick of driving. To be able to sit back in a car without having to listen to the navigation voice, or trying to fight through traffic, seemed like the height of luxury. During the drive back to Santa Clarita, Chloe said, "You seemed like your usual self around your buddies today. Do you feel as though you've had a boost of enthusiasm and confidence?"

Rick sounded defeated as he replied, "No, I was just trying to fake my way through it and I hoped no one would press me on career plans. I decided that if I could pretend to be self-assured and cocky, they would buy into it and lay off with the questions. It worked but it was exhausting."

Chloe sighed and thought for a moment on how best to respond. She was running out of patience with Rick's defeatist attitude. "I've heard it said that if you act confident, and are in command, even when you're not feeling that way, you will come off as self-assured and good things will happen as a result."

Rick thought her comment was annoying self-help drivel, and it took all his willpower to suppress a sarcastic response, but he also knew she had a point. His attitude was causing a lot of problems and he understood that he had to step up and fight. In that moment, he promised himself that he would change his way of thinking. Whether that pledge would hold while sitting in Monday morning bumper-to-bumper traffic on the 405 was questionable.

The next day was Sunday and Rick tried to live up to his internal promise by maintaining a positive attitude while scanning online employment listings. He kept repeating the mantras that his rideshare days were almost over, he would be back working in an office soon, and their plans to start a family would come to fruition. It was all going to happen, it was just a matter of being patient, staying focused, and maintaining a relentless pursuit of his goals. He closely monitored his caffeine intake and by the end of the day he felt as though the resumes he'd submitted had a realistic chance of landing him an interview. His improved outlook and increased optimism inspired a desire to exercise so he went out for a three-mile run. Due to his prolonged period of inactivity, the running was torture but he refused to let his poor condition get him down. He told himself that these were the first steps in getting back to his true self. After making love to Chloe that night he told her that he felt certain good things were coming their way. She was thrilled with his new, improved attitude but silently skeptical of his claims. In her mind, she acknowledged the real possibility that they were going to have to revise their long-term goals. She didn't mind the idea of having to move to a house with less square footage, and out of their gated community, but having the baby on hold made her sad.

On Monday morning, as Rick was driving down the I-5 from Santa Clarita towards Los Angeles, his belief in brighter days ahead guided his path and all the semis, honking horns, and reckless lane changes didn't get him down. He knew there would be responses to his resumes and one would lead to the interview that would land him a new job. Within one month's time, sitting in traffic all day would be nothing more than a distant memory.

As he drove passengers around L.A., Hollywood, and the San Fernando Valley, Rick maintained a chipper attitude and he was more engaging than usual. While taking a break, he checked his ratings and saw that he had picked up several 5-Star ratings but also one 3-Star rating. Apparently, not everyone was a fan of his new chatty personality. His greater willingness to initiate conversation did lead to interesting exchanges with some of his passengers. He took one elderly couple from Encino to the UCLA Medical Center and found out they had escaped from East Germany in the 1950's. They explained to him that before the Berlin Wall was built, and the border was fortified, it was fairly easy to escape. They'd simply walked across the border into West Germany. The couple went on to tell him how difficult it had been to leave family behind but they were newlyweds and they wanted their children to grow up in a democracy. Rick thought he heard the wife weeping a little when she was telling him about seeing their loved ones for the last time. Even though she hadn't seen her parents or siblings in over 60 years, she still carried the pain of how much she missed them.

After dropping off the elderly Germans, Rick made his way back to the Valley and picked up a young man who was returning to his apartment in Reseda. He had spent the night at his parents' house following a Sunday evening get-together with family and friends. The young man, Pablo, was long-winded and he spoke at length about his family party. He further explained that he had four brothers, three sisters, and he was the only one that wasn't married and didn't have children. Rick was reminded of his college reunion beach day and he asked Pablo how often his family had parties like that. He was expecting to hear once or twice a year so he was surprised when Pablo told him that they got together almost every weekend.

Rick wondered what it would be like to be surrounded by that much family. He had grown up in Santa Maria, a city on California's Central Coast roughly three hours north of Los Angeles. His parents had wanted him to go to college at Cal Poly, in nearby San Louis Obispo, but he wanted to get a little farther from home and he ended

up at UCLA. Chloe had come to UCLA after two years of community college in her home state of Illinois. Rick had one older brother but they only spent brief periods of time together during the holidays. Chloe had twin sisters who were seven years younger and they both lived in Illinois near their parents. She generally only saw them once a year and they did not keep in close contact over the phone or through social media. Both Chloe and Rick loved their families but they also preferred to maintain a distance. They were settled in with their lives in Santa Clarita and they didn't like traveling unless it was on a tropical vacation to escape the stress of their careers.

That's how it used to be, Rick thought as he daydreamed about Tahiti while waiting for his next call. The way it looked now, tropical vacations were a thing of the past, but he reminded himself that a return to the good life was right around the corner. When his hunger levels demanded a lunch break, he pulled into a supermarket parking lot and imagined what it would be like to have his family, as well as Chloe's, coming over to their house for weekend barbecues. It surprised him that the family get-together scenario was appealing to him and for a moment, he felt lonely and isolated.

After buying a drink in the market, Rick returned to his car and took out a small cooler. He'd made a salad before leaving the house in an effort to avoid junk food and lead a healthier lifestyle. Once he was settled back in his car with his container of salad, he started to eat and then checked for new emails on his phone. In that initial moment of seeing an empty inbox, Rick felt extreme desperation and panic but he righted the ship by quickly reminding himself that he had to be patient and his time was coming. The companies he'd sent his resume to were probably still reviewing his qualifications. As he continued to eat he felt better after rationalizing his way out of the disappointment, but somewhere inside was a deep-rooted fear that his current life was the new normal and it wasn't going to change.

When Rick arrived home that night, Chloe was already in the kitchen making dinner. After a hello kiss, she started talking about how bad the traffic had been driving home but in mid-sentence it hit her that her husband dealt with traffic all day. "Sorry, I forgot, you obviously know how bad the traffic was. How was your day?"

Rick's thoughts ran along the lines of; *the same as every other fucking day*. "It was fine," he replied, "I met some interesting people and my per-hour earnings were a little higher than usual."

Chloe wanted to ask him if there had been any responses to the resumes he'd sent over the weekend but she knew that news would have been the first thing out of his mouth if there had been any. Instead, she said, "Dinner needs to simmer for a while. Would you like to sit in the backyard and have a drink?"

"Sure, but I'm going to shower first; it was a hot day and I'm sweaty." In an effort to save gas Rick only turned on the air conditioning in his car when he had passengers. He disliked being hot but he also didn't want to have to sell his house. The realization had come to him that every financial saving, no matter how small or insignificant, would add up and help them maintain their lifestyle longer than if he were being frivolous. At this point, air conditioning was an unnecessary expenditure.

After they sat down on the patio with their drinks, Chloe said, "I was thinking today that even if you have to keep driving for a while, it won't be catastrophic. We have a high mortgage payment but our combined incomes will allow us to keep the house. Money will be tight but we'll get by and we'll have a little extra to do the things we enjoy. Two week vacations in Hawaii would have to be put on hold for a while but we could adjust. I'm

mentioning this because I don't want you to worry about it." But Chloe did want him to worry and do something about it. She understood it wasn't his fault that he was in the situation he was in, and he was doing his best to climb out of the predicament, but she also wasn't thrilled that her husband was working as a rideshare driver. There had to be something better for him. He was a well-educated, highly accomplished professional, so he shouldn't be working for what amounted to minimum wage.

"In my mind," Rick replied, "continuing indefinitely as a rideshare driver would be catastrophic, a worst-case scenario."

"There is another option," Chloe said. "If we did have a baby, you could be a stay-at-home dad and maybe find some work consulting online in the evenings after I get home. If we're both working, child care will cost us a fortune, regardless of your employment situation."

Rick let out a deep sigh and then replied, "I understand that could make sense in a potential future situation but I'm not ready to give up on my career. I feel like I was very good at my job and I have a lot to offer potential employers. Conceding defeat would feel like a total failure and I've just gotten myself reenergized and mentally prepared to fight for as long as it takes. I just need you to be a patient for a little longer."

"Don't worry baby, I have faith in you. I'm just putting ideas out there for future consideration and to remind you that you don't have to stress out over the current circumstances. However it turns out, it's going to be okay." After taking a sip of her white wine, while gazing upon the glow of the setting sun, Chloe knew that she didn't believe what she had just said.

Rick could sense that Chloe was more upset by their current situation than she was letting on, but he was already doing everything he could think of, so he didn't know what else she expected. It wasn't like he was sitting around in his underwear watching Sportcenter all day. He understood that she worked in an office and courtrooms, surrounded by successful people who were living their dreams. It had to be disappointing for her to come home to a minimum wage husband after spending the day with movers and shakers, but he was trying his best to return to executive status so if she couldn't deal with it, there wasn't much he could do about it. Fortunately, all indications were that she was in it for the long haul. He wondered if the ongoing situation would wear her down at some point.

As Rick lie awake in bed that night, unable to sleep, he thought about the prospect of being a stay-at-home dad. On the surface, it didn't seem too bad, although he had never been around babies so he didn't know what that would entail. In his vision, he saw himself happily walking the baby in a stroller and teaching his child how to ride a tricycle, and then a bike. It seemed as though it could be a nice, peaceful existence, especially if he was bringing in extra income from working in his home office during the evenings. The questions in his mind related to self-esteem and how Chloe's opinion of him might change. How would he feel about himself if he accepted career defeat and entered the realm of bake sales and the PTA? How would Chloe see him if she came home from her job as a high-powered attorney and saw her husband in the kitchen with an apron on and a baby on his hip? How would that compare with how she saw her male colleagues? He didn't know and he didn't want to find out. For the time being, he was in an all-out fight to save his career and his way of life.

The next morning when Rick got out of bed he felt fatigued from a lack of sleep, but he put on his happy face and gave himself an inspirational speech for the upcoming day. *There will be an email today from the HR*

Department of a prestigious firm stating that they were dazzled by my resume. I will schedule an interview, totally rock it, and they will present me with an attractive offer. By this time next week, I will be walking into a new office building like I own the place. This is going to happen. He wanted to believe it, he had to believe it, and as he headed out of the driveway and towards the traffic hell of the greater Los Angeles area, he continued to give himself pep talks.

Rick spent most of the day transporting people around Hollywood. He drove visitors between the hotels and Universal Studios, took locals to work, and dropped off tourists at the Walk of Fame. Even though he was consistently busy throughout the morning, and into the early afternoon, he was a little behind his usual hourly rate because most of the rides were short and took a lot of time because of traffic. Despite the fact that he was under his earnings goal for the day, Rick decided to only do one more ride before heading home. He'd had it with the congestion and the crowds.

Numerous times throughout the course of morning he had given in to the temptation of checking his phone for emails. There hadn't been anything in his inbox from a potential employer but he continued to tell himself that it was too soon and the resumes he'd submitted on Sunday probably hadn't even been looked at yet. Despite his efforts at keeping his thoughts on a positive path, he felt the usual black cloud setting in, the same gloom he'd vowed to fight against. His pep talks were becoming half-hearted and when his phone was *pinged* for him to pick up a rider, he accepted the ride notification and continued on.

A woman was waiting in front of a bagel shop on Melrose when Rick arrived. After a brief check to make sure he was the correct driver, she got in the front seat and buckled up. Most riders sat in the back but some chose to sit up front. Rick's observations were that people from out of town, especially those from the east coast, tended to sit in the front so they could talk. Most of the locals sat in the back and went right to checking their phones or putting their ear buds in. Once the rider was settled in, he checked the destination on the driver app and saw that they would be headed to Thousand Oaks. He had mixed emotions since it would pay well but he was also heading away from the route that would take him home. He decided that after dropping this rider off he would cut through the San Fernando Valley on the surface streets to increase his chances of picking up another rider or two on the way home.

Rick had also noticed the rider's name on the driver app (Tina), and when he was pulling up he noticed that she was an attractive middle-aged woman. When she got in the car he had a closer look and noticed that her face looked a bit odd, as though she'd had plastic surgery. It also appeared that there may have been surgical enhancements to other parts of her body as well. Once they were through the street traffic, and slowly moving north on the 101, Rick asked, "What have you been up to today?"

"I've been pretty busy," Tina answered. "I found someone to watch my dad for the day so I got a ride into Hollywood to do some shopping and visit some friends. My dad needs constant care so I don't leave the house too often. It felt good to get out of Thousand Oaks for a while and visit some of my old haunts."

A number of questions entered Rick's mind but he knew there was a fine line between casual chit chat and what some riders considered inappropriate conversation. Usually, job-related questions were okay, so he asked, "Did you used to work in Hollywood."

"I did, and Miami, and New York, and Chicago; it all seems like a million years ago."

“What type of work did you do?”

“I was a dancer, or more specifically, a stripper. My career began in Hollywood and then I moved on to other cities as I became somewhat well known in the club circles. After my time as a stripper ran out, I spent the next five years traveling around the world. Then my mom became ill, and my dad started having memory issues, so I moved back to Thousand Oaks, where I grew up, and I’ve been living there since then.”

Rick appreciated that she was being candid and she seemed perfectly content talking about her life as a stripper. “You must have done quite well for yourself to be able to spend so much time traveling after you retired from dancing.”

“Well, I don’t want to brag, but I’ve made a lot of money. The income from dancing was very good but the real money came after I met with a financial advisor in New York. He was one of my regulars and one time, during a lap dance, he suggested that I come to his office and work on a financial plan. I was a little leery at first but I asked around and found out that he was a highly successful investor so I made an appointment and went to his office. He presented a strategy that he thought would work out well for me. I ended up investing with him and he generated a lot of income for both of us. I’ve been very fortunate in that regard. I can’t begin to imagine what it would be like to go out and look for a job now.”

I can imagine, Rick thought, *it blows*. “Did your parents have any issues with you being a dancer?” He was a little concerned that he was once again treading into waters that were too personal but Tina wasn’t phased in the least. They were just having a conversation.

“They definitely had some issues. My dad didn’t speak to me for almost twenty years, and now I’m taking care of him even though he barely remembers who I am. We made our peace before he got sick though and I had a few good years with him. I also had some quality time with my mom before she passed away. I think we all came to the conclusion that we could have handled our issues better and we tried to make up for lost time.”

“Do you feel as though you’re sacrificing your life to take care of your dad?” Rick asked. “It sounds like he could be in assisted living and you could have more time for yourself.”

“I’d be lying if I said that I’d never had thoughts along those lines, but family has become more important to me as I’ve gotten older and I feel like my dad needs me. I’ll be his caretaker as long as that’s what’s best for him. I think he’s still better off at home with me and I’ve had enough romance for one lifetime so, for the most part, I’m enjoying the isolation. I may change my mind as time passes but for now, I’m content with my life and I don’t want any major changes. I have a younger brother and sister, both of whom have families, and they live nearby so I see them a lot. After so many crazy years, I still feel like I’m catching my breath and I need to spend some time contemplating how I want to live the rest of my life.”

As they were passing by Agoura Hills, and getting closer to Thousand Oaks, Rick thought about Tina’s circumstances and how she was the opposite of him. She had financial security but no one to share it with, while he had a loving wife and the prospect of children in the near future, but he was struggling financially. Without making a decision to do so ahead of time, Rick went on to tell Tina about his life. He would later wonder why he had started blabbering about his predicament, but he found his passenger easy to talk to and she seemed to be interested in their conversation. “I lost my job as an account executive with a marketing firm about ten months ago. It’s been very difficult because we have a high mortgage payment and we don’t want to lose our house. My

wife makes a very good income but until I can get my career back on track, I have to do something to bring in more money. This rideshare gig can really wear me down sometimes, but I'm trying to stay positive and give myself inspirational talks throughout the day. I have to believe that life will get better."

When they exited the freeway, and were within a few minutes of Tina's house, she said, "Maybe you shouldn't be so worried about the financial aspect. I've struggled financially so I know that's easier said than done. Maybe if you ease off a bit and try to figure out what you want to happen next, instead of what will make you the most money, you might find an acceptable solution. I know that sounds like new age nonsense but I'm learning that taking a pause in life can be helpful."

As Rick was pulling into the driveway, he said, "Thanks, maybe I'll take your advice."

Before getting out of the car, Tina added, "You're a good man Rick, try not to be too hard on yourself."

After saying goodbye, Rick picked up one more rider between Thousand Oaks and his home in Santa Clarita. Even though it was a short ride, it at least it paid for the gas he used driving to his house. When he arrived home that night, Chloe was just leaving her office so he began thinking about what he would make for dinner. Before getting too involved in the menu process, he decided to check his email one more time. He logged onto his computer instead of using his phone so that he would have a bigger screen to read all the interview requests that were most certainly accumulating in his inbox. When he clicked on his inbox he saw that there were no such requests, not a single one, just more emptiness and disappointment. Then he remembered his conversation with Tina and the last thing that she had said to him; *You're a good man Rick, try not to be too hard on yourself.*

Tina

Upon entering the house, Tina saw that her brother Alan was sitting with her dad in the living room and they were watching a baseball game. A more accurate observation would have been that Alan was watching the game while his father stared off into space.

“Hi Alan, I’m back, thanks for taking care of Dad. If you have things to do you are officially relieved of duty as of right now.” Tina was going to add that he was also welcome to stay and keep her company but before she could get the words out, her brother turned around to look at her and the expression on his face stopped her in her tracks. There was nothing unusual about his expression; his face, scored with stoicism, held true to form, but the judgement behind the stone wall spoke volumes. Whenever Alan looked at Tina, the only aspect of her being that he could focus on was the work she’d had done on her body. There had been a time when Tina thought surgical procedures were necessary to prolong her dancing career, but at this stage in her life, she found the entire concept ridiculous.

Alan was completely unaware that he projected disapproval whenever he looked at his sister but Tina felt it every time. There were occasions, after a few glasses of wine, when she felt the urge to call him out but she never pulled the trigger. There was no point in getting into an argument with him, especially since he would never admit to his feelings of moral superiority, and he would tell her that she was imagining things. She decided that her best revenge was her financial portfolio. Alan didn’t know exactly how much she was worth, but he knew she had a lot more in the bank than he did. She enjoyed pointing out how well her stocks were doing whenever it fit into a conversation because she wanted it understood that her wealth was obtained through investments, rather than other ways.

Tina reminded herself that she shouldn’t presume to know what others were thinking and despite her certainty of Alan’s unspoken opinions, they did have a good relationship, at least on the surface. As with her parents, a start-over had been required with both Alan and her sister Dawn. When she’d returned home from New York, five years earlier, there had been no shortage of fences to mend. Her mother was dying at the time so everyone was in a forgiving mood as the need to let bygones be bygones was emphasized. Even with all the sincere hugs, and appreciation of a family reunited, Tina often felt annoyed because the perception seemed to be that she had come crawling back on her hands and knees and was begging for forgiveness. In her mind it was the opposite; she was returning as a huge success, and if anyone had anything to apologize for, it certainly wasn’t her. She hadn’t done anything wrong. There was nothing illegal about her career choice and despite what everyone assumed, she had never had sex for money nor had she ever had done anything that she was ashamed of.

Even though her family wasn’t excessively religious, they were occasional church goers and they seemed to think that Tina’s former career had violated some aspects of good biblical behavior. What those violations could have been, she didn’t know. She’d read the Bible from cover to cover on more than one occasion and had never come across anything that suggested a woman couldn’t earn a living by dancing and taking her clothes off in front of men. Nonetheless, her parents and siblings seemed to equate her career choice with prostitution and they’d made an effort to keep her out of sight when extended family and friends came by to visit her ailing mother.

As time passed, and the family saw how dedicated she was to her mother's care, the walls between them began to crumble. It also didn't hurt that Tina had purchased her parents' house at a time when it looked as though they were going to have to sell it, which coincided with the beginning of her dad's memory issues. Tina stayed on top of the situation and she took care of everything that needed to be done. The fact that Alan and Dawn had families of their own, and very little time to spare, led to an even greater appreciation for her presence. Were it not for the return of the wayward daughter, Alan and Dawn would be trying to figure out how to pay for assisted living for their father and how to squeeze out enough hours in the day to visit him from time to time. As it stood, Tina had saved them the expense of assisted living or in-home nursing care, and she made sure that the home they'd grown up in was still in the family. She was also providing loving care for their father, who seemed to deteriorate further on a daily basis.

Despite all that Tina had done, and was doing, Alan and Dawn's faces could still reveal their disappointment in her. They seemed to believe that all the good coming from their sister was a result of dirty money and that degradation and humiliation had been necessary in obtaining it. Tina felt that this belief minimized their full acceptance but as far as she was concerned, that was fine. She had her own judgmental expressions and whenever it seemed as though Dawn and Alan were heading towards condescending comments, her look would remind them that it was her *dirty money* that had provided a much better end-of-life experience for their mom than she otherwise would have had. Her gaze could also serve to remind them that they hadn't been too proud to accept her dirty money when she'd purchased their family home, paid for all of their mother's burial expenses, and was currently paying for the bulk of their father's medical care.

Since her family had always preferred to communicate non-verbally through facial expressions, sighs, raised eyebrows, a thumbs up, or a middle finger, Tina was well versed in the game. She was as accomplished as her brother and sister at getting points across without saying a word. They had been raised that way and when Tina returned from New York, she fell right back into the familiar routine. It wasn't something she did consciously; it was like returning home and picking an accent back up that was thought to be long gone.

Alan's judgmental face only phased Tina for a moment and as usual, she returned it with a look of curiosity, as if to ask; *is there something on your mind Alan? Did you want to tell me how offended you are by my face, or my tits, or my ass?* The moment would pass and they would continue on as though the exchange had never occurred. "How'd it go?" Tina asked.

"Fine," Alan replied, "we've just been hanging out since you left. I tried to talk Dad into letting me take him out for a walk but he got grumpy when I tried to insist, so I let him be."

"Thanks for staying with him. I know it's tough for you on a weekday but an old friend was passing through town and this was the only day we could get together."

Alan thought about making a sarcastic remark in reference to the *old friend*, but thought better of it. "I'm glad you could get a break. I know it makes for some long weeks when Dawn and I can only swing by on weekends. I probably don't say this enough but I really appreciate all you've done. It's been an unbelievable blessing for us that you've been willing to provide full time care for dad."

Tina found it amusing that he couldn't bring himself to mention all the financial relief she was bringing to the table, but she also knew it wasn't easy for Alan to hand out compliments, especially to her, so she took the high

road. "I'm happy to do it, we're a family, we all do what we can." Tina actually enjoyed taking care of her father even though it made her sad to see him slowly lose his grasp on reality, but she felt grateful that she was able to provide comfort. Managing her father's daily routine, in their house, added meaning to her life. She was certain that somewhere deep inside her father's mind, he knew what was going on and being in his home, with his family, led to peaceful feelings.

Even though there were still lingering issues with her siblings, Tina was very happy to be reunited with Alan and Dawn, along with their families. She considered it to be one of the great joys of her life that she was getting to know her nieces and nephews better. The holiday celebrations filled her with happiness and even though Dad couldn't do much more than sit in a chair and silently observe, they were all together, in their childhood home, with the Christmas tree in the same spot, with the same ornaments, and that was heart-warming for the entire family.

"I'm going to head out," Alan said, "I have to pick up Bobby from soccer practice. Dawn swung by for a little while and she said to let you know that she'll be home Thursday afternoon, so if you need her for anything just let her know."

"Will do, thanks," Tina replied as Alan gathered up his laptop and headed for the door. After they hugged goodbye, Alan left, and Tina sat down next to her father. The game was still on the TV and he appeared to be watching but when she used the remote to turn it off, he didn't react.

"How are you feeling Dad?" Tina asked as she reached over and gently grasped her father's hand. Upon feeling his daughter's touch, he looked at Tina and tried to find the place in his brain where he knew who she was. It was a losing battle because the journey through his mind only led from one closed door to another. He looked hopelessly at Tina but when his attention returned to the hand that was holding his, he felt comfort, and the panic that had been surging through his mind as he'd tried to find some semblance of himself, began to ease.

They sat quietly together for twenty minutes as Tina tried to project healing love from her hand into her father's. When her thoughts wandered she remembered how the Uber driver hadn't seemed the least bit judgmental when she'd told him about her life. Then again, he had his own problems and low self-esteem issues to work through. She silently wished him the best and returned her attention to her dad, who continued to stare at the TV as though the game was still on.

When the silent father-daughter time slowly melted into early evening, Tina decided to make dinner. She wasn't very hungry since she had gone out to lunch, but Dad still seemed to enjoy eating so she would make something hearty for him and then nibble on the leftovers after he went to sleep. Watching a movie with a bowl of chili, or a plate of spaghetti, had become Tina's favorite way to spend her quiet time. It often crossed her mind that her life was rather pathetic, especially considering she had the financial resources to do whatever she wanted, but staying home was what she wanted to do. She'd had more than enough of travel and nightlife, and even though she was still fit and attractive, she found that her life as she was living it was just fine. There was still the possibility of someone special entering her life, and she wasn't opposed to it, but she didn't seek it out. She was happily going with the flow and for the time being, the usual groove meant hanging out with Dad and quiet nights in her family home.

Before going to bed that night, Tina called Dawn to let her know that she didn't need anything in particular on Thursday afternoon but some company would be nice if she had some free time. Tina didn't like sounding needy but she also couldn't deny that after a few days alone in the house with Dad, cabin fever could set in. Taking him anywhere was an ordeal so she usually waited for a sibling to come by before running errands. She generally bought enough groceries to last for a couple of weeks and she had become very good at planning ahead. Trying to guide Dad into the car, through a grocery store, and then back into the car for the drive home was a difficult process. His movements were extremely slow and just walking from the front door to the driveway could take several minutes as Tina tried to keep him moving forward with gentle nudges. What would normally be a twenty-minute round trip to the store could easily take well over an hour with Dad along.

Tina was aware that her father needed to get out of the house from time to time so she tried to walk with him around the block every day. He often resisted, preferring to spend all of his waking hours in his recliner, but once she got him out, the sunshine would revive him and he would be satisfied with his snail's pace through the neighborhood. It was much easier to manage him through their jaunts around the block than trying to take on parking lots and checkout lines, so they were both happier in the calmer environment.

When Dawn stopped by on Thursday afternoon, they had just returned from one of their walks. It was a hot day so it had been a brief trip, just long enough for Dad to get a little sun and fresh air. After Dawn entered, she announced that she had made a pan of lasagna and was putting it in the freezer for whenever Tina wanted to heat it up. Tina appreciated the effort but it wasn't necessary because making dinner was something she looked forward to everyday. The days of home care could be long and tedious so having anything to do, other than sitting in front of the TV, was refreshing. Even cleaning was a welcome distraction so she kept the house immaculate.

"Thanks Dawn, that was very nice of you. You can put it in the fridge though, I'll heat it up tomorrow night." Lasagna didn't strike Tina as a great summer dish but she wanted her sister to feel good about her contribution and know that the lasagna would be eaten soon rather than sitting indefinitely in the freezer.

"You got it sis," Dawn replied as she closed the freezer door and put the pan in the refrigerator. Tina's relationship with her sister hadn't been as divisive as the ones with her brother and parents but they'd gone through some difficult periods. Dawn had never completely severed communication, as the rest of the family had, and throughout the years they had stayed in touch with phone calls and/or email. Like everyone else Tina knew in Thousand Oaks, Dawn did not approve of her career choice and she never pretended that she did. The difference was that Dawn never gave up on her sister; she always saw her potential and the possibility that Tina would come around to a morally acceptable lifestyle.

During Tina's younger, more militant phases, her attitude towards Dawn had been the same as it was towards everyone else. That stance fell along the lines of; *If you don't like what I'm doing you can go fuck yourself.* As she grew older, and her attitude softened, she came to appreciate the fact that Dawn cared enough to maintain communication and she hadn't renounced her as a family member. As everyone aged, and judgements became less harsh, Tina had been able to get her foot back in the family door. Maturity had led to a mellowing of long-held bitterness and Dawn had been the main catalyst in the family coming back together.

From Tina's perspective, the reuniting of the family had required a long, testing-the-waters process, and were it not for the financial support she brought to the table, the testing stage may have ended with a different result. Both Alan and Dawn were the parents of teenagers who were planning to continue on to college and even though their families made excellent incomes, the costs associated with full time care for their father, along with upcoming college tuitions, were beyond their means. The stripper sister had rescued them and they knew it.

After making room for the lasagna pan in the fridge, Dawn came into the living room and hugged her father. As was typically the case, there was no visible reaction or understanding on his part that he had been shown affection. Dawn turned towards Tina and asked, "How's he doing today?"

It never failed to break Tina's heart when she saw how Dawn tried hide the hurt in her face when their father couldn't acknowledge the love of his children. Dawn had always been *Daddy's little girl* and there had been a time while they were growing up when Tina had felt jealous of her sister and father's relationship, but under the current circumstances, she could only feel sad for both of them. "He's doing okay, no changes to report. We just got back from our daily shuffle around the neighborhood. How are things going with you?"

"The usual whirlwind. Russ is working 60-hour weeks, Natalie is leaving for San Diego to start school next Saturday, Jim has football practice every day and he knows he has to get his GPA up if he wants to be accepted at Stanford next year. My summer break is over so I'm back to working mornings at the school district office, and on and on it goes. I wish I had more time to swing by so you could get out more. I'm worried that you don't have a life outside of this house."

Tina laughed and then said, "Well, that's a valid concern, I don't have a life outside of this house. But that's okay, I'm exactly where I want to be, you don't have to worry about me. I hate to put it in these terms but we both know that Dad isn't going to get better and at some point, he'll need more care than I can provide. When that happens, I'll move on to something new, but it's hard to say exactly when that will be. To be honest, based on how quickly he's deteriorating, I think that time is coming soon."

Dawn had to take a deep breath and process Tina's comments. She was well aware of her father's prognosis, and she was not expecting a miracle, but when forced to confront the painful truth, it always took her a minute to recover. After a brief, conversational pause, Dawn said, "You are such a blessing, both as a sister and a daughter. I feel guilty that we've been taking advantage of you, especially after the way we treated you for so long." Dawn then began to sob.

Tina hugged her sister and whispered in her ear, "It's going to be all right, the misunderstandings went both ways. You don't have anything to feel guilty about and it's all in the past."

"I know," Dawn replied between sobs. "I feel as though I haven't fully processed Mom's death and we're about to go through it again. It seems like my emotions have been on hold while I try to keep up with my kid's busy lives."

"It's okay Sis, that's why I'm here. Focus on your family, let me worry about the medical issues, and when you need a shoulder to cry on, or you just feel like you're missing Mom, come over and let it all out. It's not good to keep things bottled up.

"I know, you're right," Dawn replied as she regained her composure. "Sometimes it seems like I can handle everything and then, out of nowhere, it feels like life smacks me in the face."

“That’s how it is when people you love pass away, or are on the verge of passing away,” Tina replied. “Fortunately, we have each other, and Alan, and all of your children, so the family is strong and our love will be the bond that pulls us through the difficult periods.”

“When did you become so smart?” Dawn asked. After her sister smiled in response, she said, “When your Florence Nightingale gig is up hopefully you’ll meet someone special and settle in nearby. Now that I’ve gotten used to you being around all the time, I don’t want to go through the devastation of losing you again.”

Tina was surprised by Dawn’s use of the word *devastation* in reference to when she had left home. At the time, she had been nineteen years old, Dawn was seventeen, and it had never occurred to Tina that her departure had caused her sister to experience any kind of trauma. The year between high school graduation, and when Tina moved into her Hollywood apartment, had been a turbulent one in their household and it set the stage for the troubles that came later. Tina had been extremely rebellious so she’d always assumed that everyone had been grateful when she left home. Life must have been much calmer for her family after she was gone. An end to the daily blowouts with her parents had eased her mind and she thought it had been the same for everyone, but apparently Dawn had missed her to some extent and she’d been sad when her sister moved out. That anyone had ever missed her presence was something of a shocking revelation. As Tina thought about it more, she realized that when she’d left her family, or a boyfriend, or a club where she was working, she’d always assumed the attitude was, *don’t let the door hit you in the ass on your way out*. In her mind, the sentiment was always *good riddance* rather than *I’m going to miss you*.

After the sisters said their goodbyes at the front door, Tina more deeply contemplated the notion that Dawn had been sad and upset when she left home. So many years had passed since then it was difficult to conjure up the feelings from that period of time. Perhaps her surprise was due to the fact that once the family found out what she did for a living, Dawn had fallen in step with everyone else in their condemnation of the black sheep daughter. While thinking about it, Tina considered that maybe Dawn only wanted what was best for the family and to her way of thinking, that meant trying to encourage Tina to adopt a different lifestyle. Perhaps Dawn wasn’t as judgmental as the others; maybe she just wanted to see her sister living a happy life, close to her family. She once again told herself that it was all water under the bridge now as she watched her sister drive down the street.

Tina returned to her spot on the sofa, next to her dad’s recliner. He was staring at the television and occasionally closing his eyes for what seemed to be brief cat naps. She kept the channel on sports since that had always been his television programming of choice, but she wondered if it made any difference. If she turned the channel to a soap opera, would he know? Would he care? Probably not, but even though the thought of watching more sports was torture, she settled in for a long, boring tennis match.

When it came time to make dinner, Tina was feeling less energetic than usual, so she made sandwiches. After helping her father eat his turkey and cheese, she cleaned him up and got him ready for bed. This was a long, slow routine they went through every night and by the time they were done, it was dark outside. Every day it became more and more difficult to go through the process of getting him up from his recliner, cleaned up in the bathroom, and into bed. She knew the day was coming soon when she would no longer be able to manage it by herself.

Once Dad was tucked in, Tina poured herself a glass of wine to go along with her avocado, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. She then turned off the TV, an act that was always provided sweet relief for her. Even though the volume was always kept low, it seemed like sportscasters were screaming at her all day. She enjoyed the silence so much that even music would have felt like an intrusion. As she slowly nibbled and sipped over the course of another hot night, Tina felt content because she was doing good things with her life, and that knowledge led to a further release of the shame others had projected on her. She had never accepted their disapproval but she always knew it was there; sticking to her skin but not penetrating. Now, in the quiet of her childhood home, with the shell of her father sound asleep in the same bedroom he'd been sleeping in for over sixty years, she was free of the humiliation that others wanted her to feel. Her skin was soft and everything that had once been sticking to it had fully evaporated.

As the night wore on, Tina got cozy with the boredom and loneliness that accompanied her lifestyle. She always felt at ease while taking care of her dad, or doing things around the house, but the nights could be monotonous. Thoughts of the future brought the realization that Dad was down to months, if not weeks, before he would need professional care. Tina knew that she would have to come up with a plan for the next phase of her life. Would she stay in this house? Would she move out of the suburbs and back into the hustle and bustle of a city? If so, which one? Probably Los Angeles; now that she was on good terms with Alan and Dawn she didn't want to be too far away from them or her nieces and nephews. She wanted Christmases in her family home, with those she loved, for the rest of her life.

When Tina had first returned to Thousand Oaks, during the time when her mother was dying, she bought the family home and rescued her parents from the refinancing mess they had gotten themselves into. She owned the house but didn't know if she'd want to live in it full time. Should she consider selling it? There were so many questions, and the future was uncertain, so Tina decided that she needed to sit down with Alan and Dawn and go over all of their options. There was no doubt in her mind that her brother and sister would want to keep the house in the family but were they willing to make sacrifices to do so?

Tina was well off and she continued to receive a substantial income from her investments, but there were limits to her cash flow. The cost of her parents' house hadn't been a drop in the bucket and the upcoming expenses associated with her father's care would have a significant impact, and those could carry on for years. Decisions would have to be made and the only way that was going to happen to everyone's satisfaction was for the three of them to sit down and discuss it.

Deciding there was no better time than the present to get the ball rolling, Tina opened her laptop, logged into her account, and composed an email to her siblings:

Alan & Dawn,

I've been doing some thinking (so brace yourself, lol) and I think we should plan a time for when the three of us can sit down and discuss the future. In my opinion, it would be better if we did this sooner rather than later. I'm perfectly content staying here and taking care of Dad but I see the day coming soon when I won't be able to manage his care and he'll need full time, professional help. We will probably have to move him to a facility that specializes in dementia and memory care. Every night it becomes more difficult to get him from his recliner to his bed, and from his bed to the recliner in the morning. It won't be long before he is completely bedridden or in

need of people with more physical strength than I have to get him in and out of bed. So, let's plan a time when we can get together and discuss this.

Love,

Tina

After clicking Send, she wondered if the tone of the email had been too negative and if she had inadvertently sent shockwaves of alarm into her siblings' inboxes. That had not been her intent and a meeting seemed to be the most responsible path they could take under the circumstances. While contemplating the matter, she stared at her email inbox and noticed that a promotion had popped up for a dating service. She looked at the ad for moment and then made a spur of the moment decision to click on the link.

After being directed to the dating service's web site, she was immediately struck by the dizzying amount of information and services offered. While looking over the options, Tina wondered if she even wanted to go on a date, or if anyone would be interested. It had been a long time since her last boyfriend and she was pushing fifty years old, so she wondered if she had missed the boat on having a partner for life. The concept of being in a committed relationship was too much to think about, especially considering her current circumstances, but before moving on she thought about setting up a profile. Taking that initial step wouldn't cause any problems and in the unlikely event someone actually responded, she could ignore the guy, or not. Maybe it would be a good idea to get the ball rolling for the future when all of her time wouldn't be dedicated to her father.

While proceeding through the profile set up, she thought about how she should describe herself physically and portray her personality. For a physical description, she entered:

5' 6" – 120 lbs. – 49 Years Old – Sandy Blond Hair – Brown Eyes

In an effort to be honest, and because it would be obvious when she uploaded a photo of herself, she added: *I've had facial surgery.* She decided to leave out the boob and butt enhancements.

For her career, she entered:

Retired, formerly a professional dancer. Stripper would have been more honest but she didn't like the idea of what kind of guys that might attract.

In the section for describing what she was looking for in a man, she entered:

Friendly gentleman with a good sense of humor and a calm, relaxed manner. I've never been married and I'm perfectly content without a husband. Having a friend to do things with is more important than romance.

For Interests & Hobbies she entered:

I'm reaching a point in my life where I'll have a lot of free time to pursue my interests. I'm still trying to work out what those will be. I've done a lot of traveling and even though I'm not opposed to occasional jaunts, I don't need to be on-the-go all the time. I've recently returned home to Southern California and I'm thinking that I'd like to reconnect with the ocean, so maybe I'll take up scuba diving or sailing. I enjoy going out to dinner and trying new restaurants.

When Tina reached the final section for uploading a picture, she looked through the photos on her computer and decided she hated all of them. *It doesn't make any difference,* she thought, *just pick one.* There were only a few to choose from and she settled on one that her nephew Jim had taken the previous Christmas and had

emailed to her. It was a head shot in front of the Christmas tree and she was holding up a mug of eggnog. With the photo decision made, she clicked Upload and the process was finished.

While mulling over what she had just done, Tina thought it was unlikely that anyone would actually see her profile and respond with a message. It had been an amusing activity to pass a quiet evening at home but the possibility that anything would come of it seemed remote. In her mind, these types of meeting services were for young people so she would have been surprised by how many men in their 40's and 50's were about to check out her profile.

Before logging off her computer, and going up to bed with a book, Tina saw that an email had come in from Dawn.

Hey Tina & Alan,

An early evening would be best for me, maybe 7:00-ish on a weeknight. I know this has been very hard on you Tina so I hope you know how grateful we are for the loving care you're providing for Dad. I think I can speak for Alan and say that neither one of us wants you to take on more than you can handle. Let's have this meeting soon so we can go over our options and talk about what are lives will be like with Dad in an assisted care facility.

Love,

Dawn

Tina assumed that it was too late for Alan to reply (he was an early to bed/early to rise kind of guy) so she closed her laptop, poured a half-glass of wine, grabbed her book and went up to her childhood bedroom. Before settling in with the latest Louise Penney mystery, Tina looked around her room. Everything from her childhood was gone except for her bed. It had different sheets and blankets though so it didn't feel familiar. She was used to this generic version of her old bedroom but it still bugged her the way her mom had removed all signs of her youth. No clothes in the closet, books in the bookcase, or posters on the wall. Just a blank room. It was as though her life in this house had been erased.

Alan and Dawn's rooms had been stripped down as well so Tina didn't take it personally. She just found it odd that her mother had felt it necessary to remove all the memories from her children's bedrooms. Tina reminded herself that it had been a long time since they'd all grown up and moved out, and Mom never did like clutter. No one would have expected her to maintain the rooms as memorials for her children but a few things here and there would have been nice. Something that expressed the notion that for twenty years there had been children growing up in this house and that period of time mattered.

After getting comfortable in her twin bed, Tina took a sip of wine and returned to the fictional town of Three Pines, Quebec. It was one of her favorite places to visit. While getting lost in the fictional world of Chief Inspector Gamache, she finished off her wine and the story was holding her interest but her eyes were getting heavy. It was obvious that the battle against the onslaught of sleep was soon to be lost so she decided to brush her teeth and call it a night. Shortly after drifting off, she had a dream about being trapped in a cave. It was brief but she experienced a moment of terror that shook her awake. For a moment, she wondered if she had actually been asleep because it felt as though she had just emerged from a vivid daydream. When she looked at the clock she knew that she couldn't have been asleep for more than a minute or two. It was a unique and bizarre

experience but she was too tired to try and extract meaning from it. Instead, she went back to sleep and enjoyed peaceful, dreamless slumber through the rest of the night.

The next morning Tina brought her father out from his bedroom to his spot in front of the TV and then fed him his breakfast. After cleaning up and making sure Dad was content with Sportcenter, she checked her emails and saw that Alan had replied earlier that morning.

Tina & Dawn,

How about Tuesday night at 7:00? Dawn and I can come over and help get Dad cleaned up and ready for bed. After that we can discuss a strategy for the future.

Love,

Alan

A typical communication from Alan; direct and to the point. Tuesday was just as good as any other day for Tina so she replied: *Works for me!*

Over the course of her day, Tina tended to her father, saw that Dawn had confirmed their meeting date, and considered her quasi-dream from the night before. It was the feel of the dream, rather than the dream itself, that confused her. It was almost as if she had been awake and had checked out of reality for a minute. Not one given to esoteric thoughts, Tina tried not to dwell on it for too long or read too much into it. Despite her best efforts to ignore it, the feeling of being trapped in a cave stuck to her like glue. When she looked over at her dad, she realized that her dream was his reality. He was trapped in a cave in his mind. From this cavern there was no escape; merely an existence without access to the functions of the brain or connections to the memories of one's life. Tina felt that she now had a better understanding of the panicked expression that sometimes spread across her father's face.

Later that night, after Dad was in bed, Tina checked her email and saw that there were several notifications from the dating service website. Three men had left messages for her. After she recovered from the surprise that someone had actually read her profile, she clicked on the links. Two of the three were immediately deleted. One sounded (and looked) like a creepy perv and another one wanted her to come to his retirement planning seminar. The third one offered some potential; his name was Steve and his photo was pleasing to the eye.

As she read his profile, no alarm bells went off in her head. He lived in Ventura (about twenty-five miles away), he was 53 years old, married once and divorced, two kids (23 and 25), and he owned his own construction company. A closer look at his face revealed what Tina liked to see in a man; a weathered, blue-collar, manly face that spent a lot of time outside. He had the look of someone in construction. Tina imagined that he had done his time building houses, eventually got his contractor's license, and was able to start his own company. Smart and tough; not a bad combination. She went on to read the message he had left for her:

Hi Tina,

I read your profile and was wondering if you'd like to get to know each other over coffee or dinner. I'm hoping to hear back from you and I'm not contacting anyone else so I'd appreciate it if you would let me know if you're not interested.

Thanks,

Steve

The message was brief but Tina felt that it was sincere. She got the sense that he really did just want to meet and talk and see how well they got along. Considering the huge number of jerks that she had dealt with during her dancing years, Tina was suspicious when it came to guys, and she generally assumed there was an ulterior motive to everything they said, but this felt different. She couldn't put her finger on exactly why, but she had a good feeling about Steve, which was unusual considering the short message and her natural inclination to be distrustful. While continuing to look at his profile page, she thought about whether she should accept his invitation. She wanted to but she also didn't want to be impulsive. The whole dating profile setup had been done on a whim and she hadn't even thought about whether she actually wanted to go on to the next step. After reading Steve's message again she decided to give it twenty-four hours. If she still wanted to arrange to meet him, she could do so after letting the notion sink in for a while.

The next morning after Tina wrestled her dad out of bed, helped in the bathroom, and got him into his recliner, she thought about the message from Steve as she prepared breakfast. There was still an entire day to think about it, given her self-imposed deadline, but she was leaning towards meeting him for coffee. The one deterrent was the situation with her father. It wouldn't be a problem to have Dawn or Alan stay with him while she met with this Steve, but what if they wanted to spend more time together after that? Her opportunities would be few and far between. Tina mulled over the possibilities as she continued with her day while at the same time reminding herself that this was just a random guy from a dating service. She didn't really know anything about him or if he was even a real person.

Before going to bed that night, Tina opened her laptop and logged onto her dating profile. There were four new messages from guys but none of them were of interest to her. She realized that she didn't want this process to be a permanent part of her life so she made the decision that if it didn't work out with Steve, she would delete her profile and let come what may. Before logging off, and returning to her book, she replied to Steve's message:
Hi Steve,

Thanks for contacting me. I think getting together for coffee is a good idea. We could meet somewhere in between Thousand Oaks and Ventura (Camarillo maybe?). I'm sure it would be easy to locate a Starbucks in the area. Let me know what you think and if there is a particular day/time you'd like to meet. Thinking of her dad, she added; *I'll need at least a few days advanced notice.*

Thanks,

Tina

After clicking Send, she shut down the computer and opened her book. It took a few minutes to get over thoughts of *My God, what have I done*, and focus on reading, but she was able to settle in with the story for more than an hour before drifting off to sleep.

Over the next few days Tina went through life as she had come to know it. Her focus was on taking care of her father and the only input from the outside world was when Steve sent a reply saying he would like to get together for coffee and he could meet any evening or just about any time on the weekends. Tina let him know that she would follow up later in the week. She would need to check on when Dawn or Alan could stay with Dad for a couple of hours so she could connect with Steve. Having several days to think about it led her to frequently question whether having coffee with a stranger was a good idea. She also wondered when full disclosure about

her former profession would be appropriate. These concerns, as well as thoughts about her father's future, swirled through her mind as the days slowly passed from one to the next.

Alan arrived early for the family meeting on Tuesday and sat with his father while he ate his dinner. He helped him with his food and made comments about the baseball game that was on TV. This gave Tina time to clean up the kitchen so that by the time Dawn arrived, all they had to do was give their dad a sponge bath and get him settled in bed. After they were seated around the kitchen table, Tina poured a glass of wine for everyone. "I don't know how you get him cleaned up and in bed by yourself," Dawn said. "It was a difficult chore for the three of us."

"That's why we're here tonight," Tina replied. "I don't think I'm going to be able to manage it much longer. When he first started needing help, I could coax him along and he would at least get a shuffle going, but you saw tonight how it's more of a dragging motion. Sometimes it feels like his entire weight is on me but for the time being, I can stabilize him when I need to, but his ability to cooperate diminishes every day."

"What you're doing is amazing," Alan said. Tina believed that Alan only gave her compliments grudgingly and through a judgmental filter, but she appreciated that he was making an effort. "I've been researching options and based on what you've been saying, we need to act quickly. We have two choices; either get him into a care facility or have full time help here. The problem with bringing in professional home care is that it still keeps you bound to the house to some extent. Obviously Dawn and I would help out when we could but it would probably require that you continue to live here. The best care facility I found is close by, in Calabasas, but it's also the most expensive. I can't speak for Dawn but without some assistance from selling this house to pay for his care, I'm limited on how much I would be able to contribute."

"Ditto," replied Dawn.

"I've been putting a lot thought into this," Tina said, "and I think the best plan would be to get him into a facility sooner rather than later. The level of care required will only increase the longer he lives. I've come up with a possible solution so let me know what you think. I know you both have huge mortgage payments, and I would love to keep this house in the family, although I don't necessarily want to live here. How about if one of you moves in here with your family, rent free, and I'll set it up so we all own a third of the house. I'll move somewhere a little more to my liking, closer to L.A., and we'll share the costs for Dad's care as well as the remaining mortgage. That way we can all come home during the holidays, or for family get-togethers, and perhaps we can leave the house to your kids. What do you think?"

Dawn answered first. "I think my family would be the obvious choice to move since my kids are college age and we live closer. It wouldn't disrupt our lives too much, Jim has more one year of high school but he wouldn't have to change schools. Alan lives farther away and his kids are still in middle school and high school so it would mean changing schools for them, or trying shuttle them back and forth. So, if we moved here, we'd have no rent or mortgage payment on this house but we'd be responsible for half of Alan's mortgage and that would free up money to put towards Dad's care. I'd have to look at numbers, and talk it over with Russ and the kids, but off the top of my head I'd say I'm agreeable to that plan."

“I’ll put a spreadsheet together with all the numbers,” Alan said. “I think your plan could work but we need to make sure the numbers add up and our spouses are on board. I don’t see any reason why they would object but you never know.”

“Well, that was easy,” Tina replied. “It would probably be a good idea to go over to the care facility in Calabasas and check it out. After that we can put a timeline together and move on to the next step.” Once the tentative plan was agreed upon, the siblings finished their glasses of wine while reminiscing about their childhood. Alan and Dawn then went home and they all hoped it would work out for the best.

Tina met Steve for coffee the following week and she liked him but he didn’t ask for a second date. She didn’t really care but she wondered why he even bothered showing up since he hadn’t been talkative. Along with Alan and Dawn, she went to the memory care facility that Alan had recommended while Dawn’s son and daughter stayed with their grandfather. They were very impressed with the facility and even though it was expensive, they agreed it would be within their means once the housing situation was settled. All spouses were agreeable to the plan so it was just a matter of timing the sale of Dawn’s house to when Dad could be moved into the facility. Tina was quick to remind them that it didn’t have to be perfect timing, she wasn’t in a rush to move so she could stay in the house until Dawn and her family were ready.

The following morning, as Tina was helping her father from his bed to the living room, she slipped on the wooden floor and lost her balance. During that brief moment, her dad fell. He didn’t hit the floor hard but it was enough of a shock that he looked even more bewildered than usual. When she tried to get him up and moving again he was uncooperative. He wouldn’t budge and she didn’t have the strength to forcibly lift him. Tina tried for over an hour to get him off the floor but she ended up having to call Alan at his office. He rushed over and the two of them were able to get their father up and into his recliner.

“That was a good indication that the time has arrived,” Alan said.

“I suppose we could put a bed in the living room,” Tina replied, “but that would just be delaying the inevitable. The director of the care facility did say they had rooms available so he could move in any time.”

“I’ll call him this afternoon,” Alan said, as he squeezed his father’s hand. “We can probably move him in this weekend. In the meantime, maybe it would be better if he slept in his recliner; he doesn’t seem to have any trouble sleeping there during the day. Then you would only have to get him to the bathroom and back. I know that is no small thing but it would save two trips per day.”

“Good idea, I should be able to manage the bathroom situation but I might need you or Dawn to come over and help with sponge baths. If we can get him in this weekend we could probably get by with one good sponge bath before then and I’ll do my best to keep him clean.”

“All right,” Alan replied, “I’ll let Dawn know. Once Dad is settled we can work on selling Dawn’s house, get the move done, and then it will be your turn. Have you decided where you want to live?”

“Not exactly, but I’ve been checking condos online in Santa Monica.”

Alan looked at his sister, smiled sincerely, and said, “You’ve been amazing through all of this. I’m sorry I haven’t been a very good brother to you over the years but I want you to know that I’ll always be here for you.”

“Thanks Bro, back at ya. We’ll leave the past behind and move on as one big happy family.”

“Unfortunately,” Alan replied, “without Mom, and only part of Dad, we’re moving into the position of elders now, but hopefully we’ll be able to keep the house in the family for generations to come.” Tina gave her brother a heartfelt hug before he left.

Moving day was hectic for the siblings and their father was confused by what was going on. When he was seated in the chair next to the bed in his new room, Tina turned on a baseball game for him. It made her incredibly sad to know that he would be spending this night, and every night for the rest of his life, alone in this room. She thought about staying overnight with him but decided against it, realizing that the sooner he became accustomed to his new routine, the happier he would be. He would be receiving visits from his children and grandchildren multiple times per week so it wasn’t like he was being cut off from them.

When Dawn and Alan went to get the last of the boxes from the car, Tina noticed the director of the facility standing in the hallway. She walked over to him and said, “I know we’ve been introduced but I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.”

“It’s Jason. I didn’t mean to interrupt but I wanted to make sure your father was getting settled in. How’s it going? Is there anything we can do to make the process a little easier?”

“No, I don’t think so, your staff has been great.” Tina then saw a cat walking by. She had also noticed a couple of small dogs walking around the facility on her previous visit. “It’s so cool that you have animals here.”

Jason smiled and said, “They’re rescue animals and we think they provide comfort for our guests. The animals love to be cuddled and most of the residents love to pet them, so it works out well. In some cases, with people who are ill and having memory loss issues, they end up being handled by care givers rather than touched with affection. It’s not intentional; when there’s no response it’s easy to forget that just because their minds aren’t working as well as they once did, they still need to feel human touch, or in this case, contact with pets. Some of the residents really light up when a cat sits on their laps or they reach down to pet a dog. They fulfill a mutual need.”

Tina crouched down and scratched the kitty between his ears and she smiled when the cat started purring. “See how immediate that is,” Jason said. “It’s good to have reminders of how important touch is.”

That night, while Tina was in bed and trying to read, she shed tears for her father and hoped with all her heart that he wasn’t lonely. She was also worried that he was afraid. A *ping* sound came from her computer so she set her book down, dried her eyes with a tissue, and looked at the screen. She saw that a message had come in from Steve.

Hi Tina,

Sorry it took me so long to get back to you but I’ve been very busy at work. I really enjoyed having coffee with you and I was hoping we could go out for dinner. How about this weekend?

Steve

Tina stared at the message and decided that with her impending move, most likely to Santa Monica, there would be too much distance between them. Just before deleting the message, she remembered what Jason from the care facility had said to her. *It’s good to have reminders of how important touch is.*

Jason

It had been a long, busy day and the fact that it was a Saturday made the time at work seem even longer. Jason couldn't remember a previous occasion when three new residents had moved in on the same day. The weekends were popular move-in days but it was usually just one person and he would typically be able to pop in, discuss any issues with the family, and be on his way. But in this instance, he'd spent the entire day at the facility and missed out on a Saturday with his family. He told himself that it was no big deal, and it was just the way the schedule works sometimes, but he did look forward to the weekends and he couldn't help but feel that an entire day had been stolen from him.

When Jason arrived home, his wife, Lisa, was in the kitchen cooking dinner and the kids were in the living room. His oldest son, Mathew, was sitting on the couch while his two younger brothers, Jimmy and Davey, were engaged in video game combat against one another. Mathew appeared to be watching the on-screen action but Jason knew him well enough to know that he was staring off into space, daydreaming. When Mathew was younger they had called him by a nickname, Matty, but when he was ten years old he announced that he preferred Mathew and he couldn't understand why they felt the need to call him by anything other than his given name. He didn't like *Matt* either.

At fifteen years old, Mathew was an odd duck. While Jimmy (age 12) and Davey (age 9) were rambunctious boys, Mathew had very few friends and he spent most of his free time reading and studying astronomy. Athletically, he was graceful and well-coordinated so he wasn't the last to be picked in gym class, but his lack of interest made him appear aloof and standoffish. His competency at sports kept him from being bullied but he didn't stand out in any way. That was the way he liked it and he was very good at flying under the radar in all social situations. It was as though he wasn't actually there and he embraced being invisible.

Jason found it strange that their oldest son was the weird one. Typically, the first born is the accomplished hero while the peculiar personalities develop later in the birth order. Despite his desire to separate himself from the world, Mathew excelled academically and when drawn into a conversation, he was well spoken and had mastered the art of clearly stating his opinions. He had full acceptance in the family and neither Jason nor Lisa ever tried to engage him in activities he didn't want to do. They had both been drawn into people helping professions so compassion and acceptance were parts of their personalities. Jason enjoyed watching spectator sports (especially football and basketball) but he knew it wasn't Mathew's thing. He wanted to relate to his oldest son on that level, as he did with Jimmy and Davey, along with his father and brothers, but that wasn't who Mathew was so he tried to engage him in discussions about books and the night sky. The problem was that trying to convince Mathew to pull his nose out of a book and have a conversation could be difficult.

After Lisa called everyone to the table, Mathew immediately got up and walked into the dining room. His gait was like that of a professor walking along a philosophical path. Jimmy and Davey tried to get in a final few seconds of screen warfare before Dad pulled the plug. When they were all seated, Jason led the family in a brief, heartfelt prayer and then it was on to the task at hand. Jimmy and Davey assaulted the pan of enchiladas

while Mathew nibbled on his salad and waited for them to finish loading their plates. Lisa asked Jason about his day as she relished the sight of her sons at the dinner table, enjoying the food she had prepared.

“It was good, other than the fact that I had to put in a full day on a Saturday. Three new residents moved in and everything went smoothly. The families were in a place of quiet acceptance so I was able to ease their concerns while I answered their questions. They all seemed to understand that the staff is doing their best to make their loved ones as comfortable as they can be.”

“How come old people go crazy?” Jimmy asked.

“We’ve been through this,” Jason patiently replied, “they aren’t all old and they aren’t crazy. There are illnesses like Alzheimer’s Disease and Dementia that affect some people’s brains and it makes it hard for them to remember things.”

“I hope I never get those diseases,” Jimmy said.

“Then eat your vegetables,” Lisa ordered. “The best thing for your brain is good nutrition.” Lisa never missed an opportunity to promote healthy eating. Jimmy made a show of trying to wolf down his salad as quickly as possible, which brought a stern look from Lisa and giggles from Davey.

“Has a link between nutrition and Alzheimer’s been established?” Mathew asked.

After finishing a bite of his enchilada, Jason replied, “It depends on which studies you want to believe. There isn’t what I would consider to be a definitive answer to your question. Researchers have linked just about everything you can think of to memory loss but in my opinion, we still don’t know for sure. My advice, for general overall good health and well-being, is to eat your leafy greens, get plenty of exercise, and keep your brain active.”

“My brain is active when I’m playing video games,” Davey said.

“How about if you try to keep those brain sparks flying when you’re at school,” Lisa replied.

The dinner table conversation changed directions when Jimmy asked if he could have some friends stay for a sleepover on his birthday. As Lisa and Jimmy went over the when, how many friends, and what he wanted to eat during the party, Jason pondered the importance of good nutrition and Mathew wondered how research studies on the same topic could come up with different results.

That night, after the boys were asleep, Jason and Lisa relaxed in bed with their books. At a chapter break, Jason remembered the comments he’d made to the daughter of a new resident that day about the importance of touch. He hadn’t meant it in a sexual way but as he thought about it, and was enjoying the feel of Lisa’s silk teddy brushed up against him, he felt the need to touch his wife, and when he did, she responded with enthusiasm.

When they were exhausted, and Lisa was breathing gently while he held her close, Jason thought about how happy he was. He had a loving and beautiful wife, three great kids, and a career he was passionate about. Financially, they weren’t rich but they were well off and they had a lot to look forward to in their future. His life was so wonderful, he almost felt guilty about it.

“Did you ever wonder how we got to be so lucky?” Jason asked.

“Lucky in what way?” Lisa replied. Their conversation was being conducted in whispers.

“With our lives and how everything has fallen perfectly into place.”

Lisa smiled at her husband and then said, "It wasn't because of luck, we made our reality happen. We saw what we needed to do in order to have the lives we wanted and we did it."

Jason thought for a minute and then said, "You're right, but there is also an element of luck associated with coming into the world in a time and place where opportunities are available. It's not always like that and there are locations where our lifestyle is an unobtainable goal."

"We don't have any control over that," Lisa replied. "We didn't create the world, we were born into it, and we made the best of the opportunities that were available to us. What were we supposed to do, make a vow of poverty and live on the streets because there are areas in the world where living in squalor is the norm?"

"I'm not saying that. It just seems like there was an element of random chance that influenced our destiny."

Lisa snuggled in closer and felt Jason's heartbeat as she said, "We weren't born wealthy and no one gave us anything beyond loving homes and a comfortable environment from which we could branch out. We both took out student loans to pay for college, we entered careers that were meaningful to us, neither one of us has ever received an inheritance or trust fund, and when we wanted to buy a house we saved every cent we could for a down payment. When we wanted to start a family, we did so thoughtfully and made sure we could provide for our children in ways that will give them the best opportunities for successful and meaningful lives. Nothing was handed to us, we had a vision of the life we wanted and we made it happen without any help. There's nothing to feel guilty about, enjoy the accomplishment."

Jason knew she was right and that was how he usually viewed the situation but there were times when it seemed too good, like it would all come crashing down at some point because that was how the world worked. He knew his thinking was irrational but it was based on seeing so many patients with memory loss issues and how the rug had been pulled out from underneath them. One day everything is great and a couple of weeks later you can't remember what planet you live on. He knew the only answer was to appreciate the moment since no one had any idea what the future might hold. But it affected him when he saw people do everything right in regard to planning for their futures, and then when their time came to enjoy the fruits of a lifetime of labor, they got a knockout punch instead.

After a period of quiet breathing, in their dimly lit bedroom, Jason said, "I think my problem is that I love our lives so much and I'm afraid something is going to happen that will rattle our foundation."

Just before drifting off, Lisa said, "Don't worry baby, whatever life throws at us, we'll take it on as a family. Have faith in us."

The next morning Jason decided to spend his Sunday relaxing. Typically, he would have a wide range of activities planned for the family so Jimmy and Davey wouldn't spend too much time playing video games (not that Lisa would ever allow that to happen) and Mathew wouldn't be holed up in his room studying star charts. Since he had worked a ten-hour day on Saturday, he decided a day of respite was well deserved. It was the opening day of football season so a leisurely breakfast with Lisa followed by a little yard work and an afternoon of watching football was the plan of the day.

Over the course of the afternoon he relived the pillow talk from the night before. For some unknown reason, the notion that it could all come crashing down at any moment was weighing on his mind and it was preventing him from thoroughly enjoying his day. He mentally addressed his concerns in the ways that his wife had laid out

the night before, and he believed that everything she said was 100% accurate, but his worries stayed with him like an annoying mosquito.

Jason thought about a recent, new arrival at the care facility; a man in his mid-60's whose mind had been completely ravaged by Alzheimer's. When he talked with the man's wife, he learned that they had put money away from the time they were married until the time they retired from their careers so they could buy a house in Arizona next to a golf course. They were both avid golfers and their vision for retirement would have been a dream come true. The couple was able to buy their new home just prior to retirement but then their world came crashing down. The husband started having memory problems and it wasn't long before he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and his painful descent into the depths of dementia spiraled out of control.

They had spent their lives looking forward to this period of togetherness in a perfect location that they had saved and planned for. This man and woman had done everything right, no one gave them anything; they worked, they planned, and they followed through. Then it was all taken away, gone, just like that. As Jason trimmed the rose bushes he knew that he shouldn't dwell on such matters since, as far as he could tell, no one had total control over their health as they grew older. Diet and exercise certainly had a significant impact but in the end, we have to play the cards we're dealt. It did comfort him when he remembered Lisa saying they would deal with any and all problems as a family. Jason decided that he would commit to having faith in his family and that reaffirmation altered his mood for the better. From the kitchen window, Lisa noticed that the melody of Jason's whistling had accompanied the sound of the hedge clippers.

Throughout the work week Jason made sure the facility was running smoothly, which is not always easy when you're responsible for a building filled with people who have varying degrees of memory loss as well as dogs and cats strolling around the hallways. His staff did a great job and he was proud of the care they provided for the residents. He knew that over the past ten years, in his time as director, his management style had not gone unnoticed at the corporate office. He was also well aware that their bottom line was profit, but there would be no profits if the care wasn't extraordinary, so he made sure the executives in their Beverly Hills office building saw nothing but good news on the spreadsheets he sent in. His career allowed him the satisfaction of helping to make the world a better place by providing excellent care for people who desperately needed it.

There had been rumblings that the corporate hierarchy, which oversaw care facilities throughout the country, wanted to move Jason up the ladder. He had mixed emotions about the possibility. He loved working in Calabasas since it was close to home and he felt that the work he was doing was important. Having to commute to HQ in Beverly Hills wouldn't be the end of the world and even though the traffic would be a nightmare, he could deal with it. He knew that he would never move out of the area because Lisa had her job and the kids were firmly rooted in the community. The fact that he wouldn't have to move did make a potential promotion a possibility, but as far as the actual work; he was certain that he would prefer continuing on in his current position rather than managing programs from an office. If it came down to it, he wondered how much money they would offer and if he could be bought. Did he have a price or was her perfectly content with life as he knew it? And would he even have a choice if he wanted to stay with this corporation.

Jason decided it was too much to think about since they hadn't actually offered him a promotion yet so once again he followed Lisa's advice by having faith in the family. If it came down to it, they would talk about any potential career options and make the decision together.

The following weekend was wide open since there weren't any new residents scheduled to move into the facility and Lisa maintained a regular work week schedule of Monday – Friday from 8:00 – 5:00 in her position as the director of the guidance counseling services within their school district. With a block of free time, and summer turning into autumn, Jason thought it would be a good idea to go on a camping trip. Since they only had the weekend it would have to be somewhere close and he thought Lake Casitas in Ojai would be a good location. The family preferred longer jaunts to Yosemite, the Kern River, or Joshua Tree National Park, but they were generally agreeable to any camping plans.

When Jason brought up the idea during dinner on Thursday he was reminded that both Jimmy and Davey had soccer games on Saturday morning. He replied that both games would be over before noon and they would have plenty of time to get to Lake Casitas by mid-afternoon. They could come back late in the afternoon on Sunday so they would have over 24 hours at the lake. Everyone was on board so he told Lisa he would leave work early on Friday, pick up provisions from the store, and get the camping gear together. That night he went online and booked a campsite. He was glad there were numerous available sites on the outer fringes of the campground. They didn't generally camp at Lake Casitas because it was often overflowing, attracted a loud party crowd, and was definitely not a wilderness experience, but if you could get out of the mainstream, it was a nice location. The younger boys liked to fish and go to the small water park, and Mathew liked bringing his telescope so he could star gaze with less light pollution than he had to deal with at their home in Woodland Hills.

Lisa enjoyed relaxing by the campsite and preparing meals while Jason spent most of his time hanging out with the boys. They typically took a hike together as a family and without any video games or electronic gadgets, the kids were enthusiastic about playing board games with their parents at night.

Once the soccer games were completed on Saturday, the family loaded up the SUV and set out on the hour-long drive for Ojai and on to Lake Casitas. Any time they camped in this location they accepted the fact that they might have to leave abruptly if the Saturday night party crowds were too loud. Upon arrival, all seemed quiet and most of the camp sites were occupied by families rather than teens and twenty somethings. They were optimistic about their chances for having a peaceful weekend.

Once the tents were set up, Jason and the boys went down to the lake to fish from shore while Lisa relaxed in her hammock with a book. She dozed for a few minutes between chapters and after a couple hours of reading/snoozing she decided to get dinner rolling. They had packed burgers for grilling so all she had to do was chop up some greens and vegetables for the salad. They would be making s'mores later on when it was dark and they had a fire going. Even though Lisa didn't love this campground, she tried to make it a fun camping experience for the boys. She would have been happier in Yosemite or Sequoia but that wasn't practical for a weekend trip so they made the best of what was available.

When the guys returned from their fishing expedition, Lisa was ready to light the fire and get the burgers on the grill. Davey and Jimmy were roughhousing and running around the campground while Jason tried to keep

an eye on them and assist with dinner preparations. Mathew sat down in a camp chair and flipped through the latest issue of Astronomy Magazine.

Once dinner was on the picnic table, the kids sat down and prepared to chow down. Jason led them in a prayer and when he was done, he mentally questioned why both he and Lisa were so adamant about the dinner prayer every night. Neither one of them were particularly religious and they didn't attend church as a family. When the subject came up with the kids, they said it was important to be thankful for all they had in life and prayer was a good way of expressing their gratitude. Jimmy and Davey didn't care too much about the evening prayer, it was just something to get through before they could eat, but Mathew would often question the content of the prayers that both Jason and Lisa came up with. They had made the decision that if they were going to pray, they should pray from the heart and not just repeat standard prayers, so they came up with something new to be thankful for every night.

After this evening's prayer, which ran along the lines of being thankful for the safe drive to Lake Casitas and the beautiful evening they were enjoying as a family, Jason wondered if his sentiments were sincere. Was there really a supreme being to thank for a safe drive and a pretty autumn evening? He didn't think there was, but there might be. Was he playing it safe, *just in case*? He didn't know but it was a little disturbing that earlier in the week he had been concerned about his life being too perfect and now he was questioning the evening dinner prayer, which he believed added value to their lives, even if they were praying to a non-entity. Why couldn't he just let things be? They had wonderful lives and expressions of gratitude brought the family closer together. Why find fault with any of it?

While he was eating his burger, Jason decided that his concerns and questioning attitude were irrational and he made a silent vow to enjoy every moment of this precious gift of life and not worry about things he didn't have any control over. After dinner was finished, everyone helped with the cleanup and then they started a campfire, which was followed by the s'mores making operations. S'mores could even bring out Mathew's fun side, which was usually dormant, and the family always enjoyed this activity when camping. Since Mathew was usually so serious, when he got a little goofy it had a ripple effect on everyone else and some of their happiest moments as a family were spent around campfires.

Later that night, as Davey and Jimmy were talking in their tent, and Mathew was looking through his telescope into a cloudless black sky, Jason and Lisa called it a night after telling Mathew to stay close to the campsite. They made love quietly so that they wouldn't be heard by their children and the effort required for maintaining silent orgasms brought a round of giggles when they were finished. Lisa looked at her husband and whispered, "It's okay if they hear us laughing, they won't guess what we've been doing." Jason realized she was right and that brought on another round of suppressed laughter.

Before drifting off, Jason stepped out of the tent to make sure all was well with the boys. He saw that Mathew was still up and gazing through his telescope. He had a flashlight with a red light because red reduced glare and he used the light to study his star charts and make notes in his journal. "Not too late tonight okay buddy," Jason said.

"I'm almost done Dad."

Jason then put his ear up against Jimmy and Davey's tent and all he could hear was their peaceful breathing, so he returned to his tent and snuggled up next to his wife in their double sleeping bag. In the middle of the night he woke up and noticed that Mathew still had a flashlight on in his tent. He thought about telling his son that he should go to sleep but he was too tired and he couldn't think of anything wrong with reading late into the night on a camping trip.

The next day, after Lisa made her awesome campground pancakes, the whole family went for a hike. It was a beautiful day in the Los Padres National Forest as the heat of summer was transitioning into the ways of autumn. It was still very warm, 80 degrees at 10:00 am, but the sun seemed a little less intense than on Sunday mornings in August, and a breeze led to thoughts of the upcoming seasonal changes. Jason and Lisa held hands, Jimmy and Davey ran ahead, fell behind, and stopped periodically for impromptu wrestling matches. Mathew walked along observing the trees and plants around him. Periodically he would take out his journal and jot down notes.

Life felt idyllic to Jason and he was doing his best to embrace the moment, but the feeling that impending doom could happen at any moment continue to linger. Lisa was oblivious to the hovering black cloud that he was unable to shake and he was thankful for that. The notion that life couldn't possibly be this good swirled around his brain and parried with his more rational thought processes. He believed reality would eventually dominate and the periods of negativity would diminish; it was just a matter of time. He knew that the more he told himself not to think about something, the more likely he was to think about it, so he nudged the invading thoughts away when they occurred. Jason hoped that as his busy life continued, and he became distracted, the pessimism would cease.

During the drive home, accompanied by the golden sun setting behind them, the family listened to classic rock and played car bingo. Mathew seemed above it all and rarely participated but it was a good distraction for Jimmy and Davey to get them through their last hour without access to video games. When they were back in Woodland Hills, they stopped by their favorite pizza joint to pick up an order that Lisa had phoned in during their drive. Once home, Jason went to work putting the camping gear away, Lisa started making a salad to go with the pizza, Jimmy and Davey went right to the PlayStation, and Mathew went to his room to transfer the astronomy notes from his daily journal to a file on his computer.

At the end of the evening, when the kids were in their rooms, Jason and Lisa relaxed on the sofa and started watching a movie. They were both tired from the busy weekend but Jason managed to stay awake as his wife dozed off periodically. Just prior to the end of the movie, Lisa decided that she needed to stretch out in bed so she kissed her husband goodnight and then continued on to the land of nod. Jason managed to stay awake until the end of the film but before joining his wife in bed, he decided to step outside and breathe in the cool night air.

While Jason was in the backyard, looking up at the sky, he heard someone getting a glass of water in the kitchen. He turned around to look through the sliding glass door and saw Mathew standing at the kitchen sink. When Mathew noticed that his father was in the backyard he came out and joined him. "What are you doing out here Dad?"

"I just came out to get some air before going to bed. What's up with you, it's late, are you having trouble sleeping?" In the past, Mathew had experienced problems with insomnia.

“No, I was transferring notes from my field journal to my computer files, and then I had some homework I had to get done for school tomorrow. Have you been looking at the stars?”

“I guess you could say that, although not with any particular purpose, just taking in the vastness of the universe.”

Mathew smiled and said, “A worthy source of contemplation. If you’re feeling adventurous I could get my telescope out and show you Saturn in the western sky. It’s easily distinguishable, even with all the light pollution we have here.”

“That’s okay, I’m going up to bed in a minute.” As father and son stood together, soaking in the quiet night, Jason tried to process his lingering concerns about an abrupt disruption in their lives. He looked at Mathew and asked, “Does looking at the stars and planets affect your state of being in any way?”

Mathew found the question to be rather odd. His father was a straight forward kind of guy and he didn’t tend to ask esoteric questions. It was also strange that he had chosen to pose the question to Mathew, who put his faith in established facts and theories rather than letting his imagination run wild. Nonetheless, he took the question seriously and thought about it for a minute before answering.

“I suppose all the influences that come together while observing the night sky help to maintain a sense of order in my mind. It seems to me that planetary rotations, gravity, and the distance that light has traveled from far away stars are concepts that are mind boggling in their consistency. Everything we can observe appears to be operating in perfect symmetry.” In a moment of rare openness, Mathew put his hand on his father’s back and added, “Just like our family; as our parents, you and Mom make up the star. Davey, Jimmy, and I rotate around your gravitational pull and everything falls into place. Perfect symmetry.”

Mathew then said goodnight and went to bed. Jason stood outside for a few more minutes and thought about his son’s observations. As was often the case when speaking with Mathew, he had to remind himself that his son was only fifteen years old and he took a moment to marvel at his son’s maturity. He also realized that Mathew’s comments had laid to rest his concerns about their lives being disrupted. The idea that their family made up a universe, not unlike the cosmos, brought him a sense of peace and reinforced Lisa’s belief that anything that could possibly happen would be dealt with as a family. Before drifting off that night, Jason’s final thought was; *as our parents, you and Mom make up the star.*

Mathew

Art class was a new experience for Mathew. He had never been interested in drawing or painting, but from his brief periods of elementary school art instruction, he knew that he had inherited some of his mom's artistic talent. His drawings as a child had always been several levels above his classmates and his penmanship emphasized perfect form. Had it not been for the removal of art and music from the public school's mandatory programs, he likely would have progressed and developed his skills. He'd chosen art as an elective this semester and it surprised him how much he was enjoying it. After some initial exercises, he noticed that his work in art class was improving dramatically and it had caught the attention of his teacher.

The teacher, Mrs. Carlson, noticed right off the bat that Mathew had talent but his skills hadn't been refined. After a month in her class, his work showed remarkable improvement and he quickly fell into the category of her most gifted students. There was something ancient and precise about his drawings that reminded her of Leonardo Da Vinci. When she observed him working, he looked engaged and calmly enthused about what he was doing.

Mrs. Carlson knew that Mathew was something of a prodigy in math and science so she doubted that he would be interested in pursuing art beyond her class, but before the semester ended she planned to have a conversation with him about furthering his art education and fully developing his skills. It could be a tough sell since it was difficult for young people who were not already obsessed with art to see it as a possible career path, and she had seen several talented young students laugh at the notion of art as anything more than a hobby. Her approach with Mathew would be a little different since he favored technical illustrations. She didn't know what his aspirations were in life but she could see how his skills could be incorporated into various fields of science and technology. She wanted to give him a few more weeks before bringing up the topic to make sure he stayed enthused, and to see how his skills developed when they moved from drawing into painting, and then on to an introduction to sculpting.

Mathew had an inherent sense of humility and his parents found that getting him to speak up about his accomplishments could be difficult. The first indication they had that he was taking an art elective was when one of his drawings fell out of his backpack. Lisa found it on the living room floor and when the family gathered for dinner that night, she brought the drawing out to the table. While looking at Mathew, she asked, "Is this yours?"

"It's mine, I drew it in art class yesterday. I was wondering what happened to it, where did you find it?"

"It was in the living room, on the floor."

"It must have fallen out of my backpack when I was getting my homework out last night. I decided to do it in the living room since it was quiet in there for a change." He then sneered at his younger brothers and they responded with their own versions of a menacing glare. The implication being that it was only quiet in the living room because Davey and Jimmy had been elsewhere.

"It's very impressive," Lisa said as she continued to gaze at his drawing of a telescope, which was separated into its components.

“Thanks, I had to take an elective and art seemed like the most interesting one available. I suppose it’s not a total waste of time, there is some value in it, and it’s preferable to some of the other options, like choir.”

“You’re probably not interested in perusing art beyond this class and I’m not an expert, but in my opinion, your talent could serve you well in life.”

“How so?” Mathew asked.

Lisa was momentarily stumped by his question but after a moment’s pause she said, “Even if you can’t find a way to incorporate art skills into a profession that interests you, drawing and painting are activities you can engage in for the rest of your life. I haven’t done any painting since you guys were born but it’s something that’s in the back of mind for when I have more free time.”

“Duly noted,” Mathew replied. Lisa knew that he wanted to end the discussion, but she hoped that a few more weeks in the class would develop an appreciation for the value of artistic expression, rather than seeing it as a means to an end.

Over the course of the next two months, Mathew’s life continued on as it typically did; he excelled in school, did his best to observe the night sky despite the excessive amount of glare in the San Fernando Valley, and he enjoyed spending time with his friends as they gathered together to prepare for various academic competitions. There were a couple of exceptions to this business-as-usual period of time. He found himself developing a greater interest in art after Mrs. Carlson started paying more attention to him and commenting that his drawings were Da Vinci-esque. Another new experience was when he realized that for the first time in his life, he was infatuated with a girl.

The girl he was falling for was part of his small group of friends who got together to study or practice for academic competitions. Her name was Sylvia and she had recently emigrated to the United States from Argentina. It was her first year in an American high school and intellectually she was on par with the brightest kids in Mathew’s class, which is how she ended up in their study group. Both of her parents were born in Argentina but her father had gone to college in the United States and he started speaking to her in English from the time when she was an infant. Because she was raised in a two-language home, she spoke English perfectly, with only a slight accent. That hint of an accent made Mathew’s heart skip a beat. A career move had brought her family to the United States for an indefinite period, so she expected to be in Woodland Hills until at least high school graduation.

Mathew marveled at the way Silvia seemed to be so at ease in her new environment. He couldn’t imagine his family picking up and moving to a foreign country and then immediately settling in like they’d always lived there. Davey and Jimmy would go completely nuts if they were uprooted from their house, let alone their country. But somehow Sylvia managed to go with the flow and she was relaxed and confident in every situation.

Due to the fact that Mathew didn’t have any experience with girls, he didn’t know what his first step in regard to Sylvia should be. His friends were all nerdy so they wouldn’t be able to give him any advice. It seemed like the only people he could talk to about it were his parents. He was tentative about bringing the topic up with them because he was a teenager and they were old, so things were probably a lot different from when they were young. He also knew that they were amused by his circle of friends. One time when his study group came over, they were working in the living room and he’d gotten up to get a drink of water in the kitchen. While there, he

overheard his dad say to his mom; *Observing these kids is like watching an episode of The Big Bang Theory*. Mathew didn't take offense to the comment because it was understandable how they would feel that way, but it also reinforced his opinion that his peers were different and out of sync with the general population.

For the time being, he was in a holding pattern. Sylvia wasn't going anywhere so he had time to do some research and make an informed decision on how best to proceed. He came to the conclusion that he should make an effort to avoid staring at her black, curly locks and the way her hair color seemed to match her mesmerizing eyes. Mathew also didn't want to create a situation in which Sylvia would feel uncomfortable. If he professed his desire to spend time alone with her, and she wasn't interested, it could make for an awkward situation. Maybe he would mention it to his dad and at least get a second opinion on the matter.

As the weeks passed, Mathew managed to keep his feelings for Sylvia in check but he was worried about how much time he spent thinking about her. His ability to focus wasn't altered to the point where it could have a potential effect on his GPA, but she crept into his thoughts. He often found himself pushing away the image of her face from his mind so that he could get back in sync with the tasks at hand. When they were in the same room together, or they passed each other in the hallways at school, he tried to maintain a casual attitude. He generally wouldn't offer anything more than brief, polite conversation unless she had something school-related to discuss. During those longer discussions he would look up, as though searching for answers to her questions, but he was trying to avoid looking at her face because he knew he would fall under the spell of her beauty and be unable to express coherent thoughts.

Mathew found that Sylvia was also making her way into his artwork. He wasn't drawing or painting her face but female imagery began to creep into what was once the exclusive domain of spacecraft, planets, and solar systems. This softening approach to his artistic concepts did not go unnoticed by Mrs. Carlson. She thought it was great that Mathew was expanding his imagination and adding human elements to his work. Her opinion was that it was making him a well-rounded artist rather than solely a gifted technical illustrator. The fact that the human imagery was always female also did not go unnoticed, and she suspected his evolution as an artist was being influenced by a particular young lady. Who that might be she didn't know but one day, as she was walking down a hallway, she saw Mathew having a discussion with the new student from Argentina and she wondered if this was the girl who was inspiring her protégé. After passing, Mrs. Carlson tried to look back and get a glimpse of Mathew's face, but the hallway was crowded so she couldn't pick up any specific vibes, although there did seem to be some electricity in the air.

Just prior to Thanksgiving break, Mathew turned in a painting of a transparent woman's face as the foreground of an intricate solar system. It was an impressive piece of work as the transparency fronting all the color in the myriad of planets was maintained despite the difficulty in keeping it prominent. Mrs. Carlson didn't know what Mathew had intended but in her opinion, it represented a female God-head observing her creation of a universe. *He must be really smitten with this girl*, she thought.

Before class let out, Mrs. Carlson asked Mathew to stop by and see her before he left. When the other students filed out, and he was standing in front of her desk, she said, "Mathew, your skills have developed to the point where I think you're ready for the next level. Actually, the next several levels. Unfortunately, this is the only art class the school has to offer so there is nothing more I can help you with here. However, I have a friend

who owns an art supply store in Reseda and he offers classes for gifted young artists. These classes aren't free but if you're interested, and your family can afford it, I think it would be in your best interests to give the classes a try. It would be a shame if you didn't reach your full potential as an artist, even if it ended up being nothing more than a hobby." She then handed Mathew a business card for the art supply store. "If you call, tell them that I recommended you and you'll get a discount."

"Okay, thanks Mrs. Carlson, I'll talk to my parents about it. I'm interested but I don't have a lot of free time. If I can work it out, I'll give it a try."

Mathew put the business card in his pocket and didn't think about it too much after that. He had developed a deeper appreciation for art and its therapeutic value in regard to expressing his feelings about Sylvia but it was still just an interesting diversion. There didn't seem to be an application for it in his life beyond sitting in front of an easel as an appealing way to spend a rainy afternoon. Nonetheless, at the dinner table that evening, he told his parents what Mrs. Carlson had said and he gave the business card to his mom. Lisa responded enthusiastically and assumed that since Mathew had passed along the info, he wanted to peruse the classes. She immediately assured him that the money wouldn't be a problem and she would call the art supply store and set it up. Mathew hadn't expected her to run with it so fast, and he wasn't sure that he wanted to take more art classes, but his mom was excited so he decided he could go to at least one and check it out.

The next morning, after asking Mathew about his hours of availability, Lisa called the art supply store from her office. They were able to work with Mathew's schedule and she made an appointment to bring him in the following Thursday at 4:00 in the afternoon. She knew that Mathew was not overly enthused about art but Lisa was thrilled that she would be able to relate to her son a new level.

When they arrived at the art supply store on Thursday afternoon, Lisa took care of the payment process and then they were led to the back section of the store where an area had been sectioned off for classes. Lisa said goodbye and let Matthew know that she would be back in an hour to pick him up. He was then introduced to Katie, who was providing instruction that afternoon. She looked at the folder he was carrying and asked, "Is that some of your artwork?"

"Yes, I've had one semester of art at school and these are some of the projects."

"Great, while I look these over, why don't you sit down next to Angie and start drawing whatever you feel like. After I review your portfolio, I'll give you some structured tasks to work on that will help improve your skills."

There was only one other student in the room so that had to be Angie. Mathew said, "Okay," and then sat down at the table next to the girl. "Hi," he said after settling in.

"Hi."

"Is Angie the name on your birth certificate or is it Angela?"

"Angie Branson is the name on my birth certificate."

She didn't seem to find the question odd, which was an unusual reaction. Mathew often found himself compelled to ask that question when meeting someone whose name might be a shortened version or a nickname. Angie seemed to consider it a perfectly legitimate question to ask whereas most people adopted a *what business is it of yours* attitude.

“My name is Mathew.” Angie looked at him and smiled. She appeared to be roughly the same age, maybe a year or two younger, and she was fully engaged in the project she was working on. As Mathew was gathering materials, he glanced at her drawing. It appeared to be nothing more than random, swirling lines. “What are you working on?”

“It’s a drawing of my brother at the helm of a sailboat.”

Surprised by her response, Mathew took a closer look and after refocusing, he could see that out of the lines of chaos, the drawing emerged as described. A sailboat on the sea with a young man steering the boat appeared before his eyes. He could even make out the name on the stern of the boat; *For a Dancer*.

Mathew needed a minute to process what he was seeing and before starting his own drawing, he said, “That’s very impressive. After seeing how your image appears out of the lines, I feel like I have a better understanding of how the universe came into being.” He immediately regretted his comment since he knew that people thought he was weird whenever he expressed the random observations that came into his mind. He generally reformatted his thoughts for the general population before speaking them. In order to deflect, he added, “I bet your brother will think it’s a very cool drawing.”

Angie didn’t seem to think there was anything bizarre about Mathew’s comment but he was taken aback when she replied, “He won’t be able to see it, he passed away last year.”

“Sorry,” Mathew said tentatively, “I didn’t mean to bring up a sad subject.”

“It’s okay, his name is Kenny and I believe when it’s my time to go, he’ll be there to welcome me home.”

Mathew didn’t know how to respond because statements along those lines were totally alien to his way of thinking. Fortunately, he was saved from having to come up with an awkward response when Katie came back with his folder. “Sorry, I haven’t actually started working yet. I was talking to Angie about her drawing.”

“She has a unique style,” Katie said.

Angie looked up and smiled when Mathew said, “That’s an understatement.”

Katie laughed and then continued, “Let’s talk about your work. You’re obviously very talented but your range is a little narrow. It seems as though you’ve been very fixated on outer space and then somewhere along the line female imagery became shrouded in the mysteries of your universe. I think it’s important to stretch one’s boundaries so I’m going to have you work on something completely different. That doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with the way you like to draw and paint. The exercises you go through here will help you expand your skill set and you’ll see improvement when you go back to the projects you want to work on. I’d like you to start by drawing a landscape that includes people. You can choose the specific setting but one idea might be to draw some friends hiking along a mountain path, something like that.

“Okay,” Mathew replied and he immediately thought of his family’s recent trip to Lake Casitas and the hike they had gone on. He decided to draw a similar scene. As he began working on his assignment, the pace felt awkward and slow. He could see in his mind’s eye what he wanted to draw but getting it out on paper was proving to be problematic. When drawing strictly from his imagination, the flow from brain to hand, and on to paper, was effortless. Everything came out exactly as intended. But this project, in which he had an actual memory to work from, felt stagnant and forced. He was also distracted by Angie’s smooth pencil strokes and the way her drawing continued to evolve into a dreamy creation.

Mathew spent the next hour fighting his way through the task and when his time was up, he was not pleased with the work he had done, but it wasn't horrible either. Katie sat next to him and said, "In the future, if you want to keep coming back, I'll spend more time with you providing instruction. For today, I wanted to see if you could work your way through something completely different from what you're used to and you did well. You'd be surprised by how many young artists struggle with this type of assignment and give up in frustration halfway through. It's not easy to work outside of one's comfort zone."

Angie looked over and said, "My initial challenges were to draw in a straight forward style and I hated it at first, but I have to admit those exercises helped me improve as an artist." After glancing at Mathew's drawing, she added, "You did pretty good, congratulations."

"Thanks," Mathew replied. "I would like to come back and take more lessons and I'm sure my mom will be willing to pay for them. She was the one who wanted me to come here to begin with."

"Great!" Katy said enthusiastically. "I'd like you to keep coming back on Thursdays if you can. That's the one day when I'm always here and I'm interested in seeing how your skills evolve. I also think spending time working next to Angie is a good idea and she always comes on Thursdays. Your styles are very different and a little crossover in ideas and technique would benefit both of you. As I said, I'll spend more time with you in future lessons; today was more of a trial run for evaluation purposes."

"I'm sure that coming on Thursdays won't be a problem and I'll let my mom know when she picks me up."

"She's here now," Katy said. "Right before I came back to check on your work she came in and she's waiting in the lobby."

"Okay, I guess I better get going then," Mathew replied. "I'll see you both next week." After Katie and Angie said goodbye, Mathew went out to the lobby, told his mother about the lesson, and said that he wanted to continue on Thursday afternoons. She was overjoyed and told him not to worry about the costs. Before leaving, they signed up for weekly lessons and while they were finishing up the process, Angie came out to the lobby. She only had to wait a minute before her mom came in to pick her up. Mathew turned around to wave goodbye and Angie returned the wave. He felt as though there was a connection between the two of them. He wasn't filled with the adoring passion that he had for Sylvia, but he sensed a kindred spirit; two weirdos surrounded by a world filled with normal people.

After dinner that evening, the night sky was clear and it was a moonless night so Mathew decided to go out to the backyard with his telescope. When he came through the sliding glass door from the kitchen he saw that his dad was sitting in the backyard having a beer and reading a magazine. When Jason noticed that his son had his telescope with him, he asked, "Will the porch light bother you? I can go in and read if it's a problem."

"It's alright Dad, even though it's a clear night, with all the light pollution around here the porch light isn't going to make much difference. If it had been a brighter light, Mathew probably would have asked his father to turn it off and go inside, but it barely provided enough illumination to read by. "What's Mom doing?"

"She's upstairs, reading in bed. A Stephen King novel has her complete attention. Funny how horror is her guilty pleasure reading."

As Mathew was setting up his telescope and focusing the lens, he thought about Sylvia and whether it was a topic he should bring up with his father. After pondering the matter for few minutes, he decided to go for it. "Dad, you probably had girlfriends before you met Mom, right?"

Jason looked up from his magazine, smiled, and replied, "A couple, why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering if you had any experience talking with girls. There's a girl I like and I don't know how to approach her and let her know that I like her."

After thinking for moment, Jason said, "In most cases, I think it's best to tell people how you feel. If there isn't a reason not to, your best bet would be to try and find a little space where you can talk in private so you can let her know that you would like to spend some time together. What's the worst thing that can happen? She'll say no and you'll move one, or she'll say yes and you'll get to know one another better."

"Well, there is a reason not to say anything. She's in our study group and we are on the same team in math competitions. It could cause problems if I told her how I feel and she didn't feel the same way about me."

"That's a tough one," Jason replied. "Oh, wait a second, is it the new girl from Brazil?"

"Argentina," Mathew said, "but yes it's her." He was hoping to avoid getting into too much detail but in retrospect, he realized that it must have been obvious once he mentioned the study group. There were a couple of other girls who were involved in his various academic groups but he had known them for most of his life so the new girl was the most likely suspect.

"I guess it depends on how much you like her. If you'd rather not risk losing her as a friend and study partner, it certainly makes sense to keep your feelings to yourself. However, if you find yourself thinking about her all the time, and you feel like you have to know one way or another regardless of the consequences, then you should tell her. It's not like it would be the end of the world if one of you left the study group. The main thing is that you don't want to have any regrets and wonder what would have happened. If it's not that important to you then it won't matter, but if you have strong feelings then you should let her know. The thing about romance and love is that it rarely works out the way we think it's going to. Sometimes we have to jump in the deep end and hope for the best."

"Thanks Dad, I'm going to think about it a little more before I make a decision."

Jason stood up, took a last swig of his beer and said, "Good luck, but don't wait too long. She's a pretty girl and I'm sure there are other boys who are interested in her. You don't want to miss the boat because you spent too much time trying to make a decision. What's that called; paralysis by analysis? I'm going up to bed, don't stay up too late and I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight Dad." After his father left, Mathew tried to focus on the constellations but his mind was spinning from the advice. He knew that a decision had to be made; either talk to Sylvia or try to forget about her and move on. Once he settled into that mindset his choice became obvious, he had to tell her how he felt and let the chips fall where they may.

Over the course of the next week Mathew was unable to follow through with his decision to come clean with Sylvia. His conviction remained firm but he hadn't found the right opportunity nor had he tried to force the issue. He wondered whether there would be a perfect time that would reward his patience, or if he should march over to her house and knock on the front door. He tried to tell himself that there was no rush, but he also remembered

his father saying that other boys would be interested in her. When his mom dropped him off for his art class on Thursday he still hadn't made his move, and it was weighing heavily on his mind, but he knew that he had to do his best to completely focus on the art lesson.

When Katie came into the classroom, Mathew and Angie were already there organizing their art supplies and discussing their academic schedules. "Okay you two, for today's assignment I'm giving you another drawing challenge. Next week we'll focus on oil painting but for today, I want you to draw a face. The assignment is to make it as realistic as you can, without any veiled concepts. Just a face, any face you want, as accurately as you can draw it. Any questions?"

"I don't have any questions," Mathew replied.

"That makes two of us," Angie said. "Let's roll."

Before leaving the room, Katie said, "I'll be up front, let me know when you're done."

Once they began drawing, the room became silent. After an internal debate, Mathew decided to draw Sylvia's face. Her image was clear in his mind so he thought he would be able to draw her well. He had never taken the drawing of a face seriously before so this would be pushing the limits for him.

While working on the drawing of Sylvia's face, Mathew glanced over at Angie's drawing. Her sketch appeared to be of an old sea captain. The drawing clearly portrayed an elderly man with a weathered face and a Greek fisherman's hat. "Who is that?" Mathew asked.

"He's a friend of our family, his name is Captain Joe. We went out on his sailboat several times and he provided sailing lessons for my dad, my brother, and his girlfriend." She then looked over at his drawing and asked, "Is that your girlfriend?"

Mathew thought for a moment on how best to answer and then he decided to give it to her straight. "I wish she was my girlfriend but I haven't been able to tell her that I like her yet."

"Why not?" Angie asked.

"I don't have any experience with girls and the thought of approaching her makes me nervous. Also, she's in my study group and if I tell her I like her, but she doesn't like me, it will cause some problems."

Angie took a closer look and said, "You've done a good job of capturing her eyes. They appear mysterious and intense. If you don't tell her how you feel, those eyes will haunt you forever."

When they were finished with their drawings, Angie went to the front of the store to let Katie know they had completed their assignment. They walked back to the classroom together. Katie spent a few minutes looking over their work and then said, "You both did great with this project. I know that drawing exact replicas isn't what either one of you like to do but both of these drawings are impressive, especially considering you did them from memory. She went on to offer some suggestions to improve their techniques but while she was speaking, Mathew was thinking about what he was going to do with the drawing of Sylvia.

When it was time to leave, Mathew put his drawing in a folder and then put the folder in his backpack. It was all for show to make Katie think he was going to keep it, but he planned to tear it up as soon as he got home. He didn't want his parents to come across it and he certainly didn't want any of his friends to see it.

That night, after reducing the drawing of Sylvia to shreds, Mathew relaxed on his bed and closed his eyes. He was tired of beating himself up over his inability to follow through with Sylvia, so he tried to ease his mind

with thoughts of the expanding universe. Before drifting off, he felt a renewed sense of confidence when he remembered what Angie had said to him that day. *If you don't tell her how you feel, those eyes will haunt you forever.*

Angie

During the drive home from art class, Angie thought about Mathew's drawing while her mom rambled on about what she had done all day. Angie had reached an age where she was annoyed by everything her parents said. She tried to be patient because as a family, they were still mourning the loss of Kenny. Her mom, Diane, was continuing to struggle with the fact that she had one less child and it showed. Angie's dad, Al, tried to maintain a permanent poker face, which he shared in common with his daughter. Even though it was obvious that they had all gone through significant changes over the past year, trauma lines were permanently etched into Diane's face.

Angie wondered what it would be like to have a life as normal as Mathew's. She didn't know much about him but it was apparent from the way he carried himself, and his mom's appearance, that they weren't going through any heavy shit. You never knew for sure, and Mathew was definitely a weird kid, but Angie felt fairly certain his life was pretty damn cool. What would it be like to have nothing more important on your mind than a crush on a girl or a guy? That question wouldn't be answered anytime soon because the Branson home, since Kenny's life journey had come to an end, was ground zero for grief management. Al and Diane tried to maintain a sense of normality for Angie's sake, but after losing Kenny, providing a solid foundation for their daughter wasn't easy.

The effort being put forth by her parents was appreciated, and Angie loved them very much, but she also couldn't pretend that nothing had changed. In addition to the undertow of sadness that threatened to drag them all out to sea, Angie had become a teenager. Along with the constant presence of grief, she was also trying deal with changes to her body and the way she felt about boys. It was a difficult time and her way of dealing with it was to internalize her feelings and read books as an escape mechanism. She had always been an introvert so she was comfortable with her coping techniques and she had learned earlier in her life that opening a Harry Potter book always led her to a place of contentment.

On those infrequent occasions when she felt the need to talk to someone, and her parents weren't up to the task, Angie either called Nicole, who was Kenny's girlfriend, or Auntie Kat, a family friend who had helped Kenny through his last few months. Kat wasn't anyone's aunt but it seemed like everyone under thirty years old called her *auntie*. Nicole was still highly traumatized by Kenny's death, and she had just started her first year of college at Cal State Northridge (CSUN), so Angie tried not to lean on her too much. Typically, if she had something on her mind, she would contact Kat, either through a Facebook message or a phone call. Auntie Kat had helped her family so much, Angie didn't know what they would have done without her. Nicole considered her to be a guardian angel as well.

Despite all they had been through, the Bransons were a functional family and they were trying their best to move forward. Angie realized that most of her parental irritation was due to teen angst, and unrelated to their loss, so she tried to process it on that level. It wasn't easy but she wanted her parents to remember they still had one child left and all indications were that Angie's path through life would be meaningful and productive. Someday they might also have a son-in-law, and grandchildren, so there was a future to look forward to. In the

meantime, they would all continue trying their best and Angie would keep her nose to the grindstone in regard to school work and escape through her journeys to Hogwarts.

“Angie, I asked you a question.”

“Sorry Mom, I was thinking about something. What did you say?”

Diane looked at her daughter and smiled. “I asked how your day went.”

“It was fine, the usual at school, and art class was good. We had to draw a face so I drew Captain Joe.”

“Will you show it to me when we get home? I’d like to scan it and email it to him.”

“Sure,” Angie replied. She knew that her mom had a soft spot for Captain Joe. When they spent time on *For a Dancer*, Diane and Sarah (Nicole’s mom) would chat in the galley or out on the deck while Al, Kenny, and Nicole learned about sailing. Angie spent the time at sea drawing her impressions of the ocean. The moms got a big kick out of Captain Joe, who always made sure they were comfortable and content. It meant a lot to everyone when Captain Joe flew back to California from Hawaii for Kenny’s memorial service. Any mention of his name and Diane’s face would soften, allowing for a momentary easing of her burdens.

After arriving home, Angie took the drawing out of her backpack and handed it to her mom. She was visibly moved by her daughter’s rendition of their dear, family friend. Angie also took out a permission slip from school and said, “The ski club is going on a trip to Big Bear in December and I’d like to go but it costs a lot so if it’s too much, that’s okay.”

Diane had come to expect that any school-sponsored trips were going to set them back since the school district didn’t have money for anything other than the basics. That they were willing to organize clubs, take responsibility, and find teachers willing to chaperone, went above and beyond so Diane had made her peace with the dollar amounts that accompanied school permission slips.

“It’s okay honey, we can afford it, you can go. Isn’t it a little early in the season for snow?”

“Thanks Mom, they said that if it doesn’t snow, they’ll be able to make snow.”

A few years earlier the Bransons had gone on a ski trip to Big Bear with Nicole and her mom. As was typically the case with anything athletic, Kenny and Nicole were naturals. After learning to adjust their rental snowboards, the young couple started with a few runs on the bunny hill. Once they got a feel for the activity, they immediately moved up to intermediate slopes and continued to improve throughout the day as they constantly pushed themselves and sought out more difficult challenges. For Angie, snowboarding was the one sport she liked and was fairly good at. She had spent that whole first day on the bunny hill and as they made more trips to Big Bear, she found her comfort level on the intermediate slopes. She had no desire to move up to steeper hills but she thoroughly enjoyed snowboarding and the beauty of the mountains.

The previous winter, after Kenny had passed away, the Bransons went on one ski trip with Nicole and Sarah. It was a sad journey because Kenny’s absence was weighing heavily on everyone’s mind. Angie stayed in her comfort zone while her dad skied and Nicole snowboarded the black diamond slopes. Diane and Sarah did couple of runs on skis with Angie and then called it a day. It was obvious that Diane was having trouble dealing with Kenny’s absence and Sarah was consoling her.

When they returned home, Angie overheard her dad mention that Nicole’s snowboarding had been somewhat reckless. It was his opinion that she was working out her anger against a universe that had struck

down the boy she loved with cancer. He hoped that she wouldn't seriously injure herself in the process of trying to work her way through it. Angie knew that Nicole would never intentionally hurt herself and she was highly skilled at rock climbing, so she was used to taking on activities that contain an element of risk. Maybe Nicole was being too aggressive on the slopes but Angie assumed her dad was overreacting and he didn't realize how good she was at snowboarding.

Even though that last trip to Big Bear had been a bummer, Angie was looking forward to going on the school trip. She would be able to spend the day snowboarding with nothing more on her mind than going down the slopes with some friends. No drama, no one needing to be consoled, no one working through their rage against the creator, just a peaceful day of snowboarding.

On Thanksgiving Day, Angie helped her mom with food prep while her dad watched football. Sarah and Nicole would be coming over later to share the feast. This would be their first holiday together since the previous Christmas Eve. On that evening, they had watched the slideshow from Kenny's memorial service and engaged in an unplanned moment of silence. As they'd stood around tree, with its twinkling lights and festive ornaments, Angie was heartbroken over the loss of her brother and she could feel the deep levels of sadness that Nicole was experiencing. Al and Diane were still devastated but they were trying to embrace the Christmas spirit for Angie's sake. Diane kept saying that they had to be Kenny-strong; meaning that her son would have wanted them to go on with their lives without dwelling on him.

Angie was certain that she would see her brother again someday but she questioned whether anyone else felt the same way. They all certainly hoped so but did they really believe it? Could they swear in a courtroom that they truly believed they would one day be reunited with Kenny, that it was a fact? Angie knew that she would have no problem swearing to that affirmation. She sensed God's presence in her heart and she felt a continued connection to Kenny, wherever he was.

As dinner preparations were being completed, Nicole and Sarah arrived with pies. Angie hadn't seen Nicole since she'd started college so they had a lot to talk about. Even though Nicole was commuting to school, rather than living on campus, it was still a major life change and Angie wanted to know all about it. The younger girls went out to sit poolside while the moms stayed in the kitchen. This was the second Thanksgiving without Kenny and even though he would always be missed, the families were able to accept life as it was and enjoy the day. Both Diane and Nicole would shed tears later that night when they were in their beds, but optimism was making its way back into their consciousness.

For the Thanksgiving feast, Diane set the dining room table with the good china and lit candles when dinner was served. She wanted to make it special and the beauty of the table, illuminated by the faint glow of candlelight, created an ambience of tranquility. Angie was moved by her mom's efforts and she made a mental note to have more patience with her parents in the future. It was a fine dinner and a heartfelt giving of thanks for everyone at the table as the two families continued to reaffirm their bonds toward one another.

At the end of the night, when the dishes were done, and their guests had gone home, Angie sat at the desk in her room and drew a sketch of the Thanksgiving dinner table. While engaging in the flow of drawing, she thought about all that Nicole had told her about college life. She was intrigued but she hoped that when it came time for her to go to college, she would be able to go away somewhere and live on campus. She didn't know if

it would be affordable for her parents but it was a life experience she wanted to have. Other than the different environment and choices in classes, Nicole's life seemed the same as it had been in high school and Angie wanted a complete change. She wanted to go someplace outside of her known world. All of her travel experiences had been within in California, mostly to the national parks and ski resorts, and she was aching to see New York, Chicago, and Hawaii.

Before going to sleep that night, Angie wondered if Mathew had talked to the girl he had drawn the picture of. She hadn't brought it up during their classes because she felt it was his personal business and if he wanted her to know, he would tell her. She was curious though and she wondered if a boy would ever be so enamored with her that just being in her presence would make him nervous. It wasn't a feeling she could relate to since she had never been completely smitten with a boy, but she liked the idea of taking someone's breath away. There were so many new life experiences to be had and Angie knew that in order to live life to the fullest, she would have to spend a less time in isolation and get out into the world. Being naturally introverted, the thought of full immersion was intimidating but she knew that she had try.

On the Saturday morning of the school ski trip Angie was feeling a little under the weather, but she had been looking forward to hitting the slopes since the day her mom had signed the permission slip and written the check. Operating under the assumption that she would feel better as the day went on, she gutted through an early morning headache and a case of the sniffles. By the time she loaded her snowboard on the bus and sat in her seat, she was feeling better and enthusiastic about the day. She sat with her friend Stacy and during the drive to Big Bear they talked about music, school, and movies they had recently seen.

When they arrived at the slopes, Angie headed for the intermediate runs while Stacy went to an introductory lesson with the kids who had never skied or snowboarded before. Riding the chairlift was exhilarating and Angie loved the crisp mountain air that completely cleared her sinuses and helped her reach an inner calm. Even though she was feeling confident and excited, she told herself to take it easy on her first run of the day. As it turned out, being cautious was unnecessary because snowboarding down the hill felt smooth and familiar. There was no need for a careful practice run because it seemed as though she was picking up right where she had left off.

After returning from a lunch break, one of the guys from the ski club shared a chairlift with her. She had seen him around but she didn't know his name. They were quiet for a minute and then he said, "I'm with the school trip, my name is Peter."

"I'm Angie."

"I know who you are, we were in the same English class last year." Angie felt bad that she hadn't remembered his name but they had never spoken before and as far as she knew, they didn't have any mutual friends. "This is my first time snowboarding and I don't know if I'm ready to move up from the bunny slope. Would you mind coming down with me, I'm a little nervous?"

"I don't mind," Angie replied. "I'm not a great snowboarder but I think if I go slow, you'll be able to follow me without too much trouble."

"Thanks, that makes me feel a lot better."

As they proceeded down the hill, Angie went as slow as she could, maintaining a wide, zig-zag pattern down the slope. Fortunately, it was early in the season so they didn't encounter a lot of other skiers or snowboarders as they descended. She was able to easily lead the way without having to avoid other people. Peter did not have total command of his snowboard but he wasn't wildly out of control either. He fell twice on their first run together and both times Angie was able to assist him and get him going again.

Their second time down the slope, Peter only fell once and he was showing signs of improvement. On their third trip up the chairlift together, Peter said, "I'm feeling better about this now, thanks for taking the time to keep an eye on me. I hope you don't feel like you have to stay with me, I wouldn't want you to miss out on going down bigger hills."

"No problem, this is as far as I take it. I know I could handle steeper slopes but the intermediates are just right for me. I enjoy snowboarding at this level, and find it exhilarating, so I haven't felt the need to go on to more difficult challenges. Maybe someday I'll change my mind but for the time being, I just want to enjoy being in the mountains."

"That makes sense," Peter replied. "I imagine I'll take it as far as I can but I understand when people aren't competitive by nature. Now that I have better control of my board, I'm feeling a lot less intimidated by the steeper hill. Do you mind if we continue snowboarding together? I like following you and I think I'm learning something new from watching you every time we go down?"

"I don't mind, it's nice to have company on the chairlift and it's great to see how quickly you're improving." Angie was starting to think that Peter was interested in more than snowboarding together. She thought he was cute, and he seemed to have a kind nature, but the possibility was so out of the blue she knew it would require some serious thought if he expressed a desire to get together after they were done snowboarding.

When it was time to return home, Angie's suspicions about Peter's intentions took another step towards being confirmed when he sat next to her on the bus. For most of the long ride they talked about how much they had enjoyed the day, their classes, and books they liked. It turned out Peter was a huge Harry Potter fan as well. That bit of information went a long way towards alleviating Angie's sense of caution towards her new friend.

As the bus was pulling into the school parking lot, Angie saw that her mom was waiting in the car. She had to wait for the bus driver to unload the gear so she could get her snowboard. Since it had been Peter's first time, he rented a snowboard and boots so he didn't have to wait through the unloading process. "My dad is waiting for me in his truck," Peter said, "so I better get going. Since we're in the same ski club we'll be seeing each other again, but I was thinking it would be cool if we went to Harry Potter World at Universal Studios together."

"You mean, like on a date?" Angie asked.

"I guess you could call it that," Peter replied. "I just thought it would be a fun thing to do."

"I don't know how my parents would feel about that. How would we get there?"

"One of my parents could drive one way and maybe one of yours could drive the other."

"Wow, I don't know," Angie said, "it's a lot to take in. Let me think about it, run it by my mom, and get back to you."

"All right, it doesn't have to be a big deal. I just like hanging out with you and we both like Harry Potter so it seemed like a good idea."

“Okay, got it,” Angie replied. “I’ll let you know at school on Monday. I should be able to find you.”

“Don’t worry,” Peter said with a grin, “if you don’t, I’ll find you.” He then walked off and got in his dad’s truck.

While Angie and her mom were loading the snowboard on the roof rack, Diane asked, “Who was that boy you were talking to?”

“His name is Peter and he had never been snowboarding before so I helped him after he moved up from the bunny slope. He wants to go to Harry Potter World at Universal Studios together.” Angie had planned to put some serious thought in how to present that bit of information but for some unknown reason, she’d just blurted it out. *Oh well*, she thought, *might as get it out there and deal with it*.

“He asked you out on a date?” Diane asked.

“I was wondering the same thing when he brought it up, but he said he just liked talking to me and since we both like Harry Potter so much, it seemed like it would be a fun thing to do.”

“Sounds like a date to me,” Diane said, “and fourteen years old might be a little young for that but I’ll talk to your father about it.”

“It’s okay with me if you say no, it’s not like I’m dying to do this. You asked me what we were talking about and I told you, I haven’t fully processed it yet.” Angie didn’t like the idea of being treated like a child, and she had a different concept of what fourteen years old meant, but she also felt that if her parents didn’t allow it, she would have an excuse not to go. Snowboarding was one thing, but spending an entire day together and having to maintain conversation was something completely different. She didn’t know if she was comfortable with that scenario.

That night, while Angie was in her room drawing, there was a knock on her door. After opening the door, she saw both of her parents standing there. “Can we come in and talk?” Diane asked.

“Sure,” Angie replied as she sat back down at her desk. Her mom sat down on her bed and her dad remained standing.

“Your father and I were discussing how we felt about you and Peter going to Universal Studios together. We came to the conclusion that we’d only be comfortable with it if we went too. We wouldn’t stay with you, we’d find other things to do while the two of you explore Harry Potter World, but we would all meet up at the end of the day and head home. This is non-negotiable.”

“It’s not that we don’t trust you,” Al said. “We think it’s best if you take new experiences one step at a time and we believe that having us there as quasi-chaperones would be a good first step.”

“That’s fine,” Angie replied. “I’ll let Peter know on Monday and we can plan a day.”

“Also,” Diane added, “when we pick him up, we’ll have to meet his parents.”

“All right, I don’t think that will be a problem.”

Al and Diane looked at each other, surprised that there hadn’t been any resistance to their decision. “All right,” Al said, “let us know when you choose a day to go and we’ll try to make it work.”

“Will do,” Angie replied. Her parents then left her room and on their way out they looked back at her as though they didn’t know who was now occupying their daughter’s mind. Angie thought their reaction was incredibly funny. Why did being agreeable come as such a shock? It’s not like she was in a constant state of rebellion and disputing everything they said. She guessed that when it came to things like dating, parents

naturally assumed their children would find their dictates too restrictive. In this case, Angie had made the decision to let fate run its course. Whatever her parents decided would have been fine because she still wasn't 100% sure she even wanted to go on a *date* with Peter. If they had delivered a firm *no*, she would have seen the experience as groundwork for future discussions on the topic, a way to break down resistance. As it stood, Peter would either be agreeable to her parents taking them, or he wouldn't. They would go, or they wouldn't, either way was fine.

Despite the fact that she had adopted an uncaring attitude, when Angie went to bed that night the notion that she would likely be going out on her first date weighed heavily on her mind. Knowing that her parents might be hovering around at any given moment, Peter certainly wouldn't try to kiss her, so she didn't have to worry about that. What if he wanted to hold her hand? Should she let him? Would it be rude to pull her hand away? What sort of signal would that send? She didn't know but just prior to drifting off, she made the decision not to resist if Peter wanted to hold her hand.

Once all the arrangements were made, the Branson family, plus Peter, left their homes in Northridge on a sunny, warm December morning with Universal Studios as their destination. Al and Diane spent a couple of minutes speaking with Peter's parents while the teenagers looked on and wondered what they could possibly be talking about. This ritual of the parents meeting seemed absurd and pointless but they both realized it was all part of the process.

As promised, once they were in the park, the parents went off in their own direction after agreeing to a time and location to meet at the end of the day. As Angie and Peter made a beeline for Harry Potter World, she wondered what her parents would do all day. Her dad built film sets for a living so the tram ride through the studio sets would probably bore him but maybe he'd endure it for his wife's sake.

Once inside the wizarding world, the young couple spent most of the day exploring the various rides and exhibits. Both were in their element and having a great time. While waiting in line to buy butterbeers, Angie felt Peter's hand brush against hers. She wondered if it was intentional. They sat down at a picnic table to try their drinks; Angie thought it was delicious but Peter found the butterscotch flavor to be too sweet.

As they were sitting quietly, Peter reached over and gently grasped Angie's hand. In her mind, the few seconds it took for Peter to place his hand in hers seemed to last much longer and she experienced the movements in a series of frames. The first frame; she senses his hand moving towards her. Second frame; she feels the presence of his hand near hers even though they hadn't touched. Third frame; the first moment of touch, a glorious split second of his fingers on hers. Fourth frame; his hand moves more deeply into hers, probing, searching for acceptance. Fifth frame; acceptance assured, their hands become fully enveloped. Sixth frame; an intertwining of fingers that Angie wasn't expecting. She didn't know that would be involved.

After their drinks were finished, they decided to move on to other parts of the park for the last hour before they had to meet her parents. When they stood, their hands separated and once they started walking, Peter asked, "Will you be my girlfriend?" After a pause he added, "I don't know if I said that right, I've never had a girlfriend before so this is all new to me."

“I’d like that,” Angie replied. Since it was all new to her as well, she couldn’t think of anything else to say. All she knew was that she had a boyfriend and she wasn’t entirely sure what that would entail but for the time being, it felt good.

After a few minutes of silence, Peter said, “Maybe you should give me your phone number so we can call and text.”

“I’ll call you right now so we have each other’s numbers,” Angie replied. She then took out her phone and after Peter told her his number, she placed the call. They giggled as they spoke to each other over their phones for a few minutes.

Later on, after they met Al and Diane, and were driving home, they were trying to contain their smiles so the parents wouldn’t know anything was up. Angie knew they would find out eventually but in those initial moments, she liked having a secret with her new boyfriend.

When they were back in Northridge, Peter smiled at Angie before getting out of the car. “Thanks Mr. and Mrs. Branson, I had a lot of fun today. It was very nice of you to take us.”

“You’re welcome Peter,” Diane replied. For the remainder of the ride home Diane was anxious to question Angie about her day but she refrained, thinking it should be a girls-only conversation. Angie welcomed the quiet time during the short drive to their house and she knew that at some point her mom would want her to spill, but for now, she and Peter were the only ones in the entire world who knew they were seeing each other and they had held hands.

Over the course of the weekend, the young couple exchanged a few texts and spoke on the phone on Sunday night. They were a little nervous about having a conversation on the phone since it felt forced and unnatural, as though they were having a conversation just for the sake of talking, without any real point to it. When they were done, Angie wondered if a day would come when she would be willing to tell him anything. Would she be able to tell him about Kenny’s death and the way that tragedy had totally destroyed her world? Would she be able to put into words how important art was in her life? She didn’t know but for the moment, all was well because a handsome, friendly boy liked her and wanted to be with her. That’s all there was to it.

The next time Peter and Angie got together was the following weekend to go Christmas caroling on Saturday night. When Peter invited her at school, he’d said, “I know this is totally lame but my dad is seriously into doing this every year. I’m not sure why. He has this group of friends and every year they have to walk around our neighborhood and sing Christmas carols. He insists that my mom and I come along and since I have to go, I’d like you to come too. If this sounds too weird it’s okay, you don’t have to say yes.”

“I’ll have to check with my parents but I’d like to go. I’ve never been Christmas caroling before. From seeing your dad when he picked you up after the ski club trip, he didn’t strike me as the kind of person who would like to sing in public. Big guy, pickup truck; he seemed like someone who would be happier watching football.”

“My dad is an oddball. He definitely looks the part of a hard-working, blue collar guy, and he is, but there is another side to him as well. Actually, many other sides; he’s a very deep thinker and it seems like he reads constantly. He insists on the family being together at the dinner table and various other times, like this caroling event every year. But he spends most of his time in the den, sitting in a recliner under a lamp, with his nose buried in a book. His responses to the simplest of questions can go on long, philosophical tangents.”

When Angie was being dropped off at Peter's house on Saturday night, his parents (Sam and Casey) came out and assured Diane that they would bring Angie home after they were done caroling. They then went inside Peter's house and had a glass of sparkling cider as they waited for the rest of the carolers to arrive. When they were leaving the house, Sam presented both of them with a song book of Christmas carols. Peter and Angie looked at each other and tried not to laugh.

The night progressed with the merry carolers singing with passion and enthusiasm as they went from house to house. Angie found it to be more fun than she was expecting and once, when nobody was looking, Peter held her hand again. At the end of the night, when they'd decided to sing at one more house, Sam said, "Let's sing *We Three Kings*." As they sang, Angie noticed that Peter's dad was singing with more gusto than he had on the previous songs. She wondered whether he had a particular fondness for *We Three Kings* or if he wanted to finish the night off with a bang.

During the drive to drop Angie off at her house, Sam said, "I really liked that last song. While we were singing, I was thinking about how the wise men followed the star to the birth of Jesus. Whether one buys into all of that or not is irrelevant because for me, the important aspect is that the song represents a leap of faith based on a star in the night sky. When I tried to apply that to our times, I couldn't imagine anyone having the kind of faith that would lead to a guiding star. So, what does guide us? What leads us to a spiritual awakening?" He paused for a moment to see if anyone had an answer but everyone in the car remained quiet so he continued.

"Instead of *Star of Wonder*, I think a more modern interpretation would be *Words of Wonder*. Both written and spoken words can lead us towards enlightenment. Think about how many words there are, and how many possible combinations of stringing words together there are; it's infinite, like the cosmos. People pass along words that can shake our foundation and rattle us to the core, and it's just words arranged together in a particular way. They can come from a gifted writer or they can come from a random comment you hear while walking down the street. I believe these moments occur frequently but we are only receptive to them at certain times. If we're open to them, the words of wonder can lead us toward our destiny.

Wow, Peter's dad is weird, Angie thought as they were pulling up into her driveway. After thanking Peter and his parents for inviting her, she went inside and told her mom and dad about the caroling. It had been a fun evening and Angie came to the conclusion that she'd like to do it again next year if she and Peter were still together.

That night, while lying in bed and waiting for sleep to come, Angie thought about her future because now that she had a boyfriend, everything felt different. It was as though the growing up process had suddenly been accelerated. College and a career path had become prominent in Angie's thoughts and she had to remind herself that she was only fourteen years old so she didn't have to dwell on those decisions yet. It was more about the future being on her radar rather than specific points of concern. Long-term life goals were taking up space in her mind and for the first time she wondered what kind of person she would become. Would she have an important legacy? Would she get married and have children? Would her art inspire others? How would she know which paths to take or what choices were right for her? Before drifting off to sleep, she remembered what Peter's dad had said that night: *If we're open to them, the words of wonder can lead us toward our destiny.*

Sam

While driving to work on a chilly Monday morning, Sam reminisced about caroling with Peter and Angie the previous weekend. It still felt odd to him to think of Peter as having a girlfriend. Sam liked Angie and thought she would be a good influence on his son, but watching the two of them together made him feel as though Peter's childhood was slipping away. He knew that this stage of their lives couldn't last forever, but he wanted to cling to this period because he had never been happier. The psychological issues that had plagued him for most of his life had diminished and for the first time that he could remember, he was at peace.

After Sam arrived at the small print shop he owned, he checked in with his lead pressman, Brad, to see how the schedule looked for the day. Sam had started the print shop on his own and for many years he had been the only one working there, which meant that he had to take care of all the promotions and sales in addition to all of the printing. Over time he managed to build his business to the point where he was able to add a second press, digital copying equipment, and hire two pressmen. He wasn't making a fortune but he received steady work from the studios for movie posters and his income, along with his wife's, had allowed them to buy a nice house in the Valley and start a family. He generally left the press operations to the younger guys and he took care of the books and project management. Even though the print industry had suffered several major blows from the evolution of digital media, he had a niche clientele that would likely need his services until well passed the time he was ready to retire.

Sam loved the world of printing presses and how spreading the printed word had changed history. He saw himself in a direct lineage with Johannes Gutenberg and Benjamin Franklin. One of the reasons he had dealt with a troubled mind for most of his adult life was because people failed to grasp the significance of his work. Not one to brag, he generally spoke about his career in a way that led people to believe he enjoyed printing but didn't think it was of monumental importance. Even though he presented his profession in this humble way, he couldn't understand why people failed to grasp the importance of his chosen craft. Printing movie posters didn't have the impact of Gutenberg's Bible or Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac, but people loved movies and the posters that came out of Sam's shop were perfect representations of exactly what his clients wanted. His posters led people to joyous experiences.

There were nights when Sam would ponder his illusions of grandeur in regard to his profession but typically his worries were focused on more significant matters. While holed up with his books at night, his mind would often drift towards contemplations on the human condition. The meaning of life plagued his thoughts and he had to fight against the urge to travel deep inside his mind, where he was sure the answers were hidden, because he felt certain that he could become lost forever if he traveled too far inward. His need to know had so far been defeated by his desire to stay sane.

In what Sam considered to be the golden era of his life, the urge to think himself crazy had subsided and that was one reason why he felt content. His need to learn and discover had remained intact so he still read for hours every night, and he felt extreme gratitude that Casey was a supportive wife and she didn't mind that he liked to keep his face buried in books. He was a very lucky man and he loved his wife with all his heart. The devotion he

felt toward his family, and the gratitude he expressed on a daily basis, made waking up every morning a blissful experience. Peter was emerging as a thoughtful young man and Sam's relationship with Casey was the best that it had ever been. Despite all the reasons to be happy and content, he still felt the need to probe for answers. Sam didn't need to have a mental breakdown in the process, but he was interested in learning what the world's most renowned thinkers had to say on such topics as; life, death, religion, the cosmos, man's inhumanity to man, nature, and beauty.

Sam spent a significant portion of his reading time with philosophers; his favorites being Kierkegaard, Emerson, and Laozi. He generally avoided the written works of politicians but he often found deep meaning in the narratives of his favorite novelists; Jack London, Albert Camus, and Haruki Murakami. Though not a lover of poetry, he did keep copies of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Jacques Prévert's *Paroles* in his truck for any periods of waiting he might encounter while out of the house and away from the shop. The manner in which the accumulation of knowledge blended in his mind had led him on the peaceful path he was currently following, but he also knew it could unravel at any time.

Over the years both Casey and Peter had been patient during his periods of *deep funk* but he didn't like putting them through those episodes. He felt extreme guilt when he believed that his existence was a burden on those he loved. It was difficult to accept that his life was worthwhile during those darker periods but fortunately, he had emerged from the mental trauma relatively unscathed. He was always aware of the fact that he didn't have anything to complain about, his quality of life was excellent, and there were many people in the world who were suffering very real pain. But instead of bringing a sense of contentment, those thoughts often made him feel worse.

There wasn't a particular turning point when Sam began to accept the complexities of life and not dwell on them in a negative way, but gradually, over time and with Casey's help, he started spending more time in the light. Even though the darkness was always hovering, Sam realized that he had come to accept that there was nothing he could do about the reality that is existence on Earth. Life, death, and the goal of extracting meaning were just companions on the path, not matters to worry about, and not something to think yourself crazy over. Due to the certainty that his mental health could spin into a downward spiral at any given moment, Sam knew that acceptance was often easier said than done, but he felt confident that if he stayed focused on all the love in his life, then he would continue to believe that he was an inspired human being.

At the end of the day, Sam went over the holiday work schedule with Brad. Giving the guys extra time off during Christmas and New Years was important to Sam. They worked hard for him and they deserved a bonus. If he couldn't afford to give them a paid bonus, he could make up for it with time off. It was decided the guys could have Christmas Eve day off and Sam would manage the shop by himself. It was unlikely there would be very much happening on that day, but if need be, Sam hadn't forgotten how to operate the presses and he could still get jobs done.

On Christmas Eve morning, Sam wanted to linger in bed but he knew that he had to get up. Casey didn't have to work that day and she was feeling warm and cuddly in bed. The mornings had been cold and Sam knew that once he got out from under the covers, and was no longer snuggled up next to his beautiful wife and her soft, lovely skin, he would feel chilled. It would be like emerging from the womb into the cold, cruel world. Sam

had the thought that he didn't *have* to open the print shop that day. There was nothing of monumental importance that couldn't wait until the day after Christmas and it was unlikely there would be any walk-in customers. But Sam knew that his most significant character trait was perseverance and the ability to get back up no matter how many times he was knocked down, so he rolled out of bed with the thought that *the show must go on*.

While waiting for the coffee to finish brewing, Sam heard Casey get up and make her way from the bedroom to the kitchen. He knew Peter wouldn't be up for several hours since he was on winter break from school and he had probably been up half the night talking with Angie. When Casey entered the kitchen, he gave her a kiss and then said, "The coffee is just about ready."

"Awesome," Casey replied, "the thought of a steaming mug wrapped in my hands is the only thing that got me out of bed this morning."

"Why did you get up so early, you could have slept in?"

"I have a lot to do today. I'm going to make a special dinner for Christmas Eve tonight and I still need to go grocery shopping. I also have a couple more presents to buy. That reminds me, I ordered a snowboard for Peter from REI and it's supposed to be delivered to their Northridge store today. Do you think you could pick it up on your way home? I don't think I'll have time to swing by there today."

"Anything for you my love," Sam replied.

Casey smiled, gave her husband another kiss, and said, "Thank you. Peter is going to be so happy when he sees the snowboard tomorrow morning. I checked with Angie on which one I should buy so I feel pretty confident he'll be pleased. They close at 6:00 today; do you think you'll have any problem getting there before then?"

"No problem at all, I'll probably be working on accounts all day so I can leave whenever I want to. I'll make sure I'm there with plenty of time to spare and I'll hide the snowboard as soon as I pull into the garage so Peter won't see it."

While driving to work, Sam thought about what might be in store for dinner that evening. He hadn't asked Casey what she was planning to make because he wanted to be surprised. With an entire day to prepare it could be anything. He was hoping for his favorite; cassoulet. Sam imagined sitting at the candlelit dinner table with his family, the Christmas tree lights twinkling, and a Dutch oven filled with a magical mixture of beans, duck confit, and sausage taking center stage. He lost his breath for a moment as the daydream infused his soul with appreciation for his family, the world they lived in, and the good fortune they enjoyed. He knew that the best way to keep the darkness on lockdown was to frequently remind himself about the importance of gratitude.

The day passed slowly as Sam dove deep into the unpleasant world of spreadsheets. Fortunately, everything was balancing out properly and he didn't run into any snags or confusing billing issues. When he had taken over the finances for the business from his accountant several years earlier, it had saved him a lot of money and had been instrumental in allowing him to hire another employee. This freed up his time to drum up more business and the numbers had been improving ever since. Accounting had been a new and alien world for Sam but he took it on and became competent in managing the finances for the business. There had been a steep learning curve, but over time he found that he was able to establish proficiency with all the necessary software programs.

He didn't love balancing the books but he had come to appreciate an element of beauty when it came to numbers. He often contemplated the mathematical universe during the days he spent with spreadsheets.

In the middle of the afternoon, Sam decided he had accomplished enough for the day and there weren't any jobs that needed to be done before the new year, so he decided to pick up Peter's snowboard and head for home. After turning out the lights, and locking up the shop, he got into his truck and turned the ignition key but nothing happened. Repeated attempts yielded the same result and his assumption was that he had a dead battery. He couldn't remember the last time he had replaced the battery but when he opened the hood to evaluate the situation, it appeared that it had been a long time since the battery cables had been disconnected and the terminals were corroded. Sam briefly berated himself for not staying on top of his truck maintenance. Realizing the larger issue was figuring out a way to pick up Peter's snowboard and then get it home, he made a mental note to beat himself up later and focus on the tasks at hand.

After mulling over his options for a few minutes, Sam remembered that he had downloaded the Uber app on his phone but had never used it. He couldn't remember why he had bothered to download the app but he had a vague recollection of Casey telling him it could come in handy at some point and she had set up an account for him. After tapping on the app, it opened and he saw that it knew his location and there was a field to enter a destination. He didn't know the address for REI but when he started to enter the business name, the local locations came up and he was able to choose the Northridge store. It was all very easy and a driver named Rick would be there to pick him up in eleven minutes.

The pick-up time prediction was surprisingly accurate as precisely eleven minutes later a car with an Uber sticker on the windshield pulled up to his business. He wasn't sure of the protocol so he got in the front seat and said, "Hi, I'm Sam, I've never had an Uber ride before."

"No problem Sam, I'm Rick, it looks like we're going to REI on Devonshire and it should take about 15 minutes to get there. I'm guessing it may take a little longer because there is a lot of traffic today, especially around the Northridge Mall."

"Okay, I'm not in a big rush. I have to pick up a snowboard at REI and then head home. Will you be able to wait while I get the snowboard and then take me to my house? It's about two miles from REI."

"Normally I wouldn't wait, but you're going to be my last ride of the day so I'll take you home after you pick up the snowboard. You'll just have to update your destination when we get to REI. I can show you how to do that when we get there."

"Do you think we'll be able to fit the snowboard in your car?"

"It should be okay," Rick replied. "You'll have to sit in the backseat and hold it because it will be sticking out the back window. I have a bungee cord so I can tie down the hatchback and secure it."

"Great, sounds like a plan," Sam said. After a moment of silence, he asked, "After you drop me off, are you going home for Christmas Eve?"

"I am," Rick answered. "My wife and I recently found out that we have our first baby on the way so we thought Christmas Eve would be a good night to celebrate the upcoming changes in our lives."

"Congratulations!" Sam replied enthusiastically. "It's going to be a very exciting time for you. I imagine you're a little nervous as well as thrilled."

“More than a little nervous. I’ve been doing this rideshare driver gig because I was laid off about a year ago and I haven’t been able to find any work in my field. We’ve taken a major financial hit because of it. My wife is the main breadwinner now and we’re not sure how that is going to play out after the baby arrives. Best case scenario is that I get hired to a new firm before the baby is born and then my wife either takes some extended time off or we look into hiring a nanny. Worst case is that I continue to flounder as a driver and end up having to be a stay-at-home dad. I should probably rephrase that; I don’t think there’s anything wrong with being a stay-at-home dad, and I would prefer it to driving around L.A. all day, but it would mean that I had completely failed in my career. That would be a major self-esteem hit.”

“I understand,” Sam replied, “it could be a difficult situation. There have been times in my life when I’ve felt like a failure, not just with work, but with everything. It can be very hard to talk yourself out of a depression like that. I’ve had to do it on numerous occasions. Fortunately, I have a fantastic wife and a son who is mature and wise beyond his years, so I have a strong support system.”

Rick glanced over at his passenger and wondered how they had segued into this fairly deep discussion. This Sam fellow was certainly a unique character and he was providing interesting conversation for his final ride of the day. The employment situation, especially in regard to the upcoming baby, had been weighing heavily on his mind, but talking with this random rideshare passenger was helping to ease his concerns. It seemed as though this man had been through the psychological wringer on more than one occasion and had come out of it with a healthy appreciation for his life. The comment about having a strong support system resonated and offered Rick a little more hope because he knew that Chloe, his wife, would be supportive and accepting however the situation played out. They had been through a lot over the past year and after a readjustment period, she had made it clear that they were a solid team and they were in it together for the long haul.

When they arrived at REI, Sam got out of the car and said, “This shouldn’t take long, the snowboard was paid for when it was ordered so it should just be a matter going in and asking for it.” The store was filled with last minute Christmas shoppers but Sam was able to pick up the snowboard after a brief wait in line. When he came back out, Rick had the hatchback window open so they slid it in together and then Sam got in the back seat to hold the board steady while Rick secured the window.

During the remainder of the short drive it was difficult to talk because Sam was in the backseat and traffic sounds were coming in through the partially opened hatchback window. Despite the noise issues, Rick asked (in a raised voice), “What led to the times when you felt like a failure?”

Sam had to think for a moment before responding. “I’ve had difficulty accepting my oddball thought process and I used to worry that my way of looking at the world was having a detrimental effect on my family. There were times when I literally thought I could go so deep into my mind that I wouldn’t be able to come out with my sanity intact. I was worried that I would think myself crazy and there have also been some career issues despite the fact that I own and operate a successful business. I often felt that people didn’t understand the importance of my work, but over time I’ve come to realize that other people’s opinions don’t matter. I know this is a thought that is often expressed but there’s a big difference between saying it and meaning it. Even though I’m in a good place now, I still have to fend off feelings of hopelessness from time to time.”

As they were approaching his house, Sam said, "I was planning to drive my truck in the garage so my son wouldn't see the snowboard, it's a Christmas present, but I don't have the garage door opener with me. I'm going to try and sneak it in through the gate and hide it on the side of the garage and then go inside to get a handle on what's happening. Would you mind standing by the side of your car while I take the snowboard out? If my son happens to look out maybe you'll block his view."

"Sure, no problem," Rick replied.

"Thanks, I know this goes above and beyond what I should expect, and you must be anxious to get home."

"It's okay, I have plenty of time."

As Rick positioned himself by the side of his car, Sam looked around to see if the coast was clear, and then he removed the snowboard. Just when the board was out in the open, Peter came out of the house with his dog Hondo. They were heading out for a walk. He led Hondo over to the car and asked, "Hi Dad, what's going on? Why are you holding a snowboard and where's your truck?"

Rick looked at Sam's face and saw that it had melted into a despondent version of the joyful glow he had been presenting moments before. As Sam was explaining to Peter that he had caught him trying to hide his Christmas present, Rick walked to the front of the car. It was obvious that Peter thought it was a funny episode and he was not the least bit upset with having the surprise spoiled, but Sam was trying to contain the anguish he was feeling from his failure.

Peter and Hondo continued on with their walk and before Rick drove off, he said, "You're a good man Sam, try not to be too hard on yourself."

"Merry Christmas," Sam replied.