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BOYS CLUB

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Elizabeth Fiset

August 2017

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BOYS CLUB
English

Missouri State University, August 2017

Master of Arts

Elizabeth Fiset

ABSTRACT

This thesis begins with a critical introduction on setting and its influence on the characters and overall effect on the fictional narrative. I use Lubomir Dolezel's theory of narrative worlds and modalities, specifically the alethic constraints that come with world building to analyze across literary genres of fiction. I argue that genre has developed into a spectrum rather than having clear cut guidelines per genre specification ranging from realism to high fantasy. After the critical introduction readers will find short stories and flash fiction all built within the same story world. Each of the stories contains similar theme of children both lost and found along with coming of age and how these instances that shape childhood affect adulthood. The title story, "Boys Club," explores the grouping of childhood friends using a collective narrator, and stories following it focalize on the individual lives of the same characters—some in childhood, others in adulthood.

KEYWORDS: genre fiction, narrative worlds of fiction, setting in fiction, coming of age, short story

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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By

Elizabeth Fiset

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Submitted to the Graduate College
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Approved:

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Stella, who makes everything a little more worth it.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the lesser utilized elements in literary fiction is arguably setting, place, or the world in which the characters act and function. There is a strong focus in literary short fiction on character, as one definition of literary fiction is character-driven fiction, which can perpetuate a focus away from other elements such as the setting or the plot. While my fiction is focused on characters as well, keeping in this same vein of high-brow literary-ness, I have moved into utilizing more of the story world, the setting, and its rules to tell deeper, more significant stories. I have been influenced recently by contemporary authors Aimee Bender, Karen Russell, Laura Hendrix Ezell, and George Saunders. They each create stories that use their worlds to persuade and further influence the telling of the human condition. I have seen how the world in which the story is set can play a crucial role in the outcome of the story itself and how it interacts with the characters, helping progress the character arc and the overall story being told.

My thesis is a culmination of stories I have been developing from within the same story world for the last couple of years. I wrote the story “Boys Club” first, and then realized all the possibilities it brought to further explore that story world and those characters. The world of the story doesn’t move beyond the boys’ childhood and requires the boys come of age—I wanted to write beyond that and into their adolescent and adult lives. The plural narration also gives implications about the transition from a collective voice to individual voices as they age and come to have a variety of experiences that separate them and make them no longer feel as connected as they did as children. The magical spell binding their childhoods was broken with the death of one of the boys, so it begs to be known what came of them.

Most of the stories in the thesis were written after this idea was conceived with the unique purpose of conveying the idea of the boys' lives post-Boys Club. "Six Hundred Pound Grief," "Drowning," "Wanda Pumpernickel," and "Truman and the Mushroom Gang" were all written after "Boys Club," and with the idea of taking the same characters or setting and placing them in a new stand-alone story. I included the others because though they weren't originally with the same story world in mind, I found they were the stories in my collection that fell into a similar tone and atmosphere to the others, and featured characters that acted as adult version of the characters in "Boys Club." Each of the characters in "Boys Club" already had their own unique experiences of childhood, but they were brought together as a collective through the club. The stories that follow the title story sometimes focus in on a character's childhood or move into their adult lives. Some of the childhood stories mention more than one of the original characters, such as Jacob Flowers in "Drowning." He reports the story of the LeDeaux brothers' deaths, but for the most part, I didn't want the characters to overlap too much in order to portray the fact that nothing was the same for any of the characters after the death of Samuel Grint and the ending of the club. I look forward to continuing this project beyond graduate school and having the opportunity to focus on the lives of every original character mentioned in "Boys Club."

A great task among writers and readers of literary fiction is creating the distinction writers want to make between literary fiction and genre fiction. While the debate on the differences will continue and the line between the two will continue to blur, I think this distinction is a mistake. While literary fiction does not typically call for pages dedicated to describing setting, there can be merit found in utilizing this aspect of a story.

Instead of shying away from story building, I've worked to see how story building can function within the construct of a literary short story. Using Lubomir Dolezel's theory of narrative worlds and modalities, specifically the alethic constraints that come with world building, I will analyze my own work, specifically a story that belongs somewhere on the spectrum between realism and magical realism, "Boys Club." I also bring into the discussion Wolf Schmid's notes on the narrated world, comparing my story to the published story "A Stop Along the Road" by Laura Hendrix Ezell, which has similar supernatural elements to my own story, but to a different effect and result, particularly because of the difference in narration.

"Boys Club" would be considered by Dolezel a supernatural or impossible world, because it does not function as a natural or possible world. Natural worlds are physically possible worlds where "nothing exists and nothing happens that would violate the laws of the actual world" (Dolezel 115). "Boys Club" functions *almost* entirely in the natural world. The characters are human, the setting is their neighborhood, and the story focuses on their childhood. However, there is one element that pulls the narrative from the natural world: one of the characters dies and returns "in the flesh—well, almost," as I put it in an earlier draft of the story. He appears in form of a ghost. Though people do believe in ghosts as being natural, most would consider them supernatural, and the way in which the ghost functions within the story is most certainly unnatural. Because this piece of the story removes the story from a representation of the natural world as defined by Dolezel, the narrative must now answer the questions that come up about the rules of the supernatural world. This is where utilizing the setting, giving focus on narrative modes, and the narrated world created by the narrator come into play.

One of the functions of a natural world is to generate a story of the human condition. Dolezel argues that this is the purpose of stories in the natural world at their very core, which can be seen in “Boys Club” as the degradation of moving from life to death. Not only do we specifically see one of the characters die, but he becomes a representation of the lives of all of the characters. Before explaining further, I need to pause and discuss the purpose of using a supernatural world within literary fiction, and the spectrum that exists concerning genre. One of the more popular requests I have from my creative writing students is to read and write fantasy in our short story class. I don’t maintain any rules in the class that don’t allow them to write in any particular genre, but I emphasize that if they move into fantasy that they must write a short story—not the beginning of a larger work—and that the story they write must be literary. Because what is “literary” is so difficult to define, and because “genre” is becoming more and more blurred, I’ve come to teach it on a spectrum (Figure 1). On one end of the spectrum lies realism (the genre people traditionally consider literary, but the stigma that only what is realism is literary is disappearing), where the narrative lies in the natural world. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum lies high fantasy, where few elements in the story represent the real world, and there is no metaphor attached to the impossible elements, and little symbolism, if any. High fantasy isn’t something that would usually not be considered literary or fit into short story writing, but could.

Closest to realism on the spectrum is magical realism, where the setting is close to the natural world, but there exists within it one impossible element that typically functions as a grand metaphor within the story, most easily seen when the element of magical realism is codexal, meaning that the element of magical realism within the story

humanness of the narrator. A similar effect happens in “Boys Club.” By introducing one of the boys as a ghost, the humanness or alive-ness of the other characters is emphasized.

Another major influencer of my work is George Saunders. His early work in what he calls “theme park” stories is among some of my favorite fiction. I love how he uses the story world to majorly play an influence on the trajectory of the story and the arc of the characters. The place of the character is used such that the character is *stuck*, and must act against it in order to move—either the story world wins and keeps a hold on the character, or it crashes and burns, leaving the characters with no choice but to move on. In his more recent short story collection, *Tenth of December*, Saunders uses more concrete examples of stories that fall on the genre spectrum such as “Sea Oak,” yet this example is still within a story world that influences believability and adds an element of surrealism to the story. A world is created for the characters that they must respond to in some way.

“Boys Club” functions as a fabulist text, as the ghost of Samuel Grint does not exist as a metaphor, but a symbol and maybe foreshadowing of the lives and inevitable deaths of the other characters within the story. The alethic constraint (a further theory of Dolezel’s) that exists between the natural and supernatural worlds must be bridged by an intermediate world. The intermediate world within the story, or the place where the natural world and supernatural world collide, is the boys’ clubhouse, as it’s the only place Grint can appear and exist in his new ghost form, and it’s the only place the other boys can interact with him. Dolezel points out that fictional stories have exploited intermediate worlds through the use of dreams and madness, as dreams create an in-authentication, and madness makes the narrative world unreliable as seen through that character’s eyes.

While I agree that dreams do not function well as an intermediate world (which is the reason why we feel cheated when we learn the story world was *all just a dream*), I think madness can be used if treaded upon carefully. What Dolezel and I would both agree on, however, is the use of the club house as an intermediate world—it neither begs the question of realness or calls into question authenticity.

Finally, the supernatural element experiences a difference in alethic endowment: “A fictional person’s alethic endowment is normal when it corresponds to the human standard and hyponormal if the person suffers from some deprivation” (Dolezel 118). This changes altogether a person (or character’s) experience. The restriction or deprivation upon the ghost of Samuel Grint is his inability to feel, to talk, and essentially, to continue with his life. He also is confined to the club house—the intermediate world—and cannot exist, even as a ghost, outside of that physical space. This deprivation is subjective, as it applies only to Samuel Grint physically, but also applies to the boys symbolically. Samuel Grint is the physical manifestation of their loss of innocence and childhood. They are forced to come of age, to move on, to grow up, and they must leave their childhoods, the clubhouse (with Samuel Grint inside) behind, the last line of the story reading, “But the boys were no longer boys, their childhoods lost with the body of Samuel Grint, hidden away somewhere that could no longer be found.”

One of the most recent influences on this collection and my writing was Laura Hendrix Ezell’s book *A Record of Our Debts* from our very own Moon City Press. When I first read “A Stop Along the Road,” I was struck by how similar her supernatural element was to mine in “Boys Club.” In the story, a woman’s husband dies and returns to visit her as a ghost, but he has a similar alethic endowment to Samuel Grint in that he

cannot talk, feel, or continue life. The main character, Maily, moves into the church near the graveyard where he first appeared, never leaving, in order to always be available whenever he appears. The story is also similar because the narrative rests in fabulism rather than in magical realism or fantasy, where the ghost is not a metaphor, but a symbol of the past. While a physical location, the church and graveyard, serves as the intermediate world within the story, one could also argue madness, though I don't think that's what Ezell was going for. The ghost of Michael, the husband, only ever appears to Maily, which potentially brings into question the reliability of his existence.

Though the two stories are functioning in similar supernatural worlds with similar alethic constraints, the main difference in the presentation of the narratives is the point of view from which each story is told. Wolf Schmid considers point of view essential to narrative construction, as outlined in his book *Narratology*. "A Stop Along the Road" is written in third person singular with focalization on one character, Maily. "Boys Club" is written in third person plural with focalization on the boys who function as one collective character and include Samuel Grint up until his death. The difference in point of view of these two stories serves each story differently. The two are similar because they are both third person, and the represented world created by the narration also includes the narrator. This functions to aid "A Stop Along the Road" because, though the focalization of that third person narration is on one character, the narrator must also be accounted for, even if extradigetic, meaning the narrator is not functioning as a character within the story. If the story had been told in first person point of view, any reader would certainly argue against the supernatural, saying that the appearance of the ghost of Maily's husband Michael could not be real because of the inevitability of an unreliable first person

narration. As is, the point can be argued that two entities believe in the existence and realness of the ghost, Maily and the narrator. Because “Boys Club” is written in the collective, there are multiple characters, who function under one focalization, that verify and authenticate the appearance of Samuel Grint’s ghost.

As writers continue to explore the possibilities of fiction, the spectrum that exists between magical realism, fabulism, and fantasy will continue to be filled out and further defined. The underutilized sense of setting and story building that I believe is lacking in literary fiction will inevitably begin to find its way in contemporary work as writers continue to blur the lines between literary fiction and genre fiction, realism, and fantasy. When we teach new writers to choose a point of view, we tell them that they must consider the implications of that point of view on the story. The experimentation of writing a third person collective narration caused me to consider this unique and fresh perspective—an omniscient voice paired with a collective focalization is rare in contemporary fiction. I continue to develop the story and seek publication, I hope to see more stories from the third person plural emerge. I’m also very pleased to have found Ezell’s work so similar to my own, while each hold their own ground and place within the literary and creative writing world (one obviously more so than the other, but I hope to change that). I look forward to seeing how Ezell’s writing progresses from her first collection of short stories in comparison to mine, as each of us will undoubtedly stem in different directions with our creative work.

BOYS CLUB

They carried the rule book with them that original member Teddy Valentine scrawled up in his basement, cover made of construction paper, stapled together with the industrial sized stapler in his dad's office. They treated it as they would any other group's sacred text: the Bible, the Quran, Seventeen Magazine. They marched into the clubhouse single file, perfect but for the occasional stumble of Truman Winters, who they dubbed "Trippy Truman." They were the fourth grade boys of St. Agnes Academy, rebels by any other name.

The Boys Club met every Friday night in the official clubhouse at Stevie Zellnik's. The clubhouse was an old garden shed that Stevie's mom didn't ever use. He told her if the clubhouse was at his house, then he would be the president of the club, and she agreed because she loved to see her son do great things.

Their group consisted of eight members: Stevie, Teddy, and Trippy were original members with Marshall LeDeaux and Samuel Grint. Since the beginning they had added Jimi Perigrine who had moved there from Seattle and Rudy LeDeaux, Marshall's little brother.

The rule book, which Teddy had recently convinced his dad to laminate, consisted of six major rules: Meetings are to be held at least once a week, and all members are required to attend. Each member is to show respect for the authority within the group, heeding all orders of the president. No inviting new members without consent of the whole group. No weapons are to be brought to the official meetings of any kind. If we fight, we fight like men. With our fists. No secrets. No girls (duh).

Loyalty was the only unwritten rule, and the most important one. It didn't matter the circumstance, the boys had the boys, so when Trippy overheard his dad (a cameraman at NEWS6,) tell his mom a boy had gone missing, Samuel Grint, it might as well of been a summons. A special meeting was called in the middle of the night for those who could make it—anyone in Stevie's neighborhood—all but Jimi, who lived in an apartment on Eighth. Marshall also didn't bother to wake up Rudy. He knew if he got caught, his punishment would be much worse if his little brother had been involved.

Stevie made Trippy recount what he had heard. Apparently, Samuel had not come home from school. His parents hadn't bothered to call the police until dinner —they had expected he was simply at a neighborhood boy's house and had forgotten to call. They were absent parents, according to Teresa Valentine, Teddy's mother and Samuel's next-door neighbor. She suspected they didn't call sooner on purpose. Jacob told him that was stupid—the cops wouldn't let you call until it had been a long time. Not for a kid, Teddy said. Kids are more important. Even skudsy ones like Sam. Don't talk about him like that, Teddy. Stevie felt like it was his job to keep the peace.

He probably ran away, said Trippy.

He would have told us so, said Jacob . No secrets, remember?

Yeah, but what if he didn't want us to come with him. Maybe he had some secret hide out. Maybe he found a girl.

Sam didn't find no girl.

They decided tomorrow after school they would go looking for Samuel Grint on their own since they knew where to look. The most obvious place was the bike trail. If Sam was smart, he didn't go out on foot, and the bike trail had some good hiding spots. It

began in their neighborhood, and they believed it went all the way to San Francisco, but they had never been past Benson Street. They showed up at exactly four pm, Marshall and Rudy the last to arrive. Rudy had begged Marshall to come, threatening to tell on him for sneaking out the night before, because yes, he knew about it. Rudy was slow on his bike, Marshall said, but Stevie told him he could take up the rear and double check everything.

The bike trail was a slender paved roadway big enough for two bikes across, comfortably, three if they squeezed. The trees came up overhead and shaded the trail a good deal, the falling autumn leaves covering most of the pavement. On either side, vines threatened the edges of the trail, like a slow death you don't see coming until all of a sudden it's too late and you're engulfed. That's how Jimi described it. Probably got it from his dad, who was always telling ghost stories, trying to scare the kids for fun. They made it Rudy's responsibility to look down between all those vines because he was the shortest. Maybe Sam was hiding in them. Maybe they had engulfed him.

They passed their school, cars still leaving the parking lot. They figured if he left from school, he wouldn't be anywhere near here and they'd have to go farther. They passed Main Street and the bank, town hall and the Baptist church.

They passed the rock quarry where Samuel's dad worked. He was always warning them not to go in—too dangerous. They saw the huge piles of rocks stacked like miniature mountains, looking like they'd be fun to climb. They imagined once you made it to the top, the piles would pull you down into them, like a volcano or quicksand. They wondered if that's where Sam was, down inside one of those piles.

The boys gave up their search to be home before dinner, and then met at the clubhouse after. There was no update on Sam's whereabouts, and there was a 24-hour search team looking all about town.

Are they looking for his dead body?

Could be, Jacob said.

I saw this story on the news one time, Rudy said, where they thought this girl was dead, but then her parents offered up \$100,000 to whoever would bring her back. She showed right up, he said.

His parents can't afford no \$100,000.

Soon, no body's gonna be looking. Teddy was right. They couldn't afford \$100,000. They wondered what type of people could, and how much money that really was and if they were capable of earning it themselves to help discover the whereabouts of Samuel Grint.

As they were passing around cookies that Stevie's mom had made for them, the door to the clubhouse opened. They expected it to be Stevie's mom with more cookies and condolences, but instead it was Samuel Grint. In the flesh—well, almost.

Sam? Are you okay? Everyone is out looking for you. Have your parents seen you? Did you notify the police that you have been found? Samuel wasn't saying anything, and they noticed something was strange about him. He wasn't the same person. He was carrying himself in a solemn manner, an unrecognizable cadence to a group of fourth grade boys. He walked up to the chalk board—glided almost, they noticed, picked up a piece of chalk, and wrote *I'm dead* on the board. He's dead and he can't talk, Teddy said. All of the boys took a step back from Sam as he turned to face them again. All but

Teddy, who walked up next to him, and reached out to touch him. Woah! It's true—look what I can do, and reached out to touch Sam on the shoulder and his hand went right through. He went for a few gut punches, but none of them landed. Sam stood there waiting for him to be done. Teddy, really? Jacob asked. Show some respect for the dead.

The Boys Club gathered in the circle of seats they had fashioned out of five gallon buckets and twelve-bys, the more timid ones on the second row, furthest from the apparition of Sam. It appears we have a lead on the disappearance of Samuel Grint, said Stevie. Correct me if I'm wrong, Stevie said to Sam, but you have returned to the clubhouse as a ghost. Outside of this being a prank or a practical joke of some sort—if so, probably by at least high school students, as it appears too elaborate a joke for the wits of our age—this means you are dead, the police have not found your body, and no one but those of us in this room know about it. Sam nodded half-heartedly. Glad to have you back, Sam! said Truman.

That's not Sam! said Rudy. Sam's got spunk!

You're right, said Teddy. That's not Sam—that's his ghost. The real Sam is dumped off somewhere in a ditch all alone rotting from the inside out! A corpse! A zombie, maybe at this point.

They say, said Jimi Perigrine, that if a body doesn't get buried within three days of death, it immediately turns into a zombie and feasts on the first person it sees.

Enough, said Jacob. We need to figure out our plan of action to avenge Sam's death. It's not enough that he has returned to us a ghost. We must find his body, find out what happened. Were you murdered? Sam nodded. By who? Sam shrugged. In fact, the more questions they asked him, the less he seemed to know. He only knew he was

killed—but not how, by who, when, why. He wasn't much help in solving his own mystery, and this was the first place he'd visited in his ghostly life. The clubhouse, imagine that.

They decided to take him to the LeDeaux's to talk to some adults, the only ones who they thought would be accepting of a ghost boy in their home. That kind of stunt was sure to get them in trouble with anyone else's parents. You'll have to let us explain it all to them first, Sam, said Marshall, but when he turned around to face him, Sam was gone. Well that stinks! Where'd he go?

Sometimes ghosts can only appear for seconds before being gone forever, said Jimi. Or they could be all around us.

That gives me the willies, said Rudy. I don't want to be near no ghost. You just were, nit-wit, what do you think Sam was?

They decided to go to the LeDeaux's anyway in the chance they could explain the situation even without the proof. Maybe the LeDeaux'sey would believe them and then they could tell the cops to start looking for a dead body rather than a live one. Maybe that's what they were already doing, but not telling anyone, keeping it PG for the kids.

The LeDeaux's didn't like what they heard. The boys told them exactly what happened—they let Jacob tell it since he was the most mature besides Stevie, and the most responsible and the most matter of fact. He even told them about Teddy gut punching him to no avail. Just went right through. Would've hurt any of the rest of us pretty good. They listened intently, but kept giving each other those corner of the eye glances parents are so good at. They told all the boys to go home—not back to the clubhouse, home.

* * *

A week later they met up at Teddy's house, and when his dad left to pick up pizzas, Teddy snuck into his office and stole the framed picture of his dad with his old college buddies on a yacht somewhere in California. He chose that one because it had the most ornate frame—gold speckled on black, eight by ten, the only one he knew his dad had not glued shut because he kept a picture of him and his old college girlfriend hidden in the back of it. The boys had decided to make a memorial for Samuel Grint in the clubhouse. They still hadn't found his body, so no one was doing anything to remember him by, and they weren't about to tell another adult they had seen his ghost—if the LeDeaux's didn't believe them, no one would.

After they finished eating the pizza, they told Teddy's dad they were going to hang out in the clubhouse for a while and they'd be back later. On the way, they stopped at Trippy's house to drag a table out of his garage.

Like a shrine, Jimi said, a place to pray to Samuel Grint and the dead in the underworld.

It's not like that, Jimi, said Truman, it's just a memorial.

Every time you light a candle, a demon finds his prey.

Shut up, Jimi.

Jacob brought the candle and dusty silk flowers from a vase his mom kept on a table in the hall. Teddy had the frame and had printed a picture on his dad's computer, Trippy had incense and chocolate, Stevie had written a eulogy, and Jimi took a black table cloth from a closet at his apartment—his family wouldn't miss it until Thanksgiving.

When they arrived at the clubhouse they found Sam waiting for them, more patiently than they had seen any fourth grade boy wait in their lives. They didn't have much to say to him. He was there, but he wasn't. It was a silent and awkward club meeting. Rudy couldn't look at him. him. Once Sam brushed by him and gave him such a stir that Rudy yelped and ran to the other side of the room, making sure plenty of other blood-flowing bodies were between him and that apparition. It only offended Sam a little. He understood things were different now. Jimi couldn't keep away. He kept asking Sam questions that he couldn't answer like if he saw everything in black and white and did he feel cold and where were all the other ghosts and was he hungry and could he change clothes and did he meet Jesus or was that all a sham?

Once, the boys had met on account of the death of the LeDeaux's grandmother. They brought the program and obituary from the funeral that listed her family and accomplishments and such. That woman had 37 grandkids, Teddy said, how come you never told us you had so many cousins? All in different states, Marshall said. Stevie's mom had coached the boys on what to say to them—kindnesses she thought would help, phrases from sympathy cards.

I'm sorry for your loss, said Stevie.

She went easy in her sleep, said Jacob.

She's in a better place, said Samuel Grint.

The memorial made Sam feel weird, but they let him pick out what he liked and what he didn't. He wanted both the candles and the incense, but cut the flowers. They tried taking a new photo with him—they had a Polaroid they used for special occasions—but he didn't show up in the frame. They promised to find a better photo of him than the

one from the third grade where he looked like dweeb —maybe the one they took over the summer that Teddy’s dad had taken on the lake trip during the only five minutes he was actually watching them before floating down the river with whatever woman—they couldn’t remember her name. The photo where you can see Jimi holding up his supernatural detector and Teddy jumping into the water right before he splashed those high school girls.

Leaving the clubhouse that night didn’t feel like leaving for good, but it was sort of like that, and Samuel Grint had to be left behind. No returning to his parents’ house and a cozy twin bed. No more chocolate chip cookies. No more bike trails. No more wondering if the rock piles at the quarry would swallow him whole. No more R-rated movies at Teddy’s. No more fist fights. No more photographs. No more birthdays. No more getting acne for the first time, wearing last year’s khakis that have grown too short. No more meeting at the Zellnik’s for prom pictures. No more graduation.

By summer, the Boys Club had stopped meeting. They were getting too old for this stuff anyway, Stevie tried to say, but no one really believed it. They never found the body of Samuel Grint, even after the Grints raised enough money to offer a \$50,000 reward.

But the boys knew where he was—waiting patiently for them to return, plopped in a bucket seat of the clubhouse, full of innocence and watching the door. Waiting for a Friday club meeting, waiting for a summer that would never come. But the boys were not boys, they were grown, they were fathers and businessmen, they were addicts, they had made mistakes, they had overcome, they did not and could not return, their childhoods

lost with the body of Samuel Grint, hidden away somewhere that could no longer be found.

CHILD UNEXPECTED

Jane and Teddy Valentine used the chaise lounge in their sunroom for one thing: sex. They gave that room and that chair this solitary duty because lazy afternoons, literature and tea at their leisure, and tiny cakes with buttercream frosting poised on the coffee table weren't currently feasible for their lifestyle. Paycheck to paycheck is a *temporary arrangement*, Jane always said. Jane worked late, a bartender at Casanova, a restaurant two doors down from their building while Teddy spent most of his time catching up on penny stocks, always a day late and nearly client-less because of it. *You can't bottle success in a jar of change*, he told Jane, who simply pressed her lips together and spread them as wide as she could, nodding in his general direction.

Jane didn't mind his lack of ambition to earn the keep, so to speak, at the Valentine household. In fact, she was so hot for him that little minded to her other than the matters of the bedroom. He wasn't what you'd call a *looker*, she told her friends before they'd met him (more of a *brute*, they said, once they had), but when you see past the thinning hair and that mustard stain on his shirt (or take the shirt off, in her case), he could really take hold of you with those eyes. Her friends had no idea what she was talking about, but Jane didn't mind that either. She wasn't so much a strong independent woman, but she could hold her own.

Having never been with a woman in *that way*, Teddy was pleased as punch to have a woman chasing his tail for a change. They met when Jane worked part-time at the restaurant, while she was still taking night classes in pottery, *a lost art*, she explained. In those days, she wore skirts that went past her knees, but the way they swept her calves kept Teddy's attention. She gave him free dessert, and he tipped her a great deal for it.

She took the bartender job after they got married, deciding they needed a more agreeable income, and with the idea that it would get her further in life—maybe even into management. Teddy was steady in persistence, if nothing else, selling penny stocks, and thus they lived.

It was a weekend afternoon, a Sunday, if Jane recalls it correctly, seven years or so into their marriage, when they were having a bit of a nooner before her evening shift at the bar when she felt the tenderness so strongly emanating in the sunroom it was as if the entirety of her being was found and bursting forth. Teddy did not feel quite as strongly, but he enjoyed it all the same. “What a marvelous culmination of all the feelings passed between us all these years,” Jane said. He pushed the hair on her forehead aside and giggled. “If only work didn’t exist for the hopeless romantic.”

Jane slid from the chaise and fumbled with her undergarments before leaving to wash her hair in the bathroom sink. Teddy followed, picking up all the other things they’d left scattered around. Teddy found Jane a moment later standing stock-still in the doorway leading to the front room. Teddy, being a good husband, followed her gaze directly to the middle of the carpet, where there sat a child about the age of two.

The child appeared unafraid of the new strangers, staring blankly at the couple, but not nearly with as much bewilderment. “Momma,” it said, and gave a giggle eerily similar to that of Teddy, which Jane noted right away and gave him a look of blame.

“Yours? With whom?” said Jane. Teddy did not have a child, and would never with anyone but Jane.

“You’re the one he called Momma.”

But Jane wasn't his (her?) Momma, she couldn't be, now could she? She would know, one would think. It did occur to her that it was unusual for them to have so much intercourse and it never produce a child, and yet she did not recall being pregnant, much less raising a child to this age—all this time without a cry or a scream or a need, it's not possible! Yet, there they were with this tiny human, no signs of a break-in, no way for a child to have wandered in on her (his?) own, not this many floors up.

Jane could remember when she talked about having children. It was within the first few years after college when all the girls she knew were getting married and having babies. She would meet their little ones and coo at them and say *I can't wait to have one of my own*. But it was never really a conviction—it was something she said, and something for her and the new mothers to talk about over coffee: baby names and birthing methods and what color to paint the nursery.

Teddy was the first to approach the child. He noticed that she (he first determined the child was a *she* from the pink bow holding tiny thin strands of hair together on the top of her head, and which the couple later confirmed at bath time) was wearing what he knew to be called a romper, a one piece outfit his own mother had dressed his young sisters in while he was still in high school. He bent down to pick her up and saw from the pacifier stuck to her mouth was attached a string, and at the end of the string was a note: small, folded evenly, and sealed shut with a finger print of wax. A tiny letter: "A birth certificate will be arriving shortly. An advance copy was sent via email. Sorry for the delay. It's a busy time of year, you know."

The sound of the doorbell startled Jane, and she looked away from the newly discovered girl in the arms of her husband to answer the door. A man from FedEx stood

halfway behind a box large enough that Jane would need help getting it through the door, if it would go through at all. He held a pin pad out in front of him.

“You Mrs. Valentine?” She took it and signed her name and he helped her get the box inside. On the top of the box was a red envelope addressed personally to Mr. and Mrs. Valentine. Another seal of wax was used to seal it, only this time it was quite large.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Valentine,

Thank you for your purchase from Cute, Cuddly Cribs! We apologize for the delay in our services, and hope the crib may still accommodate your needs at this time. For any inconvenience this may have caused, attached to the bottom of this letter is a coupon for 20% off your next order! We appreciate your business!

Cute, Cuddly Cribs Staff and Management

“You order a crib?” Jane handed the letter to Teddy after tearing the coupon off the bottom to examine the fine print. It appeared real.

“It’s addressed to both of us, dear. Must have been a mix up. Should I call?”

“And tell them what? We didn’t order a crib, but a child is here at our house, and for all we know it’s ours, so now we actually might be needing the crib, thanks?” Teddy was now on the floor, wrestling with the child in the gentlest of manners. She crawled onto his back as he flailed his arms in surrender. Jane didn’t know what to say or how to approach the child, so she picked up the tiny letter that was addressed to no one and signed from no one and thought it might be a good idea to see if there was an email to

speak of. Maybe this was some strange kind of adoption method and someone had gotten the wrong couple.

Delilah Jane Valentine, born 1:24 pm, 3 September 2012, 7lbs 8oz. There it was, an email from a hospital Jane didn't recognize: to Janet and Robert Valentine, who we have come to know sweetly as Jane and Teddy. The child was named after Jane herself: Delilah Jane Valentine. Deli, should we call her? No. Dela? What about Dee?

"Teddy! Her name is Dee! It's in her birth certificate, a duplicate copy of course, the real thing is delayed in the mail, but it says it, right there, Delilah Jane Valentine. She's ours, Teddy! She's our child!"

Teddy rolled onto his side and sat up, cross-legged on the floor and gave Jane a giddy smile, not unlike the look he gave her when they were young and Jane first told him she wanted to ball. "Of course she is, sweetie! Would you look at those curls? They're yours." Teddy had, of course, accepted the fact the child was theirs before the email and before the delivery of the crib, and before he even unfolded the tiny letter. He knew the child belonged to him the moment Jane looked over at him and asked, *Yours?* like he knew the answer was yes.

Jane and Teddy fell into parenthood as would any couple in love, but Dee already being two made it terribly convenient for them, as she slept through the night and had no problems eating the things they ate. They scheduled their work shifts around watching her, and even employed the help of Jane's mother, who didn't question the sudden appearance of a child in their lives. In fact, no one did. It was as if the universe had told everyone else a secret that was to be kept from Jane and Teddy until the precise moment

in which the moons, the stars were perfectly aligned and the appearance of a two-year-old child was an unquestionable occurrence.

It didn't take long for Jane and Teddy to figure out the best times in which to partake in their favorite sunroom ritual. Late nights after Jane came home, or early mornings before Teddy left for work. They even figured out how to slip in a midday session. When Jane's mom first arrived to the house, Teddy would tell her he preferred to spend his lunch break alone, and Jane would pretend to be in the shower getting ready for work. The running water would stifle their exclamations enough for Jane's mom not to notice, or at least not say anything. Their sex life was back to normal.

It was on one of these midday occasions when Teddy thought Jane had checked and Jane thought Teddy had checked, and turns out Jan's mother was late and neither of them knew about it that they were suddenly ripped from their reverie by a small, yet distinct voice, the voice of a child. When they turned to look, they saw a girl standing there, perhaps the age of 4, looking at them with lonely in her eyes. They stopped immediately, not sure what exactly she saw, and more so what exactly she understood, a thin blanket not the most helpful.

"Where's Nana?" she asked.

"Dee!" Teddy exclaimed, recognizing her. "Nana isn't here? She isn't here, Jane? Why don't we go wait for her in the front room. I'll meet you there, little one." As Dee left, the two scrambled into their clothes. Teddy tried to put his shirt on backwards, and didn't notice until Jane helped him.

"That was our child, then?" Jane asked.

“It would seem so.”

When Jane’s mother finally showed up, she made apologies about being late, traffic and such, couldn’t call, *wanted to be safe on the road, you know?* She didn’t seem fazed one bit by the difference in age from the previous day of her granddaughter.

“There’s a package on your front porch—seems quite big. Teddy, if you don’t take care of it before you leave, I’m afraid it will have to sit there until you come back. I also grabbed your mail.” Jane’s mother certainly always had a way of putting Teddy to work. He didn’t mind, of course, except when he was missing out on his lunch break, which had already been effectively ruined.

The package was another from Cute, Cuddly Cribs, with a note written on the side in large black letters. Thanks for using your 20% off coupon! See you soon, loyal customer! It was a bed, a twin bed for their child, who had apparently been accepted to Grisham Academy for Preschool Girls, Jane read in a letter from the stack of mail her mother had handed her.

“Dear old Dad has some work to do,” Teddy said. Jane noticed he functioned better with these changes that had been dropped onto them so suddenly. Just when she thought she would get this whole parenting a toddler thing down, she now had to learn how handle to a child starting school for the first time. She couldn’t make sense of it, and firmly believed no person should try. She longed to show Dee she loved her, that she so quickly had taken on such an affection for her she could scarce contain herself—but how?

“I’ll have to stay home from work tonight, Teddy, in order to have this thing put together before bedtime.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. You know I can do it when I get home,” Teddy said.

“And I’ll have to call this school too, and find out when registration is, and get her school things together, and prepare a healthy dinner, and braid her hair in two braids, not just one, so she can wake up tomorrow and untie the braids and have the experience of bouncy curls, like every little girl should at least once in their life.”

“Oh, but honey,” Jane’s mother began, “you can call the school in the morning, and what more could Dee need that we didn’t already get? I promise to keep to your meal schedule—I noticed you moved it from the cabinet to the front of the fridge—I thought you wouldn’t notice if I gave Dee a little more ice cream than normal, but she spilled the beans on me.” Jane looked at her mother, bewildered, and had a real interest in checking out that meal schedule on the front of the fridge.

“Well, okay, but I’m still staying home. It’s not every day that you can braid your daughter’s hair.”

“I’ll stay home, too! I’m calling the office now!” Though Jane and Teddy understood the importance of a steady income, especially now that they had a child, they still couldn’t give up the feeling they were missing out. They hoped, of course, Dee wouldn’t age more than a day at a time, now they had come to love her. It was a kind of love that was new to both of them. Like they had spent every moment of their lives building up to this. That’s what it felt like, a reason to live beyond themselves. They had found this in each other, certainly, but now they had been one for so long it felt right for them to find a new purpose, a new thing to love.

Jane realized from the list on the fridge she had been putting meal plans together for her family for what should have felt like months. They were healthy and simple, and all of the ingredients were organized perfectly in neat dishes with recipes tucked inside envelopes taped to the tops of the stacks. She couldn't hardly believe she herself had done this (she was more apt to believe it was the child herself), but the swirl of her handwriting gave it away. Even the school supplies were organized in plastic bins, color coordinated by subject next to a small seven-drawer dresser with the days of the week written on each one. Inside there was an outfit for each day—they must have gone clothes shopping for her first week of school, as well. Jane was much more at ease, and it made dropping Dee off for her first day of preschool a wonderful experience. She felt so strongly about Dee in her heart it was as if they hadn't lost any time with her at all, but in the backs of their minds, both Jane and Teddy knew differently.

Life was so grand those next few weeks Jane and Teddy nearly forgot about the girl's *condition*, they supposed they would call it, so when Dee didn't come home from school on the bus one day, it was cause for real panic. Jane phoned the school before the bus had even pulled away from the stop.

“Where's my child? Where's Dee? Valentine? Her bicycle? Well, that's not...okay, thank you, Ms. Turner. I must have forgotten.” Jane realized Dee must have skipped ages again. It was obvious, wasn't it? This was never meant to be anything like the traditional raising of a child. It was a perilous journey into the unknown.

“Teddy, dear, I need you to come home. Our sweet Dee is headed home on a bicycle, and I don't want you to miss seeing her on a bicycle for the first time! It must be something to watch her, oh, I hope she's wearing a helmet!” Dee was, of course, wearing

a helmet—a paisley print that matched her bright pink shirt, orange denim shorts, and the large peace sign pendant that was dangling around her neck. She was eleven, maybe twelve, it was hard to know. And she should have known, Jane should have been able to give her daughter’s age to any stranger who asked.

“What are we going to do for my birthday?” Dee asked as soon as she came through the door, Jane and Teddy having watched her turn onto their street and all the way to the house from the window. “I was thinking about maybe throwing a party here like Madison’s last week. It was a pool party. I know we don’t have a pool or anything, but maybe we could get one of those sprinklers that looks more like a fountain and maybe put down a slip-in-slide? I know it sounds like a lot, and that you already told me you’d be taking me out to dinner and all, but I thought, you know, since it was my thirteenth birthday that for once I could have both? To remember the special occasion? I’m only going to turn thirteen once, and I want to remember it as something special, you know? I’m glad you’re both here for me to ask, and it’s really important to me and—”

“Oh, Dee, of course you can have a birthday party!” Jane took her daughter in her arms and squeezed her so hard Dee couldn’t speak anymore if she wanted to. She now came up to Jane’s shoulder, but Jane could still tuck her head over hers and kiss it. Teddy joined in on the group hug, making Dee groan.

“You’re smothering me!”

“Sorry, little one, it’s just that we are quite excited to have you home!”

“You guys are weird. And it’s Delilah.”

Jane couldn’t help but wonder if it would be the only birthday they ever had a chance to celebrate with Dee, Delilah, practically a woman. Why’d she want to be called

Delilah, anyway? *Was it for a boy?* Oh, god, Jane hoped it wasn't for a boy. She could hardly believe the thought crossed her mind, as yesterday her daughter was in preschool.

It was then that Jane and Teddy had the conversation about their own ages. They realized they themselves weren't any older, even though to Dee, it had been nearly eleven years since she first appeared to them. They wondered when Dee would notice, or if she would take on the traits of her grandmother, who didn't seem bothered by it.

It was, in fact, the only childhood birthday Jane and Teddy ever celebrated with their Dee. They ordered the largest sprinkler set they could, had a cake specially designed from Bonafide Bakery covered in peace signs and a paisley print; when Dee saw a sketch of this, she kindly informed them she wasn't into that style anymore, that she had developed an affinity for punk rock, wanted to learn the guitar, and a simple black and white chevron print would be nice for a cake. The Valentines then had a second cake made and took the opportunity to sing *Happy Birthday* to her twice, once in Spanish the night before with Jane's mom present, since Dee had begun learning it in school.

After the party was over and Dee was asleep, Jane and Teddy did a little celebrating of their own. "What if..." Jane hardly ever spoke during sex, unless it was to praise her Teddy (and occasionally herself, their union, or the way the trees looked against the stars with her head thrust upside down, swaying with the rhythm), and it took a moment for Teddy to notice.

"What if we..." Jane herself was having trouble saying the words.

"What if, we, you know, did this for real?" By the time Jane was able to form the words into a sentence, the couple had finished and was cuddled under the same blanket, legs sprawled out on the chaise.

“What’s that, dear?”

“For real. Have a baby. The normal way. That’s not to say our Dee isn’t real, but you know.” Teddy had been waiting for her to ask, and he told her so right there. They were so excited about this they had sex again, quickly, and fell asleep all tangled up.

It was about three weeks later when Jane got a phone call from a number she didn’t recognize, so she let it go to voicemail. She was busy and distracted, driving home from the store with a box of pregnancy tests and the ingredients for a cheesecake, Dee’s favorite. Dee was seventeen now, and Jane and Teddy didn’t know how much longer they had with her. They were doing all of her favorite things.

The doctor advised Jane to take the pregnancy tests in the morning, for accuracy, but Jane couldn’t wait. She bought extras, and figured even if she took one now, nothing was in the way of taking one again in the morning. According to the package and her ovulation cycle, today was the first day she might have positive results, that is, if she was pregnant at all, and she shouldn’t get her hopes up, she knew, as it was the first time in her life she had ever even tried. It could take a while, she was told.

Teddy was as excited if not more so than Jane, but when he arrived home from work, you wouldn’t know it. Jane was taking the cheesecake out of the oven and letting it cool. “Did you hear from Dee?” he asked.

“No, where is she? She should be home by now.”

“She called from school, Jane. Our little girl’s in college.”

“No!” Jane refused to believe it right away. She had spoken to her in that very room not twelve hours ago, warning her not to be late for supper, threatening no dessert.

As the cheesecake cooled, the surface cracked. Jane had never been able to get it right, but it tasted okay. “Well, nothing is right, anyway. The cheesecake is cracked, I actually burnt the chicken while worrying about the cheesecake, and I forgot the candles. I thought it would be a good time to celebrate, seeing as how we didn’t get the chance to take her out for her birthday dinner, what with the party and all.”

“Jane, that was her thirteenth birthday.”

“Who knows what we’ve done on any of the others! What if we missed one somewhere, and she has this rotten memory of the birthday her parents forgot about—we could have made up for that! We could have celebrated the near end of her high school career, or the fact that she won the class president election, she told me so last night, or that it’s Tuesday.”

“We didn’t miss those things—we were there all along. You know that. She doesn’t know any different. She’s alright.” Jane knew he was right. No one but Jane and Teddy noticed the speed at which their daughter aged, the jumps in time the universe left for only the two of them to experience. And yet, they weren’t themselves any older. They raised a child from toddler to high school graduate in a matter of months. It wasn’t normal, it wasn’t right, to impress that sort of illogical circumstance on a couple who never asked for anything more than a sunroom that faced East with furniture big enough for two.

By the time one of Jane’s pregnancy tests showed positive, Dee was a college graduate, and by the time Teddy called her from the hospital to let her know Jane was in labor, she didn’t answer the phone. They found out later it was because she was traveling in Europe—something Teddy did remember her talking about wanting to do once when

she was sixteen. Teddy wondered how old Dee was at that time—he and Jane hadn't experienced her college graduation—or a wedding—was she married now? Would she ever have children of her own? Had she surpassed her own parents in age?

Jane and Teddy named their son Franklin Robert. He was quite a normal child, a much more trying experience than Dee had been. He didn't sleep through many nights during his first year, and by the time he reached his second, he was ornery as any child. He loved his *Aunt Dee*, a name Jane and Teddy gave her to make things feel normal, even though Frankie wouldn't have understood why it was strange. Jane was the first to realize Dee wouldn't be alive much longer. She called one day to set up a lunch date, and was informed Dee was in the hospital.

A week later she was dead.

Jane and Teddy made plans for a small funeral, the three Valentines and Jane's mother. They rented out a funeral parlor for the entire day, planning to take their time explaining things to their son, Frankie, who was six, an age Dee had skipped altogether. They spent a few minutes sitting in the back row, Teddy noting to Jane the wideness of the pews, questioning whether they could find one for the sunroom. Jane hushed him—they were in front of *both* of their children, after all.

Teddy was the first to stand up and approach the casket. Jane followed, Frankie trailed. Jane's mother arrived with flowers, three different bouquets the funeral director had to help carry in. "From Susan Marcus," she pointed at one of the bouquets, "the Dunns, and the Stevens," she indicated the other two. Jane's mother hadn't known about their plans at privacy, and had taken the time to invite all of Dee's friends she knew of and had hired a caterer. Jane and Teddy didn't want to stick around to witness everyone

saying their condolences—their relationship with Dee was different than that of anyone else. Jane even said she might feel a little jealous at what others had to say, fearing they might know her Dee more than she, though they knew they felt the biggest loss now that Dee was gone. The Valentines slipped through the glass doors and down the concrete steps before too many people showed up.

Jane and Teddy knew a high sun meant a warm chaise. It was something they couldn't help but be happy about, even under the circumstances, the first warm day of spring. They wouldn't be burying Dee until the following day, and Frankie could finish the rest of his school day, so they had the afternoon to spend however they wished. It was the bit of excitement they needed to help ease them out of grief. It was a start, anyway.

Goodbye, Delilah Jane.

THE COLLECTOR

“What’s that in your backyard?” the UPS man asked Alison as she signed for the package.

“Something else that my husband brought home,” she answered.

“Kind of big, isn’t it?”

‘It is. Thank you for noticing. Here, I’ve signed.’ He took the pin pad she was holding out, but stood there staring. He could only see part of whatever was back there from the front door through the kitchen windows. “The package?”

“Oh, yes, here you go.” He handed her a rectangular package with her husband’s name on it, Paul Greenwood. She thanked him and closed the door with him still eyeing the backyard. She looked at the return address and even though she had no idea what was in the box, she considered sending it back.

Paul’s collections were becoming overwhelming. They had bought a bigger house with children in mind, and instead he filled the extra bedrooms wall to wall with things. And not just any things, he would tell you, really prized possessions. Things every collector wished they had. Alison was never of those collectors of whom he spoke.

It started with the tiniest collection of Cracker Jack toys, you know, the ones that came in the boxes with the Cracker Jacks—tiny trinkets and pendants, a completely vintage collection. She didn’t mind this so much. He kept them in half a drawer in their bedroom, the other half the Bible and cigarettes. He would pull the drawer open every night for a look before setting the alarm and shutting off the light. It was like taking care of a pet.

It went from trinkets to Kewpie dolls. He had bought his first three all at once at the same antique store. They were placed together on the shelf looking up with their round eyes and giant heads. He put them in the spare bedroom, built shelves for display, left room for a crib. He said this would be the baby's room—it would be perfect—full of dolls. The Kewpie dolls had given Alison the creeps and she wouldn't allow any child of hers to sleep in there. At that same antique store, he had met another collector who invited him to a convention. Thousands of hoarders gathered in one place.

The house had become full of collections begun and ceased. It was crowded with bottle caps, toy cars, sheriff badges, novelty pens, Coca-Cola bottles, black Santas, white Jesuses, Diego Rivera reprints, rocks (gems, according to Paul), and more things than Alison knew what to do with. Paul walked slowly, carefully, as if he were determined to meet the eyes of every Kewpie doll and black Santa and 1970s cuckoo clock. It was exhausting for Alison, constantly trying to talk her husband out of another piece, negotiating which ones they could sell, averting her eyes from the stares of the Kewpies, the judgment of the white Jesuses. Every time Paul walked through the door with something new, Alison wondered when he would be carrying something she actually wanted. She wondered when it would be their child, wrapped in a new handmade quilt from one of their grandmothers. She wondered when she would be able to fill the space in the nursery with a crib and a mobile and have an excuse to get rid of the breakable things. Alison only wanted one, irreplaceable thing. She wanted the one thing Paul couldn't find at any antique store, no matter how kitschy the sign or motherly the woman working the register. She would even let him keep the Cracker Jack toys if he promised to keep them inside the drawer.

It had only been a month since Paul admitted he didn't want to have children. It was a shock, as they had talked about having children the entire time they had been together, even going so far as to naming their first born. He said he thought he could do it. He said he had wanted to make her happy. He had said before, as they sat across from each other drinking milkshakes at the gas station, we can call him Paul and Alison had laughed.

It was late in the evening when Paul came home from a weekend at the auctions with one of the other collectors. He was carrying a giant free-standing globe with a cast iron base and not a dent or scratch in any of the oceans.

"Watch this!" he said to Alison who was sitting quietly on the couch, reading from *Better Homes and Gardens*. "I only need to find a cord!"

"What does it do?" Alison asked without looking up from the picture of a wrap-around front porch on someone's Mississippi home.

"It lights up! And spins! Just you wait," he said as he dove into one of the bedrooms. He came out with the excitement of a small birthday boy, a thin brown electrical cord raised into the air. "Sold it to me for a good price, too, since it was missing the cord, but I was promised it would work!"

He plugged the cord into the base of the globe and trailed it to an outlet. Alison stood up, eyes glued to the North Pole as Paul flipped the switch. They watched as the globe lit dimly, a faint glow on the northern hemisphere, before flickering out. They stared as the globe tried to spin but was caught in a ticking motion, like a clock low on batteries.

“That’s odd,” said Paul. “It was supposed to spin on its axis and be bright enough to light up a room.” He pulled out his phone Alison assumed to rant to whoever it was who sold him the globe.

Alison unplugged the thing and lugged it into the bedroom that was supposed to be a nursery and put it in the space that was meant to be left for a crib, knocking over a Kewpie doll in her efforts and not caring to pick it up.

SIX HUNDRED POUND GRIEF

When Simon showed up at our door on a Friday afternoon, I was headed to my job at Marco's Garage. "Hi, Brad-LEE," he said as he passed me on the threshold. He had emphasized the second half of my name ever since he learned that I was named partially after my dad and partially after Robert E. Lee, who he and my little brother Jacob had become obsessed with in history class after they found out he was buried without his shoes, *silly, silly*, they said.

Simon Udell had been the man of the house for three years when his mother died. His father left when Simon was only five years old, leaving him to take care of his mother who was sick. Diabetes was common, Simon had heard, and really her own fault according to the other boys at school. They said only really fat people get diabetes. His mother was fat, he had to admit. It was only after his dad had left that she got *really* fat. Simon didn't know it was something bad. He thought that's what all mothers did. He thought that's what his older sister would do one day: marry, have kids, get fat. Never leave the house. Have meals brought to her bed by her children. Like a queen bee in a hive. The largest bee. The best, the mother bee.

He saw other mothers who were on their way, certainly, but there came a point when he realized his mother wasn't like all the other mothers. The other mothers didn't want to be like his mother and he knew because they said so. They all joined Weight Watchers together and talked about points per cheesecake, admitting that they couldn't eat anything but rice for dinner because they had maxed out at lunch. He heard them talking about his mother and poor Simon during the school play, parent-teacher conferences, the PTA meetings, which his mother had stopped attending the previous

year when she stopped leaving the house—that's when the other mothers really started talking, and louder like they thought Simon couldn't hear them because his ears were smaller or farther away.

Simon's sister Sarah was in high school. She wasn't around much anymore. She got tired of cooking food for their mother, who she called lazy and ungrateful. She went out and got a part time job at Chevy's Diner and spent all her money on movies and cokes and boys on the weekends. Their mother asked her if she would be willing to save some of it for groceries, and Sarah told her that she would never make enough money to buy enough groceries and good luck with the disability checks. Simon never told his mother, but sometimes Sarah would slip him ten dollars so he could buy himself something or go to the arcade when he wanted. He also realized he could buy something at the store for himself with the disability money as long his mom didn't check the receipt. She even did check it once when Simon had bought a Carmello and a Coca Cola, but she didn't say anything. By the time she hit four hundred and eighty-seven pounds, she stopped checking them altogether. They had less and less money for anything but the groceries.

Simon and Jacob were best friends, and he stayed over on Friday nights often. He was patient and well-mannered with our mom, loved the meals she cooked, and always offered to do the dishes. She never let him, but always told Jacob he could learn a thing or two. When I got home, they were both passed out on the couch sharing the same blanket, MTV music videos playing in the background. They were both dressed in some of Simon's superhero pajama pants and t-shirts, Simon in Spiderman, Jacob in Ironman.

By Sunday afternoon, I asked our mom if Simon had been home at all. She said she guessed not, but hadn't thought much about it. She hadn't talked to Mrs. Udell, though, which was strange. She usually heard from her at least once making sure Simon was okay and that he wasn't causing too much trouble and to see if he could come home for a bit, because she needed him to do this or that. When I asked Simon about her, he said she wasn't feeling well. I suggested we head over there, at the least to get Simon a change of clothes, and to check on his mom. "Sure," he said, "but she's not going to like it."

We walked to Simon's house in silence. One, two, three, all in a row. It felt like I was leading a funeral procession, and all the neighbors were watching us, stopping what they were doing out of respect. I had questioned whether or not Jacob should have stayed home, but not really knowing what we were going to see stopped me. His mother was sick, Simon said, but everyone already knew that. It could have been nothing, but it wasn't nothing.

I knocked on the door to the house when we got there, but Simon told me she wouldn't answer. She wasn't able. He turned the knob himself, walking right in, the door left unlocked. The silence was highlighted by my boots on the tiled entryway that not only made me uncomfortable, but made Jacob squeeze himself into the corner behind the door, shoulders hunched. When I looked at him, I could tell he smelled the same stench I did.

I followed Simon into the house and watched him sit on the couch and turn on the TV. "Mrs. Udell?" I called down the hallway. No one was in the kitchen. I motioned to

Jacob to go sit with Simon. I walked to the bedroom doors, seeing Simon's empty, knocking on his sister's to nothing, and finally his mom's.

I knew before I opened the door what I was in for, but who is ever ready to face that kind of thing? I should have gotten my own dad to tell me to stay at home so that he, older and wiser, could handle this. I had two kids sitting in the other room, one who had already dealt with the reality of the situation, without knowing how to deal with it. The other who, were it not for the smell, would think this was really cool and who would likely mistake his friend's stoicism for emotional stability. I realized when Simon sat down on the couch instead of walking down the hall to get his mom that she wasn't just sick. She was dead, and when I opened the door, I could tell she had been dead for a while.

When Simon talked to the police he admitted that she had been dead since Tuesday. He had been waiting for his sister to come home to help him figure out what to do. The coroner ruled the cause of death was due to lack of insulin. She had run out, and apparently either didn't know it or wouldn't admit it. Simon wouldn't have known the difference. It almost could have been ruled a suicide, but I didn't tell Simon I thought so. She died overnight, Simon asleep beside her. He left for school thinking she was still sleeping and didn't know otherwise until he had come home from the grocery store that evening. Not knowing what to do, he crawled into bed and went to sleep, hoping Sarah would be coming home soon. By Friday, she hadn't been there, and Simon couldn't anymore stand sleeping next to his dead mother.

* * *

The year that followed saw a six-hundred pound woman buried, Simon and Sarah taken in by a foster family, and a new family move into the old Udell house. The money made on the house was divided up to pay for funeral expenses and then into two trust funds for each of the kids to do with what they desired on their 18th birthday. The foster family wasn't that bad, from what I heard Simon tell Jacob. There were twelve kids, but only the littlest ones had to stay in a room with more than one sibling. Simon was in a room with only one other boy named Dustin. Dustin liked to play battleship, so he was cool enough.

Sarah had a rougher time, and I would guess it was because she was older. She was only a few years younger than me, but much wilder. Never quite found her place in the world, you know? Never had anyone worthwhile enough to guide her where she ought to go, what with a mother like that. I shouldn't speak so ill of the dead, but I'm being honest. Not that it all falls on the mother, though, her father leaving her family when she was a child. It might even be worse to know that he's around, living somewhere, choosing to be away from them. Since her mom was dead, it was easier to excuse her from life's responsibilities. Her foster parents were stricter about her staying out all night. She wasn't allowed to do with them the way she did with her mother. She had to pay for the traumatizing experiences of her little brother, sleeping in his mom's bed and all, waiting on her hand and foot, though Sarah herself never thought she should be blamed for any of it. A victim of circumstance, she learned from Joan Jett.

It only took her three months to get pregnant, not even enough time for Simon to apologize for letting her find out about her mother's death from the six o'clock news. Simon sat at our house while they took away the body—took six men and three hours to

get it taken care of. We helped them move all of the stuff from the house and sell what they could. “Do you think we’ll ever live here again?” Simon asked Sarah during the yard sale, everything that made up their lives splayed out on the lawn for the town to pick through.

“No, so get over it, okay?” It was embarrassing for Sarah to even be there, but the lawyers required it—they technically owned the place, and had say over what happened to it, though neither Simon nor Sarah were pushy about anything. You could hear the other neighborhood kids talking, kids who only came at the sides of their silent mothers or in groups to spectate. *Check out the ass print in that couch. The size of this nightgown is ridiculous. Who keeps that many boxes of cereal?* Sarah ran off to the other side of the house so she didn’t have to hear any of it. It was bad enough that she didn’t feel all that terrible about her own mother’s death, she didn’t want to have to hear what others had to say about it, or feel the looks of the pitying parents.

The family that moved into the old house was from out of town. A contractor had been hired to fix any damages and give the house a new coat of paint, so any previous signs of life at the place were gone. Simon would come over to our house and watch the family play in the yard from the window, mesmerized by a family all together at once. It wasn’t that it was strange for him to see a family like that—he’d seen kids with two normal sized parents, both sober and responsible looking. It was that it was strange seeing it in his own front yard—he was used to stomping those grounds alone—he couldn’t help but imagine what it would have been like with the rest of his family, why that couldn’t have been his life.

On a Thursday after school, Simon handed me a folded piece of construction paper that had the words *You're Invited* written in colored pencil on the outside. "It's for all of you," he said, "but I didn't have enough time to make more than one invitation." He was inviting us to a play that was going to be put on by the kids in his foster home, right in their living room. The kids had all gotten together and written a little play, made costumes and everything, he told me. I pictured some knight saving the princess, fairytale love and dragon story. He sounded proud. "They said we could invite guests, and I don't really know who else to invite."

The play started at six p.m., and there were to be refreshments to follow. Turned out to be lemon cookies, I could see them wrapped in plastic on the kitchen counter when I walked in and stood against the wall in the back, letting Jacob sit on the floor with the other kids. The scene opened to two kids sitting side by side, one holding on to a paper plate with a steering wheel drawn on it.

"That was a lovely dinner, Maggie."

"It sure was, Tom. Now, back home to our two lovely kids who should be tucked in bed and sound asleep by---ARGHH!!" The kid holding the steering wheel turned it back and forth, and then they flung themselves from their chairs. They had been in a car accident.

Another kid came on the stage and read from a piece of paper. "These are the stories of our parents. Our lives before we got here. Maggie and Tom Burgess, parents of Mickey and Stephanie Burgess," the two kids lying on the floor waved to the audience, "were killed by a drunk driver on October 23, 1978. We remember them fondly." All three kids walked behind the make-shift curtain they had put up to hide the backstage.

Oh shit.

I waited patiently, wondering what Simon would do and if Sarah was involved, and in what light they would be able to shed their parents. Simon seemed proud before of being able to put on a play, so it couldn't be all that bad, right? He had always had some blind admiration for his mother—what kid doesn't—but could he even remember much about his father? What I remembered of him wasn't good, but surely Simon didn't remember him like that. What he remembered of him was most likely made up of stories he had been told about his father, which didn't bode well for him either.

There were single parent stories, grandparent stories. One story was about a kid going to the zoo with his dad, that was it—didn't tell a single thing of how he got into foster care. Maybe he didn't know, and maybe that was a good thing.

Finally, Simon walked out wielding an empty bottle of root beer and yelling, “Goodbye! Goodbye, Simon! Goodbye, Sarah! Goodbye! Goodbye, wife, goodbye!”

The kid narrator walked on the stage again. “All Simon remembers of his father is his leaving. He doesn't remember exactly how it happened, but he imagines it went something like that. He does remember the smell of beer on his breath and stale beer in the carpet. He does remember the look on his mother's face when she told Simon his father wasn't coming back.”

Simon came back on, this time with a ball shoved under his shirt, presumably to play his mother separated from her husband, but he did something strange. I would have expected him to move to the chair and sit down. To mimic taking a shot of insulin or eating the food that kid Simon had prepared. Instead, he walked over to the mirror and shifted his weight from side to side, rubbing his beach ball stomach. He stared at himself,

held his lower back, pushed out his belly, put his hands on the sides of his face, considering.

“I will never, no never be like her,” Simon said in high-pitched voice. He reached a hand up his shirt and removed the beach ball, tossing out into the audience full of kids who laughed.

“Simon, you asshole.” Sarah appeared on the side of the stage, both hands lightly on her stomach like maybe she was going to throw up. “That’s not what we practiced.” Simon didn’t say anything, stared at her a moment, then back through the audience and right at me, perhaps searching for approval or maybe understanding. I stared back. He shrugged, grabbed his beach ball, and went behind the curtain.

WANDA PUMPERNILL

Wanda Pumpernill has died. None of us knew it. We only found out because her sons came by on her birthday. We didn't know it was her birthday. We would have brought flowers if we had. She didn't come out of her house much, not anymore, and she hadn't for the better part of a year.

We helped her sons clean out the house. It was the least we could do as her neighbors. We had seen Wanda often come home carrying small pieces of furniture—side tables, short stools, coat racks, and knew she received a daily newspaper, had a monthly subscription to Better Homes and Gardens, that she paid Eddy to mow her yard once a week in the Summer, and let him do a little maintenance. We thought they were going to do one of those estate sales to make it easier. Things tended to settle into places you wouldn't think possible the longer you lived somewhere. Like the walls expanded and drawers grew deeper every year, granting an allowance for possessions.

What we didn't expect when we went inside was the abundance of these possession taking residence in the halls, the drawers, the crevices behind doorways, stacked beside and on furniture until the cushions were thin threads weaving between decades. Perhaps this is why Wanda never came out. It's certainly why no one ever went in. What about Eddy and the sons? Had they not been inside either?

How long was she behind on those newspapers stacked by the door? We imagined the first day she received a newspaper without opening it. The day the family was visiting and she sat it down on the ledge while making food for the grandkids. The morning she woke up with a cold, made tea, and went back to bed, the newspaper untouched. She never got to it, and then none of the others, instead stacking them up to look like

something we imagined one of those stupid contemporary art exhibits in the city looked like.

Wanda was a hoarder if we'd ever seen one. Like up there with the people they put on TV. Like this foul thing was lurking right here in our neighborhood, living among us and none of us saw it. The evil, stale and relentless, surrounding her things. It wasn't so much the newspapers that bothered us, or the other explainable piles and stacks, like the yarn. It beat that of our own mothers, but it was familiar. We understood yarn—the yarn goes on sale and every crocheting woman from here to Creek County stocks up, waiting for the next baby to be born.

What made us uncomfortable were the bedrooms. The clothes that filled the closets, brand new, tags still attached, receipts tucked in pockets. It was clear that the first two rooms were meant for each of her sons, who each awkwardly stood inside his own memorial. The bedrooms were the only clean spots in the house. Pristine, untouched for years, the dry rot moving across the bedspreads like a disease.

The third bedroom was a bit of a mystery. Even the sons didn't understand it right away, and it was the creepiest of all. It smelled not of something pleasant, like lavender or chamomile, and nothing like the rest of the house, rotting decay. It smelled of mothballs. She had been preserving this room more carefully than the others. It was painted pink—for the little girl we knew Wanda never had. Perhaps she had wanted one. Perhaps she had lost one. We all retreated from the room, closed the door, locked it.

When they found Wanda, she was sitting in the only space left in the living room that was completely free of clutter, the only place she had given herself room to rest. It was symbolic or something like that. We imagined her sitting among all the newspapers

and magazines, unopened letters and wedding announcements. The yarn and boxes of old pictures, some not even belonging to anyone in the Pumpernill family—contemplating death. We imagined she was guilty for something we didn't understand or know about, or that she had at least felt guilty. There were things we didn't know and didn't want to know. The coroner ruled her death suicide by poison—a drink she created herself using the flowers from her garden. It was over now and there was nothing we could do about it.

DROWNING

Jacob Flowers, kid reporter extraordinaire

I heard when the LeDeaux brothers found themselves into trouble, they were all the way out near Marco's Garage, that's why it took a while for the ambulance to get there. There's a swimming hole out there that we go to in the summer time, but ain't nobody I ever heard of tried it in the dead of winter. My dad called them idiots straight out of the looney bin. I didn't tell my dad that if I'd have been there, I would've been right there in that water with those boys, showing off my stuff, even if there weren't no girls there.

I also heard the doctors didn't try real hard, either, at the hospital, to save them. Heard it straight from Kenny, whose mom is best friends with a nurse who works there, so it's real news. As real as how their mom showed up drunk or hungover, I can't really tell the difference when I see her. Maybe it's both. I was there, though, watched her catch herself on the elevator door before tripping out into the hallway spilling vomit all down a fake hibiscus. Mrs. Havens had me bring their homework to them after school—just in case, you know. Because there were rumors that morning that they were doing okay and rumors that they weren't.

After most things had settled, I wrote my paper on it in school. Mrs. Havens said it was in bad taste, but I thought I had done pretty good. I even had my sister check the grammar and spelling. Mrs. Havens let me keep my B, but she wrote a note home to my parents that I didn't get to read.

Marlene Parker, parent in the school pick-up line

Those boys never stood a chance, not with parents like that: always home, but rarely sober. And it wasn't just alcohol they liked. Wanted to live like Jim Morrison and would die trying. There's no place for that in a small town and with two kids at home to boot. Me and Susan Browning would take shifts picking the boys up from school since their house was on the way to both of ours and we had boys in the same grade. It's no wonder they were allowed to be out near the lake after dark on such a cold night—I heard they didn't even know the boys were gone until they got a call from the hospital, such a shame. Janet LeDeaux never should have been permitted to have kids in the first place, if only that were a thing that this town could have stopped. Of course, she was Janet *Caraway* back then, until Truman LeDeaux got a hold of her. Wasn't like *they* had the best parents either. Let her get married at sixteen to a twenty-five year-old man with no job, after popping out a couple of boys, of course. I guess that's what they thought doing the right thing was, with kids involved and all, so what could we do?

We gave her all the baby clothes we could muster, hand-me-downs no longer worn by the then older boys in the town. None of us thought the kids would make it all the way to junior high, to be honest. We certainly thought something tragic would have happened at that house, like a fire or a fight. One of the boys getting knocked over the head with a thrown beer bottle and the other dying of neglect. Somehow, though, they were still there when we took the boys to school, still there to join the soccer team and the basketball team with our boys. They were alive long enough to make our boys feel it when they died, and for every mother in this town to hold resentment against Janet LeDeaux.

Janet LeDeaux, mother once-removed

It's the strangest feeling to believe your life is over in your late-twenties, and I think that's how I was supposed to feel, but I didn't. I told some people that I did, or agreed with them, rather, but I didn't quite feel it myself. A little piece of me died, sure—my boys. I won't pretend it didn't change the way I go about living. Truman and I have got to make some changes around here. We talked about moving out of this place—too many condolences and heart-breaking phone calls, like they know how I feel. Like they know my boys are in a better place. Like they know it gets better. It doesn't get better, it stays the same, so there isn't any use in acting out about it. I brought them into this world before I was ready for it. Maybe they weren't ready for it, either.

We named the first one Truman, after his dad—tried to call him Junior, but it never really stuck, and the other one Rudy. Everyone always said they did everything together, but a mother knows better. Rudy only did whatever Truman did, always half a step behind. Boy, if I don't believe Truman coaxed Rudy into that water ever so slightly. Can't help but think about that.

Ronnie Collins, EMT first on the scene

I scowled when I first heard where we had to go and what they found out there. Two boys, eleven and thirteen, unconscious due to water in the lungs, and all the way out at Marco's swimming hole. Marco's the one found them. Said he'd been out after dark setting up hunting traps and he heard them splashing around. By the time he got there, both boys were out cold, and would have been dead cold had he not happened to be there.

Someone would have found them in the morning, too late for either of them to have survived at all. Not that it would have mattered seeing how things turned out.

We only took the one ambulance we have out there, and hooked them both up side-by-side, trying to revive them on that county road. Things were looking up and we thought everything was going to be okay, as we got them both to come-to before we even made it through the emergency doors. It was only a matter now of clearing their lungs, looking for internal damage, and keeping them warm. We thought the hospital could handle the rest well enough.

Truman LeDeaux Senior, namesake

Janet wasn't ready to have kids, I can tell you that much, and to Hell if I was. We were kids—never got a chance to grow up, always one step behind ourselves. We never knew what to expect. We didn't ask for this. Accidents lead to more accidents, I guess. We didn't plan any of this out. It just happened. There's not much else to say.

Dr. Mutner, MD, short-staffed the evening of February 22nd

We did everything we could, sure, what do you want me to say? We had Sarah Wheelman with them—she was on-call that night—brought her in from her sister's wedding reception, the only nurse who answered from the on-call list. We're working on that. They told me to tell you we hired an accountability representative to straighten things out, but really we just added the title to one of the administrative assistants. Called it a lateral move, gave her a desk. Bernie's old desk. You remember Bernie? Used to be the hospital deputy all the way into retirement. Needed him back in the seventies, kept

him on for good measure. Died in a children's wing hallway with a helium balloon tied to his wrist, his left hand dangling in the air, like it was the only part of him in limbo, not quite ready to go.

Anyway, Wheelman didn't leave them all night long. She gave them a shared room, the family was there—the sister slept on the chair, Wheelman pulled in a cot for the mom, and the father was somewhere in the lobby the whole night. She fed them all, gave them extra blankets. Top notch stuff. She even had the cafeteria make the boys hot chocolate instead of tea to warm them up and ward off the hypothermia. Special kinds of stuff nobody else was doing—there wasn't enough time, you know, too many patients that night. It was one of those boring winter nights with family around, so everyone gets into shit they shouldn't. But we called in Wheelman just for them.

Truman LeDeaux Senior, under the influence

I've come to realize this isn't our fault, but someone should be blamed. I have to look up the name of that doctor. What is his deal? Why couldn't he save our boys? I called this guy who says he defends people who have experienced medical malpractice—when doctors fuck shit up they shouldn't have. That wasn't something I had heard much about before, but this other guy Johnson at the bar told me I should sue for money and gave me a lawyer's number. Said I could probably get off big. If my boys have to die, at least I should get something out of it to make my life a little easier. And Janet's, too. Seems to me like we ought to get something worthwhile out of it, is all.

Marco Valentine, junkyard owner

Those boys were always hanging out at my garage—sneaking around like they were up to no good. They weren't as far as I know, regular boy stuff. Jumping from totaled pinto to rusted out 1950s Ford, digging down into the seats for change. Saw them earlier in the day messing around and left them alone. I didn't mind them being there, but they ran from me anyways. Lots of people around during the Summer months, but not so much in February. It's kind of nice to see someone around. Didn't know they'd be dumb enough to jump in the lake after dark. That one caught me off guard. I heard the splashing and figured it was some kind of animal until I heard them start to yell. Can't get the yelling out of my head.

Called 911 three times before someone showed up, it took them so damn long. Called their parents' house, too, but there was no answer. It came to me that maybe someone had thrown them in there. I couldn't imagine jumping in voluntarily. I pulled them out first thing, then looked around. There had to be someone else out there. Other kids, one of their drunk parents. All alone, it was almost like a double suicide attempt. Can't get that out of my head, either.

Sarah Wheelman, on-call RN

I never should have been in that ER that night. I don't know why the universe decided to put that on me. It's not my fault there wasn't anyone else available with more experience or someone who wasn't trying to celebrate their sister's wedding or someone who hadn't had anything to drink that night. Or maybe even an actual doctor for crying out loud.

That's why I became a nurse in the first place, so I didn't have to deal with the pressure and responsibility of lost lives. I became a nurse to help people, sure, but *live* people. I wasn't drunk when I showed up, but that didn't make me any less tired. Dr. Mutner sounded so desperate to get someone there I felt like I didn't have another choice. I shouldn't have even answered my phone.

When he told me I was in charge of the one room the whole night, I thought it would be easy. They had already treated the boys, but they needed monitoring. They were sleeping mostly, and I slept, too. Not in the same room, but I kept close enough to them. When I woke up at four am, one of the boys had died. No one bothered to even wake me up. The doctor doing rounds discovered him before any of the family even knew it, and they were right there in the room with him. Too much water left in the lungs. Why this wasn't taken care of as soon as they got there, I will never understand.

By then, the next day's shift was beginning and they told me I could go home. The other boy was discharged by Dr. Mutner soon after, leaving his father at the hospital to make arrangements for his brother. They were trying to clear rooms for other patients. Anyone not relying on an IV or a machine was sent home. That probably never should have happened, but I didn't think that then. I was only happy I could go home. Didn't occur to me maybe we should double check the second boy.

Truman LeDeaux Senior, giving credit

If it wasn't for Marco, I wouldn't have ever gotten to say goodbye to my boys. Hell, even then I didn't know they would be going anywhere. I put too much damn trust in that hospital. When I finish suing them, I'll make sure Marco gets a cut. He was doing

something good that night. I don't know where Janet was. I got to the hospital before she did! And now she's already talking about wanting to have more kids, like this tragedy was supposed to happen. She's ready to move on from it and start over. She's taking it as a second chance at being a parent! I thought she'd want a second chance at being anything but a parent. She's doesn't even want to sue.

I should have known after Junior died that Rudy would be quick to follow. I wish that doctor hadn't gotten our hopes up by sending him home, not that he made it there. I didn't even leave the hospital before Janet was pulling back in with Rudy dead in the back of her car, water still in his lungs, too.

Gregory Thomas, attorney-at-law

They have a case, what with them being kids and all, but I'm not sure I'm the one to represent them. I don't mean to be harsh or anything, but I'm not sure I can get paid what I want out of the ordeal. It's not like the LeDeaux's can afford to pay me if they lose the case, and I guess I'm not willing to take that chance. Everyone here knows what kind of parents they were. Can't any judge in this town rule against that. They would have to really find some evidence against the hospital, and it's just not there. Those boys shouldn't have been out by that lake to begin with, and that's no doctor's fault.

Dr. Mutner, unapologetic

I couldn't tell you what happened after they took off with the second kid. Anything could have happened in the car. The coroner diagnosed it as water in the lungs:

drowned. There was too much—it happens sometimes—there was no way for us to know. We did everything we could.

Janet Tucker, always mother

Of course we're going to have more kids. It's like I said, it's not like I've got to stop living or anything. If Truman would stop going out so much, then maybe we could even start to feel like a real family. That would be nice. Eventually, the town's going to forget about our boys, I'm sure of it. I won't let them do that—I'll just make it a point to have more boys, and be ready for it this time. I'll be a better parent and make sure Truman is ready to do the same.

Chase Long, a school paper

The LeDeaux Brothers: A Sad Story

This paper is about the drowning of the LeDeaux brothers. As self-designated official St. Agnes Student Reporter, I aim to give an accurate account of the background and evening in question as much as possible. On average, 4.6% of kids around the world will die before the age of five. Truman and Rudy survived the age of five and grew all the way to ages thirteen and eleven, so they did okay. Were their deaths an accident or was there a murderer involved? We will never know the truth, but I, Jacob Flowers, am here to share with you the facts, details, and observations surrounding that fatal February night....

JETFIRE

My husband rolled a joint at the kitchen table and I sat outside on the porch swing counting the daffodils that had popped up along the outer lining of the flowerbed, each cup and saucer already drooping towards the grass. Twenty-three. Twenty-seven if you counted the bulbs that didn't bloom. They were here when we moved in, planted by the previous owners of the house. I usually sat out here when Everett smoked. I didn't like the way the marijuana smelled. At least it didn't linger like cigarette smoke and he could come out and sit with me after he was done, a look on his face like nothing pleased him more.

Jetfire, Romance, Tahiti, and Merlin were some of the variety names I had read on the flower seed packets at the store. I had gone to see if there was something I could do to take care of the little things. There pictures of daffodils on the packets with dark orange cups and white saucers, a mixture of colors in the middle that fanned out to look like flames. Ours at home were plain yellow. I found a picture of them on a packet that said Miniature. I never was a gardener, but if I had been, I certainly would have picked something more interesting than Miniature [plain, boring, snooze-fest] Daffodils. I was so disappointed that I didn't buy a thing, not caring if the flowers ended up dead.

I walked out past the seeds to look at other plants growing in their temporary plastic square pots. One of the employees approached to ask if they could help me. I told him I was just looking.

“Annuals or perennials?” Fuck if I know.

“Just looking,” I said again, wondering if I should ask which plants did okay around pot smoke. Was it the annuals or the perennials? The Jetfire bulbs or the Miniature?

I wondered if I were to call my husband’s dealer if I could get him to stop selling to my husband. I had the dealer’s number saved in my phone as *Green* because I didn’t know his real name. I pulled it from my husband’s phone in case I ever needed it. I couldn’t think of a situation where I would, but I liked having it. I liked labeling it Green, too; it could be someone’s last name, but is harboring a secret.

It wasn’t that I minded the fact that he smoked, but I minded where these deals took him. In all honesty, I didn’t know and I never asked. I wanted to be supportive not intrusive, cool not overbearing. I imagined him driving to a spot in the inner city and finding an alley between two run-down brick buildings, one of them with a painted advertisement for *Coca-Cola* chipping near the clouds.

There is a kid straddling a bicycle, his long-haired friend standing behind him giving my husband the finger. A woman beating her six-year-old and hiding him behind her as she sees my husband’s car creep by, another woman being beaten by her husband, no one hiding her. *Green* comes into view with an unlit joint dangling from his mouth, sweat running down his white t-shirt.

He watches my husband skulk along in his hatchback like they all do, investigating this suburban outsider. He opens his car door and steps out towards the one with a dangling joint. His head doesn’t bead with sweat like theirs. Instead it’s his shoes that gleam in the sunlight, the dress shoes he wears to work. They feel the waft of air conditioning pooling at their ankles because he leaves the car door open.

“Hola,” he says.

“What the fuck?” they say.

“90?” he says.

“Like always,” they say.

“How is it?” he says.

“Como fuego,” they say.

TRIPPY AND THE MUSHROOM GANG

Friends are good at sticking around for the thin. The thin is easy. The thin is bubble gum wrappers and movie tickets. It's the thick that gets you.

Truman Winters always wanted to be a leader. He would march around with the other boys, taking new paths and hoping they would follow him, but they never did. They would yank him back into their fray, into the dust of their boots. He would say things like *the end is near, lest we be slaves to time*, these words were profound and worth a listen, but the boys simply told him to get it out of his system before their club meeting started. They let that Jacob Flowers lead the meetings even though he wasn't even the president. Why couldn't Truman have a turn? They were, he believed, all distracted by his inability to last ten minutes in a room without tripping over something, but he knew it was only a phase. It was the awkward length of his legs—long and skinny, twice the size of his torso and always getting in the way. The Boys Club was his chance to prove himself, and instead he always ended up sitting in the back row by himself because no one wanted to be knocked in the knees.

Truman only brought up psychedelics once when they were kids. He overheard a program on the radio about DMT and told them the guy said it could be a great bonding experience for families and team building for others. Best experience of his life, the guy said. Eye-opening. Unexplainable. Indescribable. He saw aliens and angels. We could use some team building, he told them. *Shove off, Trippy. Ain't no one here want to be some hippy scientific experiment.* Even Jimi didn't want in to the alien sighting. *Aliens are not ghosts. Ghosts are real.* And that was that.

He thought that regardless, the boys would keep in touch as they grew up. He thought that maybe growing up in the same place, in the same group of friends for the major part of his childhood would mean something. Yeah, sure, he'd changed since then—who hadn't? —but that didn't mean he wasn't still Truman Winters. He would have even perked up if they had called him by his old nickname, *Trippy*, which he had tried to lose for years, but solidified it into existence by tripping on stage during his high school graduation and grabbing the nearest thing and taking it with him: the skirt of Principal Biggins.

Once he was out of high school, Truman thought getting a college education was the thing to do. He wanted his friends and family to show him a little respect. He thought Truman Winters, Bachelor of Science should do it. He dropped out during his sophomore year when one of his psychology professors, Gahnig, invited him over to his house for a little *recreational education*. He explained to the three students he had invited over – Truman; Lily, the girl who sat in the front row and only ever wore ponchos; and Tuck, someone Truman had seen, but never spoken to – that they were there to enter the hidden mind, the trailing subconscious, the fourth dimension. Recreational education. All three students chose marijuana edibles among the options of psychedelics and hallucinogens displayed about the kitchen counter like a buffet. A light, but safe choice, they were told, and were welcomed back into his home any time they wished.

It was then that Truman decided that his life purpose was to further seek deeply spiritual psychedelic experiences until he had solved the world's problems, which he naively believed possible. He dropped out of college and got a job at the record store selling vinyl to high school hipsters. It was during this time that his old friends saw him

at the bar, drunk, coming down off a high, unable, it appeared, to form words. He stared into his whiskey, tapping the side of it with his index finger, watching the surface of the liquid ripple in fantastic color. It was merely the lights of the bar sign reflecting its neon, but Truman wanted to make more of it than that, to find meaning, so he stared, searching his glass for answers. His friends sort of hovered in the back, wondering if it was the right time to say anything, and if it would matter anyway—would Trippy even remember them?

Four months later, Gahnig died, leaving behind a wealthy stash of psychedelic trips waiting to happen. Truman happened to know that no one in Gahnig's family knew about the stash, nor would they be likely to recognize magic mushrooms or do anything with them if they did. When he finally convinced Lily and Tuck they needed to break in and steal the mushrooms, he got lucky, because it was after dark, and the house had just cleared of all family members. They must have returned to hotel rooms, drunk and grieving, because the back door was left open and empty bottles littered the kitchen. They found another kid there, Devin, a former student of Gahnig's, and agreed to share the lot.

The trip to the woods was planned three weeks later during Spring Break. Lily and Tuck hadn't dropped out. Truman dubbed himself their spiritual leader. They didn't care as long as he divided the mushrooms evenly. The plan was to take the mushrooms raw at the bottom, then start the climb, making it to the top by sunset. If there were going to come to any realization, it would be made while gazing into the giant ball of fire as it descended on the horizon. That's what Truman told them, and that's what they believed.

What do we want out of this they asked Truman in unison, their voices a colorful trail of staff lines floating in his peripherals. He didn't have a direct answer because the

truth was, he didn't know himself. He gave them the answer he thought Gahnig would have given, but as soon as it came out of his mouth, he felt how lackluster it really was: *An experience*. That didn't mean anything, he realized, at least not anything significant. And it sounded way cooler coming from the deep and soothing voice of his aging psychology professor than it did his own twenty-something squeaker. He wasn't sure why he had believed anything his professor had said, why he had dropped out of college, or why he had gone to college in the first place. He felt like a loser about to get lost in the woods, he felt screwed over by the universe, but he couldn't tell them that. He was in that part of the high no one wants to be, where all the shitty parts of his existence were coming into focus and he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

The colors of the woods around him on the hike slipped into one another as they climbed, colors he wouldn't have seen had he not eaten the mushrooms. He kept repeated what he was seeing over in his head because he couldn't believe it and he was trying to draw himself out of the dark place.

The mountain is purple.

Truman tapped a boulder with his knuckles and a hollow sound returned.

My hands are metallic. The dirt is crunchy.

He turned around to find Tuck, Lily, and Devin sitting in a circle, gazing at the clouds.

The clouds are waves of envy.

He couldn't wait any longer. He told the group he was headed up the mountain alone. They could find him later. He would walky them if he needed to. They looked at him as if he had rudely interrupted their gathering. He apologized and then turned to

leave. He didn't know where he was going or where he would end up or what he would find when he got there, but he knew he couldn't look at the faces of the other three anymore—each turned a different kind of dead-eyed devil.

This is only my mind. This is the place where I realize. Truman repeated this mantra over and over again in his head. It kept him sane when his anxiety wanted to take over. He was losing it, and that's exactly what he told the kind hiking couple as they passed him on the trail. They didn't stop to find out what that meant. He didn't mind. He guessed that the couple may have existed only in his mind, too, since they both had wings sprouting from their backs and pig noses. He wasn't sure either way. He wasn't sure if Gahnig had been real or made up, or what really happened to Samuel Grint when they were kids. He hadn't thought about Same for years, and he wasn't sure why now when he was contemplating the reality of his gnarly old professor did he pop up in his mind. Sam's disappearance was the thing that began the separation of Trippy from the Boys Club. He couldn't help but think that if Same had survived childhood, he wouldn't have been one to abandon Trippy. They would have been best friends forever. He thought that Sam might meet him at the top of the mountain, might be able to talk over the events of his death with Truman, might be able to give him insight into his existence, into another dimension.

He imagined being able to go back home and give the boys some answers. He imagined the impressed look on Jacob Flowers' face as he told them what really happened to Sam. How Sam had gotten lost walking home because it wasn't only after dark, but it was foggy and he couldn't tell where he was, only to stumble on an unfamiliar house inhabited by a madman who killed him and buried him in the yard. Or

how Sam was practicing his daredevil stunts, trying to make it across the train tracks only to be obliterated, his body dispersed among the tracks and the engine. Or how Sam was hitchhiking to the Vegas to get away from his parents and unspeakable things happened in some stranger's car—Sam was the unidentified boy three towns over.

Truman knew that wasn't going to happen, but he couldn't help but dream about it. He continued up the mountain until the mushrooms wore off and he only saw earth tones when he looked at the trees. He couldn't help but picture Sam as an adult. He saw Sam walking into the bar with Jacob and Marco and the guys, staring at him from behind. Truman liked to believe that Sam wouldn't have been one to ignore him like the others. He was an adult with a ball cap and a beard, but he couldn't picture him in anything but his overalls, what he saw him wearing most of the time at the age of 11. The more Truman pictured it, the less real adult Sam was in his mind. The button-down shirt faded until there was nothing but skinny arms and a bare chest under overall buckles, his beard thinning out to reveal the childhood where Sam would forever be lost

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