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Another Sort of Life: A Novel

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ANOTHER SORT OF LIFE:

A NOVEL

A Thesis

by

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A NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

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In the critical introduction of this thesis, I examine the academic and creative impulses that helped me to complete this novel. In particular, I detail my seemingly nonlinear course of study as I planned, wrote, and reflected on this novel draft. This work required significant research and study outside the field of creative writing: health care systems, cancer, shame, vulnerability, guilt. I discuss at length the processes by which I became knowledgeable of these subjects, and how even after the first draft of the creative work was completed, I continued to create a more nuanced and sophisticated concept of my own work. This introduction finds its focus in my academic journey through this novel—because this is an area of self-fulfillment.

DEDICATION

I could not have become a writer without the support of those dearest to me, who continued to whisper *I really do believe you can do it*. I owe an incredible debt of love and thanks to my wife, Wendy, and my parents, Scott and Judy. (Even to my son, Peter, who, at only two years old, doesn't yet know what it's like to have a daddy who is not in school.)

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I am forever grateful to Dr. Jean Braithwaite, my committee chair (and, I secretly believe, the person responsible for getting me admitted into the MFA program), for mentoring me far beyond the perfunctory do's and don'ts of writing. She has treated me with far more respect and care than I probably deserved.

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Thanks to the whole MFA program, students and faculty, for continually showing our program is important and meaningful and scholarly—particularly to those who would say otherwise, particularly in an educational climate that appears to devalue the humanities.

Although I cannot list each name, I thank all those who graciously read and reread my drafts, and spoke to me kindly even when there was lots of work to be done. Reflecting, I understand the tireless social network a writer needs to succeed, or at least to stay sane.

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INTRODUCTION

WRITING FOR REAL

I am a teacher. Sometimes I say *educator* instead. It sounds important, and it's ambiguous enough that people may wonder whether I don't teach, but work in education: a counselor, assistant principal maybe. More and more, however, I say: I teach. I enjoy what I do, and I might even be good at it. I have decided that however my professional career turns and weaves, I will always teach. The academic world has become an important lens through which I view my scholarly and creative contribution—they are all inextricably linked.

Mostly I teach English (although, this last year I also taught creative writing). Teaching high school English is teaching practice. Students practice annotation and close reading and analyzing so that they can practice writing essays of the sort that will, ostensibly, help them succeed on AP exams, in dual enrollment classes, and also in college. Students practice expository writing, persuasive writing, critical analysis, narrative writing. And for a great number of assignments, the audience is the teacher, the grader, the person in the room who is already an authority. Practice, of course, is an important part of improving at a skill. This type of writing yearns, however, for what educators call *authenticity*, the notion that learning is best absorbed, applied, and retained when the learning does not appear manipulated or contrived. In 1967, educator James Moffett argued that "the learner dissociates the technical issues" (the management of mechanics and conventions and rhetoric) "from honest discourse" (the *reason* a

person would write, anyway; read: authenticity). Moffett goes on to say that what is happening is a "dissociation in the minds of students between school stuff and writing for real" (247). As important as practice is, it is still practice. It isn't writing for real.

When I joined the MFA program, we practiced. Every writing workshop, several of the form and theory classes, and even some of the literature classes, included writing exercises: journaling, characterization, character sheets, mind-mapping, outlining, free-writing, listing, sketching, acting, image creation. Lots of practice. I was impressed, though, with the intent of the practice—to support the real writing that was up next. Most of the real writing we created in class was not actually publishable. But the intent of the writing was to get there, to write to say something meaningful and interesting, to become part of the institution of writers and writing. As moments of revelation and importance go, this was significant. Writing and producing for real did not mean that the practice was done, did not mean that the first draft was the best draft. If anything, writing for real meant more work than writing for practice because a practice assignment is eventually over. Real writing isn't done until it's good. There's some authenticity.

I wanted to take this idea back into my classroom, to have my students write because they were "intent on saying something for real reasons of [their] own and because [they] wanted to get certain effects on a definite audience." I wanted my students to "write only authentic kinds of discourse such as existed outside of school" (237). I wanted this because I believe that writing for real is important—maybe more important than practice. Under the influence of two scholarly articles about inquiry-based learning and multi-modal composition (Heather Brown's "Walking into the Unknown: Inquiry-Based Learning Transforms the English Classroom" and "Transforming Practice: Using Digital Video to Engage Students" by Janette Hughes and Lorayne Robertson), I developed a research assignment, the Writing for Your Community

Project. As collaborative groups, the students had to figure out how to use writing to affect their community. Some groups decided to develop websites about the relief efforts for Haiti or Japan explaining how people could get involved and make a difference; some groups decided to create YouTube campaigns about gun safety or the perils of texting while driving; one group developed a presentation on heart-healthy living and then presented in the lobby of a doctor's office. Research for the project, then, wasn't relegated to finding information about the tsunami in Japan or what kind of statistics exist about texting and driving. The students did have to find that information, but they also had to research how to build a website, and how to make it go live; they had to learn how to edit videos and put them on YouTube; they had to call doctors' offices until they found a place to present. Early on, one group wanted to protest the (somewhat strict) dress code in our district. They conducted primary research, surveys about whether the student-body at large even wanted a more lenient dress code. After they turned their findings into nice-looking charts and graphs, I asked them what they were going to do with their research? *Do with it?* Obtaining the information was just the first step, I explained. How do you make it matter? I had to remind them: we're not writing for practice, here; we're writing for real.

The project was, I believe, a success. Students were surprised that their writing might affect somebody and have implications beyond whatever grade I gave them for their effort and scholarship. The dress code group decided to present their research to the school board: they got on the agenda, made their presentation. They did not convince the school board to formally change the dress code, but the board did say that they would make dress code a matter of campus policy. At the end of the year, no substantial change was made to the dress code. However, the students did present their work in a real-world fashion; and, they demonstrated that their issue went beyond general griping to something students genuinely had an interest in.

I write for real all the time. For many years I worked as a columnist and wrote a weekly column for several newspapers; I write recommendation letters for students every year; I compose lesson plans and model essays to help me teach; I write letters and papers with the intention that they will be published. This thesis, though, is the largest and most ambitious real writing I have ever attempted. That's a bit scary.

Although practice writing and real writing have several overlapping characteristics, real writing is supposed to be "honest discourse" (Moffett 247) written for "real reasons," in a mode that "exist[s] outside of school" (237). Real writing appears to carry a burden that practice writing doesn't. It has to do something beyond practice: entertain, maybe; educate, probably; say something meaningful, definitely. It also appears that real writing is more public. Real writing carries a social responsibility that practice writing doesn't. *Another Sort of Life* is me writing for real.

A Man in Sorrow and Other Inspirations

I first tried to become a writer in the way that John Grisham became a writer: I would have a lucrative career that would fund my writing habit, and when my writing took off, I would do that full time. On paper, this is brilliant.

I began writing professionally when I was seventeen. I managed to talk myself into a job at the newspaper writing weekly columns chronicling what it was like to be a senior in high school. The response was amazing. People wrote to me saying how much the columns meant to them, that they were funny or deep. There were a few mean-spirited letters, too. But the positive response far outweighed the negative. That year was probably the last nail in the coffin—I wanted to be a writer. My parents and I did some research and found that, well, writers are often highly-educated and poorly-paid artists. That wasn't enough to shake me from the goal. It was

something I had to think through, though. As we saw it, I had three options. (1) I could do the starving artist thing as long as it took to become successful, with the full understanding that success is never guaranteed (although, I admit, at the time I did not put much credence in the idea that *I* wouldn't eventually be successful); (2) I could work as a teacher, like many other writers, and then I would always have a foot in the writing world, either teaching or producing; (3) I could try to go avocational, like John Grisham.

I didn't really like the idea of the starving artist. Without really thinking through it, I decided I wouldn't be a teacher. Everyone in my family was a teacher. I didn't need to be a teacher, too. So avocational it was. I decided on architecture.

It did not work out. After three years of study, I realized that if I became an architect, my personality is such that I would put everything I had into being a purposeful and profound architect. As interesting and wonderful a career option that was, it wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a writer of novels and book-length nonfiction. So, I made a change. I became a teacher and then quickly applied for an MFA in creative writing.

My time in architecture, however, has been brilliantly helpful to me as a writer. Writing and architecture have a lot in common: primarily, they are both purposeful compositions that carry the social burden of doing meaningful work. Think about it. Some buildings are purely functional, and do not have much in the way of design. They are bland boxes extruded across an urban landscape. Other buildings are flamboyant and bright and are interesting to look at, but inside they are not as functional. Or maybe it's a bland box covered over with a façade to look like something more than it is. Some buildings hide their structure, what makes them stand; other buildings put the structure on display. And occasionally, a building deftly navigates the process of composition to become an interesting and functional building that interacts in an elegant and

earnest way with the people that come into contact with it. Writing works the same way, even if we do not allow the metaphor.

Beyond this aesthetic understanding of writing, which I hope I might have come to understand anyway, my time studying architecture connected me to *Sorrowing Old Man ('At Eternity's Gate')*, an oil painting by Vincent van Gogh. I found a digital print of the painting to fulfill the requirements of an art class I was taking. We were supposed to find an Impressionist or post-Impressionist work and recreate it using pastels. I searched a long time before I found the old man in sorrow. It touched me emotionally and visually, and I have kept a printout of the painting on my desk since the day I found it.

Art often puts the audience in the role of observer, unseen watcher. I usually accept this as a given. The way to experience the narrative is to sit there and look at it. The artist understands this and provides something to look at. Looking at *Sorrowing Old Man* was the first time I ever felt like a voyeur (instead of part of the audience), intruding on something intensely emotional and private. The painting is of a working man sitting in a hard, wooden chair in front of a fire. He is "bent over with his fists clenched against a face hidden in utter frustration" (Erickson 86). His grief is at once palpable and embarrassing. Why he is grieving is uncertain and, I suppose, that allows the audience to speculate, perhaps even identify with him. The painting "would convey an image of total despair had it not been for the English title van Gogh gave it, *At Eternity's Gate*." Only in the title do we understand that "even in his deepest moments of sorrow and pain, van Gogh clung to a faith in God and eternity" (86). I am interested in this type of work which is overtly spiritual without necessarily being a religious work. I realize this appears to be a copout, much the same way that I once saw a comedian lambaste Californian Valley girls for saying *I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual*; but religious fiction, like other kinds

of genre writing, has stringent expectations and the publishing houses often have strict guidelines about plot and characterization. I am interested in creating a complex work that addresses, among many things, faith. That is, I believe discussions and conflicts of faith do not necessarily have to occur within a prescribed mode or genre (as is evident with the types of works that inspired my writing and the kinds of works that create my draft's cultural capital, discussed in the next section). In my creative thesis, I have characters that are bold in their religion or non-religion, and characters that are more agnostic and can believe in a god, but may not necessarily believe in God. My protagonist, Harvey, must navigate through all these characters of varying degrees of faith and spirituality, and in the course of the narrative must confront his own faith and lack of it: one moment he is sure of his own salvation, but in the next moment he cannot allow himself to be forgiven for his past. I believe this kind of head versus heart debate is true for many people of faith, and I wanted to illustrate that kind of spiritual dichotomy.

My first exposure to *Sorrowing Old Man ('At Eternity's Gate')* was in spring 2004, eight years before I would complete this thesis draft—it is the first of three meaningful interactions with art that significantly contributed to the creative impulses of this thesis. The other two inspirations come from the cinema: *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) and *Seven Pounds* (2008). All three interactions occurred before I entered the MFA program in fall 2009, and this may account for the somewhat unorthodox (read: non-written) nature of my creative influences. These three things marinated in my mind for years before I was finally able to adequately articulate the ideas and themes I felt were important in these works.

In *Stranger Than Fiction*, Harold Crick finds himself the real-life protagonist of author Kay Eiffel's book-in-progress, *Death and Taxes*. He wakes up one day hearing her narrating and revising the lines to her novel—her narration is exactly what Harold is thinking and doing. The

action is humorous and even a bit meta-literary as Harold seeks out a well-known English professor (Dr. Jules Hilbert) to help him find the author, and the professor interviews Harold to determine what *kind* of story he is in: tragedy, comedy, quest, fable, fairy tale. While Harold is following his daily routine and making notes about the types of people he's meeting, the narration announces, perhaps predictably, that "little did he know this simple, seemingly innocuous act, would result in his imminent death." Of course, this deflates the dramatic irony and turns the story in a new direction: now the protagonist certainly knows that some act will result in his death. So much for "little did he know." This is where the story takes a turn toward poignancy, though.

The "real" Harold begins to simultaneously attempt two narrative possibilities: (1) he starts to live the life he wants, picking up a hobby and going after the girl; (2) he tries to find the author, whose name he does not yet know. This is possible because the author is stumped. She knows Harold will die; she's already written that he will. She does not yet know how, so Harold has time. He'll die when she types the period on the last sentence of his life.

When Harold does finally find the author, she has hand-written the last chapter of the book. The moment is tense and emotional as Harold proves that he is actually her protagonist and that everything she types is coming true. The author gives Harold the manuscript, and he gives it to professor Hilbert, asking for his advice about what to do. After reading, the professor tells Harold that this book is the greatest thing Kay Eiffel has ever written (and we are led to believe that she is already a successful and literary author); his only advice is for Harold to read the manuscript. The next scene finds Harold on a city bus reading the manuscript. Hours go by and he is still on the bus, reading. We see him laughing. Then we see him crying. He finished the book.

Harold returns the manuscript, gives the author permission to finish writing the book, and leaves to go back to his life, the end of his life. The professor finds the author and asks her why she hasn't finished typing the pages. She responds, "Because it's a book about a man who doesn't know he's about to die. And then dies. But if a man does know he's about to die and dies anyway. Dies—dies willingly, knowing that he could stop it, then—I mean, isn't that the type of man who you want to keep alive?" (Forster).

I like this. I wanted to experiment with how a character would react to the news they would die. Not they *might* die. They *would* die. How does that affect the daily routine of an individual, especially if they have, to that point, lived their life a particular way, according to particular rules. Does all that go out the window? Does that person go to Vegas and blow it all on double-0? Or is it possible to face death nobly and with dignity—and willingly? This novel draft seeks to investigate at least one possible answer. The most difficult technical aspect of this experiment was creating a character whose death is certain, and the readers wish, the whole novel long, for him to live—to create a complex character who would die willing, so the readers want to keep him alive.

In *Seven Pounds*, Ben Thomas, a successful engineer, kills seven people (including his own wife) as a result of an accident he caused by texting while driving. The shame of his action drives him to seek out seven people who will receive a pound of his flesh—he plans to commit suicide and leave his donatable organs to specific people. The film follows him as he determines whether an individual is worthy of his gift. He wants to make sure that the people he gifts will use their lives better than he used his (Muccino).

Although the plot is simple—he has a plan and executes that plan—the motivation behind it is, to me, intensely deep and complex. What kind of sorrow and guilt was he going through?

Did he ever waver in his conviction? And again, how does a man live when he knows he is about to (willingly) die? I was profoundly struck by the idea that a person could be so affected by an event that it alters every next step of their entire life. Wrongologist Kathryn Schulz (Schulz studies regret, choices, the effects of being wrong. "Wrongologist" is the witty label she gives her career field.) argues that the prevalent *well, I can't do anything about it now so why worry* philosophy is dangerous. That, in fact, regret helps us learn: it keeps us from making the same mistakes or social taboos over and over again. (She adds that, medically speaking, people who are incapable of regret are psychopaths and sociopaths.) Both Ben Thomas, and my protagonist, Harvey Mitchell, take this idea to the opposite extreme. They are completely consumed with regret and shame and guilt. My thesis explores, through several characters, cumulative characterization: the idea that people and characters are the experiential (and, perhaps, moral) culmination of all the decisions they have made and experiences they've had. This idea does not keep people or characters from changing. Rather, that decision to change becomes another time slice in the collection of time slices in that character's biography. Throughout the novel that comprises this thesis, Harvey is given the opportunity to make this kind of life-changing decision, but instead he allows his shame to control his behavior, which keeps Harvey from experiencing the redemptive moment he's working toward.

Sorrowing Old Man got me thinking about grief; *Stranger Than Fiction* got me thinking about how people choose to die; *Seven Pounds* got me thinking about guilt and shame, repentance and forgiveness. The result is my own work: *Another Sort of Life*—the story of Harvey, who discovers he has terminal cancer. The cancer both condemns Harvey to death and is sufficient punishment for him to feel absolved for a past sin. In the moment that he regains his life, he loses it again. The novel is an examination about how the faith of the head and the faith

of the heart work with and against each other, how a man with intense shame chooses to live his life, and how he chooses to die.

Conquering Shame, Guilt, and Also Cancer

A writer is an expert raconteur and an amateur everything else. That has been especially true for me and this novel. My research for this work was often the product of happy accident and suggestion: Audible.com happened to suggest *The Emperor of All Maladies* just as I was eager to listen to a new book, just as I was beginning my research for this project; a form and theory class assigned several *Best American Essay* collections in which half the essays were about grief, death, or cancer; when people heard I was writing about cancer and hospice, they voluntarily directed me to fresh sources. The themes and content in my thesis are personal, emotional, relatable, and my path to understanding how cancer and different healthcare systems work was also a path to understanding the complexity of these themes and topics in real life. This seems, to me, the greatest testament to my thesis's cultural capital.

I wanted Harvey to be catastrophically sick, but to have time to dwell and face and contemplate his death, and choose how to die. I felt Harvey had to have cancer. Cancer is the perfect demon to face: it is at once an outward and inward disease. Although cancer is an incredibly pervasive disease (it appears that everyone in the U.S. should either have experienced cancer themselves, or personally know someone who has), it is an isolating illness, often slowly removing a person's agency and physical abilities. The prevalence of cancer in the U.S. means that Harvey's narrative, then, also becomes immediately relatable. Further, cancer has an inherent literary symbolism: oncologist and cancer biographer Siddhartha Mukherjee explains that cancer cells "live at the cost of our living" and "can grow faster, adapt better. They are more perfect versions of ourselves" (6). In Harvey's first meeting with Sam (his replacement at work),

he tries to explain how cancer "exploits the very features that make *us* successful as a species or as an organism" (38). It is an overwhelming disease that is hard to pinpoint, hard to fight, hard to *cure*, because it takes advantage of "the fundamental logic of evolution unlike any other illness." Which means we cannot simply inoculate against cancer; we cannot outthink it. Fighting cancer is, perhaps, the most difficult man versus nature conflict ever, because isn't it our own nature we are fighting? On the cellular level, "mutant clones…can resist the attack [of chemotherapeutic drugs]" and "grow out," leaving "the fittest cancer cell" to repopulate (39). On a human level, fighting cancer means literally killing swarms of our own cells. Metaphorically and as a plot device, cancer fit my needs for the narrative.

As life-changing as a cancer diagnosis is, oncologists have a decent grasp of several different cancers: breast cancer and leukemia among them, which have five-year survival rates above 90%. Harvey's death needed to be more certain, more probable. I gave Harvey pancreatic cancer, because "even in oncology, a dismal discipline to begin with, this—unresected pancreatic cancer—[is] considered the epitome of dismal" (154). Aside from pancreatic cancer's tendency to "send sprays of malignant cells into faraway sites such as the bones and the liver" (158), it is not exactly a more debilitating cancer then, say, lung cancer or breast cancer. The reason pancreatic cancer has such a high fatality rate is that it is quiet. Most pancreatic cancer patients do not learn they have cancer until it has already reached the inoperable stage IV level. As such, pancreatic cancer is particularly insidious. If found early, it is possible to treat the cancer and gain years or even remission. The normal prognosis is less than a year.

In "Letting Go," Atul Gawande writes about the drive the medical community has to keep patients alive, perhaps encouraging patients to try therapies—anything really—to obtain even a few more minutes. The drive is contagious, and often patients buy into it. Similarly,

Harvey needed to have a small hope, and he found it in a drug "so new that it didn't have a name, just a number," and he and his wife "pinned their hopes on it" (Gawande 42). In this moment, Harvey becomes convinced that his personal theology worked after all—which is a manifestation of denial and bargaining in the process of grief. As academically smart as Harvey is, he excuses himself from the kind of treatment and social conventions he places on others. In one scene, Harvey allows a patient, James Romero, to talk about his own misdeeds, thus having a kind of catharsis. Harvey thinks to himself: "The catharsis or whatever was good for James: he didn't have anyone...But that was James. Things are different with me." He continually dismisses the only therapy he *knows* will actually help him, and instead continues to hope on slim odds. This is one of the head-heart dissonances I worked to show as one of Harvey's fatal character flaws. He has devoted his life to working and listening and helping the terminally infirm—toward the end of the narrative, the reader learns that Harvey's motivation for doing this was part of the atonement he prescribed for himself. But when he has the opportunity to live his last moments with grace and dignity, his first reaction is to fight, as though he views "palliative care, the branch of medicine that focuses on symptom relief and comfort" as "an admission of failure" (Mukherjee 224). In his heart, Harvey knows this is his only real option, and has odd moments of clarity when he essentially tells himself so. His head, though, convinces him to keep fighting. (Ordinarily, we associate the head with being rational and the heart with irrationality. In this instance, I am suggesting that the rationale side is being overly tempted by the possibilities of experimental treatments, extra input in the form of statistics and other kinds of logos and ethos. His heart, however, senses that this is all for naught. Since both cognitive processes and emotion are seated in the brain, this is mostly about the flexibility of the terms.) This struggle is a more concrete representation of the abstract debate his mind and soul are having about faith and

theology. Harvey puts his trust in his head, and the experimental drug that his oncologist has found. Instead of working, however, his tumor "shrugged off the new drug—instead mockingly sending a shower of painful metastases" (154) through his body. This parallels the abstract conflict: the moments Harvey feels forgiven are never a result of the atonement he prescribed himself.

It was important for me to use snippets of these real-life moments to capture the reality of having cancer, the kinds of actions and treatments that are realistically part of the process of living with (and dying from) cancer. *Another Sort of Life* functions as the fictional counterpart to *Best American Essays* "Topic of Cancer" by Christopher Hitchens, "Group Grief" by Lily Tuck, and "A Matter of Life and Death" by Marjorie Williams, and also to the more academic writing of Siddhartha Mukherjee and Atul Gawande.

Hitchens, writing about his own cancer, says that he has "succumbed to something so predictable and banal that it bores even [him]." Yet, he turns right around to explain the "oncology bargain" all patients must accept or refuse, that in exchange for extra time, the system will take some things from you: "These things may include your taste buds, your ability to concentrate, your ability to digest, and the hair on your head" (87). This kind of hope coupled with stark rationalization is the source for much of Harvey's interiority through my thesis. Harvey also confronts the "passivity and impotence" that his cancer has forced on him, as he feels as though he is "dissolving in powerlessness like a sugar lump in water" (Hitchens 88). Toward the end of the narrative, following the Kubler-Ross model of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), Harvey becomes depressed. Part of that depression is his feeling like sugar in water. No one asks favors of him, his wife doesn't ask him to do chores or

run errands, he stops driving. He becomes less substantial. Bit by bit he becomes more and more physically and socially impotent.

Terminal cancer is a dehumanizing diagnosis. Mukherjee writes that Cecily Saunders, founder of "the movement to restore sanity and sanctity to the end-of-life care of cancer patients" was driven to reinvent palliative medicine because "she encountered terminally ill patients denied dignity, pain relief, and often even basic medical care" (225). [Incidentally, Saunders named the first hospice she created St. Christopher's. The hospice Harvey works at shares that name, a small homage to Saunders (225). The first official U.S. hospice, "launched at Yale-New Haven Hospital" did not open until 1974 (226).]

Marjorie Williams's "A Matter of Life and Death" helped me re-humanize cancer. An important element of her essay is time. She begins by saying "it would take [her] more than a year to know" (238) she had cancer. Even when she began to suspect there might be something physically wrong, "the earliest [appointment she] could get was the next week" (241). Even her first sonogram was delayed. While she was anxious, the medical professionals did not yet have a sense of urgency. It isn't until her doctor sees the cancer in Williams's body that time finally matches the situation. Williams explains that she was lucky to have a doctor who personally cared about her because he was able to "speed up the inhuman pace of medical time, which usually leaves patients begging to hear their test results, waiting too many days for an appointment, at a loss until the conveyor belt brings along the next hurried intervention" (247). In my thesis, Harvey experiences both the slow plod of medical protocol and the frantic race to get as much information as possible.

I mined Williams's piece for details, anything that might seem helpful in building realness into the scene, setting, and characterization. In one section, Williams mentions that

"now time has levels of meaning" (258). So Harvey also ruminates on time and how it is a kind of universal currency, one that appreciates in value the more obviously finite it becomes. The most important humanizing moment, however, is after a long day at Sloan-Kettering. Williams's husband asks her what she'd like to do, screw the cost. She chooses a fancy New York City hotel, and spends the rest of the day getting a haircut and pedicure and "then, feeling beautiful, [she] actually danced around the room…CD headphones blasting Carly Simon" (256). It is too hard to deal with bad news every hour of the day. Harvey also has moments when he just stops thinking about his diagnosis and lives life for a while. This is especially evident in a scene where Harvey and Claire leave on a spontaneous date because they realize they'd rather do anything but talk any more about cancer. Of course, not dwelling on the situation does not make it go away. For Williams, that evening she "lay under those wonderful sheets and felt cold to the bone." Her next image stuck with me as so intensely human and vulnerable that I felt I needed to create a version of it, myself. Williams writes: "I began to cry, loud, then louder. I shouted my terror. I sobbed with my entire rib cage…I was so loud that I wondered why no one called the police" (256). In my version, Harvey's wife begins the crying, unabashed and loud and acute. Harvey tries to maintain his stoic composure—after all, he may not like having cancer, but he feels he deserves it. By the end of the scene, Claire's range of emotions breaks Harvey down. And, yes, he cries. This marks a subtle shift in how Harvey deals with his own emotions, particularly in reference to Claire.

Lily Tuck's "Group Grief" details her own process of grief, and chronicles her participation in group counseling. *Another Sort of Life* began as a short story. I wanted to see if there was enough depth to create a novel-length work. The bulk of the story was a scene in a group counseling session. A version of the scene made it to the final draft of my thesis, and

Tuck's essay helped me understand that "counseling is meant to be educational and to leave one with more positive feelings" (218). In fact, the group counselor explicitly tells this to Harvey's group. Tuck's essay also helped me understand that those types of counseling often have a kind of curriculum that may be swept aside of the participants go off topic. Many of the activities Harvey's group does are modified from Tuck's essay, or from my own knowledge of collaborative teaching practices. Most important was Tuck's portrayal of each member's grief. I began to understand that although grief *may* proceed through a general set of stages, it is a highly individual and personal process. Denial and anger look different in different people. Acceptance doesn't mean everything is all better. "Group Grief" also helped me think about the kinds of details that people remember and hold on to. In one scene of my thesis, Harvey tries to pre-help Claire through cleaning up after his life: he begins packing away his clothes. Claire becomes angry and recounts a memory associated with one of the shirts, something Harvey barely remembered. While the memory is original to me, the type of memory recalls "Group Grief."

Insight into grief and cancer and healthcare is important to the thematic structure of this novel, but equally important is understanding what is afflicting Harvey, what drives him to act and react to his environment. Originally, I thought Harvey felt guilty about his role in his friend Gus's death. I wrote and discussed Harvey's feelings of guilt. Psychologist Brené Brown says, however, that "shame is not guilt. Shame is a focus on self. Guilt is a focus on behavior" (Listening to Shame). Certainly Harvey feels guilty, but that's nearly inconsequential to what is really going on. Guilt is not necessarily unhealthy. Guilt, like regret, helps us to not make that mistake again. It drives us to apologize. Harvey is ashamed of himself, and "shame is highly, highly correlated with addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide, eating

disorders" while guilt is "inversely correlated with those things" (Listening to Shame). On the surface, this is merely a change in my own diction; it didn't exactly change what I was writing.

But it did change how I was writing. I was able to develop a stronger interior plot to parallel the exterior one. I had already discovered how isolating and dehumanizing terminal cancer could be. Now I had learned that "shame is really the fear of disconnection," forcing people to wonder "is there something about me that if other people know it or see it will make me unworthy of connection." Brown's research on shame and vulnerability shows that "the people who have a strong sense of love and belonging, believe they are worthy of love and belonging." It is shame that keeps people from feeling worthy. This is precisely Harvey all over: he does not deserve a spiritual, emotional, or physical reprieve—he is unworthy. The struggle, here, is that Harvey's shame and worth are intimately tied to his own vulnerability, which he views as a kind of weakness. Vulnerability, though, "is the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness, but it appears that it's also the birthplace of joy, creativity, of belonging, of love." People who feel loved and worthy of belonging approach vulnerability as something required for connection. That does not make it comfortable or good, only necessary; and, certainly not weak. These kinds of people are "willing to let go of who they thought they should be in order to be who they were." Throughout the entire novel, I force Harvey into vulnerable positions and give him the opportunity to react authentically. Through most of the story, however, Harvey numbs his vulnerability. Brown explains that "the problem is you can't selectively numb emotion." If Harvey were real, he would be part of "the most in debt, obese, addicted, and medicated cohort in U.S. history"—evidence of the extreme and various ways Americans numb themselves. His addictions are grief and work. Rather than dismiss and hide the one aspect of his life that he regrets most, Harvey becomes addicted to his own story, convinced

he should leave the smallest negative footprint possible. He becomes a kindness junkie. Of any addiction, this is surely the most socially acceptable, and this allows him to slip through the usual obstacles that catch addicts. Intrinsically, his motivation isn't pure. He isn't good to be good, or even as a matter of faith; he's good so that he does not become a burden or negatively affect anyone. Extrinsically, Harvey cannot please everyone, himself included (The Power of Vulnerability).

In addition to the cultural capital *Another Sort of Life* receives through creative nonfiction (the personal essays cited here, for example) and research (as a kind of fictional culmination), my thesis also has significant fictional capital. I feel as though *A Sort of Life* could sit on a shelf with books that have themes concerning conflicts of faith, shame and guilt, death (particularly unavoidable death).

Time O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* begins with a chapter of the same name. The narrative begins by detailing the physical items each person carried. First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carries letters from Martha. In fact, daydreaming about Martha is pretty much how Jimmy Cross spends his days. Then, one of Jimmy Cross's soldiers dies, and Cross feels the loss as his fault. Because of this death, which Cross did not physically cause—very similar to Harvey's situation in my thesis—"He felt shame. He hated himself…[the soldier] was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war" (16). In the same chapter, the narrator describes that "they carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing…They carried shameful memories." With them, always, was "the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing" (21). Remembering Brown, the fear of blushing leads to the fear of being disconnected. Everywhere in O'Brien's novel, we find shame. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator eulogizes a man he killed, "a slim, dead, almost

dainty young man" (124). In the chapter, the narrator's friends try to comfort or congratulate him. The narrator never speaks—he dwells on the young man's final physical pose. The narrator is physically and emotionally taken aback by his actions. In this moment, he does not detail the shame of his compatriots; he is himself ashamed.

Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is another example of a man trying to overcome not guilt but shame. The particulars of Mr. Rochester's shame are, perhaps, better illuminated in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which functions as a response to *Jane Eyre* (somewhat beyond the scope of this introduction, except that *Wide Sargasso Sea* details the genesis of Rochester's shame in much the same way that Harvey's Gus-flashbacks details the source of his shame).

Early in Jane's and Mr. Rochester's relationship, they take a walk on the grounds of Thornfield Hall. Suddenly, Mr. Rochester "arrested his step…some hated thought seemed to have him in his grip" (167). As he was "lifting his eye to [Thornfield Hall's] battlements, he cast over them a glare such as [Jane] never saw before or since. Pain, shame, ire" showed in his eyes. The third floor is where Rochester is hiding his first wife, Bertha ("Antoinette" in *Wide Sargasso Sea*). As Jane's and Rochester's relationship grows, she becomes more and more curious about his moodiness. In response, Rochester replies:

> Conceive that you there commit a capital error, no matter of what nature or from what motives, but one whose consequences must follow you through life and taint all your existence…The results of what you have done become in time to you utterly insupportable; you take measure to obtain relief: unusual measures, but…bitter and base associations have become the sole food of your memory: you

> wander here and there, seeking rest in exile…heart weary and soul-withered (251-252).

Harvey's narrative follows this line also. No matter how hard he works to be absolved of his sin and shame, he cannot do it. At the end of *Jane Eyre*, a physically mangled Rochester finds forgiveness in Jane's dismissal of his past, and the actual death of Bertha. (The fire in which Bertha dies—by jumping off the roof—also injures Rochester. He loses an eye and also his hand.) Harvey also thinks he finds forgiveness in his illness, although it turns out to be a false forgiveness. The actual forgiveness comes in his interactions with Rose and Claire.

Literature abounds with books addressing faith, shame, and death. C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* series discusses all three (Edmund must overcome the shame of being a traitor; Aslan dies; Susan decides in the last book that they all were playing pretend and nothing ever happened), as does the *Harry Potter* series (Dumbledore's shame over his role in the death of his sister affects him the rest of his life; many characters die in meaningful ways; the big choices Harry makes are all matters of faith, not facts). Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays With Morrie* and *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* are spiritual explorations of death. Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* deals with faith, shame, and death in ways similar to O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.

The list of books with similar cultural capital could continue many more pages. One last title is worth discussion: Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. Like *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, and *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Gilead* is a secular book with overt themes and characterizations of faith, religion, and spirituality. While the book is not religious fiction, it would be difficult to separate faith and questions of belief from the narrative. In fact, the protagonist is a minister who is the son of a minister, who is the son of a minister. Religious

tenets and spiritual morals inform the narrator's actions and motivations without letting the narrative feel didactic or fettered by genre expectations. Faith and characters of faith are handled delicately, almost like real people. This deft handling of polarizing subject matter is something I tried to manage in my draft. Harvey proclaims himself to be a man of faith, but the reader soon sees that he has spent his whole life arguing the particulars of forgiveness with himself. He finds guidance in the strong and devout Rose. Yet, Harvey also has moments of poignancy with the agnostic James.

In *Gilead*, the narrator John Ames is dying. He is an old man and his life is at an end. His wife is significantly younger than he his, and he worries about his legacy, how his wife and son will continue, whether someone will step in and replace him. For such a religious pillar of the community, he is remarkably human. It is a frank reminder that even good and morally strong men and women can have deeply intense moments of humanness. I believe this goes back to living a life of precious vulnerability, finding worthiness because one has inherent value. The implication is that people who feel loved and part of something can still mess up, but it's easier to make things right if vulnerability is an asset and not a weakness.

Gilead is an epistolary novel, a long letter from John Ames to his son. Reiterated through the narrative is Ames's epiphany that "existence seems to me now the most remarkable thing that could ever be imagined" (53). I think this is incredibly beautiful and profound. To be, to exist, appears itself to be a moment full of spiritual potential. In my thesis, Rose tells Harvey that she loves life and would live longer if that were a possibility, a seemingly strange confession from such a devout woman. Harvey very slowly understands that existence is "most remarkable." For me, *Gilead* represents both a model, for content and style and deft prose, and the most perfect

example of cultural capital. If Barnes and Nobel called me and asked where they should shelve *Another Sort of Life*, I'd tell them, "Put it next to *Gilead*."

I should quickly mention Graham Greene's *A Sort of Life*, his memoir, and the inspiration for Gus's death and of Harvey's shame. Greene was probably manic depressive; his memoir definitely captures that essence. Greene was an intelligent young man who fell into debilitating boredom and apathy easily. In my thesis, Gus imagines himself to be cut from the same cloth. Greene self-prescribes a remedy for his apathy: he purposely faces death, a gamble. Gus decides to do the same, and convinces Harvey to do likewise. The first iteration of my narrative was titled *Unremarkable*, and then *The Unremarkable Life of Harvey Mitchell*, and then nothing for many months. And then, as creativity occasionally does, the title came to me in a moment. I almost feel bad taking credit for it. I like *Another Sort of Life* because of its layers of meaning. This story might be (1) another *Sort of Life*, a re-imagining of Greene's memoir; (2) another *sort* of life, an examination of a way people choose to live; or (3) another *sort of* life, an example of a life half-lived.

So Now I Have an MFA, And?

Another Sort of Life is not the first novel I've ever started. I can count at least three other starts. The project that went furthest was a story about a teenager who gets stuck with his older-than-usual parents as they cross the country in their Winnebago. I spent an entire summer learning how to play bridge so I could have my protagonist learn to play. *Another Sort of Life* is, however, the first novel I've ever finished.

To write my thesis, I studied novels, essays, short stories—and style manuals. Madison Smartt Bell's *Narrative Design* was helpful in its discussion of structure. And I worked hard to imitate the straight-man character, Morrison Long, of Percival Everett's "Hear That Long Train

Moan." Morrison Long is there to allow the protagonist to talk, to ask the questions the audience should be asking. I wanted my Sam character to work like that. In workshop, though, Sam came across as rude or stupid. I had to scrap that idea.

More necessary to address is my choice of an intimate third person narrator, and my use of detail. I am still experimenting with Jamesian central intelligence and free indirect style. I believe I understand, academically, how to use these elements, but in practice I need to make things smoother—make the contrivances and machinations of my writing disappear. And this seems to also be the issue with my choice of detail. My first intention was to create the kind of Flaubertian or Balzackian realism "that creates such an abundance of detail…[that] builds into itself a lot of surplus detail just as life is full of surplus detail" (Wood 81). The idea was to create the kind of life that "is amorphously full of detail" (64) to mark the "apparent irrelevance" (59) that often attends death. In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood painstakingly explains how detail functions in literature: everything from Flaubert's abundance of detail (and Roland Barthes's disapproval of that brand of detail) to the more neutral notion that while "we should indeed try to be the kind of writer on whom nothing is lost, we have no need to be the kind of writer on whom everything is found" (80). The interesting thing about *How Fiction Works* is that Wood never argues the practicality or stylishness of one use of detail over another.

Janet Burroway in *Writing Fiction* and John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction* argue that detail should be relevant, that even what seems initially insignificant in the moment should rush back with the force of meaning at another point in the book. The point, I think, is that detail contributes to images, and images carry a kind of social contract, an expectation, of sensory or rhetorical or symbolic meaning. Detail that does not accomplish that contributes to an image that betrays the reader's expectation. Even if I argue the purpose of arbitrary detail along Flaubertian

lines, the execution of the detail should probably be more subtle, less listy or strung out like linguistic stumbling blocks.

My thesis is, I believe, solid graduate work that stands as a testament to the sort of the things I have learned, my progress as a writer and as an academic, and demonstrates a style and voice that, while new, is becoming increasingly more deft, ever more real. In order to take my thesis from good graduate work to a publishable novel I plan to read more texts that detail what it is like to have cancer: Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*, for example. I am going to continue studying free indirect style and Jamesian central intelligence to smooth out any point of view issues. As a matter of style and consistency, I plan to make Sam and Claire warmer characters; and, finally, I plan to run the narrative chronologically. That is, I want to keep the flashbacks that reveal the Gus storyline, but I will begin at month zero instead of at the meeting with Sam.

One of my favorite first sentences is Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*: "So." That *so* says *I have a story*; it says *Listen here*; it says *Let's begin again*. What an interesting way to start a story. My creative thesis, *Another Sort of Life*, follows.

So—

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CHAPTER I

SIX MONTHS EARLIER

The board of directors hired Sam without consulting Harvey. There was no need, they said, to bother him with this type of thing—certainly not with everything he was already going through. That was just the talk Harvey had wanted to avoid; he didn't want, need, or deserve pity. Things were what they were, but the coddling and tiptoeing made it worse. All they needed from him was a smooth transition: take a few days to show Sam how things worked, introduce him to everybody, and then finally hand over the reins. So Harvey met Sam at reception, they shook hands, and Harvey escorted him back to his office. Harvey had to remind himself that it was actually Sam's office now. They made small talk about alma maters. They had both been Baylor Bears, and so it was easy to fill the time talking about the football team and whether old Bostwick was still teaching.

Still, it was like an uncomfortable *pas de deux* where neither partner was sure who was leading and who was following. Harvey remembered the time he surprised his wife, Claire, with Arthur Murray ballroom lessons—it was a just-because gift: she had mentioned once that she'd always wanted to be a dancer. The instructor had called them "gloriously wrong-footed" because they couldn't remember which foot to step off with, and trying to improvise a turn usually left them on different sides of the room. They took nearly the full course of lessons just to learn a basic two-step. She said it was the most fun she'd had in her adult life. They signed up again, and

again. After a year, they were reasonably good at the waltz, the tango, the cha cha; they had a passable foxtrot and swing; and, were making significant progress with the samba and merengue. Harvey was no Fred Astaire, but he delighted in the feel of her hand in his, moving to the beat, in synch. Here, though, in a closet-sized office in a hospice that served three Texas counties, Harvey and Sam sat across from each other, a heavy wooden desk between them. The only certain thing, in fact, was that their meeting would begin the process of Harvey leaving and Sam staying. Harvey had a vague idea of how this first meeting should go; yet, he proceeded awkwardly and seemingly off tempo.

"Have you watched someone die, yet?" said Harvey. He bent to look through his drawers for something, but the desk was already empty. It was a fair question and a good place to start.

Sam thought a moment. "Sure, I've seen dead people." And then, perhaps to assert his competence, added, "I'm young but not entirely inexperienced."

"I wasn't clear," said Harvey, still pretending to rummage through the desk. "Or maybe you're evading the question. Have you been in the room as a patient died?" He peeked over the top of his desk, "I'm guessing no—you never forget the first one you see go." Sam opened his mouth to respond, but Harvey went on, causing Sam to imitate a clown on a miniature golf course. "And it could take years. Between rounds and paperwork and therapy, you might go a long time before you actually see someone pass away. For some people," he sighed, "after the first one, they never really see it happen again. It's easy to avoid if you want to, especially easy for grief counselors like us." Harvey leaned back in his tall leather chair. It was a gift from the board of directors for ten years of service as the in-residence grief counselor at St. Christopher's Center for Palliative Medicine. (St. Christopher's was almost renamed Santiago Jaramillo Hospice, after a State Representative who died after a much-publicized fight against ALS. The

directors didn't want an unsainted Christopher for its namesake. But Father Frank, who often did last rites at the hospice, explained that St. Christopher was not uncanonized; his feast day was removed from the Universal Catholic calendar. St. Christopher's kept its name, and the community named a park for Santiago.)

Six years had passed since Harvey had received the chair and, now, it was the only evidence that he had ever occupied the tiny office. It had taken his first two years to make the office comfortable. Because the space was so small, he had installed floating shelves for his books and files. This way there was still space to sit. He like the Post-Impressionists and had hung reprints of Cézanne's *kartenspieler*, Angrand's *Man and Woman in the Street*, and Van Gogh's *The Sower* behind his desk. The wall on his right was his interaction wall. He'd painted it with chalkboard paint and invited anyone in his office to leave something behind, a quote or drawing or signature. Every New Year he washed it off and started fresh. He bought two chintz chairs with his own money. They were too large for the room, from a design point of view, but they were comfortable: soft grey-blue upholstery and fat, overstuffed arms. Claire said every office needed a ficus, so she got him one. Two years to make the office his own, and only an afternoon to empty it again. Without his things, the room looked more like a utility closet than an office. His books and personal files had already been boxed and were taking up space in the spare bedroom of his apartment. Where will the guests sleep, his wife had asked. It was meant to be a joke because they had no kids and seldom had overnight guests. Harvey looked at Sam, and Sam returned his gaze. Sam's expression was expectant, and Harvey realized that Sam had been trying to look him in the eye. "Know what I did this morning?" said Harvey abruptly.

"Tell me."

Counseling 101, thought Harvey, invite conversation. He wondered whether he was being counseled or if Sam was just being polite. That didn't make sense, though, he decided. What could Sam know? They just met. "Pushups," said Harvey, puffing out his chest. "Five sets of twenty. How many forty-three-year-olds do you know that can crank out a hundred pushups?"

"I don't think I could do it, and I'm younger than that."

"Right? It's impressive. Vital even." Harvey lurched forward and placed his once-meaty hands on either side of the desk, as though he were trying to steer the whole office. He wasn't hefty, not anymore. Not even thick. Healthy was the word. He had lost weight, sure, but he still had a healthy-sized frame. Today he wore navy Dockers held up by suspenders; a quirk maybe, but he liked the look. He wore an Oxford shirt, starched, with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He was slightly balding, but it looked good on him: distinguished, with tinges of gray, complemented by dark horn-rimmed eyeglasses. He was clean-shaven. His whole appearance was casual but stylish, powerful but not overbearing. Like a man who probably understood his abilities and appearance but normally went out of his way to make people feel comfortable. "I'm going to leave this chair, if you'll use it."

"That's very kind of you," said Sam. "It looks like it has been," Sam searched for a word, "well-used."

"You're being diplomatic," said Harvey. He smiled and swiveled in the creaky chair. Its brown leather was faded on the seat and up the back; the arms were cracked and flaking away. "To be honest, though, when I first started, I didn't think I would use the office much. I figured we have a people-job, and there are no people in here. Know what I mean?"

"Sure," said Sam.

"I spent my days in the patients' rooms, and in the rec area," Harvey explained. "If I had paperwork, I did it in the dining hall—I tried to be available."

"Something changed?"

"I hadn't figured out that the people that work here, the nurses and orderlies, the doctors, aren't immune from grieving." Harvey thought a moment and said, "You'll win points if you leave your door open and allow the staff to come to you." Harvey reached for his wallet, "Can I show you something?"

"Of course."

Harvey removed a postcard. On the front, a man with a full beard and thin smile stood, his arm around a rosy woman with round shoulders; between them smiled two gap-toothed preschoolers. He slid it towards Sam. "I got this two years ago from a nurse who used to work here. Her name was Tina. She quit to be a stay-at-home mom."

"Cute family," said Sam. He turned the card over and read the message: *Thank you. Love, Tina and the <u>whole</u> Warner family*. "Nice."

Harvey took the postcard and thumbed the side. "Tina had energy like nobody I've ever seen. Lots of nurses change bedpans and IVs and bandages, right? Tina, though, was peppy. Had energy and grace like someone who had actually found their calling, you know? I never got the impression she was doing a job, or at work. I know that probably sounds weird, but stick around long enough and you'll see: healthcare makes people cynical and sarcastic and sometimes plain unpleasant. One time, this old codgery fellow took residence here, room 301 I think. He was angry, angry about being sick, angry about being in pain, angry about dying. His wife and son were heavy smokers, but he wasn't. Unfair as it is, he gets lung cancer and they don't. Second-hand smoke. He was so sure that it couldn't be cancer that he put off even going to the doctor for

years. Then it was too late. Anyway, he was giving hell to the nurses and staff; he refused to see me. So Tina gets the idea she's going to do that scene from *Patch Adams* where Robin Williams walks into the old guy's room as the angel of death and the exchange euphemisms for death and then everything is OK."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"Nope, she totally did it."

"Did it work?"

"Hell no. He chunked a bedpan at her, and in her costume she couldn't move very fast. Hit her right above the eye. She got stitches for it."

"Damn."

"Yeah, but she didn't stop."

"She get through to him?" said Sam.

"No. He died angry and even evicted his family from his deathbed."

"It was useless then."

"Maybe," said Sam. "Tina told me that if he died angry, it wouldn't be because she gave up. I admire the audacity of it all."

"Sounds like an impressive woman."

"Yes," said Harvey. The fluorescent tube lighting the office buzzed and flickered. "She got pregnant a few months after she started working here. And it was weird, this constant reminder of life around all these dying people." Harvey's eyes began to drift and he slipped into a private reminiscence. "It was a good kind of weird," said Harvey, becoming aware of himself, "the patients latched onto it as a circle-of-life type of thing. So we decided to throw her a baby shower. I think she was six months in, when we had the party. I remember, she wasn't feeling

particularly well that day, but wouldn't let us postpone anything. We had snacks and games and gifts, and every twenty minutes she'd dash off to the bathroom. She was so exuberant when she came back, saying things like 'All better!' and 'Made room for more cake, y'all' that we couldn't help but laugh and play along with her. It was a good party, worth a memory." The buzzing from the light became louder. Harvey climbed on the desk and adjusted the tube. The light briefly went out and then came back on. No more buzzing. "Then in her seventh month, all of a sudden, she took her maternity leave. We were worried because, obviously, the baby was premature and that can mean all kinds of complications."

"That's awful," said Sam.

"We were wrong—she had a late-term miscarriage. She was far enough along that she had to deliver the stillbirth. They had a funeral." Harvey and Sam sat in silence. "The people we counsel here see death coming, even if only briefly; Tina was caught off-guard. It consumed her. When she returned to work, she appeared to bounce around like normal. She told us that it was too painful to talk about just yet, and to give her space. I think she wanted to pretend like it didn't happen. But, there was no hiding from it. Everyone knew she was pregnant. Everyone knew she didn't have the baby anymore. Then one day, she asked to see me in my office, closed the door, and just cried and cried and cried and cried: her doctor told her that the exact cause of the miscarriage was uncertain, but that it had badly affected her body: he 'strongly advised' against having children."

Sam let out a rush of breath and shook his head. He broke his gaze from Harvey and stared at the floor.

"She wanted to be a mom so bad," said Harvey. "She had carried around her baby binder at work from the moment she knew she was pregnant. One of those moms-to-be, you know?"

Harvey leaned back and the chair squeaked until he was fully reclined. “She had tweaked the colors for the nursery, spent hours deciding which bottle sanitizer to buy, could talk on the finer points of the latest in car seat technology.”

“My wife was the same way,” said Sam. “Had to have everything perfect. Do you have kids?”

“No.” Harvey felt a twinge of regret that he and Claire had never been parents. It was complicated, and it was too late now, anyway. Why did Sam interrupt? Harvey felt himself beginning to get angry. This isn’t me, thought Harvey; it’s the situation. Control it. He was trying to be part of a conversation, that’s all. The silence was turning awkward, so Harvey continued his story. “All of a sudden, Tina thought she’d never have kids—never be a mom.”

“What happened?”

“For the next two years, as she recovered physically and emotionally, she would stop by my office. Maybe twice a week. Every once in a while, she’d send someone else my way. It took a long time for her heart to heal. She told me she had given up on ever becoming a mom. I told her about a friend of mine who is an adoption agent. Tina had never even considered adopting.”

“The kids in the photo are adopted?”

“It took another three years, or something like that, before everything worked out and was approved. The two kids are siblings. Tina and her husband adopted them together: the girl as an infant, and the boy was one.”

“Fantastic, she got to be a mom after all. And a stay-at-home mom to boot!” Ah, youth, Harvey thought. The happy ending means you can forget the journey, the pain. How Disney. “I keep the postcard with me, because it cheers me up when I’m having a bad day. I look at it and remember somebody I helped, who said thank you.” Harvey put the postcard back in his

wallet. “The chair has history for me. Holds a lot of memories. I don’t have room for it at home, and I don’t have the heart to throw it out. Take it. If you decide to dump it, just wait until I’m gone.”

“Absolutely. No problem,” said Sam. Harvey realized he must have looked relieved because Sam added, “Thank you.” Then quiet. Harvey ran out of things to talk about. Sam looked around and his eyes settled on an imperfection in a ceiling tile. Harvey stared blankly at the wall as his fingers tapped out the patterns of scales and arpeggios on his desk.

Finally, Harvey stood, reaching out to shake Sam’s hand. “I realize I’m stalling. Can’t put off the inevitable, though.” Harvey’s smile was genuine.

Sam squeezed Harvey’s hand and looked him in the eye, “No, Harvey, none of us can stop the inevitable.”

Harvey blanched. “I’m fine.”

“I’m sure you are. I just wish we might have met under other circumstances—”

“I am fine,” Harvey interrupted. He dropped the handshake and stepped outside, but immediately regretted it. He turned around and leaned on the doorjamb. By way of an apology, Harvey offered, “I’ve always felt this place was my first real job. It’s hard to let go.” He glanced down the hallway. “About a year and a half in, a Japanese girl—Yukiko Takahashi, seventeen—moved into the room right across the hall. Leukemia. It had metastasized to her brain.” He paused, “I watched her die.”

“Hey doc, I have a new one for you!”

“Yuki, again, you can call me Harvey. What’s up?”

“Right,” said Yuki. Her bed was positioned so that she was sitting straight up. She was gaunt, her skin a papery gray. Her hair was gone, so she wore a headscarf with a silk-screened Japanese flag on it. I was born there, but I don’t remember it, she’d say. Several blankets covered her legs and shoulders. Every flat surface in her room: The nightstand, counters, much of the floor, was covered in books of all kinds. She had a few books open on the bed with her, and her thin fingers flipped pages quickly and with purpose. “Which do you want first: useless, interesting, or serious?”

“Useless, definitely.”

She straightened and addressed Harvey like a professor might address a classroom. “I’m pretty sure that entropy, which is roughly the tendency of hot things to disperse their heat into their surroundings, says that if you walk downstairs and pour yourself a cup of coffee and then remember that you need something from upstairs, it is better to pour the cream into your coffee before going upstairs than it is to let it sit without cream.” She used her hands to mime the acts of pouring coffee and then of running upstairs.

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“The heat from the coffee wants to disperse and equalize with the air temperature,” said Yuki. She rolled her eyes and affected a tone of mock-frustration at having to explain something so obvious. Harvey knew that she relished finding things he knew nothing about. “The extreme difference between the two temperatures makes the entropy very high, but putting the cream in lowers the difference and makes the rate of heat diffusion slower. So, your coffee should be warmer when you return if you add the cream first.”

“Why wouldn’t I just take the coffee upstairs?”

“Ergo, useless.”

#

Sam laughed, leaning back in Harvey's chair. Harvey sat in Sam's seat. "That's how she was," said Harvey. "Brilliant. Smarter than I'll ever be. All she did each day was read. If I came into her room, she'd tell me about something she'd been reading or thinking about. Some people you have to be patient with, and others are ready to talk about anything." Harvey's expression became distant and he chewed his bottom lip.

"What about you?" said Sam. Harvey ignored the question.

"You know that expression 'a twinkle in the eye'?"

"Yes."

"You know it has nothing to do with eyes, right?"

"I haven't given it any thought, really," said Sam.

"It's a metaphor, isn't it?" said Harvey. "Not really about twinkling eyes. I mean, how often can light reflect off an eyeball?" He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees. And although he was looking in Sam's direction, Harvey wasn't exactly talking to Sam as much as he was talking out loud while Sam was in the room. "We say it when we meet someone with vim and vigor, with some sort of palpable lifeness in their personality."

Harvey put his hands on the desk and, this time, looked right at a somewhat tense-looking Sam. "You know what," said Harvey, beating the desk for emphasis, "it isn't even about the damn eyes." He looked at Sam for understanding, "Get me? It's like when someone smiles and the corners of their eyes get crinkly and their cheeks puff to make them squint a bit, and maybe their lips even come apart some." Harvey leaned back and smiled like he had shared an

incontrovertible truth. “That’s what people mean whenever they say ‘Oh, so-and-so’s got a twinkle in their eye.’ It means they’ve got life brimming up through their face.”

Yuki tossed a chemistry textbook on the floor. She shivered, as much from cold as from the excitement of companionship. The nurses rarely had time for more than one bit of trivia, and her family didn’t want to talk about such frivolous things. Only Harvey allowed her to talk until she was exhausted.

“Ever heard of Jerry Sternin?” said Yuki.

“Never.”

“He went over to Vietnam in the ’90s to help with child malnutrition.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell. What about him makes him worthy of trivia time?” said Harvey. He stooped to organize some of the books shoved onto the floor.

“He only cured malnutrition.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Well, he improved conditions by, like, 65% in less than a year.”

“Where are you getting this?”

Yuki flung a small, blue book at Harvey. “The writers are brothers from Texas, somewhere in Austin, I think. Or they were. The book jacket says they teach at Stanford. Maybe that’s only one of them. I can’t remember because I don’t know where the book jacket went.”

“So is this interesting or serious trivia?”

“I haven’t gotten to the important part, yet,” said Yuki. “Jerry didn’t do it with some crazy technology or even some American innovation or even with tons of money.”

"Quit keeping me in the dark! I'm on the edge of my seat."

Yuki's eyes twinkled. "He looked at the Vietnamese kids who weren't malnourished and how those families were eating. Then he showed all the village moms how to cook like that: it was stuff like adding shrimp and greens to their rice. Proteins and vitamins make for heartier children. So you see how that's important?"

Harvey jingled the change in his pocket. "You've stumped me again. I'm not following your logic train."

"The solution was already there. He didn't teach Vietnamese to eat like Americans; he taught Vietnamese to eat like other, healthier Vietnamese. All he did, really, was choose a different point of view. Like hologram stickers where the picture changes when you move your head. He stopped looking at what was wrong and tried to copy what was right." Yuki settled against her pillows and took a large breath. "Anyway, I think it's cool. What if all problems have already been solved, but we're so stuck on what's wrong, that we never realize it?"

"She really said that?" said Sam. "She was how old? Seventeen?" He was sitting up now, too.

"No kidding. I don't think I had a single deep thought before I was married. And, even then, I think many of those were plagiarized." It was nice, thought Harvey, to talk like this without wondering whether anyone was in denial or depression. Soon, though.

#

Yuki held up a thick book with a black cover, “You ever read this?”

Harvey flipped through the copy *Invisible Man*, “Way back in high school. It’s about a black man searching for an identity, I think.”

“Did you get that from *Cliff’s Notes* or something?”

“I read the book, OK?” said Harvey, and with an exaggerated huffiness, put his hands on his hips. “I may have supplemented my understanding of the book with some outside sources.” Harvey saw Yuki smirk and thought about being a teenager. “To be honest, in high school I was into a different kind of literature.”

“Like what?”

“Graham Greene. Heard of him?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, I guess he’s not so popular anymore. He wrote a memoir that by best friend, Gus, and I got really into.” Harvey let his sentence trail off. He was suddenly aware of tension in his brow, lips, and shoulders.

“Are you OK?”

Harvey forced his muscles to relax. “We got very in to the book—anyway, I’ve totally interrupted! You were saying something serious about *Invisible Man*.”

“I was going to say, actually, that a lot of people talk about how it’s a coming-of-age story and a search-for-identity story, but I think they missed something big.” Yuki reached out for the book and flipped through some of her annotations. “They say that tearing a story apart kills it. You can’t ever go back and just read it.”

“Do you think that’s true?”

"Maybe. I don't know. I read a lot, but I can't remember the last time I reread something. I don't have time for that right now."

"Would you like to talk about that?"

"No. What I want to talk about is *Invisible Man*." She read back and forth between two pages, and held the open book up like a lawyer presenting a piece of damning evidence. "This scene right here is one of the first times you can really see it." She paused, perhaps ordering her thoughts, and took several deep breaths. "The Narrator is getting reamed by his college's black president, Dr. Bledsoe, for driving a rich white man around to all the degrading and violent areas in the black part of town: he gets accused of being a stumbling block for black progress. He basically gets expelled for it! No second chance; just sent packing!" She tossed the book to Harvey and folded and unfolded her arms. "Look for yourself!"

Harvey caught the book and rifled through the pages. Scrawled and shaking writing created an almost solid border around the text. THE NARRATOR DID CHOOSE AN IDENTITY, HE WAS GOING TO BE BOOKER T. WASHINGTON!...HE WAS HUMILIATED AT THE ROTARY CLUB MEETING (VERY, VERY BAD), BUT IT GOT HIM TO COLLEGE (VERY, VERY GOOD)—COLLEGE BOY WILL CHANGE THE WORLD!...EXPELLED? NO. NO. NO! THIS BOOK ISN'T ABOUT SEARCHING FOR AN IDENTITY. IT'S ABOUT THE IDENTITY YOU'RE ALLOWED TO HAVE!...BLEDSOE MIGHT BE JUST AS BAD AS THE WHITES—HE DIDN'T STEAL THE NARRATOR'S IDENTITY, BUT HE BLOCKED IT FROM HAPPENING!

"It's not fair!" said Yuki. As she spoke, she hit her mattress with tight fists, causing books to fall to the floor. "He could've been anything, right? Like, actually, anything." She drew out the syllables, emphasizing *anything*. "He was a smart, black kid, maybe a genius, right? He

could've been Colin Powell, way before Powell was. That's what it sounds like in the book." She was speeding up now, punctuating her sentences with quick gasps for air. "One moment," she said. "One moment and his future is gone." Frustrated and desperate tears made puddles around her nostrils and lips. "From the next Booker T. Washington to a line in the obituaries of a newspaper no one reads."

"Were you able to talk to her," said Sam. His foot bounced against the desk.

"Not then. She wore herself out and fell asleep pretty fast."

"So later? I mean, that sounds like classic anger stage grief."

"She didn't need me to tell her she was experiencing the anger," said Harvey. "She knew. I was there to let her feel it."

"How much longer was she here?"

"Two months," said Harvey. His hands, without anything to do, worked out a particularly difficult chord transition that was part of next Sunday's church service. Eventually he'd have to give up the Sunday service, but, for now, he was still the contemporary service pianist.

"What happened?"

Harvey sat still for a moment, as his hands practiced the piano on his legs. Then he folded his hands in his lap and looked Sam in the eye. "I came to her room because her parents were at work and wouldn't be able to come see her until that evening. She told me that one of the Oxford English Dictionary's most prolific contributors was pronounced legally insane and had spent most of his life in an asylum for killing a man, which is probably why he had time to look up strange words. Crazy what that kid knew."

Sam smiled, but did not say anything.

"Then she got a really bad headache. We pressed the call button for the nurse, but before one could arrive, she began having a seizure. There was nothing anyone could do. She died."

"She sounds like she was an amazing young lady—"

"Do you know what happens right after someone dies?" Harvey held up a hand to keep Sam from responding. "All the muscles relax: no puffy cheeks, no smiling, no crow's feet. I don't know that it looks particularly peaceful, but there is definitely no twinkle in the eyes."

"She was the first person you saw die?" said Sam. He opened the desk drawers and saw they were empty.

"No. She was the second."

"So who was the first? The one you'll never forget?"

Harvey stared at his desk for a long time. Too long. He understood that he was forcing Sam to ask his question again, or sit in awkward silence. He felt a strong desire to talk to him. Sam really did seem nice. He had a nice smile, not one of those grimacing ones. He dressed nicely and, for all Harvey could tell, he knew his stuff. But he was young. Harvey decided he was thirty, or thereabouts. Maybe this was going to be Sam's first *real* job, which made him a lot like Harvey. For all that, Harvey couldn't just confide in Sam; he had carried this secret for too long to simply spill it now. That would be too easy. He didn't even know if Sam was worthy of the information. "Honestly," said Harvey, "I haven't decided whether I'm going to tell you."

Sam looked confused. "That's fine, I guess. Pretty rough memory, huh?"

Harvey didn't answer the question. Instead, he said, "There's a story about St. Francis of Assisi where he's in his garden and he's hoeing, and then somebody walks up to him and asks 'If

you knew you were going to die tomorrow, what would you do today?' You know what he said?"

"Preach? Find his family? I don't know—eat a box of chocolates? That's what my wife says she'd do."

"He said, 'I would keep hoeing my garden.' How about that?" Harvey slumped in his chair. His hands didn't move. He looked toward the ground. "There's a Country song—you like Country?" Harvey looked up to see Sam shrug. "The song is this conversation between two guys, one who had cancer once. The healthy one asks something about what the other did when he found out about his disease. He said he went skydiving and mountain climbing and bull riding and grew a mustache and really started living like he was dying."

"What's wrong with that?"

"I love Country. It's a Tim McGraw song, and I like Tim McGraw. But I hate that song." Harvey realized that he wasn't being clear. His thoughts were bumping up against each other and coming out in bits and pieces. He knew what he was talking about, or at least he knew what he was trying to talk about, but Sam must be lost. He wondered whether this was how it felt to be senile. "People think that if they found out they were dying that they would spend all their money and go do everything they've always wanted to do. Take a cruise, jump out of a plane, eat tons of junk, whatever. Know why?"

Sam looked at Harvey, uncomprehending. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Because they weren't living a life they could be proud of in the first place. St. Francis, he believed he was doing what God called him to do. So when asked how he'd spend his last day, there was nothing to change. It's probably a parable; the kind of thing St. Francis might have said. Something people forward in emails now as a life lesson, or to avoid bad luck."

Harvey still looked at the ground. “I’ve seen it happen lots of times. Almost no one goes skydiving. People fight as long as they can and when the disease finally wins, people go home, get their things in order if there’s time, and then they die.” He sighed and sat straight again; he looked at Sam. He was serious. “What’s your answer to the parable?”

“I don’t know, Harvey.”

“Think about it a moment.”

“I’m sorry,” said Sam, “What are we doing here?”

“I must seem all over the place.”

“Meetings just to meet are awkward, I get it. They’re hard to begin, hard to end. However, I don’t understand what this has to do with me transitioning into your position. I thought we’d shake hands and start some rounds or something. Introductions? A tour?”

Harvey looked in Sam’s direction. He’d heard what Sam said, but he was committed to an idea forming in his mind. “I don’t have an answer either, but I need one. I feel like I have a whole lot to get done.”

“Can I help you with something, Harvey? Please, the truth.”

“Will set you free.”

“Yes, the truth.”

“That’s a funny phrase,” said Harvey. “I’m guessing people think freedom comes with relief, right? The same way people think the acceptance stage of grief means they will pass away peacefully, which isn’t necessarily true. It’s freedom from blindness, but what if vision is intimidating?”

Sam sat with his elbows on the desk, hands propped up and covering his mouth. His eyebrows raised in apparent anticipation, “Yes?”

“Know what else is messed up?”

“You’ll probably tell me.”

“The butterfly effect. You know it?”

“It’s a theory.”

“A butterfly flaps its wings and causes a tsunami on the other side of the world.”

“They’re not talking about an actual storm. You’re supposed to think about how small initial changes can alter scenarios down the timeline.”

“But why a tsunami? Why doesn’t the flapping cause a breezy day, or sunshine, or rainbows?” said Harvey.

“Who knows,” said Sam, “maybe sunshine doesn’t pack the imagery that a wall of water does.”

“So does knowing that the tsunami about to wipe out your village is the result of a butterfly collecting nectar make the consequence easier to bear?” Harvey’s heart was pumping, he felt anxious. He only talked openly with his wife, and even she didn’t know every single detail of his life; he didn’t believe he deserved another’s attention like this. He was a listener, not a talker—but, he thought, circumstances have changed.

“Perhaps not. Sometimes people just want to know why,” said Sam.

Harvey thought about that for a long time while Sam sat there. Sam began tapping his fingers on the desk. Perhaps he was becoming impatient. Eventually Harvey asked, “Do you think it helps to know that a mutated gene on a broken chromosome is the most probable reason for a middle-aged, Caucasian male who doesn’t smoke to develop pancreatic cancer?”

“Who are we talking about, a patient?”

“Although it is equally possible, so he’s been told, that his weight or eating habits may have also been a contributing factor.”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. It depends on the person.”

“Do you know why you were hired?” said Harvey.

“No clue,” said Sam. “You got a promotion? Another job? Your stock options matured and you’re taking an early retirement?”

“No,” said Harvey. He squared himself so he sat directly opposite Sam. “I’m really very sorry. I should have made an agenda, helped you fill out paperwork, introduced you to people. I’ve been an ungracious colleague. You have to believe me when I say I’m not usually like this.”

“No problem, you’re forgiven,” said Sam as he threw his hands up.

“Full disclosure,” said Harvey.

“That sounds good.”

“I have late-stage, metastatic pancreatic cancer,” said Harvey. “It’s terminal.” Harvey had seen people deliver the news to their friends and family: the expressions of fear, dread, anger, sorrow; the hugs; the profuse apologies; crying. Sam, though, was pensive. He didn’t react wildly. He was probably recasting their relationship, forcing all his responses through his therapist’s filter. It wasn’t fair, Harvey thought. He was losing everything and he didn’t even get any satisfaction from dropping a bomb like that on Sam. “I thought telling you would make me feel better,” he said. “Get things out in the open; clear the air.”

“Do you feel better?”

“Not really.” Harvey took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. All the rubbing made them appear red and tired. He did not feel powerful at all. He felt worn and defeated, like an athlete who has spent everything and still lost.

The two men sat in the tight office, cramped with its overlarge desk and chairs and bare walls, and did nothing. Several patients, unaware of Harvey's reason for leaving his post, walked by and wished him lots of luck in his new endeavors, and then were introduced to Sam. Harvey and Sam made small talk about the weather in Texas: hot, lots of sunshine. Sam asked about procedures: whether he would be required to sign in and out, if he needed a parking permit.

"So," said Sam, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. "What do I need to know about the patients?"

"The nurses' station has all the charts, and most of what you need is in there. I think I did a pretty good job of adding notes for you." Harvey fought the urge to be selfish. I can't blame him, he thought. He has to work here when I leave, and he didn't know what was going on with me, although he does now. It felt strange that he could still think rationally but feel impulsive, because what he really wanted to say was, *What? You can't wait until I'm done, all cried out or something?* Make it really sting. Instead, he said, "Mr. Romero passed away last week. It's unlikely you'll need to do anything about that. John Barry, in room 107, has severe depression. Jackie Davis has stopped eating and has increased her morphine. She'll probably go very soon. Rose Williams is an incredible lady. You can't even tell she's dying. She'll be a good visit for you. Pick up your spirits. But, she's already been here three months; health-wise, she might go any time." Harvey let his mind wander while he debriefed Sam on the patients. He thought about his old friend, Gus. It had been twenty-six years since Harvey had seen him, but he thought about him almost every day.

#

Harvey found Gus sitting under a mesquite tree by the Resaca. They usually met up there after school. He was smoking and watching a few people fish. Harvey didn't understand how fish got into the resaca. It was a big canal, a drainage ditch. As far as he knew, the water came mostly from rain. Every time he and Gus came out here, though, people were fishing: barefoot kids in cutoff jeans and no shirts; leather-skinned old men wearing wide-brimmed Panama hats, coolers of beer at their feet.

"Want a cigarette?" said Gus.

"Nah."

"Why not?"

"My mom smelled it on my breath and went all psycho on me, talking about cancer and life insurance premiums."

"You can't let the Man manipulate you. That's how it starts. Parents begin the inoculations, school continues, and then you become a drone in some office or something. I'm telling you: if you want to smoke, then grow a pair and light up. You're a high school senior, not a frickin' baby."

Harvey picked up a mesquite seed pod off the ground. He rattled the beans inside and started prying the pod open. Gus always did this. He had to pick at things. Harvey's mom really had gone full tilt, but it was just a convenient excuse. Harvey didn't like the cigarette anyway. At times like these, Harvey had learned, it was best just to be quiet, look deep in thought. Eventually Gus would move on.

"I—am—so—bored," said Gus. "I'm about to go drown myself in the canal just to have something to do." Gus crushed his cigarette in his palm.

"That doesn't hurt?"

“Not usually.” Gus stood up and took off his shirt and kicked off his sandals.

“You’re not jumping in?”

“Hell yeah, I am.”

“You can’t swim.”

“That just makes the potential outcomes more interesting!” Gus pushed off the mesquite and ran hard toward the resaca, his feet thumping and making small puffs of disturbed dust. And he jumped high and far. His jump arced away from the slope of the canal. The men in the Panama hats watch the trail of his jump. The kids screamed.

Harvey ran over to the edge. The flood gauge said ten feet. That was good news, mostly. It meant Gus probably wasn’t dead. But he hadn’t surfaced yet. “Do you have a rope?” he yelled to the fishermen.

All they had were two tow ropes. Harvey knotted the two ropes together and then looped one end around his waist. It felt heavy because the ends held large iron hooks. He shoved the hook in his pocket. Out on the street, none of the cars seemed to notice what was going on. It was hot and the heat shined off the asphalt. The kids had disappeared. Harvey hoped one of them had called for an ambulance. Just in case. He gave the other end of the rope to the fishermen and looked down into the resaca. How much time had passed? A minute? Maybe two?

He saw waves and bubbles and slid down the slope as fast as he could go. Thorns from bougainvillea branches scratched his arms and his face. At the edge of the water he dove in. The water was too murky to see, so he felt around for anything that felt like flesh.

And then—he had Gus’s hand and Gus was grabbing back. Harvey yanked hard on the tow rope and he could feel himself being pulled to the surface; he was dragging Gus behind him.

Climbing up the slope was slow. Gus had broken his ankle and so finding a footing was rough. At the top, an ambulance was just arriving.

"Why, man? Why'd you do that?"

"That was the best rush ever," said Gus. He was getting his foot set for the ride to the hospital. "I'm alive. It's like you don't live until you're almost dead. Besides, you're the one who came after me. That's heavy. That's like blood brother status. I owe you."

Harvey's scratches were burning; the sun was drying him off and searing his wounds.

The paramedics were helping Gus into the ambulance. "Hey, call my folks and tell 'em to pick me up, please. They're probably still in their offices at the university."

"Sure, I can do that."

"And listen, come by my house tonight. I've got something for you—a book. It's called *A Sort of Life*."

"OK."

"It'll blow your frickin' mind."

"You probably had to read *Romeo and Juliet*?" said Harvey.

"Required reading in high school, yup."

"I hate that Shakespeare gave away the ending right at the beginning: 'A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life.' Why would he do that?"

"Maybe the point wasn't that they died, but how they got there," said Sam.

"I don't like it. There's no hope. How can you read a story when you already know the ending?"

Sam was quiet and motioned for Harvey to continue.

"It's no way to start a story!" Harvey was feeling combative and confrontational now. He recognized the feeling but could not stop himself.

Sam only nodded, "You might be right about that."

"Don't try that with me," said Harvey. Wow, he thought, already to Counseling 102: the noncommittal answer.

"You're right," said Sam. "What's a better way to start a story?"

Harvey crossed his arms and huffed. It was a stupid idea to confide in Sam. Stupid, at least, to do it today. He knew that one confession led to another. It happens like that a lot. Most patients want to die with a clean conscience, and once they start blabbing, they can't stop. "So."

"So—what?"

"Exactly," said Harvey.

Sam waited.

"I read a story that started like that. It was a version of *Beowulf*; you read it before?" Again, Harvey didn't wait for a response. "The whole book starts just with 'So.' And it doesn't matter that Beowulf dies at the end of the story, because in the beginning there is still hope: Hope that this is the type of epic where everything will turn out all right. It's not even a tragedy until the last page." Harvey was actually smiling. "There are a thousand ways to go from 'so' and a tragic death by an untamable monster is just one possible outcome. Maybe he gets help before the story is over, right? Maybe he gets a weapon that can beat anything. Maybe someone rescues him before it's too late." Harvey imagined himself coming back to work a year or two from now, even healthier than before. Stronger, more compassionate, with a story and better able to counsel the patients because he'd known what it felt like to be dying.

"Are you hoping that will happen for you?" said Sam.

That was faster than I imagined it would go, thought Harvey. I'm not the therapist anymore; I'm the patient now. "You sound like a counselor." Harvey had meant it to sound only slightly dismissive, but it sounded like an insult. He'll live, thought Harvey. Then, "What I meant," he began.

"It's OK, I understand."

"You're doing it again. No one wants to feel like they're talking to a counselor. It makes people feel like they're a task on a chore list. You don't have next week's session to gain someone's trust. You have a job to do, sure, but make that part invisible. You're going to have to figure out how to manage someone's grief without making them feel like they're in therapy." Maybe I can't stop this from happening, thought Harvey, but I'm still relevant. I still have things to say. My experience counts for something.

Sam nodded, and they talked about things that were easy. They talked about places they had been, road trips they had taken, they learned that they were both avid campers. Sam asked about the commute and the community. Harvey discussed history and demographics. They talked about Green Energy. Sam said that biofuel produced from algae was a potentially lucrative movement, but hard to back because oil was still powerful. Harvey said it would be easier and more beneficial to outfit buildings with solar panels as a standard feature. It was a dispassionate kind of talk, things one could say to anyone without much consequence: things without emotion, nothing worth investing in. Harvey showed Sam around the building: a simple plan, really. St. Christopher's was an elegant building. The front entrance had a drive that curved around a fountain: the very infirm wouldn't have to walk from the parking lot. There was a long covered walkway with Corinthian pillars that reminded Harvey of the loggias his art history professor

used to drool over. The first thing inside the building was reception, a semi-circle marble counter where an important-looking lady, her hair in a bun, sat and directed new arrivals, family members and visitors, and delivery men to the right places. Immediately behind reception was a spacious common living room. Sofas and recliners were grouped around a fireplace in one corner, a TV in another. There were solid tables with lowered edges for playing dominoes. The building curved around a central garden that had plenty of benches and walking paths. To the right of the living room was the dining area, and each meal time the hall filled with the smell of yeast rolls, gravy, roast chicken. Beyond the dining hall was another smaller recreation room with another TV, a pool table, two card tables, and a magazine rack. The rec room was all windows and light. To the left of the living room, the patient rooms curved in a wide arc. Gardens and benches popped up around corners. St. Christopher's, Harvey mentioned, had a reputation for being lavish. Harvey walked Sam out to the parking lot so show him his new parking spot. Just around the corner was the ambulance entrance to transport bodies to the mortuary.

"What do you know about cancer?" said Harvey.

"I know that it battles heart disease as the nation's leading cause of death."

"Not everybody here has cancer," said Harvey, "but a lot do."

"That makes sense."

"It's a mutation in the genes that causes unbridled growth in cells. Technically, cancer cells are immortal. Scientists are studying cancer cells that are decades and decades old."

"That's amazing."

"It is. I read somewhere that the vitality that drives a cancer cell's growth is derived from our own bodies. Their survivalism is from the same drive we have to survive. If you think about

it, the life inside cancer is like another level of evolution: this thing driven to live forever." In another time, Harvey would have found this incredibly fascinating instead of horribly depressing. They stood in the parking lot and Harvey was keenly aware of the heat and humidity. His glasses fogged over and he had to wipe them off several times. The cars around them shimmered as heat rose from the asphalt. "I don't have kids," said Harvey. "My wife and I tried a couple times, but we decided that it wasn't meant to be." Last year Claire got morning sickness. She complained about tenderness in her breasts. And she was hungry. Harvey literally ran to the drug store to buy a pregnancy test. Maybe, he'd thought, it'll be different this time. Maybe it will take. Claire took the test into the bathroom and three minutes later they were excited at the prospect of being parents. The last week of the month, though, Claire had a heavy period. When she went to the doctor, he confirmed that, again, she was no longer pregnant. *I'm tired of this, and now I'm too old for it*, Claire had said. *I don't think I can stand to do this again.* From then on, they were officially no longer trying for kids. "The truth is that's all right with me. There will be fewer people affected by my death. That's important to me." He was glad that he didn't have a toddler who would become fatherless. His wife. What would she do? How long would she mourn? Would she move on? He wanted her to be able to move on, but was jealous of her future relationships: friends, clubs, jobs. Another man?

"You don't need to worry about that," said Sam.

"Wrong," said Harvey. He knew from experience that his actions affected the people around him, and he told Sam so. Dying with a crowd of mourners wasn't just sad to think about, it was irresponsible. Harvey couldn't carry that burden, especially not now.

"You have to assume that everything you do will affect someone else," Harvey repeated. His ribcage tightened around his lungs and his stomach heaved. He felt his face twitch and tense,

feeling red and hot and ripe. He gritted his teeth, but that only made the sensations more intense. There it is, thought Harvey, the compulsion to confess everything he had ever hidden away. He had not cried, for real, since he was seventeen, and now his own body was fighting to hold back, to not give in to the almost forgotten feelings of impotence and responsibility. He pressed his fingers into his closed eyes until sparks and spirals exploded across his vision. Harvey gasped and fought the urge to sob in front of Sam, a stranger, with deep, guttural throat-clearing. Harvey felt dizzy and out of breath. He placed his hand against a car. He tasted bile and swallowed it back. He knew he must appear out of control, suddenly sick, off the deep end. If Sam could just get inside my head, thought Harvey, he would understand I'm real messed up and finally getting my punishment. Cancer made the most sense, anyway. It had that whole eye-for-an-eye feel to it. Harvey saw Sam looking around, probably for help, or maybe a wheelchair. Harvey stood straight and breathed deep. He wouldn't cry. He wouldn't retch. He decided that in all things he would maintain his dignity. That was doable. That was in his control. But, Harvey knew, he believed, and he had to tell Sam again, "Everything you do affects someone else. Always."

"We don't need to do this right now," said Sam. "If you need time, I understand."

Sam would have to learn about the urgency. The dying lose sense of dollars. Time becomes currency. Every choice is weighed against how long it takes and how enjoyable it is versus how necessary it is. Do this later? What did he know? "You work in a hospice," said Harvey. "There's never more time."

CHAPTER II

1. EIGHT MONTHS EARLIER

Harvey and Claire lived on the third floor of a downtown building. Originally the building had been a general store and a lawyer's office. That was nearly a hundred years ago. Since then, the building had been a post office, a department store, abandoned, then renovated into a residence-above-commerce. The whole downtown had been renovated, part of Senator Wernecke's city revitalization plan. Of course, back then she was Mayor Wernecke. The revitalization had been a major civic and environmental success, so said a particularly favorable article in *Texas Monthly*. Downtown was now a walking community. The first floor of every building had some sort of business, usually family-owned, like small greengrocers and restaurants and a musical instrument shop and even a printer who made his own paper. The upper floors functioned as residences. And every building had a name (often some historical figure, although a few buildings were named after investors). Harvey's building was the three-story S.F. Austin Building. The plaque next to the front door noted that "Stephen Fuller Austin led many of the first American settlers into Texas."

The second floor of the Austin building was leased to Blaize, whose real name was Marcus Williams, who was an artist.

"Why the pseudonym?" Harvey once asked.

"It's the real me, my real name, the artist in me," said Blaize.

Harvey thought this an interesting explanation, especially because the Blaize persona was a grungy, tattooed, Mohawk-wearing individual who occasionally donned spiked bracelets, while the real Marcus Williams had no tattoos, neatly-combed hair, and often wore his *ITsoloutions* polo shirt tucked into khaki slacks.

"Besides, if Blaize isn't the real me," Marcus said, "then at least he's a more fascinating version. I can't stand needles. That's OK, because this way I can have a different tattoo any time I want."

Generally, the second floor reeked. Turpentine and incense and air freshener. Also sweat, clove cigarettes, and warehouse club cologne. Otherwise, Blaize was a good neighbor. Harvey had even purchased one of Blaize's masterpieces, a world map collage where each country was represented by its primary "export." China was composed of babies, tchotchkes, and smog; telephone headsets made up India; Russia was vodka labels; several Middle Eastern countries appeared to export Islam, represented by decoupage pages torn from the Quran; the U.S. was exporting Monopoly money. "It's ironic, see," said Blaize, "because it's completely stereotypical. China's actual major export is machinery, but nobody knows that."

When Harvey took the piece upstairs, Claire demanded it sit on the porch, where it underwent several rounds of Febreezing and airing out. "Why, Harvey?" she said.

"We should support art, when we can."

"How much are we supporting art?"

"More than you would've spent," said Harvey.

"I would have passed."

"Who knows, maybe he's avant-garde. Maybe we've got the first piece he's ever sold, and he's about to become a big name in the art world."

"He's never sold anything before?"

"Someone always has to be the first, right? We're early adopters." Harvey knew Claire wasn't actually mad. Flummoxed, maybe, by his sudden interest in art, but not mad. They agreed to mount it in the guest bedroom, because nobody really went in there anyway.

The first floor was a dry cleaners. The owner was an old Mexican widow who Harvey only knew as Doña Tita. For all Harvey could guess, she was fifty, or else she was seventy. Hers was a kind of spry ancientness that made her seem old-fashioned and ageless at the same time. She called him *joven* even though he was forty-three. He liked her.

Because it was Monday, Harvey gathered the laundry to drop off before work. The building had a small lift, but Harvey always took the stairs, even when he carried the stiff canvas bag that Doña Tita gave all her customers for their dirty clothes. This Monday he had a dull gut ache. He hadn't eaten much breakfast. It just didn't feel good to eat. Nothing major, just discomfort.

At the bottom of the stairs, Harvey turned left, into the shop, instead of straight through to the street. A brass bell hanging from the door announced that he had arrived. The shop was plain but clean. The floors were an orange-red clay Spanish tile that made footsteps sound like a herd of mustangs. Three straight-backed wood chairs were pushed against a window that advertised *Same Day Laundry!* and *$1.50 DRYCLEANING!* A low Formica counter cut the room in half. A wall hid whatever machinery and products Doña Tita used to get the clothes so spotless. The wall behind the counter was covered with autographed photos of her customers. "I didn't know anybody famous," she'd said. "So I get the autographs of the people famous to me."

Doña Tita called from the back, "Harvey, *un momentito*. I've got my hands full."

"Take your time," said Harvey, and he meant it. Why rush over laundry? He had a few minutes to spare, and there was no reason to ask her to work harder or faster than she probably already was.

Doña Tita shuffled up to the counter. She wore a bright red sundress. Harvey knew she had the same dress in blue, yellow, orange, white, green, and purple. Over the dress she wore a perfectly white apron, rosary beads hung out from a side pocket. "Every week, Harvey. How much laundry can two people make?"

"You're the best, Doña."

"That's true, that's true." She accepted the bag from Harvey, and as he turned to leave, she stopped him. "*Joven*, these shirts still have creases in them."

Harvey mumbled something about having worn them already, and they were his favorite shirts, after all. She had to agree to that, didn't she? Any time she saw him wearing either of the shirts she always said, "*¡Que guapo!*" And he wanted the shirts to be perfect because he had some big meetings this week and wanted to look his best, and he already said she was the best, after all.

"I know what you're doing, Harvey," said Doña Tita. "Maybe business is slow." One of her hands began fingering her rosary beads, as though she was unconsciously calling out a prayer while she talked. Harvey let himself smile, and then let his eyes find patterns in the Formica countertops. It was easy to do someone a favor when they didn't know it, but if they figured it out there was the gratitude or sometimes bruised pride. "I 'preciate it," said Doña Tita. "*Me bendices, joven*." She squeezed his hand a little and whisked the shirts into the back room. Harvey heard her shout, "They'll be ready for you when you get back from work, like always."

Harvey left Doña Tita's, but before the door latched, he caught it and held it open for a few seconds. He did this for every door he went through because he might not have noticed someone exiting behind him or entering in front of him. So much did he care that the door not hit anyone that he held the door even when he knew he was alone.

Harvey and Claire owned their apartment outright because they moved into Downtown during phase one construction. The apartment was priced to move. What's more, it was only a few blocks from St. Christopher's, so Harvey usually walked to work. This is quite wonderful, thought Harvey as he passed the storefronts. The sun was still low, barely above the horizon and the heat had not yet become oppressive. Happiness could sneak up on you, thought Harvey. And there isn't anything you can do about that. He had long ago accepted that occasionally he would be happy. Like right now: he was having a good morning, waking with the sun. Harvey had always hated the aggressive *urrh-urrh!* of most alarm clocks. He'd startle awake, his heart beating uncomfortably fast. Clock-radios were only slightly less unbearable. Instead, Harvey convinced Claire to sleep with the blinds up. It felt natural and healthier, he had reasoned, to wake up with sunlight. This morning he woke and could smell coffee. Claire wandered into the bedroom. She was in her robe and her hair was pulled back. Without makeup, Harvey could see the light freckles on her nose and just around her neck. She was pretty, even without her makeup. He told her all the time, but she demurred saying something like, "Just wait until I get my face on." Why couldn't she just accept the compliment?

"Breakfast is ready, sleepy head."

Eggs in a basket, probably Harvey's favorite meal ever. And she had used sourdough, lightly buttered. If it hadn't been for his slight upset stomach, he would have scarfed it down, chewing optional. Maybe asked for seconds. Then, downstairs to drop off the laundry. Now, a

three block walk to St. Christopher's. He thought about how good Claire was to him, surprising him with breakfast today. If he could remember, he'd get a bottle of wine on his way home. She liked a nice chilled Riesling.

The shops were just opening, and there wasn't any real traffic, only the occasional rumble of a city truck. The sun wasn't hot and he could smell the dew. It all just felt beautiful, and Harvey realized he was happy. He could forgive himself for that. Joy, though, had to be guarded against, because, at least for him, it was undeserved.

Harvey tried to recall a passage from that damned book he had started to tell Yuki about all those years ago. He remembered the words: "Boredom seemed to swell like a balloon inside the head; it became a pressure inside the skull: sometimes I feared the balloon would burst and I would lose my reason." These words, thought Harvey, seem so banal now. How did I ever find—power—in them? *Happiness*, and also *complacency*, swells like a balloon inside my head. Harvey felt remorse, and he knew his reason was safe. There would be no real joy today. Harvey walked the last two blocks to work. He was keenly aware of the pain in his stomach, and a familiar disquiet occupied his thoughts. He remembered Gus.

Gus and Harvey were next-door neighbors growing up. At least until Gus's grandpa passed away and left his house to Gus's parents, which was a few blocks away. By then, though, they had bikes and the distance didn't matter.

They became friends, Harvey remembered, in the peculiar way only children navigate relationships. Harvey was a latchkey kid, walking home from school every day and spending a few hours alone until his folks got home from work. The rule was: once Harvey got home, he

needed to call Mom and then he should not leave the house (unless *of course* there was a fire, which there shouldn't be, because he shouldn't even look at the stove). So Harvey usually spent about fifteen minutes sitting outside his house, on the storm drain, crushing acorns with his heel. As long as he made his phone call by 4:30, he was fine.

One day in the middle of third grade, Harvey headed to the storm drain and found Gus sitting there. "Hello," said Harvey.

"Hi."

Harvey sat down and started crushing acorns.

"Why are you doing that?"

"I always do this," said Harvey. "Or else I have to go inside and do my homework."

"Oh."

"Yup."

"Where do you live," asked Gus after a moment. Harvey pointed out his house. "Oh," said Gus, "I live in that one over there."

"Nobody lives there."

"I do," said Gus.

"Nuh-uh."

"Yes, we just started today. That's my dad's red car, see?"

Harvey couldn't deny there was a red car in the driveway. He also noticed that the lawn had been mowed. "Oh." He kicked his crushed acorns into the storm drain and said, "I have to go inside now."

"OK."

Harvey looked at Gus. He was just normal-looking. He wore glasses, and the earpieces had a neon string tied to them. That was cool. Harvey considered things a minute and then asked, "Do you want to be friends?"

"Um, OK."

"What's your name?"

"Gus. Yours?"

"Harvey." And so they were friends.

Harvey hadn't thought about that day in a long time. The simplicity of that moment and the unquestioned friendship that followed, Harvey knew those things were beautiful, were remarkable, were quite possibly once-in-a-lifetime. Harvey had arrived at St. Christopher's and held the door open for nobody. He smiled at the receptionist and stood straight, but really he felt so swaddled in regret that he couldn't imagine actually helping anyone today.

Harvey couldn't eat his lunch. His gut ache seemed stronger and eating wasn't appealing. On the other hand, he thought, I'm usually more aware of my aches and pains after I've been thinking about Gus. It's probably just me.

Nothing very dramatic happened to pull Harvey out of his funk, for which he was grateful. He visited patients, keeping track of their grief or depression, listening to their stories of bygone days or their stories wishing they had done everything completely differently. Hospices have an odd way of changing patients: the very young seem so much younger and the very old seem so much older; the middle-aged are the most distraught, and they spent the most time in

denial and anger and depression. Harvey was thinking about this as he closed up his office to go home for the day.

"Harvey, you need to come talk to me."

"Any time, Rose. What can I do for you?"

For a woman with stage four breast cancer, Rose looked strong. She was a thin Black woman who must've been pretty before the cancer had begun to steal the flesh from her bones. When she spoke, she expected people to listen, and Harvey was certain that this trait was part of her pre-cancer life. "What is wrong with you, Harvey?"

"I'm good."

"No you're not," said Rose. "Don't argue with me, either."

So I was too transparent, thought Harvey. I'll need to be better about that. "I've got a bit of a stomach ache, I guess. I didn't mean to bother you about it." This wasn't untrue, decided Harvey.

"If I was bothered, you'd know."

Harvey laughed. Rose was a pleasant surprise in a hospice, even though that was the wrong way to phrase it. Like anyone, she had her bad days when the pain was intense, but she didn't talk about regrets or getting a do-over at life. She was confident that dying was part of the plan for her life. "Everybody dies, Harvey," she'd said during their first meeting. "Some of us shuffle off this mortal coil earlier than others, that's all." She was well-educated and liked to turn a phrase. Very often, she'd respond to one of Harvey's questions with some quote and expect him to play along. The first time she did this, she told him that she expected death to be an awfully big adventure. It took Harvey several confusing minutes to realize she was reciting *Peter Pan*.

Rose was a bit of a celebrity. She was a high school teacher, and brought attention to herself when she won Secondary Teacher of the Year for the whole state of Texas. In her acceptance speech, later repackaged and sold under the title, "I Too Have a Dream," she publicly rebuked policy makers, institutions, parents, students, other teachers. She railed against standardization and educational commodification; she lambasted the bastardization of grading procedures—"Grades are *supposed* to be an artificial representation of the mastery of a skill or concept," she had said. "We treat grades as though they were achievements. Let me be clear on this: grades are not achievements; they are measurements. As long as we prostitute our educational values in favor of achieving grades, real learning becomes untenable." This type of diatribe was unprecedented. She received a standing ovation. Rose was invited to D.C. for lunch with the Secretary of Education. The papers were all over her for a while.

Like so many things, her star dimmed. She told Harvey that she was a year from retirement when she learned about her cancer. She had drained her HSA with all the tests and an attempt at surgery: she had little left when the doctors gave her six months. Rose told Harvey it was a miracle. Her school district began fundraising, and their efforts funded Rose's admission to St. Christopher's. The papers learned about the school's efforts and began running stories again about Rose and the district that was helping her. The result was that Harvey knew a lot about Rose before she even officially took residence.

Since moving in, the ladies from her church were having their weekly Bible study in her room, and the last few weeks they had taken to ending their meetings with raucous hymn singing. Rose had recently decided that she could sing even if her Bible study wasn't around, so she sang in the cafeteria and in the shower and the recreation area. She sang everywhere. If

anyone suggested she take a break, she'd say, "Oh you don't mean that. Come sing with me and you'll see."

"Harvey, if you are sick then you need to see a doctor. I mean it."

"I know," said Harvey.

"Don't you 'I know' me," said Rose, and Harvey had the impression that she might be able to see right into him. Altogether not a heartening thought. "You know I love the Lord, don't you Harvey?"

"Absolutely."

"I'm going to die, Harvey. I'm not scared, I think."

"You're a strong woman, Rose."

"Of course I am. And don't interrupt." She winked at Harvey. "But I would take another minute on this earth, if the Lord allowed. I already miss the world; no regrets, mind you. I believe the world is wonderfully made. I'd like more time in it. You see what I'm saying?"

"The Lord is good?"

"You're half an idiot Harvey," said Rose. "If you're sick, go to a doctor. Life is too precious to suffer through it." She narrowed her eyes on him. "And you know I'm right. Obviously I have some perspective on this."

Harvey thanked her for the advice and then she dismissed him because she was done saying her piece. Don't you come talk to me, she said, until you've made a doctor's appointment. Harvey figured she probably meant it, so he walked over to the nurse's station to call his doctor. He made the first available appointment: Thursday, ten in the morning.

Two days isn't such a long time, except that the pain was becoming more intense. It didn't feel good to eat. He either felt full or the dull ache became a stabbing. Sometimes it hurt to bend over and put on his socks.

"If it hurts that bad," said Claire, "maybe you should take a day off and try to walk-in, or go to the ER."

"I've already got an appointment. I can wait it out."

The doctor's office was on the other side of town, so Harvey had to find a ride, and that was somewhat more complicated than usual: Harvey and Claire only had one car. The pain was intense. He had decided not to worry Claire with it, yet. Better to wait until after the doctor had a look. He called a cab so Claire wouldn't take off work. She was the Events Director for the Convention Center.

Harvey and Claire met in college. They sat next to each other during a performance of *The Nutcracker* by the Moscow Ballet. The ballet had come to town as part of the college's ARTS series, whose purpose was to *engender discussions of arts and humanities in all aspects of life*. Harvey had come because he badly needed extra credit in Art History and his professor told him he could write a review of the performance for a few points.

To get to his seat, he had to squeeze past Claire. She's cute, he thought. Lots of freckles. Don't see that very often. "Hi," he said.

"Hello."

Harvey's knees pressed against the chair in front of him. He hated auditorium seating. He took out his pad and pen and tried to get comfortable. Impossible, he thought. What's the point

of seeing a show if I can't even concentrate on what's going on? It's like only short people enjoy art or need extra credit from the art history professors. He twisted and shifted. "Hey," he said. "Would you mind switching seats with me? I can't squeeze myself in good enough to take my notes."

"Uh—sure," she said.

They swapped seats and Harvey stuck his legs out in the aisle. "That is so much better. Thank you so much." She smiled and nodded. "My name's Harvey," he said, and stuck out his hand.

"I'm Claire." She shook his hand.

Her touch was firm. He liked the feel of her hand in his. And those freckles. She had to be here alone, he thought: she was in the aisle seat and his ticket was right next to hers. "You," he opened his mouth before he knew what he was going to say. Claire raised her eyebrows at him. "You working on extra credit, too?"

"Is that what you're doing?"

Harvey explained his situation. He finished, "And so I have to write a review and I don't know anything, really, about ballet."

"Oh." She turned her attention to her program.

The lights dimmed and brightened again to signal five minutes to curtain. All around them people in suits and dresses were settling in their seats. Claire had on a simple black dress and a string of pearls. Harvey thought he had done well be wearing a button up shirt and tucking the tail into his pair of nice jeans, but he suddenly felt underdressed and out of place. He had to get Claire to open up. He had the length of the performance to make an impression, or she might

be gone. He couldn't think of anything suave to say. That wasn't his style, anyway. "So," he said. "Why brings you to the ballet? Definitely not an assignment."

Claire looked at him, and Harvey thought it looked like she was trying to decide whether to engage in conversation, like she already knew what was in his mind. Finally she said, "I love the ballet. Dancing, actually. But there is something powerful and graceful, majestic, about ballet. A good performance is like watching Renaissance sculpture come to life—the ideal. You watch and see what you always believed was impossible become real. If you could only get out of your seat, you could maybe be a part of it." The house lights went dark and Harvey didn't have a chance to respond.

He didn't know anything about ballet. The last time he had even seen *The Nutcracker* was on a field trip with his third grade class. It's just a story of Christmas toys coming to life, he thought. But he couldn't get Claire's words out of his head. He didn't want to. He watched and could not describe what was going on. He couldn't decide what was important and what might just be transition. Was every moment important? He looked at Claire and she was holding her breath, her hand to her mouth. Harvey looked at the stage just as the ballerina made a great leap—and was caught. The ballerina's arms and legs curved high into the air. The male ballerina's ("cavalier" Claire later told him) muscles showed through his tights. Without any bouncing or 1-2-3, he lifted the ballerina over his head, glided across the stage, and very gently and slowly lowered her to the ground. As he did this, he raised his right leg up. There, ballerina and cavalier stood a moment; a slight trembling, almost imperceptible, moved through their bodies. They were statues, like anything Michelangelo had ever chiseled. For the remaining performance, Harvey took his cues from Claire: when she held her breath, or sighed, or gasped, or braced against the seat, he took notes.

After the performance, Harvey followed Claire to the lobby. “Claire,” he said. “You were right. It was beautiful.” He saw her eyes soften. “I don’t understand it very well. Please, let me buy you a cup of coffee. Help me see this how you see it.”

They went to Eugenio’s, which, despite the great name, was a hole-in-the-wall. The carpet curled away from the baseboards, the couches had holes patched with duct tape, the side-table lamps worked only occasionally. But, Eugenio’s had the best coffee, and the baristas would make pictures with the foam if you tipped them a dollar. Harvey and Claire sat against a window and used the streetlight to illuminate their table. Claire told Harvey about the history of the Moscow Ballet, and of *The Nutcracker*. She talked about grace and strength, music and storylines, symbolism. Harvey took brilliant notes. “How do you know all this?” he asked.

“I would have loved to have been a dancer.”

“What kept you from doing that?”

“I did take dance lessons,” she said. “I even performed in our local *Nutcracker*. I’m no prima ballerina, though.” She looked sad, and Harvey wanted to put his arm around her, but it was way too soon for that. “Not everyone who paints becomes Dalí, right? Not every kid with a chemistry set becomes a Curie. No. I watch and enjoy.”

Claire consented to give Harvey her number, and he called her when he got the grade for his paper, an A, and invited her to celebrate. She declined. Harvey spent the next several months asking her out before she finally agreed.

Harvey was too used to the overt comfort of St. Christopher’s to appreciate the padded seats and magazine selection in the clinic lobby. Also, people at the hospice were sick and in

pain, but usually they weren't contagious. If I'm not sick, I will be by the time I leave, thought Harvey. Compared to the congeniality of the hospice, the clinic was mechanical and scrubbed and smelled like ionized air, kind of metallic. There was also a humiliation involved with the doctor's office: *Remove your clothes and have a seat. The doctor* (who will be wearing several layers of clothing and wielding a clipboard and a stethoscope and whatever else to poke and prod) *will be in shortly*. Harvey sat on the crinkly paper in his boxers, playing games to occupy his mind. He practiced tongue twisters, then recited all fifty states, and then tried to name the capitals of each state: Alabama, Montgomery; Alaska, Juneau; Arizona, Phoenix (those were easy); Vermont was easy because its capital had a funny name, "Montpelier." He couldn't remember, though, if Missouri was Jefferson City or Springfield, and he soon gave it up.

When the doctor came in Harvey was humming the tune from an insurance commercial. "Mr. Mitchell," said the doctor. "What brings you in, today?"

"My stomach hurts."

The doctor had Harvey lay down. More crinkling. "Throbbing? Stabbing?" His fingers pressed in on Harvey's belly. "Does this hurt?"

"Doesn't feel good."

"How about here?"

Pain screwed through Harvey's abdomen and he involuntarily brought up his knees to shield himself, the paper on the table announcing his discomfort with an unbearably loud *chshh* and then tearing. "Stabbing, right there."

"What about weight loss? Any cramps?"

"Yeah, some. My back hurts. I don't know if that's connected."

"Let's get some tests."

Harvey hated that. He remembered the time he was sure his mole was growing and he had melanoma. He was twenty-two. The doctor had barely glanced at the mole before sending him home. Harvey thought this would be a funny story for the doctor to hear.

"Middle-age, Harvey," said the doctor. "After forty, it usually *is* something. Don't worry too much. It feels like it might be some blockage. We're just going to be sure." The lab tests were easy enough; the clinic had a lab, so Harvey gave his blood and urine. Three days for the results and until then, "Try some stool softener. Drink clear fluids and try softer foods."

Waiting, waiting: the most difficult part of any diagnostic test is the waiting. The doctor had said it was probably nothing, but let be sure. Why be sure of nothing? It's like the doctor prescribed three days of freak-the-hell-out while I take my time determining nothing is wrong with you. The cost in anxiety is only a few days of internal torment. But is that too high a price for certainty? Harvey tried to busy himself with work. That was the universal palliative: ignore everything and consume yourself with matters of great importance. Harvey's gut still ached. Sometimes a stabbing pain, but often just a dull reminder. On Monday, a nurse from the clinic called Harvey and left him a voicemail: "Mr. Mitchell, the results of the lab work were not conclusive. The doctor would like you to have an MRI. We have scheduled you for the scan in two weeks, again on Thursday at ten in the morning. If this time will not work for you, please call me back to reschedule."

Inconclusive? Two more weeks? More waiting, more anxiety. Hell, if it is anything serious, he thought, I've lost a month just waiting. The stabbing moments were coming more often. He ate less. His weight loss was prominent now. Only Claire knew he was unwell. His coworkers congratulated him on his diet. *Wow, Harvey, looking good!* and *If you keep it up, you'll disappear!* and *You've got to tell me your secret—I'm so jealous!* Only Rose asked if he

was all right, to which he replied, “Just waiting on tests,” which was true, but also didn’t reveal the small panic growing in the back of his skull. I might actually be sick, he thought. And it was strange to feel both relief and despair about that.

On the day of his MRI, the technician could not be convinced to reveal any opinions about what he saw. The doctor would probably call him tomorrow, and they could discuss it then.

“Harvey,” said the doctor when he called the next morning. “The MRI shows a mass.”

“What does that mean?” The words were out of Harvey’s mouth before he could stop them. He knew what a mass meant. No, no, that wasn’t true. A mass could be so many things.

“Between the lab tests and the MRI, it could be pancreatitis—that’s inflammation in the pancreas, and could be causing your abdominal pains. But it could also be pancreatic cancer.”

Harvey was quiet. Finally, he said, “OK.” That’s all he could voice. Pancreatitis, annoying. Pancreatic cancer, fatal. The doctor probably wanted him to have hope, but he was spiraling. He wanted to shake the doctor by his lapels and make him choose: cancer or not? He felt suddenly tired. He’d never been lucky. Why should he be, now?

“Only a biopsy can tell us for sure. We need to do it as soon as possible. Can you come to the hospital today?”

“No, not today,” said Harvey. A big needle in his gut? He’d be awake for that, too. They’d probably say he shouldn’t drive for a few hours. He hadn’t even told Claire about the MRI. She’d only have worried, and that was unfair to her. Worrying would not have made the appointment sooner; it would only have made her pace and dash to the computer every few minutes to look something else up on *WebMD*. Besides, *the doc said* it was probably nothing. Why rush to test something benign? He wouldn’t be able to hide a biopsy. “Monday?”

Claire and Harvey arrived at the hospital early. “I’m not mad,” said Claire again. Harvey was probing to see whether she was upset about his initial secrecy. “I’d have liked to have known, sure. But you’re probably right; I would’ve worried.” Harvey wasn’t satisfied with this answer and continued prodding her. “If you ask me again,” said Claire, but she turned back to her magazine.

Tallahassee, Florida, thought Harvey. Helena, Montana. Carson City, Nevada. Seattle—no, Olympia, Washington. He was wearing a paper gown, in his underwear again. A nurse came in. She said, “The procedure itself isn’t lengthy. But it will be painful.” She waited.

Harvey thought she expected a reaction or at least a grimace. So he grimaced.

“It’ll be OK,” she said. “It’s part of getting better. Think of it like that.”

Harvey nodded. I could do without the commentary, he thought. He kept it to himself. No reason to hurt her feelings just because he was having a bad day.

“The good news is that abnormality in pancreas cells is easily observed. So we’ll know what’s up before you leave today.”

That was nice. The waiting game was the worst part of all this. It had been more than three weeks since his first doctor’s appointment. He knew he was lucky, compared to other people. Sometimes waiting could be months and months. An answer. That would be nice. How can you make plans when you’re waiting to find out if you’re sick? He heard that at the hospice sometimes. It’s just nice to know, they’d say.

An hour later, Harvey could not get comfortable. The biopsy did hurt. A lot. Now it seemed he would never find a position that didn’t injure him in some way. Claire kept asking if she could do anything: pillow fluffed? something to drink? the TV on? What Harvey really wanted was for everyone to stop asking him anything and to let him figure out how to control his

pain. If I can just get my mind around this, he thought, I can probably handle this. He didn't want to be rude, especially to Claire who was always so helpful, so he said the TV might be nice.

The doctor came in and gave Harvey something for the pain. "It's cancer, Harvey. I'm very sorry," he said after a moment.

The medicine was fast, and the pain ebbed from both his gut and his wound. He felt better. The doctor was squinting at him, and Harvey realized he was smiling; the pain relief was much appreciated. Harvey said, "That can't be right."

"Pancreatic cancer often remains unnoticed until the tumor is large enough to push up against the bowel or intestines. That's the case with you."

"I don't feel sick."

"I'm referring you to Dr. Patag. He's an incredibly capable oncologist."

"No." Harvey expected he might be ill, but he did not think he had cancer. "It doesn't feel like cancer." The doctor opened his mouth to speak. Harvey cut him off so he could explain: he wasn't just being silly. "I read last night that pancreatic cancer is sometimes misdiagnosed as pancreatitis or gall bladder problems. I mean, why can't it be the other way around, too?"

"That's what the biopsy was for. It eliminates, to a high degree, misdiagnosis."

"What about jaundice? I'm not jaundiced, and the symptoms include jaundice. I don't have the runs either."

"Harvey," said the doctor, deep concern written in each line of his crow's feet.

Funny, thought Harvey, crow's feet are also the result of laughing. I wonder if he's laughing at me.

“Rarely does anyone have all the symptoms of a disease. And sometimes people have no symptoms. They can still be sick.” After a moment he added, “You’re a medical professional. You should know this.”

No, cancer is wrong. I want it to be wrong, thought Harvey. After that, Harvey participated less. The doctor spoke to Claire, who took notes and accepted telephone numbers. She wasn’t crying or sniffling. She was super attentive, asking questions, finding out procedures. Harvey knew it was a front. This was on-the-ball Claire to hide scared-Claire. Harvey signed some papers, although he wasn’t sure what they were exactly. Claire put them in her purse. She drove them home and began researching. He sat on the sofa and watched television. It occurred to him that he hadn’t taken the laundry down for today, a first in four years.

Claire occasionally asked him questions. The TV was hypnotic, and if it wasn’t for the questions, Harvey supposed he might have drifted off and then who knows how long he would have been out. “What’s ‘resectable’ mean?”

“It’s a medical term,” said Harvey. It was an obvious answer, but he had a hard time finding the right words to define it. “It kind of means ‘operable’ or ‘removable.’ It’s about tumors and things like that.”

“OK.”

“What are you looking at?”

“Trials. There all kinds of clinical trials,” said Claire. “I think you can probably get in one or something.”

“Hm.” This was how Claire mourned, Harvey knew. When her father died, she cooked all day for the reception, and then cooked for the family that was in town, and then cleaned everything up. She was a busy-body. If she cried, it would be later. When there was less hope.

Harvey knew what she would find on the first Google search: pancreatic cancer equals death, almost always. For most, in less than a year. Only a small, small percentage lasted longer than five years. She would ignore that, on the lookout for hope. Where's the hope? Harvey didn't believe there was any. But he didn't tell her that. Instead he sat beside her and they talked about clinical trials.

In the morning, Harvey dressed for work: things had to be taken care of. Pills were managing his pain, and he physically felt better than he had in a month.

"Don't forget," Claire said, "you have an appointment with Dr. Patag today."

"Right."

Harvey didn't go to the appointment. Claire was angry. She spluttered and walked around the house and even shouted into a pillow. Harvey tried to explain that work was hectic after he'd been gone all those days. Besides, hadn't they already picked out with trial he was going to apply for?

Claire went for a walk. When she came back, she looked at Harvey and said, "You should know better. I know what you're doing."

"I'm not doing anything. I just got busy." He wasn't lying. He had to make her understand. "We got two new patients today, Sheila Brannigan and also her son, Parker. Both of 'em. She's late sixties with stomach cancer and he's in his forties with leukemia." Harvey started pacing around the coffee table and gesturing and becoming very animated. "Anyway," he said, "Ms. Brannigan went into a full meltdown at the idea that her son might go before she does. I was with her all day. I didn't even get lunch.

"You deal with people going through this all the time. You're either being dense, or you really don't see what you're doing."

"I'm not doing anything. In fact," he walked over to her and grabbed her hands, "I feel pretty great."

"Stop it."

"Maybe everything was a mistake. Look—" Harvey did some jumping jacks and some squat-jumps.

"Stop it."

"Watch this." He bent low and jumped up and put the palm of his hand flat on the ceiling. "When was the last time I could do that? That has to be at least nine feet."

"Stop it!"

"What?" Why did she have to be like this? He was feeling really good and he thought she'd like a spaghetti dinner and some wine. Then maybe some romance. A song, something slow. He'd kiss her like if he was a teenager and then she'd start on his pants and he would pick her up and sweep her to the bedroom. "I thought you'd be happy for me. For us."

"Make the fucking appointment."

As long as Harvey had ever even known Claire, he'd never heard her curse. In fact, he never would again. Harvey made an appointment to see Dr. Patag the next day.

Dr. Patag's office was professional. It didn't smell bleached, and it didn't feel surgical, nothing like his GP's office. This place was warm and inviting. There was a small waiting room. Against one wall was a brown suede loveseat. The other walls had pairings of seats: two high-backed, upholstered wing chairs; a bench seat. Nothing for just one person. In one corner, a drink fridge invited visitors to help themselves. Harvey wanted a Diet Coke, but he took a water. The doctor was short, a bit round about the middle, wore large-framed glasses. He said his name was

Jeremy Patag, and that it was fine to call him Jeremy. He asked Harvey to have a seat, offered coffee or tea or soda. Harvey declined. He already had a water.

"I've had a chance to read your file," said Jeremy. "I'm sorry we weren't able to meet yesterday." Dr. Patag's inner office was comfortable, clean, very professional. In the center of the room he had a sturdy-looking conference table circled by heavy wooden chairs. It was dark. Maybe mahogany? His desk and file system were against one wall. The other side of the room, where they were now, was set up like a living room: dark leather couch and two seats opposite, a coffee table between. Hung on the walls were all kinds of hats. Some of them had placards under them.

"Me too, actually."

"How's the pain?"

"I'm not feeling anything now."

"That's good to hear. I have some suggestions, and I want to see what you think." Dr. Patag gave Harvey a thick folder. "You can always ask me anything directly, but this file has a lot of information about what you can expect. I understand you work at a hospice."

"I do."

"Then you must be fairly certain about the normal progression of this cancer?"

"I found some things online that I wanted to talk to you about."

"Be wary of the web. There's false hope there. Don't be swayed by testimonies of misdiagnoses and miracle drugs. I'm going to help you through everything, as much as is possible. I want you to have a true and realistic understanding of everything, however."

"Absolutely." Harvey felt slightly stung. He wasn't naïve. He thought he could pick out a reliable source against the rubbish. Now wasn't the time to quibble, though. When it was his turn to ask some questions, he'd show Dr. Patag that he was no fool.

"Pancreatic cancer has a poor prognosis. We need to run a PET scan to get a better idea of how far, if at all, it has spread. I'm recommending we operate on the tumor. If we can remove it completely, if it hasn't metastasized, your rate of survival will increase dramatically. If we can't remove it all, the only result will be a decrease in pain and that translates to a higher quality of life, but a diminished survival rate. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"The complicated thing about pancreatic cancer is not that it is a worse cancer than, say, lung cancer or leukemia, but that it stays hidden. By the time symptoms appear, it is often too late to completely eradicate the cancer. The PET scan will tell us more. The size of the tumor is worrisome. We'll battle that with chemotherapy and maybe radiation, after the surgery. If it's just the tumor, though, your chances are much higher. We're going to fight it, though. You better believe that."

Of course, thought Harvey, why wouldn't we fight it? Fight it until the very end, right? Even when the outcome is already obvious, fight anyway. The doctors were always saying stuff like that. Fight, fight. They had a hard time letting patients go. Harvey's patients at the hospice sometimes worried whether they made the right decision because their doctors were so confused by their willingness to just go comfortably.

"I have a question," said Harvey.

"Shoot."

"I was looking at the National Cancer Institute's webpage, and there are all these clinical trials. Maybe some potent drug? My wife found some that look promising. Maybe I could get in one of those?"

"Harvey, if you qualify for one, we'll get you in. But you can't hope on that. Many of the studies are comparative studies, not really about new procedures. Some of the objectives are concerned with learning more about the cancer or the effect of certain therapies. The outcomes are minimal: extra days; not extra years."

"Well, yeah, I understand that. I mean, though, that there are advances, right?"

"We're learning more all the time. Doesn't necessarily translate into more time."

"But there's stuff we can do?"

"We'll work until the last possible moment."

"Like get into one of those trials."

"Don't worry about the trials, right now," said Jeremy. "You're setting yourself up for a disappointment."

Harvey stood up and walked around the office. What kind of crazy ass doctor actually reduces hope? Was that what he was doing? Harvey walked over to a black cowboy hat. This hat had a placard. It read, "Worn by John Wayne in *True Grit*." The next hat was an army helmet, "Worn by Cpl. John Patag, 1942-1945." The next was a Rangers ball cap with Nolan Ryan's autograph on it. The hats continued around the room. "Neat," said Harvey.

"Thank you. I've worked a long time to collect them."

Harvey walked back to his seat, shaking his head. "Doc, you're cutting away all my tools: no Internet, no trials. What do you want me to do here? Where's the hope?"

"We can have hope. Be positive. Think good thoughts. Pray. All that helps. However, stay realistic."

"I'm being realistic."

"I'm sorry, Harvey. I need you to understand this. I'm trying to give you the benefit of the doubt here, a bit of professional courtesy. You're a member of the medical community and I'm trying to give it to you without sugarcoating it. It's important to whatever success we may have. You have pancreatic cancer." Jeremy was wringing his hands.

Maybe, thought Harvey, he thinks he's handled this wrong. Maybe he's nervous now. "I know I'm sick."

"Very sick."

"And people get better from being sick."

"If the PET scan confirms my suspicions, I'm going to buy you a few months. You won't be getting better. We'll only slow it down."

"Some people get better."

"Rarely."

"I could get better."

"You don't have a touch of cancer, Harvey."

"Maybe I have the same kind as Steve Jobs? That's like seven more years. Or even a decade. That's a chance for actually getting better."

"Your silver lining here is that you have some time to get your affairs in order, to tell your wife you love her. Do not waste what we are able to get you."

Claire knows I love her, thought Harvey. What does Patag know about that? How am I going to take care of her if I'm not here? He felt dizzy with all the things he suddenly needed to

do: he had to call the insurance company and prepare them; he had to write down all the account numbers and passwords that Claire might need; he needed to reconcile the checkbook; St. Christopher's needed to be informed and a replacement found. He saw his reflection in glass top of the coffee table. He was confused and sad, but his face was blank. How could he be feeling so much but nothing show on his face? He looked at Dr. Patag sitting patiently, legs crossed, watching him. "Oh my God," said Harvey. "I have cancer."

"Yes, you do."

Harvey stood again and walked over to a pith helmet that didn't have a placard. With his back to Dr. Patag, Harvey cried. The tears slipped down his face. He cried for Claire who would probably be a widow soon; he cried about everything he had yet to finish; he cried for so many things; he cried because he knew he deserved this. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "So," he said, "what do we do now?"

"First we see how much we can remove. That will make you more comfortable, physically. It also gives the chemo and radiation less to do."

"Fine. Schedule it. I don't care. Call me when I need to be somewhere." He left.

CHAPTER III

2. SIX MONTHS EARLIER

Claire had fallen asleep. She had wedged herself between Harvey's legs; she was on the floor. Her arms wrapped around one leg, and she used his thigh as a pillow. Harvey sat on the couch and very slowly combed his fingers through her hair. He did this whenever she couldn't get to sleep. Like last year when she got the flu out of nowhere during the summertime. Her body ached everywhere. Even the slightest touch was uncomfortable, and she couldn't get to sleep. She rolled over, threw off the covers, tried sleeping on her side. No sleep. Harvey figured out that if he stroked her hair, she would drift away. It was the only way she could get to sleep that whole week. Harvey stared at the muted TV. The captions running along the bottom of the screen were extolling the utter brilliance and impossible-to-do-without qualities of a set of Ronco knives: *These knives will cut through anything. Do you hear me? Anything! Watch this: the sole of this military boot? No problem. This tin can? Piece of cake. The head of this hammer? Amazing! And look—without sharpening, I get paper-thin slices off this tomato.* Harvey wondered, briefly, where surgeons bought their knives.

Tonight had been strange. Harvey had started chemo, but hadn't told anyone at work anything yet. Only Claire knew. And his doctors. Others might suspect, but he wasn't ready to tell anyone. He was the one who was supposed to comfort people and he always felt awkward when anyone offered him support or their condolences. They didn't do it right, anyway. They

didn't show the right amount of compassion: he could always see the fear or relief in their eyes, or else he heard it in their voices. After several weeks of chemo and tests and meetings with doctors, and hours of watching medical lectures on YouTube and TED and iTunesU, and page after page of dry research from the American Cancer Society, he and Claire were exhausted. During dinner, neither one said anything about the cancer. There wasn't anything new, and what was the use of rewarming stale conversations: did you see that article about TTF? That looked promising. Is it too late to cut out all red meat? Should we just take a trip?

"Let's go for a walk," said Harvey.

Claire actually smiled. "I'd like that. Very much." She began to clear the dishes.

"Forget that. Let's go, right now. They'll be here when we get back."

"Let me grab my jacket, at least." It took her a long time to find her jacket, and when she emerged from the bedroom, Harvey could see why. She had put on a black cocktail dress; it fit her body close and then, just at the hip, fell in folds and creases to her knees. She wore high, strappy heels. Her ponytail was gone, and her hair fell on her bare shoulders. He could see the freckles on her shoulders. Harvey remembered their honeymoon, pretending to kiss each freckle. Why didn't he do that anymore? "I hope it's OK," said Claire.

Harvey looked her up and down. "It's," he said, "perfect." Maybe we're not going on a walk. Maybe this is a stroll, an old-fashioned date. He ran to his closet and changed into his tux, bowtie yes, cummerbund no. When would he have a chance to wear it again?

They ran downstairs and saw that Blaize's door was open. He was spinning around to Indie music and flinging paint in the general direction of several canvases. "Blaize!" said Harvey.

Blaize opened his eyes and found Harvey and Claire in his doorway. “Yes? Uh, the music too loud?”

“No,” said Harvey. “We don’t care about the music.”

“Oh good. I just can’t work without my jams.”

“Can you get your camera?”

“Hm?”

“Could you take a picture of us? All dressed up.”

Blaize’s eyes got wide. “Me? Take your picture? I can do that. Just wait. My camera’s here. Just a minute.” Blaize nearly knocked over his paint cans in his rush to find his good camera. “Come out to the balcony,” he said. “It’ll be pretty with the downtown lights behind you.” They spent half an hour snapping photo after photo: first with their backs to downtown, then looking out over downtown, now holding hands, now kissing, finally with Harvey dipping Claire, hugging. They laughed and listened to Blaize talk about angles and holding the aperture open and how he could make the background seem out of focus so that they really popped out, or make it look like their bodies were trailing lights like spirits.

As they were leaving Harvey secretly handed Blaize a hundred dollar bill. “I want the best shots, done up as nice as you can. Deliver them as soon as you can.”

On the street Claire pulled Harvey into the bar across the street. They drank and danced and threw darts and gave the jukebox five dollars worth of quarters and selected every country artist they could find. Brooks & Dunn, Willie, Haggard, Reba. They left, and walked up and down every street in downtown. “Hey,” said Harvey, “let’s go in here.” He pointed to the old one-screen cinema. During the downtown renovation, the city decided to keep the cinema and turn it into a second-run theatre. It either showed family films or art films.

"Dressed like this?"

"Why not? People used to get dressed up to go to the movies. It'll be fun." They bought two tickets to see Steve Martin play Jacques Clouseau in *The Pink Panther*. "A comedy is what we need. Something silly and sensational." They bought Twizzlers and Snowcaps and decided to share a large Icee, wild cherry and Coca-Cola mixed. The theater was nearly empty. Harvey and Claire sat in the very top row, like cinematic royalty. Above their heads, Harvey was aware of the projector's *tuh tuh tuh tuh tuh*. Their shared Icee was in the cup holder between them, but that wasn't going to work for Harvey. He took a big swig and told Claire to put it on her side. If he wanted more, he'd ask for it. Harvey took Claire's hand and fit her fingers between his. This was nice, he thought. We can be together and not have to worry about filling every minute with talking and problem solving. Tonight we're just a couple on a date. The movie was silly and slapstick and completely ridiculous. And they laughed. They couldn't even help it. The simple absurdity was infectious.

Midnight, walking home, they got ice cream. They held hands. Claire put her head on Harvey's shoulder as they walked. The movie had been silly, but it was very quotable.

"The good cop-bad cop routine is working perfectly," said Harvey.

"You know, usually two different cops do that," said Claire. She looked over at Harvey and made him stop and look back.

Oh please, thought Harvey, don't ruin the moment. Let's keep the illusion a little longer.

"I must ask you something," she said.

"OK."

She affected a horrible French accent, "Do you live alone Inspector?"

Harvey laughed with relief. Just more movie talk. “Yes, I do.” His French accent was even worse.

“Do you ever get lonely?”

“Not since the Internet.” They tickled themselves by repeating the lines over and over.

In their apartment, they collapsed on the couch. For a long time they sat on the couch, quiet. Claire made a move to go to bed and grabbed at her neck.

“Are you sore?”

“A bit.”

“Let me rub your neck some,” said Harvey.

Claire sat on the floor between Harvey’s legs and Harvey rubbed her neck. She oohed and aahed and moaned some. Her head began to droop. Harvey stopped rubbing and started playing with her hair. Then, she was asleep, and Harvey was alone. He turned on the TV and watched infomercials. *I can’t believe I’m about to do this, but my producer just gave me the go-ahead. If you call now, I mean right now, I am going to double your order, throw in our Super Sharp Scissors, and this is what’s really crazy, our patented Mince-O-Matic. All you need to do is pay separate shipping and handling.* For a moment, Harvey was sucked in. How can they afford to add all that stuff? I bet it has something to do with the shipping and handling.

Harvey took off his bowtie and cufflinks. He wanted to sleep, to drift away like Claire. His mind would not be still: the vacuum was broken and he hadn’t fixed it yet, although he had said he would; there was a new resident coming in tomorrow; he had been avoiding Rose, and he couldn’t do that anymore; he should tell St. Christopher’s what was going on—he was back to having cancer.

At least, thought Harvey, Claire and I had tonight. That's stupid. If tonight was strange, out of the ordinary, then that was my fault. Our fault. We could've had dozens of nights like tonight, maybe hundreds. What a waste.

Harvey ground his teeth and gripped the armrests. He didn't want to wake up Claire, but this was easily as much her fault as it was his. She might have worn that dress more, or talked him into going dancing or something.

That's not true, thought Harvey. You did this to yourself. *You* made choices. *You* led a life that didn't deserve happiness. Kismet. She got sucked into it. You could have told her about before, with Gus. And maybe she wouldn't be grieving right now or feeling sorry for you. Maybe she'd be relieved to get rid of you.

Harvey threw a pillow across the room. It hit the wall and made a soft whump as it fell to the floor. Claire didn't wake up. How could she sleep? He should wake her up so that she could be miserable, so that he didn't have to be alone in his head. He felt like arguing, maybe. Or fixing the vacuum; he might as well get to it while it was on his mind. When else? After chemo? After chemo: he always wondered whether living like this was worth living at all. He decided to wake Claire. He didn't want to be obvious about what he was doing, though. He yawned and stretched and moved his knees. She did not wake. He adjusted how he sat. She did not wake. He kicked off his shoes and let them thump to the floor. Still, she did not wake. Harvey decided he would start rubbing her neck again and that way he could be doing something nice as she woke and she wouldn't be upset about waking up.

He moved her hair away from her neck and saw her freckles. They emerged from her hair and fell down her shoulders and disappeared under her dress. Harvey began to cry. They were silent, stupid tears that stung his eyes. He leaned forward and began kissing each freckle. He

started on her shoulders and climbed her neck. He could not control his breathing any more and the tears fell in great swells and heaves. Harvey grabbed the last couch pillow and tried to smother himself, but he only cried harder and his body shook. He hated himself. He hated that he wanted to wake Claire, he hated his sickness, he hated tonight for reminding him of what he was leaving behind, he hated his miserable life, he hated the people dying at the hospice.

Harvey was tired. His body was sore with exhaustion; his mind spent. A dull and heavy weariness pressed down on Harvey, the kind that only comes after crying. He had seen it happen with the residents. Why hadn't he remembered that? Then, Harvey fell asleep.

The next few weeks were routine. Harvey went to work, dropped off laundry, held open doors, counseled the grieving, and dutifully went for chemo treatments. So far, the cancer had not shrunk. But it didn't appear to be spreading either. Harvey couldn't decide whether this was good news or not, but Dr. Patag seemed to take it in stride, "Any extra time we get, Harvey, is time we can work on finding a better combination of treatments for you." The more Dr. Patag explained it, the more he sounded like a mad scientist, which made Harvey a lab rat. "Chemo, radiation, surgery, and the other treatments we use aren't exactly one-size fits all," said Dr. Patag. "Chemotherapy is poison therapy. We're trying to kill the tumors inside you without killing you also. Some people respond or don't respond to certain kinds of drugs, or maybe the side effects are too powerful." Side effects was a benign way to say, at least for Harvey, painful vomiting. He was wary of eating before any chemo, and instead often dry heaved. This was somewhat more painful, but definitely less messy. "If anything," said Dr. Patag, his face becoming serious, "it gives you more time and that might mean time to say goodbye or set things straight or even do something you've always wanted to do."

Like he could do something he's always wanted to do, dragging a bag of poison around. The chemo left him tired and nauseated. Setting things straight and saying goodbye? Why is it that only those who don't know when or how they'll die find a blessing in seeing the hourglass drop its sand? Harvey was on the floor of his closet. The only benefit in dying this way, he thought, in seeing the guillotine: he certainly wouldn't be leaving tons of burdens for Claire. He was packing up all his clothes, except for one week's worth, into cardboard boxes. The widow Duncan from church used to talk about how hard it had been to pack Mr. Duncan's clothes and send them off. Claire wouldn't have that problem. Harvey was doing it for her. He was also already building their Life Drawer, the collection of their insurance policies, wills, account numbers and statements and passwords for their financials. He hadn't told Claire yet, but he already submitted the paperwork to take his name off the car title and condo deed. He had called the electric company and made her the primary contact instead of him. Often, though, he hated that his coworkers or Claire might never see that last grain drop, that they might simply live their lives and one day not be around, that they wouldn't have to face or even understand their own mortality. It was these times that Harvey recognized his fear and emotion, his anger and despair—despite his training and profession, he reveled in it. Grief was an addiction he knew well, and there was a small comfort in its pattern and routine and compulsions. He had often warned families about grief addiction. Of course you can become addicted to grief! When Mr. Michaels had died, Harvey counseled Annette, his wife, about grief addiction.

"Addiction is often associated with a cycle," he said. "In one stage you'll participate in the addiction. In this case, grief. After, you might feel bad about that and try to be better, emotionally and physically."

Annette nodded like she was already caught up in the cycle. She took out a tissue and poked at her eyes. “And then I feel bad about feeling better,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I feel like feeling said and sorry and hopeless is how I should feel. I kind of feel good about myself when I feel so sad and depressed.”

“It’s as hard to break as any addiction.” Harvey recommended that she try visiting a therapist, or maybe some group therapy for awhile.

“Does it work?”

“It can.” Harvey’s own grief addiction had begun so long ago. He had been only seventeen. By the time he’d even heard of grief as an addiction, it was too late. He couldn’t think of life in any other way; and, now, what would be the point?

James Romero had arrived at St. Christopher’s the morning after Harvey and Claire’s spontaneous date night. James was short. He was very white. His hair was red. He was boisterous and cocky and he flirted with the nurses, who couldn’t decide whether he was charming or arrogant. Harvey had watched him check in: he had walked up to the receptionist and announced, “I’m here to die. Where do I check in?”

The receptionist was quick, although Harvey thought he saw a moment of surprise cross her face, eyebrows up and her mouth open. “You’ve come to the right place, then. Your first stop is registration, which is just down the hall. They’ll get you set up and give you a tour.”

Harvey knocked on James’s door a few hours later.

“Come in,” said James. He was hanging up his shirts and pants. James’s room was the smallest St. Christopher’s offered. In the corner there was a cramped room where a commode and shower were. The bed was placed against the back wall, but stuck out into the middle of the

room and left little space for walking or anything else. One wall had windows looking out into the garden. The last wall had an old-fashioned wardrobe. That was one of St. Christopher's attempts to take away the hospital feel. All the furniture was actual furniture and not the generic things found in hospital rooms. Even the bed, with its monitor and IV hookups, looked like a normal bed with a headboard. On either side of the wardrobe were two soft Eames lounge chairs. Harvey noticed that James had not set out any family pictures or mementos. Usually the residents set about making the rooms homey. It looked like James had only brought clothes. "You must be Harvey, right?"

"I am."

"Here to make me feel better about dying?"

"Not exactly. I'm here to answer questions you may have," said Harvey. "But, how do you feel about dying?"

"It doesn't really matter how I feel about dying, does it? Won't change the outcome. It's coming, I know it, so now I'm here."

Harvey nodded but didn't reply. Training and practice told him that James was probably on a roll and didn't need any encouragement to talk, so he should keep quiet. He was increasingly aware of his own jealousy and anger about James's seemingly blasé attitude toward his imminent death. Another reason he should keep quiet.

"All you need to know is that I chose to be here. I've had a couple heart attacks, and the doctors told me I needed open heart surgery. I have elected against that, and my doctor has said my heart could give out any time."

"All right," said Harvey. "Sounds like you're on top of things. Do you have any questions, or maybe there's something I can help you with?"

"I'm fine. Unless you know how to play cards? Hearts, spades, bridge? Maybe dominoes, forty-two? I like games. I think I'd like to play some games."

"I can probably help with that."

Harvey left James's room, trying to decide whether James had really accepted his future or was only playing at it. It certainly wasn't unheard of for patients to fully understand and be at peace with death. Some of them had been dying so long that making it into the hospice was a relief. There was something rough and blunt about James, though, that didn't read "acceptance" to Harvey. Deep in thought, Harvey accidentally turned right instead of left out of James's room.

Harvey was suddenly aware of singing: *Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto the Ancient of Days—From every nation, all of creation bow before the Ancient of Days*. He stopped still, pretended to remember something, and turned around.

"I see you Mr. Mitchell, and if you ignore me any longer, I will begin to take it personally." Rose was in the hallway and had her arm crooked through Harvey's before he could explain about the thing he forgot to do and that was urgent, very urgent. "You'll be taking me on a walk through the gardens, here. And if you even pretend that you have something to do besides talk to me, I will brain you. Understand?"

Harvey did not know how to respond. He was experiencing a troubling cognitive dissonance. One of the reasons he liked Rose was her abrasive and no-nonsense attitude, and so he felt some of that pre-cancer warmth he was fond of. But, he no longer had time for nonsense, and if he didn't want to do something, well, he just wasn't going to do it. Right now, he did not appreciate being led around like a neutered puppy. "Rose, I'm happy to walk with you but, really, I've got quite a bit to do. Patients, you know. Some aren't quite as strong and resilient as you are."

"That's probably true," said Rose, and Harvey realized how weak that must have sounded to her. They walked along the path, toward the outer garden. St. Christopher's property was expansive, much of it gifted piecemeal to the hospice. As land was donated, they built gardens and trellises and benches and ponds, places for people to sit and watch and talk or even to be alone. The individual gardens were connected by pea gravel paths and lanterns. The garden that Rose and Harvey sat in was built to attract butterflies. Honeysuckle grew up and along a trellis, bright red hibiscuses surrounded the benches, purple and yellow buds that Harvey did not recognize grew in manicured clumps around a koi pond. Her arm, through his, felt brittle and trembled with weakness. He felt her weight on him, and he realized she was using him as a human walker. He couldn't see it by listening to her, she was so strong and stubborn, but she was getting weak, slowly breaking down. "Tell me," said Rose, "why you have been avoiding me."

There's that assertiveness again, thought Harvey. She doesn't even ask if I'm avoiding her, just demands to know why I am. "I haven't been, Rose."

"Oh." Rose watched a butterfly land on a hibiscus flower. "So why haven't you come to see me in almost three weeks?" Something is different with her eyes, thought Harvey. Her eyebrows aren't hard and focused. She was supposed to be strength in this place, a tower, and example of emotional resilience. Harvey didn't know if he could handle a Rose that was anything but vigor and sass. This Rose was too human. If she couldn't keep it up to the last, how could he?

"The job. It got busy. Had patients to see."

"Harvey, have I ever given you the impression I'm unintelligent?"

Rose was many things but stupid was not one, Harvey admitted to himself. "No."

"I'm going to allow you to revise your answer, then, if you would like to."

Harvey remembered getting in trouble as a little kid. He knew he was caught when his mom would give him a chance to change his story. He never took it because he could never be sure what she actually knew. “No.”

“Am I a patient here, Harvey?”

“Yes.”

“And you were too busy to see me because you were doing your job of seeing patients?”

Harvey mumbled something about her being particularly resilient. He resented very much this conversation and didn’t feel the need to mask his expression or tone of voice. The message should be obvious, he thought. Just leave me the hell alone.

“I cannot believe you are being short with me,” said Rose. “This is not the Harvey I’ve known for the last several months: the Harvey that came by to chat for no reason, who held doors for me, who played the piano so I could sing to music.” She tugged on Harvey’s arm for him to stop. She was breathing deeply now. They sat on a stone bench made warm by the sun.

Harvey heard the words and stared at the gravel. He felt incredible guilt for affecting Rose so negatively, and he felt a rage rising in him: he was not a little boy. He was a man. A man, dying. And he didn’t need this.

“Look at me, Harvey,” said Rose. He saw that the sternness was back in her face, the resolve of someone who had little time and didn’t want to leave things unsettled. He also saw, he thought, a kind of motherly tenderness, as though she could see inside his head and was going to help him and it would be painful probably but she knew the relief would be greater than the pain. “You’re really skinny,” said Rose. “You’ve got a temper all of a sudden. Maybe it’s just me, but you look a little green around the gills.”

Harvey shrugged.

"I know you went for tests," said Rose. "You told me that."

Harvey nodded.

"What did they say?"

"Nothing good."

"Sounds worse than that. Isn't it?" Rose put her hand on Harvey's knee. It was a thin hand, made skeletal from her cancer, the skin stretched tight like it might rip any moment. Another reminder of Harvey's future. "I would have understood. Maybe you can't talk to people. You're the counselor; I get it. Why ignore me, though? It hurt."

"I hurt you?" He squinted at her.

"I couldn't understand why you would avoid me."

"I had a stomach ache, and you told me to get it checked, and it was cancer! I would rather have had a stomach ache."

"I didn't give you cancer," said Rose.

Harvey stood up and looked down at Rose. "But I didn't have to know, did I? I could have hopped up on pain meds and been fine."

"That's ridiculous. You'd still be sick. Except you'd be ignoring it."

"I would've been OK with that."

"Oh, Harvey," said Rose. "I know what you're going through."

Harvey was done. This was exactly what he didn't want: pity, consoling, advice. This was his business. What could anyone tell him about grief that he didn't know already? He shook his head at Rose and left her there.

Rose called out behind him, "I know you don't really mean this. I know you'll feel sorry later, and feel guilty about all this."

Just shut up, thought Harvey.

"Don't feel bad—I forgive you. Understand?"

Harvey wanted to knock over the concrete planters or push over one of the ridiculous statues, replicas of David or Venus. He wanted to sweat, to physically exhaust himself. But, he knew those kinds of things would draw too much attention. Instead, he went into his office and closed the door; he flailed his arms and punched the leaves of his ficus. He slammed his fists on the seat of his chair. This is unfair, he thought. What does anybody know about me? When he wore himself out, he walked over to the nurse's station and checked out. He made sure to send an orderly to go pick up Rose who was probably still sitting on the stone bench, "Take a wheelchair. I don't know if she can make the walk back." Then, Harvey took the rest of the day off.

Despite their conversation, Harvey continued to avoid Rose. If he ran into her, he said hi and made small talk if he absolutely had to, but then ducked into another room or rushed off with something the doctor needed to know. He never really had anything urgent. They were just excuses to be somewhere else. The hospice didn't have a steady stream of new residents to keep him busy, so Harvey spent as much time as he could with the new patient St. Christopher's did have, James Romero. Harvey tried to set up regular card games between James and the nurses or some of the other residents. The nurses didn't have time for full games, and the other residents weren't particularly fond of playing cards with James. He wasn't rude or obnoxious—he was just very good at card games. If visitors came, the other residents left the game. You couldn't blame them, but Harvey saw that it aggravated James. As a solution, Harvey found two laptops and had them delivered to James's room. Then, using the Internet, Harvey and James would log on to game sites and play cards as long as they wanted. In the beginning, Harvey and James partnered

up in online versions of hearts, spades, and bridge. They were a good team, and won most of their games.

Harvey spent more and more time with James. He couldn't deny that a big part of that was because it was a legitimate way to avoid Rose. But, James also intrigued him, and he felt like he should work on getting James to open up. Plus, he enjoyed playing cards and here was a ready-made partner. Today they were playing Spades.

They played several rounds in pleasant silence. Around them, Harvey took in James's room. It was still devoid of the usual human touches like flowers or cards. "James, why aren't there any photos or knick-knacks?"

James looked around his room as though he were noticing the asceticism for the first time. "I travel light, I suppose."

"But why travel so light?"

"Hey, it's your turn," said James. "Don't keep everyone waiting."

Harvey clicked on a card and dumped a point into another player's trick. "James, I understand you don't need counseling. I'm not trying to walk you through therapy. I'm just curious. Why no photos? Why travel light? It's a bit out of the ordinary."

James studied his hand. "We bid wrong on this one. We're going to have lots of extra points this round." He clicked on a card and took a trick full of points. "I don't have pictures because I'm estranged from all my relationships."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's my fault," said James. "Mostly, I guess. I tried to make amends last year but no one wanted to see me or give me any time."

"What happened?"

“It’s personal.”

“Of course,” said Harvey. “I’m sorry for prying.”

“Human nature to wonder.” They continued to play. The game wasn’t going well for either of them. “Thing is, I don’t exactly mind sharing. I get the impression that we get along and enjoy each other’s company and I’m worried that if I tell you what happened, you’ll stop coming around.”

“I understand,” said Harvey. “I can’t imagine me changing opinions. I know today-James, and maybe he’s different than yesterday-James, but that’s how it is, isn’t it?”

“I guess. I don’t know.”

“This moment right now is the culmination of all the moments before it. This moment decides the next. If I blink my eyes and you are a completely different person, then you must have made a decision in this moment to affect that, right?” Harvey could see his ideas playing around on James’s face. “All I’m saying is, I guess, that I want to believe that change is possible, that a person is not one version, extruded out over decades. Instead, we are like slices in time, and we might be radically different from one moment to the next. I’d like to hear your story. I’ll keep an open mind.”

Harvey and James played several minutes in silence. It looked like James was considering what Harvey had said. “My chart says I have a bad heart, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve had several heart attacks in the last year. My last one was a few months ago. My doc said I needed surgery to live, and I declined. So he certified me ready for hospice. He says the next heart attack will kill me and that it could happen any time.”

“Why wouldn’t you get the surgery?”

"The success rate was really low. I can't get a transplant. If I'm going to die, I'd rather be comfortable and not on an operating table."

"Too far down on the transplant list?"

"Disqualified, actually."

"Oh." Harvey knew there were only a few things that could completely disqualify someone from a transplant. Usually it meant that a patient could not be trusted to care properly for the new organ.

"I think I'm done talking for today."

"Sure thing." Harvey understood that to mean he could bring it up again later. It was always good to get patients to talk.

Harvey continued his chemo, and Dr. Patag continued to be optimistic that the tumor wasn't growing. "But it hasn't shrunk?"

"No. We're going to keep working on it," said Dr. Patag.

Harvey was getting tired of working on it. Nothing was progressing, for better or for worse. Harvey and Claire had entered limbo. All the time the cancer hunger over their heads. They stopped making plans further than a few days in advance. What was the use? He might need to rush off to a doctor's appointment, or—it just didn't make any sense to make plans. Harvey and Claire had an unspoken agreement to not bring it up unless there was something new to discuss: a breakthrough, a decline, a new feeling. But don't bring up the same stuff over and over. It didn't do any good, and the stress of those conversations made Harvey feel like throwing up.

Claire continued to do research online. She had also joined an online support group for spouses with cancer. "It's been really helpful," she told Harvey after a he had finished a really

rough chemo session. “It helps me to—to feel, out loud, everything that’s rushing around my head and my heart that I don’t want to put on you.”

“You can talk to me about things,” said Harvey. “It’s what I do.”

“I don’t want to be part of your job right now. I want to be your wife.”

“You are my wife.” He was so tired. He spread out on the couch. “If you’ve got something to say, I really do want to hear it.”

Claire wrung her hands.

“It’s OK. Just say it.”

“I saw your box of clothes,” she said. “Why?”

“Just in case, you know. I mean, it can be hard to—if I can maybe ease your time after.”

“Don’t do it anymore. Maybe I don’t want that. Maybe I need you to believe. If you don’t believe, then what hope do I have?”

“I’m sorry.”

“And maybe,” she said, “I don’t want help. Maybe that’s the price of *‘til death do us part*, huh?” She was still sitting at the computer desk. “You packed the t-shirt we got you at the Grand Canyon. That kind of sandstone-colored one? Maybe I wanted to put that away.” Claire didn’t look at Harvey, and he knew she wouldn’t for fear of not finishing. She stared at her keyboard and Harvey wallowed on the couch. “Maybe I wanted to remember that grouchy man on the train out to Flagstaff who didn’t want to swap seats with you because ‘he had bought his ticket fair and square’ and so you, even though you had to sit behind me,, you snaked your arm through the seats to hold my hand, but you grabbed his accidentally. Remember that? You told him, you said, “Man, you coulda let me sit next to my wife and we wouldn’ta had this awkward moment here. Then you gave his hand an extra squeeze, remember?” Claire was laughing

through her tears. “His face, it was just—” She looked blankly at her screen. “Maybe the pain of putting it away is worth reliving it all.” She ran into their bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Harvey wanted to follow but his body was unwilling. He called her name, but she didn’t come. He finally slept.

James and Harvey were playing cards again. It had been a few days, and James was itching to play again. They played a few hands before Harvey ventured, “So, not qualifying for the transplant list means something hereditary or something personal. I’m going to guess probably drugs at one time.”

“Yup,” said James. “I’m a recovering addict. I’ve been clean for six months, my longest stretch in three years, but not eligible for a transplant. Before you ask, because I know you want to know. Everyone always wants to know, even if they don’t admit it. Enemas.”

“Enemas? What did you do with them?”

“You can do lots of things. I filled ‘em up with alcohol.”

“And you can get drunk that way?”

“A hell of a lot faster than by actually drinking. You bypass the stomach and digestion. You don’t lose any because you sloshed your beer a little. All of it, straight into the bloodstream.”

“Makes sense. I’ve never heard of that before.”

“It’s pretty dangerous, actually. Really easy to reach alcohol poisoning and die. A few times I did some other stuff, but alcohol was my best high. Cheap, fast. I think I knew that it would ruin my liver. I never thought it would bust my heart.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Harvey.

Through the telling of his story, James never stopped playing cards. “I was charming when I had to be, but I started mooching off my friends and family. They knew what was going on. If they refused me, I bitched them out. I wasn’t violent, but they could never be sure, right? Anyway, they began sending me away. Divorced, no visitation; no friends, no couch. I haven’t seen or talked to any of them in years. Then I had my first heart attack.” James gently massaged his chest. “I decided to try rehab again. I have an addictive personality, they tell me. I’m prone to overindulging. I fell off the wagon plenty. I’m supposed to tell them I’m sorry, part of the program. I can’t get them to talk to me though.”

“I’m sorry about that. The forgiveness step is a tough one.”

“The ‘sorry’ step. I’m not very religious. Agnostic, maybe,” said James. They had started a new game and James was far in the lead. “Although, I do like that Rose lady’s singing. She’s got a good voice, and the lyrics are beautiful, and—it’s hard to explain. It’s nice to hear when everybody has a right to be perfectly morose and morbid.”

Harvey didn’t want to talk about Rose. He would avoid her, he decided, even in his conversations. He brought it back to James. “How do you stay clean?”

“Addictive personality, right?” said James. “I just traded one addiction for another, less harmful one. I play cards. Lots of cards. As long as I keep my brain occupied, then I don’t think about getting high. I’ll admit that I don’t think very much about getting high now, anyway. Mostly just dying.”

“So you do think about dying?” This is different, Harvey thought. Maybe James wasn’t as cool and collected as he had appeared to be.

“Of course,” said James. “What did you think?”

“You seemed confident about why you’re here and about death.”

"I'm intimately aware of what I've done to be here. I wore out my body. I hold no illusions about what will happen. I even imagine that my next heart attack will be rather painful if I'm awake for it. All that doesn't mean that it's not on my mind. All the time."

"Oh," said Harvey.

Here was James spilling his guts, thought Harvey. After a life he's not proud of, he is letting it flow. Does it feel good? Is this the deathbed talking? How much does the end change a person? The thoughts occupied Harvey's thoughts and interrupted his play. He tried, but couldn't get his head back in the game. He excused himself with a promise to come back tomorrow and play a few hours.

He liked James. No, he couldn't attest to whatever kind of person James was before he arrived, but he was a nice enough guy now. Was that all that mattered? Suppose you're dying, thought Harvey, and you've got a secret. Maybe it's a big secret, or even if it's a little secret but you perceive it as big and bad. Then, in your last moments you let it all out. What good does that do? What was the point of keeping it a secret in the first place if you blab it when holding it in is hard? What if once the secret is out nobody thinks it's a big deal? Then you have a lifetime of stress and worry informing all your life choices for something that was "no big deal." Or worse, the secret is nastier than you imagined, and in your last moments you ruin someone else's life by telling; or, at the very least, you change their minds about you and then there isn't any time to fix it. Just spill and then dead.

The catharsis or whatever was good for James: he didn't have anyone, and Harvey wasn't going to be affected by what he said. But that was James. Things are different with me, thought Harvey. I'll get whatever relief I can through James's talking. That's it, though. Don't get sucked in.

Harvey and James had long stopped playing games as partners, and they had begun playing as opponents on the same tables. They were closely matched, but James was a slightly better player, winning probably 65% of the games they played together. Harvey and James sat across from each other. The game of the day was hearts.

"I know you're trying to shoot the moon," said James. "You can't do it. I've got too many takers."

Harvey grimaced. It was true. He had been trying to take all the points in the round. It was risky, sure, but he was so far behind in this game that it was the only strategy here.

"That's your problem," said James. "You're always trying to shoot the moon but never have enough points in your hand. So you end up with tons of points instead. You're killing yourself over there."

They played cards into their second hour together. Down the hall, they could hear Rose singing—*then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee*—and they listened. She really did have a good voice, thought Harvey.

"When I was little," said James, "I would go to church with my mom. It was a nondenominational church in north Texas. At the end of every service, the pastor would reach his hands out and say 'May the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.' I think that's beautiful, don't you?"

"I do, yes."

"You a religious man, Harvey?"

"I am."

“The blessing was my favorite part. I think maybe I was excited about being included in the group. Or maybe I thought it nice that someone I didn’t even really know wanted me to have a good day. I miss that.”

“You can always go back to church.”

“No, I don’t think I can.”

“Tell me about that,” said Harvey.

“No,” said James. “We’ve talked enough about me, and I don’t feel like talking about it.”

“All right. If you ever do feel like talking about it, I’m available—”

“I doubt it.”

They played one more game of hearts and Harvey excused himself to visit the other patients. “I’ll come by again soon. Maybe we’ll play bridge next time?”

“Sure thing,” said James. He opened his mouth and then didn’t say anything.

“What?” said Harvey. “Need anything before I go?”

“It’s silly.”

“Go for it.”

“Would you—bless me?”

It wasn’t unheard of. People so close to death often asked Harvey to participate in some kind of conferred blessing or prayer or ritual. “I can do that for you. It isn’t silly at all.” Harvey put his hands on James’s shoulders and said, “May the Lord bless you.”

“Not that one,” said James. “That’s part of a special memory. And I’m not particularly religious anymore. Something else?”

Harvey thought for a moment and then put his hands on James’s shoulders again. He said:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,

And so he plays his part.
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
San teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

"Thank you," said James.

Gus's parents were academics: his dad was a professor at the university and his mom was a researcher. Every time Harvey went to Gus's house, it seemed like his parents were discussing important and elevated things. They went to art shows and watched opera in Italian and. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday Gus's dad picked them up from band practice. He'd drive up in his Ford Windstar, the windows down, and NPR's "Thistle & Shamrock" blaring bagpipe music like it was Clapton or the Eagles.

By the time Harvey and Gus were in high school, they had decided that they were also academics. Their teachers praised their intelligence; their peers tried to get in their study group. They would casually bring up politics at lunch, anything to impress anyone who might be listening.

Gus had come up with their most recent endeavor: poetry. "Harvey," he said. "I was at uni with my dad yesterday and there was this guy reciting poetry in the quad."

"So?"

"Man, all these chicks were hanging on every word, like if he had actually written them. No shit. They were drooling over him and he wasn't anything special, some college slob with a head full of Auden and Dickenson and I don't know who else."

"I don't know. Poetry?"

"It'll make us deep. Or at least we'll look deep."

"But poetry? The way Ms. Salinas teaches it, it sounds like hippies and snaps and faking it." Harvey usually didn't argue with Gus about stuff like this. He had helped Harvey get a brainy reputation, and that was nice. But he couldn't help feeling that poets were playing a trick on everybody: they tell us it's sophisticated and meaningful and we believe it. One day we'll bump our heads and realize we've been naked the whole time.

"Maybe." Gus tossed Harvey a thin book. "I bought this for you. I have one too. We're gonna start here, hokum or not."

"Why?"

"We're already smarter than all the plebes in this school. They're going to take anything we do as brilliant. Plus, and this is the important so listen, girls. Lots of girls. Anyway, what else have we got to do. This place is lame and I'm bored."

"Fine," said Harvey. "I'm convinced. Where do we start?"

"The first section in the book has some Shakespearean monologues. Might as well start there."

#

Two weeks and thirty games of Hearts later, Harvey sat in the corner of room 172. Just outside the door a small blue lamp glowed, a lame eulogy for James Romero. The lamp was a quiet and polite way to notify the other residents that one of their number had passed. Usually, Harvey would wait for family to arrive. He would teach them about grief; he would lay his hand on a shoulder or allow a hug. He would show concern, and also how to be strong. Then he'd give them some informational literature and his card and permission to call any time, day or night.

It wouldn't be like that with James. He never listed any family or next of kin. St. Christopher's would place a brief obituary in the *Gazette*: "James Romero lost his battle with heart disease last night. He was an asset to the community, and he will be missed." Then he would be cremated. Now, though, the body of James Romero lay on his bed, a white sheet tucked tightly around him. Harvey sat in James's room waiting for nobody.

A long time passed. Then, he walked to the office of the public relations clerk. "Marty," he said, "Mr. Santiago didn't lose his battle with heart disease. Don't write that."

"What?"

"I know you're about to submit his obituary to the *Gazette*, that nonsense about him losing his battle with his heart."

"I don't understand. He didn't die from a heart attack?"

"Yes he did," said Harvey. "But he didn't lose a battle. He wasn't in a war. Did you ever see him? He came here to die with dignity, right?"

"Of course, Harvey," said Marty. "We're trying to give him the benefit of an obituary."

"It wasn't war, OK?" He puffed out his chest to seem even bigger to Marty, who was sitting. "He was lucid. It wasn't a battle because he wasn't fighting. He got sick. He died."

"But this is the blurb we use when we need one."

"It's boilerplate bullshit."

Marty looked confused. "OK. There's no need for that kind of language."

"Well," said Harvey. "You're obviously not getting the seriousness of the situation here."

Marty sat, frozen. Slowly she put her hands in her lap, looked directly at Harvey and said, "What do you need?"

"For James to get a real obituary."

She picked up a pen and a legal pad. "What should it say?"

"James Romero died from a heart attack. He died a good man, despite his past. He loved good singing and poetry. He was a fantastic card player."

"I will see what I can do for you Harvey."

"And poetry isn't hokum. It's beautiful and emotional and mature." Harvey left Marty's office. He shut the door harder than he meant to. He was on fire. Several ideas struggled to take focus in his brain. He might have well as stood on a table and announced his own cancer. Mild Harvey cussing Marty out. That was going to spread and would require and explanation. Maybe he just wouldn't give one. Harvey paced the hallway. His brain was fighting a battle: *You're angry; Screw you! Use your training. You know what's happening; Nah, nah, nah, nah. Harvey…; Shut up!* He couldn't rein in his emotions. Or maybe he didn't want to. Through the window he saw Rose, sitting in one of the gardens. He banged on the window to get her attention. When she looked up, he mouthed STAY RIGHT THERE. I'M COMING TO YOU.

"Rose," he said, "just listen. I'm mad. I know you didn't give me cancer, but you made me find it. That doesn't make any sense, and I realize that. OK?"

Rose looked accosted and bewildered.

"That's coming out wrong," said Harvey. "I'm trying to apologize."

"I knew you didn't mean it. Not another word. I'm fine, understand? What about you?"

"I had to tell the directors last week that I'm sick, that I can't carry on my duties anymore. James died. I liked him. It's moving so fast. My doctor said that the chemo isn't killing the cancer; it's only stopping the spread. I just know I'm going to die. And before I leave St. Christopher's I have to welcome the new grief counselor."

"They already found someone?"

"Some young buck with lots of recommendations. I don't know how I'm supposed to face him. I want to be kind, but I don't know if I'll be able to."

"I'm so sorry."

"I have to meet him next week. His name is Sam."

CHAPTER IV

3. FOUR MONTHS EARLIER

"It'll be a good excuse for you to get out of the apartment, at least once a week," said Claire. Dr. Patag agreed. It was two to one. What choice did he have?

Harvey didn't feel like going. He knew he'd be that guy in the audience who knew there was already a rabbit in the hat. The magic just wasn't going to work for him. But Claire was getting a lot out of her support group, and she just wouldn't let up. "Fine, I'll go. Not online, though. Real people."

The support group Harvey found was called Cancer Allies and it met at the Dana Fulls Community Center, in the conference room. The room was comfortable enough for an hour or so of sitting and talking. In the middle of the room was a long conference table that looked like wood, but Harvey could feel rough particleboard underneath. Veneer. Decent for a city budget, though. There was a big whiteboard on the far wall, and some dry erase markers left in the tray. The chairs around the table were padded and had wheels. The community center brought in extra folding chairs in case the group needed more chairs. A folding table was set up along the back wall. Somewhere along the line, nobody could remember when, the weekly support meetings had become a potluck. It wasn't absolutely required that each participant contribute, but everybody did so Harvey felt compelled to bring something. He brought chili con queso because he had a crockpot and could put it all together without much trouble. The other members of the group had

their own specialties. Mrs. Goodwin (breast cancer) was an expert in salads, and each week she brought something different: pasta salad one week, shrimp and avocado the next, Caesar with homemade dressing. Darrell Traeger (prostate) owned a barbeque pit, and he brought either ribs or pulled pork. The other folks in the group rotated between providing beverages or cups and plates or maybe a side like green bean casserole or potato salad.

Vero Gomez (cancer survivor) ran the meetings. Technically, the support group ran through an eight-week course, but since there was no limit to how often someone could participate, most of the Allies had been through the whole course already. “I think,” said Vero, “since we’ve got a few new people this week, it’s a good idea to begin with Week One and move through our curriculum.” Everyone nodded. “So, the first thing I want to let everyone know is that this is a support group; it’s counseling. The purpose here is education, to leave everyone with some more positive feelings, to give the group some coping strategies to use. This is different from therapy, and if at any time you feel like you’re in need of therapy instead of counseling that is completely OK. Just find me after the meeting and I’ll see if I can help you out in any way. Any questions?” Vero looked from face to face. When nobody asked anything she said, “Let’s begin by mingling about and meeting each other just briefly. We’ll give this maybe ten minutes.”

Harvey met Mr. Cordoba (lung), who trailed a sickly sweet scent behind him. “I don’t smoke anymore,” said Mr. Cordoba. “But I do chew on the end of these.” He pulled out a fat cigar that had one very tattered end. “Takes me about a day just to finish one. So much better than smoking three packs a day.”

The polite thing would have been to smile and congratulate him on his progress. He didn't have time to be deferential, though. Nobody here did. "You know they won't give you a lung until you quit?"

"We all have our demons." Mr. Cordoba moved off to the corner of the room and whispered something to Darrell.

There was also George Choi (testicular) who explained that his medication made him have to run off to the bathroom frequently. Phyllis (throat) and Stanley (supporting Phyllis) owned a coffee shop. "The coffee they gave us at the meetings was awful," said Phyllis. "Really awful," said Stanley. "That's why we bring the coffee every week, you know? Something to brighten everyone's day. None of that Robusta crap. This is Arabica." Stanley added, "We grind it ourselves."

Vero called the meeting back to the table. "We should start at the beginning. What was your reaction to first finding out about your cancer? Call out your answers."

"I went batshit crazy."

"I cried for, like, a week."

"I realized how alone I was."

"No way, nope, no way. I just kept saying that over and over."

"My husband said we'd beat it. I still believe him."

"Why me?"

Vero nodded and nodded. Her head might just fall off. Positive reinforcement, check. She's got that one down; good for her. "Everyone take a sheet of paper and a pen," said Vero. "I want us to try a visualization exercise. Draw a window as big as you can, and then sketch what you can see through the window."

Harvey drew the bedroom window from his apartment. On the white space outside his window he drew in the pictures and knick-knacks Claire had put up. Both he and Claire loved photography and their walls showed off bright prints of landscapes and birds. Claire had taken many of them herself. Harvey spent most of his time drawing in what he could remember: the brick wall, the solid frames around Claire's work. He drew in their floor-length curtain, but left it open because the exercise was all about what each person could see through the window, a representation of what people could see of their futures. Harvey filled in the window with fog, but left the edges white. Was it possible to still have hope? Was it irresponsible?

They went around the room and showed their drawings. Mrs. Goodwin said she didn't know what to draw, really, so she drew the hills and cabin where she and her husband vacation during the summer. Darrell said he wasn't much of an artist and so everything was stick figures. "It's my family standing around our restaurant. Cancer or not, I'm set to retire in five years about. I'll be handing off the keys to my son, if he'll take them." Mr. Cordoba said he needed more time because he couldn't think off anything to draw. He had a doodle of a camel. Stanley didn't know whether he was supposed to draw because he was only supporting Phyllis. And Phyllis said she didn't know how to draw something through a window. Instead she just drew a scene outside. It was a playground her parents used to take her to when she was only a little girl. "It was razed and a parking lot put over it," she said. George Choi had excused himself to the restroom and had missed the whole activity.

"I drew fog," said Harvey. Everyone said *Yes, yes. Been there. Very tough in the beginning. Very tough.* Vero just about nodded her head off.

"Goals," said Vero. "Let's end today by sharing what we hope to get out of our time together."

"I want somebody to understand."

"Me too. Nobody at work can talk to me about all this. And I don't want them too, anyway."

"A safe place."

"I go between being very angry and very depressed. Maybe I could learn some way to deal with it?"

"I think," said Harvey, "if I could figure out what I have to do—then everything would be OK." *Nod, nod, nod.* Bobble-head dolls: nudge them in the right direction and they'll agree with you all day long. Week One complete. It didn't hurt, but there wasn't an epiphany or anything. Week Eight felt very far away.

Harvey continued to visit the hospice. "Please," he said to the head nurse, "give me a task. Anything. I want to keep these bones working as long as possible." There weren't many jobs that he was allowed to do.

"Harvey!"

He turned to see Sam walking down the hall, a big grin spread across his face. "Hi."

"I'm glad to see you—the nurse tells me you're looking to help out around the place. Do a little volunteering. That right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Fantastic. I might have something for you. But first, tell me why."

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to help out around here?"

Mechanically, Harvey repeated his prepared answer: "This place has been my home for a little over sixteen years. I want to feel useful, and St. Christopher's is what I know best." He felt

Sam's stare. Harvey wasn't here to hurt anybody; that was certain. And he wasn't a patient here, so he didn't deserve such scrutiny. He wasn't lying. Maybe not telling the whole truth, but how could he admit that he thought being even more helpful and proactive than usual would somehow work in his favor. Like a metaphysical tit for tat. He'd sound like a crazy person, and Sam would send him home. "The nurses don't have a job for me, do they?"

"You remember how it is," said Sam. "You can't mess with the meds, and we've got a custodial staff. There isn't anything like that for you to do." Sam leafed through a stack of papers on his clipboard. "However, *I* have something for you to do. If you don't mind."

"I'm on board. Name it."

"It's Rose."

Harvey froze. "She isn't—I haven't heard anything."

"She's still with us. She is bedridden. Since you've got a good history and rapport with her, I thought you might not mind visiting with her whenever you're around. How's that?"

"Absolutely." Harvey hadn't been around for almost two weeks. He felt ashamed for having forgotten to visit Rose. He walked down to her room and listened at her door. There wasn't any singing. He could hear the television murmuring a bit. He knocked on the door.

"C'm in."

"Hi Rose," Harvey whispered.

She looked at him for a moment and said, "I've never quite figured out why people whisper in a dying person's room. Isn't this the time when I should probably be the most deaf?" Harvey didn't know whether he was being scolded or she was making a joke. Then she smiled. "I've missed you, Harvey. Can you manage a hug?"

He hugged her, pulled up a chair. “I’m going to be coming by as often as I can,” said Harvey.

“Why would you do that? You should be caring for your own body, eh?”

“It’s just something I have to do.”

“What does that mean?” As much as she was able, Rose focused her gaze on Harvey.

He noticed how much strength was gone from her features. He guessed that she was readying herself for a sermon about priorities or spending as much time with loved ones as possible. He wasn’t ready to listen to any of that. He had a task and a mission that needed to be executed. He wanted to help. “I was going stir crazy at home. I needed to get out and be useful. This is the best place for that.”

Rose looked at him awhile longer before she put her head back on her pillow. “If you say so.”

“That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.” That didn’t get the laugh he thought it would. “Is there anything I can do for you on the days I’m here?”

Rose was quiet a long time, and Harvey wondered whether she fell asleep. It wasn’t uncommon. Sometimes people close to death nodded off. “Actually,” she said suddenly. “I miss going for walks. Haven’t been in the sun in over a week, now. I want to get out of my room, too.”

“I can do that.” Harvey went out to the nurses’ station and returned with a wheelchair and an orderly. Together they moved Rose into the chair and hung her IV. Harvey wheeled Rose out of her room. “Where first?”

She took a big sniff of the air. “Can you smell that? That kind of metallic zing?”

“I think that’s part of the filtering system. Ionized air.”

"I don't like it much." She sniffed the air again. "Take me over to the butterfly garden."

This is worth doing. This is good work. I like Rose; she likes me. This is valuable. It has purpose. If anything good comes, doubtless it will be a result of this. He would come every day. Make a point of it. Just to be sure he wouldn't feel tired or sick, he timed his visits before he had his own doctor's appointments or chemotherapy.

A few days later Dr. Patag's receptionist called Harvey: "Mr. Mitchell, Dr. Patag would like you to come in to the office as soon as you can. We can fit you in today if you have time, or perhaps tomorrow morning."

"What's all this about?" He was already meeting with Patag once a week. Special meetings like this reeked of bad news.

"I apologize, sir, he only asked me to make the phone call. Beyond that I do not have any details. At the moment he is at the hospital. I can ask him to call you when he is back in the office."

Dread lay thickly over him and paralyzed him. There was no more being useful today. "No. It won't make any difference by then. I'll come today. When do I come?"

"Three, this afternoon."

"I'll be there."

Harvey could not focus. There were really only two possibilities: *Harvey, the chemo isn't working. You're dying.* Or, *Harvey, I have found a miracle cure for you.* Not knowing—waiting for tests and results, wondering how much time was left—had always been part of the stress and difficulty of having cancer, but now he'd be glad for a few more days of limbo. A death sentence was so certain. He went early to Dr. Patag's office and was surprised to be shown straight into his office.

“My last meeting ended early,” said Dr. Patag. “No need to wait, right?”

“Jeremy,” said Harvey. “I’m about to bust a gut here. I need to know what’s up first, and then we can small talk. Be frank, good news or bad news?”

Dr. Patag sat himself in the easy chair and motioned for Harvey to relax. “I’m hoping that it will be good news, but I don’t know for sure.”

Harvey declined to sit and instead paced behind the couch. “As non-committal answers go, that was great.”

“There is a very experimental drug. So new it doesn’t have a name, just numbers. The initial studies suggest that it might be successful on your tumor. The drug has recently been approved for human testing. I think we can get in, if you want.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to?” This was great. The support group and working at the hospice. It was paying off. Do good work and it’ll come back around. “The chemo right now isn’t shrinking my tumor. We’re stagnating here.”

“You could say we’re stagnating. You might also say we’re buying time.”

“Maybe,” said Harvey. He sat down on the couch and crossed his legs and then uncrossed them again. “Buying sick time isn’t like buying healthy time. I want healthy time.”

“All right.” Jeremy retrieved two folders from his desk. He gave one to Harvey. “Here’s the information I’ve got on the trial.”

Harvey read through as much of the paperwork as he could understand. “I get lost pretty quick, here. What am I looking at?”

“It’s saying that this is a trade-off. The new chemo can’t run simultaneously with the chemicals we’re using that are currently retarding the growth of your tumor. It also says you

understand the risks and voluntarily choose to participate in the study, and that whatever results are obtained from your time on the drug may be used as data."

"We have to stop the current chemo?"

"That's the gamble."

"If it doesn't work, what does that mean?" And what did it mean that he even had this chance? It felt natural that he should find a way out from this cancer hell. It made sense: he exchanged a lifetime of service, a few months on death's doorstep, and a recent renewed vigor in his charitable work for his life back. If he was wrong, though, then what? What was the end result? He'd die anyway. What if? "Can we go back to how things are if this doesn't work?"

"We can try almost anything that you're prepared to try." Dr. Patag flipped to the back of his folder and read several pages of facts and figures. He seemed to be considering his words. Finally, "It is my professional opinion that *if* this doesn't work, it is possible—probable, actually—that we will not be able to contain the spread of your cancer again."

"What?"

"If this doesn't work," said Dr. Patag, "we're out of options. We'll have left my area of expertise and entered yours."

Harvey flipped through the pages of his folder but didn't bother reading anything. "Maybe we don't do it, then what? Stay on the chemo? What is the plan of action there? What's the likelihood that another opportunity like this comes along?"

"I don't think this choice is between one potential cure and another. The gamble here is a potential cure and a treatment that isn't *not* working."

"I don't know what kind of choice that is. I feel excited by this new possibility. You know what? Let's just do it." Adrenaline rushed through his body. It felt good. He felt good.

They could stop working from a defensive position and take some action. Defense only kept you from losing. Offense made you win.

"I'm excited, too. If this is your choice, then I am all in." Jeremy leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. He looked Harvey full in the face. "I don't suppose I act like the usual oncologist?"

"I haven't had a lot of experience, actually."

"I want you to sleep on it. You don't want to make a decision without consulting your wife. I've seen that argument before. Go home. Talk it over. Call me tomorrow afternoon. *Then*, I'll be ready to do what you want to do."

That made sense. "I'll call you tomorrow with my answer."

Harvey called Claire on his way home. "I've got good news, I think. When work is over, come straight home so we can talk." That evening over dinner, Harvey explained everything Dr. Patag had told him, even the warnings and the possible outcomes. "What do you think?"

"Sounds like you're already leaning toward doing it."

"I'm leaning that way, sure. Maybe you see something that I don't."

"You said it all already. We're not making any progress. If it doesn't work, we haven't really changed anything, except maybe the timeline." She looked down into her plate.

He couldn't tell if she was thinking or crying. "Are you OK?"

"I don't want to be a part of this discussion. If I choose wrong, then it was my choice that injured you. I don't know if I could stand the thought that I had a hand in killing you any faster."

Harvey accidently dropped his fork. "Sorry." Did she know? How could she? It had barely even been in the papers, and his name had been kept out of it. Surely, he was projecting. What could she know about killing anyone?

"You choose. Whatever you decide is fine with me. I just, I can't be the one to make the decision."

"I completely understand."

"Harvey?" Claire's chin trembled and she hid her eyes.

"Yes?"

"Make a living will. I don't know what I'd do if something happened in all this and you were—you couldn't talk to the doctors yourself."

Finally, something he'd done right. Pulling her out of her chair into a bear hug he said, "I already did that."

The next day, Harvey called Dr. Patag and agreed to the trial. Harvey thought he might feel anxious about moving forward, but he felt invigorated and liberated. Not having a plan is another kind of prison. So what if he wasn't getting any sicker? He wasn't getting any better, either. Now he had a plan. He would work the plan. Work the plan, that's all there was to it. He attacked his work at the hospice and at his support group with renewed enthusiasm. Work the plan. He visited Rose nearly every day. He would walk her through the gardens and then read to her a bit, and sometimes she asked for him to sing and play the piano. He did it all with purpose and promise.

The Cancer Allies were telling stories. Vero-the-survivor began: "This week's theme is Help, and asking for it. The truth is we're not in this alone. Something like one in three people will have cancer in their lifetimes. It can feel like cancer separates us, but maybe it just makes us more human. Why is it hard to ask for help? Tell us about a time that asking for help was difficult. How did you handle it?"

George Choi volunteered. Harvey could hear his leg bouncing under the table. “Thing is, it doesn’t matter that Lance Armstrong beat it, testicular cancer is emasculating, you know? I haven’t told anyone at work. My doctor is really confident that I’ll make a full recovery. Part of his plan is to,” he paused. He looked around the room and shrunk back in his seat. He whispered, “He wants to get rid of the bad one.”

Mr. Cordoba interrupted, “But then you’ll be healthy?”

“Yeah,” said George.

“So then?”

“I’m going to do it. I just haven’t told anyone.” George was shaking both legs now. “Even these meds I’m on, they think I have kidney problems. Going to the bathroom all the time. My boss even joked that I should invest in diapers so I could get a full hour’s worth of work in a row. Can you imagine asking for leave to get one of my balls chopped off?”

Phyllis had her hands up to her mouth. “I’m so glad it’s just me and my husband at the shop. I don’t have to deal with stuff like that. George, that’s awful.”

George nodded and allowed Phyllis to continue.

“Stanley and I worked all day at the shop. Since I’ve gotten sick, we’ve had to hire three more people to cover the open shifts. Maybe that’s not asking for help in the way that you mean, but it’s been hard for us. It’s cut our income. The kids are nice, but they don’t do everything exactly the way I would do it, you know?”

Mrs. Goodwin said, “I don’t think it’s hard asking for help. The worst anyone can say is ‘No,’ right? I have to assume that people are grown-up enough to make their own decisions. If they say yes when the should’ve said no, then they must’ve had a reason for it.”

“Very smart,” said Vero. “Very smart.” George excused himself to the restroom. Everyone else took the opportunity to refill their plates. Seated again, Vero looked around the room and her eyes settled on Harvey. “What about you, Harvey? Do you have a time when you should have asked for something but didn’t?”

He had already made up his mind to participate. Why mess up a good thing just because he could see the end of her lesson before she announced it? She hadn’t done the grief session right, either. But, Harvey hadn’t interrupted and taken over the lesson. He’d only made some suggestions during the discussion which she jumped on right away. No need to embarrass her. He was going to play along. Maybe this was another way he could covertly counsel people. “I don’t ask for help very often,” said Harvey. “My wife thinks it’s a personality fault. Mostly, I don’t want to be a burden to other people. I’m deliberate. Do I really need someone else to do this, or am I being lazy? That kind of thing.”

“Exactly,” said George.

“I’m not saying that my decisions don’t have consequences. It’s just not right to complain about it if I chose it.”

“Tell us about that,” said Vero.

Harvey took a gulp of his fruit juice. “When I was little, my mom used to come tuck me in before bed. She’d give me a kiss and then close the door as she left.” Vero was nodding again. “I would always be on my back, right? That way my mom could kiss me and then be out.” Harvey looked around at the faces in the room. “I didn’t like sleeping on my back. I wanted to sleep on my stomach.”

“And you couldn’t turn over?” asked Darrell.

“Let Harvey tell his story,” said Vero. “This is an environment of safety and camaraderie.”

“Of course I could turn over. The way it went through my head, though, was that my mom went out of her way to tuck me in, to lay the blanket on just so. I didn’t want to mess that up. So I tried to sleep on my back. That never worked. Then, I would start shimmying a little. Eventually, I would end up on my stomach with a minimum of the blanket disturbed.”

“I don’t understand,” said Darrell.

“I felt it was important to honor the effort. My mom didn’t need to come tuck me in. She didn’t need to put the blanket on. She did, though. I thought I should do as much as I could to not mess up her work.”

“That’s something else,” said Darrell, shaking his head.

“I was a little kid,” said Harvey. “Can you blame me? The point is that I could have asked her to wait until I rolled over. I never did, and I had to spend time every night getting myself on my stomach.”

Harvey told Rose about the meeting during their walk the next day. “In my head,” he said, “the story was a little deeper. It just didn’t come out perfectly. Or maybe Darrell just didn’t get it.”

“I don’t quite get it either,” said Rose. “If I was still teaching, I’d have written a big BS at the top of your paper. Sounds like you’re trying too hard.”

“It’s a true story,” said Harvey. Since when was it a crime to try too hard? He and Rose were sitting on the edge of a fountain. A light breeze blew mist at them. “Is the mist bothering you? Making you cold?”

"It's very nice. Reminds me of being on vacation. Do you remember ever going to those theme parks? Like Six Flags? And they always had a shaded plaza with fans and misters strung up? The mist reminds me of that. It's a good memory. We can sit here awhile."

"Let me know if it gets uncomfortable and we'll move."

"Don't worry so much. Why are you trying so hard right now? And with the counseling, too? You don't seem to like the leader very much."

"She's nice enough. A good counselor, actually. She nods a lot."

"Harvey, you used to nod all the time when you were listening to people. I saw it, myself."

"Did I?"

"Absolutely."

Vero's just doing her job. A job he used to do all the time. It's a tough job, no doubt. We all have our idiosyncrasies. "I'll think on it. Perhaps I'll cut her some slack."

"Is the group helping?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I'm not learning anything, but there are people in kind of the same situation as I am."

"Same as here, also?"

"Uh-hm." Harvey didn't want to say that the group still had hope. They hadn't agreed to their death sentence just yet. He was still part of that group. Hospice meant giving up. He hadn't given up yet.

"Why are you trying so hard, Harvey?"

"I've got to do what I've got to do."

"And if it doesn't come out to anything?" she said.

"Then it wasn't for trying," he said.

"You're covering all your bases, then?"

"Yeah."

Rose sat silently for a moment. Then, "You know, Harvey. It is getting a bit chilly, after all. I think it's time I go back to my room and take a nap."

The next support group meeting was full. Everybody showed up and there were even a few new people who had come to see what it was like. Vero said, "We should take this opportunity to give updates. What's going on in your world lately?"

Harvey volunteered first and explained how he had been volunteering almost every day at the hospice, and it felt good to be back at work.

Phyllis said, "Stanley and I had a long talk the other night." She squeezed his hand. "I've been worried lately that if I don't pull out of this, our children will," she began digging through her purse and pulled out a handkerchief. "What if they forget me?"

Harvey was momentarily glad that he and Claire didn't have children. One more thing he didn't have to worry about: whether people will remember him. Would he have even wanted that? Probably not. Memories can be burdens. He'd seen the families of patients never able to let go and move on. It was memories. The good memories could not be relived; the bad memories were unresolved. Why hope that anyone would remember you?

"But Stanley told me that no matter what happened, he would work to keep me alive in their memory. For that, I'm grateful."

"How about you Mrs. Goodwin?" said Vero.

She didn't answer right away. Her plate of food lay untouched in front of her. She looked gray and bland. Her hair, usually styled around her face, was tied behind her head in a tight

ponytail. Melancholy or depression, Harvey couldn't tell, hung about her. She said, "I'm so tired."

Harvey had heard that before. He looked around the room. He saw fear and pity. *Tired* was code for *done*. Nobody moved or said anything. Then, very quietly, Vero said, "We should talk just a minute after the meeting's over."

"I guess the resaca is a no-go for a while?"

"Just until the cast comes off." Gus offered Harvey a cigarette. When he refused, he said, "Because you don't like it? Nothing to do with acquiescing?"

Come off it already. If I'm not bending to my parents' will, then aren't I bending to Gus's? I don't like doing it. My folks are just a convenient excuse. Is it better for me to be obedient or lame? Harvey walked over to the window and opened it. "I didn't like it, man." Gus seemed to accept that answer. He took a long drag and blew his smoke toward Harvey. "Damn, Gus," said Harvey. "At the window." He pushed some books off the corner of Gus's bed and sat. "How's the foot?"

"Forget about the foot. Ask me about my soul."

"How's your soul?"

"New. Things have meaning. You know that? The problem with existentialists is that they forget to exist, to practice finding meaning."

"I'm not entirely sure that's true."

"You've got to trust me on this one. I know."

How could he know? Gus was too smart. Even if he was wrong, Harvey couldn't articulate why. He looked so happy, though, and he hadn't been like this in awhile. If Gus had figured out how to be happy, maybe it was worth listening.

"You saved my life, Harvey."

"You probably would've been fine."

"No, you did. You saved me. You jumped in. Who else did? Nobody. You could have gone for help. No. You were committed."

Harvey felt uncomfortable and he wished they could be back to normal. "It wasn't anything. You would've done the same."

"Exactly. You saved my life. I'm going to save yours—we can be more than a couple of schlubs reciting poetry to scam on girls. We have more available to us than what our school can offer us. We can take our education into our own hands and experience something that they never have and probably never will: what it's like to really live. Once you really live, everything becomes accessible."

It sounded good. Gus had a way with words, and the things he said sounded good in Harvey's ears. When Gus got excited, it was hard not to get excited also. Harvey felt that Gus existed on a level above the rest of the town. He read books and could talk about Nietzsche and Schrodinger and Freud, and the teachers didn't even care if he paid attention in class or not. He made A's whether it looked like he was trying to or not. It didn't make sense to Harvey that Gus had chosen him as a friend, but he was glad of it.

"Did you read the book? *A Sort of Life*?"

"Yeah—the guy was kind of messed up wasn't he?"

"No, no, no. That's just our perception of him, and that perception is a result of all the things we've been told are normal and worthy." Gus motioned with his cigarette over to his bookshelf. "Pick any of those books out and you'll discover that we're all just interpolated beings. Everything acts on us—school, church, the company we keep, where we live—and slowly we begin to think homogeneously. Even the loudmouths among us are really just arguing for another version of what already exists."

"Maybe, but—"

"And this guy, Graham Greene, he was outside of that. You see that, right?"

"He just sounded depressed to me."

"Not depressed," said Gus. "Bored. He wasn't stimulated. That's us, here. Unstimulated, falling into routine, becoming another cog. All because, like Greene, we've forgotten what it means to really live, to be alive, to love life."

The words intoxicated Harvey. How could they be wrong? Gus was almost never wrong. "The thing is," said Harvey, "I get what you're saying. But I don't feel like a cog."

"That's why it's so important that we do something now. Something major. When you stop feeling the machine around you, it means you're becoming integrated. Get me?"

Again, it made sense. There were times when he had little purpose in his chores or schoolwork besides keeping him busy and out of trouble. Maybe he had become lazy and maybe he was submitting to whatever machine Gus was talking about.

"You have to trust me on this. The only way to live life is to confront your mortality, come to terms with it."

"Like you did with the resaca."

"That was kid stuff compared to what we're going to do." Gus smothered his cigarette and tossed it toward his trashcan. "Listen: you have to let me do this for you. I want you to have what I have. We chose each other. Know what I mean? In all this place, I have one good friend. That's you. And you showed me how much you care for me. I need to share what I know. It's my turn."

Nobody, except maybe his parents, had ever said anything like that to Harvey. It felt good, gave him goose bumps. Something meaningful was happening and he didn't want to miss it.

"I owe it to you, Harvey. I'm not going to stop until you agree."

Harvey looked at Gus, leaning far forward and looking directly into his eyes. He was intense and his face set. Why not? He wanted to live life like Gus was doing. "I'm in."

"I knew you'd come around."

Harvey walked over to Vero and George. "You haven't heard from Mrs. Goodwin at all? Not a text, email, phone call?"

"No, I haven't," said Vero.

"Me neither," said George. "What about her husband? He hasn't tried to contact you?"

"No," said Vero.

"Anything in the newspaper?" said Harvey.

"I didn't think to look," she said.

Mr. Cordoba, Phyllis, and Stanley stood around the coffeepot whispering to each other. Darrell sat in his chair, typing into his phone. The meeting should have started fifteen minutes

ago, but Mrs. Goodwin hadn't arrived yet. It was common courtesy to call someone from the group if you were going to be absent—it helped ease everybody's mind.

"I think we should start the meeting," said Vero finally.

"Let's give it just a few more minutes," said Phyllis.

"I'm checking her Facebook," said Darrell. "There's nothing there."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," said George. "We don't know anything, and certainly we're closer than her Facebook friends."

"At least I'm trying something."

"Guys," said Vero. "We'll give it a few minutes."

This is what it's like when you die. People left in the lurch. Minimize the pain by minimizing the people involved? In a group like this, no one was supposed to go. This was a support group. You were supposed to become a cancer survivor or stop coming if the hope was gone. This was the hope group. It didn't make sense for anyone from the group to die suddenly.

"I am so sorry I'm late." Mrs. Goodwin and her husband walked into the room. They held a large sheet cake with *Thank You Cancer Allies!* written in puffy icing. "I know I usually bring salads, but you'll have to deal with cake tonight. I've got great news." They set the cake down and began slicing pieces and passing them around. "I've been so tired of fighting it lately. Of trying to eat healthy and take my meds and exercise when I felt like I could, and I couldn't see a light, you know? It was too hard and too long, and I think everyone could tell that I was ready to give up—I'm sorry for doing that to you all." She began to tear up. "I had been hoping so long that if I kept working at it and doing what the doctors said, then everything would be all right." Vero and Phyllis walked over to Mrs. Goodwin and gave her a hug. "I got new test results back

today. I'm in remission. We're going to continue with the therapy a few more months, you know, just to help it stick. But, I think, I beat it. I've got a whole new lease on life."

Lease on life? Another one of those funny phrases. A lease means none of us owns our own lives. We're just making payments. Harvey pushed the thought from his mind. This was a great day. She wasn't dead. She was healthy. This was why people joined a support group: to get better and share a congratulations cake. Hope filled him. And he felt hungry. He hadn't felt actually hungry in nearly six months. Dread and stress and, of course, the tumor pressed on his guts all the time. Tonight he felt hungry. Really hungry. It was vanilla cake with buttercream icing and a pineapple filling. He ate two pieces.

CHAPTER V

4. TWO MONTHS EARLIER

Harvey was numb. He had been warned. It was a gamble, that's what he'd said.

"I'm very sorry, Harvey," said Dr. Patag. "The results clearly show that the medicine has had no effect on your tumor."

Harvey sat back on the leather couch. It felt cold on his skin and he shivered. He'd probably never be warm again. His body would slowly give up its heat. He'd have to wear sweaters and sleep with an extra blanket and wear socks to bed. "Can we restart the old chemo?"

"The scans show the tumor has metastasized. It's out of control and affecting other organs now."

Why gamble? It was so easy to say the old chemo wasn't working let's take risk. What did he lose? Did he exchange several weak and nauseating months for days or weeks? "There's nothing else, then?"

Dr. Patag removed his glasses and wiped them with his sleeve. "At this point, there is little we can do but manage your pain and discomfort."

"I'm well aware how that goes."

"I'm sorry, Harvey. I wish things were different."

"Me, too," said Harvey. "At least we tried, huh?" That was it. It felt so final, but he wasn't dead yet. Maybe this was what it was like to be sentenced to death but have to wait for an

execution date, or maybe it was more like having your head shoved in the stock and waiting waiting waiting for the executioner to drop the blade and you could only just barely hear the creaking as the blade slid down the wood because then it was over—but the moments before the blade dropped probably felt the most dreadful. He went home and went to bed. There was nothing else to do.

He stopped chemotherapy and began taking a regimen of pain management drugs. The doses were still small. Even though he no longer had poisons coursing through his body, he still lost weight and his skin sagged. He looked at himself in the mirror and felt betrayed. There would be nothing dignified about dying like this, nothing valiant, nothing worthy of a story or a song.

He changed channels on the TV while Claire worked around him. She used to bug him about taking the trash down or helping out with the dishes, but she didn't ask him to do chores anymore. He tried to take the laundry down to Doña Tita's.

"I can do that; don't worry about it. Just relax."

"I always take the laundry."

"But it's OK. You don't need to. I can handle it," said Claire.

"We haven't taken down any laundry in weeks."

"There isn't much, anyway."

How was Doña Tita going to handle losing business? Claire wouldn't take down the laundry as often if it was just her. "No, we take down the laundry on Mondays. I'll be right back. It won't take me long at all."

"I'll do it. Don't worry about it. I got it."

"What do I do?"

"Just relax. That's all. Just be comfortable."

So all he did was take up space. What purpose did he have anymore? The more he thought about it, the less he could figure out. St. Christopher's didn't need him. Claire was doing just fine without his help. There wasn't even a reason to take a shower. He went back to bed.

When he wasn't in bed, he sprawled on the couch and watched TV. He spent all his time in his pajamas. Since he didn't leave the house, there was no need to get dressed. Nobody called or came by, probably letting him relax and take it easy. Downstairs, Blaize seemed to be keeping it quiet. Everybody was going out of their way not to disturb him, and he despised it. He was disgusted that he was an object of pity. Pariah. That was a better word for it. He was unclean and sent to live at the edge so that he wouldn't contaminate anyone else. He might not be dangerous, but why take the chance? Stay clear of the sick man.

"Harvey?"

He rolled over and looked at Claire.

"Are you going to get up and dressed today?"

"Why?"

"It's been a couple days. It can't be—good for you."

"News flash."

"And besides, today is your group meeting."

"I'm not going."

"Why not?"

She didn't understand the intricacies of a group like that. How could she? He could try to explain it, but she wouldn't get it. The group was for those who'd survive. Now that he wasn't going to survive, he was obligated to stop going. He owed it to them. The group was more

intimate with death than, say, the average person. But they were fighters; they were engaged in struggle; they weren't awaiting certain fate. It would be cruel to go to the meeting and show them what was really out there, even if they did deserve to know. "I don't want to go."

"If anyone could understand what you're feeling, it should be them. I can't think of a more important time to go than now. It's a *support* group. They're supposed to be there in your time of need."

He didn't have the will to argue; he didn't want to argue. What would be more exhausting? Arguing with Claire, or going to another meeting. The meeting, at least, would be over after an hour or so. "Fine."

That evening, Claire sat with Harvey. The meeting began with the usual mingling and food. Everyone had energy: they chatted and drank juice and laughed; they carried purses and books. They were showing off. It was unfair. Harvey would never jog again or help someone move. Even now, the stairs up to his apartment were an effort. He sat there and watched them and knew he should not have come. This was not a place for people like him.

"Let's begin," said Vero-who-had-beaten-*her*-cancer. She looked at Harvey, "I understand you're having a difficult time. Would you like to talk about it?"

"No."

"I think it would help, wouldn't it?" said Phyllis.

"We never force anyone here," said Vero. "Harvey, when you're ready, we're ready."

"We're supposed to be like family, here," said Darrell.

"That's true," added Mr. Cordoba.

"Enough," said Vero. "Harvey, you can see we're here for you, whenever you feel like participating."

It was bad enough that Claire made him come. Now these people knew. Like family? "You're here for me? That's ridiculous."

"Harvey—"

"You sit there with your ninety-six percent treatable cancers and hope of remission, and I'm going to die." He swallowed air. "I am going to die. Do you even understand that? Look at me." He looked each person in the eye. Fear, maybe? Were they afraid? Because here was a specter of what could be? They shouldn't have pushed him. He could have sat and been quiet and gone home. "How many days or weeks before this person, look at me, no longer exists?" Phyllis put her hands over her mouth. Claire tugged at Harvey's sleeve. "How can you expect me to participate in *educational* sessions when I'm a goner? Come away with more positive feelings? That's what you said in the beginning, remember? What are you going to learn from me? Answer me." He waited, but nobody answered.

"I think," said Vero, "that we owe—"

"For most of you, maybe *all* of you, I'll be a reminder of how close you got before you survived. You'll do your walk-a-thons and raise money for research and I'll just be a story you might remember: This is why we need research, you'll say. Me? I'll be dead. In fact—I won't be back." He wanted to storm out, to punctuate his speech with a door slam, but the door was too heavy. He squeezed through and waited in the car. Claire was a few minutes behind him, probably apologizing on his behalf, soothing whatever sting he might have left. But he wasn't going back. That was for damn sure.

Back to bed. Not even TV. Just sleep and medicine. Claire brought him food and encouraged him to bathe, but she didn't press him anymore. She had tried to apologize, but he'd been silent and she went away. Time was his only currency, and he lost any sense of its passing.

He kept the blinds drawn and a small lamp on. It might have been a day or two, or maybe a week. He didn't care. He slept.

"Are you ready?" asked Gus.

"I think. I don't know."

"Get in."

"How did you convince your dad to lend you the van?"

"What was to convince? I asked to borrow it. He said yes."

Harvey had ridden in this van two times a week for the last three years. It was just a van. The upholstered seats slightly frayed at the seams. There weren't enough cup holders. Just a van. How anticlimactic that this was the vehicle that would ferry them to clarity. The great literary heroes had horses or ships, and when they walked it was a feat of strength. He and Gus were driving an old Ford Windstar.

Gus drove them past the city limits out onto the mud flats. Officially, the flats weren't anything but a long dusty stretch of land where almost nothing grew. During the summer there were drag races. "I want to show you what I got." He grabbed his backpack and pulled out a snub-nosed revolver and a single bullet. "My parents don't know I have this. I found it last Christmas when I was snooping for gifts—it was on the top shelf in my mom's closet. It makes sense, though."

"What does?"

"A revolver in the closet and *A Sort of Life* in the bookshelf? My parents must have done this, too. Today is big."

"I know."

"Even bigger for me. It's also like a rite of passage, to walk the same steps my parents have."

"You really think they did it?"

"They must have. It's our turn."

"Our turn."

Gus unlocked the cylinder and loaded the single round. He fit the cylinder back in place and spun it several times. "We don't know where it is now."

"Who goes first?"

"You do," said Gus. "I already had the resaca, so I'll go second. Your turn to understand."

"To understand."

"Just like Greene. Like me."

"I just do it?" asked Harvey.

"Like in the book. He went to a field. We're in a field. He had a revolver. We have a revolver. He just pulled the trigger."

The gun felt heavy. Too heavy for its size. It shouldn't weigh this much. The cross-hatch on the grip felt rough on Harvey's hand and left tiny waffle marks on his palm. He traced his finger from the hammer down the barrel to the muzzle. Gus's eyes were wide; he licked his lips. Was he holding his breath? Harvey felt his pulse in his fingertips. This is what it took to live, to really live. That's what the book had said. Greene was so smart, so creative. Like Gus. And his parents. If this is what it takes, why not? Greene never got hurt. It couldn't really be a gamble.

The odds were in his favor: six chambers but only one round; that wasn't even seventeen percent. He closed his eyes. He heard Gus's seatbelt squeak from strain.

He put the muzzle to his temple. Already it was working. He was experiencing life more keenly. His pulse beat hard and fast. That was his lifeblood aching to live. He heard every creak and crack as Gus twisted and turned in his seat to watch, and he smelled the heat. Like metal. It smelled like metal. This is what Greene felt, his senses in overdrive, the input overwhelming, everything more real than ever before. Gus felt this below the water in the resaca. This was the gift. It had to be. Life, full life, only in death. He pulled the trigger.

The hammer slapped metal on metal, louder than anything Harvey had ever heard. He dropped the gun and it fell into the foot-well. He was alive. It was *luck*. That was stupid. Graham Greene wasn't insightful. He was suicidal. This was a mistake, the worst most awful thing he had ever done in his life. Better to smoke and die slowly like a normal person. Never again. Gus was wrong about this one. Too much was at stake. He could actually be dead right now. Seventeen percent was too much, especially if he didn't *have* to play that bet. Why, though? Gus had been so sure, so convincing. There were lots of people at the resaca. He hadn't been in real danger of drowning. One of the old men would have gone down, probably. This was different. This was wrong.

"How was it?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"Don't do it."

"Why not?"

"It's messed up, man. This was a mistake. We were wrong about this one. I'm telling you."

"Come on. It's just jitters. You feel alive right now?"

"Yeah, but not because—"

"And you're glad to be alive?"

"Yes, but—"

"Why wouldn't you want me to have that? You're being selfish now? In this moment? This was my idea."

"It's not like the book. Greene, he was sick, I think. He shouldn't have done it. He was too convincing. I will never do it again. I didn't like it. This isn't confronting mortality, like you said. It's, I don't know. It's not brave. It's making trouble where there wasn't any. I can't explain it."

Gus unbuckled his seat belt and bent for the gun. Harvey moved also, but he was still wearing his seatbelt. He tried to block Gus's movement with his feet, but Gus was quick. Gus held the gun.

"Please don't," said Harvey.

"I have to."

"You don't, actually. Choice."

"This one is bigger than me, Harvey. I have to know what it's like. It's the first step to being somebody. Get me? I can talk philosophy, but so can so many people. This, though, makes me different. You understand, don't you?"

"Please. Don't."

"Don't take this from me." Gus raised the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger.

Harvey shut his eyes and heard the hard metal slap of the hammer hitting the pin. He looked at Gus. “How was it.”

“That—was amazing.” His eyes were wide and he licked his lips.

“Let’s go home.”

“Amazing.”

“Please.”

“I need another one.”

“Don’t mess with me. I don’t like it. Let’s go home.”

The gun was in Gus’s lap. “I’m not kidding. This was maybe the greatest thing I’ve ever done.” He picked up the gun and spun the chamber.

“No!” Harvey lunged, but the seatbelt held him in place.

Gus put the gun to his temple, eyes closed, and pulled the trigger.

Harvey couldn’t hear anything. He yelled but couldn’t hear his voice. Something sweet and metallic was on his lips. He could taste it. Gus’s head hung out the van’s window. But the window had been closed, hadn’t it? Small shards of glass were cutting Gus’s neck. “Hey! Your neck.” A warm tickle spread down from Harvey’s waist, along the backs of his knees, and felt cold in his shoes. Do what?

He unbuckled his seatbelt and opened the door. The wind was blowing and made him shiver. He ran toward town. Why does it smell? He stumbled. His feet wouldn’t work the way they should, and that didn’t make sense. Harvey was good at running. He could feel his pulse painfully in his ears. Coming toward him was a white and black car. Stop the car. That was the right move. Harvey walked into the middle of the street; he thought he was jumping and waving his arms, but when he focused on the state trooper, he knew he was on the ground.

"Can you hear me? What's your name?"

"Harvey."

"OK, Harvey. Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Who's hurt, Harvey? You have blood all over you."

"All over?"

"Who's hurt, Harvey?"

"My friend. He's hurt pretty bad."

"Can you tell me where?"

"There's a van more over that way. He cut his neck on the glass."

"OK, Harvey. We're going to get everybody some help. Stay awake."

"All right." But Harvey knew it wasn't. Gus was dead. Harvey would tell them everything and then they would rule it a suicide and everyone would pity Harvey until he went away to college and never came back. He wouldn't be invited to the funeral, which was probably appropriate. Gus was dead. And it was all Harvey's fault.

Harvey woke suddenly and vomited into the trashcan he kept by the bed.

The phone was ringing. Harvey let Claire answer it; he needed to wash out his mouth and brush his teeth.

Claire came into the bathroom. "Are you OK?"

"Yes," said Harvey. "Who was it?"

"Sam."

"Why?"

"He said Rose asked for you to come by, if you could."

Harvey saw himself in the mirror. The neck of his undershirt was yellow. His checks were patched with whiskers. He pulled out his electric razor and began shaving. "I need to take a quick shower, and then I need you to drive me down to St. Christopher's. I'll be ready in fifteen minutes."

Sam met Harvey in the lobby. "I'm really glad you came."

"How is she?"

"Soon. I think she's only waiting for you."

He had seen it many times, a body lingering just long enough to say goodbye. How strange that the body could do that, but couldn't rid itself of the disease in the first place.

"Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks, Sam." Harvey walked to Rose's room. The door was open and he leaned against the doorjamb. The curtains were shut. The only light came from the hall. Rose was under a quilt, and he could only see her face and her arms. A bag of clear liquid hung high on the bedpost. A monitor beeped the slowing rhythm of her heart.

"I sent everyone out," she rasped. "I told them I needed a nap and some quiet. They're around somewhere, maybe getting coffee, just waiting to get word. I wanted to tell you goodbye, though."

"Are you scared?" He pulled a chair up to the side of her bed.

"Of what? The nurse will come in a moment to increase my morphine. I'll go to sleep and I will not wake. Not here, anyway. Are you scared?"

"Every day."

She laid her hand over his. Her fingers were cold and had almost no flesh. “You are a beautiful human being. Why are you scared?”

“I feel so human. I’m not perfect, and nothing I do feels like enough.”

“Not by works, Harvey.”

“In my heart I know that. I do. My brain has never caught on. Never allowed me to move on.”

“Move on from what?”

He rubbed warmth into her hand and she sighed. Lightly and gently he massaged her palm. “From every moment I have ever regretted.”

The nurse came in and walked over to Rose’s IV. “If you’d like me to increase your morphine, I can do that now.”

“Will it put me to sleep?” asked Rose.

“You might feel drowsy.”

“And no more pain?”

“No more pain.”

“Please increase it. Thank you. How long?”

The nurse pressed some buttons on the machine and checked Rose’s IV bag. “Just a few minutes. Press the call button if you need anything at all.” As the nurse left, she whispered to Harvey, “It’s nice to see you again.”

Rose turned her head toward Harvey. “You know the story of the rich man who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Luke 18 I think?”

“I know the story.”

"Many people think the parable is only about wealth and how hard it is to let go of material things. But maybe, just maybe, if the rich man had sold everything, Jesus might have said *Now earn it all back*. Everyone remembers the verse about the camel going through the eye of the needle, but they forget the verse that ends the story: *The things that are impossible with people are possible with God.* The rich man wanted to know what he could do. It's legalistic, like the Pharisees. I imagine Jesus would have made the rich man continuously sell and earn all his money—kept raising the stakes until the man couldn't do it anymore. Understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes." Too much was going on. She saw into him more clearly than most people. As much as he wanted to talk more, she was dying. Why should she spend these last moments counseling him? That was his job. His gift.

"I have enjoyed our time," said Rose, "as much as anything else in my life. You're a good man, Harvey. Do something for me."

"Anything."

"Kiss me on my forehead and tell me everything is going to be OK."

He leaned over her and wiped the hair from her face. He pressed his lips to her forehead. "Everything," he said, "will be fine."

"I can't sing anymore. I've lost my voice. Please, would you sing for me. I'm so tired." She softly pressed Harvey's hand.

So he sang. "In the secret, in the quiet place—" Rose's breathing became slow and even. "In the stillness you are there—" She was so tiny, the quilt did not move with her breathing. Only the medical beep of her machines let Harvey know she was with him. "In the secret, in the quiet hour—" She began to sweat, and Harvey dried her face. He knew she didn't feel any pain.

Her body jerked a bit and she sweat more. “I wait, only for you—” The machine began to sound irregularly. The nurse stood in the doorway and waited. “ ‘Cause I want to know you more—” Harvey knelt beside her bed and held on to her hand. “Pressing onward, pushing every hindrance aside—” The machine made no more noise. “Out of my way, ‘cause—” Her body was still, and he wanted to believe she was smiling. “I want to know you more.”

CHAPTER VI

5. ONE MONTH EARLIER

Harvey was in the car with Claire. She wanted to run by the mall, and Harvey wanted to go, too. “I want to go wherever you go,” he had said. “I don’t care how menial. Whatever errands you have, I want to go too.”

“I think that would be really nice.”

“You were right. It’s not mentally healthy like this.”

Claire hadn’t said anything. Wherever she went, Harvey went. No more festering at home. No more dwelling on things he couldn’t change. Time was the only denomination he dealt in, and he would spend it with Claire. Now, in the car, she patted his knee.

Rose was his last patient. She held out longer than many hospice residents do, longer than the expected six months. She had simply—or, if it wasn’t so simple, she never let on—accepted what was to come for her. One of the most misunderstood, maybe misnamed, aspects of grief. Acceptance means approval, doesn’t it? The willingness to receive something; consent, agreement. When he was small, his family used to call his grandparents collect, and the operator always asked *Do you accept the charges*? Acceptance was a choice to have something or not to have something. You could always say no. Harvey had worked to get patients and their families to the acceptance stage of grief. They never really had an alternative, especially at the hospice. Death was coming whether they accepted it or not.

Traffic on the highway slowed to stop-and-go. Claire changed lanes but that only got them further stuck. Around them the metal glared with the sun high above; they smelled the exhaust from the truck ahead and Harvey pressed the recirculation button on the console; drivers craned their necks out windows and over steering wheels to get a glimpse of the holdup.

Almost always, people thought acceptance meant peace. Recognizing the inevitability didn't make the disease hurt less; it didn't remove old injustices; it certainly didn't mean that everything was going to be OK from here on—and that made people angry, especially the families. *How come he is still in so much pain? You said he was in the final stages of grief.* What can you say but *I'm sorry*? It's hard to get people to understand: "He's done grieving, but you're just beginning." Nobody is ever in the mood for a lesson on emotional health and physical health and how they're tied, or how the chemicals in the brain work, or what it means to be grieving. *Just make it better*. How do you explain that acceptance is better? You can't blurt it out like that. Bluntness only works with some people. Telling a grieving person what they are feeling and why they're feeling that way was almost the same as telling an angry person to calm down. It doesn't work. He talked and listened, sure. And as best he could, he tried to tell people what was coming, not *why*, but *what*. It took some of the fear away. Uncertainty was scary. Knowing what's coming doesn't stop it from happening, doesn't exactly make it easier, either. It's just that—knowledge can be a small sedative, just enough palliation to face things.

Traffic was fully stopped. A police officer walked down the lines of cars. "Get back in your car! You're still on a highway!" Another officer joined him and they began direct the cars to one lane on the far right.

A large man with big jowls leaned out the window of his semi, "What happened? What's the problem?"

"Sir," said the first officer. "I'm only here to get you back on the road. I don't have answers."

The problem is acceptance sounds a lot like giving up. No more options? Throw in the towel. Is it giving up if there isn't anything else to do? Nobody ever accepted that they had the flu. They just had the flu. Pump up the vitamin C and E, maybe a shot if you had to, a day off work, several hours of TV, and you were better. Acceptance feels like you ran out of fight. Harvey had to explain over and over that not fighting wasn't cowardice, it wasn't weakness. It was a choice. *Why would he just give up like that?* We're conditioned to believe that we should fight fight fight to that last breath, and that anything less if failure. What's the cost? How much time—the only real currency, after all—is spent on gaining minutes. What sense does that make? Hours of treatment for a few extra minutes.

That was all well and good for the residents and families at St. Christopher's. Harvey had made a career out of it. He had never been there, reached any kind of acceptance. What was the use of getting there now? It wouldn't make him hurt less. Inner peace? Twenty-seven years since Gus. How would he even know what inner peace felt like?

Harvey and Claire were moving again. He saw lights ahead, a dizzying show of red and blue and orange and yellow: two police cruisers, two ambulances, a fire truck, a tow truck, and a news van. There it was; he could see it now. A car had hit the barricade and flipped and then got hit again from behind. Paramedics shoved stretchers into the ambulances, yelling: "Sir, my name is Robert. Can you tell me your name? Keep your eyes open. I need you to stay awake with me. Can you tell me your name?" They evacuated with their sirens blaring. He couldn't tell how badly hurt anyone was. Bad enough for stretchers. The firemen began sweeping up the glass and mangled pieces of rubber and fiberglass, plastic and steel.

"I hope everyone's OK," said Claire. "That's so sad."

It was sad. And it was stupid that inching past this torn mess was Harvey, days or weeks from his own death. Today people were dying. Suddenly. They woke and dressed and went about their business, and then they were dead. Like an ambush. Death interrupted their lives. Their grief would be hard. In truth, many people were resilient and dealt with life's hardships. The pulled themselves together, went back to work, provided for their families. It was the all-too-suddenness of death that caught people off guard: the plans already made, the appointments that would be broken, the promises that could not be kept, forgetting and setting a plate at dinner. Harvey would outlive people, people younger and healthier than he was. Maybe that is what acceptance is—acknowledging that anyone could die any time. Death wasn't approaching. It was here, a real and potential possibility all the time.

Cancer, Harvey believed, was punishment for letting Gus die. The gun had been in his own foot well. He should have known how persistent Gus was going to be. He could have pulled the trigger until the gun fired. It was his fault that Gus was dead. How many things could have happened but didn't?

Harvey wanted to believe that Gus's death was a debt he had to pay, something he owed regardless of his personal salvation. It didn't make sense, but he wasn't under an obligation to make sense, was he? If the man in the crash could die today while Harvey sat dying, feet from his broken car, why should Harvey bother to make sense? Harvey looked again at the wreckage. Someone would blame the driver; someone would blame the road or the weather; someone would blame developer and the barricade he built. Harvey saw that it was an accident. There were too many variables and they collided in one awful moment, a moment that could affect the rest of someone's life. And if it wasn't his fault, how could he reconcile his life? He'd spent

more than half his life making up for Gus's death. For what? Claire was checking her mirrors and staying the speed limit, giving her full attention to the road. Harvey turned his face to his own window so she wouldn't see him cry.

That night, Harvey and Claire sat watching TV. They didn't go to bed anymore. That was something normal people with normal lives did. They'd lied there in the dark. Harvey's eyes were open and he imagined Claire's would be, too. In the dark he could make out the outlines of the dresser, just a stupid oak dresser: heavy, even with the drawers out.

"We have to keep it," said Claire. "it was my grandmother's. It's an heirloom."

"Heirloom? This thing isn't an antique, yet? It's just old. Heirloom only means passed down. It's *barely* an heirloom. We could sell it and get something less heavy."

"My grandfather built it." She sat on the dresser and didn't move.

So Harvey pushed it up three flights of stairs. He thought he'd died. He'd never built anything that didn't come with an Allen wrench and instructions in three languages. It had been their dresser for years. Harvey heard the whump, whump, whump of the ceiling fan beating the air. It was off center. Who would fix it?

On the walls he could see the frames, now. Around the window were photos Claire had taken long ago. She like art and wanted to be part of it. One summer she came home with stretched canvas and paints.

"What's this?" asked Harvey.

"We're making art."

"We can buy a few reproductions if you want. We can afford it—"

"No. It'll be better like this. Our own ideas and stories. Neat, right?"

Their amateur landscapes and imitations hung on the wall opposite Claire's photos. Crude by anyone's standards, but Claire always brought company into their bedroom to show them off. "Every night, after dinner, we pulled out the paints and got to work. Took us a month to make all these."

"A whole month?" they'd say.

Only a month? It felt longer at the time, but much shorter now. He couldn't be in this room anymore. The happy memories were too much to bear. "Claire? You awake?"

"Yes."

"I can't sleep."

"Me neither."

"It's this room," said Harvey.

"I was just thinking about the floor."

"The floor?"

"It took us—what?—a year to agree on the color and grain of the wood?"

"I remember."

"And the installers had it laid in two hours." Claire sat up and threw the covers off. "I'm suffocating in this room and the quiet and my brain won't shut up and all I want to do is stay awake while you're awake and the bed just isn't comfortable anymore." She grabbed her robe and pulled it on. "I think I'm going to watch TV, you know, until my head isn't so—"

"I'm coming, too."

They hadn't been back to bed since that night. The sheets were still pulled back and rumpled. Every evening when it was time to go to sleep, they pulled on their pajamas and turned on the TV in the living room. They'd sit together until their bodies became heavy and it was

finally harder to stay awake than to go to sleep. Sometimes they talked. Mostly they cuddled. Silence was OK because he was till with her. They were awake and together and that's all Harvey really cared about right now. The TV was there to be white noise and drown out the bleating in his brain.

Harvey looked at her and stroked her hair. The fan was on and it was a bit chilly. He pulled her in closer. Tonight his brain was too loud. You should definitely tell. Or else it'll be like the teacher's kid who gets bad grades or the dentist that has bad teeth. Everyone will think that she'll be fine. Of course she'll be fine, they'll say. Harvey was a grief counselor, they'll say. She'll be better off than most because she's seen it, really lived it. But they were wrong. Harvey didn't bring work home, and hadn't weighed those things on Claire. She knew some things, probably, but not enough to struggle on her own. It only makes sense to tell her. Sure, it would be better if she already knew—just another regret for the mantle. He had to tell her.

She was fine, now, though. Why interrupt? Maybe she could actually get some rest tonight. Real rest, not just eyes closed. He had to stop that. Supposing and hypotheticals and what-ifs were for people who had time to explore and imagine and reflect. For Harvey, there was do or do not, and he'd already spent too much time debating with himself. Still massaging her head, he said, "It's going to feel like you're forgetting things."

"What?"

"When I'm gone." That's right: *when*, not *if*. "You'll feel like you are forgetting things, and that, maybe, you're losing your mind—but you're not."

"Harvey, please," said Claire. She stretched herself along the couch and put her head in Harvey's lap. "Let's not talk about this right now."

That would be easiest. He knew she meant let's not discuss this at all, though. It was her own personal denial. That's the danger in denial. The movies make it seem like denial is insanity: the disease doesn't exist, and that's cinematic bullshit. Real denial is inaction, non-decision, not dealing with it, focused and concerted procrastination. "Then when?"

"Later."

Harvey ran his fingers along her arm. "You have to let me do this for you," he said. "I'm taking care of you. Even if you can't see it."

Claire wiped at her eyes and watched TV. Finally, she whispered, "OK."

"It's one of the hardest things, and nobody talks about it. You aren't forgetting things. It's just that—" The words didn't flow as smoothly as he thought they would; it sounded better in his head. Out loud it felt awkward and dorky. "People in relationships make silent agreements with each other to control certain information and chores. Do you understand?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Sure, OK. How about this: when I buy groceries—"

"You're terrible at buying groceries." She chuckled some.

"I know, I know I am," he said. "I don't know what we really need or if the milk is in date. *You* buy the food and you know exactly how you go about it, right?"

"Yeah."

"But *I* take the laundry down, and I remember to submit our bills."

"I could do that. It's just that you do it."

"Of course. That's the point. Why would you bother to remember dropping off your laundry? That's my job. Or names. Between us, don't I remember the names? I remember who people are and you remember where we met them and why we know them. We never agreed to

that. It just happened, and—when you open your closet and you don't have any blouses, or you *know* that you know that guy, or you get a nasty letter for the electric company for being late on payment—you're going to wonder how you could possibly let these things slip. But you didn't, exactly. Your mind isn't going. You're not emotionally distraught. You're fine. Completely fine," he said. "You'll have to teach yourself to remember by yourself again. That's all."

Claire began to cry. It was a silent crying where her eyes welled and her chin trembled. A personal kind of crying, Harvey knew. He shouldn't interrupt or console. It just had to happen.

"You'll be mad at me," said Harvey.

"No, I could never—"

"And it is OK. You'll wonder how I could leave you or how I could get cancer. How could I do this to you."

"No," Claire whimpered.

"Harvey gently shushed her. "You might—and it doesn't hurt me." Sometimes the family members of those died at St. Christopher's called Harvey, howling with guilt when, in a moment of clarity, they realized they blamed the dead person for dying. As if that person had a choice. "You might blame me. You might hate me," said Harvey. "It's OK. It doesn't tarnish your memories of me. It doesn't change our life together. It won't hurt my feelings. It will only make you feel bad. But don't. Don't feel bad for the thoughts and feelings that come at you, out of your control. And Claire," he turned her face toward him. Her eyes were red and swollen, and her face streaked with quiet tears that had begun to soak the frilled collar of her nightgown. "I forgive you."

Whatever composure Claire had must have been exhausted. Animal sobs shook her body. Her crying was nearly screaming. What good would it do to hush her? Nothing could stop her.

Maybe Marcus or Doña Tita would hear them and, afraid, call the police? Let the police come, then. Harvey envied Claire: to feel so deeply and show it so viscerally. Tears were part of his life, but hardly from him. And when he could no longer hold them in, he hid them. If he had more time, more life to live, maybe he could have explore himself or gone to therapy. Tears were natural, especially now, and particularly from Claire. He felt his chest burn and heave and knew his own tears would come; and, he was embarrassed. He had started this conversation, and it was—he had an almost moral obligation to be strong. Didn't he?

Then, suddenly Claire was clawing at Harvey's shoulders, pulling herself up and she kissed him. A hard kiss, salty and messy and wet, and then she was kissing his chin and his cheeks, his nose and neck and ears. His forehead. He felt, in her kiss, all the words they could not say out loud, all the times they should have said *I love you*, the intense loneliness she would feel much sooner than they had ever thought—and he was crying, too. Together, their great, hacking sobs rose without thought or care about who could hear or might be bothered. Harvey held her close to himself, squeezing and pressing because maybe it was possible to become on in spirit and in flesh, to be one body. He lost sense of time. They had spent themselves and sat quietly, but still gripping each other as though they could, by physical strength, stay tethered to this temporary and physical world. How long had it been? What time was it now? He remembered he had more to tell her. Should he bother? He knew that if it was important then, it was probably still important now.

Softly, so quietly he wondered whether Claire would actually hear, he said, "Most people are resilient. They bounce back after a time, and life goes on. That's not shameful, understand? You should continue to live, and even—have a full life. Do not feel like you are wronging me by living: going to work, taking vacations, having relationships." There was one more thing to say.

She had to know, already. He was going to tell her anyway, if he could manage it. “I have,” he said. “—I have enjoyed every minute of you. More than I deserve—” He could not talk any more.

Claire took his face in her hands. The two of them were a mess: covered in snot and tears, their pajamas wet and wrinkled, their hair matted in places and up at odd angles in others. “Harvey,” she said. “You are a good man and you deserve more than you have allowed yourself.” Whatever else Claire said Harvey did not hear. He was openly crying.

CHAPTER VII

LAST MONTH

Over time, Harvey's and Claire's spare bedroom became a catchall for things that didn't fit in anywhere else or had no place to be put away. Harvey's St. Christopher files sat in the corner, and against the wall leaned stacks of books that Harvey remembered must have been important. Last week there had also been a pile of junk mail and a few scatter candles that Harvey had tossed in when they'd had some unexpected company. Claire had cleaned up the room a bit and put new sheets on the bed.

The new sheets had felt good the first time Harvey limped under the covers a few days ago. They were cool and dry and fresh, new. Claire hadn't argued when Harvey suggested he move to the bed in the spare room.

"Are you sure? We could set up the sofa with sheets and a pillow," she said.

"No. I think—a bed will be better."

"Absolutely. I can do that. Need anything else? We could set up a TV in there." And she hopped off to clean the room. When a nurse from St. Christopher's came by with monitors and IV bags, Claire simply directed her to the spare room.

That was the signal. Harvey rarely took medicine unless it was specifically prescribed, not even an aspirin. Calling for morphine was the end. At least he didn't have to say it out loud. The hardest part was to manage his pain without completely dulling his senses. On the morphine,

his gut throbbed with each heartbeat. He felt weak and weighed down at the same time. Off the morphine, though—

In the moments when his pain was greatest, he could not describe it. He couldn't do anything. He was a slave to the jerking of his limbs and twisting torso; he clenched his jaw and would be sore in his face for hours. Harvey pressed the button in his hand and the drug flowed into his veins. Describing the pain after the narcotic release wasn't adequate either. The tumor in his belly split him open like a dull blade, ripping and pulling at his muscles, but not clean like slicing. The heat and searing struck at his thighs and knees, and ravaged his chest. He had no strength, and still, on its own, his body clenched and wrung itself into a tight ball. If he folded in on himself, then maybe he would cease to feel.

But those words were too tame, as though the relief took his ability to think. Or maybe the only way to describe it was inside the seizured jerking and cramping of the moment, and words were never adequate anyway. His first few bed-ridden days, he waited until the throbbing became convulsions be he palliated his pain. It was a moral victory that Claire did not understand.

"They brought the IV," she said. "Why not feel no pain?" Her face was folded in with confusion and worry.

"Because," Harvey gasped, "you can't—" How to say it right? "You can't be," he gritted his teeth, "selectively numb." Numb was numb and if the pain went away, he'd be less able to carry a conversation: he'd think slower. "I want to be here," he said, and he took several quick breaths, "While I'm here." He didn't tell her that he wanted to make the decision for himself.

Now, he felt sleepy. Sometimes dizzy. The pain wasn't entirely gone, but it didn't bother him, anymore. He pressed the button anytime he wanted, and he felt—he knew and couldn't

explain—that, well, Rose would have found an appropriate quote. He knew he could know *shuffle off this mortal coil*. One thing left to manage. Claire was reading in the rocking chair next to his bed. He could look at her and she didn't seem to notice. And she was beautiful. Really, actually. One of his first patients used to cry about how unfair his diagnosis was. *Not just to me*, he said. *Why should my wife have to bear this burden? Why should her life be upturned?* It made sense. However I feel about dying won't bother me much longer. Claire is the one that has to figure out how to move on.

This is the window. It's probably only a few hours, maybe a day. Then my body will stop working and I'll have no choice. It happened all the time at the hospice: a brief stay against the involuntary separation of soul and body where the patient could choose to go. Death was imminent. There were no eleventh hour reprieves from ceasing to exist. But—he'd seen it himself—often people were given one last chance to be in control. One moment to say *It's time*, and to close their eyes or press that button. Before, it never seemed like much of a choice. The result was the same. Now, though, after months of life eroding—he stopped working, people didn't ask for favors, Claire didn't want him doing chores or tasks, he stopped driving, he stopped leaving the house, he couldn't leave his bed—moments of decision and control taken from him, this was important.

His lips were dry, and so was his tongue. "Claire," he said. His voice sounded to him very far and away, down a tunnel. "Please call Sam."

Her eyes got wide, but only for a moment. All the color in her face disappeared, except right around her eyes and nose which were becoming bright pink. Her voice was precariously steady, "How long?"

"I think," said Harvey, "hours."

Sam arrived quickly and Harvey regretted how coldly he had treated Sam during their first meeting. He'd have to apologize for that. Claire delivered Sam to the spare room; her face was a bit puffy.

"I'm so dry lately," Harvey said to her. "Would you mind going down the block to Sonic and getting me a cup of RSI?"

Claire nodded and Harvey listened to her walk through the kitchen, grab her purse, and softly latch the door behind her.

Harvey turned to Sam, "Thank you for coming."

"You're welcome," said Sam.

This meeting would be different from their first meeting. The roles were clearly defined. The silence was not awkward or gamesmanship; it was because Harvey was in pain and breathing was hard.

"I still have trouble starting the conversation," said Sam, after a moment. "When I visit with the patients at St. Christopher's, I mean. I tried 'How are you feeling, today?' but it always comes out way to clinical sounding."

"Yeah? For me, it was leaving. I always felt it sounded like I was giving them the brush off." Harvey clenched his teeth against a quick spasm through his gut. The days took the edge off, but sometimes the pain slipped through, anyway.

Sam sat quietly while Harvey regained his composure. "What did you do to get into someone's room and be natural?"

"It's like a dance, I think," said Harvey. "First thing is presence." Harvey gasped and licked at his chapped lips. "I kept the clipboard at my side instead of up and in front of me. Read it before I even walked in. Makes it *look* like a visit."

"That's good. That's real good."

"Second, is stepping into the territory they let you have. Say something about whatever they're doing when you walk in. If the radio is on, say something about music. Reading? TV? Talk about that. Crying? Offer to help with something, to listen."

"If they're awake and silent?"

"Say 'hi' and wait."

Sam looked like he was mulling this over. Perhaps it's an act. If it is, it's kind of sophisticated. It did get me talking. He's very good. It felt good to talk and know about something, again. He's very good.

"I like that," said Sam. "It means I can ask you what RSI is."

Harvey wheezed a laugh. Actually using the advice right away. He's very, *very* good. "I love the ice at Sonic, those tiny cylinders. Beverage-perfect. A hell of a lot better than the half-moon wedges my fridge makes." He paused to catch his breath. "Claire thinks the ice looks like—well, rabbit pellets."

"OK?"

"We call it rabbit shit ice."

Sam laughed loud, "That's brilliant. Totally made my day."

Harvey grunted and his body twisted around. He reached for the button. Where was the damn thing? Sam tugged on the cord and pulled the remote from under Harvey's back. Harvey jammed the button and cold relief washed over him. He closed his eyes and just rested a moment. Time. The window is closing. How much longer? He looked at Sam, "Our first meeting. I was angry, and I was unfair to you. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. It's OK."

“You’re good—there, I said it,” Harvey tried to chuckle. “St. Christopher’s is going to be fine, right?”

The front door opened and Harvey could hear Claire working in the kitchen. A moment and she walked in with a large glass in her hand, filled to the top with small, wonderfully crunchy bits of rabbit-shit-sized ice.

Sam asked permission to use the restroom and excused himself.

Claire knelt beside the bed and fed Harvey a few pieces of ice. Slowly, one at a time, until he’d had enough. She laid down on the bed and put her head on Harvey’s chest. Harvey felt his heart pulsing and throbbing, as though it doubted Harvey had the strength left to talk, and so it would physically beat his emotions out—a kind of spiritual Morse code to tell her how much he yearned for her: body, mind, and soul.

“Tonight?” asked Claire. The steadiness was gone. Her voice, already soft, trembled and threatened to succumb to tears with each syllable.

“I’m so—tired.”

She cried. Not wild and unbridled like before. Quiet and wet and understanding. Her body did not shake or convulse. Harvey did not stop or hush her. He ran his fingers through her hair.

“I’m sorry,” said Claire. “I’m being selfish and—”

“As long as I’ve known you, you’ve never been selfish. Not once.”

She sniffled into Harvey’s shirt. “Does it…hurt?”

“Not much. Not anymore.”

“Tonight?” asked Claire.

“Yes.”

"I—if you need to, I understand. It's OK."

She would be fine. He'd worried so long about her. Could she recover? Would she want to? But she understood. She would still grieve, and it would not be without pain and heartache. He knew she would be fine. And he had peace about that.

For the first time in years, Harvey's mind was silent. Wonderfully and gloriously blank. He thought about nothing. He lived in the moment, in the present. Nothing haunted him. The future did not frighten him. He stroked Claire's hair. Her breathing slowed, evened out, became calm. She was asleep.

He kept stroking her head. His strength was ebbing. Even this tired him. He stopped and put his hand on her shoulder, and let her doze.

Claire startled awake. "I—how long was I asleep?"

"Only ten minutes, maybe. It was beautiful." Yes, the time had come. "You should go on to bed," said Harvey. "Get some rest if you can." This was part of the unspoken code they had worked out. It was time for her to leave the room.

She took Harvey's face in both her hands. "You've given me a good life. We had a *good* life. Know that." She leaned over and whispered into his ear, "I love you." Then she turned quickly, wiping her eyes, and stepped toward the door.

"I love you," said Harvey.

Claire turned in the doorway, "I know." She stood there looking at him, uncertainty in her stance.

He knew she was trying to decide whether she really should go. "Go rest."

She stepped through the doorway and turned toward their bedroom. He heard the door close.

A moment later Sam walked in. “Are you sure?”

“Have you watched someone die?”

“I’ve thought about that quite a lot, actually. But, no, I haven’t.”

“I don’t want her to see me die, to hear the monitor slow then become irregular. And then the flatline. The only way to stop the flatline is to turn the machine off. It stays in your head. The moment is hard to survive if it isn’t already part of your life. You hear it everywhere. Trucks backing up. The microwave. She doesn’t need it to be part of her life.

They sat quietly a moment, Harvey panting away the effort of talking. He was becoming more and more easily winded.

Sam adjusted himself in his seat, and then adjusted himself again. “I really don’t know what to do, here,” said Sam. “Do we sit and be quiet? Do we talk?” He fidgeted and licked at his lips.

“Are you scared?”

“A little.”

“You’ll be fine,” said Harvey.

“How do you know?”

“Call it a leap of faith.”

“What’s—what should I be doing? Am I supposed to record your last words?”

Harvey smiled. “There’s a popular mystique about last words. Like we think that those moments are the most profound, the most poignant. Maybe the dying see both sides at once, here and there.” He gulped for air. “I told you about Yuki.”

“The young girl. She had leukemia.”

“Her last words were, ‘Oh, I’ve got a headache.’ Then she had a seizure and died.”

"What does that mean?"

"It means all you have to do is be here." Harvey pressed the button on his morphine drip. He looked at Sam, still tense, but les afraid. "Do you know the greatest secret ever kept?"

Sam thought. "No."

"Of course not." He took several quick breaths. "No one does. The best kept secret is one that goes to the grave. Deathbed confessions are merely the next best kept secret."

"Are you going to confess to me?"

"No," said Harvey. "But it happens. Just listen when they do." Harvey clicked the button again. "I did keep a secret from you."

"What secret?"

"Yuki was the second person I saw pass away. I saw someone die before her."

"You don't need to tell me."

"I do, actually. I told you the first time: everything you do affects someone, even if that someone is yourself. I doubt you'll walk away tonight unaffected. This evening is one slice of your life, and it becomes a part of the cumulative person you are. Some moments are strong enough to change you, and so it is important to be ready. If you're prepared, you get to make a choice instead of just reacting." Harvey pressed his button.

"What choice?"

"Whether you will be affected temporarily or permanently." Sam did not respond. Harvey took a deep breath, as much air as he could, and he held it. He was so tired. "I watched my best friend die when I was seventeen. He shot himself—and I think I could've stopped him. I was scared." He pressed again for morphine.

"Oh—"

“I’ve been so ashamed.”

“Harvey—”

“I think, now, I was wrong.”

Sam put his hand on Harvey’s shoulder and gently squeezed. Harvey chuckled, weak and tired.

“What?” asked Sam.

“I was thinking that Gus—that was his name—would have quoted some Frost just now. It would sound good. Convincing. Important. He just had that way that some people have. He would’ve said, ‘Harvey, the poem say whether the path was good or bad, just that it made all the difference.’ He would have let me think on that, really process it.” Harvey pressed the button on his morphine drip, and again he felt the chill come into his body at the IV and spread a steady numbness on him. “Then Gus would have said, ‘But that’s not what the poem is about. It’s a trick.’ He was smart; he really was. He wouldn’t tell me the answer. He’d make me get there. He’d say, ‘What’s the title of the poem?’ And I’d finally understand. I finally understand.” Harvey was tired and closed his eyes. He could have been sleeping.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Andrew Hollinger was born and raised in McAllen, Texas. He received a Bachelor of Arts in History from Texas A&M University in College Station. In May 2012, he received a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Texas-Pan American.

When he graduated from high school in 2003, he vowed to never become a teacher. Not for any philosophical or economic reason, but because his parents and grandparents were also educators, and he wanted to forge his own way. Turns out, when something is in your blood, like writing or, say, teaching, you cannot escape it. A devout life-long learner, Andrew became a teacher of high school English shortly before entering the MFA program. He has discovered that teaching and writing are complementary arts and sciences, and cannot imagine a career without both halves. He writes both fiction and nonfiction and has a heart for participating in both English and educational scholarship.

As of fall 2012, he is a full-time lecturer in the Department of English at UTPA.

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