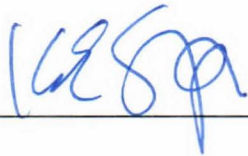


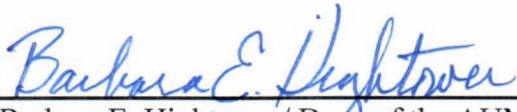
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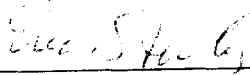
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Auburn University at Montgomery
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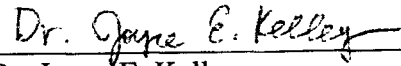
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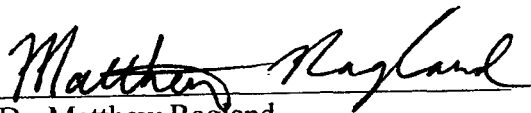
Approved by



Dr. Eric Sterling
Thesis Director



Dr. Joyce E. Kelley
Second Reader



Dr. Matthew Ragland
Associate Provost

Margaret, are you grieving

Over Goldengrove unleaving?

Leaves, like the things of man, you

With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

Gerard Manley Hopkins, from

“Spring and Fall: to a young child”

There will be time, there will be time

To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet...

T. S. Eliot, from

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

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Introduction

We live in a world of our own creation. We create ourselves, and we believe we understand ourselves. We create others, and we believe we understand them.

But we do not. We cannot always explain why we feel a certain way or why we react a certain way. Nor can we understand why others act the way they do, especially since they might behave quite differently from the images we have created of them.

Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, "Spring and Fall: to a young child," presents a youthful Margaret who believes she is grieving over a tree that is losing its leaves, possibly because the shedding tree represents the passing of time, the inevitable progression of life, or perhaps, on a more superficial level, the simple loss of an object of beauty. The wise narrator understands, however, that Margaret's sorrow has roots in eternity—possibly the stain of original sin but certainly the fact that all innocent children will eventually lose their fresh thoughts and replace them with unpleasant, worldly realities.

Margaret might not understand her grief, but the narrator does. Or does he? He might not know Margaret, either, and he could be superimposing his own grief onto the image he has created of the child. We have all heard of unreliable narrators who do not tell the truth about the events unfolding in a story. But an innocent narrator might simply misunderstand events, or misunderstand himself, and he could believe that his version and interpretation of events are absolutely true.

This type of unreliable narrator is present in many of my stories. He might be bold and confident as he plows through this world with the effortlessness of a god, but he often remains quite unaware of who he really is and who others really are. Sometimes he

will gain clarity at the end of the story, but most times, as in real life, he will not. He will simply file the experience in the messy, overflowing, mental and emotional basket of life events. Perhaps someday he will weave all the pieces together and declare that he finally understands himself and others. Or perhaps not.

One thing is for sure, however. Self-awareness and self-growth can only occur if we point a story's mirror directly back at ourselves, and not tilt the mirror so we can only see others and make judgments about them. Even then, we must observe not the "faces" we have prepared, as T. S. Eliot calls them, but the real faces underneath.

-Ken Stephens

The Coke Machine

“Parties always end up in the kitchen.”

I don't know if I actually made that remark out loud or just thought it, but I observed that the puzzling phenomenon of kitchen-gathering was once again upon us as guests leaned against countertops, chair backs, the sink, the stove, and even the refrigerator, where guests grabbed beers by reaching between the leaning guests and opening the door only slightly to protect the precious cold air. Colder beer was available in the various coolers lined up along the wall, but big red plastic boxes made excellent seats, and partygoers preferred to retrieve beverages by parting fridge-blockers instead of asking cooler-sitters to stand. Later in the evening, increasingly drunk patrons would stand on the coolers, perhaps to gain a better vantage point for lip-synching to the overly loud stereo, perhaps to check out the dust on the top of my cupboards, or perhaps to attract attention for an “important” announcement. Such a perch, however, doesn't guarantee attention—partiers don't gain the floor through a higher location or a louder voice, but through the quality of old memories vying for the spotlight among memory-rich guests.

Several co-workers were present, along with newly made friends I had accumulated after ten years in the city. But the true purpose of the party was a reunion of sorts among old college fraternity brothers who had arrived in town for a college football game. My town was not a college town, and football games weren't ordinarily played here, but my employer decided to grab an opportunity and front the money to sponsor a bowl game. The contest was designed for college teams that barely eked out a winning record but who needed a season-affirming reward that in turn raised more money for

school athletic programs. Every large city seemed to want a bowl game—cities loved the prestige, corporations loved the publicity, and fans loved the revelry. Fans, like my old college buddies, would use the event as a gathering place for re-igniting old friendships and igniting lavish parties, not necessarily in that order. While my particular party could not be described as lavish by any means, I always attracted fun people. I figured that the population inside my townhouse, although constantly changing, was about a hundred at any one time. Only a few guests, however, could compete for a coveted spot in the kitchen, where the meaty memories were always unleashed. About fifteen could squeeze into the small area, although a sign above the sink proclaimed a “Maximum Seating Capacity of 155 by Order of the Fire Department.” I think I was the one who stole the sign many years ago from some hotel lounge in some city during some college trip, but I couldn’t be sure. Regardless, the plaque continued to inspire belly-laughs from old friends who had admired it repeatedly over the years as it moved from various fraternity house rooms to my first small apartment to my second slightly larger apartment to my now-cherished townhouse. Surely the announcement of the city fire ordinance was no longer funny, but I laughed uproariously along with my friends whenever the little plastic sign was pointed out. While on the surface my friends had all matured and grown more serious and professional, laughing at silly things made us feel like we could hold onto the rambunctiousness of our youth a little longer. We all played along, and we all knew we were playing along.

The constant ringing of the doorbell made me certain that old friends were arriving regularly, but they knew their way in and I couldn’t afford to lose my prominent perch on a kitchen counter. One by one, new faces appeared through either the door from

the dining room or the door from the hallway, and each was greeted by screams of recognition and repeated exclamations of “how long has it been?” Everyone looked visibly older, but not ten years older. Some had gained a little weight, but no one seemed to have lost any. Some brought wives and girlfriends, but at least one old friend violated a still-sacred rule of partydom and brought an infant, along with toys and blankets and bottles. The child bore an expression of terror and held tighter to his father’s neck than a polyester necktie at a summer company picnic, but the wife/mother wrenched the youngster away and retreated to a safer room. We always knew that parties would eventually transform into tame events where children were welcome, and stories would convert from wild college memories to tales of first words and first steps and first potties, but we wanted to hold out as long as we could. For now, the competitive story-telling ruled, and I knew this new father would eventually realize this and quietly slip out the front door with his new family. He would call in a few days and apologize for leaving so soon, and I would apologize for not spending more time with him. I would share some of the old memories with him by phone, and we would see each other again in another ten years.

And the stories were indeed magnificent. Richard Rafter reminded us of the time about fifteen of us streaked at a beach hotel, and his story led to more elaborate tales of public nakedness—each with increasingly embarrassing locations and with ever-growing numbers of spectators. Doug Dryden shared the memory of many water balloon fights, especially the one climaxed by an explosion of flour sacks from the fraternity house rooftop. As soon as everyone was thoroughly saturated with water and then covered in flour, what could the ghostly specters do but run across campus and jump in the

administration building fountain? And did we remember the presence of campus policemen everywhere? Did we remember they always caught everyone? And did that fact stop the frivolity? “NOOOOO,” shouted the room, causing other partygoers outside the kitchen to peek in.

“Wait, I’ve got one,” said Gunter Grider as he squeezed his way into the room, giving someone’s date a forced but much-needed opportunity to leave for the bathroom. “Do you remember when we stole that sculpture in front of the Art Building and sent a ransom note to the police?” Gunter’s story showed exactly how dumb we were in those days, but I knew he would cover all those details. First of all, the sculpture was of an amorphous, indeterminate creature—if it was a creature at all—so the concept of ransom did not make sense. In fact, the police and many school administrators were probably happy to see the ugly object disappear. Nevertheless, the escapade ended with us all feeling very nervous and stupid for committing an actual crime instead of a harmless prank, so we sent an anonymous note to the police with directions to an empty field where we hid the sculpture. A week later, we couldn’t bring ourselves to go and watch the placement of the rescued statue back on its perch, but we could envision the puzzled look on workers’ faces as they tried to determine which side of the shape was up and which side should be attached to the pedestal.

To my surprise, even this anti-climactic tale brought loud laughs from the room, especially the dates and wives who had not heard it before. Gunter was energized by his story-telling success, and guests looked like they would allow him to maintain the floor, but I worried that he might proceed to some stories that were highly interesting but better

left untold. So I had no choice but to jump in (I was the host, after all) and tell the granddaddy of all college stories—The Coke Machine.

According to the way I always told the story, “the Coke machine was not actually a Coke machine. I think it was full of some other soft drink brand, but out of habit we always called it the Coke machine.” This completely irrelevant and unimportant detail was met with nods and a recognition that everyone understood what I was talking about. Someone wanted to break in and share his own story about mis-named devices, so I quickly continued. “It was located in a storage room on the first floor of the fraternity house, and it rarely worked. But for some reason that only 19 year olds could understand, we continued to put money in it. We wrote notes for the service-man who attempted to fix the machine, but he repeatedly blamed us for the malfunctions—in his mind, we put pennies in it, we beat it, we tilted it, and we did anything we could to break the piece of junk. Maybe we did some of those things, but we rarely got drinks even when we were gentle.”

“Why didn’t you throw the stupid thing out of the house?” someone asked, much too early in the story for any type of resolution. But the question required a few seconds to ask, and I used the opportunity to grab a beer from the nearest cooler. The beer was a fancy brand that I hadn’t purchased, but I felt entitled to it because I was the host and I was the moment’s entertainment.

“Wait, wait, I’ll get to that,” I said. “Where was I? Oh yeah, after continued attempts to get the machine fixed or at least get our money back, the soft-drink employee decided to punish the ‘rich’ fraternity boys by not bringing any refills for a week. We’ll

show him, we thought, and we decided to carefully break in the machine door's lock and fill the refrigerated unit with beverages of our own choice..."

"Beer!" yelled the room.

"Yes, beer," I said, "but not just any beer. We knew that we would eventually get in trouble for the prank, so we only used the cheapest beer available--the stack of Red, White and Blue beer that we had won in a football game with the Kappa Sigs. You see, we failed to agree with them beforehand on the type beer associated with the bet, so they rewarded us with skanky beer."

"Morons!" shouted Ben O'Riley, a former Kappa Sig.

"Shut up!" I said as I threw a pretzel at him. "The nasty beer was always brought out at the end of parties when no one could tell the difference, but the novelty of obtaining beer from a Coke machine breathed new life into the unpopular brand." An old friend familiar with the bet and the story attempted to interrupt with an elaboration of the football game bet, but I forcefully continued my tale, and he probably made a mental note to jump in later.

"The intimidated Coke rep apparently showed up after a few days to refill the machine while we were not watching, and he must have been quite shocked to find all the beer. He didn't waste any time summoning his boss. We tried very hard not to laugh when the pasty-faced supervisor with a sparse and greasy comb-over was led into the house living room."

I gave the partiers a few seconds to visualize the scene, and then I mocked the supervisor with a high, nasally voice: "You have violated the law by tampering with our

machine. Furthermore, most of you in this house are probably under age for drinking or possessing alcoholic beverages. I plan to report this to the police immediately.”

“We immediately started fasting and praying,” I said, back in my normal voice, but my ill attempt at humor was not as good as the story itself. I regrouped. “Seriously, we tried to claim that we hadn’t done it, that some losers had come in to our house and vandalized the machine.”

“We’re innocent!” a girl familiar with the story yelled in an exaggerated Southern drawl, mocking our lame defense. The exclamation drew laughs, so she fluttered her eyelashes and twanged, “We didn’t do anything,” covering nearly an octave with as she dramatically scooped her words. “It was those dastardly Betas.”

The room took a collective drink as I then explained how weak our argument was, since Red, White and Blue beer cans were strewn around the room. I told them that we resolved the matter when we promised to clean out the machine and pay for the lock damage, and the supervisor and his underling amazingly agreed to the compromise. Some guests contorted their faces in disbelief, so I acknowledged that the deal was crazy because the supervisor had the goods on us. But he wanted nothing more than to get out of that uncomfortable fraternity house, and he let us off the hook. “Charmed lives,” I said. “It saved four of us from criminal records and ghastly prison tattoos.”

Several party-goers seemed relieved that the story was over and they made their way to the refrigerator for more beer. “But wait,” said Eric Stetson, calling after them as though they were in a separate room. “There’s more.”

Like the skillful orator I thought I was, I smoothly regained everyone’s attention and continued toward the centerpiece of the tale. “After about a week, we started calling

the beverage company to ask if we could get new (and legal) drinks in the machine again since we had fulfilled our part of the bargain. Our calls were not returned, and we languished for days with an empty Coke machine. Although we remembered that the machine stole our money much of the time, we still wanted the convenience of cold drinks without having to drive to the stupid store.”

I told the kitchen crowd that the Coke people continued their neglect as the summer drew on, and we had to endure weeks with an empty drink machine. I overdramatized the agony of such a situation, and I carefully worked the gathered crowd into a hatred of corporate bureaucrats who tried to punish us for a simple college prank.

“One afternoon,” I continued, “four of us returned to the house after an intense game of touch football. We were sweating like fat politicians on election day, and we hoped for a moment that the impotent machine might be fixed. But noooooo,” I exaggerated for impact, “the punishment was apparently still in effect. So we walked over to the Beta house next door with all our pocket change and started dropping quarters in a functioning Coke machine. Or so we thought...”

“That machine didn’t work either?” someone’s anonymous date inquired while digging through the ice in a cooler. I noticed that her long hair was hanging down in the ice as she bent over, and I hoped that no one was using that ice for mixed drinks. I didn’t say anything, of course, but I made a mental note to use refrigerator ice for myself.

I regained my rehearsed rhythm and continued the story with increasing animation. “To our surprise, the machine was loaded with beer, like ours had been! Glory! The motherlode! What geniuses! We started guzzling the welcome beer right there in the enemy camp, right in front of framed composites full of young men we were

more accustomed to fighting in sports than in sharing moments of brotherly love. Then the enemy himself entered the room, in the form of a big muscular jock who might've looked more at home in a locker room than a chapter room. He looked puzzled and asked what we were doing, but he seemed truly anxious to help us—he was obviously a pledge.” The room’s guests collectively nodded their heads in recognition of the lowest of lows—the fraternity pledge.

“He sounded more like a department store clerk than an enemy,” I said, “so we decided to play the chummy role and we offered him a beer. He not only accepted, but he brought several of his buddies in with an ice chest full of beer they had just packed down.”

“It’s the Coke Machine story!” someone yelled from outside the door, and I saw several more people crowd around outside the kitchen doors. I knew about half of them, and I was quite certain that several of them had heard this story many times. Nevertheless, they dutifully gathered around like I was delivering a political speech that the entire country depended upon.

I notched the volume up a bit to account for the heightened crowd noise. “The rest is history. We shared stories about the pathetic reliability of vending machines, easily the most important problem in the world for college fratboys. We complained and drank and laughed and drank and plotted revolutions and drank. After about three hours of revelry, Buddy Norris, my roommate and accomplice, stood on the chapter room fireplace hearth and started shouting instructions designed to work the group into a frenzy. ‘Let’s do it,’ he said, ‘let’s get rid of that piece of junk Coke machine and throw it into the lake for good! That’ll show them!’”

As the words came out of my mouth, my memories moved in the background like a slow, silent stream. The “them” in Buddy’s speech was unclear, but we all had our own versions of who might be guilty. The vending machine service man? His combed-over supervisor? The Coke company? Capitalism? We just knew at that moment that someone, something, must pay for the horrible injustice that was perpetrated on us. But how would we get the Coke machine to the lake, a good block away? And wouldn’t the owners of the machine figure out rather quickly who did it? And what about the criminal records that would inevitably result? Remember the pain we went through once before to avoid such blots on our records?

Such logic was not present during the frenzy we had reached that fateful fall day twelve years ago, and the kitchen recounting of the story continued from my lips with oft-repeated precision. The bleary-eyed partygoers did not need logic, order, or reasoning. They did not need outcomes or analysis. They needed the climax, the big ending.

“Eight of us marched back to the scene of the impending crime, four from my fraternity and four from our new best friends. We propped the back door open. We tilted the machine over and picked it up. We were shaky.” My sentences grew shorter and more dramatic at this point, allowing for deep breaths between sound-bites. I imagined that the audience followed my pauses with their own deep breaths in unison.

“The adrenaline kicked in more and more. We loaded the machine on the back of Buddy’s pick-up, and we drove it loudly down the street to Pooter’s Pond. Seven of us rode on the back of the truck. We shouted like wild men and banged our fists on the vanquished captive.”

Some of the spectators turned their attention slightly back to their drinks and their bladders, knowing the familiar story already and realizing that the end was near. One old friend moved from a slumping position to a more upright stance, apparently preparing to tell his own story next. His perceptive date grabbed his forearm and pulled him closer, silently discouraging him from doing so. Another acquaintance eyed a large cooler on the floor, predicting that he would soon have an opportunity to fish for a beer after moving the two guests who were using it as a bench. And some unknown guest, maybe from the office or maybe from the neighborhood, stared disapprovingly at a large puddle of melting ice on the floor. The circle of water was like a magnifying glass for the dirty shoe-prints on the tile. As good as the story was, I knew I had to finish it immediately or I was going to lose my audience.

“We backed the Coke machine up to that lake. We pulled down the back gate of the truck. And we slid that sucker right into Pooter’s Pond.” My volume increased ever-so-slightly. “It bobbed, it tilted, it plunged...it died.” Everyone in the room exhaled in unison, leaning back on whatever was behind them. I could have added a more conclusive ending to the story, but after all these years I had never thought of an appropriate one. Everyone always just knew it was over.

“Did you get caught?” someone asked, but to my knowledge the question was never answered. Crowd noise increased as all the guests either marveled at the story or added their own personal details that I might have omitted. I was victorious. No guests could top the story, no matter how hard they tried. I then turned around to find the cooler with the fancy beer—I needed one and deserved one. As I leaned over to lift the lid, my

peripheral vision noted a man's arm reaching toward me with a newly-opened beer, obviously offered as a gift, an offering for the fantastic yarn I had just told.

The arm was normal as arms go. The sleeve was rolled up, exposing a well-tanned arm that contained a moderate amount of fine brown hair. The hand was large, like a quarterback's, and contained a wedding band that seemed slightly loose over the long fingers. There was no watch, but a white band of tanless wrist indicated the place where one usually rests. Although the next few minutes seemed to move in slow motion, I still did not have enough time to identify definitively the gift-bearing hand before its owner spoke the words, "Great story, Brad!"

The world stopped turning. A burst of heat spread through my head like an injection of hot acid, but I hoped my face did not become bright crimson as it usually does in moments of terror. I became paralyzed, but needed to remain in motion. I felt nauseated, but I could not show it. I accepted the beer and looked up into the face of none other than Buddy Norris, my old roomie and accomplice, my best bud from the past, and one of my partners in the Coke machine crime.

"Buddy, how in the world have you been?" I spoke in a lowered voice as I grabbed him and gave him a big bear hug. The lowered voice was appropriate for the reunion, indicating a special bond that could be shared by no one else. But this moment that should have been tender was instead one of horror, because I knew that the story I just recounted, the story in which Buddy was a participant, was completely false.

Not completely false, I justified to myself, because there was indeed a Coke machine that gave us fits. There absolutely was a beer-drinking party with members of the fraternity next door, and their machine was in fact filled with beer that we guzzled.

But the finale of the tale, the trip on Buddy's truck to the lake and the submersion of the ill-fated machine, never happened. The lake part of the story was not exactly a lie, but an embellishment that had been added over the years to make the events more dramatic and interesting. The memory was so good in its embellished state and had been retold so many times that I almost believed it. But here I was, face to face, embracing one of only a few people in the world who could expose my fraud. He would certainly do it, especially since our friendship had become less close over the years as we made that natural and inevitable move apart—he married and settled down and I became career-oriented and started the corporate climb. We had not seen each other in years, not because our friendship had waned but because we just could not commit the time necessary to travel the distance required to maintain the relationship. But here we were, the truth would be told, and I would be outed as an exaggerator and a liar. I had to get Buddy into another room quickly and apologize, grovel, and explain why I took a fine memory and prostituted it for the sake of...what? Why do I feel a compulsion to magnify stories? Did this one really need improving?

I finished the hug, pulled back and looked at Buddy. The hug had not been too short or too long but interestingly just right. Buddy had not pushed away, and he had not held on long enough to whisper "liar" in my ear. Perhaps he would give me time to explain. Maybe he would forgive me after all. But the second I looked in his eyes, I realized that something else must be up his sleeve. His expression was one of joyful reunion, of true happiness in seeing an old friend. There was no slanted head or slightly dipped eyelid to indicate he knew something that no one else knew. What was he up to? Was he toying with me?

“Excuse me,” whined someone’s date. “May I get in the cooler?”

“Of course,” I said, not comprehending the source of the voice. I backed away from the cooler and recognized the young woman as the wife of a co-worker. She was a tall, thin, attractive woman with wavy blonde hair that was styled much too perfectly for the occasion, and I was immediately annoyed with her interruption.

“I’ve heard that story before, but it still seems so unbelievable!” she said. “I can’t believe you guys actually rode down the street with a Coke machine on the back of a truck. I doubt if anyone thought you were up to anything but no good. Did anyone ever squeal? Did you get in trouble with the law? It was a crime after all. Let’s see, vandalism, for a start? Maybe criminal mischief?”

Her husband, a quiet fellow who had remained outside the kitchen for the story, stuck his head in the door and gave her the look that said, “Let it go, honey—I work with Brad and we need to get along...”

“I hear a beer calling my name,” I cried too loudly, as I turned too abruptly and slid through the crowd to the refrigerator. I glanced back ever-so-subtly and saw that the annoying accuser had engaged in conversation with Buddy. I grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and decided the best course of action would be to migrate into the living room where I could think. But the living room was filled with more old friends, shouting for my attention and waving for me to come over. I obliged, wondering if my face was the bright red that it felt. I pointed a finger in the air to say “one minute,” and I contorted my face in a way that communicated, “I need to go to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

Of course, the bathroom in the hall was occupied, so I made my way to the more private bathroom upstairs outside my bedroom. It was occupied as well, and a short line of two ladies waited outside the door.

“Nice photos,” said one of the strangers, pointing to a line of framed photographs on a bedside table.

I ignored her compliment and turned quickly back toward the stairs. “Sorry, everyone—I only have two bathrooms,” I said as my voice trailed off into the stairwell. I descended the stairs quickly until I realized that a turn in the stairs offered a small spot where I could remain unnoticed for a few seconds. The turn had always been a source of annoyance when moving furniture, but now it offered a welcome safe haven. I stopped to take a drink of my beer, hoping no one would disturb my moment of solitude. What was Buddy thinking? Had he exposed my falsehood yet? Was our long friendship over because of some new-found maturity that prefers truth over lies?

In these few seconds of peace, my mind raced back over a long friendship with the man who now owned me. Buddy was the most popular guy in the fraternity—he was the best student and the best athlete. He was the best looking, he got the best dates, and he was always the life of the party. He was a legendary prankster, and virtually every story I could tell about college mischief would somehow include him as either the architect or the perpetrator. I knew he had to have changed in the years since we were closest, but I was unsure how much. I guessed I was about to find out.

“Brad, where are you?” The voice belonged to Buddy, and I resumed motion on the last few stairs without exposing my time of reflection.

“Come on, let’s find a place to sit down and catch up! The party is starting to wind down, so maybe we can spend some time together before I have to head back home. But before we get started,” he said with his characteristic broad smile, “take a look at these!” Buddy reached in his pocket and pulled out a bulging wallet, from which he slid a large stack of photos. He carried them into the living room and started laying them out across the back of the sofa before I could utter a word.

“This is Allie, and this is Mollie,” said Buddy, pointing to each photo lovingly and tenderly. I watched the excitement in his face as he pulled out a steady stream of photos, some of them dropping to the floor as he scrambled to organize them for my viewing. He was breathless as he described the setting of each picture, but I had trouble taking my puzzled eyes off his unchanged face.

“They’re beautiful, Buddy. We’ve come a long way since our Coke machine days.” There, I laid it out, right across the plate, expecting him to hit the softly thrown ball right out of the park.

“But wait, this is the best one,” he said, ignoring my lob and pulling a final photo from the special plastic compartment designed for a driver’s license. This time I actually looked down at the photo, pulled it closer and adjusted its angle to get the best light.

“Yes.” I examined the photo and suddenly thought of the questions I needed to ask. How old are they now? Where do they go to school? Are they “daddy’s girls?” Do you think you’ll have more kids? An attempt for a boy, maybe?

Answers were interspersed among whichever questions actually came out of my mouth, but I didn’t hear any of them as I looked into his eyes. In my peripheral vision, I could see his mouth moving breathlessly, speaking of a subject he was passionate about,

and I could perceive the raising of his lip corners into a broad smile each time he stopped for air.

“Yes,” he said, “we’ve come a long way since the infamous Coke machine. But life has never been better.”

Again, there was no flinch, no look of knowledge, and no indication of anything other than sheer delight over the pictures of his girls.

“We were crazy, weren’t we?” he continued. “But I still tell that story all the time. My new friends can’t believe I was ever so wild.”

This was the last straw. He had to be toying with me. But I resisted the temptation to come clean, and he gathered up his photos and headed toward the kitchen for one more beer.

“I don’t get many opportunities any more to drink, and I’ve only had two beers, so one more won’t hurt.” He grabbed a beer from a cooler and popped open the top. He then took the remaining beers from the cooler, removed the plastic holders and placed them neatly on a rack in my refrigerator. “You can keep these. I wouldn’t want to get *too crazy!*”

He emptied the ice from his cooler into my crowded sink. He then squeezed between the new people gathered in the kitchen and gave me a big hug in the doorway. “See you next time!” he said. “And you can buy plane tickets my direction as well. Let’s not stay away so long next time!”

Buddy exchanged some good-byes with other guests, and he let himself out the front door. I shrugged off some other partiers who were also trying to say their good-byes, and I stepped out on my front porch alone. Buddy walked to his car and I watched

him press the unlock button on his keyholder when he reached the halfway point. The car was a typical car that a family would choose, but he had not yet succumbed to the desire for a large van. He waved as he pulled away with his cooler, his photos, and his damned memories.

I hated him and loved him. I went back inside and began giving hints that maybe it was time for the party to be over. I moved most of the cups and glasses from the sink to the dishwasher, and I went upstairs only to find an even longer line for the bathroom. Partiers laughed and told stories and continued to drink. Perhaps some of the stories were true.

The next morning, I woke up and rolled over in bed, expecting a headache but feeling none. I slid across the floor to the bathroom, which I had apparently taken some time to clean up after the party, and looked across the vanity top. Everything was in order. I returned to the bedroom and saw no unusual items on the nightstands or the dresser tops. Downstairs, I performed the normal sweep of the room for cups, glasses, mugs and anything else that could hold liquor. A second sweep, also normal, recovered all the cups that had been placed in weird places behind books, perched in flowers pots, and even covering a chandelier bulb. No one had pulled the typical prank of tilting all my paintings and artwork to the side, knowing it would upset my obsessive/compulsive sensitivities, and all the window-blind slats were neatly pointing in the same direction. Maybe they had forgotten that old trick? Had these party-goers never attended the Buddy Norris School of Mischief? Had they all grown up?

Surely the coat hangers would be hanging in haphazard directions in all the closets. That was a favorite of Buddy's—a prank that I had to correct immediately by

removing all the clothing from every closet and replacing them neatly, in order, and in the same direction.

But there was no chaos, no disruption to my little world. And there were no notes. I looked casually around the townhouse for a note that might say “LIAR” or “GET YOUR STORY STRAIGHT,” but I found nothing. I walked to the front door and looked out to where his car had been parked. There were no plastic flamingos in the yard, no spray paint on the sidewalk, and no evidence of vandalistic playfulness.

I knew, though, that clever and playful Buddy, even in his mature state, wouldn't be able to resist leaving some sign of his special knowledge. He had to. If the lie would be kept secret, he had to let me know he was in on it. How could he leave an excitable skunk in a room full of firecrackers and pretend there's no smell?

I then speculated that the most obvious form of communication might be a Coke bottle placed in an amusing but conspicuous place somewhere on the premises. I looked around the house but found nothing. I went outside and looked up at all the window ledges, and although I discovered a few remaining beer cans behind the bushes, there was no Coke can or bottle anywhere. A final sweep inside revealed nothing, either, except for a can placed high on the ledge above my kitchen cabinets. A quick hop onto the countertop revealed another cola brand, probably left from another party, another night.

I looked outside again at where his car had been parked. Buddy had left nothing. I almost wished he had.

The Fire Tower

The old wood plank stairs zigzagging up the steel frame of the Taft fire tower were splintered and creaky, but they felt solid under my feet. The planks grew more and more narrow as I climbed the steep steps of the eighty-year old tower, and my first trip all the way up to the tower cabin was a mixture of exhilaration and exhaustion. The view from the 120 foot tower was breathtaking, even before reaching the top, and I had to be careful to keep my eyes steadily focused on the steps instead of the rolling green countryside. The exhaustion was surprising for someone of my age and fitness, and I hoped I would soon be able to make the climb without having to stop so often for breath.

The final steps into the cab, as they called it, were more like a ladder than stairs, and the ascension up through the hatch door was quite precarious. For some reason, the door was padlocked, and I had trouble getting the key out of my pocket while holding the other hand in a death grip on the top ladder rung. I held a sack lunch between my teeth as I completed the awkward maneuver, and I almost dropped my meal because my gasping was now the result of terror instead of windedness.

Once inside the ten-by-ten feet room, I could catch my breath and take stock of my new situation. The advertisements for the job required a person who had no fear of heights and no problem working alone, but the ads also should have warned about claustrophobia. The room was square with windows on all sides, but even the stunning views did not relieve the cramped feeling of the tiny space. Amenities included a small metal desk, a well-worn swivel chair, a coffeemaker, and a mini-refrigerator. The desk contained a telephone and, amazingly, a plastic name plate with my name on it—Jess Haynes. Name plates for my weekend substitute and two other unknown persons were

inside the desk's lap drawer. Another small table contained several pairs of binoculars, maps, and radio equipment that was once considered state of the art. A hanging flower basket swayed gently from the ceiling, but I realized that the movement did not come from a window draft but from the almost imperceptible swaying of the tower itself. The basket contained a plastic pot and dirt but no living plant, so I took it down and placed it under the desk until I could get more accustomed to the height.

In the center of the room was a device called an Osborne Fire Finder. It looked like an old phonograph with a shiny disc on top, and aligning its viewers on smoke below allowed the lookout employee to pinpoint a possible forest fire with excellent location accuracy. The device was an antique, and replacement parts probably were no longer available, but the Finder continued to serve its purpose here in rural, densely wooded southwest Alabama. I knew that new technology provided for satellite detection of forest fires, and I knew my job was already considered obsolete in many parts of the country, but the Taft Lumber Company continued to believe that the earliest possible detection was available through human eyes monitoring the vast acreage of their empire. The fire tower was closed for a few months after the Forestry Service abandoned it, but the timber mill, the town's largest employer, believed the old structure could still be effective.

By effective, I also mean cheap. My pay for the eight-hour, five-day job was miniscule. But I needed to take a break from the university for a while, and the solitude and free time available in a fire lookout job gave me the ability to study for a night course I was taking at the local community college. Plus it would be a really cool job, in my mind, watching the beautiful countryside all day.

I received training on the radio equipment and the Fire Finder at Taft's headquarters, but my boss still wanted me to send test messages and location coordinates throughout the first day. I expected no real fires for weeks or even months, but I was surprised to deal with a real emergency by noon—a slightly errant trash fire from Rob Lawson's back yard. Most residents of the area were trained to call the fire tower in advance if they planned any control burning, but Mr. Lawson forgot, and he was highly embarrassed that he had let the fire get too close to his neighbor's chicken house. I laughed with him over the phone and asked the volunteer fire department to refrain from using the siren on the way to the fire, but they blared their antique horn anyway. I could even hear it from the tower.

On my second day, I found the tower stairs to be a little less frightening, and I relaxed enough to spend some time with my school work. Even from my lofty perch, internet reception was spotty in this area, but I listened to pre-recorded music on my I-Pod when I needed a break. I also began to survey the countryside for known landmarks, and I could distinguish specific homes, automobiles and even certain people with my high-powered binoculars. My most interesting find of the day was a large tree house at the back of Stanley Mitchell's property—maybe a playhouse for his kids, but more likely a shooting house aimed toward any deer that leaped over the fence from Vincent Carter's property.

After my first week in the tower, I headed to my parents' house in north Alabama for the weekend. I must confess that my "time off" from the university was not completely my choice, because the university participated in that decision. In fact, they told me I was on probation and would flunk out if my grade point average did not

increase. So my parents decided I needed to get a job, think about my future, and come home every weekend to work on the farm. If they had thought it through carefully, they would have realized the weekend work would only take away time I could have used for studying. But things worked out, and I was fortunate to get a job that allowed extra studying time and even some extra “thinking” time, as they called it.

But even the nicest of set-ups can become boring. After three weeks, I had already memorized the countryside, and there was not much visual change from day to day except the disappearance of pine trees. One day a tract of land could be green from tree tops, and the next day it would be brown from clear-cutting. The pine trees would be shipped to the paper mill, and the hard woods would be shipped to various sources, primarily Taft sawmills in the area. Some days, following a rain, I would notice tracts of land that had become visibly greener, representing new pine seedlings that had been planted in previously brown areas. I loved the cycles of forest management, and I was impressed with the careful rhythms of planting, cutting, and planting again that provided so many jobs in the area. I could only see daily snapshots of the land, but I could discern that it was changing, growing, and providing. And to think, I could be sitting in an office job right now, counting money and waiting on grumpy customers. I didn't care if the tower job got a little boring—I loved it anyway.

One morning something caught my eye outside an old farmhouse near the base of the fire tower. The house was secluded, and access was only provided by a dirt road winding through the woods from County Road 55. I'm sure most people didn't even know the house existed. But I could see a woman who seemed to be waving, so I grabbed my binoculars for a closer look. I could not make out many details, but she

seemed to be an older lady who was hanging clothes out to dry on a clothesline in her back yard. She was thin and had white hair, and she wore a yellow dress with a white garment in front—probably an apron of some type. And she was indeed waving, vigorously, up into the air in my direction. Could she be trying to get my attention? She had no binoculars, and she could see the fire tower from her distance and perspective, but she certainly could not make out anyone inside. I worried that she might have an emergency of some type, but she soon stopped her waving, moved her clothes basket farther down the line, and continued hanging clothes.

The next morning I curiously watched for the lady again, and sure enough, she came outside to dry clothes about the same time as the previous day. And just like before, she stepped back from her clothes basket after a few minutes and vigorously waved up toward the tower. Once again, there did not seem to be an emergency, only friendliness. Did she know me? That couldn't be the case, I thought, because no one knew me in this town, and I wasn't sure anyone would even know a new lookout employee had been hired. Was she just waving at the tower in general, much like we would wave at passing trucks on the highway when we were children, hoping they would blow the horn at us? After about thirty seconds of waving her arms in the air, she again calmly resumed her clothes hanging and then went back inside the house.

The clothes belonged to a man and a woman, because I could make out overalls, shirts, dresses, and underwear of different sizes. The line was also filled with sheets, towels, and smaller rags. There seemed to be clothes for two adults, so I gathered that the lady was old enough for her children to be long gone. The clothesline sat in the middle of a large grassy area, with woods on the sides and a cleared spot in the back where row

crops might have once been. An old barn backed up to the woods on one side, but I could see no farm implements or equipment on the premises. There were no pets or farm animals, and a lone pick-up truck sat in front of the house. I could see little patches of red near the house, probably from flower beds.

On day three, when her arm motions began, I had an idea. I looked around the cabin, reached for my lunch sandwich, and carefully unwrapped the aluminum foil that covered it. I folded the foil neatly into a small square, and I held it up in the morning sunlight. I slowly moved it around at various angles to catch the sun's reflection, and then I grabbed my binoculars again to look down at the waving lady. To my surprise, she not only waved with broad semi-circles over her head, but she jumped up and down, apparently acknowledging my signal. She was indeed waving at me! I was excited for a moment that we had made this brief personal connection, but I soon grew embarrassed that such a silly thing had thrilled me. I retrieved my sandwich from the desktop and proceeded to eat it, turning my attention back to the other three sides of the fire tower and the forests below.

I was even more embarrassed the next day when I found myself stuffing a small bathroom mirror in my back pocket. What was wrong with being friendly to the old lady? She apparently had a husband to keep her company, but in the three days I had paid attention to her house, no man had ever come outside. Perhaps he was sick. He certainly did not leave for work, because the old pick-up never seemed to move from its spot in the yard. Whatever her situation, maybe I provided a nice diversion for her—a little moment of human contact while her husband lay indisposed, maybe deathly ill, inside. I didn't hurt anything by giving her a little attention.

As expected, my little mirror did the trick. Every day for the next two weeks, I flashed a reflection from my lofty spot, and she seemed to enjoy it immensely. She waved with no less passion on the two days that had heavy cloud cover. One of those days, she could see nothing from me but still waved back at the regular time, assuming I was watching. The other rainy day I tried to catch a reflection from the light bulb in my desk lamp. She may not have seen anything, but she waved with vigor anyway.

This friendly pattern of waving continued for two months, and I confess that each morning I eagerly awaited the exact time she would come outside. There was little variation. One day I tried to catch her attention when she retrieved her dry clothes at the end of the day, but she did not seem to have an interest in the signals except during the normal morning time. There were other days I missed her because of minor fires I had to report and monitor, but the next day our routine would resume as normal. I found myself resentful of fires that occurred at exactly the time I needed to interact with my friend, but I laughed off the offense and chastised myself for being so silly.

One day I noticed several cars parked in front of the house, and there was no outside activity that day at all. The same was true of the next two days, except a different lady came out to hang clothes, and a young man mowed the grass. I had not seen anyone mow the grass before, and I always assumed that her husband hired people to do the yard work, late in the afternoon after my shift was over. For the next week after the unusual outdoor activities by strangers, no one seemed to be at home at all. No clothes were on the line, and the house seemed very quiet. The pick-up truck was gone, obviously moved out during the night. I had a couple of small fires to deal with that week, but I found myself getting very bored without my anticipated morning treat.

One morning, however, the old pick-up reappeared in the front yard, although in a slightly different spot. I waited anxiously for the usual time, and, much to my satisfaction, the lady emerged from the back door with a basketful of wet clothes. She placed them in her normal spot under the first row of clotheslines, carefully pinned up a few items, and then moved her basket a little closer to her next stop and placed it on the ground. Would she wave? Yes! Yes! At the proper time, she looked up and joyfully waved her arms above her head. I immediately flashed back the mirror reflection, and her waving continued a little longer than normal. But something very disturbing became evident as I observed the return of our little morning ritual. She only pinned up women's clothes. The overalls were gone, along with all the shirts, pants, and boxer shorts. Her husband must have died! Or maybe they had divorced, although I quickly discarded that idea because divorce for an elderly couple would be unheard of in this town. Yes, he was dead, and she had probably sacrificed all her time caring for him while he was sick. She was a really fine person, I thought, and I hoped she would not be lonely in that secluded old house alone.

The restored waves from my newly widowed friend were as welcomed as the excellent grade I made on my final community college exam, and I became eligible to return to the university in the fall. I would still be on academic probation, but I was on the right track. The weekend farm work for my parents had slowed down, and I had actually saved a little money from the farm work and the fire tower job. Things were looking up. I even toyed with the idea of continuing the fire tower job for a while longer, taking another night course and enjoying the reduced stress. My boss at the lumber company wanted me to stay, because he considered me a responsible and dependable

employee. He even offered me a raise. But I knew it was time to move on. I believed for the first time in months that I had a bright future ahead of me, so I needed to take advantage of this burst of optimism.

Nevertheless, in a strange way, I was saddened to realize I only had three more days to communicate with my farmhouse friend below. Each morning we waved at the normal time, but during the afternoons, I thought a great deal about the kind old widow and wondered who would care for her after I left. I had seen activity only from friends and relatives during the funeral time, and no one ever seemed to visit before or after that time. Typical relatives, I thought. She must not have a lot of money to leave them, so they go about their own lives and refuse to give her the time of day. I wished I could help in some way, but I had very little time before school started, and I had to do lots of packing and moving.

Nevertheless, as I watched the landscape for one last wisp of smoke somewhere, I pondered how much it would mean to the lady if I could stop by and introduce myself, and maybe visit for just a few minutes. I didn't assume that I was the only fire tower employee who ever provided attention to her, but I bet I was more responsive to her waves than everyone else was, and it might really brighten her day to meet me. I would certainly enjoy meeting her, especially since I knew the memory of our unique relationship would soon begin to fade and eventually exit my mind entirely as I renewed the rigors of university life. I was in a hurry, but I believed it was important enough to make the time to drive down that long country road to her house and introduce myself.

Then I thought of the possible downsides of a surprise visit. What if she were terribly lonely, as I suspected she might be, and she cried when the time came for me to

leave? That would make my departure tough, and I would have a great deal of guilt for leaving her. Or what if she told me all about her uncaring relatives and then begged me for help? Or money? Those would require commitments I could not make. Or what if she turned out to be crazy? Waving at a phantom in a fire tower would definitely be considered abnormal behavior, but then again, perhaps my waving back with the mirror was not so normal either.

After looking down at her lonely and deteriorating old farm one last time, I knew I had no choice. I had to go visit. It was the right thing to do. I gathered my things and pulled a camera out of my bag, and I took a photograph of her house from the fire tower perspective. I would stop by the drug store and have a print made of the photo, and I would also pick up a box of chocolates as a gift. After taking one last look around the tower cabin, I climbed out the hatch door for the last time. I chuckled at how afraid I had been the first time I climbed into the cabin, and I made the descent with haste, hardly losing my breath at all. At the base of the tower, I thought of one last gesture of goodwill, and I picked a handful of colorful wildflowers to present to my friend. It would be a nice visit, and I was glad I discarded all the selfish worries I had contemplated all afternoon.

The narrow road to the house was badly maintained, but I had memorized all the sharp curves and knew what to expect. The first close-up impression of the yard and house was exactly as I predicted it would be, except the yard's greenness came more from weeds than from grass. The thick old Bermuda grass grew higher underneath the old pick-up truck, showing the laziness of the hired yard men who didn't even ask for the keys to move the truck temporarily while mowing. The flower beds still had a touch of

redness from various summer blooms, but weeds were beginning to gain a stronghold. The front porch floor was painted grey, and four square wooden posts held up the porch roof. Old white rocking chairs sat diagonally on each side of the front door, and a floor mat announced that visitors were welcome. An old metal mailbox hung on the wall next to the door, although I suspected the post office no longer delivered mail all the way out to the house. Reflecting letters of the alphabet were pasted individually and crookedly on the mailbox, spelling out “G. SMITH.”

I pulled on the screen handle so I could knock on the front door, but the screen itself was locked with a small latch. I knocked on the screen door softly, but soon realized I needed to knock harder so Mrs. Smith could hear me. After several rounds of knocking at progressively increasing volumes, a voice finally came from inside.

“Who is it?” the female voice called through the wooden door. I could sense a bit of irritation in the voice, probably because I had awakened her from an afternoon nap or had disturbed a favorite soap opera on TV. I was glad, however, that she was cautious in opening the door, especially in this secluded area.

“I’m the man from the fire tower, Mrs. Smith. I just wanted to stop by and introduce myself and say hello,” I eagerly responded.

“How did you know my name?”

I didn’t expect this question, but I again remembered that one could never be too careful of strangers out in the country.

“I read it on your mailbox,” I said, trying to show kindness in my voice while talking loud enough for her to hear me through the large wooden door. “I just wanted to

say hello. Today's my last day at the fire tower job, and I thought it would be nice to stop by before leaving town," I continued.

She immediately followed up with some words that I could not understand, so I awkwardly had to ask her to repeat them. "Ma'am?" was the word I chose, after a short pause.

"What's your name?" she asked, this time more clearly.

"I'm Jess Hanes. I work at the fire tower," I articulated carefully.

She opened the door slightly and looked out. She was exactly as I envisioned her, and she wore one of the four different-colored dresses I had observed her wearing each day in predictable order. Today was the pink dress day, and she wore matching house slippers. Her white hair was a little duller in the lower light. Her face was as wrinkled as I had imagined it would be, but her facial expression did not match the animated waving I had observed for the past few months. In fact, she had no expression at all, and I realized that she was standing there silently, waiting for me to continue conversation. She never unhitched the screen door.

"I've enjoyed seeing you wave every morning. It brightened up my lonely day in the fire tower," I said, through the screen.

She pulled the main door open a little farther and looked at me more carefully.

"Nice to meet you," she said in a monotone.

We did not actually "meet," as she called it, because she did not introduce herself. She paused, shuffling her feet into a different position. The pause seemed endless, and I had trouble thinking of the next words to say.

"Can I help you with something?" she finally asked.

I was stunned. I thought she would be excited to see me. I knew she understood the connection between the person at the door and the person flashing the mirror from the fire tower, because she did not seem addled or confused. She actually seemed very alert and aware of who I was, but she was distant and uninterested. My feelings were hurt, and I wished I had never come.

“Uhhhh, no ma’am. I don’t need anything. I just wanted to say hello.”

She smiled with her mouth but not with her eyes. “Well. OK. Nice to meet you,” she said, dropping off the last word to indicate the conversation was over. “Come again sometime,” she tacked on the end.

I opened my mouth to say goodbye, but I remembered the photo I had taken of her house. I had left it, along with the chocolates and wildflowers, in my car. “Would you let me run to my car and bring you something?” I asked, hoping this might brighten up the visit.

“Why of course,” she said, almost like I was silly to ask.

I ran to the car and retrieved the small framed photo and the box of chocolates from the front seat. I saw the flowers lying in the floorboard, wrapped in newspaper, but I decided to leave them there. I walked back to the house, up the front steps, and held out the photo and candy with a large smile on my face. “It’s a photo I took. Of your house. From the fire tower,” I said, pointing toward the sky as if she might be deaf.

She unlatched the screen door, finally, pushed it open about ten inches and reached her hand out to collect the items in one hand. She laid the chocolates on a table by the door without looking at them, and she looked at the photo for only a second and

then looked back at me. “Thank you,” she said, with only the slightest expression in her voice. An awkward pause occurred, again.

I backed away and nodded my head. “Goodbye,” was all I knew to say.

“Goodbye,” she responded, again in a monotone.

I turned to walk back to the car, and I could hear the screen door latch behind me before I had time to get off the front porch. I walked toward the car, climbed inside and started the ignition, finally looking back up at the house. Both doors were shut, and I did not notice any parted curtains. I was now a distant memory to her, if there were a memory at all.

Mean old woman, I thought. I reached over and grabbed the flowers from the floorboard as I drove slowly down the gravel road. When I arrived at the main paved road, I stopped, rolled down my windows, and tossed the flowers in the culvert. They would be visible to passersby, but I doubted if Mrs. Smith would ever notice them. I angrily turned onto the main road, back in the direction of North Alabama, my university, and my future. I realized after about five miles that I had never turned on the radio, and I was also driving much faster than normal. I looked up at my rearview mirror, and I could still see the old fire tower in my rearview mirror, now like a matchstick in the distance, but standing like a beacon over the rolling countryside.

The Lawnmower

Kevin Lee loved his father very much, but he understood that a mysterious twilight lurked just beyond the horizon for both of them. For his father William, a gradual decrease in memory only manifested itself currently as a struggle to remember names and an eager willingness to repeat a story, often within a single conversation. However, Kevin knew this decline would become more severe over time, and his 85-year-old dad would eventually lose all his memory, his independence, and his way. For Kevin, the twilight was less severe but no less mysterious—he helplessly faced the slow slipping away of his mentor and best friend, and he dreaded a future without the man he idolized.

As Kevin drove the 150 miles through the countryside to his parents' home in the Hopewell community, he rehearsed the various responses he could make concerning the lawnmower dilemma. Each potential solution depended on which version of the crisis turned out to contain the most truth. Kevin knew some things to be facts. For example, he knew the early May rain had made the grass grow speedily, and he knew the old John Deere riding lawnmower would not work. He also recognized that young teenage boys, yearning to make summer money mowing yards, were no longer around. Maybe the demographics were wrong—a town of 853 people might only have a few teenagers, and they could be busy working their own farms or perhaps busy playing their video games. Kevin shook off this familiar exercise in his mind and tried again to focus not on reasons for the problem but on solutions. That was his training, his desire, and his effective manner of dealing with problems—choosing the best solution among alternatives and leaving the non-productive judgments about the “why” to someone else.

Other versions of the problem created less clarity, however, and the facts that would eventually emerge might affect the necessary corrective actions. For example, William would not accept the fact that the lawnmower was dead, and he believed one of his buddies could easily fix it. Even if the lawnmower were salvageable, Kevin reasoned, it was over twenty years old, and the rust on the outside would give most anyone pause about what the equipment might look like on the inside. And nothing in Hopewell could be “easily fixed.” No one in the Lee family owned a truck that would transport the large lawnmower to the nearest repair place, which was twenty miles away, and no one seemed to know the business reputations of any of the remote repair shops. That type of knowledge had become a necessity for Kevin in the age of instant information and social media, but Hopewell residents were reluctant to share negative information about their own businesses.

Furthermore, the source of the lawnmower’s problems was unclear. Kevin’s mother Rebecca claimed that the machine was out of gas, but William apparently feared a greater problem and chose to take the entire lawnmower apart. He then forgot how to put it all back together. William called an old friend for help, but the friend also enjoyed taking the equipment apart and could offer no help in reassembling it. Rebecca had discretely recovered several lawnmower parts that had not made their way back into the reassembled mower, but she could not guarantee she had found all of them. When asked for details on exactly what parts had been removed, William claimed no memory of dismantling the lawnmower, and Kevin always chose to let it go, especially when his mostly-deaf mother’s description of the problem changed a little bit each time she told it. Kevin did not want to frustrate his father by harping on his memory problem, and he did

not want to frustrate his mother by loudly pressing for details. The best solution, he thought up until this point, was simply to buy a nice, new, fully-assembled lawnmower.

Kevin arrived at his old home in Hopewell and walked through the unlocked front door with his large sports bag, which he had packed with enough clothes for a four day visit. Four days would provide enough time to help his father with some household tasks and to play several games of Scrabble with his mother, who at 85 could still beat him about half the time. Four days would also be long enough to show his parents the online photos of the proposed new lawnmower, place the order, and receive the new equipment within two days. Enough time would be left to make sure everything was in working order, and Kevin could even celebrate the first mowing with a large country meal that his mother was bound to cook.

Rebecca's beloved cooking took more of a physical toll on her over the years, but she never complained. Because she labored in silence over her extravagant meals, Kevin was never sure if he should risk hurting her feelings by suggesting something simpler. William, on the other hand, never allowed a thought in his head to remain there. William was known for his story-telling ability, and he could charm adults and children alike with his great talent of making the most mundane story seem interesting. He could make his stories last for hours, with elaborate details and animated hand motions. And if someone interrupted with another story or with questions that swerved the subject in a different direction, William could later resume the tale in the exact spot where he had left off, often with the same breathlessness he was exhibiting when someone else temporarily gained the floor. For years, Kevin and his mother had been embarrassed by hearing the same stories repeatedly, and they assumed that visitors also dreaded them and listened

only out of politeness. But Kevin eventually learned from townspeople that his father was well-loved by people who thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to hear his stories. Rebecca would never be completely comfortable with William's desire to tell "his life history," as she called it, but Kevin eventually learned to cherish each repeated tale as though he were hearing it for the first time.

As the years took a toll, however, the stories became shorter and they were repeated two or three times in the same sitting. William lost his energy, and he also lost his audience. He still had reasonably good long-term memory, but his short-term memory was rapidly slipping. He also became less interested in routine yard work, and Kevin understood why his father assigned little urgency to the tall bahia grass covering the front yard. Consequently, Kevin had to move quickly to solve the problem.

"There's nothing wrong with that lawnmower," William said, when Kevin first broached the subject during the seventh inning stretch of the baseball game loudly blaring on the TV.

"Remember, dad, the last time I was here—we couldn't crank it?"

"You just don't know how to crank it. I'll show you tomorrow morning."

"But you were the one who couldn't crank it, remember?" Kevin responded softly.

"It's fine," William retorted as he turned his attention back to the ball game. Rebecca did not hear the short conversation, especially over the loud TV, but her exit from the room gave Kevin the signal to follow her to the back of the house. He waited a few minutes and then left the room, noisily fixing a glass of ice tea in the adjacent kitchen and then slipping into the back bedroom where he knew his mother was waiting.

“He’s not ready to admit the lawnmower can’t be fixed,” she said. “But that broken lawnmower is just part of the problem. I don’t want him out there mowing the grass in this heat, and he can’t admit that he just has to let some things like that go. I don’t want to find him keeled over the steering wheel from a heart attack.”

“I understand,” Kevin said, “but we need a functioning lawnmower here so I can mow the yard when I’m home. I’ll be here often enough.”

He had to repeat the sentence loudly so his mother could comprehend, making him uncomfortable that his father might overhear the conversation.

“Nor does he want to spend the money...” she continued.

“I’m paying for it, Mom,” Kevin interrupted.

“He doesn’t want to spend the money,” she repeated, “and he doesn’t want you to spend it either. And he doesn’t want to hire someone. And he’s not motivated to mow the yard himself...”

“Probably because an attempt to crank the mower will expose the true problem, which he can’t face,” he followed.

After years of sensitivity about her deafness, she hated to ask Kevin to repeat the sentence. So she grabbed him by the arm and suggested that maybe the best thing to do was to order the lawnmower and face the fallout after it arrived. She was confident that he would soon forget the old John Deere, which was a gift from his employer when he retired. Kevin understood that his normally decisive mother did not want to be the bad guy, and he noticed that she actually seemed afraid—an unusual condition for the strong woman he knew her to be. So instead of following her back into the den, he took his glass of tea to the back door and announced that he was going to try to crank the mower.

As he walked down the path to a small backyard shed, Kevin looked back and realized his father had not followed him. He rounded the corner of the shed and took a long look at the rusted old mower. He had to mount the machine carefully because the rusted spots on the deck were so large that he was afraid he would step through. A spider had built a web over the gear shift knob, and the indicators for gear speeds wore away a long time ago. An old patio seat cushion replaced the original yellow mower seat, and the mowing deck lever would not budge in any direction. The gas tank was full and the oil reservoir seemed to be full, but as he expected, the engine would not turn over at all.

Kevin returned to the house so he could covertly place the online order, but he dreaded this transaction because his parents had no computer and he would have to use his smart phone with no wifi. His father was sound asleep in his recliner, but he opened his eyes when Kevin's phone made a noise, and he pretended he had not missed one minute of the baseball game, now in the ninth inning. Kevin labored through the slow ordering process, but his father, suspecting something was going on, suggested unexpectedly that maybe they could hire someone to mow the grass until he could get the John Deere fixed.

Surprisingly, Rebecca heard the comment. "I was told that a young man named Harold Brinson mows yards for a living, so maybe you could call him," she said hopefully, looking at Kevin. The frustrated son knew this new request from his mother totally contradicted what she mentioned five minutes earlier, but Kevin understood that her frustration was much greater than his own, so he chose not to ask for clarification. William acted as though his statement was all anyone needed, and he obviously did not wish to participate in the conversation further. Kevin pulled out his reading glasses and

found the number already circled in the tiny old phonebook. Mr. Brinson worked out of his home, Kevin learned, and it might be possible to catch him since it was late in the afternoon.

A gruff voice answered after five rings, and Kevin immediately perceived that this person did not like to talk on the phone. “May I speak to Mr. Brinson?” Kevin asked.

“Speaking,” the voice said.

Kevin then explained the unique situation of his parents, perhaps in too much detail. Mr. Brinson waited patiently as Kevin described the size of the yard, the type of grass, and the broken lawnmower. Mr. Brinson mumbled that he already had too many yards to mow. Nevertheless, after a pause, Kevin thought he heard him say that he would come take a look at the yard the next morning. Kevin started to give the address, but the lawn man said he knew where “Mr. William” lived. Kevin told him to come as early as he wanted, because they were early risers, but he never heard an acknowledgment.

When the lawn man did not arrive by 9:00 am, Rebecca became visibly nervous and asked if Kevin should make another call to see if Mr. Brinson forgot. William sat in his recliner and watched TV, not seeming to comprehend that someone might come by soon to mow the grass. Kevin was reluctant to make the call, fearing the fragile deal could fall apart, but he was relieved, finally, to hear a knock on the front door around 10:00 am. Kevin sprang to the door, and his father awoke with a start from a nap. His mother had already explained to Kevin exactly what portions of the large yard should be cut, so she was content to allow Kevin to handle everything with Mr. Brinson. When the excitement died down, she would explain everything to William—for the third time.

Mr. Brinson was a slender, deeply tanned man with grayish-blond hair that partly stuck to his head and partly stood straight up, apparently the result of a hat that had recently been removed. His few remaining teeth were yellow, and he had long nose and ear hairs that indicated a lack of interest in grooming. His clothes were filthy, and the dirt did not seem to be totally a result of the morning's earlier yard work. He was of indeterminate age, somewhere between 40 and 60, but Kevin narrowed down the age possibilities when Brinson confidently indicated that he and Kevin had gone to school together. Kevin had no memory of the face or the name, but he politely asked which high school. Brinson unapologetically replied that he had dropped out of school in the seventh grade, so Kevin realized their acquaintance must go back to elementary school. The two of them conversed a little more about families, but Kevin did not let on that the names were completely unfamiliar to him.

The next step was for the two to walk around the yard, because Kevin wanted to make it clear that the entire property did not need to be mowed—only the parts inside the fence and not the large vacant lots on both sides of the house. Those only needed mowing about twice a year, and he had a strong desire to get the critical parts mowed so Brinson could get his money and get out of there as soon as possible. He knew his parents would be inside watching every move the yard man made, because they were not accustomed to having anyone but themselves performing work on their property. So as soon as the walkaround ended, Mr. Brinson quoted Kevin a reasonable price and the work began.

Kevin wanted to help, but he also wanted to leave the new employee alone so the work could get done. He knew that if his father walked out to talk with the yard man,

delay would be inevitable because of pent-up stories that William would seize the opportunity to share. But Kevin's greatest worry was not about his father's stories but his father's fears—of aging, of uselessness, of irrelevance. Consequently, Kevin embarked on some nonessential work outside the designated mowing area, partly to keep an eye on his dad and partly to be available for questions from Brinson. After about 30 minutes, however, Kevin saw another problem taking shape. His mother walked outside to talk to Brinson, and she handed him a tall glass of water and a large piece of pound cake—the kind that was always available for guests. The yard man grabbed the cake with his big dirty hand and swallowed it in a few bites. His delight was measured by his enthusiasm for eating the cake and not by a change in his facial expression, but Kevin's mother had always been more pleased with demonstrations of eating instead of vocal compliments. As Brinson drank the water, Kevin could tell that his mother was explaining something to Mr. Brinson, but she finished the conversation and moved back toward the house before Kevin could move to intervene. Hopefully the conversation involved only country pleasantries and not instructions that conflicted with the ones he had provided earlier, because an ever-increasing job scope might make the yard man less likely to come back for future jobs. But Kevin shook his head and continued his work, praying that his father would not come outside to start his own conversation.

After about fifteen minutes, Kevin felt bad about the doubts and worries he had about his mother's little intervention. She was simply exhibiting an act of kindness, Kevin realized, and he felt ashamed that his city ways made him suspicious of such innocent encounters. But his moment of reflection was short-lived, however, as he perceived a change in the direction of the lawnmower sound. He laid down his weedeater

and walked around the house to find the yard man exiting the main yard through a gate, on his way to cut the forbidden tall grass of the adjacent lot. Kevin's mother must have asked Mr. Brinson to do the extra work, but Kevin's frustration grew even more when he realized his father was holding the gate open. Kevin walked slowly and calmly toward his father so he could rehearse in his mind a positive inquiry instead of a scolding reprimand. William told Kevin that some tall grass was growing up around the pond, and he wanted to ask if Mr. Brinson could handle that work as well.

Kevin hoped his face was already red from the hot yard work so his father would not notice the burning frustration rising in his forehead over the now out-of-control situation. Kevin turned and watched Brinson's body bouncing up and down on the lawnmower's seat across the mounds and furrows that years ago had made up a fine country garden but had more recently turned into a vacant lot comprised of tall weeds. Kevin wanted to stop the new work that would add hours to the job, but he decided the best course of action at this point would be to lure his dad away to another subject.

"Why don't you come show me how to run the bush-hog, and I will take care of the weeds down at the pond," Kevin asked. "I've needed to learn how to use it for a long time, and this will give me a good opportunity to help. And I'm free."

"We don't mind paying him," William responded, completely contradicting Rebecca's assessment. "We want you to relax while you're home."

Kevin predicted this is what his father would say, but he also knew how much his father loved to teach him things about the property. Therefore, Kevin pressed harder and his father predictably agreed to show him how to run the bush hog. Kevin knew this was

his dad's favorite piece of equipment because it was a perfect size for moderate undergrowth and it was self-propelled—even an 85 year old man could operate it.

Kevin and William walked to the barn where the bush hog resided, and Kevin pulled the heavy machine out by the wide handles into an open area so the cranking lesson could begin. Kevin glanced over all the knobs, buttons, and gears, and believed he could figure out things for himself, but he wisely settled into the role of a student and asked his dad for instructions. William then started to explain all the cranking steps in elaborate detail, much like he would tell a hunting or fishing story, and Kevin relaxed enough to savor the father-son moment. Kevin knew that his father had only used this equipment a week ago, so he felt safe that the lesson would be fruitful and would provide joy to William by making him feel useful and productive.

The bush-hog, however, had other ideas. After the slow, painstaking verbal explanation, William then triumphantly proceeded to perform all the actions he had just delineated to his son. But the equipment sat quietly unimpressed with the demonstration, and it made no sound other than the clicking of the ignition key. Puzzled, William stepped back, and Kevin asked to give it a try. William ignored the request and began to speak through all the actions he had just performed, and he appeared frustrated because he didn't seem to have forgotten any steps. A second cranking attempt was made, but to no avail. William once again rehearsed all the steps. Kevin watched as his father pointed to all the knobs that required some type of manipulation, but he knew after five tries that further attempts would be a waste of time. Kevin started suggesting possibilities for the failure—the gas, the oil, the throttle—but William now seemed obsessed with repeatedly running through all the steps in his head, carefully pointing to bush-hog parts as he

progressed. Kevin suggested that maybe they could just try it another time, because he had some other things to do in the house and he needed to get a shower. William, however, began to act more and more irrationally by repeatedly undertaking the same actions over and over, thinking the results might miraculously change the next time. He no longer seemed to notice that his son was present, and Kevin's anxiety changed to pity as he watched his father lose control.

Rebecca had told Kevin in the past that the best course of action for William's problem, in addition to the dementia drugs, was to keep him calm and in a routine. Kevin realized that the entire day had pushed his father out of his comfortable routine, and the bush-hog training session had pushed everything a step too far. Nevertheless, Kevin was determined to salvage this situation by pleading with his father that it was too hot to work at the pond anyway, and that it would probably crank next time, so maybe they could just push it back under the shed and try again later. Nothing worked. William grew more and more agitated as he talked through the cranking steps to himself, failing again and again to make any progress.

Kevin understood at that point that nothing was working to pull his father out of the rut, so he felt he had no choice but to get firm. He wouldn't use the particular words that first came to his mind, but he knew he had to resort to treating his father like a child. "OK, I've had enough. I'm going to pull the bush-hog back to its shed and we're going inside," he said with less force than he intended.

Kevin's red-faced father then stopped briefly from his ritualistic motions and panted, without looking at Kevin, "I'm just trying to get this little bastard to crank."

Kevin gasped, dumfounded but angry, because in 55 years he had never heard his father curse. “Bastard” was a very tame word by current standards, especially since it could be heard on TV every day. But he had never heard his father utter even the mildest of vulgarities—not a “damn,” not a “hell,” not a “shit”—nothing. Since when did this behavior begin? What other changes had developed in his father since he had last visited? Unable to deal with his stubborn father any more, he backed away from the machinery and announced, “If this is how you get when you can’t get something to work, then I’ve had enough and I’m going inside.”

William ignored the comment and started going through his steps again, this time with jerking motions and a more rapid progression through the process. Kevin knew he should not leave him like this. But nothing else worked, so he angrily stomped back toward the house. He had lost his temper, but it was now time to turn the situation over to his mother. As he made his way up the trail to the house, however, he noticed that Brinson had now made his way back down to the main yard and was cutting grass very near to the father-son altercation that had just taken place. This made Kevin even angrier—was the stupid yard man about to intervene in the bush-hog fiasco? Or was he trying to get close enough to ask Kevin about new changes in the scope of the job? Had Rebecca added more confusion to the situation? Kevin could not take any more, so he went inside to calm down and cool off. His mother, sensing a problem, was waiting in the kitchen with a glass of water. When she asked what had happened, Kevin muttered a quick summary between gulps. Rebecca could not understand the explanation and reluctantly asked Kevin to repeat it. Kevin had grown tired of repeating himself, however, so he stormed off to the bathroom to wash his face and pull himself together.

He pulled the lid down on the commode and sat down with his hot wet face in his hands. He was too angry to cry, but his mind raced through the realization that his father needed more help than a son could provide. Was institutionalization in his father's future? Who would take care of his mother? If she moved in with him in the city, she would hate it, he knew. And who would take care of the old home place? He had to work for a living.

Kevin was surprised that his mother had not knocked on the bathroom door, but he decided after a few minutes that he was ready to come out and talk with her—to start discussions with her, however difficult they may be, on William's future. To his surprise, however, she was not in the house, and he dreaded what he might see when he looked out the window in the direction of his father. Before he could pull back the curtain, however, he heard the unmistakable sound of the bush-hog running. He looked out the window and was amazed to see his father and Brinson talking about the now-fixed equipment, as his mother stood nearby with a look of anxiety but relief. He opened the window and could hear his father yelling over the beautiful sound of the bush hog, "Go tell Kevin that he can get his work done now!"

By the time Kevin made his way outside, Brinson had resumed his mowing and William had a satisfied look on his face. Rebecca told Kevin that the only problem was a loose cable, which Brinson easily discovered when he left his mowing for a minute to come down and help. For some strange reason, this solution angered Kevin even more, but his anger turned to sadness when he suspected his father had no memory of the altercation that had occurred just twenty minutes earlier.

"We got it to work," William stated. "It was just a loose wire."

Kevin told his father that he had decided not to do the work at the pond—it was just too hot, but he was glad the bush hog worked. “Can we go inside and clean up and have lunch?” he asked.

William seemed perfectly happy now, and as a consequence, Rebecca was happy. Kevin knew that reality would return, however, and the big issues must be discussed. Tears must be shed, and decisions must be made. For now, though, he was happy that his father had forgotten the agitated, repetitive and useless state he was in earlier, and perhaps he had forgotten the cursing as well. Kevin accompanied his parents toward the back door, but he glanced out at Brinson and remembered that one problem remained. Will the lawnmower man come back, now that he knows he will get conflicting instructions from every household member? Will he realize the work takes too long and he can’t fit it in his schedule? Worse yet, will he realize that he can easily take advantage of the old couple by overcharging them? Kevin shuddered as he once again remembered all the things that can go wrong, and he decided that maybe it would be best for everyone if Mr. Brinson would just take his money and leave for good. Kevin would think of something, after all. He had to.

When all the work required by the various Lee family sources was complete, Kevin walked outside as Mr. Brinson loaded his equipment back on his trailer. Kevin waited patiently as the man carefully tied everything down, and he realized that the yard worker had spent five hours at the Lee house, making another yard job that day impossible.

“Please tell us how much additional money we’ll owe you because of the extra work,” Kevin stated as soon as he could get face-to-face with the yard man.

Brinson obviously had a prepared speech. “Because of the extra lots, I’ll have to charge double the amount I quoted this morning. I was only expectin’ to work about three hours, but it took a lot longer. I’m sorry I have to do that...”

Kevin interrupted, overjoyed that he had a reasonable amount to pay, and this day’s excitement could finally come to a close. But there was something about Brinson’s look, his slight humble bowing of the head, that made Kevin change his mind about future work at the house: “Do you think you could come back every two weeks, only to do the inside yard? It should be easier next time.”

Brinson ignored the question, but his planned speech took a different turn. “I have a father who got really old, and he just needed a lot of love,” he said, still with a slightly bowed head. His voice trembled slightly as he added, “They won’t be around forever.”

Kevin had spent many hours in management seminars over his career that taught executives how to control the defensiveness that naturally occurs when someone tries to apply correction. This was a moment, however, that caught Kevin off guard, because correction does not usually come from someone who has so little knowledge about complex family relationships and the world in general.

“Your father just needs to feel important—that he has something to contribute,” the yard man continued.

Perhaps the defensiveness would come later, but for now, things did not seem so complex. Kevin took out his checkbook, propped it on the edge of the trailer, and started making out the payment. He was ashamed that he had forgotten Brinson’s first name, so he wrote the check simply to “Mr. Brinson.” He still didn’t remember Brinson from

school, but he hoped his memory failure was not evident. He turned and handed over the payment, this time making direct eye contact with his new friend. Neither man had a bowed head or a sheepish look.

“Thank you,” Kevin said. He reached his hand forward, never taking his eyes off Mr. Brinson, and they firmly shook hands. Mr. Brinson turned and climbed in his truck, never answering the question about future lawn work. Kevin watched him crank the old vehicle, and the gravel driveway caused the lawnmower to bounce vigorously as the truck moved from the gravel driveway onto the main road. Kevin perceived someone watching him as he walked back to the house, but he tried not to let on that he could see the lace curtains slightly pulled back in the living room.

Dreadlocks and Tattoos

My morning coffee was getting cold, but I hated to ask my secretary to run down to the cafeteria to bring up a fresh cup. She had worked late the night before, and I was certain she also came in early that morning to finish a project for me that was due by noon. She was an extraordinary employee, and she always went the extra mile without feeling a compulsion to tell everyone how overworked she was. Other employees liked to casually mention what time they got home the previous night, or they made sure that I saw them leaving late in the afternoon with their laptops and large briefcases full of work. I was grateful for their extra work, and goodness knows I worked long hours myself, but I appreciated the extra-special employees like my secretary who quietly and tirelessly did their jobs because of a simple passion for excellence. Other employees also did good work, but many of them only made sacrifices if they were certain the Big Boss saw them.

I was the Big Boss, and over 30 years in the business had helped me achieve much growth in my personal attitudes about business and life, if those things can be separated. In the early years, I thought I was God's gift to the corporate world, and I used my brains, connections, and good people-skills to climb the corporate ladder quickly and decisively. I worked hard, and I must confess that I spent much energy in those early years making sure everyone knew the sacrifices I made on behalf of the company. When people asked me at age 30 why I was not married yet, I told them that my long hours did not allow for much of a social life. When I reported good corporate results at staff meetings, I made sure that executives saw a direct line from my specific business decisions to the profitable bottom line. If results were not profitable, others gave the reports and they focused on changes that would improve results down the road.

Over time, however, the achievements and the recognition did not mean as much, and large personnel increases placed me further and further from actual corporate results. I only achieved things vicariously through other people, and my emphasis shifted from personal responsibility to leadership responsibility. My job was to hire good people and to keep them happy, motivated, and rewarded. I did it well, and my employees seemed to love me professionally and personally. I was even awarded city-wide “Boss of the Year” accolades on three separate occasions. I was grateful for my employees, and I treated them well and made sure they got the recognition for good results, not me.

This is not to say that I failed to get recognition of my own, but I always made it clear that I was nothing without my “team,” as I now called them. The “team” terminology was one of many new things I learned at management seminars, because people change and executives must always stay on top of corporate language trends. I believed my employees really rallied around the team concept, especially since I would never ask them to do something that I would not do myself, and I tried very hard to form personal relationships with them and ask them frequently about their families. At Christmas, I would take the entire team out to lunch, split in smaller groups, of course, and I made sure they knew that I paid for the meals personally and was not reimbursed by the company for the expense. This way, they knew that I cared for them personally and not just as employees, and this approach served me well over the years.

In fact, the reason I was a bit dreary that morning and needed extra coffee was because I had stayed late the night before at a hospital visiting the terminally ill father of one of my brightest young employees. Very few of my fellow managers would get involved personally with employees like I did, but I liked having the reputation for

showing kindness, especially to lower-level workers. The particular employee with the sick father was a fairly new team member, and consequently very low on the corporate ladder, but she had a great future and I liked her work and enthusiasm. I had trouble finding the correct hospital room, however, because I could not remember her father's name. But I luckily found a doctor buddy I knew who was able to get me to the right hospital wing based on a description of the illness. From that point, I relied on my good connections in the nurses' station to get me to the right room. The anxious employee was very grateful that I had stopped by, especially since I assured her that she did not have a thing to worry about with regard to her time off work—I would make sure this situation had no negative impact on her career. She was also appreciative when I left the room for a moment and returned with a beautiful bouquet of flowers from the hospital gift shop. I had surveyed the room on my first visit so I could make sure my flower arrangement was the largest. She could tell that my concern was real.

I decided that I would need to take a different route to the cafeteria to get coffee, because my super-efficient secretary would insist on dropping her critical tasks if she saw me walk by her cubicle with an empty coffee cup. I made my way through my private conference room to another exit that took me directly out into the working floor, where I had a nice time weaving through cubicles and visiting with folks. Everyone smiled and chatted, and I remembered most of the names without looking at the name plates perched on top of each cubicle wall. Some team members used the opportunity to ask work-related questions, and I knew the answers to many of them. I made a special effort to talk with newer people, asking them how things were going and how much I wanted them to enjoy their jobs and have fun at work. Many of them already knew my reputation as a

people-person because they had seen the “Boss of the Year” plaques on my wall, and some of them showed me pictures of children and even pets. I loved walking around the department like this, especially since my job offered fewer opportunities to take such strolls, and young employees seemed to appreciate my efforts to get to know them.

Department visits also allowed me to see the results of my diversity initiatives, and I was proud to see the floor become more colorful and diverse. As a white Christian Ivy-Leaguer, I knew I had a disadvantage in recruiting excellent employees of different races, nationalities, religions, and sexual orientations, because they would assume I could not relate to them. But I worked extra hard to learn about different cultures before I conducted job interviews, and applicants always seemed to warm up to me quickly. Exposure to different ideas can only be good for a corporation, and good for me personally, and I knew we had come a long way when I realized that I could not even tell the race of some of my employees. Every person on my team was a person of great worth, and I could find ways of integrating all types into our corporate environment. It was one of my greatest accomplishments.

During my trip to the cafeteria, which had probably taken much too long, I stopped by the main restroom to wash out my coffee cup, a gift from a project task force I had mentored in some previous year. Scalding with extremely hot water usually did the trick for my secretary, so I followed her advice and then reached for paper towels for drying. To my pleasant surprise, a young black man stepped forward and handed me a couple of towels.

“Here ya’ go, sir,” he said with a wide grin. He was a nice-looking young man of caramel complexion, dressed in the traditional polo-shirt of our contracted maintenance company, and I thanked him profusely.

“Are you new to the company?” I asked with my usual smile.

“Yessir,” he replied, tearing off another towel to make sure my drying operation was a success. He had nice green eyes and his eyebrows were lifted in anticipation, perhaps because he had seen my portrait in the main lobby. He had a very pleasant disposition, but his hair extended halfway down his back in what seemed to be hundreds of small pig-tails, which I realized people now call dreadlocks. I always considered that kind of hair unsanitary, because young men and women would spend large amounts of money getting the braiding done, only to make the hair unwashable. But not everyone is like me, and I sat my coffee cup down and offered a hand and a smile.

“I’m Fred Whitman,” I said with a smile, making it a point to use my casual name instead of the “Frederick” that was engraved downstairs on the portrait. “Tell me your name.”

“I’m Mike--Michael Watters, sir,” he said, shaking his head a bit in embarrassment when he could not decide which name to use.

Michael offered no more information, but his big smile remained in place as he turned back to his janitorial duties. I followed up and asked, “How long have you been with the cleaning company?”

Turning back to face me, he replied, “Today is my first day, sir.”

Although it is certainly not required, I admired his use of the word “sir,” and I asked him a few more polite questions about his background. He seemed a little more

comfortable and less nervous than many new employees I get a chance to meet, so I enjoyed our little conversation. I told him where my office was located, and I assured him that I would help if he ever had a problem—he could just stop by any time. Of course, the plush trappings of my office suite made it a little imposing for young employees to “just stop by,” but I really enjoyed visiting with people and I hoped we would have a chance to talk again later. My secretary knows when to let people in and when not to let people in, and she was always very good about getting the right people in who had serious problems and needed help. I was always happy to provide help to needy people.

Two days later, I again ran into my new friend Michael in the hall. He was pushing a cart full of cleaning supplies, and I made it a point to stop and chat. He liked his new job, and he seemed to have a terrific attitude about his work. He told me with pride about the cleaning tasks he had already completed that morning, and I told him he was doing a great job. This comment fed his enthusiasm even more, and he said he hoped that I had noticed the bathrooms were much cleaner than before. I did not tell him that I rarely used the employee restrooms because I had a private restroom in my office suite, but I was truly congratulatory of his attitude. I wished that some of my much higher-paid employees had the same outlook on their jobs, and I told him I would pass on a good report to his supervisor. I did not know who his supervisor might be, but I would find out, and Michael expressed a big “thank you” and rushed off to his next project.

The next day I saw Michael from afar as I made my way to a conference room on another floor, but I did not get a chance to talk with him. I remembered, however, that I had promised to talk with his supervisor, and I made myself a note to follow up. When I

talked with his manager, I suggested that someone of Michael's caliber might be good for cleaning the executive offices where I worked, and the supervisor seemed genuinely surprised. I supposed that much of his day was spent hearing complaints on broken towel dispensers and overflowing toilets, so he seemed relieved to hear an actual compliment. He promised to look into it, and about a week later I saw Michael vacuuming the carpet outside my office.

“Well, what a surprise,” I said while offering a handshake. Most executives would never offer their hands to a janitor, but I was proud of my new relationship and vigorously shook his hand. As we shook, however, I noticed with dismay a large tattoo that reached from his bicep to his wrist. Tattoos are almost as unsanitary as dreadlocks, I thought, but I tried to give the appearance that I had not noticed. Had the tattoo been there the first time we met? Or had he received a raise from the promotion to the executive suite, promptly spending it on something stupid? My opinion of him sank a little bit on the speculation, but then I chided myself for thinking everyone else should be just like me. So what if he had a tattoo and dreadlocks, I thought, and I invited him into my office to look around. The extra time I spent with him made me reconsider my initial rush to judgment, and I soon forgot about it and enjoyed a pleasant conversation about his family. He had a wife and two children, although he did not look a day over twenty. I silently scolded myself again for being judgmental, and I pictured Michael once more as an ambitious young employee who had great potential if he could only continue his education. Perhaps I could help him do that someday, I thought.

Over the next six months, I saw Michael about twice a week, and his infectious smile always made me feel better. From time to time I would talk with him about his

family, and eventually I started asking questions about his dreams—his vision for the future. Did he always want to work for the cleaning company? Could I help him in any way? He always seemed eager to grow, but I knew that he would never have a higher paying job until he went back to college and finished his degree. I learned that he dropped out of college to support his first child, and when the second child arrived, he lost all hope of continuing his education. I wish he had exercised some common sense and used birth control, but I nevertheless promised to help him in any way I could along the way. I meant it. This kid could brighten up any room he walked into, and I secretly wanted to make some of my own sour-faced team members work with him for a day—maybe they would learn a little humility and gain some appreciation for their well-paying jobs.

I was eventually successful at getting Michael a job directly with my company, although it took some wrangling with the independent cleaning company to let him go. I never threatened them directly, but I made it clear that I had some influence over the cleaning contracts and I did not ask for many favors. Michael's new job was not glamorous. He would perform menial, entry level tasks in our documentation area, yet he would have a career path that would allow reasonable salary increases even without a college degree. I had tried to get him a job in Information Technology, but he did not pass the weird analytical tests that are required for those positions. The failure had no impact on my opinion of Michael, because I knew there were many weird people in IT who had somehow passed that test, and I continued to offer my support and encouragement as much as I could.

Michael's new job placed him on another floor, so I did not get to see him as often, but I was happy that he felt comfortable enough to stop by my office occasionally. Weeks turned into months and months turned into years, but he always made a visit when he received a promotion or an award, and he impressed me greatly by sharing some details of a special project he had been given—a project that he had masterfully completed to the betterment of the company. I was so proud of him, and I even stopped by his cubicle whenever I was on his floor.

Despite Michael's progress over the years, I was disappointed that he continued to sport dreadlocks, and he now had a matching tattoo on the other arm. I would have expected him to hide the unprofessional tattoos by wearing more long-sleeve shirts in his new position, but he seemed to be prouder than ever of the body ink. And of all things, at some point he decided to get his ears pierced—not in the normal spot on the lower lobes but high on the sides of the ears. And the colorful earrings he chose to wear were decidedly feminine, making his appearance even worse. I wished he had asked me for advice before he did such a thing, because some supervisors are not as tolerant and progressive as I am, but I shook it off and remained silent.

I continued my relationship with Michael over the years, although our conversations never amounted to much more than casual encounters. I was busy, and he was busy, so I knew he was fine with the depth of our friendship. Whenever there was a large meeting that involved both of us, I could tell that he maneuvered his way close to me—I am sure he thought the proximity would somehow help his career. Large meetings typically did not give me an opportunity to chat, but I always made it a point to speak to Michael either before or after the meeting.

Our friendship would likely come to an end soon, however, because I eventually made the decision to retire. At my retirement reception, though, I was surprised and especially glad to see Michael take a prominent position toward the front of the crowd. The reception was a large, sumptuous affair, and I was happy to see a very large and diverse crowd assemble in the company's banquet room. I had, after all, been the architect of the corporate diversity program, and I made a special point of inviting a large group of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Indians (the kind from Asia), and I was thrilled that many of them showed up. I did not know all of them personally, but I am sure they knew that I was instrumental in bringing them into our IT department, which could barely function these days without the foreign help.

I was disappointed that many of the foreign employees stayed largely within their own groups at the reception, however, because photographs of the crowd would have looked much better if an overall mixture had been attained. Nevertheless, my final party as a corporate executive was a beautiful gesture of appreciation, and I was grateful for the large numbers of people who showed up. The company president made a brief speech, and several of my fellow senior vice-presidents offered kind words. But nothing topped the moment when my young friend Michael made his way to the podium and asked to say a few words. I was overwhelmed by the kindness and appreciation he showed, because many people that I helped along the way did not even bother to show up. I was eternally grateful to my young African-American friend, and I was so glad that I was able to provide some tiny opportunities on which he could capitalize. He was a fantastic young man, and I was very proud of him.

Retirement was fulfilling, and I had no shortage of activities to keep me occupied. I had many buddies who had also retired recently, and the infrequent golf outings we enjoyed back in the client entertaining days had now turned into mandatory, weekly events. We met at the country club every Wednesday without fail, and my golf game became fairly decent despite my lack of passion for the sport. I especially enjoyed our long poker games after golf, but I wearied of the complex betting schemes (for both golf and poker) that were difficult to remember and made the casual sports seem too much like work. I also grew tired of the competitive nature of retirement banter about “things.” We all had plenty of money, as evidenced by the country club memberships, the large homes, the fancy cars, and the fancy wives. But did we have to remind one another of them constantly? Yes, I suppose that I was as guilty as the rest of them in flaunting the trappings of success, but I wanted them to notice my “things” on their own instead of my having to casually drop remarks about my lot size, my square footage, my horsepower, or whatever other measurements might be expressed in numbers. Conversations also centered on the success of everyone’s children and grandchildren, but I showed restraint and let my Club friends find out on their own about my two kids. After all, my physician son had treated some of them, and my lawyer daughter had appeared in the newspaper often with her well-publicized lawsuits to protect the poor. Those lawsuits provided some anxiety during my working years, even though she refrained from suing my own business, but in retirement I am extremely proud of her benevolent causes. She obviously got her passion for helping minorities from me, and I supported her even when she took on some of my friends’ companies. They could spare some of their money to help the poor—it would not hurt them.

One day while enduring an endless discussion about which company has the best financial advisors, I glanced across the club dining room and was shocked to see none other than Michael Watters, my old friend from the office. What was he doing there? I was instrumental years earlier in making a push for the Club to recruit more minority members, but that did not change the high cost of maintaining a membership, and I was extremely surprised and overjoyed to see him. I asked my friends to excuse me for a moment, telling them I wanted to go speak to an old friend, and I could not wait to see the expressions on their faces when they saw me talking with an African American covered with dreadlocks and tattoos. Michael still had them, all right, but as I walked across the room, I was shocked to see that his body piercings now included some type of metal ring in his eyebrow. My great joy in seeing Michael allowed me to hide my disgust in his appearance, however, and I hurried toward to his table.

Michael did not see me coming because he was diligently working with a baby in a booster seat next to his expensive leather chair. He sat at a large round table with two other small children and a beautiful black woman, apparently his wife. There were four empty seats at the table—probably chairs reserved for the club members who had invited Michael and his young family.

“Michael, how are you doing?” I asked with enthusiasm. “It is so good to see you!” I glanced back at my table to make sure my friends were watching, but they were busy starting a game of poker. I hoped they would eventually look up and see that I had a minority friend, but I hoped they could not see the eyebrow jewelry. Even for the most progressive businessmen, body piercing carries personal creative expression a little too far.

Michael had one last task to perform with his infant, and then he looked up at me. I am sure it took just a few seconds for the eye contact to occur, maybe because he no longer recognized my voice, but it was enough time for the rest of the family to become silent and stare at me in puzzlement.

“Mr. Whitman, what a nice surprise! How is retirement?” he finally asked.

“Oh please, Michael, call me Fred!”

He did not get up from his chair, so I walked around the table and grabbed his hand and vigorously shook it. “Is this your family?”

Michael’s face showed signs of his characteristic wide smile, but he did not display his gleaming white teeth as he normally did. He opened his mouth to speak when the child in the booster seat screamed and started beating plastic toys on the tray. Michael put his index finger to his lips and whispered “inside voice, inside voice” as though the child might comprehend. One of the two other youngsters then joined in with a loud shushing sound that had no impact on the noise. The mother then rushed around to the side of the table with the screaming child and picked him up. The noise immediately ceased, and Michael and his wife exchanged glances that seemed to say, “I’ve got this” and “Thank you.”

Michael continued to keep his seat as he introduced his family members. He said that one of his close friends who worked at the Club had just been voted Employee of the Month, and the reward was a big dinner at the club with guests. “We just got here before our hosts did, but they went ahead and seated us,” Michael said. “How is retirement?”

“Oh, I’m staying busy, of course—you know those ‘honey-do’ lists,” I replied with a laugh. No one at the table laughed except one of Michael’s daughters, but I

supposed it was because of something her sister had said while the adults were talking. Michael was polite, but he seemed to have trouble with a follow-up comment.

“I have a few years to go before I get there,” Michael said as he turned his attention to a waiter who was now passing out menus. “Do you have any recommendations?” he asked the waiter. “The Bentons are not here yet, but we can be thinking about it.”

Michael, who had been offered many opportunities because of my long-term support and encouragement, seemed to be more interested in the menu than in me. I figured he was probably nervous about the intimidating country club environment, especially since he could see no other African-American guests in the dining room that night. He also might have sensed that if people of color achieved membership in the Club, they probably were not the kind who had dreadlocks and tattoos. I hoped he thought that, anyway, because such a perception would serve him well.

I stood a few more seconds admiring the young children and telling them how his father and I became friends over the years. They were unimpressed, and one of them took two straws and stuck them under her upper lip to look like fangs. Michael and his wife said nothing, but the silence was relieved when the Bentons noisily arrived in the room.

Michael stood up and walked toward his hosts. I knew it was time for me to go back to my table, but I needed to wait until Michael returned to his seat so I could properly say how nice it was to run into him. He took his time at the door, however, because his girls jumped up from their seats to go greet the Benton children. The baby started whimpering in the absence of his father, so the mother quickly retrieved him once

again. Feeling like an intruder, I waved at Michael across the room and animatedly moved my lips in the shape of “Good to see you!” and turned to walk back to my own table. I glanced back to see if Michael was waving, but he was busy picking up one of the Benton children. He gathered up everyone and headed back to their seats, apparently forgetting that I was just there.

“Who was that?” one of my poker buddies asked without looking up from his drink.

“He was a janitor at my old company,” I responded. “I remembered him because of that hair and those tattoos. He got his job because of me.”

I glanced back at Michael’s table a couple of times, and the group was having a grand time. One time Michael leaned back in his chair and it looked like he might turn over because he was laughing so hard. Every time the waiter appeared with food, the table burst into “oohs” and “ahs” as each dish was uncovered. And the children seemed to get along splendidly, perhaps because they were comfortable with each other.

“Are you going to play this time?” one of my buddies said as he shuffled a deck of cards. He loudly spoke with the irritation of someone who did not want to have to repeat himself.

“Deal me in,” I said as I turned back to the table. “Has the waiter been by already?”

Crybaby

Valerie Banks had a lot to cry about. Four weeks earlier, state troopers pulled her from a bloody accident just two miles from her home in rural Pennsylvania. A drunk driver killed her mother and her little brother. Valerie survived with a concussion, a broken leg, and a broken heart.

She was only fifteen, and she could not help but feel guilty because she had called for the shotgun seat on the right side of the car. Pieces of the left side—the driver’s side—would be discovered over time in various corners of the Pleasant Valley intersection, in ditches along County Road 29, and in Merlin Johnson’s hay field. The remaining car frame looked like a crescent that was laid, points up, on the back of a flat bed truck, with deployed air bags hanging out like bloody tongues.

Her twelve-year-old brother, the loser of the shotgun game, was instructed to sit in the back seat on the driver’s side, creating the largest distance possible between the two siblings so they would avoid fighting. Both children buckled themselves in tightly, but seat belts and large tank-like cars do not provide much help when an inebriated sixteen-year-old boy navigates an incoming missile. The light was red, but the teenager and his newly-discovered freedom never even applied brakes. His sole injuries came from the hot friction of his new car’s air bags against his barely shavable face.

Surgery on Valerie’s leg had been successful, but she remained in the hospital for four weeks because of lingering symptoms from the head injury. She was dizzy and complained of double vision, but the most debilitating result of her accident was a constant flow of tears. Valerie had been unable to attend her mother’s funeral, so she experienced none of that feeling the adults called “closure.” In fact, such a definitive

term offended her, because she could not imagine how a sixteen-year old could ever get over the loss of a mother. Lying in the hospital bed was nightmarish, because the trauma made it impossible for her to formulate pictures in her mind of either a healthy, vibrant mother prior to the accident, or a peaceful mother lying in a casket waiting to be carried to “that better place,” as visitors described it. She felt completely lost in the middle, and grief over her brother had not even begun.

Valerie’s father, Todd Banks, had cried his own share of tears, but he had already begun to replace his grief with an overwhelming anxiety about how he could possibly go back to work and also care for his daughter—alone. The doctors assured him that Valerie, too, would eventually move beyond her grief, but Todd was not hopeful as he prepared to take her home from the hospital. He remembered that when he first gave her the details of the funerals, she cried. When he explained that her personal prognosis was excellent, she cried. When he merely walked in the room, she cried. When he peeked into the room at night while she tried to go to sleep, she lay there crying.

All the nurses’ reports identified Valerie’s state as melancholic, and each nurse confidently offered a unique solution for cheering her up. These nurses created a pathway of love and laughter for Valerie in the hospital lobby as Todd pushed his daughter’s wheelchair to the car on her dismissal day. He stroked her curly blonde hair as nurses provided rehearsed smiles and laughter. They gave her balloons and stuffed animals. But each moment of personal contact made her crying more intense.

At home, Valerie’s tears would subside briefly when she became interested in a mindless television program or a simple coffee-table book. Nevertheless, without fail, something in the program or book soon would set her off again. Neighborhood friends

were gracious to come over when she was well enough to entertain them, but invariably someone would say something that upset Valerie's fragile emotions. Listening from another room, Todd could tell that the young neighbors were growing more uncomfortable in Valerie's presence, and their parents eventually would have to bribe or force them to come to the Banks home, if they came at all.

Todd knew he soon had to return to work full-time, even though lawyers assured him that he would certainly receive a large monetary settlement from the drunk driver's insurance company. Todd had finished college twenty years earlier, and he had spent that time buying, rehabilitating, and expanding small businesses that others had driven to failure in Pleasant Valley and surrounding towns. He loved to succeed at such risky ventures, but he also recognized his inability to sustain interest after a failing business became prosperous. This was a major weakness. He would invariably get bored, sell the business, and then move on to another project, often before the peak time for selling. Nevertheless, his businesses, even as short as he kept them, provided a good income for his family, and his various division managers happily filled the void while he was home with his daughter. But he needed to get back to work for his sanity's sake, and he needed to have the perception that he was providing well for his family. Yes, he knew a huge insurance settlement was coming, but he could not wait for it. He believed the pressures of work would help take his mind off pressures at home, but at the same time, he realized that treatment for Valerie might take a long time, making his work life very different. She was his daughter, not a project, and he was committed for the long haul. But for now, he recognized that she would soon have to go back to school, where adolescent

pressures might provide a diversion similar to his work pressures. Maybe school could pull his daughter out of her sadness.

Teachers reported that Valerie cried frequently during the day, and it was rare for her to go more than three hours without sobbing. Todd knew that teachers could not walk on eggshells forever, and fellow eleventh-graders could not indefinitely temper all their remarks around Valerie. Still, everyone made a valiant effort to make Valerie happy. Students learned to be careful about mentioning parents or siblings, and they avoided questions about current events they might have seen on television. Conversations about automobiles or drunk-driving were off limits. Teachers and students were sensitive about leaving Valerie alone in the hall or in a classroom, because just a few minutes of solitude would generate loud, lengthy weeping.

Students were willing to tolerate Valerie's condition, at least for a while, because she had always been a popular student, and the summer before her accident had been her time for true "blossoming." She was a smart student, especially in literature and art, and she had generously offered writing help to several young jocks who were more interested in football statistics than the ability to write a complete sentence. She had been looking already at several fine liberal arts colleges, but she also maintained the large state universities as possibilities because they were nearer to home. She was a pretty teenager, and she had already begun to contemplate ways to convert her naturally curly hair into a more mature style. She was fair-skinned and had fewer complexion problems than most fellow students, and her mother had always helped her find the most stylish clothes to complement her tall and slim figure.

The nearly constant flow of tears, however, changed Valerie's fair cheeks to a puffy clay color, and crimson splotches appeared randomly on her neck and arms. She abandoned attempts to apply eye make-up, and the light green irises in her eyes dulled against a backdrop of tiny broken blood vessels. Teenagers began to contemplate the large commitment of time and caution required to maintain a friendship with Valerie, and some frustrated students lost their patience and resorted to name-calling—"Crybaby" was the favorite. Tenderness had no impact, and neither did meanness—Valerie continued to live with her endless grieving, showing no signs of improvement.

Todd ultimately had to remove her from school. This way, people could blame Valerie's inevitable loss of friends on him instead of her. He didn't know if the withdrawal was temporary or permanent, but he knew his daughter needed a change of environment. After much interviewing and agonizing over its necessity, he hired a former school teacher, Jill Hopson, to start a homeschooling program for Valerie. The new teacher was a kind, attractive, thirty-two-year old widow, who, like Todd, was trying to find her way in life after the premature death of a spouse. Todd worried about upsetting his fragile daughter's world by providing a teacher who had her own grief issues, but Mrs. Hopson was highly qualified as both a teacher and a mentor for Valerie.

Physiological and psychological examinations continued for Valerie as she adjusted to daily life away from a traditional school. Although the doctors admitted that they had never treated such an intense and lengthy melancholy, they still predicted they could help Valerie in due time. So far, they could not. Some suggested that Valerie's problem stemmed from a desire for attention, or a subconscious anger at her father, but visits to the stable, loving home quickly proved them wrong. Others suggested an allergy

problem, but intensive cleaning of every square inch of the house, including the attic and basement, had no positive impact. Tranquilizers only increased the crying.

Amphetamines also increased the intensity and frequency of the tearful times, and they made her jumpy during the dry moments. Hypnosis was ineffective, and Todd forbade treatments such as shock therapy because he feared they might make his daughter worse.

The most perplexing psychological observation was that Valerie, between crying spells, could briefly get her mind off her sadness and even laugh—often uproariously. Jokes worked, pranks worked, and short comical video clips worked, but anything that triggered a memory of her mother or brother—even a pleasant memory—set the child off. She could be in the middle of a boisterous laugh and then, in an instant, burst into sobbing. Todd and Mrs. Hopson were perplexed—they could never predict when the sad fountains would begin.

Valerie herself expressed embarrassment and shame about her unusual problem, and she desperately wanted to move on with her life. But she could not simply will herself to stop crying. And tears provided no release for her—she had nothing comparable to what others called “a good cry.” Every crying spell would eventually taper off when tear ducts dried up and she turned her attention to happier thoughts, but in the back of her mind, she always wondered how many hours or minutes would pass before the next spell overwhelmed her.

She was sorry for the predicament this put her father in, and she honestly yearned for the ability to “move on” like he did. Consequently, when she noticed a budding interest between her father and the homeschooling teacher, Valerie made a sincere effort to respect and be nice to her father’s new lady friend. Jill, as they now called Mrs.

Hopson, made Valerie cry, of course, but the grieving teenager knew her father needed companionship. He had grown visibly older since the accident, and their more frequent hugs made her notice the first strands of grey in his thick brown hair. He was thinner, but he maintained his muscular build by exercising frequently in their make-shift gym above the garage. Valerie noticed that he had placed a box of tissues next to the treadmill, and she realized that they were for him and not for her, since she was in no shape to exercise yet. He still cried, too, and she hoped he could find some happiness with Jill.

In order to keep her sobbing private, Valerie quickly left the room whenever her father's or Jill's presence provoked sad memories. Todd and Jill knew that Valerie was leaving the room to cry, but they were never sure if they should run after her or not. Jill understood how the simplest things could trigger tears, because she had just gone through mourning herself. But she had never seen anything like Valerie's never-ending grief, and she fervently sought to learn more about it. She read books about depression, but Valerie's overall demeanor did not fit the textbook descriptions of that disease. She studied books on bipolar disorder, but doctors were somehow able to rule out that affliction as well. Valerie indeed seemed to have excessive highs and lows, with little ground in the middle, but Jill could find in the girl none of the other psychiatric symptoms described in the scholarly books. The more Jill studied, the more frustrated she grew. But as her frustration grew, so did her resolve to help the young girl. But that was not all. Coinciding with her growing resolve was a growing affection for Todd's daughter...and for Todd himself. She could not predict her future with Todd, but as Valerie's teacher, she was prepared to make whatever sacrifices were necessary for the helpless child.

Todd, meanwhile, developed fitful anxieties about his own psychological state. He knew the saintly attitude that others saw in him was not as polished as everyone thought, and he struggled mightily with the powerful urge to take Valerie by the shoulders, shake her vigorously, and scream that she had to GET OVER IT—HE COULDN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE. But his calm sense of reason always prevailed. Maybe his budding relationship with Jill helped calm him, or maybe his deep abiding love for Valerie kept him in check, but he always resisted the temptation to administer “tough love,” as his well-meaning pastor called it. He suffered his deepest frustrations in solitude, and he confessed his temptations to no one but Jill.

Only a few people attended Todd's wedding with Jill, perhaps because invitees feared that a new stepmother could push Valerie over the edge. But Todd and Jill had discussed the potential marriage extensively with his daughter, and Valerie gave her enthusiastic approval during an “up” moment. Nevertheless, the now-eighteen-year-old Valerie cried non-stop through the procession, the vows, the kiss, and the cake. The honeymoon was a short one, only two nights, because family members all developed reasons for not keeping Valerie. But Todd did not blame them. He was anxious to get back home and establish some semblance of a routine with the newly enlarged family.

Over the two years, the newlyweds continued searching for ways to help the ever-sad Valerie. They tried travelling with her outside the country, but Valerie always found something new to cry about—tearful departures of loved ones at airports, homeless people on city streets, hungry animals scrounging for food in alleys, monuments to fallen soldiers in some war. They strategically changed their approach and visited rollicking

amusement parks in the United States, but Valerie was saddened by the petting zoos, the fretful children, and even the realization that so many people cannot afford to travel like they could. Granted, she found the park rides to be exhilarating and joyful, but reality always returned when the roller coaster lunged from its highest climactic point to deposit its laughing riders near the long lines of people waiting to go next. Valerie just could not win, her father thought—he could find nothing that was sorrow-free for her.

But Todd did not give up. Valerie's lead psychologist in Philadelphia, tacitly admitting defeat, recommended a new psychologist in New York City, Dr. Arnold Fleming, who had just published a scholarly book on grief management. Although the new doctor's studies had not dealt with any cases of Valerie's duration, Todd believed it was worthwhile to make contact. Dr. Fleming's nurses all seemed to doubt Valerie's story, because they had never seen any cases of such prolonged crying, but they ultimately agreed to set up a telephone interview between the skeptical doctor and the patient.

When Dr. Fleming talked with Valerie, he was actually quite amazed by her symptoms, because they did not correspond to any of his research conclusions. He did not doubt the sincerity of the multiple crying spells that occurred during the telephone discussion, and he marveled at her acute awareness of her own state. The doctor eventually turned his attention to Todd's story, and Jill's story, because he guessed that some close external factors in Valerie's environment must be the source of her problems. Consequently, after one meeting with Valerie and two meetings with Todd and Jill in New York, the doctor agreed to travel to the Banks home and witness first hand the type of environment that caused Valerie so much anguish. Dr. Fleming hoped to find new

research material, and Todd hoped to find a cure. Todd knew the consultations with this doctor would be costly, experimental, and uninsured, but the insurance settlements from the car accident had been finalized and he was now a very wealthy man. He was anxious to do whatever it took to help his daughter.

Dr. Fleming, like all the previous doctors, was surprised to find a stable and love-filled environment in the Banks home. The Banks lived in a modest country farmhouse, and although its furnishings were clean and comfortable, there was no evidence of wealth or conspicuous consumption that could spoil a child. Two large dogs and one fat cat lived in the large barn behind the house, and they were welcomed inside whenever they desired petting. Valerie's room was decorated like a typical teenager's, although the doctor noticed tissue boxes on virtually every tabletop in every corner of the room. Decorative trash cans were also abundant in the room, and their large amounts of white tissue paper made them look like beer mugs overflowing with foam. Valerie's brother's room had remained exactly as it was when he was killed, but no one ever entered it.

Dr. Fleming was also pleased to observe the carefully controlled conversations in the home, focusing on topics that had made Valerie laugh in the past. Politics and religion were taboo subjects, and the doctor added economics, history and all current events to the forbidden list. Banishment of the internet, a source for all these forbidden topics, created the most anguish in Valerie, but she understood and was willing to trust the doctor and try anything. Todd also placed a great deal of trust in the doctor, who looked twenty-five but had to be at least forty-five based on all the degrees, certificates, commissions, and fellowships displayed on his office wall. Todd was somewhat intimidated by the doctor's impressive education and experience, but the young published

physician fit right into the Banks' home routine, and he participated in all conversations with ease and comfort.

After the doctor observed Valerie's home life for three days, he met with her parents privately and presented his proposed treatment plan. His first recommendation was an experimental new drug that was undergoing tests in bipolar patients, although he acknowledged that Valerie had never been diagnosed definitively with that disorder. The drug seemed to work in a different part of the brain than other bipolar drugs, and he believed it was worth a try. His second recommendation was not only to remove external grief triggers from Valerie's life, but to remove Valerie from the external triggers. He suggested a new home, a new city, and complete removal from her old life. "This is radical, I know," the doctor said, "but maybe it won't be required for long. We just need to break Valerie's cycle of crying. If we can get it stopped for a few days, and then maybe a few weeks, then perhaps she can be cured."

Todd surprised the doctor by looking at Jill intensely and nodding his head, as though they had already contemplated such a solution. "We'll try it," he announced. "You see, I recently purchased a small vacation cottage on an island in the southern Caribbean, near Grenada. I bought it as an investment, realizing we may never personally go there. The place is only accessible by boat, and very few of the locals speak English. We can move the three of us there for a long vacation, now that Valerie has graduated from high school, and we'll control her environment completely."

"Careful—you can't control it completely," said Dr. Fleming. "But you can come closer than you can here, in Pleasant Valley. If you'll do your part, I'll do mine—this

new experimental drug can hopefully stabilize the mood without tranquilizing the patient. The downs will be leveled out.”

“What about the ups?” Todd asked.

“The ups might be sacrificed as well,” Dr. Fleming said, “but that is why the drug is experimental. It has been proven safe in previous test cases, but all patients are different and there is some risk...”

“We are willing to try anything,” Jill interjected. “I believe Valerie is ready, too. She desperately wants to stop frightening people and to develop some lasting friendships.”

“But don’t you see,” the doctor continued, “that her friends may be part of the problem?”

“Teenagers can be cruel, we know that. We know about the names that some mean students call Valerie. But we’ll face that when the time comes,” Todd concluded with a sigh of relief. “I believe Valerie is ready for the treatment.”

Dr. Fleming looked over his horn-rimmed glasses at the two of them, pinched his lips together and rubbed his fingers across his chin. He was surprised by the eager acceptance of such a radical plan, but he reasoned that the Banks had run out of options. “Then let’s get started,” he said, as he scribbled out a prescription and handed it to the parents. “You’ll have to wait a few days to get this filled, since it is an experimental drug. Red tape is always required, so be prepared to answer lots of questions.”

Within two weeks, Todd decided to leave his businesses behind and step out in faith. Valerie, Todd and Jill loaded their car, pulled away from their front doorstep, and

headed to the airport. Two changes of planes would be required, and the final leg of the journey would be by boat. They only carried enough clothes and toiletries for the trip, because they planned for a grand shopping excursion upon arrival. They would purchase new clothes, new furniture, new appliances, and even new plants for the yard. They bought new paint for the house, several different colors, and they would schedule family projects to complete the work. Valerie and Jill had never visited the vacation home, but they still wanted everything to be completely fresh.

They also carried a six-month supply of the new drug, a tiny red pill that was to be taken twice a day at first and then increased to three times a day. Todd and Jill followed Dr. Fleming's instructions to the letter. They were happy to receive the pills by mail a few days before they travelled so they could determine Valerie's tolerance. She seemed to do just fine.

"Can't we have music?" Valerie asked, after her new home was almost completely furnished. She was finally able to sit down and relax after an exhausting day of furniture arranging.

"Remember, honey, that music would often drag you down in our old home," Jill responded. "Let's try it with just the open windows and ocean breezes for a while, and then maybe we can discover some new kinds of music we've never heard before."

"But I remember the music, and I can carry it in my head," Valerie retorted too quickly, because she realized the music prohibition was all part of the plan. Her lips quivered a bit and a few tears slid from her eyes, but she got herself under control by focusing her attention once again on the new furnishing and decorations. "That's OK,"

she said. “I know you want me to listen to music that has no lyrics, but I don’t think I can ever learn to handle classical music, or elevator music. Maybe we can learn to like some of that wild music I hear coming from the beach bars.”

Jill laughed and quickly changed the subject, noticing that Valerie did not laugh or even smile at her own humor, if the remark was indeed intended to be funny. Maybe she will require some time to get used to the new medicine, Jill thought as she asked Valerie to help place and straighten their new artwork. All of the paintings by local artists were bright, colorful, and abstract, and various art objects covered the tables where photographs might have appeared in a typical home. Valerie helped choose all the accessories, resulting in a teenage mixture of elegant sculptures and tacky beach curios. It did not feel like home, but Valerie did not expect it to. She understood the experiment.

Large panoramic windows covered walls where televisions could have been placed, and magazine racks were noticeably missing. Bookshelves contained dried flowers and more pieces of art. The only written literature in the entire house advertised upcoming “how to” classes—how to scuba dive, how to surf, how to fish, how to play golf, how to cook Caribbean food—how to do just about everything on a secluded island. Nevertheless, Valerie understood that the point of all the planned activities was to keep her busy and teach her “how *not* to” instead of “how *to*.” She settled in her bed that night, totally exhausted, and she cried herself to sleep.

Todd wasted no time the next day cranking up all the activities. The schedule consumed from 8:00am until 5:00pm, and between classes, he unleashed streams of happy stories, obviously planned in advance for gaps in conversation. Idle time for reflection could not be allowed, and even Jill was exhausted to the point of tears by 5:00.

Everyone had enjoyed the day, but Valerie did not seem as animated as she was in the past during her non-tearful moments. And during the day, Valerie's crying spells seemed as numerous as in the old world, but they were not as lengthy. In fact, she seemed almost businesslike in the retrieval of her facial tissue, the mechanical wiping of her eyes, the checking of her face in the compact mirror, and the acknowledgement of whatever subject someone had changed to for her benefit. Jill again hoped that the medicine would begin to take effect soon.

The Banks welcomed guests over to see their new home, but Valerie could tell that everyone was carefully preselected and coached. Families never brought children along, in fear that they would act bored upon discovering no televisions or video games. Teenagers presented a difficult problem for Todd and Jill because of unpredictability, but they found some young people who were willing to meet Valerie and engage in guarded conversation. Even some young men welcomed the opportunity to meet her, especially since her normally puffy face had begun to brighten up with the disguising effects of a sun tan, and the glow made her look even prettier than before. The "conversations," however, were more like political talk shows in which a moderator asks questions and the politician answers with a rehearsed statement totally unrelated to the question just asked. No potential suitors could deviate from the pre-planned script, and even Valerie's well-meaning father realized how frustrating this would be for the eye-rolling Valerie. He made a mental note to limit all teenage guests in the future to superficial young girls, and he would cautiously phase in young men later, when Valerie was much, much better.

After about six weeks in their new home, Jill and Todd felt every day like they were performing in a seventeen-hour-long play, and the mental and emotional energy

required for such an uninterrupted performance began to take its toll. But they loved each other deeply, and their anticipated reward finally began to materialize when Valerie started gaining more control, little by little, over her crying spells. The duration had already diminished, and now the frequency of tearful episodes began to slow down as well. Todd and Jill just had to keep going, despite the daily exhaustion and the overwhelming need for some down-time and even solitude. Once Valerie was cured, they thought, they could return to their normal lives.

Dr. Fleming required weekly reports of Valerie's progress, but he would not talk with her by telephone because he considered himself a voice from her past. Based on Todd's reports of Valerie's listlessness, however, the doctor adjusted her drugs regularly to see if the bright side of the young girl could be brought back. Furthermore, he made recommendations on additional stimuli that should be removed from Valerie's life, based on Todd's and Jill's meticulous notes. Together, they would hit the right combination to unlock the old Valerie—they just had to be diligent and patient.

Todd and Jill might have needed inspiration to develop patience, but Valerie seemed to have an abundance of it. She had no trouble sitting on the porch swing, staring at passersby and waving at them with no affection or change in facial expression. She spent more time there as her crying diminished, and the separation allowed her parents to savor some much-needed time for themselves. More time was available, because Valerie had dropped some of her "how-to" activities, with her father's blessing. She simply had no interest in improving her skills, and she and her instructors became bored. Her surfing lessons, for example, proved to be maddening for her eager young instructors. In the first place, these overly-tanned, bleached-blond surfing experts were not allowed to converse

with the attractive Valerie beyond the fundamental instructions required to teach her how to surf. But more annoying was the fact that Valerie would fall off the surfboard, slowly pull herself up out of the water and climb back aboard, ready to go again but making no effort to improve or eliminate errors. All the other students in Valerie's original class had moved on to more advanced instruction, but Valerie was content to surf and fall, surf and fall, day after day, with no desire to get better. The young instructors suggested to Todd that Valerie should take up something less demanding. "I think I know how to take care of my daughter," the tired and frustrated father said, with a mixture of firmness and kindness. He turned away and headed for home, taking deep breaths and assuring himself that he was doing the right thing.

One afternoon when Valerie sat on the front porch alone, she noticed a jogger running by who looked very fit, but she concluded he must not run very far because his path took him in front of the Banks home every few minutes. Valerie was curious, but she never acknowledged his presence because she had no interest in striking up a conversation with him. After several afternoons of running along the same monotonous path, the jogger finally stopped in front of Valerie's house, leaned over and placed his hands on his knees, panting for breath. He was tall and slender, and his clean-shaven, tanned face and short-cropped brown hair made him look more like a vacationing college student than the narcissistic health nuts she often saw running down her street. He looked up at Valerie, obviously hinting for a glass of water. She said nothing, and she made no change in her expression. She did not stare at the handsome jogger, but neither did she avert her eyes. Assuming she had been caught off guard, he vocalized his request and

asked for a glass of water. His panting had almost disappeared, but he still gave an expression of great thirst.

“Water?” she repeated, as if she had not heard correctly.

“No, that’s OK,” he said, standing to his full height. “I’m close to home and I can get some there.”

He paused briefly, as though he expected her to protest and leap up to get him a glass of water. She did not move.

“Hey, aren’t you Valerie Banks?” he asked, shyly.

“Yes, I’m Valerie. How do you know?”

“I’m Larry Harrison,” he said, ignoring her question and stepping out of the street onto the Banks’ sidewalk. Valerie did not move from the swing, and her facial muscles gave away no hint of what she might be thinking. “I live right up the street,” he continued, “or at least I live here for the summer with my parent. I just graduated from college and I’m trying to decide if I should go back to graduate school or start my own business. ”

“Nice to meet you, Larry,” she said. She made no move for the water, but she glanced toward the windows to see if any curtains had been pulled back in the front rooms. She realized this was a wasted glance, because if her father had seen her having a conversation with a non-trained outsider, he would have wasted no time and would have bound out the door immediately to stop the impromptu interaction.

“I just wanted to meet you,” Larry said, “because...because...a lot of people...talk about you and I wanted to see for myself.”

Valerie recognized this as a moment that would typically unleash a waterfall of tears, but her eyes remained dry. Her stomach heaved in light jerks for a moment, and she subconsciously clenched her jaw, but she did not cry. She wanted to hear more, and the young jogger's directness had not bothered her.

Speaking quickly as though he knew he had only a few minutes, Larry continued. "Some jerks on the island call you 'nambania,' which means..."

"Crybaby," she interrupted. "I know."

He continued. "Some people say you're high on drugs all the time. But you don't look like a druggie. And if you were an addict, your parents would be complicit because you are almost always in their presence. And they don't look like druggies, either."

Larry was astonished at his boldness, although at the same time he was too nervous to remember any specific details about what he just said. Had he expressed a desire to get to know her yet? Or had he only insulted her and her family? Whatever he said, he realized that he would not get a do-over.

She remained motionless except to fix a stray strand of hair that had blown into her eye. "I have a psychological condition. I have frequent crying attacks," she said matter-of-factly. "But they are much better since I've moved to the island and stopped fretting so much about sad things."

"Is it true you have no TV?" he asked, taking a few steps up the short sidewalk toward the porch. It was only now that Valerie could get a good look at him. He appeared to be about her age or slightly older, and she believed the old high-school designation of "cute" was inappropriate for him—he seemed to have good looks combined with an air of maturity that was lacking in even the best-looking of her old high

school friends. He wore crimson gym shorts and a grey Princeton t-shirt, and his white socks slumped around his tanned ankles as though the elastic had worn out. His short, straight hair was light brown, apparently trained to stay off his forehead by frequent strokes with his left hand. When he noticed her looking at his shirt, he crossed his arms over the college name and took another step closer.

“No TV,” she admitted. “You should try it. It’ll make your life so much better.”

“Better if I don’t know anything?” he replied. He was instantly angry with himself for such an impulsive remark. Did it sound like he was accusing her of not knowing anything? This was a conversation at a beach house, not a witty debate in a Princeton dorm room.

Before Valerie could contemplate an answer, her step-mother emerged briskly from the front door, making Valerie jump and causing Larry to slide a couple of steps backwards. She might have been watching for a while, Valerie thought, although it was unlikely that Jill had wasted any time when she saw Valerie talking with a stranger.

“Hello, I’m Jill Banks,” she said, glancing for a second at the young jogger and then turning to Valerie. “Valerie needs to come inside now,” she softly continued without waiting for Larry to introduce himself. Valerie immediately got up from the swing and walked toward Jill, who put her arm around the girl’s waist and ushered her into the house. Larry never had a chance to say a word, and Valerie did not look back. Still standing on the front steps, he put his hands on his hips and slowly turned around with a puzzled look. Maybe the gossipers were partially correct. He could not explain it, especially since he had endured his share of high-maintenance girl-friends, but Valerie

was different. He felt compelled to come back, to learn more about this puzzle. He thought about it when he got home, long into the night.

Larry continued to jog by the Banks house daily, but Valerie was rarely on the porch any more. When she was there, Jill was usually with her in the porch swing. They would both wave, and Valerie would show no evidence of wishing her step-mother was somewhere else. Some days her father would also be on the porch, but he would not wave. One morning, as Larry turned down Valerie's street, he noticed that she was about to take her place in the porch swing with a large pad of paper and a glass of iced tea. She was alone. She carefully placed her glass on the window ledge next to the swing, and Larry suspected she had not yet spied him. He stopped abruptly and turned to run back out of view, where he impulsively decided to take off his shirt before he ran in front of the solitary Valerie. He had not worked on his buff summer chest and abs for nothing, he thought, and he might as well show them off. He wadded his sweaty t-shirt into a ball and carried it in his left hand as he ran back into Valerie's line of vision. He saw that she was drawing something on the pad, obviously some type of art work as evidenced by the broad fluid strokes on the paper. He immediately waved when he saw her look up. Disappointingly, she only waved back with a single motion and then picked up her pencil to continue drawing. She adjusted her lips briefly into the form of a smile, but she showed no great interest in his physique or his presence. Nor did she seem worried that someone might burst out the front door and retrieve her. She did not behave like other girls, he thought, and that made him all the more embarrassed about their earlier conversation and his dumb shirt removal. He stood for a few seconds silently, but she did

not look back up. He wiped his forehead with his bare arm, as though he still had on a shirt, and he awkwardly continued on his way.

Larry never ran into Valerie at any grocery stores in town, because she was forbidden to see any newspapers or magazines that might lurk nearby on a rack. She could not go to the post office, he had heard, because of the “wanted” posters. Summer concerts and theatre were also off limits, because a sad song might be performed. He was told that she once attended a ballet, which was a big mistake because she had to be ushered out in tears after about ten minutes. Even museums and art galleries were off limits, but apparently Valerie’s parents had agreed that art was acceptable as long as Valerie created it herself. Larry used this knowledge to guess that Valerie most certainly worked on her art at home, probably with a private tutor, because her guardians would surely want to protect her from other artists’ potentially emotional work. But he was pleasantly surprised one afternoon when he saw her parents drop her off at an art studio about three blocks down the street from her home. He surmised that she had to be driven this short distance to avoid contact with other neighbors, particularly joggers.

Larry observed that Valerie attended the art classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons. After two weeks of making sure the pattern was consistent, he decided to drop in on the aspiring young artist. He entered the old frame and weathered house that had recently been converted into an art studio, but he found the front room populated only by two large women in their 60’s and a short dumpy man of indeterminate age. Both women had jet black hair and deeply tanned skin that had been wrinkled much longer than it had been exposed to the sun. The male student’s age was difficult to discern—his hair was an obvious toupee from a twenty-year old donor, but his skin had

the deceptively wrinkled look that could have come from thirty years on a farm or six months on a beach. Larry moved toward several doors that offered passageways to back rooms of the house, but he was stopped short by a young woman who poked her head out of one of the doors and asked if she could help him. This woman had long orange hair pinned up in various haphazard designs on her head, but she had no signs of make-up or excessive tanning. Larry assumed correctly that she was the art teacher.

“I’m looking for Valerie Banks,” he said, sheepishly.

The art teacher let out a big smile, tilted her head dramatically to the side, and slowly swept her hand through the air to direct the hunky young athlete into a private studio. Valerie was painting, but she looked up from her work toward Larry and said “hello...,” with an awkward pause that suggested she had forgotten his name.

“Hi, Valerie, I’m Larry, and we met when I stopped by your house for water one afternoon,” he said, nervously.

The grinning teacher hurriedly exited the room, offering no indication that she cared about leaving Valerie alone with the young man, even though she knew it violated an agreement with the parents. Looking up at Larry, Valerie said, “Of course I remember you. How are you doing?” Her question took the tone of a debutante at a fancy social event, polite but indicating no desire for an answer.

“I like your painting,” he lied, as he looked at a large canvas full of realistic but faceless children on the beach. The colors were correct, although subdued, and the realism was actually quite good, but the abstract nature of the faces was disconcerting. He attributed it to the drugs.

“Valerie, I’d really like to get to know you better, but I never can catch you alone, you know, where we can actually talk.” He pulled up a chair next to the young artist and leaned toward her as he talked. “Could we get together one day, just the two of us?”

“We can talk right here,” she offered, with no change in expression. Her face was not puffy from crying.

He glanced again at her painting and boldly suggested that her sky could possibly be a brighter shade of blue.

“Oh, I know,” she said. “My teacher suggests the same thing, wanting me to paint everything with bright colors. But the brightness requires some extra steps to mix the various paint tubes. I’m a little lazy, I guess.”

“Do you remember a time that you loved bright colors?” he interjected.

“Excuse me, but...what?” she asked, looking up at Larry and genuinely pondering a question she had never been asked. Larry expected the Valerie Police to come running into the room immediately, but nothing happened except for the girl laying down her paint brush and looking more directly into Larry’s eyes.

He continued. “Do you remember laughing, and having fun, and getting...say...excited about things? Any things?” He placed too much emphasis on the word “any,” he guessed, and he was worried he might have upset her.

“I do remember laughing more,” she responded, “but that was back when I cried almost all the time. Now things are more...level...if you can call it that. It’s better now, because the medicine has really helped me conquer my emotions. You have to understand that it was very embarrassing to burst into tears at weird moments. I had no control over it. But I guess you’ve heard all this already, from your friends who ‘talk.’”

“Maybe,” he admitted, “but I see a person inside you that is full of life. I’d like to meet her.”

“Well, sorry, but this is the real me,” she replied, expressionless. She turned back to her work.

“Really?” he said, taking the free hand that was not still clutching the end of the paintbrush. He noticed a slight but sudden widening of her eyes. Her cheeks turned a tan shade of red—not the bright red he might have wanted but a more generic red, like the basic shades on the paint palette between them. Her bottom lip seemed to enlarge slightly, and it began to quiver almost imperceptibly.

He wanted to shock her and lean farther in to plant a light peck on her cheek, but the art teacher interrupted them. She frowned and reported that Valerie’s parents were driving up. Valerie slowly responded by placing her art accessories into a metal box that had been lying nearby on the floor. She stood up and said, “Goodbye, Larry. Please come back any time you like.” The art teacher dropped her jaw in an exaggerated manner representing shock. She winked at Larry, the potential young suitor for the troubled young girl.

“But could we chat sometime without your medicine?” he said quickly, without noticing the complicit behavior of the teacher. “Could you let the pills go for a few days, just as an experiment?” He had not planned to ask such a bold question this early, especially in front of the teacher, but he realized he might not get another chance.

Valerie walked out of the back room toward the front door, between the older students who acted more interested in their animated conversation than their artwork or their strange fellow student. She did not look back, but when she opened the door, she

stopped for a second as she touched the screen. Her parents were waiting in the car outside, but Larry was certain that she said the word “maybe” as she continued on out to the front sidewalk. Larry was unsure if he should be frightened or overjoyed, but he knew he would be back to the art studio in two days. He turned to the art teacher, who introduced herself as Maggie and told him he was welcome to visit any time. He left with his heart beating so rapidly that he could see his pulse jumping in rhythm as he took hold of the door knob, and his complete exhaustion made him realize the racing had occurred consistently since he had first set foot in the art house. He wondered what was next, as he slowly walked down a side street toward his home. Did he want to risk this? Did he really want to invest the effort that would be required? He reached his home in about ten minutes and noticed that his heart had not slowed.

Larry’s second visit to the art class was much like the first. He brimmed with enthusiasm, especially since Valerie seemed to have exerted more effort in making her naturally lovely appearance even more beautiful. Her blonde curls were more combed, although she had pinned them back at various points around her head. Earrings dangled from her ears, and he had not noticed her wearing jewelry before. She even wore a little lipstick, providing a contrasting color on her face. Her clothing, although ragged since this was an art class, after all, seemed brighter and better-fitting. Had she done this for him? Or was she also attending a “how-to” class on grooming and fashion?

Larry could hardly contain his excitement, but his thrill was short-lived when a dull conversation about art commenced, led by Valerie. Larry had skimmed some coffee table art books at his house so he could at least learn some art lingo and some famous

artists, but he had little interest in this subject. He tried to steer the conversation to more personal issues, but Valerie met the attempts either with blank stares or with well-rehearsed subject-changing techniques. Larry's frustration made him fearful that a deeper relationship with the girl might be impossible, and he wondered if he had made a mistake. Was Valerie just a project for him? A project to "fix" her, to remold her into the image and the personality he had created in his mind? Or was there more to it, perhaps even love? Larry had found summer "loves" before on the island, but he quickly forgot them when he headed back to school. But Valerie was somehow different. Yes, the drugs and the parental controls had changed her, but something underneath was so tender and honest. He wanted to find it, if he could.

When the time came for Valerie's parents to arrive, he decided to stuff a handwritten note in her art supply bag. He had spent hours composing the note and agonizing about giving it to her, and he decided in advance that he would take the risk only if she showed some signs of interest in him. She had not, except for the possibly-imagined upgrade in appearance, but he impulsively threw the note in her bag anyway.

"Would you read this privately when you get home?" he asked, worried that his voice sounded too nervous.

"Sure," she said, in a tone much like she would give to a Jehovah's Witness who handed her a pamphlet at the door and asked if she would study it.

Valerie walked out the door without hesitating or looking back. The other students stopped talking for about thirty seconds as they watched out the window, and then they all started talking at once, loudly and authoritatively offering their advice to Larry.

“You must tell her to stop taking those pills,” the toupeed man said in a high-pitched whine that rose above the other noise.

“Yes, that’s the problem,” concluded one of the ladies, who obviously obtained her charcoal hair frequently and professionally from a high-quality bottle, because she showed no grey roots.

Larry flushed with embarrassment, because he did not want to share his struggle with strangers. But then, perceiving his reluctance to talk, Maggie jumped in with her own psychological opinion. “Honey, you just can’t imagine all the instructions we were given by her parents,” she said breathlessly in an old southern accent she had tried for many years to eliminate. “What to say, what not to say, how it would be best if she stayed in a separate room.” She walked over, placed her hand on Larry’s shoulder, and looked directly into his eyes. “Cryin’ is bad, but it’s a part of life. I’d rather cry a lot and mix in some moments of fun now and then. It’s better to cry...”

“...than to be ‘level’ all the time,” the other black-haired lady interrupted, glancing around the room for affirmation. “Everybody cries,” she murmured.

Larry realized they had simply verbalized what he had fretted over for hours in his note to Valerie. But his note had no philosophy, no psychology, and no preaching. He wanted her to know that he was only interested in getting to know her better, and the depth of their relationship might improve if she could try life for a few days without the drugs. If the crying returned in an unmanageable way, he would be the first one to support her continued use of the pills.

Larry thanked Maggie as the art students continued their analysis of the problem. As he turned toward the door to leave, Maggie continued. “I’ve seen her drugs,” she

said. “She started crying one afternoon when she overheard these other guys talking about their ex-husbands and ex-wives. They’re not supposed to talk like that, but my job is to teach art, not to patrol student conversations. But anyway, Valerie immediately retrieved a red pill from her box the moment she started crying. Within five minutes she stopped wailing, but her interest in her artwork was also gone. She simply sat on the porch and waited for her parents to pick her up. It was the most pitiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Larry started to respond, but he could not. “Crying is normal,” said one of the ladies. “She seems so...so imprisoned. She’s so remote sometimes that she makes *us* want to cry. Somebody needs to help her.” She stared at Larry and raised her eyebrows at him. The other students followed suit.

Larry ignored them all and turned to walk out the door. The students frowned and tentatively resumed their painting, but Larry could sense their stares as he left the art studio and turned down the street toward his house. “Imprisoned,” he thought, was an interesting choice of words.

When he saw the message light blinking on his answering machine, he expected a warning from Valerie’s parents. He was wrong. He had a message, all right, but it was from Valerie.

“Hello, this is Valerie,” the message began, as though Larry would not recognize her voice. “I *would* like to get to know you better. But I can’t give up the pills. I tried it before and my parents figured it out immediately. Would you consider coming to talk with them?”

The message concluded with no “goodbye,” only a beep. He replayed it twice. Her phone number displayed in his caller I.D., and he knew he must call her right away before he over-analyzed his potential response. He therefore picked up the receiver and immediately called Valerie’s number. To his surprise, a kind and respectful male voice answered after one ring.

“This is Todd Banks. Could I help you?” The voice almost sounded like an answering machine greeting, but after a brief pause Larry realized it was the real thing.

“This is Larry Harrison,” he gulped, “and I’d like to visit with you. I’d like to talk to you about spending some time with Valerie, getting to know her a little better.”

After a long pause, Todd began a speech. He had obviously given the speech before, or he had practiced it repeatedly, because it seemed very polished to Larry. Todd spoke quietly but firmly about Valerie’s condition, and how something had clicked in her after her mother’s death that she could not turn off. He spoke of her endless crying, and how they’d tried everything to get her to stop. He gave an inventory of all the treatments she had endured, but he had not found any success until he totally removed everything sad from her life. He and his wife had sacrificed everything to place Valerie in a controlled environment that would include only happy things. He knew that people talked about Valerie and her “drugs,” and the islanders probably saw him and Jill as evil guardians who wanted a puppet instead of a daughter. “But we only want what’s best for her,” he finished.

With these words, Todd’s voice cracked, and Larry heard another voice in the background asking who was on the phone. Todd held his hand over the phone and whispered to the other voice, while Larry’s mind raced back over what he had just heard.

Why would Mr. Banks share such details with a stranger? Maybe he does not see me as a stranger, Larry thought. Maybe the speech was not prepared at all, but from the heart, waiting for this day to arrive. Could this be his way of reaching out for help?

“I’m sorry, son,” Todd continued. “But I’ve seen the alternative and it’s not good. I’m afraid Valerie can’t engage in any sort of relationship like you have in mind, because pain will be inevitable.”

Larry wondered how Mr. Banks could know what he had in mind. These final words from Valerie’s father were not rehearsed, he concluded, but the result of a great frustration that he felt the need to share. He was not a controlling ogre, but a loving father. He was only trying to do what was best for his daughter. Maybe he was right. But Larry would not give up. Something inside him told him to keep trying.

Valerie showed up for her next art lesson, but her father stayed and waited on the front porch of the art studio while she painted. Maggie, however, had given Larry permission to enter the house from the back door, but he chose not to run the risk, at least in the beginning. For two lessons he stayed home, trying to figure out if he should attempt a face-to-face conversation with Mr. Banks, or if he should wait for Valerie to make the next move. She had, after all, placed a call to him.

But Larry soon made the defiant decision to sneak in the back door and visit with Valerie. She seemed happy to see him, but in a guarded way. Her emotions remained in check, but Larry found himself strangely wishing that she would let her tears flow. He knew that most guys hated to see girls cry, because tears were often manipulative, and tears forced guys to say tender things they weren’t quite ready to say. But he

remembered he was not like most guys, and he wanted honest emotions regardless of where they might lead.

The clandestine art class meetings continued for three weeks, and Valerie's father continued to wait patiently outside on the porch for his soon-to-be 21-year-old daughter. He never attempted to come inside the art studio, according to Maggie. Larry could not stand the secrecy, however, so one afternoon he told Valerie that he planned to walk out the front door and confess everything to her father. Valerie, to Larry's surprise, did not flinch. "Fine," she said. "But that will be the end of our meetings."

Meetings, she called them, thought Larry. In his mind, the relationship had developed into much more, although he occasionally found himself irritated and frustrated that her listlessness did not improve because of her insistence to continue the drugs. Nevertheless, his attraction to her made him very forgiving, and he knew that some catalyst was required to spur some type of forward movement. He decided his only choice would be the conversation with Todd.

The other art students held their breath as Larry hastily walked out onto the porch. Larry introduced himself, but Todd already knew him from the phone conversation and the frequent, transparent jogs in front of the Banks' house. Surprisingly, Todd did not lose his temper about the meetings behind his back, but he calmly stated that Valerie, from that point on, would join the other students in the large front room. Todd would also be present.

"But Mr. Banks, Valerie will soon be twenty-one. Can you guard her like this forever?" Larry asked. "I know you love your daughter and want what's best for her, but I believe I can give her something valuable as well."

Todd was struck by Larry's use of the word "guard," but he held his anger in check. "Young man, you don't know anything about me or what I want for my daughter. Have you seen her crying herself to sleep every night, despite the medicine? Have you seen how embarrassed and ashamed she is that she can't be like other girls? Have you seen her plead with her mother and father for help? Have you?"

Larry opened his mouth to respond, but Todd continued. "Mr. Harrison, I know all about you. From all reports, you are a fine young man. You were a top student and you come from a well-respected family. I believe you are truly interested in my daughter for her welfare and not for some intellectual or sexual contest. But I also know my daughter very well, better than you will ever know her, and I believe I know what is best for her."

Larry wanted to say that Valerie was no longer a "girl," as Mr. Banks called her, but an attractive young woman. But he didn't. He lowered his head not in shame, but in deference to Mr. Banks' role as Valerie's father. Larry would have no impact. His relationship with Valerie was now truly over.

Despite the finality of the dreadful meeting, Larry stared at the ceiling all night and thought about what was really best for Valerie, and with every new count of the ceiling tiles he grew more and more emboldened. She can cry in his arms as well as she can cry alone in her room, he thought, but he could not think of a way to win over Mr. Banks. Fortunately, however, Larry would not have to make the next move. Maggie the artist would paint the next stroke.

After another week, Maggie startled Larry with a phone call at his home. He did not know how she got his number. "I've arranged for Valerie to meet with you on her

front porch tomorrow morning at 10:00,” she said. “Her parents will be on the other side of the island all morning, and I volunteered to stay with Valerie while they’re gone. You really must come. I think you’ll be surprised. She stopped taking her medicine a week ago.”

Larry begged for details, but she whispered, “Just be there. Gotta go.” He looked at the receiver and his heart again started racing. What would he say? What would he do if she started crying?

The next morning, Larry arrived on time. Valerie was already waiting on her front porch, this time unmistakably dressed and made up for the occasion. Her curls were neatly brushed but allowed to flow back over her shoulders. Her eyes contained a hint of mascara, probably borrowed from Maggie, and her simple, well-fitting blouse and slacks had been neatly pressed. Maggie ushered them both inside, shut the door behind them without a word, and sat on the porch swing with a sigh of relief. She knew the meeting would be difficult, because Valerie had already been crying that morning.

Not knowing what to say, Larry took Valerie by the hand and led her to the living room sofa. At the point he would have asked her to sit down, he instead turned to her, put his hands on her blushing cheeks, and kissed her. She returned the kiss, instinctively wrapping her arms around his waist and pulling closer to him. He kissed her again, certain that she was feeling something inside her that she had never felt before. But to his dismay, he felt her back heave briefly and then become rigid. She needed to cry, but she was employing every muscle in her body to keep from doing so.

Larry continued the embrace but pulled far enough back to look directly into her eyes. He said, “It’s OK. Let it go.” She then immediately heaved convulsively in his

arms. The tears flowed down her cheeks in all directions, as if their normal path had been temporarily flooded.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so embarrassed,” she wailed. “But I can’t help it.” She held Larry even tighter, sensing that he had no intention of stepping away in disgust. Nor did he run toward the bright red pills on the kitchen counter, which were in complete view. He just held her tightly.

“I don’t know why I’m crying,” she panted, trying to catch her breath. “Maybe it’s because I’ve never felt anything like this before. And I’m afraid you’ll leave me and never return again. Then I’ll *never* stop crying.”

He wiped tears from both of her cheekbones with his thumbs, while he gently pushed her hair behind her ears with his fingers. He tilted her head up toward his, and he kissed her forehead. “You know what?” he said as her crying changed more into a soft dripping instead of jerking sobs. “That might happen. I might leave. I might hurt you.” Her crying continued but did not intensify. “But I also might love you and care for you. I might protect you and make you laugh. We take such a crazy risk when we love someone.”

He paused a moment as she laid her head on his chest. The top part of his white shirt was now wet, and the little bit of mascara from her eyes now made tiny black semi-circles across the fabric of his shirt pocket. He knew at that moment that his love was not a project, but a true willingness to sacrifice himself in order to make Valerie happy. His short relationship with her was not the product of curiosity, but of love. He never dreamed that he would fall in love with such a challenging girl, but the difficulty

somehow made the effort more worthwhile. But what if she could not make the sacrifice for him? What if love was just too much for her, too uncontrollable?

Valerie stopped crying, but she spoke with her head still buried in Larry's chest. "I know there's no simple cure for me," she said. "But if I understand what love is, then maybe I can stop thinking so much about fixing myself. Maybe I can focus my attention on others—maybe one particular other. Maybe I can learn to give, and share, without sucking the life out of every room I walk into."

There's no guarantee," Larry said, lifting her head from his chest and looking directly into her eyes. He wanted to tell her that she didn't suck the life out of every room. He wanted to explain that a free life, full of sadness and joy, is better than a controlled life with no chance of either. But he remained silent, giving her a chance to draw her own conclusions, on her own timetable.

"But my father..." she said, stopping short, but not expecting a reply from Larry.

"Your father may be closer than you think," Larry responded softly. "I believe he is beginning to understand that his anxiety comes not only from your crying, but from your growing up. I suspect all fathers have to deal with that second one, eventually."

The next communication did not come from Valerie but from a slight, tentative throat-clearing on the front porch. It was Maggie, he thought, alerting them that time was up, and her parents would soon be home. He gently pulled the silent Valerie to her feet, and he kissed her once again on the cheek. They spoke no words as they walked to a front window to give Maggie a signal that everything was all right. But as they pulled back the curtain, they could not contain their shock. Maggie was not alone in the swing, but was accompanied by Valerie's parents, one on each side. All three of them looked at

the door, not moving, and Larry felt a sick feeling in his stomach. He dutifully made a movement toward the door to confess, to apologize, to explain. But Valerie's hand softly pulled him away, and she opened the door herself.

"Hello, mom and dad," she said. "Were you out here the whole time?" She did not cry.

Larry sank down into a chair across the porch, as though preparing for a long speech by Mr. Banks. Valerie remained standing. "I guess I'm in big trouble," she said.

"No baby, you're not," said Todd. "We've known all along that we could not protect you forever. But we wanted to try."

Larry froze in disbelief. These were not the words he expected. Did he miss the speech? Had he blacked out, and he was now dreaming the words he wanted to hear? Larry's puzzled thoughts were interrupted as Todd continued. "We realized that protection from sadness was also protection from happiness," Todd said. He motioned for Valerie to join him on the swing, and Maggie jumped up to make a place for her. "In a way," he continued, "we hoped you would never fall in love, because that emotion has created so much pain for so many. And for a woman like you, a woman who has already been severely wounded in life, we thought that love would be too much to bear. We still might be right. But we've got to let go. When you were a little girl, we encouraged you to step out of the baby carriage and walk, understanding you might fall. But I guess we've tried to put you back in it. You're a woman now, sweetheart, and you will need to make your own decisions about your treatment. If you really need more treatment."

Valerie burst into tears. She did not need to explain that they were tears of joy as she pulled her father out of the swing into her arms. "I love you, daddy," she whispered.

Jill cried too, but Larry felt only astonishment and relief. His grin was as wide as the porch swing.

“And don’t think we’re giving you free reign, young man,” Todd continued, perceiving Larry’s sudden elation. Larry decided it was a good time to display humility, but Todd continued in a confirming manner. “It’s not like we were wrong about you—we knew you were a good kid. But we didn’t see how you could possibly know as much about Valerie’s trauma as we did, and we resented your interference.”

Todd took a deep breath, hoping his voice would not crack as he finished. “But in the end, we are grateful for your persistence,” he said.

Larry did not know what to say. He eventually held out his hand to Todd, who took it and shook it vigorously. “And did you really think we didn’t know you were back in the art studio with Valerie?” Todd confessed. “We’re not stupid. But we did not know what to say, what to do. Maybe, just maybe, you would be the source of Valerie’s help. Don’t blow it, you little snot-nosed Ivy Leaguer.”

Was this a joke? Larry wondered. But the wide smile now belonged to Todd, beckoning for Larry to join him. Valerie then showed a hint of her father’s humor by stating dramatically, “Do you want me to move, so you can sit here with my father and hug?” She laughed as she spoke, but no one dared mention the delightful, spontaneous display of emotion. They all feared they might jinx it.

“No,” her father quickly followed. “You’re the one I want,” he said as he squeezed her tighter. Todd was now the one crying, but Valerie remained in peaceful, hopeful control.

Maggie made no attempt to move from her prime viewing location. She simply smiled and pursed her lips, much like at the end of a sad movie she had seen many times and could recite all the tear-jerking dialogue herself. She was determined not to cry, however, and she eventually made herself get up, cross the porch, and walk down the steps toward her car. She paused briefly, and then slowly and carefully followed the narrow sidewalk to the curb, making sure her high heels stayed on the cement and not in the adjacent sand. She could hear animated voices behind her, breathlessly covering past, present, and future in only a few seconds' time. No one called after her, and she did not look back. She did not need to.

Words

A one-act play

Characters

ROBERT CLIFTON	Age 70, a retired gentleman farmer; smart, but not technically savvy like his children.
BEN CLIFTON	Age 45, a young professional, son of ROBERT and Sally.
ANGELA CLIFTON	Age 42, BEN's wife, a young professional.
MELISSA CLIFTON	Age 15, daughter of BEN and ANGELA.

Places

The elder Cliftons' home in rural Alabama

The younger Cliftons' apartment in New York City

Note to the Director

This short play is about communication, or rather the *failure* of communication. Consequently, the play contains some confusing and overlapping dialogue that should be presented quickly without pauses, unless the pauses are noted in the stage instructions. A sense of exasperation in the audience might be an appropriate response.

Words

SCENE ONE

A large living room/dining room of a modest farmhouse. The lights come up on ROBERT, BEN and ANGELA on two sofas that face each other.

ROBERT

I'm so worried about my sweet Sally. I should've spent the night with her in the hospital. How could I leave her?

BEN

Dad, you've spent the last three nights with her—the doctors say she'll be fine. She's turned the corner.

ROBERT

But it's my fault she's there—I shouldn't have paid attention to that stupid witch-doctor advice on the internet. I just felt so helpless after her stroke and I needed to do something.

ANGELA

It's not your fault. A lot of people take too much medicine and I bet it's good to trash it in some cases.

ROBERT

I should have asked the doctors first. She couldn't move her right side, she couldn't speak—and none of the medicine was helping.

ANGELA

We gave you the laptop so you could learn how to e-mail, but the internet can also be a great thing for you. You'll figure out over time what to trust and what not to trust.

BEN

Angie's right—you don't need to throw away the laptop like you threw away the pills. It's a lot more expensive.

ROBERT

(smiling)

I'm not so sure about that—you should see my pharmacy bills.

BEN

It's nice to see that smile again. The important thing is that mom's gonna come home in a couple of days. We'll be here for the next week and we'll help Mom—and you—adjust to a new routine.

ROBERT

A whole week? That'll really help. But can New York survive that long without you two?

ANGELA

(laughing, hugging ROBERT)

It'll be tough on the Big Apple! We can work from here, though. We have our laptops, and our phones actually have more computer-horsepower than that laptop we gave you.

ROBERT

(shaking his head)

You're kidding—let me see that.

ANGELA

Wait, hang on, it's ringing. Please excuse me for a moment. Hello, this is Angela Clifton.

ROBERT

(to BEN)

I didn't hear it ring.

BEN

It vibrated, dad—we have them set up that way.

ANGELA

Yes, thank you. I'll get that to you by the end of the day...yes, I will.

(hangs up)

ROBERT

(gloomily again)

Sally seems to get a little better every day, but this puts us back where we were right after the stroke. It's such a slow process.

ANGELA

I know you're not used to doing anything slowly here on the farm, heaven forbid. But aren't you supposed to be retired? I know your focus is on Sally right now, but how are you holding up? I'm sure there's still a lot to do around this place—how can we help?

ROBERT

I'm fine, I'm fine. In a time like this, you learn what's really important in life and you let the rest go. Don't worry, the dogs get fed and the bird feeders stay full. But I'm not going to get stressed if we can't plant a winter garden this year. We know where the grocery store is.

(pauses)

It's just so difficult to see Sally like this. She can't talk, but I know she can understand me. I can see it in her eyes. Along with the fright...

BEN

There you go again.

ROBERT

I know. She's gonna be fine. I have to keep telling myself that.

BEN

(getting up)

I'm going to get more stuff out of the car. I'll be right back.

(exits)

ROBERT

Angie, forgive me for being so focused on Sally and me. How's Melissa? Where's Melissa?

ANGELA

My sister's staying with her for the week. She loves having a chance to stay in Manhattan for a few days, and I'm sure she and Mel will see lots of plays and eat lots of expensive food. But that's OK—I hope they have a good time.

ROBERT

How is work? Is this trip to Alabama going to hurt your business?

ANGELA

Things are going well right now, and we both have a great staff of people who can handle problems while we're gone. Robert and I spend most of our day on the computer or the phone, so we can be productive wherever we are—at home, at the office, or even during the commute to the office. We'll even work a little bit here over the next week. But don't worry—we'll keep it to a minimum. We're here to help you, remember.

ROBERT

Computers. I guess Sally and I made it just fine all these years without one. Anyway, will you be tying up the phone lines? The hospital may call.

As ROBERT speaks, BEN re-enters the front door with two large suitcases. He has a Bluetooth phone device in his ear and is talking straight ahead as he walks.

BEN

And could you get those delivered within a week?

ROBERT

What delivered?

ANGELA

(to ROBERT, whispering and pointing to her ear)

He's talking on his phone.

BEN

(to ROBERT)

What?

ROBERT

(to ANGELA)

What?

BEN

Don't worry, we've got our own high-speed connection.

(exits to bedroom with suitcases, still talking)

ROBERT

What? Connection to what? What is he talking about? Was he talking to me?

ANGELA

We use our smart phones as high-speed modems. You attach them to your laptop and—it's a miracle! You get the internet at breathtaking speeds. By the way, let me take a look at what's in the kitchen so I can start putting together some meals for us.

ROBERT

What's a modem?

ANGELA

It's a...a...never mind, just trust me. It's faster than your dial-up connection to your home phone.

(exits the room as BEN re-enters)

ROBERT

My computer is attached to the phone?

BEN
(talking on his hands-free phone)

We'll be back in a week.

ROBERT

Where are you going?

BEN looks at ROBERT and points to the phone in his ear. He then turns away and finishes his phone conversation.

ROBERT

If Angela could make a list, I'll run get some groceries. It might do me good to get out of the house for a few minutes now that you're here to listen for the phone. In fact, I think I'll walk—I need the exercise. Ben, could you go with me to help carry the groceries back?

BEN

I'd be glad to, but there's no need for that.

ANGELA
(re-entering, waving a list)

We can order all these things online.

ROBERT

What? Our grocery store doesn't deliver, or at least I don't think they do.

ANGELA

We have enough to get us through today, but just watch...

(sitting down, thumbing furiously on her smart phone)

We can select everything we need and it will be on our doorstep by midday tomorrow.

ROBERT

(looking at ANGELA, puzzled)

Wonderful...I think. I'm so far behind the times. I'm glad this sort of thing works for you and Ben, but I still enjoy chatting it up with my buddies down at the real grocery store. Where they also sell fish bait and fix flat tires.

BEN

(laughing)

Don't worry, dad. This is the life Angie and I have chosen. Every minute of every day is optimized and planned—our calendars keep us sane. And by the way, you can get fish bait online, too. No one's figured out how to fix flat tires at Amazon.com yet, but I'm certain they're working on it. Go ahead and get your exercise outside, and we'll stay in here by the phone. Get some fresh air.

ROBERT

OK, OK, I still know how to do that. I'll just take some deep breaths and come right back.

ROBERT walks out the door with a smile, shaking his head. BEN walks over and joins ANGELA at the table, where she triumphantly finishes up her online ordering.

BEN

Nor can they fix a stroke online.

ANGELA

(still distracted while searching for a credit card)

What?

BEN

Nothing. I'm just realizing how hard this...this situation is for both of them. This is the first time they've been separated in 49 years of marriage. I hope the doctors are right. Or rather I hope that my father's version of what the doctors said is right. He might be spinning it a little bit to keep things positive in his mind.

ANGELA

It's good for all of us to stay optimistic. We'll drive over and see what we can pry out of the doctors tomorrow. Privacy laws, remember.

BEN

I know...oh wait, it's my phone.

ANGELA

Would you please use your hand-held phone so it's not so confusing?

BEN

(ignoring her)

Hello? This is Benjamin Clifton...yes...yes...thank you so much! Let me find my files on that, and I'll call you back in five minutes.

BEN goes back outside. ANGELA places a Bluetooth device in her ear and walks to the sofa to sit down and place a call. She lays a laptop by her side.

ANGELA

(on the phone, but speaking forward)

This is Angela Clifton. Will you have the documents finished by 3:00?

(pauses for a response)

But they must be finished today and overnighted to Chicago.

(pauses for a response)

I know you're busy, but this work must be done. Can someone else help you?

(pauses for a response)

She's doing what? You need to find her and explain that this project is more important.

(pauses for a response)

I don't care.

(pauses for a response)

I don't care.

(pauses for a response)

To repeat, I don't care. It must be done today.

During ANGELA's conversation, BEN re-enters the room with a laptop. He sets up the laptop on the sofa directly across from ANGELA and places a call on his hands-free device. BEN and ANGELA are now looking toward each other, talking at the same time to different people, each tuning out the other. The pauses should occur simultaneously. Midway through the concurrent conversation, ROBERT re-enters and is understandably puzzled.

BEN

This is Benjamin Clifton. Will you have the documents finished by 3:00 o'clock?

(pauses for a response)

But they must be finished today and overnighted to Los Angeles.

(pauses for a response)

I know you're busy, but this work must be done. Can someone else help you?

(pauses for a response)

She's doing what? You need to find her and explain that this project is more important.

(pauses for a response)

I had better not find out she's been on the Internet all day.

(pauses for a response)

ANGELA

On another subject, will you set up a meeting with Cliff Carson?

(pauses for a response)

I can be available any time next week if he can come to New York.

(pauses for a response)

Why don't you set up a lunch meeting, maybe on Thursday, and include Cliff?

(pauses for a response)

I realize this will take time away from the other critical project. You can work on it after 3:00 o'clock.

(pauses for a response)

OK, I'll check back with you later this afternoon.

(hangs up phone)

I don't care.

(pauses for a response)

I don't care.

(pauses for a response)

To repeat, I don't care. It must be done today.

When BEN hangs up, he and ANGELA open their laptops and immediately begin to type, not noticing ROBERT has entered.

ROBERT

What a nice day! You guys should go look at the red maples!

(realizes that BEN and ANGELA are ignoring him)

Oops, sorry. When will the groceries arrive?

(still ignored)

Can I get you guys anything?

(still ignored)

The house is on fire...and there's an earthquake...and a tornado coming...

BEN and ANGELA smile but continue typing. ROBERT picks up a photo of Sally and stares at it. He then clutches it to his chest and exits the room into the kitchen. The lights slowly go down as BEN and ANGELA continue their typing.

SCENE TWO

One month later, in a fancy and beautifully decorated New York city apartment. The lights come up on MELISSA, who is playing video games on her laptop. ROBERT is sitting on the sofa with his foot in a cast propped up on the coffee table. He has his own laptop and is studying the screen intensely, but not frantically pressing any keys like MELISSA is doing.

MELISSA

(focusing on her game)

Are you going to see Grandma this morning?

ROBERT

The speech therapists are still working with her for another hour. She's so close to talking, but she just can't get the words out yet. Then she has to do her exercises. I'll get to sit with her this afternoon. I'll read to her and we'll watch the football game together. She's getting a little more responsive every day.

MELISSA

It's just going to take some time. I'm just glad Mom and Dad knew about this rehab place in our building.

ROBERT

I think you've got an entire city in this building.

MELISSA

(excited about a good move in her computer game)

There's not much for teenagers.

ROBERT

I've been reading all about stroke therapy on the Internet, and you're right—I've just got to be patient.

MELISSA

Uh oh, I hope you've learned not to believe all that stuff out there. You have to be careful.

ROBERT

Yeah, I've learned my lesson. I'm willing to wait and trust the doctors and work with her as long as it takes. She's not talking out loud, but I'm beginning to understand what she's trying to communicate.

MELISSA

(still playing)

While you're surfing the web for medical advice, you can also probably find some information about how to walk down the back steps without falling.

ROBERT

(not noticing her joke)

As long as it takes.

MELISSA turns all the way around to look at her grandfather and she smiles. ROBERT grabs a pair of crutches and exits. MELISSA, remembering her game, quickly turns back around as if to catch up what she missed. Her phone rings a pop song and she starts an animated conversation.

MELISSA

You have GOT to be kidding! You saw him where?

(giggling as she talks)

I guess he's going to start pretending that he's intellectual. Boys. BOYS! And then he went to the gym? So he'll look athletic. We're SO on to them. What are you doing tonight? My grandfather is here for a few days...yes...oh, you'd love him. And my grandma is downstairs in a physical rehab clinic. Come over if you get a chance. Otherwise, I'll keep you up to date on Facebook.

(as ROBERT re-enters the room)

Got to go! Bye now! Yes, we will...

(hanging up)

Come pull up a chair over here, Grandpa. I want to show you this game I'm playing.

ROBERT

I'm sorry to interrupt, but what is this Facebook thing that everyone is talking about?

MELISSA

(typing on her computer)

Come here and I'll show you. You'd love Facebook. I can find old friends I haven't seen in years. And since you're so much older, you'd probably find a million old friends on here...oops, I didn't mean that. Look, here is my "page" and you can see my friends over here, and all their posts run down the middle of the page.

ROBERT

(dragging over a chair, using only one crutch)

And this stuff on the right?

MELISSA

Ads, of course. Everybody's got to make money.

ROBERT

Let's see...ads for acne medicine and teen magazines...you can tell this website is designed for kids.

MELISSA

But it's not, really. These ads are designed for me—you would have different ads.

ROBERT

How could I have different ads?

MELISSA

The ads are based on your usage, and what sites you go to, and all that stuff.

ROBERT

What? How do they know those things?

MELISSA

Oh, they know. And if I looked at your page and saw only ads for lady's underwear, I would be worried about you.

ROBERT

Sorry, but that's...how would you say it...creepy.

MELISSA

It's no big deal. Just be aware that someone, somewhere, always knows what you're looking at on the internet. But look here at what my friends posted. Joanne's in my algebra class, and she's posted a request for help with a homework assignment. She'll be very disappointed if anyone other than her boyfriend responds. She knows he's online, so he'd better get his act together and help her. And here's something from my friend Christine...

ROBERT

(interrupting, fascinated)

What does that number over there mean? 1,326. Is that the number of your friends using this program? How can you have that many friends? You must be really popular.

MELISSA

(laughing)

No, they're not all close friends. Many of them go to my new school, some go to my old school, some are old friends, like I said, and some are just acquaintances who sent me a friend request. You don't have to know them well. Some I don't know at all. Everybody does it.

ROBERT

Is the number of friends a competitive thing?

MELISSA

Not really, although some losers seem to take pride in the number. Here, look, you can find photos of friends, get information on their favorite movies, books, bands...

ROBERT

(shaking his head in disbelief)

But these comments, these "posts" as you call them—they are just between you and the person you're communicating with, right?

MELISSA

No, they're pretty much for everybody who's logged in. I mean, there are ways to do things privately, but most everything is for public viewing.

ROBERT

And you like that?

MELISSA

Sure, everybody does it. It's how we keep up with everything.

ROBERT

But I guess that's my question. Do you really want to keep up with everything?
(pointing to the screen)

Here's someone who says she's about to go wash her hair. Really? Do you want to know that much about people?

MELISSA

(laughing again)

Not everyone goes into that much detail. Usually, if someone posts something like that, it means she's lonely or she's trying to communicate that she's getting ready to go out if someone wants to meet her.

ROBERT

So you have to read between the lines.

MELISSA

It's just words. We all understand each other. Except the losers, who don't seem to get it. But even they can be amusing.

ROBERT

And these "losers," are they your friends, too?

MELISSA

Of course!

ROBERT

I don't get it. I just don't get it.

MELISSA turns and grabs a cord from a table, connects it to her laptop and climbs under the table to plug in the other end. Her shirt comes up and exposes a tattoo on her lower back.

ROBERT

(noticing MELISSA's bare skin)

Melissa, what's that on your back?

MELISSA

(turning and pulling up her shirt to expose the tattoo fully)
Why gramps, it's a tattoo. Surely you've seen one before.

ROBERT

(shocked)

I'm sorry sweetheart, it just caught me off guard.

MELISSA

It's just a rose, see?

ROBERT

(trying but failing to hide his disapproval)

But what do your parents think?

MELISSA

(shrugging, pulling her shirt down)

They're fine with it. They wouldn't get one for themselves because it would look bad to their business clients. But I told them they had plenty of places on their bodies that business clients would never see.

ROBERT

(shocked)

Melissa Dawn Clifton!

MELISSA

(hugging him)

Oh, it's nothing. It's just something I wanted to do—it doesn't mean anything.

ROBERT

But honey, it does mean something. It communicates something.

MELISSA

(not irritated, trying to explain)

No it doesn't. It's a private thing on my own body. It's no one's business. They don't have to get one if they don't like them.

ROBERT starts to speak, then closes his mouth and slowly picks up his crutches and starts to get up. MELISSA puts down her laptop and moves to the couch.

MELISSA

(patting her hand on the sofa beside her)

Oh, come on over here. We can talk about it.

ROBERT

What time do your parents get home?

MELISSA

The scheduled time is in about two hours, but the actual time will be more like three hours. It's OK, it lets me have some time to myself after school. Go ahead, let's hear it—the tattoo. We need to talk about it because it's there to stay.

ROBERT

(sitting down next to MELISSA)

Look. Please don't take this the wrong way. But tattoos communicate things. Just like wild hairdos, and radical bumper stickers, and body jewelry. Right or wrong, people make judgments about you.

MELISSA

I don't have wild hair or a radical bumper sticker. In fact, I don't have a car to put it on. Would you start working on that with my dad? But I'm thinking about a little diamond stud in my nose.

ROBERT

Let's be serious for a minute.

MELISSA

It's a private thing. It's not anyone's business. It's wrong for people to make judgments. They're the ones with the problem, not me.

ROBERT

I agree, but that's the way the world is. Do you know what we used to call tattoos on young women, particularly in that spot?

MELISSA

(patiently, not unkind)

It doesn't make any difference, but tell me.

ROBERT

Tramp stamps. Tramp...stamps. Do you know what that means?

MELISSA stares at ROBERT with her mouth dropped open. She slowly puts her hand over her mouth, holds it there briefly, and then starts laughing hysterically. ROBERT stares at her, trying to make this a serious moment, then starts laughing uncontrollably himself. They finally compose themselves after stopping and restarting their laughter several times.

MELISSA
(milking it)

Grandpa, do you think I'm a tramp?

ROBERT

No, honey, I'm just trying to warn you that you may be embarrassed by your...your tattoo...someday when you're older. It might be a hindrance in a job interview. Or you may find a nice young man someday who doesn't like it.

MELISSA
(smiling)

Assuming no nice guys will have tattoos, of course?

ROBERT

Or maybe you'll want to be an actress someday and the role will call for a girl without a tattoo.

MELISSA

Like Annie Oakley, maybe? Oh, I bet she had a tattoo.

MELISSA jumps up immediately from the couch and, imitating Ethel Merman, starts belting out a rousing rendition of the chorus of "There's No Business Like Show Business." ROBERT gets up to join her, only to remember his broken foot.

ROBERT

(laughing but wincing in pain)

Ouch! I'm serious! I'm serious!

MELISSA
(sitting back down)

You want to talk about communication? What about bumper stickers? I love the one that says "Choose Life" and the driver is smoking a cigarette.

ROBERT

(also sitting down next to MELISSA)

And don't forget the guy with a fish symbol on his trunk who flips you a bird.

MELISSA

But my favorite is the stuffy rich guy at the restaurant last night who looked around and then slyly picked his nose. What a poser—he'd die if he knew what he had just communicated.

ROBERT

Mel, honey, why don't you show me how to use this Facebook thing? I'll teach Sally when we get home and it'll exercise her mind some. I'm sure none of our fuddy-duddy friends knows how to use it, but we'll give it a shot.

MELISSA enthusiastically starts to set up an account for her grandfather and grandmother in Facebook. ROBERT turns toward the photo of Sally on the end table and loses interest in MELISSA's work. He stares at the photo as the lights slowly go down.

SCENE THREE

Two days later in the same apartment. BEN and ANGELA are sitting at the dining room table working on their laptops, while ROBERT is sitting on the sofa furiously punching away on a laptop computer. MELISSA is in another chair talking on her phone.

ROBERT

I just added my 100th friend! I can't believe how many contacts I've made. Here's an old friend from the fifth grade who would always get chosen first for the baseball team during PE. I hated him.

ANGELA
(to ROBERT)

You remember that sort of thing?

MELISSA

(turning her attention away from the phone for a second)

You've still got a long way to go to catch me.

BEN
(looking up for a second)

Remember what?

ANGELA

Is anyone ready for lunch?

BEN

Dad was always good at baseball, but I remember this guy dad is talking about. Is he on Facebook?

ROBERT

I would always be chosen second or third, but I could never beat this guy. Anyway, I'm going to post what a nice morning I've had here in the apartment with Melissa. It gets pretty boring around here when she's in class.

MELISSA

Mom, what time are we eating?

ANGELA

Does everyone like taco casserole? I'm thinking about that for dinner tonight.
(exiting into the kitchen)

BEN

That's fine for dinner, but let's have a quick lunch. I've got that big presentation this afternoon I need to finish preparing for.

ROBERT

I don't know if I'll ever get a thousand friends, but 100 is pretty good for a fuddy-dud.
(looks at his screen with shock)
Melissa, could you come here for a minute?

MELISSA

(into the phone)

OK, I'll meet you this afternoon after lunch. The deli? If we run into Mark, don't tell him I've been at home because I told him on Facebook that I'd be at the library all morning.

BEN

(getting up to set the table)

Angie, are we using paper plates or real plates?

ROBERT

Melissa, who are you talking to?

MELISSA

(not hearing ROBERT, but hanging up the phone)

Let's use real plates for a change.

(laughing)

Grandpa can help wash them when we're done.

ANGELA

(poking her head in the door)

Ben, could you help me with some things in the kitchen?

(she disappears; BEN does not react)

ROBERT

Angie, do you have any milk?

BEN

(to ROBERT, ignoring ANGELA)

I'll be right back—I've got to find a flash drive I need.

(exits to bedroom)

ROBERT

(alone with MELISSA)

Melissa...uhmm...I've been looking at your Facebook page, and some boy is writing some inappropriate things.

MELISSA

(sits next to ROBERT and looks at his screen)

What? What sort of things?

ANGELA

(poking her head in again)

Did you say you wanted milk? I'll send Ben for some.

(not waiting for an answer, disappears again)

ROBERT

No, Angie, I didn't say I wanted it...I just asked if you had it. Anything is fine.

(to MELISSA)

This Kirk kid, isn't he the one you mention as a "close" friend?

MELISSA

Sort of. We all hang out together with a bunch of other friends.

ROBERT

What does he mean when he talks about "doin' the wild thing?" I may be old, but I get the impression from the context that it might mean something...say...not nice for an innocent young fifteen-year-old.

MELISSA

Oh my goodness, there are much worse things on his page. And I'm not that innocent. Let me see...

(taking the laptop)

ROBERT

Sweetheart, your parents have talked with you about the...uh...thing on the mind of young teenage boys 100% of the time.

MELISSA

(laughing)

Duh, yes, but I'm not going to talk with you about it!

ROBERT

I know, I know, it's none of my business, but I worry about you, especially with parents who are so busy all the time.

MELISSA

Don't worry...I understand about protection.

ROBERT

(softly)

Melissa.

MELISSA

(hugging ROBERT)

I'm just teasing, Grandpa. Don't worry about me. I understand boys.

ROBERT

I know, I know...I'm just a little shocked at all this openness. Laying your private thoughts out there for everyone to see.

MELISSA

It seems perfectly normal to me. Some of it's sharing interesting and clever things. Some of it's bragging—letting people know you're doing something a little more fun than they are. Some of it's manipulation. See...look at this.

ROBERT

(looking over MELISSA's shoulder)

Cindy Stanbridge is about to go to Tony's house to study. So...big deal.

MELISSA

Let me translate. Cindy wants to date Tony but he's never asked her out. She's trying to put the world on notice, however, that she's closer to getting a date with him than anyone else is, and everyone should back off. For this afternoon, she thinks she owns him.

ROBERT

Does Tony have a page? Let's see if he responds.

MELISSA

(typing)

Nope. He doesn't mention it. He does say, however, that he's going to the movies tonight with the guys. He's manipulating Cindy back, letting her know that she only gets a small amount of his time.

ROBERT

And he chooses this method of communication *why*, pray tell? Why don't they just be honest and talk about how they feel to each other and not the entire universe?

MELISSA

Oh come on, everyone plays games. And the heart-to-heart gazing-in-the-eyes kind of thing doesn't happen much any more, at least not with my friends. And don't pretend you didn't woo my grandmother in some very public ways when you were young.

ROBERT

(tenderly)

The truth is that I indeed had to do a lot of pursuing, a lot of wooing, as you call it. But back in those days, I got permission to go over to Sally's house, and we would sit in the living room with one another for an hour on the weekends and talk. Real live talk.

MELISSA

What did you talk about?

ROBERT

Her parents were always in the next room, listening, but it didn't matter...we just talked about the weather, and school, and sports, and weather, and school...

MELISSA

And sports? That's what Kirk and I talk about. It's just a different sport.

ROBERT

(not amused)

Melissa. Please.

MELISSA

I'm just messing with you. I'm a good girl. Didn't you and grandma "try things out," so to speak, before you got married?

ROBERT

(shocked)

No.

(pauses)

No, Melissa, we did not. And the truth is that we never got to really know each other until after we were married.

(turning toward SALLY's photo, speaking tenderly)

I was as nervous as could be when I set up an appointment with her dad to ask him if I could marry his daughter.

MELISSA

After how many visits?

ROBERT

I was scared to death, and he asked a thousand questions about my plans for the future and how I could support his daughter. I can't remember what I said, but it must have been acceptable because we were married the next weekend.

MELISSA

I know you both love each other very much, but things are different today. Don't you agree that it's better to really, really get to know one another before you take the big step of getting married? Wouldn't that reduce the divorce rate? Weren't the two of you lucky, to some degree, to find each other compatible?

ROBERT

I don't know the statistics. All I know is that I loved Sally Jean Benton and she loved me...

MELISSA

Loved? How could you possibly know that after a few supervised visits?

ROBERT

Well, there was more than just love. There was this thing called commitment. It was important to us, and we understood what it meant. We knew difficult times would come, but we were committed to dealing with them. And we did. Divorce was not in our vocabulary. Going to bed angry with one another did not happen. Because of the commitment, we were forced to deal with things. In person. Up close. Not for the world to see.

MELISSA

(pulling out her phone and looking at it in horror)

Oh no. Oh no. Grandpa. Why did you post on my page that you had a wonderful morning with me here in the apartment?

ROBERT

(confused)

Uhhh, I thought I was being nice?

MELISSA

That's very sweet, except for the fact that I told Mark I'd be at the library this morning.

ROBERT

What? Let me see here. You lied and I made a kind remark. And I'm the bad guy?

ANGELA bursts back into the room with a plate full of sandwiches and condiments. She sets them on the dining table and shoves back the computers and papers.

ANGELA
Let's eat. Oh, I forgot to send Ben for the milk.
(yelling)

Ben! Sandwiches!

MELISSA
I thought we were having taco casserole.

ROBERT
I'm fine with whatever you have. Tea...water...Coke...

ANGELA
(ignoring him)
We can also take some snacks down to Sally if she's through with today's torture. Come on, everybody.

BEN
(entering with a flash drive in his hand)
I finally found it in the magazine rack in the bathroom.

MELISSA
Eeeewww. That's gross.

ROBERT, BEN and MELISSA move to the table and grab their sandwiches. ANGELA gets a phone call and starts talking on the phone while she tries to fix her plate with the other hand. BEN turns on the TV with a remote. MELISSA grabs her phone from the sofa. After everyone is seated with their various devices, the family prepares to say grace while ANGELA asks the caller to hold for a minute. BEN mutes the TV.

ROBERT
Father, we thank you for family, for love, and all the many blessings you give us.
(looking up toward SALLY's photo)
We are blessed in so many ways. So many ways. Amen.

ANGELA
(back to her phone call)
Yes, that was a prayer you just participated in. It probably did you some good.

BEN
(eating)
Dad, have you made friends with Joe Norris on Facebook?

ROBERT

I'm afraid so. Joe was the quarterback of our high school football team and I just learned that he is...a...

ANGELA

(hanging up the phone)

A homosexual?

ROBERT

It's disgusting. No, I'm sorry, I realize times have changed. He can do whatever he wants to do. It was just a shock after all these years.

BEN

So is that why you posted a verse from Leviticus on his Facebook page about homosexuality being an abomination?

MELISSA drops her sandwich and puts her hand over her mouth to keep from spitting out food. ANGELA quickly picks up her phone to place a call. BEN un-mutes the TV and stares at his sandwich without eating. Everyone must now speak loudly over the TV.

MELISSA

You posted what?

ROBERT

Somebody had to tell him. He needs to know.

BEN

Maybe so, but through that medium?

MELISSA

Yes, for the universe to read?

ROBERT

I know, I know, I shouldn't have done it, but I couldn't help it. I don't want to know about his love life.

BEN

(muting the TV)

Then why couldn't you just let it be? Or maybe you should have contacted him and started rebuilding a relationship so you could start slipping in the Bible verses little by little?

ROBERT

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it. It's just so easy.

BEN

But that's not all.

MELISSA

Not all?

(her phone rings and she answers it quickly)

Liz, I'm gonna have to call you back. There's something going on I can't miss.
(hangs up phone)

BEN

Kimberly called yesterday to tell me to tell you to keep your archaic political opinions to yourself.

ROBERT

Why didn't she call me? She knows I'm here. And I didn't give any of my political opinions at all.

BEN

You didn't have to, apparently. When she mentioned something about her favorite candidate in the upcoming election, you posted that he was an imbecile who didn't deserve to be dogcatcher, although he's never seen a government job he didn't like.

ROBERT

But it's true! He's an idiot!

BEN

And you think the internet is the place to convince someone of your heartfelt political beliefs?

ROBERT

No, but she did it first.

MELISSA

Excuse me, but are we on the school playground?

ROBERT

It's stupid little electronic words that don't hurt anybody. Remember the old "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never harm me."

BEN

The worst words of "wisdom" ever spoken. Of course words can harm.

ANGELA
(on the phone)

Could you guys tone it down a little?

Everyone gets silent as ANGELA continues her phone conversation. MELISSA's phone rings and she answers it, walking to the living area so she can hear better. ROBERT and BEN remain silent, looking at each other. BEN's phone rings, and he apologetically motions that he must take the call. ROBERT gets up and hobbles back to the sofa.

MELISSA
(ending her phone conversation)

Now what were we saying about politics?

ANGELA
(ending her phone call)

Melissa, drop it. We all communicate in different ways. Your grandfather is not accustomed to this generation's desire to expose itself.

(to ROBERT)

Just be careful on Facebook. You never know who's telling the truth, or even who you're chatting with.

ROBERT

I guess I'm a coward. I say that old-fashioned communication is better, but then I jumped at the chance to correct someone I wasn't eye-to-eye with. Facebook made me bold, I guess, to say things I wouldn't have said in person. Do you use it, Angela?

ANGELA

Of course! See, it's right here on my phone. My smart phone. Although it's not as smart as me.

MELISSA

That's debatable.

ROBERT

Melissa, don't talk to your mother that way.

ANGELA

She's actually telling the truth. Smart phones may be smarter, but they don't know a lot about truth.

ROBERT

(picking up Sally's photo again)

Some things can be communicated without words. Not this time, though—I'll call both of them and apologize.

ANGELA

Hold on—some things don't need to be communicated at all. You've already done your damage—just let it go.

ROBERT

(gets up and hobbles back to the table)

I know what I'll do. Isn't there a way to "unfriend" friends? I'll get out of their business in case I make more slip-ups.

ANGELA

Don't do that...people can tell if you "unfriend" them. Some people get very nasty when they're "unfriended."

ROBERT shakes his head not knowing what to do. He picks up another sandwich and starts to squirt mustard on it. The top falls off the bottle and mustard goes all over the table.

ROBERT

Great. Can you read my mind right now?

MELISSA

Yes, Grandpa, and I'm so ashamed.

ANGELA

(not moving)

Oh, I'm sorry. No problem—just put it back in the bottle. You know, the ten-second rule.

ROBERT

What? I'm afraid it's not going back in the bottle. I'll get a towel.

ANGELA

I guess that once the mustard gets out of the bottle, it can never be put back.

(pausing for effect)

Like words.

MELISSA

Oh great—now a sermon.

ANGELA, BEN and MELISSA look at ROBERT in silence. BEN is still holding his phone but says nothing. ROBERT slowly picks up a towel and starts to clean up the mess.

ROBERT

Mel, it's a sermon I need to hear. I'll close my Facebook account right now and go back to communicating the way I always have. The way I know best.

MELISSA

And that is...

BEN

(laying down the phone)

I think we all have a lot to learn about communicating.

ANGELA

(to BEN)

Honey, would you run down to the store and get some milk? Your father wants some.

Lights out.

SCENE FOUR

The next day in BEN's and ANGELA's apartment. Suitcases are packed and sitting near the door. BEN and ANGELA are sitting across from one another sending text messages. ROBERT and MELISSA are sitting on a sofa. ROBERT is reading a real paper book and MELISSA is reading a Kindle. ROBERT laughs at something in his book, then MELISSA laughs a little louder at something in her book. The competitive laughing escalates.

ANGELA

(not looking up from her phone)

Will you two behave?

ROBERT

Us behave? What about you? You two are texting each other, aren't you?

ANGELA
(laughing)

Guilty as charged.

ROBERT

You're sitting in the same room. Ten feet from one another. Don't you remember how to talk?

BEN

Of course we do. Angela was just forwarding me a photo from one of our friends. She did attach some rather humorous comments.

ANGELA
(to ROBERT)

I would send it to you as well, but you have an antique cell phone.

ROBERT

I'm OK with the antique because I only need it for emergencies. And maybe I was too quick to suggest that you don't remember how to talk. Once in a while I see you talking on your phone, although most of the time you're thumbing it.

ANGELA

Thumbing...is that a verb? Stop pulling my leg—you know about texting.

ROBERT

Is that a verb?

ANGELA

You got me. I know I should probably use it less. It's just so easy and convenient to call from the grocery store instead of having to write down a list. It takes less time to call my own voice mail and leave reminders to myself. You should be more worried about our loss of writing skills than our loss of talking skills.

ROBERT

I'm nostalgic for the old days...

MELISSA

There you go again...

ROBERT

...when we were really interested in one another and talking came easy. It's not that the three of you aren't interested in each other—I'm just saying that communicating ain't what it used to be.

MELISSA

Don't bring me into this. At least someone didn't have to kill a tree in order to produce my reading material.

(holding up her Kindle)

ROBERT

You may win the environmental argument, young lady, but there's nothing like cuddling up with a real book and turning real pages. I love the smell of a good book—either the fresh new smell of a newly printed book or the old moldy smell of an old classic found in the attic.

(holding the book up to his nose and breathing deeply)

MELISSA

So what? I just love the smell of the electronics and plastic in my Kindle.
(dramatically holding the Kindle up to her nose and breathing deeply)

ROBERT and MELISSA start competitively sniffing their respective reading materials until they lapse into laughter.

BEN

OK, children, we get your points and you both win. Maybe we should carry on a good old fashioned conversation before Mom and Dad have to head back to the country. Let's turn off all electronic devices for the next ten minutes and just...you know...converse.

ANGELA

(holding up her phone)

I'm in, but the clock doesn't start ticking until I take this call from my boss. He forgets sometimes that it's Sunday. Making a living...bummer...

(answering)

ROBERT

How did she even know it was ringing? I didn't hear anything.

BEN

Oh, dad, remember how we talked about phones vibrating? Or lighting up? Do you want me to set yours up?

(takes ROBERT'S phone and starts working with it)

ROBERT

I'm kidding. I know phones vibrate, but that wouldn't wake me up out of a daydream.

MELISSA

OK, I'm putting down my book because I'm at a good stopping place. And by the way, I can mark the place just as well as you can with your old-fashioned bookmark.

ROBERT

(tries to grab MELISSA's Kindle, but she pulls it away)

OK, I'll get it started.

(pauses)

We'll talk about me first.

(pauses)

My cast comes off tomorrow. I believe my foot is going to be well enough that I can take Sally home and get around just fine.

(pauses)

We've really had a wonderful time visiting with the three of you. We love visiting New York, but we're anxious to get back to real grass and real powdery brown dirt instead of concrete and oily black dirt. And as inconvenient as it is, we'll actually enjoy putting a key in a lock and walking in a door instead of punching in a code and swiping a card to get the elevator to work.

ANGELA

(leaving the room)

I'll be right back.

ROBERT

(to ANGELA, already in another room)

Wait, we had an agreement!

(to MELISSA)

All right, our turn. Let's try to start a real conversation. How is your schoolwork going?

MELISSA

Fine.

ROBERT

Fine?

MELISSA

Yes, fine. Finer than fine. All A's, if that's what you're asking.

BEN

(still working with ROBERT'S phone)

Tell him about your science project.

MELISSA

That is so boring.

BEN

(jolting and answering ROBERT's phone, then picking up the correct phone)
Oh hey, Mr. Phillips. Sir? Could you speak a little louder? I think we have a bad connection. Mr. Phillips? Hello?

(pauses)

Mr. Phillips?

(to ROBERT)

Oh, he'll call back when he gets in a better spot.

(answering his phone again)

Yes? Hello? No, it's just like before.

(pauses)

Did you say noon? Mr. Barnham? At the office? Hello?

(to ROBERT)

Well, I think I'm supposed to meet my boss at the office in a couple of hours.

ROBERT

That's OK—we need to be getting on the road. Angela can drive us to the airport if you have an emergency.

BEN

Let me send him a text to make sure I understood him correctly.

(exits)

ROBERT

This has been an illuminating conversation.

MELISSA

Oh grandpa...we'll miss you.

ROBERT

Here, let me try once again. Have I told you the story about how your father met Angie?

MELISSA

About a hundred times, but I'd love to hear it again.

ROBERT

I think I can take a hint.

MELISSA

I'm just messing with you. But how would you like to hear about my dad's inability to remember birthdays?

BEN

(bursting back in the room)

That's enough, or I'll tell him about your obsession with vampire shows on TV...

ANGELA

(re-entering the room)

All right, you two. Let's just sit down and enjoy the last few minutes with your grandfather. It may be a while before we get to see him again.

Everyone is seated where the scene began.
Everyone looks at one another in silence for a few seconds, and then ANGELA makes an attempt at conversation.

ANGELA

We'll miss you guys.

ROBERT

We'll miss you, too.

BEN

We'll make it down there in a couple of months, but call if you need us sooner. Any time, day or night.

ROBERT

Were you right about the meeting?

BEN

What meeting?

ROBERT

The one you just texted your boss about.

BEN

Oh yes, that one...I have plenty of time.

ROBERT

Don't worry. I've been meaning to tell you—there's no need for you to get the car out. We'll be fine taking a cab. If I can call cows and get them to come to me, I can hail a taxi.

ANGELA

That's a good idea. It'll be safer than Ben's driving, anyway. What time's your flight?

BEN

It's at 11:00, so we'd better get all this luggage downstairs. And I heard the remark about my driving.

ANGELA
(to ROBERT)

Did you wrap up all your Facebook ends?

ROBERT

(pausing)

There's one thing I couldn't resolve. There are things I said that I wish I hadn't said. But there are also things I read from other people that I wish I hadn't read.

ANGELA

Really, like what?

ROBERT

Nothing. I shouldn't have mentioned it.

ANGELA

Politics? Religion? Sex?

ROBERT

It's nothing. I allow my feelings to get hurt too easily.

ANGELA

Now you've got to tell us—was someone nasty to you? Don't worry about it—some people click "send" before they think. A good rule of thumb is always to give things time before you send them. I've avoided a lot of unpleasant situations at the office by following this rule.

ROBERT

Do you *always* follow that rule?

ANGELA

I'm sorry...what?

ROBERT

(softly)

I spent some time glancing through some of your friends' pages. Maybe I was nosy. Maybe I just wanted to get to know some of your friends a little better. Do you remember telling your friend Adele that you dreaded having your in-laws in the apartment for two weeks? Do you remember calling us dinosaurs?

BEN

Angela!

(to ROBERT)

Dad, I'm sure she didn't mean anything—she was just joking...weren't you, honey?

ROBERT

Probably so. Maybe she was joking like you when you called us the Beverly Hillbillies.

BEN

Oh my God. I didn't think in a million years you would ever read that. I was just playing.

ANGELA
(horrified)

Dad, I am so sorry. I didn't mean it. We both love you dearly.

BEN

We do. We do. Please forgive us.

ANGELA and BEN hug ROBERT.
MELISSA looks on in disbelief.

ANGELA
(wiping back tears)

I don't know why we said such things. Maybe we just didn't want our friends to consider us Alabama people.

(pause)

Maybe it was a way to make us look more civilized than we really are. The truth is that we love our roots. We love our country upbringing. And we love our family. Can you forgive us?

BEN

Does mom know about this?

ROBERT

No, she doesn't know. And son, it's not a big deal, trust me. I am a dinosaur. And a hillbilly. I just know that the two of you will get some time to explore on Facebook in the next few days and you'll remember what you'd done. I figured I would save you the fright of recognition and get it out in the open now. It's not important. I love you all, and I know you love me. It's just words. Silly words.

BEN

I'm so ashamed. I make public presentations every day to large groups of people, and I'm pretty good at it. But when it comes to words that count, I'm a failure.

ROBERT

You're not a failure, but we all need to think a little bit before we say things. Why do we say hateful things if we don't mean them? I don't know. I can't explain human nature. And why do we fail to say the things we really mean? Like how much we love each other? Just now we've openly expressed our love for each other, but it's been a while since we've done that.

BEN

It's not my nature.

ROBERT

Nor mine. I'm glad I learned some things about myself over the last few days. I didn't want to destroy relationships with old friends on Facebook. I just got carried away...it's so easy.

BEN

I love you, dad. And I love mom. Will you tell her for us? I hope you two will be OK down in the country, but I can't help but worry. Will you be able to comprehend what mom is trying to say to you? Aren't you worried that something will happen to her and you won't be able to figure out what she needs?

ROBERT

Don't worry. I think we can communicate just fine. We love each other. If you were a hillbilly, you'd understand.

BEN looks at his dad. They both start laughing at the same time, breaking the tension.

BEN

Becoming a hillbilly is something I should aspire to. And I need to rethink my quickness to judge your communication skills, since my own need work.

(pauses)

I can't help it. I'll still worry about you.

ROBERT

I know. I'll worry about you three as well.

ANGELA

Why would you worry about us? We're not recuperating from a broken foot and a stroke.

ROBERT

No, you're in terrific shape. Just don't lose touch with the world outside of sound and data waves flying through the air.

MELISSA

(ducking as though words are physically flying through the air)

Look out—I can feel some now!

ROBERT

Melissa, if you don't behave yourself I am going to tell you a very interesting story about changing my lawnmower tires.

MELISSA

And I have one about washing my hair. But don't worry--I'll post all the details on Facebook for you. And the rest of the world.

ROBERT

Give me a call. I'm leaving the social network world behind. Let me get out of here so I can rescue Sally from the torturers. Bye everyone!

BEN and ANGELA rush to pick up bags and head toward the door with ROBERT. Everyone hugs and kisses. ROBERT, BEN and ANGELA exit. MELISSA stands at the door and waves goodbye. After a few seconds of waving, MELISSA leaves the door open and returns to her chair and starts reviewing messages on her smart phone. In a few seconds her parents return, also grabbing their smart phones. They sit in silence working furiously on their devices. Unknown to them, ROBERT pokes his head back in the door and looks at them. He quietly takes his computer bag and leans it against the wall just inside the door. He disappears again. The lights go down very slowly in silence until there is total darkness.

THE END