

Mark Winters

15 April 2024

Final Theological Essay

Prof. Derek Woodard-Lehman

*Thesis: I want to be a storyteller who expands people's theological imagination, demonstrating in explicit or implicit ways how God is indeed that "than which none greater can be thought".<sup>1</sup>*

Outside of the rarefied space of seminary classrooms (and perhaps even within some of those), our collective theological imagination has grown frustratingly limited. People used to imagine divine figures with personality, drama, even senses of humor (see any society's trickster tales for a witness on this). These images of God may have leaned heavily into human or animal characteristics, but stories of Greek Gods, Irish legends, and other Indigenous folktales include beauty, tragedy, humor, and whimsy as these cultures used story to explain certain truths about the world. Western Christianity on the other hand, (aside from the incarnation in Jesus), has reduced our concepts of the Almighty God to overly simplistic parent/child metaphors, or the old man in the sky with a long white beard, a la Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. For a lot of people, their perception of God could be compared to a broken vending machine. You put your money in, press a couple of buttons, and, hopefully, get what you want. But because it's a broken machine, you could get potato chips instead of a Twix. Or your Twix, for which you have been longing, gets stuck on the spiral ring, and will not drop

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<sup>1</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, "Proslogion," in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia, PA, Westminster Press, 1956), 73.

down for you to retrieve it. Or nothing happens. The machine ate your money. Or you could get lucky and get the Twix you want. My point is, even some very devout people experience God this way. Their experiences with this vending machine God may or may not cause them to lose faith. Some will faithfully continue putting their money in, keep praying, keep worshiping, participating in the sacraments, hoping they will eventually shake that Twix loose. Even if the candy never comes, they will faithfully hold on to hope that the Twix will be waiting for them on a silver platter after they die.

Is this all God is? Sometimes responding to us, sometimes not? Do we imagine God, playfully enjoying our distress, while we hope against hope that at some point, in the future, after it no longer matters (are we even still hungry on the other side of this life?), we will at long last get the candy bar we wanted from the vending machine all those years ago?

There are at least two problems with this image, which are admittedly related to each other. First, why would one stay in relationship with a God who is so unresponsive, or at least, unpredictably responsive? This sounds more like a relationship with an abusive partner who alternates between ghosting and gaslighting. The other problem with the vending machine God is that this relationship (if you want to call it that) is predicated entirely on *transaction* between believer and deity. If I (believer) do a particular thing, then God will (maybe) respond in a particular way. Quid pro quo. Granted, for a very long time, Christianity has been a transactional faith. Salvation, for many, is understood in transactional ways. If one believes in Jesus, and accepts him as their personal Lord and savior, this is how one earns a ticket to one's personal mansion in the sky. This transaction has provided hope for Christians for a very long time,

including until today. But this transactionalism is problematic because it comes out of a specific all-too terrestrial power dynamic, based on the human relationship between commoners and royalty, or vassals and lords. The assumption is that we humans have nothing, and are worth nothing, and God has all the power. Our role is simply to praise, obey, and humbly accept whatever charity God is willing to sprinkle upon us. Which of course, is how authoritarian human rulers prefer things to work. But if our relationship with God is merely transactional, where is the metaphysical or transformational component to that? Is that all there is to our relationship with God? Are we mere lab rats, hoping for a bit of cheese at the end of the maze of life?

A significant number of people have grown weary of putting their money in an unpredictable machine, and have thus walked away from religion. These individuals have joined the ranks of the agnostics or atheists, and many now think God is for simple people, stupid people, or anyone who has yet to take a freshman philosophy or science class. This indicates that not only have some faithful people's imagination of God grown stagnant, even some nonbelievers have too small of a concept of God.

I have been in ordained ministry for 15 years. When I encounter someone who claims to not believe in God, I will often ask them to tell me about the God they do not believe in.<sup>2</sup> They generally respond with some version of the old man in the sky, or they might have a very judgmental view of God—the one who condemns and smites people for being “bad”, or because they believe in the “wrong” religion. They inevitably tell me this with a tone of condescension, proud of themselves for charitably enlightening me of

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<sup>2</sup> I first heard this strategy many years ago, and believe it was either John Shelby Spong, or possibly Marcus Borg. A Google search yields many colleagues using the same question without attribution to its originator.

something which should be obvious. What generally causes them a great deal of confusion is when I tell them I do not believe in that God either.

Thus we arrive at my thesis—that I want to be a storyteller who expands peoples theological imagination. But what 15 years of church ministry has also taught me is that traditional methods for engaging with people’s theological imagination in a faith community (primarily preaching, but also occasional teaching of adults and teenagers) are minimally effective. A 15-20 minute sermon, even a good one, might be remembered for a little while, but it is difficult to achieve much depth in such a short time.

Additionally, in the context of the ubiquitous widening division in our American society (and church) between liberal and conservative, it seems that we clergy are expected to choose a side and rally people to the cause. This is tempting. There are some very clear divides in our society—divides I would not consider to be political, but rather, moral. Theology ought to have something to say about moral divides, no? But I have also seen this kind of thing play out before, having studied and lived in Northern Ireland in 1998, and again in 2000-01. I have also learned a little over the years about how to help communities become more inclusive in terms of sexual and gender diversity. In both of these contexts, there are two things which were have been moderately effective—1) relationships, and 2) storytelling. Neither is a guarantee. But being friends with someone generally makes it harder to hate them. And telling stories, personal stories, is how we build understanding in an open, invitational way, rather than confronting someone head on with arguments or judgement. (If arguing has ever changed anyone’s mind, I would be delighted to see of it.) In my writing, I hope to do

both—nurture relationships within the context of the churches I serve as pastor, and reach beyond those congregations through storytelling.

As a writer, I will use multiple tools to engage people’s theological imagination, and harness people’s wonder. Humans are remarkable creatures, but one of the things that is most important in order to retain our spiritual wellbeing is humility. And we can’t retain our humility if we lose the capacity for awe, wonder, or reverence. Thinking we have everything figured out, deluding ourselves into thinking we *can* figure everything out, leads us to making an idol out of our own head, or our own tribe, our own nation, or our own religious tradition. If we have everything figured out, anyone disagrees with us, or our people, or our nation, or our religion, they are obviously wrong and must be ignored, dismissed, or worse, eradicated. But if we realize and appreciate there is something greater than ourselves, and maybe even exercise our wonder, awe, or reverence for that *something*, we retain the essential humility necessary for our wellbeing.

Nearly 1,000 years ago, Anselm of Canterbury set to the task of defending the existence of God, and wrote an essay initially called “Faith Seeking Understanding”. Later titled, “Proslogion” (An Address), he imbedded a critical theological insight within a dizzying series of arguments at the beginning of his essay. God is, he said, “a being than which nothing greater can be thought.”<sup>3</sup> I have used this phrase many times to remind myself that if I ever think I have God figured out, chances are, someone somewhere can conceive of something greater. Indeed, many centuries later, Paul Tillich insisted that God cannot be “a being” because that would mean God is “subject to

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<sup>3</sup> Anselm, 73.

the categories of finitude”.<sup>4</sup> Thus Tillich both demonstrates and challenges Anselm’s point, that the concept of God as “being itself” is in fact greater than Anselm’s insistence upon God as “a being”. All of this demonstrates that our theological imaginations need expansion from time to time. If we ever think we have God completely figured out, this assumes we can completely circumscribe God in our own minds, which, we’ve known since even before Anselm, when Gregory of Nazianzus pointed out that, “to comprehend the whole of so great a subject as this is quite impossible and impracticable”.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of expanding one’s theological imagination is not solely a Christian responsibility of course, but Christianity is the tradition from which I come, and the framework within which I operate. In spite of our many faults, it is a tradition whose stories deserve a better telling than the narrow, fundamentalistic framework which has taken over the popular consciousness. So with whatever skill I have, for whomever is willing to listen to, or read what I have to say, I am willing to try my hand at at least some retelling, as Anselm, Tillich, and Gregory of Nazianzus imagine. Or perhaps I should say “rediscovering,” and as Ecclesiastes 1:9 wisely articulates, “What has been is what will be, and what’s been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.”<sup>6</sup>

I want to pause here for a moment, and discuss the concept of wonder, as recapturing a sense of wonder is intrinsically related to my thesis about expanding our

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1971), 235.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, “The Second Theological Oration: On God”, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy, (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 2006), 138.

<sup>6</sup> Biblical quotations from the New Revised Standard Version, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1989.

collective theological imagination, and as I will further elaborate, it also relates to the critical importance of humility. In his recent book, *Wonder As a New Starting Point For Theological Anthropology*, Professor José Francisco Morales Torres points out:

...the human cannot ‘grasp’ wonder. Instead, wonder ‘grasps’ the human. Wonder cannot be grasped; therefore, it can be neither manipulated nor commodified. That is to say, there is something about being human that cannot be grasped, contained, reduced, or flattened...any attempts to reduce or ‘flatten’ the human in fact dehumanizes her... A reclaiming of wonder has the potential to return humanity to itself, to make the woefully estranged, wonderfully marvelous again.<sup>7</sup>

This quote is focused on anthropology, rather than theology, but it is clearly leaning in the direction of theology by describing something (wonder) which “cannot be grasped,” “neither manipulated nor commodified”—qualities which are also attributes of the divine. Indeed, wonder depends upon the existence of something beyond the self, which, in relationship with its beholder, creates transcendent experience. Later, Francisco Morales Torres points out, “Wonder is ultimately grounded in the same goodness that grounds existence because wonder, like goodness, expresses desire—indeed the deepest desire, to know the Good.”<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps ambitious of me to claim such a desire, but I believe it to be worth the attempt to nurture in my audience a sense of wonder, as I believe it could be both a cause and a result of an expansion in our imagination about what or who God is.

This course both implicitly and explicitly has asked us to consider ourselves as public theologians. Being a public theologian is not new to me. My passion to critically engage with the world around social, political, and various other public issues has

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<sup>7</sup> José Francisco Morales Torres, *Wonder as a New Starting Point For Theological Anthropology*, (London, UK, Roman and Littlefield, 2023), 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 97.

probably been with me since I learned to talk. Lurking behind this passion, there was also always a deep spiritual sensitivity, an appreciation of mindfulness, seeking the deeper voice underneath, around, and beyond the din of human debate. Prior to seminary, writings from certain individuals such as John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, and Karen King were expanding my theological curiosity. Reading their work inspired me to go to seminary. My Master of Divinity studies at Chicago Theological Seminary both fed and increased my theological hunger, as I got a clearer and clearer picture of how much I did not know (and may never learn). CTS's ethos certainly underscored the necessity of engaging in theology as a *public* pursuit. Though he began teaching at CTS after I graduated, José Francisco Morales Torres, describes the public nature of theology by saying, "Faith is a communal endeavor...One's life is both public and private, and faith shapes both."<sup>9</sup> It is simply insufficient to content oneself with private thoughts between oneself and the Divine. Our understanding of the Ultimate, God, has intrinsic implications for our relationships with others. On the off chance I am incorrect about this, if theology can concern itself only with the relationship between one human and God, such theology is worth little—merely its value to that one individual. It *may* be worth something to God—but it is worth nothing to anyone else. Unless of course the individual's behavior, attitude, or actions toward their neighbor are impacted at all. But if this happens, my point is proven—theology has intrinsic implications for our relationships with others.

Going back to Tillich, (who described God as, "Ultimate Concern"), Anselm, Gregory of Nazianzus and others, clearly God is vast, complicated, and beyond the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 5.



human ability to circumscribe the totality of the Divine in our own minds. But at the same time, our theology, our concepts of God, determine what we think is possible, and what we think is not possible. Our theology impacts how we understand power, how power works in our lives and in the world. It's how we understand just or unjust uses of power. Theology frames the importance of humility (or lack thereof), as theology demands we consider that there is something greater than the self. Thus, theology, by its nature, *has* to be public.

Again, most of my public theological reflection has come in my preaching. In this task, I have always striven to connect the ancient testimonies of scripture with modern life and experiences. Theology is not merely an object for display in a museum of ancient artifacts, but it is, rather, a living exercise, so I have endeavored to awaken ancient passages with historical context, trying to make intelligent connections between the “then” of the Bible, and the “now” of our modern context. (I hasten to add here that the value of including context in such discussions, whether historical or modern, is itself an acknowledgement of the *public* role of this discourse. A passage's context is the community of people involved in its origin, stewardship, repetition, recording, translation, telling, retelling, hearing, and interpretation. In other words—context *is* the public.

I have also used preaching to try and expand people's theological imagination; to examine traditional concepts of God, and encourage broader understandings. If someone's concept of God is limited or narrow, this is not necessarily their fault. It is most likely exactly the concept they were taught at some point. Many churches are perfectly fine with limited theological concepts. They make things easier. Or, maybe someone left church as a young person, and did not realize that those of us who stayed

continued to expand our ideas of God. This practice—leaving church some time in adolescence—leads many to assume religion is something one does as a child. But my challenge, my calling, is to demonstrate that a relationship with God is neither naive, nor childish. A more mature relationship with God is not only possible, it is, one hopes, deeply rewarding. It allows us to thrive in a religiously diverse world with less fear and anxiety, less worrying about what people think, either to judge them, or fear their judgment of us. Even for many who stayed in church, their concepts of God are easily out-thought, thus betraying some of our most enduring theologians.

To be clear, I am not engaging in public theology because there is a dearth of it. On the contrary, there is a significant volume of public theology. It is the quality of it that needs improvement. At CTS, I was encouraged by colleagues, and the teaching of then-president Susan Thistlethwaite, to engage in public theology. At CTS, we largely understood it to mean *theology for the public square*. In other words, theological conversation or engagement without the barriers or containment of a church, or faith institution. It was also understood that such engagement was meant to be on behalf of social justice. In Prof. Thistlethwaite's Public Theology class, we each started a blog, and published our theological reflections on public issues. I have been involved in public theology this way for many years, joining protests, writing editorials, and speaking publicly on issues of justice. I have felt righteous in doing so, and have received a great deal of appreciation for this work. I happily engaged in this work because I wanted to be a counter-balancing voice to what I perceive as the dominant Christian voice in the public square, the conservative voice which is far more interested in building a Christian empire, judging people's behavior, or, seemingly, bringing people to their church. To be

clear, I have not changed any of my commitments or opinions, however, I have grown discouraged about the degree to which any of this may actually improve the human condition.

Current CTS president Brad Braxton addresses this impulse, to engage in public theology, in his new book *Open: Unorthodox Thoughts on God and Community*. He writes, “The goal is not to invade the public square with Christian imperialism disguised as evangelism. Rather, our calling as believers is to improve public conversation and conduct through distinctive if not unique, values and practices.”<sup>10</sup> Braxton thus articulates a concern which has been steadily brewing in me over the past several years, as I’ve observed colleagues and allies become increasingly visible at exactly the same rate as division seems to increase in society. Now, when I say “increasingly visible”, I should specify—I mean increasingly *acrimonious*. Publicly standing up on behalf of love and justice is important. But if the advocates of love and justice mirror the same tone of, “we’re right and you’re wrong,” which has (rightly) turned many people off from church, a) we are not modeling the love in which we claim to believe, and b) we are actually *increasing* the sum total of judgment and antagonism in society. Trying to build an empire, even if theoretically on behalf of love and justice, is still imperialism. My vision aligns with Braxton’s—to improve public conversation and conduct by helping people to expand their theological imagination.

So I am committed to being a public theologian, but what is my intentionality around audience? What is the public in which I imagine myself doing theology? This is a

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<sup>10</sup> Braxton, Brad, *Open: Unorthodox Thoughts on God and Community*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2023, p.94.

question which may be overlooked in some conversations about public theology because “public” is often understood to be a more permeable space compared to the space within, say, the confines of a religious institution. But of course, all theologians have a “public” of a sort. If one teaches in a seminary or university, one’s “public” is one’s students, peers, and whomever else may read whatever the publish. As a pastor, my public is the congregation of the Federated Church of Martha’s Vineyard. We have learned how to worship online, thanks to a global pandemic, but we have thus far done more to expand our *potential* audience, than our actual audience.

I am committed to remaining in the pulpit, and continue writing for that public. This happens through writing prayers, hymn lyrics, and other liturgical pieces with the goal of expanding our language about God, and hopefully by extension, our collective theological imagination. A great deal of ink has been spilled speculating about the decline in church attendance over the past several decades. I have a number of theories myself, some of which I have already discussed here. Liturgical theology has simply not kept up with the complexity of human life. It has either valiantly held onto formulations or values which no longer work in a pluralistic society, or depended upon significant theological education which most people no longer receive. So people are either turned off by a church which feels aloof or oblivious to their lives, or because the liturgical language is foreign to them. Updating the language of prayers and hymns could, possibly, have a chance of at least helping people stay awake and pay attention in church, if not also open up their imagination beyond the vending machine God.

But I am also interested in reaching out beyond church, to open doors and conversations outside the institution. Through writing, I hope to be invitational, but also

hold up mirrors in which readers might reflect, and hopefully recognize themselves. I want to explore characters who are realistic, deep, three dimensional, complicated, flawed, messy; characters who fall in love, and are loved. I want to include social justice values such as organically ignoring heteronormativity—just showing queer characters who love each other and are loved. I want to tell funny stories because laughter is healing, and it only comes when one recognizes something of oneself in an other person. (Laughter is also one of the best anti-anxiety drugs there is, and it is sorely lacking in theological discourse.) I want to tell stories which are fun, whimsical, stories in which surprising things happen, magical things, which inspire wonder and yearning for better ways of being, thinking, and doing.

Gareth Higgins' has a reflection on shelter in his book, *How Not to Be Afraid*.<sup>11</sup> He describes an experience on a Irish mountain top, in a terrible rainstorm, where the precipitation was coming sideways at him and his group. They found relief from the storm in a stone shelter. Though it did not make the rain go away, the shelter did render the rain irrelevant. Higgins' reflection gave me the idea of creating stories in which readers might experience that kind of shelter. As the psalmist prays in Psalm 46, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Stories could be one way to manifest that sacred Presence, which cannot make life's storms go away, but can perhaps render the storms irrelevant.

Creating safety from danger however is not unambiguously good. Fragile people need safety. And some readers might assume that safety means they are free from confrontation. But if someone is confronted about something for which they should be

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<sup>11</sup> Gareth Higgins, *How Not to Be Afraid: Seven Ways to Live When Everything Seems Terrifying*, (Minneapolis, MN, Broadleaf Books, 2021).

justly held accountable, if someone has actually done something wrong, what does safety, shelter, refuge, or sanctuary mean, in that case? There are two very different contexts of fragility. One is fragility of the oppressed, people who have been actually harmed, and need some protection in order to heal. But the other kind of fragility is fragility of the privileged. This kind of fragility is also fragility—but healing from it cannot mean an avoidance of confrontation. On the contrary, mirrors are necessary to see the reality of the harm of privilege. If we have convinced ourselves of our superiority through false stories—stories of entitlement for ourselves, and/or stories of unworthiness of others—we need to confront those lies and create new stories of equity and interdependence.

Can I be a storyteller who creates sanctuaries to protect the vulnerable from potential poachers, while also creating mirrors in which the poachers might understand themselves in different ways? Can stories convey the universality of suffering, and the interdependence we have upon each other and creation, in such a way that encourages uncomfortable people to stay engaged with hard truths? Can stories hold the fragility of the oppressed in tender care, while the fragility of the privileged is deliberately deconstructed?

I will obviously not do all of this on one project, or even, necessarily, do all of this altogether. But my first attempt is a fiction project which I am writing for this doctoral program, and it is intentionally (albeit perhaps ironically) designed to reach beyond institutional boundaries. It is a novelization of the book of Job, written for middle schoolers. Job is one of the oldest stories in the Bible, and has lasted, I think, because

of the reality of suffering, and the age-old question: why do bad things happen to good people? There is a lot in Job which can open up the conversations I want to encourage — characters who are good, but who suffer, friends who are well-intentioned, not bad people themselves, but they are stuck in privileged ways of thinking about suffering. And ultimately, there's the confrontation in which God asks Job, "who are you to question me?," after which the only response is to quietly wonder, in awe of all existence— realizing what a miracle is is that we get to exist at all, that we get to experience anything, even if it is pain and suffering.

The main character in my novel is an eighth grade girl named Jo, who's a good kid, going through a terrible year. Changing the gender of the main character from the biblical original is one immediate way of expanding our imaginations about this ancient story, but so too is setting it in modern times, in the fictional Aramson<sup>12</sup> Middle School, full of all the tween-age instability that defines any middle school experience. Jo goes through the year experiencing terrible classes, inedible cafeteria food, cystic acne, a very annoying little brother, and to top it off—her father is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Her friends, Billie, Ellie, and Zoe,<sup>13</sup> do their best to be helpful, but are ultimately, mostly, not. Billie just wants Jo to pull herself together, nose-to-the-grindstone style. Ellie thinks retail therapy will solve everything, and Zoe is convinced Jo has done something to deserve all this bad karma. The book climaxes in a conversation between Jo and her principal, Ms. Asher (a woman in the role of God is another way of

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<sup>12</sup> "Uz Middle School" would be distractingly strange, so, since Genesis 10:23, notes that Uz is one of the sons of Aram, "Aramson" became the name of Jo's middle school. It's biblical enough for purists, but not so much it makes skeptics suspicious.

<sup>13</sup> Modern, feminine versions of Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar—see note 12 about purists and skeptics

expanding theological imagination), and in this conversation, the principal basically tells Jo to get over herself and appreciate what she has. Principal Asher does this more delicately than God does it in Job, but I think the message will get through more effectively this way, that existence in and of itself is a miracle. (Or in other words, “existence is pure gift.”<sup>14</sup>)

I cannot predict whether the novel will get published, or shared beyond my own social circle. Nor can I control whether or not the religious connections with the Book of Job are made with the audience. That will somewhat depend on decisions related to publishing and marketing. Some people may be *more* interested in reading it if they know about the biblical connections, but in that case, they may possibly have issues with some of the expansion concepts (e.g. a woman in the role of God). But at the same time, if I am too explicit about the biblical connections, I could turn off other potential readers. My intention is to use fiction (or fictionalized scripture, phrases which are their own problems for some) to try and find a way into a reader’s theological imagination, not by didactically telling them about God, but by coming alongside their own experiences of suffering, acknowledging their questions, and then, in the case of this project, gently leading the conversation away from the question about why God/power doesn’t stop bad things from happening, or why life is not all sunshine and lollipops, and toward an appreciation of our imperfect lives as they are. Without me explicitly saying so, Jo (and the audience, hopefully) learns to begin the theological task with humility—letting go of thinking we have (or should have) control of the universe, and we begin to let go of the transactional expectation that if we are good, we should expect some kind of reward.

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<sup>14</sup> Francisco Morales Torres, 97.



(And if there's an ancillary benefit, perhaps readers may also learn what is not so helpful to friends going through hardships.)

Fostering humility can have a shadow side, but my intention is not to diminish the human self, but rather, to generate the desire to build connections beyond our selves, to relate empathetically with our fellow creatures, and to open up to a concept of God or spirituality, or some kind of ultimate concern. Stories like Jo's could, hopefully, be a means through which such humility and connection begins to occur, or at least, be imagined.

I suppose I could write entirely original stories which are not based on books of the Bible. Or I could write based on other ancient stories, as Rick Riordan has done very successfully with stories about ancient Greek, Norse, and Egyptian Gods. The Bible, however, aside from being the sacred text of our Christian tradition, is a good source of ancient stories about how humans have interacted with each other and with God. Some of these stories describe ways in which humans have created justice, or threatened it. There are stories about authority—both divine and human authority—and its responsible or irresponsible use. Now, I realize this may be ironic, as I am appearing to both appreciate and deconstruct institutionalization, but I actually still believe in institutions. When churches are at their best, they do remarkable things, and provide communities of support and encouragement for millions of people. They also can cause great harm and discord. Similarly, though I am not a biblical idolator, I have become a surprising apologist for the Bible. Honestly—the reason I love the Bible is a little salty, but I love the Bible because, like other institutions, it is as fucked up as we are. It contains incredible stories which create inspiration and wonder. It also contains jarring

inconsistencies and probably raises far more questions than it answers. But we humans also contain incredible stories which inspire and move us, and we are also jarringly inconsistent. If human life is precious, beautiful, wondrous, as well as painful, violent, and occasionally incomprehensible, why shouldn't our sacred text embody all of that as well?

In preaching, I enjoy taking difficult or annoying Biblical texts and finding something of value in them. It could be a text that's violent, misogynistic, xenophobic, or appears to be exclusivistic. There is no shortage of texts which have such outdated language or anachronisms in one way or another. Some of my colleagues would tend to ignore these passages, and there are some which would appropriately be labeled, in the common language of the internet, NSFW<sup>15</sup>. My willingness to not just talk about some of these texts, but also to explore beyond surface level interpretations (which tend to justify bad behavior or theology), is a way of modeling how to engage scripture without fear. By extension, it also demonstrates how to be less anxious about other things in life from which we may want to similarly turn away.

I have a number of tools I use for this in preaching and teaching. One is something I have mentioned earlier here, but which learned from CTS Professor JoAnne Terrell. This is to imagine a difficult text as if it were a mirror, wondering, where in this story do we see something of ourselves reflected back at us? Another tool is to simply tell the story of the passage, pointing out the various characters within it, and looking at the story from their diverse points of view. I then encourage listeners to think about a character with whom they identify, and consider why we feel a connection with

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<sup>15</sup> In this case, Not Safe For *Worship*

certain characters. If a passage seems harsh in tone, say, in one of Paul's epistles, I've also invited my audience to give Paul the benefit of the doubt. Rather than just assuming him to be an egotistical jerk, what if we were to practice charity of mind? Could we assume that he sincerely had the best intentions, and if so, even if we still disagree, could it help us to understand his point of view? These preaching strategies will come into play as I consider reimagining ancient stories in a different form.

To say a bit more about process, I want to note something from my sermon-writing process. Before setting out to write a sermon, I begin with a prayer, from Isaiah 50:4, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning, God wakens—wakens my ear—to listen as those who are taught." I repeat this prayer to remind myself both of my calling, as a teacher and preacher, but also stay humble—to listen, as the student I still am. A good preacher, a good storyteller, must be first a good listener. That said, there is an infinite amount of material to which I could be listening—some of it helpful, some of it innocuous, and some of it toxic. So, to what should I be listening?

Attending to this with intentionality is critical not only to maintain my own mental health, but also in light of the privileges I occupy. Over the past couple of years, I have become more intentional about curating my "media diet" as to which writers, filmmakers, artists' work I "consume". I am intentionally seeking out creators who have a different point of view from my own—women, people of color, or openly elsewhere from where I am on the sexuality or gender spectrum. This change in my diet is helping to broaden my idea of how stories can be told. Additionally, for most of my life I have been the proverbial news or politics "junkie", eagerly consuming news about what is going on in

the world. This feeds my interest in public theology, and has given me plenty of food for analytical thought in terms of thinking about issues of social justice. For a class in our program, Gareth Higgins assigned us two books, one being his own (referenced previously) and another by Rutger Bregman<sup>16</sup>. In both texts, the authors encourage readers to take in less news because, generally speaking, the news is intended to make us anxious. Reporters of politics and world events are also seeking audience, and even beyond the old adage, “if it bleeds it leads”, the more anxious their audience, the more interested the audience will be in seeking more news. This is true across the political spectrum—liberal to conservative. To be honest, I probably should have figured out the danger about this sooner, considering my use of the word “junkie” in relationship with news consumption—not just here, but frankly for as long as I can remember. Alas, sometimes we need someone to hold up a mirror. Even (if not especially) those of us who claim the calling of holding mirrors for others.

In my listening, as I think I have shown here too, I have heard a lot from those who may never come into a church building or open a Bible. What I clearly hear is how important it is to lower or eliminate the barrier of what one believes or does not believe. Only if people trust that their lack of belief, or their different belief will not be judged will they open up consideration of whatever story I have to tell. And so if I want to create safe refuges for these individuals, I may only get as far as stories about acts of compassion, thoughtfulness, generosity, all of which are acts of humility, and thus, though I may not be able to say so, the beginning of spiritual practice.

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<sup>16</sup> Rutger Bregman, *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, (New York, Back Bay Books, 2019).

None of this endeavor is for the purpose of enhancing my ego, or even to build an empire of compassionate, justice seeking folks. Nor am I motivated by any kind of imperialistic desire to *win souls for Jesus*. I am doing this because it is a way I can share good news, improve the public conversation and conduct, and expand our collective theological imagination.

To be honest, I've wanted to write for a long time. My bachelor's degree is in English, and in my early adulthood, I imagined myself going into journalism, or writing of one sort or another. Part of my hesitation has been that, really, the last person anyone needs to hear from is another white, middle class, American, Protestant cis-gender male in a heterosexual relationship. People like me have held the microphone for far too long. And yet...we live in a fallen world. There are people who, because of white supremacy, and misogyny, and heteronormativity, may be more likely to read something from someone like me. I could be a Trojan horse for theological open-mindedness! Even if that does not happen, conversations about social justice have gotten so acrimonious, that fiction may be the only way to explain the clear values of justice within the Gospel without being argumentative. Stories may be the pathway from transactionalism toward transformation.

Having taught seminary students a bit over the years, I have pointed out to them that in spite of polity, and in spite of some Christian rhetoric which pushes hard against this, ministers do have power. And power is not inherently a bad thing. The critical thing is to use the power we have, *for good*. Many good pastors eschew the power they have, thinking that power is inherently negative. It is not. In fact, eschewing power can actually cause more problems for a community, by creating a vacuum of moral leadership. So

maybe this whole doctoral program is the Holy Spirit's mirror to me, reflecting back the things I have taught and said, telling me to use my power, and use it responsibly. Use it for good. Use it to create a more just and merciful world.

Story has power. In some cases, story is the power. Used for good, with thoughtfulness and sensitivity, stories can expand people's theological imagination. They can open up people's minds about themselves, about God, and about what's possible. Writing can make space to invite people into the conversation who have felt left out, or left behind. Writing can demonstrate the intellectual depth of theology, showing how God is in fact, more than a broken vending machine. Ancient stories from scripture can yet reveal meaning for us in our modern lives, even centuries removed from the originators of those stories.

*Jo*

a novel

by Mark T. Winters

Submitted as the Creative Portion of his final project  
for his Doctor of Ministry in Creative Writing and Public Theology

Mr. Jimmy Cajoleas, advisor

April 2024

## Chapter 1

Jo Harrison's life was not far off from perfect, as far as she could tell. She had two parents who loved her, and occasionally drove her nuts, but that was normal for parents. She had a little brother who almost always drove her nuts, but that was normal for little brothers. Jo had great friends, most of whom she'd known her whole life. This fall, she was going into eighth grade at Aramson Middle School, which, although a middle school, was entirely tolerable. Even more so, now she'd be in the oldest class. Sixth and seventh grade were a bit hit and miss in terms of tolerability, but being in the oldest class in school was definitely the best place to be.

This summer, her family took a vacation to Florida. They spent a lot of time on the wide sandy beach in Clearwater. Jo only got a little sunburned on her shoulders. They went to the aquarium and saw rescued dolphins. Her dad, Jason, made sure Jo and her brother Ethan got ice cream every night. It was the best. Her dad said so, one night watching the sun set over the Gulf of Mexico: "This is the best," he said, "sitting on the beach, with my family, watching the sun set over the Gulf. I could stay here forever."

"You forgot 'eating ice cream,'" said Jo.

"Well that goes without saying. Ice cream is a prerequisite for anything claiming to be the best."

"I miss my friends."

"Well kid, we can only afford a room big enough for the four of us, so, sorry, but not too sorry."

"I know, I just wish they could be here."

"Why, so Ethan can embarrass you even more often than he does already?"



Jo laughed. “No, I just keep getting texts from them.”

“About what?” Jason hesitatingly asked.

“Nice try. I’m not telling you,” Jo replied.

Jason let out a relieved sigh.

“Why’d you ask if you didn’t want to know?”

“What makes you think I didn’t want to know?”

“Dad—”

“I’m trying to be an attentive parent. Attentive parents are supposed to be interested in our kids’ lives.”

“‘Supposed to be’?” Jo asked. “What wise parenting experts think adults want to know about what thirteen-year-olds are gossiping about?”

“Oh Jo, my dear daughter, you have no idea. There is an extremely powerful cabal of self-appointed parenting experts. They write articles, post blogs, and film videos of themselves, all to make modern parents feel guilty for everything we’re doing wrong.”

“Ah, don’t worry about them. You’re doing ok.”

Jason stopped eating his ice cream, put his hand to his chest, and looked meaningfully at his daughter. He then wiped a fake tear from each eye. “That may be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me!”

“Ugh,” Jo said, rolling her eyes, and immediately regretting the compliment she had given her father. She waved her hand, swatting his sarcasm out of the air like it was a fly.

Jo's mom, Wendy, and Ethan walked up to them at that moment. "You get anything for us," Wendy asked, "or did you eat ours too?" Jason leaned over and pulled his wife and son's orders up off the towel next to him. "One strawberry shake for you, my dear, and a partially melted, hot fudge sundae for my favorite ten-year-old."

"Thanks dear," Wendy smiled eagerly at her milkshake. Ethan grabbed his sundae like a starving animal. "Ethan—someday you'll learn to think a bit further in advance about your ice cream order. You knew it was going to be here for a while. Look, it's like soup now."

Ethan shrugged off his mother's concern, shoving a giant spoonful of ice cream, whipped cream, and chocolate into his mouth. "ISH—ISHUS!" he said, though a mouthful of frozen dairy product. They couldn't make out his exact words, but his family figured he was basically content with his decision.

"Everything ok up in the room?" Jason asked his wife.

"Yeah. We finally found the shirt he's been looking for. It was under the bomb fragments which his suitcase has become." Ethan was notorious for his lack of organization in packing. It was a small miracle if one of their family trips didn't also include multiple stops to pick up all the things Ethan had forgotten.

"By the way," Wendy said, between sips of her milkshake, "you had a voicemail on your phone from the doctor's office." Jason had intentionally left his phone up in the room so he could enjoy just being on the beach.

"Huh. Wonder what that's about," he said. He'd had a recent physical, so it was probably related to that. Although usually the follow ups just came through the app or an email. He checked his watch. "It's too late to call them back now. I'll call in the morning."

He then considered their early morning departure, and added, “Or maybe just wait until we get back.”

“Probably fine to wait,” said Wendy. “Jo wanted to get breakfast at that pancake place, then we’ve got a long drive after that. You could call from the car, I guess.”

“Nah, I’ll just wait.

“Dad,” Jo spoke up, “what if it’s serious? It’s okay—we don’t have to do the pancakes.” She had seen an online post about these amazing-looking apple pancakes, and had been dreaming about them ever since. But something about this didn’t feel right.

“Probably just a satisfaction survey,” her dad said. “No biggie. I’ll call when we get home.”

Jo leaned on her dad’s shoulder. Wendy leaned into him from the other side. By this point, the bottom half of Ethan’s face was covered in melted, whitish goo, with an occasional streak of brown. He was almost finished obliterating his sundae, but had noticed a seagull nearby. He was digging his toes into the sand, looking back and forth, clearly judging the distance between him and the bird, when Jo noticed.

“Don’t do it bro.”

“What?!” replied her brother, with feigned innocence, spoon and cup hands in the air, though he did pull his toes back, and turned away from the unsuspecting bird.

“That’s what I thought.”

Jo always knew when her brother was up to something.

The sun was sinking below the horizon, but Jo continued to feel its lingering warmth on her skin. Holding the crumpled napkin and cone wrapper in her hand, she

could still taste the caramel, chocolate, and vanilla flavors in her mouth. Even as her little brother threatened to instigate avian chaos over their fellow tourists' heads, most of whom were by now starting to pack up their folding chairs and coolers, Jo felt a kind of contentment here on the beach. The gentle sound of the waves, the expanse of the Gulf of Mexico, the colors in the sky.

She reviewed the day—swimming in the warm ocean, sand in her hair at lunch, the smells of sunblock and saltwater, playing frisbee with her parents while Ethan tried to build a sandcastle much too close to the waves. As much as she missed her friends and wanted to keep up on what was happening back home, she also kinda liked how the beach seems to make time move differently. Like she was just a little bit outside of time, or maybe, alongside it, parallel, but not within it. Like in a kind of Neverland. Just Jo, her family, and of course hundreds of other beach-goers from New York, or Chicago, or somewhere in between. *I guess it wasn't too private*, she thought, *but maybe this time-out-of-time feeling is why people like coming here*. The waves, the sand, the warm ocean water all have a way of making the drama of normal life feel less important. Like, if you stay long enough, maybe you could make time stop altogether.

Alas, the increasing darkness rather rudely contradicted these thoughts. Wendy got up, and started collecting their towels, hats, and sunglasses into their beach bag.

“Can't we just hang out a little longer?” Jo asked.

“We still need to get the room packed and ready to be out the door in the morning, kiddo,” her dad replied.

“And did you hear me mention Ethan's suitcase?” added her mom.

As if on cue, Ethan ran up to them, holding a small crab in his hand. “Can we keep it?! Pleeeeeease?”

“You’re an idiot,” said Jo.

“No, Ethan,” said Wendy, with an exasperated sigh. “We went to the aquarium yesterday, that doesn’t mean we’re starting our own tonight.”

“Aww,” said Ethan, as he dejectedly dropped the crab onto the sand. “Bye, Grabby,” he said, sadly.

“You named it?” Jo asked.

Ethan held up his pinky finger, which appeared to have a little pinch mark on it.

Jo shook her head and rolled her eyes at her brother. She then gave in to the inevitable ending of the day, found her flip-flops, put a t-shirt on over her swimsuit, and gently shook the sand out of her towel.

“How is it,” Wendy observed, “that when you do that, you just shake the towel gently, but when your brother does it, he snaps it like he’s trying to make us all go blind?”

“You know, some families are perfectly happy only having one kid,” Jo replied.

Wendy chuckled and shook her head.

A few phone flashlights were starting to show up and down the beach as it got darker. As Wendy finished packing up the bag, and found her sandals, Jason stared at the spot where the sun used to be. “You ever wonder what fish think of day and night?” he asked. Jo squinted, and looked at him sideways. Jason continued, “Like, you know, how humans used to think there was, like, a God who would strap the sun to a chariot, and drive it across the sky every day? Do you think the fish think that way?”

Without looking up, Wendy turned, and started walking back to their hotel. Over her shoulder, she said, "Maybe you should've asked that cod you ate with your fish and chips for lunch."

Jason laughed.

Back at the room, the family surveyed the mess they'd made over the previous four days. "How much of this do we need to take care of, and how much do we need to tip the housekeeping staff if we leave it behind?" asked Jason.

Jo went to her suitcase and grabbed some clean underwear and her shower bag. "I'm showering tonight."

"Good idea," said her mom. "That'll get us out of here quicker in the morning. Ethan? When was the last time you showered?"

He furrowed his eyebrows, trying to remember, then asked, "Does swimming count?"

"No."

"In that case, I think it was before we left home."

"Gross," said Jo, as she closed the bathroom door.

"You're showering after Jo gets out," said Wendy.

"Aw, do I have to?" he complained.

"Do you want pancakes tomorrow?"

"Yes!"

"Then shower. Otherwise it's yoghurt."

Ethan glowered, but ended his objection. Showering was bad, but yoghurt for breakfast was worse.

## Chapter 2

It was two weeks before the first day of school, and Aramson Middle School Principal Jennifer Asher, and her Assistant Principal Ed Versri were in Principal Asher's office, catching up, and talking about the upcoming year. Asher was a good principal, tough, but fair. Versri was older than his boss by several years, and a bit cynical. Though to be sure, cynicism occasionally comes in handy when disciplining middle schoolers.

"Middle schoolers are utterly irredeemable," said Mr. Versri.

Asher squinted at him. She wasn't convinced.

"Seems like you didn't get enough time off this summer, Ed."

"Seriously," he replied, "if these kids disappeared off the face of the earth for three years, who would care?"

"Oh dear."

"They're loud, awkward, they smell terrible, they run into you for no reason, none of them knows what the heck they're doing, or what they want."

"You do know you work in a middle school, don't you? What you just described is kinda normal."

"No need to remind me! Seriously, Jen, you know these kids make no sense, right? One day, they'll ask you about...I don't know...joining the basketball team. So you say, 'Sure! tryouts are tomorrow!' Then you see the same kid the next day, and you're like, 'Hey! Ready for tryouts this afternoon?' and they look at you like you're an extraterrestrial moron, roll their eyes, and walk away. What's up with that?"



Jen laughed. “They’re middle schoolers, Ed. What do you expect? Messy is kinda their thing.”

“I’m just saying,” Ed continued, “if you shipped them all off to a desert island until they turn fifteen, no one would complain.”

Principal Asher raised an eyebrow at her colleague, but she considered what he said. Aside from definitely needing therapy, somewhere in the midst of her Assistant Principal’s cynicism, underneath his indifference and insensitivity, there was a small kernel of truth. Middle schoolers are a hard bunch to work with. She’d commiserated with teachers many times about inconsistencies and unpredictabilities. She’d had meetings, long phone calls, and exchanged countless emails with exasperated parents. But she loved these kids. She’d been principal at Aramson for eight years and had taught seventh grade math for six years before that. For reasons she didn’t always understand, Jennifer Asher was born to work with middle schoolers. It takes a certain kind of person to ride the tsunami of hormones and drama that defines sixth through eighth graders, but Jen was one of those people. She knew how to handle them. Or maybe she just knew what to take seriously, and what she could ignore, which might be all one needs. But, she also understood where her vice principal was coming from. Could she help him to see what she sees in their students, that these kids did have some redeeming value?

“I think you’re just burned out, Ed. You might try therapy. Or maybe a sabbatical.”

“You think me taking a break is going to have any impact on the sanity of middle schoolers?”

“I get it, we’ve both been doing this a long time. Tell you what,” said Asher, “I’ll bet you \$100 that I can find you ten kids by winter break that will make you eat your words. Ten middle schoolers whose kindness and maturity will prove that these kids are not as horrible as you think they are.”

“Ten? I’d be shocked if you could fine one!”

“Shocked enough to bet? If I find just one redeemable middle schooler? Come on. I’d feel bad taking your money.”

Ed considered this for a second. “Can we make this a little more interesting? Tell me who you’re thinking about, and let me mess with them a little.” Asher wrinkled her brow, deeply uncertain about where he was going with this. “Nothing cruel,” Ed quickly clarified, “just, you know, giving them some...let’s say ‘opportunities’...to see just how ‘kind and mature’ they are. You’ll be paying up by Halloween.”

“This sounds like a terrible idea.”

“I’m not going to cause any permanent damage, just, you know, change their schedule, move their locker, make ’em TA for Hubbard, or something like that.”

“You’re sadistic.” Jen thought for a minute. There were so many ways this could go wrong. But she was also fairly confident she could win. “You’re on. \$100?”

“Sure.”

“But—minor things. Nothing unsafe, nothing that’s going to mess with a kid’s future. Check in with me so I have a heads up before you do anything, or I’ll consider it cheating, and the bet’s off.”

“Deal.”

"And for God's sake, keep it between us. Kids are suspicious enough as it is, and I don't want any lawsuits."

"Jen, have you no faith in me?"

"Frankly Ed, not a lot."

"Aww, come on. This'll be fun! Who's our victim?"

"'Victim,' you say? I say 'hero'. Or rather, 'heroine'. There's no way you're turning this one."

Jo had picked out her first day outfit a few days earlier. But then she changed her mind three more times, only to arrive at the same conclusion she'd come to initially. Her new white sneakers, ripped blue jeans, the Nirvana t-shirt she found in the basement, and zip-up navy blue hoodie. Yeah, this was it.

She then went to her backpack. She and her mom had gone school shopping, but she double checked, going through the checklist in her head. *Wait—where was the spiral notebook? Oh right*, she remembered, she was going to reuse the one from last year. She peeled off the old unicorn sticker, tore out the three pages that had been randomly scribbled on, and shoved it in her backpack.

Her parents were already downstairs, still in their bathrobes. She had to catch the bus fairly early, and her parents weren't morning people. So they weren't usually up when Jo had to leave. But this was the first day of school, so there they both were, mom drinking coffee, dad staring into space creepily, while Jo scarfed down some cereal. Jason also couldn't stop yawning.

"You guys all right?" Jo asked.

“What?” Jo’s voice seemed to startle her father. “Sorry—not awake yet. Not really paying attention.” Jason blinked a few times, and stretched his arms out as he yawned again.

Jo finished her cereal, got up from the table, and grabbed her backpack. Now for the obligatory first-day photo shoot in front of the house.

“Wait,” Wendy stopped them, “shouldn’t we get Ethan so he can be in the picture too?”

“Mom! No!”

“He’s sound asleep, hon,” said Jason.

“Fine,” Wendy relented, “I guess it’s just Jo then.”

“So sorry to disappoint,” said Jo, though she was relieved to not have to deal with her brother this early in the morning.

The three of them went out onto the front porch. Jo put on her best fake smile, and looked back and forth between her parents’ phones as they took pictures, until her obligations to their social media accounts had been met. She then turned away, and walked down the driveway, and over to the bus stop on the corner. When she got about a dozen feet from the other couple of kids who’d already congregated, she heard her mom’s voice, shouting over the front lawn. “Oh! Jo! Hold... I just got an email. Your schedule’s changed? Something about...a computer mix up? Here, I’ll text it to you.”

“K, thanks,” Jo shouted back.

But, what was this about? A schedule change before she even got on the bus? This couldn’t be good. She’d registered for classes last spring, why would her schedule be changing? Her mom’s text popped up. The screenshot revealed bad news. She was

supposed to be in a bunch of classes with her three best friends—but now, almost every class was different from what she thought she was getting. Different math class—*Pre-Algebra*? She'd taken that last year. This made no sense. Different ELA, different lunch. And—a TA? For Mr. Hubbard? Hubbard was the sixth-grade science teacher. He was probably the most boring human on the planet, and there'd been rumors about him being a drinker forever. *And what is a TA, anyway?*

Jo was knocked out of her bewilderment by the screeching of brakes, rumbling of a diesel engine, and the unmistakable sound of the opening of a school bus door.

*Here we go*, she thought. But, into what? She was only beginning to realize that she had no idea.

Jo turned, waved at her parents, and got on the bus.

### Chapter 3

Jo made her way toward the back of the bus, toward her friend Billie, who pulled up her backpack to make room. Jo sat down, and shared a knowing look with Billie as they both acknowledged the unique sensory experience of the ubiquitous pleather seats, rusting old metal, and the air of nerves that can only be experienced on a school bus heading for the first day of middle school.

Billie and Jo met in third grade when Billie moved to town from Toronto. It was kinda cool to have a Canadian friend, if not a little exotic. And Jo only occasionally teased Billie about her accent. But having arrived in the United States in third grade, Billie mostly lost the “ehs” fairly soon after her arrival. Jo and Billie were on a soccer team together that first year, but neither kept playing after that. They mostly enjoyed the post-game doughnuts and getting to spend time with each other. The running, the balls flying toward their heads, the early wake-ups on Saturday mornings, the cold weather—that was all much less appealing.

In fifth grade, they both took up an instrument and joined the school band. Billie played French horn, Jo, clarinet. Jo liked that she could shove her clarinet in her backpack. Billie, well, no one picks the French Horn for its ease of carrying.

The two had hung out together a lot over the summer, so they didn’t have much to catch up on. But this latest news was earth-shaking. “Girl—check out my schedule,” Jo said. “My mom got an email from the school this morning saying that my classes have all been changed!” Jo showed Billie her mom’s text with the screenshot of her new schedule.

“What the heck?” Billie said. “Are we still in any classes together?”

“I think just band,” Jo took her phone back, and scrolled through her mom’s email. “I’ve got PE first period...”

“Aww, that sucks! You’re going to stink all day!”

“Right? Ugh. Second period says ‘TA Mr. Hubbard’? What’s a ‘TA’?”

“Teacher’s Assistant, usually. Why are you doing that? I didn’t even know we had TAs in middle school. It’s probably for kiss-asses or nerds.”

“Thanks so much,” said Jo, sarcastically. “I don’t know, I didn’t sign up for it.” Jo was starting to feel a tightness in her chest. “Third period is band, then Pre-Algebra, then fifth period is ELA...wait. Pre-Algebra? Again! We took that last year!”

“Why would you take it again?”

“I’m telling you, I didn’t ask for any of this.”

Billie took her phone out to look at her schedule. Nothing was lining up. They were in different sections of everything but band.

“Jo,” said Billie, “seriously, how did this happen? We registered together last spring. The whole point was that you, me, Zoe, and El would be in classes together.”

“I know!”

“We were supposed to be in the same classes.”

“Right.”

“But these aren’t the same classes at all. We specifically signed up for 6th period PE so we wouldn’t be rank all day, and you’re supposed to be moving up to Algebra like all the rest of us. What the heck is going on?”

“I don’t know. This is seriously weird.” The tightness was getting worse.

“What did your mom say about it?”

Jo looked back at the screen shot her mom forwarded. “It just says there was a computer mix up, and they had to balance out class sizes or something. But that doesn’t explain the math?”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Yeah—what did I do to have to take Pre AI again?”

“Maybe we’ll at least have lunch together,” Billie hoped. It’d be small consolation compared to losing most of their classes together, not to mention they wouldn’t be able to help each other on math. Well, she could help Jo, but Jo probably wouldn’t need it. And Jo definitely wouldn’t be able to help her. But Billie wanted to try and find the bright side of things. “Ah well,” she said. “It stinks, but honestly, how bad can it be? We still have band. And think of it this way: we’ll get in less trouble for talking to each other in other classes.”

Jo was sinking lower and lower in her seat. She wanted off the bus. *Why did this have to happen to her? So what if there were issues with “class sizes.” Why is that her fault? Why does she have to be the one to make up for their mistake? This was so unfair. And why was she a TA?*

“The whole TA thing,” her voice began to take on some of her emotion. “I hated sixth grade science. Why would I want to go back to Hubbard’s class? Do I get paid?”

Billie chuckled. “Wouldn’t that be great? I doubt it.”

“Shouldn’t I have to like, sign up for that? Or be interviewed or something?”

“I don’t know. But,” Billie gestured toward Jo’s phone, “apparently not.”

Phones don’t lie.

Apparently.



Or, at least, emails from the school don't.

"This is gonna suck," Jo said.

"You're being too emo about this. It's only the first day of a whole new school year. It's a blank canvas! A whole new start! And who knows? You might like the TA thing—lording our advanced power and maturity over the lowly sixth graders. At least you probably don't have to be too awake in there."

The bus pulled up at the school, lining up alongside several others, not to mention a corresponding line of minivans and SUVs, parents dropping kids off who lived too close for a bus, but not close enough to walk. Kids were pouring into the school from all directions.

On the way into the school, Jo observed that one could reasonably predict which grade a kid was in based solely on body language. Seventh graders had a year of experience under their belts, so they walked around like they owned the place, overconfidently shouting toward friends, strutting toward their lockers fearlessly. Eighth graders were pretty calm (except Jo), acknowledging friends with waves or nods, not loud and obnoxious like the seventh graders, but nor were they in much of a hurry.

Sixth graders just looked like frightened squirrels. They darted around the other kids, hoping no one would make eye contact, clearly daunted by the whole experience, which was radically different from elementary school—changing classes, multiple teachers, lockers. It was all very frightening.

Jo found her locker, put in her bag, and headed to PE. She hoped that, being early in the year, they would be doing some units outside, which ought to be less

sweaty. The first class didn't tell her much though; they spent most of the period taking role.

Her second class was Hubbard. Jo grabbed her bag from her locker, and took all of her belongings with her, not knowing what she'd need. She had to traverse nearly the entire length of the school, but at least she knew where she was going. It was one of the perks of being an eighth grader, and having been around these halls for a couple of years. This morning however, there were so many lost and confused sixth graders, it might've been faster if she could just walk around the outside of the building. She counted seven students who were crying at their lockers, clearly defeated. There were a bunch of teachers out in the halls trying to help, but the supply of teachers was clearly inadequate for the demand from students.

As Jo arrived at the classroom door, a couple of sixth graders were pressing their bodies into the cinderblock wall. If they'd been wearing white, they may've blended in. Their frightened eyes were darting back and forth between their phones, checking their schedule, the door, which gave away nothing, and each other, which only seemed to make them more anxious.

Jo walked up to them. "Hubbard?" she asked. "Second-period science?"

They just looked at each other, then back at their phones.

Jo waved her hand in their faces, which seemed to alarm them further, but they did look at her. Which is to say, they looked at her hand, then, nervously, up her arm, shoulder, and they really only got as far as her chin. Jo repeated, more slowly, "Mr. Hubbard? Second-period Science?"

Their heads, moving in unison, gave a very slight nod.

"I'm Jo. I'm the TA for this class. Don't really know what that means yet," she said, "but I'll be here with you," attempting to reassure them. Of course, seeing as how Jo herself was somewhat uncertain, her attempt to make them feel better did not have quite as much effect as she'd hoped.

Jo looked left and right, over her shoulder toward the main hallway, then toward the door, to make sure was still closed, and she leaned in. "It'll be okay. Whatever you've heard, he's not that bad. And it's only one class."

This seemed to make them feel marginally better, which Jo could only discern by witnessing their bodies slightly loosen out of their paralysis, and begin to stand, slightly, away from the safety of the wall.

"Come on, let's go in together."

Mr. Hubbard was a legendary teacher at Aramson, but not for good reasons. He had begun teaching there sometime before the Spanish American War, and was probably using the same notes for his lectures. And they were lectures. Hubbard did not have any discussions. He assigned no group work. It was just listening, and taking notes. Apparently, if this method worked for people to learn how to send a telegraph message, it must still be good enough for modern American sixth graders.

If a student had a question in Mr. Hubbard's class, it didn't really matter. They could raise their hand, but Hubbard would ignore them until their arm lost all feeling. If he deigned to acknowledge someone, he'd menacingly look at them over his glasses, as if they were a mosquito he wanted to vaporize from existence with only the power of his gaze. Most people just gave up and put their hand back down, having learned their

lesson. If, however, they had the stamina and temerity to keep their hand up, chances are Hubbard would just move on, and their question would eventually become irrelevant. If they really persisted, and if they were particularly (un?)lucky, the most response he'd give would be a growly, angry, "What!," which was not a question. His clear preference would be that any student thus acknowledged would respond, "Never mind," put their hand down, and be quiet.

Which is what usually happened.

But every now and again, someone would miraculously get to the point where they could verbalize an actual question. Hubbard would maintain his screwed up, angry face while the student was talking. He'd glare at them like he was barely holding in some explosive diarrhea, and they were the only one preventing him from relief. If a question actually got out of a student's mouth, Hubbard's responses varied little. It was either, "That's a stupid question. Just listen to me and write down what I say," or, "I answered that question five minutes ago. Check your notes." Or possibly, "If you needed to know that, it would be in my lecture. Put your hand down and pay attention!" Hubbard was not interested in popularity, trends, changing pedagogical research, or, frankly, student engagement of any kind.

Jo and her two new sixth-grade friends entered the classroom, and were among the last to arrive. Thinking she should probably make herself known, even though Jo had taken his class two years prior, and Hubbard ought to remember her, she nevertheless went up to his desk to introduce herself.

Jo cleared her throat.

No response.

“Mr. Hubbard?”

Still no response.

“Um, Mr. Hubbard?”

“Just take a seat and get out your notebook.”

“I’m Jo? Jo Harrison? Your TA?”

“Oh,” he processed the thought for a second. “Right. I’m uh, not really sure what to do with you yet. Just sit over there in the corner and stay awake.”

“Ok,” Jo said, “got it.”

Jo made her way into the corner, somewhat relieved that at least she could take a bit of a mental vacation, but also thinking that following his instruction to stay awake may be the hardest thing she had to do today.

During band class, Jo updated Billie on what happened in Hubbard’s class. “I don’t know how I’m going to do it, Billie. I might have to start drinking mom and dad’s coffee to stay awake.”

Jo then had Pre-Algebra. She asked Mr. Donald why she was there again. He gave a mildly quizzical look, and shrugged. “Jo, I thought you liked class last year,” he said, as if he might’ve even been slightly offended she didn’t *want* to be there. “Yes,” Jo replied, “but...is it normal to take Pre-Algebra twice?”

Donald lowered his voice. He did not like conflict. “I understand, Jo. Mr. Versri and I talked about this a week ago. While you did technically pass the class—”

“Technically?” Jo interrupted.

“Yes,” Donald continued, “*technically* you passed—but—remember how you missed a couple of weeks?”

“I was sick with COVID! It’s not my f—”

“Yes, Jo,” he cut her off, “but those absences, coupled with barely passing, Mr. Versri and I agreed that repeating the class would be good for you. And, since taking Pre-Algebra in seventh grade is considered advanced, you’re not behind. Think of it as a chance to cement your skills before moving on.” Mr. Donald could tell he wasn’t convincing her. “You’re still at grade level,” he added, “and who was ever hurt by a little review?”

*A little review?* Jo thought, *going through a whole year of a class for a second time was not “a little review,” it was torture.* She was neither pleased, nor convinced by Mr. Donald’s explanation. But, the classroom was also filling up, and her classmates were starting to get curious about her hushed conversation with their teacher. So she also realized she probably didn’t have much of a choice. She took a seat.

That tightening in her chest was turning into nausea. Which might’ve been helped if she could eat something, but being in Pre-Algebra fourth period meant that Jo had third lunch. So her class had to wait through the whole period before getting to eat. Often, third lunch also meant that the lunch room was running out of food by the time students got down there. By the time Jo and her class got to the cafeteria this first day of school, Jo’s options were either some kind of unrecognizable, mystery meat patty and instant mashed potatoes (the consistency of which was just this side of sawdust), or, she could go to the salad bar.

Jo opted for the salad bar.

Unfortunately, that was not much better of an option. There was a tray of something under a sign saying, “Green Salad,” but whomever filled the tray underneath that sign must have thought it was merely a suggestion. Or perhaps students were meant to transform the white and yellow iceberg lettuce into “Green Salad” with the simple power of their imaginations.

Next to the allegedly “Green Salad”, there was a small container of desiccated carrots, looking as if they’d been shredded by an angry robot at least five years ago, a bowl of radishes that clearly no one had touched, and then there was a third container which had once had tomatoes in it. Jo only knew this however, because there were a few sad yellowish tomato seeds remaining on the bottom.

*No big deal*, Jo thought, optimistically, *nothing a bit of ranch dressing can’t fix*. But of course, adding insult to injury, they were also out of ranch dressing. Jo tried valiantly, taking the mini plastic ladle, scraping at the sides of the pot to harvest what she could, but as she then flung the tiny bits of creamy, herbal white dressing onto her iceberg lettuce, only a few tiny strands of ranch came off.

As she turned toward the tables with her tray of lettuce, Jo realized what was even worse than having nothing of real value to eat. She was the only one of her friends to have third lunch. It all would’ve been more tolerable if she could commiserate with at least one of them, but by the end of her lunch period, Jo was not only still hungry, the chest tightness was starting to throb.

This year was off to a terrible start.

After lunch, Jo had English Language Arts with Ms. Carpenter. Ms. Carpenter was younger than average (for a teacher), so she had really only been teaching for a few years. She dressed casually in long sleeve shirts, jeans, and Chuck Taylors. Ms. Carpenter had a reputation for being relentlessly positive. She was also always so relaxed, usually smiling, or at least there was a satisfied smirk on her face, like she'd read ahead to the last chapter of life, and knew everything was going to turn out just fine. There was simply no way to bring Ms. Carpenter down.

Rumors had spread that during one class in her first year of teaching, a kid tripped on something, fell, and hit his head on a desk on the way down. He was not only out cold, the blood started pouring out of his forehead. Students started to freak out, but Ms. Carpenter just calmly put her book down on her desk, and told a student to run to the office, which, of course, he promptly did. She then asked a second student to take out her phone, and call 911. When the girl reached into her pocket, Ms. Carpenter said, "Aha! I knew you hadn't left it in your locker!" The girl froze, worried she might be in trouble, but Carpenter just said, "Good thing. Who knows how long the office is going to take?" The student was still somewhat frozen, which finally got Carpenter slightly animated—"It's okay! Call 911!" So she did.

According to the story, the young first-year teacher then went to her coat rack, pulled out her own silk scarf, went back to the kid who'd fallen, and gently tied the scarf around his bleeding head. Then she looked up at her terrified class, and said, "Relax everyone, it's just a little blood! Anyone want to pick up where we left off?" The class was stunned, as much by what happened as that she wanted to keep reading.

"Is he dead?" one student asked.



“Of course not, he just got knocked out. He’ll be fine, I’m sure.” But everyone also saw Miss Carpenter pick up his wrist to check. “I can feel a pulse! It’s serious, but bodies are amazingly resilient. He’ll heal from this, no problem. Come on guys, let’s keep reading!”

The class was only marginally comforted by their teacher’s reassurance. They might’ve actually been even less worried had she not exhibited such a casual attitude toward what appeared to be a fairly major head injury. Nevertheless, her calm demeanor did prevent the eighth graders from completely panicking. Which of course, would’ve helped no one.

Sadly, by the time Jo had Ms. Carpenter for eighth grade ELA, all eyewitnesses to this event had long since moved on to high school. So who knew if the rumors were actually true? (Although, there was a strange, dark stain on the carpet toward the front of the classroom.)

Being the first class of the year, Ms. Carpenter called the roll with much more ceremony than usual. She practically sang each student’s name, like it was some kind of poetic lyric in her mouth, an ode to nomenclature, which, come to think of it, might’ve been the point. Once each student identified themselves, she smiled at them warmly, her twinkling eyes lingering on their self-conscious faces, as she tried to memorize the connection between the name and face. It’s the kind of thing that seems nice at first, but after doing it several times, starts to feel less sincere. Jo couldn’t help thinking, *if this woman is as happy to see me as she is to see Jeremy Babbit, she clearly doesn’t know either of us.*

Ms. Carpenter then started to sing her way through the syllabus, telling the class what they'd be reading this year. They were going to start the year with *Anne Frank, Diary of a Young Girl*. Jo wondered if any of her classmates would risk a head injury to get out of it.

"Did you know," Ms. Carpenter stopped to ask the class, "Anne Frank and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were born the same year! Isn't that fascinating?" No, they almost universally thought, it was not fascinating, but Miss Carpenter never let surly teenagers dampen her enthusiasm. Jo's mind started to wander. *How many people were born in 1929? Is it really that remarkable that two famous 20th century figures were born the same year?*

Her empty stomach started growling.

The last class of the day, sixth-period social studies, wasn't all that bad. But considering she hadn't had anything substantive to eat since before 7AM, not to mention all the other delightful surprises of the day, Jo really just wanted to go home.

At long last, the final bell rang, and it was time to go. Happily, her dad's work schedule was such that he could usually give her a ride, a welcome relief from the crowded school bus. Especially since, going home, it would smell decidedly worse than in the morning. Jo went out to the car rider line, found her dad's old, faded blue two-door. Bad as it was, the embarrassment she felt getting into her dad's car was worth it not to have to ride the bus. And at least it was easier to quickly find it amongst the soccer mom mobiles. Jo opened the passenger side, pulled the release lever on the

seat, threw her bag in the back, pushed the seat back to its upright position, and got in the shotgun seat.

“Kiddo! How was the first day of the last year of middle school?!”

Jo just glared at him.

“Yikes,” Jason’s head snapped backwards, “that bad?”

Jo actually felt a slight relief at his words. However miserable this year was going to be, it was her last year at Aramson, and things had to be better in high school, right? Of course, she didn’t outwardly express this relief to her father.

“Dad, I’m starving. Can we just go?”

“Plotting course for home, Captain, awaiting your order.”

Jason Harrison was a Star Trek nerd from way back. He regularly imagined himself as an officer on board the Enterprise, much to his children’s irritation. He had his hands on the wheel, head pointed forward, but he was looking sideways at Jo, expectantly. Not moving the car.

“Dad. Seriously?”

“Awaiting your order, Captain.”

“Jesus,” she said, rolling her eyes. “ENGAGE!” Jo dropped her face into her hands, while her father smiled proudly, and pulled out into traffic. He was determined to mold his children into sci-fi nerds whether they liked it or not. Jo just shook her head.

“How much longer are you going to do that?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“Dad.”

“Inculcate the values of long life and prosperity to my offspring?”

Jo sighed. Heavily.

“Captain, I’m sure I don’t know what you mean. I’m simply following Starfleet protocols, ma’am.”

Jo wasn’t sure if the ‘ma’am’ was on purpose, but she nevertheless recognized the reference, and decided to indulge her father. “It’s not crunch time yet, Mr. Kim, I’ll let you know when.”

Jason was delighted.

“Apologies, *Captain*,” he replied, his heart swelling with pride, as his daughter perfectly landed the *Star Trek: Voyager* quote.

Jo was tired, having to get up early this morning for the first time in a while. Annoying as it was, so long as no one else was there to witness it, it was mostly harmless. Not to mention, playing along with her dad’s geekiness might win some favors from him later.

But her hunger was getting to her. “Do you have any food in here? It smells like french fries.”

“Sorry kid, that was my lunch, and they’re all gone now.”

“Aww.”

“If it’s any consolation, I’ve had a stomachache all day.”

“It’s not, thanks, maybe you shouldn’t have had fries if you had a stomachache.”

“I thought maybe eating something would help. Guess not. Why’re you so hungry? Didn’t you eat lunch?”

“You *could* call it that, but it wasn’t really lunch. At least, not by reasonable standards.”

Jason was curious, but he needed to keep his focus on the road.

“The hot lunch was gross, so I had the salad bar. But that was gross too. They were even out of ranch!”

“Ah well, remember Jo, there are starv—”

“Yeah, yeah,” she cut him off, having heard this speech many times before, “*There are ‘starving kids all over the world,’* blah, blah, blah.”

“I just want you to be—”

“Dad—I get it. You want us to be, ‘grateful for what we have.’ I know the speech. I’m still hungry.”

Jo reached over and turned on the radio. She searched through the usual stations, but they were all on commercials. “You know Dad, modern cars have this miracle technology that lets you listen to music from your phone!”

“I like the radio!”

“You like commercials?”

“Who doesn’t!”

Jo rolled her eyes, reached behind her to get her earbuds out of her backpack, and turned on her music.

A few minutes later, they pulled into the garage. Jo went into the house, kicked off her shoes, threw her bag onto the kitchen table, and went for the pantry.

“If you didn’t have a very good lunch, you might want more than whatever you can find in there,” Jason suggested, with vague hopefulness. Jo grabbed a bag of chips, and sat down at the table. This was not the day she’d expected for the beginning of eighth grade, but food made it slightly better. Getting a ride helped too. If she’d been on the bus, she wouldn’t be getting home for at least another twenty minutes. Often longer on the first day of school, as the drivers don’t usually know the route yet. Getting a ride also meant she was home even longer before Ethan.

She considered Billie though, who would still be on the bus at this point, so she texted her.

>Hey, how’s the bus?

>Ugh, your dad pick you up? Or did you miss it?

>Dad

>Lucky. Jack’s playing his freaky emo music at full volume

>OMG that sucks

>Bus driver’s ignoring it IDK how. Maybe he’s deaf?

>A deaf bus driver? That’s one way to survive

Jo thought about asking her dad if they could give Billie a ride too, but then she remembered the Star Trek line exchange, and she quickly decided against it.

Billie texted again, >How was Hubbard?

>Quiet. Doesn’t seem to know what to do with me yet

>Weird

>IKR

>Why would he have a TA if he didn’t have plans for you?

>Good question

Billie asked exactly what Jo had been wondering about. Why did they shove her in Hubbard's class to be his "assistant" if he didn't really even seem to want her there?

## Chapter 4

The next day, things went slightly more smoothly. The sixth graders were finding their classrooms more easily, for the most part, so they didn't look quite as lost or scared. The lockers were still a challenge for many of them, but Jo didn't see anyone crying today. PE was starting with outdoor kickball, which wasn't so bad, though it still felt like summer, so the heat presented some danger of sweating. Jo could only hope that her additional application of deodorant would hold. Hubbard figured out something for her to do—pulling out his lecture transparencies for upcoming classes, and arranging the files in order. This was definitely busy work because he hadn't really changed anything since he first made the transition from stone tablets, but at least it was something to keep her awake. And yes—transparencies. Mr. Hubbard still used an overhead projector—like a light box with a triangular lens positioned over it, to project from the lit-up base onto the screen. It probably emitted unsafe levels of radiation or something. The kids in the front couple of rows should probably be wearing lead aprons like they make you wear when getting an X-ray.

Ms. Carpenter introduced the unit on Anne Frank by showing a slide deck about Europe between World War I and World War II. Even though she was explaining the lead up to one of the worst periods in human history, Ms. Carpenter was oddly cheerful about it. Her sing-song presentation took on a minor tonality at the appropriate parts, so it wasn't insensitive per se, but she was probably not giving the material the full weight that sectarianism and genocide probably deserved.

Lunch was about the same as the day before, though the mystery meat was a slightly different color. Jo headed for the salad bar again, hoping the "Green Salad"



would be at least slightly, if not actually, green. It wasn't. The same yellow and white iceberg leaves—possibly the very same—sat limply in the stainless steel bin, staring at her through the plexiglass sneeze guard. At least there was about a half-tablespoon of Ranch dressing though, so at least she could get a few calories.

The end of each day was a bit of a saving grace. Her last period was social studies, one of her favorite classes. And helpfully, the band room was close to the car rider pickup. So when band students went to pick up their instruments, even though it was only a clarinet for Jo, at least no one had to haul anything too far. That is, if they were lucky enough to have a parent pick them up. Bus kids weren't as lucky.

Jo ran into Billie in the instrument room. "Have a nice ride home with your chauffeur," Billie said.

"Why doesn't your mom pick you up?"

"To be honest, I don't actually mind. It's good for me to mingle with the commoners. I just like to give you grief."

"Thanks a lot."

"Later, spoiled brat!"

Jo snickered and headed to her ride.

A couple of hours later, the school was nearly empty. Principal Asher and Mr. Versri were walking out to their cars in the parking lot, talking to each other in hushed tones, even though no one was really in hearing distance. "Are you having fun yet?" Asher asked, "I'm already getting complaints about your stunt with the food order."

"What? It's only been two days."

“They say the meatloaf isn’t what they asked for, and they’re arguing with our supplier. But the supplier insists they sent what was ordered. If those lunch ladies ever find out you’re behind this, you may get whacked by a long-armed ladle.”

“Aw, come on,” Ed waved away her concern.

“Ed, you know the lunch ladies. They have to put up with all the whining, the ever-changing allergies, the parent complaints, not to mention the pickiness of these kids, every day. You really shouldn’t make their lives more miserable than they already are, or we’re going to have to get a new lunch crew mid year.”

“They’ll be fine,” Ed dismissed, as he unlocked his car. “It’s just first-week nerves.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it.”

“By the way—did you notice your Jo? She had a pretty miserable look on her face this afternoon...”

“I’m telling you Ed, she’s not gonna crack.” Jen paused while she put her back in her trunk, and opened her door. “She’s a good kid. Even if you make her repeat Pre-Al for dubious reasons.”

“It’s not dubious!” Pause. “Ok, it’s not *that* dubious. She was borderline. She got a low C last year, and missed 14 days of classes.”

“She had COVID, Ed. If we made everyone repeat classes for being out for COVID, it’d be the whole school.”

“It’s close enough to justify repeating a class. Donald agreed with me. And she was a year ahead anyway. She’s actually in class now with more eighth graders than she would be if she were in Algebra.”

“Yeah, just none of them are her friends.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re still going to lose.”

“We’ll see.”

## Chapter 5

The first weeks of school went along about the same as the first days. Jo started to find a groove within her new routine. Lunch stayed terrible. Mr Hubbard figured out that Jo could grade quizzes, which seemed to come about three times a week, but wasn't actually too terrible. And she sometimes got to go down to the office to make photocopies. There were also a few social opportunities coming up outside of school, which meant she could actually see her friends. She was really looking forward to going to the first high school football game with Zoe and Ellie. She'd gotten to see Billie, but the other two lived closer to school, so they didn't ride the bus, and neither was in band. So Jo had barely seen them. The game was a place where the fab four could be together again.

Jo had to take the bus home that Friday, because her dad had an appointment. No biggie. She and Billie could "mingle with the commoners" together from time to time. Jo was in her room, picking out which hoodie to wear, when her parents got home. Her mom's voice came up from the kitchen. "Jo? Ethan?" Wendy was loud enough all right, but there was something weird in her voice. Jo could hear her fine, but her mom's voice sounded...quieter, somehow. "I need you guys down here." Ok, this was weird. Usually such an invitation would either come as a question, like, "Could you come down here?" Or there'd be a reason, like, "Dinner's ready," or more often, "We're gonna be late!" Jo decided on the white hoodie with the dolphin on it she got on vacation, and she headed for the stairs. Ethan poked his head out of his room. He was not wearing a shirt, which was, sadly, not usual. "What's mom want?" he asked.

"How should I know? Why are you naked?" Jo asked.

“I have pants on.”

“Oh great, I’m so relieved,” she said sarcastically. “Put a shirt on and come downstairs.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” he said, and marched confidently into the hall, swiftly closing his bedroom door behind him. Jo rolled her eyes, not wanting to know why he was so quick to close his door, and they both started down the steps.

Jason and Wendy were both waiting in the kitchen. Wendy sat against the wall, hands in her lap, looking vaguely out the window. Jason stood against the counter, arms folded, staring at the floor. As soon as Jo got to the bottom of the stairs, Ethan sprinted around her to get to the kitchen first. Life, for Ethan, was a never ending opportunity to display his speed, in spite of the fact Jo never seemed to be interested in racing him.

“Beat ya!” he said, proudly slamming his butt on the chair next to Wendy.

“Congratulations,” said Jo.

But as she came into the kitchen, Jo felt the air change. Her parents were not making eye contact with them, or each other for that matter. Even Ethan picked up on the tension and settled down more quickly than usual. He and his sister had clearly arrived, but had not yet been properly acknowledged. “What’s up guys?” he asked. “You seem tense.” Ethan was not one for small talk.

Wendy sighed. Jason pulled out a chair, and joined his family at the table.

“Kids...we have some, uh, hard news. I, uh...” Jason looked at his wife for help. She reached across the table for his hand, which he took.

Jo’s heart sank. This could only mean one thing. When Zoe’s parents got divorced, this was how her parents started the conversation with her and her sister. *We*

*have some hard news*, they said, those exact words. Mom holding dad's hand was a little weird, but Jo's mind reeled. *This didn't make sense*. She knew her parents fought sometimes, but that was normal right? People fought? Her dad started talking again, but Jo wasn't listening. Her mind was going off on tangents, but then his voice started to find its way back into Jo's ears.

"...stage four," she heard, "...belly pain...serious...chemotherapy..."

"Wait, what?" Jo clearly missed something. Everyone turned and looked at her.

"Cancer, sweetie. I have cancer," Jason said.

"So you're not getting divorced?"

Jason wrinkled his eyebrows at Jo, confused. Wendy released a nervous chuckle. "Stay with us Jo," she said, "Though to be honest, divorce might be easier."

Now Jason gave Wendy the wrinkled eyebrows.

Jo's disbelief was shifting from one subject to another, but she was still trying to process what she just heard.

Ethan was even more confused, and decided to start with Jo. "Why did you think they were getting divorced?"

"Because—" she started—"never mind." Then, to her parents, "What do you mean cancer? Like prostate cancer?"

It was Jason's turn to release a nervous chuckle. "Prostate is probably the word you're looking for, not prostate, but no. What I have is called *pancreatic* cancer. Your pancreas is right next to your stomach, which is part of the reason I've been having tummy aches."

Jo winced. Partly because her dad used the word, “tummy,” which he really should’ve stopped saying years ago, but also because of course she knows where the pancreas is. They learned it in seventh grade. Jo didn’t like being talked down to. But maybe the anatomy lesson was for Ethan.

Jason continued. “There’s always reason to be hopeful. The doctors say it’s pretty advanced unfortunately, but they have a plan. They’ll hit it hard with chemo, and hopefully kill it off.”

“Hopefully?” Jo asked.

Wendy and Jason looked at each other, then at each of their kids. Wendy took over. “Stage four pancreatic cancer is very serious,” she said. “We want you to know that because we want to be honest with you both. We don’t want to give you false hope.”

“False hope?” Jo said.

“You know, in case the worst happens.”

“Hope is hope. It’s not true or false.”

Wendy did not expect this depth of thought from her eighth grader. She was unexpectedly moved. “I guess you’re right Jo. That’s a good way to put it.”

The family sat quietly for a while, staring without focus into the kitchen table, processing what had just been shared. Jo’s phone buzzed. She pulled it out of her pocket. “Shoot—the game!” She didn’t realize how much time had passed. “Ellie’s looking for me.”

“I can take you,” Wendy said, getting up from her chair, frankly grateful for a little distraction. “Got everything you need?”

“Seriously?” Jo said, “I don’t know what to do. I mean. Should I still go? Can I still go?”

“Of course!” Jason said. “You know what? Let’s all go!”

His family looked at him, a little surprised at this sudden enthusiasm.

“Guys, I’m not fragile,” he said. They were not totally convinced. “Seriously. I’m not gonna die tonight.” Then Jason got a little more serious. “We should go to the game. We should keep doing what we’d normally do. I don’t want my cancer to stop us from living our lives.”

Wendy had a proud smile on her face, Jo and Ethan looked at each other, then at their parents, and realized their dad was right.

“Did you look at the forecast Jo?” Wendy asked. “Is it gonna get cold tonight?”

“Mom, it’s like 75 out there, I don’t think so.”

“You never know.”

“Mom, I know.”

“Just, hold on a second,” Jason put up a hand, “one more thing. I want us to keep this just amongst ourselves for now. We just got this news today, we’re still trying to figure out what it means. People hear ‘cancer’ and they can kinda freak out about it. I’m serious about wanting to keep our lives as normal as possible. If people find out I have cancer, that’s gonna be impossible. They’re gonna ask questions, and we might or might not know the answer, or we’ll forget who we told what to, so when things change, we won’t know who to update. So at least for now, I’m asking—no, requesting—please don’t tell anyone yet. Ok?”



The kids looked at Wendy to see how she was going to react, but Wendy's face clearly indicated she knew Jason was right. "Got it, Dad," said Ethan.

"Yeah, I mean, whatever you want," Jo added.

Though truth be told, this was a hard ask. The Four didn't really keep anything from each other, and this was a doozy. Would they be upset with her for not telling them? At the same time, this was the first time the Four had been able to be together in weeks. She didn't want to bring everyone down. Jo decided to not say anything at the game, and she'd figure it out later about whether she could tell her girls. And her dad also had a point—if they didn't know, she wouldn't have to deal with questions for which she didn't have answers, and she could at least pretend things were still normal, which might come in handy. Besides, eighth grade was clearly enough drama on its own.

## Chapter 6

The days were getting shorter as they got a couple of weeks into October. Temperatures were moving slightly downward, mornings were getting a little frosty, and the ash trees were turning shades of yellow. Jason was also going to start chemo soon. Nothing else though had changed with him, he was mostly himself. If she didn't know about his diagnosis, Jo wouldn't have thought anything was amiss. No tumor silently attacking him from the inside out.

One crispy Tuesday morning, Jo's phone alarm went off at its usual ungodly hour. The sun was a way off from fully rising, but the darkness clearly had dawn on its mind. Jo took a minute to open her eyes, as she processed the liminal space between sleep and wakefulness. Her room slowly took shape around her. She stretched her arms and legs and pushed off the covers. She got up, rubbed her eyes, and made her way to the bathroom. She flipped on the light, and squinted for a few seconds while her eyes adjusted, and—*oh. Dear. God!*

Was she awake yet?

Was she dreaming still?

Jo could not believe what she was seeing.

She blinked a few more times, hoping to wake herself out of this dream or, more accurately, what was clearly a terrible nightmare.

Ugh. Nope, this was all too real. A giant ruby-red stoplight had taken up residence on her forehead overnight.

This monstrosity was one of those her dermatologist would call “deep.” It was dark red, and angry looking. She gently poked it with her finger—*ow!*—it was also extremely painful. *Oh crap, she remembered, it’s picture day!*

She called Zoe. Zoe had the best skin of all her friends, and she was always trying new products. She’d have the answer.

Of course, given the hour, Zoe also took a minute to answer.

“Girl—what—why are you calling me so early?”

“Zo, I need your help, I’m desperate! A giant red zit erupted on my forehead, and it hurts.”

“A zit?”

“Yes. One that was spawned from the pits of hell. What am I going to do!?,” Jo pleaded.

“Let me see,” said Zoe, and she pushed the button on her phone to switch to a video call. Jo closed the bathroom door, and, reluctantly, accepted. Then switched the camera around so Zoe could see.

“Oh. My. God!” said Zoe. “I think I’d go back to bed and try again tomorrow.”

“Thanks. Not helping.”

“Sorry, it’s just...dang. That’s big!”

“Again, thanks. What am I going to do?! There’s no amount of concealer that’s going to hide this. And it hurts! What should I do?”

“Did you try ice?”

“I just woke up.”

“So, you could try ice, I don’t know. But jeez, girl, what’d you do?”

“What do you mean what did I do?” Jo was slightly offended.

“I’m just saying. Like, did you eat something last night? Our bodies are temples, you know. We have to treat them with reverence and faithfulness.”

“I eat something every night Zoe, and that’s a myth about food causing acne.”

“Is it? Deena Morales binged on sugar cookies and candy last Christmas, and she said she broke out like she had chicken pox.”

“How does she know what chicken pox looks like? No one’s had that in like a million years.”

“I don’t know, that’s just what she said. Did you eat a ton of sugar?”

“Really?”

“I’m just asking—there’s probably something you did. I mean, this isn’t not normal. Do you wash your face?”

“Zo!”

“Or—maybe you wash too much—do you moisturize?”

“Zo! This isn’t helping.”

“Oh wait—my mom heard this thing on the radio about your skin’s microbiome. Maybe you screwed up your skin microbiome somehow?”

“How would I have done that? You’re really not helping. Don’t you know something I could do? Or have like, some miracle product or something?”

“I told you, try ice. Otherwise, sorry kid, but, nothing I’ve seen could touch that one. You may need to go to the emergency room. That giant red thing is not normal. You look like Jupiter.”

“Sweetness and light, you are.”

“Oh shoot! It’s picture day today!”

Jo gave the screen a, ‘duh, that’s why I’m freaking out,’ face.

“How about your hair?” said Zoe. “Can you bring it forward to cover that up?”

Jo grabbed a brush and brought some of her hair forward.

“I look like Cousin It.”

“Ok, but I can’t see Jupiter any more.”

“Funny. Maybe this is better though?”

“Yeah, your parents will love a picture of your face behind a curtain of hair.”

“This was your idea!”

“You could give yourself bangs?”

“With my luck, that’d be the only thing on my body to look worse than this monstrosity.”

“Girl, I gotta get in the shower. Have you showered yet? The steam might help. And maybe washing your face.”

“I thought you said washing too much was bad?”

“Maybe? I don’t know. Good luck!”

“Thanks for the brilliant advice,” said Jo.

“Love you!”

“Yeah, me too.”

Jo ended the call.

It was nice to have friends, Jo thought, but at this moment, she’d prefer a fairy godmother. Though a shower did sound good. She started the water, and got in. As she soaped herself up however, she felt another painful spot on her chest, and her heart

sank. When she got out of the shower, she wiped down the mirror, and saw, there were three more Jupiter spots right over her sternum. At least no one would see these, thank God, but what the heck was going on with her skin? Guess the steam didn't help after all. Or at least not fast enough.

The mirror began to fog over again, giving her an idea. Could she hire someone to walk in front of her all day with a portable fog machine? That way, she could be constantly obscured from public view. That's all any modern teenager really needs—a constant VFX artist coordinating their day. It would make puberty far more tolerable if everyone could CGI their way through it, and avoid having to face real life. Switching to avatars and doing middle school in the virtual world would be so much better. Shouldn't this technology exist by now? Alas.

Jo finished getting dressed and went downstairs. She heard the telltale gurgles of the coffee machine finishing a brew, which let her know at least one of her parents was also, strangely, awake.

"Woah, what's on your face?" said Jason.

"Thanks Dad. Good morning to you too. Is it really that noticeable?"

"Sorry, it was just...I mean...yeah. It is."

"You're really bad at making people feel better."

Wendy finished pouring her coffee and looked up. "Oh! Jo! I'm so sorry. You probably get that from my side of the family."

"Thanks mom. You're such a giver."

"I try," said Wendy. "There're some eggs on the stove if you're hungry."

Jo made her way across the kitchen, put a piece of bread in the toaster, grabbed a plate, and served herself some eggs. “It’s picture day today too—so just be aware, this year’s pictures are gonna suck.”

“No problem,” said her dad, “we’ll just get a ‘superstar’ sticker to put over your forehead in the frame.”

Jo wondered if the toaster could overheat and burn the house down so she could skip school.

“Think of it this way,” said Wendy, “it’ll be like the ‘before’ picture compared to your beautiful high school pictures.”

Jo couldn’t help but wonder why was there such a gap between how hard parents work to make their kids feel better, and how bad they actually are at doing it. What Jo needed was a magic wand, not advice, not perspective, definitely not an “it gets better” speech.

“I have more on my chest. And they hurt,” said Jo. “Lemme see,” said Wendy. She came over, pulled Jo’s collar out, and looked down. “Well at least you can cover those,” Wendy said. “What did the dermatologist say last time we were there? I think he said you need a warm washcloth on them for a few minutes a day.”

“Well I just got out of the shower and that didn’t help.”

“A shower’s probably good, but one shower isn’t going to do it. When you get home, get a clean wash cloth warm with hot water under the tap, and lay it on there for a few minutes.”

“How’s that supposed to help me now?”

“Sorry sweetie. I wish there were a faster way of getting rid of these things. It’s just part of puberty sometimes.” Jo enjoyed conversations with her mother about puberty almost as much as she looked forward to more of these boils on her face.

“Why are you guys both up so early?” she asked her parents.

“Chemo,” said her dad.

In the midst of her derma-drama, Jo had completely forgotten about her Dad’s chemo commencing. It was a lot to take in, her dad’s cancer, on top of her own life drama. She wasn’t really sure what to think about it. Would chemo fix him? And at least she could get that part of her life back? So far, her parents hadn’t really kept her up to date on the details about his treatment. Maybe they didn’t want to scare her. Maybe they didn’t want to bother her with complicated details. All she knew was that “stage four” was bad. It meant things were really serious. *But if they’re treating with chemo, that’s good, right? I mean, they wouldn’t bother treating him if he was definitely going to croak, right?*

Jo contented herself with this thought as she stuffed a few forkfuls of egg into her mouth and put jam on her toast.

“Ellie’s coming over after school,” Jo said, through another mouthful.

“Oh. Um, Jo?” her dad said, “I hate to do this to you, but with the chemo, I’m immune compromised. So we need to limit the number of people I’m around during the treatment.”

“Seriously?” replied Jo. “I’m at school all day with all these people. If they have something, I’m bringing it home.”



“I know, it probably doesn’t make sense, but the oncologist said that if I can limit the number of visitors and people I interact with, it’ll be better.”

“Ugh. Fine. Can I go over to her house?”

“If her parents are okay with it,” said Wendy, “sure.”

“Cancer sucks,” said Jo.

Jason raised an eyebrow. “Yeah? How does it compare to acne?”

Jo rolled her eyes.

“Speaking of cancer,” said Wendy, “and your dad being compromised, he and I were thinking that it’s probably time to tell our friends what’s going on.”

“You mean, like an announcement?” asked Jo.

“Well, I thought I’d call your school counselor at least, Mr. Johnson?” Jo nodded.

“Yeah, he’s probably dealt with this with other families,” Wendy said. “But it’s up to you, I guess, whether you tell friends, or who you tell.”

Jo immediately knew who that would be.

“We’re also going let Miss Marge know,” Wendy continued. Miss Marge was their next-door neighbor who used to babysit Jo and Ethan when they were little. She was probably the nicest person Jo knew. She always gave them things at Christmas and Easter, and always gave them an extra handful of candy at Halloween. “I know you and your brother are too old for a sitter, but just in case there’re ever times we need another adult around, or someone to drive one of you somewhere, it might help.”

“Makes sense,” said Jo. Her parents had clearly planned this out. “Can I go now?”

“Sure.”

Jo got up and grabbed her bag. “Just text us if you go over to Ellie’s okay?” said Jason. “Don’t impose—if it’s not okay.”

“Got it.” Jo didn’t think it’d be a problem. Ellie’s family loved having guests.

## Chapter 7

“As I’m sure you were all riveted by last night’s assigned reading,” Miss Carpenter began the day’s discussion, “I want to discuss today the relationship between the adults and young people in Anne ‘Secret Annex.’” She was referring of course to the drama that unfolded early on in *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* in their secret apartment, which the Frank family shared with another family, the Van Daans. “The physical proximity,” said Miss Carpenter, “between the two families, parents and children, did something to the family relationships that might not have happened were the two families not forced into hiding by the Nazis. What do you think that was?”

Jo had read the parts where Anne detailed the arguments between the adults. It was mildly entertaining to read Anne’s take on how the adults seemed to lose their filter around each other. Jo also thought the one-basin-bathing descriptions were particularly upsetting. Apparently, the secret annex didn’t have plumbing for showers or baths, or maybe it was hot water? Anyway, they had to share a single basin, and apparently, only really washed themselves once a week. Jo didn’t understand why they couldn’t each use the basin more frequently. Does a basin wear out if you use it twice or more in a day? Seemed to Jo they didn’t have much else to do. Maybe it was because they had to be quiet during the day.

Jo also noticed that it sounded like in Anne’s time, people were more strict about everything. Adults acted with more authority, kids tended to fall in line. So maybe that’s why it seemed to be more of a surprise to 1940s European teenagers to see their adults so out of sorts. Maybe not, but in her time, Jo was getting a pretty clear idea that adults really didn’t have nearly as much figured out as they wanted kids to think they did. She

tried to imagine her own family locked up with another family in close quarters, and wondered which of her parents' faults would be on display more quickly.

"Miss Harrison?" Miss Carpenter's voice was unusually direct, shaking Jo out of her daydreaming.

"Sorry. What?"

"Jo—are you with us? Mr. Johnson would like a word with you."

Jo obviously had spaced out. She didn't realize her teacher had taken a call on the intercom, and was apparently trying to get her attention. But she did remember that her mom mentioned this morning that she was going to call Mr. Johnson about the cancer.

"Ok, uh, should I take my stuff?"

"That's up to you. I don't know how long you'll be."

Jo grabbed her books, figuring the counselor would want to talk for a bit, and she headed for his office.

Jo didn't know Mr. Johnson well. He was new to Aramson last year, but he wasn't new altogether. He came from some other district. The students didn't really talk about him, or know much about him, other than that he was tall, and had a vaguely Chicago-sounding accent. This probably explained the Chicago sports memorabilia Jo noticed on his shelf as she entered his office.

She knocked on his open door.

"Mr. Johnson?"

“Jo—yeah—come on in. Have a seat—WOAH! Holy Moses!” Mr. Johnson had apparently noticed Jo’s forehead. “That looks painful!”

Jo momentarily considered turning around and bolting. This was not going to go well.

“Uh, yeah, it is.”

*More painful when people audibly recoil in my presence, thanks very much.*

“Gosh, I’m sorry. I know being a teenager can really stink sometimes. Puberty, huh? How’s your year going so far?”

“Honestly?” *Why sugar coat it?* “Not all that great. I didn’t get most of the classes I signed up for last year, I’m having to repeat Pre-Algebra, and I got stuck as a TA for Mr. Hubbard, which I didn’t ask for.”

“Yeah, how’s that going?” Mr. Johnson asked this with such enthusiasm, it was clear he was ignoring everything else she said. He also seemed to hope that a cheerful tone could make Jo forget she was complaining.

“I guess it’s fine.” Jo picked up on the fact that her counselor wasn’t really interested in that much honesty.

“Good! I know you didn’t sign up for it.”

*So he had heard.*

“But you know—and don’t tell him I said this—but Mr. H is getting up there in years.”

*Duh.*

“A couple of us were talking this summer, and we thought that a bright, helpful eighth grader such as yourself might be just the thing to rekindle that spark!”

*Rekindle that spark?* Jo was pretty sure that Hubbard never had a spark to begin with, but if he had, it probably went out about the time her parents were in middle school. At least she now knew why the TA thing happened. She was apparently a part of some behind-the-scenes plot, presumably to get Hubbard to loosen up, but Jo suspected it was far more likely they thought having TA would get him so frustrated, he'd finally quit. Like the Franks and Van Daans, they were trying to turn up the pressure to force an issue. Maybe it was code named "Operation Secret Annex."

"Jo," Mr. Johnson continued, getting slightly serious, at last, "the reason I called you down here is, as you might know, your mom gave me a call this morning."

"Yeah, she said she was going to."

"So you know what this is about?"

"That my dad has cancer?"

Mr. Johnson nodded.

"Yep, guess we're on the same page then."

"Jo," he leaned forward on his desk, "I want to say that while everyone's experience is different, I have been through this with other students and their families. So, my door is always open. I can give you some hall passes you can use any time, and you can come down here, and we can talk, or if you just need a quiet break, we can make that happen."

Jo was not really feeling Mr. J's office as place of refuge—it felt more like he was trying to sell her a used car. What might have been helpful would be access to the teachers' lounge. At least they probably had snacks in there.

“Your mom also mentioned,” Mr. Johnson added, “that you’ve known about this for a little while?”

“Yeah.”

“Mm. How’s it going for you so far?”

Jo shrugged. She had thoughts of course. And feelings. But she didn’t really know Mr. Johnson all that well. “Ok, I guess. I haven’t done this before. They say it’s stage four, which is supposed to be pretty bad. But I guess they have a plan for treatment.”

“That’s great to hear! You mom mentioned that too.”

Jo wasn’t quite sure Mr. Johnson had heard her. He was using that tone again, as if a happy tone of voice could make things better on its own.

“Listen, if it’s okay with you, I want to let your teachers and a couple of staff know, just so you have a number of people you can talk to. Doesn’t have to just be me.”

At least had the humility to realize his limitations.

“K, thanks. I guess it’s okay.”

“No problem. I’m here for you Jo. Any time! And good luck with that forehead zit!”

Jo sighed. “Thanks.”

*He just had to bring it up again?*

## Chapter 8

“I have the perfect solution to your problem,” Ellie said, and she opened her front door to let them both into the house. Jo and Ellie had walked there after school. It was nice to get some fresh air, and Jo was honestly looking forward to some time away from both school and her house. But she also wasn’t sure which problem Ellie was talking about.

“Hold on,” Ellie continued, “let me see if mom can take us.”

She walked down the hall, leaving Jo in the entry way.

*Take us? Take us where?*

Jo wondered if she should put her backpack down or keep it on. And what about her shoes? She usually took them off at Ellie’s house, but Ellie left hers on as she went to search for her mother. Everything was always so clean at the McConnells’. And frankly, with her massive zit, she really didn’t want to be in public any more.

Ellie was more sophisticated than Jo’s other friends, more refined. She wouldn’t have just yelled for her mom upon entering, she quietly went to find her, got the answer to her question, and calmly came back to Jo with the answer.

“Good news my friend—she said yes! So get ready—we’re going shopping!”

Again, the zit came to Jo’s mind. She was worried about the looks she might get if she had to be in public any more. “Ellie, thanks for trying to cheer me up but—“

“The mall!” Ellie ignored Jo’s hesitation.

“Yeah, but—“



“No ‘buts’! Mom will be ready to go in ten. Let’s go get ready!” Ellie kicked off her shoes, and started up the stairs to her room. “Ellie, said Jo, following her friend up the stairs, “I really don’t want to go out in public like this.”

“Sweetie,” Ellie stopped at the top of the stairs, and looked down at her friend. “No one will be surprised to see a middle schooler with acne. If it’ll help, I’ll draw a fake zit on my face so we match!” This was the first time Ellie had mentioned the zit. She was too classy to have reacted like other people. *Cough, cough, Mr. Johnson!* But she also had, obviously, noticed. She turned back up the stairs and went into her room.

Jo wanted to be honored by Ellie’s willingness to mark up her own face in solidarity, but she thought two of them together with cystic acne would probably just be twice the freak show in a public setting. Especially if one of them wasn’t real.

“Seriously darling,” Ellie continued, as Jo followed into her room, “you need a change of pace, and you definitely need some retail therapy.”

“What’s retail therapy?”

“Shopping, sweetie! Get your mind off your troubles! Some new fits, and you’ll feel so much better about your life.” Jo wasn’t convinced. Her parents mostly shopped online, so she didn’t really understand.

She tried a new tactic. “Yeah, but who goes to a mall any more?”

“Jo, sweetie, this is not the kind of mall you’re thinking about. It’s the new one—you know the one with the fancy, outdoor concept? They have beautiful landscaping, water features, all high-end stuff, haute couture, no old fashioned department stores or tacky food court, I wouldn’t take you anywhere like that.”

Jo's heart was starting to race. Aside from shopping online, places "like that" were probably much closer to what she could afford. "Yeah, but..."

"Throw some water in your face, tie your hair back, and let's get ready! You can try this new concealer I got if you want."

*Tie her hair back?* If anything, Jo wanted to comb it forward like she had in the mirror this morning.

Jo walked down the hall to the bathroom. She stood, staring at the mirror, wondering how she got herself into this, when a text popped up from Ellie.

>Chin up sweetie—this'll be gr8!

Jo looked again in a mirror at Mt. Face-suvius. She shook her head, and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. She thought about Anne Frank, and how much she was supposed to read before tomorrow. *Guess the gestapo will have to wait*, she thought. She checked the wallet app on her phone to see if she had any money there. It would maybe enough for a pretzel or a drink at a mall "like that," but she didn't know what to expect from this new place.

She remembered she was supposed to text her parents, and also thought to tell her she was going out with Ellie and her mom. Wendy hearted the text right away. Jason asked if she'd be home for dinner. She texted back, >think so?, which got a thumbs up from her father.

>Can u send me some \$\$?

>What happened to your allowance?

>Spent

>Too bad

>Pleeezzz

>Maybe you should use next month's allowance to hire a spelling tutor

>YER NAHT PHUNNEE

>ROFL!! How much you need?

>IDK, Ellie says it'll be good for me to go out.

>Ok...text us if you find something you can't live without

>k

Then Jo remembered.

>Hey, how was chemo?

>Could be worse—at least I don't have to go shopping

Jason hated shopping. And at least he still had his sense of humor.

As far as Jo was concerned, his answer about the money meant there was a chance her parents might send her enough money to get something. And at least Ellie had money. Maybe retail therapy can work vicariously? Is it enough to watch someone *else* spend money?

She was getting that sinking feeling in her chest again, and it was now morphing into a stomach ache. Could she tell Ellie she was sick? No, not likely. She and Ellie had been together since school got out, and people don't get sick that fast. Though her tightening stomach made her wonder, *maybe people can actually get sick that fast?* And also, *I guess I won't have to worry about having money for a snack.*

Ellie meant well, but Jo really wished they could just stay home, finish their homework, watch some TV, and chill. By tomorrow, whatever facial plate tectonics were causing the volcanic activity on her forehead would hopefully calm down. Or, maybe

Ellie was right. Maybe people weren't as impressed by middle schoolers with acne, and maybe going someplace new would at least give her other things and people to think about besides her own misery.

There was a soft, but firm knock on the bathroom door. "Jo? Sweetie?" Ellie called. "Coming!" Jo replied, and she opened the door to a smiling Ellie, who promptly took Jo's hand, gave her a caring, confident look, and led her down the stairs.

Ellie's mom had backed their giant SUV into the driveway, and she was waiting for them with the engine idling. Mrs. McConnell waved at Jo excitedly. Apparently she didn't need much encouragement to take her daughter shopping. Ellie took shotgun, Jo got in the back seat behind her friend.

"Hello Jo!" said Ms. McConnell, "It's been so long!"

"Hi Mrs. McConnell."

"Ellie tells me you had a rough day?" Mrs. McConnell turned halfway around as Jo buckled her seatbelt, but when Jo looked up, "OOH!" Mrs. McConnell audibly started, registering her shock at Jo's face.

"Mother!" said Ellie.

"Is it that bad?" Jo instantly covered her face with her hand.

"Tsk, I'm *so* sorry sweetie," Ms. McConnell quickly collected herself, and flipped her vocal switch back to her default level of cheerful. "Forget I said anything! We've all been there. Skin is a living thing, and it doesn't always cooperate when we want it to!"

Easy for her to say, Jo thought. Ms. McConnell's skin was always flawless.

The ride to the mall was slower than normal as the afternoon traffic was starting to pick up. With the slow speeds and frequent stops at traffic lights, Jo was grateful for

the McConnells' tinted windows. That way, no one could look in at her face and recoil in horror as the freak show made its way through the suburbs. At least Ellie and her mom were in the front seat and would have to exert some effort to turn around and look at her. Once they got out, it'd be a different story of course, but for the moment, Jo felt slightly ok.

Once they arrived, walking around wasn't actually all that bad. Maybe rich people are better at ignoring things, or at least, better at pretending not to notice things. Ellie tried on several outfits and tried to get Jo to as well. Jo finally relented, though didn't end up buying anything. She carried a couple of Ellie's bags, which did actually feel kinda fun. Mrs. McConnell bought them some fancy drinks that Jo had never heard of, but they were colorful, and they tasted good.

After a few hours, it was time to head home. The car pulled up into the Harrison's driveway, and as Jo got out, Mrs. McConnell handed Jo a small bag. Jo looked at it quizzically. "Just try it," said Mrs. McConnell. "It's the only thing I would use on my face."

"Oh, you didn't have to," Jo protested.

"I know I don't have to. I want to. We all understand these things."

Jo felt awkward, but took the bag, and thanked Mrs. McConnell, who smiled in return.

"See you tomorrow, El."

"Bye Jo! Thanks for coming with us, and good luck!"

Jo went straight to her room, dropped her backpack, and sat on her bed. She set Mrs. McConnells bag on her desk. It was one of those fancy foreign sounding cosmetics

brands that she couldn't pronounce. Jo still had homework to do, but wanted to shower and try this face stuff. Her forehead looked as bad as it had all day, and she was desperate.

The bathroom door was locked.

"Ethan?" Jo asked through the door.

"I'M POOPING!" announced her brother. Jo winced.

"Eww! Could you please hurry? And let me know when you're done? I need to shower."

"You sure you want to come in here?" Ethan asked, followed by unmistakable auditory evidence of his present activity. Jo made a grossed-out face, and shook her head. Maybe she could light a candle while she was in the shower?

"Just make sure to wash your hands," she yelled through the door.

"No promises!" Ethan responded.

"You're so gross!"

*Dear God*, Jo thought. Maybe she should get that fog machine person to follow her around with disinfectant. Would one of those backpack sprayers work—the kind they used to fog airplanes during COVID?

Ethan's only response was to release yet more auditory reminders of what he was doing. Jo hurried to her room.

Next morning, Jo woke up with her face feeling like it had been stretched out on an artist's canvas. She turned on a light, and went to her mirror. She couldn't believe it. Yesterday, it was just a bad zit. Today, her forehead had a three inch crimson splotch

the shape of Utah! Oh dear God—she must be allergic to whatever Mrs. McConnell had given to her. What was she going to do?

“Mom!?!” Jo yelled.

No response.

“MOM!!!” Jo yelled more desperately.

Wendy came down the hall and opening the door “What on earth—,” reacting to Jo’s face. “Come on, I think I’ve got some allergy cream in the medicine cabinet. What did you put on there?”

“Some stuff Mrs. McConnell gave me last night.”

“Seems like you’re reacting to it.”

“You think?”

Wendy turned on the hall light, and found the ointment. “Chin up sweetie.”

“Really? You’re trying to cheer me up, now?”

“Jo, put your chin up so I can see where to put this.”

Chagrined, Jo did as she was told, and Wendy spread the cream on her daughter’s forehead.

“Do I have to go to school today?”

“If this doesn’t have an effect, maybe we can call you in for a ‘mental health’ day. You probably deserve one.”

Jo was greatly relieved.

## Chapter 9

The allergy cream did what it was supposed to do. It reduced the redness at least, and, mercifully, took just long enough to work so that Jo did get to stay home from school that day. Which also gave her zit a little time to heal as well. Had it not, Jo might've considered Zoe's advice to use hair as a cover up.

Usually Jo enjoyed the lower temperatures of the fall, shorter days, and colorful trees. Halloween was also a bright spot in the season, but this year, she just wasn't feeling any of it. She really wanted the whole thing to be over and done with. The sooner the leaves dropped, the sooner winter would come, the sooner the world would get on with spring, and return to normal life. Everything around her was failing, the corresponding signs of death in the natural world didn't help. But, she thought, if the cycle of the seasons could be a metaphor for everything else in her life, maybe she just needed to trust the process, and summer would come back again. Everyone goes through seasons in their lives, times of rest or quiet, and everyone also goes through times of growth and vibrance. So maybe if fall and winter go more quickly, then Jo's real life could go back to how it was supposed to be: everything working, everyone healthy, happy, alive.

Alas, her dad seemed to be getting sicker. Maybe it was side effects from the chemo, but if chemo was supposed to be the equivalent of Jason's body having it's autumnal preparation for winter's rest, Jo was worried about what came next.

What would be the equivalent of a winter of cancer treatment?

Would it be too much for him?



Was there a chance he wouldn't make it to spring?

One night in the first week of November, Jo sat at her desk in her darkened bedroom, her brain desperately trying to focus on the words on the page in front of her. She was reading the chapter in her history book about the War of 1812 for a test the next day. This year, homework was sometimes a welcome distraction for her, one thing she could somewhat control, at least in terms of whether she did it or not. Other times it was hard to concentrate, as she was worried about other things. As much as she'd been able to make peace with many of her middle school frustrations, it was all starting to get to her. It was pretty much cold every day now, outside, and their school bus had no heat. The bus driver kept telling them "they're aware of it," but nothing had changed. It'd been several days of being fairly frozen by the time she arrived at school.

Her skin was slightly improved, no thanks to Mrs. McConnell's horror cream, but it was also still in active rebellion against her, nasty volcanoes popping up in random places on her body. Ethan was being his usual self, using any available free time to annoy her, and of course, her dad was getting sicker. Wendy was busy with her own work, and taking care of Jason, so she wasn't noticing what was happening with Jo. This was okay—Jo understood. But she also kinda wished her mom would notice what was going on.

She still had her friends. Although they weren't always helpful either. Zoe and her family had invited Jo out for apple picking the weekend before Halloween. Jo always loved doing that—going to the actual orchard, apple cider doughnuts, hay rides, and sometimes, a corn maze. That was all good this year, but the social time between Zoe

and her was a bit harder than it used to be. Any time Jo mentioned anything about things that were bothering her, Zoe always took it as an opportunity to blame Jo—like it was bad karma she somehow deserved. Jo brought up skin care regimens again, but Zoe assumed there was something Jo could do, or avoid doing, to get rid of her pimples. She also shamelessly took sides with Mr. Donald and Mr. Versri about Jo having to repeat her math class. “Maybe if you’d worked harder last year,” Zoe said, breaking Jo’s insides, “your sick days wouldn’t have hurt you so much.” Worse yet, she wasn’t even all that sympathetic about Jason’s cancer. “It’s probably his diet,” she advised. “Hippocrates said, ‘Let food be thy medicine’! It’s amazing what people can cure by just changing their diets.”

Jo was pretty sure that if drinking smoothies or eating more kale were the cure for cancer, it probably would’ve made some news by now.

Suffice to say, under all of these circumstances, focusing on the Battle of 1812 was nearly impossible.

Jo heard the garage door, and her dad’s car pulling in.

*Focus!* she thought to herself. *Dolly Madison...portrait of George Washington...*

*White House fire...*

Two car doors slammed in succession. Mom and Dad were home.

It was no use.

And she was getting hungry for dinner anyway.

Jo closed her books, and headed downstairs. Something was wrong. Jason came slowly into the kitchen, and he looked like sadness. Wendy’s eyes were red and

puffy. Any thoughts of homework vanished out of Jo's brain as Jason wearily raised his eyes to his daughter, and pulled her in for a long hug.

"Dad?" said Jo, weakly.

Jason let his daughter go, and slumped into one of the kitchen chairs. He had trouble looking up at her, which of course Jo noticed, and it made her chest twist up like a dishrag.

Wendy spoke. "Is Ethan home?" Her voice was pinched, coming, as it was, out of a tightened throat.

"He's upstairs." said Jo. "Mom, what's going on?"

No response.

"Dad?" she tried. "Mom?"

"Ethan?!" called Wendy, horsely, "Can you come down here?"

"Guys, you're scaring me—did something happen?" What could it possibly be this time? She wasn't sure she could bear any more bad news. She heard the telltale footsteps of her brother's feet coming down the stairs.

"I'm here—what's up?," said Ethan.

"Sit down kid," said Jason, faintly, "we need to talk." Even that short sentence took a great deal of effort.

Jason and Wendy looked utterly defeated. Jo kept looking back and forth between them.

"What now?" asked Jo, getting more anxious by the second, remembering the last time they "needed to talk" at the kitchen table. Was *this* the divorce conversation?

Jason took a deep breath and blew it out.

“Bad news?”

Jason nodded.

“Well you’ve already got cancer, what could be worse?”

Jason finally looked up at his daughter.

“It’s worse?”

Jason searched the table with his eyes, hoping it would speak for him. Then he looked to Wendy, who somehow found the words he’d been seeking. “The chemo isn’t working,” she said.

Ethan scrunched his eyebrows. “What’s that mean?”

“It means,” Jason slowly forced the words out of his mouth, “I’m out of options. Doctor says we’ve got, maybe, a couple of months.”

“A couple of months until what?” asked Jo, but she knew.

A couple of months. Period.

An image of the White House on fire flashed across Jo’s mind, the British soldiers ransacking Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capital to the White House.

*NOW she thinks of the War of 1812?*

Wendy sat in the last empty seat at the table. Jo and Jason sat frozen, in shock. Ethan looked back and forth between his parents and his sister, a slightly curious look on his face, not really knowing what to make of any of this.

*Was this normal?*

*Is it normal for dads to get sick and die before their kids get to high school, or in his case, middle school?*

Ethan didn't think so, but it also didn't look like he was going to have much of a choice in the matter.

Jo shoved the unwelcome History Channel documentary out of her mind, and started thinking about the future.

Who was going to teach her how to drive?

Her dad always did the family's taxes.

And how was the lawn going to get mowed?

*Damnit*, she thought, *he always takes the trash out to the curb every Tuesday night*. Now she would probably have to do that.

The dad-shaped space in her brain was starting to get bigger and bigger, as she contemplated him not being in it.

In all of her knowledge of the world and how things worked, everything her dad did with her and for her, he was like the teeth of a thousand cogs in the machine of her life. Things fit together, because of him. Things functioned because of him. And now, he wasn't going to be there anymore, making any of it happen.

Aren't dads supposed to always be there for you? Isn't that in the manual? In fact, Jo was pretty certain he'd said exactly that to her at some point, "I'll always be there for you."

*Well, what now Pops?!*

*Not just are you not "always going to be there" for me, but you actually, really imminently won't be there for me. Like, not even for eight grade graduation maybe.*

This really sucked.

Jo's phone buzzed in her pocket.

*What now?*

She ignored it for a minute. It buzzed again.

It was Billie.

>Girl—missed you in band 2day

Hubbard had kept Jo late to grade some papers he needed for third period. So she missed band, and therefore, the one class she had with a friend.

>Sry Hubbard kept me late

>Ugh

>Sorry, what do u want me to do about it?

>No, not mad at u—just sorry for u

>Sorry I missed band, wish that was the worst part of the day

>Why, was Hubbard drunk again?

>No, not...

>What then?

>I...

Jo stopped typing. She remembered that when he first got diagnosed, her dad was wary of telling people. So she thought she should ask if it was okay to tell her friends.

“Um, guys?”

“Yeah Jo,” said Wendy.

“Are we keeping this secret like we did the cancer at first?”

Jason shrugged. “That’s up to you. I’m gonna have to deal with people knowing sooner or later.” Moving into “dadvice” mode seemed to energize Jason a bit. “Just realize,” he continued, “kinda like what we talked about when I first got diagnosed. People are weird about cancer. They’re even weirder about dying. Once it gets out, people may treat you differently. They may be nervous, not knowing what to say, or how to talk to you. They may ask questions you don’t want to answer, or can’t answer. They may look at you funny, or, feel like they’re walking on eggshells around you. News like this generally changes the way people treat you.”

Ethen jumped in, “Well if you’re really gonna croak, it’s gonna be part of our lives anyway.”

“Ethan!” Wendy was a little shocked by her son’s casual attitude.

“Sorry.”

“I...guess it’s okay,” said Wendy. “Maybe it’ll help to lighten things up a bit around here if we don’t feel like we always have to be serious.”

Jason recognized what his wife said, and gave an appreciative nod.

“Kids,” he said, “at this point, honestly, bringing in our friends is probably really important. This is gonna be a lot to handle for us by ourselves. I don’t want my final days to be hiding from the world. I want us to see people we care about, spend time with them, do whatever we can do together, while I still can. We are going to need people on both sides of this—friends to support us while I’m still here, and the three of you will need people here for you after I’m gone. So Jo, yes, tell your friends. Bring them in close, cause friends are how we get through these things.”

Wendy was weeping, silently. Jason held her hand tightly.

Jo was touched by her dad's thoughtfulness. As shellshocked and uncertain as he seemed a minute ago, and as unwilling as she was to face the reality of his dying, her dad's sudden clarity of mind and ability to articulate things was much better now than it was a minute ago. It only occurred to Jo later that he may have rehearsed this speech to himself at some point since his diagnosis, even if he hadn't told her yet.

Jo picked up her phone to text Billie back. She understood what her dad had said, and was theoretically ready to tell her, but until she had to actually make the words with her fingers and see them on the screen, she could still pretend it wasn't real. Maybe, if she didn't type the words, her dad could still get through this, and her life wouldn't be a complete dumpster fire?

Who was she kidding.

>Dad's treatment isn't working

>WTF? What do you mean?

>Dad's cancer treatment. It's not good. Dr says we only have a couple of months

>OMG!

Jo's phone started buzzing. Billie wanted to talk with Jo live. Jo slid her finger across the screen to answer, stood up, and walked toward the stairs.

"Jo—who is it?" asked her mother.

"It's Billie," said Jo. "I'm going up to my room."

"Jo, can it wai—" Wendy started, but Jo was already on the stairs having answered the call. Jason mouthed "it's ok" to his wife.

"Hey," Jo said, answering.



“Oh my God Jo, I don’t even know what to say.”

“I know. I don’t know what to say either. I just found out.”

“This can’t be right. There’s gotta be something they can do. Doctors can do anything. I mean, what about that commercial that’s always on TV? About cancer treatment or something? You should call them.”

“I’m not really in charge of my dad’s medical care.”

“I know, but there’s gotta be something. I mean, it’s the 21st century. They have, like, robots that can do surgery and...I mean...it’s just cancer. People beat cancer all the time.”

“Not my dad I guess.”

“Oh, come on. You gotta think positively! That’s what people always say. Look on the bright side. Find the silver lining and all that shit. Never give up! Never say die!”

“Maybe not that last one.” Jo was starting to wonder if taking this call was a good idea.

“No seriously—this is what that means! *Never say die*. Never surrender! Never give up! If you say it you’re admitting defeat. Let’s beat this shit, eh?”

Billie’s Canadian “ehs” came out when she got particularly excited.

“Billie,” Jo started.

“Don’t say it, Jo! You gotta not let that bad juju into your mind. Don’t believe those doctors about ‘*nothing else we can do*.’ That’s bullshit.” (Billie also tended to swear a bit more when particularly excited.) “There’s always something,” she continued.

“Meditation. Or yoga. Maybe acupuncture! Chinese people have been treating people for years with just needles! They didn’t need X-rays, or body scans, or fancy technology,

they just use like, karma or something, and they heal people! Maybe that's what your dad needs..."

Billie kept going, but Jo had stopped listening a while ago. A giant dump truck of reality had just unloaded its contents on Jo's life, and Billie thought a little hand trowel was going to make a difference. It was nice she was trying to help, but it really wasn't helpful at all.

"Jo? You still there? Jo!"

"Sorry, I guess I spaced out a bit."

"Hey, let's FaceTime, and we can google this together—find something that's going to work."

"Billie, I—"

"Don't say 'no'! We can do this! We can save your dad!"

"I don't think so."

"Aw, come on Jo! You can't lose hope! If you lose hope you lose life! Or something like that..."

She kept talking again, but Jo cut her off, "Seriously Billie, thanks, but I just can't right now."

Jo ended the call.

She didn't like hanging up on her friend. She really was just trying to help, but Billie's relentless positivity in the face of Jason's imminent demise, was just not helpful right now. What she needed was something that fit her mood. A torrential downpour with some serious thunder and lightning would be good. An accompanying tornado would be

even better. Maybe it could tear through her neighborhood, obliterate Jo's house, her school, everything around her, and make none of this matter any more.

Alas, even a tornado wouldn't be able to separate her dad from his cancer. And with Jo's luck, she'd end up with no one left at all.

## Chapter 10

Principal Asher put the phone down, stood up, and began pacing in her office. What started as a borderline sadistic test of character was now completely out of line given what she'd just learned. She stormed into Assistant Principal Versri's office, and briskly closed the door behind her. "Ed, what did you do? This wasn't what we talked about." She was in full panic now, even though she knew not even Ed Versri could kill someone with cancer. She was still worried however that word of their little bet was going to get them in serious trouble. As well it probably should. She was not at all sure what to do at this point.

"What're you talking about?" Versri asked.

"Jason Harrison."

"Yeah?"

"Cancer."

"Yeah, we knew that—"

"It's terminal."

"What?"

"I just heard."

"Oh shoot."

"Yeah."

"Wait—you asked what I did—I didn't give Jo's dad cancer. You know that, right?"

"No, I know, I just—how can you justify your little plan now? Can we reverse any of these schemes?"

“My little plan? Hey, you okayed this, remember? And Jen, if we change course now, it could blow up in our faces.”

Jen was well aware of the risks. “Her dad’s going to die from cancer, Ed. Hasn’t she suffered enough?”

“That’s not what I mean. It’s just—she’s bought into the schedule changes, and all the explanations of how it all happened. If we change now, it’ll make things more suspicious.”

“And she’d be right to be suspicious.”

“Ok, ok, I get it.” Ed thought for a moment, going back over his plan. “Let me think... Maybe I can loosen up the food order. We probably need to do that anyway to prevent mutiny from the kitchen staff. They’re getting really ticked.”

Principal Asher was more than a little relieved to hear this. She was getting many complaints from the staff, not to mention numerous angry parent emails and voicemails daily.

“But we can’t change her schedule in the middle of the term,” Ed finished.

Asher looked at her assistant principal in silence for a beat or two. Bereaved students tended to get some grace, but perhaps not *before* a parent died. Versri avoided her eye contact. “I guess you’re right,” Jen said at last. “But Ed?”

Now Versri met her eyes.

“Can we call off the stupid bet?”

“Why, you think you’re gonna lose?”

“Seriously? Cancer, Ed. Terminal. Don’t you feel even slightly guilty?”

“Why should I? Everyone knows middle school is tough. Nothing we’ve done is really all *that* bad, and how were either of us to know Mr. Harrison was going to get cancer? Besides,” Versri got a wicked look in his eye, “nothing like a death in the family to reveal one’s true character.”

Asher glared at him. “I’m now seriously suggesting you think about a sabbatical.” She took a deep breath. “You’re also not wrong about the character part. The difference though, between you and me, is that I know this all makes me more likely to win. Jo is going to break your frozen heart, Ed Versri. So, for the record, I prefer twenties. It’s too hard to actually *use* a \$100 bill anywhere.”

Versri snorted, doubtfully, “We’ll see.”

## Chapter 11

*Dear Kitty,*

*I don't know if you're still taking messages. Seems you were there for Anne Frank, so I'm hoping you're still there. I could use you.*

*My dad died today.*

*It's awful.*

*I don't really know what else to say about it.*

*Why am I writing to you? Guess I don't really know. He'd been at the hospice for the last week, so we kinda knew it was coming. I was there all Saturday and Sunday, and he hadn't eaten or drank anything in a while. I wanted to give him water. His mouth looked so dry, but the hospice nurses told us not to. I guess it actually makes things worse. Mom would've let me stay home from school today, and maybe I should've.*

*The morning felt mostly normal. Billie sat by me on the bus and didn't talk too much. She asked a couple of questions about the weekend, but pretty quickly stopped and just held my hand. Getting to school was nice, to be in a familiar place, actually, with people who didn't really care what was going on. Even people who knew Dad was dying, only a couple actually knew it was imminent.*

*When the counselor, Mr. Johnson, came to get me, I was in Ms. Carpenter's class. I knew why she was there. Miss Carpenter met him at the door, and they murmured to each other. She put her head down, then they just looked at me. Was he dead already, or were they getting me so I could say goodbye? Anyway, like I said, I*

*knew. They didn't have to say my name. I grabbed my stuff and went to the door. Miss Carpenter reached for my arm, and for the first time ever, she actually had a sad look in her eyes. Not crying, just pity. She kinda looked like she wanted to give me a hug, but a hug from a teacher would be weird, and I didn't want to slow down. In case I still had a chance to say goodbye to Dad. I mean, I'd said as much as I could yesterday, not knowing how much longer we had. I don't really want to tell you what I talked about. It was kinda between us. And you're an eighty-year-old fake listener to someone else's diary. So I don't really know why I'm even writing to you.*

*Anyway, once we were out of the the classroom and the door was closed, Mr. Johnson told me. Dad had passed away about fifteen minutes ago.*

*Mr. Johnson kept talking, but, I couldn't make out the words he was saying. I just stared at my shoes. "C'mon Jo, let's get you to your dad," he finally said.*

*He gently put his arm on my shoulders, nudging me forward. We walked together to the office, where our neighbor, Miss Marge, was waiting, crying. She'd been on call, just in case, but it seemed she might've hoped not to get this call.*

*Marge drove me first to get Ethan. "Want to come in with me?"*

*"Can I just stay in the car?"*

*"Of course, dear."*

*A few minutes later, she came out with my little brother. The two of us, fatherless siblings. We drove to the hospice. A nurse was standing at the door, waiting for us. Miss Marge asked if we wanted her to walk us in. I said, "No, thanks," then added, "Thanks for driving Miss Marge."*



*“You’re so welcome dear. Your mom said she could get you guys home, but you tell her to call me if she needs me to come pick you up. It’s no trouble at all.”*

*“Ok, I will. Thanks.”*

*Ethan and I got out, and we walked up the sidewalk to the door. It was a newer brick building, and they haven’t really gotten the landscaping in yet. So it felt kinda out of place, like the building hadn’t really settled yet. Which, to be honest, made sense. Nothing about this really felt “in” place.*

*The nurse at the door was one we’d seen before. She had worked on Saturday morning. She walked us to Dad’s room. Mom and Rev. Mike were sitting on the bench outside in the hall. Rev. Mike had to put his hand on Mom’s shoulder, but she jumped up when she saw us come around the corner. She grabbed us together and pulled us into her body like a drowning woman grabs a life jacket she didn’t have time to put on right. She held us for a long time. Rev. Mike stood their quietly. Maybe he didn’t know what to say either.*

*So that’s it. It’s just us now. Just mom, Ethan, and me. No dad to joke around with, pick me up from school, get Ethan to stop being obnoxious. It’s just the three of us. And a great big, giant hole where Dad used to be.*

*Yours, Jo*

## Chapter 12

The following Saturday morning, Jo woke early. When she opened her eyes, it was still dark outside. She reached for her phone, which told her it was 7-something. She closed her eyes again and lay there quietly, listening. There was something reassuring about the quiet of the morning, but she preferred to go back to sleep rather than get out of bed. At least while she was sleeping, life would leave her alone. Awake, people need things from you. Or talk to you. They have opinions about what you should or shouldn't be doing, or they give you more bad news. At least if you're asleep, people will hesitate to wake you to give you the bad news. "It's okay, let them sleep," they'll say.

And though she hadn't gone back to school yet, Jo also felt like the whole world was constantly watching her. Maybe it's because people don't know what to do with a kid who's dad dies, and their watching to see how you're doing.

At least while she was still in bed, she could be left alone.

After several minutes of laying still in the silence, as it started to get a little lighter outside, Jo started to hear drawers and cabinets opening and closing from the kitchen. *Mom must be up.* Jo slowly pushed herself up onto her elbows, and sat on the edge of the bed. She went to the window, and twisted her blinds open, slowly letting the soft dawn light into her room. Could she just stay here for a while? Just linger in this moment? If the world could stop turning, maybe she wouldn't have to go forward with this day.

The black dress hung next to her closet. There was no getting out of this.

There was a knock on her door.

"Yeah?"

“It’s me sweetie,” said Wendy. “Just wanted to remind you people’re gonna start dropping things off for this afternoon.”

*More good news*, thought Jo, rolling her eyes. Wendy had invited people to come to their house for a reception after the memorial service. So a bunch of friends were dropping off food this morning.

Jo wasn’t sure she could do this. Couldn’t she just stay home, be by herself in her room, and not have to deal with *people*? If she left her room, *people* would be looking at her. *People* would be feeling sorry for her. *People* would want to say things to her and not really know what to say, so *people* will look at her with tear-filled eyes, and blubber something nonsensical. Or worse, borderline cruel. Someone had already told her, “God just needed him more, I guess.” *What a stupid thing to say*, Jo thought. Why would God need her dad to die in order to “have” him? Doesn’t God “have” all of us, alive or dead? If her dad is dead, *only* God “has” him.

Staring out her window, Jo realized that, apparently, like most everything else in her life, participating in today’s activities probably wasn’t up to her. So, she switched her brain off as much as she could, and went through the motions of the morning—breakfast, shower, getting dressed, occasionally answering the door for a casserole. Time came to go to church for the service. Wendy’s brother, Uncle Danny, picked them up and drove to the back entrance of the church.

Ethan jumped out of the car. Jo and her mom moved more slowly.

“You guys okay?” asked Uncle Danny.

Wendy just looked at him.

“Sorry, dumb question. Look, this is probably going to be hard, but all you gotta do is just say to people, ‘thank you for coming’. No one expects you to have things to say.”

They entered the church building, and, just as Jo feared, there were people. A lot of people. Coworkers of her parents, neighbors, several people from school too. Ellie, Zoe, and Billie of course, but there were others she hadn’t seen in a while, and their parents, all looking a bit lost. A couple of teachers were there—Ms. Carpenter came up to Jo, and, mercifully, didn’t say anything. She just looked at Jo sympathetically, and gave her a gentle hug.

Jo kinda zoned out at this point, responding to comments according to her uncle’s advice, with, “thank you for coming,” then she’d look away, toward the next well-meaning mourner, wishing time would move more quickly. When her knees started to wobble, Ellie, Zoe, and Billie, who were lingering nearby, came over to her. Billie grabbed her left hand, Zoe her right, and Ellie made a pathway through the crowd like a seasoned security guard, and Billie, Jo, and Zoe followed through the parting crowd. They took her into the sanctuary, and walked her up to the space reserved for family. They sat together in the second pew, and squeezed up against Jo, so close that if she did pass out, her friends at least would already be holding her upright.

They didn’t speak a word.

They just sat.

A few mourners tried to approach, to offer her their sympathy, but the collective glares from Jo’s three friends made it clear, Jo was not available right now.

In spite of her grief, Jo had never loved her friends more.

The service went as memorials do. The minister prayed and talked, songs were sung, though not with great enthusiasm. Some memories were shared, Jo remembered Uncle Danny talking about her parents' wedding. Some laughs, a lot of sniffing. Then they stood for the minister's final blessing, and got to the part her dad probably would've loved most, which was that they'd somehow convinced the organist to do a medley of Star Trek themes for the postlude.

Jo had found it hard to focus on much of what anyone said, but the blessing of the service was that she could sit, supported by her friends, without anyone trying to talk to her. Now, all of these people were going to come over to her house, and linger.

Uncle Danny drove the three of them home again. Ethan was maintaining his obliviousness to all of this—maybe it was just what happened in a person's life? He was also interested in the significant amount of food that'd been arriving all morning, and which he had consistently been told "not until after the service." It was now, clearly, after the service. He was ready to jump out, but Jo hadn't yet unbuckled her seatbelt. Wendy put her game face back on, and said to her kids, "Guys, I know this might be hard. Uncle Danny and the family are going to make sure all the guests stay downstairs. So if you need any breaks," she looked at Jo, "for however long, you can go up to your rooms any time."

"Do I have to show up at all?" asked Jo.

"You might get hungry at some point."

Maybe Jo could get Ethan to bring her a plate, though it would likely be mostly chicken wings and cookies.

“Sweetie,” Wendy leaned in to her daughter, “do you remember what Dad said when we realized this was coming?”

Jo stared blankly.

“How we’re going to need our friends to help us get through this?”

Jo lightly nodded.

“This is a part of that. I know the crowds are a lot. And I know it feels like none of them probably understand you, or they don’t know what to say, but hon, this is hard for all of us. Your dad was my best friend. I can’t get through this without these people. I can’t get through this without you and Ethan.”

Ethan perked up at the sound of his name and started paying attention.

“I mean it—take breaks in your room when you need to—but please don’t stay there the whole time. Look—none of this is supposed to be happening. I mean, we all die someday, but not now. Not for at least another thirty or forty years. You were supposed to be grown, and have your own family, and Dad was supposed to get to be a grandp—”

Wendy choked up, and couldn’t continue.

Ethan moved closer and put his arm around his mom’s waist. Wendy hugged him close.

“But we don’t get that,” she collected herself, and continued. “What we get, as much as none of us *wants* to be here, is this. These people. This is the part of death and loss that is good: we get to see how much your dad was loved.” The tears were

coming down again in earnest, as the words came through Wendy's cries. "We get today—all these people, who are only here because your dad, and our family, the two of you, and me, we matter to them."

Jo was crying now too.

The three stayed like that for a while. Jo had unbuckled her seatbelt at some point, starting to see that the social terror in front of her had other ways of being understood.

Finally, Wendy wiped her nose with a handkerchief, and said, "So yes, Joey, you have to show up. You have to show up, and let these people love on you, and remind you that no matter how alone we might feel in this, we aren't. Got it?"

Jo nodded.

"All right. So let's get in there. I gotta wipe my face a bit. But hey—I think I saw some of Mrs. Hatch's coffee cake in there. You should at least come in before that's gone."

Jo did love Mrs. Hatch's coffee cake. That was definitely worth getting out of the car for.

## Chapter 13

After the memorial service, Jo began to adjust to the new, dadless, normal. She went back to school a week later, but, no longer having a ride home meant she had to take the bus. Billie usually sat with her, but not always. Her teachers were patient with her for as long as they could be, but after a few days, started hinting that she should probably turn some of her assignments in.

Her second day back in band though, she lost count during one of the extended rests, and spaced out, looking through the music stand in front of her as if trying to focus somewhere beyond it. When her fellow clarinet players on either side raised their instruments to play, they glanced at Jo through their peripheral vision, but also didn't make an issue of her being lost.

One bright spot was toward the end of her first week back, the lunch room miraculously received a shipment of actual food. By Thursday, students of Aramson were eating chicken patty sandwiches and fries. The energy in the lunchroom was palpable. It felt like Dorothy coming into Oz, utter delight, as if seeing in color for the first time. They even had chocolate milk again! *Was this all real?* Jo wasn't the only one looking around for hints she'd taken a knock to the head, like she was actually imagining all of this. If it was a dream, no one wanted to wake up. The knot that'd been in Jo's stomach the past several days mercifully loosened, and she actually enjoyed a school lunch.

By Friday however, Hubbard was done waiting for Jo.

"Harrison—glad you're here. Listen, I've got these transparencies that're starting to fall apart. They're fading and getting harder to see. I finally found some new



transparency sheets on eBay, so I want you to take these markers, and copy over all my notes onto the new pages, starting with the first lecture from September.”

Jo was in slight disbelief. She realized Hubbard was old school, but had he never heard of a computer? Did he not realize he had a smart board in his classroom?

“Um, Mr. Hubbard?”

Hubbard’s face turned sour, as if his breakfast were starting to fight back.

“Wouldn’t you rather...” His face twisted up tighter. There was obviously no way to end that sentence which would result in a positive response from Mr. Hubbard. The answer would always be “no,” there is nothing he would “rather” do, other than what he just told her he wanted her to do.

“Never mind,” she said.

“Good. Here are the markers, get to it.”

“Mr. Hubbard, I—” Jo started. The ancient teacher cut her off.

“Miss Harrison—I realize your...situation. But I do not need you or anyone else to lecture me on how to teach. You have no degree. You have no knowledge. I have been teaching since before you were born. My methods worked then, and they work now. Do not presume to ‘correct’ me, thinking I might listen to you out of sympathy. You are not a special case. You are to do as I ask. You are *my* assistant, not I yours. Do you understand Miss Harrison?”

“I was just going to ask what colors you wanted me to use.”

Mr. Hubbard was so worked up, he doubted Jo’s honesty. But his tirade was too much for her. She threw his markers back onto his desk, grabbed her bag, and stormed out of the classroom.

Jo was furious. Is this what people thought? That she was trying to gain sympathy because her Dad died? Like she orchestrated her father's cancer so she could get some kind of special favors, or get out of things? *The nerve!*

Jo blew into Principal Asher's office, ignoring her secretary who stood up in an attempt to protest, but Jo was too fast. She threw open Asher's door, dropped her bag, and slammed the door behind her.

## Chapter 14

“IT’S NOT FAIR!” yelled Jo.

Principal Asher looked at her blankly, the phone still up to her ear. “Can I call you back?” she said, to whomever was on the phone. “Thanks.” And she hung up.

“Jo—have a seat.”

“Where do people get off, anyway? Was it my fault my dad died? Was it my idea to put all my friends in other classes? I never asked to be his TA! This school sucks. You barely feed us, and by the way, really, you should let people have sick days for acne. Or let us do online class or something.”

Jo forgot she was sad at this point—she was pissed. The whole year seemed to drop onto her all at once. Why should she have to carry all this? Would it kill someone, somewhere, to be nice to her? To make things just a little easier?

Ms. Asher quietly evaluated Jo. She knew Jo was right, of course, that she had been dealt a raw deal. And neither she nor Versri ever imagined Jo would have to face losing a parent. But still. If Asher let Jo in on how unfair her life *really* was, Jo would lose all faith in humanity. Even if that would be reasonable under these circumstances, Asher wasn’t willing to take the risk. Not anymore.

“Look—I get it,” Asher said, finally. “I get that you’re pissed, and you have every right to be. But Jo—and I know how patronizing this sounds—but this is just, life, sometimes. We all have years that are just awful; when it seems like the whole world is against you, like nothing you do or say is ever the right thing. You can’t change any of the bad things that’re happening to you. And sometimes it seems like everything everyone says to you is complete bullshit.”

If this was Principal Asher's way of trying to make Jo feel better, she was doing a terrible job of it. But the shock of hearing her principal say "bullshit" at least momentarily distracted Jo from getting even angrier.

"But," Asher continued, "and I say this with the utmost respect, because I see how strong you've been this year, and I know you can get through this. But for crying out loud Jo, a little perspective wouldn't hurt you. Every day, people all over the planet are dealing with worse than what you've had this year. In some cases, way worse. They maybe haven't eaten in days. They're homeless. A hurricane or wildfire just wiped out their house—their business—their whole town? A lot of people lost family and friends to COVID. Right now, you feel alone. Like you're the only person in the world, and you're the only one to whom bad things happen. But you're not. Bad things happen every day to people all over the world. It isn't personal. It feels that way, but it's not. And you can hang out in misery for a bit, but self-pity isn't going to ever bring anyone back, or change anything about your circumstances.

"All of us suffer, Jo. All of us lose people we love. It's a condition of living a human life. You're only thirteen."

"Fourteen," Jo corrected.

"Fourteen. Still. If you keep living, more bad stuff is going to happen to you. Good stuff too, by the way, but you have to keep going, especially when the bad stuff happens. Or did someone promise you life would always be easy and good?"

Jo shook her head.

“Good. Because if they did, that would’ve been a lie. That’s not how it works. Death and pain are as natural a part of life as birth and joy. If nothing else, middle school proves that.”

Asher saw Jo getting smaller in her chair, and realized she might’ve been a little too blunt, so she eased up a bit in her tone.

“Jo, every teacher and staff member you know here has been through as bad a year as you’ve had this year. Every one of us.” Asher paused for a second. “Except maybe Miss Carpenter, she seems to float on a cloud somehow.” This was true. If the holocaust couldn’t bring her down, probably nothing could. “Anyway. Not the point. The point is—life is hard. Really hard. Most of the time. If it were easy, old people wouldn’t have so many wrinkles or gray hairs. Shoot, Mr. Versri would still *have* hair. The point is, we all, you, have to find something, preferably somethings, that you love. Something or someone that brings you joy. That when you look at them, they remind you there is good in the world. Even if that’s just a memory of your dad, you need something that reminds you every day, or at least a few times a week, you need something that reminds you love and joy are *possible*.

“We need people who make us laugh, who sit with us when we’re sad, and know when enough’s enough and we need a laugh. But remember, we’re all people. So even if they bring you love and joy most of the time, they’re going to disappoint you at some point. That’s how people are. So also prepare yourself to forgive them. Because God knows they will have to forgive you too for something stupid you do as well.”

Jo was quiet for a long time. Principal Asher realized she’d said quite enough and let the quiet hang for as long as necessary.

Eventually, Jo put her head down. She felt a tear coming, and after all that, didn't feel like showing weakness. But Principal Asher just handed her a tissue. "It's ok," she said, "if you didn't cry after the year you've been through, I'd be worried you may not have a heart."

Jo's chest heaved, as she stopped fighting the tears. It was partly from all her frustration, but, as the tears let fly, it was also from her mortification that she was crying in front of the principal. Asher turned away and started typing on her computer. After a minute, she stopped, and said, "Take your time. You can sit here as long as you need to. Or at least until the bell rings, I have a meeting next period." She went back to typing.

Jo took a few minutes, found her breath, wiped away her tears with a second tissue, sat up, and started to grab her bag. "Ms. Asher?"

"Yeah Jo?"

"I can't decide if I want to say thank you, or something, well, something I shouldn't say to a principal."

"Screw you?"

"Something like that."

"I get it. Like I said, after what you've been through, I'd be pissed too."

"That's not—I mean—I am mad, I just...I don't know."

"It's okay not to know." The principal paused a second. "You don't have to figure everything out. Sometimes life's just a matter of breathing in, breathing out, and putting one foot in front of the other. Things will eventually make some kind of sense. Not now,

of course, you're in middle school. Middle school isn't supposed to make sense. But, someday."

"Can I go now?"

"Sure. But Jo—"

Jo sat back in her seat.

"In spite of all of this—in spite of all of the crap, all the bad stuff I just talked about—remember that life can be really beautiful too."

Jo stood up. "No offense, but I'm not really feeling that right now."

"I know. But just think about all of the billions of tiny things that had to happen in just the right moment, just the exact right time, for me to be here talking to you, and for you to be where you are."

Jo considered this for a moment.

Ms. Asher continued, "Sometimes I think we worry too much about what's good and what's bad, what's wrong or what's right. We worry too much about what we 'deserve,' rather than just being grateful that anything happens to us at all. When you think about it, everything that happens is kind of...amazing. Every single thing we experience is amazing."

The bell rang.

"Meeting?" said Jo.

"Yep."

Jo turned around and left the principal's office.

As she walked out of school that afternoon and headed toward her bus, it started to rain lightly. Of course it did. Why shouldn't the weather match her mood? Students

hurried to get onto the busses quicker. Teachers put clip boards above their heads, kids pulled up their hoodies. It didn't do much good, but luckily, it wasn't raining hard.

Jo moved toward her seat like she was in a trance. The whole sensory experience on the way home assaulted her—the smell of body odor and green pleather, Jack's emo rage music uncontained by his cheap earbuds, even the way the whole bus lurched with the driver's heavy foot on the brake—it was all just one reminder after another that her dad wasn't picking her up anymore. According to Principal Asher though, she was supposed to experience these things as miraculous wonders of life. Jo figured the principal probably didn't mean *all* of these things. She wished for all the world that she was sitting in the passenger seat of Jason's old sedan. Its only smells were from whatever he'd had for lunch earlier, which might've made her hungrier, but at least weren't unpleasant. And she could always pick the music.

Jo tried not to think about the conversation with her principal. She didn't want anyone to try and make her feel better. She didn't want sympathy, didn't want anyone to rationalize, or confront her, or do anything, really. Yes, she went to her principal's office because Asher was someone she could yell at, and she needed that. But all Jo really wanted was for everyone to shut up and stop looking at her with sad eyes. Or stop avoiding eye contact because they were afraid she might blow up at them, which was a reasonable fear today.

Jo had a right to be angry. Dads aren't supposed to die. They're not supposed to leave you when you're in the middle of the worst year of your life, and you need them to pick you up from school so you don't have to take the damn school bus. The now-



familiar lump came up in her throat, but she forced it down. No crying on school busses. That was not gonna end well.

The sun was getting lower in the sky, and was coming through the bus window, warming her right cheek. She closed her eyes, and with the brightness of the sun hitting one side of her face, it was like she was looking at a split screen—whiteish red on one side, black on the other. Her skin started to mimic this with her right cheek warming, and her left cheek staying chilled, as the bus's heater was still broken. She felt the contrast on her face, as she saw it on the back of her eyelids. Red and warm on the right, cold and black on the left. Her face, her eyes, both feelings. Both colors.

Maybe Asher had a point. As much as she didn't want to admit it, nothing the principal had said was factually wrong. Everything just hurt so bad. And even though Asher said it wasn't personal, it sure felt that way. Even her friends seemed to think she must've done something bad for karma to have dealt her such a terrible year.

But Jo knew herself. There was a lot about her circumstances she didn't understand, or, things she thought had been settled, but this year threw into doubt. But she knew herself. She knew she didn't deserve any of this.

So could Asher be right? Could it be true that life isn't about getting what we deserve or don't deserve? That didn't seem fair. There ought to be justice in the world—good people should get good things, and bad people should get bad things. And Jo was certain she was a good person getting bad things, and she was also certain that wasn't fair.

But, if life isn't about whether things are good or bad, it's just about experiencing—good, bad, amazing, horrifying—just about getting to be alive at all, if that's what life is

about, she was definitely getting to experience a lot of life this year. Maybe she should think about getting to breathe, rather than worrying about the smells. Maybe it was good to have a heartbeat, even if it would one day stop. How many possible humans never exist, or random events never happen at all, because some seemingly innocuous event takes place, and an entire chain of events never gets started?

Jo wished, so much, that her dad was still alive. He should be alive. He deserved to be alive, and she deserved to have her dad. But she did have her dad. Goofball, nerd, embarrassment that he was, she had him. He was hers, and Ethan's, and he'd always be their dad. Even if she couldn't hug him, even if he wouldn't teach her how to drive, or take out the trash, or mow the lawn—she would always be Jason Harrison's daughter.

And, though it didn't have the comforting effect Principal Asher was going for, it was also true that a whole lot of people are in much worse shape. Some kids only ever know one parent, or maybe never know either of their parents. On the other hand, some kids maybe *wish* they never knew their parents. Jo still had her mom and Ethan. And she at least had fourteen years of a dad who loved her. Yeah, could've been worse.

*I hate when adults are right*, she thought.

## Chapter 15

Before his death, Wendy wanted to talk with Jason about final arrangements. He didn't have a lot of strong feelings about it, pointing out the obvious—he wouldn't be there. But there were two things he requested. For the memorial service, he really wanted was the Star Trek postlude. The second thing he asked for was that his ashes would be spread in the Gulf of Mexico.

So the following summer, as the Harrisons made their trip south, Jason came along in a little box between the front seats. It turns out there're rules about spreading ashes in the sea. You can't just wade out into the gulf, and pour the ashes over the waves. Which makes sense, I guess. Swimmers and surfers probably don't want to be swimming around people's loved ones. So the family hired a charter, sailed out to the required three miles from shore, and then, after saying their last goodbyes, poured what was left of their father and husband into the water, along with a few flowers. Wendy was stoic, holding the kids, one on each side of her, as they watched the sun sink over the western horizon, the way the four of them had done so many times from the beach.

Life without Jason was awful. But they were moving along, knowing he was watching from somewhere on the other side. "Obviously," he'd said to them in his final days, "we don't know how long we have. I'm proof it might be less than you expect. I know you're sad. I'm sad too. But don't mope forever. Live your lives! I'll do what I can to keep an eye on things, cheer you on from the other side." It was hard to hear at the time, of course, but they were starting to understand more and more how much of a gift this was. It meant that moving on with their lives was not a betrayal of him, rather, it was a way of honoring him. So Ethan started playing baseball this summer, as he and his

dad had talked about, even though Jason wouldn't be there to help. Jo figured out how to run the lawn mower without killing anyone, mostly thanks to online videos. She was also really looking forward to high school. Wendy was able to readjust her schedule and work from home some days, so she could be more available to the kids.

The sun sank lower and lower, and Jo noticed the sky change color. She looked up and around, and thought for a moment. She thought about how no one tends to notice the sun during the day, we only notice it when it comes toward evening and starts to go away. Then, like a grand finale for the day, the sun puts on a spectacular show of color, and blows everyone's minds.

Wendy nodded to the captain, who then turned the engines back on, and steered the boat back to shore.

Jo's life was not perfect. She had one living parent, one dead one, but they both loved her. Her little brother still drove her nuts. And she had great friends who, though they occasionally didn't get it, stayed with her through the worst year of her life, and she would not have made it through alone. And, high school was a whole new world of possibility.

Jo hadn't processed all of her feelings about the past year. If a do-over were available, she wasn't sure if she'd take it. Maybe if she could guarantee things would go better, but she now knew she couldn't. That isn't, apparently, how life works. But she felt something in the increasing darkness, as the boat bounced over the waves of the Gulf, and the wind blew her hair to the side, it was a feeling she hadn't had in quite a while.

*Thanks Dad,* she thought.

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