

SALAD DAYS

by

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A Thesis

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of

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Creative Writing

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Abstract

SALAD DAYS

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George Mason University, 2016

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SALAD DAYS is the story of Anne Roberts's coming of middle age. Anne has enjoyed an uneventful, uninspired life as a mother, wife and English teacher, but that all begins to change once she and her husband become empty nesters. From her husband's surprise decision that they will climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, to a series of misadventures for her sons, to some misconstrued romance in her school life, Anne realizes the end of her salad days. In keeping with the Shakespearian drama she teaches her high school students, she finds the coming of middle age a fine line between comedy and tragedy. SALAD DAYS traces Anne's year as she tries to navigate that precarious line.

Salad Days

A Coming of Middle Age Novel

Charmian: By your most gracious pardon,
I sing but after you.

Cleopatra: My salad days,
When I was green in judgement, cold in blood,
To say as I said then.

Anthony and Cleopatra 1.5.75-79

You're either gonna laugh about it or cry about it, so you might as well laugh.

-Betty Frost Baldwin Creech Watkins Mirmelstein Alford

Chapter 1

Anne's eyes flickered and there was a slight sucking noise as she pulled her cheek from the car window. She wiped at the dried drool on her chin and ran her tongue over her teeth; her mouth felt dusty.

"Why are we stopped?" she asked, trying to focus. Last time she looked, the horizon was moving. She turned her head towards her husband, "And I was NOT snoring."

"Oh, yes you were. I'm surprised you didn't wake yourself up." He shifted his weight, grabbed a handful of popcorn from the bag in his lap, stuffed it in his mouth and mumbled, "Oh, yeah, we're stopped because we're sitting in our driveway. Want some?"

She waved off the plastic bag of popcorn crumbs and sat up in her seat. Dan crunched a few kernels and held up a fistbump in front of Anne's face, which she also waved off. Undeterred, he bumped his own fist, singing out, "And another one bites the dust!" Amid a flurry of popcorn flakes, Dan swung open the car door and squeezed his 6'4" frame and three hundred or so pounds out of the old Volvo wagon.

"I've got to go hit the can," he announced, adding "Man, am I sore." he stretched and shuffled towards kitchen door.

Anne remained seated, observing her husband limping along the driveway: *Oh, god, is it the gimpy knee-the one he tore in that softball game? Or, maybe it's his hip;*

that's all he needs—a hip replacement. Maybe the sciatica..oh, god, not the sciatica. Last time he was in the La-z-Boy for three months. And please god, not the shoulder; nothing makes him more helpless than that damn shoulder. She watched him wince while reaching for the key in its hiding place under the mat, and tried to remember if she'd picked up any Icee-Hot at the grocery store. Then she gathered up the heavy Shakespeare volume open in her lap. What had she been reading before she conked out?

Ever since she read that article on Facebook about postponing early onset Alzheimers she tried to instill a habit of making herself remember whatever she didn't think she was remembering. That and memorizing random lines from the plays she taught (God knows she'd read them enough!) were her main defenses against what she could already see looming in her future—thanks to her mother, who seemed to get nuttier every time Anne talked with her. She didn't hold out much hope for Dan; the only thing he memorized were NFL schedules and stats, and the Lombardi quotes he had plastered along the cinder block walls of his office at the Community College, where he played Athletic Director..

While she unhooked the seatbelt, pulled down her “JMU MOM” T-Shirt and pulled up David's (her oldest son) bleach-spotted high school gym shorts, Anne thought back: They finished unloading Colin's, their youngest son, earthly belongings out of the car and into his already smelly freshman dorm room (for which they were paying the equivalent of rent on a nice beach-side condo). They fed their not-in-the-least sad son at some pizza place and hit the highway. Dan complained about why kids who spent so much time lifting weights couldn't manage to get a few boxes up a couple flights.

Anne's spousal filter kicked in then, and Dan's words became background noise, along with the blather from the sports radio show he insisted was news.

Ah, it was coming back to her; she remembered she had been re-reading (for like the fiftieth time) *Anthony and Cleopatra*, pretending to prepare for the start of the school year, when she would touch the future in her senior English elective, "Shakespeare's Famous Lovers." For some perverse reason, she was looking at the last text she would teach during the year-long course; channeling the aging but still commanding Cleopatra was just more appealing than putting up with the fickle Juliet; besides she'd have enough teenaged drama soon enough. She focused even harder, squinching up her face with the effort. Maybe all this thinking would burn a few calories. Finally, with relief, she remembered the conversation between Cleopatra and her maid, Charmian, from early in the play. *And people said your short term memory was the first to go!* She even remembered being struck by Cleopatra's dismissal of Charmian's reminder that, back in the day, she had been just as crazy about Caesar, as she claimed to be about Anthony. But Cleopatra was not rattled; she simply relegated the great Caesar to the lowly position of an infatuation from her salad days, when she was "green in judgement," (a line, which, unfortunately, brought back some painful memories of trying to teach metaphor and convince students that it had nothing to do with Caesar salad—).

The last of their three sons deposited in an institution of higher learning, Anne and Dan were alone, for the first time in, what, twenty-four years. Of course there was still Oberon, the Great Dane, but for all intents and purposes, she was returning to an empty nest.

Anne was not sure how she felt about that.

But fortunately, before she could consider the new situation, there was dinner to be imagined, mail to be collected and the dog to be fetched. She exited the car, stopping to wipe off the potato chip crumbs that clung to the back of David's pilled nylon shorts and knocking the tome to the car floor, where it would remain until Anne's attention was turned toward the future, not idling in the present.

Coming from the Virginia dog days humidity into the arctic air conditioning of their smallish, but nice enough house, Anne felt a little dizzy. She flipped on the light, heard the fan whirring in the powder room and figured Dan would be busy for a while. In the harsh glare of the overhead light, it looked like a bomb had gone off in the kitchen. Anne took stock of the damage: bowls crusted with Captain Crunch leftovers lay on the table, a half gallon of milk sat warming on the counter, and then there were the leftovers from last night's Chinese. Various sports equipment Colin had elected not to take lay strewn about the floor and a single sheet—possibly a bottom sheet, sat neatly folded over a kitchen chair. Anne doubted that Colin would notice.

And clothes; they'd had a moment of reckoning about the clothes, Dan demanding that Colin take only what he could fit in the newly purchased (during an shockingly expensive trip to Bed, Bath, and Beyond) duffel bag. Watching her youngest cramming faded T-shirts with indecipherable band names and what resembled pornographic images, tossing aside the rainbow of polo shirts she had gotten for him at the outlets, made her question the wisdom of Dan's dictum, not to mention the judgement

of her last born. But she was too tired to protest at the time, and seeing all those beautiful shirts now, most of them still sporting a price tag, she began to gather them up, to send to him. Or maybe hold until Christmas.

She put the pile of shirts on the steps, passing by the still whirring powder room fan and shook her head over the 7-11 chilidogs Dan insisted on eating; she bet he was regretting it now. She retrieved the mail and flipped through the ads, the bills—already a tuition bill, they didn't waste any time, and the...what was this? A heavy mailer, addressed to Daniel Lee Roberts, from Thompsen Treks, with the promise “We'll take you to great heights!” She laid the other papers on the sticky counter and was preparing to open this curiosity when she heard the powder room fan give a gasp and die.

Muttering about those damn chilidogs and why did she let him eat them, Dan entered the kitchen.

“Did you get the mail?” his eyes sliding to the envelope she held out. Dan's gift for the obvious used to be kind of disarming; now it was just irritating.

“What's this?” she asked, waving it in front of his face.

Dan grabbed it and tucked it under his arm, “Oh, it was something I ordered. Or, actually, it's something the boys wanted me to order. I was just curious. It's nothing,” he concluded.

Dan was a bad liar, which, until now, Anne had always seen as a good thing.

“I should go fetch the dog. I'll just head over; where's the leash?” He still operated on the deflection theory of defense from his football days. He looked around helplessly, easing his way to the door.

She grabbed the leash from the back of the chair and tossed it to him. Like the receiver he had once been, Dan automatically reached for it and dropped the envelope in the process. Anne snatched it up from the floor and ripped it open.

“Dear Mr. Roberts,” she read aloud. “Thank you for your deposit of \$10,000 on “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” safari for two trekkers.” She looked up at her husband who had somehow acquired an idiot grin. “Deposit? Ten thousand dollars?” she repeated. She counted the zeroes again, in disbelief.

“Oh, hell, I can never keep a secret. OK, what I said before—that’s not really right. The truth is I booked an adventure for us, to celebrate your 50th and our 25th—OK, here’s my great idea: we’re gonna climb Mt. Kilimanjaro!”

Anne stared at him; his expression reminded her of Oberon when he waited for a treat; she half expected drool to drip from his mouth. Finally, she asked,

“Why?”

“Because we can!” Dan was warming up; Anne recognized all the tell-tale signs of a Dania—an especially frenzied state her husband took on at times, when he had a great idea, and thought, *Here we go*.

“Anne, we are not getting any younger, in case you hadn’t noticed, and now that the kids are all in college, I thought it was time we did something for ourselves, you know?” Dan paused to inhale. *Really? Something for ourselves?* Anne rolled her eyes and broke in,

“Where did you find ten thousand dollars? And,” she looked down at the letter in her hand. “Where is the balance that’s due January 1 coming from?” She stifled a sudden memory of her mother’s voice.

Dan pondered a minute. “Well, honey, I took out some of the money my mother left us, you know, when she died.”

Anne lowered her eyes to the letter, took a breath. “Dan you know that was our retirement money.” How many times had they talked about this, how many times had she silently thanked his mother for dying and leaving them the remains of Dan’s great-grandfather’s winnowed trust?

“I am sure Mom would have wanted us to spend it on something we wanted,” Dan declared. Anne doubted that his mother, a Baltimore debutante, would have understood, much less approved, a trip to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro. Anne didn’t understand it herself.

“Honey, I just wanted to surprise you! C’mon, it will be great! I’ve always wanted to do this. We’ll start training—you’ll like that, you can get off a few pounds...” Anne glared at him. “We’ll get in shape, like you’re always badgering me...” Dan shrugged. “Anne, you worry too much. You gotta live more in the moment.”

As from a distance, Anne looked up at her husband, moving from that irritating Tom Sawyer smile to his yellow ruin of a T-shirt (complete with brownish stains—Chili? Rust? So many possibilities) which didn’t quite meet the khaki shorts belted under his paunch, a glimpse of tighty whitey elastic exposed, finally resting on his thick calves disappearing into battered Docksidere.. *Be still my heart*, she thought.

“Just go get the damn dog.”

Once Dan left the kitchen to retrieve Oberon from the neighbor, Anne fumed—for about three minutes. *Twenty-five years of marriage will do that to you*, she thought. *Strip you of anger, excitement, curiosity, lust—any of the emotions that probably induced you to marry in the first place.*

As she scrubbed the cereal bowls and picked up the remains from Colin's packing—and unpacking, Anne wondered, not about what had happened to those feelings they had started with; that was ancient history, but what feelings were left for this second start, this empty nesting phase. People acted like getting your kids out the door was the greatest thing that could happen to a marriage, but she was not so sure. Not that she had spent much time thinking about it; it felt like yesterday that they were celebrating getting Colin out of diapers and getting Michael (the middle son) into soccer cleats. And David entering first grade at the Baldwin Country Day School, where Anne taught high school English. Besides, Anne had always thought of herself as a pragmatist and living with Dan all these years had done nothing to convince her otherwise.

Anne paused a minute in her cleaning (relocating stuff, more like) as she faced once again that this would be her twentieth-first year of guiding fecund minds to an appreciation of great literature. Well, force-feeding it to them. And the first year without one of her boys to high five in the halls, and.

Also, the second year without Ellen, her mentor, confessor, (at times) substitute mother, favorite person in the world. Though Ellen was twenty years older than Anne, they hit it off from the very first faculty meeting, when they found each other reading

Remains of the Day, hidden in their planners, while the headmaster droned on about goals and objectives and SAT scores. “I just can’t put it down,” Ellen whispered to Anne. She smiled in agreement. And that was that—they remained devoted colleagues and steadfast friends for the next twenty years.

Until Ellen decided she’d graded enough papers and written enough college recommendations. She completed her last set of exams, posted her final grades, and moved to a retirement community in Arizona, where she started blogging. She called her blog, “Old Age is No Age.” After Anne got over her initial grief at Ellen’s departure, she admitted, to herself only, that she was a little jealous of her friend, living by herself (Ellen had never married, her Persian cat her only family) and spending her time writing and reading.

At one point in her life, Anne had envisioned a similar future, only in a loft in Soho or maybe Paris. But that was before she ran into Dan. When she was in her second year of her MAT degree, she tripped on the soft stone walkway designed to look older than it was, and fell into the Dan’s muscled arms. Dan, who was living the life of the BMOG in his fifth year of football. He carried her—literally carried her—to the Student Health clinic. She felt light as a feather and he was so handsome... it made up for all her past dating failures; at least things seemed that way at the time...

But, back to the present.

Dan, who seemed determined to spend all their money on something ridiculous and prevent her from ever retiring to a life of reading and writing. She knew she raise a much bigger stink about this whole mountain climbing waste of money, but Anne’s

guiding principles of marriage came straight from her mother: #1 Rule of Engagement: Never argue about money; just fix it when he's not paying attention. Anne crammed a lacrosse stick in the coat closet and tossed a baseball up the stairs and hopefully out of view.

God, it was quiet in the house. Gone were the constant pow-pow-boom of the violent video games, the jangling of ring tones, the occasional good-natured banter and almost constant arguing between the boys. Now she had the minute of peace, she was always begging for, in a house that seemed to belong to someone else.

Why all gloom and doom?—the best years were ahead, right? No middle age crisis for her; didn't she read the other day that fifty was the new thirty-five? Well, there was only one path of least resistance to stave off those threatening feelings. Stopping to look out the wide kitchen window, she checked Dan's progress. He appeared to be settling himself on their neighbor Joe's porch, yakking as usual.

She retrieved a juice glass out of the dirty dishwasher and helped herself to the box of Chardonnay in the back of the refrigerator. She pushed the speed dial button for the pizza place that knew each of the boys by name and order. "Here's to my salad days," she said, aloud to no one, gulped down the wine and returned to the fridge for a refill.

Chapter 2

Hamlet's line came to her as she turned into the winding, potholed driveway of the Baldwin Country Day School: "*The readiness is all...*" She passed by the recently re-painted sign that declared: "BCDS: Where we can be our best." Along with the repainting, Anne noted that several new colors and ethnicities had been added to the beaming row of faces, delighted to be their best. After pulling into the parking space with the faded "32," she sat a moment in the car, watching the hugging girls, and the shoulder-punching boys, greeting each other like soldiers getting ready to deploy for a tour of duty. *Was she ready? For what, anyway?* Then, waxing philosophical, she wondered, *Are we ever truly ready?* She gathered together her book bag, her laptop case, her lunch bag, and some bag that had something in it that she thought she might need, even if she couldn't remember what that was. If Anne had learned anything about teaching, it was that you couldn't have too many bags to schlep to class. Based on the number and variety of her bags, *yes, she was ready.*

She marched up the sidewalk, winding through the brownish, but well-manicured lawn, up the low set of bricked steps, and through the flashing glass doors, held open by the headmaster and the dean, her one other friend to survive this long at BCDS, Rob Myles. Since Ellen had retired—was it really two years ago? Rob had become the only person she talked to much at school. The headmaster greeted her and looked at his

watch, and Rob touched her shoulder as she plowed through the doorway, amid the “How was your summer?’s”. The loud voices, the constant motion, the crush of Axe-smelling and floral Bath and Bodyworks lotioned teenagers, overlaid by a hefty dose of libido: unexpectedly, Anne felt at home for the first time since dropping off Colin. Maybe not the libido part.

Lugging her bags, which were starting to grow heavy, she zig-zagged through the crowded hallways, stopping to hug the girls and shake hands with the boys until she reached her white-washed cinder block bunker of a classroom and slid through the door, without turning on the lights. She dropped her bags on the desk, raising a small cloud of chalk dust, and sneezed. *Ah, home sweet dusty home*, she thought and went to pull up the shades. As a “senior member of the team” (read: old teacher), Anne was entitled to a room that had a window. Her well-earned window overlooked the parking lot, not exactly a view anyone actually wanted.

She pulled up the heavy blinds, allowing the morning sunlight to waft through the haze of dust motes. She busied herself arranging two rows of desks in half-circles, flinching at the screeching noise created in the process. Then Anne unloaded her bags, took a disinterested stab at wiping down her desk with a paper towel, and jumped at the sound of the first bell. *The readiness is all...* she reminded herself and prepared for the onslaught of outwardly self-assured teenagers who, along with their eager parents, would soon find themselves knocked down a peg or two by the college journey, as the simpering college counselor liked to label it.

She stood by the door, greeting the newly minted seniors and sharing their easy laughter, their pretend dread at coming back to school. She knew what they would be up against soon enough and knew also that she should have some sympathy, having recently gone through the process for the third and last time. (Truth be told, only David, the oldest, was an easy sell to colleges). These kids were a part of the one percent, the privileged, and much was expected of them, or, at least, much was expected of the school for them. Their parents were betting big time on the advantages of an independent school (the moniker “private” gone by the wayside, ironically seen as a negative reminder of the elitism these people—she had to include Dan and herself—had sacrificed vacations, second homes, new cars, financial freedom, for). And then as she looked into the shining eyes and brilliant gleam of orthodontia, she had a stabbing reminder of Dan’s grin as he told her about the now un-surprise trip he had purchased, and she thought there could be worse things than tuition to spend your money on.

“OK, OK, folks, settle in. While I figure out who we’ve got here, I want you all to do a little reading and writing. [dramatic groans]. You can start with the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*. Read it and write about what you think Shakespeare is suggesting—who is he talking to and what is he trying to say?” She fumbled with a computer printout of names and student numbers. Then, the warm glow of being back in school dimmed:

“Is this graded?”

“Mrs. Roberts, the bookstore ran out of the book, so I can’t do the reading.”

“No one said we needed our books the first day.”

“Do you have an extra copy?”

“Does anyone have any paper? I didn’t know we would have to write anything on the first day.”

“How does Colin like college?”

Anne ignored the last question, but like a small boat buffeting rising waves, she went up against each of the others, and, her patience not yet exhausted; it was the first day of class, after all, and her responses remained cheerfully afloat. Again, because it was the first day of class, she ultimately elected to read the Prologue aloud, and ordered a round of applause for the one girl in the class whose mother had thought to purchase notebook paper. After exaggerated inspection, aimed at subversive texters, she settled herself onto the front of her desk (a position which allowed for both a sense of informality and a commanding view) Anne began:

*Two households, both alike in dignity
(In fair Verona, where we lay our scene)
From ancient grudge break to a new mutiny . . .
,*

When she finished, she stared at her students until there was a reluctant concession to having a task at hand, and they took up their pens and pencils and began to make marks on the paper. Anne went back to her roster.

Many of the faces were familiar; Anne also taught ninth grade English and was always pleased to see her former first years as seniors. But there was one face she didn’t

recognize, so she peered into the tiny print on the sheet and thought, *Shit, it's Teddy Reilly.*

She looked up and scanned the room, but there he was, his long frame jammed into a desk at the edge of one of the half circles—the one nearest the door. Even hunching over his paper, long hair curling up behind his ears, he stuck out of the crop of silent scribblers like some rogue weed. She had never taught Teddy Reilly, but she knew who he was. Everyone in the school knew Teddy. Many, many faculty meetings had been devoted to discussions of what Teddy had done, what he needed to do, what he had to do. She had heard that he was brilliant, that he was “on the spectrum,” that he was lazy; that he had learning difficulties; that he had learning differences; that he didn’t care; that he couldn’t, that he wouldn’t. And now she would have the chance to experience him in the flesh, in “Shakespeare’s Famous Lovers.”

And again, she thought, *Why me?* Her readiness did not include Teddy Reilly.

“OK, let’s bring your writing to a close,” she said automatically. Thinking that a good offense would be the best defense, she asked,

“So, Teddy, what did you write about?”

He looked up from his desk near the door, shook the hair out of his eyes and smiled, “Oh, I didn’t actually write it down, but I think Shakespeare is warning not just the families, but the entire audience, of the dangers of denying passion for the sake of convention and tradition.” Pause. “By the way, I go by Hollister now.” After an initial head turning, the class were studiously examining the scribbles on their borrowed loose leaf.

Anne narrowed her eyes and thought, Sparks Notes alert!! But how could he already have... She could feel the class waiting for her response. Quickly she fell back on Ellen's tried and true advice: never deprive a student of an opportunity. Ellen applied this philosophy to everything from leading discussion to making copies to getting her coffee; Anne tried to keep it to classroom activities. She turned to the pony-tailed blond in the third row, not so discreetly trying to scroll through Facebook on her phone, which lay between the pages of her book.

"Ashley, do you agree with what Teddy..." she stopped herself and turned up the corners of her mouth, "Excuse me, I mean Hollister. Do you agree with what he said about the prologue from *Romeo and Juliet*?"

Anne took some satisfaction when Ashley jumped at the sound of her name and dumped her phone on the floor. She listened (the soul of patience look on her face) as Ashley sputtered something about how it always took her awhile to get into books and she didn't really get what Teddy said, and she wasn't sure she had signed up for this class., but Anne was really watching Teddy, whose face took on a practiced blankness. He lowered his eyes, doodling on the piece of paper, and Anne felt like she had doused water on some almost-lit spark.

"Mrs. Roberts, can you read the first couple of lines again? I can't remember how the speech started," asked the overachiever in the front row.

"Let's just begin reading Act I," Anne said, nodding at the six or seven kids who had thought to bring their books. "Yes, out loud. Amber, you assign the roles," she rewarded the go-to bossy organizer of the senior class. Amber took up her role and

directed her classmates with an ease that suggested a future in business leadership, or elementary education.

As the denizens of Verona began to speak their lines, Anne remained seated on her desk, occasionally correcting pronunciation, but really watching Teddy, who had not been deemed worthy of a speaking part. Of course, he had no text, and seemed uninterested in his classmates' ponderous plodding through the lines. His head was bent over the paper; he was writing something—Anne was certain it wasn't anything to do with *Romeo and Juliet*. Well, as long as he didn't disturb anyone. At least any of the other students.

The voices droned on, tumbling over words like a flat tire over a rutted road. Teddy kept scribbling with his stub of a pencil and Anne felt her ears and eyes starting to glaze over.

“Okay, that's enough. Finish reading Act I for our next class.” There was a moment of dead silence: the bell hadn't rung but the class had all the appearances of being over. The students looked at each other helplessly, unsure of what to do in this absence of direction. There was a fumble for phones and a shuffle of backpacks.

Then, BRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGG! Anne felt a physical relief in the sudden din and squeal of chairs moving and conversations erupting. For her own safety, she stood back from the class exodus, pretending not to watch as Teddy, who was a full head taller than anyone else in the room, swung his limp backpack up onto his shoulder and plowed through the little islands of chatterers and flirts. He was out the door and gone in no time, lost in the flow of the slow-moving march of the undead students.

Rob was holding court in the faculty lounge-- lounge being a complete misnomer, since there was rarely any sitting room. Faculty juggled books, laptops, and their dignity, in a rush to reach the coffee urn before the next class. Anne skirted the crowd, avoided the lumpy donated sofa with the stained flowered slipcover, moved past the scarred table, and waved at Ron. She noted that he was patting the shoulder of the perky new ninth grade math teacher, with the enormous boobs and tiny waist. Anne tried to remember having a waist, or boobs. She must have had them at some point, but now everything just kind of flowed together. She grimaced (inside) as she saw the newbie flash her big pearly whites at Rob and then turn, flipping her honey blond hair over her shoulder. Though he was old enough to more her father, Rob displayed shameless grin as the young woman pranced off. Anne tucked her comments away for later.

“Anne!” Rob found her face through the afterglow, and had the decency to look slightly abashed.

“New friend?” she asked. Another bell went off and the non-lounging faculty scattered out the door and back to their classrooms, some still clutching empty Styrofoam cups. Anne and Rob were alone.

“Don’t you have some minds to cultivate?” Rob tossed his half-filled cup of coffee into the trash can; “I did not miss this slop over the summer.”

“Nope, I am free. And as you well know, since you are in charge of everyone’s schedule.” Anne plopped onto the sofa, sinking into the worn cushion. “This feels like déjà vu.”

Except it didn’t, she thought. She watched Rob cross the room to join her; his face had a relaxed healthy glow to it that suggested a summer spent sailing, playing golf, maybe vacationing on some island, all possibilities. Despite two marriages and a career spent with children, Rob had managed to avoid procreating. During the summer, his time and money were truly his own. He looked rejuvenated—like you should on the first day of school. Anne shifted the waistband of her skirt, trying to contain the muffin top that suggested what she had done over the summer.

“So, how was the summer?” Rob sat down in another discarded piece of furniture from some parent’s den, placed just across from the sofa. “The boys are all at school?”

“Yeah, we dropped Colin off over the weekend. I guess I should be used to this by now, but the house is so quiet—it’s driving me crazy. I keep listening for the pitter-patter of cleats.”

“I am sure that’s natural. And you have lots of substitute children here to keep you busy,” He sat back in the faded upholstered chair.

“Actually, I came to ask about one of those substitute children. Turns out I have been awarded the custody of one Teddy Reilly for the year. I thought I’d managed to avoid him, but there he was, in the back row of the classroom, big as life. What should I know about him?”

Rob leaned forward, “Ah, so you have the honor of spending time with Mr. Reilly. He and I go way back...but I am not sure I can enlighten you on his class work. We have spent many detentions together; doesn’t make for getting to know a kid much.”

“Well, I just thought maybe you had some hints—or some secret knowledge of what makes him tick. Oh, and by the way, he goes by Hollister now.” Anne likewise leaned forward, as though they were engaging in some kind of intimate conversation.

Rob pondered for a minute, “I just don’t get these kids. Well, let him call himself whatever he wants and let me know if he becomes a behavior problem. As I said, Teddy and I go way back. So what else is going on with you? Did you get time to go anywhere? Do anything?”

“No, nothing really.” She knew that Rob would never understand the energy it took to keep the boys busy at gainful employment, or even why she would have to worry about that. . “You?” she asked.

“Well, as a matter of fact I did get away. I spent almost all of July and August at the family cabin—you know, in Maine. By myself.”

Anne looked across at her friend. There was something in his voice that she didn’t recognize, a kind of a catch. “Where was Joyce?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.”

Anne leaned in a little closer. “Rob, you don’t mean you’re separated? I thought things were going better.” Rob didn’t regale her with many stories from his personal life, but she knew enough to not be entirely surprised by this development.

“I don’t know, Anne, in late June she went out to Boulder for a conference and she didn’t come back. I called, I offered to go out there to talk things over, but she wouldn’t have any of it. So, I got kind of mad and I just blew out of town. I haven’t heard from her since I got back.”

Anne paused at this virtual outpouring, “Rob, I am so sorry. I didn’t realize...Are you okay?”

“Okay is a relative term. To be honest, I don’t know what I am right now. I was just glad to get back to school; I know who I am here. All of the rest of the crap just goes away. You know?”

And she did.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, “ Anne offered impulsively, trying not to care that she was about to violate another of her mother’s marriage principles. “You wouldn’t believe what Dan is...”

The door flew open and the headmaster’s secretary poked in her frazzled face and called to Rob; he rolled his eyes at Anne and jumped up. So much for the moment, she thought.

Anne gathered up her books. She slipped out of the door, and headed for what the faculty had dubbed “The Copy Close,” thinking:

Maybe readiness is overrated.

Chapter 3

At four o'clock, Anne gathered up her several bags and struggled out to her car. She tossed the bags in the back and thought, maybe I would lose my balance completely if I didn't have all this crap to weigh me down. After navigating the carpool line and various cross country teams getting in their miles across the campus, the car found its way home.

She turned the corner onto good old Stratford Lane and saw Dan's car already parked in the driveway. Anne did not greet his early arrival without irritation; she had been looking forward to some alone time to recover from all the smiling and social interaction the day had required. All she wanted to do was pour herself a glass of wine, sit on the deck and drink, without any thinking at all. Not that talking to Dan would require much thought. She pulled up behind the old Volvo and turned off the engine of her stoic Camry, which had survived all three boys' driver's ed classes as well as Dan's occasional attempts at auto maintenance. She exited the car and became aware of an odd croaking noise coming from their brown rectangle of a back yard. She left the bags in the backseat and went to check it out.

Anne walked around back and find Dan and the dog wrestling. Sort of. Dan was wearing the weight vest he bought for David with the intent of "bulking him up." He had pinned Oberon to the ground, but the dog appeared delighted to be getting attention, even

if it meant losing his canine dignity and dominance. Legs thrashing, tail whipping back and forth, the usually graceful Great Dane squirmed underneath Dan's spread-eagle body. Anne had a vision of dog days gone by, when the boys practiced their wrestling moves on the accommodating pooch.

"I can't get up!" A sound emerged from Dan's prone figure.

"What?" Anne walked a little closer. Dan sounded like an ad for some medical alert thing. "What are you doing down there? Why are you home so early?" Anne stood above her husband, hands on her hips.

"Don't just stand there! Help me!" The volume increased, as did the frantic nature of the tone.

"Well," she puzzled, looking for some place to grab onto the two legged part of the puzzle,, "What the hell do you want me to do?"

"Just pull me off! NOW!" Dan croaked and lifted his right elbow. She moved cautiously over to his right side and gave his forearm a yank. Nothing moved and Dan let out a breathless, "Shit! That hurt!"

Anne took her focus off her husband and looked at the four legs and long tail poking out from under him. The black and white spotted hide wriggling was not a sign of delight.

"You're hurting the dog!" Anne said. She took another look and decided, "I am going to call 911."

Before she could reach the kitchen or her purse in the car, Dan croaked, "Keep your voice down. Just try pushing from the other side."

She moved quickly to the left side, falling on her butt and lining up both feet against his side, so that she could give her best ab strengthening kick—the one she learned from a trainer she had hired for a week, four summers ago. She drew her legs back and shoved hard against Dan’s side. With another “Shit, that hurt!” Dan rolled over off the dog, who scrambled up and ran for the neighbor’s house.

“What the in the world were you doing?” Anne gasped, as she scrambled to her feet, not nearly as gracefully as Oberon, despite having half the legs. Upon reflection, she added, “Are you OK?” Dan groaned, unhooked the weight vest, and lolled over on his back.

“I was going to take the dog for a run and I was leaning over to put his leash on and I, well, I guess I just sort of fell over on him,” Dan wheezed, gazing at the sky above him.

Anne plopped down beside him, a little light headed from all the activity. “Are you crazy?” she finally asked.

Dan hauled himself up to a sitting position, leaving the weight vest on the ground. “No, I am not crazy,” he stated. “I am in training.”

She somehow resisted stating the obvious: climbing Kilimanjaro would involve going up, not down. Anyway, she had thought by now the Dania would have died down and he would have come to his senses, or moved on to something else. Anne found passive-aggressive waiting out Dan’s impulses the most effective strategy; she always felt powerless and stupid trying to argue; it was easier to let him hang himself.

But Dan seemed kind of shaken by the turn of events, and behind the waves of irritation and the lack of oxygen, she felt an unfamiliar pang of sadness: not so long ago this would have had the two of them rolling on the ground, tears in their eyes from laughing.

When had everything become so serious? Anne stood back up, brushed the dirt from her skirt and went to retrieve her bags from the car. Dan lay back down, pretended to do some sit-ups, and then pushing himself to a standing position, glanced around and stalked in the direction of the neighbor's to retrieve the dog.

Anne was sipping from a second glass of wine by the time Dan led a panting Oberon through the kitchen door. The dog threw himself on the air conditioning vent in the dining room and groaned.

"We're none of us spring chickens, are we?" Anne said, chugging the last of the cheap Chardonnay. She considered herself a connoisseur of the \$7-\$10 bottle range offered at the local Harris Teeter, but recently she had taken to buying innocuous boxes of wine with names like "Mommy's Time-Out" and "Cupcake;" boxes that could sit undisturbed and unobserved in the back of the fridge. And be replaced easily. Dan's face took on a little frown as she shook the box for the last few drops.

"Empty calories..." he pronounced, as Anne tossed the box at the overflowing recycling bin.

"What's that?" Anne opened the refrigerator door and stared at the array of plastic containers, most of them half-filled with left-overs of various colors and textures,

none of which looked appealing. *Just something edible jump out...surprise me!* Anne thought.

“Never mind,” Dan called from the dining room, where he was squatting and petting Oberon, who still sprawled across the vent, his tongue lying on the floor, his sides heaving. “Hey, big guy,” Dan murmured. Anne retrieved a dubious-looking jar of Ragu (canned and bottled food another of her areas of culinary expertise), closed the refrigerator door and watched her husband with the dog. She crossed through the kitchen to squat beside him, and rubbed Oberon’s silky ears.

“You know, I think I can take the boys growing up, and us getting old, but when this guy starts to wear down; well, that’s just a different story,” Dan said, patting the dog’s chest; Oberon’s tail thumped loudly on the floor.

A boy and his dog... Anne thought, and she reached out to rub Dan’s shoulder. It had been her idea to get the dog, for the boys. When she announced this plan, Dan had objected; his experience with pets limited to the hunting dogs—(Spaniels? Pointers? She could never remember), his father kept in a kennel outside their house. Dan insisted they didn’t have the space or the facilities to keep a dog, and, furthermore, they had no reason. But, after suffering years of her mother’s misinterpretations of just what constituted a pet, Anne was determined her boys should experience the joys of dog ownership she never had.

Why they had to experience the joys of owning such a big dog, well, Anne couldn’t really say. What she could say is when she saw the bereft puppy at the SPCA,

crammed into a cage that would cramp a beagle, her caretaker thing kicked in, and Oberon came home to stay.

And despite the scratches on the wood floors, the chewing (and occasional swallowing, digesting and pooping) of many favorite shoes, the persistent fog of dog smell,, Anne never regretted bringing him home. The boys took him up immediately; as Colin liked to say, he was like a four-legged brother, except nicer. And, as David would add, better looking. Anne couldn't count the number of times the dog had cheered her up, or made her laugh, just by being there.

But it was Dan who loved Oberon the most. Despite his initial disapproval, almost immediately, he became the dog's champion. Oberon brought out a boyish-ness, a kind of giddy affection Anne had not seen before in her husband. Though Dan kept up a consistent discipline with the boys' behavior, Oberon could get away with anything (everything, according to Michael). The dog became his constant companion.

Anne stood up, listening to her knees creak, and patted Dan's back one last time. "Oh, don't worry about this guy. You will be amazed how quickly he moves when it's dinner time."

At the word "dinner," the dog scrambled to his feet, knocking Dan over onto the floor. With the revived Oberon galumphing beside her, Anne returned to the kitchen and measured out the kibble, while the dog woofed and wagged wildly. She put the bowl down and watched him gobble up the crunchy chunks. Dan was back on his feet, complaining of cramped calves and sore muscles and where was the Advil?

Anne pretended she didn't hear him. She watched Oberon slurp water out of his bowl, and, revived, trot out of the kitchen to find Dan. Alone, finally, Anne got out a pot, filled it with water and set it on the stove to boil. With all that commotion, Dan was sure to conk out in front of the TV and Anne could take some time to have another glass of wine and pretend to construct something resembling dinner. She was finding it hard to break loose of what Ellen would have called the mommy cage (back in the day, Ellen had been what Anne's mother would call, with a mixture of disdain and pity, a "bra-burner"). *Anyway, what's was wrong with having a little structure?* she told herself.

She looked around the kitchen, as though there was someone there to argue with her. But there was just a small, lighted empty space surrounding her. She heard the squeaky protest of the La-Z-Boy as Dan plopped his behind in it, followed by the din of talking heads and changing channels. While she waited for the water to boil, she reached under the sink, located her emergency box of wine and filled up her glass, one more time.

Oberon wandered back in, tail wagging, looking for scraps. She reached into the cookie jar on the counter, found a forgotten Oreo and tossed it to the dog. *Dogs are good*, she affirmed. Oberon woofed in agreement.

Hours later, Anne lay wide awake, staring and sweating in the dark. It wasn't the cacophony of snoring that kept her awake: Dan snuffling on the other side of the bed and the dog stretched out at the foot. No, by her calculation, Anne had not slept eight hours in a row in at least twenty-five years. First it was the pregnancies and babies (*kids knew instinctively to break you down early*) then it was anxieties and worries about—

everything and anything, from toilet training to grading papers to paying bills to waiting out Dan's cockeyed schemes to feeling anger, confused by guilt, about everything to do with her mother. Now it seemed mostly habit—and the two M's: middle age, and menopause. It was such an ugly word; it was easier to use words like vagina and fuck in conversations. "Menopause" did not trip off the tongue. It sounded dirty. And shameful.

Anne turned her head to gaze at the lump that was her husband. He had no problems sleeping—any time, any where. And, no one talked about men's middle age issues: the medications, the weight gain, the troubles concentrating, the inability to get it up. In fact, everyone joked about the male middle-age crisis; Anne was not finding this funny at all. As Anne noted the time: 2:17, the hamster wheel in her head spun in yet another direction and she tried to remember the last time she and Dan had sex. *He started on that blood pressure medication when David was entering high school...and the pre-diabetes stuff when Michael was a junior.* There were some Viagra and Cialis interventions, but Dan's embarrassment and Anne's difficult-to-mask pity just complicated an already delicate balance. It was simpler just to live as roommates and focus on the boys.

But the boys were no longer there to worry about. Well, that wasn't quite true. David was always good about sending her a text every couple of days—to tell her about something he was studying, a funny thing that happened. Good David, the older brother. He was born to take care of people. Always elected the captain of the team, president of the class, David gave off an aura of stability, soundness; people knew they could count

on him. Just this year, he had been selected to head his college's prestigious Honor Council. It hadn't surprised Anne when Michael had elected to attend the same college; in fact, she was kind of relieved.

Even though they were but a year apart—Irish twins--Michael, well, that was a different story. He communicated only when something good had happened; no news from him was bad news. And Anne realized she hadn't heard from him since a short email at the beginning of classes, to tell her that he was going to drop the stats class and pick up a class on nineteenth century French poetry (he knew better than to tell his father). He wasn't asking her for approval of his choice, but Anne knew he would suffer in anxious doubt until she sent her cheery response applauding his trading in math for literature, and that he need not bother his father with this information. Michael was always trying to please—his friends, his parents, his teachers, his coaches, the next door neighbor, the guy who worked at the 7-11 on the way to school, anybody who friended him on Facebook. The weight of his worries burdened his mother and confuted his father.

And Colin...Anne realized that they hadn't heard from him in over a week. That worried her for completely different reasons. . As the third boy, Colin had learned at a young age how to take care of himself—and how to work his parents and his brothers.. When he chose a larger state school for college, she had been glad, thinking that being a small fish in a very big pond would keep him from getting in too much trouble. Colin was a charmer and, if she was honest, maybe a bit of an operator—a benign one, but she

worried that it would catch up with him. Probably when he (and his mother and father) least expected it.

Anne glanced again at the blue neon numbers on the alarm clock on her bedside table. *Damn, 3:22; a whole hour gone by and I'm still no closer to sleeping.* Sometimes, in a night like this, when counting backwards from one hundred didn't work, she would try to remember Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech. This usually absorbed enough attention to frustrate her mind and divert it from the web of worries it was spinning. So she began...

To be or not to be, that is the question...

Whether 'tis nobler to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or...or

To be or not to be, that is the question...

Chapter 4

“I am Fortune’s fool!”

At the end of that very long first week, Anne began class by shouting Romeo’s line, thinking, (hoping), *This’ll wake ‘em up!* Other than a few raised eyebrows and some quick (Is she nuts?) glances, the effect was pretty much, well, nada. She tried again, “Ok, say it with me! I am Fortune’s fool! I am Fortune’s fool!” Nobody said it with her.

To be fair, it was Friday. The first Friday of the school year. And that meant boys in football jerseys, texts locating parties, kids leaving class early for the pep rally—the basic pandering to what was really important. She stared at the faces before her, then glanced subtly at the clock. The minute hand had not moved. How time can stand still when...

“Romeo is such a whiner!”

Anne lifted her eyes and scanned the room.

“What makes you say that, Ted...Hollister?”

She hopped from her perch on the desk and could almost feel the class sigh with relief...they knew what to expect when she was on her feet, asking rhetorical questions, telling them what to think.

Except Hollister, or Teddy, whoever he was. He lounged at his desk, again looking a little like Gulliver in a Lilliputian class. His long legs were stretched out uncomfortably, his Timberland boots without laces, his jeans falling just below his slight hips, a border of plaid boxer short revealed.

“What lines lead you to that observation?”

“It’s just that he wants to make everyone else responsible for his own bad decisions, his own mistakes—like killing Tybalt, like the thing with Juliet...”

“What thing with Juliet? Elaborate...” she continued, in teacher speak.

“Like seducing her and then convincing her to fake-kill herself, all for his own gratification of his stupid romantic ideals. And his own horniness...”

Of course, this woke up the rest of the class.. There were guffaws from the boys and titters from the girls. But before the class went completely off the rails, the go-to feminist, Delilah, deigned to weigh in,

“What you’re suggesting diminishes Juliet to some kind of prop. I don’t think that’s fair.” Her nose piercing flared in indignation.

“What do you mean? They are in love; it’s the rest of the world that’s messed up. There is no equals sign when you’re in love,” offered up Christine Fortas, inspecting her electric blue nails.

Ignoring Christine’s nonsequitor, Matthew Murphy, the skinny, khaki-clad, basketball team manager who was a whiz at computer stuff, but still searching for puberty, chimed in “They are like, what, thirteen, fourteen; you can’t be in love when you’re that age,”.

“Falling in love is not about age,” pronounced Lauren Wentworth, who was dating a boy from the sophomore class.

Anne stepped gingerly into the unexpected fray. She hadn’t experienced a discussion this lively on a Friday in, well, since one of her ninth graders offended most of the girls in his class by stating that the girl who played Hazel in the movie version of *The Fault in Our Stars* was too pretty to have cancer. But before she redirected the class to the text, she glanced at Teddy Reilly, the surprise instigator. He lounged in his desk, watching a BIC pen twirl through his fingers. Already checked out.

I do not get this kid, Anne thought as she instructed the Lauren to find a line from the play that supported her view. She couldn’t kick him out of class for not paying attention, nor could she reprimand him for distracting the other kids. Teddy was quickly turning into the most masterful passive-aggressive manipulator she had ever seen. Or, possibly, the most disengaged, saddest kid she had ever seen.

But, regardless, there were seventeen other kids and only one Teddy Reilly. Anne returned to her seat atop her desk (where she could be above and among at the same time) and resumed Mrs. Roberts, English teacher mode. The discussion was still alive when the bell rang and Anne nodded benevolently as attention turned to loading backpacks and locating phones.

“Everyone, have a nice weekend—and don’t forget to finish Act IV for Monday,” she queen-waved at the departing bodies. “Behave..” she added her signature line. She was surprised by Teddy Reilly’s face pausing in front of her.

“I’m planning on reading *A Comedy of Errors* over the weekend, Mrs. Roberts. Does that count as behaving?” She hadn’t noticed how long his eyelashes were, how deep set his chestnut eyes.

“Sure—as long as you’re not drinking vodka while you’re reading,” she responded. Teddy grinned, hoisted his empty backpack over his shoulder and shuffled out of the classroom.

Anne plunked a large brown bag on the kitchen counter and from it removed a rotisserie chicken, a bag of salad and a bottle of “Bad Momma” Sauvignon Blanc, an excellent value at \$7.49. As the promising chicken odor began to fill the kitchen, Oberon lifted himself off the saggy sofa and meandered into the kitchen, sniffing the air hopefully. Anne removed the chicken to the microwave over the stove and snapped on his lead quickly, since Oberon had been known to ignore his bodily functions in pursuit of food. And, like Dan, the older he got, the more frequently he needed to pee. What was it with aging males?

After the dog’s three minute watering of the single flowering plant in the dismal line-up by the driveway, Anne returned to the kitchen, unhooked him, and got ready to pour herself some “Bad Momma.” The kitchen phone rang and she glanced at the clock: five o’clock, on the dot. Only one person called on that line at this time of the day. She could see her mother settling in her leather chair across from the TV, her first Scotch and “a splash” in her hand. The thing her mother, Penny Wirtheimer (her most recent

husband, Artie, a retired dentist, left her not only his name but a sizeable trust) missed the most about living by herself was not having anyone to have a drink with at cocktail hour. Which did not stop her from having a drink, or three, by herself. Rather, she tended to find some company elsewhere—if none of her neighbors were around, she would call Anne, to catch up, as she liked to call it.

“Dr. Wash died,” Penny greeted her daughter.

“Hi Mom,” she answered. “Who?” Out of habit, she hooked the telephone between her shoulder and ear and looked for some task to occupy her, like unloading the dishwasher or opening a bottle of wine. She could hear her mother pouring her Scotch into an ice cubed-filled glass. “You know, Dr. Wash...your father’s first partner. He remarried Sally Fulbright and they moved to”

“Oh, yeah, I remember,” Anne cut her off, knowing how long such a recitation could last. “You haven’t seen him in years. How did you find out?” *And why do you care,* Anne added in her head. Penny was always full of information about acquaintances, friends, distant relatives, people her age; the only constant being that they had recently died. She scoured the obituaries, not bothering with anything that might be considered real news; it was the only reason she still subscribed to the local paper.

“Mom, you have to stop thinking about death so much,” Anne said, juggling the phone and a corkscrew.

“I am not thinking about death,” she said. “I just like to keep track of who’s still left.”

“That is ridiculous. You’re making yourself depressed, all this dwelling on how many people you know that have died. Why don’t you go out to lunch with some friends that are still alive?” She gave the cork a good yank (*\$7.49 and a cork!*).

“Next you’ll be telling me to go see a shrink. I am not depressed and I do see people. I just thought you’d be interested in Dr. Wash,” she chased her explanation with another sip. “You worry too much,” she added..

Oh, really? Anne skirted that conversational abyss, and asked “How is everything else? Do you need anything? I’ve been really busy, with school starting and everything.” As her mother dove into a story about the yard man and his request to borrow five hundred dollars, Anne put her mind on idle and thought about how she wished she could talk with her mother about actual worries: about the boys, about Dan, about stuff at school. But she knew Penny didn’t want to get her hands and mind too dirty with her daughter’s scattered detritus.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about that dog you had...that Clifford..” Anne’s attention returned to her mother.

“Huh?” she relocated the phone on her other shoulder, wondering just how many Scotches her mother had already had. . “The one you took and had put to sleep while I was at school? Right after HE died?”

They chose to refer to Penny’s first husband and Anne’s father as “HE.” Dr. Chuck Wilson died Anne’s freshman year of college, suffering a heart attack while “consulting” with his nurse in his office; an OBGYN, he was a man who loved his work. He left Anne’s mother a new life of shame and (to her surprise) debt, but in doing so, he

touched some latent survivalist spirit within her. She shed thirty pounds, got her real estate license, and began a series of marriages that ended in three more widowhoods and a good chunk of change. While Penny was not a great real estate agent, nor a very good mother (by Anne's calculation), she became a great wife, and her subsequent husbands showed their appreciation in very generous ways.

Anne tuned back in again.

“Yes, that one. Well, I've been thinking about that dog and I shouldn't have done that; I should have let you decide and come with me. I was just trying to save you some hurt.” Penny said this with apparent relief, accompanied by the tinkling of ice cubes in a now Scotch-less glass.

Anne pulled out the first object she could reach in the cabinet—a measuring cup, as it turned out, and measured out $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of wine.

“Mom, exactly when did you start cocktail hour? You're not coming down with Alzheimer's, are you?” Penny had tried this before; dipping back into the past and trying to re-right it. But Anne decided she didn't have time for an intimate insight, or a long self-justifying recitation from her mother on this early September Friday afternoon.

Let's nip this in the bud, she measured another $\frac{1}{4}$ cup and drank.

“Mom, it's OK. I got over the dog a long time ago. And I got over you putting him down without my knowing about it. I am sure you were just trying to be a good mother.”

“Well, I was just thinking about that dog. Jim up the road is taking care of his daughter’s dog. It just reminded me...” her voice trailed off and Anne had the distinct impression she was ready for a refill.

“I understand. Well, listen, the boys are fine and Dan is OK. I hope we can get down to visit sometime soon this fall. I’ll call you.”

“OK, honey. Love you.” She waited for Anne to respond.

“Love you, too,” Anne stated and listened to the small click and the empty whoosh of air.

She stood, sipping her measuring cup, and thinking that dog, Clifford, (from an early age, she had always been about naming dogs after characters in literature). She had fought to get that dog; her mother had been the stumbling block; HE wouldn’t have cared one way or the other, he was rarely home, anyway. But Penny kept saying, “I’ll end up taking care of him; you’ll never remember to feed him and you’ll be too busy to walk him.” Anne protested, but managed to avoid voicing her real reaction to this charge: *what did Penny care—she didn’t have anything to do anyway*. Relentlessly, for an entire summer she vowed she would feed the dog twice a day, she would walk him miles and miles, she would give him a bath every week. She would get a job so that she could pay for his food. Even though she was nine and her options for work might be limited.

This went on for five years. Anne and Penny shared a certain bullheaded-ness that got in the way of any productive negotiation.

Finally, about the time her mother’s concerns were beginning to migrate over to her husband’s office and Nurse Betty, Anne did get the dog she’d been begging for all those

years—a big, not-too-smart poodle-Labrador mix, from a litter the neighbors’ dog surprised them with. He may have been dumb, but he was truly unconditional in his affection for her—and everything else, it turned out. Especially anything with four legs that he could hump. In fact, that’s what got him hit by the car—he was racing across the street to “greet” the Whitleys’ pug. Clifford evidently had no idea of the potential physics involved in humping such a small dog, but he never had a chance to discover the impossibility, because the really cute guy who lived a couple of houses down and drove a MG Midget also came racing down the street.

The car and the dog collided with an unforgettable sound from Clifford. Of course the boy was horrified and he offered to take the dog to the vet, so the three of them (Anne, Clifford and cute boy/now canine assaulter) stuffed themselves into the car and raced to the vet, who didn’t give poor old Clifford much of a chance.

But Clifford’s existence became a mission for Anne. She focused all her attention and time on his care. She wouldn’t let her mother come near him, as if her Cassandra-like original warnings about getting a dog were the cause of his accident. And Clifford lived, but something was clearly missing—the blow he had taken seemed to affect only his brain on a permanent basis. So, though he could walk and bark and poop and pee, he was like a stuffed dog. Gone were his delighted wagging tail, his happy woof-woof greeting, his sneaking up on the bed at night. It was as though he had been lobotomized.

Anne had to leave the Clifford project (as she thought of it) behind when she went north to college. So, as Penny predicted, she did wind up taking care of him. It wasn’t long after HE died and Anne had returned to school after the funeral that her mother took

poor Clifford to the vet and had him put out of his blank misery.. Anne came home at Thanksgiving and there was no Clifford. When her mother informed her of what had happened to the dog, Anne refused to stay in the house. She returned to an empty college campus, thus accomplishing several goals: hurting her mother irreparably, exercising her independence and confirming for herself that life truly did suck. As she stalked the deserted campus and read through all of Jane Austen's novels, She kept at bay the nagging realization that she was actually relieved by Clifford's disappearance. She had to admit—to herself, anyway,—that she actually found it awfully frustrating to try to love something that wouldn't, or couldn't, show any kind of affection. But opportunity was knocking, and she punished her mother for a good month before she came home at Christmas. Anne and Penny resumed their life without the dog and without HIM, like nothing had happened at all. They never really talked about the dog again, until this phone call.

Anne chugged down the ¼ cup left and poured herself a full cup this time; as she sipped from the smooth thick glass, she wondered, *Something's up with her; could she be getting married again?* Since Penny seemed to attract men at least a decade older, as she reached her seventies, the pickings were getting slimmer. Maybe that was why she was talking about old Dr. Wash...

A car door slammed. *Focus on the chicken*, she told herself,. She re-corked the wine, placed the bottle on the refrigerator's lower shelf and, automatically retrieved three plates from the kitchen cabinet. Then she remembered and put one back. She shook her head and thought, *it is true—old dog, new tricks...change is hard.*

All those years of waking up to feed baby boys, treating midnight fevers and stomach viruses, gripping the blanket and watching the green glow of the bedside clock register curfew time, should steel a mother for nighttime disruptions. But at the light jangle of Dan's cell phone in the early hours of Saturday morning, Anne's eyes popped open and her heart pounded as she reached across Dan to the nightstand, where both phones lay charging. Still asleep, Dan muttered something and shifted onto his left side.

"Hello?" Anne whispered.

"Mom, it's me."

"Who is this?"

"Me, David, your son."Remember?"

"Jesus, David, it's late—or is it early?"

"Mom—is Dad there?"

Anne paused; *where else would he be?* Then: *wanting to speak to his father at this time in the morning could only mean one, or two, things: he was in jail or he had wrecked the car.* Dan had been very specific with the boys about late night communication with him: ONLY two situations called for his attention. Running out of money, being stuck on a country road after being robbed, having your identity stolen: apparently these were all problems a mother could solve. But anything involving handcuffs or tow trucks: this was man's work. She had never asked, but assumed Dan claimed these because he had some experience with both.

"Where's the car? Where are you?" she hissed in a loud whisper.

“I’m in the emergency room and the car is parked in the lot outside,” David said softly.

Anne felt a pounding in her head. They had no protocol for emergency rooms. Emergency rooms were too horrible to consider.

She kicked Dan in his thigh under the blanket and gripped the phone tighter.

“What emergency room? Why? Are you bleeding?” It was the best she could come up with. Dan mumbled and snorted, interrupted in the midst of a healthy snore. “Wha’?” he muttered.

“Mom, can I talk to Dad?”

“Well, your dad won’t wake up and so you’ll just have to talk to me.”

“OK. . . . It’s not me, it’s Michael.”

”David, tell me what’s going on,” she managed, giving Dan another shove.

“The RA in Michael’s dorm called me. He found him passed out in his room, couldn’t wake him up. Called an ambulance. They had to pump his stomach. But he’s going to be OK.”

“Mom, are you there?” “Mom, what’s going on? Are you OK?”

“Oh, David.” Anne swallowed a sob. “Why was he by himself?”

“Mom, I don’t know. I was in class all day and I had a meeting at the Career Center at 6. I haven’t seen much of him this week; I’ve been meeting with the Honor Council. And we had all this frat stuff to do, getting ready for rush. Anyway, Michael usually steers clear of the Friday night parties, and I just can’t see him getting that drunk, much less alone, They gave him something—he’s asleep now. Is Dad awake yet?”

Dan was sitting up now, reaching for the phone, somehow fully conscious.

“I’m awake,” he shouted, pressing the phone to his ear. “David, give me the details and see if you can get hold of a doctor. ...Yes, we’ll be on our way. ...No, you go on back to campus and get some sleep. I’ll take it from here. Maybe we’ll catch you for lunch? Oh, right, I forgot you have service thing. . .” Now in control of the situation, he continued delegating. “Anne, we’re gonna need to go down there. Can you get some coffee going and figure out what to do with the dog?”

Anne was already stumbling towards the bathroom. *Michael, Michael! What are you doing?* She turned the shower on, as hot as it would go, as if she could shock herself into motion, cauterize her jangling nerves. Wash away the tears she knew would irritate Dan.

Chapter 5

Thank god Joe's an insomniac! An earnest, if silent, tribute of gratitude flitted through Anne's mind as she sipped at the cold coffee in her BCDS Spirit Club fund raiser to-go cup. She peeked over at Dan's speed and quickly put her thoughts back to their neighbor and the sleepy Great Dane. Joe was happy for the company and his wife, Jackie; well, she was in for a surprise on this Saturday morning. Anne avoided giving the reason for their sudden departure. Michael's troubles just didn't feel shareable.

As they sped along the highway, making the nearly three hour drive a two hour one, Anne felt an ominous dread stealing over her, and not just because of Michael, or Dan's driving. The problem was...she hated hospitals. She suspected she had a hospital phobia, if that was possible—probably connected up with her father, and that white coat he wore home every night after making his rounds. Only insurmountable pain, the kind related to appendicitis and childbirth, could induce her to be swallowed up by the automatic doors and strategically neutral walls, because hospitals could only mean bad things. Really bad things.

She couldn't think of anything to say. Dan seemed entirely focused on the driving; his face had that squinty expression that said, "I am a man on a mission; do not interrupt." Kind of like Matt Damon in the Bourne movies—except without the steel-cut

facial lines. And the steel-cut body. So the ride was spent in virtual silence that felt as oppressive as the grey sky coming to light while a solid red ball of sun tried to rise.

Ann was reminded of her mother's chant, "Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning." Anne had a mental attic full of her mother's inexplicable sayings, like "Keep your eyes peeled" (what did that mean, anyway?) and "Tough toenails," (which was just gross). None of Shakespeare's poetry for Penny, that was for sure. And with this reflection, Anne let the rhythm of the tires slapping the road lull her into a semi-conscious state, not even noticing when the cup slipped from her hands and balanced between the car seat and the door.

"Anne, it's go time. C'mon," Dan stood in the mostly empty parking lot of the Lexington County Hospital, leaning into the car and instructing his wife, before he marched across the asphalt. Anne unclicked her seatbelt and jumped out of the car, running her hands through her hair and slinging her purse over her shoulder. The cup fell out of the car and, though she knew she was losing ground, she stopped and tossed it onto the car's floor. She jogged to catch up with Dan.

Anne whooshed through the automatic doors of the emergency room, shuddering at the air conditioning colliding with her clammy skin, and straining against the threat of tears. Dan was already at the desk, talking with the receptionist in a low tone. Anne sat down in one of the bright orange chairs lined up across the room from the desk. In a minute Dan sat down beside her.

Anne's mind assumed a fetal position as they shifted uncomfortably in the hard plastic. She stole a glance at her husband, who was rolling through something on his phone. *We look hung over*, she thought, pondering the stains in the nubby carpet.

"Mr. and Mrs. Roberts?" Anne looked up to see a white coat standing in front of her. Dan rose quickly and she looked his way, suddenly noticing that his shirt was on inside-out. She bolted up and was horrified to feel movement under her shirt; she had neglected to put on a bra. *What would these doctors think of poor Michael's white trash parents?* She could only imagine. But when she actually looked into the young doctor's face, all she saw was compassion. Maybe he had a boy of his own.

"Michael's fine. He's still out, but he's resting comfortably now. I'd like to just check up on him when he wakes up, but he can be discharged this morning, when he's ready."

"Thank you, Doctor. We were so worried..." Anne started, but Dan cut her off.

"Just what was his alcohol level when he got here? Was he conscious? Is there any damage? Did he say what the hell he was doing? Where did he get the stuff?" He peppered the doctor with questions, as though answers and explanations would solve anything.

She put her hand on Dan's shoulder; he stopped, hung his head. Though he towered over the doctor, Anne thought at that moment he seemed so small.

"We were just so worried..." she repeated. "Can we go see him?"

The doctor guided them down a long hall, dodging nurses and carts and sleeping patients on gurneys. While Dan and the doctor walked and talked in front, Anne couldn't

help but peer into open doors that provided glimpses of white curtains, sometimes pulled back to reveal a thin leg or socked foot—no faces, only body parts. For a moment she felt like she would be sick and wanted to look for a bathroom, but then they were turning into one of those open doors, into an antiseptic-smelling room with curtained partitions. She raced to the first bed, pulled back the curtains and found it empty.

“You did say he’s OK?” she whispered.

“He’s over here,” Dan said, having already established with the doctor (who was now “Bill”) the ubiquitous male bonding in the face of a woman’s hysteria. His pursed lips said, *See what I have to put up with?*

All this was swept away by the sight of Michael, small and pasty-white, sleeping on his side, his head curled into his chest, just like when he was a little boy. He was anchored to a IV pole with plastic tubes and he wore a hospital gown, like an old man. Anne stood beside the bed and pushed back his hair, which looked dirty and needed to be cut. She touched his forehead and cheek; his skin was so soft, just like a baby’s. A little patina of acne ran along his jawline. His long dark eyelashes, just like his dad’s, and thick brows made a sharp contrast to his ashen skin. She had trouble swallowing past the huge lump in her throat. But no tears, not now.

Dan stood beside her, and together they watched their middle son sleep. *If only we could all stay like this, safe and close enough to touch,* Anne thought.

Dan cleared his throat and stepped back. “I guess we’d better get him up and get him back to school,” he said slowly.

“You mean wake him up? Now?” Anne’s grip on the bed rail tightened. “The doctor said to let him sleep until he wakes up naturally.” *Am I the only one who listens to people?*

“Anne, he needs to get back to campus; get back on the horse and move past this. He screwed up, but let’s not compound the problem by babying him. He can’t afford another semester like the last one.”

Because she knew that Dan’s default reaction to a difficult situation was to try to take control of it, Anne squelched the urge to slug him in the mouth and knock him into the hospital bed next to Michael’s. Instead, she stroked Michael’s shoulder and he stirred. She noticed that the pillow was wet where he had slept with his mouth open, and she felt like crying again.

“Michael, wake up,” Dan shook his shoulders gently, as though he was getting him up for a Saturday morning soccer game, trying to ease him into consciousness. Michael’s eyes blinked open and he turned to look at the two figures hovering by his bed.

“Am I home?” he asked, his words taken over by a huge yawn. “I was dreaming...” Anne touched his forehead, as though checking for a fever. She worked at a smile and said,

“You’re at school, Michael, remember? And you’re in the hospital. Do you remember what happened last night? Why you drank so much?”

Michael furrowed his brow at her questions. Dan started to say something, but Anne motioned to him, *let Michael talk*, as she had done so often in the past.

Michael sat up a little, brow still wrinkled, eyes boring down into his hands folded together at his waist. “I remember going to the quad and someone handed me a cup of something and I drank it fast because I had to catch up. Everybody was there and they were so drunk and it was crowded and I realized that I didn’t know anyone. So I found this trashcan and dipped my cup in it and I guess I did that a couple of times and ...I don’t remember what happened after that. Until I just woke up.”

Dan barged in, “Where was your brother all this time?”

Michael’s look of irritation heartened his mother. “Dad, David doesn’t have to take care of me. I am almost an adult.”

“Well, you’re sure not acting like one...” Dan threatened to begin a liturgy that each boy had heard numerous times.

“Dan, can you do the paperwork, so we can take Michael back to his dorm?”

Dan hesitated a minute, maintaining his stern look. “Okay,” he said slowly. “I guess we can continue this conversation in the car, on the way back to campus.”

Anne and Michael listened to Dan’s deliberate footsteps disappear down the hallway. Without much sign of interest, Michael began to look around the room, trying to locate his pants and shirt and shoes. But nothing here was recognizable, so he gave up and slid back down into the hospital bed. Anne found his clothes folded neatly in the white cupboard by the bathroom. When she brought them to him. Michael didn’t seem to realize that they were his clothes, just folded. “Here, put these on while I get a nurse,” she told him.

He slipped out of bed and turned his back to her.. She noticed his bony shoulders, his slim waist; he had only just started doing a little weight lifting. *When I see him again, he'll probably be all muscles and sinew*, she reflected. She thought of the little chubby red-faced boy who laughed and splashed her in the tub and she had to marvel at how fast and how sneaky time passes—

“Mom, can I please dress by myself?” Anne left the room and glanced up and down the hall for someone with a nametag.

“I know it can be tough at times at your age, but you have to keep your eye on the prize,” Dan warmed into his faux Lombardi rallying speech. Anne long suspected it was the same speech he gave the community college football team he coached.. *OK, just wait, here it comes....*

“It’s not whether you get knocked down, it’s whether you get up.”

Right on cue, Anne thought. She glanced in the rear view mirror and watched Michael, gazing forlornly out the window. He was still looking a little green around the gills and it was no surprise that Dan’s speech wasn’t making him feel any better.

The car continued to inch along the many speed bumps planted along the campus main drag. Finally they found themselves in front of Michael’s dorm. He chose not to take the fraternity route, unlike his brother—perhaps scared he wouldn’t get invited to join one, Anne suspected—but lived with the few other sophomores who had managed to stay on campus. Dan parked the car and the three of them emerged slowly. Anne felt a tidal wave of fatigue wash over her.

Dan clasped his son's shoulder and looked hard into his face, "Michael, are you going to be OK?"

Michael's shoulders slumped, but he looked up at Dan. "I will be OK, I promise. I was just being stupid and I know better. Really, I swear."

Anne rested her hand on Michael's arm for just a moment and tried to give him a hug. He pulled away, before she could wrap her arms around him. Dan seemed relieved at Michael's response and reached down to grab him around the neck and tousle his hair, just like he used to. Except Michael didn't laugh and throw his arms around; he stood there limply, hanging his head in Dan's arm.

Anne's throat filled up with unspoken words. Then she patted his arm, promised to put some more money in his account and made him say he would eat three meals a day, earning a wan smile when she urged him to include something green every once in a while.

She and Dan returned to the car and watched their son straggle back to the dorm. The sight of his thin back, his too big jeans, the plaid boxers rising above the canvas belt, his hands pushed deep in the pockets: Anne could feel herself falling into a deep well of sadness. She knew Dan was feeling this way too, but he turned the key, pushed the radio button and honked the horn, waving both hands out the window. Michael opened the pock-marked metal door and disappeared inside..

Chapter 6

“And so we flew down there—and I mean fly—when Dan hit 90, I closed my eyes and thought about giving myself last rites—anyway, we went right to the hospital and found him lying in a hospital bed, all knocked out and tubed up...”

“Tubed up?”

“You know, he had all this rubber tubing attached to him...I guess it was an IV. He just looked so...” Anne paused; even in the frenzy she was whipping up, she couldn’t betray Michael by labelling him pathetic...”tired.” She finished and took a slug of now lukewarm coffee. She shifted her weight uncomfortably; the chair in the dean’s office was clearly meant for smaller butts. Across the desk, Rob leaned back in his pleather desk chair and shook his head.

“Well, clearly Michael is suffering sophomore slump. At least he got it out of his system early in the year,” he cocked his head at Anne, “You know what I mean?” he insisted.

“I guess so,” she responded automatically, though she wasn’t really registering what he had just said. *Why do men feel like they have to control everything?* Dan’s disquisition on the ride back, elucidating her on the challenges boys faced in college, with all the distractions, and how if Michael had only stuck with the baseball, he could have

played in college, had structure in his life, and something to think about besides himself, and never have ended up in the hospital because he drank too much.

She hadn't really listened, but she was glad that Dan waxed on and she tended to her own ruminations. She tried to crowd out the image of her son's slim back disappearing into the dorm with memories of little Michael, happy Michael: *he had been a happy kid, right?* She flipped over the snapshots in her mind: Michael in the Peter Pan costume they had fashioned out of green felt and her circa 1978 leather moccasins; Michael curled up beside Oberon, his arms around the dog's neck; Michael sitting under the sofa cushion fort, buried in *Harry Potter*. He had been a happy kid.

Right?

In just a week, the usual routines kicked back in. Sunday morning, they lay in bed until nature called one of them too insistently—usually Oberon was the first to go. Took the dog out, made coffee and toast, read the local paper, planned calls to each of the boys that evening. When Dan threatened to take up the topic of Michael's "fuck-up," Anne took refuge in the shower. Dan left to "work out:" code for sitting in the gym's steam room and trading predictions for the Redskins with his steam buddies.

Ignoring the siren call of ungraded papers and the even more pressing demands of the house, which was beginning to smell like a kennel, Anne spent the afternoon horizontal on the creaky lounge in the backyard. Her school books lay on the ground, and a half glass of now warm Lady's Choice Pinot Grigio balanced on the arm of the

lounger. Anne lay with her hands behind her head, watching the wispy clouds meandering across the dulled blue sky.

She was thinking about something her mother always said: *As people get older, they get more like themselves.* As a woman on the cusp of middle age—fifty in the spring—, her mother’s words suddenly had some relevance, just like TV ads about hot flashes and vaginal dryness... well, never mind that one. Was Anne really the hand-wringing hysteric who showed up in Michael’s hospital room? Where had the “Take care of it” Anne gone, the one who made sure everyone was fed and clothed and listened to?

. David’s call and Michael’s behavior had shaken her trust in, not her boys, so much as the core dictum she had been raised on and taught to live by: *No news is good news.* And the correlative: *Don’t ask if you don’t really want to hear.*

She took another slurp of the wine and watched her neighbor’s black cat slink across the yard, something furry hanging from his mouth. Her thinking returned to the boys. Colin, who had adjusted to college better than anyone had a right to, judging by his lack of communication, became her immediate focus.

What freshman doesn’t call his mother on a regular basis? Even a cocky freshman, like Colin must be? No, there must be a reason... Anne thought back over the Colin high school “fuck-ups,” realizing that Dan applied this term pretty loosely. There was the Junior Homecoming debacle, when he arrived with one girl and left with another, the Senior prom scandal, involving vodka in the parking lot, the ninth grade sneaking out of math class and reappearing—in the school’s cafeteria...the more she remembered, the

more convincingly she talked herself into thinking that Colin was due for a visit from his parents, no matter that Parents' Weekend wasn't for another month.

With growing conviction, she told herself that there was no way she would allow herself to be open to that kind of shock to the system again. Yes, she still had some intuition...and as she took a final glug from the glass and pursed her mouth at the vinegary remnants, she made a decision: she (and Dan, she graciously included) would make an unannounced visit to see Colin was doing, and on the way, they would stop at her mother's. *Take care of two birds with one stone.*

Anne hoisted herself up from the chair, gathered up her things and her glass, and headed to the house with haste: her mother's sayings were starting to make sense to her.

Chapter 7

The even rhythm of the tires had been replaced by a muffler-rattling bumping down the dirt driveway her mother had refused to pave. Penny felt, perhaps rightly so, that the forbidding condition of the driveway served as a deterrent to potential thieves, or worse (Anne had never gotten the “or worse” part). But she ignored the fact that it also served as a deterrent to her few remaining friends and family. There were times Anne thought her mother intentionally made it hard for people to visit her. Dan pulled in next to the baby blue Sebring, which served to mark the designated parking pad. Before they could unclip the seatbelts, Penny popped out of the house, waving and shouting, “Yoo hoo!” Dan turned to his wife and said without a trace of humor, “Well, ding dong, the witch is still alive.”

Anne chose to ignore him,

Dan wasn't Penny's biggest fan. He had spent too many hours pretending to listen when Anne complained about her. In fact, after the death of Penny's last husband (Fred Oakley, retired gum doctor) Dan mentioned that when he saw her in her tailored black suit—new for this funeral, the old one having seen too much wear—he couldn't fit the mother of Anne's angst with the tiny, delicate, appropriately sober woman shaking hands with people at the gravesite.

Anne and Dan tumbled out of the car, tried to stretch their limbs and put on their happy faces. There was a time, pre-children, when they were in the car every weekend, going to visit battle fields, see college football games, maybe head down to the beach for the day. Now it seemed their travel took them down the same highway—Route 66 on their way to see Anne’s mother near Leesburg, and now Colin at James Madison, about an hour’s drive from there. Both were on the way to Washington and Lee, David’s and Michael’s school. Anne spied her mother peeking out of an upstairs window and thought about how it never occurred to her (and apparently Dan) to go anywhere else.

Penny glided towards the car with the decided grace of a Southern hostess right off the plantation, with her arms outstretched, crooning, “Anne. Dan,” over and over, reminding Anne of how much she hated the unfortunate rhyming of their names.

“Hi, Mom.” Penny air-kissed Anne’s cheeks and headed straight for her son-in-law. Knowing what was expected, Dan bear-hugged his mother-in-law, lifting her off the ground—*when did she get so tiny?* Anne wondered. It seemed as though every time she saw her mother, Penny looked smaller—or was it just that Anne felt so much bigger? But Penny loved attention from a male and giggled as she landed, patting her hair and pulling down her polo shirt. “Come in, come in,” she waved them in, “I have the best Bloody Marys all made up—you know, that recipe from the Virginia Hospitality cookbook?”

Of course, Anne never had an occasion to make Bloody Marys and had no idea what cookbook she was referring to. Her mother had probably the largest (maybe the only) collection of Junior League cookbooks in the world. Not that she cooked anything out of

them; she just liked to examine the recipes and copy down “promising” ones to serve at future dinner parties that she would never give.

As Dan and Anne straggled into the front hall, the confused symphony of ticking reminded Anne of her mother’s all-time most irritating collecting passion: cuckoo clocks. There were clocks from Switzerland, from Germany, from Tahiti. There were clocks with spinning can-can dancers, cawing ravens, twirling tuba players. Throughout the house a guest could count on the background noise of a couple dozen clocks ticking time away and when the hour struck...well, it was just terrifying. After Fred died, her main occupation became winding the clocks: For her, keeping time right was nearly a full-time activity.

They followed her to the living room, where, indeed, an entire bar was set out, complete with limes, lemons, cherries and tiny pigs in a blanket, something Anne knew her mother assumed Dan would like. Dan and Anne looked at each other, communicating with their eyes only the way people who have been married for at least two decades can: *Hey! Pigs in a blanket!* his eyes observed...*Don’t you dare eat those things,* Anne’s eyes responded. Penny turned to Dan and asked him, just shy of coquettishly, “Dan, what can I do you?” Dan responded, “I’ll have one of those Bloody Marys, I guess—can you make it a virgin one?”

“Now Dan, you’re too old to want a virgin,” she stated as she poured and stirred, like some kind of chemist making a formula to cure cancer, completely unaware of her double entendre. Watching her, Anne couldn’t help but notice what might have been tomato juice stains on her shirt and chips in her nail polish. She was keeping her hair colored

and coiffed, though. And her lipstick was on straight. It was probably nothing; maybe her manicurist was on vacation.

“Here you go, darling. After all that driving, you need a pick-me-up!” Penny handed Dan the glass, decorated with celery stalk, and a dab of bleu cheese dressing. Dan took a sip, succumbing to his usual coping mechanism when visiting Anne’s mother: regular infusions of alcohol and whatever sports he could find on the TV. Thus, he retreated into the den, where he could watch the beginning of a college football game and sip on the best Bloody Mary ever. Leaving Anne with her mother.

And the incessant ticking. It was her third husband, the proctologist with the Swiss leanings, who first piqued her interest in cuckoo clocks. He moved in with his own clocks, setting one up in each room and painstakingly winding them twice a day. He even kept a journal of his windings. Always susceptible to a husband’s hobby (Anne’s mother was quite a chameleon), before too long (at least before he died of prostate cancer, a cruel irony), Penny was seeking out clocks in antique stores, in magazines, at yard sales; apparently the cuckoos, the winding, the constant ticking—not in sync, of course—appealed to some deep-seeded compulsive need. Or maybe she just liked the way they looked on the wall. In any case, over the years she had collected a good thirty or forty cuckoo clocks of all sizes and shapes: with everything from happy birds to St. Bernard dogs to Swiss maidens to Muppets announcing the hour, quarter hour, half hour and, occasionally, no hour—just cuckooing for the hell of it.

“Actually, I’m glad we have a little time together,” Penny said, as the two women sat across from each other. Her mother sat in the high-backed Queen Anne antique while Anne sank into the toile overstuffed sofa, her suspicions raised by her mother’s serious tone.

“Are you getting married again?” Anne blurted out. Penny uncrossed her tanned legs and put a hand to her mouth as she tittered..”Oh, no, Anne, I told you, I’m all done with marriage. After poor David...” she sighed, remembering her last husband, who was found to be riddled with cancer not three months after their honeymoon cruise. Penny nursed him for two years, falling comfortably, but not very graciously, into this familiar role. At his funeral, she took Anne aside and whispered fiercely, “If I so much as get near another man...you drag me away!” Since Penny insisted on marrying men at least ten years older than she, the pickings were getting slim, anyway.

“No, no, I just wanted to catch up a little. It’s easier without Dan. How are the boys?” Penny began, sipping her drink.

“Oh, they’re OK. David and Michael are old hats at the college stuff now and we haven’t heard anything from Colin—that’s why we’re headed down there today.”

“Well, as I’ve said before, no news is good news, right?” She settled herself into the chair.

“Yes, you have said that before,” Anne replied. “But I do like to hear what’s going on, you know? What we’re paying all that tuition for, if they’re going to class, if they’re eating anything that’s good for them, if they’ve used their sheets yet, or if they’re just sleeping on the mattress, little stuff like that...”

“You always did worry too much, Anne,” Penny stated.

“I come by that naturally, wouldn’t you say?” Anne set the glass on the coffee table. Penny jumped up to place a napkin under it. Then she again took her place in the chair that seemed to swallow her.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about something so that you wouldn’t worry. I have to go into the hospital and have some surgery done. It appears I’m having some female problems and they want to take everything out—of there.” She waved her hand slightly, as if to indicate that she would like to dismiss “their” opinion. “But really, I am fine. It’s just a precaution.”

Anne thought, *Surgery on a seventy-five year old woman does not sound like a precaution to me.* “When?” she asked. “Where?” she added.

“Well, sometime around the first of the year. Evidently I have low iron in my blood, or something like that. So I have to build my blood up. But the doctor has assured me this kind of surgery isn’t a big deal; he does it all the time. They say I’ll only be in the hospital for a couple of days.”

“Mother! Of course he does it all the time—but that doesn’t mean it’s easy for the patient. I’ll try to get at least two weeks off, so I can take care of you.”

Penny waved her hand dismissively. “Actually, I am all set; David’s daughter—you remember Margo? Who is a nurse, by the way, is coming in to help me once I get home from the hospital. She’ll take me and bring me home and keep things straight. You know they don’t let you stay in bed very long these days. She offered and I said OK. I didn’t want to bother you; I know how busy you are.”

“ I should be the one to take care of you, Mother.”

“Now, Anne, you’re getting that tone in your voice. This is not about you, and whether or not you’re a good daughter. This is about what’s the least amount of trouble for all of us.”

“It shouldn’t be about the least amount of anything!” Anne pushed herself up from the generous sofa cushions and struggled to maintain her almost-fifty composure, even while thinking, *Why am I acting like a child? As if David’s daughter, whatever her name, was going to take away my mother.*

“Now, don’t you worry. It’s all been arranged,” Penny leaned over the sofa cushion and patted Anne on her leg.

“I just wanted to tell you so you’d know.” Penny took a last long pull at her Bloody Mary. “Anyway, Dan is probably starving. I made a little snack for you two; let’s go into the kitchen so you can have something before you leave.” Anne rose to her feet, collected her glass, and followed her mother, thinking about how often things had been settled for her in this way.

“Egg salad sandwiches,” Penny sang proudly and pointed to a decorative platter, piled with deconstructed canapés. It looked like a Junior League jubilee. Dan wandered in from the den, drawn by the siren call of food.

She glared at Dan and commanded “Eat.” He sat down, took up a plate and began filling it with delights worthy of an Ole Miss tailgate, or a ladies bridge game.

Penny sat down, then jumped right back up, stating “Oh, I haven’t showed you the new one yet!” And she scurried off. Anne waited, listening. Penny was famous for

interrupting private conversations, especially those that centered on her. Anne just watched her husband fill his mouth happily and said nothing.

“Here it is!” her mother called out from upstairs.. Anne shoved one of the canapés into her mouth and swallowed quickly, as if taking a hit of tequila.

“Here we go! Isn’t this just gorgeous? I found it at the St. Leo’s bazaar—picked it up for a song. Or should I say a cuckoo?” Anne’s mother laughed, and held up a large clock, beautifully carved and gold-leafed. Penny moved the hands around until there was a grinding and ultimately, a marking of twelve o’clock with a procession of what looked like robed figures.

“What are they?” Anne had to ask,.

“Popes,” Penny said triumphantly. “One of a kind, don’t you think? I was hoping Dan could help me hang it; I’m so bad with a hammer and nails.”

“It’s why I came..” Dan lifted himself from the chair, tugging on the bottom of his shorts. “I’ll get the hammer...” he muttered as he made his way out to the garage where Penny sequestered most things male that she couldn’t use. There was a set of weights, a lawn mower, several bikes, fishing poles in varying stages of disrepair, and all the tools the second husband had accumulated, including a very fancy jigsaw that even Dan, the anti-handyman, coveted. Not that Penny would ever actually give away any of these dusty, spider-webbed pieces of metal. Anne was sure her mother would have kept a few of her husbands out in the garage, if she had dared.

“So, explain to me again about this “little surgery,” Anne jumped right back in, abandoning the egg salad and turning to the large bowl of potato chips her mother placed on the table.

“Really, Anne, it’s nothing for you to worry about. I’ll be fine...I am fine. I just need to get this done, that’s all. I didn’t want to bother you; you’re always so busy with work and the boys.” She popped a morsel of egg salad into her mouth, a punctuation mark on the hospital inquiry. Another spoke on the wheel of guilt.

Before Anne reply, Dan returned with a hammer and nails.

“So, where do you have in mind?” Dan addressed Penny, but was looking at Anne with a *We need to go* stare. His face had the frozen patience she imagined he usually reserved for freshman who questioned their grades. Anne rose out of the kitchen chair.

“Jeez, Dan, we have to get going,” Anne said to her mother, who was absorbed by the decision of where to hang it;

“Yes, of course, I didn’t mean to hold you up. Let’s see, Dan, what do you think about the right corner of the entry hall? So people can straighten up when they see those little popes circling,” she just kept talking as she marched out of the kitchen, dangling the clock in front of her. Dan followed, tightly clutching the hammer and maintaining his smile. Anne listened to them discuss exactly where to put the nail as she gathered up their things.

Mission accomplished to Penny’s satisfaction, Dan returned the hammer with amazing speed, headed out to the car, muttering something about giving the ladies “some time to

say goodbye.” Penny bade Anne wait a minute; she disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a grocery bag full of junk food.

“Here,” she instructed, handing Anne the bag. “I bought some things for Colin; I know how much he must miss home-cooked meals.” Anne looked at her to see if she was kidding, but there was only an earnestness on her face, as if to say, See, I remembered my grandson.

Anne kissed her mother on the cheek. “Goodbye. Thanks for lunch.”

“Call me when you get there,” she shouted out the door as her daughter trudged to the car. Penny always said this. Anne stopped and turned around to wave. Her mother looked so tiny, her thin arm raised in goodbye. “See you soon!” Anne shouted; she always said this.

Dan honked the horn and Anne ran to the car. Watching in the rear view mirror, she saw her mother wave one last time, then close the door.

“From the agony to the ecstasy,” Dan commented. Even nearly thirty years out of college, Dan remained at home on a campus: any campus, it turned out. Anne watched his shoulders straighten, his belly attempt to flatten, his mouth curve into a smile and she could almost have sworn he tried to flip back his hair, even though he had none to speak of. Dan became the BMOC all over again.

Sitting next to him, Anne couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling she always had on a college campus: *everyone is having fun but me.*

They stopped at the large map posted by the concrete bulldogs that guarded the campus. Dan studied it and pronounced, “Let’s just go see if he’s in his room.” *Not a good idea*, Anne thought, as she pocketed the cell phone in a convenient place. It was clear to her that Dan still thought of Colin as about ten years old. Anne wasn’t quite so naïve, but Colin was her baby and as such, occupied a special place in her psyche, one that was often deaf and blind to his occasional failings. Though she missed his laugh, his dry humor, his cleats in the middle of the kitchen floor, his wrestling with Oberon, Colin’s absence didn’t leave her feeling sad, because she knew he was in a better place.

At least, in theory. The dorm proved to be a little less than up-to-date: long, dim hallways lined with beat up doors that told volumes about the weekends’ activities. *And maybe the weeknights’, too*, she thought, reminded of their recent early morning visit to another of their sons. Of course, as they tromped up the four flights to his room—*where were the ADA elevators?---* Anne tried to warm up to this building; after all, it was Colin’s home for the year. Dan ran up the steps, two at a time, while Anne plodded behind him, pausing every once in a while to slow down her panting.

When she finally reached the landing of the fourth floor she found Dan standing by a door, with his finger on his lips. “Let’s surprise him,” he whispered, as if he had time-machined back to fraternity days. “I don’t know, Dan,” Anne started to say, but it was too late.

Dan kicked open the door, shouting “Police, come out with your hands up!” Several doors along the hallway creaked open and a few bedraggled heads peered out.

Meanwhile a laughing Dan had stormed into the room amidst screaming—female screaming.

Before Anne could get to the now wide-open door, she saw Dan falling all over himself—backing up awkwardly and sending out a steady, if not coherent, stream of apologizing. Colin shouted, “What the hell?” and then “Dad?” The female screaming was reduced to panicked sobbing and what sounded like frantic reassembling. Dan closed the door softly and stood with his head bowed. Finally he looked at Anne,

“What do you think he’s doing in there?”

“Are you serious?” She took him by the arm, pointed him towards the stairs and they trooped down. This time he did the plodding. For the second time in a month, they had no protocol for this situation.

Within a few minutes, Colin joined them, looking remarkably clothed and serene. Dan, still speechless, hung his head in his hands and refused to look at his son. So Anne was the one who had to address Colin. All she could think was: *Wasn’t this the dad’s job? I thought I just had to worry about sewing nametags in his shirts.*

“So, who is she?” Anne asked, recognizing as soon as the words came out of her mouth that this was not the best approach. Colin drew himself into a defensive posture (much practiced and usually very effective) and demanded indignantly,

“Oh, does her appearance bother you?” Anne couldn’t think what to say next. *What the hell is he getting at?* So instead of talking, she spouted,

“Wha—no, that’s not it, I don’t care about that, I mean, I don’t care..wait, what are you talking about?”

“About the fact that I had a black girl in my room. That’s what’s bothering you, isn’t it? That she’s black?”

“What do you mean? I didn’t say anything about that. I didn’t notice…” Anne stumbled.

“Yes, you did. I saw the hard look you gave her.”

The kid knew how to push buttons. Colin’s accusation totally distracted his parents from the issue of having a girl in his room in the first place and sent both of them scurrying for evidence of their tolerant natures and asking themselves if, indeed, that was the problem.

Dan retreated into the ultimate parent’s defense by standing up, looking down at Colin and declaring, “You know better than to talk to your mother like that. You and I are going to find someplace to sit and then you have a lot of explaining to do, son.” They walked down the well-kept path, landscaped far more beautifully than the Roberts’s little yard. Anne wrapped her arms around herself and walked slowly back to the car; that stack of papers on *Romeo and Juliet* she’d thrown into her bag would surely distract her from this modern day teenaged tryst.

She dozed off by the time Dan and Colin finally returned, clearly recovered and reconciliated. They could have been fraternity brothers, coming back from some initiation ceremony, or a keg party. Dan opened the driver’s side door and Colin jumped in the back, and the two men both continued a discussion about where to go for dinner. Anne listened to them talking about dinner places, football games, the state of the club

soccer team Colin played for. It felt like old times; and Anne did not have the energy to feel a blossoming irritation at her familiar role—the silent one. She thought to ask Colin the girl’s name, but that seemed a moot question at that point. Neither she nor he would ever see the girl again; of that she felt certain.

Chapter 8

After the adventures of September, Anne welcomed the grind of October, with no holidays and the evil Lady Macbeth and her clueless husband to contemplate (Anne like to teach the play in October, the witches gave off a bit of a Halloween vibe). The now more consistent communication with the boys assured her that everyone was OK, at least for now. Dan had joined a volleyball league at his school and in a not unusual fashion, put himself in charge of arranging gym time and celebration time after each weekly game. When Anne pointed out that standing around on a volleyball court for an hour and then drinking beer and eating wings might not really count as a workout, Dan assured her it was not just a social time. *Really?* she thought, but replied, “OK, I won’t worry about dinner then.” As if she had worried about dinner since the boys started playing sports.

So Anne had a night (or two, some weeks) to herself and Oberon, who did not deny himself his twelve hours of sleep, even with this slight change in schedule. She intended to use the time wisely: grading papers, preparing for class, maybe taking up the novel she had half-written in grad school (if she could find it). *I finally have that minute of peace!* she told herself.

But, instead of using the time to catch up and get ahead, as she would have any other time in her life, she found herself pouring another glass of wine and sitting on the sofa—on the part not taken up by the sprawling Great Dane—and playing around on the laptop:

the obligatory and fruitless search for her sons' Facebook pages, knowing that David's was hidden from view, Michael neglected his, and Colin had blocked her from his. Dan had set up a page when the boys were in high school, then never looked at it again. She knew better than to search for a page for Rob; he would have no interest in anything that might reveal something personal. And, anyway, as he admitted, he'd just be tempted to find out all the off campus stuff he'd have to discipline the kids for and just keeping them straight on campus was enough work. So she looked for some other names, some former students, to see how they were doing. And then, on a calculated whim, she started typing "Teddy.." then stopped, hands poised over the keyboard. She deleted the name and instead she typed in Theodore Hollister Reilly. And up popped Teddy.

Anne stared at the screen, filled with a post card style shot of what looked like the Blue Ridge Mountains: sun glinting off the snow capped peaks, no humans, no trails in sight. To the left side of the picture was a profile picture of a young Teddy, in too big waders, grinning and holding up a fish. He looked so happy and proud...

Anne immediately clicked off the Facebook site. She put down the computer, picked up her empty wine glass and walked into the kitchen mechanically. Oberon heaved himself up at the sudden absence of a warm body and followed her.

Just as Anne was leaning over to put her arms around the yawning dog, Dan burst through the kitchen door, sweating and smelling of beer and buffalo sauce. "You should have been there," he shouted. "We nailed them. They didn't stand a chance!" He stopped and looked at his wife, "So..I see you are meeting up with another man while I'm off at the gym!"

“Ha ha,” she replied.

“I was kidding—I meant you and Oberon. It’s a joke.” Dan rubbed his shoulder and rotated his arm. “Think I might have pulled that rotator cuff again...where’s that heating pad?”

“Maybe in the bathroom cabinet? I don’t know. I’m off to bed. Take the dog out, will you?” She left the kitchen, walked up the stairs, and thought *I’d like to stick that heating pad up where the sun don’t shine.*

Later that week, Anne arrived home from school to find Dan’s car in the good parking place and wondered with irritation what he was doing home so early. Thursdays he was supposed to hold office hours in the evening, which mostly meant that he watched ESPN on a TV he had hijacked years ago. Anne was looking forward to walking Oberon in the still pleasant fall weather, maybe eating something caloric without Dan murmuring, “Do you really want to eat that?”

Annoyed, she parked on the curb and, carting her optimistically overfull book bag, trudged across the now-brown lawn. As she juggled her purse, the book bag, her lunch bag, and the mail she had retrieved, to open the door, she realized that it was locked. Dead bolted, as a matter of fact.

This was odd. They never locked the door while anyone was at home. And it was terribly quiet—she suddenly missed the enthusiastic greeting Oberon offered to anyone entering the house. She checked again; yes, Dan’s car was definitely there. She pushed the door fully open, dropped her stuff on the floor and wondered where those two could

have gotten to; then it dawned on her that maybe Dan was up to his training business again and unwisely involving the dog. Yes, that made sense...even though she tried not to see the leash resting in its usual place.

Anne took her time changing into sweatpants and going through the mail. Then she pulled out frozen salmon fillets and put them in cold water to defrost. It was starting to get dark. She looked over the paper she hadn't had time to glance at this morning, starting with the headlines and TV listings. She dwelled over the obituaries, reading each with even more care than usual, and listened for the phone.

Finally, as she was stuffing towels into the washing machine, the phone rang. Anne raced up the basement stairs and breathed a "Hello" into the receiver.

"Anne, are you there?" Dan sounded like he was at the bottom of a well.

"Yes—where are you? Where's the dog? Why was the door locked?" He cut her questions off.

"I'm at the hospital, waiting for some pills..."

"You're where? What's going on? Are you hurt?" She started to look for her keys and purse, squeezing the phone between her shoulder and chin. "Which hospital?"

"The animal one," he said flatly. "Really, Anne, you need to calm down. You overreact to everything..."

She cut off his familiar diatribe and dropped the keys and purse. "What's wrong with Oberon?"

“Well, I came home and he looked kind of punk—you know, he just lay there, with his head down; didn’t even bark when I came in. Even refused a biscuit. He needed his nails clipped anyway, so I brought him in.”

“Then why is your car still here? Did you feed him anything weird? What did they find? Is he OK? I am heading over there right now,” she said, noting his “Big Dog” bowl half-full of the expensive kibble.

“Anne! Chill out! My car was making some noises, so I borrowed that old clunker of Joe’s. The dog is fine; the vet thinks he might have Lyme disease; he’s giving him some antibiotics while they check for sure. It’s all taken care of.” In the background Anne heard a deep woof, as though Oberon was affirming this.

“Lyme disease? But he had that shot in the summer and we never let him off the lead...”

“Listen, Anne, I’m on my way home. The dog is fine. You’ll see for yourself.” He clicked off and Anne imagined Oberon, ears flat and tail between his legs, pulling Dan towards the door. The dog hated the vet.

She returned the phone to its receiver and wandered over to the sink to stare at the gray-brown of the October twilight. The branches that framed the sky were mostly bare, with only a few brown leaves clinging stubbornly. Every fall, the boys and Dan raked at the carpet of leaves, creating larger and larger piles, only to have Oberon race from pile to pile, his long legs undoing all the raking. It was an annual ritual, ending with the boys and Dan and the big dog rolling around in the leaves, wrestling and laughing and making a fine mess. She loved watching their fun, their boyish-ness, their unleashed energy.

“I think I will die if something happens to that dog,” Anne said out loud. Outside the window, the darkness was pushing back the day.

Chapter 9

After the intensity of a solid month without a holiday,(though Halloween had become like a day off, at least for the students), Anne always thought that November was a good time for a comedy. A comedy was a good antidote to the depressing shortening daylight, the pressure of the holidays coming on, the final disaster of Thanksgiving, when you are forced to realize just how dysfunctional your family can be and, to add insult to injury, you have to polish the silver and iron the tablecloth, to keep up the appearance that you are actually thankful for the opportunity to watch people you see only once a year wolf down in an hour what took you several days to prepare..

So, after the tragic impetuosity of the ill-fated, pubescent Romeo and Juliet, and the creepy Macbeths, Anne turned to her favorite of Shakespeare's comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing*. The kids were always relieved to get past the oppressive Capulets and Montagues and they were so baffled as to what was funny in the comedy, that they really did read, trying to get the clever wit of Beatrice and Benedick (Beatrice much the cleverer of the two, Anne made clear to the students). By the time they were finished with *Much Ado*, they were ready to plunge into *Othello*: revenge and death they got.

That fall, Anne looked forward to *Much Ado About Nothing* with more than the usual enthusiasm; in fact, her introduction of the play resembled nothing less than a manic

stand-up routine—not her usual, deliberate, be-sure-you’re-taking-notes pace. With a final flourish involving Magic Markers, old Halloween masks and Hershey kisses, she heard the bell ring somewhere in the distance and looked up from a bow, to see open mouths, glazed-over eyes and stupefied expressions. *Ha! I knocked ‘em dead!* She added loudly “Read Act I” before they all started up like a herd of buffalo startled by a stray dog. Only Teddy, AKA Hollister, gave her two thumbs up and a smile.

Anne busied herself gathering up books and papers, so that she could relinquish her classroom to the irritatingly young and enthusiastic teacher of ninth grade geography. She forced a smile in response to the perky “Do you mind if I rearrange the desks? We’re going to be making a living representation of the European Union—doing some kinesthetic learning,” and was nearly knocked over by pimply-faced ninth grade boys rushing in to assist the tiny young woman in her furniture moving. Anne stalked out of the room, feeling like a Clydesdale in a paddock full of Shetland ponies.

“Ah, youth...” Rob waited in the hallway as Anne managed to avoid a collision with the last (and apparently slowest) fourteen-year-old.

“I guess you’re not referring to me,” she said. They fell into step together, as they often did, dodging the kids late to class, the jangling of the bell preventing any further conversation. Once they reached the faculty room, both plopped onto the sagging sofa, the only space clear of other teachers’ forgotten mess.

“They can raise twenty million for new lacrosse fields, but they can’t afford a new sofa for the aging faculty,” Rob sighed.

“Don’t forget—we can always sit on the lacrosse field,” Anne replied, pulling a pile of papers from her grade book. “I need to get working on these ninth grade essays on *A Raisin in the Sun*. I brought rainbow pens to mark them since, as we were so carefully instructed in our last professional day, a red pen gives off a negative vibe.”

“Which would be the point of a red pen, I would imagine. I can’t believe you’re still having them hand in hard copies,” Rob replied, shifting his weight and moving closer to the Grand Canyon-like depression Anne felt her rear end making in the sofa. “So how are things going these days?”

Always ready to be distracted when grading ninth grade essays, she set the papers in her lap, as a pretense that she would get back to them, and turned to face him. “Ok, I guess. I just think I am operating in a sort of shell-shocked mode, with the empty-nesting, having no idea what the boys are up to at school, putting up with Dan’s craziness—I thought he’d have forgotten about this mountain climbing thing by now..., and my mother, don’t get me started with her...” Not at all understanding why she was doing this, she found herself launching into a recounting of the fall’s events, ending with the dog taking ill and a recent phone call to Michael in which she had clearly woken him from a deep sleep at 2:30 in the afternoon. “It just set off warning bells in my head—you know what I mean?” she finished.

Then there was only the hum of the refrigerator. Anne turned to look at Rob.

“I’m sorry for just blurting all that stuff out,” she said, “I guess I really needed to talk. I can’t just go next door and bug Ellen any more. I used to babble away at Michael; he was always a good listener. Now there’s just...”

Rob remained silent, returning her gaze. She noticed the deep blue of his eyes and the light stubble on his chin. He shifted his weight just a little and asked her, “And Dan? Do you talk to Dan?”

“Oh, well, you know Dan—he’s always got some sports event to watch; he doesn’t have the time or patience to listen to my whining,—that’s what he thinks it is...” she responded weakly.

Rob sighed. “That’s just it, isn’t it? When do you lose the interest, the energy, the vocabulary?” He paused. “Joyce moved all her stuff out last Saturday and went back to Colorado. For good. She couldn’t even keep up appearances long enough to get through Thanksgiving.”

Outside there were the faint, distant sounds of chairs being pushed in, students chattering, teachers raising their voices to make one last point. Soon the bell would ring, soon the hall would be loud with kids talking, laughing, soon teachers in need of a caffeine lift would turn the creaky handle of the thick door with its tarnished brass “FACULTY” prominently displayed.

“Rob, I don’t know what to say. I am so sorry,” Anne managed, even as she detected the stentorian lamenting of Col. Dickinson, the legendary chemistry teacher. She leaned over and placed her hand on Rob’s, “I am so sorry.”

Rob’s hand curled around hers and he tightened his grip. Then he lifted her hand and gently pressed it to his lips. Anne removed her hand from his, and laid it limply on the sofa. He smiled and then, cocking his ear towards the door, said, “And a one, and a two and a...”, then extricated himself from the sofa,. The door burst open and the tweedy

crowd elbowed each other into the faculty room. Rob turned to face the onslaught and greeted Sid Frankel, the nerdy math teacher who was always kicking students out of class, not realizing that he was giving them exactly what they wanted.

“Hey, Sid, I need to talk to you about...” Rob’s voice moved across the room. Anne stared at the pile of papers still resting on her lap. Reluctantly she picked up the first one, reading, “Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* shows what happens when two people don’t share the same dream...”

Out of the mouths of babes...

While her eyes continued to run over the page, fingers automatically circling the comma errors and misspelled words with the non-ego damaging purple pen, she thought about Rob. And Joyce, whom she had met only once or twice. Rob always came to the school’s command performance events alone; Anne assumed he was sparing Joyce the agony of the faculty’s complete self-interest and total lack of social grace. Anne left Dan behind for different reasons, mainly his disinterest in anyone else and his inability to read social cues. Anne remembered that Joyce did appear at a graduation once, to see Rob get an award. She was tall, thin, dressed with sophistication in a lime green linen suit, white elbow-length gloves and a Jackie Kennedy hat, yellow to match her leather heels. She remembered Rob’s rumpled khakis next to her immaculate A-line skirt; it was something in their manner: they were too polite to each other.

Anne paused, lifted up the purple pen and gazed at the constant motion before her. She thought about Rob kissing her hand and felt heat rise in her cheeks. Rob had asked her if she talked to Dan. There was a time when she would have turned to Dan and told

him everything that was worrying her; there was a time when he played confessor without even saying a word. His listening, his availability, his reassuring platitudes—it used to ease her mind. But, and she hadn't thought about this before, the boys had required so much of their mutual energy—not that she or Dan begrudged them that—there was not much left for each other, and maybe their marriage had become just a matter of polite inertia.

“Anne, a penny for your thoughts?”

Anne looked up to find the Rastefarian twisted grey hair of Sylvia Oglethorpe, the middle school drama teacher. Sylvia liked to think of herself as a New Age therapist of sorts and she looked for any opportunity to claim a victim for her services. She was also the biggest gossip on the faculty. And no one would dare call her on her ridiculous hair.

Anne shook her head and rose up from her crater on the sofa. “Oh, Sylvia, you know my thoughts are worth a nickel, at least.” Cradling her book and papers, she slid by the disappointed drama teacher and headed towards the door and her classroom, where she could ponder in cinder blocked isolation. At least until her next class.

Anne surprised Dan that evening by presenting a warmed-up Stouffer's lasagna and a bagged salad for dinner. “Home cooking!” he pronounced and then grabbed a plate, filled it full of drippy lasagna and headed towards the family room.

“Dan! I put silverware on the table. I wanted us to have a real dinner tonight.”

“Oh, hon, it's Thursday night. The Redskins are on TV tonight. Gotta catch the pre-game show; you know that.”

“Seriously?” Anne said.

His mouth full of a forkful of lasagna, Dan mumbled, “OK, well I guess we should sit down together for a while.” He stepped back into the kitchen and plopped himself at the little table. He took another bite and mumbled again, “This is nice. Dinner together.”

Anne conceded victory, put a spoonful of the cooling lasagna on her plate and brought the plate over to the table. She had set the two nice wine glasses on the table and poured a half-glass of red wine in each, from an already opened bottle waiting on the table. Dan continued to plow through his dinner, alternating salad with the forkfuls of noodles and cheese. Anne took a drink of her wine, lifted her fork and watched him.

“No wine for me, I am still in training for our big trip, you know, Kilimanjaro.”

Anne put down her fork, and took another sip of wine.

Dan sat back in his chair and wiped off his mouth with a paper towel. “It’s gonna be the trip of a lifetime.”

Anne reached over, poured Dan’s wine into her glass, and stated flatly, “I think you are a selfish, crazy fool, and I have no intention of climbing any damn mountain with you.”

“Aw, honey, it’s just kind of scary to think about. You’ll come around. I’ll take care of everything. Just don’t worry about anything.” He heaved himself up from the chair, removed his plate to the sink and headed once more to the family room and TV. He paused, turned to face her and said, “Oh, and thanks for the nice dinner. Haven’t had lasagna that good since...since the last time we had Stouffers.” He smiled. “Anne, it’s a

done deal. We're going climbing next summer and it will be great. I mean it." He grabbed up the channel changer and "The Voice of the Redskins" blared forth.

Anne chugged the rest of the wine, and felt her face getting hotter and hotter. She dabbed her napkin at the angry tears threatening to emerge. But she would not allow herself to cry; she would do just what he said: she would not worry about his stupid trip and she would not worry about him. She resolved to never, ever say one more word about it and she would never, ever climb one step with him.

It was a relief to imagine a resolution, however lame, and to pretend that a conflict had been avoided, or, at least, postponed. Anne took some deep breaths, scraped her dinner into Oberon's bowl and shoved the dirty dishes into the dishwasher. The Great Dan happily slurped up the congealing lasagna, whipping his tail around in happiness.

Anne felt better, just watching him.

Chapter 10

It was the Sunday afternoon, before Thanksgiving, that Anne saw him in the frozen food section, reading the labels of boxed frozen dinners with great intensity. She had to do a double take; Seeing a student outside of school was guaranteed to make her mind go completely blank. Kind of like an instant lobotomy. She abandoned her half-filled cart by the canned items aisle and moved in for a better look.

“Teddy?” she queried.

He jumped as though Anne had shocked him with a cattle prod. A package of Stouffer’s Creamed Spinach toppled out of his hands and landed with a hard splat on the floor.

“Mrs. Roberts!” He whispered, glancing around him as if she was giving away his position. “What are you doing here?” Then, gathering himself, “It’s Hollister, remember?” Then he straightened up and jerked out his hand as though he were greeting the minister at the end of the service.

Anne shook his hand, startled by the chill of his skin (he had been handling frozen food, after all). After they returned their arms to their sides, they just stood there while David Bowie and Bing Crosby sang about a little drummer boy. Finally, Anne looked up at Teddy/Hollister and asked,

“So, are you grabbing some dinner?”

“No,” his eyes downturned. He sighed. “No, actually, I was looking for something for Thanksgiving. My dad...well, he just can’t get things done. And since it’s just him and me, I was trying to figure out something to cook.” He looked down at the box of frozen spinach and added, “My mom used to do all the cooking.”

Anne reached out to put a hand on his arm, “I had no idea.”

“Last spring,” he said. “It sort of happened really fast and I, well I didn’t want anyone to know. There would have been all sorts of the lame things people say and they would have made me talk to the stupid counselor and I just didn’t want any of that.”

“I am so sorry.”

“I really don’t want anyone to know, OK? And please don’t tell anyone you saw me here, will you?”

“Sure. Of course.”

“Well, I’ve got to go. See you in school.” “

She reached into the freezer shelf and took out a different brand of creamed spinach. “This one’s better—lower in calories and cheaper.”

He took it from her. “Thanks. And don’t forget it’s Hollister.”

Anne returned to her cart and turned into the crackers and cookies aisle. She watched Teddy out of the corner of her eye.

Holding onto his creamed spinach, Teddy walked to the check-out counter, looking around as if he were buying beer or cigarettes, not frozen vegetables.

Anne watched him cross through the glass doors that swished open as he approached and shut tight as he exited.

Chapter 11

The anticipations of a family Thanksgiving, complete with her mother and the three boys, kept Anne awake at night, calculating how to cook a turkey, stuffing, roast vegetables, and a sweet potato casserole that no one would eat but that everyone would complain if it wasn't served—how to get all this cooked and kept warm with one oven. There was always the microwave, but that seemed like cheating. It was a relief to worry about such practical things; things that could and would be solved one way or another.

Penny was due to arrive Tuesday because she wanted to avoid the traffic on Monday and Wednesday. She would leave for home on Saturday, because she wanted to avoid the traffic on Friday and Sunday. Planning your travel around what you didn't want to do was not Anne's strategy, but she supposed her mother had her reasons. The boys would come in, all with different transportation arrangements, but all by Wednesday, they promised. Dan had tickets for the Redskins game that Saturday and they were all excited about that. At least he was.

Anne was secretly unhappy that he would get the boys to himself the one day she could enjoy them without her mother and maybe have a real conversation with each one. At least Oberon would be there to commiserate and make turkey soup with her. Monday

night she began the ritual of defrosting the 25 pound turkey. The once regal bird sat in the laundry sink, the tip of the white plastic iceberg promising a glacial melt..

Let the festivities begin, Anne thought.

Though technically a half-day, the Tuesday before Thanksgiving felt like the longest day of the year.. The empty desks and quiet halls attested to the number of stressed out parents making a mad dash for their beach houses or their ski condos, trying to suck a week's worth of vacation out of a four-day holiday. Anne could have taken the easy way out, like so many of her colleagues: showing a movie, playing the dictionary game. But she forged on in a discussion of *Much Ado*.

“So, like, Beatrice and Benedick really like each other, even though they fight all the time?”

Anne could tell Lauren had thought about this hard and long and, frankly, she was impressed by the girl's furrowed brow and earnest question. Sadly, for Lauren, her parents got no further than their own dining room for the Thanksgiving break. Any plans they might have had were always impeded by the demands of their jewelry business and Black Friday. But Lauren was a good sport; she put up with this unusual family quirk (working over Thanksgiving) and returned to school the following Monday decked out with the spoils of her pre-Christmas shopping.

“Well, Lauren, what do you think? What evidence do you see to support that thesis?” Anne said primly from her perch on the desk. Experienced (read lazy) teacher method—always turn the question back on the kid.

“I dunno,” Lauren drawled after a discernible pause, the clicks of the clock reminding them all how time was as frozen as the turkey sitting in the sink. “They remind me of Jennifer Aniston and Ross on *Friends*—you know? They are always getting mad at each other, but they really love each other.”

“That’s such crap. Just because they have a baby together and have sex all the time...” Another county heard from.

Anne could sense where this was going. “Wait, wait, let’s stick to the text for any supporting evidence. Now, open your books and find the lines that tell you something about the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick.”

As the newly bonded stay-at-homers reluctantly dug out their texts from their backpacks, she scanned the desks again: no Teddy. He might spend a good deal of his time out of class when he was in school, but Teddy did come to school every day. And after their brief encounter Sunday, she knew he wasn’t heading north or south for the holiday. The revelation that he had lost his mother recently had given her an entirely new perspective on Teddy, AKA Hollister. She thought vaguely of inviting him, and his father, she supposed, to the Roberts’ Thanksgiving dinner. But it took her even less time to dismiss this crazy idea, and now she felt strangely vindicated, since he wasn’t there to invite.

And the class was certainly the less for his absence. Whatever his other issues, the kid certainly talked in class. Often the other students were startled into silent contemplation by his comments. With him absent from class, those who didn't dare voice an idea were suddenly emboldened; hence Lauren's reference to *Friends*. Anne tried to sneak a glance at the clock, her line of vision bumping into everyone else's in the room.

"Tell you what. Let's leave Beatrice and Benedick alone until after Thanksgiving and we'll do a little writing."

Involuntary groans all around, silenced quickly by a sharp once-around-the-room with her teacher stink-eye. As any teacher worth her salt knows, sometimes you can say so much more without words. General stirring, reluctant digging out of raggedy notebooks, extended search for writing utensils. By the time everyone was sufficiently equipped, a good five minutes was knocked off the clock..

"What should we write, Mrs. Roberts?" Ryan looked up with a practiced eager to please expression.

Anne cast about in her mind. "Write about a family gathering."

"You mean like Thanksgiving?"

Anne restrained a "DUH." "Sure, we all have stories about Thanksgiving," She bent her head over her own raggedy notebook, trying to model the behavior (and noise level) desired.

They all wake up early, lured into consciousness by the seductive aroma of an already-glazing turkey; isn't it always the biggest one ever? Of course, I've been up since long before the dawn's reddening of the sky; I've been up stuffing, basting, mixing,

setting the table, drinking coffee and savoring the pleasures of anticipating a happy meal with everyone I love. I feel an unfamiliar jolt of pure joy as I fold the napkins and set out the silverware, which has miraculously emerged from its dusty box gleaming. It's been a bit of a tough fall, I say to myself, and surely we are entitled to this afternoon together: no time demands, no social demands; just the chance to enjoy each other, remind us of how important the family is. I hear a stampede of bare feet on the stairs, the happy cacophony of the boys' voices as they boast to each other about how much they will eat today. David, Michael, Colin: they enter the kitchen laughing and punching each other, rushing to hug me and lift me off the ground, joking about how much lighter I must be than the turkey, each vying for a chance to wrap his strong arm around my waist. I sink down slowly onto the kitchen floor (which has developed an incredible sheen) and turn to greet my mother, who is smiling and perfectly coifed (gotta love that word) and handing out fifty dollar bills to the boys, which they graciously take under some duress. Finally, as we sit, contented, around the kitchen table, sipping coffee and catching up on the fall's happenings, Dan comes in the kitchen, having slept late and miraculously morphed back into the muscled, focused man with hair on his head that I had married. As he leans in and kisses me like movie stars do, the boys and Mother smile and wink at each other...

Anne looked up to find half a dozen pairs of eyes watching her. She closed her notebook and, using her reading glasses as some sort of intellectual prop, said "Anybody want to share?"

"Mrs. Roberts, it's time to go—we have a shortened schedule today. You know, so we can put our cans in the gym." Anne had to think a minute to realize the kid meant food cans, not keisters.

"That's right, Lauren." Anne felt only a tired relief. "Well, I guess it's time to go...I hope you have a wonderful Thanksgiving break; have fun stuffing yourselves!"

Thanks all around. As they tripped out of class, newly energized by the realization that there were only seven more periods to get through, Lauren stopped before her and asked,

"Mrs. Roberts, you looked pretty into whatever you were writing. Do you want to share?"

Anne felt her face get warm and hoped it didn't show. "Oh, no. Lauren. I was just imagining what my Thanksgiving dinner will be like."

"Like the volleyball coach tells us? To see the win? To believe the win?"

"Yes, I guess so—something like that."

She nodded and flipped her ponytail. "Well, I hope you have a great Thanksgiving—just like the one you wrote about." She smiled her \$20,000 smile (including implants and bleaching) and, hoisting her backpack over her shoulder, put her arm around Anne's shoulder and hugged her teacher.

Anne had to admit, the kids could be a lifeline sometimes.

Later that afternoon, after the turkey, stuffing and cranberry sauce lunch served up by the cafeteria (why they would serve this two days before Thanksgiving is a mystery not worth exploring), a Thanksgiving assembly (complete with pilgrim hats made out of pipe cleaners, provided by the fifth grade), and a final look around the classroom, Anne walked down the hall experiencing the electric feeling you only get when you're about to walk out of school for four days. Evidently most of the faculty had managed to cut out even earlier than she did; her lone steps echoed on the purposely brown and grey specked tile. S

She turned into the faculty room to retrieve a much valued marked-up copy of *The Scarlet Letter*, and heard footsteps quick-marching behind me. Unsure of who was left, and who had the energy to walk down the hall that fast, she dashed into the faculty room and waited behind the door. The footsteps stopped outside the door.

“Anne?” The voice sounded familiar. The door creaked open slowly, and Anne waited, holding her breath.

“Anne? I thought I saw you come in here... Are you alone?”

A body entered the room and the door began to shut; She saw a shadow on the floor, then a shoe and then...

“Why are you still here?” Rob stepped into the room, closing the door fully behind him.

“Uh...Just looking for a book I thought I left behind. Why are you still here?” she returned.

“Oh, just checking for stragglers. Don’t want anyone locked in the building over the holiday,” he smiled weakly.

“That would be a nightmare,” Anne said. She thought a minute and remembered,

“Rob, are you alright? I never asked you what your plans were... for the weekend.”

Rob turned to face her, taking her hand in his. He pulled her closer, and for a moment, she thought he was going to cry. With her free hand she compulsively batted at her coat pocket, frantically feeling for a tissue. As she was debating the utility of the not used, but suspiciously crumpled tissue, he leaned in. And kissed her.

Even as she tried to pull away, she was aware that she hadn’t been kissed like that in a long time: his soft lips and gently roving tongue took her back to the early days of Dan’s courting. She was so astounded by the kiss that she hardly noticed his roving hand, traveling around her ribs to land like a suction cup on her behind. She was embarrassed to feel her body start to sag and her mind give into physical sensations. *Oh*

my god, am I liking this? It had been so long since she'd felt a flutter in the stomach and that melting between the legs; all she knew was pure physical reaction.

Somewhere in the center of all this was an excited voice shouting, "He wants me! I am irresistible to a man! I am attractive! I am sexy!" Actually, it was a chorus of voices.. As from another body, she recognized that she was kissing him back, once she remembered how.

Wait a minute!

Anne pushed myself away from him. Rob stepped back, covered his face with his hands.

"I am so sorry," he whispered. "I don't know what came over me."

"It's OK," Anne gasped, "Holidays tend to bring out all sorts of feelings? Let's just forget it?" she offered, as she picked up her book bag, her purse, and a biology textbook someone had left behind on the table nearby. After a moment,

"Well, I should be heading home; I have a date with a turkey," she said, her face blazing, brushing past him towards the door.

"Wait, Anne, we should talk..." Rob called, although she was moving fast, click-clacking down the hall noisily, in case anyone should doubt she was heading home. She couldn't get out of there fast enough.

I stretched my bare legs out luxuriously and plumped the pillow under my head. A slight glow filtered through the blinds: yes, it was morning. But no alarm. No sounds of the shower running or the dog whining. I turned over on my side, pulling the covers up around my shoulders like a cocoon. A warm, down-filled cocoon that meant no school today. I thought to look at the clock, to see how much longer I could linger in my semi-somnolent state. Propping myself up on one elbow, I reached over the figure next to me to see the clock. He turned over slowly to face me and I smiled, preparing to celebrate this holiday morning the way we used to. I shifted closer and closer and...oh my god it's Teddy!

Anne sat bolt upright in bed, gasping . She blinked, shook her head and tried to slow her racing heart. As recognizable, even familiar sounds floated up from downstairs, she realized that she'd been dreaming. Just dreaming. She looked fearfully at the hollowed out place beside her; no Teddy, no Dan, not even Oberon lay there. Just Anne and her subconscious. And sweaty, guilty confusion.

Once she realized that she had been asleep and was now awake, she listened. Normally on Thanksgiving morning not a soul stirred until noon (except the executive chef—Anne). . Her mother was ensconced in the now-guest room (David's old room—he had to bunk with Michael), probably plucking her eyebrows or filing her nails; the older she got, the longer it took for her to consider herself presentable. David and Michael had come in sometime late the night before; Dan and Oberon were left watching *Chariots of Fire* to serve as the greeting committee. Colin was still AWOL, but he was

relying on a former neighbor for a ride home and had been instructed to stay at Ronnie's house if they got in too late—or too early in the morning.

Anne rose from the bed, throwing off the covers, embarrassed to feel damp sheets. Had she not been in denial about menopause, she might have accepted night sweats as part and parcel of the ordeal, but she chose instead to think it was all a product of an overactive libido. She quickly stripped the bed and tossed the sheets into the laundry basket. Before she ventured to the one shared bathroom, She paused, caught by the sound of voices: furiously whispering male voices.

She tiptoed down the stairs, with disheveled hair, disheveled pajamas, disheveled thinking, still disturbed mightily by her dream. Halfway down, she grasped the handrail and sat, concentrating on locating the noise..

“What were you thinking? The drinking incident, the money stuff—that is correctable. But getting kicked out? For cheating? That's just....”

“Unacceptable. Exactly. And to put me in the middle...”

“Yeah, and what about you? You were supposed to look after him? Didn't you check in with him? Didn't you see that something was wrong? Or were you too busy to ...”

“Dad, stop. It's not David's fault. He didn't do anything.”

“That's my point. You didn't do anything. You knew your brother was having some problems and yet...”

“Dad, that's really not fair. And it's beside the point anyway. I knew you'd react this way...the point is, that we need to figure out what to do. I'm probably violating

about ten Honor Code rules by even discussing this with you and Michael. I mean, consider my position. I am the president of the Student Honor Board. And now I have my brother coming before...”

“How many times do I have to say I’m sorry. I’m sorry I screwed up, I’m sorry I ever went away to school, I’m sorry I was ever born...”

This last comment propelled her up and into the kitchen, where the surprised faces of her husband and her two eldest stared at her.

“Anne! What are you doing up?” Dan hissed, as though there were anyone else left to wake up. He turned to Michael, “I told you to keep it down. Now we’ll all have to talk about it.”

Anne adjusted the elastic waist of her pajamas, patted down her bird’s nest hair and stood up straighter. In hindsight, she imagined she looked like a little girl, in the midst of these men. But she didn’t feel like a little girl. Instead Anne felt like a very old woman.

“Talk about what?” she demanded, anyway. She looked around the kitchen. “And where’s your brother? Where’s Colin?”

“Colin should be here any time; he texted me a little while ago. Something about car trouble. “And we were just discussing a little situation at school, Mom.” David patted her head and, as if practicing his future career as a lawyer, tried to maneuver her thinking, “It’s really no big deal. Do you want me to help you with the turkey?”

She shook off his hand . “Dan, what little situation at school? David—go fetch the turkey from downstairs and let’s hope the damn thing is defrosted. Michael, you go help him.” She searched the kitchen again. “What’s going on with Colin?”

Both boys left the kitchen double-time and clumped down the basement steps, Oberon hot on their trails. She turned to face her husband, who, she couldn’t help noticing, was wearing only his boxer shorts.

“What?!” he started And Anne knew it must be bad. Only when he wasn’t clueless did Dan try to act clueless. She braced herself.

He turned towards the sink, gazing through the window at the leaf-strewn backyard. “Better get at those leaves,” he muttered. She held her ground, saying nothing, but unwillingly noticing a split seam down the back of his boxers. Dan cleared his throat, “I just don’t know, Anne. These kids...” he paused to wipe at his nose. Anne reached over, pulled a paper towel off the roll and handed it to him.

He blew his nose into it. “Thanks,” he said, tossing the paper towel into the sink. As she inspected her husband, Anne wondered idly how long it took two boys to carry a twenty-five pound turkey up a flight of stairs...

“Dan, what the hell are you talking about?” She looked up, right into his eyes, adopting her Inspector face. It always worked with her students.

Dan shifted his weight, scratched his head. “I’m waiting,” Anne couldn’t help. Dan opened his mouth, then closed it as a loud chorus rose up from the basement:

“MOM!!!! Come down here quick, you won’t believe this...”

The couple looked at each other for just a moment, then they raced to the basement steps. That word, that “MOM!!!”: the bell for Anne’s Pavlovian response—after years of indoctrination, her reaction was pure muscle memory—get to the source as quickly as possible.

“Mom—look!” David and Michael pointed at the laundry sink. The recent crisis faded (not disappeared) as the four of them huddled over the concrete anachronism and stared—at nothing.

“I don’t see anything,” she said to the sink. It was David who finally said,

“That’s the point. You said the turkey was defrosting in the sink—but it’s not there and Michael and I have been looking around the basement and we can’t find anything that even resembles...”

“Oberon!!” Michael cried and dashed up the steps, two at a time. David gasped and followed him. It took their parents a little longer to put the equation together: Oberon plus frozen turkey equals no Thanksgiving.

The boys found the dog “hiding” under the dining room table, his place of refuge from recrimination; the Great Dane was under the delusion he could hide his 150 pound hide. By the time Dan and Anne reached the dining room, the boys had dragged the dog out from under the table (as well as the freshly pressed antique table) and were conducting an inane interrogation.

“OK, buddy, what did you do with the turkey? Did you bury it? Did you hide it somewhere? Did you eat it? Just tell us what you did and it will all go a lot easier.”

The dog dropped his black and white head until it almost touched the faded carpet.

Michael interpreted:

“He DID eat it. Look how guilty he looks!” Dan dropped down on his knees, lifted Oberon’s head and looked him in the eyes.

“Hey, buddy, did you really try to eat the turkey? You don’t look so good. In fact, we’d better get you out of here because...”

And before he could finish his sentence, Dan found himself covered in whatever happens to a half-frozen turkey and its plastic bag in the inner workings of a rapidly wolfing dog. It was not pretty.

Dan didn’t seem able to move at first. David, Michael and Anne looked at him, looked at the dog and then looked at each other. It was actually David who first began to laugh. Michael and Anne restrained themselves until David paused to catch his breath and said,

“Well, at least we found the turkey!” There was no holding back after that. Dripping with indescribable goop, Dan stood up and tried to find some dignity, while the three others bent over, wrapped their hands around their mouths and howled. Oberon disappeared (most of him, at least) back under the table. Dan looked around the room at the mess that was not to be the Thanksgiving meal and said, wiping grey, foul-smelling quasi-liquid from his face.

“Michael and David, at least you can clean up this mess. We’ll talk about the other mess later—we are not finished yet. I will be in the shower, and I don’t want to be

interrupted..” Leaving big drops of something as he walked, Dan passed through the dining room and out the kitchen door..

“Well, who left the damn basement door open? I am sure I locked it...Boys, get back in here. Did either of you...?” Anne puzzled, but she was talking to empty space. Michael and David had quietly vanished, leaving Anne and Oberon to figure out what happened.

It was then that Penny decided to descend.

Chapter 12

“Good morning, all!” she gushed. “Gobble, gobble gobble! I thought I heard some noise. Where are those handsome boys?” Anne’s mother rarely acknowledged she was a grandmother and this involved all sorts of different methods of addressing the boys, most of which they didn’t recognize as pertaining to them. To confuse them further, she was wearing a rather complicated appliqué First Thanksgiving Dinner scene, complete with smiling Indians, grave-faced pilgrims and oddly happy turkeys. In addition to her interest in cuckoo clocks, Penny made a hobby of collecting sweaters for every holiday. Christmas, Halloween, Fourth of July— piece of cake, but she couldn’t, or wouldn’t stop there. She found crocheted bunnies for Easter, cable knit shamrocks for St. Patrick’s Day, even a cotton hoodie that proclaimed, “I have a dream” for Martin Luther King Day. She’d found the tribute to Thanksgiving she now displayed at some craft show in the Mid-west, as she waited for some husband to get a final diagnosis from the Mayo Clinic. The coat-sized sweater, knit with soft, bulky cotton thread, seemed to hold no sad memories for her because she had hauled it out every Thanksgiving Anne could remember spending with her mother. Its festive, fall-leaf colors provided a sharp contrast to the pale linoleum floor, adorned with smudged footprints and gray dog vomit.

“My goodness, what is that, Anne? I did suggest that you wait for me to begin cooking. Is that some new gravy mix you’re trying? I told you I would make the

gravy..." she leaned over to observe the chunky liquid. "This doesn't even look cooked..." she said.

"Well, Mother, that's because it's not," Anne grabbed another paper towel and an industrial sized bottle of Lysol. "There's coffee," she directed.

As her mother wiped out the inside of a coffee cup with the sleeve of her sweater, Anne quickly wiped the floor without gagging. Penny knocked back a good slug of black coffee before she thought to ask, "Where's Dan? And the boys? You've haven't been down here talking to yourself, have you?"

"Oberon ate the entire turkey—raw—for breakfast. I don't know where the men are—they seem to disappear whenever it comes down to cleaning up a mess." She gave one last swipe to the floor. "I still can't figure out how he got down there. I know I locked that door."

"Oh, you mean the basement door? I had to get down there yesterday to look for the Scotch. When did you and Dan start keeping your liquor in the basement?"

"When we had three teen aged boys living in the house. And you did what?"

"I had to get down there. It was five o'clock and you hadn't come home from work for some reason and no one else was here. It was cocktail hour! Anyway, I wiped some cobwebs from the ceiling while I was down there. You really should keep after those things.."

"Mother..." Anne started. Then stopped.

"Honey, what's wrong with you?"

“Ah, nothing. Mother, why don’t you take your coffee into the family room—you can watch the parade.” She smiled wanly, her eyes still looking past her mother as Penny refilled her cup and turned to leave, saying, “Oh, you know how I love those floats. I told you about the time I was elected the Homecoming Queen in high school and got to ride on my own float in the Homecoming parade? It was covered in white crepe paper and....” Penny continued her story into the family room; no need for an audience,; she was used to talking to herself.

Anne moved over to the sink and peered out the kitchen window. With brittle brown leaves still drifting from the mostly bare branches, the little oblong area that constituted their back yard appeared the same as it always did in the throes of autumn. Anne had seen, just out of the corner of her eye, a familiar-looking figure sliding through the leaves, carrying a partially filled trash bag slung over his shoulder. The figure ducked through the border of cypress trees and disappeared. Anne checked to see that Oberon was snoozing peacefully under the table, then located the dog walking boots she kept near the kitchen door..

Outside, the overcast sky kept any sun hidden, and Anne quickly wrapped her arms around her, wishing she’d thought to get a coat on her way out. The neighborhood had that holiday quiet; that everyone-was-sleeping-late-but-you kind of stillness. Anne stood just beyond the kitchen door and listened, training her eyes on the area where she’d last seen that figure. She detected a rustling, then heard the low moan of a rusty bolt protesting. She moved towards the source of the noise. There—the tool shed that Joe

had built himself, that held no tools, because Joe hated taking care of the lawn. Anne stopped and gave the area a probing look—but there was nothing.

Joe and his wife had left early that morning to drive down to their son's house in North Carolina; this Anne knew. She would just have to open the shed door herself. So she stepped closer and yanked at the handle.

A high pitched scream greeted her. Followed by a deeper voiced “What the fuck?” It was dark in the shed, but Anne recognized the second voice, and then, realized she had heard the first voice before.

“Colin? What the hell are you doing in here?”

There was a rustling and a quick whispered conference; Anne strained her eyes, but she could only make out the shadows of two people

The beam of a high-powered flashlight poured into Anne's face, and once she could see again, Colin's face appeared behind it.

“Mom! What are you doing here?” Colin asked, holding his eyes big with feigned surprise.

“The jig is up, my friend. You have exactly one minute to tell me what's going on and to introduce the other person you've lured into this shed.”

But before Colin could arrange his story, the other voice spoke up. “Mrs. Roberts, I'm Alisha Moore, and I'm afraid we were not thinking very clearly when we decided to spend this holiday together.” A slender body, clad in torn jeans and a JMU sweatshirt stepped into the light and held out her hand. “Colin said you and Mr. Roberts wouldn't understand, but I can see he was just being protective of me.”

Anne took Alisha's hand warily, gave it one shake, and stepped back again, hitting the splintery wall. "Wait...you what? Colin what?"

"Mom, you heard her. We just couldn't stand to be apart, so I told her to come home with me and we'd find a way to be together. I was going to bring her into the house, when the time was right. But I forgot that Grandmother Penny would be here. So we were kind of waiting until the coast was clear."

The two moved side by side. "Mrs. Roberts, I know this is probably hard to hear right now, but we are in love."

Anne reached out and took the flashlight from Colin, and reversed the beam, seeing two teenaged kids, one white and one black, holding tightly to each other's hand. Anne looked hard at her youngest, noting with a pang that his face held a new earnest expression.

She lowered the flashlight and tried to think., knowing that she would have to be the one to fix things. She always felt she had to resolve everyone else's problems without their knowing it. Because copasetic was the name of the game—another of her mother's teachings.

Anne went into stage manager mode.

"OK, here's what we'll have to do. Colin, you'll have to look like you're just coming in—your ride had car trouble, or you got started late—think of some valid excuse to cover your lateness; I know you are an expert at CYA. And you, Alisha is it?, I am going to put you up at Joe's house—he's our neighbor whose shed you've broken into and entered—because you clearly can't stay here. And we keep all this on the LD—"

“Mom—you mean DL? Down low?” Colin’s self-assurance seemed to return with Anne’s plan. But when Anne gave him a glare, he immediately redirected his tone to add, “Mom, you are being really great about all this.”

“Yes, Mrs. Roberts, I can’t tell you how much...”

“‘All this’ isn’t over yet and we will have a very serious conversation about ‘all this’ after we get through Thanksgiving and my mother is on her way home. The last thing I want is to try to explain this to HER. I also don’t want to have to get your dad involved right now...understand?”

Anne lifted the flashlight’s beam to see the two faces across from her nodding rapidly. Then Anne cocked her head listening. Colin and the girl heard it too.

“Mooooooooooooommmmm! Where are you? We need to figure out what we’re going to do for Thanksgiving dinner? Dad wants to know...”

Anne leaned in and hissed: “OK, let’s do this. Colin, you go first. Alisha, come with me and I’ll let you in Joe and Helen’s house. Then, I will saunter in as if I was just out on a nature walk—everybody got it?” Again, the two nodded and Anne pushed her son towards the shed door. She grabbed the girl by the hand and followed closely behind.

By the time Anne returned through the kitchen door, Colin had staged his arrival, and the loud chorus of male voices made it felt like the old days, for a minute. Anne found all the boys and Dan and even Oberon (standing apart, a little wobbily) arm punching and laughing at each other’s stories; yes, it did feel like old times. Anne entered the fray, hugged Colin, and retreated to the kitchen to deal with what now seemed

the least serious problem of the day: what to do about dinner. She stared into the refrigerator, trying to imagine the mostly vegetable and dairy products as a traditional Thanksgiving feast. Penny came up behind her, “Can you see any lime juice?”

“Lime juice? What for?” Anne closed the refrigerator door.

“Well, I went down to that basement bar of yours, looking for some vodka; remember how Dan loved those Bloody Marys, from that Junior League cookbook? I was going to fix some—for all of us—well, not the boys, of course, but all I could find was this...” she shoved forward a bottle. “Tequila! And that made me think of those wonderful margaritas Donald [husband #2] used to make. I think I can remember the recipe, but I’ll need lime juice—fresh is best—and some crushed ice, and the secret ingredient—a little Tabasco..”

“Mother margaritas? Today?”

“Well, from the looks of things, that’s about all that’s going to get made for Thanksgiving dinner. Now, where would you keep the blender? I can’t begin to guess...”

“I’ll tell you what, let’s do one better. Let’s go out for Thanksgiving dinner. There’s bound to be some seats available somewhere.”

“Guys! Where do you want to go to eat Thanksgiving dinner?” Anne called out in the direction of the den, where the sounds of changing stations and arguing about what to watch filled the air,

She was not surprised to hear several enthusiastic suggestions. *Why didn’t I think of this sooner?* As the volume got higher and the suggestions more hilarious, Anne shut

it all down with a declaration: “Alright, we’ll just figure it out!! Everyone get dressed and let’s go.”

Chapter 13

The seating in the large booth was tight, but they managed to all fit in. Anne looked around the crowded room: Who knew so many people went out for Thanksgiving dinner? They tried all their favorite haunts and found that reservations had been made for MONTHS. So the boys took one car and Dan drove the Volvo, Penny in the front gripping the door tightly, Anne in the back. They drove—aimlessly, looking for a restaurant with any kind of food and any kind of seating; their standards deteriorating with each cell phone conversation.

“How about the Holiday Inn? The one on Valley Drive?”

“Wait! David says he thinks Peppi’s is open!”

“Last time I ate at Peppi’s I got food poisoning.”

“Well, you can just sit there...”

“Are you going to stop or what?”

“I just can’t see eating pizza for Thanksgiving dinner. Besides...”

“Let’s keep looking. It’s only four o’clock. The Detroit game doesn’t start until 8..”

It was her mother’s bottle of tequila (to which she still clung, in case the restaurant eventually found should lack a liquor license) that prodded Anne remembering

the Mexican Hat, near the mall. Though the parking lot looked suspiciously full when they pulled up, somehow the manager (Big Roberto) recognized the boys and found them a “cozy” booth, which used to fit the five of them quite comfortably. As Anne and her mother scooted around the greasy red leather, compressed by four large male bodies, she groaned and tried to claim a space. Dan pushed David and Michael further in and looked at her as though to say, “*Well, it’s not my ass that’s gotten bigger.*”

“Margarita,” Penny piped up, as soon as the sombrero-wearing waiter came within shouting range. “Make it two—frozen, strawberry,” Anne added, reaching over her mother to grab at the basket of chips, before the boys devoured them.

For a while there was only the sound of chip crunching and straw sipping. Penny and Anne were the only ones drinking alcohol; always one to set an example, Dan had very visibly ordered water (with a lemon) and David, the only other one of age, still hadn’t worked up the nerve to order a beer when they were out—at home it was a different matter. Michael and Colin slurped up their usual gallons of Coke and ate basketfuls of slightly stale tortilla chips; Anne was onto their strategy—by keeping their mouths full they couldn’t be expected to talk. She wondered what that poor girl in Joe’s house could be thinking.

Choosing to be oblivious to everyone else in the crowded booth, Penny rambled on about the cheesy Mexican décor and how it reminded her of the Acapulco honeymoon with Frederick (husband #3):

“You’d have thought he was thirty-five, instead of seventy-five. We swam and sunned and when we found a nude beach one day...”

“Okay, Mother, let’s hear about what the boys have been up to this semester...”

Anne said. Every male stuffed into the booth crammed a handful of chips into his mouth, including Dan. The waiter came around with two more baskets of chips and Penny signaled for a third margarita and then excused herself to the Senoritas’ room. Anne saw an opportunity.

“So what were you guys whispering about this morning? Nobody has said anything to me.”

David and Michael looked at each other, and Dan looked at Anne.

“Hurry up, before she gets back,” Anne added.

“Mom, it’s an awkward situation, but I think Michael and I can work this thing out without parental intervention. Anyway, I have to respect the confidentiality of all students, even if they’re related to me.” Dan drank from his glass of water and nodded.

“Just tell me what happened. I have no intentions of “intervening,” as you called it, but I do deserve to know what’s going on, if for no other reason than that I help to pay the tuition.”

“Actually, Anne, strictly speaking, it’s my mother’s estate...” Dan ventured.

Anne glared and he shut up.

“Michael,” Anne’s tone became gentle, almost apologetic. “No matter what you did or didn’t do, you know we love and support you. You can be honest and forthright about what happened. It’s always better to tell the truth.” She tried to put her hand on his shoulder, but she couldn’t get it loose from its place under the table.

“Mom, they said I shared answers with my partner in Calculus. She asked me for the answers to problems we were supposed to work on individually; I thought she just wanted to check hers. I never thought she’d turn them in as her own. And now she says I used her answers; and you know how strict the Honor Code is.”

A series of waiters began setting down what seemed like a dozen dishes the same consistency and color. .

““And I’ll have another margarita. This time no salt.” Anne said to the back of the last waiter.

“I’ll take a Dos Equis,” Dan added.

“Me, too,” David piped up.

“Well, it’s time for a Mexican Thanksgiving!” Penny returned to shut down any conversation. “Did they bring me another drink?” She squeezed into the booth, and the plate sorting began. Once everyone had what they thought they ordered, vigorous chewing ensued.

When their grandmother excused herself after the plates were cleared, the boys looked at each other and shifted out of the booth. After they dropped off Colin, they were going to visit some friends, but they would be home early, David and Michael assured their parents. As soon as they were out the restaurant’s door, Penny turned up, having made a stop at the bar on her way back to the table.

“Well, amigos, did the boys head out? I’m sure they have lots of friends and parties they’d much rather be going to than sitting with a bunch of old people like us,”

With exaggerated care, Penny gently placed her highball glass on the table. The amber color sloshing inside suggested that she had finally found the Scotch.

“You got that right, Penny. Come on, girls, let me get the bill and we’ll head out too. We old people have to get to bed on time, you know.” Dan could be a smooth gear shifter, when called upon. He signaled Pedro or Jesus or whoever had calculated how much they’d just spent. As Anne helped her mother with her coat and gathered up both their purses, she tried to calculate just what had been lost here, in this ridiculous place..

The night air was raw; Anne could detect of a cornucopia of odors: the oddly appealing restaurant-grease smell; from somewhere far off, burning wood; closer, the familiar tug of Anne’s mother’s perfume, her own Tide-washed clothes smell. Conflicting smells, really; distracting. She turned to look at the warm lights and the shadows of happy diners reflected in the front window decorated with red lights in the shape of chili peppers.

“Come on, Anne, we need to get home and check on the dog,” Dan’s muffled voice emerged from the car.

She pulled her jacket tighter and slid into the front seat. Dan started the car and began backing it out of the parking space as Penny leaned forward from the back and patted his arm, resting on the back of the top of the seat.

“Not to worry, Dan. I am sure they all will be fine,” she said, then sat back and promptly fell asleep.

Chapter 14

Only later did she compile the “if only’s”. If only she hadn’t been so concerned about the possible consequences of Oberon’s Thanksgiving day feast (Anne could not be convinced that a dog could consume a semi-frozen, raw turkey and not suffer any after-effects). If only she hadn’t been so determined to figure out a way to take care of Michael’s cheating charge. If only she had slipped out to talk to Colin’s girl, but Joe’s house was empty was when she went over to check on her Friday morning. Maybe the girl had been scared off—it was probably for the best. If only Thanksgiving hadn’t been such a complete mess. If only she could sleep..

After the Mexican Thanksgiving and a Friday of late sleepers, after Penny left at the crack of dawn, after Dan and the boys headed to the stadium for the Redskins game, Anne had the house (and time) to herself. She sat in the tiny room she called a study, alone in the now quiet house.

The silence was unnerving. She got out the laptop, her go-to distraction, to check the *VetMed* website and see what it had to say about dogs and raw turkey. By force of habit, she hit the mail icon at the bottom of the screen. Before she moved on to a search engine, she noticed a new email.

The address read: flyboy90. *Who? Must be spam...* But she clicked anyway.

Hey Mrs. R.—

Sorry to miss your class on Wednesday. I had something to do. I need to ask you a favor. THR Happy Thanksgiving.

She read it again. And again. There was only one THR she could think of who might have missed her class. *How could he have her email address?* The shock at seeing the initials THR on her personal email account first froze her, and then intense heat infused her cheeks, and she instinctively turned her head to see if anyone was watching. She impulsively clicked “Reply.”

Dear Hollister,

I am not sure how you got my email address, but thanks for the note and I will see you Monday. Mrs. R.

She read over the lines quickly—*not exactly Jane Austen*. But, really, what could happen? She pressed “Send.”

Chapter 15

“Good to have things back to normal,” Dan stated. He was lolling on the sofa, a bowl of buttered microwave popcorn on his stomach, football games spread across the big screen in front of him.

“Normal?” Anne responded. With assurances that they could and would fix everything before Christmas, (*Ah youth*) the boys headed out Sunday morning. She spent the rest of the day building a pile of stuff they left behind. With the exception of her mother’s temporary home, the upstairs looked like an unnatural disaster. Finally, she just closed all the bedroom doors and resolved to get to it later. She made herself a peanut butter sandwich and took a long nap.

School Monday morning was a different story; she couldn’t put that off until later. As the car rose and dipped over the school driveway’s speed bumps, Anne felt a concrete dread settle in her system. And this free fall to Christmas break was supposed to be the easy time of the year.

Once she entered the building, magically transformed into a copier paper/glitter pen winter wonderland, she was amazed to find that everyone acted, well, normal. In the hallways, students stopped to say hi to her, colleagues hustling to their classrooms smiled and waved. She nodded and waved, keeping an eye out for Rob, and Teddy, for

that matter. Neither appeared. She let herself into her classroom and prepared for her first class. Normal.

In the cafeteria, Anne nodded to a science teacher's diatribe about parasites in domestic turkeys while she watched Rob walking towards their table. He was carrying a tray laden with what looked like the Thanksgiving leftovers special.

"Can I have this seat?" he put his tray down across from Anne. The science teacher continued to drone on and Anne nodded at Rob. Her mouth felt dry and, maybe it was the parasite talk, but the sight of brownish gravy topping grayish turkey made her nauseated. She looked away as Rob sliced off a large piece and forked it into his mouth.

"So, Anne," Rob interrupted. Anne looked his way again. Conditioned to interruption, the science teacher returned to his yoghurt.

"So, Rob," Anne replied.

"You remember that you're on homework detention duty this month—4:30-5:30 Monday through Thursday?"

"Ah, sure." It was not what she expected him to say.

"I'll put the names in your mailbox. You can keep the kids in your room."

"OK. How was your Thanksgiving?" she asked slowly.

"Fine, fine. I was just glad to be out of here for a few days. Took a quick trip up to the city that never sleeps." He swiveled his head around at a loud burst of laughing.

"Well, I'd better go nip that in the bud." He rose, tray in hand, and charged to the source of the noise.

The science teacher again took up his thread, leaving Anne to puzzle over this new normal with Rob. Had that kiss even happened? She stuffed down the rising feeling of righteous anger—how could he act like it was nothing—and instead recognized the relief of another tenet of her mother’s training: let the past stay in the past. Even if the past is only a couple of days.

It wasn’t an unpleasant duty. On Mondays, she held quiet court over yawning teenagers who’d had too fun a weekend. By Thursdays, the crowd thinned out; only the half-dozen usual suspects slunk into their usual seats. Anne took role, made sure everyone had something to do; then for one hour, she did whatever she felt like doing at her desk. This included: reading a thriller, making Christmas lists for the boys, scrolling through what was on sale at Anthropologie, checking the ten-day forecast, looking for funny Great Dane videos on YouTube. The school texts and plan book stayed crammed into the reusable grocery bag, (the nice one) and student papers remained hidden in tiny file folder icons. Anne did not even think about them.

Teddy was one of the usual suspects. As she watched him slide awkwardly into his seat in the back, Anne hid her surprise; he always seemed to his homework for her class. She glanced at him over the computer screen; he worked through a pile of books and papers efficiently. Once she announced dismissal, he rose up from the desk, stuffed the papers and books into his backpack and, after pausing for a smile and thank you to her, he was the first one out the door. Funny kid, Anne thought as she watched him leave. Maybe he doesn’t want to go home either.

By the third Monday, Anne figured that Teddy did not resent in the least having to come for study hall every day after school. In fact, he seemed to plan on it. The study hall numbers dwindled as Christmas break approached; teachers tired of checking or caring about homework done or undone; they just tried to survive until the holiday. . The Wednesday of the week before Christmas break, Anne found only Teddy and herself in the classroom at 4:30.

Teddy kept his eyes down and slid into his usual desk. He began to unload his backpack, but paused after yanking out a biology textbook and dumping it on the desk seat. He lifted his eyes, looked around the room, and focused on Anne. She shrugged her shoulders and said, ‘Welcome to solitary confinement.’ Teddy smiled and shrugged his shoulders. He continued to pile books on the desk, finishing with a dog-eared looseleaf notebook. He left the books, took the notebook and sat down in a desk closer to the front.

Anne took note of his movements, though her eyes remained glued to the computer screen. She was looking up new ways to cook yams and finding cooking yams was just innately boring. She was about to click off the yams and try, yet again, to see what Colin was up to on his Facebook page when she detected the familiar odor of well-worn tennis shoes. She lifted her eyes and there was Teddy.

“What’s up?” she asked. It was understood that detention study hall was a no contact zone; Anne was just there to check off names and make sure no one left until 5:30. Another stellar use of her talents, like chaperoning dances. But it seemed silly to

insist on the rules, when there was just the two of them. “Do you need something?” she added.

“Remember I told you I wanted to ask you a favor?,” Teddy said reluctantly.

“Normally, I would never bug you about this, but I am getting kind of desperate. And you can just say no, you don’t have to help me.”

“OK, noted. What is it you want help with?” Teddy’s fingers tapped the worn notebook and he shifted his weight back and forth. “Do you want to sit down? Why don’t you pull up a desk?”

Teddy’s moved a desk to the side of Anne’s seat. She closed her computer, put on her reading glasses and looked up at Teddy with her teacher-smile. “So?”

Teddy opened up the notebook and showed her a series of pages filled with scribbles and lines and an occasional F---. Anne thought back to the last professional development session about kids who might be disturbed. She swallowed her misgivings and said, “I’m not sure what kind of help you need.”

Teddy sighed and slumped. “This is my college essay.” He turned a few more messy pages. He looked at his hands, “I don’t even know if I want to go to college; I know you’re supposed to and all that. My dad is making me apply, he says I’ll regret it if I don’t. And he also says he hasn’t spent over \$60,000 on private school so I can bail on college.”

“So you want some help with your essay?” Anne deduced. “Why didn’t you come to me earlier? I’ve been helping kids with their college essays forever.”

“Cause you have enough to do. And ‘cause I should be able to do this myself. I like to write and I’m not that bad at it. I just don’t like writing about myself.”

Anne took the notebook from him and leafed through the pages. “I think we should start over,” she told him. She tossed the notebook in the trashcan. “First, you can’t just sit down and write one of these things. You have to do a lot of thinking on paper, just to figure out what you want to write about.”

Anne could see Teddy struggling, but she persisted. “Look, I can give you some exercises that will help you think about your experiences. It will really help get you started. Would that be good?”

A smile crept across Teddy’s face. He held out his right hand and said, “Let’s shake on it.” Anne took his hand and shook it gently. “I’ll email you some things to do. You can work on them over the break.” Then she added,

“Let’s get out of here and say we didn’t. Nobody should be in detention this close to winter break.” Teddy agreed, “You got that right,” and began packing up his back pack.

Chapter 16

Eliot claimed that April was the cruelest month, but clearly he did not have to face a classful of college-deferred, vacation-sapped adolescents who had figured out that their presence, much less their interest, in class, was beside the point now. Along with the tide of disoriented, yawning students she might have recognized back in December, Anne was pulled, into January and the second semester.

After the detour through *Much Ado*, “Shakespeare’s Famous Couples” took a sharp turn into the morass of *Othello*. To give the play the soap opera element sure to keep the attention of the class, Anne waxed poetic about the significance of Othello and Desdemona and Iago and the “green-eyed monster.” The students listened without comment, or, maybe, comprehension, their hands shoved into pockets, trying to avoid the weaning from their rampant vacation texting. But as soon as a short grace period was up (say, at the end of the first week back), Anne roped in the cell phones and handed out detentions. Finally, the class was left with only their teacher and her syllabus. Anne always (wisely) held out a final lure to reel them in: she promised them Lawrence Fishburne and *O* and, voila! They were back where they had left off in December: a class.

After the Christmas holiday, Anne was more than ready for some dramatic tragedy. The two week winter break was too calm, too polite. She did all the things she felt were expected: she cooked dinner each night, she bought and wrapped gifts for everyone, she found and sent out the Christmas cards she'd bought last year half-price after Christmas. She watched the endless football and basketball games that seemed the only events (besides food-related ones) that drew the family together. She called her mother nearly day. Penny had migrated down to Florida around the first of December, to stay with some step-child Anne had never met. She wanted a little sun and sand, she said, before she had to return to Virginia and the hospital for her surgery, which the doctor had "absolutely" forbidden her to postpone again.

"But not to worry, Anne," Penny brushed off her daughter's questions about the surgery, the hospital stay, the recovery..."I'll be fine. This is just some silly precautionary thing; you know, once they find out you've got MediCare, you spend the rest of your time getting tests done so they can find something wrong with you. After having you with that emergency C-section, with the intern who didn't know what he was doing and your father insisting he couldn't operate on a family member, well, this will be a piece of cake."

Anne wasn't so sure about this.

She found some solace on the computer. True to her word, she emailed some prompts and some model essays to Teddy, and he responded with a few ideas for his college essay, ranging from scoring a touchdown in middle school football to learning to play the guitar. Anne read through them, emailed some suggestions to Teddy. And so

they went back and forth. Teddy emailing Anne pieces of dull, drafts, and Anne making dull comments on the writing. *Don't be afraid to reveal yourself, to put yourself out there*, Anne wrote. Sometimes observations that had nothing to do with Teddy's writing, or college essays, cropped up. Anne looked forward to the daily communication.

If Anne had really thought about it, she would have realized that, somewhere, back in the recesses of her better senses, she was counting on all this emailing ending with the vacation. After all, they would be in class again, she teacher, he student.

But even after the Christmas holiday was over, this, of course, did nothing to explain the vague flutter of excitement she tried to ignore as she looked out over the vaguely familiar faces before her.

"So, everyone, how was your break?" Anne put special emphasis on the past tense. While she took role, she let the conversation break out between the rows, as she scanned the faces before her.

No Teddy.

Before her face revealed anything, she turned to grab her text and prepared to read Othello's speech explaining how he won Desdemona (*"I should but teach him how to tell my story/And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:/she loved me for the dangers I had passed/And I loved her that she did pity them."* (1.3.166-167)). This sometimes worked to grab their attention, after she announced she was about to give them some dating advice (although they usually winced at the word "dating"). With the dog-eared

paperback opened to the speech, Anne paused to look out at the now-relaxed faces, chatting across aisles.

“Okay, Okay, how many of you have seen *Apocalypse Now*?” She knew most of them had seen this now accepted substitute for actually reading *Heart of Darkness*. (The film was more gripping, even Anne had to admit). Their attention was drawn front-wards as they reminisced about Mr. Hawley’s ninth grade English class, and spending more time hearing his Viet Nam stories than reading. And watching movies, some of which actually had some literary allusions, like *Apocalypse Now*. Before this could become a discussion of Mr. Hawley’s sudden, permanent absence from school during his second year of teaching, she coaxed their attention back, by picking up the remote. Silence ensued.

“Well, we’re going start our study of *Othello* with some visual references. I am going to show you some of *O*, which stars Laurence Fishburne. You know, he played the kid who went down the river with Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now*?”

A deeper silence ensued. While they struggled to focus long enough to figure out who Martin Sheen was, she rustled around in her desk and located the VHS copy of *O*. She felt relief as she asked Mike to turn off the lights and pressed that volume button as far as it would go, but she knew she would pay for her spontaneous avoidance. Eventually, they would actually have to read the play. But then, at that time, she needed the back-of-the-room quiet darkness and the tragic figures trapped in the small box at the front of the room, whose fates could only take them as far as the end of class.

Since Thanksgiving, Anne had avoided the faculty room. In fact, she avoided the dining room, the hallways, anyone's office, any other classroom. She dashed from the parking lot to her classroom and remained there all day, with only the occasional desperate flight to the copy machine or the ladies room. She guessed that Rob had taken on the same kind of strategy; so they avoided each other and everyone else with the same exclusivity they had not so long ago practiced in seeing each other.

But by January, Anne found that the only person she really missed was the person she was avoiding. Observing the school world from the back of her classroom door offered an amazing clarity: her circle of once-friends had almost completely spun away: to other jobs, retirements, other cities. Sitting at her desk scooping yoghurt, she used her twenty minutes of lunch time to reflect and remember the people who had come and gone in her life, people she always promised myself to keep up with, people she had once thought she couldn't work without, people who, at one time or another, had known more about her than she did.

Like Ellen. At Ellen's retirement party, Anne had promised herself that nothing would change; she and Ellen would continue their relationship just as they had for the past twenty years. And they did keep in touch, that first summer. But when she got busy with school again in the fall, Anne didn't think about Ellen as much, and, by the spring, Ellen was an item on her to-do list. It must have been the same way for Ellen. And by December of this year, she pushed Ellen to the far reaches of her mind, and she had to make herself remember her. *How could she lose track of someone she'd spent so much time with? Who had been so important?*

Anne realized that she had lingered at the school long enough to become a lone bastion of the Old Guard; she was like the grey-bunned Miss Whoevers..the stalwart old maids who celebrated forty years at the school, earning their silver plate with pride. Where had the time gone? The days always seemed so long; how did the years go by so fast?

Having time to think isn't always a good thing.

The grey cold of January brought with it a major problem with the out-dated heating system. And with Shakespearean symbolism, the atmosphere reflected the disorder on earth (at least in Anne's life) as the area had a record-breaking dip in temperatures. That first week back, she sat behind her desk, in her icy solitude, rubbing her gloved hands together and watching her breath mist. By Friday, even the animal warmth of complaining teenagers didn't cut the chill and she had had enough. After her quiet ninth grade study hall, she resolved to sacrifice her mental health for her physical well-being: she grabbed her yellow coffee mug with the red smiley face (gift from a student) and bolted out of the room and right into Rob.

"I was just about to come find you," he announced, and stepped back.

Anne crossed her woolen-covered arms in front of her and said quickly, "I guess you found me. What's up?"

Rob made a show of putting on some reading glasses and flipping some pages in a notebook she hadn't noticed he was holding. He stopped turning pages, took out a pen and held it over the notebook, as if he were a reporter conducting an interview.

“So, what’s up with Teddy Reilly?” he asked, looking down at her through his glasses expectantly. Anne was annoyed to feel her cheeks grow warm.

“Huh?” she replied.

“You marked him absent every class this week.”

“Yes, that’s because he was absent every class this week. Is there some problem?”

“Well, it’s just strange. Because no one else marked him absent this week. And I have seen him around school, with my own eyes.”

“Are you suggesting that I somehow missed him while taking attendance all week? Maybe he’s been hanging out in his car, with the heat on.”

At this point the bell rang and students burst forth from doors all along the hall, like all prisoners escaping from their cells. Rob and Anne stood facing each other with maybe six feet of gray-specked linoleum between them. The two adults were quickly swallowed up by a swarm of down jackets and backpacks. .

“Sorry, but I’ve got to go,” Anne said.

“Let’s talk about this later. Come up to my office, OK?”

She threw out a “Sure” and swung into the off-limits-to-kids handicapped bathroom. She didn’t realize just how hard she had been gripping the coffee mug and her fingers pounded as she let go of the ceramic handle. She locked the door and stood before the sink, startled by what stared back in the mirror.. *Oh, my god, is that really me?*

Maybe it was the lighting, or the neutral color of the walls, but she noticed a sheen to her hair that she had never noticed before—a silver sheen. And lines—she'd always prided herself on her complexion, one thing she could thank her mother for. But today, in this place, Anne looked older than her mother.

A light knock at the door (*why do people knock at locked doors?*) interrupted her distress, and her hand flew to the door handle, dashing the happy mug to the floor, where it crashed into about a million pieces.

Unfortunately, real life is not better than fiction. Instead of having an epiphany, or disappearing into another time warp to become a Christian martyr or futuristic alien, Anne simply knelt and carefully picked up the shards with a paper towel, covering the sharp edges with another paper towel in the plastic trash can. Then she drew up her coat around her, unlocked the door and walked back to her classroom.

Where the heat had been restored. As she removed her coat and gloves, basking in the climbing temperatures, Anne thought, *Ah, maybe there is a god.* She hung the coat on the back of the classroom door and had another thought, *Or this is hell?*

Chapter 17

Tire-tread traces of ice caught the last rays of the cold sun setting as Anne turned into the driveway. The neighborhood showed no signs of life; she removed herself carefully from the car, juggling bookbag, purse, laptop case, a couple of empty plastic bags she had saved for Oberon's walk (his digestive system long recovered from the turkey incident, as it became known). She stood for a minute, inhaling the sharp winter air, enjoying, for a moment, the stark definition of the trees. Anne hated the cold weather and short days, but there was always a certain sense of vitality in winter. It was only when she pushed into the warm kitchen that she felt a leaden dullness.

Out of old habit, she listened in vain for the chatter of the television, for Dan's outbursts as he watched the scores pass across the screen. But Dan had found reasons to stay at his school—after his success arranging volleyball games and beer nights after the games, he had been sought out to add a few more activities to his evenings, like departmental dodge ball (“You should see those nerds trying to throw a ball at someone!”), some exercise thing called Chaos for the Body (“Lots of 80's music”) and a class called “Stability,” which had to do with physical stability, not the mental kind, as Anne originally assumed. And the Fantasy Football League he set up for the math and science faculty. Though Dan had always looked around the house and the neighborhood

for his entertainment, this phase of empty nesting seemed to bring out the frat boy/ team captain Dan.

The gloom descending over her thoughts was interrupted by the frantic sound of claws scraping on the wooden floors and an encouraging “Woof.” Oberon appeared in the kitchen door, his eyes foggy with sleep, his tail whipping back and forth in undisguised joy.

“Dogs are good,” Anne proclaimed and reached for the leash behind the door. At least Oberon understood her.

When they re-entered the kitchen, bringing a blast of cold air with them, she saw the ominous red pulsating of the kitchen phone, indicating a message. No one she ever wanted to hear from called this phone, let alone left a message. *Probably some solicitation.* Well, whoever had resorted to this primitive form of communication could wait. The dog needed dinner and she needed a glass of wine.

There were a few nice things about Dan’s getting home later: she could sip on a glass or two and nibble on junk food with abandon. She could change into her sweats and read through catalogs. She could even plug her ears into the tiny iPod the boys had fixed up for her at Christmastime and have a dance party with Aretha and Chaka Khan, if she so desired. Pouring some merlot from the “Where’s the Baby Sitter” bottle, she moved over to the blinking phone.

After only a few tries, she punched in the magical combination of numbers and pound signs and received permission to punch in more numbers. “You have three

messages,” the mechanical voice told her. She hit “1” and took a large sip from the now ruby-hued glass.

“Anne, Anne?I guess you’re not there. Oh, I guess I’ll have to leave a message. Let’s see, do I have to push anything? Anne? THIS IS YOUR MOTHER. I WAS CALLING TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT...well, just call me tonight, when you get back from wherever you are. I’ll be home.” Click.

She moved to the next message., A voice, indecipherable except for its clear tone of annoyance;

“Mom? Why is your cell phone off? Listen, I need to talk to you about something. And it’s not about money. I need to talk to YOU, so don’t tell Dad I called, OK? Oh, yeah this is your son.”

And this would be which son? Not only was it extremely rare for one of the boys to call this phone, but that he should want to speak to Anne and have no talk of money concerned—. Move to the next message.

“Hey, where are you guys? This is Colin. I have some great news; at least I think it’s great. I’m going to the game tonight, so call me back tomorrow, OK?”

She put down the half-lifted glass. Anne was pretty sure great news for Colin would not necessarily be great news for his parents. She made an executive decision: Dan could handle this one. She punched “2”, to save it, and hung up the phone. Then she poured herself another glass of “Where’s the Babysitter” and grabbed another handful of chips. She hesitated, looking around the kitchen, which was disturbingly tidy, then she disappeared into the “study” and got out her laptop.

The truth was that after her conversation with Rob, Anne's first thought was that she could email Teddy, a seemingly innocent, casual check-up on his absences. But once she had clicked on a new email and typed his address, she just sat there, fingers poised over the keys, unable to think of one thing to write. Much less what tone to take. Light? *Hi Teddy, wish you were in school?* Maternal? *Teddy, I have been concerned by your absences. Is everything alright?* Professional? *Dear Mr. Reilly, Your recent absences compel me to remind you of the attendance policy of this school...?* Her problems here should have signaled a big red stop sign for her:.

But it didn't. Her better judgment—in fact, all her judgment—crashed on the keyboard and she typed out:

Hollister,

Mr. White told me that you have been in school all week and that you seem to be skipping my class. What's up?

Mrs. R.

And hit send.

Anne sat back on the creaky chair and poured the last of the merlot down her throat, closing her eyes and choking at the last little bit. *What was done was done, right?*

God, it was true; women did become like their mothers.

Dan came home to a thoughtfully heated up frozen chicken tetrazzini casserole (a Lean Cuisine, no less). He wore his sweats from his football days, towel wrapped around his neck. His face was still flushed from his workout and he just radiated good health.

For a frightening minute, he looked like someone Anne didn't know. But then, everyone seemed different that day.

“Whoa, is it my birthday? Did I miss Valentine's Day? Real food?,” he joked. Anne removed a big scoop from the aluminum pan, transferred it to a plate and handed it to her husband.

“Where's yours?” he responded, lifting a large forkful from the plate and pausing before the shoveling began in earnest.

“Oh, I already got something,” she muttered and turned to get him a glass of water.

“I'm sorry I'm so late,” he munched. “The guys wanted to get in an extra practice before the big game on Monday.”

“Big game?” she leaned back on the sink and tried to look interested.

“Yeah, well, you know, this is a tournament league and we're down to the final red robin and the team has a pretty good shot....” His words got lost in the tetrazzini. He lifted his head from his plate and looked around, “Where's the dog?”

“Dog?” Anne echoed, her own thoughts interrupted by his change of topic.

“Yeah, you know—Oberon—the big dog who lives here?”

“No, I was just thinking about something else. I took him for a walk—maybe he's just recovering from all the exertion. Remember when we used to walk him four times a day and he still had the energy to chew up a couple pairs of shoes, a few chairs...”

Dan scraped the last of the casserole and held his plate out to be refilled.

“Remember the time he ate all of David’s Star Wars plastic ewoks? And David took off after him with his light saber, and Michael took off after him, shouting, “Don’t kill my dog,” and then Colin—what was he, about three then? Took off after him and they all ended up in a big pile under the dining room table?”

She did remember, and the ghost of a smile lit her face. “Those were the days: undigested ewoks, brothers biting brothers, general mayhem—and after all that, dinner and a bath.”

Dan stood up and surrendered his fork and plate to the sink. “Do you ever miss those days? I sure do.”

“Sometimes I can’t believe they’re over,” Anne replied. “Sometimes I feel like I’m in some sort of suspended animation state, waiting to pick up somebody from something.. waiting...for something, I don’t know what.” .

Anne studied the floor, noting on the To-do pad in her head that another piece of the flooring was loose. Dan took up his leaning position by the sink.

Anne opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by their neighbor, Joe, bursting through the kitchen door. “Joe, what’s the matter?”

Dan offered Joe a wave, and asked. .”What’s up? “

“I’m sorry to bust in like that...” Joe started. “It’s just.. I found Oberon—lying out by the old swing set. He doesn’t look so good; he wouldn’t even get up for me. I know he’s not supposed to be out there by himself and so I...”

Dan wiped his face quickly and became all business. His hand still on the door, Joe pulled it open and waved them on.

At first she could only see a single paw—a big paw. The paw was just lying there...even when he was at rest, Oberon's limbs were always restless, chasing imaginary rabbits, or maybe elephants. But this, this stillness; this was unnerving.

As she came closer, behind Joe, with his flashlight, and Dan, she was relieved to see and hear the heavy thumping of Oberon's tail, scattering moldy leaves and pine needles. And with a huge sigh, Oberon hoisted himself up from the ground and shook off the dirt and mulch.

“How did you get out, big guy?” Dan knelt down and grasped the dog's muzzle gently, looking into his eyes. He stroked Oberon's head, tracing the outline of the big black splotch that engulfed one ear. “Are you OK?” he kept repeating while he felt along the dog's legs and back. Dan stood up, shaking his head, “I can't find anything.” Anne reached over to pet one silky ear.

Oberon recovered himself slightly and looked even a little embarrassed that he had been discovered in this state. He kept butting his head against Dan's crotch, while Dan rubbed his ears. Joe scratched his head and gave the Great Dane a thumping pat on his side.

“Well, I'll be damned. I guess I got you guys all excited for nothing—sorry to scare you. It's just that he was out here and lying down and I thought maybe..” he paused...”anyway, how am I going to take advantage of my vicarious ownership if there's no dog?” he finished. “I'll be off; must be some game on TV..”

By now, Oberon's tail was up to warp-speed and he jumped up to put his paws on Dan's shoulder. "I guess he feels better," Dan observed, whipping his head from side to side, trying to avoid the large tongue seeking contact with his cheeks.

"I guess so. I have no idea how he got out.." Anne wondered aloud, as she reached over to rub the crazy pattern of black and white hair.

Dan detached himself from the dog, carefully placing Oberon's front legs on the ground. "Maybe he found a magic tunnel," Dan joked.

"Maybe..." she murmured, getting an unwelcome flashback to watching Colin navigate the trees at Thanksgiving. Dan grabbed the dog's collar and began marching him back to the house. Anne followed along behind.

"Oh, Dan," she called out as the three of them entered the warm, bright kitchen. "That reminds me, Colin called the land line today, left a message, if you can believe that. He's got good news, so he says."

Dan turned to face her. His grey T-shirt looked like it had had a rough day: pieces of brown leaves and mulch surrounded two Great Dane paw prints. "He said what?"

"That he had good news..at least he thought it was good news. He also said he lost his cell phone, but I don't think that was the good news." Anne's attention now focused on the sasquatch-like footprints that appeared across the kitchen floor and were wandering onto the sand-colored carpet of the den. She opened the cabinet doors under the sink and retrieved the 409.

Dan paused, thinking. “Wonder what that means,” he said. “I’m going to get a shower,” he added and then his own Bozo-sized footprints crossed with Oberon’s path.

“Aren’t you going to call him back?” Anne called after him, as she began spraying the 409 across the kitchen floor. “Oh, and my mother also left a message, but I deleted that one, in case you’re interested.”

“I think I’ll take a shower. If it’s important they’ll all call back,” and he continued his way to the staircase. “Or, if we’re lucky, not.”

Now we agree on something, Anne thought.

From the basement, Oberon woofed for his dinner.

“I’m coming, you old attention seeker..I’m onto you,” she shouted as she headed down the stairs to the basement.

“How did you find a way out of here?” Anne mused aloud. Oberon picked daintily at his kibble.

Chapter 18

“Mrs. Roberts, I had to go to the dance rehearsal last night and I didn’t get a chance to do my homework. Well, actually, it wasn’t just the dance rehearsal, my mom and I got into a fight about me going to the dance rehearsal and then....” Melanie McClinton, the professional whiner. She had built her high school career on sob stories and excuses that usually became so convoluted, the teacher ended up apologizing for giving her homework and complicating her life. This morning, though, Anne had more than the usual trouble tolerating, or even pretending to listen to, her story. Her eyes kept wandering past her to the now crew-cut head popping up from the final row of the desks: Teddy was back.

Anne had not gotten a reply to her email asking Teddy about his absences, but she figured that was for the best. She could put this whole, ridiculous thing behind her and just get back to her real life.

In the midst of Melanie’s incredibly boring report of her evening, Anne had felt a woozy feeling in the pit of her stomach, akin to what she might experience when the headmaster would poke his head in and ask for a minute of her time, or when she spotted the IRS heading on an envelope

“Mrs. Roberts, are you OK? You look kind of pasty and you know there’s a flu going around and that’s part of the reason my mother didn’t want me to go out last night.

Anyway, by the time I got through the rehearsal, I had to get some dinner and then..."

Melanie's voice penetrated Anne's thoughts.

"Alright, Melanie, I get the picture. Get it in this afternoon and I won't take off any late points. Put it in my mailbox." A bit pouty, Melanie made her way to the seat being saved for her by Ashley Turner, a whiner-in-waiting.

"Let's get going, everyone," Anne raised her voice and took her presiding position at the front of the desk circle. "We need to look closely at poor Desdemona's death scene. Open your books up to page 139 and Molly, you read the part of Desdemona;..."

"Mrs. Roberts" a familiar voice boomed out over the heads of the other students,

"I'll read Othello."

"Okay, Teddy..."

"It's Hollister."

"Okay, Hollister. .Everybody turn to Act 5, Scene 2. You start, Othello..."

Usually Anne could only tolerate students struggling through Shakespeare for a few minutes, but today she was happy to let them stumble on without pause or correction. Her mind was busy calculating... *if I let them keep going through the entire scene, that would take up at least forty minutes and then I could have them write about some lines and ...I could manage to get through this class without saying anything.*

"It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!/Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars..."

Anne ran her eyes over the text as Teddy/Hollister/now Othello read, pausing at the end of each line (*did they think punctuation didn't count in poetry?*). Her mind wandered back in time to Professor Duffey, who, her freshman year, had taken advantage of her virgin ears and seduced her into loving Shakespeare. And she had remained faithful to this perhaps first love, through her intellectual thick and thin. In fact, Shakespeare had never disappointed her, unlike some of the plot lines in her life. She came back to her classroom in time to hear:

“It strikes where it doth love. She wakes.” Pause.

“...I said, “She wakes.”

“Who’s there? Othello?” Anne piped up, embarrassingly echoed by the assigned Desdemona, who was not thrilled about having her part usurped. Amidst the laughter (anything for comic relief), she heard Amy’s fiercely whispered defense, “*She did say I was Desdemona...if she wanted to read herself she should have just started reading...*”

“I’m sorry, Amy, I guess I just got carried away. Let’s keep going...”

It wasn’t her imagination that sly glances and winks passed between the aisles. Only Amy who was trying to find her place once again, and Teddy, with his eyes glued to his book, seemed exempt.

“Line 23,” Anne directed and took a threatening what’s-so-funny look around the classroom.

“Okay, I got it. Who’s there, Othello.” And so the very sad, very tragic murder of Desdemona by her too easily convinced husband became an unemotional white noise as two teenagers stumbled through the words. In spite of the unmoving recitations,

Anne's heart was still pounding in an uncomfortable way. In that split second of subtly shared smiles and winks, something had happened. If only she had been able to figure it out what it was.

At the end of class, Anne tried to catch Teddy's eye as he moved forward with the swarm of backpacks and voices. She was craning her neck over the backwards baseball caps hurriedly donned and the streaked shiny hair being flipped around, when Melanie again assaulted her ears.

"Mrs. Roberts, I have a problem getting the assignment in today. You see, my mother is making me go to the dermatologist because she thinks I don't wash my face enough. But I think she really wants him to put me on the pill..." While she droned on, Anne watched Teddy's head, towering above the rest, pass quickly and silently out the door, without so much as a glance her way. Something had definitely happened.

Anne ventured to the cafeteria at lunch. In the small room the faculty allotted the faculty, she sat down next to Maria Marquez, the strikingly Latin Chinese language teacher who was prattling on and on to some new math teacher, "Zeese kids...Zeese kids.." Being one of the old guard does have its privileges: Anne knew she was not expected to listen or even acknowledge Maria's frustrations—being assumed to have her own share of stored up frustration and bitterness. Anne settled in with her ham sandwich, and waited for some gossip.

She left the lunchroom with an empty lunch bag and no information. Maria complained about students the entire time in her garbled English. Suddenly the teachers had important meetings and the room emptied, leaving Maria to pack up her collection of Tupperware containers and wonder where they all were going.

Anne noticed Rob crossing the cafeteria, heading her way. He had his dean face on.

“Anne, Anne!” he called. “I went to your classroom to find you.”

“Well you found me here. What do you need?”

“I just wanted to check to see if Teddy came to your class today.”

“Yes, he was there,” Anne reported. “He had a haircut.”

Rob narrowed his eyes and angled his head, reminding Anne of Oberon when he heard the word “outside.” “I hadn’t noticed. His father got a little email from me about his attendance problem...and I guess he . . . anyway, I’m glad he’s back in class. Any idea why he might have wanted to hook your class?” His eyes had lost their quizzical look and were now boring into hers.

“I have no idea!” she said with an overdone laugh. “I have no idea,” She repeated, “but I’m glad he’s back. And out of trouble, I hope.”

“You are glad he’s back? Well, that’s good. A little email is all it took.”

Anne looked sharply at him. But his clear blue eyes remained just that—clear.

He turned and crossed the cafeteria again, herding the unhappy kids who had lunch duty towards the brooms. Anne heard the barking ringtone from her purse and took out her phone. She didn’t recognize the number. “Hello?”

It took her a minute to realize that the call was from the hospital in Virginia..

Something to do with her mother.

Chapter 19

Anne was all action. At school she quickly contacted the headmaster's secretary, took the emergency lesson plans to her department head, gathered together books she thought she might use and papers she might grade, and then she drove home. There, she called Dan, threw some clothes together—clothes she could imagine wearing while sleeping in a chair--, dashed Oberon out to use the begonia bush (ignoring the suspicious-looking wet spot by the sofa), stared into the refrigerator and decided to leave Dan to his own meal devices. It was late afternoon by the time she jumped in the car and pulled out of the driveway.

While she filled up the car at a gas station on the way out of town, Anne called the hospital. When Anne mentioned her mother's name to the desk person stationed in the ICU, she could hear the woman put her hand over the receiver and say, "Go get Nancy, it's that woman's real daughter." After a moment, the phone was passed over to Nancy, who in her crisp and efficient way, reported that she did not want to worry Anne, but her mother had suffered some complications during the surgery and she thought her daughter would want to know.

"Complications?" Anne tried to sound just as crisp and efficient. "That can't be good."

With a barely restrained sigh, Nancy replied, “No, of course not. I don’t mean to minimize the situation.”

“Minimize?” Anne echoed. “Can you just tell me what’s going on? I didn’t even know she was going in for the surgery. At least not now; I mean I knew she was going to have surgery, but she kept putting it off.”

“I really shouldn’t be giving out patient information over the telephone. But I can tell you that Penny came in for a routine hysterectomy. As happens sometimes, she had a bit of trouble with the anesthesia. She is conscious, though, and breathing on her own now.”

“I don’t understand. Was she not breathing on her own?”

“I really think you should talk to her doctors. I’ll give you their numbers and you can get in touch with them. I am sure their offices will be open by nine tomorrow.”

“Forget it. I’m coming down right now.”

The smell of gas brought Anne back to where she was: standing without a coat by the car’s open gas cap. A wind had come up and she realized that she was cold and that she’d been standing there without taking the nozzle from the tank to fill up the car. Just beyond her, cars flew up and down Hidenwood Boulevard, headed...somewhere. It didn’t seem possible that something this bad could be happening on this perfectly normal, grayish winter day.

The setting sun was throwing a pink gleam through the bands clouds as Anne pulled into the parking lot of the hospital. She came to a stop behind a concrete barrier with a large D and a silhouetted giraffe painted on it—she had neither the time nor the energy to wonder about this choice of parking lot designation, because she had driven all the way through without stopping, and consequently, her bladder was demanding attention. Immediately.

She ran-walked into the closest automatic door, which happened to be the emergency room entrance. An aide came forth with a wheelchair, shouting “Obstetrics?” Anne rushed past him, her hand positioned against what she thought must be her bladder, as if to hold it steady. She pushed open the door entitled “WOMEN.”

A full ten minutes later she was able to focus outside her body and re-orient herself. She looked around: *Yes, it is definitely a hospital, if memory served.* People in scrubs strode across the shiny floors, their expensive-looking clogs or Nikes squeaking quick-time. There seemed to be two or three hospital aides rushing about for each person waiting in the rainbow of hard plastic chairs lined up along the flesh-colored wall.. Most were sleeping, face propped up against the back of the chair, but some were watching with blank eyes an infomercial selling a complicated exercise machine that was guaranteed to take off inches with its five-minute workout. The whole aura of time suspended contrasted sharply with the hurried figures dashing to save a life, or maybe just to take a cigarette break. Over all the human pageant lay the disturbing odor, fiercely chemical, definitely unnatural, that Anne used to swear she could smell for weeks after one of her reluctant visits to the hospital. She swallowed a gag as she slithered up to a

large semi-circular counter which offered INFORMATION on a small brass plate. “Can I help you?” a bright young blond chirped.

“Uh, I am looking for my mother.”

“ Well, let me check my files. What were the circumstances? Did she arrive by ambulance? Did someone bring her? Do you know what time she came in? Were....?”

Anne held up her hand and the questions stopped. She gulped some air and pushed down another gag. “No, she’s not here.”

“I’m confused,” her face furrowed with an imitation of concern. “Do you know where you are?”

Anne restrained herself, then replied, “Yes, I do know where I am. I am looking for my mother who had surgery yesterday and is in the ICU with complications. I just need to find the ICU, I guess.”

“I’m not sure what to do about that. You see, I just know how to find emergency room patients. And I never go in the rest of the hospital. I only know how to get to the Coke machine. It’s down the hall.” She pointed a coral-colored finger past Anne.

Anne took another breath. ”Is there anyone here, today, who can point me in the direction of the ICU?”

Another brow furrowing. “Um, maybe Mitchell. He’s been here a long time. Hey, Mitchell...” she hollered at the aide trolling for women having babies. “There’s someone here who needs you.

Mitchell quickly pushed the wheelchair up to Anne. “I tried to flag you,” he said with a certain triumph. “You know, you got to be in the chair if you’re in labor.”

Anne restrained herself again. “I am not in labor. I am trying to find my mother.”

“Is she in labor?” he asked doubtfully.

“No, nobody’s in labor. She’s old, I’m old, for that matter. My mother just had surgery yesterday and she’s supposed to be in the ICU—I just want to find out where that is, so I can go see her.” Her voice caught.

“Oh, I got you. This place is a maze; I can understand your trouble. You look like it’s been a long day. C’mon and sit down; I’ll take you there.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly. I’m not sick. Wheelchairs are for the sick people.” He continued to gesture to the seat.

“C’mon. Ain’t nobody gonna notice. Sit down and I’ll get you there fast.”

Anne was tired...tired and weak. She did sit and was grateful. Mitchell was true to his word: he got her there fast.

Chapter 20

The ICU looked nothing like the place where TV characters awaited their fates. There were actually a series of rooms, each with a mostly closed door. By several of the rooms stood elaborate trolleys, with computers and all manner of tubes and plastic sacks filled with liquid. Mitchell pushed Anne past them with nary a glance, pushed her right up to a desktop shaped like a donut, resembling the bridge of starship Enterprise. Every once in a while a beeping noise emerged, and she watched the grim woman in pink scrubs slap at a button and the beeping stopped..

“Can I help you?” The grim woman looked up from the Christmas tree glow.

“I’m looking for my mother...they told me she was in the ICU.” The nurse eyed Anne, the wheelchair and Mitchell. “I’m not a patient, though,” she added.

“No, and even if you were, you shouldn’t be in here without a pass.” She looked piercingly above Anne’s head, at Mitchell.

“Now, Stella, this young lady has come a long way in a short time ‘cause she was worried sick about her momma. She could hardly stand up, much less walk, she was so upset. I told her I’d get her here fast and I did. Can’t you help her out? I know it’s hospital policy, but she’s here now and to go back and try to wrestle a pass out of those front desk biddies would be...”

Amazingly, a slight smile stretched out the corners of the woman's chapped lips. "Mitchell," she said, "You could charm the honey out of a bee. Listen, I got twenty more minutes on my shift and then I'm done for the night. I'm too tired to worry about hospital policy; what's your mother's name?"

"Penny Wertheimer. No, wait, I guess her real name is Penelope...but her last name is still Wertheimer. Wait...no, that's it."

Pink Scrubs was looking at her like she had three heads. "You sure it's your mother?"

Anne laughed a hollow laugh. "I know it sounds weird, that I have to think about my mother's name. But she's been married several times and I was trying to remember the last one's name

"Not my business," she slapped at another beeping light. "Lemme check the files."

She plopped into a chair, wheeled up to one of the computers and began an elaborate clicking process, her right index finger moving up and down with wicked speed. "She's in room 114—just back down the hall."

By now, Anne was standing by the desk, and Mitchell had taken off to find another damsel in distress, maybe one in labor this time. Anne couldn't resist peering over Pink Scrubs's shoulder, looking for something on those many screens that might mean something about her mother.

"You can go see her now," the nurse directed Anne. "Now," she repeated for good measure.

Anne turned without a thank you and walked with trepidation to the door marked 114. Visions of Penny with tubes and IV's and no make-up flooded her senses and she thought she might be sick. Anne pushed open the door.

To find an empty bed, a patient-less room.

Anne stood just inside the door, feeling tears gathering, looking for some trace of her mother, something she could hold onto.

“Hello?” a voice called out.

Enter Pink Scrubs, clutching a pile of charts to her chest. She paused at the open door, rifled awkwardly through the charts, finally located the one she wanted and brandished it at Anne. “Wrong room,” she said in a flat tone.

“What?” Anne wiped her hand across her nose, sniffing, and repeated: “What?”

“Wrong room, I gave you the wrong room,” the nurse stated while trying to flip through pages with her encumbered hand. “She’s not here.”

“I know,” she sniffed and looked around the room. “You guys sure move them out quick.”

“No, no, no. She’s on another floor; they took her just this afternoon. The chart was just updated,” she explained.

Anne stood up and asked wearily, “Can I see her?”

“Sure,” Pink Scrubs said slowly. “She’s up in the obstetrics recovery ward, with all the new mothers. They were running short on space and she insisted on a private

room, almost bit the doctor's head off and threatened to sue." She consulted the chart again. "Looks like she wasn't very nice to the nurses, either."

Anne brightened, "It sounds like she's herself again."

"Well I don't know about that. All I know is that she's not making any friends up there. Try four floors up—room 520. They have probably fed her by now." Pink Scrubs reinstated the chart and turned to swish-swish her way back to the still-blinking desk. She turned briefly, as if she'd forgotten to turn out the light. "Sorry for any confusion," Anne listened to the plodding squeak of her tennis shoes.

The information that her mother was OK caused another wave of fatigue to fall over Anne. Suddenly she was starving. And in need of something alcoholic. She needed time to collect herself, before she saw her mother. From the sound of it, her mother could wait; there were doubtless a few nurses she hadn't harassed yet. She retraced her steps back down the hall, saw a sign advertising The SportzBar right next door and bundling her coat around her, left the hospital to join the young—and some not so young-new fathers, waiting to meet their babies.

Perched on a barstool, awaiting her Polo Burger (hoping that didn't mean it was made out of horse meat) and a second glass of acidic red wine, Anne glanced around at her fellow barflys. Or, rather, she thought, barguys, for everyone else in that place was male. It did seem indeed to be a waiting room for new dads and consequently, there was a charged air about the place. Haggard-looking young men—some the age of David, Anne realized, sat in isolation, clutching cell phones, nursing glasses of beer, staring

intently at a soccer game which seemed to have been going on all afternoon and showed no signs of ending. There was no excited chatter, no back-slapping, no signs of nervous anticipation, no male bonding going on at all. Only the sense of waiting, Without knowing what for, exactly. The second glass of wine eased Anne to a place where she actually began to feel a sort of envy—it might be stressful sitting on that side of parenthood, not knowing what's to come, but it was a hell of lot more stressful being on this side, still not knowing what's to come, but knowing enough to dread it. .

Chapter 21

“Mother!” The word came out kind of strangled, as if Anne were surprised to find her alive. And alive she was, sitting up comfortably in her bed, wearing peach silk pajamas and pearls. A pamphlet entitled “Women’s work: Taking care of yourself after a hysterectomy” lay unopened in her lap. Peeking out from behind her pillows was a *Cosmopolitan* magazine: Anne could just make out the words, “pleasing your man.”

“Mother, who do you think you’re fooling?” she said,, as she reached around to draw out the *Cosmo*. Penny smiled and began to laugh, grabbing her stomach and repeating, “Now don’t make me laugh...I’ve been told I could pull out a stitch, so, no laughing here,” she said,. Anne rested her hand lightly on the stiff sheet covering her mother’s abdomen. “You know they had to put some stitches...well, down there... Anne, honey, can you reach over and get me my lipstick; I know I look like death warmed over with no color on my face.”

Anne handed her the tube and said, “I was told you were “death warmed over,” or that you on the brink of becoming so. Do you know how shocking it is to get a phone call at work advising you of your mother’s life-threatening complications and how embarrassing it is to have to admit you didn’t even know she was in the hospital? Mother, why didn’t you tell me you were going into the hospital—and what you were having done?”

Penny twisted her shoulders to put the magazine back behind her pillows. “It would have just freaked you out. You know how you get about things like this. You would have felt obligated to come down and there’s nothing you can do and you would just worry about not being at work. You always take things so personally.”

Anne drew back her hand and grabbed onto the bed’s cold metal railing. All she could really concentrate on was how much she hated when her mother said, “freaked out.” And she always said it with such an annoyingly exasperated tone.

“Where’s Dan? And how are the boys?” Penny asked, as though she was relaxing in her sitting room, as she liked to call it, one hand cradling the telephone, her other hand reaching for her five o’clock Scotch and water. But her smile became a grimace as she tried to sit up. Her face went white and brittle underneath what Anne now saw was carefully applied foundation and blush and suddenly, she looked like an old, sick woman.

“Mother, are you OK?” Anne shifted about, looking for something to give her. When the boys were sick, Anne had the process down. She always knew what to get for them: a cool washcloth or Tylenol or a popsicle or a hot bath or a towel to throw up on. Now, with her mother, the way she looked just then, Anne felt completely at sea. “Should I call the nurse?” she finally resolved.

Penny shook her head and slid back to her original lounging position. She closed her eyes and when she re-opened them, there were tears standing in them. “Mother?” Anne felt her throat thicken and her eyes fill. Her hands were now holding each other, having found no other purpose.

“Anne,” her mother sighed . “Anne,” she repeated.

“Yes, Mother, what can I do for you? Can I get you anything?”

“Thank God you didn’t go into medicine like your father thought you should.”

Her face relaxed and took on its familiar angles.

“Huh?”

“You and hospitals...you would just make your patients sicker. You have the most tragic look on your face. You’re going to end up in the next room, if you stay here much longer. I’ll be fine. It just takes some time to recover, you know. At least being in the ICU gives you a couple more days, with the insurance. I will be fine,” she repeated.

“You need to get back and take care of your husband. He’s probably wandering around the kitchen right now, wondering where you keep the plates.”

Anne sighed. “I just wanted to be here in case you needed me.” She was suddenly sure that her mother would never admit to needing her.. Their connection was a bridge made of toothpicks.

“Anne, don’t get your nose out of joint. I am doing fine. And I have plenty of friends to take care of me. You go on home to your family. The last thing I want to be is a burden.”

Anne moved to gather up her coat, which lay in a heap on the floor, and her purse, which she had hooked on the IV stand. Penny curved her lips into a shadow of her cocktail hour smile and gestured in the general direction of the bags of liquid drip-dripping through the plastic, “If someone would just pour a little toddy in one of those bags, I’d be going home tomorrow.” And she winked.

Anne stood by the bed and leaned over to kiss her cheek, which her mother offered to her as though a reflex. “I do mean it, Mother. Let me know if you need me,” Anne repeated.

“You are sweet to come all this way, Anne. Could you please hand me that copy of *Southern Living*, so I can look busy if that nosy nurse comes by?”

“Sure, Mother. Don’t forget the *Cosmo* you socked away behind your pillow.”

“That’s not mine; one of those old ladies with a cart just left it here by accident. I was embarrassed to have it lying around. It’s such trash.”

“Sure, Mother,” Anne repeated and handed her mother the *Southern Living*, its cover boasting, “The Most Beautiful Bulbs Ever! Welcome Spring!”

“Safe travel, Anne. You give my best to Dan and the boys.”

Anne repeated one final time,, “Sure, Mother.” She left her room, left the hospital, got in her car and drove back to her life, such as it was.

Chapter 22

The house was familiar, but I knew I'd never seen it before. It was a kind of summer house, like my grandparents' beach cottage, where we'd stayed a few summers when I was little. But it wasn't summer; no, it cold outside and I was looking for the fireplace, which, now that I think about it, I would never find, because the house was a summer house and not meant to be lived in during the cold weather. I wandered from room to room, opening door after door and finding only ghostly outlines of sheeted furniture. I wasn't worried or scared; but I had a feeling of urgency and I began to walk faster down this really long hall, which did not seem to have an end. I heard thought I heard someone behind me and I turned around, but there was no one there. I turned back around and heard my mother's voice. So now I was looking for my mother, instead of the fireplace. I saw shadows coming from some light way ahead of me and I knew that was where my mother was and if I could just hurry and get to her before...but then Rob appeared and I ran up to him and threw my arms around him and we started kissing...

Anne put her hands to her face and felt a wetness on her cheeks. She brushed her hand across her eyes and felt something rough and wet attached to her face. It was all very confusing and she tried to back away from Rob to figure out what was going on, but he just came closer. Anne backed into a wall, but she still couldn't detach myself from

his wet mouth. In a panic, she started to flail her arms and twist and turn. A huge weight pinned her against the wall; she couldn't breathe..

“Jesus Christ, what is Oberon doing in the bed?” Anne’s eyes shot open at the sound of Dan’s sleep-coated voice and she realized the real source of her discomfort.

“Anne, why do you have that dog in bed with us?” Dan raised his head for one piercing look at his wife, grabbed up another pillow and turned over with a snort. Anne tried to stir, but found herself pinned to the bed by 150 pounds of tail-wagging and face-licking Great Dane.

“Oberon, get off me! What ails you? You’re not a puppy anymore!” She managed to push him off her and the dog slid off the bed. Dan elected to sleep through all this commotion. Anne turned over, her back to Dan’s back and found Oberon’s muzzle inches away from her face. She peered up at the clock next to the bed: Five AM. She calculated: back home by 12:00, in bed by 1:00—that means four hours sleep; but for better or worse, she was awake now, if still in the mistiness of that confusing dream.

It was a dream, right?

A little January chill and some coffee would bring her back to real life. She threw off the covers and shuffled down the stairs with the now happy dog. When Anne came in from taking Oberon outside to pee, (she guessed that’s what he wanted all along) with her bare feet frozen and nose running, she heard the distant sounds of the shower and knew that Dan had beaten her to the hot water. As usual.

It's always surprising and sobering to see how easily life goes on its regular path, not matter what's happened, Anne reflected as she entered the school extra early, ready to allay anyone's concerns about her quick exit the previous day, but it soon became clear that no one had missed her. After walking unnoticed down the hall (it was early) she mechanically unloaded her books and papers, mentally ran over her schedule for the day and unconsciously kept her eyes and ears focused on the rising noise outside the door.

When the bell had rung and the steady buzz entered her classroom, Anne tried to listen to the chatter while looking like she was taking role. From the few sound bites she gathered that the kids were all astir about rumors of some internet scandal, when they weren't trying to scare up a party (it was Friday, after all). She also perceived that Teddy Reilly was not in class again. Her thoughts were interrupted by Alex's piercing "Mrs. Roberts?"

"Yes, Alex?" Anne prepared to explain her absence the previous day.

"When do we start a new book? One that's not so depressing?"

"Well, we'll have our test on *Othello* Monday; then there's the inevitable essay to write and then it's on to *Hamlet*, which I am afraid isn't going to lighten the mood much."

A massive groan by way of reply, Alex joined by the few who had actually listened to her question and Anne's answer. Alex countered,

"I'm sorry I asked! How many days 'til spring break?" This drew a universal response, ranging from calculations in weeks, in days and from some clever wag with a calculator, in hours.

“OK, OK, I’ve told you all before, math doesn’t work in this room. Just poetry.”

Another groan, but less heart-felt this time.

“Let’s see if we can block the last act. Move those desks back, so we have a stage. Mollie, you cast Scene 1.” Mollie barked out characters and names and Anne heard a tapping at the glass in the door. Outside Rob gestured to her.

“You guys get started reading your parts; Dean Myles needs to talk to me for a minute.” After pausing until some purposeful activity seemed to be happening, Anne stepped outside the room, leaving her students to mispronounce their way through the tragedy of Othello and Desdemona and Iago.

“Hey, you needed to see me?” It flashed through her mind that he wanted to know about her mother. Over the years Anne and Rob had commiserated over their parents; maybe this would get them back to a normal place.

“Anne, I need to talk to you about something. A school thing—can you come to my office for a few minutes?” Rob had a strangely officious tone.

“Can’t it wait until next period? I’ll be free.”

“No, I think we’d better talk now. I’ve arranged somebody who’s free to sit with your class; you can come with me.”

“OK,” Anne said dubiously. This didn’t like an informal inquiry about her mother. Rob turned and she followed him, feeling pinpricks at her scalp. . She searched for a reason, for some student she’d pissed off, some parent she hadn’t called. Out of the depth of her thinking, Teddy Reilly’s name floated to the surface., Rob held the door of

his office open and gestured for her to enter. She saw the headmaster sitting in a chair.

Shit. Shit Shit.

“Have a seat, Anne,” the headmaster gestured to a folding chair that had been placed at an angle to Rob’s desk, clearly to look less Inquisition-like, which, of course, made it all the more Inquisition-looking. Anne moved over to the chair, and her eyes passed over the familiar junk that had accumulated on Rob’s desk over the last twenty years: a wooden file holder some kid had make for him in shop, a bobble head of Brett Favre, his football hero, a gilded whistle from his 1999 championship volley ball team, a ceramic figure that was supposed to be him, made by an adoring female student back in the day. Her quick glance also noticed what wasn’t on the desk: any pictures. Rob had always placed a honeymoon-in-Hawaii picture of him and Joyce in an appropriately themed frame front and center, but the ceramic beach scene was nowhere to be seen.

“Anne?” Rob called her back to the room and the folding chair. She obediently sat down, crossed her ankles and held her hands together in her lap. She tried to look straight at the headmaster, but her eyes kept lowering, so she compromised, and stared at the line of class pictures on the wall behind him. Rob pulled his chair from behind the desk and sat on Anne’s left, just out of her sightline. She would have liked to be able to see him. Before anyone else could say anything, Anne burst out with:

“Well, as Hamlet says, “How all occasions do inform against me!” forcing her lips to curve in a smile, trying for the light touch. “What’s going on?”

The headmaster spoke up, “Well, Anne, something has come up that we wanted to hear about from you. I believe you have a student by the name of Theodore Reilly in one of your classes?” Anne tried to meet his eyes and not to turn and look at Rob.

“Yes? At least he’s enrolled in my class; he hasn’t been in class much lately. Is there a problem?”

“That’s what we’re here to determine.” A pause that seemed an hour long. “I don’t know if you know this., but Rob has been doing some research on Teddy. He’s been in contact with the boy’s father—his mother is deceased.. Rob talked to his teachers and he’s been monitoring his email.”

Anne could feel a hot blush creeping up her neck and cheeks.? She tried to recall specifically their over-Christmas virtual conversations

“Yes?” she said, swallowing.

“Anne, you know how much this school values your teaching. You’ve been here a long time. In his research, Rob picked up what some might see as personal, perhaps inappropriate, exchanges between you and Teddy over the email.”

“Inappropriate?” Anne stammered. “I’m not sure what you mean. I did exchange some emails with him, but we were just working on his college essay.” She paused, then added, “Teddy asked if I would help him.” Then she shut up, suddenly realizing she should be very careful here.

“Anne, please understand. We’re not here to accuse you of any untoward behavior; we’re here to find out what’s really going on. We’re concerned about the boy

and trying to figure out why he seems to be having such a hard time right now. We'd like to make sure he graduates."

Again Anne fought an overwhelming urge to turn around and face Rob. Why had he not come to her with this? Anne could only wonder what he was thinking.

"Anne? So can you tell us the nature of these email exchanges—they seem to have come between the boy's school email account and your personal email account. Can you tell us why?"

"I don't know; I never thought about it. I can't remember how it started. I think he emailed me about some assignment; he found out my home email, somehow. I was surprised, but I just responded and when he asked me to help him with his essay, we just kept using the same accounts. I didn't feel anything was wrong." As she spoke, her mind continued to flip madly through any memories of their exchanges; could the words have been misinterpreted?

The headmaster folded his hands and leaned his elbows on his thighs in what she guessed was supposed to be a casual posture. But the man could never look casual, especially when he tried.

"Rob printed out some of the emails exchanged, and, there's no mention of anything blatantly inappropriate, but the tone of the messages suggests...well, in a certain context, it suggests a relationship beyond that of teacher and student. In some places, you sound as though you are speaking to a colleague, or, worse, an intimate."

"Could I see some of the emails you're talking about? I think something has been grossly misinterpreted. Exactly what are you accusing me of?"

“Anne, no one is accusing you of anything,” Rob’s voice emerged from behind her. “This is all really for your own protection.”

She finally gave in and now twisted her head to look at him. “Own protection against what?” She hoped her eyes pierced through that administratively arranged mask, right through to his heart.

The headmaster took over again. “Rob means protection against any possible action by Teddy or his father.”

She felt the flush deepen as anger began to take over the fear. “Action? Excuse me, but you are throwing around some pretty serious words.”

“Listen, I don’t want to keep you from your class. Rob and I have decided that it’s best to remove Theodore from your class, which we have. Rob was able to schedule him in another English elective during the same period with Abby Ulrich; you will forward her his grades so far this semester? It’s not really a bad time, since the second semester is just getting started.”

Anne registered this decision. She had never had a student removed from her class for any reason and her primary reaction was a deep humiliation. She knew that if she opened her mouth, she would burst into tears, so she just stared straight ahead, her line of sight just over the headmaster’s bald spot.

“Anne, I know you will keep this confidential. In this day and age of such accessible communication, maybe we all need a refresher course in where to draw the lines,” The headmaster leaned over to pat her on the shoulder, then reached around to shake Rob’s hand. “Thank you both,” he signaled his leaving..

Anne turned furiously to face Rob, whose face was a stricken white. She opened her mouth, then thought better of it. Instead, she hauled open the door and slipped out of Rob's office. . *I will never speak to him again*, she decided and tried to lose herself in the sea of backpacks and hoodies, going in the opposite direction of her classroom. Her mind was a complete blur and all she wanted to do was go home, get in bed, and start over again.

Chapter 23

She'd survived the day, refusing to leave her classroom until she perceived that absolutely everyone had left—this was one time having a window overlooking the faculty parking lot was an actual benefit. She slunk out of the building, into the car, leaving all her books and papers just where they lay on her desk. It was the first time she had ever left the school building without taking work home. Her mind could only replay what happened in Rob's office. She felt an electric energy, like some kind of downed wire, hissing and sparking.

She drove home without thinking and pulled into the driveway. She sat in the car, listening to the hum of the engine. It was only when she lifted her head from the frozen spots on the cracked asphalt that she noticed that the lights were on in the house.

She got to the kitchen door and realized two things simultaneously: the door was unlocked and Oberon was nowhere to be heard. However bad the day had been (and it was hard to imagine that one could go worse), Anne knew she could count on the happy scrambling of dog feet on the kitchen floor and an overjoyed “WOOF!” Oberon could always be counted on.

So where was he when she needed him most? Anne hedged her bets, retrieved a box of dog biscuits from under the sink, shook it and called his name, too rattled to leave his devotion to just the verbal cues. She was rewarded by the sound of a large body

galumphing down the stairs. Relief set in; knowing that Oberon could be counted on to come through the door, like he did every night, restored a molecule of faith that not everything had gone to hell.

“Come to Mama, big boy,” she shouted.

“Jeez, Mom, what’s up with you? You sound like some kind of pervert.” Anne registered two large feet on her shoulders and the voice of her youngest son, who sauntered into the kitchen after Oberon’s tail-wagging and tongue-licking leap.

“Colin! What are you doing home? You just got back to school! Don’t you have to study? How did you get home, anyway?” Anne removed Oberon’s feet and gently set them on the floor. She stared at Colin, who looked perfectly at ease.

“Mom! I got a ride. Can’t you just say hi, glad to see you?” Colin leaned over to hug the now horizontal dog, as Oberon continued his love-fest.

“Of course I’m glad to see you, Colin. I’m just surprised, that’s all. (*And suspicious*). I wish you’d called and let us know, so I could have gotten something together for dinner.” She opened the refrigerator and stood there, staring. Colin detached himself from the dog and came over to close the door.

“Hey, Mom, it’s no big deal. I didn’t come home to eat; I just wanted to see you guys. We can order a pizza or something.”

He hoisted himself onto the kitchen counter and added, “And also, I wanted to talk about some stuff with you. When is Dad going to be home?”

“Probably pretty soon, I guess. He’s got all these clubs and teams and things he has decided to be in charge of—I don’t know what’s on Friday. What kind of stuff do you want to talk about?” she asked.

“Just some ideas I want to throw around. I’ll just wait until he shows up—I don’t want to bore you with stuff now. So, Dad’s involved? Does this have to do with climbing that mountain?”

“How should I know?,” Anne sighed, “Why? Do you want to go with him?”

“Aren’t you going?” Colin was a master at deflecting attention, especially negative attention. He’d had lots of opportunities to develop the skill.

“Colin! Look at me. Do you really think this body could make it up a small hill, much less Kilimanjaro? I refuse to go, but your dad, well you know him. Always in charge. He made a down payment for two.”

“You should at least try, Mom.” And with that, the energy that had been sparking through Anne’s mind and body shorted out.

“OK, that’s enough of that. Listen, I’m going to go change; why don’t you call and order a pizza,” Anne called over her back as she plodded up the stairs. “I’m glad you’re home, whatever the reason,” she finished..

Colin was an expert pizza-orderer, a skill he had carefully developed as his brothers became increasingly occupied with sports practices and late dinners. He was pretty well-known in the pizza delivery community. When she came back downstairs,

he had put out placemats, napkins and poured himself a glass of milk and Anne a glass of wine. A pizza box lay on the counter.

“So, you found the wine? she said, taking her seat at the table.

“Mom, you are one pathetic hider. Stashing the bottle under the sink, behind the garbage bags, is not hiding.”

“I guess I assumed that would be a safe place, given how nobody but me ever puts the trash out,” Anne removed a slice of mushroom pizza—her favorite—with care and something like worship. She realized that she hadn’t eaten since the morning; the whole visit with Rob and the headmaster, which was beginning to seem surreal now, had taken away any appetite.

“Thanks for ordering the pizza. Shall we save some for your father?”

“There’s another one in the oven, keeping warm.”

Trying not to sound too suspicious, Anne reached over and grabbed one of the mushrooms he had removed from his pizza, asking “So why are you really home?”

Colin took a bite of his pizza, chewed deliberately and swallowed. “I was going to wait until Dad was home, but maybe it’s better to talk to you separately. My good news is that I’m getting married!” His face wore the same expression he had displayed when he hit a home run in Little League. Anne started to choke, downed the wine and sputtered,

“What?!” She began to cough in earnest. . She choked out, “Colin, I hate to state the obvious, but you’re only eighteen, you haven’t even finished your freshman year of

college and you have no job, no money and you're just too damn young to even think about this!"

"That's the other part of my good news," he shifted in his seat, contemplated a mushroom on his plate, unfolded and refolded his napkin. Absently Anne tried to remember if she had ever seen Colin actually fold a napkin. His next words jerked her back to the moment.

"I am going to get a job and not only will I be able to take care of Alisha, but I will be entirely independent financially and every other way. I'll have a house and travel, and everything will be paid for."

"And you'll be in college?"

"Well, no, not exactly." He again raised his eyes and looked intently at her. "I'm going to join the Marines."

She shook her head. "Marines? You mean like the Navy Marines?"

"Is there any other kind?" Colin boomed, becoming Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*. "Mom, you should be happy. I'll be out of your hair and off your hands."

"And in Iraq." Anne added quickly. "Colin, have you thought this through? You do know there's a war going on ..and you're so young." She paused, "And you know you're not very good with authority—I mean when you don't have it."

"Mom, I am eighteen. That makes me an adult by most standards. I have thought this through and I am certain that this is the right thing for me."

"Yeah, just like the time you had to have a snake—you were pretty certain that was the right thing for you, too."

“I was eight years old! And we found the snake eventually; it was the cage that was the problem. Anyway, it’s done. I enlisted today. That’s what I came home to do.” Colin took a big slug of milk and bit into his pizza with gusto.

“So let’s go back for a minute. You didn’t say anything about that girl—she’s the one you hid at Thanksgiving, isn’t she? I thought that was all over with. Why this rush to get married? Doesn’t she want to finish college? What happened to feminism? What’s going on, Colin?”

Colin removed the pizza slice he had folded over to consume and put it gently on the plate. “Now, this is the best news of all. We want to get married before the baby comes.”

..

“You mean you want to wait to have sex? Colin, that’s certainly a noble perspective, but it’s a little impractical in this day and time. There are lots of birth control options, you know, you can talk to your father. It is certainly no reason to get married at age eighteen.”

Colin laughed. “Mom, you are not getting this. We want to get married before the baby comes—this summer. The baby is coming this summer.” He paused. “You’re going to be a grandmother!” he added, in final triumph.

Anne sat in shocked silence.

Just then Dan burst through the kitchen door in his gym shorts and hooded sweatshirt, and the dog slunk out from under the kitchen table where he was (barely) hidden to make his claim on Colin’s pizza. As father and son greeted one another,

Oberon saw his chance. He pulled the pizza box off the counter and bolted out the not-yet-closed kitchen door. Anne, headed to the sink with wine glass in hand, was knocked over in the process.

“Anne!” “Mom!” Dan and Colin raced over to her and lifted her out of the glass shards, a good deal of which had fortunately been dispersed under the refrigerator, where, undoubtedly, they would remain until Anne and Dan sold the house or died in it. Dan steadied her on her feet while Colin took off into the night after the happy thief. As Dan got out the dust pan and started to sweep up the glass and various dust balls, Anne sank back down into a chair and examined her palms and knees. She watched Dan’s hunched-over back as he swept up the tiny pieces.

Anne felt the tears gathering; she sunk her head into her hands and started to weep.

“Anne, it’s OK,” Dan rose up from his awkward position with the dust pan. “We can get another wine glass.” He dumped the broken glass into the trash can.

“It’s just that everything is such a mess,” she gasped, wiping at her nose..

“How much wine have you had?” Anne grabbed her greasy pizza napkin and blew her nose. Dan sat down in Colin’s seat and examined her wet face. He took a swipe at her upper lip with Colin’s carefully folded napkin,

“You missed a little spot,” he informed her. That was enough to get her started.

“I had an awful day at school and then I get home and Colin is here and he tells me that,” Anne exhaled the words, “that he is going to join the army and get married and have a baby.” She sniffled.

Dan's expression told her this was not news to him.,

Dan cocked his head and nodded, " Damn, Anne, everything will be OK; nobody is hurt, nobody is dying. Things can be solved, you just have to take them one at a time. There's no reason why you should be so upset. I had a feeling Colin was cooking up something; he's been sending me emails asking me if I wished I'd gotten married sooner and did I ever wish I had gotten to go to war. I thought it was just some course he was taking, or some phase."

Anne was upstairs, placing a warm wet washcloth to her face, when she heard the kitchen door open and Colin telling the tale of Oberon's capture ("Dad, the idiot managed to cover his face with the pizza box and he ran right into a tree! You would've loved it!") Loud laughter and the dog's punctuating woofs, almost as if he were laughing at himself.

Then the voices began a low mingling and, as she carefully dried her face and suddenly, she was struck by the almost (had it been happening to someone else) laughable irony:. *It's not often in life that you are accused of inappropriate communication with an eighteen-year-old on the same day you are told you're going to be a grandmother by another eighteen-year-old.* Anne put on her faded flannel nightgown and got into bed. She was out in a minute.

Chapter 23

Even a freakish warm front, a February thaw in the dregs of January, couldn't dispel the reality that greeted Anne the next morning: her son sitting at the kitchen table, slurping from a bowl of undoubtedly stale Fruit Loops and running his eyes over the Saturday sports listings, Oberon's head in his lap. Anne stood in the kitchen doorway and watched him for a few minutes. His pillow-pressed hair still swirled in that stubborn cowlick to which she had applied a lake's worth of water; his cheeks, his eyes, his mouth still retained a boyish softness: there were no lines or tired places, the scars of disappointment and hurt that so often come with growing up. And it occurred to her that he hadn't grown up; he was just playing house and army.

"Hey, Mom, there are some great games today. You could spend all day flipping channels, watching college hoops. Can we get some wings later?" Oberon's long tongue stretched across the table's edge, trying to catch the milk dripping from Colin's spoon.

"You're not impressing me with your maturity. Go, take him out;," Anne tossed the leash to Colin, who cheerfully clipped it to Oberon's collar. Both of them burst out of the kitchen door into the grey chill of the still winter morning. She watched them chasing each other around back yard, their breath making vanishing clouds in the heavy air. Anne noticed Colin's down parka, hanging lopsided on a dining room chair, where

he had left it last night, no doubt. She picked it up and got ready to plunge into the cold to bundle her son up, just as she used to when he really was a little boy..

“Wish I had that energy,” Yawning, Dan joined her at the sink as she stood watching Colin and the dog, both her arms wrapped around the worn parka.

“Wish I had that lack of worry,” Anne commented.

“You know, you don’t have to worry. Worry is a waste of energy,” he said, turning away and opening the refrigerator. He bent over to pull out a hydrator door and let go of a mighty fart.

“God, Dan!” Anne used Colin’s jacket to cover her nose.

“A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do,” he responded, straightened up and closed the door. “And right now, this man has to go to the can.”

“Don’t come back until you find some air freshner,” Anne lobbed at his retreating back. “And I am not through talking about Colin,” she added, raising her voice. No answer.

Colin and Oberon came in scrambling through the door. “Jeez, it’s fricking cold out there,” he shouted. “I’m getting in the shower,” Colin called from the stairs. “Man, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, man, can that dog poop!” The sounds of the bathroom door squeaking open. “Mom, where are the towels?”

Anne hung Colin’s coat on a kitchen chair and yelled, “I’ll get you one,”

And what is it with men and poop, anyway?”

Later in the day, when Dan and Colin were planted in front of the television, absorbed in the never ceasing college sports offerings, Anne disappeared upstairs to take a nap.

“Mom! Mom!” Colin yelled up from the staircase. “I just got a text from David—do you ever answer your phone?”

“I answer my phone. When I know where it is. What did he say?”

“That he and Michael are on their way home. He didn’t say why. Maybe it’s karma—we’re all coming home at the same time. Maybe they’ve got some news to share, too?” Colin seemed to think this was funny.

“Let’s hope not.. Have you seen my phone?”

Colin called upstairs, “They won’t pick up,” he advised.

“Why not?” she asked, rummaging through her purse.

“Just call it a brother’s tuition,” Colin said as he took back his phone.

“IN-tuition,” Anne corrected loudly. *This damn empty nest is filling back up!* she thought, grimacing at a loud “Booyah” emerging from the den.

David and Michael did not arrive until much later that evening. Anne never heard the boys pull up in David’s clanking junker of a car. She never heard Oberon’s sleepy greeting or the refrigerator opening or the voices of Dan and the three brothers as they talked. She was unaware of all this noise, having swallowed three Tylenol PM tablets before closing the bedroom door and falling into bed.

Sunday morning, once-familiar noises invaded Anne's sanctuary. She woke to the deep rumble of voices, punctuated by laughter and the rattling of pans drifting up from downstairs. She heard the shower working hard, full-blast, and some kind of muffled rap music emerging with the steam from the slightly ajar door (she could only make out the words of the chorus: "Motherfucker, motherfucker..."). The dog was barking and some object was bouncing against a wall, ker-plunk, ker-plunk. And, as she began to come to her senses, she became pretty sure that every electronic device in the house was turned on, droning sports scores or thumping with a primal beat. Anne lay back down and pulled the covers over her head. *Just like the old days.*

But somewhere between almost falling into the toilet before she noticed that the seat was up, dodging the icy pellets that would have to constitute her shower, and navigating her way through backpacks and piles of large, smelly clothes, she realized that, indeed,—THEY WERE ALL BACK.

She found the four of them in the kitchen—five with Oberon—slinging bits of the Sunday paper, slinging football predictions, slinging insults, a boys club tradition she had never quite adjusted to. Several boxes of doughnuts covered in neon frosting and sprinkles lay scattered across the table, which was covered in newspaper and half-full Styrofoam cups of coffee. They were all reading the paper, talking, stuffing doughnuts into their faces between acerbic comments, and leaning backwards and forwards in their chairs while feeding Oberon doughnut crumbs or bouncing a tennis ball off the refrigerator door or clicking through their phones. Everyone completely oblivious of the

other. Little islands of motion unto themselves—*yes, John Donne, some men are islands.*

Anne stood there a good five minutes before anyone noticed her.

But finally the dog ran out of hand-outs, and spied Anne standing at the door, hypnotized by the variety of activity and fighting off the temptation to grab a doughnut before they were all gone—*and I don't even like doughnuts*, she thought. He wove his way between the boys and greeted her with a happy tail-wagging and friendly inspection of her crotch.

“Hey Mom!” the boys looked up. Dan, leaning on the counter, arms crossed, smiling as he surveyed his boys. *How can they all seem so damn happy?* Anne asked herself. Only a bit of brow furrowing as they studied the sports page. The discussion of the NFL playoffs began again in earnest, as if it was the most important event of their lives.

“OK, what’s the deal? What’s going on?” Anne burst out,.

Michael responded, to her surprise. “Mom, you know that incident I told you guys about at Thanksgiving? The group work assignment they thought was plagiarized? That I got in trouble for? Well, some dean ...”

“Some asshole dean..” David chimed in.

“... appealed the decision the Honor Council made and I got suspended. For the rest of the semester.”

She looked over at Dan, “I thought you said that this was all handled, everything was fine...I worry too much!”

Dan's voice took on an exaggerated patience, "Like I said, I called down there, and..."

"Mom, you don't get it. The official Honor Council heard Michael's case and decided that there was nothing malicious in his actions and required him to write a paper explaining the various forms of plagiarism, as a consequence. We thought the whole thing was over—we didn't even feel like we needed to tell you guys. It was so stupid in the first place. And I didn't even have to recuse myself—everybody handled it really well," he gave a thumbs-up to Michael, who continued,

"Right. But then, just as classes are getting going,, this assistant dean gets a hair up his butt (sorry, Mom) and decides he needs an example to be made so he sends me an email and tells me that I'm suspended, that my 'case' has been reviewed by him and he doesn't agree with the decision the Honor Council made. And he put that there was nothing I could do about it. Actually, the girl who borrowed my work got suspended too.

"And to support my brother, I resigned the Honor Council and I pulled out of my classes. And we came home," David stated firmly, pink doughnut sugar lining the corners of his mouth.

"But you only had one more semester to go.." was all Anne could get out, wanting more than anything to wipe his mouth off.

"I can always finish school. But I couldn't continue in that place, the way they treated Michael. I am trying to make a point."

"And this seems a good way to make a point? Screwing up your future? What is with you guys?" Anne looked around her sons, whose bottoms she had wiped, whose

every mole she could point to, whom she had cajoled and comforted through every hurt and thought, *Who do these boys belong to?*

The brothers looked at each other and at Dan. Even Oberon looked befuddled, as he moved over to Dan and sat down beside him. Dan looked at Anne and shrugged his shoulders as if to say *What are you going to do?* “What’s done is done,” he began. “We will all survive this, nobody is sick or dying; we’ll just find a way to make the best of all this. I’m proud of these guys.”

Nobody had anything else to say, it appeared. Finally, Colin piped up “Hey, it’s time for NFL Today,” And the whole bunch of them, chairs scraping against the now-sticky floor, wrestled each other out of the kitchen and onto the sofa and floor of the den.

“What about this mess?” Anne cried. She swatted at Oberon, who was getting closer and closer to the doughnut boxes. “We’ll get it later,” David responded.

“You bet you will,” Anne could only grumble and she grabbed up a half doughnut one of the boys had left on a paper towel. She took a bite and cringed at the thick, sugary icing hiding the bland pastry. *I am sure there is a metaphor in this..* she thought as she chewed meditatively..

Chapter 24

“You have to pay attention to the minor characters and the minor scenes, like the one at the beginning of *Hamlet*. You may just glaze over the first scene, with the guards changing watch and all that, but don’t. There’s important stuff going on, important themes developing,” Anne shot a glare around the room, daring any of them to disagree with her. Her practiced look made a rapid circuit, without catching a single eye. Because all eyes were all directed past her glare, at the purple words written on the whiteboard behind her: *For March 23, complete Hamlet.*

“OK, then, let’s read *Hamlet*...James, you cast the first scene,” she started to flip through the book, put on her reading glasses, indicating that she meant business, and settled herself in a vacant chair, which unfortunately turned out to be the one imported from the second grade classroom. Hence, the top of her head came about level to her two neighbors’ bony shoulder blades.. “James?”

“Uh, Mrs. Roberts, March 23 is the day we get back from break,” Kyle Frasier spoke up. Kyle could be relied on to blurt out what everyone else was thinking, but not willing to say. His face bore a pained expression, as if it had taken all his effort to figure this out. Which it probably had.

“Thanks for the calendar update, Kyle,” Anne responded. “C’mon, Dan, assign some roles, so we get something done today.”

“Uh, you’re welcome,” Kyle continued, not a trace of irony in his voice. “But I thought we weren’t supposed to have homework over the break.” He looked around, rather helplessly, for some affirmation.

“Yeah, and Mrs. Roberts, it’s the second semester of senior year. We’re not supposed to have any work anyway.” Ashley was another student who could be counted on to distract the class, often with remarks that were so ridiculous that you had to stop and think about them.

Kyle and Ashley were now joined by a Greek chorus of whines and moans and declarations about what was supposed to happen and what wasn’t supposed to happen. Four months ago Anne might have entertained their protests, cajoled them out of their sense of injustice and probably ended up cancelling the assignment. But not now.

“To be or not to be! That is the question!” She stood up and held up her hand, as if channeling some greater force. The incongruity worked; a hush fell over the class and now their eyes were on her.

“Are you going to be high school graduates in two months? Are you going to be college students in six months? Listen to yourselves. Is this how you’re going to impress your professors? They’ll be halfway through their lecture and you’ll miss everything important. Now, last time I checked, you were still enrolled in high school and still signed up for this elective. Yes, we are going to finish *Hamlet* by March 23; and if we don’t complete it in class, you will be spending time with Hamlet and Ophelia during Spring Break. And that’s just the way it is.” she sat back down in her little chair. She

made a pretense of opening the book again while the class bonded in their searching glances and mouthed comments of disbelief. “James?” Anne repeated,. James grabbed up his pristine paperback and flummoxed around, trying to find Act 1, Scene 1. “Uh, uh, OK, Tim, you be Barnardo, uh, Caitlin, you be Marcellus...” he droned on, filling out the cast. A pause ensued, as they all waited for Anne’s next outburst.

“OK, first line, Barnardo...’Who’s there?’ Probably the most important words of the play,” Anne stated with authority. There was a frantic grabbing up of highlighters and earnest underlining, without anyone knowing or even interested in what was important about that question. Tim and Caitlin stumbled through the text, creating an entirely new metric pattern, joined by James, as he took on the part of Horatio; Anne knew his participation was motivated not from his interest, but from his fear of the social consequences of assigning any more roles.

She looked at the clock and realized with sadness that only five minutes had passed...fifty more to go.

It was more than the twisted *déjà vu* of the boys all being home; more than the unfamiliar dynamic of getting home before Dan, more than the uncomfortable acceptance of the shifting of responsibility, more than school becoming a place to put in time.. Worse than the feeling of isolation was the fear that once she peeled away the layers of responsibilities and roles that defined her—mother, wife, teacher, daughter, friend-- like Peer Gynt and his onion, she would find nothing at the center.

By the time Anne got to this point in her gloomy meditations, the noise in her head was the only noise she heard. She looked up to find eighteen pairs of eyes pointed at her.

“What?” she said. “Whose line?”

The eyes all headed south, taking up an intense inspection of the floor. Anne glanced at the clock—still forty-five minutes to go.

Anne stood up, knocking her text and blank pad of paper to the floor, where it made a satisfying disruptive thump. “Just go,” She commanded. “If you can’t read by yourselves in class, just go find a place to read outside of class. And for the next class, you’d better come ready to talk about Act I, in its entirety” She leaned forward, “Everyone got that?”

Only their heads moved, spinning around in search of understanding with an intensity rarely seen in their reading of Shakespeare. It was Ashley, in her blissfully deliberate thought process and lack of verbal filter, who said finally,

“So you’re letting us out of class early?” At last, some clarification. The eyes once more turned towards Anne.

“Close...I am sending you out of class early,”

The class gathered up their books and jackets and backpacks with a speed and coordination their coaches would have liked to see. They were out the door in an unusually silent rush, united in the unspoken, but clear directive: let’s get out of here before she changes her mind. James was the last to leave and he smiled at her as he gently closed the door behind him.

In the sudden vacuum of silence, Anne looked at the clock again and saw that there were forty minutes to go now. She looked around the room at the scattered desks, felt the unforgiving fluorescent light beating down on her head, listened to its thin, barely perceptible, but always-there whine. Even though she was always claiming that all she needed was some quiet, so she could think, her mind just stopped working in this absence of mingled conversations, squeaking desks, snapping gum. She had to get out of there.

As she walked down empty hall, Anne tried to remember the last time she taken this route. She had avoided the faculty room since the day, mid-February, when she'd come in to find a copy of *Notes on a Scandal* sitting in her mailbox. As it turned out, it was her copy that lent to a student at the beginning of the year, found stranded in the library. But when she spied poor Cate Blanchett's vacant eyes and Judith Dench's raptor-like gaze, she felt her face get hot. She peered around the faculty room to see if anyone was watching, but no one was even glancing her way. The usual cliques were bitching about the usual things and Anne realized that she would have had to take off all her clothes or drop over dead to get anyone's attention. But the icy shock stayed with her and she had buried deeper into her self-imposed alienation.

But now she was visible, taking the chance of someone talking to her, asking her how things were going. Or even worse, seeing Rob. Or running into Teddy Reilly in the hall..

Given that it was the middle of first period and everyone else was probably teaching, as they were hired to do, her shuffling down the hall and dive into the faculty room went unnoticed. The room was empty, as expected, but showed all the signs of a

recent, hurried evacuation. She noticed a recently penned sign over the coffee urn: “Use a mug, save the earth.” She located a Styrofoam cup that looked unused and cased the room as she sipped at the dregs of the morning coffee. A half-eaten icing-laden cake, with a vestige of a swirled yellow “HAPPY...” lay forgotten in its bakery box. She suddenly felt hungry, so because the cake looked fairly recent, she found a plastic knife and cut off a tiny smidge, following the long habit of faculty room decorum (you could eat as much as you wanted, as long as you ate tiny slices and claimed you just wanted a “taste”).

As she chewed the cake, she strolled around the room, noting the usual piles of forgotten tests, spine-cracked textbooks, unused copies. She stood eye to eye with the shadowy pictures of board members and faculty with their firm smiles and lifeless eyes and thought about all the time she’d spent in the room, laughing, telling stories, getting advice, giving advice, making connections..

Certainly everyone currently living in her house had no trouble letting go and marching on. Despite her almost constant attempts to talk Colin down from his crazy (as she saw it) plan, her son turned a deaf ear. As he waited to receive his “orders,” Colin took up a physical training program with Dan and was auditing a literature class at Dan’s school. The two would meet up for lunch and the gym, returning home sore, sweaty and doing a kind of verbal arm-punching.

David and Michael found work during the day at a neighbor’s business, Concrete World, loading and unloading concrete blocks, concrete bird baths, concrete St. Francis of Assisi; anything imaginable made of concrete.. They, too, came home tired and sore

(David stated that he and Michael were just two working stiffs—literally).. But at night they came alive, huddling around their laptops and their phones, texting their friends still at school, keeping up a vicarious presence.

She had to admit, Michael actually seemed something close to happy. For once, he was getting more messages than he was sending. When she tried to talk to her middle son about the situation, sure she must cajole him out of feeling like a complete failure, Michael surprised her by replying that he felt, for the first time in his life, that he had done something right. And David's support meant the world.

David, always the steady rock, the achiever, seemed to be experiencing some kind of latent adolescence, staying up until 2 or 3 watching action movies. One early morning she found him asleep on the sofa, fully dressed, still gripping a copy of *Atonement*. Her “who has time for fiction?” son told her he was going to read everything he could find by Ian McEwan.

Am I living in an alternate universe? She asked herself.

No one seemed concerned in the least with the stuff gathering dust (and who knows what else) in three dorm rooms. No one seemed concerned with Costco-sized packages of hotdogs, ground beef, boxed macaroni and cheese, protein bars that the boys dragged in daily (“Incoming!” Colin would announce, stumbling in the door behind some enormous box of something). The laundry piled up; towels vanished and reappeared in bathroom corners. There was a stack of dirty boxer shorts in front of the boys' bathroom's toilet. The only oasis of neatness was hers and Dan's bedroom. Except it

was becoming her personal space, as more and more frequently, Dan fell asleep on the sofa watching some war movie with Colin.

Anne was beginning to feel like a stranger in her own house, or, rather, like she'd taken a wrong turn somewhere and wound up in some frat house. Even Oberon had no compassion for her unsettled state; he reached back into his puppyhood and, encouraged by the boys, took up all sorts of behaviors Anne thought he had grown out of, like throwing himself at whoever came in the door and barking loudly whenever more than two people became engaged in a conversation. He also took to leaving "presents" in the dining room, often ones that required two hands to get a plastic bag around (Michael dubbed these "two-fisters"). Anne kept meaning to call the vet and ask about what the dog's issues might be, but it never quite made it to the top of her to-do list.

She thought about her boys, two-and four-legged, as she meandered around the faculty room, looking at the black and whites of faculty gone by, crumbling stale cake in her mouth. She wondered: *Is that where I would end up being remembered—a bad yearbook picture in a cheap frame staring Cassandra-like at the new and eager teachers who took my place?* She could remember making jokes with Rob about just such a prospect; they had promised each other that whoever was still around would ensure the appropriate defacing of the picture. As she took a last sip and tossed the remaining "smidge" of cake in the overflowing trash can, all those empty eyes staring at her from the wall made her feel like she was living an episode from *The Twilight Zone*—not that most of her colleagues would get that reference.

She headed back to her classroom just as a crowd overtook her; she heard “Anne, I haven’t seen you in forever…” and “Hi Anne, we’ve missed you in here—where have you been?” and “Anne, where have you been keeping yourself?” and “Anne, have you lost weight? Is that a new skirt?” How are your boys?” All of which served to prod her out of her gloomy reflections and into the oddly pleasantly noisy present.

So Anne hung around for a few minutes and caught up with her neighbors on the hall; asking questions and registering the appropriate reactions. She surprised herself by carrying on a few conversations to a satisfactory place. She’d forgotten how good it could be to talk—about nothing. To make people laugh, to offer an empathetic nod, to promise to talk about a student in greater detail later. Anne might feel her life coming apart on the inside, but, clearly, on the outside, she was the same Anne, at least in her colleagues’ eyes. She realized she was actually smiling and laughing. Then she saw Rob enter.

He nodded and tried to catch her eye; Anne looked for some way to avoid him. But the room wasn’t that big, and the teachers were crowding the door to get back to class. So Anne did not move, though she did have a fleeting thought that she could pretend she hadn’t seen him. But it was too late. There was Rob in his familiar button-down shirt and corduroy jacket, smiling as he approached her, as if everything was still the same.

Before he reached her side, Anne held her hand in front of her face. When the words came out of her mouth, it was as though someone else was saying them, “Don’t come near me.”

In the crowded silence, Anne brushed past him and left the room.

Much later, Anne might admit that she might have taken some personal responsibility for the wide-ranging rumors that would begin their spiraling even before that day's lunch. No news travels like damaging news.

Chapter 25

On Friday, March 15, Anne began class by asking her set of Shakespeare scholars about the significance of the date; to which they responded as a chorus: “The Friday before Spring Break!” She repeated the question, adding “What would Julius Caesar say?” They repeated the same response, then devolved into comparing the various cruises, islands and ski slopes they would be heading towards, either late that night, or early Saturday morning. Some had already departed, the happy victims of their parents’ decision to value cheap flights over a day of school. After all, they were seniors, with one foot out the door.

“Beware the Ides of March!” Anne pronounced. The class was startled into silence, looking up from their various conversations. Serena Lipstock attempted to whisper, “What did she say?” but Serena had never learned the art of modulating her voice, so the words echoed in the temporary silence.

“BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH!” Anne repeated, “Who said this?”

Serena stepped up to the task, “Did Hamlet say that?”

“Good guess. But no,” I sighed. I knew someone had to know; I elected to flush out the reluctant ones who actually remembered *Julius Caesar*. “Your assignment over Spring Break is to look up and write about the Ides of March. Four to five pages, single-spaced.”

This statement drew a mutual gasp. Anne chose not to notice the Blackberrys removed discreetly from backpacks and the flurry of Googling going on. It didn't take long. Justin Miles came through with an answer.

“OK, the Ides of March was a Roman holiday honoring some gods around 432 BC. It is also claimed to be the date Julius Caesar was stabbed thirty-three times by his so-called supporters, among them Brutus and Cassius. The word, ‘ides’...”

“Thanks, Justin, that's enough. Yes, that's right, so watch your back today,” she smiled. . A soft, relieved patter of noise acknowledged her attempt at humor.

“ So, let's look at Act 5 of *Hamlet*. Why do you think Shakespeare begins with the gravedigger's scene? What do you make of this crude, coarse character joking about death?” A new, more profound silence set in. Anne sighed.

“OK, let's watch the gravedigger's scene—you'll recognize Billy Crystal...it's such a great scene and I think you'll get the humor when you see it on the screen.” She busied herself setting up the TV and DVD player, while the class closed their texts and settled comfortably. Some girls slid out of their seats and huddled horizontally on the floor. TV on, minds off. It was the Ides of March and the Friday before Spring Break. No sense in taking chances with too much thinking.

It wasn't until she came home to an empty house that she felt a stirring of the old relieved fatigue occasioned by a school holiday. It was just her and Oberon, for about forty-eight hours, anyway. Dan was driving Colin to Fort Bragg for his physical and various other stuff. Colin was eager to get on with things; however, his future wife's

parents had not taken their news with quite the same acceptance as Colin's. They ceremoniously removed Alisha from school and deposited her at a convent near their home, a convent which helped "reform" unwed mothers through 4 AM prayers and the routines of a dairy farm.

Though he was forbidden communication with her and her parents, Colin held out a firm belief that once he was established as an official member of the US Marine Corps, they would see that he was a man of his word, that he would take care of Alisha and their child, and that they were destined to share a future together. At least that's what Anne gathered from her eaves-dropping and secret visits to his computer..

David and Michael had decided to return to their campus for the weekend, planning to take advantage of the stampede south for Spring Break. They would have places to stay and be able to talk to certain adults who might help them re-establish themselves at school. More effectively than anything their parents might come up with, Concrete World had helped them realize the value of higher education and convinced them of the need for negotiation and a bit of groveling, if necessary. Their parents both offered support, but the boys preferred to fend for themselves and try to make up their semester of righteous anger in the summer session. The boys drove off that morning in high spirits, happy to not have to go lug concrete figures around. Spring was on the horizon and the demand for bird baths was building.

So Anne had some "own self" time, as Colin joked. And she had big plans (none of which involved thinking): cleaning the kitchen, washing the basement floor, sorting through the linen closet, giving Oberon a bath.. She also planned to sleep, having

purchased a big bottle of Tylenol PM with the intention of using whatever it took to put her out for eight hours in a row. As she placed the bottle far back in the medicine cabinet she thought of Hamlet's lines: "To sleep, perhaps to dream/ Ay, there's the rub..." Dreams didn't scare her.

The house was dead quiet; at first she was unnerved by the absence of TV voices shouting, video game car wrecks, the general humming of machinery that served as a backdrop to modern living. The only sounds to be heard were the occasional drip of the leaky kitchen faucet and Oberon's heavy breathing. Anne glanced at the clock on the stove: 4:18, and her mind immediately turned to a consideration of what to make for dinner. But then she remembered, *I didn't have to make dinner. In fact, I didn't even have to eat dinner.* She shook the leash at the dog and entertained the idea of drinking dinner instead. She was beginning to feel better..

Outside the world did its best to promise the return of spring. Mixed in with the dull grey-brown of the front yard grass was a shimmer of green, if you squinted your eyes the right way. The branches of the tiny dogwood in the front yard held out the possibility of leaves in almost indiscernible pale green and white tips. Though the sun was on its way down, the final rays looked warm, even if the temperature didn't show it. The slight sprinkling of rain felt like a rejuvenating mist. Anne breathed deeply, trying to pull in that chance feeling of change.

But in the midst of her appreciation of what Virginia in March had to offer the spirit, Anne's arm was nearly jerked out of its socket and she sank to her knees, trying to hang onto one hundred and fifty pounds of water-phobic Great Dane. "Oberon!" she

gasped as she scrambled to her feet and let go the leash. “It’s not even really raining. What’s the deal?” she called after his retreating black and white hide. Anne knew she’d find him: at the kitchen door, whining to get in. She wiped at the dirt on her pants and walked back up the sidewalk, the delightful mist becoming cold rain.

“You know we’re not going in until you take care of your business,” she spoke calmly, as if it were possible to reason with a dog. Oberon only shoved his large body closer against the door. Anne heard the phone ring.

The phone kept up its ringing, even with the time it took for Anne to un-Velcro the dog from the door and get it open. She dashed over and grabbed the receiver, while Oberon squated and leave a vivid yellow pool on the kitchen floor.

“Hello!?” she said into the receiver, shaking her finger at the dog. A slightly foreign sounding voice said, “Ann Roberts?”

“Yes...”

“I am looking for Ann Roberts..” the voice trailed off. *Indian*, she thought. *Must be a telemarketer.*

“You found her,” Anne said a little louder.. “Can you speak up? I’m having trouble hearing you.”

“Ms. Roberts, I am calling from Riverside Hospital. I am calling in regards to your mother.”

“You mean with regard to,” she corrected automatically. “

. “But My mother isn’t in the hospital,” Anne reported, then added vaguely, “She’s in Florida, I think.”?

“Your mother is Penny Wer..Werth-heimer? She came to the emergency room complaining of stomach pain.. I am sorry to say that she is quite sick.”

Anne stared at Oberon’s puddle of pee. The room seemed shimmery, as if at any moment it might reveal itself to be a mirage.

“But that’s not possible. She told me she was going to Florida.” *She did say Florida, didn’t she?*

“I am sorry, ma’am. I am calling you to let you know that your mother is quite ill and that you might want to come to the hospital as quickly as possible.”

“I am not getting this. Are you telling me that my mother is really sick?”

“Yes, ma’am. And that you should come to see her as soon as possible.”

Chapter 26

It was close to eleven when Anne pulled into the hospital parking lot, which had a disturbingly familiar feel. This time, she knew where to go. This time, she found the blinking Starship Enterprise control board without any help. This time, no one questioned her presence. This time, she found her mother without any help.

The door to Penny's room in the ICU was slightly ajar and light spilled out through the gap, as though it were not the middle of the night. When Anne gently pushed through the door, she saw why. Surrounding the hospital bed was a bevy of nurses, taking vitals, changing bags on the IV stand,. Anne stood for a moment, just inside the door, fingers on the handle, trying to find her mother in the midst of all those nurses. The only sounds were machines' beeping of the machines and shoes squeaking on the shiny floor. She let go the door and it closed with a tiny click. Like deer startled by a misplaced step in the underbrush, the nurses all raised their heads.

"You must be the daughter," one of them said, motioning to her. Anne slowly slid across the floor.. One of the nurses, with breasts so large they looked like they could comfort the world, approached her and said, "I'm Dottie, I've been with her all along." Dottie took Anne's hands with held them to her chest, murmuring "She's been waiting for you. She'll be so glad you're here."

Dottie drew Anne up to the cold steel of the side rail and placed her hands on Penny's shoulder, whose eyes were closed and mouth slightly open. Every once in a while her mouth would open wider and her breath would catch, as though she had an ever so slight case of the hiccups. The gown had slipped off her shoulder and her breast was almost completely exposed; Anne gently pulled up the edge of the gown. She knew her mother would be horrified at revealing so much.

"We've had to put a chest tube in; there was so much fluid. You'll see how swollen her legs and belly are." One of the nurses pulled back the sheet to reveal her mother's calves and thighs, with skin stretched so tight they looked like a cheap baby doll's plastic legs. Anne saw that her mother was wearing a diaper. She shifted her gaze and the nurse replaced the sheet.

Anne looked hard at her mother's face. The usually carefully colored and coifed hair looked like used steel wool; ridiculously, Anne was thankful there was no mirror nearby. Without lipstick and powder, her face was sallow, lined, sunken. Anne touched her cheek; it was cool. She looked up at Dottie and said with some confusion, "She's cold."

"We keep the temp low in the room; she's been running a fever of 104 or so and we're trying to lower it. She's still here, but she has been unresponsive for the last couple of hours. Sometimes they do that."

"They?" Anne's voice was scarcely above a whisper.

The other nurses finished and shuffled out, leaving Dottie and Anne. Nurse Dottie came around the bed. Together they looked down at Penny and listened to her

guppie gasping. After a minute or two of listening to the hum and beep of machines keeping track of Penny's bodily fluids and functions, Dottie spoke.

"I don't know what they told you..."

"Just that my mother was very sick," Anne interrupted. "I didn't know...I couldn't imagine...she looks so bad," She wiped her nose with her sleeve.

Dottie leaned over, pulled a tissue out of the box resting on the table, and handed it to her. Anne nodded her thanks and blew her nose.

"I don't even really understand what's wrong with her..." Anne said. "Or exactly what happened..." she finished in a whisper.

Dottie began to move about, tucking in the sheet, straightening the sanitized-looking objects on the steel tray on wheels. "You need to talk to the doctor; he'll explain everything. I'm just here to make her comfortable." Anne put her hand on Dottie's shoulder, halting her in mid-towel-folding.

"Wait, I was told she came in for some stomach problem...I don't see how this could happen..." She could feel Dottie's surprisingly solid muscle tense.

"Tell me your name again," she asked.

"Anne."

"Anne, I know I'm not the one to deliver this news, but apparently you need to hear it. I am so sorry, I truly am, but your mother is dying. She came in with severe colitis and she had waited so long to come in that...she developed C Diff and her organs just started shutting down."

In her stunned, silent reception of these words, Anne felt her mind looking for something to attach itself to, some ancient unsolved worry, some inane decision she probably didn't even need to make, the search for the title of the stupid song that had filled her head on the drive down. A random memory popped out of her head, onto her tongue.

"You know, she never would say goodbye. The words, I mean. She always insisted on making a leaving seem like a temporary interruption. She would go "See you soon," or "Talk to you soon." Every night she would say "See you in the morning." I liked to drive her crazy by not responding to it; she had to hear me say, "See you in the morning" back to her, like some kind of promise. I never really knew why she did that..." Anne stopped.

Dottie took her hand and placed it on Penny's cool fingers, resting on the sheet. Anne held them lightly, then tightened her grip gently. She could feel the four gold bands her mother never removed: Penny used to say the bands were her "stripes" and that living with four different men had earned her those stripes.

Penny's head sunk a little lower, her breath became shallower. Anne held on to her hand and tried hard to make this moment real: *This is your mother. She is dying. You are holding on to your dying mother.* But it was no use.. The only real emotion she could recognize was pity. Pity for her mother, whose only child couldn't even scare up tears at her death.

Anne had never really thought about it before, but she probably would have assumed that there was a definite moment when a person passed from living to death.

Certainly this quitesessential moment must be marked by some significant sign. But this was not the case, she thought,, holding her mother's hand. She couldn't remember actually touching her for so long; they hugged and cheek-kissed, but there was no substance to it. How odd, how sad, that only in this forced moment could Anne actually feel her mother's flesh, with her own flesh.

Still, it was Dottie who had to tell her that her mother has passed.

Gently removing Anne's hand, she began disconnecting the tubes and machines that had kept Penny tied to the bed, and to living. At the nurse's touch, Anne looked up, startled.

"Wait, you mean...?" her tongue felt detached, swollen and heavy. Then she felt the tears coming. Too late, though, she thought.

"Yes, dear she has passed. It takes a little while for the body to settle. Would you like me to call Father Mike?" Clearly she knew the drill. But Anne was lost.

"What happens now? I mean, I've never had this happen to me before...my father died, but I was away at school and I"...she trailed off, as it dawned on her that someone would have to do something, make some decisions and that someone appeared to be her.

"You are welcome to have as much time as you like with the, ..with your mother. Just let me know when you're ready and what the arrangements are, and I'll contact the funeral home."

Arrangements. Such an odd word to use at such a time.

Anne had no idea what to arrange. As far as she knew, her mother planned on living forever.

But Dottie knew what to do. She patted Anne's arm and offered the name of a funeral home, run by her cousin, who was honest and would know what to do. Anne numbly nodded her head, as Dottie rummaged in her deep nurse pockets and pulled out a card. In any other circumstances, this would have horrified Anne, but, given the situation, she was only grateful.

"Yes, let's just call them," she managed, without a glance at the card she held between thumb and forefinger. "I really appreciate your help," good girl Anne kicked in without hesitation.

"You take your time," Dottie quietly pulled the door behind her.

Anne leaned over the tiny figure slumped against the tightly stretched sheets. How did she get so small? And, like the appearance of an old friend at a much needed time, Macbeth's words came rushing into her head: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/And then is heard no more." She quickly kissed her mother's still-warm cheek, a real kiss, not like the pretend kisses they had given each other all those years. She ran her hand over Penny's soft cheeks and wondered if her mother knew she'd gotten there in time; barely, but Anne had been there for her. Penny's blank face and closed eyes gave her daughter no clue.

But that was nothing new. Anne felt that she never knew what her mother was thinking. Or not thinking. Anne ran the back of her hand across her mother's cheek once more, trying to hold onto her mother's image. Then she turned to what she knew more

about—trying to see to things. She pulled open and passed through the door, and
Macbeth's voice returned, "It is a tale /Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

Chapter 27

The family stood like stairsteps in the first pew: Anne, of course, the lowest step, and then Dan and then Michael, then Colin, and, wearing a recently acquired formality, David. Occasionally Anne thought she could detect a whirring sound and sensed one of the boy's hands reaching in his jacket pocket to secure his phone; apparently even during a grandmother's funeral one had to keep in touch.

But she couldn't really drum up any strong feelings about cell phones in church; in fact, she couldn't really drum up any feelings, except a vague relief that, as it turned out, she could be just another mourner, not the master of ceremonies, as she dreaded. The week before, as she set out locating papers, filling out papers, throwing away papers, her mother's lawyer (something she did not even know her mother had) presented her with explicit directions as to how Penny wanted to spend eternity, including a very specific program for her memorial service (*No grim long funeral; keep it in the church, but keep it upbeat!* Anne could recognize her mother's chickenscratch handwriting at the top of the page). Further surprises: she had opted for cremation, had even selected and paid for an urn—not trusting anyone else's taste, certainly.

The only potential controversy involved which of her four husbands she would be reunited with, at least earthly proximity-wise. They were all buried in the same cemetery at various locations: the duck pond, the large spreading oak, the nameplates-

only section. But Penny even took care of that decision, reserving (and, again, paying for) a spot in the new mausoleum, eschewing the companionship awaiting her in the older sections.

In truth, Anne hadn't had to take care of anyone, including herself, in this entire process. Dan had come down immediately with David and Michael and the three of them took care of what needed to be done. Once they returned to their house, the boys were wonderfully kind and solicitous; she was astounded by the things they could do, from running a vacuum to making tea. While staying at her mother's house for the funeral, they answered the telephone, wrote down the names of callers, arranged to have the obituary on-line, a concept Anne hadn't, and couldn't, entertain. Dan took stock of the valuables in the house, talked with lawyers, made arrangements with the funeral director and even talked with the minister of the church her mother had once attended when she was married to a Lutheran man, to determine a time and place to have an "upbeat" service. The only thing he couldn't do was to scare up many people to attend the service.

Anne glanced around the unfortunately large sanctuary; the church was one of those quasi-modern, high-ceilinged, light wood-panelled, lots of dove images kind of designs: it reminded her of an ark, waiting for the animals. Or people, she sadly realized. She glanced around quickly as they waited for the organist to begin. She spied her mother's yard man, Henry, hat in hand, his head bent in prayer. Across the aisle from him stood Muriel, the housekeeper who had worked for Penny for as long as Anne could remember. Their quiet presence touched her deeply. She scanned the rest of the nearly empty church, she thought about how important their presence must have been for

her mother all those years. That was the closest Anne got to tears during the whole service.

Then the organ belted out the first low chords of “Amazing Grace.” Colin threw a worried look at her and mouthed, *Shouldn't we wait?* Anne touched his shoulder and whispered, “It’s time.” He glanced over his shoulder and back; she could see him putting together a revised image of her mother’s life. Not that he probably ever thought about his grandmother’s daily existence—what she did to fill her time, who she talked to during the day, what she might eat for dinner. She had not been much of a part of his life. For the first time, that thought made Anne not angry, but sad.

Just as the minister was making his way to the pulpit, the sanctuary door squeaked open and they all turned towards the noise. The unknown step-daughter, the nurse, had entered. She had thrown a coat over her brightly colored smock, with an embroidered “Nurse Nancy” just visible. She grimaced in embarrassment, but walked down the aisle and took her place in the empty pew across from the family’s, reserved, Anne guessed, for “almost family.”

She tried to pay attention to the minister’s reassurances that death is not an end, but, rather, a beginning, but all Anne kept thinking about was those damn cuckoo clocks, now accusingly silent for lack of winding. She had never felt any attachment to those clocks, nor to much of anything in her mother’s house. But the day after her mother’s death, Anne found myself wandering around the house, a bottle of wine in hand, watching the figures dance and listening to the chimes sound the hours, until they all just

wound down. Later, when she found David gently removing the 12 Popes clock from the nail Dan had positioned it on not so long ago, she started to weep. The clocks stayed put.

At the minister's signal, David and Michael walked together to the pulpit (which, oddly, resembled a tree trunk) and began to read alternating verses of 1 Corinthians. Anne and her husband exchanged a look; they were both remembering that 1 Corinthians had been read at every one of her mother's weddings, at least all the ones they had attended. Even in death, she remained a bride, of sorts.

Colin stood straight and tall beside his mother, impressed with the gravity of the occasion. His coming had been such an effort, requiring phone calls and bus rides, that he had not had time to prepare anything for the funeral, much to his relief. Anne studied him out of the corner of her eye, briefly despairing at the stubble on his head that passed for hair.. An image of Colin at two, wearing a diaper and red cowboy boots, the mop of almost white hair falling into his eyes and ears as he danced to "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" appeared from the photo album in Anne's head. He didn't talk about his brief experience at the base so far; he didn't even talk about his Alisha, who had been allowed one phone call from the convent to express her sympathies to the family. She and Anne had a nice chat, their first real exchange, and Anne was surprised to discover that they'd been talking for nearly an hour when the nuns came to retrieve Alisha.

People from school had called and flowers had been sent, and Anne responded politely, but it was hard to pay attention to them. When Rob called the house, Anne was out getting sub sandwiches. She did not return his call. Some lines from *Hamlet* came back to her: "When sorrows come, they come not single spies/But in battalions."

As a final hymn, “We Saw three Ships Come Sailing In,” they began to file out of the pew. Anne nodded to Nancy, who was wiping her damp with a half a box’s worth of Kleenex. Outside the church, the unpredictable March breeze had turned sharp, almost piercing. Anne pulled up the collar of her jacket and put her head down against the cold.

It seemed best to just keep going through the motions.

Chapter 28

“Mrs. Roberts?”

Anne paused to glance up from her attendance taking. She knew she should recognize the voice; that insistent whine was so familiar, but the name just wouldn't come. *Wait, there was an S sound involved: Susan? Shawna? Sandy?* Her brain was flooded with names of students past, but not the student present who belonged to that noise.

“Mrs. Roberts? Did you hear me? I tried raising my hand, but you were looking at your desk. I wanted to ask you if I can leave class a few minutes early because....”

The rest of her explanation became a blur of words as Anne's eyes focused on the shiny purple nails waving in the air. Magically, like with Proust and his madelaine, those nails recalled the name...

“Cynthia! That's your name, thank God,” she burst out. Cynthia withdrew her hand and looked around her for confirmation that she couldn't be expected to deal with any teacher who decided to lose her mind in May, just when school was almost over. Suddenly everyone in the class had an urgent need to rustle around in their backpacks, looking for something important. Not so long ago Anne would have already joked with them about empty desks and empty minds, inspiring a good-humored attempt to pull out a text, but today, she was just relieved to retrieve the girl's name.

“Sure, OK, whatever you need to do...” Anne retreated back to taking attendance, “OK, everyone is here?” she finally gave up, closed the attendance list and emerged from behind her desk into the uneasy quiet of the room.

“So we’re coming to the end of our Shakespeare experience.” Somehow, this didn’t inspire the rousing cheer such she hoped for. “Anyway,” she tried again, “we started with star-crossed teenagers and we’re going to end with, well, an older couple. A much older couple.” Anne sensed a universal grimace.

“Before you jump to conclusions, this is a very powerful, very attractive older couple.” Anne tried again, “An older couple who couldn’t keep their hands off each other and who gave everything for love.”

“Will, read the plot summary of *Antony and Cleopatra*, will you please? I am pretty sure at least some of you know who these two characters were in history.”

“The queen of the Nile!” Lauren piped up, buoying Anne’s hopes for a brief second, until she continued, “She’s in some Disney movie, I think,” Lauren paused in thought, “or maybe it’s some video game.” Will looked around, unsure how to proceed as an enthusiastic discussion of favorite Disney movies ensued.

“OK, OK. Can we get back to Shakespeare now? Here, let’s watch a little of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor—so you can get a visual before you start reading.”

Once again she was taking a retreat along the video path of least resistance. Before she could even gesture, little Paul McKay was up to ease her through the always baffling process of hooking up the VCR and playing a movie. When she handed him the movie, he inspected it curiously, like some artifact.

“Wow, Mrs. Roberts. I didn’t even know they made these anymore. Is this an eight track? It’s gonna take me a minute to figure this out..”

Anne took it from him and jammed it into the VCR side of the machine. . Anne pressed PLAY, glad for the darkness and the soaring music.

At first, the return to the house and the dog and school and the routine she and Dan had begun in September, sans boys, felt like returning to college after the summer: familiar and promising, yet accompanied by a kind of floating dread and uncertainty. Anne tried to ignore it; it wasn’t as though she’d been so close to her mother—Penny had been just another source of worry and irritation for her. And the boys being gone—Anne should be relieved about that, appreciating the quiet and the relative calm of everything at that particular moment. And Dan was back to coming home at three, watching golf and the NBA play-offs; all talk of climbing Mt. Everest disappeared like the summit in a bank of clouds. And school—she did her teaching mechanically, just as she received the condolences, heard the stories of colleagues’ parents’ deaths, threw out the browning flowers sent by the Hospitality Committee. Everyone at school gave her room now, which was what she had tried to make for herself all year.

It looked like things had come full circle. *So why do I feel as though I’m watching life, not living?*

“Mrs. Roberts! God, I think she’s fallen asleep. Sarah, what should I do?” A furious whisper dispelled Anne’s fruitless self-reflection.

“What’s the matter? Why are you whispering? And I’m not asleep,” she stated flatly, her attention captured for a moment by the observation that she kind of preferred Antony/Richard Burton’s outfit better than Cleopatra/Elizabeth Taylor’s. Perhaps trying to compensate for his incompetence with the VHS tape, Paul bravely turned on the lights and announced “Class is over, Mrs. Roberts.” As the bell validated his words, the now sleepy seniors staggered to their feet, gathered up their backpacks and water bottles, and headed through the door, one class closer to graduation.

Anne squinted at the now ghost-like figures of Cleopatra nuzzling Antony’s ear and, realizing that the remote control was still in her hand, aimed and clicked the EXIT button at the screen. With a final burst of light, the screen went dark and the lovers disappeared.

Chapter 29

Two odors confronted Anne as she shoved open the kitchen door. She was juggling a book bag, an optimistically packed gym bag shuttled daily between her car and the house, a large purse (christened “Mom’s big-ass bag” by Colin) and several plastic grocery bags full of heavy items. A delicate whisper of curry pulled at her nose first, unfortunately followed by the unmistakable gag-reflex stench of dog shit. It is one thing to run across the droppings of a careless pug or Pekinese, but when a Great Dane suffers intestinal distress in a warm, enclosed area, the world suffers with him. There was no way anything, even the lovely hypnotizing promise of curry, could overcome the tell-tale evidence of Oberon’s disgrace.

“Dan?!! Don’t you smell that?” After checking the immediate vicinity, she set down her bags and started looking. The unwritten rule about dog messes—from either end—was: the first to detect it was the one to get rid of it. Dan had removed his fair share of the immense leavings, and—truth be told, Anne often feigned not noticing the offending pile. But this was not to be ignored.

“Dan!!!” she repeated. . Anne ventured further into the kitchen, locating a tall brown bag harboring what clearly must be Indian take-out. she paused, confused by this rare find: they had a strict no take-out rule during the week. And Dan hated curry. The

mystery of the take-out would have to wait, she realized, as she stepped into the family room and found the dog's accident—with her feet.

“Dan!!!” she yelled once more. . “Shit!” she exclaimed (aptly) in frustration, as she removed her new \$100 clog and limped back to the kitchen sink.

“You got that right,” Dan appeared from the basement, brandishing a bucket, a mop and several rolls of paper towels. “Why are you doing that in the kitchen sink?”.

“Where have you been? I have been yelling your name for the last twenty minutes!” Anne turned the faucet to create a steaming gush of hot water to wash away the traces of her misstep. “OK, probably not the best place to do this, but I didn't think about it. Why do you have all that stuff?” She removed a paper towel roll from under his arm and pulled a few sheets off, to dry her soaked shoe.

“I have all this *STUFF* because I have been cleaning up dog shit for the last hour or so. It's all over the house. He keeps dropping it as fast as I can get it up. I didn't know he'd made it to the family room—I just stuck him outside in the back yard.” Dan bent over and began working on the pile.

Anne looked out the window over the sink, steamed up by her cleaning efforts, to see Oberon in a full-out sprawl under the fairy-land white blooms of the flowering dog wood planted their first year in the house. His black and white hide showed up starkly against the vibrant green of the now growing grass. He heaved himself up and began to circle the yard, ultimately sniffing the right spot and hunching over the overgrown area of weeds the boys referred to as Anne's garden. He waited, like a patient martyr.

“Dan, I think we’d better get him to the vet. He looks bad,” she kept her eyes trained on the dog.

“Well, I was about to do that, once I got all this shit cleaned up. You are more than welcome to give me a hand....” Sarcasm was not Dan’s metier.

“I’ll go get him and meet you out by the car. You’ll put a hole in the rug if you keep that up.” Anne grabbed up the leash hanging by the door and stepped carefully through the yard to the slowly tail-wagging, but otherwise completely still, dog, once again lying under the dogwood.

The couple peered at the smoky black and grey images hanging before them, knocking together their heads as they jockeyed for position. The vet, who looked all of about twelve and sported a shiny metal object in her nose piercing along with her white coat, pointed at the x-ray:

“This is his intestinal tract,” she said, waving at the series of large black clouds, as though predicting the arrival of a front.

“And those are blockages? Geez, that’s gotta hurt,” Dan muttered. Anne looked at him doubtfully, “Given the amount of evidence I collected on my shoe, blockages don’t see to be blocking much.”

“No, that’s gas,” the vet nodded. “OOHHH,” Dan groaned, with a new appreciation for Oberon’s condition; Dan knew about gas. “We’ve got him on an IV of Kaopectate. Older dogs can react dramatically to a change in their diet, or to eating some

kind of people food. Have you recently switched dog food brands? Or noticed him getting into anything he shouldn't?"

Dan and Anne looked at each other. Mark Antony engaged in a steady diet of things he shouldn't eat, from thawing ground beef to rotten banana peels that didn't make it to the trash truck to entire bags of Halloween candy, wrappings and all. Dan turned to the vet.

"No, I sure haven't seen him eat anything unusual."

"Well, I think you'd better leave him here overnight, so we can watch him. I think the Kaopectate will probably fix him right up. As you all know, things just don't work as well as you get older."

"Did you hear that dig about being old?" Anne said, once they were safely buckled in the car. Dan shoved the Volvo into gear and commented, "How much do you think that IV of Kaopectate is going to cost us? I've got a whole bottle of that stuff in the bathroom cabinet; I could have given him that. And 'keep him overnight to watch him!' Keep him overnight to empty our bank account, more likely!"

But they ran out of complaints about the vet and closed into silence as they drove home in the soft, gathering darkness. Dan stared at the road ahead while Anne turned away, her eyes running over the trim lawns and recently planted impatiens.

The house felt too quiet, too empty, when they finally arrived home. It's not as if the dog made a lot of noise, or, often, even deigned to rouse himself out of his sleep when anyone entered the kitchen door. But his presence was something they counted on, Anne

realized—a surety in what had seemed a revolving door of people in this year. Oberon could be counted on.

Dan picked up the bag of Indian food, the charming smell of curry having evaporated, replaced by the much less exotic odor of soggy paper bag. “You want some?” he asked, opening the bag and peering in, as if he didn’t know what was in it. “No, thanks, I’m really not hungry anymore,” she said, knowing he would be disappointed in her. After being married almost twenty-five years, it was easy to detect disappointment; it felt a lot like that soggy paper bag smell.

“Dan, he will be OK, won’t he?” Anne turned briefly from her retreat upstairs, one foot on the first step. “Oh, sure,” he said. She could hear, rather than see, him burying the bag of food deep in the trash can.

“I’m just going to finish cleaning up,” Dan said.

Anne focused on the immediate tasks at hand: brushing teeth, washing face, changing into a nightgown, getting to sleep, and not thinking about Oberon, lying in a cage with pink stuff flowing into his stomach. What would he dream about, she did allow herself to wonder, as she closed her eyes and fell into a hard sleep.

Chapter 30

The next morning, as Anne went through the motions of the mid-week malaise, she could think of nothing but Oberon. She woke up to the alarm, instead of opening her eyes to pleading Great Dane eyes and a long-nailed black and white paw on her chest. Everything that morning seemed to proclaim his absence: No snuffling nose beside the cereal bowl, no large body to trip over getting out of the shower, no suspiciously lost shoes.. Who knew a dog could fill up so much space?

As she gathered up all her bags, she heard the toilet flush upstairs and, as she had often before, bemoaned her lot compared with her husband's. Dan had no hormonally charged, emotionally confused adolescents stunned into complacent resentment by the early hour. In fact, he had no one waiting for him, because his teaching responsibilities had ended a week earlier, with the semester final exam, designed to leave everyone feeling good, especially him. Anne knew about this, because she had helped him create this masterpiece of multiple choice and short answer which just about anyone could pass and he didn't have to spend much time grading. Politicians might come and go, wars fought and lost or won, Communist governments toppled, but Dan's final exam remained a constant. Anne stuffed a folder of essays (ungraded) into her book bag and reflected on how she couldn't stand to even teach the same books year after year, yet Dan had no such compulsions in his work. Or in his life, really.

“Dan,” she hollered up the stairs. “What about the dog?”

“I’ll call the vet this morning. See what’s up.” She could hear him yawn.

“I want to go with you to get him,” she yelled impulsively. “Wait until I get home.”

The eight o’clock bell was already ringing in her head.

“Why do they say May Day?”

The complete randomness of the question, in the midst of what had become Anne’s dialogue with herself about Antony’s decisions and motivations behind those decisions startled everyone. The out of sync-ness of both the question and the sound of a voice other than her own stopped her cold

“What did you ask?” Anne looked for the source of could be construed as intellectual curiosity.

“Laura, was that you?” Anne tried to keep the tone of disbelief out of her voice. Little, pasty, greasy-haired Laura had yet to look up from her notebook this year; Anne had given up long ago. *Why would she decide to talk three weeks before she graduated? And why would she save up for a stupid question like that?*

“I’m not sure of your question’s context. Tell us what you were thinking about...” All those “dealing with reluctant learners” workshops came in handy once in a while. Anne chose to ignore the restlessness of the natives as they tried, with some grace, she had to admit, to avoid staring at Laura and eye-signaling some disparaging remark. In that moment she was proud of them.

“You know, like when a boat or a plane is about to crash, they say Mayday, Mayday. I just don’t get why. I guess I was thinking about how this was a day and it was May and, like, why did they pick May? I mean, why not, like, October? “

“Or April...?” “Or January?” Anne quelled the rising clamor with a practiced stink eye..

“Well, that is an interesting question, and something I have never thought about before. I am not sure what it has to do with *Antony and Cleopatra* or Shakespeare’s Famous Lovers or even English class, but maybe Paul could Google it later and enlighten us all.”

“On it, Mrs. R.” Paul came alive with the promise of technological glory.

“OK, while you Google away, we’ll get back to Egypt and the crisis on the Nile. Now, who can find some text that suggests Antony’s dilemma?” Through some strange karma, Laura’s randomness had relieved the class of their inattention and, given them a focus.

Seeing the heads bent over their books, she relaxed a little and thought again about Oberon, and hoping he didn’t feel scared and abandoned. She tried to think about him as a puppy, so graceless and goofy, because she couldn’t bear the image of him lying in what must be a too-small cage, hooked up to an IV full of pink stuff. She was thinking about the time he hooked his head inside an empty grass seed sack and zig-zagged around the yard shaking his sack-covered head until he was stopped by a large oak tree. She could still see him standing up, weaving a little then...

“Got it, Mrs. R.! ‘**Mayday** is an emergency [code word](#) used internationally as a [distress signal](#) in [voice procedure](#) radio communications. It [derives from the French](#) *venez m'aider*, or *m'aidez*, meaning "come (and) help me".^[1] It is used to signal a life-threatening emergency by many groups, such as [police](#) forces, [pilots](#), [firefighters](#), and transportation organisations. The call is always given three times in a row ("mayday-mayday-mayday") to prevent mistaking it for some similar-sounding phrase under noisy conditions and to distinguish an actual mayday call from a message about a mayday call.’
Actually., there’s more, here let me see...”

“That’s great, Paul. So, actually, Laura, your question has relevance because the term, ‘Mayday’ represents the process of language expansion and incorporation. Just like with Shakespeare. Can anyone think of phrases or words from Shakespeare’s plays that are a part of our modern vocabulary?”

Evidently Anne was trying too hard to save the lesson. The class looked at her like she had three heads. She opened her mouth to get back to the play at hand, but it was too late.. As the relieved students leapt up from their desks and nearly knocked each other down in their hurry to reach the door, Anne wanted to cry, “Mayday, Mayday,” never imagining that someone might be listening. .

The thunder of students changing classes in the hallway outside died down to a rumble, then to a final patter as one last kid ducked in the door just as the bell clanged. Anne sat back down at her desk, stared at the stacks of essays piled in the wire “In Box” situated on the right side. She stared at them for a while, with a mind as empty as the

“Out Box” on the left side. Finally, she reached for a handful and deposited them in the wire box on the left.; it made her feel better..

Anne took out her yellowed copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*, to get ready for her less jaded ninth graders. She pawed through the pages to the assignment, then remembered that it was the scene in the bar, when Holden buys drinks for college girls and tries to hit on them.. She stared down at the book, but her mind quickly wandered from the night club in New York. She’d been teaching *The Catcher in the Rye* for probably twenty-five years and, although she would never admit this to her colleagues (or her students!) she’d had enough of Holden Caulfield. *If he were alive, he’d be, what? in his seventies or eighties—but do you think he’d have the least idea of what made him happy? I seriously doubt it. Just because coming of age books usually revolved around teenagers didn’t mean that once you survived your adolescence, you were good to go as far as overcoming disillusionment and disappointment went.*

In fact, when she really thought about it, life was just one wave of disappointment after another...and everyone just had to stand there, backs to the sea, getting knocked down every time the tide came in. She shifted her gaze to the window. Just outside stood an ancient magnolia tree, with its waxy deep green leaves and the hint here and there of a future bloom.

Because her back was to the classroom door, she couldn’t see who entered at that moment. When she heard the door open, she figured one of her kids from the first period had left a cell phone or iPod—something that would be missed immediately (ie not a textbook) and had returned to claim the property. Anne turned away from the tree

to see a vaguely familiar figure. He came closer and heat suffused her face as she identified, “Teddy!.”

“I know I’m not supposed to be here,” he said as he began a slow walk across the classroom.

“That wasn’t my decision, you know,” she stated. She glanced at the door, wondering if anyone had or seen him enter the room... Somehow in the damning conversation with Rob and the head master, Teddy had grown into something menacing. She looked at him and she saw only a boy.

“It’s Hollister, remember?” he said as he reached the desk, a forced smile jerking at the edge of his lips. He rested his hand on the metal desk top and there they stood, facing one another across the desk.

“I just wanted to come by and say I heard your mother died and I’m sorry.” His eyes gave away his honesty. A snapshot memory of Teddy in the frozen food aisle, debating vegetables for Thanksgiving dinner, popped into Anne’s head and her heart hurt for both of them..

“I appreciate that,” she said as she moved around the corner of the desk and stood to the side, arms folded, blinking back welling tears. . No one said “your mother died.” They said that she passed away or she was gone, skating around the harsher finality of “she died.”

For once, Anne had no words. As from a distance, she saw herself come near to Teddy and wrap her arms around him, letting the brimming tears fall against his chest. Awkwardly, he moved his arms around her and patted her back gently.. His grip tightened and grew more natural as she dissolved in his arms. Even with her teary self concern, she sensed a string of what felt like intimate details: the fine sand-colored down on his forearms, the yellow rubber Livestrong bracelet on his wrist, uneven patches of light stubble on his cheeks, a faint odor of laundry soap nearly masking the raw smell of nervous perspiration. Perhaps that's why she didn't hear the classroom door open.

But Teddy must have heard it, because he jumped back as if tasered. Anne's head jerked up and she spied an open-mouthed Rob, his features hardening as she watched. .

His years of dealing with indelicate situations must have trained Rob to first contain the damage. "Office, Reilly," he barked. Head down and arms limp at his side, Teddy walked out of the room without a glance back. . Rob turned to follow him, slamming the door behind him.

If this scene had been designed by Shakespeare, Anne thought, I would have access to a devastating soliloquy, my mother's ghost, a bloody dagger or two. At least a disguise and escape into the forest. But this was here and now and her direction was determined by the frizzy-haired, thick-spectacled, always harassed school secretary.

In typical fashion, Mrs. C. (everyone called her that, adults, children, probably even her husband) burst into the room as though announcing the approach of the Apocalypse. She was, as always, so intent on remembering whatever message she

brought that she didn't notice Anne's distress nor her disheveled appearance. Regardless, Anne began tucking and straightening, wiping her nose and face with her sleeve, and generally appearing to have been caught in a compromising position. But this was lost on Mrs. C., as she nearly ran into Anne, reading from her scrap of paper..

“Anne, Anne, your husband just called and he needs to talk to you right away,” she exhaled triumphantly. And stood there, as though waiting for a tip. She gave Anne a discerning look.

“Are you alright?” she asked. “He did say it wasn't an emergency,” she backpedalled, catching her breath and fanning back a twist of graying hair. Anne and Mrs. C. looked at each other in silence for just a minute,. She stopped at the door and said, gently, “You can use the office phone, if you need to.”

Anne was disinclined to leave the room—maybe ever. She took out her cell phone, pretending not to notice the ninth graders straggling in. “Hello?” she plugged one ear and squeezed the phone closer to her other ear.

“Anne, is that you? Where are you calling me from? A train station?”

“Dan, what's the matter? I was told to call you... I'm at school, where else would I be?”

“It's just that there's all this noise in the background—you sound kind of tinny.”

What's the problem? I have a class coming in right now,” Anne caught the eye of Ben McIntyre, who quickly plopped down in a desk and opened his notebook. Ninth graders could still be pushed around with just a meaningful glance.

“OK. Well, first, I got some not so great news from the vet. About Oberon. Seems there’s more to his problem than a little, make that a lot, of gas...”

“Like what!?” She interrupted.

“You know I’m not a science kind of guy, but I think what she said was that he had a twisted bowel; I’m not sure what that is, but it sounds really painful.”

“A twisted bowel? So what do they have to do? Operate?”

“It’s a little complicated, evidently. She said that they can try surgery, but if it’s been like that for too long, there’s not much they can do. Except...”

“Except what!?” The noise behind me was beginning to escalate.

“Now, Anne. It’s not quite that grim. Yet. You just have to be aware of the possibilities. There’s nothing we can really do. He’s lived a good life. But there’s something else. Did Colin....?”

“You sound like he’s already dead! I want to see him. I am going to the vet’s..”

“Anne, there is *nothing* you can do. They will call and let us know...”

Anne had been told that all too many times in the past six months. “They will let us know,” “We thought we should contact you to let you know that your mother is quite sick,” “I will talk with you later...” the words flew around her head like the rising swirl of a startled flock of birds.. Quite rationally, at least maybe to appearances, she set the cell phone gently on the desk, gathered up her purse and sweater and walked out of the school without telling anyone, leaving the ninth graders looking to each other to figure out what they had done wrong.

Chapter 31

Anne had only one thought:: Save the dog. Everything hinged on Oberon. She tried to think back, connect the dots. When had things started to go wrong? When Colin left for school? When Dan decided to spend their retirement on that ridiculous mountain climbing?? When Michael wound up in the hospital? When Teddy Reilly showed up that first day of class? When Rob decided to cross the boundaries? Her mother decided to die? Wait...Maybe further back...When she took the job here? When they got married? When her father died?

Once Anne threw her things in the passenger seat and climbed into the driver's seat, she noticed the moisture sliding down her back, along her ribs, building along her brow. She sniffed and recognized body odor; she was becoming repellent to herself. But she rolled down the windows, and backed out in a hurry. Anne swung out of the parking lot, looking down at her purse trying to find her phone (which was back on the desk in the classroom). She just missed hitting the crossing guard.

Gravel scattered as she pulled in the vet's driveway, nearly taking the door of a white Lincoln with her into the tiny parking place. The small parking lot was filled with large luxury sedans and even larger SUV's. There was barely room to find a dog a place to pee, much less trick a reluctant Great Dane into getting into the car.

“I’m here to pick up Oberon...ah, Roberts,” She said to the woman sitting at the reception desk. The phone was ringing, the fax machine buzzing, files and tangled leashes scattered across the piece of stained Formica that served as a desk. And the barking in the background! Anne listened hard for Oberon’s distinctive woof, but couldn’t recognize it amidst the confusion of canine communicators. “Who?” the woman strained to hear me. “Oberon Roberts,” Anne repeated.. The harried receptionist rustled through her files, putting her telephone person on hold and clicking through screens on the computer. “Why don’t you take a seat? This might take me a few minutes,” she smiled wanly, then turned and shouted “Chelsea!” in the vicinity of the barking.

Anne squeezed onto the claw-scarred vinyl bench, between an older man who looked as though he had just wandered in from the heath, tweed jacket and tam, stroking the large, rounded head of a patient yellow Lab and a blue-haired velour-suited woman cradling a small and fluffy dog, far more coiffed than Anne. She smiled at each in turn and pretended to read a pamphlet on the dangers of letting your dog go without dental treatment. She waited. Then she decided to take things into her own hands.

“Can I help you?” A young woman, in a cartoon dog and cat smock, smiled up at her. Anne smiled weakly in return, “Uh, I was looking for the bathroom?”

“Down that hall,” the girl instructed, gesturing at a place beyond the dog food. “You can’t miss it,” she said as disappeared into an examination room. Anne scurried down the hall, hoping that the bathroom was in the vicinity of the Really Sick Dog Unit.

As she travelled in the direction of the promised bathroom, the barking dwindled off until she began to wonder if there were any dogs in this part of the low-ceilinged construction.. But then she the thumping. The thumping of a huge whip of a tail that could knock over vases filled with spring flowers, destroy arduously constructed Lego cities, demolish treasured family ornaments on a Christmas tree in the split second it took to notice that the dog was too close.. Swallowing back tears, Anne traced the sound to a closed door and knocked gently. She whispered, “Oberon?” A familiar weak “Woof!” answered her.

The powerful odor of disinfectant overwhelmed the surprisingly large room. Oberon was not alone in his suffering; there were two other crates, much smaller, one housing a greyed, mostly beagle mutt, lying in an unconscious state, a telltale shaved area on the abdomen. The other crate contained a yellow Lab, clearly another surgery patient, also knocked out. And then there was poor Oberon, his head now raised from between his front paws, nose pressed against the bars of a huge, but not large enough steel crate.

Anne put her mind on autopilot; because to think about anything other than her mission meant she’d have to think about all the things that had gone wrong.. She opened the crate and signaled for Oberon to get out. He looked around, as if wanting confirmation. Anne signaled again, acting as if the dog had ever obeyed, or understood, any command. Finally, she slipped a small leash over his head and pulled. As the plastic

cord tightened around his neck, he let out a shocked whine,, but he crawled out of the crate, stretched his legs and shook himself all over.

She opened the door a crack and observed the hallway. She left the room, pulling Oberon behind her. She stopped to pat him, to let him know that things were OK. . His skin felt so loose; he seemed a bag of bones. She spied a small no longer lit “EXIT sign and went for it.

She led/dragged the dog around the back of the building to the car. His legs seemed to give out as they got closer and Anne had to lift him into the back seat. He offered no resistance and just lay spread out on the seat, sighing deeply as he put his head down.

Anne got behind the wheel and put the key in the ignition. Just as she fired up the engine, she had the awful realization that she was at the end of her plan, that getting Oberon wasn't going to solve anything. *I need to get him away from here!*

Above the uneven rumble of the engine, she could hear the dog's heavy panting, so she turned up the air conditioner and the radio, drowning out everything, even the static in her head.. She whirled out of the graveled parking lot and onto the adjacent road,, nearing cutting off a white delivery truck, with the slogan “Follow me to a New Life!” dashed across the side in bold red paint, flanked by giant-sized painted “Energy to Go” bars.

“It's you and me, big guy!” she shouted.

Chapter 32

When she reached the exit to the interstate, she heard Oberon begin a low, soft whine. She glanced in the rear view mirror and saw that his breathing was much more labored now, his ribs struggling to rise, only to fall again. His eyes were closed and he lay akimbo across and over the back seat. “Hang on, buddy,” she said aloud, looking at the road signs with determination. Distracted by the dog’s sad, resigned noises, she fastened on the word “South,” and merged onto the interstate.

Now, moving in a forward fashion, Anne relaxed enough to realize that she was freezing, the air conditioner blowing cold air on the layers of sweat acquired during the morning’s debacle. She also noted a tightening in her gut, suggesting something catastrophic was about to happen that would require an empty bathroom. She picked up the pace and turned on the cruise control, keeping a constant motion of 69 MPH.

Her body became more insistent. Once she determined she would have to stop, Anne felt a kind of calm wash over her. Take one problem at a time, don’t be overwhelmed, she told herself, as she strained to see any sign of retail along the side of the road. She had said those exact words to Michael before he set off for college last fall; he was always so quick to think the world was ending and that he was responsible for the whole collapse. *Start small, she told him, find a piece of the situation you can control and start with fixing that....*

.Worry about what you can control, she told herself. Get back to the dog, and the plan. But first the bathroom: intestinal and bladder relief moved to the top of her list of concerns. The dog's noises became more constant and louder, as she swung off the highway onto an exit ramp that promised some restaurant called "Iron Skillet." Down the road she spied a one storey, concrete building, its small dirt parking lot carved out of a pine-laden forest. She sped towards the weathered billboard-sized sign; the letters "I" and "killet" the evident survivors of years of wind and rain. *Not a good omen,* she thought as she pulled into the dirt driveway.

Anne put her foot down hard on the brakes and skidded up to one of the concrete blocks meant to mark parking. She scrambled to look back over the front seat and nearly fell on the dog, who was mercifully asleep. She could see his ribs moving up and down slowly, but in a regular rhythm. Relief washed over her, head to toe. But not for long.

Oberon woke up. Standing, he filled the entire back seat, with his head bowed to his chest. Something about the small space, his condition, or maybe it was Anne's pulling on the thin vet-leash to try to steady him; Oberon had had enough. He wanted out.

He began to frantically scratch at the door with both front paws. Anne couldn't think what to do; Oberon's gyrations were making the car jerk back and forth. She had no choice but to open the car door and let him get out. And so she did, yanking and pushing simultaneously amid the big claws ripping through the cheap seat material, until the back door swung open. A warm breeze seeped into the car and Oberon smelled his exit. He lowered himself to the ground, dragging his hind legs onto the dust; she could

hear him shake himself and trot off, his little whines growing fainter as she scrambled out of the car,. By the time she got herself untangled from the seat, he was gone.

There was no sign of him anywhere. How could she lose a black and white Great Dane so sick they had written him off? Anne peered into the bank of trees and realized that this was the start of some kind of no man's, uninhabited, probably hillbilly-ridden enclave. The scrappy bush and needle-laden floor shaded by the secret pines reminded her of the area behind her mother's house, before she had civilized it with a barrier of monster blue hydrangeas.

Now, that could be a destination, she thought. For me and Oberon. Her mother's house lay empty and undisturbed, except for the "For Sale" sign at the head of the driveway. Technically, it was her house. But first, she had to find the dog. *Focus on the part of the problem you can solve...*she set off towards the trees at a quick walk. . The land beyond the gravel loomed in a fairytale menace., leaving the Iron Skillet and civilization behind.

Chapter 33

There was no path. Just a sad sprinkling of past transgressions: some flattened beer cans, shredded red Solo cups, bits of plastic bags hinting at potato chips or pork rinds, a liquor bottle tossed under some brush. Anne tried not to notice all the human detritus, as she peered ahead and around, in all directions, worried that she'd miss some sign of Oberon: a tail snaking off through the trees, a paw print. She zig-zagged through the dense woods, continually brushing away gnats and tripping over roots.

. . .

There was no trail, no guideposts to help her know how far she'd gone, where she was going, or when she might come to the end. Anne became aware of the time only after when she stopped panting and wiping sweat from her hairline: the sun was going fast. In a life so determined by blocks of time: first period, passing time, lunch period, faculty meeting time, getting to the kids' practice times, dinner time, bedtime, this absence of bells and whistles to determine her exits and entrances seemed unnatural. And unnerving.

"Oberon! Come on, big guy!" she croaked. Her words quickly died in the depth of the forest. Her mouth was bone dry and tasted vaguely of iron; somewhere along the line she bit her tongue.. She stopped and looked into the slanting rays filtering through the mote-filled air. She waited for something to happen. But there was nothing.

She realized: *All along I had been waiting for the villain to emerge, for lover to reveal himself, for the fairy to remove the magic, for the fool to direct:* but none of these things would ever happen.

I see now, she concluded, if coming of age is a loss of innocence, then coming of middle age is the experience of loss.

The distant sense of something (alive) crawling up her leg snapped Anne out of her gloomy revery. She looked down at her scraped flesh and something with a million little leg-like things making its way between the slashes of red and peels of dead skin. In her experience, primal aversion to crawly things always trumped intellectual rationality. She screamed and jumped up at the same time, hopping on one leg while she swatted at my other leg, until everything started to smart from the contact. The crawly thing had long disappeared, but Anne took off running and did not look back...or forward, either.

When she finally came to, Anne was looking at a dimming canopy of leaves and branches. She checked: eyes worked, head ached slightly, arms moved, butt ached, legs itched, but moved. Dirt and dead leaves covering everything. She dragged herself into a sitting position and sat there until the world became stable again.

Then she smelled it: undeniably--dog shit—fresh dog shit. There could be only one source and she forgot about her aches, the possibility of concussion, a growing chill as the sun went down, and scrambled to her feet, sniffing the air. It was somewhere close...she followed the smell, giving all her concentration to finding that poop. She stepped slowly, carefully through the dusty pine needles, dead leaves and fallen branches.

She was sure she would find him now. For a moment Anne felt a flutter of something other than bad...hopeful, maybe? It's a tribute to the human spirit that in the midst of a soul-sucking crisis, we can still find something to propel us forward, even if that something is dog shit.

The odor grew fainter, or maybe the nostril hyperventilation was heading her towards a black-out. Here was a place Dan might have been useful. He might not see dirty clothes covering the floor, or dirty dishes filling the sink, or weeks-old newspapers taking up space in every nook and cranny, but he was downright fastidious about dog poop. She put her nose in the air and sniffed harder, zig-zagging through the darkening forest.

Anne felt her feet slip, the odor sharpen, and knew she had found the source.. She heard a kind of scratching noise, like a squirrel darting through the branches, or maybe a snake slithering through the debris-littered forest floor. The scratching continued; Anne tried to pinpoint the direction of the noise, but it was getting dark. She had to get down on her hands and knees to follow the faint sound.

She couldn't have crawled twenty feet when she spied a flash of white in the midst of a dense collection of low growing plant life. She stood up, training her eyes on the contrasting spot of lightness, and moved towards it with a growing sense of dread. As she stalked closer, the white began to float up and down, slowly. And she gasped and sobbed as she recognized the rhythm.

He was lying on his side; his tail the only part of him that seemed to have three dimensions. Anne knelt down and traced the splotches of white, locating the familiar feel of his silky ears, the sharply definition of his head. He was still breathing when she

touched him, but even without the medical training she had promised her father, Anne could feel he was slipping away. She cradled his head in her lap and stroked his face. A faint shudder passed through his body and his handsome head became weight in her hands.

So she cried. And wailed. She would have pulled out her hair, if her arms would unlock from their grip on the dog's head. There were no papers to file, no funeral to plan, no calls to make, no belongings to go through: no duties to distract Anne from realizing what she had lost.

Later Anne would realize that she was grieving for more than Oberon; it was whole chunk of life that went with him. Still holding on to the dog, her mind drifted away from the hard present into the more forgiving past and her memories of the friend she held in her arms.

As it got getting darker and darker., Anne realized that the dog was growing colder and stiffer, and so was she. Finally, her physical discomfort betrayed her consuming grief: she had to move. With a joint-popping struggle, she managed to gently transfer Oberon's head out of her lap and onto the ground, while negotiating her body into an upright position. Her thoughts about what to do next came to a dead halt when she detected noises; noises that sounded like talking. Ghosts! was all she could think.

Chapter 34

There was a loud buzzing, very annoying. This was accompanied by an equally annoying steady beeping, beeping, beeping. Anne tried to knock it away, but her arms were too heavy. And attached. She shouted for it to stop and tried to see where it was coming from, but neither her mouth nor her eyes would open. She was trapped in the buzzing and beeping and there was nothing she could do.. She sank back into whatever state she had been in before she noticed the buzzing and stayed there, thinking, *Don't fight the things you can't control.*

Then there was light, really bright light; blinding light. Anne figured out her eyes must be open, because how could light be blinding if her eyes were closed? And something was hovering over her—she hadn't ever really believed in the mumbo jumbo visions of heaven, but it did occur to her briefly that maybe this was the proverbial light and those shadows she sensed hovering over might be angels, and maybe dying wasn't so bad.

But she was destined to be wrong: the hovering shadows sharpened into focus and it was the surprisingly real face of her husband that she recognized, not the diaphanous gauziness of some connection with the afterlife. No, it appeared to be Anne's fate that

she would have to forego the tragedy of dying and return to the comedy of living. Or was it the other way around?

“Anne, Anne? Can you hear me? Can you see me? Are you OK?”

“Dan?” This time the light didn’t come from some unforgiving fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling; it came from his face. She moved her tube laden hand over towards him, tried to reach for his face. But it was too much. Dan leaned over the bed’s extended side rail and made as if to kiss her, but once he got within passing distance of her hair, she felt him pull back.

“I know I screwed things up...” she began in a whisper.

“No, no, Anne. You didn’t screw up anything. But you do stink, and I’m going to call a nurse and get you cleaned up—what, did you fall in dog shit or something?”

Anne’s eyes shot open and she managed to grab his hand this time. “Oberon?”

“They found him a couple hundred yards from the bowling alley, the poor guy. But at least he’s not in pain anymore.”

“I thought I could save him,” she said, mostly to herself.

“He didn’t need saving, honey, he needed letting-go. And you gave him that,” Dan stated as he rose up to push the “Call for nurse” button. “Right?”

“Right, I guess,” she managed, just before a bevy of purposeful nurses came to clean her up.

Chapter 35

And so, patient reader, I come to the close of my tale. Unlike with young, rash Cleopatra, it does not end with asps and everyone dying. No, it ends with a funeral, a wedding, a journey and a return home. And a final speech from the fool, which explains what it all means. Ok, well maybe not completely. But the writer feels entitled to share what she has figured out, in letting go, however awkwardly, of her salad days. Age does have its few privileges.

First, the funeral.

My short stay in the Powhite Mercy Hospital had longer term implications, and I was grateful to have washed up in this ill-named little place, because I was taken care of by some of the nicest, most competent people I can ever hope to meet,

My three days in the hospital gave us time to figure out what to do with Oberon. Dan found him in his resting place before anything else did, wrapped him in a borrowed hospital sheet that the hospital did not know was borrowed, carried him to the car.

Oberon returned to our house—his house—in a remarkably small metal box. I wept the entire ride home, my arms tight around what was now Oberon, finally the lap dog he always wanted to be. I stood at the kitchen sink and watched as Dan dug a hole in the spot where the dog loved to lie, under the low-branched pines, in the coolness. I was still

feeling pretty unsteady, so Dan took on the responsibility of saying goodbye to our friend.

Grasping the edge of the sink, I watched Dan carefully placing dirt over the box. But what I was really seeing were the shadows of the boys and the dog playing tag on the foot-worn backyard, racing in and out of the then shoulder-high Cyprus trees. How long, complicated and demanding those days had seemed—at the time. Who could know time was really moving at warp speed?

In June Colin and the chastened, if not chaste, Alisha made good on their threat to love, cherish and obey each other, in a simple ceremony at the Army chapel on base. Dan and I sat in the front pew on one side and Alisha's parents sat in the front pew on the other side, alternating between outright weeping at the sight of their only daughter standing at the altar with her short veil, maternity wedding dress (who knew there was a market for such things?), handsome new husband, and glowering at us for producing said husband. Actually, after it was all settled, we parents all went to the only bar in Fayetteville that didn't have motorcycles parked in front of it and proceeded to drink and talk all afternoon, until the future of our kids started to look rosy and we started to like each other. Colin and his bride were busy gathering the few tangible symbols of their new life together (pots and pans, an antique spool bed and new mattress (Alisha's parents' practical wedding gift to the couple), a set of china and a military-themed cuckoo clock (my impractical wedding gift to the couple). Though I wept the entire drive home, I had to admire their impetuous certainty in what they were doing; it seemed

a giant leap of faith and hope. And I wait here for a call, any day now, that will announce the actual arrival of Hope, my (gulp!) granddaughter.

Where is here, you might ask. Just like any run-of-the-mill, somewhat enlightened character at the end of Act 5, I have come full circle, returned to where I began. I asked for, and was given, a year's leave of absence from the school, a decision that suited everyone concerned, especially the headmaster. I have the option of coming back for the next year and I might, but I'll wait and see how it goes. I've taken up residence at my mother's house—my house, I guess—for a while. At least while the boys in my family are all off climbing mountains.

Dan exchanged the two “excursions” to the Mt. Kilimanjaro that involved a good chunk of our life savings for three trips to a more local challenge: Mt. Whitney. He and David and Michael spent June and July getting ready and now they're out west, having the time of their lives. When they return in late August, Michael will return to school as a junior, and, though David is officially finished with his coursework and technically able to graduate, he will hang on for a semester, assisting the school's football program. The boys will be living in some house off campus. In any other circumstance, the house would be condemned, except because it's close enough to the school, instead of having to tear it down, the owner is encouraged to charge exorbitant rent to the privileged kids who elbow each other out of the way in their hurry to sign a fifteen page rental agreement. The boys acted like they'd won the Lottery when they “got” the house and immediately started collecting the debris of past furniture stages, getting excited over

unsteady, assembly-required bookcases and a hideous sofa from Dan's parents' house, with permanently dog-flattened cushions.

And Dan? After several sob-ridden sessions in which I tried to explain, or at least narrate, the events of the year, Dan had the grace to pretend to understand, and the faith to hang on while I made some major changes in my employment and living arrangements. So we ventured to vastly different sea levels, not running away from each other, it seemed, but running to ourselves. At least for a while, but not forever.

Because if I've "learned" anything this year, it is that there is not much in human experience that you can count on as forever. Or even probable. As I mentioned, I've come full circle, or maybe it's more that I'm starting over, trying to put things in place. I roam the halls and rooms of my mother's house, where I thought I had grown up. I read and read, disappearing into worlds of words. And I am writing, really writing. There is something about middle age that allows one to tell one's own story, with a sense of both the tragic and the comic, and without any sense of restriction or reflection. I don't know exactly whom I am telling this story for, but I'll just get to that later.

Biography

Leslie Goetsch graduated from Duke University in 1979, with a BA in English. She also received a Master of Liberal Arts Degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1988. *Back Creek*, her first novel, was published by Bancroft Press in 2008.

