



The
Moments
in Between

J.R. Waller

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ER Every Reason
to Believe

The Moments in Between by J.R. Waller
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“Give me a man, I have some stories. Give me a woman, I have a few more stories. Give me a man and a woman and the stories are infinite.”

-J.R. Waller

INTRODUCTION

The Moments in Between is a strange novel for me. I often spend years thinking about the plots and programs of the books I write, but the idea for this one came out of the blue and was fully realized from the start. In fact, I wrote the initial draft in only five weeks.

I did a preliminary release of that draft a little more than a year ago, but I wasn't pleased with it. It wasn't print ready and being the owner of a small publishing ministry I knew I needed to release a more polished version which is the copy you have in front of you.

This copy probably has some errors too but I'm much happier with this version and am confident you'll enjoy it too.

Still, the merits of any book rise and fall with its readership. The validity and excellence of this title will live or die on the sacrificial altar of audience opinion. That being said, just as I have the freedom as an author to write what I want to write you have the freedom as a reader to love or hate what I write.

So, what kind of book is this? It's a meditation on grief.

The grieving process is disorienting and disheartening. It's a terrible thing. However, grief is what gets us through. In our fallen universe grief is the mechanism that helps us heal. In the long run, and if we allow it to be, grief is actually a good thing.

This book was born of out grief. I was captivated by the idea of what happens during seasons when nothing makes sense – during *the moments in between* tragedy and normalcy. The process of healing that takes place during the grieving process has always fascinated me, and this book looks at that process in all its ugliness and glory.

While it doesn't always occur to us in the moment, during times of profound struggle God continues to work in the lives of believers. Even if we lose faith in Him during such times, He never loses faith in us or leaves us. He renews us daily, His compassions are new every morning.

I've seen this in my own life, and in the lives of many others. When we come out of pain and have clarity once again, we realize that God was (and still is) working the entire time, even during *the moments in between*. The truth is we're powerless in our own strength to "get through" life's endless onslaught of pain. Yet, while we're weak in the face of remorse, turmoil, guilt, regret, and sadness God is all-powerful. When we can't see ahead in the fog of life, God sees perfectly through it all and He gently leads us to where He wants us to go. That's what this book is about.

Other themes include how our minds lie to us, how our emotions play tricks on us and how we can't solely rely on feelings, especially during times of struggle. This should be apparent through the main characters in the story, Jane and James. I wanted to get inside the heads of the two leads and explore feelings that all of us have felt but rarely admit to experiencing out of fear that others might think we're "crazy." However, in God's economy it's ok to be crazy, we're sinners and we're a mess. This life is no bed of roses, Jesus told us that, and He prayed for us and wept over Jerusalem. He is a friend of sinners, a very present help in time of need, our comforter, strength and refuge.

There are two things I want you to take away from this book. First is the truth that God works during every season and in every circumstance regardless of what your feelings tell you. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you can be confident that He who began a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. God will accomplish what He set

out to do in your life, and that is to make you more like Him, and that's a very good thing!

Second, I want you to be a little more open with others when you're struggling. Let them in. Sure, some will think you're not for them, but those aren't the kind of people you want in your life anyway. Instead, do the work of being vulnerable, it's a testimony and a way to allow better people into your life who God will use to help you heal.

With that I digress and leave you to read on. Thank you for spending two scarce resources on this volume – your time and money. It means a lot to have you spend some time with James and Jane.

Here's to the next novel.

Soli Deo gloria!

J.R. Waller, MBA

August 2022

(John 3:16, Romans 10:9-10, Ephesians 2:8-9)

THE SOUND OF RAIN

James stared out the window. His eyes were intensely fixated on the rain. The harmony of the repetition brought him solace. The drops were endless. One by one pelting the window, over and over, like a tranquil song in the darkness.

His life had become relentlessly stale. Everywhere he went he saw *her*. She always turned up, even when he didn't want her to. She was around even when she wasn't. Ultimately, and though it proved a fine distraction, not even the rain could fully keep her from his mind. She had a nasty habit of constantly slipping into his head and remaining there for hours on end like an unwanted guest you can't get rid of. For James, forgetting her was futile.

However, he could always count on rainstorms to drown her out of his thoughts, albeit for a short time. That was good enough.

Yet, reality is a sleuth. It always found its way back to him. It was Monday, around dinner time. She was due home and right on time she approached. Back to reality.

He watched the rays from her headlights break through the rain as she pulled into the driveway. The flat horizontal glares of light cut across the lawn. She parked, exited the van, grabbed some grocery bags from the passenger seat and proceeded to the front door. James listened to the

sound of the lock as it turned. His final remnants of peace ebbed away with each click of the pin. Nevertheless, he remained stalwart, and kept his eyes on the rain. He wasn't about to give up what precious seconds of tranquility he had left that quickly.

Jane slammed open the front door. A loud thud rang out as the door hit the wall. A torrential downpour flew inside. Her raincoat flooded the carpet. She rushed to close the door, and quickly shut it just as loudly as she opened it. She had grocery bags under her arms and in her hands. She struggled to make it into the hallway. James's concentration finally broke, he turned and watched as she wiped her feet, set the bags down on the floor and diligently but quickly removed her raincoat, tossing it onto a hook on the wall.

She was wearing a tweed houndstooth blazer, with a matching skirt. A silk scarf around her neck, a solid black shirt and a pearl necklace accentuated her look. There was a large golden lapel pin on her blazer with her alma mater's insignia – a shield with an eagle on one pane and an angel on the other, and a Latin phrase about learning and achievement. She was in her customary tall coffee brown riding boots. Her long blonde hair was done up in a flipped bob style, with a dark green and yellow argyle hair band topping it off. She wore a small diamond encrusted watch on her right wrist. She was the epitome of an academic professional, like something straight off the steps of Berkeley in 1950, or Cornell in 55. She was, naturally, the Ivy League type, and in all ways timeless.

Jane taught comparative literature at the local university, but unlike many of her colleagues, she dressed for the role because she wanted to, not out of obligation. Hardly a day went by without James seeing her in a blazer and skirt combo or a cardigan and skirt combo. The look worked. It complemented her high cheek bones, bright lively face, and large deep set green eyes. Even when rain soaked Jane was in all ways the consummate professor with a hint of bookishness.

Despite her grand entrance from the elements, James remained where he stood. He pursed his lips and glared at her as she took off her boots and

grabbed some of the bags of groceries from the floor.

Jane noticed him in the corner of her eye and slowly glanced over at him in short clandestine intervals. Those eyes of hers, which were once lovely to him, now felt stone-cold, they pierced him, like a knife to the heart. Even the slightest ill-timed glance from her hurt him.

“Are you going to just stand there? I’m soaking wet if you haven’t noticed,” she called out.

For a few split seconds James willfully ignored her. Then, he slowly and deliberately turned his head back to the window and stared outside before letting out a big sigh. He wanted the silence back, the bliss of temporary forgetfulness to return. But he knew better. Whenever such situations took place in their interactions with each other any escape was useless and impossible. So, he turned and walked over to her.

“I got it,” he said, as he bent over and grabbed the rest of the bags from the floor.

Jane, despite asking for help, intentionally declined to acknowledge his acquiescence. It was her way of doing battle. He would stare, avoid and relent; she would often take a more active approach. Hurtful words, brittle non-verbal cues and acid tongued remarks. Those were her choice weapons. She preferred verbal swordplay, he liked cold-shoulder distance.

“Careful!” she yelled bitterly.

“I told you I’ve got it.”

Jane placed her hands on her hips and bit her lip as she watched her husband struggle with the heavy load.

Seconds later, the inevitable; the bottom fell out of one of the bags. A carton of eggs smashed onto the entryway carpet, and James successfully set off a volcanic eruption.

He placed the other bags on the dining room table with great defiance and began to storm off, but not before Jane could get another word in.

“Where are you going? Clean it up!” she yelled, hands still on her hips.

He turned, looked over his shoulder, and with great apathy simply said, “I don’t have time.” With that, he went upstairs to his home office.

Jane wasn't going to clean up after his mess. She had wasted too much time lately being his personal street sweeper. Since the onset of their domestic war he had become lazy when it came to any sort of housework. Naturally, she wasn't one to live in a mess, so she took it upon herself to carry the load no matter how stubborn and defiant James was. However, tonight he pushed her over the edge. She was more content to let the eggs rot away their wooden floor than to stoop to being a servant to his indifference.

She began a long, listless waltz to the living room sofa. Her feet even stepped right into the eggs. She didn't care, in fact it felt good; stepping on his beloved oriental rug and smearing chicken embryos into it brought her the utmost satisfaction. She never liked the rug anyway, and of course it was his fault, he lifted it all in one attempt when he shouldn't have. Everything was his fault.

Jane sat on the sofa, pulled her egged socks off, threw them to the side and curled up to relax.

Both she and James were equally at odds with each other. Their protracted "full out domestic war" was fully two-sided. However, they coped in similar ways. As she sat there, she turned her attention to the same thing he had. She stared out at the rain. The rain was her solace too. It took the edge off things. Even if she could never fully remove him from her mind, it at least provided her with short glimpses of peace, and tiny morsels of retreat which she devoured as quickly as she could manage. Of course, like any of us, she'd get sick from time to time from digesting too much time alone.

A shared love for the rain wasn't their only similarity. Their tactics were similar too in that they produced the same recurring results. They were both committed to never bringing any closure or resolution to their war. It was trench warfare. Deep down that was how they liked it. Blow up, avoid, stare out, that was their formula. Neither of them would ever admit to being similar, but they were. Rivals are like that. They're alike. Yet they never dare say so. If you'd ask either of them to describe each other, you'd

find that they viewed each other as incredibly different from one another.

From Jane's perspective he was a workaholic, self-centered and inconsiderate, while James had come to know her as flighty, disrespectful, and callous. Quite a slew of adjectives, all different yet similar. Despite all this, they lived in the same house, shared the same coping mechanisms, and attacked with the same goals in mind and with similar tactics. They were alike. Deep down they knew it. That's why they got married in the first place albeit for far different and optimistic reasons. That fact ate at them and kept their battles from ever going all out, or coming to any sort of finality.

Thankfully, for their neighbors' sakes, the rest of this evening would remain calm. She would eventually clean up the eggs and eat dinner in the guest bedroom alone. He would stay upstairs working. They wouldn't see each other at all. That was the way they did things now. Come and go. Start and stop. It was a cold war really, just bursts of violence, mainly emotional, every so often. Just enough to keep things tense and real.

FLASHPOINTS

James stumbled out of bed the next morning. It was time for his daily foray into his email inbox. Five years ago he quit a large big city investment firm, and traded in his white shirt and tie for shorts and a polo. And not just any shorts or polo. No, the dry wick kinds that were all the rage in the upper-middle class circles that he and Jane associated. Theirs was a world filled with tech entrepreneurs, academics, wealthy heirs and overly educated stay-at-home moms – all of whom had a strong penchant for athletic wear. As such, his ensemble paired perfectly with his consulting business in mergers and acquisitions, which he began after saying bye to the financial world.

All things considered; it was a good life. He had clients all over the world. From young jet set south Asia entrepreneurs to old guard Wall Street Wharton MBAs, he had all the right connections and was never wanting for clients.

Jane used to join him in the fun from time to time. Though James would now deny any such claim Jane liked tagging along with him back then. In fact, the walls of his office were canvasses for various photo montages of the two of them on business trips together. They remained on the walls despite their war with each other. James hadn't taken them down...yet. He thought about it often, but there was always something

more pressing that got in the way, or so he'd tell himself.

There they were. Jane and James about to scuba dive off Thailand, standing on the deck of a mini-yacht donning wet suits and gear, expressions of joyful apprehension on their faces, dead giveaways to the world that this was their first aquatic rodeo. Jane and James sitting cross-legged on silk pillows, a low teak table in front them with a tea service on it, both of them sharing a meal with an automotive company executive and his team in historic Kyoto. Jane and James and a four-legged friend at the Southernmost Point in Key West, and so on.

Frame after frame, the happy carefree couple parading across every wall of the room. No matter how scenic the locale, how important the people, or how beautiful the vista, these always paled in comparison to the smiles and genuine exuberance the two exhibited in every photo. They were happy. Genuinely happy. Joyful. Thankful. But that was how it used to be. Among every varied terrain and with every different place and face, they stood together, seemingly inseparable. But the glory days of yore were now bitter memories. For James they were now nothing more than a mix of chemicals on silver gelatin paper. Or so he'd tell himself.

This morning, just like every other, James leaned back in his desk chair, and looked at the photos with a blank stare. The same stare that looked out at the rain the night before. His wife had become nothing more to him than the rain. Same stare, same emotion, same reaction. He never looked at the photos for too long. If he did an inescapable burden would begin to weigh him down. Then, his eyes would drift to that thing from which all of his problems flowed. It was the source of everything. The ilk, the incendiary household atmosphere, the tension, the fights and the war itself. A small urn stood atop the mantle in his office. Their son was inside. It happened suddenly. A car accident, he was barely over one year old. He was taken out of life instantly.

Every war, even a domestic one, has an ignition point. The death of their son was theirs. In mornings like these, when James's eyes would go from looking at their old photos, and then to the urn, his heart would

descend into something beyond melancholy. Something indescribably dark and remote. To a place without any feeling or emotion.

He looked at the urn for just a few seconds, before abruptly turning away. That's what he always did when he saw it. After, he opened his laptop and forgot all of his feelings in an endlessly shallow pool of busywork and emails. Some choose cheap wine, others money and some addictions. James chose to hide behind the amber glow of several thousand pixels to inoculate himself from the uncompromising nature of reality. It was no bother though, after months of it he was accustomed to the habit. He actually had a system down to efficiently dull the pain.

First, James browsed the spam folder, hoping to find something of interest, but really just wanting to kill a few moments in vague wanderlust. Today there were some coupons for pet food. He didn't even have a pet. Then some click bait and strange emails from Eastern Europe requesting his interest in mail order brides. It was the usual fare, nothing worth pursuing – sweepstakes and chances to increase his search engine optimization for the hundredth time of the week.

Next, James opened his inbox to see what was there. Usually, it was nothing but what an inbox is - a list of other people's agendas staring you in the face. There was rarely any urgency to any of it. Even if clients had reached out, he could often work at his own pace since as a consultant he was primarily engaged in selling knowledge. He learned early on that people will wait to learn specialized knowledge because they have no other means of acquiring it. However, today was different.

There was a string of unread emails that were sent to him overnight. Seven in fact, all from his dad, and all of them short and asking James to call him. He glanced at his watch. It was late, he had overslept. He hadn't realized that his dad had been trying to contact him.

James scrambled over to his phone. His dad called a few times too. James called him back to see what was up. His heart raced as the phone rang. After a few tense moments of waiting for the call to connect to Denmark, his dad answered. He was trying to be calm, but James saw through

it. He felt the anxiety lurking under the surface. In fact, James knew the moment his dad began to speak that something was wrong.

James's mom had a heart attack and was in the hospital. Thankfully, she was in stable condition and the doctors were expecting a full recovery. Still, James was concerned. He sat on the edge of his bed, put the phone on speaker and wiped his hands through his hair before continuing on.

"Should I come over?" he asked.

"No, don't worry yourself, she'll be fine," his dad replied with an old, raspy sailor voice.

James expected his dad to say that. His dad always downplayed even the worst of situations – a career as a cod trawler will do that to man. After you face forty-foot waves in the Baltic, freezing temperatures on the Great Lakes and a shipwreck off Newfoundland nothing else really compares. As such, when it came to James's dad even when things were "good" to him they usually were not to all other parties concerned.

"Is she *really* alright?" James pressed.

"She is, *really* don't trouble yourself."

James didn't believe him. No onslaught of excuses from his dad could (or would) convince him she was ok. His mind was already made up. The sound of his dad lighting a pipe in the background was all he needed to confirm his suspicions. He recognized the sound of that match strike anywhere, even over the phone. James's dad was a trouble smoker. Only smoked when there was trouble afoot, and since life is often a continuous series of troubles he smoked all the time. Or so went his reasons for justifying the habit.

"I want to see you guys. I'm going to book the next flight out."

His dad knew better than to pick a fight, especially given the situation between Jane and James.

"Sounds great son, we'll be glad to see you. Will Jane be coming too?"

His dad took a risk by asking such a question, but he was of an age where he no longer cared about what people thought, especially if it meant taking one for the team and for the greater good, which in this instance he

felt he was doing.

James took a long, calculated pause. Jane still liked his parents. In fact, she never had any problems with them at all. But his dad had just played his hand. He was all too aware of their troubles. He wanted them back together more than anything. And James's mom more so. She was incredibly close to Jane.

However, James would have nothing of it. "No, just me. I've gotta go, I'll call you when I'm at the airport." James hung up and got down to the task at hand. There was no time for second thoughts, he would make sure of that.

It was a flight he had done many times. Moreover, his consulting work had given him the distinct advantage of accumulating a plethora of sky miles, frequent flier rewards and perks. Getting a last-minute ticket was a cinch. Within minutes he went online, booked a flight for that afternoon, set up an auto reply out of office email and began packing.

Decisions in the heat of battle are a most interesting thing. They say never to make major decisions during seasons of emotional turmoil. Whether that is true or not I'll leave to the reader to decide. For James at least, he knew deep down that his mom was probably going to be fine, and while he did want to see her, and while his dad was always overly optimistic even in bad situations, what he really wanted was to get away from home. And by home he meant Jane, the urn, and from his current life in general. It was a special escape mission in the Jane and James domestic war, and he was compelled to complete it.

He tossed a large suitcase onto his bed and began to stuff it full of whatever he could find. James was an expert in the post-millennium art of multitasking. You know, when you do two things at once but neither well. He called the airport while packing his shoes. Then called his airline rewards program while shaving. Efficient and effective, he was a man on the proverbial move, destination unknown.

This went on for a while until he realized that he had an inordinate amount of space left in his suitcase. So much for multitasking. To make

matters worse, as he stood over the half empty suitcase he envisioned Jane's things filling the remaining empty spaces though they weren't really there. Her black beatnik beret, cat eye sunglasses, literary anthologies, blazers, shirts, shoes, silk robe and lingerie, he envisioned them there, just as they used to be.

A short pause left him bereft. For a split-second the domestic general soldier became soft. He saw things with the eyes of a civilian. He was envisioning the enemy's belongings in his suitcase, and that was a problem. Because, in that moment, he missed her. It's a funny thing to miss someone living in the same house as you. That was the point they had reached.

He bolted the suitcase shut without a second thought or blink of an eye. Onward he went, stuffing his carry-on with his laptop, some books and other paraphernalia one never really uses when on a plane but that you feel obligated to take. He slung the carry-on over his shoulder, grabbed and lifted the suitcase up, grabbed his phone and took a quick survey of the room.

Everything was in order. He swept his hand along his dresser top and scooped up his wallet, a stick of gum and his keys. Seconds later he closed the door behind him and walked downstairs to the living room. Then, something unanticipated took place. Jane was in the living room watching TV. He had to pass her to leave. An unexpected development.

Nevertheless, he continued on to the door, playing it off. But she was no fool. Even in the midst of the war she could also play civilian. She too could miss him when the timing was right. With his arms full of vacation items and his gait moving him speedily towards the front door, she instantly conceded a temporary truce at the first sight of him. In a split-second she declared in her mind that the floor they were both standing on was neutral ground. She spoke up as fast as she could. She was scared.

"Where are you going?"

He stopped in his tracks, and with a disgruntled thud placed his suitcase on the floor and his hands on his hips before turning to her and

in the most deliberate manner replying “to get away.” He had his moment of missing her back upstairs and would have no more of it today.

The reply did its necessary work for it caused to Jane to lose her sense of feeling as well. She grunted, bent forward and slammed her still half full bowl of cereal onto the coffee table. She then crossed her arms and reclined back on the sofa, fully entrenched and back on the defensive. There was a tense pause before she went back onto the offensive.

“I asked where, not why. The least you could do is be honest.”

“I’m going to see mom.”

Jane’s face turned soft. James’s mom was not an enemy. She and Jane thoroughly and deeply loved each other. However, James’s mom was in that strange position that some find themselves in unawares and by no fault of their own in a domestic squabble. She was caught in the middle. She was like Belgium, ever the doormat for Europe in every war. One person side stepping over her one day, the other the next. Back and forth, arguments like tennis balls and she the net. Every now and then getting hit yet all throughout no less loved by both parties because she was the mediator. What is tennis without the net anyway?

“What’s wrong?” she inquired, genuinely concerned.

He took a long pause and sat his suitcase down. “She had a heart attack...she’s fine, but I want to see her, I want to get away.”

Jane’s lips relaxed at the first statement but quickly pursed at the second. “From what?” turning to him.

James rolled his eyes, picked his suitcase back up and made haste to the front door.

Jane sat up. “From what? It’s obviously not your work and it’s not this house that I’ve slaved over for years. Tell me what is it that you’re so eager to *get away from*,” with hands on her hips. Her question was a futile reconnaissance mission. She knew what he meant. She knew he was trying to get away from her.

He opened the door and turning to her he gave her the truth, “from you.”

He said it softly, but the pain hit home. It was a precisely calculated attack and it landed right on target. One word, one near fatal blow. To cap off the offensive he slammed the door behind him. He was gone. Nothing remained inside the house except a ball of tears sobbing on the couch.

DETOUR

James hopped into his car and quickly turned the radio on high so he could listen to his favorite talking heads on the sports channel. This was his antidote to help him forget what he had just left behind crying in the house. He then put his sunglasses on and peeled out of the driveway as fast as he legally could. He turned the air conditioning on high. He did everything and anything to get her out of his system, or so he tried.

Just as he was making progress on his route his phone alerted him that there was a traffic build up on the normal route and he'd have to take a detour on some back roads. He couldn't believe it and didn't want to but there it was.

About three miles from home, he veered off onto a two-lane rural road. Shortly thereafter he passed by an ice cream parlor and dairy. Its twenty-foot-high plastic cone which sat on the roof was hard to miss, and the memories he had accumulated there over the years were impossible to ignore.

He and Jane went there often when they courted and were newly-weds. Then after their son was born they brought him along. Even at the tender age of one he loved the cows. They fascinated him and his love of them fascinated Jane and James. They'd take him there at least three times a week. They'd go after church, with friends and on holidays. They'd sit

there and watch him crawl on the grass and up to the fence. He'd smile at the large bovines grazing nearby and reach out as if to grab them, like they were stuffed animals. He loved the cows. Jane and James could never get enough of it. They even bought him a cow blanket from the dairy gift shop. Some nights they'd even let him have two ice creams just for the sheer bliss it brought them as proud parents. Of course, he'd barely eat them, but they loved that too.

The ice cream parlor was their lighthouse. In every stage of their relationship, both before marriage and after it stood as a beacon. Somehow it could always light the way. It could shine on any scuffle or pain and not only reveal what needed to be done but heal whatever emotional bruises had surfaced between them over any given week. It was their meeting place for hard discussions. It's where they went when big decisions had to be made – financial, relational occupational, health-related, you name it the dairy helped them through it. It's where they entertained friends and brought family. It was a gathering place, a pseudo-sacred shrine of healing and a hospital for the soul. It was, to coin the over used phrase, “their happy place.”

James glanced at it in the rear-view mirror. He watched as the large cone and silos disappeared from sight. Thankfully for him, the memories faded fast, tossed into the rearview mirror of his mind. He and Jane hadn't gone back since their son died, and they had no intentions to ever go back.

James arrived in town a few miles further down the road. It was a modest southern coastal hamlet. The kind with a main street and one four-way traffic light, a county courthouse and Victorian painted ladies peering out behind large willows, oaks and white picket fences. What made their town special though was that it had some local attractions that made it vibrant. Because of this it was able to stand out and thrive in a world where the surrounding towns were slowly fading into oblivion for lack of jobs and money.

There was the local university, where Jane worked, and a host of art museums. In fact, the per capita ratio of residents who held doctorate

degrees per square mile without question outnumbered those of all the similar sized towns throughout the state. The university was a sight to behold, a true gem of the liberal arts tradition, and one of America's best regional colleges. The campus carillon stood in plain sight as James drove through downtown. Next came the large brick entrance to the promenade that led straight into the heart of the campus quad.

While the ice cream parlor was his and Jane's cure for pain and a light in the darkness, the university had always been the holder and harbinger of their dreams. The ice cream healed by speaking to the present. The university healed by beckoning them to brighter tomorrows. It illuminated the future and promised that no matter the struggle in the here and now tomorrow would be better. It's where they went to get lost in wonder.

They first met at the university. She was a year ahead of him and was already teaching part-time while also juggling responsibilities as the editor for the university's student literary journal. In the meantime he was busy taking a full slate of business courses and leading the Student Investment Club.

James always found her in one of three places back then – the classroom, the tutoring lab where the journal staff worked or in an aisle of the local town bookstore. However, when they dated James made it a point to show her the great outdoors of the campus. Eventually, one their most cherished pastimes was sitting and talking together under a large oak tree. They'd talk about their interests of course. She'd wax eloquent about Ezra Pound, Yeats, bookplates, marginalia and dangling participles. He'd go on about the product life cycle, the purchasing decision and the complexities of global supply chain management. However, their conversations revolved most around their plans for the future. Her desire to teach literature. His passion for building a career in the corporate world. Everything was outstretched in front of them and fully for the taking. And take it they would, together.

When their son was born they decided that he was going to be the next generation of their family to call the proud little liberal arts insti-

tution “alma mater.” For his first birthday they got him a hand knitted hat with the college mascot stitched on the side. They took some of their favorite baby pictures of him on the campus quad in that hat.

James kept one of the pictures in his wallet. The three of them, sitting there on the grass, a white blanket beneath them, each of them holding him tight and proudly in front of them. Soft shadows from a maple tree gently shadowing their faces. The campus carillon standing proud behind them. And smiles as wide as the Missouri River on every face in the frame. Every time passed by the university, he would see the picture in his mind. He saw it today, despite trying to speed by to avoid the thoughts.

After a few minutes of sitting at a couple lights on main street, James hopped onto the interstate for the final leg of his detour, despite every fiber of his being telling him not to. He never wanted to, but he had no choice, it was the only way to the airport. His heart rate increased the moment he got onto that awful road.

The ice cream parlor and dairy were odes to joy. The university an emblem for the future. The interstate was the evil that ruined it all.

He would do what he always did though, just keep his mind on the road ahead. He wouldn't look, he wouldn't even think about it, he wouldn't even glance at it.

Soon enough however, as the mile markers counted down to that wretched place, he could feel the same strange desire that always scared him out of his wits when he would get close to the site. Wanting to stare into the face of oblivion just one more time was a weird thing, and it horrified him. He could never explain why he thought that way about it. Was it to punish himself? Was it to cope? Did he want to revel in the regret? Or maybe looking one more time could somehow make things different? Whatever it was, he couldn't stand it, but he also couldn't prevent it. His mind was a seesaw. Despite all his best efforts he could never strike a mental balance when it came to the place.

Just like clockwork, at mile marker fifty-five, in a split-second...he caved in and looked to the side of the road. There it stood, the monument

to all of his and Jane's sins. It was the kind of thing that means nothing to almost anyone, yet that matters acutely to the family whose loved one's name is etched on it.

It was a small sign, nothing more than three feet high; nothing more than footnote at the end of one person's history book, except this footnote stood alongside a highway. It stood there blending into the great tapestry of human history, only to be beholden by the few who cared. The state gave them out in condolence to families whose loved ones were killed on its roads. It sold them to such families as a fitting memorial, but the truth was it was nothing more than a standard issue roadside sign that cost a few dollars to mold and print. It was the least they could do.

The sign at mile marker fifty-five was staked into the roadside a month after Jane and James's fourteen-month-old son was killed instantly in an auto accident. As he passed James read the words "In Memory of..." followed by his late son's full name. Then he looked at the flowers that he and Jane had set out the previous month. Though they couldn't stomach being together anymore, and though they'd drive separately to the site, they still took time for their monthly act of respect to their lost son.

Black ice, a spin out and a roll over. He was "tired" that morning and she was "busy." They never hit a car, just the skids. It was no one's fault but their own. At least that's what they told themselves. The police report however clearly blamed it on the black ice. They left the wreck physically unscathed, while their son went into eternity. He was safe in heaven, while they had been gutted to the core emotionally and relationally – left to endlessly grieve on earth.

In that single moment the life that Jane and James shared together came to an end. Only a shell remained. Everything they had worked to build burned to the ground. Just like the mangled body of their son, their lives were left in shambles, and they had yet to recover. Nothing could make it better. Not the ice cream parlor. There was no longer any solace to be found in the present. Nor could the university's promises hold anything for them anymore. Any hopes they had for tomorrow had been dashed to

the ground. The child would not inherit his parent's kingdom. He would never taste their ice cream again. He would never go to their university. And the two souls he left behind would never be the same.

A few seconds after passing the dreaded sign James put the accelerator to the floor, turned up the radio even higher and blazed onward to the airport; teeth clenched, knuckles white.

AN ENCOUNTER

James arrived at the airport right on time. He parked his car in the long-term lot, got out and proceeded toward the terminal; rolling suitcase in tow, sunglasses on and mind fully focused on the journey ahead. He put to rest whatever happened to him on the detour and he was now fully on mission.

He entered inside. It was deserted. It didn't get much traffic normally, and since it was a weekday things were even slower than usual. James scanned his ticket and placed his suitcase on the scale then sent it away. Throughout the process he constantly had to remind himself to slow down. James erred on the frantic side to begin with. He was always too early to functions and meetings. While most would want to be late, he'd probably be early to his own funeral. Nevertheless, he was aware of his tendency to rush, and calmed himself. There was no point to hurrying and scurrying around a deserted airport. He concentrated on that and managed to slow his pace a bit. No one was going to get in his way in line, security would be empty as would the lines at the restaurants and restrooms. He tried as best he could to give himself permission to take it easy.

And just as he suspected, there was no need to hurry. He made it through the security line in a matter of minutes. After a brief stop at a newsstand, he settled in his waiting area, with a half hour remaining

before his flight.

The main terminal was even less inhabited. A small family on their way to Europe for vacation. A few couples and some business travelers peppered in among rows of empty seats. A half-open café and many closed restaurants. It was certainly the slow season. It was so empty that the echoes of a single person walking on the terrazzo floor sounded like tapdancing elephants. Every little sound was magnified. Every event a big deal. A janitor sweeping, a kid crying, a captain walking around, all of it stood out amidst the boredom. It made the mundane feel important.

Ever the escapist and never one to relish the moment, James sat at a high top at the café, took out his laptop and once more poured over his emails. Of course, not much had changed in the couple hours since he left home, not that he expected it to. A couple new coupons for pet food and spam messages for special once in a lifetime offers from places he had unsubscribed from years ago littered his inbox. His other folders were just as disenchanting. Things like “please find attached,” and “all best,” were the status quo language he’d been used to by now. Nevertheless, it was enough to whittle away a few minutes.

Then, the unexpected occurred. Someone sat down at the table directly across from him. It always amazed James how you could be eons away from a crowd, intentionally minding your own business, but still get interrupted by someone. It was the same phenomena he’d observed all his life in parking lots. Park far away where there’s no one around. Come out and you find a car parked right next to yours. He never understood why people did that.

This someone was a middle-aged woman, a business traveler. Short black bobbed hair with bangs, pants suit, a small carry on. She looked tired. Hair unkept, no lipstick, bags under her eyes. No coffee, just a water bottle. James imagined that she had just lost some big deal and was on the way home after an arduous journey. Perhaps she had just wrapped up some weeklong “leadership conference.” That would be enough to destroy any man or woman’s sense of being. Or maybe she was a tramp, he didn’t care.

She probably reminded him of Jane. He was most likely just projecting his feelings for Jane onto her, or maybe not, whatever.

He tried to ignore her, but it proved difficult. In this instance he was actually intrigued by her sitting next to him. It broke his aimless email reverie and the sounds of silence of the empty terminal. Still, he was in no mood to engage her. Especially because she seemed like the kind that would chew his ears off. He was certainly not ready to be nosed on. He would jet, he'd force her to keep her tattered self-confidence and life problems to herself. There would be no penny for her thoughts. Not on his dime.

After a few split seconds of awkward glances, just as he was about to leave, she turned her head to him. James knew what was next. She broke the silence, just as he was getting up. He had failed, he was stuck..

"Pardon me, when's the next flight out?"

James was aghast at the absurdity of her small talk. Her ticket was sitting right in front of her, practically starring her in the face. She knew the departure time; she just meant her question to be a conversation gateway. And he almost fell for it.

"Should be here shortly," was James's terse response. He never took his eyes off his laptop screen, even when she spoke up again.

"Are you going to Heathrow too?"

Of course he was, where else would he be going? The one-way to London was the only plane taking off from their terminal.

"Yeah," James said. He began to pack his things, it was his way of signaling that the conversation was not only officially over, but also that it would never start. He made it look believable enough. A glance at his watch, a sigh, some looks around. He came off as a man on a mission for sure, however fake that mission was. As he got up, she held out her hand, blocking his retreat.

"Wait!"

If her goal was to surprise him, she achieved it. James frequently had run-ins with the bored, overworked businesswoman type during his

travels. But this, this was something new. She looked at him with intense eyes. They were red and puffy. On closer inspection black and purple rings circled them like morbid halos. It was as if she hadn't slept in days. Her dilated pupils were flanked by bright red blood vessels, and her mascara had run away a long time ago. She was in a rougher state than he realized. She was profoundly fatigued.

"What's wrong?"

"Do you by chance have an aspirin?"

"Yeah, I think so."

James clumsily felt his coat pockets. He always carried some with him because Jane was headache prone, she had been her entire life. It was due to a blood pressure issue she developed as a child.

"Here you go."

James handed her a couple pills, she grabbed them, her hands shaking a bit, dropped them in her mouth and took a swing from her water bottle. James remained. Even if he wanted no part in long talks with her, he was nevertheless a bit concerned. As she sat the water bottle down she noticed his concern and felt obligated to set the record straight.

"It's ok, I had run out and wanted to make sure I took some before the flight. I appreciate it."

James was relieved that she seemed to be letting him off the hook.

"You're welcome. Well, I'm gonna get going, have a safe flight, ok?"

She smiled, nodded and James left. He was surprised he was able to make such a quick exit but there it was. Once he was about halfway back to the terminal gate he glanced back at her. She was sitting with her head on the table, resting it in her arms. James cringed a bit, it was strange to say the least. Still, he turned and went on, not his monkey, not his problem. Ever since his war with Jane began his emotional tank had very little in it for anyone but himself and he wasn't going to waste any of what little empathy he had left on a stranger.

He found a seat near a large window overlooking the runway and spent the next half hour or so going over emails. He also managed to read

a few chapters in a business book until a stewardess appeared and alerted everyone that it was time for priority boarding.

James watched as the fifty or so passengers in the empty terminal all huddled around the gate. He decided to join them. There was obviously no point in priority boarding. In a crowd that size everyone was a priority. One by one, family by family, the meager group boarded the plane, the burned-out businesswoman included. Within an hour they were fast crossing the Atlantic.

DISSONANCE

After James left Jane went on a massive cleaning spree to pass the time. She was on spring break and needed something to occupy herself with before the semester resumed. Dusting, organizing, mopping, laundry, you name it she did it. It was a coping mechanism, a way to forget about James. However, no matter how much she tried, her cleaning binges continually confronted her with all the fine and intimate details of her matrimonial existence - the opposite of the intended effect.

She dusted her photo frames, she saw James. In the breakfast nook closet she moved containers around like deck chairs on the Titanic, causing her to become more and more acquainted with his favorite foods, some of which she had completely forgotten about since they hadn't shared a meal together in quite some time. There were boxes of sugary cereal that she once thought cute but now deemed immature. Canned pears, for some reason he always liked them. She came to like them once but now detested them.

Later, while cleaning the library she dusted and organized his favorite volumes. It's said you can learn more about a person by the books they keep on their shelves than from anything else. Supposedly it's more accurate than even personality tests. And there they were. Books on world history, philosophy, astrophysics and other sciences. When they first met

and all way back through elementary, middle and high school she thought James's fondness for science compelling and worthy of her highest admiration. Now, she blocked the science channel on the TV, avoided anything remotely scientific on the news, and pledged to herself that she would never set foot inside the university planetarium (one of James's favorite spots on campus) again. She could, at least, rest in the fact that her books were no longer seated next to his, she having moved them to the guest bedroom months ago.

The last stop on her cleaning spree was the backyard where she fought with his plants. He was nowhere near the green thumb his mom was. In fact, James's mom taught Jane everything she knew about the subject. The last time she visited her and Jane planted their own garden in the far corner of the yard, to celebrate her one year anniversary, and for a while her and James tended it together, but in time it fell into disrepair, with both parties neglecting it. All Jane did now was uproot copious amounts of weeds from the garden and backyard. It was cathartic though. Each time she pulled a stubborn stalk from the earth it was like she was ripping James out of a part of her life. It felt good. Still, the back of her mind was restless with a still small voice. Everything she confronted that day she used to embrace. The pictures, food, books, garden, these were things that brought joy to her and James's life together. But alas the cognitive dissonance was getting her nowhere, so she pushed the brief reverie of sentimentality out of her mind, and continued her cleaning expedition.

Despite her attempt however, she couldn't get away from facing the things they still shared together. Their car, their master bathroom, their media center, their sink, their dishwasher, their washing machine and their dryer. All things that still brought them together. The fact that somehow they still shared these things gave Jane a sense of ease. To her at least there were still things keeping them together. It was strange, an hour ago she wanted to kick James out of sight and mind; now she felt a wandering ache for him and their relationship. Feelings like this ebbed and flowed through Jane's mind often. Like the tide, in and out, anger and

remorse, back and forth. She wanted him gone, but was glad they were still together.

She continued along, headphones in her ears, hips swinging, and imagining that with every wisp of the broom, every flick of the mop, and every spritz of cleaner that she were somehow polishing their relationship back to life. "If I could just get things clean enough, he'll relent and thank me," went her mind.

However, when her quest was finally over, she sat down on their master bed and reality's gravity brought her back to earth, and back to her hating her husband. She waved her hand across the comforter and looked at his pillow and hers. Memories of passionate nights filled her mind. They hadn't slept tougher since the accident. Suddenly, a yearning for all that he was consumed her if only for one fleeting moment. Would she ever experience the thrill and peace of giving herself up to him again? Would they ever be together again?

Like a tornado, such thoughts left her just as fast as they had come. Who was she kidding? Intimate? With him? It was now a far off dream, just like her memories of nights with him. It was all so painfully obvious, the blight on their relationship was nowhere near gone. No matter of dusting, vacuuming, sewing or mopping would change that, nor could any of it give her any of the control over the situation that she so desperately wanted. In a matter of hours Jane had gone from hating James, to missing him, to hating him, to wanting him back then to sheer disillusionment over it all. War and grief will do that to you. All she was left with as she stared at the ceiling, lying on the bed, was a headache.

Then, she remembered she had one room still left to clean. How could she have missed it? James's study. And what better time. The enemy was away. His command center for the taking. Despite the opportunity before her, his study was, deep down, the one place where Jane didn't want to go. Yet it sat there in her mind like a signal. It told her that everything cleaned up to that point meant nothing. But the fact that she didn't want to go there made it plain to her that the pain was still there, but maybe she

could start moving forward if she cleaned it? Perhaps if she cleaned it she could “get over it.” Jane wanted to understand why she was so apprehensive about going there.

She battled in her mind whether or not she should enter. She went through a million scenarios in her head. In one she’d open the upper most drawer of his desk and find a box of illicit love letters. In another she’d find all their photos boxed away, and realize she’d been forgotten. The last scenario involved her discovering that he had not gone to Demark at all. Instead, he hopped a flight to Australia never to return. In the end, each time she imagined herself left isolated, lonely and alone. An insurmountable trifecta of pain. A ruthless undercurrent of fear below her surface.

Deep down though, she knew her flights of fancy were nothing but wan distractions with no real bite to them. Just figments meant to avoid. Or so she tried to tell herself. Regardless, she took a deep breath, opened the door, turned on the lights and slowly stepped onto the hallowed ground.

Then, it jumped out at her. The urn was still there. It had never been moved since the day they brought it home. It sat there, staring her down. It disturbed her. Provoked her.

A beautiful baby boy dies a horrific death in a car crash. Then he’s reduced to ashes and put into a tiny jar. She always wondered what the point was to it all. Humanity back to dust. She knew the funerals and ceremonies were for the living, not the dead, but she often wondered if they just made the living more dead inside themselves. She missed him, more than anything else in the world. But a jar of his remains did nothing to bring him back. It did nothing to console. Quite the opposite. It just sat there to remind her it was all her fault.

She couldn’t take it. She immediately turned, stepped out and slammed the door behind her. Near to collapsing, Jane’s back fell against the door. She slid down along it until she sat on the floor with her face buried in her hands, weeping bitterly. She cried out, but no one was there. Who was she crying to anyway? It wouldn’t have been any different if James

were there, he'd just stare at his emails with his headphones on, lost inside himself, conquering the land of apathy. And despite all her attempts at prayer she felt God had forsaken her long ago. There was no one to help her. This she fervently believed, and it only brought her further down into the depths of despair.

In between sobs she gave the occasional punch to the floor. As if it would help somehow. She had to do it, she had to beat herself up, because it was her fault. It was always her fault. She'd pushed James too hard that morning. He wanted to sleep in. But she wanted to get things done early for a party she had planned for faculty at the university later that afternoon. She was always selfish like that. Always busy. She thrived on affirmation from her colleagues. She always deferred to others. She was weak, she knew it, she always knew it, that's why she was crying, she couldn't handle it, maybe James was right all along, she'd never get over it. Maybe she was worthless, maybe she was washed up just as much as their marriage. All these things circled inside her head like vultures. It didn't matter that before the accident everyone loved her, including James above all else. In the fog of despair nothing mattered now. There was no perspective, no anchor, no safe harbor. No past to ground her, no present for her to enjoy and no future for her to cling to.

Her desire to impress her colleagues had killed her son that morning. That was her story, and she stuck to it. It was her burden to carry. The story, fiction or not, was like a weight, always slowing her down, always preventing her from becoming happy again. It was her punishment, and she took it gladly. It was her atonement. Her ball and chain. Everywhere she went she made it a point to give people that reason. They'd say "it wasn't your fault," or "I know how you feel," and the classic "if you ever need anything, I'm here." All trite phraseology, nothing more. She hated those phrases, especially when James would say them at the start of their war. It was his idea of being diplomatic and it backfired. Ultimately, you can be lost in thought, but Jane had come to lose herself in her thoughts in the most literal way. She didn't know who she was anymore. Without

her son, she just didn't know. There was no longer a line in sight for her between fact and fiction, or between lies and truth,

Eventually Jane pulled herself together. She got up, walked downstairs, grabbed a cup from her espresso machine and reclined outside on an all-weather plastic recliner; phone in one hand, brew in the other.

In times like these calling Belgium always made things better. Jane was the apple of her mother-in-law's eye, and vice versa. She was concerned too about her health and wanted to say hi. Also, there just might have been a part of her deep down somewhere that wanted to see if James was telling the truth. Ultimately, Jane relied on James's mom because she was the only person that she could talk to, while everyone else over the last year were merely people who talked to her about it all.

Everyone, especially Jane's female friends, thought it their obligation and duty to always bring things up to her. What they failed to realize was that they weren't allowing Jane to come to them and bring things up herself, which most of the time was all she ever wanted. Because of this the people who Jane knew became tepid and stale to her.

At first it was all about their son, then when people got over it they latched onto the obvious tension between her and James. Every single co-dependent woman she knew, and everyone she knew seemed to be that way at one level or another – always making her problems their own. Jane couldn't even have conversations with her friends anymore, any attempt she made was clouded with thoughts running through her mind regarding their real reasons for wanting to "help" and "talk" to her. Were they just living vicariously through her and trying to find answers to their own problems by helping her? Did they feel superior by asking and telling her about things? Or did they simply want to gossip? It bothered Jane deeply that no one she knew would give her permission to reach out to them about things and that they instead would come to her to supposedly help.

As a result, she walked on eggshells with everyone, including those who actually wanted to hear from her. She was confused, and with the

confusion came an inability to discern good people from selfish people. Instead, she just lumped everyone into the latter category. An unbearable way to live.

Appointments with friends, dinner parties and church gatherings slowly faded out of the picture. Eventually, they disappeared from Jane's calendar altogether. The only constant anymore was James's mom. She could still talk with her. She always let Jane vent, and ask questions. She was always there to listen. James's mom was a source of affirmation, a light that could guide things to a better tomorrow.

Also, she was also an invaluable asset to Jane in her feud with James. While she claimed to be neutral, Jane always believed she was on her side. The attitude towards others that Jane developed after the death of her son was really a doubled edged sword. To be sure, many did not treat her right or know how to. However, Jane often fell into the habit of making it her mission to drag people into the fray – something that she of course would unequivocally deny if questioned about it. Most people were wise enough to not have anything to do with their domestic war. Even James's mom straddled a fine line between being an open ear and go-between for them. Jane couldn't help it though, she needed an ally, she didn't know what to do, yet by the same token she knew exactly what she was doing. Going to James's mom simultaneously for solace and to get at James was just another unexplainable action that had taken Jane by the reigns since her son died.

Jane dialed the phone. Their conversation began amiable enough.

"Hi, its Jane."

"Why so it is! How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine."

"I was just wondering how you were feeling?"

A long pause. James's mom was well keen to her daughter-in-law's tone. She was young once too. She was no stranger to heartache and domestic disputes or losing loved ones. As such, experience and grace were

her gifts, and she was always ready to dispense them, yet she could also tell when Jane was probing and moving her around a chess board.

"I'm fine too, it was a minor instance. They might put a stent in next time but for now I should be good to go for a while. They're planning to discharge me later tomorrow."

Jane took a deep breath in relief. James was telling the truth.

"You know James is coming over," James's mom said.

There was a long pause. Nothing would get past James's mom. She knew Jane was worried about James.

"Yes, he'll probably arrive later today I guess. He's on the redeye to Heathrow apparently. He texted me a bit ago as he was boarding."

James's mom was no pushover, nor was she oblivious to the fact that she was a pawn for both sides. She knew James was traveling over to get away from Jane and she knew Jane was concerned and didn't want him to despite any protests to the contrary.

"He's always putting those sky miles to work."

"Yes," Jane replied, staring at the ceiling and counting the tiles, the cup of coffee dangling from her other hand.

"Have you two been able to finally get on a vacation again?"

If there was one thing James's mom was tired of it was her son and daughters-in-law's avoidance of each other.

Jane paused, rolled her eyes and stared out at the garden before crafting a response.

"No. We haven't."

"I think it would be good for you. Maybe when summer term starts, and you have some free time you can go somewhere together?"

"Maybe, but you know, it's been hard. He's got lots of clients and I've got a lot of work outside the classroom to attend to. It's difficult to find the time."

"You were able to find the time before, and in spades too," she replied, with a slight laugh to ease the tension.

"I know, we'll get around to it. Someday."

“I hope so.”

The next words out Jane’s mouth, much as she wished they were untrue, were a complete gut reaction. She had allowed James’s mom to get her thinking, and it caused her, in the moment, to get soft. What followed was an unashamed, unvarnished, deep-down truth...

“Me too,” Jane replied, unable to believe what she’d just said. She had betrayed everything, including herself, by verbalizing this innermost desire.

“Jane, do me a favor.”

“What?”

“Remember the good times. Look forward to the future. But live in the now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” with a deflecting laugh.

“That’s what’s called *life* honey.”

“That’s called you being cryptic,” still laughing and taking a swig of coffee.

“Life happens in the moments in between. Don’t ever lose sight of that. Do you understand?”

Jane sat back and continued to dangle the coffee cup. She was lost in thought. The truth was, she didn’t understand it at all. And that bothered her.

“Jane are you still there?”

“Yes, yes I’m here, I’m sorry.”

“Do you understand?”

“Sure...I understand.”

“Good, now I’ll have to let you go, the doctor just came in for some more tests. I’ll let you know when James arrives.”

“It’s ok, I’m going to be busy the next couple of days.”

“Very well, I love you, take care.”

“I love you too.”

Jane sat there for a long while after the conversation ended. She sat and listened to the din of her neighbor’s lawnmower, then to the sound of

morning doves as she gazed at the setting sun. It put her in a strange state of malaise, and she remained there thinking not only about what James's mom had said on the call, but what she had said.

The state of her domestic war with James, at least for her side, was entering a new stage. It was coming to a place where she couldn't avoid the answers anymore. They were becoming increasingly obvious as time went by. They were inside her. She knew what she wanted, she wanted James back, and her old life, but she couldn't fully admit that to herself yet. It explained her recent mental back and forths – and the cleaning sprees and social avoidance. There comes a time in any dispute when you've done all you can. You've let off all possible steam, you've used up all that you have. At that point, it's either surrender or retreat. She didn't know how to do the first, and she didn't want to do latter. She felt trapped. She couldn't go on with hot and cold reactions all the time. There was no consistency in it. But what could she do?

Also, if her talk with James's mom was any indication, no one was going to give her any magic answers. It wasn't their place to. Only her and James could figure things out now. They were the only ones left on the battlefield.

Jane continued to sit there, long into the evening, reflecting on life and the future. She wondered what her world would look like without the grief, pain and strife. Such thoughts intrigued her. It was the first time since her son died that she was able to get to a place where she could even remotely dream of such things. Maybe being able to was a sign that she was taking the first step to restoration?

DEVELOPMENTS

The first leg of the flight went off without a hitch. It was, for James, gloriously uneventful. The cabin's white noise serenaded him into an unincumbered semi-sleep state, while the endless blue carpet of the Atlantic below, and the space afforded him by his first-class cabin, rounded out the blissful atmosphere, leaving James cocooned in ignorance. He simply lay there, fully leaned back, hands folded behind his head, drifting into space.

In and out he went, every now and then some light noise or another would come close to jolting him awake but he'd quickly fall back asleep again. Visions of his son and Jane. Then a jolt, a cabin cart wheeling by. Images of great moments in his life, then laughs from nearby passengers. A tiny nightmare or two, then messages on the intercom. In and out he went. Never fully awake but never fully asleep.

Soon enough though James's waltz through the land of relaxation abruptly ended. It was all thanks to the intercom. It was the captain. They were going to have to land outside London instead of in the city. There had been a situation. Everything was fine, but they were going to be delayed at least an hour. Groans and whines from the passengers filled the cabin with noise. James didn't really get the memo at first. He was still in a fog. He wiped his eyes and looked around, wondering if what he had heard were really true. Things appeared normal enough, a delay seemed

out of the question. He wondered what caused it.

Not long thereafter a flight attend flew down the aisle. Eventually, every few minutes another flight attendant would come rushing down the aisle as well, trying his or her best to keep up appearances as they so often do in times of crisis. Later, an older man was hurrying behind one of them.

“Where is she?” the old man said to a flight attendant, heaving and trying to keep up with her.

“She’s in first, she’s stable but we don’t have a doctor on board.”

“I’ll do what I can,” he said as he rushed after the attendant. He was a rotund man, in his sixties probably. Suit and tie, pretty dressed up. He had a short salt and pepper beard, tweed jacket, horn rimmed glasses. His nearly bald head was perspiring greatly. The two flew by James’s seat. He turned and watched as they disappeared into the next cabin.

James, though a bit alarmed in the moment, shook it off and moved on mentally, barely missing step. He glanced at his watch, they would be heading in for a landing soon. Through the window he could see the British countryside peeking through the clouds in short intervals. It had been a while since he had been to the United Kingdom. It was one of his favorite haunts. Jane’s too. They did a grand tour of the island many moons ago. It was a special trip. They frequented various countryside manors and took a plethora of photographs. Back then, the manors of the old aristocracy were in disrepair. They made for great pictures and memories though. They had never forgotten the excitement of driving up to the next dilapidated old estate, getting out and trespassing around. They’d creep and crawl together, laughing all the way, around the bare artifices of bygone ages. He felt like Wordsworth at Tintern; an esteemed poet-explorer, treading on forgotten sacred ground.

Some of the places were nothing more than standing ruins, others still had some meat on their bones, but all of the manors were wrecked by time and neglect. It was a profound juxtaposition; the contrast between the old ruins and James and Jane’s new love for each other (they were newlyweds at the time). In fact, the difference between the ruins and

their love made their appreciation for each grow stronger during the trip. They'd run their hands across some old stone wall or she'd sketch the façade of some long-destroyed structure or they'd carefully hike around forgotten gardens, minding the thorns and thistles, peering into empty cracked fountains and witnessing the glory of nature overtaking everything. They'd look at each other and think about how lucky they were to have found each other, how their place in the world was firmly entrenched in the grand narrative of history. Love did conquer all. It was cosmic in a way; God's plan fashioned their togetherness. To them their marriage would never become a relic or lost to history. They would never allow their relationship to be overtaken by neglect.

Those were good times. But that was just it, they *were* good times. "I guess we turned into those old manors after all?" James thought, staring out the window. At any rate he stopped his mind from dwelling on the useless. Instead, he contemplated the fastest way to Heathrow. He needed to arrive on time or he'd be late for the mainland. He needed a plan. Just then the fasten seatbelt light came on. They were beginning their descent.

The captain announced that they were going to land at a regional commercial airport. James's mind went into overdrive. He took out his phone, opened his map app and tried to figure out the fastest way into town so he could still catch his flight to Denmark on time. It was going to be tight, but he could make it on time, barely, barring no further interruptions.

About fifteen minutes later the plane made a successful landing along a rustic strip of asphalt nestled in the middle of farm country. It was quite a contrast. Rolling hills and large warehouses, things that naturally don't go together.

Just as James took off his seatbelt one of the flight attendants told everyone to remain seated so they could let people from coach come through first. James and the others watched as the old man from before led a caravan of about three flight attendants down the aisle. Through his window he saw see an ambulance pull up. A few seconds later a person on

a gurney was rolled from the plane, and placed inside. James couldn't tell who it was but the team was moving relative calmly, so maybe the worst had passed.

Not long after the call was made for their cabin to disembark. James got up, stretched, grabbed his carry-on and belongings and made his way to the exit. He followed a small group of passengers down a portable staircase on wheels and stepped out onto the tarmac. It was much colder than back home. He stood there with the others waiting for a baggage tram to approach. It was quite the scene. A group of mishappen travelers stranded in the middle of a commercial airport runaway in the middle of the British countryside. The airport was something one would expect to find in Tahiti or in the middle of some Canadian boreal forest, not an hour outside the most visited city in the world. It was grassroots of the tallest order. Fifty or so misfit passengers, brave enough to fly midweek at an odd time on a budget airline. The cream of the crop. James could barely contain his pride for being numbered among them, and the feeling was mutual for all involved.

The group stood there awkwardly for a solid ten minutes more. They behaved in a manner consistent with and expected of all groups in similar situations. There was much phone checking, calling loved ones and waffling back and forth in place. There were of course the know it all types who talked endlessly about how the airline didn't land properly and that they weren't handling things well enough. "Take it from my experience," one man began. Then you had the nervous types that talked endlessly like morale sergeants, trying to reassure themselves by reassuring everyone else with jokes that no one thought funny and that they had heard a million times before. Anger, despondency and apathy began to percolate from within the ranks of the impatient group. A noxious brew. Then, an announcement.

"Attention everyone," one of the flight staff called out with a megaphone. "If you would like a connecting flight or refund please see us inside after you receive your bags. The tram is now on its way. Thank you for

your patience. We apologize for any inconvenience.”

The crowd murmured as the baggage cart finally arrived. James grabbed his things then joined back with the group for the short walk to the terminal. It was a commercial terminal, not much to write home about. Still, James had a special fondness for such places. He had clients all over the world who operated in similar sites. He was no stranger to the hustle and bustle of freight and commercial flights. Nor did he find the stoic repose of large million square foot distribution centers off-putting. In his mind they were emblems of commerce. In fact, he toured one of the largest warehouses in the world for a client one time. Jane was with him and she found it interesting too. He thought about that as he got closer to the terminal building.

As soon as they entered inside the mad rush began. Some let loose and descended like a horde of marauding Vikings upon the airlines' makeshift folding help desk, clamoring for refunds. Others, James included, began fast walking to the exit to get to the taxis and rideshares first. Just as James was bypassing the refund table frenzy a voice from behind interrupted him.

“Excuse me!”

James turned, it was one of the flight staff accompanied by the old man.

“Can I help you?” James said.

“I'm sorry, but do you happen to know this woman?”

The staff member held out a photo. James didn't notice the woman at first glance, his mind was still set on exiting the terminal as quickly as possible. Suddenly though, just as he was about to walk away, he recognized her. It was the woman from the café. Perplexed, James studied it for a moment more before replying. He was amazed at how much more “with it” she appeared. She was like a totally different person. Bright smile, arms crossed in confidence, head tilted to the side a little (Jane smiled that way, she could never smile without tilting her head, he loved that about her) and shoulder leaning against the side of an office building. It was a

nice business photo, it looked like something straight out of a professional periodical. But there was a feminine charm to it too, she was no “girl boss” or “fierce” businesswoman, no, she was genuine, kind. Just like Jane, a woman not afraid to be a woman.

“I guess I do. Well, I mean, I met her briefly before the flight, we talked for a couple minutes, that was the extent of it. Why?” James fumbled; his mind still resolute on getting on his way.

“Did you give her any aspirin?” the old man chimed in.

“Yeah, how did you know that?” James’s curiosity was piqued.

“She had a heart attack mid-flight, that’s what the delay was about. This man here is a retired physician,” the flight attendant stated, pointing to the old man.

“Oh, ok.” James’s mind failed to ascent to a place of emotional empathy. He was now more set on London and his own affairs than ever, especially as he watched more people leave the refund table and head for the exit. They’d beat him to the punch if he wasn’t careful. As such, the moment he realized he wasn’t in any trouble he left any thought of the woman’s condition to people that really cared. He was ready to leave the two behind and move on to better things. However, the doctor continued the conversation.

“You should be proud,” he said, wiping sweat from his head with a handkerchief.

“Why?”

“You saved her life, the good doctor here told us she would have died if it wasn’t for you,” the flight attendant said.

James didn’t quite know what to say. When it was put to him that way he felt good about it to be sure, but deep down he just didn’t care. He didn’t want to be held up anymore. The two could tell be James’s body language that he wasn’t going to let them keep him any longer, so they pulled back.

“Thank you again,” the doctor said, shaking James’s hand.

“Well, you’re welcome, glad I could help.”

“Did you want to see her? She’s outside in an ambulance.” The flight attendant made a final attempt to keep the conversation going.

James loathed when people did that. He had experienced it ever since the accident. People would notice that he wasn’t fully right or that he was down, or not with it or whatever. To the doctor and the attendant James should have been jumping for joy as a hero, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. So, like he would always do in such instances, James went on the offensive. It was how he withdrew from people. He believed they could see right through him and into his sad existence. He didn’t want or need their help. He didn’t want their prying.

“No, I don’t have time, you can give her this if you want,” James handed the flight attendant his business card as a way to get them off his back.

The two looked at him for a moment before smiling and exchanging final pleasantries. As soon as they began to walk away James was off. Once outside, he put in a request on his phone for a ride share. Minutes later he was on his way to London.

THOUGHTS AND WORDS

The small ride share sedan drove out of the airport and passed the runway. James watched the lights from the ambulance flickering in the distance in the rear-view mirror. It was the final reminder of what had happened. Soon thereafter James forgot all about the flight, the delay and the woman.

James was grateful that his driver was few for words. It assured him that he could relax, take his mind off everything and get lost in the splendor of the countryside. It reminded him of home. It was pleasant. He had grown up on a farm. Jane too.

However, their agrarian upbringing, though no less bucolic, was culturally a far cry from the one outside his window. His childhood environment paid no resemblance to Hardy's Wessex. Nor to Tolkien's rural ideal, the Shire. There were no "dark Satanic Mills." No "to the manor born" types. No, their's was just plain old Americana country.

This contrast between worlds brought back memories in James's mind about a time when him and Jane scoured their attic for their old yearbooks not long after they got married. It was an arduous search but eventually they found them. They sat together, legs crossed and eyes wide, pouring over the dog-eared pages, stickers from sweethearts and scribbles of "HAGS" (Have A Good Summer) written on the flyleaves. He remembered it like it was yesterday. There were plenty of photos of the

two of them. Their school had only a few hundred students. It was sweet, tart and syrupy, just as a relationship should be for those who happen to find love at a young age.

James grinned and his mind took a more cynical turn. He thought how that, in hindsight, their relationship was like a yearbook. That is, a forgotten yearbook. In time, sweet innocence was replaced with reality, and as more of life was piled on them, the old sweetness was completely forgotten. Their former relationship was like some old forgotten yearbook. It was a distant memory locked away in some barn attic somewhere, collecting dust with no friends except silverfish and moths. Forgotten, that's what it was. Feelings now foreign.

Yet, the meteoric romance that him and his favorite little blonde shared in elementary, middle and high school could not be entirely forgotten. They knew each other all the way from third grade. They did everything together. He could never really forget everything, and he didn't know what to do with that fact. His mind waffled and jumped around as he rode in the back seat, trying to tell himself that the old days were gone while simultaneously wrestling with their memories.

His mind drifted to other times from their upbringing. Church dinners on the grounds, fall festivals, harvest days, class dances, summer camps, and the occasional trip to the "big city." All these things played out in his mind in quick bursts of emotion and memory. He asked himself how he got from that Midwestern idyll to where he was now; some back woods road outside London, without his sweetheart, without any real direction or goals. How could a world that he lived in for nearly two decades, half his life, become so distant and remote?

This wasn't the first time James questioned such things. He played similar games in his mind all the time. Most of the time though he'd block out the past, or get angry about it. By doing either he'd deflect attention away from finding the reasons behind the thoughts. Thus, he'd keep the doors, behind which were answers, eternally barred.

James was afraid to ask why, afraid to find out what was behind the

doors. However, if he continued to let his feelings eviscerate him, he'd just be engaging in an emotional cannibalism where, in the end, he'd be even less of a person than he had already become. Regardless, he'd keep those doors closed as much as he could, growing more emotionally cold as a result. To him it was better than confronting all his questions and giving himself permission to discover their origins and answers. He'd keep the doors closed. But he often fought with himself over the definition of the word "closed." He liked to think it simply meant not opening, but he knew that there are variations to opening something. When is a door really "opened" anyway? Truth is he never really kept the doors entirely closed. He was too curious. He was like a child pushing the proverbial envelope. He'd peek inside from time to time by intimating at questions and then abruptly shutting such inquiries down.

As the car continued on, he thought how he hadn't forgotten his past at all, quite the contrary. Rather, it was the world of his childhood and teen years that had deserted him. But alas, maybe he left it too? It was another time, and another place. And sure, things stood out, a special sermon here or there, homecomings, first jobs and such. Yet he couldn't recall the moments in between. All the little things. Caressing Jane's hair, watching ball games with his dad, riding the school bus, working odd jobs, going to the movies and such. The millions of little things that made up that childhood tapestry, the eons of events and people that made him into the man he became, all seemed lost forever. He remembered when his parents returned back to Denmark, his marriage, graduations and other major milestones stood out, but that was it.

Then, James had a glimmer of hope. Maybe he could get the memoirs back? There it was, with that thought he swung wide open the doors he wanted so badly to keep closed. He got too close to the sun, to his innermost thoughts. He knew why he forgot. The three-foot tall headstone on the side of the road! It was no secret to him. When his son died, he died too. His death had, in one fell swoop, like an eraser to paper, wiped out his own childhood and adulthood with it.

It was too much, he quickly closed the doors again, and stopped asking questions immediately. He reached down and grabbed a book from his bag and poured over its pages. He felt relief. Too many questions with answers he didn't want to hear. He read the book to take his mind to greener pastures.

But James's reverie didn't last long. As they got closer to London he overheard ambulance sirens in the distance. Thoughts of the woman from the café entered his mind. What had happened at the airport did bother him at some level. In fact, he was surprised that he didn't even know her name and there he was, the recipient of praises being sung by a doctor and flight attendant for his life saving miracle. But he was no miracle worker, not by a long shot.

Suddenly the car slowed. They hit a traffic jam. The driver loosened his seatbelt, reached over, grabbed a bag of chips from his glove compartment and began to feast on them like a rabid dog. James knew all too well what was going to happen next. This was it, time for long drawn-out small talk. Just when he thought he'd have a trip with no discussion, the traffic knew better. The driver grabbed a second bag of chips, turned around, and held it out to James.

"Want some boss?"

"No, I'm good, thanks though."

The man shrugged his shoulders and sat the bag on the dashboard. He was an upper middle-aged man, Indian. Bald on the top, hair on the sides, gray and black mustache. He smelled of curry and incense. There was a charm dangling from the rear-view mirror, a small hand crafted piece of jewelry shaped like India with an elephant in the middle. He seemed pretty put together, though James sized him up as the nervous and scattered type. Legs bouncing up and down, swift intermittent glances to the left and right, and short bursts of checking phone notifications.

Thankfully, after a minute or so of silence James realized the driver wasn't going to spark a conversation. He seemed too preoccupied with the traffic, chips and tapping his finger in rhythmic intervals on the steering

wheel. James buried his face back into the book. Small talk avoided. However, James glanced at his watch. Time was slipping. He knew precisely how much time he needed in order to catch his flight to the mainland. It was getting close. Much to his regret, he was going to have to start a conversation. It was a sacrifice he was going to have to make, it was for the greater good. He needed to know how long the traffic was going to go on for. James sighed, placed a bookmark in his book (he had read one page the entire time since he first opened it), sat it down and moved forward.

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah?” the driver looked back, a bit startled.

“How long do you think we’ll be stuck in this?”

The man rubbed his mustache for a moment, looked around, checked his phone and then gave the disheartening news. “To be honest, it’s at least a half-hour delay.”

James shook his head in defiance to the world. He took out his phone and began searching for new flights. The driver noticed his impatience and spoke up.

“Sorry, these roads are always like this. We’re not going to make it in time.”

James kept silent, he already knew that, he was already placing an order for a one-way ticket for a flight later in the evening when the driver took things in another direction.

“So, what’s on your mind?” he said. His tone changed, he was quite serious. It caught James off guard. He looked up from his phone as soon as he pressed “order,” wrinkled his eyebrows and immediately took a defensive posture.

“I just lost a few hundred dollars, that’s what’s on my mind.”

The driver took another unexpected turn in the conversation.

“No, I mean before.”

“Before?”

“Yeah, you seemed angry, tense.”

James sat back and crossed his arms (the epitome of angry and tense).

"I don't mean to pry, but us drivers are pretty astute. We know when something isn't right with someone. We see a lot of people every day you know." The driver laughed a bit to ease the tension that was unfolding between them.

James went from defensive to sarcastically offensive. He folded his hands behind his head, laid back even more and went on the attack. If he couldn't avoid a conversation at least he could try to end it or at a minimum make it interesting.

"Now how can I be upset at a time like this, I'm a miracle worker!"

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes sir, I gave a woman some aspirin before my other flight. Apparently, she had a heart attack mid-flight and some doc told me that the pills saved her life. Or so that's how the story goes." James leaned his head on the window and stared at the surroundings. People were biking and walking faster than they were driving.

The driver paused for a moment, unsure of how to respond. He knew James's type well though, the burned-out despondent world and life weary traveler type. Such frequented the back seat of his Citroën daily. He decided to take the Socratic route.

"That's good."

"Yeah, I'm a genuine life saver."

The driver leaned back in his seat, tossed the first bag of chips aside, took the wheel with one hand and began to eat from the other bag.

"What do you mean by *life saver*?" he asked with a playfulness underlined with seriousness. His delivery made the conversation somewhat compelling to James.

"Well, it's more than just a candy, that much I know."

"Hah, you're quick on your toes," with a laugh.

"That's what they tell me."

"But really, what do you mean when you say, *life saver*?"

James was perplexed. The last thing he wanted to do was mental gymnastics. Nor did he want to play into some taxi driver's psychological

puzzle. Yet, at some level, he felt he had to, for whatever reason, he wanted to see where it would take him. He was willing to play along.

“I think it’s pretty obvious, she almost died, but she didn’t, her life was saved.”

The driver held the second bag to James who refused the salty goodness a second time.

“Do you base the gravity of that off of what she was saved from or just because she avoided death?”

“I mean she avoided death, that’s a saved life. I don’t understand the question.”

“I guess it all depends on how you view death.”

“How do you view death?”

“I mean, we are only saved from death if death is something to be saved from.”

“Yeah? And when isn’t it something to be saved from?”

“When it’s a good thing.”

“So, you’re saying death is a good thing? You’d rather she died? Hah, I’ve never met a cruel cabbie before.” James shrugged it off and gave a nervous laugh. Jokes aside though, James’s emotions were going into overdrive inside. He was beginning to catch on to the driver, and he didn’t like it.

“No, because it’s not a good thing at all, for some people.”

“Some people?”

“The lost.”

There it was, what James feared most.

“Oh, so you’re a church man?”

“I am, aren’t you?”

“What gave that away?”

“The cross, on your carry-on, the keychain. It’s a cross, and it’s a specific one too. You identify as a Christian?”

James took a deep breath, crossed his arms again and leaned back before continuing. He couldn’t believe it. He had forgotten he even had

the thing anymore. It was a token from long ago. From a time when it meant something. From yearbook land where lollipops and town carnivals roamed. From those days at church parties with all the farm families. From the land of retreats, revivals and Bible studies; small groups and missions trips. It was from the age of Jane, of bright hopes and tomorrows. It was a relic. A symbol of a bygone era. To James, it belonged in the same attic where his lost yearbooks were stuffed away, or maybe in some box amid the vegetation covered ruins of one of the old manors that him and Jane explored years ago. He had merely forgotten to discard it, or so that's what James wanted to think, for the next words out of his mouth betrayed any such sentiments.

"Yeah, you could say that," he remarked, confused as to why he agreed with the driver. His response was almost scripted. No, it was genuine.

"Well, if you do then you know if that woman were a Christian, then death wouldn't had been so bad. Of course, if she wasn't then it would have been bad."

"What's your point?"

The driver then let out a tremendous laugh.

"Just passing the time is all boss."

"Do you always make it a point to pry into the affairs of your passengers?"

The driver looked back, deep-set brown eyes peering straight into James.

"Listen, I don't pry. I probe, I get people to think. That's my real job. The cab is just a, pardon the pun, a *vehicle* for my real purpose."

"So, you're a cab driver on the surface, but you're really a psychologist for the people is that right?"

He winked and gave a thumbs up. "Yeah boss!"

There was a moment of silence and then he spoke back up, turning again he told James, "Listen boss, whatever is eating you, don't let it. There's way too many things in this world that want to feast on you, don't let them. You're not anyone's dinner."

"I appreciate that, but things are beyond repair right now," again James's frankness scared him. He didn't have to answer honestly, but he did. The words just came out.

"That's good."

"Good?"

"Yeah, like you just said, it's all for a season."

"I don't follow."

"Ah come on boss, you said things are beyond repair *right now*. Maybe it will be better soon?" he said, flinging his hands in the air with a shoulder shrug and smug smile.

James looked up. His eyes met the driver's. They were staring at him in the rear-view mirror. The driver winked again. James took a deep breath, smiled slightly, put on his headphones and began to read again.

As he sat there he wondered why he kept betraying himself. In his heart he'd say all was undone, that it was over, that there was no hope, that the fond memories of yore were lost for eternity. His internal voice told him he was no longer a churchman, no longer a worthy husband, no more the great man and father he used to be and certainly not a life saver. Yet the actual words he would use to others never really said the same kinds of things. Sure, they were acerbic and sarcastic, but they always barked louder than they bit. They always gave a shade of hope. They always betrayed him. What was that other voice then inside and where did it come from? Moreover, which one was true? His thoughts or words? His mind thought on these things, and soon the traffic let up and they started off once more.

COMMUNICATION

James arrived at Heathrow two hours behind schedule. He was so late in fact, that the sun was beginning to set as he boarded his second plane of the day. Much to his annoyance, this time the flight was jam packed with people. He was flying at the busiest time of the day this go-around. It was filled to the brim with business travelers, commuters, sightseers; there wasn't an empty seat in the entire tube.

"This is what I get for booking last minute," James mumbled as he took his seat.

It was going to be a one hour flight though, short and sweet; a silver lining to his day. Maybe his luck was starting to turn? As he sat there waiting for takeoff, a text came through. It was from Jane. He wasn't entirely surprised. Despite their domestic war, they had kept communication lines open, as all great rival powers do. Nevertheless they didn't text nearly as much as they used to. The message simply read, "Ok?" To which he responded, "Yeah."

With that, James slid his phone into his pocket, closed his eyes and fell asleep. He never gave a second thought to the intent of the message. He relegated it to a simple check in from the axis powers and responded with a meager assurance that all was fine. Of course, it wasn't all fine, but feuding parties seldom want to tell the truth. Sure, his response conveyed

that he hadn't thrown in the towel or run off with another woman, but it was nonetheless terse, shallow and without love. That's how he liked it. Stay at arm's length, let her know he was generally fine, but let her also know he wasn't close to her anymore.

Back home, Jane sat her phone on the kitchen counter, walked to the fridge and took out a carton of milk. She poured herself a glass then sat down at the kitchen island. She had gotten his message, and its internal hidden meanings, loud and clear. However, she was thinking about it in ways far more complex that he ever could have realized.

She originally planned on not sending him anything. Then she wanted to spill it all and break the news. Then she waffled between the two as most moderns do. The way of all flesh under forty in the twenty-first century would be nothing without an incessant over analysis of text messages. She was no exception. What to say, how to say it and what symbols to use? Then, when you get the gumption to actually press send, you sit and ruminate about the reaction on the receiving end. Did they or didn't they receive it? Did they get what I meant? Why did they take so long to respond? On and on goes the routine.

At the end of Jane's hour-long internal monolog about the right thing to send to James, she simply relegated her imagination and emotions to "Ok?" That was the grand, sweeping grammatical epic that her best intentions could muster. Of course, she didn't send it blindly. She had her reasons. She thought keeping it simple would be best. So that was that. Still, it didn't make her feel any better. Nor did it serve to really improve anything.

The air in the house was still, and her heart heavy. The weight of what she was carrying was almost too much for her to bear. Did James know what had happened? Was he really ok? Her message wasn't enough, in fact she would have been better off not sending it.

"I guess he'll know soon enough," she said to herself, looking for her reflection in the glass of milk.

After a few wistful moments she looked up and stared across the

island at her bright white kitchen. A large set of copperware hung proudly from the rafters. A large white basin sink with regal sheen. Both emblems of good taste. Both monuments to Jane's culinary skills. Now just tools with no purpose.

She used to love cooking for James. It was to her the best outlet for her to share her love of test kitchen science with the world, and back then, he was her world. Even before they got married, all the way back in grade school, her parents would let her "borrow" the family kitchen to cook for him. She'd bring lunches to school for him. To church too, and of course she'd bring them to his baseball games and practice meets.

Over time though, the frequency of said meals declined. After their son died, they stopped altogether. Jane tried for a season to cook for herself. It didn't last. She detested it. Now, the meals were nothing but memories. They were hiding somewhere in the house, but in spirit only. Still, she rested in the fact that tucked away in the recesses of musty old family and church spiral bound cookbooks lay the keys to warm social meals, laughs and to her husband's heart. Those recipes were special formulas that could whisk any care away. Yet even now they were powerless. Maybe someday they'd return, but for the time being, fast food was the only option. Their war, like all domestic wars, was infamous for its bad nutrition.

She thought long and hard about cooking, until her mind ran back to the matter at hand. Nothing could take her mind off of what had happened. She was numb by the news, and even more perplexed that James's dad didn't want her to share it. He wanted to be the one to tell his son. That was that. Even her short text was a step out of bounds.

Eventually, Jane finished off the milk. After the last gulp she slammed her cup down, got up and took a walk outside. It was time to get away, take her thoughts somewhere else.

They lived in the town's historic district. White picket fences, poodles, painted pastel ladies, rod iron gates, cupulas, widows' walks; all of these the modus operandi of the local environment. Across from their house was a large park; bandstand, fountain, swan boats, streetlamps; right out

of an early twentieth century postcard. It was nice. In fact, she had forgotten just how nice it was.

She walked around and thought. Then thought and walked around. It was strange to her to stroll along and not hear the sound of the local brass band, or even the university symphony which would play there occasionally when in season. She and James had it lucky. They could open their windows or sit on the porch to listen to them whenever a show was on. It was almost like sitting front and center. Those were the days. At the start of new semesters Jane would have her fellow faculty friends and the dean over for light dinners. She also hosted her church book club at their home on Tuesdays, and occasionally their pastor's wife would bring the ladies Bible study group over. No matter the occasion, those in attendance would always wind up out on the wrap around porch listening to whatever tunes were humming from across the way. Those were the best of times. Now, it was just a park with an empty bandstand. The porch, a monument to what used to be and to what could be again. Could she...could *they*, get those times back? This venture into the land of possibilities scared her. She feared such thoughts were merely wishes that could never be granted.

She was still concerned about James. She wondered what he would feel going back into a hospital. She hadn't been in one since their son died and couldn't even stomach thinking about what going back into one would be like. Jane stood just as firmly entrenched against them as James. To be sure, if she absolutely had to she'd go to a hospital, but only if it were a matter of life or death. For any other reasons she kept them at arm's length.

The night their son died he was taken to the local hospital. The same one he had been born in just fourteen months earlier. The paramedics knew he was already gone at the scene of the accident, or at least that was the narrative that James and Jane liked to tell themselves. They insisted he be taken in anyway "just in case." As proud and loving as Jane and James were as parents, they knew he was already dead at the site, and that even if not he was too far gone. Nothing was going to bring him back. In their

minds, all that awaited them next was a prolonged series of emotional pains and tortures until they'd finally be handed a death certificate.

Moreover, the paramedics did nothing to instill any confidence in their wrecked hearts. Nevertheless, James and Jane conceded. And when they did they managed to cling somehow to the nearly impossible notion that he'd survive. But what happened next only fueled their apathy and terror more.

They had to ride in a separate ambulance all the way to the hospital. She'd never forget that horrid ride, every mile an eternity, every "how are you feeling now?" from the staff on board an increasingly painful aggravation. Thereafter Jane always compared it to being in a military caravan. No windows, nothing but sterile equipment to keep you company. After a while, everyone inside just sits around despondent; like soldiers ready to be deployed from an amphibious assault vehicle, or airmen about to jump out of a plane. Did any of them really have faith anymore? Or were they just going through the motions in the name of a "crisis?" The minutes of that trip felt like hours. Despite the incessant check-ins from the staff, there was no talking. Just silence. But that silence spoke more than words ever could. She and James had nothing to say.

They arrived at the hospital slightly after their son. He had already been wheeled off to surgery. They waited. Long into the night they sat and paced around waiting for the inevitable. The five hours they spent in the waiting room were emotionally excruciating. It was during this time when the battle lines between them began to be drawn for the very first time. While the war would not be declared between them until their son was declared dead, in the interim they built up their arsenals. Instigations and insinuations commenced.

It started predictably and harmlessly enough. They each told each other how the accident was the other's fault. But those accusations were to be expected, they were just "venting." Next, things escalated into "Oh don't blame yourself, it was my fault" territory. But, as time went by, the barbs became more pointed, the words coarser, the glances rougher. Mere

venting gave way to premediated phrases and remarks. That's when the first real skirmishes began.

Neither of them could come to terms with what had happened, or that either of them could be to blame. Or even more that neither of them were to blame. It was after all deemed, "an accident." The police report said it was black ice. To the authorities it was just an "accident." But that word gives no solace to those in the throes of turmoil. It only helps those filling out medical and police reports to get on with their workdays. It only matters to those who pat you on the back and tell you how they feel sorry for you. Not to the principal cast. Not to James, not to Jane. It was no accident to them, no matter what the lawyers said, or anyone else.

Though they had both been thinking of words to throw at each other, Jane let loose first.

"If you had gotten more sleep..." was the shot heard round the world. She had cast the gauntlet. James quickly retaliated. He was just as ready to attack. She merely beat him to the punch.

"Me? You woke me up, you wanted to get out early!" was his calculated reply. And with those two lines a series of events was set off. Soon after, a doctor emerged from the operating room. The report was given. Their son was dead. The war began.

ARMISTICE DAY

Jane continued around the park. Memories of how her and James's relationship had deteriorated flooded her thoughts. She felt distressed, and lightheaded. She sat down by the bandstand to calm down.

No rest for the weary. The first conversations between her and James at the hospital continued to haunt her, even more so in light of what had just happened. Equally disheartening to her was the reality that she had become a mortal enemy to the man she had once pledged her life to. To the man whose life comprised half of her own. To the man she had made love to, cherished, read the Bible with and traveled the world with. She had given everything to him back then, and vice versa. She lamented that they had gone from being husband and wife to nothing more than a demolition crew. They used to build each other up. Their only goal now was to tear each other down, brick by brick, one insult at a time.

Jane didn't have any bricks left that could be demolished. She felt like an emotional skeleton. One more blow and she'd be gone for good. She also, for first time in months, owned up to the fact that James was in the same boat. They were both heading towards marital oblivion. Spiteful words, hateful actions, emotional abuse. She was guilty of every domestic war crime known to man just as much as he was. Who made her right in all this? Who made him? To her, it had become all too blurred, and at

some level it hardly mattered to her anymore. Each of their lives had been shelled so far into the ground that only rubble remained. Things had gone on for so long that the reasons for the war had become forgotten. Each of them had become unrecognizable to the other. Who was Jane anymore? Who was James? Who were they to each other? They were nothing.

Jane bent her head down and rubbed her eyes. Everything ached. She sat back up and stared at the band stand. She felt dizzy. Then she felt a tinge of panic. The culprit? Her mind latched onto the idea of hope. She was beginning to see the war for what it was. She saw the reality of it all and in that reality there was no utility, progress or reasons to justify it any longer. But those reactions scared her. She had spent so much time in denial that the truth was like some zombie or creature from another world. Truth and hope had become disguised as harbingers of something foreign; something to be feared. Could such feelings really be trusted? Or would she continue believing lies?

Suddenly, church bells broke the silence. Jane jumped. It was the church, her church, *their* church. Its carillon was unmistakable, and its call even more so. Westminster chimes, loud and clear. Jane felt compelled to stop in for a visit. It was no whim. In that moment she fully wanted to visit. This desire frightened her. Despite not having given the church the time of day since the war with James began, she wanted to go back. Why? She didn't really know, she only knew she wanted to and that somehow it was the best thing to do.

Despite her desire to go, she got up with great reluctance. One small step for her, one giant leap for her and James, or so she supposed. She talked to herself for the entire length of the half-mile trek to the church. Words of reassurance, words of conviction and words of self-doubt were the drumbeats to her cadence. What was she doing? Was she mad? Was she merely reacting? Or was it something more? She relegated those thoughts to the back of her mind when she was confronted with the church's large stone façade. It stood there, something so familiar but somehow lost over the last year.

Jane walked deliberately and slowly up the building's steps. It felt like she was climbing a mountain. There was gravity to each new height she reached. Once she got up to the large oak doors she turned and looked out at the street below. She hesitated. She knew the doors were open, they were open twenty-four seven. There was no doubt in her mind that she could grab the handles, whisk them open and enter. She practically grew up in that church, she knew it inside and out, literally and figuratively. Yet, the voice in her mind, like a tape recorder, began an endless refrain of questions and cross examinations on her self-worth, motivations and character. Sure, she knew the church then, but that was when she was Jane the innocent. Now, she was Jane the warmonger, pretty on the outside but battle scarred on the inside.

After a couple minutes of railing leaning, nail biting and gazing at the ground she mustered up what little courage she had, thrust open the doors and proceeded inside, albeit with deliberate hesitation.

As soon as she entered the lobby long since forgotten yet all too familiar smells confronted her. A musty wooden ceiling above, incense, candles; all of these flooded her senses. She took it all in and her mind calmed. She felt at ease. Her heart rate lowered, her breathing slowed. Comfort and bliss that only a truly familiar place could bring ensued. What was long since lost, had been found. She slowed her pace accordingly and waltzed along the lobby's wooden floor. With every calculated step deep refrains bounced from the walls in a majestic echo; the kind that makes everyone sound important as they walk, the kind that gives gravitas to simple traversing. The sound caught the attention of the pastor who was walking down a nearby hallway. He followed the echoes and entered the lobby.

"Is that Jane?" he said, with authentic surprise. His was an older, peaceful voice, the kind that evokes wisdom with its deep tone and vintage inflections.

Jane was caught with her guard down, she jumped, looked over her shoulder and saw the pastor standing in the nearby doorway. She smiled as her eyes met his, the way two old friends' eyes do. It was a meeting of

knowing and familiar eyes. Neither of them were strangers to each other. Quite the opposite. He saw her and James grow up. He even officiated their wedding in Denmark. Yet, for all the memories of her life that he was a part of, in that moment he felt like a lost treasure that had been unearthed from some hidden temple. A memento of a bygone age that she had just rediscovered. He represented better times, when her world was young and untouched by tragedy, just like the old church building, the park and the bandstand. All of them were there when life was better. He was like so many of the things that slowly faded out of her and James's lives since the onset of their domestic war. So many things were casualties of that war. More than Jane ever realized or wanted to accept.

"Pastor, it's you, you scared me."

He smiled and walked over to her. He was an older man, in his sixties, tall, thin, white snow hair, vest and polo, horn rimmed glasses, slight bend in the back, a slow gait; everything speaking to wisdom. He was a man who had been through many highs and lows in life, but who had somehow remained undeterred. Quiet confidence, servant leadership, a bright mind; all were his hallmarks. They were etched in the hard lines of his face, the crookedness of his fingers and in the strength of his smile.

He held out his hands. Jane took them both.

"It's good to see you, I can't believe it's really you!" he said, shaking her hands.

Jane didn't say anything. She knew she didn't have to. He understood. She could see it in his eyes. Grace. Acceptance. Relief. He was the kind of man who would resume his conversation with you like nothing had ever happened. Jane smiled a demure smile, that's all she needed to do. That spoke volumes to him. He didn't need any further explanation.

"How about some tea?"

"Yes, I'd love that!"

"Great, I just made some, it's in my office," he pointed in the direction of a corner hallway. Jane paused and looked at him, smiled and suddenly as the familiarity of old times began to swell up inside her she began a

confident stride and led the way.

They continued into and down the hallway, passing various Sunday school classrooms until they arrived at two large double doors. Jane looked back and smiled at him, she knew those doors too.

“It’s still there, go ahead,” the pastor laughed, encouraging her to open them.

Jane gently opened the doors and stepped into the pastor’s office. Her eyes lit up like a kid in a candy shop. She had returned to her sanctuary after having gone astray. She loved that office. As a little tyke she’d spend summers volunteering there. As a reward she would get to spend as long as she wanted reading books from the pastor’s library. Jane was also best friends with his daughters while growing up and before they left for college. That office was so many things to her throughout her life. A den of knowledge, a girls only hideout from boys, a doorway to another realm and the headquarters for all sorts of mischief. She always thought fondly of those times.

Jane had also found her first love in that office; literature. In fact, she learned more from the pastor’s tomes about grammar, linguistics and reading than she ever did from anyone or from anywhere else.

She looked around; it was just as it always was. It hadn’t changed a bit. A large rectangular room. A great oriental carpet, large old blown glass windows on one side looking out at the church cemetery. The same windows on the other side facing the parking lot and garden. Two large, overstuffed chairs sat complementary to each other in front of his large old oak desk. Flanking every side of the room were endless floor to ceiling bookcases loaded with volumes new and antique; some theological, others literary. Large sets of Calvin, Darby, Luther, Hardy, Maupassant, Zola, and Warfield. Everything was set in a warm amber glow by a chandelier above while lights on wall sconces bounced reflections off the rooms gilded gold and red wallpaper. To top things off, there was a dessert cart parked near the side of the room, on it the aforementioned tea service.

Jane stopped in the middle of the room and watched as the pastor

wheeled the cart in between the two large chairs. He handed her a cup and saucer and poured a bright orange oolong for each of them. After, he lifted the lid on a large tray revealing fresh baked scones.

“Let me guess?” Jane began, eyeing the scones, “Bethany?”

“The one and only.”

Bethany was the pastor’s wife. Another close friend of Jane’s over the years.

“Is she here tonight?”

“I’m afraid not, she’s hosting a home Bible study tonight.”

“You’ll have to tell her I stopped in, I’d like to catch up with her. This tea smells amazing by the way.”

“Because it tastes amazing. It’s a new flavor,” motioning Jane to sit.

“When did you get into oolong? What happened to your affinity for British Isle teas?” she said.

“Well, everyone has to branch out sometime.”

They both shared a laugh and then he sat down at his desk. She was content to sip her tea, but as he sat there, fiddling through his calendar and overlooking some paperwork a sudden nervousness overtook her. The moment of truth had arrived. What would happen now? She’d come this far, but for what?

“Would you like to catch up?” he asked, the exact question she feared.

Jane set her teacup down, and took a deep breath. The fun of the reunion was over, now it was serious, or so she thought. She folded her hands in her lap and sat silently. She was like a bright light that had suddenly lost its power source. Her eyes were no longer able to make contact with his. She waited a minute before speaking up. In spite of everything, she had come this far, there was no turning back now.

“It’s been a while you know,” she began.

“It has, but that’s ok.”

“I’m sorry that we’ve kept you on the outside looking in.”

“Don’t worry about it, please, I know it’s been hard, I’m just happy to see you again. Beth won’t be able to contain herself when I tell her you

stopped by.”

“Thanks. A *hard time* doesn’t begin to describe it,” with a nervous laugh.

“I don’t doubt it.”

“At any rate, I’m glad to see you too.”

“It’s funny timing.”

“What is?”

“Your coming here.”

“How so?”

“It’s just that I didn’t think I’d see you again on a weekday night and this late no less. I thought it’d be on a Sunday morning, with James.”

“Yeah, well, here I am.”

An awkward silence.

“Were you enjoying the weather? It’s been so nice lately. Beth’s perennials having been loving it. She’s been in the prayer garden constantly lately.”

“Yeah, it’s been nice.”

The small talk was getting to Jane. Her pastor, despite his acumen for conversation and counsel, always let those who approached him make the first foray into the realms of what really mattered. He could joust in the land of small talk forever. That was his way. Better to let the sheep lean into their struggles than lean into theirs first. That was his philosophy of engagement. And, after a few more silent moments, it worked.

“It’s James.”

“What about him? Is he alright?”

She told him the news. Then she went into how it was causing her so much distress.

“I just don’t know what’s going to happen to him over this.”

“You’re worried about how he will react?”

“Yes,” beginning to tear up.

“But?”

“What?”

“You’re really worried more about the two of you than anything else, aren’t you?”

Jane went silent. She clenched her jaw, squeezed her fists, and turned away. He had hit the proverbial nerve. She wasn’t scared of the idea that there was a light at the end of the tunnel. She was scared if the light would be nothing more than an illusion.

“Yes,” she whispered. “This could be the end of us, I’m scared he’ll hate me even more.”

“For not telling him?”

“Yes, at least, not directly. I did try to tell him.”

“But that was his father’s wish, he’ll respect that.”

“But what about his heart!” Jane pounded her fist on her thigh. “What about that!” she yelled, another pound of the fist.

The pastor paused for a moment. He heaved a great sigh then clasped his hands together, leaned forward, put his elbows on his desk and looked down at Jane with a slight smile and comforting eyes.

“Jane, you’ve respected his father’s wishes. You’re doing the right thing.”

“But what if he leaves me!” she yelled.

There it was. A long silence ensued.

“Is it a major shakeup? Sure, and I’m not downplaying that for a second, but it’s not the end of you two, not by a long shot.”

“How can you be so sure? With all due respect it’s easy for you to say that because you’re on the outside looking in.”

“Jane, you can’t base what’s right on outcomes you don’t know about, you have to base what’s right on the good that results in the moment. Right now, the good is that you have honored his father’s wishes. Let the rest unfold as it needs too.”

“It’s just, I know something tragic that he doesn’t. I have to keep it inside and for the first time in over a year-”

She stopped. She was choked up. A million bottled-up emotions erupted inside her. She was trying with every fiber left in her to keep them inside. The cacophony of intense feelings that welled up inside her was

so intense that it lodged in her throat with such force that she couldn't muster up the courage to say what she really wanted and needed to say. She swallowed deeply, wiped her eyes, and looked out the window. Then she began to crack under the pressure and began slowly.

"For the first time in over a year...I don't want to hurt him anymore," she said, softly and quietly.

Jane's heart broke. The emotions poured out. Great waves of tears followed.

"I don't want to hurt him anymore!" she repeated, once more hitting her thigh with her fist. The pastor quickly got up, handed her a tissue, and walked over to her. She wiped her eyes and continued.

"Jane, I know how it's been, all of us here do, we haven't forgotten you."

"I know, believe me I know, it's just this war, this war we're in! It's awful, it's been awful ever since he was taken from us. It broke us. We thought we could conquer the world but the world conquered us! Now, on top of it all, comes more terrible news. How are we...how is he...supposed to bear it?"

The pastor sat next to her in the other chair and handed her a scone. There was a short break in the discussion, during which Jane finished the scone and tried to regain her composure. Once things settled down a bit, the pastor spoke back up.

"You know, all things considered it seems like you've taken the news well."

"I wouldn't say that at all, it hurts me, I mean I wouldn't be here otherwise."

"What I mean is, it hasn't broken you. Its thawed you. Its melted your heart. Jane, you're feeling again."

Jane looked up, her eyes met his for a brief second. In that moment things hit home. In that split second she understood what compelled her onward that entire evening, from the island in the kitchen, to the park, to the church, to the pastor's office. The journey wasn't some mere stroll. It was not just a walk in the park either. It was her processional. A triumphant march, the last military parade for her side in the domestic war, and

this, this meeting with her pastor was her white flag moment. For her, the war was over. This was her unconditional surrender. While hope might remain elusive, she had made the first steps toward its promises.

They continued on for another hour. They talked about everything under the sun, and in the moments in between Jane's heart was slowly becoming whole once again.

However, amid the reunion she was fully conscious of the new atmosphere and flavor of her world. Gone was the world of war, here was the world of the armistice. A new world, one that would need to be rebuilt again from the ground up. The carnage would be difficult to undo, but it had to be done.

Would things ever truly be the same? If not could they be better? And most importantly, what would the other side think of this sudden development? Would James concede too? Or would it be the end of them? Would the world of the armistice be a world without him? These and a million other questions confronted her while she walked home.

It was near midnight by the time she arrived back at the house. As she opened the front door she tossed down her coat, kicked off her shoes and immediately proceeded upstairs. When she got to the guest bedroom she collapsed onto the bed. She thought about how James would be arriving in Denmark soon, and about what would happen next.

It remained to be seen, and rather than sift through a million scenarios she turned out the light and fell asleep.

POINT OF DEPARTURE

Despite the crowds, noise and small seat, James's second flight did one thing that the other had not; it arrived on time and at its intended destination. After disembarking James called his mother, but no one answered. He then called his dad. Again silence. James shuffled through the crowds and picked up the pace. He was getting concerned. A half-hour later he retrieved his bags and was sitting in the back of yet another taxi on the way to the local hospital where his mother was recuperating.

Within twenty-minutes he arrived. He tipped the driver, and rushed into the main lobby, suitcase in tow. James hadn't stepped inside any medical facility, not even a doctor's office, since his son died. Within seconds the reality of where he was hit him like a ton of bricks. The atmosphere brought everything from that horrendous day back to him. It dredged up the mire from his past and poured it out all over him. He walked to the reception desk. He tried to think of the right words to say. His Danish was rusty, plus he couldn't stay focused. Instead, his eyes wandered to those waiting in the wings.

Their faces haunted him. He saw himself in them. An old man, bent over with a cane, starring at the floor, deep set eyes, hanging jaw, barely alive. A wife holding her son on her lap, bouncing him endlessly up and down subconsciously with her leg, trying to comfort him, her eyes

bloodshot from tears, hair frizzed in a mess, she had obviously cried so much that she couldn't anymore. And then, sitting close to the desk, a man clinging to his arm, his wife trying to console him. Her eyes said everything, "Just a little longer, just hold on a little longer." He was wincing at random intervals from a marauding pain in his arm. Each of them were straddling the line between life and death.

While all humans know they are born to die, most try to remain intentionally oblivious to the fact. Yet, here were these people, all a little closer to death than others. All fully aware of life's evil fragility. It bothered James. He couldn't handle looking at them anymore. He saw himself seated among them, just as he did over a year ago, waiting for the verdict about his son's demise.

As he approached the desk he felt like a boxer about to enter a ring with a heavyweight. A showdown was approaching. A strange premonition rose in his mind.

"Excuse me," he asked the receptionist. His Danish vernacular was rough, but she understood well enough.

"Yes, can I help you?"

He asked her where his mother's room was. The woman said she'd pull it up on the computer and check. James leaned on the counter, burying his head in his hands and rubbing them through his hair every few seconds. On top of everything else, jet lag was setting in.

"Have you located her?" he said after a few uneasy minutes.

"I'm sorry, but she's not here," the perplexed reply.

"Well, I'm sorry, but she was here a few hours ago."

"Let me search again."

Just then, James looked over his shoulder. He thought he saw his brother coming out of a nearby hallway. He watched the stocky blonde-haired middle-aged man proceed through the lobby. He wasn't sure, but it certainly looked like Jeff. Or was it? He wasn't supposed to be there. He lived in Spain and was usually busy with his wife and kids. James hadn't seen him in a long time.

"I'm sorry sir."

"What's wrong?"

"Your mother, she's not here, if you want I can call to another hospital and see-"

He realized it was Jeff and he cut her off.

"Don't worry about it, thanks. Hey...Jeff!" James sped away from the desk and rushed over to his brother.

"Jeff is that you?" he yelled.

The man turned. His eyes caught James who was now speeding towards him. His face was tense. He was surprised to see his younger brother so soon.

"James?" Jeff remarked.

"Yeah, what are you doing here?" James replied, out of breath.

Jeff's face turned stark.

"I just got in."

"Oh, well, I didn't expect to see you here; dad didn't say you were coming. So where's mom?"

Jeff bit his lip, leaned back against the wall, and crossed his arms.

"You don't know?"

James assumed the worst.

"Where is she?"

"She's gone."

"What? What do you mean gone?"

"She's...gone James. She died."

Like all of us when confronted with the news that someone close to us has died, James didn't believe it. He couldn't believe it. Then, again, just like all of us, anger began to swell inside of him. Within seconds his heart was burning with rage as the reality of the situation hit him at full force.

"You can't be serious, where's dad?" James yelled.

"Don't yell, I'll take you to him, follow me."

Jeff led James down a long corridor. For James, the journey was like something out of a horror novel. Mixed emotions were running circles

in his mind. It was hard for him to discern what he was feeling. The hairs on his arms shot up, he felt chills and his eyesight was getting foggier by the minute. The compound effect of the news of his mother's death and the reminders of his son's death were almost too much for him to handle. Gone was the brash uncaring man trying to get away from his wife. That façade was torn away in an instant. In its place was a shadow of a man wrecked and unaware of what was happening to him and his world. Such is the nature of grief.

Maybe it was for sick pleasure, maybe for self-punishment but as they continued James made it a point to look inside each hospital room they passed. Each look a voyeuristic glimpse into the face of tragedy. Each look a gaze into futility.

In one room a man lay hooked up to so many machines you'd wonder if he was even human anymore. Another featured a child trying to be fed medicine through a tube, his parents worriedly looking on, powerless. As he approached the next room James heard shouts and screams. A husband and wife were arguing in a doorway. They were so loud that a nurse had to tell them to quiet down. While they toned down their voices slightly, they were still audible enough for James to listen as he walked by. It was a disagreement about last rights and power of attorney. He wanted money, she wanted money. That was all he heard and all he needed to hear.

While the environment at hand presented a bitter reality for James, it also presented to him an intriguing one. The best and worst of people can be found in moments of tragedy. That's what James always tried to believe. And hospitals to him were the arenas where all the fraught drama of the human condition played out each and every day in striking detail. It was a coliseum for one's emotions. How much can you take? How many rounds can your heart and mind survive? He thought himself a gladiator as he continued down the hallway.

Everywhere he looked, nothing made sense. Sure, there were victories to be found. People celebrating the overcoming of some incurable disease. Someone walking for the first time in months. But for every victory there

was defeat as well. Someone in cardiac arrest on some operating table on another floor. Families all over bickering over last rights and powers of attorney. The common denominator? All of it composed a tapestry of human frailty. The worst part? He was a player in that menagerie whether he wanted to be or not. In the middle of the coliseum he was fighting for his own life.

Jeff stopped in front of the hospital chapel.

“Dad’s in there, you can go in.”

James stared at his brother for a moment, he was still in shock.

“Here, watch my suitcase,” James sat it down and entered the chapel.

It was empty except for his father who was sitting bent over in the front row praying. It was dark too, save for a few streams of multi-colored light streaming in from a large stained glass window that sat front and center near the altar. Its hues bounced off the rosewood stained sheen of the pews.

“Dad?” James said, sitting next to him.

His dad looked over, and noticing him gave him a hug.

“James, you’re here!”

“Dad...is it true?”

“Yes, your mother passed a couple hours ago.”

James looked up and rubbed his hands through his hair.

“This isn’t happening, this can’t be happening. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I didn’t want to upset you. I wanted to tell you in person.”

“You think this kind of news makes any difference in person instead of over the phone? Death is death dad, it doesn’t matter where you learn that someone’s died, it doesn’t undo it.”

His dad took a deep breath, put his hands on his knees and waited before responding. The situation was tense. Incendiary even. His dad was fully aware of what James was feeling. He expected as much. He proceeded with much rehearsed tact.

“James, let me explain.”

“Explain away, but can we please talk somewhere else?”

“Sure, let’s go somewhere else.”

They both got up and left the chapel, James’s dad leading the way.

“Jeff, the doctors will be down soon, take care of things until we get back, I’m taking your brother out for a bit.”

Jeff nodded, he was leaning against the hallway wall guarding James’s suitcase.

Unlike before, James didn’t waste his time focusing on the affairs of those around him. He refused to make any eye contact with anyone at the hospital, much less looking inside any of its rooms. He blindly followed his father, step by step. They eventually exited the hospital and settled at a café a block away. They sat there, ordered some coffee and waited a bit before continuing their talk.

“How can you be so nonchalant about this?” James began.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re taking it surprisingly well.”

His dad leaned back in his chair and lit a pipe.

“What are you getting at?”

“Isn’t there a lot to take care of? Paperwork?”

“Jeff will handle it.”

“See there you go again.”

“What?”

“Acting like this is no big deal.”

“James, I never said it wasn’t a big deal. You think I’m sitting here all chipper after my wife just died? After your mother died? No, I’m not, but we need to talk.”

“How can anything we have to discuss be more important than the matter at hand?”

“Son, you wanted to leave the hospital. You wanted to talk, and we’re talking. Now, can I say what I want to say or are we going to run around in circles dancing eggshells?”

James crossed his leg, and motioned his father to continue.

“On all ears.”

“James your mother had been dying for a while.”

James rolled his eyes. He was furious.

“Oh the news just keeps getting better. How long have you kept this from me huh? Months, years?”

A waiter broke up the tension. He placed two cups of coffee on the table. James’s dad took his while James let his remain on the table.

“She was sick for the past year.”

“A year? Are you kidding me? Why didn’t you say anything? We could have helped.”

“James, your mother wanted to keep it from you. She didn’t want to hurt you or Jane.”

“What does Jane have to do with this?”

“She has everything to do with it.”

“No, she doesn’t,” James said, slowly and deliberately.

“Yes, she does,” James’s dad slammed his hand on the table so loud that people sitting nearby took notice. This surprised James. He wisely backed off. From then on the conversation took on a more amiable tone.

“James, your mother didn’t want to make things worse for you and Jane. She knew what you both were going through and I agreed with her.”

“And you think that makes it right?”

“It wasn’t a matter of right or wrong, it was and still is a matter of reality. She thought telling you would ruin things beyond repair. James, she loved Jane, more than you could ever know but she loved you even more as her son. The last thing she ever wanted was to see your life in shambles because of her health.”

James sat still for a moment as the words hit home. He felt dejected. He didn’t know what to think. He had, like many in his situation, never stopped to consider the ripples and waves his situation had made. How it affected those around him.

“It was a heart issue. The honest truth is that neither us nor the doctors thought it was as serious as it was. Her recent hospitalization was

supposed to end with a stent being put in but she didn't want that. She knew the risk, she was supposed to be discharged tomorrow. She had a heart attack this afternoon out of nowhere. She went quick."

James's dad's eyes teared up but he held it back.

"I just...I can't believe this is happening."

"James, your mother was stubborn, we all know that. We kinda liked that about her. But she stayed alive for you and Jane, do you understand?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

"I think you do, I think you just can't understand it because you've been entirely shut off from the world since everything happened. Sometimes I wonder if you even know what love feels like anymore."

"That's enough, I don't need this," James said, getting up and about to leave.

"James, wait. Hear me out."

James sat back down, reluctantly.

"So, mom played the hero because she thought she could salvage our marriage is that it?"

"No, she didn't play a hero, she was a hero. I don't think you realize how much she loved you or the sacrifices she made. When you barely returned her calls for a year, when you didn't visit us, when you were in so much pain no one could get through, she was sending prayers your way. Every day in fact. She never wanted to ruin things further by burdening you two."

"That wasn't her responsibility," James said, tears welling in his eyes.

"But she made it her responsibility. James if you think for a second I'm not devastated by this then you're as wrong as wrong can be. However, her and I prepared for this, and she was ready to move on. The truth is, wanting to see your marriage survive and thrive again is what was keeping her alive most of the time. She was a hero James, and I for one am going to miss her every single day, for the rest of my life until we meet again."

James crossed his arms and sat there for a while. He watched as his dad tried to hold back tears in his eyes again. Every time he'd get close to

letting it all out he'd take a sip of coffee. He was a proud man. A seafarer to the bone. He'd seen his fair share of heartache over the decades.

James allowed the sound of the cityscape and the sunlight to drown out his thoughts for a little while. Then he thought back to Jane's text on the plane. He didn't know why, but his mind fixated on it again.

"Does Jane know?" he asked.

"Yes."

James was fiddling with the rim of his coffee cup, rubbing his fingers across it in a circular motion, lost in thought.

"You told her but not me?"

"We had trouble getting ahold of you on the plane and I wanted to wait to tell you in person. Again, these aren't exactly things that can be communicated properly through a text."

While his father's old-fashioned ways of doing things were certainly a source of annoyance for James, it was the fact that Jane never said anything about everything that burned him up inside. He tapped his foot up and down on the ground, arms crossed, face bitter.

"The least she could have done was tell me."

"James, I told her not to tell you."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because this was a matter for us to handle in person."

His father took a few final sips of coffee before continuing.

"In fact, I'm surprised she kept her word, says a lot about her."

Given the torrent of stress stirring inside him, James could only somewhat comprehend his father's intentions. Again, his mind latched onto Jane's text, the simple "Ok?" In that moment he realized his father wasn't entirely correct. She contacted him, she did try to tell him, and he didn't even realize it or think about why. He never gave her message a second thought, until now. Truth be told, she had probably stewed over sending the message to him and going against his father's wishes. But James had never imagined she really cared anymore, nor did he in any way think something had happened to his mom. He was, like he had been since his

son's death, fully absorbed in himself. Pride had replaced all else. And what did he send back? A simple "Yeah." What a lie! He brushed her off like it was nothing. She knew about his mom, she tried to reach out to him as best she knew how and he threw it back in her face.

"Son," his dad began, looking over toward him. He broke James's concentration. He looked back at his dad with great intensity, the most he had given him during their entire time at the café up to that point.

"Your mother and I have only wanted the best for you two, that's why we did what we did. Ever since you came over here for the wedding. For crying out loud ever since we first met Jane when you two were just kids and we lived back in the States. Don't hold it against us and don't hold it against Jane for not telling you, please. She loved your mother too you know."

James was playing with his coffee again, but this time his face relaxed a bit. It was as if scales of anger had been shed for something humane and raw, revealing a face he hadn't shown in many months. His dad continued.

"Jane adored her. The two of them became so close," he laughed a bit. "So...how did she take the news about mom?"

"Not well, she was upset, naturally, but we didn't say much really. She didn't know what to say, she cried. It's getting late, we better go back to see your brother and handle the paperwork."

The two of them got up. James's dad placed a tip on the table, put his coat on and motioned for his son to lead the way. Once back on the main street James stopped.

"Why don't you go on ahead dad. I can do without the paperwork, besides I'm beat, I want to get some rest and think over all this."

"Do you have a hotel?"

"Not yet."

"Here..." his dad said while tossing him a key, "that's to the house."

"Dad I can't, not during all this."

"I insist, please, I need the company, especially now, ok?"

James hesitated then acquiesced.

“Alright, make sure Jeff gives you my suitcase.”

“You should get it now.”

“No, I’m not stepping back into the hospital. I’ll get a cab and head home.”

“Alright son.”

His dad held out his arms and the two embraced. Not long after James hailed a taxi and made his way to his parents’ house on the coast.

WALKABOUT

The jet lag and onslaught of stressors over the last twenty-four hours caused James to fall into a deep sleep the moment he entered his parents' house. He collapsed on the guest bed eight hours ago and was only now waking up. A digital clock on the nightstand read "7 a.m.," and the rising sun was peeking in along the edges of the room's blackout curtains.

James moaned as he rolled over. His head was throbbing. He was still emotionally drained and fatigued from everything. Thoughts about the situation flooded his consciousness. For a second he thought it all a dream. He felt around the bed but it was no dream. He eventually got to his feet and opened the curtains.

Bright sunlight filled the room. His shoes were sprawled out near the foot of the bed. His suitcase propped up against the door. His dad dropped it off during the night. As he looked around the room, his mind relaxed a bit. He sat on the edge of the bed and gained his composure. He looked around some more. Pastel green walls, a cuckoo clock, old writing desk, table lamp, wooden sconces and a mirror. Nothing out of the ordinary. All decidedly Danish.

His parents' house was a seaside cottage. It sat nestled among rolling hills and farms that flanked Zealand's eastern coast. As he peered out the window the Baltic Sea sat a couple miles away, big and blue. Dotted along

the maritime landscape were various fishing trawlers and other vessels coming and going from the town port below. It was windy, just like it always was there. He missed the sea breeze and thought about it for a moment until the smell of breakfast caught his attention.

He got up, changed clothes and went downstairs. His brother and dad were sitting at a counter near the kitchen. The emotional currents in the room were anything but joyful. They were just as tired as he was.

"I'm up, sorry, I was beat," James said, joining them at the counter.

"We put your suitcase at the door," Jeff murmured.

"Yeah, I saw, thanks. So, what's the news?"

James's dad took a deep breath, sat down a paper he was reading and lit a pipe.

"Well, we finished all of the paperwork yesterday evening. Your mother's will has been sent to the lawyer. We've already contacted the funeral home. It's going as well as can be expected."

They all nodded in agreement. Not much room for words. A silence hung over the three men as they finished off a plate of biscuits and pitcher of coffee. James noticed his father's eyes. They were weary, bloodshot. Jeff didn't look much better for wear, he hadn't shaved in days and was haggard. Death's aftermath was firmly entrenched in all of their minds and its side effects written on their faces. There was no denying it, and there was no accepting it. It just was, and they just were.

The only truly tangible thought that James could center his mind on was how much his world had changed in just one day. He didn't have long to reflect, however. After a few minutes a cuckoo clock in the living room went off. It was one of his mom's favorites. She collected them. Within seconds more went off until the entire house chimed with energy. A dozen different tunes, all lite, airy and upbeat. It was as if she were speaking to them from heaven. The three men were deeply unsettled. They looked awkwardly at each other. They were all feeling the same things. Then Jeff did what all of them wanted to do but couldn't. He broke the silence.

"I'm gonna go for a walk, let me know if the lawyer calls dad," Jeff said

abruptly. He couldn't handle it anymore, he needed space.

James's dad was the next one to abort the moribund gathering. He grabbed the dishes, took them over to the sink, and set them down. He then lit another pipe. The only person still left at the counter was James.

"You want to take a shower son?"

"Sure."

"Drop by my office after, we can chat more."

"Sure dad."

James went back upstairs. A half-hour later after he had freshened up he was knocking on his dad's office door.

"Come in!"

James walked inside. The room was filled with various nautical knick-knacks and trinkets from his father's sea faring days. James's dad had been raised on the water. When he met James's mom the two moved over to the States. She became a teacher and he ran boats on the Great Lakes. Not long thereafter James and Jeff were born.

Throughout James's childhood, his dad became one of the most renowned fishermen in the region. Consequently, he had spent most of his life on the waves hunting cod and crabs, instead of being there for his family. For every baseball game the brothers played in, there was a more pressing catch to be had on Lake Michigan. Every time there was a family reunion Lake Erie would call and ask him for a month of trawling.

He would get long month-long furloughs from time to time though, which he felt made up for a lack of consistent fatherliness, though Jeff and James would have argued otherwise back then. The problem was that, for all his attempts, James's dad was rarely emotionally available. Still, it could have been worse. Most of James's friends growing up didn't even have a dad, so there was that. Also, once James's parents moved back to Denmark they retired and set up more time for him and Jane and for Jeff and his family. Perhaps that's why James's mom's death stung so much. One clot of an artery had robbed them of years of future time together. They were all mourning not just what they lost, but what they could have had, they

were lamenting a potential future.

James sat down on a bay window. He watched the ships and the bright clear sky out of the corner of his eyes. His dad spun around in an old pretzel backed cherry oak office chair, lit a pipe and looked his son square in the eyes. On the floor was his old sheepdog. He had taken up residence at his feet, oblivious to the world and its problems.

“You know, it doesn’t hit you until you stop,” his dad remarked, fiddling with his pipe.

James knew what his dad meant, but he just sat there and listened. He was still in a bit of a malaise from it all.

“I was running ragged yesterday. In spite of everything that happened, it all happened so fast that I never really let the emotions drown me like they’ve been today. How are you doing son?”

“Hanging in there I guess.”

“Jeff is working on funeral arrangements. Did you want to stay for the ceremony?”

The question struck James. He didn’t know what to do. That bothered him. There he was, not a day removed from the death of his mother, and he didn’t know if he wanted to attend her funeral or not. It distressed him. He wasn’t supposed to think or feel that way. But then there were a million things surrounding his anguish over his son’s death too that he shouldn’t have thought yet he thought anyway. He rubbed his hand through his hair and looked down at the door to avoid eye contact with his father. The dog looked at him instead.

“Strange as it might seem...I don’t know.”

His father leaned back, then bent down and petted the dog.

“Is that a weird thing to say?” he added.

“Oh I don’t think so.”

“Why’s that?”

His dad looked at him.

“Because of everything.”

He knew what he was getting at. It was no secret to James that the

situation was just as much about Jane as it was about his mother. However, the last thing he wanted to do was converse about the vagaries of the problem at hand. He decided to go for a walk and left promptly. His dad blew a large puff of smoke into the air, propped his feet on his desk and closed his eyes to relax.

James meandered through the living room and out the front door. He was careful not to trip on any wild flowers that grew along the path leading to the front gate. His mother was an exceptional gardener. Every patch of the yard was a monument to her botanical acumen. Bright flowers filled the scene. James approached a half-height white wooden gate at the front of the yard. She painted it years ago. The family crest etched into it. She etched it herself. He gently pushed it open, stepped out onto a bright dirt road, and wandered down to the small seaside town in the distance.

The path was a gradual yet gentle downward grade. Along the way James passed by various other cottages, some still donning their historic thatched roofs, others more newly built. Every so often a group of old, hobbled over fishermen with nets dangling over their shoulders and crab traps at their sides passed by. They would nod or hold up their pipes in symbolic “good day to you” gestures. As the road turned into town a group of schoolkids went by, a woman and her sheepdog, and a few tourists. James smiled and nodded to each in return. He was able to manage that ok.

The population of the town and the surrounding area hadn’t changed in decades. It was just as it had always been. The town itself was sparse but proud. Stucco and brick buildings lined its main thoroughfares, most just two to three stories high, all with bright red roofs, flags jutting outward from balconies and large groupings of flowers on every sill. The bucolic stillness only interrupted by the occasional café or storefront where people gathered and shopped.

It didn’t take long for James to get through downtown. It was only a few blocks long. Soon enough he found himself in the town’s port district. At one point he stopped, cupped his hand over his eyes, and peered off to

the hills above. He could make out the house. He smiled then continued onward.

The port was the loudest place in town. Seagulls squawking, foghorns blowing and yells and hollers from various fishermen. Not to mention the constant gurgle of waves lapping on the seawall, boat engines firing on all cylinders and dock workers gutting fish. All of the activity got to James very quickly. He picked up his pace, walked down a set of stairs that went over the seawall and began to stroll along the seashore.

The hard sand, craggy rocks, and howling wind made the scene a far cry from any postcard. At times James shielded his face from intervals of stinging whipped up sand. Despite the clear sky and warm atmosphere, the sea was angry due to the wind. Out in the distance ships bobbed up and down like toys in a child's bathtub; flags outstretched in the direction of the gusts. Above birds struggled to keep pace with the currents. They'd flap their wings as hard as they could but remain essentially in place.

James kept on until he finally had enough of the sand blowing in his face. He stopped and walked back inward. He crossed a small road and found himself in a large forested area. Endless stretches of pines. He walked along a small dirt path through the trees, and eventually arrived at a large clearing. It was a great field surrounded by flowers on all sides. In the middle was a small park. It was a modest one, similar to the one back home save the bandstand. Some old stone benches precariously placed, a little pond and a few weeping willows and poplars.

Much to his surprise, James didn't realize where he was at first. He was so intent on escaping the sand and wind that he hadn't given much thought to where his feet were taking him. Then it hit him, he knew the place all too well. He couldn't believe he settled *there* of all places. He stopped, placed his hands in his pockets, and slowly walked onto the green. Every footstep become deliberate, each glance decided. He sat down on a small stone bench that sat along the edge of the green, placing his elbows on his knees and resting his chin on his two hands, observing what was before him.

He never thought he'd see the place again. How did his two miles of wandering lead him there? Maybe he really did want to go there, and he just didn't want to admit it to himself? Like an animal returning to some mystic place of significance, or like some religious seeker he had somehow made a pilgrimage, a migration, a journey, to the place where him and Jane were married many moons ago.

It was seven years since the day of their marriage. They traveled over to Denmark for the ceremony because it was the most convenient place for everyone to gather. Also, Jane always wanted a seaside wedding, as did James's mom. James didn't have any real reservations when it came to the ceremony, no less its setting, so he let them do as they pleased. Back then he was only happy if Jane was happy, and if a seaside wedding in Denmark would make her happy then he was all for it.

They spent months planning. James's mom planted special flowers for the occasion back when James and Jane were engaged. They even planted some after the wedding to commemorate and remember the day. They were still there too. James could see them growing in the distance along the edge of the field. Yellow and pink tulips. And so many of them.

The day of the wedding some one-hundred people across four generations gathered to celebrate. It was windy that day too, just like today. In his mind James could still see Jane's dress and veil blowing in the wind. She looked like an ethereal angelic figure from a fairy novel that day. It was, as they say "magic."

After the ceremony they had a large feast out along the shore where they danced with the waves early into the morning. How long ago that seemed. For James the memories were like something from another world.

He remained seated there; his mind recreating in great detail the entire wedding ceremony from start to finish. He could see everyone seated out on the lawn. He envisioned Jane and her dad walking down the aisle. He remembered the cheers and pomp. But he mostly remembered his mom, sitting front right, wide-eyed, overwhelmed with pride and a slight sadness. Excitement and anxiety hand-in-hand for her son. That day had

been her day more than perhaps anyone else's. It was also the day when Jane and she truly became best friends.

James's reverie was suddenly cut short by a giant gust of wind that roared out of nowhere across the field. Its howl distracted him and brought him back to reality. The next time he looked out at the field, he could no longer materialize any memories from his wedding day. All he saw now was an empty field with some exotic flowers flanking its border. No people, no wedding, no family, no friends. The only thing left for James was the realization that his mother was no longer among the living. She was gone, and with her the memories from that day.

This line of thinking caused James to suddenly descend inside himself, to a place where he could execute judgement on himself for what had happened. James didn't need any prison to atone for his flaws. He was quite content to kill himself from the inside out with his own shaming thoughts and self-loathing. He had become exceptionally good at that since the war with Jane began.

Over and over he replayed the last twenty-four hours. He concluded that if he were there, if he had not been late, his mom would have remained alive. He knew this was an unfair judgment and not based at all in reality, but such emotive reasoning doesn't have to be realistic for it to matter. It *felt* real, and that's all that matters to a grieving heart. He was just a few hours late and she was gone. It was his fault. Case in point. Case closed.

Or was it? He looked out again, noticing the tulips bending in the breeze.

Then something deeper struck him. Jane crept into view. He was terrified at the prospect of it being too late for her, and for their relationship. He felt that Jane, who in some respects was even closer to his mom than he was, wouldn't have any more reason to stick around now with her gone. In his mind this was it. It was the fatal blow to their war. His mom was dead, no more neutral party. Now he and Jane would either tear themselves apart or just wander away into the sunset to die alone and

apart from each other.

Where was the meaning in it all? Surely something good would come out of the war, right? If not, could things somehow be salvaged? James took out his phone and looked for any messages or emails from Jane. There was nothing. Then he opened his last message to her. He read her “Ok?” and his “Yeah.”

He couldn't answer any of the billions of questions that assaulted his mind as he sat there, dejected on the bench. All he could do was weep. He sat there and did just that for the next hour before he went home to sort things out.

MANSION IN THE WOODS

The rest of the day was fairly uneventful. Jeff informed James about the legal paperwork regarding his mother's passing. They decided against a formal funeral. Mom would have wanted it that way, besides his dad could only afford a cremation. It was a morose end to everything.

Before dinner the house was unbearably still. James was resting in the spare bedroom, Jeff was on the porch watching the boats go by with a cup of coffee in his hand, and their father was reading a paper in his study.

James didn't know what to do. He was worn out, all he could do was just stare at the ceiling. Occasionally he thought about when he should return home. Then he thought about Jane again and the future of their relationship, and of course his mother's passing and memories of her took up ample headspace. He felt mindless, like an empty shell, unable to act on any of his thoughts. It was grief at its most debilitating. There was so much confusion swirling around his brain. Indecision was his only decision. Thinking in and of itself was causing him problems. He began to think about thinking. Was he thinking too much or not enough? He endlessly racked his mind over the coals until his phone rang on the nightstand. He jumped up and answered. He hoped it was Jane, but it wasn't. It was a woman he didn't recognize.

"Hello, is this James?" she began.

“Speaking, who’s this?”

“Suzette, Suzette Simmons, remember?”

“Sorry, I’m afraid you have the wrong number,” James said half dazed.

“Wait!”

James was in no mood for phone games, he almost hung up, but then what she said next persuaded him otherwise.

“I’m the woman from the airport, the café, remember?”

He was floored. He didn’t know what to say.

“Hello, are you still there?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you remember me?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, you caught me off guard was all.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to, a flight attendant gave me your business card.”

James couldn’t believe it. Her voice surprised him. She sounded a lot different – much livelier than before. She sounded like an entirely different person.

“How can I help you?”

“Well, I wanted to thank you for one, for the aspirin.”

“Don’t mention it, it was nothing.”

“No, it was definitely something, you saved my life!”

“Well, you’re welcome. What was the second thing?”

“My husband and I are going to be in Denmark tomorrow and we wanted to see if you’d like to join us for dinner? We have a residence that we need to check up on. How far are you from Ringsted?”

“About an hour, we’re on the coast.”

“Would you like to come over? We’d love to have you over and thank you.”

He thought for a moment. Affording small talk was one thing, allowing dinner an entirely other thing.

“I’m not sure, I need to get back home, it’s been a rough trip.”

“All the more reason for us to thank you, what do you say?”

James didn't know what to say, but his answer rolled off his tongue.

"I guess it can't hurt."

"Wonderful, does six tomorrow work?"

"Yeah."

"Great, I'll text you our address, we'll see you then."

"Sounds good."

"Looking forward to it," she hung up.

James sat the phone back on the nightstand and laid back on the bed, hands behind his head. He had no idea what he was doing. If life was a carousel ride he was surely on it; going in circles and never in the lead, never really seeing beyond the horizon. What was he going to do? There were still a million questions in his mind. Why did he agree to go? Surely it would be a waste of time.

Later that evening he had dinner with his dad and Jeff. Chinese takeout. They didn't say much. During the meal the cuckoo clocks joined in their resounding choir of sound again. This time the three men did a better job ignoring them. Once their plates were clean, they each went back to their own little worlds.

James stepped outside and sat on a lawn chair in the backyard. It was cooler now in the evening and the wind was calm. The stars were out, and a near full moon. A group of owls was hooting at random intervals in the distance. It complimented the sound of the ocean waves. He stayed out there long into the night, thinking.

The next day arrived and was as uneventful as the last. James asked his dad if he could borrow his car for the evening so he could take it to Suzette's house. He barely raised an eyebrow.

"Sure, go for it," he said, tossing James the keys. He then buried his head back into a newspaper and gnawed on his second pipe of the morning.

James took the keys, got some breakfast from the kitchen and retired to the porch to eat. Everything still felt dreary. Maybe getting out for the evening would be just what he needed, or so he wondered as he sat and

ate. After a bit he looked up the address Suzette gave him. It was located in a rich suburb of a nearby city. The area was known for its mansions and large estates, many inherited from old royal families down through the ages and almost all of them located in a secluded and heavily forested area. He thought about what he was getting himself into. His mind went from not wanting to go to dinner, to wanting to go and back again. Many ask for a penny for their thoughts. James wanted to ask for an odometer for his. He was concerned about what he was going to do about Jane. To him time was ticking, and he needed to make a decision and fast. Tonight had become a roadblock. Then again, it had only been a couple days since he left home, maybe he shouldn't rush into a decision so quickly?

He was concerned about the dinner, about opening up and enduring the endless prattle of another person who probably couldn't empathize or sympathize with what he was "going through."

"No one understands grief, that's the problem with the world. Yet they always force their own recovery agendas on you, and even when you do want them to work they don't because you just can't get a hold of yourself and allow things to work for you for the better. You can't help it," James mumbled as he sat.

Eventually though he decided to go. Later on he put on some slacks, a pink and green striped polo, some cologne, combed his hair and put on a diver's watch. He left, hopped in his dad's sedan and headed off for the deep interior.

All along the journey he thought about the dinner, Jane and his mom. These mental dilemmas preoccupied his thought process until, later that evening, he pulled up to a large rod iron gate that stood outside the Simmons' estate. He rolled down his window and pressed a button to let the staff know he had arrived.

"Hello?" a voice spoke.

"Hi, I'm James, I'm here for dinner, Suzette invited me."

A short pause then, "Ah yes, please drive up, you can park in front of the steps, we look forward to seeing you."

“Thanks.”

James rolled his eyes, then watched as the gates opened. He drove along a long cobble stone road for what seemed to be a half-mile or so. The random bumps kept him alert. The road was surrounded by a dense forest of pine trees. An occasional deer peered out from the darkness, eyes looking at his car like it was some object from another dimension. Near the end of the road James began to wonder if he would ever arrive. Then, a large mansion appeared in the distance seemingly out of nowhere. At the same time the forest gave way to a multi-acre clearing. It was an estate, and a palatial one, there was no doubt about it.

The turbulent road led up for a little bit more before splitting with both sides encircling around a large fountain. James stayed to the right then followed the road as it joined back together beyond the fountain. About a hundred feet later he parked at the foot of a large set of marble steps that led up to a set of enormous double doors. James rolled up his window, got out and closed the door. He took off his sunglasses and took in the sheer size of the place.

It was a standard two-story mansion. Harkening back to the Enlightenment or thereabouts. It was painted a bright pastel yellow, with white accents along the windows. Out front were numerous hedges and gardens, all perfectly manicured and exhibiting mathematical precision and symmetry. Squares within squares. Various statuary placed tastefully around. The seventeenth century ideal. The air was clean, it felt good. Everything was peaceful. James stepped up to the doors, but just as he was about to open them second thoughts crept into his mind.

“What am I doing here?” he whispered to himself.

At that moment the doors opened and Suzette appeared. She looked entirely different than before. Gone was the drowsy, disgruntled and worn complexion of before. She looked vibrant, alert, confident. A new black business suit, black skirt, a small pair of low-heeled pumps, red lipstick and a set of pearls around her neck. She was class personified. James couldn't believe it. He hesitated. Suzette broke the ice.

“James! Come in, did you have any trouble finding the place?” motioning for him to enter.

“Thank you, not really, it wasn’t far from where I’m staying at all actually,” walking inside.

“Thank you again for coming, we’ve been so excited,” smiling and closing the doors.

“Don’t mention it, thanks for inviting me.”

James looked around. They were standing in a large high-ceilinged lobby. Light blue and yellow square tiles comprised a floor that looked like a never-ending chessboard. The walls were Rococo and adorned with various hanging tapestries and oil paintings, many of the subjects clad in military or royal uniforms – no doubt painted by former Dutch grand masters. They looked serious and intense, dressed in the most flamboyant garb possible so onlookers down through the ages could see them just as they wanted to be seen and remembered.

There was a large double staircase that led up along both sides of the room before meeting in the middle and forming a balcony above. It was made of what looked to James like mahogany. Its many boards interlaced with various knots. Suzette was perceptive of James’s awe, and not wanting to make him feel out of place she didn’t let much time elapse without conversation.

“Would you like something to drink?”

James turned and was caught a little off guard. “Sure, what do you have?”

“Whatever you’d like, here I’ll show you the pantry.”

She led him through three lavishly furnished rooms until they entered a large kitchen. Inside was a cook working feverishly, prepping for dinner. Most of the appliances were industrial size. The delicately complex wallpaper of the other rooms was gone. Now just stainless steel and chrome accents as far as the eye could see.

“This is James, he’s our guest.”

“Pleasure to meet you James!”

The chef was kneading a pile of dough that would be used for making handmade pasta.

“Likewise.”

“Here, pick anything you’d like.”

Suzette called him over to a large stainless steel double door industrial fridge which she had opened. James pulled out a cola, smiled and Suzette closed the doors.

“Dinner will be ready soon, here let’s go out back, we set up a table on the veranda.”

Another trek through opulent rooms, until they exited out onto a large marble floored patio out back. It was the kind of place some aristocracy of a bygone era would stand on for hours. Where they’d debate politics. Where they’d find and lose romance and where they’d eat lavish meals. The veranda sat proudly at the top of a large hill. James looked out at the large clearing below. It seemed to go on forever. It was quite a sight to behold. A skeet shooter’s paradise. They stood there for a moment in silence, a few sips of cola to pass the time, until James finally gathered enough courage to speak for himself. He didn’t want to appear rude or awkward by remaining silent any longer.

“This is quite the property.”

“Oh yes, it’s our summer home, we live back home in the States most of the year though.”

“Did you inherit this?”

“Yes, my husband did actually. His great-grandfather was a baron, and his father an earl, or something along those lines,” she let out a short laugh. “Don’t get me wrong, we love it, but it’s too much to handle. We rent it out most of the year for private parties and dignitaries and things. We wanted to convert it to a museum, but we don’t have enough time to manage something like that. So here it sits.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Well, we like it but again it’s far too extravagant for us. However, the kids love it.”

“Oh, you have children?”

“Yes, three, a girl and two boys.”

“How old?”

“Ten, eight and five.”

“Wow.”

“What about you?”

James paused and pursed his lips a little. He wasn't expecting the question.

“No...no kids. So, you never told me, what do you do exactly?”

“I'm in concierge medicine, sales.”

“You must travel a lot then I take it?”

“Yes, all the time.”

“What does your husband do?”

“He's an architect. There he is,” she pointed out to the clearing.

“Hi dear!” a loud voice yelled.

James turned his attention to the clearing. Suzette's husband was a large man, blonde hair, leather jacket, jeans, mustache, slicked back jet black hair. He was carrying a dead rabbit by the tail in his right hand and a rifle in the other.

“Sorry I'm late,” he said, joining James and Suzette on the veranda. “I lost track of time,” he held up the rabbit with great pride and kissed his wife.

Suzette was visibly embarrassed that her husband would fling a dead animal in front of a guest. She nudged him to put it away.

“Don't worry about it, I grew up on a farm,” James said, taking another sip of cola.

“Ah a farm man, then you definitely understand. When we stay here I try to get as much hunting in as I can, the forests around here are spectacular. I'm Henry by the way, I'd shake, but well, you know,” he held up the gun and rabbit again and laughed.

“I'm James, nice to meet you, thanks for having me.”

“Absolutely, I wasn't going to miss out on meeting the man who saved

Suzette.”

James didn't know how to respond. He still didn't believe he was any sort of hero.

“Suzette, why don't you round up the kids, they're still upstairs and I'll show James around a bit before dinner?”

“Sure, but please don't give him a three-hour tour. In fact, if he does James just cut him off,” she gave them both a playful smile.

“We'll be down in time for dinner, I promise, let's go James, onward!”

James noticed how Suzette and Henry were the kind of couple that spoke to each other without words just as much as with words. They communicated a plethora of things to each other in between the words they spoke. He and Jane used to be that way. They used to be “on the same wavelength.”

“Let me just leave the rabbit with the chef real fast, then I'll put the gun up,” Henry remarked as he led James back inside.

Henry was the kind who narrates everything he does. When they dropped back into the kitchen he talked to himself about how he would put the rabbit in the freezer while he opened its double doors. Then they left and went back to the lobby. Before taking the first step up the one side of the double staircase Henry mentioned how he would take a few steps to the second floor so he could drop his gun off in an old safe. James remained quiet the entire time. Once upstairs he talked about how to open the gun safe as he opened it. Then he closed it and talked about to lock it.

“Now, what would you like to see first?”

“Oh, it doesn't matter, I mean whatever you'd like to show me is fine.”

“How about the library?”

“Sure.”

Henry led James back downstairs and into the library. The room was gigantic. The floors were covered in oriental rugs, there were multiple large tables with piles of books, desk lamps and all sorts of paraphernalia on them. Elephant tusks, fine rocks and minerals, an ivory chess set, various scientific contraptions, a stereoscope, an Edison Standard phono-

graph, a myriad of trinkets from around the globe and many other things were scattered throughout the room. The walls were covered with floor to ceiling bookcases with moveable ladders. Two golden chandeliers above.

“This is our favorite room in the house,” Henry remarked.

“It’s impressive, how many books do you have here?”

“About twenty thousand.”

“That many?” James said as he browsed one of the walls of books.

“Yeah, most of them were inherited and passed down, but we also try to stock it too, for guests.”

“Seems like it gets a lot of use?”

“Yeah, the guests use it all the time when they stay here.”

“What kind of people stay here?”

“All kinds, usually larger families. It’s the only way to justify the square footage of the place. They’ll stay for a few weeks in the summer until another family takes their place. There’s also the occasional work or board retreat. We also have some who stay here to use the library for research. For instance, we have a guy who owns an archaeological firm, and he comes here to study on his time off while he’s with his family. He does Old Testament research. Most of our other guests just enjoy reading for pleasure when they’re away. You a reader?”

James stopped and turned. He looked down at the floor and slowly back at Henry, as if lost in thought.

“Oh, not really, my wife’s the reader in the family,” James said despite his deep love for books, particularly on the sciences.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, she’s always been that way, ever since we were kids.”

Henry leaned against a couch, put his hands in his pocket and relaxed.

“Does she like anything in particular? Suzette loves cozy fiction, she can’t get enough of the stuff,” he laughed.

James smiled and found himself speaking out of pure reaction. “Jane’s the same way, she has her own stash of them, she’s always reading them, she even brings them on trips. Then again, she’s a literature teacher so I

guess it comes with the territory. Though I wouldn't call cozy fiction high floutin'."

They laughed.

"So, you've known each other since you were kids huh?"

"Yeah, we met in third grade."

"I didn't know those kinds of romances still existed, I mean apart from cozy fiction that is," grinning sarcastically.

"Yeah, it's pretty crazy when her and I look back at it, we know it's rare."

"Is she coming tonight?"

James paused, he ran his finger along the top of a globe that was sitting on top of one of the library tables. He waited to respond until he had run his finger along the entirety of the USSR and the Pacific Ocean. He was trying to find the right words to say. Everything he had said since he entered the library he had spoken in the most natural manner. He was surprised, he hadn't talked in kind terms about Jane since before the war. Why the change? He wanted to talk about her now. That scared him. He recoiled.

"No, she's back home," he said, firmly and shortly.

A long pause.

"So...what do you do for a living?"

James leaned on one of the tables. "I used to be an investment banker, but I left that and went into consulting for mergers and acquisitions."

"That's great, is that why you're in Denmark?"

"No, I came to visit my mom," he said slowly. When he heard himself say "mom" his heart sunk.

"Is she ok?"

"What makes you say that?"

"It's just, well, you seem upset?"

"It's nothing."

"Sorry, in my field we're trained in perceptiveness. Inspecting buildings all day will do that to a man."

James's attention was gone, he was staring out a window at the forest

and clearing.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Henry said, trying to double back and strike up a conversation again.

“What?”

“The forest.”

“Yeah.”

Just then Suzette entered, “Dinner will be ready soon, I just called the children, they’ll be down shortly,” leaving as fast as she appeared.

“You’ll love the kids, they’re great,” Henry said.

James crossed his arms and nodded. He had let his guard down too much. He was angry. Everything was bringing her back to his mind. The books especially reminded him of her. What angered him most though, was not that he had spoken about his enemy in pleasant terms, it was the reason why he did it. In his mind he had somehow come to believe that everything was going to turn out alright. That Jane would accept him and they’d move on from all the discord and heartache. But his other half began to whisper a different narrative. It told him that such dreamy sentiments were the stuff of fantasy and that things were not going to get better. Naturally that upset him. His mannerisms, and his speech reflected the inner turmoil.

Suddenly, loud screams echoed from a nearby hallway. Some kids were hollering and running on the marble floor. It sounded like a herd of cattle – a tiny stampede. It got louder until all three of Henry and Suzette’s children stormed into the library. A girl and two boys, just like Suzette said.

“Daddy!” the two boys yelled, while the girl ran and jumped onto one of the couches in the room, exclaiming “books!” with great gusto.

“Woah now, is this any way to behave in front of a guest?” Henry said. He grabbed his sons’ shoulders and turned them away from him so they could see James.

James looked the two boys in the eyes and didn’t know what to do. He didn’t expect kids to be around. To make matters worse, they looked like how he would have envisioned his son when he would have grown older.

James went pale. He smiled as best he could and then turned and saw the girl reading on the couch, oblivious to everything, caught up in childlike wonder and imagination.

James always wanted a girl. In fact, him and Jane had planned to have one by now, but everything was halted after the accident. He looked at her and for a short few seconds imagined what his girl would have looked like. He didn't think he'd ever have one now, or any other child for that matter. But as he looked at her he also thought that maybe he would have a daughter someday after all. Maybe, just maybe not all was lost.

Henry spoke back up. He read James just as if he were reading one of the twenty thousand books on his shelves. "Kids, head on to the dining room and help the chef and mother ok?"

"Ok!" the girl said, jumping from the couch and running out of the room.

The oldest boy smiled and left quietly, while the younger turned to James and spoke, "Nice to meet you sir," with a smile.

James nodded and watched as they all left. Henry walked over to James, put his hand on his shoulder and said, "I hope you like Italian?"

"Yeah, sounds great."

"Let's go, it will be ready soon. By the way?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about them, they're just more rambunctious this time of year. It's summer vacation. They're away from home so they get kind of crazy. Plus, you're the first guest we've had lately so it's a big deal to them," he said.

James felt guilty. "Oh, it's fine, please, don't mind me."

Henry was hoping for a deeper discussion but there was none. He simply nodded to James and the two left the library for dinner.

IN THE STILLNESS

For all of the old-world splendor of the mansion, James was surprised to discover the dinner to be such a homespun affair. It was a stirring juxtaposition. Bowls of home-made angel hair pasta, ravioli and spaghetti, store bought sauce and all, while dignitaries painted in oil from centuries past watched you through towering windows that peered onto the veranda. One could almost sense that they were watching in horror at the banality of the meals being served in their castle. Everything was so rustic. Suzette's family was clearly more Midwest than Royal Danish.

Moreover, for all the pomp of their surroundings, for all the money the family was obviously rolling in, they were in all aspects fully down to earth. The only thing missing from the occasion was plasticware.

The conversations were primarily focused on the mundane and the ordinary. Work, school, travel and weather were the topics of the hour. Yet, while most of the talking landed on the boring side of things, what was supremely interesting to James was the authenticity of everyone, especially Suzette and Henry. They made even the trivial sound genuine. They didn't try to be anything they weren't. If there was any superiority among them it was hiding under some oriental rug in another room because James could not for the life of him discern any ulterior motives, vanity or comeuppance from any of them. They were a breath of fresh air.

It gave James permission to come down from his agitated state and truly unwind. He didn't even realize it was happening half the time. From the moment he sat down, his fears seemed to run away from him instead of running away with him as they normally had done since his feud with Jane began.

During the second course he began to understand why. Ever since the domestic war with Jane started, James had been unable to just talk to people for the sake of talking to them. He had forgotten how. The feuding and grieving over his son left him emotionally and conversationally paralyzed unless such conversations were about work. In such instances he could divorce himself enough from his own thoughts to make sense of life and focus in. Nevertheless, he lost the ability to keep up any normal life conversations with people in general situations.

To make things worse, no one really understood him. Sure, people would express their "condolences," tell him they'd be there for him and that they "understood" what he was going through. But nothing really helped him. He grew sick and tired early on with people just talking to him because they felt guilty.

It became a vicious cycle because what James really needed and wanted was someone to talk to and someone who would simply listen to him. But no one really understood him except his mom, and now that one rock in his life was gone. If he was going to put things right with Jane, how would he manage to now? If people couldn't help him before, how would they now? Such thoughts came into his mind from time to time between the pasta and garlic bread.

Once dessert was served Henry stood up and made an impromptu speech. He hoisted a glass. "To James, who saved mother's life, we are forever in your debt!" Everyone raised a glass and cheered for him before cutting into a large chocolate cake. The kids were thrilled. Suzette got up and walked a plate over to James. He thanked her and began to eat. Chocolate was Jane's favorite, he couldn't help but think of her as he ate it. He wished she were there. He used to get her a chocolate cake once a

month just for fun.

“After dinner would you like to stay a bit longer and relax?” Henry asked.

“Sure.”

About an hour or so later Henry, Suzette and James were walking with the kids outside in the clearing behind the mansion. Suzette clung to Henry’s arm while James walked behind them. The kids were all over the place jumping and running around, fully content to chart their own paths. It was nearing twilight, but they didn’t care. The important matters of childhood took prominence. They caught fireflies, tumbled and rumbled in the grass and ran all over. James watched them as they went along. Carefree, no problems in the world. He noticed their smiles and laughs. At one point the younger son came up to him, his hands clasped firmly in front of him.

“Look at this Mr. James,” he said.

“What is it?” James said, bending over to see.

The little boy slowly opened his hands. Inside was a bright monarch butterfly. The child’s eyes widened as he slowly opened his hands further until the butterfly eventually flew away. Him and James laughed. James patted the kid on the head and he ran off again to join his siblings.

James didn’t know what was happening but he felt at ease. Just like Suzette and Henry. Now, he was no fool. He knew the grass wasn’t always greener, but he also knew that this family had something that he so desperately wanted. Something that him and Jane had both so eagerly anticipated years ago. Something they pledged to achieve but failed to attain – family. That’s all they ever wanted. And yet in the space of twelve months a son and grandmother were both taken out of this life, and out of Jane and James’s equation. They were fatal blows, and James still felt them insurmountable obstacles to overcome, no matter how at ease he was beginning to feel.

Eventually the sun went down, and darkness settled in. The group doubled back to the mansion. Along the way James looked at his watch. It

was getting late. He suddenly became nervous about leaving. Despite his apprehension to visit in the first place, he had found the Simmons family to be entirely charming, and his time with them insulating from the harsh world inside and around him. He realized that in the span of an hour he'd be back on the road again, off to his dad's house. Then what? What would he do?

For some reason, James felt the answer to that question resided with Suzette and Henry. They had what he wanted. They had what Jane wanted. Emotional warmth. Grace. Acceptance. Genuineness. While these traits seemed a far-off dream for James and Jane, somehow Suzette and Henry reached a place in their lives where such traits existed for them in spades. But could he really ask for their help? Did they really know anything about anything? Would they understand him or just hand out platitudes? His mind was conflicted all the way back to the mansion. Time was running out.

As they climbed the back stairs onto the veranda, James decided to forget about it. He conjured a million reasons why. They were just lucky. They were fake. They never suffered a day in their life. He could figure it out on his own. He didn't need anyone up 'till now and he wouldn't need anyone moving forward. He was and would always be a lone wolf.

Suzette led them inside.

"I'm going to take the kids upstairs for bed, I'll be right back," she said, gently nudging her daughter forward as the two boys ran ahead.

"James, would you like some more dessert?" Henry asked.

"Sure."

"I had the chef put some in my study, we can relax a bit and Suzette can join us later."

"Sounds good to me."

Henry led him into a small office room in the far-left wing of the house. The room was much more modern than the others. Henry eschewed Rococo portraiture for Kodak prints scattered all over the walls. There were also a few drafting tables, model homes dioramas, and other

personal mementos scattered throughout the room.

“This is my office, like it?”

“Yeah, I have one just like it.”

“It’s the only room in the house where I can get any work done,” Henry said with a laugh.

“Here’s the cake,” he added, motioning James to a side table.

James cut himself a small slice and placed it on a plate. He then turned and looked around. Henry sat down on one of several chairs in the middle of the room. Each were situated around a large coffee table. James walked over to join him, but as he did something extraordinary happened.

There was a large framed photo of the Simmons family sitting on a corner table. There were four kids in it. The photo looked recent enough because the two boys and daughter he met weren’t visibly that much older than those in the photo. But there was another boy in it, younger than the rest. James almost brushed it off, but halfway to the chair he stopped and walked over for a closer inspection. He felt compelled to find out who the boy was. He looked at him, and there was no doubt in his mind that he was related to Henry and Suzette, he looked just like the other kids. Maybe a cousin? Most likely. Without James realizing it Henry had gotten up and was standing next to him. He reached forward in front of James, much to his surprise, and picked up the photo.

“This is one of our favorite photos. That’s why I keep it there,” Henry said in a somber tone.

James was startled to see Henry’s countenance having undergone such a dramatic change so quickly. He looked stern, solemn and sad. It was the first time he’d seen Henry look that way all day.

“Who is the younger boy?” James asked.

“That was Sam.”

James’s heart sunk. Waves of fear and anxiety cut through him like a knife. He suspected that the child was no longer among the living. He knew it the moment he saw the lines appear on Henry’s face when he picked up the photo. He had the look of a man in grief. James knew that

look, it was like looking into a mirror.

“He passed away two years ago, cancer,” Henry said. He gently placed the photo back onto the nightstand. Then Suzette entered.

She walked over to them and put her arm around Henry. She knew why they were standing in front of the photo. She knew that look on her husband’s face. For a moment there were no sounds or words, just plain stillness. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

“He was a great kid,” Suzette said to James.

James turned. He was trying to keep back tears. He didn’t know why, but his emotions were running away with him. Suzette and Henry noticed James’s struggle. They recognized the same grief they knew so well on his face. They were kindred spirits in grief and loss.

James stepped back to the table.

“How...how old was he?” James asked softly.

“Four,” Henry said, Suzette leaning on him, her head clinging firmly to his shoulder.

James walked back over to them.

“Can I ask you both something?”

“Sure James,” Henry said.

“How-”

He couldn’t say it.

“What is it?” Suzette said warmly.

“How...how did you make it through?” James asked, tears in his eyes.

Suzette let go of Henry and the two of them looked at each other. The look they gave to each other said that they didn’t know what to say – that they didn’t really have an answer.

“Hard to say,” Suzette said.

“Time I guess, we got back to normal gradually,” Henry added.

“But the thing is you never fully get over something like that. I still struggle with it,” Suzette said.

“That much I know, but how did you both survive it?”

“We almost didn’t,” Henry said.

James was surprised. Henry and Suzette both walked over to the coffee table and they each sat down. James followed and sat with them.

"I know it seems hard to believe, but we almost didn't make it," Henry said, grabbing hold of his wife's hand.

"So how did you?" James pleaded. This was his moment, he wanted so badly to cling to any word of advice they could offer.

Suzette and Henry looked at each other, still not really knowing what to say. Then they both smiled.

"You know, we don't know, and that's the best part of it all," Henry said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, eventually things just got better. It took time and it certainly wasn't easy, and we're not there yet, but through it all something else, or rather *Someone* else was thawing our hearts and moving things forward for us," Suzette rubbed her hand over a Bible resting on a side table next to her chair. She smiled and her eyes looked completely at peace. Then Henry chimed in.

"We're blessed, we know, but it's not always roses. Every good thing in our relationship goes against our natures, we have to fight things every day, but so does everyone else," he said.

He continued, "If it's any consideration I'll say this, when you lose someone it's a line in the sand. You either lose yourself with them or continue on. There really is no other option. Somehow, we moved forward and were saved from the worse of those two options. In the process we learned to appreciate each other and those around us even more," he turned and smiled at Suzette.

James watched them intently as thoughts of Jane flooded his mind.

"That's why we brought you here you know," Henry added.

"What do you mean?"

"We really wanted to thank you for saving Suzette's life. I don't know what we would have done without her, or without you. Back then, when our son died, there was a season when neither of us would have cared if the other had died. Now, we can't imagine life without each other. James...

thank you for saving her. For saving my wife.”

“I’ll never forget it you know, the morning at the airport. I was all disheveled and a mess. It was a long trip, and our son was on my mind a lot. I wanted to just curl up and cry, but then you helped me,” Suzette added, looking at James.

A heavy silence filled the room. No more words needed to be said. The three of them, each with tears swelling in their eyes, each with hairs standing on end and each with profound thoughts racing through their minds sat there in the stillness. Henry thought about what it would be like without his wife. Suzette thought about what would have become of her family without her. And James thought about what his life would be like without Jane.

“It’s me who needs to thank each of you,” James remarked.

“Why?” Suzette asked.

“Because I didn’t save your life.”

Suzette and Henry looked at each other, perplexed.

“I didn’t save your life, you saved mine. You see, we lost a son too. A year ago, it was a car accident. It wasn’t our fault but you know how that goes, we’ve had a hard time not blaming ourselves. Jane, that’s my wife. Her and I have been on the skids for a while now. I also lost my mom and-”

James got choked up. Henry and Suzette got up and walked over to him. They each placed a hand on each of his shoulders and bent down next to him. The three of them remained there and prayed, laughed and cried together.

In that mansion in the middle of the forest, James forged a bond with a couple he had never even known just a couple days prior. That mansion in the middle of the forest was also where he raised his white flag. The war was over.

The three of them stayed up long into the night. Before James left they exchanged numbers and addresses. As it turned out they didn’t live too far from each other back in the States. They hoped to see each other again in the coming months.

James left after midnight. As he neared his dad's house he realized that it was early morning back in the States. He pulled off to the side of the road and drafted a text to send to Jane. He wanted to let her know that he was coming home soon. However, just as he was about to press send he deleted the draft and dialed her instead.

It was eight in the morning back home. Jane was working on a syllabus when her phone rang. She saw that it was James. She couldn't answer fast enough.

"Hello?" she began.

"Hi...Jane," James said in a way he hadn't spoken to Jane in months – calm and peaceful.

There was a long pause. Jane was so glad to hear from him.

"How are you?" she replied, equally at ease.

"I'm doing ok. I wanted to-"

James got scared. This was the first time in nearly a year that he had communicated with the Jane on sound terms. Jane was suddenly just as worried. Each of them knew this would either be the end or a new beginning.

"What's wrong?" she said nervously.

"I wanted to tell you I love you, and that I'm coming home."

Jane took a long pause. She leaned back in her chair and took a deep sigh of relief. She looked over at her desk at a photo of them and smiled. The silence made James concerned.

"I was going to get the first flight out," he said, trying to figure out what Jane thought.

"James," she said.

"Yeah?"

"I love you too."

James took a deep breath. It was the first time the two of them had said such things to each other since their son died.

"I'll have dinner ready," Jane added.

"Thanks, well I'd better go, I'll be home soon."

“See you soon and...thank you...James,” Jane said, calmly and cheerfully.

“You’re welcome...Jane.”

They hung up. James felt a tremendous weight lift off his shoulders. He knew things wouldn’t be easy, but just as Henry and Suzette had said, *Someone* had been taking care of things all along, and *He* would see them through the rebuilding and to a new era of peace.

James thought about that as he continued to the house. He thought about how, despite his late arrival to Denmark, God worked. In the moments in between a life was saved. He also thought about how during the hard to get through days, and in the knock-down-drag-out fights and in the isolation of grief – in all of those moments, God was working things out. In the moments in between life moved on. In the moments in between God brought healing, even if neither he nor Jane could see it at the time, and He was still working in their lives.

James continued on. He arrived back at his dad’s house. He parked, entered and walked up to his room, careful not to disturb anyone. He then managed a few hours of rest before waking back up.

He quietly packed his bags and then went into the kitchen and got some breakfast. Next, he booked a one-way flight and sat there to finish his meal.

Not long thereafter Jeff and his dad came down. The three of them caught up, reminisced, and discussed things. James told them he was returning home and they all agreed it was the best option right now. James’s father for one, despite everything else going on, was happy that his son was at long last patching things up with his daughter-in-law.

Next, they all said their goodbyes, then James’s dad drove James to the airport. A couple hours later James was once again fast crossing the Atlantic.

His return flight was entirely uneventful. There were no lives to save, no thoughts about his domestic war, no ambiguous text messages and most importantly to James, no delays. Eight hours later he was back in his

car in the long-term lot at his Midwest hamlet's airport. He pulled out and onto the interstate.

As the mile markers counted down and he approached the sign that signified his son's death, James's mind naturally thought about it. He looked at it again as he drove by, just as he had done a few days ago. He was sad, but he let the feeling pass without judgment. Later he drove by the university. He wondered if the campus art museum had any new exhibits showing. He looked forward to visiting it again with Jane. Last but not least he passed the ice cream parlor and dairy, where he went through the drive thru and ordered his and Jane's favorite flavor.

Not much later James pulled into his driveway. He exited the car, not with his suitcase or carry on, but with two vanilla cones, one in each hand. Jane heard him on the sidewalk as he approached the front door. She pulled back the curtains of the large living room window and looked out. In the twilight James saw his beautiful wife. The ambient amber glow of the living room lights illuminated her. She smiled, and James watched her run to the front door to welcome him home.

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J.R. WALLER, MBA

J.R. Waller, MBA is the Founder of Every Reason to Believe, a Bible teaching ministry. He was also the Founder of The Greater Heritage, a Christian publishing company that was in business from 2019 to 2024. He holds an MBA from Rollins College, B.S. in Psychology from The University of Central Florida, Certificate in Christian Apologetics from Biola University, Bible Knowledge Certificate from The Master's Seminary Institute for Church Leadership and Introduction to Philosophy Certificate from The University of Edinburgh.

He is former James Madison Institute Leaders Fellow and University of Central Florida Center for Public and Nonprofit Management Fellow. He has also authored several books.



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A powerfully moving story, *The Moments in Between* is a study on the grieving process and how God continues to work for the good of believers even when all hope seems lost.



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