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A Novel to Facilitate Education

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A NOVEL TO FACILITATE EDUCATION

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HONORS PROJECT

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Kensington

By Matt Griesinger

My wife left me on a Tuesday. It wasn't like in the movies where they leave an eloquent note and run off with some guy with a foreign name. He has hair that is too long and shirts that are too small. He likes to eat with his hands.

We were too normal of a couple to resemble anything from a movie. We began sleeping separately a month after the wedding. It started because she needed a firm bed and I couldn't stand a mattress that didn't cave in and surround me when I fell into it. Instead of staying in our soft bed, I bought a firm mattress for her and put it in place of the old one. She got to keep the room and I moved into the guest room. And so it went for six months until that Tuesday when she left.

I woke up at six to read the paper and have my coffee. I taught at the local school, it was the only school, and had nothing in particular to do during the summer. She got up at eight and I heard her run the water for her shower. Everything was a routine for us. After her shower she'd take ten minutes to get dressed and she'd be out the door with a cup of coffee in hand. She worked at the health and fitness club down the street. Her parents owned it and she instructed daily fitness classes in the evening and had individual customers to train in the morning.

That Tuesday, she came down with two bags of clothes and never took her coffee. I had it waiting for her on the counter by her purse. I never saw her again. I don't think she ran off to be with another man. She'd have to get me to sign divorce papers or something. She was the marrying type. I was her third husband. We were both relatively young. I was just five years out of college. But she had time to run away with a boy when she was nineteen and then try again with an ex-preacher when she was twenty-one. I was the safe option. I had a job and a house before we met. I didn't mind the fact that I was her third and safest choice. I enjoyed the company.

My summer went on and was rather uneventful apart from the house fire. I was at the market when it happened. The investigators decided that it started in the attic because of how dry of a summer it was. I never completely believed that story but I was just too tired to really bother with more investigations – it wouldn't bring back my house.

I rented an apartment on Third Street above the South Side Market. Our town was small. While I lived on Third Street, there was not a First or a Second. There was one street, one mile long, that made up our town – Third Street. The north side of Third Street housed a diner, another market, a clothing store, a sporting goods store, and an empty lot that was never developed. Six other units were empty. There were about twenty apartments

above the building on the north side. Most were vacant. On the south side of Third Street was one massive building that stretched a mile long. That building housed my in-law's fitness club, two bars, an empty spot that used to be another bar, and a market. The rest of the units were vacant. Most had pieces of wood covering the windows. Two apartments sat above each of the units. There were about twenty on the south side, too. My apartment was one of the best in town in that it was in the middle of everything. I could see everything and everyone from my front window.

Behind the south-side building were the houses. Three rows of twelve identical houses erected after World War II extending one half mile from Third Street. Thirty-five houses and one charred skeleton. No one lived behind the units on the north side. In an area identical to the size of land for the thirty-five houses and pile of ash sat the school, fire and police department, church, and a man-made lake in the shape of a rectangle.

I taught in the first, second, and third grade classroom at the school and had nearly sixty students. Another teacher had the fourth through sixth grades and another had seventh and eighth. The ninth through twelfth graders, the high school kids, had a team of four teachers who rotated for each subject. School was a sad place except for basketball season when the boys would most likely win another state championship. They had something like seven championships. It was the only sport in the city and everyone watched every game.

The fire and police departments shared a small building and had two police cruisers and one engine. We all pretty much prayed that no emergencies happened.

The church seemed to have fewer parishioners than my classroom and did well to keep to itself for the most part. We rarely heard anything about the church – which I guess could be good or bad, depending on someone's view. All I know is that on Sunday mornings I could look out of my window and watch people stumble out of their cars and into the church. An hour later they'd leave and I'd watch.

The lake was both a wonderful and terrible place depending on the time of day. It was a perfect rectangle, a half mile by a quarter mile, made simply because the city planners didn't know what to do with the land. Bad things happened there at night but during the day it was a beautiful place to lounge, especially up on the hill that overlooked it. When the sun went down all of the people who the town was not proud of seemed to find their way to the edge of the lake to smoke, drink, and have intercourse. The police did nothing to stop it. Perhaps they could stop it if they could see it. They would have needed my apartment though. The north-side building was

shaped in such a way that the only clear view of the lake and everything else in town was from my apartment's window.

I once saw a man have intercourse with a young girl at the far end of the lake. It was a foggy night so I'm not sure, but it may have been rape. It seemed violent but ended almost casually, as if they knew each other.

The girl was throwing stones into the lake at the northeast corner and was abruptly grabbed from behind by a man in dark clothing. I would have reported it but I waited for the morning paper to see if a rape was reported. That was about month after I moved into the place. I heard nothing of it and really haven't thought much of it until now. That is such an interesting place and way to have intercourse. I probably shouldn't have watched but my window is just so convenient.

2

I left my husband on a Tuesday. He was my fourth husband but he thought he was the third. I often found it better not to tell him things that truly didn't matter. The details as to why I left him are rather fuzzy to me. I just remember feeling stuck. We slept separately and lived out our days separately. Three of my four marriages came out of Kensington relationships so after I left my last husband, I got as far away from the town as possible.

From what I heard, and still hear, Kensington died a long time ago. I mean, it's still a city with its normal population and probably the same good basketball team, but as far as being a lively and enchanting part of Small Town America, Kensington might as well be off the map.

My parents lived there for awhile after I left. They ran my father's fitness facility until they were bought out by one of those massive conglomerate chains. If I remember correctly, that was the first big business to come into Kensington. After that, a breakfast chain took over one of the spots on the south side and a massive grocery store was built where the old church once stood. Maybe it was corporate America that led to the death of Kensington. I guess it would seem like that to an outsider. But I think Kensington died when Coach J stopped coaching.

Coach J was known as Coach to everyone in town. He taught at the high school since I can remember and coached the basketball team to a bunch of state championships. I was always around the team in high school – I dated three, maybe four players throughout my schooling. I don't think our players were any better than other towns', but I think Coach J made the difference. Toward the end of his career, he opened a diner that I think still

operates today. I'm sure he's long gone though. After he retired from coaching, the town never saw another state championship.

His son took over the team eventually and just couldn't get out of his father's shadow. I actually dated his son back in high school. Even had a minor affair with him during my third marriage. He wasn't married yet and actually didn't know that I was. He was a sweet guy. But the teams got lousy as the years went on and people from the surrounding cities – and even the people of Kensington – stopped coming to watch the games.

The town lost all of its bars, too. People used to go drink after games. That eventually led to all of the arsons. The guy whose bar closed first went on a massive spree and burned down houses and bars and eventually the church. He was pretty crazy.

Seeing this, other bar owners sold their lots to the big businesses and Kensington subsequently died.

I think it was good that I got out when I did. My last husband was an elementary school teacher and had no aspirations of doing anything different. He made it to where he wanted to be. He was done. I needed more than that.

I haven't been back to town since I left. My parents moved out here to California to live in my guest house after they sold the gym. I may head back to town for the three hundredth anniversary. My parents are going and I wouldn't mind seeing what the town has become. I guess a kid much younger than me from Kensington rose up pretty high in one of the corporations that has its thumb pressed down on the town and is throwing the party. If I go back it will only be for a day or so. I never divorced my last husband and really have no interest in seeing him. I didn't get a divorce because I knew I would just end up getting married again. At least this way I can't legally get married. I'm not sure why he never tried to get one though.

My last husband was a strange man. Last I heard, he was living in the highest apartment in the South-Side plaza. The reason that apartment was so high was because that used to be Dale Kensington's house. Dale Kensington was the founder of the town of Kensington and as the town grew, the idea for two nearly-identical plazas came into the minds of the city planners. Instead of moving what was then the only building in the town's historical society, they just built around Kensington's home. The first level of his house became a market and the upstairs became two apartments. The market is a chain drug store now but the two apartments are still above it.

As far as I know, the boring old first grade teacher is still living in the highest part of town. He can see everything out of his window that is north of the South-Side plaza. I'm sure he saw the church burn and probably still watches the delinquents at the lake. I'm also sure he sits idly at his window and does absolutely nothing. That's just who he is. He watches things and takes no action. He's a coward.

I gave him every opportunity to get me back after I left him. I stayed in town for three months waiting for him to show some guts and try to get me back. The man lets life pass him by and instead of chasing it, he waves to it and smiles. He is the perfect example of someone from Kensington. Dead on the inside. Waiting to die on the outside. He never acts, but he is always acted upon. How different things would be if all men in Kensington were like Coach J.

3

I stood in front of the flat top with my back to the breakfast crowd. My waitresses were busy. All of the tables were full and the wait in line for a table was fifteen minutes – or at least that's what my hostess was trained to tell guests. The real wait time was probably closer to thirty.

I went back to flipping the sausage patties and hash browns. Shelly, my veteran waitress sat two regulars at the counter behind me.

I placed two cups of black coffee in front of the old couple and looked up at the TV above the counter but paid no attention to the voice reading the morning weather report. Instead, I listened to our newest waitress. She had gone through the training before we opened. We called it training – it was just Shelly telling her how everything worked – took maybe ten minutes. After the training, we just threw her into the masses.

My hostess delivered the new waitress a middle-aged woman with her two girls. A six-year-old and a sixteen-year-old.

“What would you like to drink?”

“Coffee with cream and – “

“Ma'am, the coffee comes black. The cream and sugar are on the table.” Off to a good start. The kids ordered orange juice and the new waitress went to the machine in the back to fill the drink order.

I could feel the woman in the booth staring at my back while I tended to the grill. I laid down eight strips of bacon and cracked four eggs.

“So Coach, what do you think of the team this year?” an old regular at the counter asked.

“I think things are going well. Returned a good amount of starters and Tim sounds like he's got the boys whipped into shape.”

“Yeah but he'll never be like his old man. Every kid that goes through that program will always be 'Coach J's kid.'”

“Thanks. Means a lot. But you forget – Tim is Coach J, too.”

“You know what I mean Coach.”

The new waitress walked to her table. Ready to take their orders.

“And what do you girls want to eat?”

“Pancakes!” said the youngest.

“Sorry hun, we don't have pancakes. There's a waffle iron in the corner where you can make your own waffles. All you can eat.”

“No pancakes?” said the woman. “What kind of diner is this?”

“Ma'am, if you really want pancakes, there are several other places in the city that serve them.” I was impressed, she sounded almost as careless as Shelly.

“No, that's okay. She'll have the waffles.”

“And I'll have oatmeal,” said the sixteen-year-old.

“Okay listen girls. We have eggs – anyway you want them. We have bacon and sausage. And we have what Coach calls a Lazy Omelet. It's basically scrambled eggs with whatever Coach wants to put in them. This morning it has onions, peppers, garlic, and sausage. No substitutions. And we have toast – white, rye, and wheat. That's it. Everything comes with hash browns. So what'll it be?” Perfect. She listened to Shelly and came across just as bitter as I wanted.

I was a seventy-five-year-old man at the time, back when Kensington was still becoming a ghost town. Now, of course, the town is dead. But at the time, it was just beginning to die. I was a retired English teacher and basketball coach. I wasn't a chef but I could work a flat top and I knew when sausage is fully cooked. I liked to keep it simple. People came to my diner to socialize and get a good breakfast at all hours of the day. If they wanted a kind and courteous waitress, they came to the wrong place. It was all a part of the experience.

The woman and sixteen-year-old each ordered eggs over-easy with bacon. White toast for the woman and rye for the girl. I started the food before they ordered. I knew what they would order before they walked in the door.

I plated the regulars' meals at the counter, my old assistant coach and his wife – one of my favorite students – no check, I was in a good mood. All meals were usually accompanied by a check. Something about handing guests their check with their meal – it let them know we were happy they were there but would be happier when they left.

My hostess was chatting with families as they entered the diner – hugging some regulars as they walked in after church.

“You know Coach, she was born to do that,” my assistant coach’s wife said, gesturing with her toast towards my wife.

“I don’t know if it’s fair to say she was born to greet people in a diner – maybe born to make people smile.”

“Aw cut the soft stuff Coach,” said my assistant coach. “It always makes me shiver when you aren’t a grumpy old man.”

“Your shift starts in three minutes. I’m not dealing with the church crowd.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ve been doing your dirty work for twenty years – why stop now?” He wiped his mouth, kissed his wife on the cheek, and walked to the back to get his apron.

I grabbed the woman and girl’s meals and walked the plates to their table. I walked slowly – I had the route memorized but sometimes little kids from the church crowd ran around the place. The new waitress saw me do this and hurried over to catch me.

“I’m sorry Coach. I must not have heard you call my name.”

“Relax kid, I wanted to serve my daughter-in-law and grandchildren myself.” I smiled as she realized it was all a set-up. “You did fine.”

I sat down with Tim’s wife and my grandkids. Laurie, my wife and hostess, abandoned her post and sat down with us.

With my wife seating guests, my assistant coach cooking, my sister-in-law training the staff, and my son coaching the boys – the diner had a funny way of running itself.

4

The best time to witness the true liveliness of Kensington was to walk down the street on a Sunday morning. The people were out walking the main street to go to the market and sometimes church. The bars were closed so that unholy liquid the devil put on this Earth was unavailable to our brothers and sisters not yet saved. I liked to say that I wasn’t in the business of saving people, just in the service of the Good Lord.

On Sunday mornings, my parishioners would walk into His house in their best outfits and would be truly happy to see one another. There was no need to drive because even someone with the longest walk had less than a mile to go. Also, there wasn’t a parking lot. The church’s land consisted of the small church itself and an even smaller lodging in the rear where I

lived. Apart from the firemen who lived at their station part-time, I believe that I was the only person who lived north of the north-side apartments.

I enjoyed my lifestyle very much apart from the actual masses. I was extremely nervous when I had to speak in front of large groups of people. Oftentimes I would never speak. Instead I would allow a parishioner to give mass and I would sit quietly and watch. Usually the same man spoke every Sunday.

Most of my day consisted of organizing my valuables in my cottage in the back yard. My cottage was surrounded by tall trees on three sides and the lake on the other. Inside was a towel that I used as my bed, a nail on the wall that I hung my Sunday suit on, and a candle that allowed me to read the Bible. I liked to think that the candle was God Himself. It wasn’t much but I loved my life.

The best part about the life of a priest is that people are always surprised. What people don’t know is that I was allowed to drink, gamble, and have sex all I wanted. No one had any rules about it. With that in mind, my usual day consisted of trips to a few of the bars where I could drink and gamble and then hours at home reading His book. At night I would usually sit outside my cottage and wait for women to come by that I could have sex with. It was a wonderful arrangement. Although I was allowed to do all of those things, I seemed to feel uncomfortable doing the sex part so I usually wore a covering over my head so no one could see that I was a man of God. I just don’t think God wanted to be seen when I was with all of the women. If they could see my eyes, they would be able to see Him. I couldn’t let that happen.

My life went on in this way for twenty or so years until my cottage was destroyed one day when I was at the market. I went to the market on the south side and when I returned with matches, two more candles, and a loaf of bread, my cottage was unrecognizable. I made it just in time for the market to be open and left as the sun was going down. As I made my way back to the church, I stopped first at the front doors to make sure they were locked. I never locked them during the week but somehow they were always shut and locked except for Sunday mornings. But I just wanted to check. As I walked into the back yard of the church, I came upon a head covering of mine. I thought that I must have dropped it the previous night.

Returning to my cottage, my Sunday suit was thrown lifelessly at the base of a tree and only two walls remained standing. My bed had boot prints all over it and my Bible lay open, face-down, on the floor. My candle was out but still smoking so I ran around the back of my cottage to see if I could catch the culprit running away. I saw no one.

After a few short prayers, I straightened up my bed and neatly closed my Bible, setting at the foot of my bed. I placed a new candle into the holder and lit what remained of my house. I set my bread down on my bed and started to rebuild my house. The walls weren't at all difficult to pick back up and piece together because they were never fastened together. I couldn't fall asleep that night so I went out to the shores of the lake and played in the water.

That was a Saturday night so there were lots of people out at the lake. I remember having sex with a few women in the tall grass at the northeast end of the lake. I liked that spot. Anyway, I always made sure to wear my mask so the women couldn't see God in my eyes.

I also remember feeding my bread to the ducks that night. All of God's creatures love bread and if the ducks couldn't get it themselves, I was more than happy to do God's good work. I usually took my mask off for that part because I wanted God to be able to see his creatures out of my eyes.

The next morning I went to mass and allowed the same man to give the service again. He was the same man with the keys to the church so I thought it was fitting that he gave mass if he wanted. I was always too nervous anyway. That morning we had a special praying time at the beginning of the mass to pray for what my helper called "A terrible increase in the amount of rapes that have been happening on a nightly basis in Kensington."

Usually, I didn't like it when my helper strayed from the traditional mass, but everyone seemed to agree with this change. And because I wasn't sure what "rape" meant, I sat quietly in the back and bowed my head like the rest of my congregation.

5

Looking back, high school graduation was probably the most important moment of my life. Graduating allowed me to get out of my town. It's not that I was in an unsafe neighborhood or anything like that, but the place where I grew up was a dead end. The best way to illustrate the life-trap that was Kensington was just to look at town on any given Sunday morning. The town was one square mile with one road running through it. Starting on the west side of the main street and heading east allowed a guy to see just how dead some living people can be.

The two markets were open but no one was inside. The bars were closed but there were always some guys hanging around the entrances to the bars or stumbling towards the south side of town where all the houses were.

It looked like they were swallowed by the bars on Saturday night and spit back up early Sunday morning.

There was one diner that everyone seemed to flock to that would always be busy. That was the lively part of town – even though it was run by an old man and his wife. Apart from the diner, the town of Kensington was the town of the walking dead. Everyone was awake and carrying out their days, but everything was lifeless. Hopeless.

So I needed to get out. I spent my first eighteen years there and knew that if I didn't get out and go to college in the city, I'd be stuck for the rest of my life.

We graduated in the gymnasium of the high school. I say high school, but every grade was in the same building. It was just the school.

I stuck around afterwards with the rest of my graduating class but only for a fraction of the time everyone else stayed there. I think people wanted a Goodbye full of emotionally charged words and the most eloquently phrased, individualized Good Luck wishes from teachers. I realized after ten minutes that the teachers were just as dead as the Sunday morning citizens and that they too, were stuck in Kensington. I needed to get out.

I wasn't supposed to leave for college until a month into the summer. I ended up packing and leaving the day after graduation. My mom was sad to see me go but knew that I couldn't afford to get stuck in town for the rest of my life. My brother never showed very much emotion about anything and he just waved as I walked out the door. He was ten years older than me and had already missed his opportunity to escape.

My dad walked me to the bus stop and we both waited for the 9:30 bus. It was the only bus that came through town. It came on a nightly basis at 9:30 pm sharp. The bus stop was just a bench directly in the middle of town. I remember setting my two duffle bags of clothes on the ground next to me and my dad sat to my right.

"Gots everything you need?"

"I think so."

"Bus ticket?"

"You don't need those anymore."

"Then how'd they know where to take you?"

"All of the buses lead to the city. As long as I stay on the bus and hand them four bucks every time they ask for it, I'll be good."

"I think I seen something in the news about that."

"I think they stopped messing with tickets about a year, maybe two years ago."

“What do you think that guy is doing up there?” My dad looked up into the apartments on the south side of the street and into the window directly across from us.

“I don’t know. It seems like he doesn’t know we are here. He’s looking at the lake I think.”

“Looks like a weird guy. Know him?”

“I feel like I do. I mean, I’m sure we’ve both seen him around town. There aren’t enough people here for us not to know someone.”

“I think I seen him at the diner a time or two.”

“Probably.”

We saw the bus coming from the west side of town towards the stop. I picked up both of my bags after shaking my dad’s hand and walked onto the bus. I picked a spot on the opposite side of where the bus stop was. I pretended to look for something in my bags as the bus pulled away. My dad and I didn’t have any problems. I just didn’t feel like going through that sappy moment of waving through the bus windows to my dad standing in front of the bench. That happened in too many movies. I stayed in touch with my parents throughout college and even came back to Kensington for a few Christmases.

I was actually back the Christmas after I graduated when all of those fires were happening. I remember one solitary house fire when I was still in school – people came out to watch that one. But the summer I left, they fixed up that house and I think the woman who used to live there moved in. Anyway, that Christmas there was something like ten fires in a span of two weeks. When the first few were being investigated, the fire department said that they didn’t suspect any foul play. They were wrong.

It turned out that all ten fires were started by the same guy. I don’t remember him this way, but I guess he used to be a bar owner in the south side building. They finally narrowed it down to him when they realized that every victim was associated with the two bars still running that forced him out of business. It took years for everything to get fixed. I remember considering living back in Kensington for a summer to make some money fixing up houses but the thought of getting stuck was too horrifying so I stayed in the city.

But that’s how Kensington was, an interesting and inviting place to outsiders but a lifeless trap for those on the inside. I wish I could remember more exciting things about Kensington but when asked to illustrate my most vivid memories of the town all I could ever come up with were the lifeless corpses walking down Third Street on a Sunday and the confused-looking man watching over my dad and me at the bus stop. I know it’s not much.

6

I’ll never forget the day they caught the man responsible for all of the rape cases. He was a squatter behind my church. I preached to the man nearly every Sunday. He sat in the back in a tattered blue suit that was much too small for him. When I first found out that the rapist was one of my parishioners, I was distraught. I thought that I was doing something wrong if a man who came to my masses every week couldn’t refrain from a terrible sin.

I was relieved, however, when I learned of the man’s mental handicaps. He was a squatter who lived in a kind of man-made hut in the woods behind my church. They arrested him during somewhat of a sting operation one night at the shores of the lake. I say sting, but in reality it was just a female officer from a neighboring town acting as an undercover victim. As the man approached her, she saw that he had a mask which fit the description from victims she just cuffed him and took him away.

I saw it in the paper the next morning. He didn’t look like the stereotype of the rapist we all had in mind. He didn’t even look like the caricature sketches that the newspaper provided throughout the summer.

When I read in the paper the next morning that he claimed to be the priest of my church, I was rather concerned. That was my church. I didn’t want anyone to think that my church had anything to do with what the poor man was doing.

I went back behind the church to see what kind of shelter the man had. He had created a sort of open-air roof that was just a large amount of sticks leaning against a tree. Under his roof was a Bible stolen from my church. We had Bibles set out in the back of the church for people to take, but this one was a Bible that I used for masses. A large-text version of His word, hard-backed with gold-edged pages. He was a rapist and a thief.

The police called me down to the station on the north side of town to identify the man. Apparently when he told them that he was the priest, they called for me. We had a total of four police officers in the town of Kensington and three of them were my parishioners. They knew right away that he wasn’t the priest. I eventually identified him as a man who oftentimes sat in the back of the church during mass and who took coffee anytime we offered. That was all I knew about him. I told the police that I found his shelter and that all that was inside was my Bible.

That was the last anyone heard of the homeless man behind the church. I later found out that he was transferred to a state penitentiary on something like seventeen counts of rape. Our town became a bit more laid

back and there was a large consensus that the church had nothing to do with the man after I took out space in the town newspaper later that week.

Our newspaper was just a local woman who printed papers out of her basement. She had a vintage printing press that followed one major story throughout a season and had one page devoted to weekly stories. It came out on Thursdays, covered gardening in the summer, cooking in the fall, basketball in the winter, and didn't come out during the spring. The articles were usually written by the woman except for any spaces sold to townspeople who could essentially print anything they wished. The majority of spaces were advertisements but every so often someone would take out a space to write an opinion piece or a public congratulation to another community member.

So the following week after the man was arrested, I bought space for the article offering sincere condolences to the community while also insisting that the guilty man had nothing to do with the church. My mistake was that after my first article, nearly forty weeks went by during which the entire local section of the paper was taken up by community members responding to my article and the articles of their fellow community members all concerning the rapist.

My church was said to have aided the man as we gave him coffee and shelter. Members of my church then insisted that we did not know of the man's actions or where he lived and that good church-going people never hesitate to give drink to those who are in need. The argument went on throughout the summer, fall, and winter and only subsided when the paper stopped its service in the spring.

My church ended up losing two thirds of its parishioners throughout the process. We still held mass throughout the spring even with twenty-five parishioners. I left Kensington the next summer for a job in a neighboring city as a private school teacher after our church was burned to the ground. The fire department and police department never came to put out the flames. By that time in the late spring I lost the three officers who were parishioners and all four of the firemen who used to come to my church.

As far as I'm concerned, when they caught the rapist, Kensington died. God looked over the community as it struggled throughout the newspaper fiasco, throughout the house burnings the summer before, and the raping of the women at the hands of an ill-minded squatter. But the town showed their movement towards hell when they burned the Lord's house. I would never wish harm on one of God's children and I have forgiven the Kensington community, but to me it is no wonder that the town is dead.

7

My least favorite time at the diner was when the late dinner crowd came in. I'm still not sure why, but I always felt like if something bad was going to happen, it would be in the late evening. Families of four, high school kids grabbing a burger before a movie, couples on dates, pretty much anyone not retired. For some reason I remember one particular Friday night pretty well.

I cleaned off the flat top and threw down a dozen patties. A group of kids bellied up to my counter and stared at me. I could feel it.

"Good evening Coach."

"Hello boys," I said without turning around.

"How are you?"

I turned around.

"Take the hoods off. Are you criminals." All three snatched off their hoods before I was done with the demand. I was glad that I had guessed correctly and that they were, in fact, wearing hoods.

"Sorry Coach, we forgot. Our minds are on tomorrow's game. We want those free burgers." It was Tim's captain, Jeff. I coached his two older brothers. For some reason that made him feel like he knew me. I didn't mind though. He was a heck of a player.

"Well I'm not serving you burgers tonight. Can't have this greasy stuff before a game."

"Yeah-"

"Yes."

"Yes. We know. Just wanted to come in and ask you a question."

"If it's an English question then fine. But I'm not helping with basketball – you have a new coach now. And who are those other two criminals?"

"This is-"

"They can't talk for themselves?"

"I'm Kevin, Coach." I knew who both of them were. But sometimes you have to hear from the quiet ones. They could be brilliant. That's how I used to teach.

"Hello Kevin. Good to meet you." I turned back to my flat top, flipped the burgers, and added another dozen – a group of about six walked in during my talk with the boys.

"I'm Josh. Good to meet you Coach."

"So Coach, our question..." said Jeff.

"Yes, go ahead."

“Well the three of us are the captains and the only three seniors.”
“And we are kinda in charge of tomorrow’s game,” said Kevin.
“Yes, I know how it works.”

“Well,” said Jeff, “I’m not sure if you know, but it’s against St. Thomas.”

“Why aren’t you guys starting off with a weaker school? That’s always how it used to be. I remember my three years of coaching we played Windy Hollow and beat them by at least twenty each time. I’m not sure they even have a team anymore. Why hasn’t Tim found you a weak school like Windy Hollow?”

“We don’t know Coach. But that’s how it is.”

“Okay so what?” I removed the first dozen burgers and set them aside to rest before I threw them on the buns.”

“Well the last time we beat them was eight years ago when you were the coach.”

“That’s too long ago for me to give you any pointers if that’s what you want.”

“We want you to coach.” I dropped my spatula on the floor.

“What are you talking about? I’m not your coach. You want me to take the job from my own son?”

“No Coach, nothing like that,” said Jeff. “We just want you to sit on the bench.”

“Ask Tim.”

“He said to ask you.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“It would mean a lot to us Coach.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“You’re going to be there anyway right?”

“Yes. But you expect me to sit on the bench and listen to my radio?”

“Radio?”

“Well I certainly can’t watch the game now can I?”

“What?”

“I can’t see anything. You know that. Everyone knows that. You just want me there so you can look at me. It’ll look great in the papers and people will love it. But what about me? The last time I was on that bench I could at least see my boys. Now all I can do is listen. Get out.”

The boys reluctantly left. I went back to my flat top until I heard the front door close.

That was really all that happened that night. The dinner crowd was unusually quiet – probably because of my verbal attack on the kids who wanted me to watch their game. Watch. Sure.

Some guy tried to pay with a credit card and got real flustered with Shelly when she said we only take cash. I never understood why people got so upset – the sign on the front door said “CASH ONLY” and we even had an ATM at the counter.

People just get mad at small things – guess that’s the only way to put it.

Coach’s Place ran herself again that night. Shelly left around nine to go check on Laurie. Almost a year after to that day we would have to put Laurie in a special home for Alzheimer’s patients. Hardest thing I ever had to do.

The place could run without the two of them, but it just wasn’t as happy as it could have been. I probably wouldn’t have kicked out those boys if Laurie was there. I probably shouldn’t have.

The young waitress from years earlier was still around. I knew she would stick around after her first day. I can’t even begin to count how many new waitresses failed that little test with my grandkids. We closed the place down and I threw one last burgers on the flat top. I sat in a booth by the window with all the lights off except the one over the waitress stand. The dark didn’t make any difference to me. We always got first-time customers because everyone wanted to see the blind old man cook – they rarely came back. My place wasn’t a place for curious spectators. My place was for my family, my friends, and my boys.

8

It took me seven thousand steps to get from my house in the southwest corner of Kensington, to all of the front doors of every other house, and back to my front door. I took that walk with thirty-five copies of the newspaper in a sack on my back every Thursday. When I got too old to carry the papers, I sold *The Lantern* to a young man who vowed to run the paper just as I had for thirty years.

I delivered my papers in the winter, summer, and fall. I took the spring off to tend to my garden and rest my legs. The real reason I started the paper was because my husband was bedridden during a basketball season and couldn’t make it to the games. As I was the one who stayed home and tended to him, we would have to wait for a neighbor to remember to come by the house after the game to relive the action and tell him the score. That was back when Coach was in charge. That meant the boys were

winning and everyone in town would be at the diner after the game. With all of the celebrating and the location of our house, my husband would sometimes have to wait for morning to come to hear about the game from a forgetful neighbor. I don't think they forgot as much as they were too lazy to stop by the house. No matter which neighbor it was, they would always have to go out of their way to come over – just the costs of being the farthest house from Third Street I suppose.

Anyway, I decided that that town needed a way to stay informed without having to rely on forgetful neighbors. The next week, I went to the game and took detailed notes. I had never been to a game when Coach was in charge. I used to go when I was in high school, but that had been thirty years prior. Watching Coach was more exciting than watching the game.

When he coached, he wrote novels. Now, I don't mean to say that he was writing literature while the boys played. What I mean to say is that he took notes in a small black book. After every play and every whistle, Coach would be scribbling something in his book. That was while the boys were on the court. When Coach wanted to talk to the boys, he would slowly rise out of his chair, nod to the referee, and the game would be stopped. When I was in high school, this usually meant that the band would begin to play and a few cheerleaders would jump across the floor. But when Coach spoke, everyone in the gym craned their necks and turned their ears toward Coach. We all wanted to hear what he had to say.

I don't recall a single time Coach yelled during a game. The opposing coaches were so often drenched in sweat after spending the game pacing and yelling at their players. Coach simply sat on the end of the bench, wrote in his book, and reacted calmly to everything that happened. Coach's most famous speech happened when the boys were on the verge of getting knocked out of the state tournament by a team from the city. There was less than a minute left in the game and we were down by six points. When he asked for a timeout, I rushed behind the bench to get every word. It was journalistic gold.

"It's getting pretty loud in here boys. I mean, I could barely hear the whistle for the timeout. I just wanted to stop the game for a second because I have a few questions for you boys. I have some notes in this book here, but I'm having trouble with something and I can't get my mind off it.

"You see, my brother, he lives in Ohio, he just asked me to be the godfather of his newborn baby. I've been thinking that this is a great opportunity and that I should, of course, take it. But as I'm watching you boys play, I'm beginning to realize something.

"I don't want to be anyone's godparent. I think asking someone to be a godparent is actually insulting. A godparent has to take care of the kid if the parents die. So naturally, the parents can't be with the godparents when they die because then everyone would be dead with no one left to take care of the kid. Therefore, a godparent has to be someone who will most likely never be with the parents. The parents have to choose someone who will never be with them thus choosing a sub-par friend as a godparent. So this could either be my brother's way of telling me that he doesn't like me very much or this is his way of making sure we don't spend too much time together in case something tragic happens and we all die.

"Anyway, that's just what I've been thinking about while I watch you boys play. I mean, this is a big time decision. Basketball is one thing. All of the bouncing and tossing the bouncy thing into a circle. That's all great. But someday, you boys are going to have to sit your brother down and tell him you don't want to be his kid's godparent. Man, that's some real-world shit. Alright, I'll talk to you boys when the game ends in a minute."

The boys came back to score seven points in the last minute and win the game. They would eventually go on to win another state championship.

I had been printing *The Lantern* and covering all of the games for a few seasons by then and it was customary for Coach to find me after the game for one question. He was always clear that I could ask one question and he would give one answer.

"Coach, we all heard your speech at the end of the game. I have it all right here. Is it alright if I print it in Thursday's paper?"

"Be careful now," he warned, "because that sounded like a question. You know you only get one."

"Right. No, that wasn't my question. My question is...well, I don't know quite how to say this...I want to know if...what I'm trying to ask is...okay just what the hell was that?"

He laughed and said, "We all needed to relax. Things were getting pretty serious out there and I thought I could put all of the seriousness into perspective. I mean, it's great that we won, but I am disappointed that I still don't know what to do with my brother." He then smiled and walked away.

The crowd at the diner that night was as loud as ever. There were arguments about the game and about what Coach should do about the godfather situation. We all ate burgers greasy enough to incapacitate us for the night and argued with each other with the smell of onions on our breath. That was the Kensington I like to remember.

The best part of the night was when I found Laurie alone at the hostess stand. I wanted to get her opinion on what she thought her husband should do about his brother's newborn.

"Coach doesn't have a brother," she said.

9

I stepped on the bus and walked straight to the back. As I walked down the aisle no one looked at me and I looked at no one. I got to the farthest seat, the one that only fits one person, and stared at the fat kid in it until he moved.

Before I continue, there are some things you should know. I'm bipolar, very bipolar. If a person could be more than just bipolar, that person would be me. Also, I fall in love easily and often. Usually with the same girl. Finally, I lie – a lot. I lie sometimes without even knowing it. Sometimes I say things like *honestly* or *to tell you the truth*, but that usually means that I'm lying. But for your sake, I'll try to be honest. To tell you the truth, everything I say from now on will be the truth, honestly.

I got off the bus when it arrived at the school and I made my way to my first class. I could tell you the details of my morning walk to class, but in retrospect, the details are pointless. I got to English, assumed my usual spot in the back of class, and put up my hood. I always thought best when I had my hood up and didn't have the distractions of the dumb kids next to me. They were the ones who always spoke in class. They always had something to say regardless of the situation.

I never responded to their statements as a reply probably would have resulted in the teacher wanting to either kick my ass or worse, hear more of my reasoning. I would have taken the ass-kicking. It's not that I'm afraid to give my opinion, I just hate saying things out loud. I guess that particular day was the day we had to present our Shakespeare speeches. Apparently, we each had to pick a monologue from Julius Caesar and present it from memory. I had no idea that we had to do this so I waited for as long as I could to present. Finally, only two minutes of class remained and I thought surely I was off the hook.

Looking straight ahead down the row in front of me, I looked at the back of Kris's head. She was busy reading one of her romance novels. She was always reading. In nearly every class she would sit in the front row and bury her nose into some book or she'd be scribbling away at a yellow legal pad. She always looked busy. I'm sure the red hair didn't help. At the time, she had long, red hair that reached the middle of her back. She said it was strawberry blonde but I never understood what a fruit had to do with her

hair. Anyway, she changed her hair all the time so it really wasn't worth trying to figure out the color of the week. In fact, it gave me a great excuse to say something to her. I stared at her as I tried to think of something creative to say about her hair. Then, I tried to remember if I already said something about the current fruity-red style. She always made me second-guess myself without even trying.

"Hawking, you're next," said Ms. Knight. Damn it. I needed to stop thinking about Kris in the middle of class.

"Alright. Let's see how this goes."

I decided to go with something better than Caesar and that was when the bipolar came out. I removed my hood, stood up straight, and smiled.

"Alas! Poor Yorick. I knew him Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He had borne me on his back a thousand times and now how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I had kissed I know not how oft'."

And with this, I grabbed Kris sitting in the front row and kissed her. Not just a peck on the cheek. I picked her up out of her seat, leaned her over and really kissed her. Poor Kris just blushed and sat back down while the rest of the class seemed too shocked to even chuckle. Kris was the only person I ever loved. She was unattainable though.

"Hawking!" said my teacher.

I turned to her, smirked, and continued.

"Where be your gibes now?"

"That is enough!"

"Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar."

With this I playfully nudged Kris's chin and walked out the door. English class was good that day.

Prematurely leaving class eventually caught up with me and I ended up in the assistant principal's office. It was her last year before retirement and she was trigger happy with the detention slips. I didn't really care about detention – just more time to read in quiet.

"Hello Hawking, I trust you know why I called you in today." First mistake lady, don't trust anything around me.

"I have no idea. Why?"

"You don't know? Well your English teacher, Ms. Knight, called me and told me that you kissed another student during class and then left without permission."

“Okay.” I had noticed the poster on the wall next to me that read, “God gave you two ears and only one mouth for a reason,” and I wasn’t paying much attention to the yapping woman because I was caught up on the idea of God *giving* me ears and a mouth. To be honest I was also caught up on the idea of God in general. That’s a detail that doesn’t really matter though.

“So are you admitting to kissing a student and leaving class without permission?”

“You talk a lot.” This will be good.

“Excuse me?” That’s right lady, take the bait.

“I said that I think you talk a lot. I mean, that poster on your wall, it applies to you too right?”

Silence. It was working.

“So do you have another mouth somewhere or do you just get to talk a lot because you believe that you can intimidate anyone who walks in here? Allowing you to say whatever it is you want to hear yourself say.”

She attempted to say something but wasn’t sure which point to attack first.

“In all actuality, I kissed a friend of mine and then walked out of class not ten seconds before the bell rang. Is that so terrible? Did I disrupt the learning environment? Was learning even occurring while I gave my speech? Quite chap-fallen?”

“Chap-fallen?”

“Yeah, it’s from Hamlet. You should read it. There’s a crazy lady so you’d like it. Have a nice weekend.”

Just like that, I made it out of her office without a scratch. She’ll probably remember *that* meeting for a while. I walked out of her office with a smile and a bit of a strut and didn’t know it at the time, but that would be one of my last smiles.

I got on the bus to go home and found my usual seat in the back. As the bus left the school I watched the rest of the seniors make their way to the senior parking lot. I would have driven home in my car but three weeks earlier, I leant my car to my cousin who needed to drive to Detroit for something. No one had heard from him since he left and I accepted the fact that I probably wouldn’t see my car again.

10

A thousand things ran through my mind when I tried to give her the flowers. All that came out was “Here.” She seemed confused as to why I

was giving the flowers to her. She also seemed like she didn’t know who I was. Maybe if she knew how much trouble I went through to get her the damn things she would have actually said more than “uhh...thanks.”

A few weeks before that I was walking back to the school to get a book that I forgot to bring home. I lived on the southeast side of town. It was as far away from the school as you could get without leaving Kensington. Instead of walking directly north from my house and then turning left when I got to the church, I decided to take the shortcut and cut through some back yards as I headed northwest. It was much shorter but it meant I had to risk seeing people. I avoided interaction whenever possible. It wasn’t that I didn’t like people. It was just that I didn’t know how to talk to anyone. I always felt so awkward towards the end of the conversation. I never knew when to walk away. Usually I just stood there until the other person left. I guess I just never had enough things to say to keep a conversation with someone.

It was getting dark outside as I began to cut through back yards. I was careful not to go near any houses of kids I knew. That way if anyone saw me they might not know my name.

I was walking past Lindsay Masterson’s house when I saw her silhouette in a downstairs window. She was a year ahead of me in school but everyone knew who she was. She was the only girl confident enough to wear a bikini in the summer time when she walked into the market. Everyone else covered themselves immediately after they got out of the lake. I remember reading that Updike story about the girl who walks into the store in a bikini in Ms. Knight’s freshman English class. That was Lindsay, always walking around like she wasn’t the center of attention when everyone was busy staring at her.

I froze in the middle of the street and just watched her window. I don’t know how long I was standing there but at some point the street lights came on. I made sure to stay in a shadow. Almost immediately after the lights came on, Lindsay walked to her window and opened her blinds. The lights were on inside the room. I watched her as she walked away from the window towards her desk. She sat down and began to braid her wet, black hair. She must have just gotten out of the shower.

She pulled the braid that started at the top of her head tight against her scalp. When she was done with her hair, she began putting on makeup. I laughed and thought about the Shakespeare lines her brother recited that day. I wasn’t in the class, but the whole school heard about him kissing the girl who writes all the romance novels. He never said it, but it was the same passage that Hamlet explains that Ophelia could put on makeup all she

wanted but she was just as beautiful without it. Lindsay was like that. She didn't need makeup.

Lindsay was putting deep black lines of eyeliner out past the ends of her eyes. It made it look like she had a perpetual smile. When she turned toward the window with her pale face and black outlined eyes, she looked just like Audrey Hepburn. I remember feeling bad that I was comparing her to two dead women...even if one was fictional.

She stood in front of the window facing the street. I was off at a bit of an angle so she would have had to turn to her left in order to see me. Of course that would be in the daylight. I was wearing dark clothes and was still in the shadows. I kept looking across the street to see what she was staring at. It was already too dark for me to see anything that the streetlights didn't touch. I must have been standing there for hours.

Just as I was turning around to go home, Lindsay started to cry. She was just standing there in her room, in plain view, with black tears running down her face. Her big white robe was turning black around the collar. The thing that I found so odd was that she made no effort to wipe her tears. It was like she put on makeup just to cry. Just the sight made me want to cry.

Without noticing, I guess I was slowly moving toward her window. I realized I was walking, in some sort of trance, when I stumbled on a sprinkler head in her front yard. I began to leave because I was afraid of a girl who could just cry for no reason at all.

As I was walking away, a car turned around the corner behind me and illuminated everything. Out of pure reaction, I turned toward the headlights and then immediately towards Lindsay's window. The car turned into her driveway and Lindsay immediately turned off her light. I started running.

Heading home, I tripped twice and cut my forehead on a mailbox. I don't remember getting home but I know I woke up to an empty house and I cleaned my forehead myself. On any other morning I would have wondered where my family was but I was too worried that Lindsay or the person in the car had seen me.

After a hot shower I came to the conclusion that Lindsay saw me fall on the mailbox and helped me to my house. That was why I bought her the flowers. After I handed them to her at her locker the next day and saw her look of confusion and embarrassment, I realized that she never saw me.

I knew that I would never get her to talk to me after that. She didn't know who I was to begin with and flowers for no reason are never a

good thing. It took me two months to get the nerve to talk to her again. I said something mean about putting on makeup to cry.

I never should have said anything. I never should have done anything. I left town a year later. Staying there wasn't worth the diploma. The fires started that summer anyway. It was good that I left.

11

One of the Hawkings was a very quiet person. I never truly got to know this one until he took me to a basketball game one Friday night in the winter. We both lived close enough to the school to walk to the game but he insisted on driving. It turned out well though because that night there was a terrible snow storm.

When Hawking arrived at my house he got out of the car and ran to the passenger side to open the door for me. He left the engine running and instinctively reached inside my door and hit the automatic lock just before he shut it. He ran back around the car and slipped on a patch of ice in my driveway and fell flat on his back. I rushed out to check on him but by the time I got out of the car, he was already standing up and brushing off the snow from his behind. Had it been a scene in one of my books, the woman protagonist would have taken him inside, put on a pot of coffee, and striped him down to get him out of his wet clothes. The rest would continue like any other romance novel should.

But my life was never a romance novel. Thank God. Instead, he fell, I got out of the car, he stood up, and I closed the door. I locked us out of his car. I felt terribly about it and offered to have my mom's boyfriend come out and break into his car. He shook off that idea before I finished my sentence.

I couldn't tell if he was angry at me or upset that what he thought was a date had begun so awfully. But either way, he looked like he was on the verge of tears. I played up the innocent girl act and looked up at him from under my long eyelashes – a fantastic trait I inherited from my mom – hugged him, and apologized. He hugged me back, although he hung on much too long, and hesitantly asked if it would be okay if we walked to the game. I laughed and agreed even though I wanted nothing more than to get into a warm car. I'm glad it all happened though, he had Christmas music blaring in the car. So loud that I could distinctly hear Bing Crosby claiming that "There's no place like home for the holidays." It was barely November. I asked Hawking why he listened to Christmas music so early and he said something stupid like "Oh I've loved Christmas since I was a kid."

What kid didn't love Christmas and the fantastical lies of a bearded octogenarian who exploited dwarf labor? I decided from an early age that I'd tell my kids that Santa is a woman. I just didn't think patriarchy should tell *my* kids what lies to believe. My kids, my lies.

Anyway, I didn't want to hurt Hawking's feelings so I smiled and said how sweet it was that he was a child at heart. He wasn't just a child at heart though – he was a child in every aspect of his life.

Hawking didn't listen to Christmas music in October because he loved Christmas. He just wanted to love Christmas. He wanted to be the person who was known for loving something so much that he prepared for it more than two months in advance. Christmas was just an easy thing to pretend to love.

We made it to the game and didn't talk much while we were there. It was really loud and there was just no use trying to have a conversation. I felt sorry for Hawking though – I could tell that he really liked me and going to a basketball game was definitely not the right idea for a first date. But everyone went to the basketball games and although Hawking never did anything anyone else did, going to Kensington basketball games was mandatory of all residents.

When we walked back home after the game we took the long route so we could stop by Hawking's house to get the spare key to his car that was still sitting in my driveway. It ended up being out of gas by the time we got back to my house and Hawking had to get it towed anyway. I think he just wanted to spend more time walking with me.

When we got to his house, Hawking took me in through the garage but just as I was beginning to struggle to get my boots off, he hesitantly said "I'll be right back" and ran inside and closed the door. I would have stood out in the dark garage had Hawking's sister, Lindsay, not opened the door for me. She invited me into the house and I wasn't at all surprised by the look of it. We were in Kensington. Everyone had roughly the same income and if someone was splendidly rich or devastatingly poor, the town would know about it.

"Lindsay, right?" I remembered seeing her at school a few times.

"Yes. And I know you're Kris. Hawking talks about you all the time." I smiled.

Before I could tell her how pretty she looked in her fluffy, white bathrobe and dark, black eyeliner, Hawking ran downstairs just as fast as he ran inside from the garage and we immediately left to head back to my house.

He could sense that the date hadn't gone very well and as we got closer and closer to my house, Hawking's right hand came increasingly closer to my left. I knew what he was trying to do but I had no time for a serious relationship and I didn't know the boy well enough to answer my mom's questions about him if she saw us returning home holding hands. By the time we got to my driveway, Hawking's hand was straight out from his side at almost a perfect forty-five degree angle. He looked ridiculous.

After I brought him the phone to call the tow truck and right before we saw the truck turn down my street, I lifted myself onto my toes and kissed his cheek. I figured he had gone through enough trauma after taking me on the worst date in history so I kissed him out of pity. He was still a nice boy – he was just going to be too much of a hassle to continue dating.

I remember looking through the blinds in my living room window and seeing him slumped in the passenger seat of the tow truck. He looked exhausted. With his sock hat pulled down half-way covering his eyes and his scarf wrapped around his neck to cover his mouth, I knew the kid must have been crying.

12

Years later, when Kensington was falling apart, Tim walked into my diner after one of his basketball practices. Shelly and I were wrapping silverware in a booth in the back. The diner was empty. We were between the breakfast and dinner hours.

"What's on the menu today pops?"

"Oh don't be smart. Burgers. It's always burgers. How were the boys today?"

"Practiced like shit."

"Watch your mouth," said Shelly. He sat down in the booth next to his aunt and started to roll silverware. He looked exhausted.

"Sorry," he said, and kissed her on the cheek. He was still breathing hard and I could tell by the smell that he was wearing the same white practice shirt that I used to have the boys wear. The practice shirts were always thrown into the washing machine in the locker room after practice, but someone always forgot to add the soap. So the shirts were just rinsed and always retained the smell of diluted sweat. The white shirts used to have the school's ram logo in the middle with a basketball drawn awkwardly at its feet. There were seven maroon stars in a circle around the ram by that time – one for each state championship. Tim saw me coach all seven of the wins – he even played in two of them. It had been a long time since Kensington saw a state championship.

“I know you’ve got a lot of pressure coming from the community to make the count eight. But you just worry about making the boys better.”

“It’s not that easy dad. I know I’m qualified to do it, but in their eyes, I’m not you.”

“So what? They can’t coach. You are the best we have.”

“What about you?” – He was yelling.

“What about me? I’m no good anymore.” – I kept my voice soft and low. I always hated when Tim got this upset about basketball. I’m sure I was just as stressed before the season began but after being away from the game for a few years, I realized how unnecessary all the stress really was. But the kid did have a lot of pressure on him. Mostly it came from the community – those die-hard fans that knew very little about basketball but became fans after we won three state titles in four years. They were tired of losing. That year’s team had a strong senior class and was expected to win. But Tim made the mistake of getting too caught up in all of the hype. He was screaming at me in my own diner. A level-headed Tim would never have done that.

“Alright boys,” Shelly spoke up, “we’ve got a big crowd coming in and if we don’t wrap this stuff up then I’m going to have to do it on my own.” Tim and I lowered our heads and wrapped the rest of the silverware.

The following night’s game was the season opener for Tim and the Rams. I made the promise to the program as part of my retirement speech that after every win they could come in that night and eat for free. The opener was always an easy game – usually against a smaller-town team – so nine free meals were almost inevitable.

The dinner crowd was huddled around the front door as I walked from the back to unlock it. It was 5 pm so I didn’t even bother putting burgers on the flat top. That was always the extent of my dinner. Hamburgers. Cheeseburgers. Fries. Onion rings. Want something else? Go somewhere else.

The early dinner crowd were all friends from school. Guys I used to teach with and their wives. Women I used to teach with and their husbands. My place was less of a restaurant and more of a hang-out – people enjoyed catching up with everyone. If I knew them, they could stay and relax. If I didn’t know them, a check was presented with their meals. They were old, like me, and were hungry. The thing is, we were old, but not *that* old. We didn’t want greasy burgers and fries at 5. I cracked a few eggs and started to make a batch of lazy omelets.

I had an excess of green peppers so I threw those in the mix. Shelly started to seat people, the regulars didn’t wait, they just bellied up to the

counter. Laurie had some appointment so she couldn’t come in that night. When she said she wouldn’t be coming in, that just meant she’d come in late. She just said it that way so I wouldn’t ask her what time.

Onions? No, I saved the onions for the rings for the late crowd.

“What’s in it today coach?”

“Well hello there,” I said to my youngest granddaughter, Beth.

Tim’s youngest. The waffle one.

“What’s up?”

“You mean, ‘How are you?’”

“Yeah-”

“Yes.”

“Yes, sorry. How are you my dear old grandfather?”

“You better watch it, or I’ll put mushrooms in it.”

She laughed and probably made some kind of disgusted face.

Barry, a newly retired history teacher began where Beth left off.

“Yeah coach, what are you feeding us today?”

“Filet mignon. Bacon-wrapped. With an apple butter reduction sauce.”

I felt Barry’s confused stare.

I laughed at him. “You may be an old retired guy now, but you’re still just as foolish as the day that kid gave you a fake hall pass.”

“That was my first day!”

“Second.”

“Okay second. But still, how should I have known?”

“Everybody listen!” I shouted. Shelly looked up and hit the cowbell over the waitress stand. People liked to listen to my stories and we needed a way to get their attention.

“My friend Barry here is newly retired. Hold your applause, please.” Laughter. Barry probably sank in his chair, his wife probably smiled and kissed his cheek.

“On Barry’s first day teaching with me at the high school, the two of us were walking from the cafeteria to our offices.

“Well while we were walking, some kid, probably 30 by now, was walking around going no place in particular. Barry, probably wanting to show off for me, stopped the boy and asked him for a hall pass. The kid reached into his back pocket and produced a hall pass. Barry looked at it, sighed, and gave it back to the kid.

“I stopped the kid again and asked for the pass. And guess who signed it? None other than Ronald Reagan.” Laughter. His wife clapped with the rest of the crowd and I’m sure Barry covered his face.

“Now Barry, there’s something I never told you about that day. When I handed the boy back his hall pass after pretending to take down his name, I also handed him a dollar.” Barry looked at me, standing at the flat top, yelling the story over my shoulder and cooking the mixture of what had become eggs, green peppers, ham, and potatoes – and was confused.

“That’s right buddy, the kid was in on it. And that *kid*, if I heard Shelly greeting him correctly, is here now. Brandon? You in here?”

Brandon DiGiullien, the fire chief at the time stood up and must have waved. My diners clapped and resumed their own conversations. Brandon walked over and shook Barry’s hand. Barry was still in shock.

I opened the small refrigerator under my counter and grabbed Barry a beer. I didn’t serve beer, but I kept a few under the counter for the times I embarrassed people with a cowbell story.

Whenever a guest asked for a beer, Shelly always said, “Sorry, Coach has to publically humiliate you before I can grab you one of those. How about some iced tea?” Other waitresses just said that we don’t serve alcohol. And it was true, I hated having alcohol around. Only kept it in case I ever made fun of some closet lunatic. It was my defense mechanism.

I guess refusing to serve alcohol was just out of fear. I hated what it did to people. Took control of them. Maybe it was just me, but I liked being in control. I made a joke out of it just like I did with the pancakes – if you want a beer, there’s three bars down the street. If you want to be drunk, go do it somewhere else. The only person allowed to be drunk in my diner was Hemingway – and he was long dead.

13

I tried to cry when Hawking saw my bare head. I tried. But I couldn’t. I was upset after his cousin left town so soon after he found out about me and I needed someone to turn to. His cousin only found out because wigs have a funny way of falling off in the backseat of a car.

I knew Hawking was interested in me so it seemed like the logical step. Looking back, it was my greatest moment of weakness. I used to pride myself on my strength. I was strong enough to go through a sickness like this and to keep it a secret. I was strong enough to stop his cousin that night in the car and keep it a secret. Secrets are rare in Kensington.

Hawking was coming over to work on some homework and I thought I’d have him come into my bedroom. Even as I explain it I am failing to see the logic. I was young and sad that the only boy who knew my secret had left town. I guess I wanted to get back at him. I wasn’t going to try anything with Hawking. The thing is, Hawking was a poor choice to

take out my little act of vengeance on. He was unassuming and innocent – at least that day he came into my room. Sometimes he could surprise me. Like when he kissed me in Ms. Knight’s English class. Or when he kept answering Coach when he was our English substitute. Hawking was never the same person for two consecutive days and when you wanted one Hawking to show up, he never did. Or worse, the Hawking that you definitely did not want to show up was the one who did.

I needed the Hawking from those two days in English class to show up to my house that night. I needed the Hawking from that night to be the one who drove Rachel to my reading and I needed a Hawking who simply didn’t exist to comfort me when my wig fell off.

He never told anyone about it and we did go on that terrible date a few months later, but I’m sure that if he would have handled that night in my room better, everything would have been different.

I found out that I was sick when I was twelve. My mother took me into the city after the doctor in town didn’t know what to do about my constant migraines. We went to the city and into one of the many hospitals there. I had to trust my mom when she told me it was a hospital. It really looked like the mile-long building on the south side of Kensington had been stood up on its side. After my first brain scan, it was decided that I’d be staying in the city indefinitely. I remember that word because I had to ask my mom what it meant. I then spent hours writing it on a piece of paper with a pen that a nurse gave me. I liked the way my writing looked on the paper.

I know now that they found a growth on my brain that was cancerous. They removed it a week later and I went through about six years of chemotherapy. In the first surgery, they ran into some complications which warranted two more surgeries. I spent almost six months in the hospital in the city.

After my first surgery, Coach’s wife, Laurie, came to the hospital on a daily basis. She taught me how to play cards and introduced me to those awful midday soap operas that seem to do nothing but put you to sleep. She would fall asleep every time. I, on the other hand, watched them intently. I was drawn to the way the actresses never made eye contact with the actors or even each other. Instead, they looked just above and to the left of the camera. Sitting in the bed with Laurie to my right, I was convinced that the women were looking at her.

This fixation on soap operas is what led to my interest in romance novels. When I started writing in my hospital bed, I didn't realize that I was writing romance. I thought it was a soap opera.

One day, when Laurie fell asleep at my bedside, I picked up the book she was reading instead of watching a rerun of *All My Children*, she was always so careful not to let me pick it up. I was initially intrigued only by the cover of the book – the man with bulging muscles carrying the woman who wore only a bed sheet. I picked it up because I knew I shouldn't. As I began to read, though, I couldn't understand why Laurie wouldn't let me read it. It sounded just like the soap operas and just like the stories I was writing.

Everything changed when I got to the second chapter. I understood why I shouldn't have picked it up. I understood why Laurie couldn't put it down. And I understood what my stories were missing.

The rest of the romance writing continued as you would think it should. I wrote until my mom picked up a story that I left sitting out. I then promised to stop writing until Laurie and my mom sat me down and told me to keep going. They told me that I had some talent and that they would never be ashamed of me. So on it went until books were published and I eventually left for college.

Looking back, staying in Kensington would have been a nightmare. Hawking would have worn me out and his cousin would have slipped the rumor about my sickness to someone. I'm sure they know now, but then again, who's left in Kensington that still remembers me?

14

I had to get away from Kensington without bothering anyone. It wasn't that I wanted to run away from anyone, I just didn't want to inconvenience anyone. There was too much stuff going wrong in town and I felt like I was just taking up space. I figured going into the city would bring a new world with new things to do. There was also a girl there who was falling in love with me.

I told my cousin, a senior in high school, that I needed to borrow his car for a few days. He didn't mind. He had bigger things to worry about. The kid had two friends, his dogs. What was he going to do with a car? Go see his other non-existent friends?

I didn't have much of a plan for how or where I'd live once I got to the city. After a few days of driving around and living out of Hawking's car, I found a group of guys replacing a roof on a house about ten minutes out of the city. They let me help only after I lied and said that I had roofing

experience. I picked it up pretty quickly and became what the boss called an "independent contractor."

Essentially I would wait for a phone call early in the morning for the address of the house that they needed help on. The theory was good but eventually the mornings without calls outnumbered those with calls. I needed money.

I saved enough for first and last month's rent on a horrible little place above a dry cleaning place. It was originally a two-bedroom flat, but the owner installed a wall right down the middle to double his income. My side was a bedroom, kitchen, and half living room. The other guy got a bedroom, bathroom, and the other half of the living room. I was allowed to use the employee bathroom downstairs. My shower was the sink.

My biggest obstacle was my own pride. The longer I lived in the city, the more I realized how easy life was in Kensington. I was cold and hungry, but full of pride. I had pride in my stupidity.

My search for money became my reason for living simply because it was my method for living. After a random afternoon of working for the same roofer, another worker asked me to deliver a package for him. Apparently he knew where I lived and figured I wouldn't mind dropping something off on my way home.

"Mail it," I said.

"I'd rather not."

"So it's illegal."

"No, but it's safer not to use the government to deliver my stuff."

"Because they'd confiscate it."

"Because it's a lot of money."

"It costs too much to send or the package is worth a lot of money?"

"Yeah." He smirked, put the package at my feet, and slipped a fifty into my hand.

And so I became a transporter.

In the early days, my services would travel by word of mouth. I'd get a call with an amount of money and a location and I'd accept or decline. If I declined, the call would be forgotten. If I accepted, I would tell the person on the other end a date, time, and location for the pick-up.

It was all money. Usually dirty money but I'd never ask. I figured that if someone didn't want to deliver money themselves, they were probably involved in something illegal. That's where the goods transporters came in. I stayed away from those guys. Essentially just pimps and dealers.

During the drop-off of money from the caller to me, the caller would slip me some cash. The amounts would vary and were based solely

upon what the caller, I called them “Charlies,” thought I deserved. I always thought it was funny that they called the guys who slept with hookers “Johns” and I wanted a name for my customers, too. Anyway, the idea behind not having a set price was that the better the Charlie paid, the more likely I’d be to transport for him in the future.

A Charlie who shorted me on a previous transaction may have shown up with his package and, upon my noticing who he was, found the drop site to be abandoned. It was my little method of keeping costs at my desired level.

Eventually the money amounts got bigger and my business became electronic. I had an old man working my phones. He was an ex-banker who was relatively trustworthy and knew the system. It also helped that I had some leverage on him. He knew my account number but would never risk hacking it. I knew his granddaughter Kris back in Kensington and was the only person outside her family who knew she was sick. I guess it was a big family secret that I found out about when we were fooling around my senior year. We both went our separate ways from there. It wasn’t worth the risk to him to let the family secret out. Apart from the blackmailing, the two of us actually had a good working relationship. We worked well together.

He’d get a call and ask the amount from the Charlie. The old man would then call me, stating the amount, and would wait for my answer.

“No,” meant hang up on the Charlie on the other end. I wasn’t interested. But any numeric response was a “yes.”

The number was my cost. The Charlie would then pay the old man the transferred amount and my costs. I’d find the person who was getting paid and obtain their account number so I could transfer the money. The old man would then transfer the money into the business account where I would withdraw my costs and transfer the rest into the new owner’s account, completing the process.

The old man was a crafty banker in his day so he was pretty capable when he created the business account. It had a base amount of five hundred grand which was fixed. If any amount of the five hundred was touched, the account would collapse. Additionally, if anyone but me got into the account by guessing my pin number, the account would also collapse. I could then hire some “independent contractors” to deal with the hackers.

It all happened within the course of three months. That’s when Hawking found his way back into my life and essentially ruined everything.

My senior year of high school was coming to a close. It was nearly summer time and I was itching for the nearing summer to end. That’s an odd thought to be honest. I wanted something that hadn’t started yet to end. Anyway, I wanted to get away from home. It’s not that I didn’t like being home, I just wanted to move on with my life. Summer time in Kensington was unlike anything else. The colors in the sky just before the sun went down were enough to make you want to sit under a tree and read for hours. My favorite place to read was up on the hill that overlooked the lake. It was the same hill where I found Kris the previous year writing one of her books.

We were talking and flirting for awhile so I found her up on the hill and we watched the sunset. Looking back, it was rather amusing. I kissed her, she blushed, she kissed me, I smiled.

Losing Kris is my only regret about my life in Kensington. She was smart. Unbelievably smart. She had this deal with most of her teachers that she could do whatever she wanted in class as long as she sat in the front row. Most of the time she would read. She read those almost-stereotypical romance novels with the half-naked women on the cover being pulled by shirtless men. The teachers knew how much of a genius she was. She wrote a few of her own romance novels under the pen name Constance Confines. I could go on for hours about the beauty of that name. But for the sake of this, my interpretation of her pen name is rather useless. Anyway, a few of the teachers had some of her dirty books. She would never admit it of course, but I did see *Hawk’s Dream by Constance Confines* in an unassuming pile on Ms. Knight’s desk one time.

I think that’s why I fell for Kris so quickly. She was so different. There is something so intriguing about a girl who acts in a way contrary to what a person knows as “girl.” She could manipulate the heavens out of me. Honestly, there was no one after her that would ever compare. One time, during a party at her house, I sat at her feet while a few of us watched a movie. Out of nowhere, she started to play with my hair. She was petting my head and playing with the short hairs on the nape of my neck. After the movie was over, people started to leave and I asked if I should spend the night.

She looked at me like I had asked a horrifying and terrible question.

“No, that’s probably not a good idea.”

“Okay. Sorry for asking.” I wasn’t sorry. All I wanted was to sleep near her. No sex. Just lying together.

“It’s fine. I had fun tonight. Thanks for coming.” She slammed the gavel. I lost.

She was so different. I wanted her simply for that reason.

I'll never forget the time she invited me into her bedroom when I was over to work on a school project. I arrived early and she had just gotten out of the shower. When I knocked on the front door, it swung lazily open and I heard her calling for me to come in and come upstairs.

I walked into her bedroom and sat on her bed. The bed sat immediately to the left when I walked into the room. I remember being confused as to why anyone would sleep with their head towards the door. It just seemed different.

When I walked in, Kris faced away from me. She was straightening her hair and looking into a vanity mirror above her dresser. She wore a pair of black yoga pants and two unmatched socks. Her bare back was exposed to me.

I could see her smile and nod in the mirror. Acknowledging me.

I looked down at the side of the bed and peered into the pink, wire waste basket near my feet. Two receipts. One for a pair of yoga pants, \$13.95, and one, a purchase only three minutes later, for a tin of chocolate covered pretzels and a Cosmopolitan magazine, \$9.70. The pretzels must have been individually wrapped as six small, white wrappers littered the basket. I looked back at Kris still fixing her hair. Three finger lines of melted chocolate streaked her behind.

Also in the waste basket was the empty box of her birth control pills. The box was smashed flat and rolled up so it could fit through the opening of an empty Coke bottle. The only reason I knew it was a pill box was the color. A white, otherwise unassuming cardboard box, save the familiar pale pink and bold green sporadic stripes. This same color scheme frequently appeared on television commercials on nearly every major channel.

An empty nail polish bottle sat upside down at the bottom. Remnants of the jet-black polish were clumped on the inside of the bottle. Looking back at Kris's feet, I could see ten black dots of polish bleeding through her one white sock and one yellow sock.

Papers that were once stapled together were scattered both inside and outside the basket. An essay by Kris Daniels on "Underlying anti-feminine themes in Conrad's Heart of Darkness."

The pages were unmarked by Ms. Knight's notorious red pen except the note "Flawless" on the last page.

I started to ask her about the essay but as I looked up, whatever she was using to straighten her hair clamped onto her hair too tight. When she pulled her hand away, her wig fell to the floor, exposing her bare head. She

began to cry but before I could comfort her she calmly asked me to leave. I had no idea she was sick. No one did. I even asked a few people around town if they knew.

I think things really would have been different if things had worked out with Kris. But that pretty much sums up my experiences with girls – at least girls I've been interested in. I mean, I've had my opportunities to have sex with some girls but I'm not trying to just jump into bed with anyone.

16

Back when I first opened the diner, Brandon DiGiullien walked in after we were closed for the night. I was fixing my dinner – an over-done burger and some fries. I liked my burger so charred that I could drop it and it would shatter. Dinner at midnight was something I began to look forward to. It meant that I had made it through another day without chopping a finger off or serving an onion on a bun instead of a burger. These are the kinds of things that a blind short-order cook has to worry about. I miss those days.

"We're closed," I shouted over my shoulder.

"I know Coach," said Brandon. "Just wanted to talk."

Brandon played basketball for me toward the end of my coaching career. He was one of those kids who scared other people when he walked through the hallway at school or down Third Street at night. Just a big kid with one of those walks that made it seem like he wanted to warn people that he was coming. I'm sure the thought process was that, because he was so big and people were so easily afraid of him, if he sounded like a Clydesdale, people would be able to prepare themselves. Instead, his loud stomping sounded like a warning to all other pedestrians. The sad part was that he couldn't shoot the basketball. He grabbed rebounds and had a knack for fouling out of games, but he rarely scored.

"How are you Brandon?"

"Good-"

"Well..."

"Sorry. I'm well Coach. I just wanted to talk about my new job."

"I didn't know you got a job. Headed into the city?"

"No. I just got hired as a new firefighter."

"That's outstanding Brandon. I'm proud of you. In fact, I remember when we didn't have a fire station. We just had a few volunteer firemen who would run around with garden hoses. Not much of a crew, but then again, we didn't have fires like we do now. You would have thought that getting rid of all the bars would *decrease* crime."

“Anyway Coach, I just wanted to get your thoughts on a few things.”

“Go ahead.” I was just about finished with my burger and getting ready to move onto the fries.

“Well, I’ve wanted to be a fireman for a while now. I mean, it’s a good job and it pays well.”

“Don’t give me some argument about money Brandon. That’s not why we work.”

“It’s why some people work,” he responded.

“It’s why *most* people work. But you and I aren’t most people. Are we?”

“No.”

“What are we?” I was beginning to sound like a teacher.

He mumbled something in response.

“Louder Brandon.”

“Heroes.”

“That’s right. Heroes in the?”

“Strife.”

“Good. Are you smiling? Because I can’t tell anymore.”

“Yes Coach.” He heard that lecture on a yearly basis with the basketball team and probably a handful of times in my English class. When I taught or coached, I liked to toe the line between creating robots and nurturing freethinkers. Not an easy task and definitely one of those situations where one is often confused with the other. Brandon and most of my students enjoyed that lecture because it wasn’t really a lecture at all. It was different each time and even ended at a different destination each time I gave it. They enjoyed the discussion because it was a collective effort. Wherever we got, we got there together and as a result of one another. But that’s enough about teaching.

“Okay so go on. What’s the problem?”

“Well it’s fire. It’s hell. I’m willingly running into the closest thing we have to hell.”

“And that’s troublesome to you,” I guessed.

“Shouldn’t it be? Wouldn’t you have an issue with it?”

“I’d have an issue with the heat,” I joked.

“I’m talking about the principle of the action. Not the action itself Coach.”

“I know.” My fries were gone so I could think now.

“So what do you think?”

“What if it isn’t hell? What if that’s not what hell is? What if there is no hell?”

“There *has* to be a hell Coach.”

“There doesn’t *have* to be anything.”

“But the church – ”

“The church doesn’t know anything more than you or I know. We’ve all read the same book.”

“So you don’t believe in God?” He was getting upset.

“Brandon, I never said that. All I’m saying is that there are a lot of things in this world that we don’t know about. But that doesn’t mean we can just make things up to fill the void.”

“So you are against the church?” Now he wasn’t listening.

“I’m not saying that either. Listen to what I’m saying instead of planning your next question. All I’m saying is that I don’t know many things and I’m comfortable about that. And to answer your question about the church, I think church is a great place – a bunch of people getting together to talk about doing good things and being nice to each other. I can’t complain about that.”

“I think I see what you are saying.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah – ”

“Yes.”

“Sorry. Yes. So what do I do with this hell idea? Do I just pretend it doesn’t exist?”

“That could be problematic.”

“Why?”

“What if it does exist?”

“So now I’m stuck either way.”

“Why not just say ‘I don’t know’?” This silenced him for a moment. I walked into the kitchen and washed my hands.

“Brandon,” I called from behind the door, “are you afraid of me?”

“No,” he chuckled.

“Were you afraid of me before you met me?”

“Terrified.”

“And you laugh now because you had no reason to fear me...right?”

“Right.”

“So why be afraid of something that you don’t know about? I could have been the greatest coach you’ve ever had, I could have been the worst, or I could have been anything in between. You didn’t know until you

met me and played for me. You were going to find out eventually, so why fear it before it began?"

"I understand. Hell could be real or fake. Same with heaven or even God."

"As long as that's *your* interpretation of this conversation."

"It is."

"So what are you going to do?" I asked.

"I'm going to save lives. I'm not sure if hell is hot or if it even *is*. But that's not going to stop me from going to church."

"Fine with me."

"Like you said, as long as they keep talking about doing good and being good, it can't hurt."

"I didn't say that. You did."

"Thanks Coach."

When the church was burning after the deranged man who raped all of the women claimed to be the priest, I wondered for a moment why the fire department wasn't rushing to put out the flames. Brandon had been promoted to Fire Chief a year earlier and stopped going to church around the same time. I asked him why he stopped going to church and he said "they stopped being good."

Knives dug into my back when he said that. He wasn't saying it out of spite and he wasn't upset with me. He was in disbelief that his one-time place of worship was burning and was in even further disbelief when he realized that I was right. The problem was that I wasn't trying to be right. I was just trying to encourage him into the profession that he always wanted to pursue.

That night, as the church burned and the firemen sat still at the station, I missed the old Kensington. The Kensington that saw its people file out of my diner and into the church and then out of the church and back into my diner. All like little soldiers marching toward two places who were there for the good. We took two different paths, but the destination was always goodness. I missed that Kensington. I never saw it again.

17

I was on the hill behind the lake when Kensington began its quest to kill me. I'm sure that *quest* isn't the right word, but it was on that hill that I was truly happy for the first time. When I left the hill, the town closed in on me and got my sister instead.

The hill sat behind the lake and behind the church. Most people went to the top of the hill to drink or smoke or whatever it was that sixteen-year-olds did. They would sit on the hill at various heights so that, when looked at from a distance, the hill would look like a green and black chessboard. Green patches of grass and small groups of teenagers with their hoods on strategically placed so that they couldn't be heard by neighboring groups or recognized from a distance. It would appear as if it was imperative that the queen's bishop kept its identity a secret from the surrounding pawns.

Kris led me to the top of the hill and held my hand the entire way up. She told me not to make eye contact with the various hooded figures we passed during our climb. I'm not sure they would have recognized me or I them. They looked like ghosts and smelled like maple syrup.

"Why does it smell like maple syrup?" I asked.

"What?"

"Maple syrup. Everyone we passed on the way up here was smoking and it didn't smell like cigarette smoke."

"They weren't smoking cigarettes Hawking."

"Then what?"

"Pot."

"Oh. Right. I knew that. It must be a different kind than I am used to smelling," I lied.

"You don't have to lie."

"How many times have you been up here?" I needed to change the subject.

"I've never been here before."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"It's Kensington, Hawking. Everyone knows everything about everything. Look this way. Don't look toward the lake."

"Why not?"

"Because the lake is in Kensington. I don't want to be in Kensington tonight."

She stared off into the darkness while I thought of the next thing to say. To be honest, talking with Kris was never easy. I could plan what I was going to say days before and I could usually get halfway through my memorized lines before she said something like "I don't want to be in Kensington tonight."

There was nowhere else to be. It was past midnight in Kensington, Michigan. The next town over was thirty minutes away. She couldn't

actually mean that she wanted to leave. I'm sure that she wanted to leave Kensington eventually. We all did. I'm just not sure I knew it at the time.

While I turned circles in my mind about what she was trying to say, Kris asked me about stargazing. My mental gymnastics took me from not being in Kensington to looking at the cherry trees starting to blossom on the other side of the hill to thinking that maybe she meant that she wanted to go down into the cherry trees. Then I thought about the girl who was a few years older than me who had sex in the orchard. She got caught, but the cops couldn't do anything because the cherry trees aren't actually in Kensington. For a moment, I considered the idea that this could be Kris's way of telling me that she wanted to do the same thing. So then I thought about having sex in a cherry orchard. It might smell like cherry pie and be so quiet that we could hear the lake move on the other side of the hill. But then I got realistic and figured that sex in a cherry orchard at night would mean cold, wet grass and the smell of wood. Cherry trees don't smell like cherries. They smell like trees. And then there would be mosquitoes and whatever other little bugs inhabit cherry orchards after midnight. On top of that, any sound we heard would be mistaken for a cop out of sheer paranoia. I also had to take into account the idea that I had never had sex. Grass stains would be an annoyance, too.

"Hawking? Hawking?" she was noticing that I was no longer listening to her.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"Stargazing. Have you ever gone stargazing before?"

"Walking around and looking at stars? Or are you talking about full-fledged telescope stuff?" I was confused.

"No. I mean like lying right here where it's dark and staring at the stars."

"Just looking at the sky. No I haven't done that. Does anything happen?"

"Sometimes you can see a shooting star. I've seen seven."

"Well that's exciting. You know, I've heard that when you see ten, you can start calling yourself an astronaut." I'm still not sure where that came from. To be honest, it was probably one of the other Hawking's trying to come out.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No. I'm not. I'm sorry. I've just never heard of someone looking at stars."

She didn't say anything for a while. Then, she just laid down on the hill and pulled me down with her.

"I don't see any stars," I said.

"It's too cloudy. We'll have to come out another time."

"We?"

"Sure. The two of us. We'll come out here another time when it isn't so cloudy."

"Okay."

We sat staring at the sky until she leaned over and kissed me. I pulled away from her and sat up. My first kiss didn't feel the way I thought it should feel. Looking back, no other kiss ever felt that way again. I felt it on my lips and then in my stomach. It was as if all the air was sucked out of my body. I kissed her again partially because I wanted to and partially because I needed to. I needed to get the air back.

As soon as our lips touched, we heard tires skid and brakes squeal over on Third Street. The echoes of the crash were louder than the crash itself. Kris guessed that it was fireworks. I couldn't guess. The air was still gone. I would soon find out it was the sound of a pickup truck passing through. It hit Lindsay and killed her instantly. I don't remember a trial or if they even caught the driver. It wouldn't bring her back. To be honest, I don't remember much about that night or the weeks that followed. I was too focused on the fact that Kris kissed me.

After Kris and I laid back down, we concluded that fireworks was the best guess.

"Do you like me?" she asked.

"Yes. Do you like me?"

"Yes. That's why I kissed you. Is that why you kissed me?"

"Yes. And I needed my air back."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Hawking, you're strange."

"Well that means you are strange, too. Because you said you like me when you knew I was strange. So if you like a person who you know is strange, that makes you strange. You are willingly accepting the strange nature of this relationship."

"You could have just said that I'm strange, too."

"Okay."

"Don't be so defensive."

We laid there in silence and looked at the clouds. I found myself wanting to see stars even though I had never actually looked at the stars before.

Kensington got to Lindsay before it got to me. For a while, I thought her death was a result of my happiness with Kris up on the hill that night. I also thought that I saved Kris from Kensington because I was touching her at the time of the accident. Kensington was coming for Kris, but because I had my hands on her back, it shifted its aim toward Lindsay. To be honest, I think that's why I had to be in constant contact with anyone around me. I realize now that neither Kensington nor the rest of the world work like that.

"What are you thinking about?" Kris asked.

"I'm wondering why cherry trees don't smell like cherries."

"Oh. What do they smell like?"

"I don't know. I've never smelled them."

"So they could smell like cherries and you just might not know it."

"Probably not."

"Why not?" she was interested now.

"Things just don't work out that way. Life never smells the way it is supposed to smell."

18

The girl I thought I was in love with in high school always wore vintage clothing. Perhaps *vintage* is not the correct word to describe it, but because I have never been one for words, I'll stick with vintage. High-waisted skirts, plain white shirts, and coats with the big shoulder pads. She was an original in every way.

I had just graduated when she asked me to come over to her house to see some new clothes that she ordered. She was three years younger than me and just finishing her freshman year, but impromptu fashion shows like this had become common. Although I never told her I loved her, she definitely knew. We lived in a small Michigan town and telling your best friend that you liked a girl was just as good as putting it in *The Lantern*. Everyone knew.

Although today the age difference seems rather extreme, at that time in that town, it was never an issue. Perhaps it would have been more of a problem if it were anyone but her. She was very strong-willed. She knew her values and stuck to them. There was absolutely no telling her what to do. She had a massive problem with people telling her that she *had* to do something.

"I *have* to go to the winter dance?" she'd say. "I don't *have* to do anything. I can and will do as I please because no one can tell me what is and what is not the imperative thing to do."

She was smart. Very smart. Oftentimes I would say something just to try to get a laugh out of her and she'd pick it apart and argue just for the sake of arguing. It was wonderful.

As I walked towards her house, I wondered if it would be the day she finally let me get close to her. I rationalized it as a graduation gift.

Usually when we did this, I'd sit on the couch in the parlor and she'd walk up and down the stairs putting clothes on and showing them to me while I drank iced tea that her mother always seemed to have ready. I had to sip it though. What she called tea could really pass as lemon water. It was bitter and left my mouth feeling dry. Most of the time I would just stare at the glass of iced tea and wish it would evaporate.

I usually passed the time she spent changing trying to come up with something to say about each outfit. I never wanted to say the same thing twice and I certainly didn't want to disappoint her with an expression that she didn't think was good enough. Once, when she skipped down the stairs in a black 1920s flapper dress, I smiled and said "Well look at you Ms. Daisy Buchannan."

She frowned and ran back upstairs. She returned ten minutes later in sweatpants and a tee shirt and told me I could go. I realized later the two mistakes I made. First, she was a freshman and had yet to take Ms. Knight's twelfth grade English class in which she would read *Gatsby* and understand my joke. And second, she never wanted to be compared to anyone. She was a unique individual and worked hard to show that to others. From then on, in the two fashion shows that followed, I was sure to practice my looks of excitement and awe before she came down. I was always sincere and even told her the few times I thought the shirt was too big or skirt too small, but I made sure she knew how much I loved to watch her walk down the stairs.

My graduation show was different from the moment I arrived at her house. Her mother's car wasn't in the drive and the lights in the house were off. I knocked on the door and she answered as if nothing were different. To any stranger witnessing this event, I was the best friend innocently viewing her new clothes.

"Is it okay with you if I don't walk up and down the stairs today?" she asked.

"Yes, that is fine. I can still see you at the top of the steps in I sit on this chair over here."

"No, I don't mean like that. I was hoping you wouldn't mind coming upstairs with me."

I was shocked but I played it off coolly and calmly agreed to walk upstairs with her. Too many years have gone by since this last fashion show

to remember every slight detail about her room. I do, however, remember the smell. It smelled like dried flowers. That slightly musty scent that still seems fresh and makes you think of the lingerie department at one of those big department stores. And as I looked around the room for the flowers that I knew I smelled, I remember everything being almost foggy. Not foggy in the sense that my vision was impaired but a feeling that there was something else in the air intermixed with all of the oxygen that I was sucking in. I remember her asking me why I was breathing so hard. I never answered. I didn't even say a word until she tried on the first outfit.

She went into her closet to change and came out in what could easily pass as a bathing suit. At first I wondered if she had switched from her vintage kick and moved onto a modern wardrobe, but then I realized the color of the outfit matched perfectly the pale of her skin. It was lingerie and I was shocked.

The bra was silk and glistened in the light as she spun around for me to see. I was speechless.

"What do you think of the bottoms?" she asked.

I couldn't speak. I smiled and nodded.

The bottoms sat high on her waist and cut inwards halfway up her behind so parts of each side of her bottom were exposed. A few inches below the waist line was a ruffled piece of fabric that went all the way around her body. I had the minor epiphany that somewhere out there, someone was smart enough to figure out that *more* fabric on a woman's body could somehow make her look even more beautiful.

I remember her laughing at me standing awkwardly in the middle of her bedroom with my mouth open and, I'm sure, a rather confused look on my face. All I wanted to do was tell her how beautiful, how unbelievable, how perfect she was. But all I could do was smile and stare. I knew at that moment she was too good for me.

It's no wonder that now, fifteen years later, I'm a struggling newspaper editor still searching for words while she's probably in New York or Paris changing the lives of everyone she meets.

19

I couldn't move when Kris's wig fell off. I wasn't stunned and I wasn't scared. I was stuck. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to spring into action, jump off the bed, run to her side, pick up the wig, and hand it to her – or maybe I was supposed to put it back onto her head. I still feel like she would have hit me if I tried to touch her head. If I ran away, I'm sure that would have been just as bad. She may have needed me to console her. I

quickly thought better of that as I remember that Kris never needed me for anything. I was an unnecessary addition to her life – I existed on the fringe. She had her writing and her constant dreaming of escaping Kensington. If anything, I was an anchor that kept her there. Of course, that also carries with it the idea that I *could* keep her. To do that, I'd have to *have* her at some point. Kris could never be had.

These are the kinds of mental twists and turns that I put myself through after spending any time with Kris. It happened nearly every time I saw her.

Did that smile mean that she was thinking about me? Did she smile like that for other guys? Was that even a smile?

I did the same maneuvers when her wig fell off and she sent me out of her room. Even though she asked me to leave, should I leave? Is this a test? Did she let it fall on purpose? Why was she straightening her hair? Was she getting dressed up for me? I had too many questions in relation to the absence of answers. I decided to leave like she asked me and I went to the diner for a burger. I didn't go to the diner often but when you live in Kensington, not going often means going at least once a week. Those who ate at the diner often were there daily.

Kris lived in the first row of houses south of Third Street. In a functional and non-life-threatening town, her house would be on Second Street or maybe even Fourth Street. I guess it would depend on the whim of the city planner. Instead, Kensington was a life-trap and only Third Street had a name. If it made sense, I'd be able to say more.

As I walked from Kris's house to the diner on Third Street, I began counting my steps. As I hit step number 35, I decided that I made a mistake by leaving. She wanted me there. I thought. Maybe. I still wasn't sure. By step 77, I remembered that her bare back was exposed. I couldn't remember if she was wearing a bra. Either way though, that was not something Kris would normally do. She would also never invite anyone up to her room. By step 132, I decided that she was definitely topless and by step 135, I decided that she definitely wasn't. I tried to stop thinking at step 212 and by step 213 I was convinced that she wanted me to see her wig but that she didn't want me to stay. By step 289, I could smell the grease and by step 297, I was opening the front door of the diner.

I saw an old man cooking burgers on one side of a counter and empty seats on the other side. There were a few people in the diner but I didn't know any of them. Of course, I recognized them and knew where they lived, but I didn't know their names. That was always my definition of knowing someone. If you know a person's name, you probably know

something important about them. I knew my mom, my sister, and Kris. The rest of the people in Kensington were just on the fringe. Just like I was to Kris. Maybe. I'm still unsure.

I recognized the old man but couldn't decide where he lived. I knew that Coach owned the diner and I knew that he was usually the only cook. But I never actually met the guy.

The old man turned around and asked what I wanted on my burger. I liked that about the diner – if you came in after breakfast, you got a burger, that's it.

“Just plain.”

“Fries?”

“Nah.”

“You mean ‘No.’”

“Okay. No.”

This guy was rude. He set my burger down in front of me accompanied with my check. He never even made eye contact. As I sat there, I realized that I had never been to the diner alone. This was the first time I had to pay for my own meal. As I ate my burger and stared at the check, I couldn't help but feel like I was eating four dollars. Sure, it tasted good. It was beef and grease. That's hard to mess up. But I felt like I was being self-indulgent. There was food at my house that would have been free. I didn't deserve to treat myself. In fact, I should have been treating Kris. If anyone deserved a four-dollar burger, it was her. I felt guilty and smelled like grease. The whole place smelled like grease and I wondered if it also felt guilty.

When I was done eating, I was the only person left in the diner. Just me and the old man.

“Have you ever worn a wig?”

The old man straightened his back but didn't face me. “What?”

“I'm just wondering about wigs. Why would someone wear one?”

“I've never worn a wig. And I'm not interested in this conversation.”

“Okay. I'm sorry. It's just that I found out that my friend wears a wig.”

“Who's your friend?”

“Kris – ”

“Kris doesn't wear a wig,” he said sharply.

“Yes she does. I just saw – ”

“Kris doesn't wear a wig.” He was yelling.

“You must not know her like I do.”

“She doesn't wear a wig.” He still refused to face me. It bothered me.

“Look man – ”

“I can't look.”

“What?”

He paused and hung his head. “I know that Kris wears a wig,” he began, “and I know that she is sick.”

“She's sick? How do you know? How bad is it?”

“I know because we are...we are friends. She's going to be fine.” I didn't like that he still refused to look at me. I wanted to stand up and walk to the other side of the counter but I was stuck again. I thought about grabbing the old man by the collar and making him tell me everything he knew. I then realized that that wasn't something I was even remotely capable of.

“You aren't her friend.”

“I am. But you aren't.” It was like arguing with Lindsay when she was three.

“You are just a sad old man. You probably think she likes you because she eats here sometimes.”

“You can leave now kid. You don't know who you are talking to.”

“It's *to whom* you are talking,” I smirked.

“Get out of here and don't come back,” he screamed. I liked making people scream or yell. Anything that made them visibly upset. It let me know that I was winning.

I laughed at the old man and left the diner. He acted like he owned the place.

20

I spent only one year in Kensington. It was all I needed. Or at least at the time, it was all I thought I would need.

My year in Kensington was my first year of high school. I made very few friends and kept to myself most of the time. Every so often a new boy would try to take me on a date but the right one never asked. I needed a boy who I could manipulate. Someone confident enough to ask me on a date but also insecure enough to melt in my hands.

I knew I only had a year so I actually wasn't looking to try anything. It all just fell into my lap.

We moved to a new city every year. My mom worked for the state of Michigan as an interim city budget planner. In short, when a city went bankrupt, my mom showed up for a year and fixed the budget. Essentially

she just made a bunch of spending cuts that others didn't have the guts to make. People weren't exactly lining the streets to greet us when we arrived in a new city.

When I was younger, I hated the constant moving. But once I figured out how to mess with some boys, I loved the one-year vacations. I was able to do what I needed to do and never be seen again.

Like I said, Brendan just fell into my lap. The way he looked at me and attempted to talk to me – he was just so nervous. He played with his hands when he introduced himself on the first day of school and never made eye contact. He was a senior but acted like he was twelve.

As our friendship progressed, I had him come over my house a few times for what he thought was a personal fashion show. Really I was just making him comfortable with the fact that I was in charge. I held all of the power in the relationship simply by walking up and down the stairs.

I decided when he would see me. I decided what he would see. And I decided if his reaction was sufficient. By making him question his reactions to my little outfits I made him crave my satisfaction.

Everything changed when school let out. I invited him to come over for one final time just like I did with the three boys from the three homes before Kensington. The plan was to change the scenery, let him come up to my room and give him a show he'd never forget.

Sparing some personal details, I'd wear just a bra and underwear and as the fashion show went on, I'd lose the bra and underwear. We'd play around for awhile and, in the heat of the moment, I'd drop some hints about a necklace, dress, or other expensive gift. The three times before Kensington, I woke up to a box at my front door with some kind of gift. It always worked.

The first three times were back in towns around Cleveland. That was when mom worked for the state of Ohio rather than Michigan. The first boy bought me a black tube-top with a big, black bow across the chest. I always looked good in black. The second boy bought me a blue and white striped dress that worked wonders on the third boy. He bought me a thin, pink sweatshirt with a bunch of horizontal slits on the back. I liked the way someone could see my bra through the back of it.

The night I took Brendan up to my room I had my heart set on a pair of tear-drop shaped diamond earrings. I had never tried this with anything other than clothing, but Brendan seemed like a great target. The earrings were four hundred dollars in the Macy's catalogue. I set the kid up perfectly for the entire year. I thought everything would work out.

As I stepped out of my underwear and unhooked my bra, I began to sense that something was wrong. When I looked at what was usually a face of surprise and excitement, I saw a pitiful looking boy with his hands folded across his lap and his head down. He was whispering something to himself and seemed to have no interest in looking at me.

I figured he was just nervous so I walked towards him and sat him down on my bed. He slumped down against my pillow and kept whispering to himself. I tried to lift his chin with my finger but he was surprisingly strong. As if he was determined not to look at me.

"Please put your clothes back on," he said. "I'm not comfortable with this."

That never happened to me before. I was shocked and confused. It was then that I realized I was living a lie. What I thought I knew about myself was, in fact, not true. I wasn't manipulative or sexy. The three right boys had simply fallen into place. Brendan showed me that I was a minor detail in life.

As far as homes go, Kensington was my last. After that night, Brendan continued living while I began to feel Kensington's grip around my neck.

I attempted suicide three times that summer but failed so miserably that no one even noticed. The first time, I tried to overdose on pain killers but instead took the perfect amount just to make me tired. The second time, I swam out into the middle of the lake and tried to drown myself. The water was cool and the sky was a beautiful shade of blue that lured me back to the surface every time.

I realized then that I was a failure at doing something that happens to most people on accident.

My last attempt didn't kill me but it got me into the place I call home now. I knew about the one abandoned house a few blocks away and I had gone there a few times during the school year to fool around with some boys. It was a great place for me to die. I don't remember much of the details because I became unconscious during the fire, but I do remember being carried out of the house by a volunteer fireman.

My trial was rather quiet as was everything in Kensington at the time. I was charged and convicted of arson and attempted suicide because they found my suicide note in my purse. Looking back, I wish the pain killers would have worked. Brendan's silent prayers and chivalry showed me the destruction that Kensington was able to create in a person.

I often wonder what happened to Brendan and why he never visited me in the hospital. When I get out of here in three years I'm sure I'll look for him. He's probably a priest or something.

21

People die. I get that. But I didn't fully understand the concept until well after I left Kensington. Starting around the time Lindsay died, I began to develop the need to be in constant contact with people. It wasn't the annoying but innocent verbal contact either. When I was with people, I needed to be touching them. I mean, that's how I ended up saving Kris on the hill that night. Looking back, the touching could have been problematic had I ever spent time with other males. But because I was either alone or with a girl, I just became the guy who liked to rub elbows with people. I was okay with this label as it was better than everyone around me dying. It actually seemed to work.

I'm trying to get the dates right – I think I was sixteen when Lindsay was hit. So by the time I was eighteen and had two years to blame myself for her death, I was the safest driver in town. I kept all of my emotions inside so I wasn't crazy to the rest of the town yet. I still spent time with girls and by then, I could drive them anywhere. Of course, because my cousin took my car, I was usually driving around in my mom's minivan. Regardless of the girl in my front seat though, I usually fixed it so our elbows would touch on the arm rest between the two seats. It was enough contact for me to be sure they wouldn't die and not enough for them to think I was trying to get into their pants.

When Kris and I were still going around together, she asked me to come to one of her book readings at Coach's place one night. She also asked me to bring her cousin Rachel who lived in the city. Usually a bus ran from the city into Kensington, but it ran at noon and the reading wasn't until midnight. Coach closed his diner around eleven and didn't approve of Kris reading her stories in public. Luckily for Kris, Coach's wife loved the stories and agreed to sneak back to the diner to re-open so Kris could read her stories to her fans. The city wasn't too bad of a drive and Kris knew she could have asked me to drive to Ohio and I would have said yes. I tried to act like I was hesitant to drive so much in one night and even asked why Rachel couldn't drive herself.

"She's fifteen, Hawking."

"Alright I'll get her."

"Thank you...and don't you dare try anything with her."

"She's fifteen, Kris."

"I know. And I know how much you love those whores."

"Your fifteen-year-old cousin is a – what?"

"Just be good." And she kissed me on the cheek and was gone.

I got to Rachel's house with a great deal of effort considering the awful directions Kris gave me. For a girl that could write as well as she could, she was somehow unable to communicate.

Rachel lived in one of those gated communities just outside of the city. I pulled up to the gate and a fat, old man slid the window of the guard shack open. He mumbled something that I couldn't hear. He was too far away and my car was loud.

"What?" Was he really so fat that he couldn't get out of his chair?

"Are you lost?" he repeated.

"No, I'm here to pick up Rachel."

"Rachel who?" I had no idea what her last name was. She couldn't have the same name as Kris. Kris had her mom's last name because her dad wasn't around anymore. Rachel had to have another last name.

"I don't really know. She's fifteen."

"That's not enough for me to let you through." I saw that the guard shack didn't have one of those mechanical arms or spikes on the ground so part of me really wanted to yell "she's a whore!" and speed off. But I've never been the kind of person to do something like that. It turned out that Kris told Rachel I'd be there at eleven so Rachel emerged from the darkness into the spotlight of an overhead streetlight. She looked like an elegant child. As if she worked so hard to look old that it made her look young. Her brown hair had a particular shine from the spotlight and she had one yellow flower clipped onto the left side of her head. She wore way too much makeup but in the spotlight, surrounded by darkness, she looked like a stage performer. She wore a white dress with red flowers and bright pink high heels. The heels were what gave her away – she couldn't walk. Actually, she could walk, but the high heels made her look like a tightrope walker who lacked confidence. I thought of Lindsay and I'm not sure why. She saw me chuckle.

Rachel gave me this quizzical look through the windshield. I'm sure she was wondering why I was laughing but I quickly stopped as soon as I saw that look of confusion. She looked just like Kris.

She opened the passenger door and said some kind of thank you to the fat guard. I performed a nervous U-turn and headed toward Kensington.

"Don't you think it's awful that people want to have things in common with their partners?" Rachel asked. We had driven for five minutes

in silence. I was more surprised with how loud she was speaking than the absurdity of the question.

“I’m not sure. Isn’t it good to have things in common?”

“Maybe. But then you should only be friends.”

“Me? Who should I only be friends with?”

“With whom? And I didn’t mean you. I meant people who have things in common should be friends not lovers.” I couldn’t believe a fifteen-year-old said the word “lover.”

“Lovers?”

“Sure. Look, all I’m saying is that when someone says they want to be with someone who shares their interests, they are being selfish. It’s like saying ‘I have these interests and I need to be with someone who loves everything I do.’”

“Well what’s wrong with that?”

“It’s narcissistic.” She was using words that Kris like to use. I started to think about my relationship with Kris. Of course, it wasn’t really a relationship. She decided when we could see each other and when she was mad at me. I really couldn’t figure her out. I spent a few minutes trying to decide if that made Kris a narcissist or me a masochist. Kris would be impressed with my vocabulary.

“Big word,” I said.

“Kris told me you were smart.” She giggled when she said this. Giggled in a way that made me feel three-years-old.

That was when she grabbed my arm. She kept laughing and, in a fit of excitement, she reached her right arm over to mine as it was resting on the arm rest. It startled me at first but the idea of touching her made me feel safe. It made me feel like she wasn’t going to die tonight.

“Kris told me that your sister died,” she said.

I didn’t say anything.

“Mine did too. Was she older or younger than you?”

“Younger.”

“My sister was older than me. Five years older. She had cancer. Your sister – ”

“Car accident.”

At that point, I would have done anything to stop talking about Lindsay. I missed her, but that didn’t mean I wanted to talk about her with some fifteen-year-old girl who couldn’t walk in high heels. Especially when she looked like Kris. It was a tease. I feared that I would get lost in the moment and, thinking that I was actually talking to Kris, feel like I was getting somewhere with her.

My initial idea was to kiss her to shut her up. I figured that if my lips were on hers without any time for her to prepare, she’d stop talking about my sister. We were stopped at a red light so I simply leaned over and surprised her. As I pulled away, I opened my eyes and was stunned to see Kris sitting where Rachel once was. Of course, it wasn’t Kris, but with it being so dark and with the dim, red light coming from the stoplight, Rachel really looked like her cousin.

We drove in silence for the rest of the drive into Kensington. When I kissed her, I thought of her as a mature teenager. The way she talked and the way Kris talked about her gave me the impression that she was mature for her age. By the time we reached Kensington and pulled into Coach’s diner, I saw that a look of panic had taken over Rachel’s face. She ran out of the car and into the diner before I could turn off the engine. I didn’t know that she was a child.

22

Like I said before, attempting suicide was a problem for me. Actually, I was great when it came to the attempting part, I just couldn’t follow through with it. I couldn’t do the dying part. I didn’t take enough pain killers the first time and trying to drown myself was childish. No one willingly drowns without getting drunk first or maybe tying cinder blocks to their feet. I mean, sure, Virginia Wolf put stones in her pockets, but she either had massive pockets or there is something they aren’t telling us.

Although Brendan, the only boy who didn’t fall for my fashion show con, never visited me in the hospital, Lindsay Masterson did. I didn’t think much of it until she died in the middle of Third Street. I was still in the hospital at the time. She had visited me only days before. It was odd seeing someone from Kensington in the hospital. The nearest hospital was in the city so that meant that by coming to the hospital, she had successfully escaped. The biggest oddity was when she left my bedside. Of course, it was odd that she showed up in the first place. The cute girl who was everyone’s friend showing up at the bedside of the girl who took her clothes off for jewelry was a strange event. When she left though, she was willingly going *back*. She made it out and was going back. It still confuses me even more than why she visited me.

When she walked into my room, she introduced herself. I couldn’t get over how humble she was being. Everyone knew who she was.

“Hi Jen. I’m Lindsay Masterson. From school,” she said.

“Hi. What are you doing here?” I think I was more shocked that anyone came to see me than actually wondering why she was there. It was more of a question of why anyone would show up. Not just her.

“I just wanted to see how you are doing.”

“I’m fine.”

She took a deep breath. “Was it a boy?”

“What?”

“I’m just wondering if it was about a boy.” I didn’t say anything. I just stared at her and tried to make her disappear. I actually hoped it was a dream.

“I just know,” she continued, “that you talk with a lot of boys.”

“Is there a problem with that?”

“Jen, all I’m saying is that boys are trouble. They break your heart. Even the ones that you don’t think you are interested in or the ones you don’t even know. I’m just guessing that you are upset because of a boy.”

“Because you see me with a lot of them?”

“Because you flirt with a lot of them. I mean, I’m not judging you. I’m just thinking that you get involved with boys and that means you are bound to have your heart broken.”

“What would you know about having your heart broken?”

“More than you think. Maybe I’d surprise you.”

“I doubt it. Why are you even here?” I was speaking loudly in hopes that a nurse would step into the room and ask if everything was alright. But the things I hope for rarely happen.

“I’m just trying to be nice Jen. Maybe I should just go. They were right about you,” she said as she stood up to leave the room.

“Who? What did they say?” I stopped her.

“When I told people that I was coming to visit you, they warned me against it. They said you are self-absorbed, rude, mean...you know, everything you are being right now. I’m sorry I even came here.”

I sighed and lowered my head.

“You’re right,” I said. “Please sit. I guess I’m just not used to people being so nice to me. How about you tell me about your boy problems?”

She was reluctant but she sat. Looking back, I should have let her leave. Maybe she wouldn’t have walked down the middle of the street.

“There’s this boy,” she began, “who gave me flowers at school a few weeks ago. He just walked right up to me in the hallway and said ‘Here.’ I didn’t know what to do.”

“Why did he give you flowers? Did you tell him you wanted them?”

“No. I think he saw me crying one night and he thought I could use a smile.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I don’t even know him.”

“I understand that. But it sounds like a boy, who definitely likes you, did something nice for you. And it also sounds like you didn’t even thank him. Did you at least kiss him?”

“Kiss him? I don’t even know him. Is that how you say ‘thank you’ to boys?”

“How else would I say it?”

“Have you ever tried *saying* it?”

I lowered my head again to think. I just didn’t know what to say next. Lindsay looked out the window and said “We are two very different people. Aren’t we?”

“I guess so.”

“How long have you been here...in Kensington?”

“Almost a year. You?”

“My whole life. And my family has been here forever.”

“Forever?”

“Since before it was Kensington.”

“What was it before Kensington?”

“I don’t think it had a name. I found some old papers in my basement about the town before it had a name. But there is never any mention of a name before the name.”

I was intrigued. “Could you imagine living somewhere that didn’t have a name? How would you tell someone where you are from?”

“I’m not sure you would have an answer.”

“I think I’d tell people that I’m from Nowhere.”

“That’s where he always wanted to be.” She was deep in thought with her eyes almost glazed over. I suddenly became aware of the sounds of the hospital room. The fluorescent bulbs above my head were buzzing. I couldn’t tell if the buzzing was coming from the bulbs themselves or the few flies trapped between the bulbs and the plastic cover.

“Who is he?”

“What?” She was lost in a thought.

“You said ‘that’s where *he* always wanted to be.’ Who is he?”

“Oh, no one. I’m just thinking about someone.”

“A boy?”

“It’s not important. Just someone who always wanted to be Nowhere. I’m going to go now. Glad you are doing well.”

And she left. I didn’t give her sudden change much thought. I simply thought she suddenly remembered something that she had to do back in Kensington.

The buzzing flooded my ears and I turned on the television. The only things that were on during the day were those awful soap operas. I’m not sure who watched those things but I couldn’t stand them.

23

Laurie had everything set up in the diner when I arrived that night. The publisher sent some posters with the cover of my latest book on them as well as twenty-five copies to sell. It was the first time I was going to read anything I had written out loud.

“How do you do it?” I asked Laurie. We both slipped into a booth in the back of the diner. We still had an hour before anyone would arrive.

“Do what?”

“Read this stuff out loud. I have to describe sex to all of these people. In a diner.”

“Well I have to do it out of necessity. Since Coach went blind, I’ve been reading everything too him.”

“Any thoughts of him learning Braille?”

“He is way too set in his ways. You know that.”

“But still, how do you not get embarrassed when you read my books out loud to him?”

“Honey, I’ve read so many things to him that I don’t even listen to what I’m saying. He just tells me what to write and when to write it.”

“So, any advice?”

“Sure. Smile, read, and remember that you are the only person in this town whose name is on the cover of a book.”

She always knew what to say. I told her I needed to take a walk to relax. She agreed to set up the rest of the posters and move the tables and chairs. She wanted to transform the diner so I wouldn’t feel like I was reading my book in the same place her husband makes burgers. Looking back, I still felt like I was in the diner.

When I left Coach’s diner, I turned left and headed down Third Street. The street was quiet and empty. I realized that I had never been on Third Street this late before. There was one street light above the bench at the bus stop, so I hurried toward it. They had already caught the rapist, but I still wanted to be safe. I passed three vacant storefronts and the clothing

store before reaching the bench. Sitting down, I put my chin into my hands and looked straight ahead at the market across the street. I don’t remember all of the bars being open, but my mom always said that Third Street was a completely different place now that only two bars remained. Sometimes, I wish I could have seen Third Street alive, just once. Even if all the liveliness was a result of a few drunks. I don’t think about it too much though because I know that’s how Hawking’s sister died. No one really talked about it very much, but the rumor was that she was walking down the middle of Third Street when it happened. Some people claim that they heard tires squeal and her body hit the pavement. I’m not sure I believe that because it happened on a night like this. No one was around and the silence on Third Street made it hard to concentrate on one thought for too long. Maybe Lindsay was caught in between two thoughts and didn’t see the car coming.

As I was thinking about Lindsay, I found myself walking into the middle of the street. She was a smart girl so she had to have been there for a reason. As I wandered, I realized that Hawking was probably on his way to Kensington with Rachel. I invited Rachel to listen to me read because she was the only person in my family who actually read my books. My mom glanced at a few pages and carried a copy around for a few days to make it look like she was reading it. But Rachel actually read them and then called me to talk about them. She frequently accused me of writing about my life. She even called me Constance sometimes.

Rachel’s interest in my books didn’t worry me as much as her being with Hawking did. I never knew which side of Hawking would be present at any moment. Without being in the car with them, I could assume that they were concurrently driving in silence and pulled over to the side of the road fogging up the windows. At any time, either situation could be correct. I never knew when it came to Hawking. All I knew was that he was never the same person from one day to the next.

I had traveled all the way to the church without noticing. Thinking about Hawking and Rachel caused me to lose focus of where I was. I thought about walking back to the lake, but I remembered what my mom said to Coach about how proud she was that I wasn’t one of those girls who go to the lake at night. I walked onto the sidewalk on the south side of Third Street and headed back toward the fitness center.

I usually tried to stay as far away from the fitness center as possible. That was where Hawking’s cousin worked before he left town. After my wig fell off and he drove me home, I never got a chance to talk to him again. He just ran away with Hawking’s car.

When I got back to the diner, all of the lights were on inside and people were standing around drinking coffee. It felt natural to be outside the diner and looking in at all of the people. That's what my mom and I did while we waited for the church crowd to thin out. Although Coach and Laurie always made us feel welcome, we were much more comfortable eating there when we knew that the people who disapproved of my writing were safely at church. We would wait outside for the pre-church crowd to leave, eat our breakfast in the empty diner, and then leave before the post-church crowd entered. My original intention was to avoid all of this by writing under a different name, but that quickly fell apart when Laurie congratulated me on my first book while we were eating in the diner. After that, everyone in Kensington knew that I was Constance Confines.

I walked into the diner and was hit by the smell of coffee. It's not that I wasn't used to the smell, I was simply unaccustomed to the smell not being accompanied by the smell of onions and sausage.

As I walked through the door, I heard whispers of "Kris" and "Constance" from the people standing around the tables. Laurie poked her head out of the kitchen and motioned for me to join her. My mom was with her.

"Standing room only," Laurie said. She was sipping her coffee and shaking. At the time, I thought she was excited. Looking back, I'm sure it was an early sign of her Alzheimer's.

"When should I start?"

"Now," my mom said.

"Is Rachel here?" I looked out into the diner at all the people standing and sipping coffee. Some were even holding copies of my book.

"Did you sell my books already?"

"They sold out immediately. The first people in the door bought them," said Laurie.

"I wanted to give one to Hawking."

"Who's Hawking?" asked my mom. I got nervous.

I looked at my mom but before I could answer, Rachel burst through the kitchen door. She was holding back tears. My mom hugged her without really looking at her. Rachel just looked over my mom's shoulder as she hugged her, wide-eyed.

"Mom, Laurie, can you give us a second?" They looked at each other and nodded. Laurie grabbed a coffee pot and headed out the door. My mom followed. I grabbed Rachel's shoulders.

"Don't cry. You'll ruin your makeup." She just stared at me. She looked much older than I remembered.

Rachel tried to open her mouth but as soon as she made a sound, her tears began to flow.

"Don't," I said, "Just nod and I'll talk." She nodded.

"Are these sad tears?" She shook her head.

"Are these mad tears?" No again.

"Are you scared?" She nodded.

"Did something happen?" She nodded.

"Hawking?" Yes.

"Is he alright?" Yes. For a moment, I thought he was hurt.

"What did he do?" She just looked at me and cried. She couldn't control it and I wasn't helping by asking her to hold back the tears.

"Did he try something with you, Rachel?" She lowered her head.

"Did he touch you?" She nodded.

"Is he still outside?" She nodded and I ran out of the kitchen and out of the diner. I couldn't believe that, after talking with Hawking about Rachel's age and the fact that she was my cousin, he tried to hurt her. I couldn't trust which Hawking would ever show up, but I thought I could trust that none of them would assault my cousin. She was fifteen.

Hawking was sitting in his mom's van pouting like he did when the tow truck took him and his car away from my house after the terrible date. He looked like a child.

I slammed on the window and made him jump. He didn't roll down the window and I didn't want him to.

"I hate you," I mouthed.

He opened the door and stepped out of the van.

"I didn't mean to – " he started.

"Save it Hawking. I knew I shouldn't have trusted you. She's fifteen." I was starting to cry. Hawking leaned his back against the van and looked up at the sky.

"Shooting star," he mumbled.

"Don't try to be sweet again. You messed up Hawking. You messed up like you always mess up. I know you wonder why we never worked out... why I could never date you."

"It's because I'm from Kensington."

"It's because you are never the same. I can never count on you to be the Hawking that I need."

"I'm always the same."

I laughed. I could tell he was getting defensive.

"Each day, Hawking, there is a new person. You look the same, but you never act the same. The only thing I can count on is that you'll

never do anything about it. Sometimes you talk about things and other times you get upset, but you never do anything. Your cousin takes your car and you just sit around and feel sorry for yourself. You see my wig fall off and you just leave. Even when Lindsay died you just became a shell of a person. There was a huge investigation and you didn't even care.

"It's people like you that make me want to get out of Kensington. Actually, it is you. I see in you every person from Kensington. I see the person that I can't become.

"I hate you Hawking."

He nodded, climbed into the van, and drove away. That was the last time I saw him. It shouldn't have surprised me when I found out about what he did to Beth. It can't surprise anyone that someone who assaulted a fifteen-year-old girl would do what he did to Beth. He deserved every word I said to him that night at my reading. I'm content that those were my last words to him.

24

Kris sounded like a professional when she read her book in my diner. It was as if I was listening to an audio book. If a trained professional were to read the book and record themselves doing so, Kris would have sounded even better. She changed her voice to fit the characters in a way that only Toni Morrison did when she read *Beloved* on tape. Perhaps the secret is to have the author read their own work. She knew when to pause, when to speed up, and when to make a moment in the book last a half hour in the diner. In all, she was the Toni Morrison of erotic fiction.

By the time Kris was reading her book in the diner, I had gone completely blind and read all of my books on cassette tapes. Newer books were available on disc, but it was Kensington and our only library was the small room in the school. I took what I could get. Laurie always found it odd when I sat in bed reading a book. She called it listening but I wasn't ready to admit that I, a retired English teacher of forty years, couldn't read. The reason Laurie thought my reading process was odd was that I held a book while I listened to the tape. I liked the feeling of a book in my hands, even if I couldn't see the words. The first time Laurie saw me reading, she thought I could see again. She then laughed when I told her I was reading *On the Road* and held up a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

I wasn't supposed to know about the reading, but someone at the breakfast counter that morning asked me who Constance Confines was.

"Who?"

"Constance Confines. The poster over there."

"What poster?"

"Under the TV. The one that says 'Constance Confines,' 'book reading tonight.'"

"Never heard of him." I smiled and turned back to the flat top. I was upset that Laurie and Kris were keeping secrets from me, but I understood why they did it. There was no way I'd let her read one of those books in my diner. I wouldn't let her read it in Kensington. The people here were never happy about her stories. What really upset me was that they were taking advantage of my blindness. The truth was staring at me every morning as I cooked. I just couldn't stare back.

I hid my contempt and added sausage and potatoes to the lazy omelet. The lazy omelet was a favorite at the diner as well as a favorite of mine. My mother used to throw whatever she could find into the scrambled eggs on Sunday mornings and say "Here's everything I wanted to put into an omelet. I was just too lazy to make the omelet part." When I opened my diner, the first item on the menu was Mom's Lazy Omelet.

Kris was celebrating the release of her second book that night and I was looking for a reason to celebrate. The boys were in the middle of their worst season in thirty years and the town felt it. It typically went that when the boys played well, the town was happy. So the town was rather quiet. Friday nights in the diner still smelled the same – burgers and grease on the flat top made the place smell like it was full of fat and happy people. But when the boys won, the place sounded like the game had been played in the diner. People would reenact the shots, yell at each other arguing over who was the player of the game, and erupt when the boys walked in to get their free burgers. This season was a quiet one though. More orders for coffee than for burgers after games and more cause to argue over who lost the game for us rather than who won it.

I waited for Laurie to tell me she was leaving for a doctor's appointment before I set a timer at home to go off in an hour. I knew she would have to go to the diner early to set up and I wanted to get there when there was enough of a crowd that I wouldn't be noticed by Laurie or Kris. I know now that everyone notices the blind man when he walks into a reading for a sex book.

When I walked in the door, I reached for the hostess stand. I'm sure it looked like I was feeling my way around the place, but I was more concerned with making sure I was in the right place than finding a seat. The place smelled so strongly of coffee that I was worried I had walked into some new coffee house. I found the podium and reassured myself that this was, in fact, my own diner. I laughed when I realized that no one would

ever open one of those massive coffee houses in Kensington. Nothing is massive in Kensington.

Kris had already started reading when I walked in so I stood at the podium and listened. This was her night.

Just as I was getting a grasp on the different voices of the characters, I felt a strong hold on my arm.

“What are you doing here?” whispered Laurie.

“Just listening.”

“How did you know?”

“That’s not important. It’s okay though.”

“I know I should have told you.”

“It’s really okay. I wouldn’t have agreed to this but...how many people are here?”

“Maybe two hundred.”

“Two hundred?” I was almost yelling.

“Shhh,” she scolded.

“Well. That’s outstanding. Kris really needed this.”

We stood at the podium and listened to the little girl from Kensington read her printed words on the pages of a real book. I realized then that the pride of being a teacher will always outweigh the pride of a championship coach.

After listening in silence, I nudged Laurie and felt for her ear.

“Does she sound like she has been crying?”

“She was. She ran out of here right before she was supposed to start.”

“What happened?”

“She’s upset about a boy I think.”

“Who?”

“Oh it doesn’t matter Coach. Look at her up there – ”

“I can’t,” I joked.

“Oh don’t you play the pity card. You walked here alone tonight without any help.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Who helped you?” She was more interested in me than Kris.

“I didn’t walk. I drove.”

Laurie slapped my shoulder and turned back toward Kris. I didn’t need to be able to see her up there. I could hear just fine.

Don’t be cows. That’s it. That’s the first thing the old man said when he walked into Ms. Knight’s classroom. Where was Ms. Knight? None of us knew. What we did know was that we were about to have a substitute teacher. It couldn’t be easier. The sub would walk in, try to quiet us, be unsuccessful, he’d raise his voice, we’d raise ours, and the period would belong to us. Instead, this old man walked in. The only person in class smiling was Kris. She looked like she knew the man and some people asked what sounded like “Is that him?”

I was in my usual spot in the back of the room so I couldn’t really tell what was going on. Of course, I really didn’t care what was going on either. Whether or not Kris knew this guy made very little difference to me. In fact, it could have been the old basketball coach who runs the diner, I still wouldn’t have known. I’m sure I was one of only three people who didn’t pay attention to who Coach was. The other two were probably the drunks who still hang out at the bar. It didn’t matter much to me though. I knew the people I needed to know.

“Don’t be cows,” he began. Blank stares. I could hear the asthmatic next to me breathing through his mouth.

“In the world’s broad field of battle,” he continued. “In the bivouac...who can tell me what a bivouac is?” Silence. This guy was crazy. He comes in talking about livestock, then quotes some ancient poem, and finishes the scene by begging for a definition. Crazy.

“Come on someone has to know this one.” He began to pace up and down the aisles of desks. Desks filled with the empty minds of empty students.

“In the bivouac of life? Anyone?” Any human would be uncomfortable with this amount of silence.

“A temporary shelter,” I heard myself say from the back of the room. Why did I help the old man? If I would have waited another minute he probably would have walked out the door. Me knowing what a bivouac was probably took ten years off his life. He sprang into action.

“Yes! A temporary shelter.” He was almost jumping. Almost shouting. “So if life is a bivouac...”

“It’s temporary...fleeting...short-lived.” Why was I talking?

“Beautiful. Life is short-lived. I like the way you put that.” Heads began to shift back and forth between the old man and me. They couldn’t decide what anomaly to question first – the raving, anonymous lunatic quoting Longfellow, or me, the always-anonymous student in the back who kept answering the man. I couldn’t decide how I knew who Longfellow was.

"In the world's broad field of battle," he continued. "In the bivouac of life... what is your name? In the back. Bivouac Man." No way did he just call me Temporary-Shelter-Man.

"Hawking." I don't know why I answered him. I don't know why I kept answering him. Every time he prompted me, the words came out before I could shut my mouth. The guy knew how to get me to talk. Why didn't anyone else talk?

"Great. Hawking. In the bivouac of life, be not like dumb, driven...?"

"Cattle," I answered. How did I know that? Why did I say it?

"Beautiful. Be not like dumb, driven cattle... Be a...?"

"Hero," I couldn't shut my mouth. The man's eyes pulled the words out of my throat.

"Be a hero in the strife!" He was shouting now. Hands over his head. Fists clenched. He looked like a championship boxer. "So everyone... don't be cows! Because life is fleeting, be heroes! Do something!"

"Like what?" Finally, someone other than me spoke up. Unfortunately, it was the kid who had no mental abilities to understand anything that was happening. He was the same kid who used to shove crayons up his nose.

"Learn!" the mysterious old man shouted. "Don't be ignorant!"

"But ignorance is bliss," the crayon sniffer replied. But the old man was ready.

"If ignorance is bliss, then what is knowledge?" Silence. The crayon kid was back to dreaming about the smell of the dark blue crayon.

"A burden." I said it willingly this time. It sounded like the old man was going somewhere – like he had a plan all along.

"We can work with that. Knowledge is a burden. And who tells us that?"

"The people who say 'ignorance is bliss.'" I figured I'd talk with the old man, maybe it was a bipolar moment. The rest of the class might as well have left the room. It was just him and me.

"Who are those people Hawking?"

"The ignorant people."

"Good. And why do they say knowledge is a burden?"

"Because they are ignorant. They think that because they are ignorant, everyone else should be, too. So they make up these sayings hoping we will all follow suit." This was actually making sense.

"They are trying to make us ignorant?" he asked.

"Yeah. So that they can be smart."

"Smart?" he asked.

"Compared to us."

"That's pretty tricky of them don't you think?"

"It's brilliant."

"So now you think they are smart?" he asked. He smiled like he had me cornered.

"They aren't smart. They're brilliant. Brilliant and lazy. Rather than learn, they spend their time making sure no one else learns." I smiled back.

"How do they do that?"

"They tell us that 'Ignorance is bliss.'"

"No. *How* do they do it? It has to be more than just idioms."

I had to stop. We were going so fast for so long that I needed a break. This had never happened before. I couldn't come up with anything though. Other kids were starting to turn around to see if I was still there. The uncomfortable silence was beginning again.

He started again. "*How* do they –"

"They teach us!" I was yelling.

"So you learn from them?" He thought he got me again.

"No. Well, we think we do, but we don't. They teach us just enough to keep us happy without every *really* teaching us anything."

"What do they teach you?"

"Well... poetry for one."

"And vocabulary words," he continued.

"Like bivouac."

"Okay so they teach you these things –"

"But they never teach us what to do with them!" I was yelling again. It was beginning to make sense.

"So they teach you that Longfellow says 'Be not like dumb, driven cattle'..."

"But they never teach us how to be heroes in the strife." It actually made sense. But as soon as I hit that moment of clarity, that glimpse of the sun, I froze. What had I been doing for the past twelve years? What was I missing?

"Good job Hawking." The old man then smiled and ran out of the classroom. The bell rang for the next class and I tried to rush out into the hallway to chase him but my feet couldn't move.

By the time my mind allowed my body to move, I was late for my next class. I hurried to my seat and the teacher said something about my tardiness. I told him to stop treating me like a cow.

26

I often look back and wonder why we moved the company's headquarters to Kensington. Apart from the fact that I grew up here, there was really no connection between our multi-national chain of department stores and this once-vibrant town. As I rose to the top of the company, a few of the trustees asked me about the changes I had in mind for the company. I froze and couldn't think of anything profound to say.

I knew that I needed to impress these people but for some reason, all I could think about was the night I sat on the bench with my dad before leaving Kensington. I still remember that man in the window above the south side market looking out toward the lake. He sat there like he was watching something that never moved. That vague kind of stare that is unwavering but bored at the same time. I guess I was just feeling sentimental. Not many kids from Kensington grow up to be the CEO of a company like this.

"We are going to move our headquarters to Kensington, Michigan," I said. Before the trustees could ask the question that everyone who isn't from Kensington asks when they hear the name, I held out my right hand and pointed to the middle of my palm. This seemed to confuse them even more.

"Michigan looks like a mitten," I explained, "and on the map, Kensington is right here."

They nodded like they understood, but I could see them trying to think of ways to depict their home states with their hands. One man held up a fist and said he was from Ohio. I told him I didn't know that Ohio had knuckles.

After that joke and after what must have seemed like a magic trick to the people who weren't from Michigan, the transition began on its own. One of the trustees must have liked me enough not to question the town as a setting for a company like ours and probably started the paperwork on his own.

I was grateful that I didn't have to tell them the real reason I wanted to go back to Kensington. In fact, I'm surprised no one in Kensington asked why we were coming. The majority of the people in Kensington spend the first thirty years of their lives trying to escape and now, someone who escaped after high school and rose to the top of a

grocery store conglomerate was returning. That should have prompted more than a few questions.

I was grateful because I didn't have to explain to the board of trustees that my brother was a convicted rapist who lived behind the church and raped women at the lake at night. I didn't have to explain that Kensington was dying because my brother shamed his family and the church which probably led to the church burning. I didn't have to explain that I needed to do everything I could to help Kensington.

Six months later, I was leading the ceremony for the groundbreaking of our new headquarters. The groundbreaking was a simple ceremony that was attended by no more than five people and a reporter from the city. We tore down the church, or what was left of it after the fire, and started construction.

We expected some protestors or even some of the people who were still adamant about their religion to come out to the site and make some noise, but everything happened so fast that the town of Kensington wouldn't have even had time to organize an opposition. That's just how things work with big companies like this. I made a decision and it went into action within a day. No time for protests or city ordinances or zoning restrictions.

We wanted to tear down the church so we bought the land from the city, sent in the wrecking crew, and it was done. Headquarters was fully-functional in another six months.

I've always been somewhat of a pessimist. I know that things can only go so well for so long until something bad happens to me. It's like the universe's way of keeping things in check – a universal system of checks and balances. That first year during the move to Kensington went so well for me that I knew to be alert for the next heartbreak. Over that year I received a promotion, I returned to my birthplace, I demolished a burned-down church, erected a new corporate headquarters, and turned a two million dollar profit.

I started to anticipate the bad event. I knew I wouldn't be able to stop it, the universe can't be stopped, but I figured that if I could anticipate what might happen, it would be less of a shock.

Knowing that everything went so well with the transition in terms of the town's reaction, my guess for the big disaster was that there would be some kind of uproar and the town would boycott our store or maybe even one of the notorious bar hoppers would try to burn down headquarters. Neither of those would be detrimental to the company itself – a small

boycott wouldn't do a thing to our profits and the security system in the new building wouldn't let someone without an employee pass within five hundred feet – but both would create a press frenzy that could upset the board of trustees. They trusted me with this move and I couldn't afford to lose that trust.

My idea was to throw a celebration for the town. Just something to keep them happy. I made up some story about it being an anniversary of the founding of the town. People tend to believe things they are told if you just act like you don't have a doubt in the world that it is the truth. At this point, I've begun to lose track of the truths.

Everything was organized and we spread the word about the celebration months in advance. That way, the people who actually got out of Kensington could contemplate coming back, even if it was for a weekend. They would need time to weigh their options. It's not so easy to just return to a place like Kensington. It's life-threatening.

On the morning of the celebration, the bad event arrived in the same way that all bad events arrive. When you are thinking about what might go wrong, nothing ever does. I got complacent by thinking that I had anticipated the bad and created the good. I never considered that my guess was wrong.

That morning, Coach's wife, Laurie, died in her sleep and the town stopped. Kensington was a dead town and it usually caused the people in it to stop and slowly wither away. But for someone like Coach, the town was helpless.

Coach closed his diner for the first time in twenty years and because the people of Kensington didn't know what to do, they stood in the middle of Third Street in one massive group. Some people spoke to the people near them and others just wandered in circles not knowing what to do. I think they knew that Kensington had gotten to one of the good ones. I'm sure many knew that Coach was now all they had left.

It was an odd scene that weekend. The carnival rides and street vendors were sitting around our new headquarters, all operational, but no one strayed very far from the front doors of Coach's diner.

I cried during the funeral but I'm not sure why. I never knew Laurie and I had only spoken to Coach once when he took my order at the diner when I was still in school. I had no reason to be sad, at least not to this extent. But everyone else was crying so it seemed like the easy thing to do.

I named my dogs to impress a girl. I know that is a sappy thing to say and it may even make me sound like a romantic. But in all honesty, I loved the dogs more than I loved the girl – I just didn't know it at the time. I thought I loved Kris probably because she was the girl I couldn't have. Of course, *having* a girl has all kinds of implications that someone much smarter than me would have to talk about. I just knew that I could never be with Kris and that made me want to be with her. She was unattainable. Kris understood how my mind worked and she perpetually made efforts to make me question everything about anything and that made me love her. I never told her I loved her, of course, because love wasn't enough of a word. It didn't mean enough.

Anyway, I got my dogs after my dad left. It wasn't like my mom felt bad for me and let me have anything I asked for. I was almost sixteen. It also wasn't like I was trying to fill the void left by my dad with two dogs. It all just happened the way everything happens – one thing after another. Dad left and I got my dogs. One didn't cause the other.

We had just finished reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Kris got into an argument with some kid about the characters. I wasn't really listening to the argument, but I do remember the last thing that Kris said.

"Atticus and Scout are more like best friends than father and child," she said.

A week later, when a man came through town selling dogs, I bought his last two and named them Atticus and Scout. I hoped Kris would one day meet them, ask what I named them, and then be so impressed with my literary knowledge that she'd no longer be unattainable. Looking back, it would have taken a lot more than naming my dogs, especially because they were both male dogs and I named one of them after a female character – I probably should have read the book. But I really never had a chance with Kris. She didn't belong in Kensington. She always had bigger dreams. I could never be part of the dream as long as I had ties to Kensington.

Atticus and Scout were my best friends. They understood me – well they understood as much as I pretended they could. I think they understood me because I wanted them to understand me. It's incredible, the things we can trick ourselves into thinking.

When I used to take the bus home from school, I sat in the back and went to work on my leg. I would find hairs that looked like they didn't belong and just pull them out. I wasn't trying to hurt myself, but I did enjoy the stinging right when the hair came out. On a good day, I could pull out about twenty hairs. My upper thigh was the best location. I could get the

pain I wanted but keep the blood hidden. It was never a lot of blood, but on really good days I would pick at the place where the hair once was and open it up. Sometimes, I expected to find another person down in the little hole. But that was only on the best of days.

I remember getting off the bus and both Atticus and Scout were already running to greet me. Atticus was a twelve-year-old husky and Scout was just a puppy – a three-year-old yellow lab. This had to have been a few years after I bought them from the man in town. I only intended to buy Atticus. I felt so bad that no one wanted to buy the full-grown dog. Everyone wants puppies. I guess it's because everyone wants to start over. After I bought Atticus, I saw the yellow lab puppy and took him, too. I couldn't stand the idea of leaving either one of the dogs alone.

Anyway, Scout got to me first and began sniffing my leg – the blood was beginning to soak through my shorts. Atticus finally arrived and was almost tired of the habit – as soon as he smelled the blood he returned to the garage and waited next to the garbage can.

Whenever I was bleeding, I would retrieve a hidden towel from behind the garbage can and wipe off the blood before I went inside the house. I didn't want Lindsay to see my leg. She would be the only one who would be concerned – probably the only one who would notice. Lindsay was my sister. She was four years younger but had a mind much too mature for her age. She liked to contemplate life – its meaning mostly. I'll tell more about Lindsay later.

Scout was jumping at the door to the house while Atticus stood wisely at my side – he was used to this drill – it had been occurring for years.

I walked into the house. Empty. I went to my chair in the basement, turned off all the lights, and proceeded to fall asleep. It was summer-time in Kensington and there was nothing to do. School would be ending soon so there would be a few parties, but I never went to parties.

I woke up from a dream about living in the woods. Kris was there. I hated dreaming about her because it meant she was winning. She played with my head. She lived in my head. Maybe the person I half-expected to see in the bloody holes in my leg was Kris. That would explain a lot.

28

Going to Coach's diner was always a big deal for my mom and me. We used to go every Sunday after church but once my books started to get published, we never felt very welcome. So instead of going to Coach's immediately after church, we went while church was in progress. That way

we didn't have to sustain any judgmental glares from the Catholics of Kensington and we had a better chance of getting to talk to Coach.

Before I was born, my mom was a teacher at the school and was taken under the supervision of Coach. It's a little known fact in Kensington but Coach used to teach. My mom still says that she thinks he continued teaching for several years before he let anyone know that he was blind.

We walked in and a new waitress took our order.

"What would you girls like this morning?" the vaguely familiar-looking waitress asked.

"Two eggs...scrambled...bacon...white toast," my mom ordered first.

"The same for me, thanks," I followed.

Before our waitress left, Coach turned from behind the flat top and looked in our direction.

"Good morning Mary. Good morning Kristen," he smiled. He must have had the orders of a hundred regulars memorized.

"Morning Coach," my mom and I simultaneously replied.

"How are you Kristen?"

"Good thanks."

"Well thank you," he corrected.

"I'm well Coach. Thank you for asking. I like how you've rearranged the furniture."

A look of sheer panic overcame the old man's face for just a second until he realized that I was joking.

"Good one. I'm putting onions in your eggs." The man was a saint. He definitely had his favorites and I was undoubtedly quite high on the list, but interacting with Coach was what made Sunday's for me in Kensington. There was nothing else like it.

There was no one else in the diner so I brought up the subject of my next book.

"Coach I'm almost done with the first draft of my next story. Can I give you the manuscript like I did last time? Your edits were very helpful."

"Mary, I don't know how you can sleep at night knowing the thoughts that go through that head of your daughter's. If the writing wasn't so perfect, I'd disown the both of you just like that church with the rapist did."

"Now Coach, was that really necessary?" our waitress asked as she handed us our breakfast. "The church didn't know nothing about that creepy old man."

“So they knew *something*?” Coach was insufferable about grammar.

“Huh?” asked the waitress.

Coach just turned back to the flat top and my mom and I chuckled.

“She can write anything she wants. She doesn’t go out to the lake on weekends like other girls in her class and I trust her not to fall into the arms of some gentleman lover and make sweet love –”

“Alright that’s enough sarcasm out of you Mary. I already get enough steamy crap from your daughter’s books.”

“So you’ll help me again?” I asked excitedly.

“Have I told you how awful it is to have my wife sit there and read your manuscript to me? I have to listen to her describe some intimate scene and then correct the words that come out of her mouth. Makes me feel like I’m correcting my wife.”

“I thought you said you like my writing?”

“Oh Kristen if I could have taught your books in my class we would have had a field day with your symbolism and imagery. What you write about is garbage, but how you write it is artwork.”

“So...yes?”

He sighed “yes.”

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” I repeated as I ran behind the counter and hugged the old man. He was surprised that someone was touching him because I came so quickly. I often forgot that he had actually never seen me.

I meant what I said about Coach being a good editor, but getting his help really had nothing to do with the editing process. He helped with my second and third books. By that time I had people at the publishing company in the city who handled the bulk of the editing. But getting Coach to read my draft meant that I could thank him in my dedication. When the people in Kensington saw that Coach supported my writing, I got a lot less opposition from the town. That wasn’t the case after my first book was released. The town was caught in an uproar. The church made it clear that we were unwelcome and I was never able to get a job anywhere in town. I had this sort of negative celebrity when it came to large groups of people, but when I was able to talk to people individually, they realized I wasn’t a dirty whore who wrote about her sex life.

I was sixteen at the time and because it was just the first book of an unknown author, the publisher in the city only distributed to Kensington and a few other small towns. The book ended up selling well in the towns so the publisher encouraged me to write another book. Coach helped with

numbers two and three and I never wrote again. I moved onto college by the time my third book hit Kensington and I never came home afterwards.

The story of Hawking made national news so it’s no use really getting into the details. By hurting one person he hurt the entire town. The boy was special to me even though I played with his heart from time to time. He was a fool for wearing his emotions on his sleeve for the world to see and those emotions are what came back to kill the spirit of what was once a wonderful small town.

29

Almost a year to the day that the big super market chain came to town, Laurie died. She had been in a home for Alzheimer’s patients for about two years when it happened. They told me she went peacefully in her sleep but I still fear that that is something they tell the family regardless of the truth. No one wants to hear that their wife struggled against death for hours or even days. Somehow we find solace in the fact that death creeps up on our loved ones.

The big chain coming to Kensington is only important because its arrival led me to buy the general store that was next to my diner on Third Street. The store was owned by a young couple who moved into town a few years earlier. They bought it from a teacher who retired and moved to Florida and he bought it from the State of Michigan when it used to be a post office. Once they set up one of those bright blue mailboxes next to the bench on Third Street, we really didn’t have any use for a post office.

The young couple ran the general store until the big chain came to town and ran them out of business. They were going to sell the space to one of the old bar owners who wanted to give his bar idea another try. He was one of the first to go out of business when all of the bars were closing. His bright idea was to set up each table with its own beer tap. That way, he could hire less bartenders and waitresses. My fear was that the new bar would change Kensington for the worse. It wasn’t that I was worried about having so much alcohol so close to my diner – Kensington is only a mile wide – everything was close. Instead, I just wanted to keep things the way they were. Kensington was already changing with the coming of the big super market. I simply wanted to resist the changes and keep Kensington the way it was when I could still see.

I bought the general store from the couple and ran it like I was an employee rather than the owner. It was open when I wanted to work and closed when I was busy. I didn’t bother hiring other people or taking inventory. I worked at the cash register when I was tired of the diner and I

ordered new items when someone came in and told me we were out of whatever it was. The previous owners left me all of their contacts for the various items and I let someone at the diner dial the phone for me. Just like the diner, the general store had a funny way of running itself.

I think the best part of running the general store was during the summertime when the kids came in before they went out to the lake. They came in for snacks and sodas. The store had all kinds of items – shovels, cleaning agents, clothing, and even medicine. We never sold very much of that stuff and the medicine was a hassle to carry because it expired so quickly. Potato chips will last seven years but some cough syrup expires after six months. After about a year of having Shelly come in from the diner to check every box of cough syrup, I gave up and just remembered to tell anyone buying the medicine to check the date on the package.

During the summertime, the store was always loud. Kids were excited to be on their way to the lake and probably even more excited to not be in school at one o'clock on a Tuesday. It made me miss teaching. The students were so eager to get out and so were many of the other teachers. I was usually sad to have to leave the school in the summer. It was another one of those places that never changed. The hallways never moved, my classroom was always as I left it, and the bell to signal the beginning and end of the periods was always the same monotonous ring. When I retired, I lost that monotony and had to create my own in the diner and the general store. I think that's why the general store in the summertime was always so special. I could leave the diner at noon when the breakfast crowd was gone and open the general store next door by 12:30. By one, the door would fly open and shut, the bell would jingle against the door, and shouts of "chips," "Coke," and "sun screen," would fill the air. I'd smell the girls' makeup caked on their cheeks and the hair gel in the boys' hair. I think they liked the idea of jumping in the lake and still having their hair stand up. I've never been sure what to think about girls and makeup. For a few years after I went blind, I could still smell it on Laurie. I think it became more of an exercise in comfort than a practical application. I still miss seeing Laurie all dressed up though.

I can't speak much about the accident. I know that it started in my store and that it hurt those closest to me. Apart from that, I wasn't much help to the police and I definitely can't give many details. I know many people in Kensington wish I had my vision but no one wants it back more than I do. I don't think I would have saved anyone and I certainly don't think I could have stopped it. However, it's times like this, when someone

asks me to describe the accident, that I wish I could do more than blame my blindness.

30

The door lazily shut behind me and a warm-faced man turned away from the register to inspect his customer.

"Good afternoon," he said, before I was even completely in the store.

"Hey," I replied, not even thinking to ask the old man how his day was. "Do you have any rope?"

"Hello. And no, we do not," said the old man, even though he was the only person in the small store and "we" did not apply. He looked like the kind of experienced man who had seen and done everything there was to see and do in his life. He seemed like he was content with standing behind the counter at his small store. He had these kind-looking eyes. They would have been really beautiful had they not been all glossed-over. I could tell he didn't like me looking at him because he never made eye-contact with me. His eyes seemed to look just past me, giving the man a strange aura of mysteriousness. He looked like another one of *them*.

They were the kind of people that I had lived with all of my life. They knew everything and they loved to tell me about it. Anything that I said was always wrong. There was only one rule for them – I was always wrong, They were always right.

I left them on the farm back in Ohio and drove my mom's red jeep about halfway from this small town. I ditched the jeep and hitchhiked with a kid driving this direction. Eventually I got tired of listening to the kid talk so I asked him to stop and pull over. Instead of getting out I just punched the kid in the face. He just stared at me for a second and then calmly got out of the car. He left the door open with the car still running and just walked back in the direction we had just come from. It didn't even feel like I was stealing a car. I just moved over to the driver's seat and kept driving and looking for a town. I kept glancing in the rearview mirror and the kid never even looked back. He just put his head down and eventually walked out of my sight. But he's not important.

I needed a town that I could do what I needed to do but that was far enough away from the farm that They would never hear the news. This was the place.

"What city is this? What direction is the bridge from here?" I asked, not realizing that I had not given the old man an opportunity to answer the first question.

“This is Kensington. The bridge is a quarter mile down the road...west...out of town.”

“How high is it?”

“How high? About ten or twelve feet I suppose.”

That wasn't high enough. The man was useless. I couldn't use a rope and there was nothing to jump from. I could find another store, but the way that this place was packed to the ceiling with anything anyone could ever need – except for rope – it gave me the feeling that this was the only store for miles.

I decided to look around the cramped store for anything useful. When I got to the back wall of the store, I saw the drugs. I figured that people overdose all the time. But the town must have been the origin of the common cold because all the old man had in his store was cough syrup. I couldn't do anything with cough syrup.

As I turned away from the back wall, the man was turned toward me but looking just to my right. It felt like he was staring at me so I figured he just had a lazy eye or something. I shifted my gaze to the counter he was standing behind. On the top of the counter were three large bottles of carpet cleaner. I found what I needed. Carpet cleaner would surely do the trick.

“How much is the carpet cleaner?”

“Twelve ninety... Why?” The old man was hesitant. He knew what I wanted it for. First, I asked for rope. That alone is suspicious. Next, I asked about how tall a bridge was. How stupid of me, the old man surely knew what I wanted to do.

But did he really know? Did he know what I had gone through and what They put me through? I didn't care if he knew. I would buy the carpet cleaner, do what I needed to do, and I would never have to worry about the old man again. He didn't matter in my life. Only I mattered.

“Twelve ninety? Okay.”

I looked the old man straight in the eyes, which were now looking right above my head, as I said this. Even though he wasn't looking at me, he looked sad. He knew and he was sad about my decision. He started to speak.

“What is the problem son?”

“No problem, I just, I just have a stain. A stain on my carpet at home.”

“Where is home?”

“Just down the road, about a mile, no, about five miles, yes.”

“So you are from around here? Then why did you ask what town with is? And why did you ask about the bridge? Unless you came from the city, you would have had to cross the bridge to get to my store.”

“Okay, so I'm not from here, big deal. I would still like to buy some carpet cleaner.”

“What kind of man do you take me for? Would you like me to run next door to my diner and put it in a tall glass with some ice, too?”

Sarcasm. The old man, just like everyone else, was scolding me with pure sarcasm. He was trying to tell me that I was wrong for doing this and I was wrong for being disrespectful to a lazy-eyed old man. I was wrong again. I was just so tired of being wrong. This had to end.

I thought about hitting the old man. It may have worked, but this old man really didn't do anything to me. If anything, he was the only person who was adamant about his views of my choices. He meant well, but he was just too late.

I looked up at the old man and watched him tilt his head slightly towards the door.

“Hi Grandpa!” a little girl in a bright yellow dress said as she skipped inside the store.

The old man's face lit up and a broad smile appeared on his face.

“Hello Beth! Do you know whose birthday it is today?”

“Don't be silly Grandpa. It's my birthday! I'm seven today!”

That day was the little girl's birthday and all she wanted to do was see her grandfather. To think, I almost hit the old man only seconds before she opened the door.

Beth walked up to the counter, casually unscrewed a large plastic jar of five-cent lollipops, searched for strawberry, and popped it in her mouth. She did so with such ease that it looked like she had been eating lollipops from her grandfather's store every day since she was two.

Suddenly, I heard a screeching noise from outside the store. It was the most hideous, yet familiar noise. It sounded like someone was driving a truck without tires, just the wheels. Then, I realized how familiar that sound truly was. It was a used Ford pick-up – so old that it was impossible to tell in what year it was made. Without looking, I could tell that there was a bearded old man driving. A bearded, drunk, and out-of-his-mind old man looking for what was rightfully his. Me.

He was the reason I left the farm. He was the one who was always right. He was the epitome of Them. He must have decided that I would have stopped in this town. Since the store was the first thing anyone saw when

they came into town, he was probably just guessing. Nice guess...he was coming for me.

I ran to a part of the store where I thought I remembered seeing gardening tools. The old man followed me with his eyes from behind the counter and then realized that I was running from whatever had made the sound outside his shop. He knew that if he didn't do something soon, I would be dead before my step-father could even walk in the door.

The old man bent over the counter and asked Beth in a whisper "Beth, down what isle is that boy going?"

"Seven, Grandpa."

He started to move from behind the counter but he was too slow to make a difference. I knew that I was better off dead than with my step-father. What I think the old man was most afraid of was that this was going to happen in his store on his granddaughter's birthday.

Did I dare end my life so quickly? I had these enormous gardening sheers and my life was in my own hands. Then, the surprise came. I heard someone running towards me. They poked their head around the corner. It was neither the old man nor my step-father. It was Beth, the seven-year-old girl knew there was a problem and she came to help. I didn't know what to do. My step-father was coming in the door and all I had to do was make one cut. I would never have to see him or deal with Them ever again. But the little girl was standing in front of me. I couldn't hurt myself and scar someone else in the process. The entire reason for doing this was to stand up to those who hurt me. Now, not only would I kill myself, but I would scar Beth for life – on her birthday.

The door of the store swung open and then slammed shut.

A tear rolled down my cheek.

"Where is the boy?"

I ran for the exit.

31

Hawking came looking for his car at the end of the summer after his senior year in high school. I felt bad about asking to borrow it knowing that I'd never return to Kensington. I was transferring money for some pretty important people in the city when I heard that he was in town. He must have taken a few busses downtown – hell that would have taken him an entire day. To be honest, I try not to think about him much anymore. I guess I can try to remember as much as I can.

The more and more I moved money for people, the more I came into contact with petty crime artists. These guys were the drug dealers and

pimps. I charged almost nothing to move drug money as long as the dealers gave me the names of their buyers. I always thought it could be helpful in the future to have a list of people just asking to be blackmailed. Anyway, I found out that Hawking was in town when I got his name from one of the dealers. He bought a small amount of something – probably just pot – so I knew he was alone. I wondered when he got into drugs and that kind of made me sad. But in the fast-paced world of the city, you have to be careful not to think about one thing for too long.

I worried about Hawking for a moment and then realized that as long as he was hooked on whatever he was buying, I'd be able to keep an eye on him. The one good thing was that he got out of Kensington. Anyone who can do that without having to steal a car deserves some kind of recognition. Anyway, I heard about Hawking about twice a month from a few dealers so I knew he was alive. I didn't much care if he was healthy or staying out of trouble. He wasn't my responsibility and as long as he was alive, no one in Kensington would think anything bad was happening. The city was a place to get lost. You only got found if you died.

Now the rest of this story is just based on what I know of Hawking and what I read in papers after everything happened. I eventually moved out of my half apartment and bought a place of my own with a garage. That detail is important only because by October someone broke into the garage and stole the car. I didn't bother reporting it because I knew the cops would ask for my information and I was sure we'd get on the subject of how I bought a house with no job. I couldn't exactly tell a cop that I move money for dealers and pimps. So the garage was opened with a crowbar from the outside and Hawking must have used the spare key that I left with him to start it up and get out. I never heard the car start so I'm assuming he put it into neutral and pushed it for a block or two.

By the next morning I heard about Kensington on the radio in the barber shop. It wasn't as much of a barber shop as it was a place to talk with some guys who knew more about the city than the people of Kensington knew about each other. The guys liked hearing stories about the small town so when the news came on the radio, everyone one quieted down to hear about the town they had come to know through my stories. Like anyone from Kensington, I oftentimes told the story about all of the fires. Everyone tells it in their own way I'm sure, but the idea is that from the times the bars closed and the time Hawking returned in his car – it was about four years – there must have been eight or so fires all deemed to be arson.

As the barber shop grew quieter and one of the owners turned up the volume, the local newswoman was talking about a young man who

crashed his car into the market. The driver lost control of the car near Coach's diner and ended up swerving into the front door of the market on the south side of Third Street. They still weren't sure if the driver died in the ensuing fire or if he just walked away.

I haven't heard any news from Kensington since then and I like it that way. There must not have been a service for Hawking because nothing was written in the newspaper in the city and I never got a call from my aunt. I'm sure life went on like it always does. Hawking never made a big difference in the world and neither did his death. He was just another piece in the machine of Kensington – very easily replaced.

32

I watched both Lindsay Masterson and Beth, Coach's granddaughter, die in almost identical ways. Of course, the accidents were years apart, but by the time Beth died, we were just beginning to forget about Lindsay.

I spent every evening in front of the large window in my apartment. I could see everything from there. It was the same window I watched the teenagers at the lake at night and it was from that very window that I saw the church burn. Sometimes, I would sit only inches away from the window in order to feel like I was part of the action. In the summer, I would open the window, press my nose to the screen, and could barely imagine the smell of the marijuana coming from the kids on the hill. I would only retreat back into the apartment when I remembered that those teenagers were once my students. It made me wonder if I had anything to do with their current choices.

Other times, I would sit about ten feet away from the window and pretend I was looking at a picture. I turned the window frame into a picture frame and watched as all the little people hurried along the sidewalks of Third Street.

When Lindsay Masterson died, I had my nose pressed against the glass of the window. I would have to back my face up every minute or so because my breath would fog up the window. When I was bored, I would write short messages to the people of Kensington with my finger. They couldn't read them, but it made me feel like I was helping. As Lindsay was walking down the middle of Third Street, I quickly backed away from the window and wrote with my finger in the fog left from my breath "Get out of the street. You aren't close enough to the light." I understood that while I could read the words, they would be backwards to anyone reading from the street. Lindsay was busy reading from a single piece of paper. She smiled as

she read and moved her lips with the words. Of course my words on the window were too small for anyone to see and no one ever looked up to my apartment. But at least I did something.

Lindsay was on the west side of Kensington walking east down the middle of Third Street. The only street light was directly across from my window and it didn't throw enough light to reach the young girl. When the pick-up truck met Lindsay's body, the piece of paper flew into the air, hovered in the wind, and then eased itself onto the ground. Lindsay, however, let out only a faint scream before being thrown almost straight into the air, not hovering, and coming straight back down. The truck never came to a complete stop. After it threw Lindsay's body into the air, it swerved, squealed its tires, tapped its breaks, and then rode off out of town.

I still wonder why Lindsay was walking down the middle of Third Street and I still wonder why the paper floated so gracefully back to the ground. I'm convinced that she should have looked up toward my window, but no one ever does.

I've never actually told the story of Beth's death. I, of course, had the best view of it. While it was similar in nature to Lindsay's accident, the two looked very different. The accident that killed Lindsay happened quickly. Third Street was silent as Lindsay walked down it, then the brakes squealed, Lindsay's body hit the ground, and everything was silent again.

But for Beth's accident, everything was slow. There was so much excitement as I watched the events unfold through the portrait of my window. First, a boy sped into town and furiously parked on Third Street. He ran into the market that Coach worked in on occasion and, although the street was silent again, the pace at which the boy ran into the store told me that there was more to come. For a moment, I thought life would return to normal when Coach's granddaughter walked from the diner next door into the market. I always liked Beth. She walked with a rhythm in her step that made her look like a tourist. Not that any tourists came to Kensington. What I mean is that she always looked so excited to be in Kensington. People from Kensington don't act like that.

Just as I was about to move closer to the window so I could feel like I was part of the action rather than just an observer, I heard the roar of an engine and saw a pick-up truck pull into the spot next to the boy's car. The man that got out of the truck was a drunk. I knew the type. He staggered out of his truck, adjusted his hat, and hesitated as he pondered his next move. I opened the window to try to smell the beer on his breath. I

imagined that it smelled like Saturday nights in Kensington when the bars were still open.

The man opened the door to the market and stood in the frame for a moment. He seemed to be unsure of where he was. After what must have been a few words with Coach, the boy ran past the drunk and into his car. The drunk in the doorway was slow to react. The boy got his car started and struggled to back it onto Third Street. It seemed as if this was the first time he had ever driven the car – that kind of hesitant confidence that causes you to first touch the gas pedal too softly and then press it too hard the next time so that you jerk forward. He backed into the street and Beth ran out of the store. The drunk was now fumbling with his own keys trying to open the door to his pickup.

The boy hit the gas hard just as Beth stepped off the sidewalk and into the street. He swerved to avoid her but his left headlight caught Beth just below the hip. He lost control of the car and it kept swerving into the market below my apartment. I felt the floor shake and could immediately feel the floor get hot with the fire below. The man in the pickup stared at the scene before he headed west out of Kensington. Beth's body was moved almost instantly and by the time anyone thought to help the driver, he was gone. For years there were rumors that they found a body but that it was too burned for anyone to identify it. Others said it was the Masterson boy, Lindsay's brother, but I had him in class and I knew it wasn't him. It was his car that the boy was driving though. I tried to write another message on my window but people never look up.

33

I stole my car back in the last few weeks of summer. I still think that sounds odd. I had to steal what was rightfully mine. I decided to hitchhike my way to the city because I needed to show Kris that I could do something. After she lectured me outside of the diner, I drove my mom's minivan home and thought about the substitute English teacher who got me to talk about Longfellow. I realized that I needed to be the hero in the strife.

Leaving Kensington was pretty uneventful. I'm sure some sob story would sound real nice, but to be honest, I just started walking one morning. After an hour or so, I was on some two-lane highway without any traffic. I stopped for awhile because the sun had completely risen and the hilly view to my right looked like waves about to crash down on me. If I had a camera, I think I may have taken a picture. But then again, I don't think I ever owned a camera.

While I was looking at the surrounding hills, a man in a Crown Victoria – the kind they use as police cars – pulled over and asked if I needed a lift.

“Sure”

“Where y’uns going?” he talked like there was someone else with me but I just ignored it. I did, however, like that he was trying to revolutionize the English language. For years, I said that we needed a plural form of *you*. “You guys” borders on being sexist. I'm sure if I took my hood off in Ms. Knight's English class and listened to the lady, I might be able to say more about sexism. “Y'all” can work in a pinch, but people tend to focus on the fact that you just said “y'all” rather than what you actually said. I'm not sure we'll ever find a suitable word but I'm glad that the guy was trying.

“The city,” I answered. I'm really not sure why I answered so quickly and decisively. I had never been to the city. I had never been outside of Kensington.

“What's yer name?”

“I'm Hawking.” I never asked him his name.

The man talked funny the rest of the way to the city. He asked me where about in the city I was going and I just had to lie.

“The park.”

“Oh yeah I remember the park. I can think of several for instances that I got into fights at that park.” All I could think was that Kris would have died if she heard this guy talk. “Gotta make one stop right quick first.”

The city hit us like Kensington hits an unprepared visitor. One minute we were going 75 on an open highway and the next minute there were fifty massive skyscrapers nearly on top of us. That would have really been the time for a camera.

The man took us to an older part of the city. It seemed darker there – even though it was only 2 p.m. – and everyone outside seemed to hate being outside. They exited a building, walked as quickly as they could to the next building and then disappeared. The man stopped at a newspaper stand at a corner and called the cashier over to the car. He whispered in his ear and then turned to me.

“Hawking, will you reach into the glove compartment and hand me one of the envelopes?” I did and he immediately handed it to the cashier who then dropped a small brown paper bag into his lap.

The cashier then said “See you later Hawking,” to the man driving me and then hurried back into his booth. The man never corrected him by

saying that *I* was Hawking but then again, he really didn't have any time. The cashier had disappeared.

The rest of the details of my time in the city are hazy. It has been nearly twenty years since then. But I was dropped off at a park where I remember sleeping a few nights. I learned my way around the city pretty quickly and even saw the man in the Crown Victoria at the same corner a few times. He never saw me but within a week, I had learned to walk like everyone else in the city – quickly, head down, stay close to the buildings. It sounds like someone would walk that way in fear of guns but I never saw anyone with a gun. It was just what you did in the city.

I eventually saw my cousin driving my car around at about 5 a.m. I followed him to a pretty nice house where he put my car in the garage and then walked inside. I'd like to tell a story about a risky late-night break in, but that's just not how things really happen. I waited for about a half hour and then just lifted the garage door. Inside was my black 1990 Ford Pinto. It looked older than I remembered it. I had the spare key to my car stuffed inside my wallet where my mom taught me to keep it. The car was unlocked. I put it into neutral, pushed it out of the garage so I didn't wake up my cousin, and then started it once it was in the street. Then I just started driving. By 8 a.m., I realized that I was on my way to Kensington. I guess that was the only place I knew to go.

On the way back, I saw a kid about a year or so younger than me in a Jeep on the side of the road. I pulled over and he told me his car died and he could use a lift.

"I live in a small town about an hour down the road. We can find someone who knows how to fix cars there."

"Thanks. How small?"

"If you blink when you drive through it, you'll miss it." He smiled then mumbled something. Once he was in and we were driving I had to roll down the windows. He smelled like a farm.

He didn't say anything the rest of the trip so I used the time to talk about Kris. I told him about her books, and about my Shakespeare speech, and about how she hated me for kissing her cousin.

I saw the county sign and told the kid that we were about five minutes outside of town. He kept staring straight ahead until he asked me to pull over. It seemed urgent so I did. He then squared his body towards me and punched me in the jaw.

I had never been in a fight before and I felt like crying. I remember being more upset that being punched made me feel like crying than I was

about actually being punched. I just looked at the kid and found it fitting that something bad would happen to me as I got closer to Kensington.

I figured things would just be worse in Kensington so I got out of the car and started walking back the way we came. Anything would be better than driving into Kensington with a kid who just punched me. I didn't even know him. So I just walked. I left the keys in the car and eventually the kid drove the rest of the way into town. I went about two years without it, I didn't need it. The hard part about walking away was letting go of Kris. As I walked, I knew that each step took me farther away from the only girl who ever really mattered. I still wonder if I did the right thing.

I have never gone back to Kensington and I'm sure I never will. I don't hear from my mom anymore. I called once I got back to the city, got a job, and found a small apartment but they hung up on me. I still don't know what I did to make them so angry but when I told them who I was, my mom gave the phone to a strange sounding man.

He said, "Hawking has been dead for six months. Stop calling."

So I guess they didn't want me in their life anymore. That's all I can really remember about Kensington.

34

After Beth died, I went back to the classroom. I had been substituting for several years, but after the accident I decided to fill in as a long-term substitute. One of the high school teachers was out on maternity leave and I felt that I couldn't let the students spend half of their year in an English class without an English teacher. The teachers were worried that I hadn't been left with lesson plans. I explained that I knew enough literature and had taught long enough that lesson plans would just slow me down. I wouldn't have been able to read them anyway.

When I walked into the school, all of the conversations in the hallway stopped. Although I couldn't see the students staring at me, I could feel it. The silence told me everything. I heard whispers of "Coach" and "That's him" as I passed through the front doors. Beth's death was an important moment in Kensington. Laurie and I helped my son and daughter-in-law through their grief along with many others. We often heard that Beth's passing came too soon and that it wasn't fair. I'm still not convinced that fairness had anything to do with the accident. Death is as much a part of life as birth is. In terms of the accident coming too soon, I decided that that implied that there is a good time for death. This, of course, leads to a discussion about God and fate. I'm not sure there is a true connection there, but when I begin to argue that we all have to die and that some of us live

longer than others, people make comments about some kind of divine plan. All I meant was that it wasn't worth my time to feel sorry for myself or my family. It wouldn't bring Beth back.

The grieving process reminded me of my favorite Longfellow poem. I figured I'd start my first day back at school with my favorite lecture – hoping to inspire some heroic actions. Kensington needed a hero. We still need a hero.

I walked into the classroom and stood at the front while students walked to their seats. I forgot how important deodorant is to a teacher. Of course, I wasn't the one who smelled like gym socks, but I would need to stand as far away as possible from the students who did. I feared that I would lose my focus and begin asking the students why they didn't believe in their hygiene. I took a few steps to my right and concluded that the gym sock students were sitting in the row closest to the windows. I made a mental note not to venture any closer.

The bell rang to signal the beginning of class. I jumped into action. Something about the four identical tones allowed me to transform from a blind old man into a performer, from a short-order cook into a teacher.

"The soul is dead that slumbers. So don't sleep while I'm talking. Deal?"

Silence.

"If you are nodding your heads, you're going to have to speak up. I'm not very good at nonverbal communication." That got a few laughs.

"Anyway, things are not what they seem. Remember that. Life is real. Life is earnest. And the grave is not the goal... what does that mean?" I started with an easy one. This was one of those questions that a student's answer always sounds good in their head but comes out messy when they try to explain it. "You are just going to have to shout out what you are thinking. It doesn't make much sense to raise your hand when I'm around.

"The grave is not the goal. What could that possibly mean?"

"It means that," a student began and then paused, "well, I mean, it means that the goal in life... it means we shouldn't try to die?"

"Are you asking me a question? You're close. Try again."

"It means that –"

"We all die," a girl in the back interrupted "but dying is an endpoint, not a goal."

"We can work with that. Okay now I'm going to ask a series of questions and anyone can answer them." I said this knowing that the only person who would talk would be the girl who just answered the first question. That's just how these lessons worked. A lecture like this always

worked out well in my head. I could re-read the poem minutes before class and have an idea of how I wanted to start and where the conversation would lead. Usually, I'd ask the first question and have to labor to get even a grunt of a response.

"So death is not the goal. If we accept that, what is the goal?"

"Anything."

"That's a poor answer. I need substance."

"Life is the goal." It was a new voice. I wasn't going to argue with that answer. For the first time in years I had two students engaged in a poetry lesson.

"Beautiful. So what do we make of the line 'Dust thou art to dust returnest, was not spoken of the soul'?"

"It's the same thing," shouted a voice from the back of the room.

"Give me more."

"Life is not just about the beginning and end," said a new voice.

"So what?" I countered.

"So that means that while we begin as dust and end as dust, what happens in the middle is actually the important part."

This was going well. Unbelievably well. "Not enjoyment and not sorrow is our destined end or way... what in the world is that?" The performer in me was beginning to show.

A new voice offered "Life isn't about being happy or sad."

"Wait," a student near the windows said. "Why can't we be happy or sad? What's wrong with emotions?" I took a step toward the voice in order to engage the student. I was immediately hit by the odor of the boys who could only be described as being on a deodorant boycott.

"I don't think there is anything wrong with emotions," I said as I took another step away from the windows. "Someone else help me here. Why isn't enjoyment or sorrow our destiny?"

"You aren't saying that emotions are bad or wrong. You are just saying that we can't spend our lives worrying about always being happy or always avoiding sadness."

Now, we were getting somewhere. I didn't know where exactly, but this felt good. It felt like light bulbs were turning on at sporadic intervals throughout the classroom. "But to act that each tomorrow finds us farther than today. Help me out with –"

"The goal is to make progress in life," a girl in the back interrupted.

"Keep going."

"We need to grow every day. We need to make the world better in some way every chance we get." By the end of her sentence, she was shouting. People were excited.

"Okay, I'm going to skip ahead. 'In the world's broad field of battle, in the bivouac of life, be not like dumb, driven cattle...why am I talking about cows all of a sudden?'"

Silence. I feared that I gave them too many lines at one time.

"I'll help you out," I said. "What is Longfellow saying about cows?"

"They travel in herds."

"Yes. Keep us going."

"They are driven by cattle drivers."

"Is that to say that driven cattle don't make their own decisions?"

Silence.

"Nodding your head doesn't help me. Say something."

A resounding "yes" came next.

"So then what is Longfellow telling us?"

"We should make our own decisions."

"And what do we base these decisions on?"

I had to wait longer than usual for someone to shout "Progress."

"Okay, here's the last line of the day: 'Be a Hero in the strife.'" A girl in the back gasped and I shouted "Give me the epiphany!"

"We have to be heroes by doing something. It can be anything but it has to be progress. There will always be people who will be driven by others like cattle. But not us. We are the heroes." The bell sounded to end class and I walked out of the door. I always liked to end class with a student getting the last word.

That wasn't just a good day of teaching. It was a conversation. Those kinds of days can only be defined as a rarity. A good teacher gets a dozen in a career and a great teacher might get one every year. I walked out of the school that day knowing I used up all of my great lecture days and I was content that it ended with a message of heroism. That's never a bad message.

35

I only wanted to see places on the day I left Kensington. No people. I had already said goodbye to Coach and Laurie and I couldn't think of anything to say to Hawking. He was gone anyway. I hadn't spoken to him since he assaulted Rachel. Looking back, I may have loved some of the Hawkings. It just wasn't worth the gamble.

The first place I visited was Coach's diner. I wanted to relive my reading. That night, I was too concerned with what Hawking did to really enjoy my night. And it really was supposed to be my night. I got to sell copies of my book to those closest to me and I even signed some autographs. I wasn't surprised to see Ms. Knight at the reading. She was one of those teachers who seemed to like me regardless of what I did, very easy to win over and even easier to persuade. All I had to do was write a few essays on the representation of women in whatever book we were reading at the time and her confidence in me would soar.

Don't get me wrong, I don't mean to belittle the plight of women in literature or, maybe more importantly, the plight of women in world history. All I am saying is that English teachers live for those arguments. I mean, sure, the canon of Romantic poets is incredibly male-dominated. But that doesn't mean that today's male poets are the enemy or that we have to compensate today for what we lacked yesterday. However, if I'm talking to Ms. Knight, then yes, the tragedy of the underrepresentation of women in literary history is comparable only to human rights violations like genocide and ethnic cleansing. With Ms. Knight, it was all about playing the game.

After a few essays, I could read other romance novels or even write my own while she taught. She left me alone, proud that one of her students was a woman in the world of literature. Although, the way she hid her copy of my first book, *Hawk's Dream*, told me that maybe Ms. Knight herself wasn't too proud of being a stereotypical female romance novel reader.

Anyway, I digressed to that point in order to explain my inscription in the copy of *My Sun and Master* that Ms. Knight bought that night at Coach's diner. I wrote "Don't call me a woman and don't treat me like a man. I am a writer." She read it, cried, and hugged me.

As I sit at my desk at my job as a book editor, as a woman in the world of literature, I often think about that inscription and smile. I *am* a woman. I am happy with being treated like a woman. In fact, I'm comfortable with saying that my gender is as much a part of who I am as my identity as a writer. This doesn't make me weak, it just means that the genocides and ethnic cleansings are of greater importance in the world today than the gender of the person whose name is on the front of the book. But maybe my priorities are just different than those of Ms. Knight.

After the diner, I went to the hill overlooking the lake. Although, I looked toward the cherry trees like I always did. A thousand memories passed through my mind.

I remembered finishing the first draft of *Hawk's Dream* on that hill. Spending hours laboring over the last paragraph. Not being able to decide if the ending should be romantic or realistic. In reality, things never go as planned. Or even as they should go. There is no prescription for real life. If I learned anything in my eighteen years in Kensington, it was that. But then again, in reality, the two main characters don't have sex on the roof. Also, it was a romance novel and I had the funny feeling that romance novels are supposed to end with some romance, or at least some romantic feelings.

As I was contemplating, Hawking climbed to the top of the hill and sat down about fifty feet away from me. He was humming some song, but from so far away, all I heard were the vibrations of his lips. That deep, annoying buzzing that remains for a few seconds after a bee flies too close to your ear. The bee is gone, but the buzzing lingers. Except that day on the hill, Hawking kept the buzzing from leaving.

"Either come over here and hum or stop humming."

He hung his head and stopped. I wrote two different endings and then looked at Hawking. He hadn't moved. I was sure that I had scared him and I feared that he wasn't breathing for fear of his own life. I knew that I could be insufferable when I wrote. I tried to loosen him up.

"Hawking?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to come over here?"

"I don't want to bother you."

"Are you a romantic?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you like the stories that end with the guy getting the girl and then riding off into the sunset?"

"No. Not really." I could tell that I was with the quiet and reserved Hawking. The one who was always aware of what he was saying and how he said it. He wasn't around much.

"So you're a realist?"

"I don't think so."

"Well if you don't like the romantic endings, you probably appreciate it when the ending is true to how the world works. People die. People leave. People find new people who aren't the original people. You know, real life."

He took a deep breath and stood up. He turned toward me and thought about coming close. Taking three steps and stopping, he said "Why can't we have both? I think that a romantic story, or even an action, is

infinitely more romantic when it is plausible. Then, it is romantic and inspiring. It can incite other romantic actions or feelings. I think the best stories and actions incite other actions. That's all I'm saying."

I took a long look at him.

"So...well...alright because I'm writing this...thing...and –"

"I think we are constantly confined by two choices. People tell us that we have to pick one or the other, either or, and we get stuck. There's nothing wrong with having both," he interrupted.

I scribbled "Constance Confines" on the top of my notebook. I needed a pen name and I had just stumbled into it. Of course, I thought, if I needed multiple identities, Hawking Masterson should have been my first stop.

I walked up to Hawking and kissed him right on the lips. He had no idea how helpful he was. I'm sure he thought I was coming to hit him or something as he flinched when I went in to kiss him.

"Thank you," I said.

"For what?"

"Just don't say anything. I want to remember this."

I'm not sure if I really loved Hawking because I'm not sure if loving parts of a person is the same thing as loving all of a person. I do know, however, that if I loved any of the Hawkings, this was the one.

I try to think about that Hawking when I find myself thinking of Kensington and the town's ability to kill. To outsiders, it only got Lindsay, Beth, and Laurie. But to those of us who got out, it is clear to see that it is the ones who are still living in Kensington who are the dead.

I wish Hawking didn't do what he did. I wish one of the good Hawkings would have stopped that one bad one. But I know that Kensington played a role in that accident. I know that only rarely does Kensington allow the good to come out.

36

To whom it may concern,

I found the following diary entry inside an old book that used to belong to my grandfather. Before him, the book belonged to his grandfather, Dale Masterson. Actually, the diary belonged to my niece, Lindsay, who lived in Kensington many years ago. After her funeral, my sister, Lindsay's mother, gave me a box of old books. I don't think she knew that this was inside. Lindsay must have gotten the book from my grandfather before he died.

Yours,

John Masterson

Jan. 1, 1901

Well they decided to name the town after me today. It seems odd to me that there will be a place named after me that was never a home. I spent a few nights in the town, but I can think of many other suitable names for this place, all of which don't include my last name. But reactionary as we all are in nature, I guess I can understand why they thought it was necessary to honor me in this way.

I'm not sure I ever thought about having something named after me. I guess I considered opening a business and naming it after myself but I never thought I would do something that warranted a town to be named after me. It sounds selfish, but I wish they would have gotten the name right. I mean, this is the only chance I'll get to have something named after me and they couldn't even get it right. Sure, if they messed up one of the vowels and called it Mastersin, Michigan rather than Masterson, Michigan, I guess I could understand. But they weren't even close.

Of course, I should be honored that they even decided to name the town after me. It was all a misunderstanding anyway. I guess it fits that one misunderstanding followed another.

I've told the story a few times, but I've never written it down. Might as well take this chance. I'll have to start back in Salamander, Indiana. Salamander is best described by describing how the people pronounce words that end with *a*. Words like idea and Indiana were all given *er* endings. You didn't have an idea, you had an idear. And you weren't from Salamander, Indiana, you were from Salamander, Indianer. People liked to sit on their front porches, talk with their neighbors, and occasionally enjoyed a tuner fish sandwich. In short, Salamander was just slightly off – it couldn't quite figure out the endings.

We liked to walk in the middle of the road in front of the farm house, Don and I. Apart from the occasional car, we considered the road to be our property. The road was where our stories came alive and where the remnants of old stories could be found discarded on the side of the road. That stick was a musket used by a Union soldier. He fired four shots and died right here. He got hit, stumbled off that ridge, and his body lied mangled right here where the yellow line separates north and southbound traffic. We wondered what the falling soldier would have said with his last breath. Maybe something patriotic like "Long live the United States of

America." Or maybe something bitter like "This is Lincoln's fault." We really didn't care what he said – as long as he didn't say something true like "My body marks the dividing line between Ohio and Indiana." We agreed that that would be the worst thing a dying soldier could say.

In fact, the true things were off-limits for Don and me when we played on the state line. A stick could be a gun or a sword or a guitar – but it could never be a stick. Don picked up a baseball one day, bit off the pin, and lobbed the grenade toward me. I was walking the Ohio-Indiana tightrope when the grenade landed at my heels.

"Dale, you are about to have your legs blown off."

"I'm fifty feet off the ground, the grenade landed far below me."

"But your weight on the tightrope caused it to lower. You are only twenty-five feet from the ground now."

I jumped from the tightrope into a ditch on the side of the road just before the grenade exploded. There were some casualties – my left shoe didn't make it. We wondered how the Union soldier would have fared if he had a grenade. Had he seen the Confederate coming up on his flank? Was he trying to reload but ran out of time? A grenade would have saved his life.

Don liked to walk with one foot in Ohio and the other in Indiana. We technically lived in Salamander, Indiana, but Ohio was just as much a part of our town. As Don was straddling the line, he'd make up rhymes like "I'm in two states at one time. I'm feeling like a mime. Hey, I found a dime." We decided that Don would be a poet when he grew up.

I liked to stand in Indiana and then jump over the line into Ohio.

"I'm in Indiana. Now I'm in Ohio. Now I'm in Indiana." We liked to be places. We liked to be in places that other people couldn't. How many people can be in two places at once? How many people can switch states in one small jump? For us, the answer was always two.

Everything went away when Don left for the war. States didn't matter anymore. And when states no longer mattered, the lines that separated them became inconsequential. In one of his last letters, Don explained how wrong we used to be when we walked along the Ohio-Indiana tightrope.

"When we were kids, everything was clear. You were either in Ohio or Indiana. I was sometimes in both. But I was never completely in both states. Here, there are no lines. I never know where I am. I never know if I'm safe. I don't even know where Safe begins and Unsafe ends. When we looked at maps in school, every state and every country had a border. We could point to the thin black line and say 'Indiana ends here. Ohio starts here. And my house is right here.' It isn't like that over here. I would love a

line. I would love a bright-yellow line right at my feet showing me where to stand when it is time to fight and where to lie when it is time to sleep. And over here, the sticks are sticks and the guns are guns. You can't argue about how high your tightrope is. And nobody gets last words like the Union soldier did. You just die. Things aren't like the tightrope Dale. You can never be safe. Nowhere is safe."

After I read the letter, I decided that the world was ruined when they decided to put yellow lines on the roads. What other choice did we have but to play on the lines? We played and we learned that the entire world is separated by yellow lines. I think that might be why Don didn't do so well in the war. He was so used to the lines. While other people ran and ducked for cover in the bushes, Don was standing upright and searching for the yellow tightrope to tell him where to stand. The yellow lines killed my brother.

As I get older, I still carry Don's last letter. The Ohio-Indiana tightrope is still a part of who I am. I was married on the line in a small ceremony. She lived across the street in Ohio. Her family sat on the Ohio side and mine in Indiana. We said our vows and kissed over that line. It wasn't until I was walking down the aisle with my new bride that Don's last words came back to me. "Nowhere is safe." That was when I stopped and stood right in the middle of the tightrope. I didn't face Indiana or Ohio. Instead, I stood right in the middle of the Ohio-Indiana border and stared off down the road. I wasn't in Ohio and I wasn't in Indiana. I wasn't straddling the line and I wasn't jumping over it. I was Nowhere. I was safe.

I think that is why I found myself walking down the middle of the road that night in what is now Kensington. Even writing it feels odd. I was in the nameless town to help take out the railroad. I started in Salamander with a group of men and we removed the abandoned railroad rail by rail. It wasn't exciting work and it wasn't easy, but it paid well and needed to be done.

We worked by towns rather than by the hour. We would take out the rails, carry them to the truck that followed us, and when we reached the end of the town, we were done. We could be working for twenty hours or two. It all depended on the size of the town. We finished in the nameless town in about three hours and spent the rest of the day wandering around the town. I can't remember much of what we did, but I do remember that when it came time to sleep, I couldn't. Instead, I wandered through the town again. But this time, I found the main street and walked right down the

middle. There wasn't a line, but I knew where it would be. I needed to be Nowhere for awhile.

As I was walking, a little girl ran out of some kind of general store. She couldn't have been more than three years old and if she were any older, I would have been embarrassed by how little clothing she wore. But she was three and half-naked so I didn't mind her grabbing onto my leg.

As I looked down at her, I saw that she was crying and looking back into the darkness she came from. I heard a man growl something toward the girl and could almost see him running toward the two of us.

I don't remember hitting the man or even touching him, but I'm told now that he had a knife and was coming for the girl. He kind of just ran into me and I fell on top of him. I guess we made enough noise that other people in the town awoke to find that one of the railroad workers had saved this little girl from her drunk father.

And that's how Kensington got its name. The people of the previously-nameless town were so happy that I had saved this girl that they wanted to honor me. They asked for my name, I mumbled "Dale Masterson," and they declared that the town would be named after the man who saved the little girl, "Dale Kensington." I was too wrapped up in the excitement of the people patting my back and the girl's mother crying and hugging me to even correct them.

I'm not really upset about them getting the name wrong. The part that upsets me is that I wasn't even trying. In fact, I was trying not to try. I was actively searching for a way to be Nowhere and I found myself Somewhere. Now this Somewhere will forever carry my name. Even if it is the wrong name.

I left Kensington thirty years ago. I remember walking away from the town after getting punched in my own car and never looking back. I think the people there forgot about me and I've spent the last thirty years trying to forget about them. Of course, I walk into every bookstore I find to look for Constance Confines's latest book. Every search is a disappointment and I frequently find myself becoming uncomfortable as I realize that I'm a fifty-year-old man looking intently at the covers of romance novels. It isn't worth trying to explain to people that the only girl I've ever loved writes romance novels. Or, at least she used to write them.

After I left my car with the kid who smelled like a farm, I found my way back to the city. I spent a few days trying to track down my cousin but he never came back to his house. I began to question if it was, in fact, his house or if he was just keeping my car there. I also figured that, if he did come back, I'd have to explain that I stole my car back but then lost it to some kid once I got to Kensington. I figured it would all be easier if I found somewhere to start over.

My mom used to tell Lindsay and me stories about her grandfather and his father when they lived in a place called Salamander, Indiana. I found some work as a farmhand until I saved enough money to buy my own farm. It was an old dairy farm that was of no use to the owner so I got a good price and figured out how to farm as I went. I learned some important lessons about putting in a fence and how to tell which beams in the barn were rotting. The rest of my farming expertise came as I needed it. When I found about a hundred mice under the barn, I learned that every farm needs a cat. Farming really is much easier than it seems if you are willing to make a mistake every morning and learn how to fix it by sundown.

Working alone on the farm gives me time to think and talk to myself. There are times, especially in the winter, that I go weeks without any human contact. I think it has helped me to forget about my role in Lindsay's death.

I'm thinking about returning to Kensington soon. I heard that the old man who owned the diner died and that the burial was open to anyone who knew him. I never paid much attention to him or anyone else in Kensington, but I'm thinking that Kris might come back to town.

We buried my dad on top of the hill overlooking the lake. No one has ever been buried in Kensington simply because there was never any

room. But after he died, Kris Daniels came back and talked to enough people to fix it so that we could keep Coach in the town he loved. I wanted to bury him in the same cemetery as my mom, but the people of the town were devastated enough. I couldn't take their Coach away from them. I realized, as I came back into the town that I once called home, that everything had changed. The buildings were still there and the diner was still full of people, but as I drove east down Third Street, the town progressively changed into the unrecognizable.

The general store and diner looked as they always did – I'm sure my dad did everything he could to keep it that way – but by the time I got to the mailbox and the bus stop, I was surrounded by vacant lots and vaguely familiar people walking with their heads down. When I reached the lot where the church used to sit, everything was gone. The massive grocery conglomerate that came to town for a few years left as quickly as it arrived and left only a barbed-wire fence and a stretch of broken concrete where the building once stood. It felt odd to be able to look out of my car window and see the lake and the hill. I liked it much better when the church was in the way.

After my mom and Beth died, I took my family into the city. We needed to start over. Walking through town everyday and seeing the charred hole where the South Side Market used to be was too much for any of us to handle. I found a job in a restaurant in the city and figured out how to work a flat-top grill quickly. I guess years of watching my dad in the diner were worth something. I figured that if he could do it blind, it couldn't be too difficult.

I left once we buried Coach and I don't plan on returning. It was nice to see Kris come back. She's doing well as a book editor and she no longer needs chemotherapy. I'm sure my dad would have been happy to see her.

The most difficult part of the burial was watching Kris stand on top of the hill after everyone left. She just wasn't ready to leave. As the rest of us walked down the hill and into our cars, Kris stood next to Coach and looked out over the cherry orchard. I still wonder why she didn't look toward Kensington. After all, she wanted Coach to be buried up there so he could watch over the town.

I thought I was the only person in Kensington who didn't go to Coach's burial. I wanted to stay in my apartment and watch the scene just like I watched Lindsay and Beth die. I watched people from all thirty-six

houses file down Third Street and walk toward the hill. The teenagers who were used to visiting the lake walked with a comfort that only comes after becoming accustomed to a place in the dark. Once they figured out the slopes of the hill and the best ways to get through the fence around the church at night, they walked with an air of confidence when they visited the lake in the daylight. I'm sure it was odd for the parents of the teenagers as they watched their children expertly maneuver around the same lake and up the same hill that they once mastered decades ago.

After they put Coach in the ground on top of the hill, everyone left except for one woman. She stood at the top of the hill next to Coach's body and faced the cherry orchard on the other side of the hill. She stayed there for almost an hour after everyone else left.

The reason I said that I thought I was the only person in town who didn't go to the burial is because after everyone left and only the woman remained at the top of the hill, I saw a vaguely-familiar man walking down the middle of Third Street. As he walked, I thought about Lindsay Masterson and her similar walk so many years ago. The man looked around town as he walked and never kept his attention on one sight for more than a second. It was as if he was becoming reacquainted with a town he once knew. I thought for a moment about writing the man a message similar to the one I wrote to Lindsay Masterson the night she died but I remembered that no one ever looks up. The danger of walking in the middle of the street was gone anyway. Cars rarely came through town anymore.

When the man reached the old church lot, he froze and stared at the woman on the hill. I could feel him thinking about his next move. He took three steps in the direction of the woman but then stopped. It was as if his mind was spinning with the possibilities of his next move. He finally decided to climb the hill but he did so with such caution that he looked like an apprehensive teenager working up the nerve to approach a high school crush. I watched the man as he reached the top of the hill. He stood about fifty feet away from the woman and stared down toward his feet. The woman finally looked at him and he eventually raised his eyes to meet hers.

I backed away from the window and drew the curtains. I saw all that Kensington could ever offer.

Lesson Plan 1 *Kensington*: Establishing and Disavowing Beliefs with Paired Chapters

This is a two-day lesson plan for a fifty-minute class session that would be best suited in a high school creative writing classroom.

The goal of this lesson is for students to cultivate and demonstrate an ability to create two, connected narratives that focus on one, central belief.

Chapters 4 and 6 are linked in the sense that they tell two sides of the same story. In this lesson, students will create their own story told from two differing perspectives. In *Kensington*, the root of both stories is the popular conclusion that Catholic priests are sexual predators. As readers are introduced to the priest, they may begin to think that the commonly-held belief about priests is true. This belief may continue until readers encounter the real priest in chapter 6. While the initial beliefs were eventually disavowed, this exercise demonstrates humankind's ability to draw uninformed conclusions and may also demonstrate the fallibility of perception.

Day 1:

Class Discussion (10 minutes):

The class will draft a list of commonly-held beliefs that may not be true in every situation. Some items that could be listed include:

- Suburban kids are spoiled/entitled
- Politicians are corrupt
- Blue-collar workers are unintelligent
- Teachers always have in mind what is in the best interest for students
- Celebrities live ideal lives

It may be helpful if the teacher gives students an example to get the list started. The example should be one with which students can relate.

Try starting with:

- High school students are lazy
- Creative writing students are poor math students

This can be a choice made by the individual teacher depending on the demographics of the class. In short, the list of topics should be applicable to the lives of the students.

Free writing (10 minutes):

Students will draft a short story centered around one of the ideas previously-listed. It may be helpful for students to begin by reinforcing the belief as the goal is allow readers to recognize the idea and also recognize that it has been legitimized. Only after this can readers read the next story that will disavow them of the previous belief and also demonstrate their uninformed conclusion. The latter is incredibly important as it comes about through the process of reading.

Close Reading (20 minutes):

Students will work in groups to perform a close reading of chapters 4 and 6. Students will answer the following questions:

1. What does the priest in chapter four do or say that make him a credible narrator?
2. What details from chapter four now stand out as being particularly weak? Alternatively stated, what does the priest do or say that challenges his identity?
3. What images appear in both chapters?
4. What effects do these images have on your final judgments of both priests?
5. Why, if at all, is the priest in chapter six more credible than the priest in chapter four?

Class Discussion (5 minutes):

The teacher will use this time to facilitate a discussion on the fifth question.

Free writing/exit ticket (5 minutes):

Prompt:

Option 1: What is the root of these commonly-held beliefs?

Option 2: What conclusions can be drawn by the idea that until you read chapter six, you may have believed that the priest from chapter four was the real priest?

Option 3: When have you encountered commonly-held beliefs that may not have been entirely true?

Possible Homework Assignments:

- Complete the first draft of the story you began in today's free write.
- Take home a classmate's free writing assignment for revisions.
- Begin a draft of the story that disavows the belief that was established in the first story.

*Another option is to allow students to choose any of these assignments. While this will make the logistics of the next day's lesson slightly more complicated, some students may benefit from the ability to choose the assignment that fits their writing process best.

*One possibility for the teacher is to collect the homework and focus the response comments on the student's ability to concentrate on one belief.

Day 2:

Free writing (15 minutes)

Students should use this time to either complete the draft of the story that they started in yesterday's free write or begin the draft of the second story which disavows the commonly-held belief. The directions will vary based on the teacher's decisions regarding the previous day's homework assignment.

Peer Review (30 minutes)

Students should meet with a partner to read and discuss their stories. After reading, the partner should provide feedback and revisions. The teacher should note that students need not edit each other's stories. The focus should be the writer's voice and the scope of the story rather than grammar or spelling errors. Plan for students to spend about 15 minutes on each story.

Possible Guided Reading Questions for Peer Review:

- Is the writer's desired subject congruent with the subject of the text?
- What are the images that the writer should focus on in the next story?

- Remember that it may be beneficial to use the same images in both stories as a way to orient the reader.
- Are there details in the story that make the central character(s) both reliable and unreliable?

Introduction of Culminating Assignment (5 minutes)

The teacher should use this time to introduce the guidelines of the culminating assignment. Some possible assignments include:

- Students will create two interrelated stories which establish and disavow a commonly-held belief.
- Students will work in pairs to create two interrelated stories. One student will write a story which establishes a belief while the other student will disavow the belief.
- Students will establish and disavow a commonly-held belief in the same story.

Developed Skills:

At the end of the lesson, the students will have expanded their ability to:

- create multiple narratives that focus on one topic
- identify and disavow commonly-held beliefs
- participate in the close reading of a text in an effort to cultivate their own writing
- work with a fellow writer to strengthen their own writing
- construct complex characters who are both reliable and unreliable narrators

Lesson Plan 2 *Kensington*: Creating a Setting that Acts as Character

This is a two-day lesson plan for a fifty-minute class session that would be best suited in a high school creative writing classroom.

The goal of this lesson is for students to create a setting that acts as a character using exercises adapted from *Building Fiction*.

This lesson plan should be used in conjunction with Jesse Lee Kercheval's *Building Fiction*. In the chapter on continuing conflict, the author provides a series of four hints for holding a reader's attention. Students should read the second hint on using setting as a character. This lesson will connect Kercheval's "Four Hints for Holding your Reader" to both *Kensington* and the students' own writing.

Day 1:

Individual Activity (10 minutes):

Each student will create a map of Kensington. These maps should be detailed and can include landmarks, businesses, and homes.

*Teacher Note: Among others, students can turn their attention to chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 17, and 23.

*For a challenge, have students map the movement of a single character in the course of one chapter. Some chapters conducive to this exercise include chapters 8, 11, 19, 23, 32, and 35.

Brainstorming (20 minutes):

Students will describe a character's journey through Kensington.

There are many variations of this prompt and students should be encouraged to go in nearly any direction.

Some possible prompts include:

- Describe a character's journey through the eyes of a different character.
 - Consider chapter 32 wherein the man in the window describes both Lindsay's and Beth's deaths as an example.
- Write a dialogue between two characters as they travel throughout Kensington.
 - What would it sound like if Coach and Kris walked around the town?

- Create your own character who journeys through Kensington.
 - Consider inventing a talkative child or giving voice to a bar owner.
- Describe yourself walking through Kensington during a particular scene from the book.
 - How would you react to the events that unfold after Beth is killed? What would it be like to attend a basketball game?

Class discussion (10 minutes):

The teacher will use this time to facilitate a discussion on place as character. Some possible questions include:

- How is the town of Kensington developed in the novel? How does it change from 1901 to the epilogue?
- How powerful is the town of Kensington? Do characters have free will?
- Why are some characters desperate to leave Kensington while others refuse to leave?

Free writing/exit ticket (10 minutes):

Prompt:

- Option 1: Draft a conversation between two characters; one who wants to leave Kensington and another who wants to stay. The characters can be characters from the novel or of your own creation.
- Consider setting the dialogue at the bus stop. Allow the reader to contemplate the right decision.
- Option 2: Give the town of Kensington a voice and have it comment on a scene from the novel.
- For example, what if Kensington had a marquee in the middle of Third Street that offered advice to residents? It is permissible to ask the reader to suspend some disbelief.
- Option 3: Write about a time during which you lived in or visited a place and felt like any of the characters from *Kensington*.
- Make the reader feel like you felt. Try to recreate your past feelings.

Possible Homework Assignments:

- Create your own setting and create a map. It can be as large as a country or as small as a house.
 - Consider building in some quirks. Kensington has a Third Street but no First or Second and a perfectly rectangular lake. One goal should be to make the setting memorable.
- Create a list of ten trips you've taken in your life or places you'd like to live (adapted from Kercheval's *Building Fiction*).
 - For a challenge, add in some places in which you would hate to live. You may use this list for future stories.

Day 2:

The focus of the second day is on synthesizing Kercheval's second and third hints. During Day 1, students focused on place as character. During Day 2, students will create sharp observations of familiar things to color their setting.

This comes from Kercheval's third hint which states that "Readers appreciate familiar things, sharply observed."

Free writing (15 minutes)

As a result of the previous day's free writing and homework assignment, students have described and characterized a setting. They also have a map of their own setting or a list of possible settings. All three of these exercises can be used in this free write.

Prompt:

Option 1: Take some common experience and describe it extraordinarily (adapted from Kercheval's *Building Fiction*).

Example: Flossing one's teeth described with absolute disgust.

Option 2: Describe a monument or landmark in your setting that doesn't belong. Think about the corporate headquarters in *Kensington*.

Synthesizing Activity (20 minutes)

This is when students will create one, coherent description of the setting. Students should draw upon all three free writing activities as well as

their homework assignment. Each student should have at least two of the following:

- A map of a setting
- A list of ten possible settings
- A common experience described extraordinarily
- An out-of-place landmark

The students will use this time to write a scene using a first-person narrator or third

person point-of-view in which the setting is described. The teacher should remind the students that this lesson centers on the idea of using the setting as a character and that a mere description may not hold their reader.

Building Fiction Exercise (10 minutes)

This is an adaptation of Kercheval's first exercise in her "Continuing Conflict" chapter. In this exercise, students will extend their previous scene by creating a character who is taking a trip to their setting. There should be some kind of external conflict that is created when the students explain the motives of the trip.

Some examples include:

- A corporate CEO who returns to a town to make up for the acts of his brother
- A successful romance novelist who returns to a town to attend her mentor's funeral
- A conflicted farmer who returns to town in the hopes of rekindling a romance with a former girlfriend

Introduction of Culminating Assignment (5 minutes)

The teacher should use this time to introduce the guidelines of the culminating assignment. Some possible assignments include:

- A continuation of the Kercheval exercise in which students create a character who visits their setting. There should be an external conflict motivating the character to take the journey as well as complications along the way.
- A story in which a character has a conversation with the setting. This may include an interior dialogue as the character journeys throughout the setting.

Developed Skills:

At the end of the lesson, the students will have expanded their ability to:

- Create a dynamic setting that functions as a character
- Use Kercheval's hints for holding a reader
- Give a voice to their setting
- Instill doubt in the reader

*Exercises were found in or adapted from:

Kercheval, Jesse Lee. *Building Fiction*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.