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**I.**

This was the right angle.

He had always seen her in angles. It was something he had noticed about her from the beginning. Sometimes she looked like Rita Hayworth, black eyes and a smile that filled the room. The way her hair always seemed perfect, but just unkempt enough to be real.

But when he moved his head, she would change. He could see the deep lines in her skin, the blue and green forest of her veins. She was still beautiful, but a wholly different person.

He looked down at his hand, and curled it into a fist. His knuckles popped louder than he ever remembered. The smile fell away.

His hand seemed suddenly horrifying. Those same wrinkles, the brown spot that had recently appeared, spreading over what seemed like increasingly translucent skin. It always felt like a dream when these moments came and went, as though he had fallen asleep and woken up old.

All of his memories seemed lost in a haze, irretrievable and pointless.

“Nevermind,” he whispered.

“What was that?” She turned to him, and her eyes burrowed into his. That was the way she had. She should have looked silly, yellow gloves up to her elbows, dirty overalls hanging from her now thin frame, little rainbow bubbles disappearing in the sunlight pouring through the kitchen window behind the sink.

This was the right angle.

“I said, I love you Lilly,” and in that moment, he did, fiercely.

“That’s not what you said!” she said with her Hayworth smile.

“It is,” he replied, and rustled the lines out of his newspaper. He wanted to laugh, to show her how good his mood was, how much he meant what he said.

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He clicked the light off, and closed his book. He had always enjoyed the moment when the room went dark, when the shadows pulling at the corners were set free to fill the walls. He pulled the quilt up to his chin even though it wasn’t cold, enjoying the weight of it.

He was going over the last chapter he read, wondering what he would have done in Eisenhower’s shoes.

He remembered his parents staring for hours at the television in the living room, at the somber faces and exploding shells. His dad crying over dinner, something he had never seen before, and his mother, with her long dress, low voice, and gray hair comforting him. He thought of that often; how they listened to the soft, languid sounds of jazz on the radio, how his mother and father would sometimes dance with smiles and laughter that echoed up to his bedroom. But it changed, turned somber, and even after ‘53, it was never the same.

He was nearing sleep, remembering the twirl of his mother’s dress against the Christmas lights, when Lillian spoke softly in the dark.

“When was the last time you talked to Ben?”

He forced himself awake. It had been a long time since they had talked in bed. In the early years, this is when they had talked the most, excitedly buzzed on whiskey and a haze of cigarette smoke, discussing the world and art until the sun and birdsong cracked through the window.

“I think it was...Saturday. Yeah, Saturday,” he said hesitantly.

He struggled to remember. They had spoken briefly while he had been on the porch, watching swans fly through the branches of the budding oak trees that lined their property. He hadn't really listened, and felt bad when he hung up.

"He used to call more," she said. "I wonder why he doesn't call as much?"

"He's busy. You know how it is. We were too busy to call our parents. Circle of life."

He knew her every gesture, what her body did when she moved against the sheets. His eyes were closed and he wasn't touching her, but he knew she was nodding.

"It's because we're old and boring," she said.

"Speak for yourself," he replied, and smiled when she chuckled. It was a good sound, one of his favorites.

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Lillian awoke with a gasp, and for a second she thought she was underwater. She panicked for a moment, but forced herself to blink and take in her surroundings. The sun moved across the sheets with that gentle heat she loved waking up to. She took a few deep breaths, and looked over to Harold. He still slept, snoring softly.

One of her favorite things was to watch him sleep in the morning. He had always woken up close to the same time as her, (entwined biological clocks was an expression she had heard somewhere), and when he didn't, she felt lucky. In some ways he was so ridiculous, tufts of white hair peeking out through his shirt, his thinning hair a white halo. She smiled, not because he looked silly, but because he was *her* silly. She had seen many versions of him, and she liked this one the best. The confident, handsome investment banker in 1970 was pretty damn good too, but this...this seemed more real now. Closer and better. She stroked his head, and his breathing stopped for a moment. He said, "buh!" and the snoring continued.

She sat up, and put her feet to the cold wooden floor. She was suddenly very dizzy, and had to grab the bed post to stabilize herself. She did not like getting old.

She stood, did her best to stretch, and walked toward the mirror. For the first time in weeks, she glanced up. She stopped moving, and stared for a moment. Her eyes stared back at her, ageless and deep green. The wrinkles gathered around her mouth as she pretended to smile. Her hair was as thick as it had ever been. Every decade she expected it to thin, but instead it had turned a deep white, skipping gray entirely. She had lost a lot of weight, her cheeks were almost sunken, her eyes a bit more pronounced. She could barely recognize herself.

But she had always been proud of the way her body was, and the way she perceived it always seemed like the only opinion that mattered.

Her fake smile turned into a real one as she thought, "*I've still got it.*"

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Lillian stepped into the shower, wincing as her right foot slipped. She carefully leaned in and straightened her leg; relieved when she could feel the hot water bounce against her back. She breathed deeply, taking in the steam, trying to shut out the memory of what had happened last week. The harsh pain of crashing against the unforgiving ceramic floor, the desperation of lying under the seemingly scalding water for ten minutes before she finally managed to pull herself through the shower curtain and onto the white tile floor. She couldn't forget how long she had lain there, reaching for the towel, fighting every instinct to cry out.

He hadn't asked her about how long she was in the bathroom, and she loved him for that. The way his eyes searched hers as she told him she had fallen asleep was enough. They said, *"You'll tell me when you're ready."*

*"Yes, I will."*

But for now she was content. The shower was a time to be alone, a time of constant sensation, a chance to think. She coughed, and doubled over as the coughing continued. When she could finally breathe, she was grateful he hadn't been there to see it.

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The thick smell of breakfast greeted him as he slowly moved down the stairs, taking great care to put one foot before the other.

"Pancakes! Blueberry pancakes and...grapefruit!" he said.

He heard her laugh before he rounded the corner. The early sun filled their kitchen, sparkling across the glassware that lined the shelf above the stove, across the white of their refrigerator.

She looked so focused, hair wrapped up in a handkerchief, plastic spatula in hand over the sizzling pan.

*"She's going to garden today,"* he thought, *"I can watch MASH. Perfect."*

"Wrong!" she said, "No grapefruit. We're out. Grapes."

"Close enough," he replied, and sat at the table. There was already a pancake resting on his plate, a slice of butter melting in the center, a white gravy boat filled with syrup and a glass of orange juice resting next to a folded newspaper. It struck him that this was perfect, it was more than he could have hoped for, to wake up and have this ready. He looked up at her, and listened to her hum tunelessly as she did, flipping pancakes with a grace and practiced ease he had always envied.

When they were first together, she would have thought the concept of making him breakfast ludicrous, and he would have agreed. Neither of them cooked at all until Ben was born, and even then, when they tried to learn, it felt like it was too late for both of them. He gave up immediately, and though she tried to cook every night, it was rarely more than prepared packages with some vegetables. Ben hated her cooking, and that was something Harold had trouble forgiving him for. Now, she was a practiced expert, and he wasn't so bad himself.

They used to laugh about people like the people they had become, walking through the steam in crowded New York streets with take-out in their hands, laughter on their lips and a seemingly endless night of sights and sounds and sidewalks and drunken friends. He had pretended to propose to her once in their early thirties, on a rooftop above their tiny apartment in Manhattan, with the skyline and the orange glow of the city behind them. They had both laughed. She had said, "Could you imagine? Promise me we'll never be those people."

He cut into his breakfast, and couldn't remember ever being so grateful to be those people.

"Thank you Lilly."

She turned to him.

"For what?"

"For all of this. Thank you."

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Lilly pulled her sunhat tighter over her eyes, and dug her spade into the earth. She loved the way it gave way after a rain, how she could pull up soft chunks of mud with little effort. The small green vegetables sparkled with moisture around her, and the birds sang overhead in the oak. She inhaled the old smell of the earth, and felt the remains of last night's rain suspended in the air around her.

She sprinkled her open packet of cucumber seeds into the hole, and carefully filled it in. She was creating life when she did this, careful to pack the soil just enough that it didn't suffocate the seed.

"*Giving birth,*" she thought, then chuckled. She had given birth, and it was nothing like this. She got to her knees, and took a deep breath. She winced as her lungs protested, and struggled to suppress a cough.

"*Maybe I should get an inhaler,*" she thought. "*That's something people my age do right?*"

She had just picked up her spade when she heard-

"Beautiful out here."

She turned to see Harold sitting on the porch, rocking gently in his chair, newspaper spread across his lap.

"Agreed. Thought you were gonna watch TV?" she asked, shading her eyes against the sun.

He shook his head.

"Later. Days like this don't come so much anymore. Gotta enjoy them while we can."

She nodded. "How about you come out here and help me with some of this labor?"

He shook the newspaper, that newspaper that he never seemed to finish no matter how late into the day he read it.

"I'd hate to deprive you my dear."

She smiled, and wanted nothing more than to pick up a soft piece of earth and hurl it, to see it explode against the wall behind him. To have him leap down the stairs and tackle her, to pin her to the ground with that half smile of his, to feel his weight, and have his eyes locked on hers.

But her arms couldn't move that way anymore, and the day seemed suddenly less bright.

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The television flickered across Harold's face as he sat in his recliner, chin resting on his chest. He opened his eyes and straightened just in time to see a mushroom cloud detonate on the screen in static black and white. He glanced at his watch, 7:30.

He sat up, and yawned. He hated to fall asleep in front of the tv. When he did, he would usually wake up at 4:30 or 5, sometimes with the pink sunlight creeping in through the large window in the living room. It felt terrible to not be in bed, to not feel her turn, not see the light turn on between six and six thirty, not feel her leave, and then roll toward her when she came back.

Even at his most rambunctious; cocaine laced binges in his late twenties, cocktail parties in the seventies, the first notes of daybreak after a long night were intensely depressing.

Reality and the silence of a quiet house settled back in, most unwanted.

"*And nothing,*" he thought, "*is more depressing than an old man falling asleep watching war.*"

He contemplated turning the tv off, going through the trouble of heading back up those stairs that seemed to be steeper every day, when Lillian strode into the room with terrible purpose.

“He didn’t call today either,” she said, as though they were in the middle of a conversation.

Harold felt a flicker of anger, his hand tightened around the remote. He had been happy enough, why did she have to put this on him now?

“Well, he’s busy,” he replied. This was far from a conversation he wanted to have right now.

He looked up at Lillian, gauging her mood.

Her arms were crossed around her chest, and she stared into the tv without watching, resolute. She wanted to talk. There was no getting out of this.

He muted the television just as it brightened, loud commercials bursting with color.

“I get it. He’s busy, that’s fine. But I’ve left messages, it seems unusual. I’m starting to get worried,” she said.

He pushed the leg rest on the recliner in, and leaned forward. He wanted to keep his voice even; he had always been good at that. He thought he sounded patronizing when he focused on keeping his voice level, but it was a small price to pay to avoid emotional escalation.

“Ben sends us presents on our birthdays. He comes almost every thanksgiving. It’s fine Lillian.”

“It doesn’t feel fine,” she said, and his throat tightened.

“Maybe how you feel makes no goddamned difference, have you considered that?” he snapped back. He wanted her out of the room. Everything had been perfectly fine until she came in with this made up nonsense.

Her voice rose, and she uncrossed her arms. For a moment, caution replaced his anger.

“This is exactly what I was talking about Harold. I haven’t done anything. I have done *nothing* to you, and you think it’s ok to turn on me like that?” Her voice was louder than it had been in a very long time, and another thermonuclear explosion of black and white from the television flashed across the room. “I would never do that to you, and you sure as hell have no right to do it to me. Goodnight.”

She turned, and moments later he heard a door upstairs slam shut.

He took a deep breath, and turned off the tv. He leaned back in the chair, and closed his eyes, listening for the crickets that would drift in through the open window. There was nothing tonight.

He didn’t like getting angry, never had, and though he didn’t like losing control, a part of him liked these fights. Seeing her passionate and energetic was like a window back decades, to when they would scream at each other about him or her, and fall asleep exhausted. They would wake up and laugh at themselves and make love until the sun was setting again.

He wanted to enjoy it, the exhilaration and the memories, but her hurt look cut through it. Even in the rare times he had felt like he hated her, being the cause of her pain was never something he could accept. A quiet flicker of guilt replaced his confused, post nap disorientation.

He groaned as he got to his feet, feeling the stiffness in his knees as he straightened his legs. Pulling himself out of a chair had gotten so hard sometimes he didn’t want to sit down.

He followed her into the dark, hoping to catch her before she fell asleep.

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Harold took a drag of a cigarette, and tried his best not to cough. He had just started smoking, and hadn't quite figured it out yet. The girl next to him, a strong jawed blonde girl with the greenest eyes put her hand on his shoulder. Her touch felt amazing.

"You alright?" Her breath smelled like something strong.

He tried to pull the half smile he had been practicing in the mirror.

"Yeah, of course. Just lovin the music."

Almost on cue the song ended, and the hostess, a mousy girl with rich parents, switched the record. The Paris Sisters started singing about love with an ethereal downbeat, and he started to wonder about the two swigs of vodka he had taken outside.

"Music's gonna change the world one day honey," said the girl, and she clumsily brushed her hand over his face in what almost felt like a slap.

Harold had never been to a place like this. All the people around him must have been at least twenty-five, the air was thick with cigarette smoke and throaty laughter. George had brought him here, and convinced him to take deep drinks from the bottle he stole from his dad on the massive front lawn. He then promptly disappeared into the crowd, chasing a girl he would never get with, leaving Harold on the couch surrounded by people he had no idea how to talk to.

He looked at the carpet, and took another drag of his cigarette, careful not to breathe in too hard.

He was feeling very sorry for himself when a pair of brown shoes and shapely calves walked past. He followed them and looked up, and took a deep breath when he saw her face.

He exploded into a cough as the smoke tore at his lungs, and felt like the whole room was watching him as he struggled to stop. It seemed like The Paris Sisters were mocking him now as they reached a crescendo.

As he gave one final cough and looked up, she was staring at him.

"Christ, someone call an ambulance," someone said across the room, and there were a few chuckles. Eyes fell away, but she still looked.

"Did I scare you?" she asked. Her voice struck him hard, so much confidence.

"No, this smoke is just old," he replied, and tried to nonchalantly put it out in the full ashtray. He coughed again, and she laughed. There was nothing malicious in it.

She wore a black dress, outdated but somehow elegant, like something his mom would have worn when she went out in '55. Her hair was long, pulled back into a simple ponytail, almost as dark as her eyes. She must have been at least twenty-six.

"Right," she replied. "Come get me a drink."

She started to walk away.

"Yeah, ok, sounds good." he said, and his heart raced as he followed her through the crowd.

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The air was much cooler outside. They sat in reclining deck chairs, staring up at the stars. They were alone, the sounds from inside a glass door apart.

Harold took another drag from another cigarette, and realized he hadn't offered her one. He pulled the pack out of his pocket, but she shook her head.

“No thanks. That shit isn’t good for you.”

Harold nodded. He kept nodding whenever she said anything, he wasn’t sure why.

“I’ve heard that. But my dad smokes. Always has,” he said. “He seems fine.”

She didn’t reply, just stared up at the stars. The crickets were out in full force tonight.

She took another drink from the small bottle she was clutching, and turned to him, propping herself up on her elbow.

“What was the last book you read?”

The shadows through the glass door danced around her, and the light from inside illuminated her silhouette.

He put his cigarette out on the armrest, and tried not to look at her curves.

“Atlas Shrugged. You know it?”

She smiled. “Of course. Objectivism. Did you like it?”

“I did. I like what was said about every relationship being a trade. How you should always get something in return for kindness. Everything should be beneficial to both parties.”

She nodded, and he wasn’t sure what to say. He wasn’t used to drinking, and though he felt in control, he wondered if he was making a fool of himself.

“Do you like it?” He asked.

“I’m glad it was written,” she said, and looked back up at the sky. The moon had just come over the horizon, huge and white. “It reminds me of a cartoon. Everyone is larger than life, caricatures of the ideas they represent.”

It was silent between them, but Harold didn’t feel awkward. He had never been particularly comfortable around girls, but her confidence put him at ease. He felt a surge of pride that this woman, this beautiful, smart woman wanted to spend time with him, alone.

“How old are you Harold?” she asked.

“It’s Harry.”

“No, it isn’t. Stick with Harold. More dignified. How old are you Harold?”

He laughed, and contemplated lying, but it seemed short sighted. “I’m nineteen.”

“Really?” she asked. “You seem older. Nineteen is rough. I promise it gets better.”

She smiled at him, and she looked like a movie star he couldn’t quite remember and his heart beat quicker.

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That night, he thought of her as he tried to sleep. There had been no real romantic instigation, but she excited him, and her interest in his life made him feel like he was someone real. Someone who mattered. When she left the party, her brown hair falling over her shoulders, she had shaken his hand and told him she hoped to see him again soon.

He knew it was silly, she was twenty-three, there was no reason on earth she’d ever remember him, but he couldn’t help but pull the blankets up under his chin, enjoy the weight of it, and laugh.

As sleep came, he imagined sitting with her in a dark theater, images flickering across her face, and the charge of her skin as his hand grasped hers.

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Every time they fought, Harold would wake up early the next day to try and make things right in his own way. It wasn't something she was proud of, but when she was younger, she had sometimes started fights just to see how he would react the next day.

As Lillian pulled herself out of bed, and stumbled to the closet to get her slippers on, she wondered what it would be this time. It had been notes, a living room full of flowers and once, and after a particularly nasty dispute, a new car.

He had come in after she was already half-asleep, and whispered, "I'm sorry Lilly. You don't deserve that, you're right." She hadn't responded, not to punish him, but because she wasn't sure what to say, and had fallen asleep before she could formulate an appropriate response.

Now, the sun sparkled through the window, and she glanced with some worry at the clock. She couldn't remember the last time she had slept until nine. It seemed like she was sleeping later and later every day, and waking up less rested.

Her creased brow fell when she heard Harold downstairs. She could already tell he was in a good mood.

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The harsh smell of bleach made her wrinkle her nose as she came around the corner and headed to the kitchen. There he was, scrubbing under the table, bright yellow gloves pulled up to his elbows, his hair bobbing back and forth as he moved the brush.

He didn't clean often, but when he did, he did it well. The kitchen was literally sparkling, sunlight shattering against the glistening countertops. It was so bright it almost seemed like a different room.

*"This must have taken him hours,"* she thought. *"Where does he get the energy?"*

He slowly got to his feet as he saw her, and wiped his brow with his arm. He had a goofy smile, and at that moment, his face shining with sweat, with the clean smell and bright light, it was impossible not to love him.

"Thought I'd clean up a bit. You do so much around here, just thought I could..." he shrugged. "Help out I guess."

"Thank you Harold," she said, and kissed his cheek. For some reason she thought it was terribly funny that he was so salty.

"You want breakfast?" she asked, and headed toward the stove. She cleaned it every few days, but she could see he had gone over it as well.

"No, I'll grab something on the way to town," he replied. "Unless...do you want something? I could make you some toast."

"Please don't ruin this wonderful gesture with your cooking," she said, and he laughed. "Why are you going into Atlanta?"

"It's Marty's birthday, remember? We're going to lunch, I told you about it. At least a couple of times."

"Right, of course! Well I hope you have fun down there. If you can, pick up some eggs on the way back. Tell Marty happy birthday for me."

"Will do. You're more than welcome to come Lillian, you know that."

"I know, and thank you. I think you boys will have more fun by yourselves," she said.

She couldn't remember him ever telling her anything about his plans for Marty's birthday, and her anxiety swelled. There seemed to be so much she was forgetting, and there was little she treasured more than her memories.

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She sat at the table, eating the last of the eggs, reading about their new mayor. She hadn't voted in years, and now she remembered why. He was just as bad as the last guy. Other party, but somehow even more extreme than before.

"I hope you have a good day Lilly. I won't forget the eggs," Harold said.

He was wearing his brown sweater and fishing hat. His sense of style never faded, she was always, *always* impressed by the way he managed to put an outfit together. She had talked to him about it, and he seemed genuinely mystified. He always color coordinated effortlessly; as his body changed he knew exactly what to wear to accentuate or hide it. He always looked good, and he didn't even know it.

She loved that about him.

"You too. Thank you again for all of this," she waved at the kitchen.

He cleared his throat, and looked away for a moment. Then his eyes met hers, and she knew what was coming.

"I'm really sorry about last night. I am. I don't know why I said what I did. I just woke up you know how I am after naps. I was far away, and it's hard sometimes to... But that's no excuse. Know that I have the utmost respect for you. I always have, and I always will."

She smiled, as she always did when he said these things.

"I know you meant what you said, but I also know it can be hard to be interrupted. Don't worry. Just have fun today. Call me when you're coming home, I'll get dinner ready," she said.

He nodded, and stepped out. The house was silent around her, and she sat at the kitchen table, taking heavy breaths, trying not to worry how hard it was.

Again, she was glad he wasn't there to see it.

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Lillian sat in a lawn chair under the sun in the front yard, her legs crossed, reading a book about a handsome young detective. She was finding it difficult to concentrate. She kept wanting to look up and take in the beautiful day. The birds were loud in the trees that lined their yard and clouds swirled across the huge sky; a sapphire and white painting. The grass moved like waves with the Atlantic breeze, that breeze that kept her cool and brought on the comforting, humid smells of spring. It was the first truly warm day in months, and Lillian was ecstatic to be done with her chores, to be able to sit out here as long as she wanted. She looked up again when she heard squirrels screeching, and watched them chase each other around the trunk of the closest tree.

This was the life they had built, and this was one of those moments that she could truly appreciate it.

It always started like an itch in her chest, an irritation that quickly built into an explosive cough. She had been sick before, very sick in the late 90's, but she had never coughed like this. Her entire body would wrench with the spasms, and the coughing would smash through her throat. There was nothing she could do except close her eyes, and hope for it to end. Sometimes

it felt like it wouldn't stop, like she would simply collapse, her lungs paralyzed, and Harold would find her that way.

But, as always, it slowed, and then mercifully ceased. She opened her eyes, trying to focus on the green of the grass, and took deep breaths. It worried her how raspy it sounded. When her breathing returned to normal, she reached for her book, and her hand stopped short.

It was red. A small spattering of blood splayed across the inside of her palm, and her heart sank. She hated doctors, not because of what they did, but because it meant she couldn't take care of herself, and someone else had to do it for her. She knew this was different, it had been around too long, made her too weak, but still she hoped.

As she looked at her hand, hoping the red was a trick of the light, it seemed like the birdsong was less exuberant, and the sun less bright.

Her only thought was, "*He is going to be so sad.*"

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Dr. John Keller's office was always an interesting experience. Despite the sterile walls and strong chemical smell, there were always children in the waiting area running and playing, and it always reminded her of a living room. Both she and Harold had been coming here for years; the doctor had become one of their best friends, and every time she came there were children falling over and crying and laughing and asking her questions and offering her compliments and insults as their parents flushed with embarrassment. She loved it here. It amused her to watch them play, but she also enjoyed watching their parents over the brim of whatever vacuous magazine she pretended to read. It made her laugh the way they ignored them until things got too loud, how they would look up from their phone, yell, and sink back into denial. She wondered for a moment if she had ever been like that with Ben. She didn't think so.

She tried to look back down at the magazine, an article about the financial crisis, about the Fed, about something. She couldn't focus, and for a moment she wished Harold was here. She had considered calling him as she washed the blood from her hand, but immediately decided it was a bad idea. He would be more worried than her, and she didn't want to interrupt his first day out in months with something that might be nothing. She called Dr. Keller instead, and he had made room in his afternoon schedule for her.

She wondered if she should be scared, but she wasn't. She felt fine at the moment, despite the coughing and weariness that comes with age. Harold would be glad she had come, he was always telling her to get a checkup. He'd be glad when she had a clean bill of health.

"Lillian my dear!" Dr. Keller came toward her, hand extended, bright brown eyes twinkling through his bushy white eyebrows. He had a loud but pleasant voice, he always reminded her of a thin, good-looking Santa Clause.

"John," she replied with a smile, and shook his hand. She liked how he would never hug her in the office, always a hand shake, even though they had been friends for years.

"It's good to see you!" He glanced around. "No Harold?"

"Not today. He's in Atlanta with some friends," she said.

"Must be nice! Come on back," he replied, and with a comforting hand on her shoulder, led her through the children, and into the back of the office.

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She didn't like the look on his face, or the cold metal pressed against her chest. "One more time Lillian. Deep breaths please," he said, listening through his stethoscope. She breathed deeply, and stifled the sudden urge to cough. It was silly, but she wanted to appear healthy.

He stood, and pulled the metal out of his ears.

"How long did you say you've had this cough?" His expression had lost all of its warmth, and that worried her more than anything.

"About six weeks," she replied. "It's not that bad, just a cold. I think."

"It's not a cold," he replied. He looked away from her for a moment, and she was suddenly very afraid.

Before she could ask, he ran his fingers through his white hair, and looked straight into her eyes.

"I don't want to worry you unnecessarily Lillian, but it's more than a cold. You have fluid in your lungs. It may be bronchitis, possibly pneumonia, both of which are very treatable."

"I see," she said. He didn't look like he was done talking yet.

"But I think it's important that you see a specialist. I can treat some lung conditions here, and I have, but we need to make absolutely sure it's not something more complex. I know an excellent Pulmonologist in Atlanta, we've been friends for years. I'll call him and let him know to expect you. When can you get down there?"

She sat back on the paper covered seat and took a deep breath. Her lungs hurt, and she was almost overwhelmed with anxiety. She closed her eyes, and tried to think straight. She wished those goddamned fluorescent lights were less bright.

She opened her eyes, and he was right in front of her.

"Lillian, I don't want you to be overly-concerned. We're just being careful here," he said, and smiled. She couldn't tell if it was a fake smile or not, but it helped.

"Right." She tried to return the smile, and was fairly certain she failed. "I'm sure in a week or two we can-"

He shook his head. "No, it really needs to be this week. Just to be safe."

"Ok. I'll talk to Harold," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

He put his hands on her shoulders.

"Good. Please call me the moment you do, and I'll call Dr. Marlowe. He's a good man, one of the best, you'll like him. And after you see him, feel free to call and yell at me for making you drive all the way down there for nothing."

She nodded. "Thank you."

"Of course. Everything is going to be fine. Don't spend any time worrying," he said, but his face was more serious than she had ever seen it.

"Yeah," she replied, and did her best to fight back tears.

**II.**

The blue smoke made a halo over his head as he exhaled. He watched as it twisted toward the open sunroof and was pulled through by the wind outside. It felt like it would rain, but they both sat, their seats reclined, staring up into the pink sky.

He turned to look at her. When he smoked it always made the world seem flat, but more vibrant, like it was being painted in front of him. He watched her as she took a hit, the way her eyes closed, the way her lips pulled together when she exhaled. Everything she did, she did with such grace, and it never ceased to amaze him.

He had missed her. It had been months since they had last spent any time together. She had moved to Raleigh for a job she refused to talk about, and though they wrote each other sporadically, she had been hard to get a hold of. When she called to tell him she would be in town for a week, he was more excited than he had been in a long time.

But she hadn't said much. He had driven her up into the hills; to what he had always thought was a beautiful view, though it seemed silly now. It was sunset, and there wouldn't be much light left, no sparkling city underneath. Just the wind through the trees.

"It's good to be back," she said, and exhaled. The smoke curled around her, and drifted out into the dusk.

"Yeah?" he replied. He liked it when she talked like this, it was always the beginning of something long and complicated and exciting. "Did you miss me?"

She chuckled. "Yeah, I did. I missed all of it. This place is simple, but it's beautiful."

"Are you having a good time in Raleigh?" he said.

"It's ok," she said, but it was not joyful. "Actually, no it's not. It fucking sucks."

It still shocked him to hear her swear, and it embarrassed him that it did.

"I'm sorry Lilly. Things suck here too if that's any consolation."

She shook her head. "It's not. But thanks."

"How's Scott?" he said a little too suddenly. "You guys doing alright?"

"Scott," she said. "Oh Scott. He's...not who I thought he was. Turns out he's deeply stupid."

"No...really!?" he said, and she slapped his shoulder with a laugh. "After everything you've told me about him, probably could have guessed."

"Look, I knew he was dumb. Dumb but nice. That's all I was looking for."

Harold felt a twinge of jealousy, and he didn't understand why. It had been years since they had become friends, and he had explored many relationships of his own. She was his best friend, and he wanted nothing but the best for her.

But when she so much as mentioned in passing some new male acquaintance or coworker, he felt an unpleasant sense of toxicity.

"Plenty of fish in the sea," he said.

"Oh wow! Did you come up with that expression? How in every way original!"

"I did actually. I've got royalties, I'm a very rich man," he said, and they both laughed.

She took another small puff, and passed the burning paper to Harold. Her smile was gone. "It's not so good up there Harold."

He nodded. She had her serious face on, and he prepared himself. He ran through the things he wanted to talk to her about, the things he had educated himself on in her absence.

"I know," he said, though he didn't really. He could see that she wanted to lead the conversation.

“If you and I were black, just...different skin, we wouldn’t be here right now. That’s not...acceptable,” she said.

He wanted to laugh. He agreed completely, but the way she bounced from one subject to another, from a joke to something like this was something he loved and hated about her.

“Separate but equal, my ass,” he said, and she smiled.

“Damn right Harold,” she said, and pulled his hand into hers.

His first instinct was to stiffen, but he forced himself to relax. She pulled his hand across the stick shift, and they lay to rest, entwined near her thigh.

He glanced at her, and he could see that smile, and he knew she was testing him. He tightened his grasp on her hand, and passed the joint back to her.

“Pretty fucked up about JFK isn’t it?”

She nodded. “It is. We get to the moon, and people still shoot each other. It makes no sense. What’s next?”

She exhaled in her perfect way, smoke filled the car, and he couldn’t remember ever being so happy.

- - -

Harold was smiling as he turned on the windshield wipers. Rain almost always made him gloomy, but nothing could dampen his mood today. He watched as the wipers flicked away the water, as his headlights reflected against the slick road. He couldn’t remember the last time he had had such a great day.

It had been months since he had seen Marty or his brother Ted. He always loved spending time with them, especially when they were together, and every time seemed better than the last. They made him laugh so much that he would be a bit embarrassed, but they didn’t mind. They didn’t get out much either.

They had started drinking beer around two in the afternoon, and had switched to scotch after they cooked steak under the rolling gray clouds. Harold didn’t drink much, as he knew he had to drive, but he could still feel the warmth and euphoria. He heard Ted say, “*God knows yer tolerance ain’t what it used to be ya pussy,*” and laughed out loud.

He was looking forward to seeing Lillian, to tell her a little (not too much) about being out with the boys, to share some of the youthful exuberance that had made his day so great. He knew she needed some time away from him too, and he was glad he could provide that.

He hoped he would walk in, that she would be sipping a glass of wine in front of the fire, listening to Bob Dylan sing softly from the record player with a book in her hand. That she would look up at him, and smile, and that he could hug her, lift her off the ground in that way she loved. That they could spend the evening talking about everything they did that day while the rain tapped against the windows.

He was still smiling as he opened the door.

The lights weren’t on in the kitchen, and it was cold. The first thing he noticed were the white curtains twisting in the strong wind, and the water on the counter and the floor. She had forgotten to close the window, and as he pulled it shut and wiped down the table, worry set in. This was very unlike her.

“*She must have fallen asleep,*” he told himself, and was reasonably satisfied as he hung the wet rag, and moved into the living room.

Instead of warm firelight and her shining eyes, he was met with the dull flickering of a candle that was almost burned away. He could see her sitting on the couch, holding something. The way she sat frightened him, her shoulders slumped, her head hanging forward.

“Lillian?” he said, and moved toward her, being careful not to run into the coffee table she had insisted putting near the door. “You alright?”

She looked up suddenly, almost afraid, as though she had been caught. Her face softened when she saw him, but it was clear she had been crying.

“Of course,” she said with none of the enthusiasm he had anticipated. “I’m glad you’re back.”

He wasn’t sure what to say, the entire situation was unexpected. Before he could speak, she stood suddenly.

“Oh damnit! I’m so sorry honey; I left the window open in the kitchen! I completely forgot. I’ll go clean up, so sorry about that.” She tried to walk past him, but as she did he placed his hand gently on her shoulder. She turned to him, and even in the shadows he could see her trying to keep her composure.

“It’s fine, I never remember. Lilly...are you alright?”

She nodded, and for a moment seemed like she was trying to speak. Instead she forced a smile and patted his hand.

After she headed upstairs with a weak excuse, he turned on the light. He could still hear the rain outside, but it didn’t seem comforting anymore, just solemn.

He lifted what she had thrown on the sofa when he had entered, and ran his fingers across the frame. It was a picture of them when they had first married, beaming expressions yellowed by the age of the photograph. On her face, what looked like a raindrop ran down the glass.

- - -

She breathed in deeply, and felt nothing except the familiar weight of her blanket. Every time she took a breath she worried she would feel her lungs rip apart, feel something that would prove she was sick. She was exhausted, tired from worry and anxiety, and the heavy weariness of crying for hours. It seemed strange that she had cried, she had done it so rarely in her life.

There were times when she felt obligated to cry, and attempted it. Her first breakup, the first time she was fired, when her father died. It always seemed to herself like she was acting. Even tonight, as she had stumbled into the house, barely managing to shut the door behind her, she felt hot tears on her skin and wondered if she wasn’t doing it because she felt like she should. But as night came, and the tears kept coming, that surrender to the body and the wild tide of emotion continued, and she let it take her.

She was frightened when Harold came in because she was forced to see how much time she had lost. When she heard his voice her awareness kicked in, recognizing that it was night, that she had been sitting in the living room for hours, that there was a storm and she had done nothing about it.

She could see that he was worried. Part of her wanted to tell him, especially when she felt his hand on her shoulder, still strong after all these years. She knew she wasn’t ready, that the unfamiliar storm of emotion might burst back in, and now was not the right time.

She would tell him when the time was right.

Now, she heard him shuffling about in the bathroom, flossing, brushing his teeth, putting on lotion. The same things he had done every night for fifty years. He always tried to be quiet when he knew she was in bed, never wanting to disturb her.

She felt burning at the corner of her eyes, and tried to think about anything other than the blood on her hand.

She had almost fallen asleep, weary and looking forward to not thinking, when he felt her beside her. He ran his fingers through her hair with a gentleness she wasn't used to from him.

"You'll tell me in the morning won't you?" he whispered.

She nodded, and he wrapped his arm around her. She hoped she would have the courage.

- - -

When morning came, she felt better. She hadn't coughed, and her mind was clear. She felt rested in a way she hadn't in weeks. The birds were greeting the sun, and the rain clouds were retreating into the pink sky.

Downstairs, she made toast and a cup of tea. She pulled open the blinds, and looked out into the yard as steam curled around her face. The backyard was finally how she wanted it, what they had both been working toward for years. Carefully manicured grass spread out to an herb garden, where a variety of plants had just peeked out of the moist soil. Near that, her flower garden, complete with blooming lilies faced the sun. On the other side of the thick grass were the tomatoes, and Harold's garden, less well kept but exciting in its wildness.

She took a sip from her cup, and enjoyed the silence of dawn.

*"It's just a test,"* she thought. *"You're old now, you keep forgetting. Tests happen."*

She glanced at the clock. She had at least an hour until Harold woke up. She still had no idea what to tell him. She was certain he would worry more than her, and it was hard to convince herself it was a good idea before she knew for sure. She had never enjoyed lying to him, and on the few occasions she had over the years, it bothered her more every time. They were by no means a perfect couple, but honesty had never been something they had a problem with.

She sighed, and suddenly felt very alone in the dark house. Her family was gone, her sister had died ten years ago, her friends were all scattered, the few that were still alive. All she had left was Harold and Ben, and as painful as it was, Harold simply wasn't an option right now.

She picked up the phone by the fridge in the kitchen, and felt a cool breeze from the open window as she dialed. It was early, but Ben always got up early.

She didn't really know what to say, and was unprepared when he answered.

"Hello?" he asked. It felt good to hear his voice, but she was having trouble responding.

"Mom? Hello? Dad? You there?"

"Hi honey," she finally managed. "I hope it isn't too early."

"No, I was just on my way to the gym. Everything all right? Why are you whispering?"

She wanted to tell him no. Everything was not alright, that she was scared, for her, and more than anything, for his father.

"Of course," she said softly. "Just...making sure I don't wake up your dad." She glanced at the empty room. There was no way Harold could possibly hear her, but the truth was, she was having trouble finding her voice. She felt the familiar spark of a cough in her lungs.

"So how are you Ben?" she asked quickly, and muted the phone, covering her mouth with her arm. Luckily, the cough died away before it came, and she listened to him talk. He loved to talk about himself, and though sometimes she wished he wasn't quite so self-absorbed,

he had always been a good story teller, and she loved his jokes. He cheered her up with a story about an awful date he had been on recently and a new girl he really liked, and as the sun finally found its way through the open window and warmed her face, she felt better.

“Sorry I can’t talk longer, just got to the gym. Say hello to dad for me!”

“I will. And call again soon! Sooner please,” she replied, watching the first birds of the morning land on a tree. “I miss you.”

“For sure!” he said in that way he always did. “I’ve just been busy, you know. Hope to see you soon!”

“I would love that,” she replied. “I would.”

The dial tone of a dead line was all she heard back.

- - -

“I’ll be back tomorrow, before dinner,” she said, a small duffel bag slung across her shoulder. He had just finished cleaning up after breakfast. He knew she was going, but didn’t expect her to leave so early.

“Oh,” he said, trying to look happy. “Well, I hope you have fun. Give Miriam my best.”

She smiled at him, the sun and wind poured in through the open door, and she gave him a hug. She was still strong, her arms gripping his chest tightly, and he wrapped his arms around her. It was a move of unexpected intensity, especially given her somber mood the last few days, but he reveled in her touch and her warmth.

She whispered, her breath tickling his ear, “Wish me luck. I love you. ”

“Good luck,” he whispered back. “But Miriam isn’t *that* bad.”

She laughed, but her smile was gone when she let go.

She moved toward the door. “Call me if you need anything. I’ll call if I do. And have fun. There’s wood in the fireplace, remember the leftovers are-”

“Lillian,” he interrupted.

“What?” she replied, and looked almost afraid. That same look she had whenever he asked what was wrong.

“I love you too,” he said.

She took a deep breath.

“I’ll see you tomorrow Harold,” she replied, and closed the door.

He heard her footsteps crunching down the gravel driveway, and the faint roar of an engine. He collapsed on the couch, and marveled at the silence. It had been years since he had felt so far away from her, or more alone.

- - -

His world was spinning. It had been awhile since the last time he had so much to drink, and this hadn’t turned out to be the release he was looking for. Instead of dulling his feelings it seemed to have aggravated them.

He knew it wouldn’t help, but he poured himself another splash of the Glenfiddich they kept in the back cupboard of the kitchen for company. He threw it to the back of his throat, and closed his eyes as it warmed his esophagus like liquid smoke. He walked carefully to the couch, surprised at how hard it was for him not to spill his drink, and fell into it. He had been wandering

aimlessly all afternoon, sitting down to do something, then forgetting, distracted by his thoughts. Then he would get up, and repeat the process in another part of the house.

He suddenly had a strong urge to go for a walk, and glanced out the window at the shadow of the fading sun. *Was it really already dark?* He took another sip, and put the glass down on the glass coffee table. His head fell against the back of the couch, and he watched the ceiling slowly spin above him, picking out faces and shapes in the textured plaster.

He felt anger well up, stronger now after the additional drink. Why wouldn't she just talk to him? There was clearly something wrong, he wasn't stupid, and it was unforgivable to keep it from him. He would never keep something from her, they never had before. Why now? What could be so goddamn important?!

"Bitch!" he yelled, and immediately felt stupid as he heard his voice echo through the empty house. His anger disappeared in an instant, and a deep anxiety took its place.

*"She'll tell you, she always has. She'll tell you when she's ready."*

His words did little to soothe his fear. He wondered for a moment if she were having an affair, and almost laughed at how ludicrous that idea was. He had thought maybe she was sick, but put that out of his mind because she would have no reason not to tell him. He had spoken with Ben immediately after she left, and did his best to find out if something was wrong in his life without alerting their son of his intention or concern. The conversation had been typically short and unproductive, but Harold felt a strong sense it had nothing to do with Ben.

*What then?*

He reached for his glass, but knocked it over. He didn't sit up as he watched the amber alcohol slowly seep into the rug. He took a deep breath, and tried not to think about the only option left.

She was going to leave him. It had been his first thought, and the only one he couldn't explain away. He couldn't imagine why, but it was the only thing that would account for her aloof behavior, her need to be alone. She was creating distance to make it easier for her to cut him away. She was with Miriam now, and Miriam was telling her to stay strong, that even though it's hard, it was the right thing.

He thought about calling her, about telling her he knew. He tried to stand, to move toward the phone, but it wasn't happening. He fell back on the couch, glad the decision had been made for him.

He closed his eyes, and tried to imagine his life without her. Waking up alone, cooking his breakfast without their discussion of their dreams or their plans for the day. Sitting on the porch without her soft humming as she dug in the garden. Knowing that the oppressive emptiness of this, *their*, home would be the only companionship he would ever have again.

He fell asleep glad he was drunk, unsure if he could face the fear otherwise.

- - -

Lillian felt like running. She could feel the pavement pounding sharply against her feet, her measured intake of breath, and the throbbing in her legs that meant she was alive. She opened her eyes, and the skyline of New York unfolded in front of her, framed by the sea of green that was Central Park. She bolted past a couple walking their dog, veering off the sidewalk and into the grass, feeling the earth give way underneath her feet as she pushed herself forward. She felt the urge to stop and the wonderful freedom of ignoring it, of letting her body free from

her mind. Her lungs burned in the best possible way as she looked up with a smile, to the clouds scattered across the unending sky-

“Mrs. Blackwood, please keep still. You’re moving your legs.”

The crackling voice came from the intercom across the white room, and Lillian snapped back. The groan of the CT machine filled her ears as it moved over her legs, slowly working its way toward her head. She had a sudden sensation of being swallowed by some great white mechanical mouth, and did her best not to tense everything.

The mouth stopped moving, and a red laser cross flickered on, lighting up her hospital gown like a target on her chest. Her arm ached deeply where they had injected the contrast material, a throbbing that seemed to hum in cadence with the machine.

“You’re doing great Mrs. Blackwood. We’re almost done,” the technician said, his friendly voice hidden behind a mask of cold static.

She wanted nothing more than to be running through the green, free as long as she could still draw breath.

- - -

It was hard not to be bothered by how young the man was who had brought her into this awful room, explained the procedure, and was now helping her to her feet. She was embarrassed for a reason she couldn’t understand. It shouldn’t have been so hard for her to stand. The only physical procedure she had undergone was a minor injection, and yet her legs were shaking. Her mind had been running at a million miles a second when she hadn’t pretended she was elsewhere, and when the test was over, she was sweating.

It had only been ten minutes, but it felt like at least an hour. Lillian had a high tolerance for pain, but there was something about that machine that frightened her in a way she could not quantify.

“You did very well Mrs. Blackwood. We got a great scan. After the Doctor analyzes the results, they’ll be in touch.”

Lillian gently pulled her arm away from the young man, and swayed on her feet. She got her balance, and walked toward the door with the technician close behind, waiting for her to fall.

“How long does it take for the results?” Lillian asked, keeping her voice as strong as she could.

“It shouldn’t be more than three days, probably less. They’ll call you at the number on your file.” He pulled the door open for her, and she noticed his attractive smile. She wondered for a second if he smiled at everyone, and then wondered how long he could possibly maintain that façade in a place like this.

“I understand. Thank you,” she said, and put her hand on his arm. “Wish me luck.”

He returned the gesture, and squeezed her shoulder gently. “Good luck Mrs. Blackwood. I hope I don’t see you again.”

It made her happy that he meant it. She could always tell when someone meant what they said.

- - -

White wine splashed into the glass, almost clear in the low light of the dining room. Miriam placed the bottle on the linen tablecloth.

“Thank you,” Lillian said, and raised the glass to her nose. The bouquet of vanilla filled her mind with thoughts of some far away valley.

Miriam slowly sat down across from her, a large vase of quickly drying flowers separating them. Just as Lillian was about to take a sip, Miriam froze with wide eyes.

“Lillian! I didn’t even think, but should you? I’m so sorry!”

Lillian was confused for a moment, then shook her head, and took a sizeable gulp. It was a delicious chardonnay with sweet hints of vanilla, and she immediately felt better.

“I’m not pregnant Miriam.”

“But if...you know...is it such a good idea?”

Lillian put the glass down, and tried not to sound bitter.

“If I’m healthy, it’s fine. If I’m sick, I’ll have much bigger problems than a glass of wine.”

“I suppose,” Miriam replied.

Dinner was served by Miriam’s chef, course by course, in what was one of the most painfully awkward meals of Lillian’s life. Forcing herself to smile and make small talk about the community around them, the community Lillian had never been invited to or wanted to be a part of was excruciating. She could tell Miriam wanted things to seem normal, and as they drank more wine, and the dishes were cleared away it was easier. Lillian could see the worry in her friend’s eyes, and felt an unfamiliar responsibility to assure her that everything was going to be alright.

She wondered for a moment if this is how it was going to be.

*“Keeping other people from being sad so I don’t have to.”*

She made a firm resolution to not think those kinds of thoughts until she knew for sure, and took another drink from her glass. She tried to follow Miriam’s story about their gardener and the missing lawnmower, but her thoughts kept wandering back to Harold.

- - -

Lillian lay on her back, trying to get comfortable on the unfamiliar mattress. It had been so long since she had slept in another bed, longer still since she had slept alone. She opened her eyes in the darkness, and stared into it until she could make out shadows on the wall, the lines of a wardrobe. She didn’t want to be here.

She was grateful to Miriam for letting her stay; though she knew it was just as much a favor to her. Miriam was lonely in this huge, empty house.

They had quite a lot of wine at supper, though Miriam drank the bulk of it, and by the time they sat together in front of a fire on an ancient couch, her words were slurring together. Lillian was pleasantly tipsy, and it was with some amusement she watched her friend struggle to articulate her big ideas.

“You have to te-” Miriam jumped as a log popped in the fire. “You have to tell him Lilly. You should’ve already.”

Lillian nodded. “I know,” she replied and looked into her glass.

“Wouldn’t you wanna know? Like if he was goin to the hospital.”

“Of course. And he would tell me. But I wouldn’t mind if he waited until he had good news.”

“And what if it isn’t good news?” The words sounded harsh, and Miriam immediately regretted them. “Sorry Lil. I shouldna said that. This wine you know.”

Lillian nodded. "Believe me, I think about almost nothing else. I know it's going to hurt him so much."

Soon after Miriam stumbled off to bed, and even though it was only 8:30, Lillian got ready to sleep as well. But now, with the bright red 9:13 like a beacon in the dark, sleep was the furthest thing from her mind. She was glad to be alone, but part of her wanted nothing more than to call her husband, and tell him everything. She knew she would have to soon, and the weight was sinking her. It would be good to get it over with.

It's good that she didn't, because Harold wouldn't have heard the phone ring. He too was alone, still sleeping off the scotch, and still dreaming he couldn't find his wife, and that she was far away.

- - -

Harold dropped the sponge into the sink, and stretched his back. He could hear the Beatles from the living room. He always listened to the White Album when he cleaned, and he knew every word. As the notes of Dear Prudence faded, he did a final walkthrough of the house.

It was very clean. He hadn't made that much of a mess, just a few dishes in the sink and the embarrassing stain on the rug in the living room he had done his best to get rid of. Finally, he had moved the furniture and flipped the rug over; he could barely see the remnants of the whiskey on the other side. He had washed the dishes and flung the doors and windows open when he woke up around seven thirty, and the cold cross breeze felt good. It aired out a dusty house and felt like a new beginning.

He hadn't known where he was when he first opened his eyes, but the throbbing of his head and the terrible taste in his mouth swiftly reminded him. He had gone to the bathroom, and brushed his teeth as he stared at his reflection. Glassy eyes, skin that seemed to sag more than usual.

It seemed like he should have felt bad, guilty somehow, but he didn't. Despite his aching body, he was in a good mood, and after a shower and some toast, he set to cleaning. Once the house sparkled, and the evidence of his depressing night was gone, he was happy. Lillian would come back to a clean home and a happy partner, and he was dead set on making sure she had everything she needed.

He was flipping the record over, handling it carefully by the edges when he heard the door open.

She walked into the living room as though she knew where he was. She dropped her overnight bag on the couch, and flashed her smile. He wasn't sure he had ever been happier to see her.

She hugged him and gave him a kiss on his cheek.

"Hi Harold," she said. The way she whispered reminded him of their thirties, the way she would steal into his loft in Manhattan before he had to go to work. He held her tightly, not sure why he was so happy.

"Welcome back my dear," he said. "Did you have fun?"

She nodded as she let go, and moved to retrieve her bag. "I did. Miriam is funny. She got drunk, slurring and everything. You would have loved it."

"Hard to imagine getting drunk at our age." He did his best to laugh.

"The house looks great! Better than when I left."

Harold shrugged. "I get bored when you're not around."

“Well I’m back now. Come help me unpack,” she said, and headed up the stairs.

She was someone new. Happier, stronger, more attractive. He wasn’t sure what to make of the change, but was ecstatic to not feel the crushing weight of unsaid words every time she entered the room.

He followed her eagerly. He wondered for a moment who she had been with, but put it out of his mind. If she was happy, he was happy, and goddamnit, he had every intention of enjoying it while it lasted.

- - -

It had been a wonderful day. They talked briefly about her trip, about how ridiculous Miriam was, but it quickly became a conversation about the worst people they had ever met. Harold watched as she washed her face and combed her hair, laughing as she told stories he hadn’t heard in years, and with an enthusiasm that lifted his mood.

They spent the early afternoon in the kitchen, and he did his best to cook the bacon for their BLTs. He described the movie he had watched the night before, complete with imitations and absurd descriptions and her laughter was a weight lifted.

He stood behind her, arms wrapped around her waist, feeling her close and tucked underneath him as she tried to repair the damage he had done to the bacon. The window was still open, and an unseasonably warm breeze filled the room. He closed his eyes, lost in the wind and the smells of an active kitchen, but more than anything the warmth and movement of her hips against him as he held her.

After lunch Lillian suggested a walk, and they talked underneath the deep green of the tree lined streets for hours. It felt so much like the 3am walks in Manhattan forty years ago, the same kinetic conversation, bouncing from topic to topic with nothing but interest in what the other said, just a desire to learn who this beautiful person was. But now, the ego was gone, the irresistible urge of having to be right, and their words flowed like the small creek they stopped to admire as the sun began to disappear.

- - -

Harold made a fire, taking care to not get ash on his white shirt. She almost always complimented him when he wore it.

They sat on the couch, her hand on his leg, her smile brighter than the fire. They talked about the seventies as the soothing smell of dinner cooking filled their home. It was a moment neither of them would forget, permanently etched in their memories as one of the very good times.

She leaned in, and her lips found his, as soft as they had ever been. He never opened his eyes when she kissed him, but today he did, reluctant to let even a second from a day like this disappear. Soft shadows danced across her face, and he raised his right hand to her high cheekbones, stunning in the firelight. He had never loved anything more.

The cutting sound of the telephone ringing filled the room, and Lillian pulled away.

“I have to get that,” she whispered.

Harold had never seen Lillian afraid, and it was devastating.

### **III.**

It annoyed Harold how nervous he was. He went back into the kitchen for the third time, looking over the stove, checking that it was as clean as he could make it. No dishes out, spotless linoleum floors. He moved into the living room, nothing here but hardwood he had spent the afternoon mopping, and two chairs next to a small desk with a turntable/radio, and a small collection of records underneath. He carefully centered the doily underneath the machine. He considered turning the radio on, finding something smart to listen to, but decided he didn't want any potential conversation to be interrupted by commercials.

Lastly, and most carefully, he checked his bedroom. Bed made tightly, dark blue comforter pulled underneath white pillows. He slapped the mattress a few times for good measure, to make it look more lived in. The last thing he wanted was to look like he was trying too hard.

He arranged the books on top of his dresser, and pulled out *War and Peace*. He tore paper from an empty notebook, and fashioned a quick bookmark. He left it out, placed "casually" in the center of the dresser.

Everything was ready.

He opened the window above his bed, and felt the breeze. His apartment was far from luxury, but it was clean, and bright, and he could see trees from his bedroom. He hadn't lived alone long, but loved every moment.

He went to the bathroom, and ran his fingers through his hair again. He thought he looked good, and straitened the collar on his button up shirt.

*"Should have put on a record,"* he thought. He was reaching for his records when he heard a sharp series of knocks on his door.

He leapt to his feet, heart racing, and silently admonished his excitement. With one final effort to straighten his appearance, he brought his shoulders up, and opened the door.

She looked incredible. He had never cared about clothes, but it was hard not to notice the colors she wore. Simple black shoes with a tiny heel, underneath a just above the knee white skirt. She wore a tight, black sweater with vertical white stripes, and her eyes shone underneath a tasteful black hat. He had never seen her dress up before, and though it seemed strange, he couldn't help but be excited.

Her eyes sparkled as she watched his face, and she laughed when he couldn't find the words.

"I know, I'm stunning," she said. "Can I come in?"

"Of course," he said, and returned her laugh. "You really do look amazing."

"Thank you Harold," she said, and brushed past him. He could smell the lavender of her hair and her lotion, and he would never forget it.

She took off her hat, and threw it on the table without looking. Her bangs fell across her eyes, and the end of her long hair curled upward around her shoulders. She went straight for the record player.

- - -

Lillian wasn't nervous when she knocked, she just hoped she didn't smell like the cigarette she had smoked ten minutes before. She unconsciously ran her fingers through her hair,

and pulled at her new sweater. It was tighter than she was used to, and she had to force herself to stop tugging at it.

She could hear the lock turning, and forced a smile.

He pulled open the door, and her smile became real. His brown hair spilled over his blue eyes, and he seemed tall. Certainly more muscular than the last time she had seen him. Her heart leapt as he looked her over, unable to hide his surprise or his desire. It was something she loved about him, his inability to mask his thoughts. His gaze made it easy for her to play the cool girl; he always made her feel like she was perfect.

“I know, I’m stunning,” she said. “Can I come in?”

She walked past him, proud of what she had said, hoping it didn’t come off as dismissive. Her laugh felt forced, she hoped he couldn’t hear it.

“Of course,” he said, and chuckled. “You really do look amazing.”

“Thank you Harold.”

She could smell his aftershave as her shoulder brushed his chest, and her resolution to make tonight special was solidified.

His apartment was sparse, but it was nice, and it was clean. She threw her hat on the table, hoping it wouldn’t slide off. It didn’t, stopping just short of the edge. She could feel his eyes on her as she leaned over to inspect his record collection.

“Glad you have this,” she said. She brought out *Highway 61 Revisited*, watching for fingerprints as she laid it carefully on the turntable.

She lifted the needle, and dropped it down as though it were surgery onto the spinning vinyl.

As the opening notes of *Queen Jane Approximately* filled the room, she sensed Harold behind her.

“I’ve missed you Lilly,” he said, closer than she thought. His arms were around her strong and thick, and she leaned her head back into his shoulder as Bob Dylan sang to them. She turned as they danced, swaying gently on the empty hardwood, their eyes daring the other to look away first. It felt different than the last time. It had only been a few months, but he seemed larger somehow, and his presence filled the room in a way that left her exhilarated.

He looked at her like she was the only thing he had ever wanted, and in that moment it was true. The way she moved her feet with his, her half grin, the daring sparks behind her emerald eyes. She stepped closer, and pressed against him as they moved together in the early afternoon of September 14, 1965.

- - -

He tried to keep her quiet with a finger to her lips, but that only made them both laugh harder. The bed he had so carefully made when he was worried what she would think was destroyed, two bodies wrapped up in sheets and blankets and pillows. After they had both fallen to the bed, exhausted and out of breath, the screams of his neighbor floated in through the window like a cartoon. That’s when the laughter began.

The release of years of tension had left them giddy, and when she burst out, he couldn’t help but follow. His neighbor was screaming at his radio, beyond upset that so and so had been walked to first. The walls were thin, and Harold knew his neighbor could hear them as well as they could hear him, but Lilly’s laughter was too perfect. Everything about tonight was perfect.

“I don’t think I’ve cared about anything as much as this guy cares about baseball,” Harold said. Lilly put her arms around his neck, the thin sheet moving softly over both of them as she pulled his head toward hers.

“Not anything?” she said, and ran her lips over his neck.

“I stand so fucking corrected,” he whispered back, and held her arms to the mattress. He looked down at a goddess, eager eyes and a confidence that sent his mind spinning; he couldn’t believe this woman was his. If only for tonight, she was his.

“Take me,” Lillian said, and the words hung in the air until he slid into her. Her soft gasp was a whisper he would always remember.

- - -

He woke to sharp sunbeams, and blinked before he remembered where he was. His bedroom was filled with day, and she was there, asleep, hand curled under her chin, and that smile. The blanket came over her shoulder as though she had placed it there. She was a painting, a movie, something unreal. As he sat up, the springs in his mattress squealed and her eyes fluttered.

She looked up at him and her voice was creaky with sleep.

“Hey. Good morning.”

“Good morning Lilly.” He was suddenly conscious of the fact he wore no shirt, and that his belly was creasing as he sat up. He brought his head back to the pillow, and they looked at each other in the sobering light of a new day.

She was still beautiful, a bashful smile, frizzy hair, bangs unkempt covering her bright eyes.

He was still beautiful, broad shoulders, glowing skin, and a commanding presence she was still getting used to.

Birds chirped through the open window.

“I guess he finally fell asleep, I don’t hear any screaming,” Harold said, and she chuckled.

They looked at each other, trying to read what they already knew was there.

“Last night was... wonderful,” he said. She nodded, her hands palm to palm, tucked between her cheek and the pillow.

“Anything we need to talk about?” he said.

She shook her head no, her smile never changing, as though she were waiting for him to say something silly.

“Good,” he said, and relaxed. She rested her head on his chest, and enjoyed the rhythmic pulsing of his heart. They lay, enjoying the sun on their bodies. They didn’t speak for a long time, they didn’t need to.

They knew there would be countless mornings like this.

- - -

“I see,” Lilly said. A torturous pause.

“I understand. Friday...” she glanced at Harold, still on the couch. “Yeah, Friday should work. Thank you. I understand. Thank you for the call.” She placed the phone on the receiver

without hanging up. She couldn't focus, couldn't feel anything. It was as if someone had suddenly placed her on a stage and given her lines, nothing was real.

Harold took a deep breath, and stood. He came toward her almost aggressive, and put his hands on her shoulders. Her expression frightened him, like she didn't know where she was. She was shaking.

"Lilly. What is this? What is happening?"

Her mouth twisted and she tried to speak. She put her hand on his chest, staring through him.

"It's..."

"Lillian. Please. I'm here, I've been here. Let me help you."

"It's nothing," she whispered. He could see tears threatening to spill from her deep green eyes, and pulled her against his chest.

"You've always been a terrible liar," he said, and felt her muffled sobs against his shirt. For a moment he looked at the fire, burning low, and marveled that something so beautiful could diminish so suddenly.

"What is it Lilly?" he whispered, and felt her pull away.

"I'm sick," she said, almost choking on the words.

He tried to keep his hands on her shoulders, but she turned toward the open window. A breeze brought her long hair back toward him and he could smell her, all earth and lavender.

"Sick? What do you mean? Whatever this is, we can handle it," he said. It should have sounded trite, but his conviction was unmistakable.

She turned back, her hair like a white halo in the small wind. When she pulled her tear clouded eyes up to him, her heart fluttered. He stood tall in the firelight, strong and ready, no fear or anger in his voice. There was a flicker of disappointment in her, a lamp burning on her great sea of nothing.

*"I should have known he would be strong."*

Her voice sounded clear now, and that was a surprise to her.

"It's not we. It's me. I'm sick Harold. Very sick as it turns out."

"Sick how?" he asked. He looked at her with such intensity.

"Cancer," she said, and her strong voice finally cracked. "Lung cancer." The words hung in the air with crackle of the dying fire, and neither of them moved until Harold put his hand to his mouth, and sat on the back of the sofa, his gaze never moving from hers.

"Are...are you sure?" he asked. And she could only nod.

"The cough...Lillian, the cough. I should have fucking known."

She shook her head and pulled his hands away from his mouth. Her soft fingers laced between his and she held their hands against his chest. She stood very close to him.

The lavender filled his thoughts and he wanted nothing more than for this to be a dream. He had dreamed so much recently maybe this-

"You couldn't have. I should have known. I waited until the end. Harold...this is scary, but blame is not a part of this," she said.

As she lay her chin on his shoulder, she watched the fire die behind them with a last sputter of popping wood. The shadows fell in.

"It's going to be ok," she whispered, but Harold's earlier words made the statement seem desperately hollow.

*"You've always been a terrible liar."*

- - -

Harold leaned on the kitchen counter, his eyes locked on the floor. He couldn't make sense of his thoughts, they were a scrambled mess of anger and sadness and fear, and so he surrendered.

On an impulse he reached up and found the bottle of whiskey. He pulled off the cork, but the smell of oak and acidic liquor changed his mind. It fell to the counter with a clatter, and he went to find his wife.

- - -

She sat in his chair on the porch, rocking gently, staring out into the darkness. He came out, careful not to slam the screen door, he knew she hated when he did. He sat next to her, in her favorite chair, and didn't say anything.

For a moment the wind ceased, and the crickets cascaded out of the night, hiding in the thick grass of their yard, playing their songs and not knowing if they would ever be heard.

Finally, Harold spoke, carefully choosing his words. He moved his chair closer to hers. "How bad is it?"

She shook her head. "It's bad. They don't know exactly, but I can tell they think it's bad. I have a needle biopsy on Friday." She grimaced. "After that we'll know just what we're dealing with."

"So...when you were visiting Miriam..."

She nodded. "I went to the hospital for a CT scan."

He took a deep breath, and tried to calm himself. He wanted to stay in control, to stay steady for her. He was so grateful he hadn't had any alcohol.

"Why couldn't you tell me Lilly?" he asked, and his voice cracked. The words hit Lilly hard. Here it was. No more hiding.

"I didn't know there was anything to tell, I had to know for sure. And really...I couldn't bear the thought of telling you. I don't have any clue how to deal with this Harold, the last thing I want to do is put it on you, especially if it turned out to be nothing..." She trailed off. She couldn't take anymore.

"But it's not nothing," he said, and reached for her hand.

"I am so sorry Harold," she said. "I never wanted to lie to you."

His fingers squeezed hers. "Stop. You have nothing, *nothing* to be sorry for. It doesn't matter now. We're in this together."

She nodded again, and held back tears. He looked at her in the dim light of the porch. She looked old, and she looked scared, and he felt a love for her that threatened to swallow him.

"You're strong Lilly. The strongest."

A dog barked nearby, and a car moved down their road, the rumble of the engine fading into the wind.

"Can I tell you something?" he said, swinging her hand gently. They looked like schoolchildren then, holding hands between two desks.

"Of course," she replied, unsure if she could handle any more. There was a weight lifted now that he knew, but the implications of that sent her thoughts spinning.

“Obviously I knew there was something wrong,” he said.

“Of course you did. And again, I am sorr-”

“No. Listen. I knew something was off. And I thought about it so much Lilly; I thought I had figured it out.”

She turned to him, her curiosity evident in her wide eyes.

“I thought you were going to leave me,” he said, and the faintest hints of a smile touched his lips.

She stared at him for a moment, and then threw her head back, and everything poured out of her in a hearty laugh Harold had not heard in years.

“You thought...” she tried to catch her breath between fits of giggling, “that I was just...packin on up? Just movin’ along?”

Her laughter was infectious, and he was not immune.

They sat in the dim porch light, shadows from their oak trees dancing across them, laughing like they once had. So relieved to pour themselves into something, to have some sort of emotional breach.

The crickets and the wind sang on as the laughter died away and the night grew colder.

- - -

‘70

He held the coat across her back, and her hands slid elegantly through the sleeves, emerging with nails painted black. She pulled the collar up, ready to fight the harsh city wind. He straightened his suit jacket, unfamiliar with the cut, unfamiliar with dress clothes entirely.

She turned to him and kissed his cheek, bringing her left foot up in a way they both thought was terribly charming. “You look good Harold. You look rich.”

He laughed, and glanced back into their home. It was beautiful art deco, moldings high and decorative, a large fireplace empty, like a mouth ready to swallow the wood floors, still scented of lemon finish. It was bare, just small brown boxes piled in the living room, their simple belongings in an apartment they never thought they could afford.

“I guess...I guess we are rich now,” he replied. He thought they would laugh, but it seemed heavy when said out loud, echoing through the wood and plaster. They both glanced back in, at this strange space they had found through a “friend” neither of them knew, rented with a hiring bonus from the brokerage Harold was still astonished he worked for. It was the largest check either of them had ever seen, and he started work today.

“I don’t want to be rich,” she said. “Let me rephrase. I do, but...”

He kissed her, and felt like he was in a movie he had watched in his childhood, like the world should be black and white. “We *are* rich see? And you’re just going to have to live with it!” he said, his lips pulled to his left in a terrible James Cagney.

She shook her head, but found his lips again before she let him go.

“Alright Harold. Trade your bonds or futures or whatever you’re doing. Make New York yours. Make it ours.”

He nodded with a smile. He tried to push the door open, but it was much heavier than expected. She laughed and threw her shoulder into it, catching her stride as the door opened.

It was a grey sky, but not as cold as they thought it might be. They both took in their new neighborhood, high rises with landscaped yards, and a distinct lack of sirens or shrieks. They felt like people in a new world, unwelcome, unaccustomed, but ready to make it their own.

When they reached the end of their walkway, they looked at each other.

“Good luck today dear,” they both said, and laughed as they clasped hands. They didn’t feel like they rehearsed it, but really they had, fearing and dreading and waiting and loving this moment since they first moved to New York.

Then they parted ways, her walking East toward her consulting job at a factory, he toward his brand new, freshly licensed trading job on Wall Street, both ignoring the cold wind and the dirty looks from everyone around them.

He glanced back and saw her walking fast, her hair bouncing, her hands stretched above her head. He could sense her smile, and it made taking on the city easier.

- - -

He held the coat across her back, and her hands slid elegantly through the sleeves, emerging with nails painted white. Harold wondered how she had found the time. The last two days had been strained to say the least, both of them trying their best to act like nothing was wrong; the occasional squeeze of the hand or sad look the only cracks in their facade.

The morning of, they had both risen before the sun. She spent extra time getting ready, pulling her thick hair into an elegant braid, and pulling on her favorite dress. She could not figure out why she did it, she knew she would have to change before, but looking good made her feel stronger.

They stepped out into the soft mid-morning light and Harold pulled the door closed behind them. It was a crisp day, oddly chilly for spring. Lillian felt a twinge in her lungs, imagined the needle sliding through her ribcage, and closed her eyes for a moment. Harold put his hands on her shoulders, and the weight was a comfort.

The keys in Harold hands jingled as they walked toward the truck, a strange sound under the somber gray of the day.

“I can drive,” Lillian offered.

“I know you can. But you hate it.” He winked at her, something he hadn’t done in months, and though she knew it wasn’t as spontaneous as he would have her believe, the gesture made her close to happy.

- - -

Lillian had always found the soft rumble of a car ride soothing. The warmth of the cabin impervious to the drizzle outside, the dull roar of the engine. It was a kind of surrender; her fate placed in whoever was driving, in the controlled explosions of the engine, in the integrity of the rubber tires moving at 840 rotations per minute. It always made her feel cozy and comforted.

But not today. Today Harold drove with an intensity, his eyes locked on the road, his posture uncharacteristically rigid. Lillian was far from cozy, her head resting against the cool glass of the passenger window, watching the rivulets of rain race down against the blurred green of the Georgia countryside.

“Lilly,” he said, and turned on the blinker, pulling off of Highway 85 toward Atlanta.

“Yes?” she replied, watching her breath spread over the glass and retreat.

“Thank you for letting me be here.”

She pulled away from the window, and lay her head on his shoulder. She put her left hand on his thigh, and kissed his neck. He smelled like lotion and oak, just like he always had.

“I couldn’t do this without you,” she said.

They said nothing else, until the monolithic glass hospital building came into view.

“I’m fine,” Harold said, and wiped tears from his eyes as he tried to park.

- - -

“You’re doing great, just don’t move,” the doctor said. His voice was muffled by his mask, but she could hear that increasingly familiar clinical tone. She swallowed, and tried her best to comply.

The harsh lights above felt like knives in her eyes. She could feel the surface anesthesia moving through her chest from the injection point, and tried to think back to the park, back to running, back to when everything worked and she wasn’t so afraid.

The doctor’s face came into view, a long, silver needle in his gloved hand, pointed at her heart.

“You’re doing fine Lillian. As we discussed, you may feel a light pressure, but don’t worry. Everything is normal.” She nodded, trying to mentally slow her heart rate.

“Please don’t cough, and hold your breath. If you feel like you need to cough, tell me immediately.” Almost instantly she felt the burning urge in her lungs, and was angry that he had mentioned it. She took a deep breath, and blew it out slowly. The urge diminished, but didn’t disappear.

She nodded, and decided to be brave.

“It will be over soon,” the doctor said, and she felt pressure on her ribs as though someone had tapped them with a hammer. She kept her eyes closed, and imagined the needle sliding through her tissue, through her blue and red veins, parting flesh until it finally-

She felt a sudden, flaring pain deep in her chest, and almost cried out as she realized it was the needle entering her lung. She whimpered, and the doctor shushed her in a way he thought was sympathetic.

“You’re doing great.”

She tried to remember how green it was, the burning of her muscles, the handsome couples she would see running together, the tall buildings and the blue sky behind them-

“Ok. Hey. Hey!” The doctor’s voice had lost his trained softness, and had an edge that was beyond disconcerting. She opened her eyes, and immediately wished she hadn’t. He was turned away from her, shouting back into the operating room, his hand still wrapped around the needle.

*“Still in my fucking lung.”*

“Listen. Listen everyone! We have a Pneumothorax, get in here!”

His dark eyes met hers over the suffocating white of his mask and the lights. “It’s alright Lillian. A minor complication. It’s common, don’t worry. Please try and breathe for me.” Other masked faces appeared behind the Doctor, and she could hear the shuffling of metal tools and hurried whispers.

She tried to breathe, but couldn’t.

- - -

Harold burst through the double doors of the hospital, narrowly missing an orderly that screamed something at him he couldn't understand. He ran through the harsh fluorescent light and white walls and bleached out smell, heart beating in his ears, until he finally stumbled to the front desk.

"Sir, you need to calm down," the young nurse said before he spoke, trying to be authoritative.

"Where is my wife?" He was doing his best to sound calm, to keep his ragged breath normal.

"Sir, I don't know, you need to give me a little more information than that. Who is-"

"Lillian! Lillian Blackwood, she was admitted a few hours ago, where is she? It's very fucking important!"

"I understand, try to stay calm. I'll find out for you, but you need to lower your voice." She nodded at a nearby orderly, a hulking young man in a white robe. He stepped forward, and crossed his arms.

Harold got the message, but his heart would not stop racing. This was it. Everything would be different now. He had to see her.

The young nurse made a call, and kept her voice collected. When she hung up the handset, it was all Harold could do not to scream at her in anticipation. The young woman nodded at the orderly again, this time with a small smile touching her lips. The large man uncrossed his arms, and stepped forward.

"James will show you the way sir," she said, and her voice had lost its defensive edge.

"Thank you so much!" Harold replied.

"Congratulations sir," she said, and he smiled back as he followed James through the folding doors and into the depths of the hospital.

- - -

Her hair was matted with sweat, sticking to the pillow, hanging over her face like straw. The fluorescent lights turned the walls a sickly green, and he could hear a TV blaring in the next room. Lillian had never been more beautiful. Her face lit up the room with a smile Harold remembered every day after.

What she held in her arms had all of her attention, and it wasn't until Harold touched her shoulder that she looked up. Her smile grew even wider, and Harold felt prickling at his eyes as tears came.

"Isn't he incredible?" she whispered.

He looked down at his son, and his world changed.

- - -

Harold pulled his head out of his hands, and immediately missed the comforting darkness of his palms. He had hoped the room would change, be somehow less horrible. The fluorescent lights still buzzed intermittently, the nurses still laughed like jackals behind the welcome desk, and the same outdated magazines still sat on the dirty table next to him.

He wanted coffee, and he wanted scotch, and he wanted sleep, but more than anything he wanted the doctor to come around the corner with Lillian limping but smiling at his side. He wanted to grab her and bring her away from all of this. He wanted her to come out of the shower, white, wet hair hanging past her shoulders, to come toward him in the familiar warmth of their room, to rest her face against his. He wanted her to whisper “everything is fine Harold I love you everything is fine now let me show you-”

The PA crackled above his head, paging someone to the ICU, and he winced as the lights flickered.

“Harold? Harold Blackwood?”

“Yes.” He turned to see a young doctor, his surgical mask pulled down around his chin. Harold noticed the small spatter of blood across the green of the doctor’s left sleeve, and got to his feet so quickly his head swam for a moment.

“How is she?” Harold asked, fear pressing down on his chest at the doctor’s somber expression.

“She’s stable Mr. Anderson. There was a small incident, it’s been-”

“What happened?!” Harold said, his anxiety taking control. The lights flickered, the nurse brayed again, and Harold felt lethal in his anger at the world.

“Please stay calm, I’ll-”

“What happened to my wife? Where is she?”

“She’s fine. Listen, she had a pneumothorax, but we were able to correct the condition.”

“Christ, her lung collapsed?” Harold said, and his knees felt weak. He had a flash of her strapped down, struggling to breathe, her breath harsh, surrounded by strangers prodding her with needles.

“Yes, her...lung collapsed,” the physician replied, surprised.

“I did research doctor,” Harold said. “Let me see her.”

“Sir, she’s resting, she’s in recovery.”

“Let me see her. Now.”

- - -

She was in their house, moving silently from room to room. The windows were shattered, the ceiling sagging with the weight of the mold, and dust covered everything. Their bed was collapsed in on itself, a tangled mess of springs and linen. She found Harold in the kitchen, young and handsome, retching into the sink. She tried to reach for him, and he turned, afraid of her. He ran across the kitchen, and his footprints indented in the rotting wood. She cried out for him, but he was gone, vanishing into the blackness outside. Why was he afraid of her? And she-

She took a gasp, and it hurt. Her eyes opened, and the bright light blinded her again. She was still in the operating room, it wasn’t over yet. The remnants of her dream were over her like a shroud, and she felt tears.

She heard a bird chirp, and held her breath. The aching in her chest bloomed out as the room came into focus. She saw the branches of a tree tapping against glass, saw the warm, bright light, not of an operating lamp, but the sun pouring in. And then she saw him, looking at her with that way he had. She felt his hand wrapped around hers in the warm light of the morning, and for a moment she thought she was dead.

“Lilly,” he said, and his voice, so cool and soft, helped her focus. She could make sense of her surroundings now, a small room in the hospital, Harold sitting close to her in a plastic

chair. It was early, she could tell by the angle of the light and his voice. His voice was always deeper in the morning, and she had never understood why.

She tried to smile.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m here.”

He laughed softly, a sound full of relief, and squeezed her hand tighter. “Yes. You’re here. And so am I.”

- - -

The headlights cut through the darkness, yellow beams across the slick asphalt of their familiar road. Lillian was hypnotized, watching where the road stopped and the forest started, where the light disappeared into the trees. Her gaze was broken by the bright lights of a truck headed in the opposite direction.

She looked at Harold as the white light passed over his face, and disappeared behind them. He didn’t blink.

She took a deep breath, and was relieved when she didn’t feel the sharp pain she had felt since leaving the hospital. It still hurt, but it was duller now, and that was a relief.

They left the hospital in the late afternoon, her reassuring the doctors that she felt fine, that of course she would call if she had any difficulty breathing at all. She didn’t feel fine, but already felt better being on the road, being with him, seeing the signs of her home closer with every mile.

She spent most of the forty-five minutes from the hospital trying to figure out how to talk to him. Where to start. He said little, offering her a comforting smile and the occasional squeeze of her thigh. She knew he would talk if she wanted to, but she let him think, she knew how overwhelming it was.

“*Enough sadness,*” she thought, and it felt right.

“Harold,” she said, and smiled.

“Yeah?” he replied, glancing at her and turning back to the road.

“You heard the doctor. It’s going to be at least four days until we know for sure. Probably longer.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I heard him. No idea how I’m going to wait that long.”

“Here’s how,” she said, and tried to bring brightness to her voice. She did her best to channel thirty year old Lillian, confident and smart and ready to show him how good the world could be. “We have fun.”

His bushy eyebrows furrowed as he turned on the blinker, and pulled onto the frontage road. They would be home soon.

She grabbed his arm, and felt a genuine excitement. “We have fun Harold. We cook whatever we want to eat, not what’s good for us, we stay up as late as we like, we drink, we carry on. We watch movies and eat ice cream all night. We spend the next few days doing just whatever the hell we want. No cleaning. No dish washing. We live like we did in Manhattan.”

He laughed, and it was just the reaction she was looking for. “I don’t think I can stay up as late as I could then Lilly. But I like the idea, living like we used to. Though I doubt I can pull two all nighters again, not like ‘78.”

‘78 triggered a flash of memories for her, blurred by drugs and emotion and a strong nausea that came on suddenly.

“Yeah!” she said, focusing on the present. “But our version. If we want to go to bed at 3 in the afternoon, that’s fine. If we want to get up at 3:30 in the morning that’s damn fine too. Whatever we want. We’ll live the dream. We know better than we did then. We’ll have real fun!”

“I’ll run into town in the morning for supplies,” he said, and she remembered how early he would wake up in Manhattan, hung over or not, and go find them breakfast before she even managed to get her clothes on.

Harold pulled into their driveway with the soft click of the blinkers. Their two story Antebellum home came into view, framed against the dark shadows of the towering elms. She had never wanted to be there more, and as he helped her out of the truck and toward the soft light of the kitchen, she felt a distinct sense that everything was fine.

No matter what, she had this.

- - -

He lay with his hand resting gently on her shoulder, the silk sheet draped over them, a bit too hot for him in this warm night. He wouldn’t move it, he wasn’t sure if she was asleep. She was such a light sleeper, and she needed it tonight.

The gentle humming of the fan filled the room, the periodic bursts of air as it blew past them, oscillating back and forth with infinite determination. He enjoyed the cool as he tried to make sense of what to do in the morning. She was right in so many ways; there was little he could do until they knew more. If she wanted fun, he could do that for her. He could make her happy, he always had.

Just as he was about to pull his arm away and try and fall asleep, he heard her soft whisper like a moth’s wings in the dark.

“It’s strange.”

“What is?” he replied, and stroked her shoulder. Up to her neck, then down to her elbow, the way he always had.

“I’m not afraid,” she whispered.

“I am,” he said, and squeezed her shoulder.

“Me too,” she said. “I was trying to sound tough.” Her chuckle was beautiful, tinged with a sadness he hadn’t heard before. He pulled up against her, two travelers wrapped together in the dark.

“Tomorrow will be amazing,” he said, and listened to her breathe until they both fell asleep.

- - -

He got up when it was still dark to make sure she had the morning she deserved. After a quick shower he watched her breathe for a moment then put on his favorite grey t-shirt, his best black sweat pants, and headed downstairs.

He opened the front door, but kept the screen closed. The dawn breeze brought in the comforting smell of grass as Harold moved to the kitchen. He turned on the light, but it seemed too harsh, so he worked by the broadening gray of dawn, first cleaning the kitchen, then preparing everything for breakfast. He was determined not to burn anything.

He switched on the small radio on top of the fridge, the one with the sagging antennae that they almost never used. He rolled the tuning knob until he heard violins, and finished cooking pancakes and bacon and omelets with Mozart, Bach, and William Byrd.

The sun was barely up when he pulled a breakfast tray out of the garage. After he washed and dried it, he held it up to the window. It was old, cracked porcelain set in aged wood, four legs on rusted hinges swung out. It seemed beautiful in the orange of dawn, like it had seen as much as they had. He brought up her breakfast, carefully balancing the overstuffed tray, the pancakes and orange juice sliding across the still wet ceramic.

When he came through the door, she opened her eyes, wide for a second, then confused.

The faint notes of Goldberg's variations on Bach echoed up the stairs as he placed the tray, and sat down next to her.

"What is this?" she said, and rubbed her eyes as she sat up. The bacon smelled perfect.

"Let's start our week right. Eat up. We're going to make this one hell of a day my dear."

- - -

After breakfast, they showered together, something they hadn't done in more than two years. They dried off, radiant and smiling at each other.

Downstairs, they figured out how to hook up the VCR that had been in its box since they received it, and curled up on the couch to watch Help. She argued articulately why George was better than John and Paul.

They went into the garden, and she smiled as she talked about the freshly sprouted tomatoes and squash, how she had decided to place what where. Harold hadn't been that interested in the past, but he had to admit, the meticulous placement of the growing plants was impressive and remarkably well organized. He loved the way her voice leapt when she talked about her garden.

It began to rain, lightly at first, but the light sprinkle became a downpour. It forced them inside, but they were determined. They put on a Billie Holiday record, and as the rain tapped against the windows and her brass voice filled the room, they played a game of chess. Harold won, but it was a long game filled with light teasing and laughter, and it was close.

Lunch was sandwiches they prepared together, toasted rye and pastrami with dijon mustard and potato chips. Harold mentioned salad, but Lillian's dirty look made him take it back.

The rain eventually stopped, and the early afternoon sun managed to spill through the clouds. It was a wonderful combination of heat from the light, and chill from the mist that clung low over everything around them. They walked down their road, and veered off across their neighbor's substantial yard, down through the thick grass, down toward the creek. It was a neighbor they knew well, one that hated receiving company, but was happy to share his land with them. Harold had often joked that he would surrender his home and all of his possessions to them as long as they never came to his house without calling first.

The smell of freshly gone rain filled their thoughts as they moved through the green, and into the copse of trees that lined the creek. It was darker here, but the crystal song of the water splashing was music to both of them. It was a small tributary, probably diverted upstream for some farmer, but it had been a huge part of their lives since they had come here. They knew every step in both directions for a mile. Today they stood, just watching as the sun finally came through the trees and shattered like glass across the water, and they listened.

It seemed as though the creek was saying everything, and all they needed to do was be together, and listen.

- - -

The days passed like this, slipping into each other, dawn into sunset. Every morning they awoke and were immediately excited. They were doing something new, something fresh. Adventure. It was a word they had often thrown around, but this was what they had always meant.

Today, she waited for him to wake as she read her book, eyes scanning quickly over the pages in her thick glasses. The chain that held them to her neck had started as a joke ten years ago, but now, she loved it. When he stirred, she whispered, "Let's go to the city today."

And they did.

Lillian laughed in a restaurant in downtown Atlanta, as glasses clinked and soft voices spoke. They toasted a glass of wine at noon, Lilly in her best silk dress, sapphires shining around her neck, and Harold in his tuxedo, fully pressed and ironed. They nodded at the people who gaped at them with smiles, a couple out of time, overdressed for this silly place with white columns and fake ferns. They had steak, and tried to finish their bottle of Cabernet. They both laughed when Harold choked, trying to finish that last glass. They tipped heartily, and left, her arm draped fashionably over his, the people around them curious and jealous.

They ordered coffee from a barista with gapped earlobes in a small shop, and sat outside. They watched people walk by, each one so desperately in their own world. Headphones and screens and screaming into their phone as if they had something to say, eyes always down. Above them the sky burned a bright blue, and the cool breeze pulled away clouds and the crushing humidity. They sat there for two hours, and Harold crossed his legs the way she always liked, not caring if someone thought him less masculine.

The next day they saw a movie, and ordered popcorn. It felt strange to her, this ritual that had been such a part of their life, now so utterly changed. The sound was deafening, the previews depressing, but the movie had an intensity and prescience that was new to her. She felt young and old, as though the world was new and there was so much she had missed. Would miss.

Harold hated it, and she teased him as they walked past the old houses choked in ivy, the great, silent mansions that stood as a testament to something so far gone it was eerie.

And only sometimes, when the sun would slip behind a cloud, or she could feel his hand weaken its grip around her, would she feel a flicker of fear and doubt. It took everything she had to push it away.

She would let nothing ruin the best days of her married life.

- - -

But the call had to come. It happened three days after the hospital, while Harold was outside watering the towering trees in the front yard, and Lillian was baking in the kitchen, humming along to the soft notes of a Shostakovich piano concerto. The shrill ring of the landline hanging on the wall pulled her from her reverie, and she lifted the receiver. She hadn't even considered it would be the news they had been trying so hard to ignore, it had only been three days. She was mildly annoyed at the interruption, and wondered if it was Ben or Marie.

"Hello?"

“Good evening, is this the residence of Lillian Blackwood?”

Her heart sank at the official tone of the caller, and she tried to set down the wooden spoon she was holding. It fell to the floor as she gripped the receiver with both hands, as the world set in around her.

“Y-yes.” She cleared her throat. “Yes, this is she.”

“I’m calling from Holy Trinity Memorial Hospital in Atlanta. Do you have a few minutes?”

Lillian couldn’t speak for a moment. She tried to read the inflection of the caller, some note of sympathy or hope but the voice was smooth as glass, highly rehearsed. They had made this call many times.

“Of course,” she heard herself saying. “Wait a moment while I get my husband.”

“Please, take your time,” was the response, and though the words were nice enough, there was no comfort in them.

Lillian couldn’t think. The receiver dangled from her hand as she looked around the kitchen. She coughed once, put her hand over her mouth, and ran to the front door.

Harold had always liked the way water filled the basins he had lovingly dug around the ancient oaks. He liked to watch the dirt turn to mud, the way it filled with liquid like a bowl of Earth. He heard the door open, and looked back at the front porch to see Lillian waving him over.

He was about to make a joke, that he was too busy to help her as he headed over, but his smile fell away when he saw her face.

They stood in the middle of their kitchen, afternoon light from the window across the tile, the smell of cookies burning, and the piano from the living room faint. They stood, Lillian in her stained apron, Harold in his muddy pants, rough hands on his wife’s shoulders.

Lillian’s finger was shaking as she put the phone on speaker.

“Thank you for waiting. Please continue,” she said. Harold kissed her neck, and wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

“I’m here,” he whispered, and she nodded, biting her lip.

#### **IV.**

The house was filled with heavy silence, nothing but the outer edge of the record looping, and dust wafting through the thin beams of sunlight across the kitchen floor.

Harold relaxed his arms, and Lillian gasped, almost stumbling forward. For a moment, the silence was a prison, oppressive and impossible to escape. He struggled to speak, to make any sense of it.

“Lillian, there are treatments, it’s not over, let’s remember that,” he managed to say, and she turned to him. Her eyes were wet, erratic breaths and their deep green breaking his heart like they always had. Light danced in her eyes like sapphires near the sun, hot and frightening.

“It’s not long enough Harold.”

He felt like falling away. He wanted to disappear into the earth, to be crushed into dust and dispersed among the stars, anything to be away from this.

“*Agony*,” he thought. A word he had never understood before. This was it.

“No...it isn’t,” he whispered. He reached for her, but she was gone, across the floor with unreal speed. She found the bottle in their guest cabinet, and before Harold could think, emptied it into a crystal tumbler. He watched her precise gestures, her effortless elegance as she set the bottle down softly. He could only see the back of her as her shoulders rose in a deep breath in front of the window, as the sweet magnolia came in on the breeze, pulling through her hair, and filling the kitchen. He thought he was dreaming, the too perfect light, the pounding of his heart, the way she seemed to fill the room and how everything else fell away.

Then she was in front of him, the tears gone, the sharp green of her eyes still burning. The sadness had become an unexpected determination. She brought her hand to his cheek, and he could feel how soft it was as it slid across the stubble on his chin.

*This has to be a dream.*

“Harold, I love you more than anything. You are my all, but I have to be alone right now, and I know you understand that.”

His skin still tingled with her touch as she swept out of the kitchen.

He blinked, and suddenly the sun seemed too bright. He fell into a chair at the kitchen table, the place that held the happiest memories of their home. He bowed his head into crossed arms, and welcomed the darkness.

“*Agony*,” he thought, and tried to make sense of the fact he was being crushed.

- - -

Lillian still stood on the peeling wood of their porch, her long skirt twisting around her ankles as she stared out to the horizon. Her legs were burning like the purple of the sky in the wake of the setting sun, but she refused to sit. It felt good not to move, to watch the migrating birds fly their organized Vs across the patches of gold and violet, to see and smell the white blossoms of Confederate Jasmine, green vines twisting up the cracks in the walls of their home. There was so much to see, and so much to smell, and she surrendered to it, embraced aesthetics and ignored her mind. Ignored the burning in her locked knees as she stood still for more than an hour, ignored the heavy fear that threatened to pour out and suffocate the back of her mind.

When the sun finally set, so did she, gently falling into her favorite chair as the first crickets chirped.

*“At least I have this. I will always have this.”*

- - -

She wasn't quite asleep when his voice broke through, she was lurking in that in that purgatory, where dreams and reality melt together. She had closed her eyes for what seemed like a second as the sky went black, as the chorus of crickets and frogs sounded from the twilight.

"Lilly. I don't mean to interrupt, but I'm going to bed to try and sleep. I'm sure I won't, but that's where I'll be."

She turned to him, momentarily confused as she snapped back to the waking world. He was only a silhouette, standing on the other side of screen door, the bright light from the kitchen behind him. His voice was so soft, and she could hear how he struggled to let her be. She felt a sudden flood of love; for this property, for the vines that crept up the walls, for the trees that towered now against the moon like sentinels, for their clean, warm house, and for this man. This man that would let her be alone even though he was dying along with her, this man that could pretend to be fine for her sake. It was strange, a sudden flare of love and appreciation in all this darkness.

"I'll be here Lilly. Anything you need, whenever you're ready," he said. He gave a small nod, that little chivalrous nod that meant the ball was in her court. She wanted him then, wanted him wrapped around her, to be warm and safe in this place they had made together. Their little island floating in a sea of doubt and fear, this was theirs, and she wanted nothing more than to feel safe.

"Wait," she said, as he turned away.

She struggled to stand, her arms felt weak. He opened the creaking screen, and she stood straight, sending one last glance into the darkness.

"Christ Harold, when are you going to fix this door?"

He didn't laugh, but she liked to imagine he smiled as he took her arm and brought her back inside their island.

- - -

They hadn't said much as they got ready for bed, both of them taking a great deal of comfort in their routine. They were both keenly aware of their synchronized and reliable schedules that night, the way they crossed paths near the bed as he went to change into pajamas and she headed to the bathroom to brush her teeth. Usually they smiled when they saw each other in those twenty minutes, sometimes he would pretend to tip his hat to her, sometimes she would blow him a kiss. More than once he had grabbed her and dipped her low as if they were in a ballroom, brought her up, and moved on to the closet as though nothing happened. She loved those moments, and so did he. They both felt a twinge of fear and sadness as they locked eyes, and neither could manage a smile. It was only a moment, and they both tried to pretend it didn't matter, but it did. It mattered a great deal. Their lives were different than even yesterday.

It wasn't until the lights were off, underneath the blankets, with his arm resting over her shoulders that conversation was a possibility. They both listened to her breathing as they lay, the moon peeking in with soft lines across their bedspread. She coughed, and they both winced, each afraid of what the other would say.

Harold broke the silence.

"I don't know Lilly. I well and truly cannot believe it, it's a goddamn nightmare. I'll tell you this," he said, and propped himself up on his elbow. She turned to him, his face above hers,

his hair silver in the dim light. She liked when he was above her, she felt safe, protected and valuable.

“You’re far too strong to be taken down by rogue cells. I...we will do everything we can to fix this. Believe that,” he said, and pulled her against him.

She nodded. “I do.”

She found that she was beyond tired. She moved in closer to him, taking refuge in his warmth, and tried to think. It surprised her that she wasn’t afraid.

As she drifted away, she heard his voice in her ear.

“I can’t believe this happened now. Way to ruin tomorrow Universe,” he said, his breath rolling over her ear.

“What’s tomorrow,” she whispered, barely awake.

His grip around her tightened. “You don’t remember?” She shook her head.

“Lilly...” he whispered, and ran his fingers through her hair. She fell asleep with a strange serenity, like the ocean had calmed, like uncertainty and fear were buried deep beneath the waves, almost deep enough to be forgotten.

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When she opened her eyes she saw dust, scattered like snow in the hard yellow beams of sunrise. It must have been early afternoon, and her heart quickened.

She coughed, hard enough to make her body shake when it finally subsided. She pulled herself up into a sitting position.

Harold was gone, rumpled sheets outlining where he had been. Her throat hurt, the light seemed too bright. She got to her feet and the world spun, and she held on to the dresser to keep her footing. She steadied herself, took a deep breath, and ignored the pain flaring out through her chest. She exhaled, watching the branches scratch against the window, watching the green of the new spring buds against the deep blue sky.

She wondered if anyone would remember her as she moved downstairs. The kitchen had never seemed so far away.

- - -

Her feet quivered as she moved down the stairs, one at a time. She had never felt this frail, but today the beautiful wood seemed like ice. Her hand twisted around the banister, and she imagined falling, one misstep and her body cascading down the stairs, and she was afraid, and being afraid was frustrating. She used the frustration, and forced herself to be careful and steady.

She had never submitted to her body before, and wouldn’t start now.

When she reached the last step she leaned on the banister, trying to ignore how tired she was. How scared.

She could smell the remnants of breakfast, and peeked out around the corner into the dining room. It had been difficult, but she had been soundless, and Harold had no idea she watched.

He sat in front of a half-eaten plate, far-away in a Hemingway paperback. She recognized the cover, the tattered edges of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. She had lost count how many times he had read it, that same look on his face, that intense concentration. His sapphire eyes locked, his deep breaths, that profound focus that he had. She fell apart when he looked at her like that,

defenseless against him. She wanted that now, but looked down, ashamed at her shaking legs, at her weakness. She was strong, she had always been strong, but she didn't feel strong now.

*"Get it together Lillian,"* she thought.

She walked toward him, resolute on carrying herself the way she always had, and he looked up, a white lock of hair falling across his glasses. He smiled at her, and placed the bookmark. He had never put a book facedown, never risked a cracked spine, as long as she had known him.

"Good morning Lilly," he said. He gestured to the other end of the table, to a meal laid out beautifully. Eggs and bacon on porcelain, pink grapefruit juice in a tall glass, and in the middle of the solid, oak table lay a single marigold in a Perrier bottle, stirring faintly in the breeze from the open window. The room smelled like spring and food and flowers and Harold, and it was almost too much for Lillian to comprehend.

As she sat, he straightened his place settings, something he only did when there was something important to discuss.

"You have quite a few messages on the machine," he said. She felt a sudden flicker of fear, and a surge of anger. More bad news; and why this game he was playing? She looked up at him, at his blue eyes that captured the sunlight like stones, and it disappeared. There was no malice in him.

"What are you-"

"Yesterday was the worst day of my life. The worst day of our life. But I won't let it ruin us. We will fight, and we will win, I'll see to that."

He spoke with a deep confidence, and as he reached across the table and curled his hand around hers, she almost believed him. She loved him especially when he was like this, so focused and passionate. She had always found his naiveté charming, more so as they had grown older.

He twisted her wedding band, still shining brilliantly after all these years, and ran his finger across her palm. He laughed and it was beautiful because it was so unexpected.

*"Still surprising,"* she thought.

"I have something for you Lilly." His other hand came up from underneath the table with a practiced theatricality, and dropped a packet of papers in the middle of the table.

She squeezed his hand one more time and reached for them, utterly curious. His broadening smile only intensified her interest.

It took her a moment to grasp what she was looking at, a jumble of dates and flight numbers.

"To New York. We leave in two days," he said, and stood, his chair scraping against the tile.

"Why?" she asked, but he was already behind her, his strong arms wrapped around her chest. She stared down at the tickets, confused and vaguely anxious.

"Happy birthday dearest," he whispered, and his voice was like silk.

Worry became understanding, and then laughter.

"I can't believe I forgot," she said as he let her go and kneeled beside her.

"I can. But I sure as hell will not. I bought these tickets months ago."

"You're so good to me Harold," she said, and felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. Not only because he had remembered, he always did, but because she had been so afraid and lonely only moments ago and once again he had shattered her sadness. He was impossibly thoughtful. Perfect.

“Of course, I completely understand if you don’t want to go. I know there is a lot we have to do, and I won’t be offended if-”

She put her hand over his mouth, and kissed his forehead.

“Shush please. We’re going. And you are the best man that has ever been.”

He looked up at her, and she felt him smile in her palm. He nodded, and winked to say “*I know.*”

- - -

“New York!” Miriam’s voice was so bright, even over the hollow crackling of the kitchen phone. “How exciting! That’s amazing! I wish I could come!”

Lillian sat at the table, clean now, dishes done, staring out the door and into the front yard. It was her favorite place to talk, so much to see. And Miriam loved to talk.

“You have to see the Guggenheim, you have to. You lived there for a decade, and never saw the Guggenheim, shameful. Also, make sure you...”

Lillian watched two sparrows fight over a small worm on the front lawn, hopping and chirping at each other. Miriam rattled off her favorite restaurants with her typical drunken exuberance. She glanced at the clock ticking above the stove. 11:36. Lilly had recently realized Miriam’s drinking wasn’t that funny anymore, and had begun to grow concerned.

“We’re old Lilly, but we’ve got so much life ahead of us. So glad you’re doing this.”

*So much life left.*

It was absurd. This conversation, those two ridiculous birds, her sudden and overdue compassion. She stifled laughter, and did her best to respond.

“Yeah, that’s true.”

*“I’ll be dead soon, and all of this will still be here, and I won’t be a part of it. Miriam will be dead soon, those birds will be gone, and now I care?”* The concept was insane, and she felt like a fool for the time she had wasted not simply living. She wanted every precious moment back, and wished Miriam was in front of her, with her silly laugh and splashing wine, so Lilly could enjoy her. Enjoy her eccentricities; enjoy her for everything she was.

*“It’s going to be gone soon.”*

Miriam detected Lilly’s sudden shift in interest, and began winding down. She was nothing if not emotionally aware.

“Anyway, I don’t want to keep you too long. But I want to hear all about it when you get back. I love you Lilly, and happy birthday.”

“Thank you Miriam. Of course I will, and I love you too,” she replied, and had never meant it so much. “I really do.”

After she hung up, she watched the birds. The larger one had given up, and bounced away across the grass.

Harold’s soft voice came from the living room, and she looked up.

“You didn’t tell her.”

“No, I didn’t. And neither will you. Not yet.”

Her mind raced for an explanation to the inevitable, “Why?” *“It’s too soon, I don’t want to ruin her day, her week, her life, I don’t know how to feel and I can’t share this yet and I’m not sure when-”*

He nodded before she could speak, and leaned against the doorframe.

He understood, and her mind was calm. The doors were open, and a cross breeze brought the damp spring into the house. The lilies lining the porch were exceptionally aromatic in their final bloom of the season, and the smell was like perfume all around them.

The vibrant and somber strings of Rachmaninoff found them sitting on the couch together, listening and being grateful for everything around them, silent because they were comfortable enough not to speak.

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“And what does that one look like Ben?” Lillian asked.

Harold turned away from the bright sky and looked at her. She brushed her blonde hair away from her eyes, and the sun made it light up like autumn fire. She pointed upwards at a cloud, vibrant white against the blue.

“Like a...goat. A baby goat!” Ben said and laughed.

“You’re a baby goat!” she said, and grabbed him. He lay between them, and Harold closed his eyes and listened to the laughter of the two people he loved more than anything in the world. The sun beamed down on this perfect day, on top of this perfect green hill with the city loud and brash surrounding them. He sat up as the laughter died down, and took it all in. He smelled the tree nearby, the scattered voices on the wind, and felt the late summer sun on his skin.

“What are you thinking about Harold?” Lillian asked,

She loved watching him like this, him above her, profile mapped out against the sky like granite. He smiled down at her, and she felt incredibly lucky.

“I’m wondering...how we ended up with a baby goat for a son!”

Ben laughed and squealed as Harold tickled him, a bundle of joy in a sea of steel and hard glass.

- - -

“Happy birthday Mom!” Ben exclaimed before they had even said hello, and Harold and Lillian laughed. They sat together on their bed upstairs, the old mattress pulling them together as it sagged, the phone resting on the night table so both could hear.

“Thank you honey, I appreciate it. I have your father here,” Lillian said. Harold nodded at the phone as though his son could see him.

“Hello Ben,” he said.

They talked for almost ten minutes, and Ben talked about himself, and was pleasant if not a bit distracted. Finally, he asked about what was new with them, and Harold clasped her hand.

“Nothing new to report,” she said, and winced. “Not...nothing new.”

“Not entirely true,” Harold said as Lilly leaned into his shoulder. “We’ve got a surprise for you. Hopefully a good one.”

“Yeah? The suspense is killing me!” Ben replied over the chatter of people behind him.

“For your lovely mother’s birthday I bought us tickets to New York. Next week!”

“Oh wow! That’s great. How sweet!” Ben really was trying his best, but the expected hesitance was apparent to both of them.

“Looking forward to seeing you of course, but don’t worry, we know you’re busy. We won’t be crashing on your couch or anything like that. Just about town.”

“Of course, no, that’s great! I can’t wait to see you guys! I’ll definitely take some time off work. No promises, but of course that would be fuckin great!”

Lilly sat up, and leaned close to the phone.

“We’ll call you before we leave to confirm where we’ll be and all that. Thanks for calling honey. I love you.”

After what felt like to Harold a rushed goodbye, the line was dead, and Lilly sat with her head in her hands. The bulb that he had been meaning to replace in the overhead lamp flickered and seemed to fade as she looked up at him.

“How am I going to tell him?”

He shook his head.

“You’re not. We are.”

She nodded, and took a deep breath. She gave him a wan smile.

“It really was a wonderful birthday, and an incredibly thoughtful gift. I love you.”

“You deserve no less.”

She plopped onto the bed, and he leaned over her, kissing her mouth, and her cheeks, and her forehead, kissing all her softness and vulnerability and her throaty laugh only made him want to keep going.

“Enough Harold!” she said with a peal of lavender laughter, but he didn’t stop, and she didn’t want him to.

- - -

Dr. Keller wrapped his arms around her as soon as she opened the large oak door, before she could greet him. He had surprising strength, and as she pressed her face against his shoulder, she could smell the pomade in his hair and the leather of his jacket.

He released her, and looked down, brown eyes sad through his bushy white eyebrows.

“I am so sorry Lillian,” he said, and she nodded.

“Come in,” and gestured. Harold was waiting in the kitchen, and John Keller grasped his hand in a firm shake, and rested his other heavy hand on Harold’s shoulder.

“It’s good to see you my friend.”

“You too John. Thanks for coming,” Harold replied. His happiness surprised him. It was so good to have someone to share their burden, as selfish as that seemed to him at the moment. Lilly coughed, and abruptly stopped herself, brushing past the two men toward a pot boiling on the stove.

“Dinner is almost ready. Grab some beers and make yourself at home,” she said, suddenly deeply intent on making sure the pasta didn’t boil over.

“You hear that?” Harold said. “I can make myself at home! Lucky me!”

They managed to laugh as the sun lay to rest on pillows of orange and red. They laughed despite the long shadows outside, they laughed as they popped open bottles of fizzing beer, laughed as they ate a meal prepared with intensive care, laughed in the candlelight, laughed even though they knew there was nothing to laugh about. They laughed because knew they shouldn’t, and weren’t sure when they could again.

- - -

The three of them sat in the living room, Harold and Lillian on the couch, John on an old arm chair that hadn't been used in years. They all watched the crackling fire that Lillian had built, listened to it snap, marveling at the way the orange filled the room, flickering and making the night so beautiful and solemn.

*"Just like her,"* Harold thought as he watched the shadows dance across her face.

A string quartet drifted softly from the record player, and John tried to place the notes as he watched the flames curl across the wood.

"I'm so glad you're both here," Lilly said, and they were both startled by the sudden break in silence.

"It's my pleasure," said John and Harold reached out and squeezed her hand. She moved closer to him on their soft couch, and cleared her throat.

"Obviously, we have to talk about this," she said. "So let's talk."

v.

Lillian drew a deep breath, and felt pain bloom like a flower of hot steel in her chest. The two men watched her closely, eyes flickering expectantly across her face in the firelight. She felt the weight of the moment, a moment she had created, and did her best to choose words carefully.

“I don’t know how to approach any of this.” she said. She wrapped her fingers through Harold’s, and he looked on, listening intently.

“I know I’m scared, and sad, but it’s bigger than that. I want to know the paths available to me, the options. The potential way forward. We’ll keep reading up and learning, but John...you know that I...that we’ve always trusted you. Don’t bullshit us. We know how serious this is; tell us what you think we should do. Don’t be afraid to be honest. We’re not.”

John ran his hand across his snowy beard, tugging as he always did when he was serious. He leaned forward in the armchair and put his hands together, and both of them thought at the same time that he looked remarkably like Freud.

“I can’t give you advice as a medical practitioner without reviewing your records,” he said. The wind was loud outside, and the old panes rattled at the coming storm. “As a friend, I can.”

Harold noticed how uncomfortable John was, the way his hands kept moving, the way he couldn’t decide which one of them to focus on.

“Please,” said Lilly. “Unofficial of course.”

The wind shook the windows harder this time, and the strings of Vivaldi’s Concerto for Cello, RV 420 in A Minor seemed to answer back, high and somber in the almost dark house.

“A terminal diagnosis is not simple,” he continued. “When a time frame is provided, it’s based purely on an average. This is something most people don’t think about when given the diagnosis, but it’s very important. Six months doesn’t mean just that, it means the average of the many, many people affected by your particular illness have an average of six months. This can vary dramatically. Some have made a recovery, some can live for decades. Six months is not an expiration date, it’s a bell curve. I want to make that very clear.”

Lillian nodded, impressed and somewhat relieved by his sincerity. He was not going to lie to them.

“But that could also mean four weeks,” Harold said, almost coldly. “Or less. The other end of the bell curve.”

“Yeah.” John nodded. “It’s statistically unlikely, but I’m sure as shit not going to lie.”

“I know. That’s why we want you here,” said Harold, and managed a small smile. He got up, and pulled another gnarled piece of wood from the stack they always kept stacked high. He pushed it into the fire as it snapped embers back at him, tightly focused, absolutely sure. She watched his efficient and powerful movements with unadulterated admiration.

He had always seemed like two people to her. The sensitive, funny, quick to apologize husband that she loved, and the efficient, powerful and almost scary person he became when it was necessary. She loved him too. The dichotomy consistently surprised her, and after decades together she still had no idea who she would wake up to.

*“I’ll miss them both.”*

“I assume you want to know your options?” John said. He lifted the amber filled glass from the mahogany table and took a deep drink.

Lillian caught Harold’s eye as he looked up from the crackling fire. He gave that knowing smile like they were twenty eight again, and she did everything she could not to laugh. It was so obviously bad news, the fact John had to get drunk to say anything more...Harold’s half smile in the glow of the embers was hysterical. He understood her in a way she didn’t

understand herself and all she wanted to do was laugh with him and pretend they were in their favorite hotel with the deep red sun rising over the sparkling glass of Manhattan.

She coughed from the smoke, and Harold's smile fell away. He sat, and put his arm around her. She laid her head on his shoulder, and he took a deep breath and exhaled and she could hear his heart beat steady and strong.

"There are so many different options. They vary in effectiveness and impact on quality of life...Christ you guys already know all this. I'll give you details, but your basic options are surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy, or..."

She fell asleep almost immediately. The warmth of John's voice, the snapping of the fire, and the rise and fall of Harold's chest were a lullaby, and she surrendered.

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She didn't dream as far as she could remember, but she didn't feel awake. The trees moved on the other side of the glass, swaying against a sky the color of polished steel in the first light of daybreak. She was transfixed for a moment, utterly lost in the intensity of sunrise.

She blinked, and the weight of the night settled in. She vaguely recalled John kissing her cheek and promising everything he could do as he left with red eyes and slouched shoulders. She remembered Harold's breath against her ear as he promised her the same thing. She remembered not caring, just wanting to sleep, to be away from this for now. Until she was strong enough to be someone else.

She sat up, suddenly very aware of the empty bed, and the tousled sheets. Her head spun for a moment, and she ran her fingers through her hair, fighting against the tangles. She hadn't brushed her hair last night before bed. She always had before. One more thing to worry about.

She headed downstairs slowly; hand firm against the banister, marveling at the way the light looked so different this early in the morning. It had been a long time since she had approached the day before the day was ready, and the house seemed overcast, almost gloomy before light spilled in through the windows.

She was careful as she stepped across the old wood of the living room floor. She knew every spot of creaking floorboard, but sometimes it would surprise her, and in this cold early dawn, she felt a strong need to be unnoticed.

He sat on the steps of the porch, reclined back so his elbows rested on the peeling wood. She could hear him singing softly as he stared across their magnolias and thick grass, at the sun rising behind the red cedar. She couldn't make out the words, but his voice was somber and deep, and she wished she could sit with him. She turned away as he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and left him as the birds joined him in song.

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When he finally came upstairs, eyelids heavy from lack of sleep and his mind thick with grief, he stared for a moment at his wife. She moved around their bedroom with an utterly unexpected speed and efficiency. Their bedside radio spoke about current events in pleasantly hushed tones, he could see and feel the steam evaporating from the open door of the bathroom, smell her eucalyptus shampoo. An open duffel bag, half full of clothes she was pulling from the closet sat on the bed. She seemed almost manic as she pulled lotions from drawers and shirts from her collection, vibrant in the sunlight. She reached down to turn up the volume, and she

coughed. She held the table as her back arched, as she coughed and coughed until he had to be at her side, hands on her shoulders.

She looked up at him, trying her best to smile through the pain he could hear in her breath. Her eyes were so green in the yellow morning, and all thoughts of sleep and the night he had spent alone fell away like dead leaves in winter.

“Help me pack Harold,” she said softly. “The plane leaves tomorrow.”

- - -

They sat in uncomfortable chairs near their gate, watching the anxious and distracted crowds of Hartsfield-Jackson airport walk past. Fluorescent announcements spoke noisily overhead. They had smiled angrily as they shuffled through the security line like cattle, laughed when they were told they had to remove their shoes, and marveled at the utter lack of outrage by everyone around them when they had to stand and raise their arms in some bizarre chemical scanner.

“You read about this shit,” Harold had whispered as he struggled to pull off his Red Wings, one hand on the chrome countertop, “I always thought they were exaggerating.”

Now they watched their fellow passengers walking with the unique desperate determination only found in a travel hub, necks stiff, unapproachable and utterly self-absorbed. Harold was glad they had arrived so early. This place was a shock to their system, but at least they had given it enough time to process.

He glanced up at the digital number cycle above the gate. *1:35 departure....JFK International.*

“It’s 12:15,” she said. “We’ve have some time to kill. Let’s talk about anything but you know what.”

He nodded, and lost himself in the crowd and her voice.

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70’

“It’s so...big,” she said.

Harold nodded and tried to pay attention to the road, tried to guide the car and trailer over the sea of asphalt. The skyscrapers seemed to come from nowhere, bright orange and white light suddenly looming from the darkness as they exited the Lincoln Tunnel.

“Holy shit,” she said. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

He smiled. “I can. We’re going to make this city ours.”

She rolled down the window and brought her hand out into the warm night air.

‘New York!’ she screamed into the wind, “You’re ours now!”

Harold laughed. “Tell ‘em Lilly! It’s ours! All of this!”

They were both smiling; brimming with expectation for their new lives as their small car and trailer packed with everything they owned slowly sailed into the city.

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They were both asleep when the plane touched down. Harold jerked awake with the violent shift in sensation as the tires touched concrete, forgetting for a moment where they were. As the crackle of the captain's voice came over the intercom, he took a deep breath, and felt for Lillian. She still slept soundly, her head falling onto his shoulder as the plane took a sharp left on the runway, searching for a gate. He watched the infinite sea of lights glimmer through the small window, watched them shift in color and density as the plane taxied, and the passengers sighed with impatience.

He was not impatient. He listened to her breathe against his neck and ran his fingers through her hair until the chime of the fasten seat belt sign filled the cabin and she looked up. He kissed her, and they both smiled as the wave of unclicking seatbelts and fluorescent light filled the cabin.

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They stood side by side against the wall where a man in a trench coat rocked back and forth. They held their rolling luggage close as they struggled to adjust to the noise and movement and the overwhelming nature of the JFK International Airport. The sun was bursting over the dirty concrete, and even these early horns were blaring and people were screaming at each other from dirty yellow cabs.

It was strange to be back in all this noise, in all of this self-absorbed insanity, in some place so human. Harold smiled, despite how tired he was, how overwhelming it seemed at first it came back to him. He remembered the ease with which they had navigated the alley ways and rooftops of this heart of commerce and human eccentricity. He looked at Lillian; beautiful as her white hair swept across her face, her black overcoat elegant, her smile as knowing as his. This was going to be as fun as they could make it.

He waved for a cab, suddenly as boisterous as he needed to be, and they moved to the curb. A young man, roughly Ben's age was also hailing a taxi, and he seemed annoyed as the car slowed in front of Harold instead of him. He was about to say something, but Lillian spoke first.

"We've been here longer than you dear. Have a nice day."

They pulled away into the concrete and aluminum jungle of shrieking cars and skyscrapers, and the young man smiled. He felt the claustrophobic and anxious rage this city seemed to percolate in its citizens diminished by that elderly woman's smile, by that genuine thank you as he helped carry their heavy suitcases into the trunk of the cab.

Maybe this day wouldn't be so bad after all.

- - -

Lillian stood on the balcony, hands gripping the railing as the city spread out ahead, already hot in the early humid breeze. She could hear Harold in the shower, and looked forward to taking one as well. It was magical though, the glass of the buildings shimmering like water against a blue sky. The sheer activity, everywhere she looked were people, and noise and the strange and the exhilarating sense anything was possible.

She coughed once, relieved she didn't feel the undeniable urge to continue, and took a deep breath. She caught a faint whiff of fried food, and was suddenly ravenous, so grateful they had ordered room service. She turned back to the room, and leaned against the banister. The room was more luxurious than she had expected, large and opulently decorated in a vaguely

Victorian style, all faux old furniture, draping curtains, a vast rug, and a large chandelier that hung from the ceiling of the main room.

It was a bit much, but she had her heart dead set on enjoying it. All of it.

She heard the shower stop, and heard Harold step out. She waited to hear him clear his throat, then the squeak of towel rack. Same as always, it didn't seem to matter where they were. She glanced out the double doors wide over the city, and smiled. This was going to be fun. She felt a surge of energy when she thought of back then, of when this city was theirs, and how it could be that way again, if only for a while.

"You doing alright Lilly?" Harold asked as he stepped out of the bathroom, steam clouding around him and a white towel clasped over his waist.

"Sure," she said, but the smile fell away as she thought of her son, and how she was going to tell him.

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Harold was pleasantly surprised as he helped Lillian out of the cab, waving at the driver who nodded back. The neighborhood was nicer than he was expecting, and as he confirmed the numbers on the brick building, he breathed a sigh of relief. It was a six story apartment building, the tallest in the neighborhood, a bit run down, but lovingly decorated with blue awnings and a small metal fence.

"Not bad!" he said, and Lillian laughed.

"What were you expecting? A dumpster in Hunt's Point?"

"Not exactly. This is nice though. I don't remember Queens being so nice."

"It's been a long time," she said, and smiled sadly. "A very long time. Things have changed."

He nodded, and opened the small gate. He liked how it creaked. He helped her up the stairs, and struggled with the buzzer.

"I thought he was apartment 104? What the hell?" Harold said.

Ben's voice responded, laced with static. "It is. I'll be right down!"

Harold put his arm around his wife, and smiled as he felt the humid city wind and heard steps coming down the stairs.

Ben opened the door, and hugged Lillian.

"It's so good to see you guys!" He waved them in, and hugged Harold. He was taller than he used to be, or maybe Harold was shorter. He looked good, his hair longer than the last time they had seen him, a faint dusting of facial hair making him look older. He wore a tank top and khaki shorts. He was tan, and his teeth were a bit too white. He looked healthy and happy, and that's all that mattered to Harold.

"Thank you Ben. You look good. And I like the neighborhood!"

"Thanks Dad. You look good too. You both do. Yeah, it's a great neighborhood. Don't know how we got the place for so cheap, but hey I'm not complaining. Let's head upstairs."

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"It's a great place honey," Lillian said, genuinely pleased as she looked around the small living room.

“Yeah! Happy you finally get to check it out. Let me give you the tour,” he said. “Any bags or anything?”

“No,” she said, “everything is back at the hotel. Thanks for asking.”

“Of course! Water? Let me know if you guys need anything at all.”

“What a good host!” Lillian said, and Harold nodded. “Looks like we raised him right.”

The house was small, but relatively clean. Clearly occupied by twentysomethings with different priorities, but she was prepared for worse. He showed them the living room first, excitedly talking about the HVAC system. The couch was black leather with a few holes, and a large painting of Charlie Chaplin hung above an unused fireplace. The kitchen was tiny, but Lillian suspected Ben didn’t cook much. She stifled a chuckle as she noticed a beer bottle cap stuck underneath the refrigerator, looked as though the space had been hastily cleaned for their arrival. Ben’s room was crowded, but neat, piled high with plastic bins of his belongings.

‘Haven’t really unpacked yet. I know, it’s been a year, but I’ve just been so busy.’

She noticed a few maps framed on the wall, when she asked about them he said they were from video games. His room was dark, but the house was bright, all the windows were open, and she detected only the faintest odor of stale beer.

“It’s a really great place Ben,” she said, and she meant it. It made her so happy to see him here, seemingly relaxed and healthy.

“Thanks Mom,” he replied with a smile. “My roommate is in Sweden for a month. Too bad, I think you would have liked her.”

He looked around the living room satisfied, and smiled. “I’m so glad you came. Wish I didn’t have to work; it would be fun to show you around the city. Christ, there’s so much I haven’t seen.”

“We’ve seen plenty of it Ben,” Harold said. “But of course, we wish you could too.”

Ben laughed, and motioned to the couch. They sat, and Lillian did her best not to stop smiling as the pain flared up in her chest. She gripped Harold’s arm tightly, and he glanced over, concerned.

“You know, I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you guys.”

“Are you referring to the fact that we created you?” Harold asked, perfectly serious, and Lillian laughed, the pain subsiding.

“That too. No, I mean all the stories you told me back home, about the time you guys spent here, it really inspired me to do the same. It hasn’t been easy trying to make it in the city, but I feel like I have.”

“Sure seems that way. We’re very proud of you,” said Harold, and Ben smiled happily

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They had dinner that night, the three of them, at an Italian restaurant within walking distance of Ben’s house. As they walked through the streets, Harold felt the old energy, the sense that no matter what time they were out, there would be adventures to be had. On occasion, he would grasp Lilly’s hand, and he could tell she felt the same. Ben talked excitedly as they walked, about restaurants, shops and cars that they passed by. His youthful exuberance was a refreshing counterpoint to Harold’s more contemplative view of the city.

The restaurant was old and the cracks in its plaster showed, but it was lovingly decorated in a faux Sicilian style, and the food was good, and the wine was better. The three of them sat laughing over glasses of Merlot and soft Italian bread, and Lillian had never been prouder. She

looked back and forth between Harold and her son, amazed at how similar they looked. That same wide smile, the way their shoulders shook when they laughed, even their voices. It was like looking back in time when she saw Ben, and it filled her with an uneasy happiness. To be back here, around all of this...

Mostly couples, laughing over the violin music (Sounds like Barber, probably concerto op.14 though she hadn't heard this recording before). Every table was its own world, everyone lost in their own enjoyment, their own problems.

She took a bite of her fettuccini, and laughed when Harold talked about the mix up with the seating on their flight. It made her so happy to see these two beautiful, remarkable men smiling side by side, and she took another sip of wine, and didn't want this moment to end. She had never been more proud of being a mother, or a wife.

The laughter continued as Ben shared the bizarre texts his ex-girlfriend had sent. They ordered another bottle of wine, Harold told Ben about their first apartment in New York, and things were as close to perfect as they had been for a long time.

Ben offered to pay, and Harold pretended to be offended, but Lillian could see he was quite proud of his son as he put his credit card down, and called the waiter over.

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Back at the hotel, they lay in bed, the double doors to the balcony still open, bringing in a warm breeze and the noise of the street. They both found the vague whispers of voices and cars comforting, like the city was singing them a lullaby. There was a movie about a pretty French girl on the television, and as Lilly lay on his chest, she wondered out loud.

"You think Ben is doing ok?"

Harold slid his hand up her back, and ran his fingers through her hair.

"I do," he said. "He's a young person in a huge city, and you and I know how hard that can be. He can do it, I'm certain of that."

He felt her nod against the pillow, and they watched in silence as the young French girl got herself a husband.

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"I think that's it," Ben said.

The three of them stood on the porch of their home, Ben standing tall against the bright green lawn in the haze of a hot summer day. Lillian tried not to cry as she looked at him, but her chest ached with pride.

"You sure? What about the chair in the living room?" Harold said, and Ben shook his head.

"Already got it. Thank you so much for the help Dad."

"Of course," Harold replied.

Ben looked up at the house, his eyes lovingly moving over every inch of his childhood home.

"I love this house," he said almost wistfully.

Lillian stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her son, and the tears came.

“I’m so proud of you Ben. I can’t wait to see what you become. I’m a bit mad you don’t want to stay here forever, but I understand.”

Ben laughed, and held her tightly.

“Please don’t cry Mom. GSU is in Atlanta, it’s practically down the street. I’ll see you all the time.”

She nodded, and smiled up at him. “I know. Its good crying. I’m happy for you.”

Harold hugged him next, and held him tightly. They were almost the same size, though Ben was wider than his father now.

“Do good out there. Follow your heart, don’t get anyone pregnant, and learn. We’re proud of you son.”

He stepped back, and put his hand on Ben’s shoulder. He looked him over, and nodded his head in approval.

“Best get going. Call us if you need anything.”

“Of course,” Ben replied, and stepped off the porch. Before he reached the moving truck in the driveway, he turned back. They stood side by side, looking small against the huge frame of the house.

“I love you both so much!” Ben shouted, and Lillian waved.

He tried not to cry as he pulled out of the driveway and saw them still standing there. Just like they always had been. He was excited, afraid, and more than anything grateful. He felt enormously lucky that they were his parents as he headed onto the freeway toward his new life.

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“Lilly...wake up!”

She opened her eyes and saw Harold pull aside a thick curtain, letting in the steel blue light of dawn.

“What’s wrong?!” she said, and sat up, confused and worried.

He sat next to her, his features soft in the dim light, and smiled. She heard a siren outside, and birds chirped from a nearby electrical wire.

“Almost nothing,” he said, and traced her cheek with his finger. “But we have a big day planned, so I need you to get ready.”

“What?” she replied sleepily. “I thought we didn’t have any plans? That’s what you said...”

“I lied,” he replied, and got to his feet with a mischievous grin. The sun broke over the horizon, and warm light flooded into the room. “We have very big plans.”

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First, came breakfast at Russ and Daughters on the Lower East Side, where Lillian had babka french toast and herring, and Harold had an excellent potato latke with wild salmon and crème fraiche. They remembered the last time they had been here in the late seventies, and how they had fought about the Soviet Union and the use of excessive force.

Then came a walk through the shopping district, where Harold went out of his way to make Lillian feel like a queen. They passed couples adorned with jewelry and clearly expensive clothes, and Harold affected a vaguely British accent as he held the doors open for her to countless boutique shops. Though Lillian had never been interested in shopping as a sport, she

did break down and buy a Donni Charm Wing Charm Merge Scarf from Barney's and a pair of Prada Cap Toe Flats that cost more than she had spent in a long time. She was hesitant, but Harold insisted, and to goad her on he bought a straw fedora from Gucci and told her, "It's our money. We worked for it. We shouldn't feel bad about spending it." She had disagreed, but she noticed he looked great in it as they walked down the street arm in arm. He led them through the crowd, and he stood tall and he was capable, and she wished they were alone so she could show him how much she loved him.

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She thought she was prepared for Central Park, but she was not. She gasped as they entered, as the memories flooded in, as the dreams pounded through her head. There was something about this place, this oasis in the center of the glass canyons and granite that stirred her deeply, and she was so happy to be back.

Harold watched her happiness with some of his own. He had brought along a wicker basket, filled with wine and cheese and meat, and even though he knew it was a bit overdone, he had imagined this moment immediately after buying the tickets to New York. It was warm, and slightly humid, but it was perfect, the blue sky framed against the swaying boughs of the trees and the towering skyscrapers. Her hand squeezed his and she laughed, pointing at two ducks fighting over a piece of bread, sunlight shattering across the water as so many people looked on.

They found the top of a hill, not overcrowded, and she gently placed the plaid blanket she had carried over the grass. They sat in the welcoming sun, spreading cheese across crackers, making sandwiches and stealing occasional sips of brandy from a flask Harold kept in the breast pocket of his sports coat.

The city unfolded beneath them, couples jogging, animals playing one moment and fighting the next. It was an organism, a strange amalgamation of steel and glass and sweat and hope and they were in the center of it all, watching it go by on their small green hill in the park, remembering being a part of it and both of them somewhat grateful that they weren't anymore. This wasn't home, and this havoc belonged to other people. It was their havoc for now, and that was ok, Lillian decided as she spread brie on the crackers he had bought for her and laughed as they talked about the small dog that kept doing backflips nearby.

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The soaring curves of the Guggenheim Museum had always charmed her, it felt like the adult version of a theme park, something you could lose yourself in, playful and vast and filled with a certain joyfulness she had never been able to articulate to her husband. Harold was a decided non fan of Frank Lloyd Wright, so it meant all the more to her as they moved past the crowds and ascended to the third level of the round building. She always suspected his taste in art was better than hers, and she often deferred to his quiet introspection. The way he looked at the work was one of unpretentious admiration, or unembarrassed loathing. She always felt like he could sense what the piece really was, and though they didn't always discuss, his opinion meant a lot to her.

After Central Park they had ordered a light lunch, even though neither of them were very hungry, and they had come here. It wasn't terribly crowded, but as in all of New York City, the constant presence of people could be exhausting. He held her hand as he pushed through the

crowd, and it lightened once they moved to the second floor. They moved briskly from painting to painting, only pausing to discuss the technique when something really stood out. Neither of them had a studied background in art history, but they had always shared a mutual admiration, and from time to time Lilly had laid paint to a canvas. She always destroyed it before Harold could see, and he was always disappointed.

They were having a very fine time, when Lillian was utterly transfixed. She gently pulled her hand from his and moved closer to a dark painting on the fourth floor. It was a three by four canvas, overwhelmingly black and gray. It seemed to Lillian night pouring in on an old city, swallowing everything except the glow of a gas lit street lamp, and woman, expression warped by time and the limitations of oil.

Lillian saw a smile on the woman's face, a smile of understanding and relief. The city towered around her, just small splotches of white and yellow on the canvas, buildings faint outlines. "*She's made her choice,*" Lillian thought, as she marveled at the complexity of the woman's skirt, billowing behind her in the painted steam of whatever city this was.

She wondered for a moment who had created it. "*Vassily Kandinsky,*" she thought, but couldn't be sure. The expression of this woman, a few inches on old canvas brought in a flood of overwhelming sadness and supreme relief, a dichotomy of intensity that Lillian was wholly unprepared for. The woman in the painting had looked back, and was now looking forward, and in that moment it was clear to her. It was clear to both of them.

Harold rested his hand on Lilly's shoulder, unaware of what had just been decided.

"I'm not sure I like this one," he said.

She choked back a sob, and placed her hand over his. With one last glance at the painting they continued on, Lillian not even thinking to check the placard with the name of the work or the artist.

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The home appeared almost abandoned. Its façade seemed to sag, the porch on which she had spent so many languid hours was bleached dry by sun and twisted by the humidity. The awning she had cleaned every Saturday morning with her red broom was peeling paint and splinters. Someone had painted the entire home a hideous yellow years ago, and it was fading, leaving the house looking almost sick. The small yard was overgrown and overrun with garbage, though grass still peaked through, vibrant and spectacularly green against everything else.

"God," Harold said, his voice heavy. "What the hell happened?"

"Nothing happened," she replied, looking at the cracked kitchen window she had cleaned countless times. "It just fell apart."

She had held that moment in the forefront of her memory for decades. His struggling to pull her through the door they had picked out together, laughing as he stumbled and dropped her on their brand new leather couch and sipped champagne and lay in each other's arms. They had been so free then, their first home, their first space, the first place that wasn't him or her, but them. She remembered walking the halls that first night after he had fallen asleep, avoiding half open boxes piling over with their belongings, running her hands across the plaster walls, smiling to herself that she finally had this. That this would be her future, her armor from the outside world, this space they would make their own.

"Should we knock?" she asked Harold.

"No," he said. "Let's go."

She turned to leave, but he looked on, and she saw the deep disappointment in the wrinkles at the edge of his mouth. He had poured so much of himself into this place, working every weekend, every late night to turn what had been a humble building into everything they wanted. She felt suddenly selfish, as though her sadness was disproportionate and entitled. This house had consumed Harold for years, he had made it something utterly beautiful, and she couldn't conceive how he felt seeing his second child worn away.

She clasped his hand as he stared on, and pulled against him.

"It's still beautiful," she said. "It always will be."

"Thank you Lilly," he replied. He took a deep breath, and managed to smile at her, tears rimming his eyes. "Let's go. Let's have a drink."

She squeezed his shoulder and nodded.

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They came out of the small liquor store laughing, utterly confused at what the foreign cashier had screamed at them as they walked out with their brown bottle carefully concealed in Harold's breast pocket. The night was a living sea of light as they made their way through the mercifully thinning crowds.

"We paid for that right?" Lillian said, only half joking.

Harold nodded. They turned a corner, somewhat tipsy and more than a little lost and caught their breath. Harold took a deep breath under the flickering neon of a tattoo parlor and Lillian laughed. She couldn't remember feeling so young, so utterly free.

"What the hell are we doing Lilly?" he said, exhausted, but smiling.

"We're living," she replied, and motioned for the whiskey. "While we can."

He handed it to her as a bus passed, a strange flash of squares and light and lonely people and as it disappeared, there was a moment of quiet.

She took a sip, and felt the burning fall into her stomach. She was utterly tired, spent and on the verge of collapsing. She forced a grim determination to ignore what her body had to say tonight, the dull aching of her joints, the faint burning in her lungs. The desire to just sit down in all of this filth and just let the night take her.

One look at his smile and her resolve grew harder. She handed back the small bottle, and took in the alley. It was old brick, filled with trash and debris and luckily no people. She could see the faint outline of the moon through the thin line of sky between the towering buildings when she looked up. She felt dizzy, ecstatic, and Harold reached out for her, and she felt so young, and her ticking bomb didn't scare her anymore.

"Now I remember why we moved," Harold said, his deep voice echoing between the walls. He took a sip from the bottle. "And why we came."

He let her go, and leaned against the brick, one foot on the stone. His eyes found the moon, and she wanted him to look this way forever. Contemplative and beautiful in the cold flickering light of the city, and her heart seemed to burst when she thought about not seeing him again.

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They sat on dirty, creaking plastic chairs on the roof of Ben's apartment building, silent as they overlooked the sea of lights flowing through the brick and glass. The horns and constant

mutter of voices, the screeching tires and occasional siren floated up from the rain slick streets. They had come up here, pleasantly drunk, wanting more than anything to remember what it had been like on the rooftop, the steam from the street below billowing and fading into the florescent night sky.

It came back to them, and it felt heavy.

Lillian had an extraordinary clarity and a pure dread, unlike anything she had ever imagined. She felt like a monster, about to unleash a wave of pestilence on the only one of two people she loved. It was inevitable, like a rising black sea, but she kept it back, and stared up into the starless orange sky.

Harold took a deep breath, and looked at her, and smiled. She could tell he was tired, she knew every wrinkle on his face, but his smile made her wish things were in any way different. That there was a future, that the world hadn't swallowed them and left them here on a rooftop in a pale and busy city. That she didn't have to say what she had to say.

"It's good to be back," he said. His voice always resonated confidence. "But I am excited to go home."

She nodded and did her best to smile, unable to speak without blurting what she held so tightly controlled.

"Lilly, just say it. After what we've been through, I'm not sure I have the patience to guess," he said. "We're here, and you're not happy. Tell me what's standing in the way."

She nodded, and watched the lights flicker in the streets below.

**VI.**

“Christ,” she said, and tucked her hands into the pockets of her long coat. “This is so...”

“There’s nothing you can tell me that will frighten me more than this,” he replied. There was no drama in his voice, just simply stated facts, and she wanted to believe him.

“I don’t want to break...us,” she said, and her voice cracked. “It’s not just me, it’s you and Ben and...” she groaned, and turned away from him.

*“Everything is unreal tonight,”* he thought as he watched her silhouette against the toxic orange light, head down, shoulders heaving.

He wrapped his arms around her. She could feel his heart beating through her back, his arms like pillars of comfort. She felt his breath across her ear, and felt the sudden strength to tell him. He deserved to know.

“I’m not going to treat it,” she said. She winced as she felt his arms loosen, as he pulled away.

“What does that mean?” he replied, and she forced herself to turn and face him. His eyes were wide and he was afraid, but so was she, and her resolve wasn’t gone just yet.

“I can’t fight it. It’s too late and I can’t die that way. Harold, my life has been so close to perfect, and to end it that way...no.”

He shook his head.

“John said we could fix it.”

She took his hand, and it was shaking.

“No he didn’t. He said I have a little bit of time. You know me Harold. You know I want to take that time for us. I’m not spending it in a hospital. That can’t be the end.”

He looked out over the city, struggling to find words. She looked up at him, so afraid she had hurt him.

“Lilly...I can’t do this without you,” he whispered.

“You don’t have to. Not yet. There’s still time,” she said.

“Not enough,” he replied, and pulled away from her, the door slamming behind him as he returned to the staircase.

She sat in her chair, the circuit board city full of life below her. She didn’t want to leave, but it wasn’t her choice. She could leave on her terms, and that meant the world to her.

She tried not to think about Harold’s life without her, about Billie Holiday ringing through an almost empty house. She tried not to think about her son’s smiling face as came home from his first day of third grade. She tried not to think about how comforting her husband’s body was when she turned over in the night, warm under the comforter they had bought together. She tried not to think about his smile and his hard, blue eyes.

- - -

It was almost sunrise when she came in from the rooftop, cold and stiff. She was tired of thinking, her mind exhausted of all thought and emotion. She simply wanted sleep. She opened the door quietly, momentarily enjoying the silence of the sleeping house.

She stopped when she saw him in the living room. A floor lamp burned weakly in the corner, and she could see how he lay on the couch, head turned to the open curtains and the early morning. She thought he was asleep until he spoke softly.

“This is going to kill us both. It’s a goddamn abyss.”

She was too tired to form any sufficient response. Her throat hurt from the cold air, and her eyes were sore from crying.

“No it isn’t. You can hate me Harold, but you know I’m right.”

He took a deep breath. “I could never hate you Lilly. But I hate this.”

“Me too,” she said, and quietly left.

He watched the sun rise slowly over the antennas and red brick. He was angry and he was afraid, but as always, she made perfect sense. She always did, and knowing she was right scared him more than anything.

- - -

He heard the sound of music, bass rattling up the walls and the vague sound of someone screaming. He opened her eyes, and saw a thin beam of sunlight across the sheets. Ben had blacked out the windows with a piece of cardboard, and the light seemed to cut in around it.

He glanced over and there she was, bright green eyes intense against the white hair falling over her neck.

“Good morning,” she whispered.

“Good morning,” he replied.

He watched her, and her eyes never lost his. She was waiting for something.

“Are you mad at me Harold?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s too-”

The door to the small room creaked open, and Ben looked in.

“Hope I’m not interrupting,” he said, and he seemed happy. They both assumed smiles.

“I’d love it if I could take you to work. I want you to see what I do. I’ve told you a lot about it, but you should see. It’s pretty cool.”

“We would love nothing more honey,” Lillian said.

They both nodded, and Ben was happy, and closed the door behind him.

She fell back against the pillow. Harold grabbed her hand, and lay back with her.

“Today is going to be horrible,” she said. “I need you at my side. Maybe you can change my mind later, but I need you today.”

He nodded. “Of course. And I hope I can.”

- - -

They sat in the back seat of his small sedan, watching as the city whirred by in a grey blur of bustling figures and concrete. Ben was talking about his work, about the pay scales of personal trainers and the hours they had to work. Harold and Lillian were both deeply lost in thought.

They laughed when was appropriate, and Harold paid attention to Ben’s enthusiasm. He never quite related to his son, always felt disconnected when he told jokes and made himself laugh, or when his mood shifted from smiling to suddenly pissed off. But he always saw himself in Ben’s eyes. The world was a scary place, hard and unforgiving, and when Ben wasn’t talking he knew he could see it. He never understood why his son had moved to New York City after college. He could have lived with them in such comparative peace. This city had always struck Harold as cruel and unforgiving, and though he loved that about it for a while; he couldn’t imagine staying in it forever.

He looked over at Lillian, staring out the window, shoulders sagging in the seat. He felt the city had beaten all three of them, and wanted to go home.

- - -

Harold had the sudden realization he had never been to a gym when they entered, as the unfamiliar smell of sweat and disinfectant mingling with the chlorine of the pool assaulted his senses. Everywhere people in tight clothes wandered, headphones in, all seeming like they wanted to impress each other as they pulled and pushed at machines. Harold found the whole thing ridiculous, and stole a glance at Lillian, wondering if she felt the same.

She was watching Ben as he talked to coworkers, high fived some of the patrons, and slipped into a comfortable mindset Harold had never seen in him before. Ben was happy here and proud of what he did, and Harold was happy to see it. Lillian laughed as Ben introduced them to his coworkers; bright teeth and wide smiles and tan skin. These were his friends, and Ben seemed at home. Lillian smiled at him, clearly proud, and Harold's mood changed for the better.

- - -

After dinner they sat in Ben's somewhat tattered living room, father and son drinking cheap beer from the can. Movie posters hung from the walls, damaged by thumbtacks and age. A dusty tv sat across from the tattered couch. Harold and Lillian sat together, Ben on a splintered wooden chair across from them. Sirens went by, echoing through the chilly night.

But inside it was warm, and the day had been fun. After Ben's work they walked the streets, taking in the incomparable bustle and sights of the city. Ben took them to his favorite places, a small park here, a hot dog stand on the corner of two busy streets. All around them were the vibrant sounds and sights of life. Lillian watched it all with an intensity she had not felt since she had arrived. There was something so surreal about knowing this would be the last time she would be around so many people. She would never feel this frenetic energy again. She was ok with that.

Now they sat, somewhat exhausted. Ben was relaxed, but Lillian was not. They left New York tomorrow morning at eleven, and Lillian had finally built up the courage to have the second conversation she had been dreading for weeks.

She squeezed Harold's hand, and he understood. They both sat up, and Lillian cleared her throat.

"Ben, I have something...very difficult to tell you," she said.

"What's up?" he said, his smile slowly fading as he looked into her eyes.

"I'm sick," she said, "and it's serious."

"What?" he asked. "Like pneumonia or something?"

Harold squeezed her hand and looked at the floor.

"No. It's cancer Ben. And it's not...it's not something they can fix."

Harold did his absolute best not to lose it. She needed him strong, and he would stay strong for her. Whatever it took.

The throaty caw of a crow drifted in from the open window, and Lillian watched as the streetlight highlighted her son's features. He was afraid, and she saw him as a child then. She remembered when they had run into a small sedan in front of the grocery store. The look he had given her from the back seat as the steam poured from the radiator, as she got out of their Pontiac

LeMans to talk to the woman gesticulating wildly through the windshield. She had smiled at Ben then, and Ben had known everything would be alright.

She wished she could smile like that now, but it didn't come.

"So what...what are you saying? Is that why you came out here?"

"Ben, we came out because we wanted to see you. And we are so happy that we did." She turned to Harold, and Harold nodded, choking back a sob. Staying strong.

"But yeah honey...I had to tell you."

Ben ran his fingers through his hair. "Fuck...Mom...I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry, what are we going to do? What can I do?"

Lillian reached out over the table, and grabbed his hand.

"Nothing. There is nothing any of us can do," she whispered.

Harold turned away, gasping for breath.

"What? What do you mean, there are so many things...cancer isn't that big of a deal now, it's like-"

Harold's voice was loud and clear.

"She has made her decision. Ben, believe me, none of this has been easy. But there is nothing you can say that will change anything."

"Well...fuck. Thanks for coming out to drop this on me. Could have used some goddamn warning. See you in the morning," Ben said. He stumbled up the stairs, gripping the handrail, doing his best not to scream as he headed toward his bedroom.

Lilly sighed, and laid her head in Harold's lap. She felt a great emptiness, but as the moon fell, and Harold ran his fingers through her hair and twisted her wedding ring it became acceptance.

- - -

The morning was grey, thick and humid as Harold waved at the cab driver parked in front of the house. Ben had done his best to apologize as they had coffee in the kitchen, and Lillian had assured him he was right, and there was nothing to feel sorry for. It was tense, and it was awkward, and Harold was disappointed. He had no idea what the ideal scenario should be for a situation like this, but it wasn't this.

Lillian hugged her son, and felt a tear hit her shoulder.

"Please take care of yourself Mom," he whispered, and she nodded.

He was so much taller than her, a bit taller than Harold, and it struck her as utterly inconceivable that she had brought him into the world. That everything they had ever discussed had shaped him, and that he had shaped her outlook. He was a person unlike any other, and the enormity of her love for him was almost frightening.

"I will. I'll call as soon as we get home," she said. "And I'll see you soon. Thank you for everything."

He nodded, wiping his eyes.

"Be safe," he replied. She pulled her suitcase into the drizzling rain, and the door fell shut behind her.

"You too dad," Ben said, and hugged Harold. It was a quick embrace, and Harold saw a more serious expression on his son's face than he had ever seen as he grabbed Harold's shoulders.

“You can’t let her do this,” he said. “You have to get her treatment. Dad, this is bullshit, you can’t let her.”

Harold returned the gaze, watching as his son’s eyes flickered across his face, frightened and confused.

“I will do everything I can. But this isn’t up to me, and it isn’t up to you. Son, this is her call.”

“No! No, I could call a hospital or...there has to be something we can do!”

“I’m going to do everything I can Ben. But this is what love is. And I know you love her as much as I do.”

Ben’s hands fell away from Harold’s shoulders, and he looked so young as he turned away.

- - -

As they felt the inertia of take-off, Lillian felt nothing. Harold was expressionless; she knew he would be until they were home. She leaned back in the airplane’s seat, coughed into her sweater, and tried to process what had transpired.

Her child knew the seriousness of her condition, and had failed to make his trajectory clear. He seemed angry, and he seemed scared, and it was very hard for her to bring that into her calculus of how to move forward.

She watched New York disappear below them as they ascended, as the shining glass monoliths became nothing but small points on a map covered by grey clouds.

She would never see this strange place again.

- - -

‘85

“So what do you think?” said Harold.

“It’s...it’s absolutely beautiful. And it’s huge. Can we really afford this?”

“Yeah. With the transfer bonus from work for moving us to Atlanta, we absolutely can. This ain’t New York; things are actually affordable out here.”

Ben ran past them, laughing excitedly and heading up the stairs near the kitchen.

“Ben! Don’t break anything! Be careful up there!”

“Ok!” he said, and she heard him running above them.

She looked around the empty living room. The open windows brought in the sweet smell of the countryside, and the enormous, empty living room seemed filled with endless possibility. She tried to imagine their furniture in here, sitting with Ben and Harold in front of this beautiful fireplace.

“It’s not too...rural for you?” She asked. She had loved this beautiful green countryside from the moment they had found it, but she wasn’t sure he did.

“Not at all. I’m sick of noise. I think it would be good for Ben out here. Away from all the insanity. He seems to like it.”

They heard him laughing upstairs. “This is my room!”

“I love it. It’s the best thing we’ve seen so far by a mile. I love the area, and this house is just...I love it.”

Harold looked around, and nodded. She had noticed he was starting to get grey hair, and it gave him an aged sophistication that she really liked.

“I like it too. It’s got everything we need. Space, good area, big backyard for a garden. It doesn’t need much work.” He smiled at her. “Let’s do it.”

She hugged him and laughed as Ben came down the stairs and asked, “Are we going to live here?”

- - -

Neither of them had ever been so immensely grateful to be home. As they walked through the screen door and light flooded the kitchen, it was all they could do to keep from sitting down at the kitchen table to rest. The world just seemed overwhelming, even in the deep silence of the old trees lining the road. All they wanted to do was sleep, and worry about tomorrow just then.

Lillian was having trouble keeping her eyes open as Harold brought the bags in. He carried them so effortlessly, and though she could see in his eyes his exhaustion, there seemed no outward sign. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. She looked around the kitchen, warm even after their absence. She could be happy here. The harsh light of the hospital filled her with an immense anxiety, but this...this she could live with. So to speak.

She almost laughed at her little joke, but she was simply too tired.

**VII.**

The weeks went by in relative calm. Lillian stayed focused on her routine. She would get up early every morning and cook a healthy breakfast. Sometimes Harold would join her, admiring her in the light of sunrise as she hummed in the kitchen. He did everything he could to be close to her, but knew her well enough to know when she needed to be alone. There were times too, as the days went by, that he would retreat into the yard, and try and clear his mind by walking down their familiar trail, trying not to imagine what was coming. Sometimes he would wake up, and she would be staring down at him with a sad smile.

But they didn't talk about it. In some ways it was the least turbulent time they had ever spent with each other. Everything took a back seat to their being together. They saw few friends, though they did their best to assure them that Lillian was in good health.

Harold spoke with Ben almost every day. He would usually call in the evening, before bed, and Harold would assure him they were doing everything they could, and that Lillian was happily resting. He sometimes got the impression that Ben didn't want to speak with her, that he couldn't handle hearing her voice. Part of him knew Lillian felt the same way.

Harold had talked to Ben about visiting. It had been almost a decade since Ben had been in their house. Ben had agreed, but left it vague as to when. When Harold brought it up to Lillian, she agreed, but it was far from the enthusiasm he had been expecting.

He came to realize by the third week that it seemed almost distasteful to shatter their new found tranquility. That they were closer now than they had ever been, and even through the desperate fear that tugged at them both they were together, and for now, that was enough. They loved Ben as only parents can, but the idea of his being there, of his fearful questions and stress sounded less than positive.

- - -

When the storm finally hit, it hit hard, and neither of them were prepared.

They were sitting in the living room when it happened; Lillian gently dozing in the corner of the couch while Harold read. The dying embers of a fire still glowed dimly, and the heat was still very much there. She stirred, and stretched, and he watched her over the top of his reading glasses.

She sat up suddenly, afraid, searching the room with her wide eyes.

"Harold? Harold?!"

He went to her. "Lilly it's ok, I'm here."

He hugged her to him, and she sighed, her face in his chest.

"I had a dream that...that I lost you," she said. "I thought you were gone."

"No," he said. "You're not going to lose me. I'll be here." He sighed, and placed his chin on her head, closing his eyes in the familiar scent of lavender. It seemed fainter now.

"I'm losing you," he whispered, and she felt her tighten against him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's not up to me."

"Isn't it?" he replied. "You don't have to leave...you could have more time."

She pulled away from him, and he could feel her relief turning to hurt. He regretted saying it for a moment, but then an anger flared, and he wanted to say more.

*"How can SHE be hurt?! She's the one leaving me!"*

"That's not true," she said. "And you know it. You think this was my choice?"

"No," he snapped. He could feel himself losing control now. The stress and fear were like a dam breaking. "But you could do something about it. Instead of giving up."

She backed away from him on the couch, her eyes locked on his, filled with anger and shock.

“Giving up?” she said, her voice hard with disbelief. “How dare you say that to me? How can you be so selfish?”

“I’m being selfish?!” he shouted. He wanted to rub his face, but knocked a glass from the coffee table and it shattered on the floor. “You’re leaving me here alone Lilly. And not just me! You’re leaving your son for the love of God, because you’re too afraid to face this thing. You’re too afraid to even try. Don’t you dare call me selfish when you are abandoning everyone because you’re scared!”

“Is that what you think Harold? That this is the *easier* choice? You don’t know what you’re talking about, that is abundantly clear.”

“Then tell me!” he shouted. “Fucking talk to me instead of pretending like everything is fine! Like this isn’t happening!”

“I can’t!” she screamed, and her intensity snapped him back. He had never heard her like this. “You wouldn’t understand, and there is no way you ever could! So don’t judge me when the only reason you’re upset is how this will affect *you*! This is my nightmare, so who the fuck do you think you are that you can talk to me this way?”

“Lilly, I-”

“I’m dying Harold. You think I don’t know that? You think I don’t know what that means? You think I want to leave you?!”

The anger was gone, replaced with a heavy silence. Harold felt tears prick at his eyes as he watched her face fall, as she seemed to sink into the couch, exhausted and afraid.

“I can feel it. I can feel everything falling away. It hurts like hell, but that’s not the worst of it. It’s not the coughing or the fatigue; it’s that that everything is just...not working anymore.”

“Lilly, we could do something about the pain at least. Christ, let me help you!”

“You have been helping me, I couldn’t do this without you. By being with me, by just...by being yourself.”

“Of course. I’ll be with you the entire way; I would never leave you, wherever we were,” he said.

She sniffed, and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, barely more than shadows in the light of the dying fire.

“I know. And that’s why I want to stay here. I don’t want to ruin both of our lives. This is our home. This is where I wanted to live. And this is where I want...it to end. Not with a whimper in a room full of medicine and doctors. I want this time to be the happiest time of my life, not the saddest. I hope you understand that.”

Harold gave a barely perceptible nod. “I’m trying to understand. That’s really all I can do.”

She reached across the couch and squeezed his hand. “I know. And that’s why I want to spend this time with you. That’s why I love you. And why I always will.”

“And I love you too Lilly. Always.”

She smiled through the tears as she felt him squeeze her hand in return, and gently twist her ring.

- - -

It was strange having him here, after so much time alone together. Strange, but not at all unpleasant.

“And how are you feeling Lillian?” John asked.

They sat around the table, untouched sandwiches in front of them, a pitcher of iced tea coated with condensation in the center. It was unseasonably warm and the windows were open, bringing in the smells of Lillian’s newly planted herb garden into the clean kitchen.

“As well as can be expected,” she replied.

“What does that mean exactly?” he pressed.

“I feel terrible. I’m weak...always tired. Everything hurts, I’m coughing constantly. I don’t know how this poor man puts up with it.”

“Simple. I make her sleep downstairs when she coughs too much,” Harold said with a wink across the table at his wife. They both laughed, and it was a great relief to John. He had been expecting the worst when he had picked up his phone late last night, a frightened call that seemed out of character for them both.

He was relieved, but not altogether surprised. As a general practitioner he was rarely around terminal patients, but when he had been, he was always impressed by the extraordinary tenacity and sheer determination of strong willed people. He knew she was suffering, he knew Harold was too, but in this moment they were genuinely laughing, and it was hard to see the pain.

“You’re a lucky woman Lilly,” he said with his big smile.

Lillian nodded. “That I am.”

- - -

The afternoon had gone by quickly. Now they sat on the wide porch, watching the sun set against the green oaks of the west. They didn’t speak; the only sound was the creak of the wood as Harold and John rocked in their chairs, and the faint tinkling of ice in their drinks. Lillian watched as the shadows fell, as the abnormally warm wind of the day took the mist and turned it to a brisk reminder that it was dark again. She smiled, remembering the conversations they had shared, how she had deftly managed to keep them light and fun and brisk and how she had enjoyed every moment of this afternoon with these two remarkable men.

She glanced back, and saw just what she wanted to see. They both sat, leaning forward in their chairs, stoic faces almost grim in the purple light. They talked in hushed tones, their deep voices an aesthetic comfort she deeply enjoyed. She listened to them speak, not trying to make out what they said, until they noticed her gaze and waited for her to ask them something. She didn’t, only smiled, and they shifted in their seats and smiled back.

She loved men, and she always had. She loved their strength, their weakness, their complex desire to love and cherish and destroy and take and give and kill and create. Their complexities fascinated her, their aesthetic beauty enticed her, and she always hated when she heard “men are simple.” She watched her lover and her dear friend and she pitied people who couldn’t see how beautiful they were. Maybe those people hadn’t been so lucky.

She turned back to the nightfall, to her great green sea of a lawn and was grateful even as she felt the pain in her lungs push up and swallow her.

- - -

Morning came, and Harold was up early. He felt the strong urge to clean, to make sure the house was everything she deserved it to be. Before the sun had even risen he had fixed the leaking faucet in the kitchen and cleaned the downstairs bathroom.

By eight he was surprised not to hear any sounds from upstairs, not the clanking of the old pipes as she turned on the shower or the familiar sound of the bedroom door opening and closing. By eight thirty he was worried, she never slept in this late.

He washed his hands, checked his reflection in the kitchen window, and went upstairs.

- - -

The patterned quilt was pulled up to her chest, and her great mane of white hair spilled out over the pillows in the bright light of morning. She looked like a statue with her hand resting on her forehead; the subject of a Jules Pascin. He loved her like this, beautiful in the yellow of the morning sun.

He watched with a smile until she took a ragged breath, and there was no more joy. He was alarmed at her ragged breathing, it sounded like she had fluid in her lungs.

He sat, careful not to wake her, and kissed her cheek.

Her eyes fluttered open, and it took a moment for the sparkling green to focus on his face.

“I don’t...I don’t feel well,” she said.

He bent down and kissed her forehead.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Because we need to move the couch in the living room, and I’m not feeling up to it,” he whispered in her ear.

She laughed softly, and turned away.

“Don’t be mean,” she said, and was immediately asleep again.

- - -

He spent the morning at her side, making sure she was comfortable as she woke up, coughed and fell back asleep again with the weight of his hand on her forehead. When he brought up her lunch on a tray it was all he could do not to drop it when he saw her.

For the first time, he really saw her illness. Her face was thin, thinner than it had ever been, wrinkled skin pulled across her high cheeks. The covers draped across her chest, tent-like, and there was too little underneath. He sat down as softly as he could on the bed, the tray at his feet.

He ran his fingers through her hair, almost as soft as the silk underneath, and tried to imagine life without her. It felt like a rock in his chest, impossibly heavy, and he was relieved when he felt her fingers curl around his.

“I had a weird dream Harold,” she said, her eyes still closed. “So terribly strange.”

Then she laughed a joyous, strong laughter that had no trace of sickness. Her face seemed suddenly fuller as he watched her.

“I dreamt that we were in school. Mr. Mr...Mordecai I think his name was. So long ago, High school maybe? It was a math class but there were whiskey bottles on our desks instead of text books, and he kept yelling at us to stop talking. But we didn’t, we were having too much fun.”

He smiled, and tried to imagine. “How did I look?” he asked.

“You looked great. You always do. Much better than I do right now I’m sure.”

He lay down next to her, lying on his shoulder so he could see her perfectly.

“Let me make something very clear,” he whispered. “You have always been the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. The most beautiful person, the most beautiful everything. And you always will be Lilly.”

She smiled and closed her eyes again. “Thank you.”

Harold felt sick. This was the first time he had lied to her in years. The truth was, he was frightened by her frailty and he hated to look at her, and the guilt in that made him want to disappear.

- - -

She had woken up before him, and she felt so much better. The last day had been brutal, a constant sharpness in her lungs, a weakness she couldn't control, and a strong sense that she could not let go and succumb to any pain, no matter how severe. She could see the worry in him as he tried to comfort her and failed. She had been out of her own control, wincing and pulling the damp quilt and blanket against her chest as she had coughed and coughed until she felt her throat would split open.

But then there were moments when she could relax, look up between her fits of feverish sleep, and see him there. As he always had been.

When she woke up this morning, she felt a great sense of relief. The fire in her lungs had receded to a gentle roar, and she felt strength again. As she walked to the stair case she avoided the mirror, not at all interested in how she looked. She winced as she realized she was afraid to glance at the glass and see her face.

*“What good what it do?”*

She remembered her twenties, when she had been so obsessed with her appearance, with the way everyone else perceived her. That seemed so deeply foolish now, the concern that genetic propensity was tantamount to success was alien and forgotten. She had loved being beautiful her entire life, and she knew she wasn't anymore.

She was so proud not to care. She hadn't bothered to look in a mirror in weeks.

And as she headed downstairs, all she had were thoughts of him; of repaying the kindness he had shown her yesterday, of showing this person that had seen so much of her that she was far from weak.

- - -

Lillian was singing when he came downstairs, and he slowed his descent as he listened to her, not wanting to interrupt. Her voice was louder and clearer than he had ever heard it before. There were times, few and far between when he would catch her singing over the years, but it was always quietly as she worked on something else, or drowned out in the cascade of the shower. When she realized he was there she would always stop, not just embarrassed but almost angry he had had overheard. He had never understood her hesitance because it sounded very beautiful to him.

Never before this beautiful. It took him only a few seconds to recognize the song, a sharp and strong rendition of Red is the Rose, and as he came around the staircase and saw her framed against the kitchen windows and the green of the oaks at daybreak he had to take a deep breath. She seemed completely recovered, sailing across the kitchen like she was dancing, the sleeves of

her nightgown a silhouette. He thought he was still dreaming, that she was a spirit here to remind him how much he loved her, that he had experienced this dream before-

“Harold!” she said when she saw him. She stopped, out of breath and coughing softly into her hand. “Hope I wasn’t too loud. I know you’re tired after yesterday.”

He couldn’t tell if she was joking until he came closer, until he could see the earnestness in her eyes. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead.

“No, you weren’t too loud. You weren’t loud enough. I always knew you had a voice on you Lilly. Wonder why you’ve been keeping it from me until now.”

“Not too many secrets to keep now,” she said softly. “But thank you my dear.”

She gently pushed him away from her. “Now sit down. I’m trying to finish breakfast and you’re distracting me.”

“It really was beautiful Lilly. You are incredible. Even still, you continue to impress me,” he said, and he was so happy when he saw the color rise in her cheeks. It had been too long since he had made her blush.

“That’s enough,” she said and turned away with a laugh. “Paper is on the table. Food will be ready soon.” He watched her for a moment as she probed a skillet with the spatula. She didn’t want or need anything from him at the moment.

He sat down, and it was strange to him how perfect everything was. A glass of orange juice, the smell of pancakes and bacon, his favorite newspaper folded on the table. And his beautiful Lillian. He was close to happiness for a moment, but he looked up.

She was bent underneath the stove, palms on the floor, coughing, her arms shaking. He moved quickly to be next to her, letting her fall against him, supporting her head and chest as the coughing fit slowed.

“Lilly it’s ok. I’m here.”

The spasms finally stopped, and the smell of burning food began to fill the kitchen.

“I’m sorry Harold. Couldn’t even keep this going. I wanted to,” she whispered hoarsely.

He ran his fingers through her thinning hair, his back cold and aching against the metal oven.

“You don’t ever be sorry Lilly. Not for anything.”

- - -

They were in the garden together, her with her hair tied up in a bandana, Harold in his work jeans, both of them doing their best to keep the rows straight as they planted seeds. The faint sound of the muffled voices came from the radio in the kitchen, the sounds of birds flitting from tree to tree. But they were focused on a conversation, and they were having fun.

“Black thumb?! What do you mean?” Harold said.

“Dear, you know I think the best of you, but everything you touch you kill. You don’t remember the roses out front?”

He laughed as she pulled out soft earth with a trowel, dropped a few small seeds in the hole, and did her best to make it look undisturbed. A few drops of water from the watering can, and she slowly moved on. He was a row behind her, planting the tomatoes. They both moved slowly, her because she felt hypoglycemic, him because he didn’t want to make her self-conscious.

“What about New York?” he said. “You remember the garden I grew, in the living room, right next to the fire escape? Tell me I have a black thumb, give me a break.”

“Garden?” she laughed. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly so the cough would fade as she dropped more seeds. “As I recall your ‘garden’ was one plant, and one not that difficult to grow. Tell me, why didn’t you keep it on the fire escape where everyone could see it?”

He laughed, and wiped his forehead. The dirt left a brown streak across his skin, and she noticed he was sweating. She felt a deep chill to her bones, and realized she would probably be cold the rest of her life even with the sun all around her. Dread fell in, but she tried to push it away.

“You’re just jealous,” he said. “You were always such a goody two shoes.”

He smiled at her, across the freshly sprouting plants, across the earth they had tilled together, across the nonsense and the fear.

- - -

“Go Harold! It’s every year, and I’ll be fine. You’re so sweet for worrying, but go. I want you to have some fun. You deserve it,” she said as he placed his coffee on the table.

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t miss it that much, it just a-”

“Go,” she said, and reached across the kitchen table, folding her hands into his. She smiled, and could tell she had done her part to make him feel comfortable leaving.

“It’s two nights. I can come back early if you need anything.”

“Harold,” she said. “I promise I’ll be in touch if anything goes wrong. But it won’t. Have a wonderful time my dear.”

They finished breakfast laughing about what they had seen on the news and that Lillian had food on her cheek after she was so sure she had washed her face.

Their laughter was music to each other; that had always brought them closer.

- - -

Harold snapped out of thought as a car blared its horn at him as it passed, and pulled his attention back to the road. He focused on the yellow divider as he headed toward the freeway and tried to be positive. He was going to see his brother, he tried to be excited. It had been too long since he had been able to unwind, but from the moment he left he felt a distinct unease.

He pulled over, careful to use his blinker, and came to a stop in the mud on the side of the road. He rested his head on the steering wheel and did his best to keep it together. He heard the splat of rain on the windshield, and when he looked up, the glass was covered and he could hear the patter of weather outside. He looked into the rearview mirror. It was gray, and it was unwelcoming, but he heard Lilly’s enthusiasm urging him on. He turned the keys and pulled away, resolving to try and enjoy himself.

For her.

- - -

Lilly was also driving, for the first time in weeks. It was a deep relief when it started to rain; she had always loved the coziness of being inside when rain fell. The stress fell away as she realized there would be fewer people on the road, and piloted the Cadillac through empty streets. She watched as the headlights bounced across the rain slick asphalt, as they half illuminated

houses that looked something like hers, as the familiar sights started to look alien in the feeble light. It felt like night even when the sun would peak briefly through the clouds.

She had encountered this so much in the last few weeks; that this was the last time she would feel, or see, or experience something. It was overwhelming to say goodbye on such a large scale, she couldn't possibly process everything she looked at. At times like these she took a deep breath and kept going, trying to see the beauty and feel none of the sadness.

She was glad it was raining today, it was suitably dramatic. She smiled when she remembered. When she was young she knew there would be a movie about her life. About her exploits, the crazy shit she did, the adventures that were never expected, the high seas and love and imprint she would leave on the world. It hadn't happened, but this felt like a good ending to that movie. Even if it would never be.

As she pulled into the parking lot and turned off the car she sighed. She took a deep breath, tried not to cough, and slowly opened the now heavy car door. As she stepped into the rain and struggled to stand she realized the ending wouldn't be as good as she had hoped.

- - -

The waiting room was empty but the door was unlocked, and Lillian wasn't sure what to do. She worried for a moment and then thought it would be funny to ring the call bell on the receptionist's very messy desk. She hit it hard, delighting in the gentle chime, and then hit it again. Inhibition seemed to be disappearing, and that was something she had always wanted. It made her a bit happy, despite why she had come here. She felt young for a moment, and she pulled her hair out of her face and did her best to tuck it into her bun.

"Lilly?"

She heard his deep voice from the examination room, and dropped her hands to her side. She didn't want to be caught fixing her hair. She smiled at herself.

*"As if it matters."*

John emerged from the dark examination room and beamed his smile.

"You look great!" he said with such conviction. She knew he was lying, but loved him all the more for it as she hugged him. He always told her what she wanted to hear in an honest way. He wanted everyone around him to be happy, and for that she loved him.

"Thanks John," she replied, and let go. She stepped back a bit, unsure how to proceed.

"Have a seat," he said, and gestured toward the nearest chairs. He moved to help her, but she waved him away and walked as well as she could toward the leather seats with the wooden armrests. The dimmed lights cast large shadows across the waiting room, and John realized it.

He reached for the switch quickly and looked like a teenager then, suddenly aware he had made a mistake. He flipped on the harsh lights.

"No," Lilly said. "It was fine." He turned them off again, and she marveled at the power she still had.

She sat on the uninspired chair in the uninspired room and tried to summon her courage.

"Lilly, those are for patients, I have better places to sit."

"I'm a patient tonight," she said.

"Ok," he replied, and sat next to her, crossing his legs and adopting his professional persona.

"John," she said, and leaned forward as if she were conducting a job interview. "Harold gets everything, except for a substantial sum left aside for Ben-"

“I have to interrupt you. I’m not a lawyer; I cannot discuss in any legal sense your end of life plans-”

“Stop talking,” she said. “I have a lawyer; this was locked down long ago. I’m telling you so you know. You deserve to know. I’m not here for legal advice.”

John nodded. “Understood. So...why are you here?”

“I’m here because I’m in a great deal of pain. It’s beyond chronic; it takes everything I have not to scream out loud. I’ve endured because my life is wonderful and my husband makes my life so much better, but I am not ok anymore. My chest hurts. My bones hurt. Everything hurts always. It’s a hard thing to describe to people.”

John nodded, trying not to think about how long he had known her, how long he had thought she was beautiful. It hurt him to see her like this.

“What can I do?” he said.

“I don’t know exactly,” she replied, and caught his eyes. Lilly’s were stalwart and beautiful green.

“I need something for the pain,” she said. “Something that can stop it.”

“I can imagine,” he replied without hesitation. “I’d be happy to prescribe the appropriate medication in addition to treatment. I know it’s been awhile but-”

She took a deep breath, and winced. “No,” she said. “I don’t need medicine. I can go out the old fashioned way but God it would make it so much easier.”

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I just mean all this pain...it would be easier without it. Or if there were less of it. I don’t know John, it’s just...it’s hard.”

He placed his hand on her shoulder, and his bushy eyebrows furrowed.

“I’m not going to pretend to know what you’re going through. You seem to be handling it better than most, but I can’t imagine. I can prescribe you hydrocodone, which is often used in cases similar to yours, but I’m telling you Lilly, if you would just let us try, we could make it even easier. You don’t have to suffer like this.”

“That would be great John. I think it would really help. And I know. But this is the only thing that makes sense to me, and frankly no one is going to change my mind.”

She placed her hand on his, still resting on her shoulder. He was alarmed by how thin she had become, but he could still hear the ever-present resolve and strength in her voice.

“I understand,” he said quietly. “I’ll give you the prescription on one condition. That you use it responsibly, and that you tell Harold. Seriously Lilly, it’s easy to misjudge the dosage, and in your condition...”

She nodded.

“Just promise me you’ll be careful. Follow the instructions I give you exactly.”

“Of course,” and her smile came through. “Thank you John. You know you mean the world to me. We couldn’t have come even this far without you. You’ve always been so good to us.”

He stood, and headed to his desk to grab a pad.

“I hope I’ve helped, though goddamnit I wish it hadn’t happened.”

She stood silently as he scribbled with an old silver pen, and when he turned around, she grabbed the slip and hugged him.

“You’ve more than helped. I can never thank you enough. For everything.”

She kissed his cheek, and with a squeeze of his hand turned to leave.

“Lilly!”

She turned back, and he saw tears in her eyes in the dim light, though her smile was unmistakably genuine.

“Just...call me with any questions. I want to see you soon.”

She nodded, and she glanced over his face and his office with a lingering intensity that worried him for reasons he couldn't quite fathom.

With one final smile and a nod she left into the gray rain, and he was suddenly aware of how alone he was.

- - -

Lilly set her unfinished sandwich down on the plate. She had forced herself to eat, and had enjoyed the first few bites of prosciutto and gouda but immediately realized it was too rich. She had always loved both of them, had gone out of her way to treat herself, but she simply wasn't interested.

She looked around the gleaming kitchen, satisfied as she dropped her plate in the sink. It had never felt like her domain, but with the sliced sandwich on the clean oak of the table she was proud. It was a perfect domestic scene all for her, and she was proud to have finally mastered that too.

She took a sip of water, doing her best to ignore her shaking hand and the spill across her white shirt. She knew it would dry. These things bothered her so much less since yesterday.

She moved slowly to the living room, and switched on the radio. She recognized the piece almost immediately, Ludovico Einaudi's Oltremare. She paused for a moment, letting the keys remind her of when they had spent entire Sundays in bed (it was always Sunday) listening to music and reading to each other and not having to speak and simply being together in a way she knew no one else ever could.

Lilly opened the bay window behind the couch, struggling with the handle. As the window came open, she felt the chill breeze of fresh evening rain and took a deep breath. She was delighted when it didn't hurt. It blew in and fluttered the curtains behind her as the piano fluttered too and she couldn't help but be content.

- - -

It was late by her standards, but she hadn't checked the clock in a long time. The small fire she had built clung to life as the heavy rain pounded against the glass and the roof. Lilly sat on the couch, legs crossed underneath her, looking at a thick photo album that rested across her knees.

She flipped the page, loving the black triangles that held the photos, the deliberateness in which they had been placed. It was strange to see her life in a series of stills.

She had only captured extraordinary memories, sometimes only once a year. Pictures of her, arms wide at their first apartment, the yellowing of the photograph a stark reminder of how far they had come. She remembered that moment, spinning through their seemingly vast living room, overcome by joy that they could actually live here.

A phenomenal picture of Harold with a cigarette hanging from his lips, trying to light it as the city stretched on behind him.

Her favorite picture of herself. She was smiling, one leg leaning against a building (she couldn't remember which one) her long coat blowing in the wind. Her hair was perfect; her eyes

looked right at the camera. It was the first time she ever saw a picture that captured the way she saw herself.

And then there was Ben. It was strange to see the focus shift from pictures of Harold and herself to almost exclusively pictures of their baby, their toddler, their tiny little boy. It was how their life had shifted, from them to him.

Ben's toothless smile and pale skin as he stumbled toward them in the washed out photo where he looked like a beautiful little monster. The memory of him walking like a dinosaur as she and Harold lay on the floor, Harold snapping a picture, and Ben falling into them as his legs gave out, and all of their laughter.

When Ben turned eight, his birthday party at Pizza Hut. It was horrifying to her and Harold, but the kids had so much fun playing at the sticky tables and eating the greasy pizza.

A great shot of Harold leaning over, trying to console some annoying screaming child as Ben looked on with concern.

Ben at fourteen, arms crossed, in bed with his headphones on, a perfect embodiment of a surly teenager. She laughed as the tears came. He had tried so hard to be surly but was never very good at it.

Harold in their new house, shirt off, fixing the gutter in the front yard. He was smiling at her from the ladder; hammer in hand, the sun beating down. She remembered taking that photo very clearly, how she wanted him to come down and take her into the bedroom.

She was wiping her eyes now, crying as she let go in the empty living room. She knew this would be a catharsis and had planned ahead for it. Still, she was surprised at the wave of emotion that threatened to swallow her.

She decided it was enough, that the memories would be unending if she went down this road. She closed the album, and set it gently on the table. She leaned back, lifted her champagne flute as delicately as she could, and took a sip. It was delicious. The most expensive bottle she had ever purchased, a Krug Private Cuvee.

As she watched the embers of the dying fire and sipped her champagne she felt no sadness, but a dawning realization that she had been incredibly lucky. She placed her hand on the photo album, her book of memories, and smiled as the wood popped.

- - -

“Good morning Harold.”

“Hello my dear, how are you?”

“I'm doing well actually,” she replied, the receiver nestled in her neck as she flipped the bacon sizzling on the stove. “Did you have fun?”

“I did,” he replied, and she could tell he had. “We didn't do much, just shot the shit. Missed you though.”

“Missed you too. It was good being alone for a while, gave me some clarity. Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

“I'll be in before you wake up,” he replied. “Make you breakfast.”

“Sounds nice. I'm making breakfast now. Cooking all the bacon so you can't have any tomorrow.”

“Typical,” he said, and they both laughed.

“Have a good time my love. You deserve it,” she said, dropping the bacon onto a plate and turning off the burner.

“You too,” he replied. “And Lilly...I really do miss you. I wish I was there.”

“Me too,” she said. “Drive safe. Can’t wait to see you.”

She hung up the phone and sat down to breakfast. She felt a great relief knowing he could have fun without her.

- - -

She sat at his desk, pen in hand, a piece of empty stationary resting underneath. She was admiring how clean and organized he kept it, every bit of paper, every spreadsheet and financial statement documented in white binders. She hadn’t seen him here in a long time, but she liked it when she did. He would sit for hours, pouring over their finances, calling his brokers, grumbling about the state of the market. She knew their finances well enough to know that he really wasn’t doing anything, that their substantial collection of stocks and bonds needed no management, but he loved it, and therefore so did she.

She tried to write, and then dropped the pen.

*“This is impossible,”* she thought.

She listened to the birds outside through the open window, calling from the oaks. She could see a sliver of blue from the corner of the living room window. It struck her that she had never sat at his desk before, that after all of these decades there were places she hadn’t been in her home.

She smiled as she thought about their life together, and began to write.

- - -

The garden was doing well. It made her unspeakably happy to see the fragile, green stems reaching up to the sky in meticulous rows. She sprinkled a bit of water from the watering can, and pulled some branches that had fallen from the trees above away from the sprouts. She tried to find more to do, but there simply wasn’t. The garden would be fine without her, and she had done all she could.

She looked up at the house. The white façade was slightly faded, the windows needed to be cleaned, but it was unmistakably beautiful. The yard was clean and elegant, even the furniture on the porch perfectly placed. She and Harold had made this place a palace together, and the enormity of everything they had accomplished was awesome. This would all go on without her, but it could not have been without her. She had done well, in every way, and it was hard for her to be afraid of what was coming knowing that.

She coughed so hard she almost lost her balance, and the raw tearing in her throat was unbearable.

It was time. She had made up her mind days ago but never accepted it. As she looked out over her immaculate yard, and felt weak and hurt and afraid it became real.

It was time.

**VIII.**

“Hey mom, what’s up?”

His voice sounded distracted, even through the static of the phone line, but she was so glad to hear it.

“Nothing much,” she said, and her eyes fell to the floor as she lied.

She sat at the kitchen table, the telephone cord stretched across the white tile. She felt tethered to the headset, and wished she could move to the window to look outside.

“Thinking about getting a cell phone,” she said. She had no idea of what possessed her to say it; she couldn’t imagine anything less true or relevant.

“Oh yeah?” Ben replied, genuinely excited. “What kind? You would be amazed what these things can do.”

She knew he didn’t care about her phone, but his excitement at the minutia of her life was all she could expect. He loved her, that she knew, but talking to her about anything important was a burden and required a skillset he did not possess. This was easier.

“Don’t know yet,” she said. She felt tears rising, and took a deep breath. “Trying to get your dad to get one too.”

Ben laughed. He felt free, she could hear it, free of her illness and the crushing reality of what was coming. She thought about herself at his age, the vastly different priorities, and the sense that the world could still be an exciting and kind place.

“Yeah right. There’s no way dad’s getting a cell phone. He’d burn the house down first.”

She laughed, and it felt good.

Her throat tightened as she tried to speak. The logical side of her wanted to make sure she covered everything she had thought about before she had picked up the phone.

“How are you?” she asked.

“I’m good! Gwen is moving in. Did I tell you that yet?”

“No, you didn’t,” Lillian said. She couldn’t stop it, and the tears spilled as she heard the excitement in his voice.

“Yeah! Her lease was up, and we were looking for an apartment for her, and then we realized...what the hell. We’d be great roommates. In addition to everything else.”

He laughed. “She really is great mom. I know you’re going to love her. We’ve got big plans.”

She struggled to keep her voice even, struggled to hide the storm of joy and sadness that was pushing into her voice.

“I have no doubt Ben. You two are wonderful together I’m sure.”

She remembered that moment, when Harold had first suggested they move to New York, to bring their lives together in that agonizingly permanent way. That sweeping thrill of the unknown, and utter fear, and conquering love and faith that they could do anything together.

“Are you ok? You sound like you’re sick or something,” he said.

Lillian tried not to sob. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and took a deep breath.

“No I’m fine, sorry, problem with the connection. It sounds like things are going great. I’m so happy for you honey.”

“Thank you. They really are. I’m excited. I feel like everything is finally falling into place. Couldn’t have done it without you guys. You know that right?”

“Of course we do,” she said. The light of the early morning sun spilling into the kitchen was blurry through her tears. She took another breath.

“Seriously mom. I know I’m not where you guys were at my age, but I’m getting there. I’ve been an asshole sometimes, but I really am grateful. I wouldn’t have any of this without you. Just wanted to say thanks.”

She could tell he felt awkward at her silence, but she could not respond. She dropped the receiver on the table and let go. It was rare she lost control, but there was nothing she could do now. She cried as she thought of him, in the concrete beast of New York, smiling and being afraid, and getting gray hair, and being frustrated with his children and hopefully, please God hopefully, finding some of the happiness she found. She loved him with everything she had, and had no idea how to say goodbye.

So she decided not to.

There were no words. No way to say what she felt, no way to sum up the extraordinary pride and joy she felt at her son being who he was, living his life by following his heart and everything he was.

She picked up the receiver.

“Sorry, I dropped it,” she said, and didn’t care how flimsy it sounded.

“No problem. Hope I didn’t get too mushy on you.”

She smiled. “My dear, I couldn’t be happier for you. I am so damn proud. You just keep being you.”

“Thanks mom! But how are *you*? How are you feeling?”

“Better,” she said. “Less pain. Thanks for asking.”

“And how is-”

The familiar sound of Harold’s truck pulling into the driveway was a sudden escape, and she took it.

“Your dad just got home. Let’s talk later?”

“Uhhh...yeah, ok. I’m gonna be out tonight, but give me a call later this week yeah? Tell dad hello.”

“Of course. And Ben...”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for what you said. I love you so much. And we’re so proud of you. Always know that.”

He laughed nervously.

“Thanks mom. I love you guys too. Take care of yourself. We’ll talk later ok?”

She nodded, sniffed, and hung up the receiver. She put her palms and forehead against the wall as the truck engine died, and she heard the comforting sound of Harold’s footsteps in the gravel of the driveway.

She opened her eyes, took a deep breath, and ran her fingers through her hair. She wore her favorite sweater, and she smiled as the door opened.

He deserved her at her best right now, however hard that might be.

- - -

He pulled into the driveway, and rested his head on the steering wheel. The entire drive home he had been thinking about her, about everything they had been through, about the life they had built together. He slammed his hand against the dashboard as he thought about her smile when they had finished decorating the house all those years ago. How she had whispered, “It’s beautiful Harold.”

He wanted to fix her, to rip out what was eating her away from the inside. He felt a rage that surprised him at this thing, this fucking toxic thing that was taking her away. He looked up at the house, their beautiful house, the oaks swaying gently in the autumn breeze. He wanted to see her so badly, but he was afraid.

“Goddamnit,” he said, grabbed his bag, and walked up the driveway.

She looked wonderful when he opened the front door. Her hair was like moonlight spilling over her shoulders, tied in an exotic braid he had never seen before. She was smiling, wearing his favorite black sweater, and she hugged him hard when he came in. She was so beautiful, so otherworldly; he couldn’t remember why he had left.

“I missed you!” she said, and he kissed the top of her head, lost in the smell of lavender and her warm body against his.

- - -

She heard the buzz of the alarm, and fumbled on the nightstand to make it stop. She took a deep breath, as she always did now to gauge how the day would be, and was happy when she only winced a little. She stood, careful not to disturb Harold. He didn’t stir.

She slid into her slippers, and shuffled to the window near their closet. It was small, a strange, awkwardly placed window too near the inside wall to provide any real light.

She remembered when they had first come into the room, empty of any furniture, walls uncared for, the room completely bereft of anything personal. He had pointed and laughed at this window. She had looked out and fallen in love with the view.

Now, it was her favorite place to stare at everything they had accomplished. There was a sill at perfect elbow height, so she could lay her chin in her hands and admire their yard. From here, she could see the sweeping green of their lawn, the extraordinary row of oaks that stood tall and proud and would stand for hundreds of years. She could see the outer rims of her garden, a light blossom against the green of the lush grass.

It wasn’t the best view of the yard, but it was the most intimate. She stayed there for several minutes as the sun rose. She had set her alarm at the perfect time, making sure she saw the fresh pink rays spill through the oak branches as they shuffled in the morning breeze. She watched until Harold rolled over, then placed her hand against the glass, smiled, and walked away.

The handprint faded slowly as the sun came through the window.

- - -

She laughed when he came into the kitchen yawning, rubbing his eyes, in his grey sweat pants and Lake Burton sweater. She put down the skillet, and turned the stovetop off as the grease sizzle settled.

“Good morning lazy!” she said.

He laughed in return, and for a second looked silly as he yawned again. But then his face grew serious, and her heart raced, because she knew this look and she was so excited for what was coming.

“I would have come down earlier,” he said. “But I heard a piece on the radio about counterpoint. I didn’t know the Latin was punctus contra punctum, but it makes sense. Point against point, I should have remembered that from college. I’ve forgotten so much.”

“Everyone knows that Harold,” she said.

She was not disappointed. He always had that look in his eye. He always knew things as though they were obvious to the rest of the world, and she could never get enough of it.

“Not everyone,” he said.

He came to her side and wrapped his arm around her waist. She wriggled against him.

“Harold, I don’t want to burn the house down. This pan is heavy.”

“Burn the house down. I can’t imagine a better way to go than this,” he said.

She stopped, and dropped the skillet onto the metal burner with a loud crash. He jumped back.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she said, so frustrated with herself for ruining the moment. She tried to ignore the sudden weakness that threatened to floor her, and put her hand against the counter. She could see the worry in his eyes. He moved toward her.

“I’m fine!” she said, and smiled. As she straightened it seemed to become true, and she felt her strength return.

“I really am my love,” she said, and reached for the plates above the counter. “Now relax. I don’t know the next time I’ll be able to cook you breakfast.”

“Better be tomorrow or you’re sleeping outside.”

She laughed as the bacon fell onto the plate.

- - -

They laughed harder at that breakfast than they had in years.

The food was extraordinary, Lillian had cooked everything in her exceptional skill set, and as they complimented each other they remembered everything. They spoke of Harold’s bellbottoms in the seventies, Lillian’s shoulderpads in the eighties-

“My boss made me!”

They laughed over cups of coffee, they laughed even when Lillian would cough and Harold had to kneel at her side, massaging her back until she could look up. Lillian laughed when Harold had to wipe the blood from her lips with the dishrag.

“I’ve been wanting to get rid of that thing for years anyway, always hated the pattern.”

Harold didn’t laugh at that. He pressed his forehead against hers, caught her eyes in his, and whispered everything he loved about her.

- - -

She had planned the day meticulously. After the extraordinary breakfast Lillian grabbed Harold’s hand and a pack she had prepared earlier, and pulled him outside into the grass perfumed air and humid morning. They walked side by side, Harold on the inside of the road in his strange streak of chivalry he felt compelled to keep alive.

“Because,” he said, as his face flushed with pink and he adjusted the straps on the backpack. “Long ago, people used to throw things out the window, and people would aim for the street but not always make it so...better the man get hit with it than the woman.”

She tried to suppress a smile. She knew this of course, and remembered asking him about it years before, but it made her so happy to see him embarrassed by something so silly. He hated talking about bodily functions, and she had always gone far out of her way to keep them as secret

as she practically could, but at times like this, she loved to have her fun. It was a juvenility she had always loved keeping alive, an internal naiveté so at odds with his otherwise solemn demeanor. It was another thing she loved about him. Another thing she would miss.

“What would they throw out?” she asked, managing to keep a straight face.

“Well, it was before plumbing,” he sighed, and she laughed. “Now though, and more importantly, if a car is going to hit one of us, I’d much rather it be me.” His face tightened for a moment after he said that, and she wrapped her hand in his as they walked. She knew they were thinking the same thing, but the last thing she wanted to do was bring it up.

He was unspeakably glad she didn’t.

- - -

The creek was just as they had left it. The thin yet powerful stream bubbled happily through the green banks, twisting and turning, pouring over old rocks under thick canopies of willow and oak. In some places on the mossy bank the sun could not penetrate, and Lillian had always loved those dark, softer spots.

But not today.

Today they sat in the patches of sun, and laughed. They spread a blanket across the pungent grass and laid a simple picnic; small sandwiches, a little pie and a bottle of Lillian’s favorite red wine.

The best moments were silent, when they lay side by side on the blanket, stomachs full, happily fuzzy from the wine. The wind was cool on them, the brook sang, and everything was perfect as the sun dappled the ground with shadows from the old trees.

“This is what life should be,” she whispered at one point, overcome with the majesty of it all. Harold nodded, and gave her that half smile she so adored and she wondered if maybe she was already gone, and the religious were right and this was paradise.

- - -

The moon had just made its way across the silk of their sheets, white against the deep red she had chosen years before. She could hear the crickets outside through the open window, and an occasional breeze billowed her nightgown and her hair over her shoulders and she felt powerful when it happened. She sat on the edge of the bed as Harold slept; running her fingers through his hair as he lightly snored and occasionally shifted in the dark.

She felt an unrelenting happiness as she watched him. She was filled with joy, an absolute sense that this was hers, that she had made this, that he loved her, that the world would keep spinning and love would still grow and she had been so impossibly lucky to finish like this. It was an overwhelming sense of love that poured through her and was almost terrifying in its power.

Everything he had done for her made her elation painful. She saw him, that simple, young man at the party as the smoke curled around her face, the obvious adoration in his eyes. She saw him as he held their son for the first time, as his strength and power was briefly pulled away as he looked down at the weak, beautiful thing in his arms. She saw him as he mowed the lawn, beautiful in the sun, his sweat mingling with the airborne grass, she saw him as she always had. As beautiful, and strong, and caring, and hers. He stirred as her teardrops hit the pillow with a light sound.

She was not crying for grief, but for a love she had ever conceived was possible.

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She hadn't slept. How could she, knowing this would be the last time she could see the red sun burn through the horizon. She sat in her favorite chair, feeling the familiar wood of it, the small bumps and grazes that made her fingertips feel at home. The birds called to each other, flickering through the oaks with bursts of motion. The sky was an agonizing, beautiful pink, clouds struggling to hold back the crimson sun.

She took it in one last time. The emerald green of her lawn, the chirping of the birds. She ran her fingers over the vines that curled up the stone pillars, and smelled their thick fragrance.

She laughed into the morning, laughed because she was happy. Laughed because her goodbye wouldn't be painful, and because she was ready. The sun had risen, and the world was a beautiful place, and it didn't need her anymore.

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Harold woke up in a good mood. He was surprised that Lillian wasn't next to him; he had gone to bed early to ensure he woke up before her. He smiled as he put on his slippers. Yesterday had been so exceptional; he couldn't wait to make today even better.

It had always been an unspoken rule that whoever woke up first made breakfast, and it felt very wrong that he couldn't smell anything as he came downstairs. The kitchen was empty, and he started to worry.

He was about to cry out for her when he saw her white hair draped across the back of the couch. He moved as quickly as he could in his slippers, and fell to his knees near the record player. He could feel his body crying out as he got to his feet and limped to the couch.

"Lilly?" he said, and passed his fingers over her face. She opened her eyes and smiled, suddenly a young girl.

"Hey there Harold," she said.

Her emerald eyes were glassy, and she was smiling in a way he had never seen before. Her head fell to her chest, and he grabbed her hand. She blinked, and raised her head. That same smile.

"Crazy that this is the end," she said. "Not a bang but whimpering or how that goes."

"Jesus Lilly, what did you do?" he said, and wrapped his arms around her. He could smell his favorite perfume, it was all lavender. She lay almost limp in his arms.

"There was no right time," she whispered. "No appropriate ceremony. Yesterday was perfect. These mornings were perfect."

"Tell me what happened, I can call a doctor, John will come over and--"

She laughed, and lightly slapped his left cheek as he bent over her.

"It's done my love. Don't be silly. It's over. But we're not over."

She wrapped her hand around the back of his neck. He could feel her tremble as she tried to pull him down to her lips.

He kissed her, and pulled her against him. He felt the hot salt of her tears on his face. He kissed her forehead, her chin, everything he could as she cried and never stopped smiling.

"I wish there could have been more Harold," she whispered. "But yesterday was a perfect day. You made every day a perfect day. I can't wait for tomorrow."

“I can’t wait Lilly. Tomorrow we are going down to the creek, and I want you to-”

She gasped, and he clutched her hand.

“I remember...I remember the day I met you. I thought you were silly.”

Harold laughed through his tears as he held her hand with both of his. “I was.”

“But even then I loved you.” She brought her left hand and let it slide over the tears on his cheek. She felt the white stubble of his beard and took in his face. She loved it so much. “I always have. Always will.”

Her eyes lost focus for a second, and he could see she was struggling to keep them open.

“Please,” he said, and rested his head on her chest. “Don’t leave. I don’t think I can do this alone.”

He felt her hand run through his hair.

“You can. And you’ll never be alone.”

“Please,” he said, muffled by the thin silk of her dress. “Just stay awhile. Please Lilly.”

“Tomorrow is going to be beautiful Harold. Every day with you has been.”

She gasped, and her hand fell away from his head.

He sobbed into her, afraid to look up, afraid to come out of the darkness and see that the woman he loved with everything he had was gone.

Finally he did, and she was beautiful. Her eyes were closed but she smiled, radiant even as the red had begun to drain away from her cheeks. She looked like she was having the most wonderful dream, and even through his thick tears he kissed her forehead and knew that she was happy.

He sat with her for a long time. The tears had gone, and all he felt was an immense gratitude to her. He had always thought she was better than him, and that she had spent her days with him felt like the most important gift. She had never believed that, but through all of it, he still did.

He sat beside her in the quiet morning of their home, and twisted her wedding ring like he always had, a reminder of what was gone.

## **Epilogue**

John Keller sat at his desk, reading the letter for the second time. It had come that morning, the day after the funeral, the day after he had left Harold alone in that empty house with his grief and assurances that he would be alright.

John didn't think he would be, but he had responsibilities to his patients, and it felt good to distract himself. By the time the last one left, John was alone in his office, and went through his mail. His hands shook when he saw the return address and the beautiful, ornate hand written scrawl.

The letter was beautiful, apologetic, funny, and altogether Lilly. She absolved him of all guilt, she said she would have done it another way if he hadn't helped her, and that she was free, and that she was happy, and that she would miss him.

When he finished it a second time, he put it down, and closed his eyes. He had loved her like few others, and a world without her was something difficult for him to contemplate. The last line said *"I meant what I said. You've made my life, our life so much better. I want you to know how much we love you."*

He wished she was here like she had been, elegant and hopeful, so he could tell her the same.

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Ben's hands shook as he put the letter down. He had only just returned from Georgia that morning, and was exhausted with travel and overwhelming grief. He had done his best to hide his anger at her from his father, he didn't need to be exposed to that, things were hard enough. The entire trip he had been silently screaming at her, *"How could you leave without saying goodbye?"*

But the letter addressed it. She had always known what her son was thinking, and the anger, such a roaring fire had disappeared completely by the time he finished reading. He realized how she had suffered, how her only thoughts of were of him and his father and how much she had loved him. Still loved him.

He felt the tears come and he let them, lying down on his couch. His grief was total, his anger gone, and all he felt for his mother was love and a profound respect. He wanted so badly to tell her that.

Gwen came into the room wearing his t-shirt and sleepily rubbing her blue eyes. She always loved to sleep in. She ran to him when she saw his tears, and hugged him.

"What happened? My God Ben, what happened?"

"Mom sent me a letter. I'm sure she'd want you to read it."

They had only been together a few months, but Ben loved her, and was so grateful to have her with him as she read the letter, and sat with him, and didn't say anything for a long time.

They sat, hands entwined, and she told him she would always be there for him, and he believed her. Together they were so much stronger than he had been by himself, and sometimes when he looked at her he imagined them his parent's age. He should be so lucky.

He could feel Lillian in the room with them, and then it didn't hurt quite as much.

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Harold sat at the kitchen table. The curtains were open, and light and fragrant jasmine came in from the beautiful day outside. He was surrounded by letters, bills, and sympathy cards from people he barely remembered. He was staring at one letter in particular, one with his wife's beautiful hand writing over an ornate gold envelope. He had been staring at it for a long time, afraid to open it, afraid at what it might contain.

The funeral had been difficult, but it was beautiful, and he had pulled it off in a way that she would have loved. People were sad of course, and there were tears, but mostly it was a celebration. Lilly had often talked about how much she hated funerals, but she would have liked this one.

Sometimes he would look around for her to tell her something, to ask her a question, and his heart would sink when he remembered. It still felt like she was here and he hoped that would never change. This could never be just his house, it would always be theirs.

Finally he reached for it, and used her letter opener to carefully slice it open and pull out the thick paper. He had always loved her fastidiously elegant handwriting, and admired it for a moment before he began to read.

He heard it in her voice, the trill of her laugh; her inflection, that angelic voice that would be burned into his mind until the day he met her again. His favorite sound.

As he read it came back. All of it. The love, the frustration, and ultimately the immense ocean of sadness as he felt that great finality. She was gone.

Gone.

*"To my dearest Harold,*

*Writing this was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. It is impossible for me to describe what you have been for me, but I'm going to try.*

*You are so much more than I could have asked for, so much more than I deserve. Every morning when I realized it wasn't a dream, that I was actually lucky enough to spend my life with you I was ecstatic.*

*My life didn't start until I met you. Until I met someone who was so sweet, and solemn, and funny, and beautiful and respectful and all of the million things that you are. I have loved you since I have known you, and not for one moment, even at our furthest apart, has that changed.*

*I know that it is going to be hard without me; lord knows I wouldn't be able to survive without you. But you are stronger than me Harold. I hope you aren't angry with me for leaving the way I did, but please know there was no other way. I think you do.*

*I'm not sure if I believe in an afterlife, but I know there is no force in the universe that can keep us apart. I am gone from here, but I will find you. Because we are one, you and I, and that will never change.*

*I love you. I always have, I always will. Spending my life with you was the greatest gift I could have ever received, and I am so grateful to you and the world for giving me the opportunity to experience it.*

*Goodbye Harold. For now.*

*Lillian*

*P.S. Take care of yourself, because when I see you again, I want you to look good.*

He laughed through his tears at that last line. He had been expecting something similar, and was not disappointed.

“I’ll do my best Lilly,” he whispered, and he thought he heard her laugh.

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Harold wandered through the garden, hearing the birds and feeling the sun on his back. The plants were so alive now, so much taller and more verdant than they had ever been before. He let his hands fall on the green stalks of the tomatoes, slide over the velvet roses, and finally he stopped at the herb garden. Lillian’s favorite.

He bent down to the earth, and sat cross legged amidst the pungent smells. He lay back in a soft bed of flowers and herbs and closed his eyes.

The smell of lavender filled his mind, and everything else disappeared.

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He was nervous as he stared at her. She was unreal, so stunningly beautiful he couldn’t be sure he was awake. She had chosen a surprisingly traditional veil and gown, but they fit her perfectly. Her hair spilled over her shoulders like molten gold, and he could see her sparkling eyes through the white. She was smiling widely, clearly as happy as he, and he couldn’t look away.

He glanced for a moment at the crowd, gathered and hushed in their wide backyard. Friends and family he didn’t really care about, not in the way he cared about her. When he looked back at her, a goddess holding white roses and stalks of lavender he was overcome. He loved her so much, so all consuming that his nervousness turned to fear as she finished her vows. He was afraid of losing her, he was afraid that he thought so highly of her that the world would go dark if she was gone.

He took a deep breath, still transfixed on his partner, his new companion, so inconceivably grateful that he could share his life with her.

“Lilly. It’s quite simple. I love you more than anyone on this Earth. I will spend every moment of every day being worthy of you. You are the most beautiful person I have ever known, and I will make myself worthy. I will always be here for you Always. Until the end.”

She smiled and when they kissed it felt electric, and they stood together, wrapped in each other, excited for a sublime future they both knew was coming.

**The End**