

Journal: Jeff Halloway

By:

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Introductory Essay

My story began with a drive back home one night that nearly ended in a car crash. I was shocked at the time, and a little (a lot) angry with the jackass who almost turned my little Honda Civic into a hunk of silver scrap. After sleeping on it, however, I felt much more introspective. The idea of almost disappearing and what that moment can do to someone, especially if they don't have the emotional support necessary to cope, became the spark for what eventually would become my first novella. "Journal: Jeff Halloway" was my way to understand and explain all the fear an abrupt ending can bring, and the consequences of denying confrontations both internal and external.

Of course, there are problems with writing about subject material that comes from personal anecdote. Part of the writing process for me was learning not to see Jeff merely as a vehicle to tell a story, but one with their own unique voice. It wasn't just about telling an intended narrative, it was having a character living and breathing through a story, and seeing what they would do. I'm reminded of a quotation from professor Lee Schlesinger when he was explaining metaphors: "Metaphors are exactly what they're compared to. But also, metaphors are NOTHING like what they're compared to." No matter how close the relationship, a metaphor is still examining the relationship between two different things, and their distinctions are just as important as their similarities. That was the mindset I had when workshopping and editing my novella. I focused on creating scenarios throughout the novella that were different from my own experiences yet held onto the emotional core that I wanted to express within the narrative. I struggled particularly with representing Jeff as a unique character while maintaining a concrete voice. I worked hard to create a Jeff with personality that compliments his story arc, rather than leaving his motivations unexplained or indifferent. For example, while Jeff is

forced to work with menial, minimum wage jobs to pay the bills, he also specifically chooses physical work over mental because he had dreams of starting his own local moving company. This contrasts Jeff's willingness to use his body with his father's attempts to overfeed and control Jeff's diet, which also makes Jeff's need to ride his bike to work more impactful.

While creating content and representing characters was a challenge on its own, the most unique struggle that presented itself throughout my novella was formatting and how those choices influenced the text. During the early stages of outlining and generating plot points, I had a vision of creating journal entries that were revised by Jeff later in time. Journals are meant to be records of the past and part of their power is creating a narrative that shares more with the reader as it progresses in real time. I wanted Jeff to not only look back at his entries, but also learn and add to his original stories. I first attempted this through a series of footnotes, as well as marking pages with specific numbers that indicated whether a particular entry was from the past or the present. While there were some interesting opportunities and moments afforded through this formatting system, the text became difficult for a reader to enjoy as they progressed.

These choices carried over to second semester but evolved dramatically when I began working with my second sponsor, Kathleen McCormick. As we discussed how the current work could be improved, we came up with a solution that felt much better to read and understand on the page, while giving the story itself a unique flair. Instead of footnotes or numbered entries, the past and present would be kept physically separate using the left and right sides of the "journal" itself. The left page would always be Journal #1, the original journal Jeff Halloway wrote in the past. Meanwhile, the right

page would always be Journal #2, the journal written from the present perspective of Jeff. Every page becomes part of an intended pair, conveying more than the sum of its parts. These comments include notes, redacted text, poems, or full stories about details Jeff neglected to comment about in Journal #1 because they didn't seem relevant at the time or were purposefully left out. This formatting solution creates a text that not only easily separates itself into an easy to understand design, but it also created new and exciting opportunities for writing interesting material.

Stylistically, I have many to thank for how Jeff keeps his journal. In the beginning, I knew that I wanted to tell Jeff's story through the narrative structure of a journal that could be edited, censored, and acted upon at any time. I can personally thank the kindness of a friend for loaning me a copy of "House of Leaves" by Mark Daniellowski, a gorgeous display of imagination that inspired me to use the journal format as a narrative tool. Studying the way characters can interact within their own story left powerful marks within my work. I also must give absolute credit to Kathleen McCormick, who taught a class dedicated to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and humbly proved that it might be one of the greatest damn books ever written. The plethora of stylistic risks dared me to experiment with anything and everything I could possibly imagine. My greatest influence as a writer has been the many works of Kurt Vonnegut. Whether it was the first time I ever read him and being engulfed in the ease of balancing multiple time periods, or just rereading a passage leisurely on the porch and marveling at his amazing word choice, he is my biggest influence. His ability to engage the reader through fundamentals of writing and his dry wit was a constant inspiration that I worked towards.

Moving away from the purely academic or literary, there are many other acknowledgements that I must make, which were equally important to my success in writing and completing my first novella. First and foremost, I must thank the wonderful friends and colleagues I made at here at Purchase; particularly I give my thanks to Grayson Lazarus, who was my roommate for almost three years and proved to me that true friends are always listening and ready to express their love to you. I want to thank my other dear friends, especially the ones I made in the Media and Literature Learning Community, a wonderful program I was lucky to be a part of that was run by Professor Kathleen McCormick (and which was unfortunately discontinued). Thank you to my parents who gave me the tools for a higher education and showed me unwavering support, through flooded cars to flooded apartments and everything in between. I also wanted to thank my girlfriend of six years: I love you. Thank you for everything.

I would like to conclude with a quotation by Kurt Vonnegut. In the epilogue to *Sirens of Titan*, before Beatrice Rumfoord dies, she talks to Malachai Constant. He says something to her that makes her want to write an idea down for a book, and she scrambles to keep that idea. This follows:

Beatrice suddenly turned her back on the painting, out into the courtyard again.

The idea she wanted to add to her book was straight in her mind now. “The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody,” she said, “would be to not be used for anything by anybody.” The thought relaxed her. She lay down on Rumfoord’s old contour chair, looked up at the appallingly beautiful rings of Saturn—at Rumfoord’s Rainbow. “Thank you for using me,” she said to Constant, “even though I didn’t want to be used by anybody.” (317)

I believe that writing is a lot like this moment. All the thoughts in the world don't mean anything if they aren't used. I hope the words of Jeff Halloway can be of use to somebody for something, "if the accident will."

Hello to all of my invited readers. If your name is Teresa Gómez (from 195 Randall Way, from the city of * [REDACTED] then this is for you! For everyone else, I ask that you send this journal to the address specified above, while refraining from looking within it. Thank you.

-AND if this is Michael Halloway, Dr. Gwendolyn Miranda, or Alexis Halloway, yall go fuck yourselves with the business end of a bicycle pump. STAY OUT OF MY JOURNAL!!!

Teresa-

~~I've been thinking~~ ~~I've known you~~ ~~This is What the hell IS this~~

We've been dating for two years, and in that time, I've experienced more... life with you than with anyone else. If there is anyone else that deserves as much honesty and truth, they haven't shown up yet. There's been so many lies that I've had to keep, but they've gotta end now before I ruin US. Maybe back when we were first going out, some secrets weren't such a big deal. I didn't think so anyways. But years have gone by since then, and we're in love with each other...except you haven't really fallen in love with **me**. Sure you've seen me be the most natural me that I've been with almost anyone else. Yeah that's true. But I've only let you fall for the parts you could see. There's other reasons for the way I am, why I move from one dead-end job to the next, why there's too many days that I can't go out and see you. So when I hand this to you and you get to read it for the first time, I know everything's gonna be so much better. This journal won't have any more lies. That's a promise.

*Redacted Text reads as Follows: “Congers, New York, 10920”

Teresa Gómez,

What’s the funniest thing about starting over from the beginning? I’ll tell you now— it ain’t already knowing how it’s gonna end. The answer is nothing. It’s never funny when your past is the punchline. It’s been a few months since we broke up, four to be exact.

I’m curious to know, how are you? Has your life been better since you dumped the baggage? I’ll admit, I came close many times to breaking down and calling you, begging for answers. But there would have been nothing to gain, no progress would have been made. WHY? Because I already messed it up. Wanna know the real answer? Here’s the funny part: looking back and realizing how wrong you were in the moment, no matter how right it felt at the time.

The fact is, I’ve contributed to my own unhappiness too, beyond lying or holding back, the mistakes I made or the shit that was shoveled on my doorstep. Did it have to end like this? The way I handled things, I think it was inevitable. The first time you read this journal, I tried to tell you everything. I thought if I just filled it with confessions, it would outweigh all the deceptions and miscommunications of the past. Making a record of my life didn’t teach me to look inward. All I did was try to hide myself away from you until I had my “perfect moment.” There are no perfect moments. I hope the notes I add in this second series of entries show what I’ve learned.

-Friday September 23rd

It's 3 a.m. Everyone in our house is sleeping but me. I don't deserve to sleep right now, even if there's a single chance of that happening tonight (there isn't). I've never even kept a journal before! I mean this thing still has my name scrawled on the cover from fifth grade. I haven't used a notebook since high school. Is writing down this crap really going to make me feel better? Just vomiting words on a page because I can't keep my shit together? I just can't believe I'm taking actual therapy advice from Miranda. I've gone beyond reminiscing about Mom for comfort, or texting a "friend" (how many of those do I have left???), or whatever bad habits telling me to shove a river of vodka inside my gut so everything's nice and numb. It's all beyond me, and I'M the one to fuck it up, again, as always. You know what you did Jeffery, so say it.

I almost killed Teresa in a car accident.

I almost ended the life of someone I loved. Nothing actually happened. No one got hurt, nothing was destroyed, we didn't even hit miss a turn. But that doesn't change the fact that it almost happened anyways, because I'm careless, or beyond idiotic, or maybe I just don't deserve to live anymore. But Teresa DOES! Teresa would have died fast asleep, life stolen away before she could fight back for it. Can you imagine the weight of that sin? I'm asking myself, I have to spell it out because there's no one else to tell me: NO! It's unimaginable, and there's no other answer. It's 4 a.m. already and I'm still awake. The towel underneath my door is keeping the lamp light out of the hallways and away from Alexis's room. No one is going to interrupt me, not tonight.

First you lose, then you reclaim, then you settle. That's at least what Miranda says to getting over something: Lose, reclaim, settle. After the night that started everything, I felt like I was in constant danger of losing you. One of the things I noticed about myself was as time went on, I kept coming back to that first entry I had written. I don't really understand why. To be honest, every rereading brought back the same feeling of terror and self-loathing that was buried inside me from the moment that car crash almost became reality. It was an obsession for me, sitting around turning over the same pages again and again until they were committed to memory. I guess it was inevitable that eventually I'd try to reclaim you in some sort of way. I hate it when Miranda's right.

During the months before Teresa and I broke up, I tried a number of times to rewrite that entry. At first it was to make it more factual. Certain parts didn't sit right anymore and they bugged me like nothing else. I wrote many versions of that entry, each with a different twist on the story, but none of them worked like the first. One by one, I'd rip the rewrite out of my journal and start again, trying to find the right angle to approach. But none of them was good enough to replace the first. I still couldn't throw out my rewrites whether they were failures or not. They stayed crammed into the back of drawer in my desk, marking my "progress." I settled in the end with the original. Here they are anyway: for existing's sake.

-Entry #1

It was late, very late: September 23rd, 2015 around 2 a.m. to be precise. We were both exhausted from our stargazing stroll around the neighborhood. Maybe we coulda cut our date short, but I needed the exercise and the half moon was so beautiful that night. It's hard to say no to "just another few minutes" when it's coming from someone you love. Teresa was catching a quick nap in the passenger seat, snoring really lightly, just breathing in and out as I drove. She's usually the one to drive but tonight the beat-up family Jeep was mine.

Teresa's red Vans were up on the dashboard, and they left little scuffmarks when she shifted in her sleep. I'd have to clean them up before I gave the keys back. I reached for the radio and started playing the only CD I dared to keep in the car. My eyes felt sleepy. I put the volume low and hummed along to Indigo King. Whenever I'm the one driving back from one of our dates, late like this, I try not to wake her until we get back. Weaving around potholes, taking slow lazy turns and keeping an easy speed, like the car and I are singing a little lullaby to the tune of the road.

So I'm driving. It's an easy drive I've done so often that I can't remember the name of the road, even now. Take a left at the intersection by the high school and then go straight down the river directly into town, and then you're there. The light turned red and I gently braked, trying not to make the car lurch. There was a pair of headlights coming up on the opposite side of the road. They looked like far away little moons. I hummed and waited. The light eventually turned green, so I got off the brakes and started to turn left, slow and wide so Teresa wouldn't be jostled around. I looked back at the headlights coming at me.

1. Facts:

- The time and date: September 23rd, 2015, happening at approximately 2:08 to 2:18 when The Event occurred.
- The road: Hemenway Road, on the intersection of Hemenway and Randall Lane.
- ~~Characters~~ People Involved: Jeffrey Halloway, Teresa Gómez, Two unidentified jackasses.
- Vehicles Involved: One red 1988 Jeep Cherokee, one Black Dodge Charger.

Description of The Event: In the time listed above, the Jeep containing Jeffrey and Teresa had stopped at a red light going north toward the Freedom Causeway. As the light turned green, the Jeep signaled and began to turn left at the intersection. Meanwhile, the Charger had been going south, the opposite direction of the Jeep. It's relevant to note that at the time of the incident, their light probably wasn't green. This is confirmed by the fact I've driven on that road before and I'm pretty sure they're supposed to wait when someone is turning. And even if their light was green, they should have stopped anyways. The Charger instead seemingly ran the red light while simultaneously flicking on their high beams to blind us. This can only mean they were intentionally attempting to run into the Jeep, or were severely impaired, or were completely apathetic monsters who go out of their way to put others in danger. Luckily the Jeep was able to maneuver out of the way using a combination of quick thinking and efficient driving and was able to avert disaster entirely.

Fuck if those lights hadn't gotten a lot closer since I first saw them. They must have been tearing up the road, drunk or tired of driving in the middle of the night maybe. I was already turning so I didn't speed up. They must have seen us. Those lights were white and bright like a spotlight and I had to squint just to keep my eyes on the road.

And then those jackasses turned on their high-beams right in my face. Maybe they were trying to tell me something. "Hey Idiot, you're in our way! We've got a green light too," but all the high-beams did was blind me. My eyes snapped shut. I rubbed them with one hand while the other turned the wheel. I forgot I was still turning. Panic washed over my face and sank deep into my chest. Everything crawled to its destination in this low, nauseating race to death.

I flicked my focus to Teresa, terrified, but she was still sound asleep, and I was still turning left on the road, and if I didn't turn fast enough, I was going to have someone crash directly into the car, into her body, laid out like a corpse. I couldn't hear a fucking sound. My favorite song was playing but there was nothing coming out of the speakers, nothing coming out of my mouth, nothing coming out of that car or mine at all.

Everything was quiet like the night, cold and dark and alone with this thing. The car was black. I just remembered that it was a black Dodge Charger, and I couldn't see the driver, but they must have seen the look on my face, mouth hanging open, scared out of my mind. I didn't even honk the horn. He didn't even honk the horn. They must've been in a rush. They must've thought I was gonna stop. Or maybe they thought I would know what the fuck I was doing at 2 a.m. on a Friday night.

Conclusion: Any blame most definitely should be directed at the two jackasses, or a higher power, or drunks. Or the night.

2. The Mighty River Kingdom

Once there was a kingdom, deep within the coves of a mighty river where few dared to travel. It was late, very late one night. A princess and her loyal knight were travelling back home by carriage. But the roads were dangerous and ahead lay two bandits, ready to ambush unsuspecting travelers as they approached. The knight was under strict instructions to protect the princess at all costs, and if an attack were to befall her while under his care, he would be cast out, doomed to wander the lands as an outcast. As the princess slept and the knight drove their carriage, they came upon a fork in the road. The knight began to drive the horses to the left, but as he did, the bandits sprang from hiding and charged the carriage with torches that burned as bright as starlight. The knight was ill prepared, but he rallied his courage and swift as the river rapids dodged his pursuers. The princess heard the cries of the bandits and awoke to discover the knight had saved her from peril. And so the two entered the kingdom of the forest, unharmed and in love.

The End

And all that time, I forgot my foot was gently on the gas pedal. I stomped down instinctively and suddenly time sped back up again, and we were sailing far away as the Charger zoomed off to Hell. Nothing crashed, nothing made a noise, nothing changed, and Teresa was still slumped in the passenger seat, somehow still sound asleep. A second later, the radio was singing, the wheels were crunching gravel under their rubber, a dog barked outside. It was all back to what it was. I got off the gas and steadied the wheel. In just one second, everything was back to the way it was.

I've never experienced anything like that before. I thought about it all the way home before I tried to put it to words. The closest I can get is watching an empty glass fall from a table. You reach out to grab it and everything sort of... stops. You can't make it in time no matter how fast you are, even in your panic. You DON'T make it in time, but it doesn't matter, cuz the glass falls and it somehow doesn't shatter. And you just... sit there. The something that could've been (somehow) didn't happen. That's how it was for me. I just sat there like an idiot, driving down the straight shot road to the river. Like I almost hadn't killed her.

I didn't say anything for a minute.. The car felt like it was moving itself while I watched. My forehead was burning up and I could feel a heavy knot form in my stomach. I started whispering under my breath "fuck" and "I almost killed her" over and over, just to release the pressure building inside. I couldn't yell. Teresa was still (SOMEHOW???) somehow still asleep. How could I explain what just happened? How I almost fucked it all up. Fuck, I coulda killed her. My brain felt like

3. The Feeling that Night is...

It's the same knot inside that binds insides together,
the same one that ties up this guilty forever,
waiting earnestly for closure
and whatever's left.

It took two blind eyes to feel desperation;
they're unable to search murky river basins
for the right question.

Only answers.

So I'll wait a little longer here,
and lick my wounds when she comes near.

The little knot within me
isn't going anywhere.

burnt egg. A headache throbbed to life. There was no fucking way I could wake Teresa up now. There's no way I can tell her now.

I was lost in my head until I was halfway across the river, only just realizing I had been watching the moonlight reflect off the chop of little waves for who knows how long. I was barely going 10mph, and I self-consciously started to speed up, but took my foot off the gas. Everything was so quiet and peaceful, enough to stop my cyclical thoughts of guilt. I cracked the window just a bit. I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath but it felt good to exhale, to breathe in the fall air and watch the river run. My headache started to come down, though the weight in my gut was still there. I can still feel it as I write, only a little less "there" than before.

I checked on Teresa, still sleeping. No one else was on the road, and I knew no one else would come along at that time of night. But I wasn't ready to go back, not yet. So I pulled over as close as I could on the narrow road and put the Jeep in park. I turned the lights off and put my hazards on, staring out the open window. I know, I should have just gone straight to Teresa's, but I needed starry sky and the riverside, at least for another minute. I heard some voices coming from the speakers. The volume was so low, I didn't remember Indigo King was still playing. Still watching the waves, I turned it up just a little bit. It was a slow jam, a sad song about a nice day. I hummed with the river's waves. She had been so close to dying. *We* were just another brain-dead second away from being pulled out of a ball of metal with the jaws of life. I hadn't thought about my own safety until then.

4. If only—

If only she hadn't fallen asleep. If she had been up, that Charger wouldn't have been so scary. There it is, high beams blinding my eyes, my hands turning the steering wheel. I'm alone here, no one can stop our two hunks of metal from slamming into each other as I slowly turn left, as they speed up and stare at the idiot who got in there way, no one, no one—

And suddenly there's another set of hands on the steering wheel. Teresa's hands are holding my own. She yelling out, "TURN JEFF, TURN," and suddenly I'm not alone. The engine roars to life we're sailing far away from those fucking idiots who almost coulda killed us. Teresa and I laugh about it the whole way home. We're both giggling like it's an inside joke we've known for years but never gets old, and she says, "God, can you imagine what would've happened if we didn't make it out in time?"

It's a little scary to think about, we both agree, but somehow it's not so scary. And the funniest part is, it's only when we're passing the riverside do we notice we're still holding each other's hand, no longer gripping the wheel anymore. And the little waves are so pretty, she can't help but ask if we can pull over and watch a little longer, and I can't help but say yes. Rocking gently away into the night like a lullaby.

I still wasn't totally convinced we had survived. I just couldn't relax, not with the shitstorm of questions rattling away inside. Was it my fault? Was it their fault? Would anything really get any better if I told her about any of this? There were so many more good times ahead for us! It couldn't be the end...right? I had seen Teresa angry before, but never at me. I'm afraid of it, that disappointing look that turns to resentment and hate on a familiar face. I had seen it with Dad, with Alexis, with Miranda. Not her. Not yet.

What's worse: her knowing or me never telling? What would be worse for me?

And right then, the last lyrics spoke through the speakers, clear enough to cut through the noise in my head: "Potato, Tomato, Potato, Tomato." The CD ended. I almost shook her awake right then. My hands reached for her shoulder but stopped by her face. I could feel the knot in my stomach wriggle. Suddenly a loud horn blared from behind us as light enveloped the car. My body jumped and I grabbed Teresa's arms as I looked over my shoulder. Someone was driving past, swerving back into our lane. Teresa shot up and squeaked in shock, her shoes kicking the dashboard in panic. I probably looked like a fucking lunatic, hovering over her with my hands while we were stopped on the side of the road. I was a fucking lunatic. My guts were tight as a noose. Teresa looked through the window and saw the car speeding away as their music faded. She rubbed her eyes and stifled a yawn.

Nice Day
By: Indigo King

Nice day
Nice day
For a walk outside

Purple flowers in an open field
I never noticed how the foliage feels
I never told you how you make me feel
I gotta make this right
Water flowing' like a reel to reel
Chop the analog and steal the wheel
It doesn't matter don't you know that dear
If you don't take your time

Nice day
Nice day
Nice day
For a walk outside

Every shadow is an empty room
I was hoping that you'd get here soon
You never got to see the flowers bloom
I really sympathize
As I wander passed the old oak tree
Every breath is like a symphony
Better listen to it carefully
Cause it'll save your life

Nice day
Nice day
Nice day
For a walk outside

(Instrumentals)

Potato, Tomato...[Repeated]

“Jesus Jeff, where are we? Why are we parked on the side of road?” She looked around for a minute before her eyes came to the night sky. “God the stars are bright tonight.” She suddenly turned to me, grinning. “Did you stop here so we can stargaze?” She looked so happy. My chances—Potato Tomato, Potato Tomato. Answers aren’t repeated often. I let it be, smiled and nodded as I gave her a kiss. We looked up at the half-moon sky, holding hands under the sunroof for a few minutes. I tried not to stare as she yawned. It was getting late. It was a miracle Dad hadn’t called yet. Time to go. I turned off my hazards and flicked on my lights. There wasn’t anything left to do anyways. I put the car in drive and moved on slowly, trying to avoid the potholes as I made my way across the riverside.

I dropped off Teresa and came home at 3. Dad was still up, the light in his room on. When I knocked on the door, the lights shut off with no answer. Giving me the cold shoulder until he figures out how to punish me I guess. I left the keys on the kitchen table and went straight to my room. And now it’s 6 in the morning. The sun is starting to rise. Today is bowling day. I can barely keep my eyes open. Fuck me, I really followed Miranda’s advice. Shit.

-Jeff Halloway

-September 24th, Saturday

I don't think it's legal to drive anywhere as tired and anxious as I was today. Obligation is a powerful motivator, and we're obligated to go bowling on Saturdays. Miranda started doing this thing to fuck with me and Alexis. She'd "drop" her scorecard in the lane when one of us was up to bowl and shriek, "Oh shit, don't run over my card!" Then Miranda would kinda scramble over to grab it and bump into our backs while she bent down to pick it up. It's only funny maybe once, and that's being generous. By the fifth time even Dad told her to sit the fuck down already. I don't know a lot of therapists but I got a feeling even the worst of them are funnier than Miranda. I mean, if you can call her a therapist...and of course, who ever bowls the lowest has to pay for the lanes. My wallet has never felt more full of empty air. And god I'm so hungry. We can't eat until dinner, whenever that's gonna happen tonight.

The alarm clock in my room said I slept for at least a couple of hours last night but it doesn't feel like it at all. My body is sore all over, especially my ribs. Then again that's probably not from exhaustion. Alexis kept poking me in the gut during the game cuz I was falling asleep on the bench. How does a girl half my size pack such a punch? Pure distilled hatred. "Blood runs thicker than water" my ass. At least she drove back, thank god. Just looking at the scuff marks on the dash made me want to vomit up the lunch I didn't have. I don't think anyone else saw 'em. At least I'm back home now. I haven't had a chance to really think about what happened. Maybe I should be feeling worse, but besides that nagging feeling in my gut, I don't feel all that bad. Then again, I haven't talked to Teresa since then... maybe she can wait a while.

-September 28th, Wednesday

██████████*

-September 29th, Thursday

I almost told her but I can't. Even on the phone it's too hard. I mean for God's sake, she could have at least had the decency to wake up before she's about to die! I'm stuck. My lips won't move to make the words, my throat gets dried out and I break out into a sweat just thinking about it. I can't go through with confessing but I have to tell her eventually or the knot in my gut is going to turn into an ulcer. It's not like I can go to Cassie about this. Besides Miranda anyways. God, I have therapy tomorrow. Imagine what life would be like if I had a normal person in charge of my mental health. Imagine someone spending real money for a professional instead of someone whose office is their own living room. Imagine that.

If I can't talk to a real professional, then I guess this journal's the next best thing. It's too much, trying to vocalize this shit. If I don't want to lose Teresa or my mind, then this journal is the best way I can tell her. And now that I have the chance, why stop there? Everything can be out in the open when I'm finished. No more secrets between us. Oh god, I can't let Miranda know I actually took her advice, she'd never let me hear the end of it. Not to mention if Alexis or Dad found this...

*Redacted Text reads as follows: “It Can’t Be Done. “

Phone Call Conversation with Teresa:

Teresa: Baby? Everything ok?

Me: Ye-yeah sure. Why wouldn’t it be?

T: No no, no reason. Just wanna make sure my man’s holding up alright.

Me: Oh! Yeah, things are...things are nice. I just wanted to call you, say hi.

T: I didn’t think I’d hear from you today, you’ve been busy all week. I mean we did see each other a few days ago though, and I’m still working on my research paper for—

Me: A week ago. It’s been a week ago, to be exact.

T: Oh? Right. God it’s been a week already? Fuckin nuts... So what’s Friday like for you?

Me: (...) Oh, sorry, I’m just thinking about stuff I have to get done tomorrow. Work and all that.

T: Mhmmm, it sucks you always have to go in on Fridays. Can’t they have someone fill in for you sometimes? You already work like, everyday. All the time.

Me: I know...

T: Well I’m still seeing you Sunday, right?

Me: (...)

T: Jeff?

Me: Uhm, Teresa?

T: What’s up?

Me: I got to go. I’ll definitely see Sunday at the usual time. I— I love you. {CALL

ENDS}

-September 30th, Friday

Every Friday is therapy day. Today's session revolved around this "exercise in forward thinking." Pretty sure that's actually a corporate term made by companies so they can give people 39 hours a week instead of 40 and not pay them full-time, but I think Miranda forgot where she heard the term. So anyways, we did a thing called forward thinking today. She took out this big whiteboard, and with her sh-sh-shaky hands, she put a big red dot in the middle. "This right here is you. You are the present, the now, the happening." She made a fat line with the fucked end of the marker going left and some of the juice spilled out to her hand. She wiped her mouth after that, which smeared red marker dye into her canyon of facial creases. I'm pretty sure it took the entire session for it to dry out. It looked like watery jam was leaking from the sides of her cheeks.

After she was done with her face painting, she returned to the white board and pointed at the line she made, which was currently bleeding very slowly onto the floor. "And this line is where you're headed." She made a circle at the end of the line and wrote a big "J." "Now imagine is THIS circle is where you, Jeff, want to end up ten or so years down the line. So where do you want to be in ten years?" That threw me off guard. I was expecting her to just tell me the red line represented fear of castration and move on (One of dad's favorite suggestions to her apparently. I found some old sketchbooks lying around with her notes that often had some of my dad's handwriting scribbled in the corner). I don't remember exactly what I wanted to say* but I took too long to answer. Miranda chose football player as my goal. I hate football. I'm pretty sure my legs would snap too if I ended up getting tackled. So in ten years, my goal is to be a self-loathing football

*When I had originally written this entry, I had an answer for Miranda. I've always wanted to be the head of my own moving company. I know that sounds weird, especially since I'm not exactly in good shape or anything, but it always felt like the ideal kind of work. Obviously it wouldn't be a huge company or anything, more local. Whenever I worked odd jobs for cash, usually older people needed the most help. Sometimes it's a crap shoot with elderly folks, I'll admit. There's a lot geezers that come into the supermarket or the hardware store and make complete asses of themselves, and I wouldn't want to work for them. On the other hand, nice old people always have amazing stories and are just really interesting. I also never got to meet my grandparents growing up, so I've always been excited to meet other people's grandparents. And I mean, helping someone move stuff around their house or move into a new house sounds like fulfilling work. I don't like jobs that make you think all the time, I'd rather work with my body. Just feels more natural to me. But I wasn't going to share all this with Miranda, not for one of her stupid ass therapy sessions.

player with shot to shit legs, I guess. To be fair, it's a funny image, but to be real, she's a cunt.

Anyways, she then puts a couple of little stars along this wet red line she's made, and she says, "If your goal is to be a football player, what are some things you should avoid?" She then started writing some stuff down, of course not waiting to hear what I had to say. The first one was "bodily harm" followed by "debt" and ending on "hubris," which was weird to see her write. I coulda sworn she didn't know how to spell that word. The bodily harm one was also pretty weird for her, but whatever, Doc's a quack. She then turns back to me and JABS the bloody marker at me from across the room, which sends a dye blot almost directly in my mouth. I didn't know the raspberry scented red markers were shit-flavored. "NOW," she said, "what are some steps you can take to stop these potential roadblocks so you can achieve your dream of becoming a football?" Besides her calling me a football player, the first half of her "exercise" was pretty fucking lame. I mean, what stops bodily injury? Not playing football. That's like the #1 most dangerous sport they let you play in most schools, unless you're into hockey. That was my first answer, which she didn't write on the board but she wrote something in her notes instead. The second answer I gave was "working hard." That was good enough to go on the board.

The final answer was actually a problem though. I didn't want to start giving dumb answers, not yet at least. If you do it too early, Miranda gets nasty and insults you the remainder of the time you have left, and it's not very interesting. She loves to do that. I don't know many 80 year olds, but I'm pretty sure they aren't all like her, waiting to watch people squirm or mess up. As much as I hate taking her questions seriously, I

gave it a shot. I told her “humility beats hubris,” which she accepted with another note in her notepad. “Now that I’ve identified these problems and given solutions, I’ve shown you forward thinking! Now, I want YOU to think of a real goal for yourself this upcoming year, and we’ll identify some potential roadblocks.” She erased the board with her sleeve (which used to be white, and became pink) and started writing a new thing. At this point, I was getting annoyed. One of her favorite tactics started with this move. Sure enough, I said “finding my own place to live,” which she shook her head at. I tried a couple more times, but I already smelled the reveal coming, so I shut my mouth. After a minute of silence, she said, “Well if you’re having trouble coming up with a good start, we can try...this!” She blocked the board from my vision and jabbed away some more, until she revealed her handiwork. “Taking care of my father.” I mean, how much more fucking obvious can you get?

I thought maybe she actually wanted to be a therapist today, but clearly that wasn’t on the agenda. I said that wasn’t fair. She yelled it was. I yelled back. This went on for a couple of minutes. Eventually my voice got tired, but she’s got years of practice shouting over clients, which I have to give her credit, she’s got vocal stamina for an old lady. After it all died down, she huffs and raises her bony little hands up in the air. Her fingers are wriggling like she’s already cl-cl-cla-clacking away at her typewriter and sending a report off to my Dad about how I’m a “corrupted mind” or whatever. “Identify a roadblock” she commands. Oh. Joy. I answered everything as quickly as I could. She was barely able to write anything down because I kept blurting out things left and right, just the stupidest shit I could think of. And eventually she got sick of it, so she just starts writing shit in her notes, and since she’s stopped writing on the board, the marker freely leaking by itself on

Client: Jefferey Halloway

Session #: Week 40, 2015

Weight: LARGEly the same. Michael's dietary plan has proved to be workable.

Today's Execution Style:

Forward Thinking Ex.!!: Goal to be Football Player

1. Bodily harm
2. Debt
3. Hubris

Reaction and Conclusions:

- Patient: HOSTILE MOOD
- TRiggered in part by feeling of obligation to father

Notes for Future: The October 15th anniversary is fast approaching, which means patient is likely to have an emotional outburst of some sort soon. Approaching the subject with a delicate touch will be key. Debating how to relate back to Michael and stay within our agreement.

the floor. I picked it up and started writing down anything that came to my head, and just like that, Miranda called the meeting over, and she starts shoving me out the door, her wrinkly hand poking out her pink sleeve like a snapping turtle's head.

-October 3rd, Monday

It's been a week and three days since I last saw Teresa, and since The Thing happened. We went out a little later than usual, only cuz my stupid phone has been getting more and more janky lately. It drops calls now and the battery tends to die kinda quickly once it's half charged. They say smartphones break down fast so it's actually a little more reliable to have a flip phone. I've never had a smartphone and maybe people who have them think they're right but I'd say they're very fucking wrong. I'd love to trade up for a better phone but I don't have the money. Whatever! Even if I had something like that, Dad would take it away instantly. There's no way he'd let me have something that expensive, or that high tech. Our house is all about the manual way [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]*

Once my phone finally started working, Teresa and I watched some bad movies at her place. Her mom bought us pizza so we got to munch on food while we laughed at Suburban Sasquatch.*Teresa's parents still seem to like me well enough, and I genuinely don't understand why sometimes. Well, at least they act like it. Teresa went off them once cuz they said something about my weight a couple months after we started dating. They didn't say anything too bad, and they're not wrong. I'm fat whether I like it or not. I try not to think about it when I'm at Teresa's but I don't eat in front of them whenever I

*Redacted Text reads as follows: “I don’t even have my own debit card, all my money is linked to my Dad’s account ever since Mom left and I had to switch over to his.”

*We started watching bad movies together a few weeks into us dating. Suburban Sasquatch was created in 2004 by the brilliantly horrible mind of David Wascavage. The only reason I know about is because Teresa happens to collect bad movies. She’s been doing it ever since she was kid apparently. A fact I never told Teresa— I couldn’t stand watching those kinds of movies. But she liked them... so I tried my best to suffer through them and laugh. I don’t think she ever caught on.

can help it, and I'm hyper aware about how much I'm eating when we all have dinner together.

It took a few hours before the knot in my stomach got unbearable and I had to leave her place. Obviously the tension in the room was high from the start but the longer I lounged next to her in bed, the more it grew. If there was ever a time to grab her face, pull her in tight, and say what had to be said, it was then. The funny thing is, the more I want to tell her, the less I think I can. Maybe that's a sign. If just confessing is going to take this much out of me, making a move later on would be better after all, when there's a full journal to back me up. Yeah, it's better this way. I had to leave quick anyways, my curfew was nearly up. Some people have work in the morning.

-October 7th, Friday

I went back to see Miranda again. She dropped the "forward thinking" techniques this time. In her infinite senile wisdom, we have regressed to "backwards thinking." I'm assuming she wanted to say hindsight but forgot that:

- A. There's a word for that, and
- B. Backwards thinking sounds incredibly stupid, even for her.

I know I've never worked a corporate job in my entire life and never had any other therapist besides Miranda, but I think her sessions are closer to business transactions than therapy. Scheduled one after the other, the same thing every week but with a new gimmick, no progress ever made. It's the safes, least appealing time-sink ever. It's honestly depressing to rehash, even to myself. *

*Here's another reason why I don't like go into detail about Miranda's meetings—I actually have to think about her as a person. I mean it's easy enough to just vent about her being a dumbass, or how she loves to take credit for techniques other people come up with, or all the creepy shit she does with my Dad, but I mean, I've known her since I was like 6 years old. She's been around as long as I could remember, and she was my Dad's therapist for even longer. Every time I walk in, she always takes the first five minutes to go on about family memories, like the bowling nights. She's been there every week. She used to always have these little jawbreaker candies that were always slightly stale but they weren't opened, so what kid in their right mind is going to complain about free candy? I know we didn't. Alexis and I loved seeing her, before she started psychologizing everyone. And we used to like her. I liked her. She's like the aunt that became my own personal bitch of an evil stepmother.

-October 15th, Saturday

I've been trying to think of a way to introduce this, but I just can't so I'm gonna start at the top and work my way down. I know Teresa still doesn't know about what happened to my Mom, mostly because I never let her near this shithole. And the lying...I can't forget that. So I might as well get this over with now. A year ago today, Mom left us. Dad's been hiding out in his room all day and refuses to say anything to anybody. It's not like I'm feeling any different. Alexis tried knocking a few times on his door. He threw his boot at the door and she got the hint. Honestly he's doing us all a favor. If he wants to stay out of our way today, then let him.

She didn't tell anybody, didn't give Alexis or Dad or me a hint. She just took her car and suitcase and left. It was on a Saturday: bowling day. Mom's Mitsubishi* at this point was already long dead, still rusting away in the backyard with its parts flung around in weird spots.

Dad rolled out of bed around two, an hour before we were supposed to meet Miranda. Alexis was in her room getting ready and Dad was in the shower. I hadn't seen Mom much all morning, she just kinda puttered around the house. She was humming a tune that I couldn't place while I munched buttered toast.

"Jeffy, hand me that would you?" She pointed at her car keys. I wiped my hands and passed them over, and she held them between her forefinger and thumb like something icky. "Thank you." That's the last thing said to me. Seriously. She headed down the

*It's weird to think that I used to have more options on how to get to work besides my bike or borrowing the Jeep. There have been other cars in our family, most of them strictly off limits to me. Dad's Jeep lasted for years and years, and Mom used to have an actually good little Mitsubishi, lime green with a white stripe on the back. The white stripe was part of a company car logo that my dad hadn't bothered to paint over, but she always said it made it look sporty. It definitely wasn't what most people would say qualified as "sporty," yet we loved it. Mom took extra good care of it, making sure to change the oil herself. Before they met, Mom used to work for her aunt as a mechanic. Unfortunately she could only do so much with her skills without tools. She sold most of them years ago for cash when she had me and Dad insisted she stay at home and not have to work anymore. "Bad for her back," he said. Bad for our wallets too.

Once that car went bye bye, we all had to share the Jeep and instead of Mom driving everywhere, Alexis became designated driver. Dad couldn't drive, or he wouldn't, it's hard to say. He never liked how I drove anyways which suited me fine, and Alexis didn't mind. Being his personal chauffeur meant no insurance payments, no gas money, and all for the low price of endless servitude. Alexis always surprised left the car smelling like body odor and I don't know how. Even if she's taken a shower right before jumping in, she still brought a rank stench with her.

I still wish we had an extra car back then. There was a time when I had a lot of extra cash saved up and went car-hunting. Nothing for a while until one day, I found an ad for an old ass 1999 Toyota Corolla in the newspaper. It was about 9 miles away so on my one day off that week, I set out early in the morning. My fat ass was about to die by the time I got there. I didn't bother to

steps to the front door and stuck a piece of paper on it. I munched away on my toast, and she slammed the door behind. I applied another layer of butter. Next thing I heard was the car start and the wheels moving slowly over the driveway. I got up from the table and looked out the living room window.

She was gone. Mom was a puff of wind that blew away in the breeze. Of course I didn't know that then. I just thought she went out to get something. Except it was kinda weird. Dad never liked it when Mom went out by herself, and he wouldn't let her go out without checking with him first. She was supposed to go bowling with all of us, and she was supposed to be driving. The back of my mind started churning with thoughts, but how could I know Mom had just up and left us all, never to come back? I finished my toast and went into the living room. Dad got out of the bathroom thirty minutes later. Strolling into the living room with the standard blue polyester jumpsuit and shiny black bowling shoes, he whistled a tune. I recognized it as the same tune Mom had been humming just before she left. He glanced out the window, did a double take. His eyes flicked over to me sitting in the arm chair and asked where Mom was.

"She left half an hour ago. I thought you knew." He stared harder, squinting. He hadn't shaved and the whiskers on his face gleamed with moisturizer.

"No...no I didn't know." He turned back to the window and peered around. "Go to your room and I don't want to hear a thing." I asked if we were still going bowling. I didn't have a clue. He started to say something, but his voice cracked. He coughed

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Once Mom left, we all had to share the Jeep and instead of her driving everywhere, Alexis became the designated driver. Dad couldn't drive, or he wouldn't, he never gave a straight answer. He never liked how I drove anyways which suited me fine, and Alexis didn't mind. Being his personal chauffeur meant no insurance payments, no gas money, and all for the low price of endless servitude. Alexis always surprised left the car smelling like body odor and I don't know how. Even if she's taken a shower right before jumping in, she still brought a rank stench with her.

I still wish we had an extra car when I was working so much. There was a time when I had a lot of extra cash saved up and went car-hunting. Nothing for a while until one day, I found an ad for an old ass 1999 Toyota Corolla in the newspaper. It was about 9 miles away so on my one day off that week, I set out early in the morning. My fat ass was about to die by the time I got there. I didn't bother to tell the owner why I was so out of it, he

and squinted at me, pointing at my bedroom door. “Go,” he said, almost calmly. That was new for him. I actually listened. I got up and started to go, when my eye caught the door. I forgot about the note.

“By the way Dad, she left something. On the door.” I kept walking, but I heard his boots slowly thunk against the floorboards a couple minutes later. He hobbles sometimes, when his foot acts up. Other times when he’s just upset with the world and his body fights back. I could hear how gnarled up his back was today by the weight of his stomps. He shredded the envelope open, sending little shivers over me with each muffled rip. Silence for a while. There was the occasional rustle of paper as pages turned but I couldn’t hear anything else afterwards.

I checked the digital clock I kept hidden in my room. It read 2:56. Almost a whole half hour has gone by. This was unprecedented. I mean, we’ve never been late for bowling, not even by a minute. I’ve missed doctor’s appointments for annual bowling shoe sales at Payless. Something felt very wrong. I poked my head out the door. Dad’s stuff was laid out on the couch, untouched. He was standing by window, Mom’s letter crumpled loosely in his hand. It crinkled quietly, but I could still hear it in the silence. I swear everyone was holding their breath, waiting for a phone to chirp alive with Mom on the other line. The air felt thin, like an invisible pressure was squeezing my lungs just a little, until I was out of breathe. I flicked my eyes toward Alexis’s room. Just barely visible through the door crack, I could make out her out, staring at Dad. We locked eyes for a second.

clearly pitied me enough when he saw the bike and the sweat soaked shirt on my back. He was a little older than me, but young enough to have some sympathy. I gave him what I had and drove back home happy, loving my baby blue piece of shit junker. The steering was loose, the engine rattled, but it worked and it was mine.

And then two weeks later, it was really junked. I was sleeping in my room when I heard a car engine gargle its last breath. I looked out the window and saw someone in a bathrobe and hiking boots scratching his head over the open hood of my car. My father, in his infinite wisdom, mixed water and transmission fluid together while changing the oil and killed it. When I asked why he'd do that, he stormed into the house. Later I heard him and Mom arguing about "being emasculated in front of his own son." Go figure.

Mom's Mitsubishi died a couple years later in a completely different but equally stupid way. Our backyard happens to slope inward to the middle, and when it rains, that part tends to flood. Overtime it's flooded and flooded so much that even a little rain makes a pretty sizeable pool out there. It was August and Dad decided he wanted our driveway car-free that summer so he could have garage sales and raise some money for a Vegas trip with Miranda. Well one day Dad parks the Mitsubishi in the backyard and wouldn't you know it, there was a flash flood later that night. The water soaking into the engine block, the interior, inside the lights, into the exhaust, basically everywhere. The Jeep of course had survived since it was high off the ground (lucky lucky). By morning, Mom declared the car officially dead. It remained there for a long ass while too.

Her green eyes became jealous slants as she stared. I forced myself to breathe low and slow through my nose, shutting the door noiselessly.

We waited for hours while Dad went into the kitchen and made calls to Dr. Miranda and whoever else he talked to those days. I still hadn't taken off my bowling shoes, in case this has all been some elaborate test. I had forgot to put the chair behind my door while I was waiting. As I watched the hands on the alarm clock tick, I heard a door creak. I turned and watched a shadow quietly walk up to the door, gently opening and closing it behind. Alexis came in and started roaming around my room, which made me uncomfortable.

“What are you doing here?” I asked her bluntly.

“I didn't sneak in your room so we can make-up and be friends Jeff-er-ey. But come on,” she whispered, pointing to the hallway. “Are we not going to talk about what's going on with Daddy and Mom right now?”

“I thought you knew what was going on. Aren't you the favorite?”

She huffed. “Look, I don't know everything. I have my bowling shoes on too ya know.” She pointed at her pair of near mint condition Pinkies and then at mine. “All I know is, you told Dad that Mom left a note on the door, and now it's 5:30 and we're still not at the bowling alley, the place we've gone EVERY Saturday since I was 15 and you were 10. So what's. Going. On?” Me, being interrogated??? Nothing new. But being questioned about Mom? That was making me squirmy.

“Look, I know as much as you do. She'll have to come back. You really

think she'd just walk out without anything to say to him? She'll be back, just like every other time."

"Jeff, this isn't like the other times! She's never taken off on a Saturday, not like this. Not on bowling day! Don't you get it?"

I stood up and yelled as quietly as I could. "What's to get? You'd want to get away for a couple of hours too if you weren't such a brown-nosed asskisser!" Alexis laughed at me.

"If you're going to be in denial about this, then I'm not going to waste my time here." She stormed off, slamming the door after shooting me a look I still don't get. That didn't matter right now. Dad had been distracted for awhile, but I knew he'd check on me now.* I crept into my closet and waited. A few seconds later, he barged in (predictably). You could hear the phone in his hand yammering on and on, even after he told it to shut up. I peeked through the cracked frame of the shut closet door and held my breath to get a better look. He had his shirt off for some reason, so his potbelly jiggled as he stomped around. He had on his classic baby blue suede bowling shoes too, ones from Mom. The soles chirped a lot, and loudly. I inhale and exhaled to his footsteps, hoping his noises would cancel out mine. He must have known where I was already. His eyes kept scanning the room and landing on the closet door before ping ponging away.

"Jeff?" he whispered. I closed my eyes. "Jeff?" he breathed again, his body pointing at the door. He waited and I waited too. He took a step forward. "Audrey—Mom is out for a little while. You don't mind that. She'll be back around soon." He was right in

*Since you've never really been to my house, I might as well explain. The way our rooms are set up, everyone who lives in our house is crowded into one hallway. Each bedroom is connected to a hallway, and all our rooms are adjacent to each other. The walls are pretty ok but no matter what, we can always sort of hear what the other person is doing. That's why whenever I have anything that needs to be hidden, I hide it very late at night when everyone is asleep . Really, anytime I could get more than a few minutes of privacy (which is a much smaller window of time than it sounds) I'd be hiding something

Making noise wouldn't be such a problem except Dad HATES it when anyone wakes him up or disturbs him while he's in his room. Alexis and I both know this, so whenever we really need to fuck with the other, slamming a door really hard or stomping around is a good way to get his attention. Then you just blame someone else and watch the fireworks.

front of the door now, all he had to do was open it. “Jeff, I’m talking to you,” he mumbled. There was scratching and sliding sounds on the door, probably his stomach leaning on the wood as he breathed. “Just come out, I want to ask you- well I need to know.” I had never gotten away with this much before. Usually by now, he’d have hauled me out by the collar, but he just kept standing there, whispering my name. The phone was still talking, louder since it was next to the door. My ear was glued to the door as I listened for the voice on the other line.

“...what’s the kid going to know that you don’t? Your carrying on would be funnier on a psychological level if I weren’t sitting by myself in an empty bowling alley. Listen Michael! You weren’t hard enough on her. She’s gone—”

“SHUT UP ALREADY, YOU QUACK! Jeff, get out here!” He had lost it. The door shook hard as Dad sent a kick through it. His foot slammed into my head right behind the half-broken closet. The door ripped itself off its hinges as it crashed on top of me. He was so heavy. Even heavier when his foot followed me down to the floor, stepping on my face. I still couldn’t see him behind the broken door. My wrist was bleeding. Blacking out from the pain was probably the best option for me but I screamed instead. My legs kicked and found two beanpole legs to hit until he suddenly got off me. The door followed his leg as he ripped it off of him. I was still screaming. At that point Alexis came in, and even she looked scared, scared enough to kneel next to me. Dad still held the phone in his hand, belly jiggling up and down, stumbling backwards onto my bed as he stared into space. That was the first time I ever saw him cry before.* His tears ran over his face as his body heaved. I was crying too. My eyes saw watery triplets.

“Daddy! What did you— oh my god is that in his arm?” Alexis picked up my bleeding wrist and pulled out a long splinter of broken door, drippy and red. “He needs a hospital, he’s probably concussed or something.” She tried to pick me up but she landed back down on her ass. I couldn’t move. All three mirages of Alexis stormed over to my three Dads and started yelling and pulling at his arms while he cried. I watched the sawdust kick around in the air as I conked out. I heard more screaming and felt someone poke my stomach hard but it was too late.

I don’t know how long after, but I finally woke up. It was twilight. I was not at home; I was in a car, but not our Jeep. It smelled like old people and blood, the blood probably mine. There was an icepack wrapped around the right side of my cheek, which I could no longer feel. Luckily, my eyes were only seeing double now. Alexis was next to me, watching. Her eyes were red and she smelled like anxious B.O..

“Good, you’re awake. You have to stay awake from now on. We’re going to the hospital. Dr. Miranda is here too.” I actually sat up a little and looked to make sure she was really driving. I remembered how bad her eyes were in an office setting and tried to forget she was there. I asked for Dad.

“He called the cops. On himself. He didn’t want to get to the hospital and explain what happened to you without being cleared first. Miranda volunteered to drive so we wouldn’t have to take an ambulance, and he’s at the precinct.” She stared out the window as the car took the ramp onto the highway. We sat there in silence for awhile. I would nod off for a second before she poked my hard in the gut to keep me up. Miranda’s driving

*Dad made it a point to never cry in front of any of us. He also made sure none of us grew up as crybabies. When Alexis and I were kids and we started whining, or if we got hurt and we started crying, he would turn his back and straight up not respond until we stopped. To this day, he'll still do the same thing to me if he doesn't think why I'm sad is "a good enough excuse." It's funny though, and I didn't notice this until now. After he cried that day, he wouldn't do that anymore. Maybe he'd insult you or whatever (hell the reason I was crying half the time was usually because of him in the first place) but at least he didn't just ignore you until you swallowed your emotions whole.

was awful. She either drove like a lunatic or rode the brakes until they squeaked, and her handling was non-existent. She tried to keep us entertained with fun facts about Freud but she eventually settled for humming. She didn't have a radio in her car, but the ride wasn't as long as it could have been. Before we got to our exit, Alexis finally broke the silence. She scrunched next to my ear and whispered, "Why Jeff? Why didn't you just answer him? I could hear you guys. He was being nice, to you. Didn't you want that? Why won't you two... can't you two be nice? She left us all, not just you and me. Him too." I didn't know what to tell her. She had to blame me, even for this? I just sat there watched the twilight go by outside the window.

We pulled into the hospital lot somehow still alive. Miranda killed the engine and told us that Alexis would wait in the car while she got the paramedics, and that she would handle all the questions the doctors would ask. "You just feel the best you can and be nice!" She left in a hurry. Alexis unbuckled my seatbelt and hers. I had something to say before they came.

"She might have left, but he stayed—"

Alexis nodded. "Exactly. He's the one here for us."

"No, no. He might have stayed, but he," pointing to my swollen, ice-packed face, "he stayed to do this. And he's not here Alexis. You're here. I'm here. Even his psychiatrist is here. But Dad... isn't. He left to save himself from trouble." She didn't answer back.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]*

*This might not seem like anything important, but this was bigger deal than I cared to admit then (which is partly why I took out of the original entry in the first place) but there was more to it than that. At the time, I genuinely thought she said “sorry,” so one day I cornered her in the kitchen while Dad was busy dicking around in his room. When I asked what she had said during the car ride, she played dumb until I kept asking over and over. Eventually she got of me pestering her all day long and she told me what she had actually said under her breath. She called me shit head. I still have a feeling she lied about that, but I was pretty pissed anyways.

*Redacted Text reads as follows: “I don’t know if my eyes were lying to me, but I thought I saw her mouth ‘sorry’ before the paramedics came and took me away.”
see out one eye.

The story after that was not much better. They took a look at my face and my wrist and bandaged both up. I had a minor concussion, my jawbone had a hairline fracture, and the right side of my face bruised up bigger than a can of Coke. They had asked how I was hurt, but Miranda stepped in and started explaining what my Dad had done “by accident” and that he should be heading here with the police. It might have been an accident, but the results are the same. Still I played along and nodded, and they “ahhh’ed” and nodded back while Miranda kept talking. Alexis meanwhile was ignoring me, her head buried in her notebook as she jotted down things the doctors were saying. Finally, Dad arrived. His head was bent down, eyes not looking to meet mine. Two cops were tailing him closely, keeping his arms locked. That’s when I noticed that he was cuffed. The doctors left the room.

The female cop on the left asked Alexis to step outside to “answer some questions.” Alexis agreed, leaving Miranda, my Dad, and me with the guy cop. He started to ask me questions. Miranda tried to butt in, but the officer shot her down. Dad finally looked up, nodding to her to leave it be. His eyes were bloodshot red and his face was blotchy. She sat down in the doctor’s chair and sulked. The cop asked me a couple of questions, asking if I was awake enough, what my name was, how many states there are. After passing his concussion test, he told me what Dad had told him.

“Your father here came into the station and said he accidentally kicked you. Is this true?” I said yes. “And your father says you were in the closet when he kicked the door down, which is how he stepped on you. Is that true? I said yes. “He also said your wrist was cut from the door. Is this true?” I nodded. “Why were you in the closet?”

“Because I didn’t want to see him.”

“Were you afraid he was going to hurt you? Did he threaten to hurt you?” I said at the time, I wasn’t scared and he made no threats. My jaw was killing me answering questions but bared through it. I tried not to move my face much as I talked. Though his head sank lower for every answer I gave, Dad didn’t take his eyes off the ground. Miranda tried to get his attention, but she shouldn’t have; he was blank to everything but the questions. He finally ran out of things to ask and the female officer came back in the room with Alexis soon after. They nodded at each other for a moment, whispering to each other while we waited. Miranda picked at her shoes a lot, grumbling about something. The cops turned to Dad. They said their investigation had been concluded, and they determined the case to have been an unintentional accident, “though one with unfortunate results” as the male cop put it. Therefore, they would keep this incident on record as an isolated incident* that warranted no further investigation. “That is, unless Jeff or Alexis has anything else to say at this time,” said the female officer. She looked to Alexis, and to me. We both looked at each other, deer in twin headlights for a second.

She spoke first: “No, nothing else to say.” The officer thanked her and turned back to me. I only nodded.

We didn’t leave the hospital until it was past midnight. Dad went back to the station to get fingerprinted while Miranda and Alexis sat in the lobby. I killed time in my room by

*After years of abuse and being a fucking asshole, I figured my Dad would have a long and interesting rap sheet. (Un)fortunately that's not exactly the case. Somehow, my father has only been to jail twice, both having to do with drinking too much and getting in trouble. However, Miranda let it slip multiple times that Dad constantly needed to be bailed out of tight spots. So how can he be getting in trouble but also hardly get caught. I couldn't figure it out for the longest time until I started looking through some old papers and junk from the attic. Dad or Miranda saved the article from the other arrest. He was stopped at the Jersey shore for public intoxication and resisting an officer, etc. Apparently he only got arrested in the first place for flipping over a street vendor's hot dog cart trying to run away from the cops.

What's interesting though is apparently, the article says Dr. Miranda happened to be in the courtroom that day and chatted with him for a while. One thing led to another and Miranda convinced him that he needed a therapist. From there, she was able to label Dad as a "emotional hysteric" and that "professional" authority helped him get out of situations he probably shouldn't have gotten away with. The article dated Dad's arrest in August of 1992, which means he probably didn't even know Mom then, and also explains how Miranda ended up becoming the family therapist for all these years. Bizarre.

clutching my face and moaning until the doctors brought painkillers. They wouldn't give me a prescription but whatever pills they gave me kept my face numb enough. It was Alexis's responsibility to watch me overnight and make sure I didn't get worse, in case I was concussed. I didn't do much talking, the doctors took care of that. Mostly though I sat in the hospital bed with my few hours (kinda) alone and thought about Mom. Where did she go and why didn't she tell us she was going to leave us? I still don't understand.

I knew we had a bad life, sure. We were stuck on Bay Street under the roof of a man who manipulated us one way or the other. I just thought that... I don't know what I thought. Maybe I figured that since Mom and I were in it together, we would finish things together. Alexis let me know where she stood in the car ride over... but she was right, as much I couldn't stand it. Mom left. She took what she wanted and left, which makes my life more worthless than one beat-up family Jeep.

Midnight came and went and so did we soon after, moseying down the road in Miranda's car as Alexis "slept" in the passenger seat. She turned toward the window once the paramedics hoisted me in and she didn't move or speak once the whole way home.

Miranda was uncharacteristically silent, though her driving was still just as shit, if not even worse in the dark roads. It took an hour to get home, stopping for gas and coffee on the way. I wasn't hungry but I ate a cinnamon bun anyways. I deserved a cinnamon bun after all that. Alexis paid for it. We pulled into our driveway and Dad was waiting for us. He was drinking out of a mug and staring off into the distance, a blanket over his shoulders. Alexis helped me to my feet as Miranda backed out the driveway wordlessly.

Once we were in, we all collapsed on the couch for a minute, exhausted. We didn't say a word. The cat clock told us it was 1:30 in the morning. We didn't answer. 1:40, 1:50, 2:00p.m. were all statues in the living room that watched while we waited for someone to say anything. Finally he broke the silence. Dad handed me the letter and said, "This is from your mother. You two oughta look for yourself." We read it together, in silence.

It said about what you would expect. She said that she was sorry for leaving, but she had to go. That she loved us, but she couldn't say where she was, or where she would be going, only that she was safe. The stolen Jeep wasn't mentioned, but Mom always said it was tacky to say sorry and goodbye at the same time. She also didn't tell us why she did it, but we could all guess. While we read, Dad moved to his armchair and watched us. He stank like sweat and regret, even from across the room. At the end of the letter, she wrote a little something for each of us. Alexis took hers before I could read it and went off to her room. Dad did the same. And I read the last thing my mother would ever give me.*

*This next entry is the note my Mom had left us the day she left. I didn't even know it was still lying around anywhere. I figured Dad would have thrown it away or burned it, in spite or n precaution, in case we ever found it. One thing my father couldn't stand was not knowing more than everyone else. Any chance he could, we were kept in the dark... Well a little while ago, Alexis found Mom's letter in a pile of junk mail and envelopes Dad had been hoarding in his room. It's funny how a buncha words on a piece of paper can mean so much, even when you didn't know what they said. I'm stalling again. The letter:

Dear Michael,

By the time you read this, I'll probably be out of town. Look, I'll drop whatever pretenses are between us and be frank. This was a long time coming. It was only a matter of time before you'd lose someone. Congratulations, you've made me abandon my own family. I hope you're really fucking proud. You've ruined our lives, you know that? There's people in the world who don't even have families and I'm sure even they wouldn't want you. You're going to ruin those kids Michael. Especially Jeff. He's probably already too far gone as it is. I used to have a future, something I was good at, friends to rely on, but you stole those things from my life. Told me to have kids when I should have been wary about the crazy fucking lunatic I was hitched to! And now I'm gonna steal your piece of shit car and take off, 25 years later. If you have any sense in your head, maybe you'll take the time and actually let your family do what they want them to do, instead of pressuring and manipulating them into doing your bidding like a slave master. Don't you ever come looking for me.

-Audrey

~~-October 22nd - October 25th~~

~~October 26th - October 29th~~

-October 31st, Sunday

It's been a while. I tried writing a couple of times but it wasn't coming to me right.

Maybe this whole journal thing isn't gonna work out after all. Everyday is the same knot in my gut keeping me down. I don't know. If there's nothing else left to say, then am I done? I guess not if I still feel the same way. Teresa and I are supposed to be going out later, Halloween and all that. Yeah, this could be the night and I just don't realize it yet. I'll bring it with me, just in case.

-November 1st, Monday

I couldn't deal. Teresa was throwing a Halloween party at her house while her folks were out of town. We were both going as Freddy Krueger (which was a pretty cute idea on her part cuz we had matching sweaters and she made both our costumes) but an hour before, I didn't feel right. My anxiety was through the roof for no reason and I couldn't shake it off. I started eating whatever Halloween candy we had in laying around in the house, except that just made me feel worse, so I ate more, until my stomach was heaving and I started to dry heave. I threw up and some unfortunately got on the sweater, so I had to ditch my costume last minute.

I showed up a half hour late sweaty, sick, terrified by the amount of strangers inside partying, and wearing nothing but jeans and t-shirt. Then I had to make up something to Teresa on the spot about the shirt getting ruined in the wash, and since she only had one

P.S. There's another two pages, something I left for the kids. At least let them have that much.

To My Jeffrey

Any leaf on the ground near winter
is destined to turn up in the spring.
Frozen to Earth, browned and fragile,
a song of biding time they will sing.

It starts muffled in the snow today,
but tomorrow it won't be so low.
We've been buried together my son,
yet the snowflakes don't feel all that cold.

We've waited our season of changing
to finally say our goodbyes.
The freeze won't feel as frozen my son
when wind will reveal our new lives.

But spring winds are always fleeting, and
I can't promise all that I can do;
Sadness is part of leaving when I'm
wondering what to do without you.

other sweater and it wouldn't fit me, I looked like a complete fucking jerk the whole night. AND I forgot the journal. I had a miserable time. Teresa tried to cheer me up but it only really helped so much. I barely spoke to anyone outside the people she introduced me to and I left as soon as I could. The universe has spoken loud and clear: this wasn't the right time. So I've decided I'm not going to force myself to write regularly anymore. I'll do it when it matter and that's when it happens. It'll be better this way.*

-November 19th

Thanksgiving won't be happening this year, for the first time since I can remember. Dad didn't say it outright, but all week he vaguely mumbled about not feeling well, and today he asked me for my end of the rent early. That means takeout from the Indian place on Mayflower Lane for him and Miranda tomorrow. I guess we aren't part of his holiday plans, which is typical. I can't help but feel (slightly) disappointed. Not that I want his company one way or another, but the family dynamics have been fucked up since Mom left. She would have started preparing the turkey by now, along with the roasted ham and stew. Thanksgiving was one of the few times of the year where things were less...depressing? I don't know how to say it but the mood was lighter.

When you have no family to hassle you besides the ones you live with everyday, the holiday stress doesn't hit as hard as it does for everyone else. It's all just the same level of anxiety over and over again. Well, it helped too that Dad never did any of the work, which sounds worse than actually was.

To My Alexis

Any leaf on the ground near winter
is destined to turn up in the spring.
Frozen to Earth, browned and fragile,
a song of biding time they will sing.

It starts muffled under frozen water,
but tomorrow it won't be so low.
We've been buried together my daughter,
yet the snowflakes don't feel all that cold.

We've waited our season of changing
to finally say our goodbyes.
The freeze won't feel as frozen my dear
when wind will reveal our new lives.

But spring winds are always fleeting, and
I can't promise all that I can do;
Sadness is part of leaving when I'm
wondering what to do without you.

*I lied. I called Teresa right before I wrote that entry. Right away, she had an attitude. One thing led to another and we started to argue for the first time. I had never gotten into a fight with Teresa, or anyone else really. That knot in my stomach was always lingering when I talked to her became 100 times worse, so I started apologizing and tearing up. We sort of made up. It was still tense. One thing that I was fixated on after the conversation was how bad that feeling of anxiety was. It got so bad, my legs almost gave out and I could barely catch my breath. It genuinely made me reconsider keeping the journal in the first place. In the end, I decided to compromise. I'd keep going but limit the number of entries. Less stress, less hassle, and less motivation for me to make her angry.

While he left us alone, Mom and Alexis and I would have enough room and privacy to cook at our own pace. We all had to learn how to cook since Dad refused to do anything “trivial” like that, as he liked to put it. I’m the worst cook out of all of us but I can still make a decent bowl of mashed potatoes.

My specialty was always keeping everything organized while we worked. I set the timers, taste-tested the food, had the important ingredients right where they need to be. Alexis was way better at cooking, even better than Mom was after a while, but Alexis wasn’t very interested in getting messy or making complex dishes, even though she always made a mess no matter what she did. She used to fight me over who got to make the green beans every year since it was the easiest dish to pull off.

Mom was our head chef, telling us how long to cook the sweet potatoes so they’d be soft and delicious and dicing up vegetables and meat into chunks that slowly simmered in the Crock Pot. Sometimes we’d listen to music while we worked, although we had to keep it low. A couple of years ago, Dad got sick of hearing the same radio commercial over and over again while we were cooking and he came in, yanked the cord out of the wall and stormed off with the radio.* Every year after, the music was barely audible.

But now Alexis and I are the only ones left in a house that doesn’t want a holiday celebration. It’s weird to look at an important date marked off months prior in the calendar become vacant, but I guess that’s what happens when your head chef goes.

*I had completely forgotten about that commercial until I read this, and I gotta say, I really regret being reminded of that trash. It's for this local magician that would do birthday parties in town. Here's how it went:

Oh yay! Hip hip hooray! My Magic Uncle's on his way!

Local Magic for kids at play? Hip Hip, hooray! Magic Uncle, come by today!

This single bit is repeated over and over again with this horrible music loop in the background. It's all cymbals and synth noises, it's very weird and extremely bad.

I would have woken up at 10 a.m. today, started cooking by 11. Instead, I'm in my pajamas watching cartoons, the next two days already taken off in advance. I hope Alexis is just as bored as I am. She's been quiet all day, and I know she's upset. Dad and Miranda never technically invited her, so even if she's not necessarily unwelcome, she'll be spending the rest of the holiday on her own, like me. Favorites only go so far on Bay Street, which is exactly what I'm banking on. If everything goes my way, maybe tomorrow will actually be a nice holiday, with a REAL family.

-November 27th (Friday After Thanksgiving)

Teresa, when you read this, I want you to know how sorry I am. You've invited me every year to Thanksgiving with your family before we even started dating, and for three years straight, I knew I wasn't ever going to say yes. Last year I had work, the year before an Aunt was coming over: all excuses. I had already told you two weeks ago that I'd be busy, though I can't remember what lie I had told you at the time. But as it got closer and closer to Thanksgiving. So I asked you if there was still a seat left at your Thanksgiving table, and you said yes. We were both happy that "my aunt had to cancel plans last minute," a lie that I'm glad you bought and wasn't too far off from the excuse I gave two weeks ago. I told Dad Dylan from work was sick and I had to go cover his shift. He didn't like it but he did like my holiday pay covering his takeout feast with Miranda, so he nodded and let me go with a look. There have only been so many times in my life that I've been excited to ride my bike over 15 miles, but this was one of them. Packed an extra set of clothes into my lunchbox when putting on my uniform, made sure I had extra money to buy a decent looking cake from Maria's bakery on the way.

The extra money for Dad's takeout was a problem. I decided to forget about it, at least not until the ride home. I'd have almost two hours to think up another lie, and knew Alexis would have cash lying around somewhere.

Guests were supposed to start coming to Teresa's around 4, but I couldn't leave then without getting caught. Dylan's shift didn't usually start on Thursdays until 5 and Alexis knew that. With nothing to do all day but sulk, her eyes were locked on my every move, waiting for an excuse to rat me out and get on Dad's good side. I was stuck for a while with nothing better to do so I dug around the room looking for loose change and any overlooked evidence of my real destination. I came up with a total of a \$1.34 and a clean room. Knew I wasn't going to find much money that hadn't been accounted for in my numerous room searches but I had to try, in case I was secretly rich and didn't know it yet... or something like that.

I triple-checked what I packed in my work lunchbox: nice polo, my only not for work khakis, extra underwear, deodorant. The only thing I couldn't take were my dress shoes for obvious reasons. I couldn't wear my work sneakers either since the soles had given out on both of them (just another expense to add to the list). By now it was five minutes past five, so it was safe(er) to leave. I had to settle for wearing my regular Converse, but at least my fucked up work sneakers could be an excuse. I peeked out my door. Dad's room was shut and locked, the sound of the *Sopranos* muffled behind it. Alexis's door was open just a crack, but it seemed like she wasn't peering out at the moment.

I walked carefully through the hallway to the front door and into the yard where my bike was chained up. The air was muggy after the last storm and I knew I was going to be a sweaty mess after pedaling through 16 and a half miles of this bizarre Indian summer heat.

“Jefferey! Where are you going?” Alexis shouted me from her window. I looked up and told her my boss called and I had to cover for Dylan. “Why aren’t you wearing your work shoes?” Only Alexis would ask what kind of shoes I was wearing to work. I mean, how did she even see them, her window is pretty far away from where the bike was chained. I told her to go into my room and take a look at my work shoes and see for herself, which I don’t think she liked as a response. She slammed the window down hard and disappeared. Couldn’t wait for her answer though, I was already an hour late and far behind. I pedaled as fast as my three speed would take me, turned onto Randall Lane and pedaled away before Alexis could call after me again.

It was just about sunset when I left, and the night came fast once I started. I prayed the batteries on my headlamp wouldn’t go out halfway there. I knew you could drive me back later but those winding roads to your house are bad, even during the day. The heat wasn’t so bad with the sun down but it was still humid and gross. The sweating started a mile in, and by three miles, I was huffing and puffing my way up the first hill. Normally I would’ve gotten off my bike and walked up those hills but I didn’t have any time. Miles 4-9 were mostly downhill plunges through the residential roads off 303, So I turned off my headlamp and prayed the battery would hold out. I’ve driven around this late

before, but it was a different kind of challenge with holiday traffic. There were a couple of cars that nearly nicked my tires pulling into their driveways, only half paying attention to the fat lump on the half-broken mountain bike.

I turned off the residential roads and headed into town to pick up a strawberry shortcake. Main Street looked nice this time of year, piles of leaves and little turkeys everywhere. Town square was holding a soup kitchen inside, the same one that Mom and Dad and I used to go to when Alexis was first born and we were always hungry. It's been ages since we've gone back, before Dad ever introduced us to Miranda while we waited on line for a hot meal.* I made my way to Maria's bakery thirty minutes before closing. They didn't have any shortcakes left, but I left with a big tray of fancy looking cookies. The tray didn't fit in my lunchbox so I had to balance everything on my handlebars. I coasted through the rest of the town uneventfully, reaching the city limits and restarting my journey to your house.

I was cursing my clunky disaster of a bike for most of the ride once I got past eleven miles. The metal frame is heavier than any bicycle oughta be, and I had two more hills to go up. I ran beside my bike for the second hill to conserve energy. On the third hill, my foot slipped and I lost my balance. My knees crashed hard into the asphalt as my lunchbox went flying up in the air, along with the tray of cookies. The lunchbox fell with a thud and burst open, spilling my clothes all over the street. A rain of cookies soon followed as they pulverized themselves into crumbs and dust on the asphalt. 20 dollars

*Back when I was around 5 or 6, there were a couple of days a month that we'd need to go to a food pantry. St. Peter's was the big Catholic church in our town and we'd go early in the morning for lunch. They'd hand out supply bags on weekends too— fruit, rice, packaged stuff, every two people per family got a big paper grocery bag to take home. The people were pretty nice there. I don't have too many bad memories of that place, besides, Dad moping since he'd have to talk to people and ask them for "handouts."

St. Peter's is the first place I remembered meeting Miranda. She'd come with us on weekends and eat lunch together. And then Alexis and I started to go to her office for family counseling, until we all were patients of Miranda's. Well except for Mom. She would only come for family counseling. I think even then they didn't like each other.

worth of expensive dinner cookies, gone in an instant. There was no street lamp over head so I had to use the rest of my headlamp's battery to see what I could salvage. My knees were bleeding into my pants leg; it didn't hurt too bad, but my clothes were all over the place. No time to sort them out or try to clean anything up (or see where the hell my extra underwear went): I threw what I could find back into my lunchbox and hooked it on my handlebars as I finished the last hill. I didn't even bother looking through the cookies, I'm sure a raccoon dined well before he was flattened into a roadkill patty.

By the time I made it to your street, there wasn't a drop of sweat that hadn't been absorbed into my shirt. My watch told me it was 7:20, a personal best. Dinner would be starting in less than ten minutes, which would be just enough time to slap on some deodorant and change into whatever clothes weren't covered in dirt or ripped. The stars were out. I didn't mention that yet, did I? The Little Dipper and the Big Dipper and Orion's Belt and the North Star, every little star I could find was out that night and I was out too, just a minute or two away from a real family holiday. Then my phone rang. I stopped my bike, and checked what the number was, hoping it would be yours but knowing it wouldn't be. Dad was on the other line. Sweat that I didn't know I had began to bead up on my brow as I answered.

“Hello?”

“Come home now.” He didn't bother asking. My hand starting shaking as I looked around. Your house was right at the end of the block, the porch light warm and inviting.

“Mikey’s shift isn’t over yet Dad, boss needs me to cover for him. My work shoes aren’t on because—”

“I sent you a cab, come home now.” That might not seem like a big deal to you Teresa, but I was really starting to sweat now. Never in his life has Dad felt it necessary to call a cab. Hell, he didn’t even call one when I went to the fucking hospital. I couldn’t ride my way back to my job in time for this cab, I knew I would be caught. I kept telling him I wouldn’t leave work, that I’d get fired, to check my work shoes for God’s sake. Meanwhile your neighbors were starting to peek out their windows to see what was going on. A crazy homeless man would have looked sane next to me. One large man yelling at a phone in the middle of the road, a shitty mountain bike lying next to him, t-shirt soaking wet and dirty, and pants bloody around the knees.

I should have lugged my bike out of the way at least but I couldn’t think clearly. It wasn’t going well. Dad repeated himself again and again, not raising his voice or threatening me, just command after command: “I sent you a cab. Come home now,” while I fed him the same lie with half-truths as many chances as I had in between breaths. As we argued, I saw what looked like the porch lights slowly pull out of your driveway. My watch said it was only 7:25, so I knew dinner wasn’t over yet, no one should be leaving yet. But they weren’t porch lights, they were headlights, and they slowly crept next to me. It was a cab.

My heart sank as the cabbie asked, “Are you Jeff Halloway?” What choice did I have? I gave up and threw my lunchbox in the backseat. The cabbie looked at the

mountain bike next to me as I hung up the phone, defeated. “You can’t bring that in here boss. Tie it to the roof, there’s rope in the trunk.” I did what he said in silence.

The cabbie took off as I climbed in, making a quick K-turn in the street. As we drove by your house, I couldn’t help but look out the window and see. The porch lights were off, but the warm insides of the house glowed in the starry night. I thought I made out someone walking by the bay window, but we sped on and away. The cab ride home was miserable: no air, stifling heat, and bad odors. I did nothing but watch the houses go by the entire time while I waited. Didn’t even bother to change out of my shirt, which probably smelled as bad as the car itself by now. I tried to call you then, but your phone was off. My watch told me it was well past 7:30 now. Dinner had been set already, midway or more past the meal. I tried not to think about it as I left you a message to call me back.

16 and a half miles took more than two hours on bike but only twenty minutes by cab. He pulled up to the corner of Bay Street and turned to me. “You owe me 35 bucks. You’ll pay with cash or credit?” I had to give him everything I had, including the \$1.34 I found earlier, and I was still short by 50 cents and nothing to tip. I barely had my bike off his roof before he revved his engine and took off. My lunchbox was still in the car. I ran after him but he disappeared into the muggy night without me. His exhaust gave me a coughing fit, miles of physical exhaustion catching up to me. Half a hacked up lung later, I was chaining up my bike. Now that my money was all gone, this bike was the second

most precious item I had and I couldn't afford to lose it. Literally. There was a shuffling and thumping above as I tied it to the fence. I looked up and saw Alexis, who had rushed to the window and stared at me, expressionless. She called out for Dad as I let myself in. Miranda's car wasn't parked in the driveway, but she was sitting at the kitchen with Dad, looking uncomfortable. No smell of Indian food in the house.

Dad walked out his room and through the hallway, looking me up and down. "You look like shit," he said. I said I felt like it. I couldn't meet his eyes. He said he had called my job and Dylan answered the phone, so he knew what was going on. He told me he was all set to let me stay out, but he noticed there was no money on the table for his takeout.

Alexis had offered to pay, but he decided that wasn't "fair enough."*He motioned to Miranda, who produced two grocery bags from behind her chair. Dad grabbed them and dumped them out onto the table. A frozen game hen fell out, along with a half a dozen potatoes and a couple cloves of garlic. He was going to make me cook he said. It'd only be fair, since I went out to have a real meal at someone else's without "providing for your own family first. The grocery bill was to come out of my wages. "You better get busy, before we get too hungry and order Indian food without ya. Better make it a good meal...nothing like a good Thanksgiving meal." Tears flooded my eyes as I blinked to hold them back. I shuffled numbly and started prepping the food.

*I don't understand. How someone can act so cruelly to someone else? To their own son.
What, was this his way of teaching me a life lesson? Or did it even matter having an actual motive, just as long as he got to fuck with my life? I don't care to know.

I made garlic mashed potatoes with the chicken. They ordered their Indian food almost as soon as I started cooking, and it arrived ten minutes before the chicken was even in the oven. Alexis paid for everything, so she was allowed to join in and eat with them.

Miranda, after finishing her seconds, suggested that since I took so long to cook, I should just eat whatever “slop” I made. They ate and ate and opened a twenty pack and ate and drank until I was done, the kitchen cleaned again. There was nothing left to do but eat. I wasn't even hungry.

My back was shot and my legs were trembling, the blood on my knees long since dried up and stuck to my leg hair, along with the bits of asphalt that were still in my skin. It was misery choking down the half-cold chicken. It went down my throat like swallowing handfuls of tissue paper stacked together. I started to burp uncontrollably, little gas bubbles that would come up and make me retch as I forced bite after bite of the chicken down my throat. They jeered and laughed as I guzzled water, hoping it'd help the mess go down easier. Nothing was as bad as the mashed potatoes though. I thought I only put in a couple spoonfuls of minced garlic but I must have overdone it, because it was making my eyes tear just smelling it. Their texture made it easier to swallow but the overpowering aroma, the quantity, choking down bite after bite of burning hot mashed stuff eventually got to me. I threw up bile soaked soggy chicken on my plate, caked with yellow and white lumps. Dad suddenly stood up, furious.

He forced my head back into the plate, vomit going up my nose and into my eyes as I

panicked. The table shook hard as I sputtered and screamed for help. Alexis and Miranda cowered in the corner, their buzz halted as Dad screamed at me to finish eating it all, “nothing is gonna be on this plate when I lift your head back up or so help me I’ll drown you in it, you fat fucking waste.” I licked the plate for everything I was worth, forcing dry-heaves back into the pit of my gut as I continued to eat everything I could in front of me, until he was finally satisfied. He let go of my head and I gasped for air, crying as the acid from my stomach burned my eyes.

He left after that, wishing Miranda a good night before slamming the door behind as he locked himself in his room. I sat there and cried for I don’t know how long. Miranda watched me for a while before she walked out the door and left. Alexis was the only one who remained. We sat on the floor until I calmed down a little. She got up and returned to the kitchen with a bath towel. “Here.” It was warm and damp. I didn’t look up but I felt it drape across my back. She didn’t stick around. Her footsteps disappeared in the distance as she shut her door behind. The towel smelled floral. I inhaled and its scent sit in my nose for a minute before I mopped up my face and chest. I cleaned up the kitchen top to bottom, taking what seemed like hours. I don’t remember going to bed. I woke up the next day numb.*

-December 18th

I don’t know how to shop for the holidays. What kinda presents do you buy for functional families? Besides the expensive shit I could never afford I mean. Any experience I have is pretty useless as is. I didn’t have many (any) friends that I could shop for and Santa was pretty scarce on Bay Street. Once I started working, my “gift” was half off the bill

Circa de '08

1.

It's another holiday, this time only with the unwanted runt of the litter. The kid can't reach high enough to hang tinsel on the Christmas tree, so he tries to wedge his leg up to the ledge of the window. Music plays loosely on the radio. "Say hello to friends you know" and everywhere pit stains greet the room with a foul smell, despite the deodorant.

*I didn't leave the house except for work for the next two weeks after that day. Teresa thought I went missing or something the first few days I didn't return her calls. Eventually I answered back and she wouldn't talk to me for days. When we did, it ended in an argument. We had been having a lot of those lately when we talked over the phone.

for that month's rent, (courtesy of my Mother) whatever Dad decided to buy at the pharmacy that year, something from Miranda which we almost always ended up having to throw out since they probably old perishables (once we got three already rotten deviled eggs in a Tupperware container, for both of us to share), and the usual empty box from Alexis. I can't remember who came up with it, but I know it started when I was around eight. It used to be a cute gag when we were younger and couldn't afford anything. Sometimes we would swap our gifts at the last second or we'd go overboard and make about twenty little fake presents so we'd leave a field of torn wrapping paper in our wake on Christmas. Nowadays it's not much of a joke, Alexis just refuses to buy me anything if she can help it... still, it's pretty much the oldest tradition we have left though. That's... huh. Adults and holidays don't mix I guess.*

Mom was inarguably the best at Christmas in our house. She liked to give everyone the exact same number of gifts, three "and a half." She called the last one a half present because it was always a big peppermint candy cane. It wasn't a perfect system, especially because, ya know, Alexis is allergic to peppermint (and yet she still got a peppermint candy cane every year) but Mom would at least get us actual gifts. Mostly race cars or little trinkets, maybe books that we needed for school. Usually Dad ended up swiping my stuff after an argument or when he felt like it, but there was at least a guaranteed day of fun. Once Mom got Alexis a fuzzy pink fedora from Party City that I always kinda not-so-secretly wanted. It had this black and pink feather on the top and a pretty neat silver and neon pink band around it, but Alexis got way more mileage with the feather than the

Circa de '08

2.

The kid sighs because he knows what gift he'll get: deodorant, and maybe some scuffed-up matchbox cars taken from some runt before him. *He went home that day with tear stains on his cheek and blood on his lips after he was pushed against the big tree in the playground. He fell on his face, he imagines, and had to "Say hello" to the grass as they kicked dirt in his eyes; he dreams of staring out bus windows.*

actual hat. She figured out a way to take the ink thing from a pen and blow it out into a soup bowl so she could dip the feather in like a quill pen. It took a lot of pens to keep the ink from drying out. She kept it for years, writing down appointments and stuff in her calendar with that damn feather. I haven't been in her room in a while, so I don't know if she even has it anymore. I never got to try on the hat of course, even though she never wore the fucking thing. The next year Mom bought me a black and gold one, but it was pretty shoddy and honestly, it wasn't the same. Alexis shoulda just been less of a cunt. I have no clue what Christmas is supposed to look like this year. Hopefully it's just more of the same minus Mom, but that's not how Thanksgiving played out. There's no escape either. There's no way my Dad is forgetting about it this year, specially after Mom deserted us. God this would be easier with an Amazon account. Also it kinda sucks that I can't use your Amazon since you're the only one I'd be shopping for with it! Merry Freakin Christmas Charlie Brown.

-December 20th

Alexis asked me what I'm doing the rest of the week. An open-ended question means someone (I really fucking wonder who???) has an agenda. I think I should be worried but honestly what good is it going to do? Can it really get much worse than Thanksgiving? Can I really get to a rock-bottom lower than a trip to the hospital and a runaway mother? You tell me Teresa. I just said I had Christmas off and left it at that, so we'll see what happens.

Circa de '08

3.

There were patches of green, white, and gray nothing outside their window.
Someone's always leaving trash in their yard; wrappers, cans, an empty stick of deodorant,
and a Christmas card that read: "Just wanted to say hello"
squished in a too small, dirty envelope, like a giant reduced to a runt.
They're carried up high by a nor'easter's gust and deposited into a tree
that still had on its trunk the remnants of old spray paint stains.

Daryl didn't show up to take over my shift today, so I had an excuse for getting home later than I was supposed to. There aren't a lot of opportunities like this when I'm starting a new job, so I made an Amazon account at the library computer once I was free to leave. Maggy showed me how to set up everything, and I have the address set for a P.O. box in town that cost \$25 more than it should have. Of course I don't have a card to use (Fuck you Dad), but Maggy let me use hers. I had to lie about "a problem with my account at the bank" and I feel a little bad about it. If it were anyone else I'd be fine, but it's harder to lie to an old lady, especially a suspicious one. I had to promise her about thirty times that I was only buying one thing, and she kept eyeing the screen and asking to see my cart while I shopped around. Still very nice of her...even though I now owe Maggy another favor again, just for one little gift.* Hey by the way, how come when you search for "green sweater," 30 different colored sweaters come up automatically on the first page? What the hell is the point of searching in the first place??? Half the green sweaters weren't even cute. Go figure.

I can't believe I'm \$51.95 more broke than this morning. I get paid biweekly at the hardware store, so thankfully there's a check coming in two days. Still not a lot to work with, specially since it's the first time they're paying me and training the past week wasn't included. I don't really know if I can afford my presents for Dad and Miranda this year. I wrapped Alexis's empty box a week ago to get it over with, and that was the only gift where the price tag matched my budget. Every year I have to find something that costs at least thirty dollars for Dad and Miranda, along with their annual list of Christmas demands and whatever other cheap crap I can get away with calling another "present."

*Maggy was such a sweet lady. She unfortunately passed away in March. She's part of the reason I wanted to have my own moving company. The library was the best place to get free movies so I tended to go there somewhat often, especially when I was in high school and I had to print out assignments. Maggy had a sign at the front desk, looking for high schoolers who could help her move out of her house for ten bucks an hour. She was pretty flexible with the time so I ended up working for her. Her house was in walking distance of mine so after school I'd walk over and help her pack boxes and carry them to her car. She always brought out tea when I was working, and she had this big Mastiff dog named Sheba, the friendliest dog in the world. It's been my most pleasant work experience.

Circa de '08

4.

Dad never bothered to tidy up outside and so the trash always stains the neighbor's good tidings and cheer. He doesn't care though; he opens the window wide and turns up the radio until the sound rattles the tree, until wayward pine needles fall and land on the sticky part of the floor (deodorant residue that was never cleaned.) "Dads don't clean messes" he says, "Your job, runt!" He fishes out a hanky and a wet nap from his pocket and tells him to "Say Hello,"

There's a good chance I'll have to find something to re-gift for at least for one of them, without Mom to pay for the other half of my rent. Still haven't heard a word from her by the way. The number Dad gave me stopped working about a week ago, disconnecting as soon as the phone rings. If Mom's smart, she cut the line or she ran off somewhere else again. Either way, she's a fucked up cunt of a mother.*

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865-372-2890

*I tried this number a couple of times, but it only ever worked once. I had been trying for a few days in a row, just calling at different times. I was up around 3 a.m. after a late shift and I decided to give it a shot before I went to bed. Things got interesting when the phone started to ring (usually it just went straight to “the mailbox is full” and ended there). I waited a minute, nothing. I tried again. Still nothing. I tried a third time and on the very first ring, someone picked up. Here’s how the conversation went:

Me: Hello?

???: MICHAEL YOU BITCH, CALL HERE AGAIN AND I’LL KILL YOU MYSELF

And then the called dropped. I tried the next day and it was back to being off. I should add that whoever was on the line, it didn’t sound anything like Mom.

Circa de ‘08

5.

as they land in the boy’s open palm. The wet nap’s electric blue slogan reads: “Say Hello to the Good Life” with a silhouette of a pretty girl on the back and BBQ stains crinkling the edges in. It’s small and evenly caked in grime like the stray runt of the neighborhood, chewed up and spat back out. The kid abandons the window and cleans the floorboards, ignoring the gift with a hole in its wrapping, revealing: deodorant.

At least it’s Irish Spring. The little clover looked like the leaf of a skinny tree

Maggy showed me how to set up everything, and I have the address set for a P.O. box in town that cost \$25 more than it should have. Of course I don't have a card to use (Fuck you Dad), but Maggy let me use hers. I had to lie about "a problem with my account at the bank" and I feel a little bad about it. If it were anyone else I'd be fine, but it's harder to lie to an old lady, especially a suspicious one. I had to promise her about thirty times that I was only buying one thing, and she kept eyeing the screen and asking to see my cart while I shopped around. Still very nice of her...even though I now owe Maggy another favor again, just for one little gift. Hey by the way, how come when you search for "green sweater," 30 different colored sweaters come up automatically on the first page? What the hell is the point of searching in the first place??? Half the green sweaters weren't even cute.

-December 22nd

Eight and a half hours of hardware store bullshit today, and ya know what happened? "We lost your check Jeff, sorry." YOU'RE FUCKING SORRY? I'm sorry as shit but I still don't have money! I can complain to my union if I want to speed up the process but when I called, an answering machine told me my rep was on vacation and can't take complaints until next week.. There's exactly \$32.33 to my name right now, the rest goes to rent. I turned my room upside down when I got back and there wasn't a cent of extra change left to find. I could try the supermarket but they don't hire people just for a few days, and they don't pay cash right away either. The only option for quick cash is Cassie and I don't have a car to use anyways. I'm too poor to even sell weed. How pathetic is that? Cassie still occasionally calls me and asks if I want to drive for him.

Circa de '08

6.

he saw on a walk with Mom. She plucked that leaf from the tree, slipping it behind his ear with a smirk. It made him happy, happy enough to say hello to his Dad when she dropped him off, along with his toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, and a twenty for food. He didn't like how Dad would greet Mom with white stains on his dirty shirt, and how he never watched her walk back to the car from the window, or the way after she left, he called her a bitch that's looking for a "jewey little runt."

*You probably don't remember much of anything about Cassie. I can't remember myself when I first started hanging out with him, only that I was in junior high by then and I didn't have a lot of friends to choose from. Honestly though, we got along pretty well as casual school buddies. It's a small town so we ended up in the same classes, mostly math because we were both awful at it and there was only one intensive math class back then. Cassie was quiet, even more reclusive than I used to be, and I had an assortment of deranged family members breathing down my neck to thank for that. Cassie's family seemed nice. He never complained about them or had the usual warning signs neglected kids tend to collect. More or less, Cassie just preferred not to be on his own when he could. He never asked me to come over to his house and we never hung out on the weekends, even years later. Never saw him stay after school or do a sport either. Hell, even Mom put me in REC soccer team once before Dad had to replace the Jeep's radiator that year and I lost that too.

I wonder what Dad would do if he knew? Mom was a hippie back then, I'm sure she experimented. Who knows what he thinks. Maybe he'd be happy about the money? I'm pretty Miranda has him on such a tight leash, he wouldn't even admit if he ever tried smoking before, let alone let me go around and sell it. Alcohol is the only thing they continue to abuse and they get enough out of that as it is. Speaking of, I didn't want it to come to this but I'm out of options. There's nowhere near enough money for both Dad and her, but I know I can get a lot of cheap table wine to satisfy them. I really don't want to encourage them to drink on Christmas...then again, what other choice do I have? No money, no options.

-December 23rd

I called in at the hardware store and they still haven't found my check. I hung up before I could say something really stupid. Days and days of work for nothing. I thought people worked so they wouldn't have to be broke and extra miserable for the holidays but the universe loves contradictions.. Looks like table wine is the only thing I have left that's semi-affordable. Technically I won't have money to get food at work until my next check, but sneaking snacks out of the fridge isn't as punishable as it used to be. Dad at least doesn't mind as long as he gets to toss some insults my way. Ya know, the usual shit.

The amount of time Miranda spent talking about seasonal depression today was irritating. I think at one point she said something like 78% of all Americans experience mild SAD every winter. Isn't that like, over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the entire population? That'd be like over 200

Circa de '08

7.

Finished with the deodorant, the runt hops up on the ledge to decorate in earnest.

If I can decorate this Christmas tree, even he won't manage to stain this holiday. And just as he slipped and fell from the two-story window, he thought

he heard

someone

say hello.

What else? He was really short, always more than a head shorter than me, and pale like a glassy igloo. We looked kinda dorky walking together in the hallways, a mismatched couple of unpopulars. His family was all Irish, but I remember he pointed out his Dad during one of our chorus recitals and he was crazy dark. "Black Irish" is what Cassie called it. I used to remember what that meant but I've forgotten since. I do remember his clothes. He'd wear just about the same thing every day: blue jeans, white sneakers, a different colored striped shirt, and a stretched out gray hoodie if it was cold. Sometimes it was hard to tell he changed clothes at all day to day but he swore it wasn't the same outfit.

One time I asked him why he wore striped shirts all the time. It was picture day and his mom sent him to school wearing a blue polo and khakis. His response was to skip his first period class and change into his gym clothes. He came back in time for his picture wearing another striped shirt, smelling of sweat and wrinkled in the middle. Usually Cassie got mad and ignored me when I asked him anything remotely personal, but I guess he was feeling proud enough to answer that day. I don't remember exactly how he said it, but it was something like, "Tigers don't change their stripes and neither do I." I laughed at that, but Cassie didn't laugh back. He had a straight face, like it was really serious to

million people! I mean obviously she's making things up for attention but it's so fucking desperate. She kept making jokes about how no one's gotten her a decent Christmas present since back when she was a "science babe" studying psychology in the 60s. Then she'd backtrack and say, "Oh I'm just kidding Jeffy, you all always get me such nice things. I look forward every year to seeing what new joys you and Alexis have in store." Repeat ad nauseam. She couldn't just be upfront about it. Dad already told me a week ago that she needed a gas card. "Work related," he told me. I don't care if it's for a trip to the North Pole, they're getting table wine cuz that's all I can fucking get.

Good news: your sweater was sent to my P.O. Box today! I hope it's the right size.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]*

-December 29th

I haven't had my notebook in days, not since the day before Christmas Eve. So I think an explanation is due. I DID NOT want to ask you for any money. No, it was not planned.

Yes, it was a family thing. No I wasn't buying drugs with it (obviously). You want to

Redacted Text Reads as follows:

“Teresa there’s no easy way to ask this—

Hey Teresa, it’s Jeff. I normally wouldn’t ask this but could I possibly borrow 100 140
300 dollars?

I know that this might seem strange, but I’m really stuck in a bind and I really need some
help for this one time only and then—

There’s nothing to worry about but I was wondering

FUCK I’M TRYING MY BEST HERE, BUT I CAN ONLY DO SO MUCH. I’VE
NEVER ASKED FOR MONEY. WHY CAN’T YOU TRUST ME

I’m nothing”

him. That was one of the things he would offer up freely to anyone who wanted to know
or might have asked. Tigers are still his favorite animal.

Though I never ended up going to his house while we were middle school pals, we did go
to mine sometimes when he missed the bus and his parents were at work. Mostly Cassie
and I used to take turns riding my bike around the neighborhood and play wall ball next
to the fire station. I wasn’t big like I am now, just sorta baby fat chubby. We did a lot of
running around outside even in the winter. There wasn’t anything to do at my house
anyways. When we were stuck in class, we’d pass notes and doodles to each other
secretly. If you got caught in intensive math, you’d have to read the note out loud to the

know why it happened? **Michael Halloway, that's why.** I hope you understand when you read this soon. God there's a lot you need to read this soon.

It was typical night. Dad was watching T.V. in the living room so I kept to myself. Part of me thought about cracking open just one bottle of wine for the night, but it wouldn't be worth the hassle. I double checked to make sure this month's rent was ready on my desk to give to our landlord tomorrow. Thought about writing but what was there to talk about? I flipped through the journal for a while and reread some entries until it was late enough to sleep. I went to go wash up and turn in for the night. The bathroom door was open and Alexis was brushing her teeth in front of the mirror, holding her small makeup bag. She spit into the sink and washed her brush before putting that in the bag with the toothpaste. I asked why she was packing her stuff. "Dad said there's a trip tomorrow?" When I asked where, she shrugged and sauntered off. I wasn't happy with her answer but I couldn't risk asking a question Dad might find stupid. I went to bed, against what I can now see was my better judgment.

The earlier the better on Christmas is the best policy. Even as a kid, no one stopped me from waking up at 5, 6 in the morning, waiting for everyone else to get up and come to the living room. I liked the quiet hours when the sun is still a little ways before rising, and everything outside is asleep, whatever gifts under the tree begging to be opened. I'm the only one like this. Even Mom would sleep in and get up at her own pace, opening presents in the middle of the day and eating snacks. That's about what I expected out of Christmas this year, so I set my alarm for 7. Except that morning, someone was knocking

class and you'd almost always got detention too. Secrecy was of the utmost importance, a skill that came in handy as students. Cassie was an amazing cheater; he could be slipping answers to math problems underneath my folder from two desks away and not get caught the entire class. I wasn't as crafty but I made up for it by being overall better at getting the answers right. We pulled our grades from a C- to a respectable B+ by the time middle school ended. We were very proud of that.

I didn't see much of Cassie after 8th grade. He made himself scarce in the summertime, and he seemed to disappear entirely afterwards. Our district only had one other high school, so we had a lot more students from other middle schools joining us. Cassie ended up in a different set of math classes, his grades good enough to take him out of the easier ones we used to share. He never sought me out, we never had each other's numbers besides the home phone number listed in the class directory. He was a no one, I was a no one, and then we were simply nobodies apart. It's not like he died or anything though, don't get me wrong. I'd see him walking to Trig every couple of days, and sometimes he'd wave back if I did first. The only thing that changed when we left high school was now we waved when we passed each other at the supermarket or a gas station around town. And it's not like there was anything between us. We didn't get into a blown out fight during lunch or start secretly resenting each other like bad friends tend to do. He just didn't seem interested in anything I had to offer, once we weren't stuck in the same classes. I didn't mind much, even while still being phased out. Something convinced me at the time that people come and go like that but it

on my door as loudly as they could. I rolled over to check my clock, which said it was 6 on the dot. Panic mode took control and I jumped out of bed, flinging the door open. Dad stood in the doorframe, a big smile on his face and a Santa hat on his head. His eyes looked miserable and sunken in, like he barely slept at all last night. I can't remember the last time he was up this early. Jingle Bells was blaring from the radio, and the bell on the end of his Santa hat jangled back in forth against the song.

“Pack your shit Jeffery, we're all going OUT!” He kept gesturing with his hands like he was keeping an orchestra in time, ya know, the guy with the stick up front? The Maestro. He was Maestroing to the song with his stubby fingers and grinning. I asked where we were going. “A secret Christmas surprise my boy, can't spoil the fun of the surprise! Now get your shit and don't forget the presents. We'll open everything in the living room first when Dr. Miranda gets here.” Miranda's car honked loudly as she pulled in. The neighborhood dogs started barking at the sound of her heels crunching through the gravel driveway. So much for a quiet Christmas morning, every creature in or around our goddamn house was stirring. I got my bag and packed for what I figured would be...well I had no clue what the hell it would be. As if we ever took overnight trips anywhere since we had to live in a motel for a week. I made my way into the living room where Alexis was sitting with a stack of presents next to her. She looked wacked out of her mind. Her hands were fidgety and she looked about ready to jump out of her skin or something. She greeted me but it was so quick and nervous, all I heard was a squeak as I sat down beside her. Miranda had also joined us by then, drumming her fingernails on the

wouldn't be the last I'd see him...which was pretty hopeful coming from a guy like me. It wasn't much, but I kept some of his doodles and a couple of funny notes of his when we graduated. Something to remember him by I guess.

I was in town a while back, riding my bike from place to place and trying to find anyone looking to hire. The third place I went was a Home Depot next to the town mall. I hand in my resume and walk out into the sun. There sitting next to the stop sign where I chained my bike was Cassie, holding his own resume and looking himself over, wearing what looked like the same striped shirt he wore to picture day. He at least swapped out the jeans for nicer pants and shoes. I waved but Cassie didn't seem to recognize me. Years and pounds later, I didn't look quite the same as I used to. Once he figured it out though, he actually seemed happy to see me. We got to talking. He was applying all over town for extra cash and something to keep him out of the house. He asked about you too Teresa. We'd been dating for a couple months by then but still... I guess word spreads no matter how low a profile you keep.

A few days later Home Depot was just another job to pay the bills for me. However, surprise surprise: the second week working the floor, I see Cassie ringing people at the register. I've been working since high school. Knowing coworkers from school wasn't nothing new, but I had to physically stop myself from hugging Cassie right in the middle of his training session. I mean, it was a cool bumping in to him. At the time, it was a nice surprise, nothing else. But seeing Cassie's striped shirt, realizing he was here, someone I could actually stand to be around. It's...I don't know. You ever run around all day,

coffee table. Her leg was bouncing up and down. Something was up, there was way too much tension for 6 a.m. Christmas. I started worrying what our “trip” was all about. Dad lugged himself into the living room, breathing a little hard from exertion. He clasped his hands together and grinned again, looking at each of us. His eyes were blinking one at a time, tired. “Now that’s what I like to see, a happy Christmas family gathered around the tree. Let’s get these gifts going! Christmas time is wasting away.” He sat down in his armchair and sighed, rubbing his eyes heavily. The grin he wore was still plastered on his face.

Alexis and I started with our empty presents. There was no extra jokes this time, just a single box each wrapped up in half-decent wrapping paper. We shredded through them, nodded at each other in thanks and moved on. Miranda was up next. She handed us each a big bag of salt and vinegar potato chips. Mine was already opened, but at least they weren’t stale. While I was unwrapping, Miranda kept clearing her throat and leaving her hands out, palms up, ready to receive her end of the deal. The coughing fit paused for a moment as Dad motioned under the Christmas tree, toward three presents wrapped in last week’s Sunday funnies. It made me cringe a little to see. Dad used to wrap everything in Sunday funnies before he stopped trying. Alexis noticed the same time I did and I looked to her, but she kept her eyes away from mine. She darted toward her gift and Miranda’s, thanking Dad in another unintelligible nervous squeak as I reached for mine. They were all the same shape, kinda small but solid squares maybe an eight inches across. I had no clue what it’d be. As Alexis opened hers, I could hear something small rattling inside, rolling around everywhere. I was curious enough to wait for the reveal.

paying attention to every little thing but you? And maybe around 9 at night, you stumble to the fridge and pour yourself a drink without even thinking. One lazy sip and suddenly your body remembers thirst. You're not satisfied with a single glass, you gotta gulp down what's left and pour yourself another and maybe one more right after that, because you were just that in need, unaware until the second it hit your throat. That was Cassie.

It sounds like we were in love or something. It wasn't like that but I really needed a fucking friend. I mean, besides a girlfriend. Compared to lunches with Alexis and therapy with Miranda on Fridays, I could deal with Cassie being an aloof fuck for just an ounce of casual conversation. Except now, Cassie was way friendlier than he had ever been before. Whatever shell he was stuck in had disappeared, at least somewhat. His personality was still there. Cassie has this "wall" about him that tends to shades his face, like other shy guys and girls build around them as they go about their life. I always enjoyed the snark that came with his brown eyes flicking off to the sides, timid laughing fits and sticking with the wallflowers. It was still there, but tweaked. We'd sit down for lunch and he'd talk about what's been going on since high school or what he was doing after work. He went to concerts now, sculpted on weekends, and was renting a two-bedroom apartment on Main Street with a couple of others artists from the neighborhood. God I wanted a futon. One thing Cassie did that I always appreciated: he never turned the conversation back at me. I didn't know what music to listen to besides what Teresa played in her car, I didn't have normal stories to swap during lunch break, and the ones I did tell were always filled

Alexis finished. Her fingers turned it over and over in her hands before she turned to Dad.

“You like it?” he asked. She didn’t answer right away. I asked what it was. She shot me a look but before she could answer, Miranda had already unwrapped hers.

“Oh MICHAEL, this is BEAUTIFUL!” She held it up in the air for everyone to see. It was a “family” photo, framed inside a glass rectangle of Miranda, Dad, Alexis, Mom, and I posing in front of the bowling alley. I remembered taking that picture about two years ago. I was about to graduate high school then, and the weather was hot and muggy. The place was closed, so it took a couple of minutes to find someone walking by that would take work with his ancient camera.

The sweat on our faces looked shiny with the flash as we smiled. I unwrapped mine and saw there was more to it. Inside the glass was a little ball and a buncha little plastic platforms to get around, like those children’s games you get at the store. Even the ball was customized. It had three little holes on the side to look like a bowling ball. Miranda gushed about the thoughtfulness as her coughing fit began to come back, eyeing me slowly Dad’s smile grew even wider as he pulled out another from his pocket.

“Something to remember the good times with, and it’s a game too! Cost a pretty penny but Miranda found someone at the mall who does em cheap enough.”

Alexis piped in, “Thank you. Best gift I’ve ever gotten...” She refused to look anyone in the eye though, not even Dad as her voice trailed off. His smile almost left

with lies. Coworker safe and sanitized was my standard. But there was no bullshit between us. I didn't have to put on any act or pretend I knew what life outside my parent's house was like. Cassie never asked so I never told, though I was a little more willing to edge closer at the truth with him. Once we were working the night shift and I told him a story about bowling a gutter ball over my Dad's foot as a kid and breaking his pinky toe. Cassie and I laughed our asses off, so loud that our manager caught us in the break room after our break was up. We both had to stay late that night and I didn't even mind.

He gave me his number after a week or two so we could fill in for each other's shifts. I tried to call a few times but no answer. I even gave texting a shot and he would respond back, but usually just with memes. My flip-phone wasn't really built for long conversations anyways, the keyboard's too small. I had this nagging feeling that this was a sign. What if Cassie disappeared without a trace and fucked off to another job? His work hadn't changed much from high school either. He'd rather cheat his way through the day if he could help it and we weren't a bunch of overlooked losers in high school anymore. You can't extend your lunch break forever, and you shouldn't be taking sodas from the coolers either but he did anyways. The prying eyes of security cameras, stuck-up employees with promotions to earn, angry customers looking for hammers and W-D-40, someone was bound to get caught eventually. Maybe we should have worried more about our jobs. I doubled down anyways. Whatever snacks I had at lunch were as good as Cassie's. I promised rides back home that I shouldn't have. When Cassie started missing work a couple weeks in a row, I covered for him, no questions asked. I saw him less than

before he caught himself. He beamed at us, then said it's time to give out our presents. Alexis went first. After digging behind the Christmas tree, she brought out what looked like (and was) a small outdoor grill and bag of charcoal. I don't know why we bother to give one gift to Dad and one to Miranda, it's obvious they're meant for both of them. After a minute of clearing wrapping paper, I brought out the bottles of wine. The communal wrapping paper ran out halfway through so some were just bottles with a bow slapped on the side.

"Oh these don't look like a gas card," Miranda nervously laughed a little, though she couldn't look away from the red wine as it sloshed around in the bottle. I handed 3 to Miranda and she passed those to Dad, trying not to drop them. He licked his lips in between his smiling lips, but he paused as he reached for his wine.

"Jeffery, is this everything you got?" Unfortunately it was. All the wine half price since I got through Cassie, but there wasn't enough for a gas card on top of everything else. I shook my head. "That's what I thought." Dad's smile was gone. Miranda's eyes were glued to my father in annoyance. Alexis started to get up from her spot on the couch next to me. "SIT." She sat, but not before looking at me with devil's eyes.

Dad stood up and walked to the Christmas tree, staring out the window. It was windy, the leftover snow from a few days ago swept up in the gusts and rattled the glass. The tension in the room told me I had fucked up, VERY severely. As he watched the snow, he told me Miranda needed that gas card. The gas card was payment for a ride, to cover 200

I used to but it was still worth it. Alexis started nagging Dad about the Jeep being gone all the time, but with all the extra shifts I was taking on, the combined cash more than made up for it. Even after the month was up and rent was due, there was more money than we usually had leftover. I kept a couple bucks for Mom (which she was VERY happy about) and gave the rest to Dad. Suddenly Alexis couldn't complain nearly as much about the Jeep. Of course they didn't stop being suspicious of me. More than once Alexis or Dad would conveniently stop by Home Depot an hour or two after my shift started. If I wasn't around, they'd ask for me until I came out. But as long as I went to work when I said I was going to, things ran smoothly. They only came around during the daytime, so at night I was free to come home late. As long as cash flowed, the usual restrictions weren't so rigid. I came home drunk off my ass late one night on cheap wines Cassie and I had been drinking after work. No one cared. I even made a grilled cheese in the middle of the night. After work I felt nearly untouchable.

Eventually he started inviting me to his place after work. The apartment was tiny, the sink full of dishes. The walls were covered in abstract art and obnoxious movie posters. I loved it. Any chance I could, I was at Cassie's. There were exceptions of course. Friday therapy with Miranda, weekly dates with Teresa (obviously), and I always had to take off on Saturdays afternoons for bowling. I still have never had more freedom in my entire life than when I was working double shifts at Home Depot. One of Cassie's roommates worked at a liquor store with his cousin, and they'd steal the cheap boozes that the owners would buy in bulk. We drank ourselves into all night stupors until the landlord shut us down and I'd bike my way back home. Sometimes I'd forget to drop the Jeep off

miles of road we'd be travelling together. I asked where and why would we be going out. He turned to me, pointing at the framed picture I held in my hand. "This Christmas, we're getting back your mother. I know where she is Jeff, we're all going to bring her back. I even got an extra picture for her." He pulled out another from his pants pocket, still wrapped and slightly crinkled. That bastard! Somehow, he found her through a guy who worked upstate near Saratoga Springs. I didn't even know he had people that far searching for her. The family Jeep that she stole was spotted a couple of days ago past Albany and followed her until she turned into a motel.. I didn't know how I felt about finding Mom. She made it pretty clear she wasn't looking for a way back. Being abandoned like that left me cynical about any chance of a reunion. She was so far away! I can't deny even now though, part of me needed to see her again too. Even if all I could get out of it was a chance to say "fuck off." And I don't know... call it nativity, call it trauma talking, whatever you think, but Dad seemed he was Dad there was something different this time. The tired eyes, the early morning eyes, the pictures. We never had pictures in the house. He was trying, and it was disgusting. Whatever feelings I had wasn't going to matter anyways, there was no contest. So I went along with it.

Everything moved very fast from there. Alexis packed the charcoal and grill together as I gathered up the wine (which Miranda insisted I bring anyways). Miranda yanked the radio out of the corner of the room and started grabbing whatever food she could find in the fridge as Dad disappeared into his room and came back with half a dozen packed bags. 30 minutes later, Miranda's car was stuffed with us trapped between our supplies,

before work and I'd have to take it real slow. The state of paranoia a drunk can reach on a drive home is only outmatched by how great it feels to stick your head out the window when that cold winter air hits your face. But I always took my time, snaking down the back roads I biked through every damn day. Cassie's place was real close to mine anyways.

So one day, Cassie and I are taking a ride to Taco Bell, picking up dinner for the crew after our shift. I pull in behind the line of cars in the lot and Cassie's staring out the window quietly, as he usually does on car rides. We order our food and right as I roll up my window, Cassie looks me up and down. I asked him what's up but he doesn't say anything, just nods and looks away. A couple minutes later, we're driving away from the carryout window, and Cassie turns to me again and asks if I was interested in making some extra money driving around. I hesitated. How could you not? I guess he took that I needed extra convincing and broke everything down. One of his apartment mates needed a guy with some wheels to do a job for them. I asked, "What kind of job?" "Sellin weed," Cassie answered as he stared out the window.

I had never smoked weed before. Sure, plenty of people did at Cassie's place and I've been to parties before where people were selling. I had no experience with it though. It was forbidden in my house, enforced sometimes by the occasional drug test when I went to Miranda's therapy sessions. "Standard procedure," she'd say. I hadn't known better at the time, but even then I had my own reasons from staying away. When you survive paycheck to paycheck, it's risky to have anything in your system more permanent than a

mostly Dad's trash bags full of junk and clothes. I tried not to think about the three hour car ride ahead as we made our way to the gas station to fill up. When we got to the local BP, no one got out of the car. Dad said something that I tried to ignore, until Alexis elbowed me hard in the stomach. I caught my breathe and looked up Dad's hand was outstretched, waiting for something. He repeated, "Gas Money, pay up." But I didn't have anything! Whatever money I did have was back home on the living room table, waiting for the landlord to collect. I told him I was honestly broke. I even opened up my wallet and "emptied it" so he could see for himself. He didn't care. No gas meant no trip, or at least that was what it seemed. Once Dad was sure I didn't have anything else, Alexis was next to be frisked. She only had a couple of dollars, not even enough for a whole gallon. Miranda offered nothing, though neither did Dad. I figured those two had some sort of stash they could spend but still they waited.. Other cars started pull behind us. One honked at us from behind as they pulled in for our pump. Miranda suddenly floored it as Dad flipped the cars behind us the bird. The wind whipped him in the face with icy snow, but it didn't stop him from cursing them out as we sped away.

He popped his head back in and rolled his window up, panting in frustration. He stared at me and pointed one of his stubby fingers at me and said this was all MY fault. He said we were going back to the house to get the money, and I'd have to come up with the rent next week one way or another. There was no room for discussion. We drove back in silence and when we got back home, Dad was the one to get out. He came back a couple of minutes later with cash, yelling at our landlord over the phone. He continued to scream

hangover. It didn't seem worth it to fail a drug test and lose a potential job right off the bat than to spend money I already didn't have, on something I could never enjoy in private anyways. Even if I had been spending my nights fucking around at work and drinking my liver into submission, I wasn't that dumb.

But selling, that was different. And as Cassie pointed out as he laid out the plan, I wouldn't have to actually sell the stuff. My job was to drive wherever Cassie had to go, and he'd do the rest for me. The pay was good too, the hours were whenever I was available, and gas money was included. It was more than tempting. What really got to me was the trust Cassie was putting in me, asking me of all people to help him. I mean, we'd literally be working together, driving around town like we usually do anyways, and making money on top of it. Still, I said I would have to think about it, and I think he understood that I needed time to think. We didn't talk about it again that night, even after we got to the apartment and sat with the boys, drinking and eating around the kitchen table.

I'm not saying that it was a choice to be proud of or anything, but the next day I said I was in. I thought things would change more, but it didn't really feel like they did all that much. Sometimes we'd go right after our shift and grab his stuff at the apartment, or I'd bike back to my house if Alexis had taken the car earlier that day. Cassie bought a knife and gave me a box cutter just in case but we never had to use them. I remember our first few runs were a little scary but mostly everyone who bought from us was pretty friendly, or at least quick about it getting their shit if they weren't. Most people want what they

at him as we made our way back to the gas station, and only after we filled up did he finally hang up. The rest of the trip was long and painful. Miranda's driving was already awful, but the wind started picking up more and more as time went on. The car kept rocking back and forth as we drove. She wrestled with the steering wheel the whole way up, going too fast for her ancient Toyota to handle without occasionally skidding into the lane next to her. Dad manned the map, or at least he tried. We missed plenty of exits once we left our neck of the woods and the lost time started to pile up.

We mighta been alright if the highways weren't so packed. I thought people usually went to church or slept off Christmas Eve eggnogs this early in the morning... apparently not. Every road was packed with herds of travelling families, fighting their own weather battles as cars left and right put on their hazards or pulled off to the side. One family looked kinda like ours, with a grandpa and father driving their kids somewhere around Mt. Kisco. One of the kids waved at us from their seat, but I didn't have the spirit to wave back. Dad thought they were trying to flip us off and started rolling down the window, but they exited before he could say anything to scar them too badly. The sun hid behind the washed out gray clouds, but it still managed to blind us as the light bounced off last week's snow. Eventually Dad told Alexis to take over driving when we reached a pit stop about 40 miles in. Miranda wasn't too happy, especially having to sit next to me, but she didn't say anything, even when Alexis dumped the grill on her lap and the charcoal dust flew up into her face. That coughing fit lasted the rest of the trip as Alexis weaved through traffic. Mirnada tried telling stories to keep spirits up... I chose to nap.

pay for, especially when your demographic is 40 year old hippies and high school kids. And the best part was, Cassie and I did it all together. Just driving from one place to another, munching on drive-thru takeout and listening to music. Maybe it's different for people who stuck around longer (in fact, I know it's got to be different) but I didn't have any problems. After all, I was just the driver. And the money, it felt like it just kept pouring in. I was still covering for Cassie now more than ever since he had to have everything set up before I got off work.

I always played it smart, I couldn't let on how much I was making now. We were already getting more cash than we usually would have with Alexis and I working, and something told me adding more would only create more demand. I made a routine of giving little bits of my paycheck to Mom when we went on walks together. I always gave it to her in cash, no paper trail for anyone else in the house to notice. I started saving up. Anything that wasn't in my pocket went under a floorboard beneath my bed late at night, when everyone was most likely asleep. The rest of the money was spent whenever I had the chance, mostly on food. The thing is, I kinda had to. I was away from the house so many times a week now that I wasn't eating at home anymore. I wasn't complaining: I had the freedom to pick what I wanted to eat, where I wanted to go, when I needed it, and how much I could have. I resisted for a few days but soon I was binging all the time. I burned whatever money I could discreetly then more than usual. Alexis had been sulking for a long while, waiting for a slip up to capitalize off of. More than anything, I just wanted things to last as long as they could.

About five hours after we left, Alexis pulled into Saratoga Springs. Even if the trip was a nightmare, I was sort of excited to look around now that we finally made it. The town was filled with Christmas crap. Candles on the light posts, garland and wreaths on doors, even horse and buggies trotted alongside us as we looked for the racetrack. It was about lunchtime now and everyone was hungry. No one had eaten breakfast in our early morning rush, and anyways, everyone but my Dad was broke. Thank god (don't actually thank god for her) Miranda had thrown whatever she could find in the fridge into a big garbage bag of all things.

We parked in a bank parking lot and took turns gorging ourselves on potato chips with lunchmeat and week-old cheese, passing it along with all the food crammed into it. Even though I found the damn bag, I was the last in line for grub. I shoveled what wasn't already devoured in a second, still hungry. Our hands were greasy and wet, caked in crumbs. Only Miranda stopped herself from wiping her hands on the car seats after we ate, kicking Dad's seat with her heels when he burped ham and cheese breath. He wouldn't open the window either, forcing us suffocate in the stench until Alexis snatched the town map from Dad and figured where we had to go.

The track was totally empty, so it was easy to find the old Jeep by itself in the parking lot, even covered with snow. I saw a boot was on one of the wheels, along with several tickets poking out of the icy windshield. We all piled out of the car. Dad hobbled over to the boot and kicked it, cursing and stomping around as he looked over the car. There was

In total, Cassie and I sold pot for about three and a half weeks and worked together at Home Depot for 4 months. Then we got a call from the manager to step into her office during an afternoon shift. We made our way up the stairs and walked through the door and found the security guard standing by her desk, along with a video tape and an old T.V. set. We already knew exactly what was going on. Without a word, the guard popped in the tape and hit play. There were clips of us stealing drinks and lighters from checkout counters, multiple times throughout the same day. Apparently they only check the tapes when inventory doesn't match up and we finally took enough for them to start digging around. I was sweating my ass off as she spoke. I looked to Cassie for something, anything reassuring but there was nothing. I couldn't see anything past the wall of apathy across his face. When the tape was finished, she turned the T.V. off and gave us a choice. Either we refuse the evidence and she called the police, or we resigned right there. We were banned from working at any Home Depot, she made sure to emphasize that. What else could we do? A few minutes later, we had our lockers cleaned out and were driving back to Cassie's place.

a decent sized dent on one side, but the other side looked like someone T-boned it. The license plates were gone too. It was a miracle the heap hadn't been taken to a dump by now. Alexis started to cry as she walked with dad. Probably upset she had finally lost the car for real now, no chance to have it back.

Miranda jiggled one of the door handles until it creaked open. Mom was always shit at remembering to lock the door before she left. Dad immediately jumped in and I followed. It looked like someone had an ill-fated orgy in our car. Cigarettes butts and sage were sprinkled over the floor and seats, along with a couple of empty dime-bags. Two sets of panties were hanging off the rearview mirror (I prayed they weren't Mom's). There was a pre-paid cell phone smashed to bits on the driver's seat with a bunch of scraps of paper and receipts. Who knows how long she'd been living out of her car. One of the receipts was from a Greyhound bus station. I picked it up to read as Dad and Miranda peered over my shoulders. Someone had bought 3 tickets to some town called Chelsea in Canada, paid in cash. The receipt was over a week old. I read it over and over again to make sure. I gave it to Dad, went back in the car, and tried to remember loving her. My heart hurt, but for the life of me I couldn't cry. She finally made it out after all. No one was going to chase her in Canada, especially not with our budget. She'd won. Dad stood there for a while, not saying anything. Finally he took the family photo meant for Mom, and threw it as hard as he could at the car, shattering it with a scream. He kicked the glass shards and snow into powder as he cursed. Alexis sobbed loudly and tried to hold him, but he swung around and threw her off into a snow bank before he slipped and fell to the ground.

I tried to keep calm but my chest felt like it was on fire. If I no longer worked at the Home Depot, I had to get a new job, which meant a new schedule. For the time, I had effectively run out of excuses to hang out with Cassie. Even if it was kept a secret, eventually Alexis or Dad would come around to check on me. But if there was no obligation to see each other anymore, what about our deal? I knew there was a chance Cassie would drop me and I didn't have an excuse to go out at night. God forbid if Miranda found out what I'd been doing. Dad might pretend like he's directly in charge but her words are still engraved into his skull like bible passages. No matter how much money it might bring in, there'd be no excuses if they found out. How long would it be before they let me out of the house again? Not to mention my weekly dates with Teresa would disappear entirely.

Maybe it was the rush of anxiety or the knot in my stomach screaming to be heard, but I started to quietly hyperventilate in the car. Cassie was staring at me quietly, more out of amusement than anything else. I had to say something. I don't remember how it came out exactly. Months worth of fears just sorta flowed out of me. I told him that I couldn't drive with him anymore, that I needed that job bad, that people were watching me and I couldn't afford to slip up and get caught doing something like this. I went on and on as I drove and Cassie listened. His eyes were bugged out and the usual stony face he used to block the world was gone. One thing spilled into another, one feeling revealed as quickly as the next. I only stopped talking when we parked in front of his apartment. I felt lightheaded but good, and also somehow more anxious than I started. Cassie sat there for a minute staring at me before stepping out of the car. He looked back at me and said he

We waited a long while before everyone shuffled back into the car. The wind was blowing again, bad weather from earlier had caught up to us. Miranda suggested we all stay in a motel for the night until the storm passed us again. No one had the energy to argue, or the desire to head home yet. Everything still hurt. Dad refused to speak to anyone as we drove in silence. Eventually we lurked through the relatively empty streets of Saratoga Springs. Miranda pointed out a quiet bed and breakfast off Main Street on our tourist map. The place wasn't fully booked, though we would have to share a single room with two beds. When they told us, Dad and Miranda groaned together. They didn't refuse though. He threw the receptionist some money and stalked off with the only set of keys as he made his way upstairs.

The rest of us lugged our stuff from the car to the room as quickly as we could, but the wind kept slamming into our faces, slowing us down. Miranda refused to carry anything heavier than a backpack. She could have used the extra weight to keep her feet to the ground if you ask me. Her high heels got stuck in the snowy sidewalk and one broke, so she stumbled. constantly, cursing under her breathe as she hobbled to the door. It took her twice as long as Alexis and me on the first trip, and after that, Miranda would only go to the bottom of the stairway before dumping whatever bags she had. I didn't mind. I dreaded what the night would end up like, especially as I hauled up the remaining bottles of wine up the stairs.

I say remaining because Dad and Miranda tried to open one before we left the track. No one remembered to bring a corkscrew, so after a few minutes of clawing at the cork, Dad smashed the neck of the bottle across the hood of the Jeep. The neck disappeared, along

didn't know what I was talking about, but if I wanted to quit, I could have just said so in the first place. Said he probably wouldn't see me around anymore since we weren't working together and he hoped whatever I was saying turned out for the best. He slammed the door behind and took a step toward his building before he turned back around and opened the door. He rifled in the backseat and fished out his work shirts from his locker. "Let me know if you want to work with me again, and uh, if you want a deal on that liquor store thing the boys and I do, let me know. I'll give ya a deal or something. See ya Jeff." I watched him walk up the steps to his apartment. I don't know how long I stayed before I drove back home.

A week later I was hired as a stock boy at Shoprite. I kept to myself and I stayed far from trouble. I texted Cassie to hang out few times, but he said he was busy looking for a new jobs at that point. Once he answered back telling me to come over for drinks but I chickened out last minute. The dealer Cassie was working with got a car a few weeks later. I didn't try to get Cassie back after that. Things settled down at home. Dad wasn't happy about me losing my job but since I still paid my share of the bills and Alexis got to use the Jeep almost uncontested now, life smoother back over.

The last time I saw Cassie was while I was working a late shift. He came in with a few people I recognized from his parties, walking through aisles in a tight pack of laughing strangers. As I was stacking some shelves with toilet paper, he spotted me and gave a little wave. And for a second, I almost lifted my hand to return it. On the way out they lifted a bag of chips. I didn't stop them.

with about half the wine inside, but they both chugged what was left from the broken bottle like it was their last. Alexis and I were offered a single sip each which neither of us accepted it, so they continued to drink. I hoped they'd cut their mouths on the glass. I wanted to throw what was left of the bottle at their faces and then bury those faces in a snow pile. I wished the police would have seen them and thrown them in jail for public drunkenness and vandalism. But nothing happened, nothing that I wanted anyway. I tried not to stare as the spilled wine in the snow while they chugged. According to Miranda, the wine tasted like fermented dog shit. She told me this after tripping over a sidewalk crack and skinning her knees. I wonder if she was feeling drunk by then. She wasn't showing it yet, just the usual toxic squawks as she yelled at me. When I went to help her up, she made sure to step on my toes, though she still followed me all the way upstairs eyeing the bottles until I put them down on the floor. There wasn't too much light in our room, just a single lamp. The curtains of bay window overlooking the street was drawn and the sky was growing dark. If we could have just all gone to bed right then.

The room was small but comfy. The beds were soft and plush, way softer than the shit we have at home. There must have been some free mints on the bed too. I saw the wrappers scattered around Dad's feet as he snored in a rocking chair by the window. He was faking sleep, though I didn't know at the time. Couldn't risk it anyways, especially not after today, and not with four and a half bottles left on the table (Miranda had stolen a multi-tool from behind the receptionist desk on the way up and helped herself to the wine). We already unpacked everything that needed to

be out. The charcoal grill and the rest of the bags were thrown in a corner to pick through later. I checked the time. It was past 7 by then, way later than I had figured. Alexis looked just as exhausted as I was feeling as she lay down in one of the beds. How long had it been since we shared a room, or a bed? Too many years to count.

Alexis must have seen me standing there, probably looking like I was about to cry all over again. Truth was I was out of steam, I couldn't have if I wanted to. She patted the side of the bed next to her, gently. Miranda had wrapped a paper bag around the bottle she'd been drinking from, probably trying to hide its half-emptiness. Now she was busy trying to force the cork back into the bottle. Dad was "passed out."* Tonight more than any night needed a temporary truce. So I crawled next to Alexis and laid down with her. She scooted over and let me roll myself up into a bundle. We didn't bother talking, even with our heads under the blankets. We stared at each other in the dim light (how long had it been since we were this close? Or since I remembered Alexis had pale blue eyes?) and prayed for sleep. Eventually it came.

I woke up a couple hours later with a start. I had a seriously bizarre dream and my head was killing me, like I hadn't slept in days*. My back was to Alexis. I peeked out from the covers and saw Miranda and Dad, both passed out on the other bed. Besides his snoring, everything was quiet. Alexis felt me shifting around and I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to her and she mouthed "food?" I nodded. We didn't bother to look for our room key. A couple of minutes later, we were slipping on shoes and quietly shutting the door behind as we walked out into the streets.

*One of the tricks Dad used to varying degrees of success was faking being asleep to catch me “in the act.” Most times it really didn’t work all that well. I mean for god’s sake, we were already afraid to make noise around him when he was actually awake, why would we try when he’s sleeping? The only time it ever really worked out was when he’d announce “Welp, time to get some shuteye,” and shut his door behind. If it was in the middle of the day, no problem, but at night, not so good. Night was the best opportunity to hide stuff under the floorboards (including this journal) so if I wanted to sneak around, the hard wood floors would me away. You had to be careful. No matter how long he hadn’t made a peep in his room, even if he had been snoring a moment ago, there was always a chance he would spring out at you in the dead of night. If you weren’t careful anyways.

*It’s been awhile since I had this dream, but I still remember some of the details. It started out with Alexis and me driving down a long road in the morning. I’m not sure where exactly, but it was storming outside. Lots of snow and hail pelting the car. We get to a stoplight and another car pulls up next to ours. I was staring out the window but everything is so hard to see that I can’t really tell who it could be in there. Then everything sorta went fuzzy for a second. Everything focused again and now it’s nighttime. The bad weather has stopped but our car is buried in snow. Alexis isn’t with me anymore withering, but the passenger side door is wide open, and so is the car other car next to ours. I crawled through the snow and climbed into the other, but no one’s there. The last thing I definitely remember was the car doors slamming shut and Alexis’s car driving away, leaving me behind.

We had slept through the icy rainstorm but not the wind. It switched between extremely pleasant to unbearable in an instant. Alexis remembered there was a Stewart's gas station two miles away, so we trudged towards the end of Main Street. We walked through town and looked at the Christmas wreaths swinging wildly on poles. Even while we were froze our asses off, I was still impressed with the Christmas decoration. Even the town clock had lights and tassel around its face. We tried to enjoy the sights as we walked but the cold hurried us along.

We got to Stewarts about twenty minutes later and bought a cup of hot chocolate with a vanilla cone to start. We sat inside at a table while "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer" played over the speakers, enjoying the good eats before getting hamburgers and hot coffee. It was...it was, ya know? We never do anything together. Usually I don't even consider Alexis a sibling, more like a live-in spy. But here we were, munching on (surprisingly) good gas station food in the middle of the night. We even started talking a little. Mostly about Mom. Alexis and I knew today wasn't going to end well. Apparently Dad had been planning this since November, even before Thanksgiving.

Things were quiet. We sat around sipping the remains of our hot chocolate. Eventually I had to ask her. So I said it straight up: "Alexis why do you hate me? Why can't we get along like this without me being in the hospital, or I'm lying in a pool of my own vomit? Did I do something to you? To Dad, or Miranda, or Mom, to deserve—" Alexis squeezed my hand tight and shook her head. She was staring into her cup, trembling. I asked her again, my voice rising catching in my throat. Finally she spoke. She couldn't look me in the eyes, not once. Even so, I believed what she said next:

“Jeff I don’t hate you. I mean I don’t think I do. But I’ve done things to you that are way worse than hating. I’ve abused you. This family has abused you, and I’m sorry.

Apologizing here won’t ever be enough, and I know that. I can’t undo my bullying, or my spying, or me prioritizing keeping Dad and Miranda happy over doing what’s right. The truth is Jeff, I was terrified of being singled out, and the only way to stop that was to target you...” She paused and I could see tears falling into her cup as she started to cry. Still she went on, breathing in and out slowly, keeping her voice in check the best she could.

“No, no I don’t hate you Jeff. I wanted to stop, but I couldn’t. You’re younger than me, you weren’t old enough to see Mom and Dad when they were happier. Things weren’t always as shit as they’ve been, or maybe I couldn’t tell the difference. And once things got to the way they are now... I didn’t want to hate Dad. I REALLY didn’t want to hate anyone, but especially not him, because if I did, all the good times would’ve been gone forever, wasted. I know it’s a waste now but I didn’t want to believe it then. You became the punching bag and I had to take everything out on you or else my life up to then was meaningless. I don’t want to be in this shit anymore Jeff. We don’t deserve this. And you don’t have to put up with this anymore. Mom isn’t. And again, I’m sorry. I really fucking am.”

There hadn’t been a day that I didn’t think about this moment. I mean, it’s Alexis. I earned the right to tear into her, no question. No question at all. Still, I knew at the moment, I didn’t have it in me let out all that anger I had felt in the past. As Alexis sat there crying into her hot chocolate, hands splayed over her face, cashier looking at us

*Police Report:

The Lakefront Ballad Bed and Breakfast called at approximately 9:00 p.m. on December 25th. The call was made for two possible 10-51s [suspects are drunk], disorderly conduct, and refusal to vacate premise. Officers McMagnus and Hills responded at 9:07. One Mr. Michael Halloway and one Dr. Gwendolyn Miranda were found within the room.

Property had been damaged, including a table, a T.V., and the carpet. The room was also covered in red wine spirits, along with shattered glass. The suspects were both clearly intoxicated and fighting when officers engaged. Suspects surrendered and arrested for disorderly conduct. Both were released the next day on bail.

like we're crazy people, I knew Alexis at least meant it what she said. I didn't forgive her, and I told her so right then and there. But I didn't reject her when she pulled me in for a hug, and she didn't pull away when I started to cry into her shoulder either. We didn't say anything. We had a truce going tonight, even if it was a tense one.

Alexis and I headed out after that. The wind was still strong but not cutting through our jackets like knives and sending us shivering to shelter. People were walking around Main Street, their faces rosy from the cold. It was only 10 by then, and the town's lights were warm and inviting. A street performer played the tune from that Charlie Brown Christmas special on violin as a snowball fight broke out on the sidewalk between some college kids exiting a bar. One of them sailed over their friend's head and hit a light post near us.

Alexis and I smirked at each other and chuckled as we walked off. We weren't ready for a scene THAT cheesey but the look between us was mutual. We passed through the streets of Saratoga Springs in peace...

Well, peace for a moment only. As we got closer to the motel, police lights flashed nearby from a parked cruiser. There Miranda sat, cuffed and sitting in the backseat, fast asleep and gray hair a mess. We ran into the lobby. Dad was in the middle of being read his rights as the cops slapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists. He was drunk, that much was clear. His back was gnarled up and he looked menacing but his eyes looked scared, weak even. As they hauled him off, the receptionist filled us in. Miranda and Dad had started the night once we left. They locked the doors and started making loud noises...apparently. People started to complain until eventually the owner had to come in

and open up their room. The place was trashed, wine spilled all over the floor, broken glass and lamps bits everywhere, The owner tried to get them to calm down but Dad started shoving him out the door. “We paid for this dump, so walk right out of here shit-stain!” That’s around the time the police were called.

We spent part of the night cleaning up our ruined room while the owner signed some paperwork, watching us just in case we tried to run out. Another part was spent waiting in the police station as they processed the two drunks. Since most of the damages were superficial and no charges were being pressed, they’d only have to spend a night in the tank before being released. Thank god or else we would be stuck with Miranda’s car but no keys to drive back. The unfortunate part was because the owner didn’t press charges, we were obliged to pay off the damages. New lamp, new bedding, a new rocking chair, the total was over over 400 dollars alone. Yeah.

The car ride home was absurdly quiet. I had never seen our group so...civil before.

Miranda in particular was passive as a sheep. She lost one of her shoes fighting with Dad in the apartment and she looked positively humiliated as she walked to her car in broad daylight the next day, a plastic bag with a rubber band covering her other shoeless foot.

Alexis and I took turns driving back and no one complained. Mostly Miranda and Dad slept like kids in the backseat while the farms and lake sides whizzed by our windows.

We got home and everyone split ways. And like that, Christmas was over.

So now you might have a better idea of what my holiday was like. Not to mention the two extra days of work I missed, no holiday pay. We're flat broke and if that's not a good enough excuse for you Teresa, then what? What do you want from me??? I can't do everything! It's a gift anyways, I'm supposed to be able to do whatever I want with a gift.

-Feb 7th 2016

I went back home today. Alexis promised Dad wouldn't bother me anymore. I didn't believe her (still don't) but she insisted, and sleeping in my own bed after weeks of Cassie's lumpy futon isn't too bad an idea. It was kinda nice to feel missed, though it's still weird coming from Alexis. Just because we bonded over a Christmas meltdown doesn't mean all is forgiven. Not by a long shot. I think she gets that. When she answered the door, we didn't try to hug each other and I could tell she hadn't snooped around in my room since I've been gone. Everything that wasn't shoved into my backpack was still lying on the ground where I left it, faintly dusty. She still watched me as I roamed past her half of the hallway. Old suspicions are hard to break. Or maybe she's just making sure I didn't change my mind and book it out the front door with whatever leftovers from the fridge tucked under my coat. Not that I'd steal anything from this dump.

I guess the house is less grimy than it usually is, at least in certain areas. The dining room table's permanent supply of random therapy notes and junk have been moved to the basement, and there's a lemony smell on the tables that tells me someone wiped them down recently. Most of the house is still a travesty (the bathroom somehow smells worse than when three people were using it) and I'm pretty sure the basement is over capacity, but hey, minimal effort is better than none. At least it feels livable. The mood is also less

Dear Jeff,

I've tried to write this letter I don't know how many times and every time I make a little bit of progress, I have to stop and start over again cuz something always ends up bothering me. Like right now, I want to throw this out and start this all differently, but I know it won't end up anywhere. So I'm going to say this once from the heart and hope you understand.

You know, I could understand keeping your family off limits. It's not like mine are perfect but I knew yours must have been a bigger deal since it bothered you so much when I brought them up. I wasn't going to push you if you weren't ready and even two years later, I still was ok with not having the full picture. Of course I wanted to be there, to know who my boyfriend's family and what they're like, but whatever. I cared about you.

I never had a problem with your weight but I know you did. I've seen you try to keep your discomfort in check when we went out or if we had dinner with my folks. Even when you showed that same awkwardness with me, I got it. You were unhappy with your body but you didn't want any help, said you didn't need it and there was nothing to worry about. I wish I could have helped more than just being an ear to listen. The fact is, I loved you for you, including your body. Whatever form you came in, that'd be fine by me. I cared about you.

hostile, but still just as uncomfortable. It's a different brand of awkward, like everyone's trying out new social cues. Dad especially interacts like a janky speak-and-spell when he's talking, trying to understand the right combo of words to say to me without being a complete jackass. The only interaction I've had with him so far today is a mutual "hey" from across the hallway. I'm pretty sure he broke out into a cold sweat just seeing me again. Good. Honestly the best lifestyle change this house has ever seen as far as I'm concerned. I don't know what Alexis told him (or maybe??? He feels actually GUILTY??? Just kidding, even I don't believe that) but I'm not about to question it. If Teresa and I can't find a place to live right away, at least I know staying in the House of Reject Halloways for another couple of weeks won't be the usual hell on earth it was.

I knew I'd have to go back sometime, for their sake at least. The rent is too expensive without a couple of different incomes. I'd feel bad if they lost the house, even if I don't think Dad deserves it. It'd be lying though if I said those were the only reasons for coming back, or the most important. I mean, I don't want Alexis to be homeless. I heard that after I left, even Dad started working again. He does odd jobs for Miranda around her office most days. According to Alexis, Miranda picks him up everyday in front of the house around 11, the earliest he's willing or able to work on any given day. He naps on the job a lot, or as he calls it, "I'm savin up me strength." Alexis sent me a picture of him changing a light bulb a week ago in the receptionist area, sweat dripping down his face as he reached for the socket, balancing on a wooden chair with one foot. He was still in his pajama pants too, the ones with the white stains on the front. Alexis says Miranda hasn't paid him since he's started working, but she buys him lunch and dinner everyday he's

So what you were busy a lot? You're hard working. So what you didn't like to share all the time? It was something we could work on. I didn't need you to be rich or have perfect family, you didn't have to have tons of friends or be a perfect boyfriend. For fuck sakes, I didn't give a shit about you riding a bicycle everywhere either. It's just another way to get around, right? I wanted to spend time with you. I loved walking around stargazing. I loved going out when you got off work and seeing where the night took us. I loved how loyal you were and how you said you were my best friend. That's what I cared about. Loving you and being in a relationship with you.

Having said all of that, what I need you to understand that we can't continue being together. I'm breaking up with you.

These past few months you've been even more distant than you ever were before, even more than when you were hanging out with Cassie a year and a half ago. I throw a Halloween party so you can finally start meeting some of my friends. You came later, acted weird the whole night and then left half an hour after you got here. Not to mention you didn't even half the costume that we planned to wear two weeks before, and then the next day picked a fight with me over the phone. You left me hanging on Thanksgiving, after insisting you can make it to dinner, stand me up, and then don't call for days.

You're gone the entirety of Christmas and don't call. When you get back days later, I gave you a smartphone, something that YOU SAID you really wanted and you actually needed because your phone was wasn't working as well anymore. I give that to you, and then you tell me you're just going to sell it? Right after I just gave it to you. And then, with no explanation, you leave home for over a month and don't tell me where you are, just that you moved out and that you'd see me around soon. WHAT??? I had to find out

come in and it keeps him occupied all day. If he's that willing to humiliate himself in front of Miranda and her clients for the chance of a lousy paycheck, then anything is possible. I'm not planning on staying forever, for a couple of weeks.

Teresa hasn't called in a while. I've tried a couple of times since I left, but her phone must be busted or something. It always goes straight to her voicemail. Come to think of it, she bought me the same iPhone for Christmas that she has. I probably saved myself a headache staying with my old flip phone then! I'll have to mention that next time I see her. We got a lot of lost time to make up for and Valentine's Day is only a week away. She doesn't know I'm back yet and we haven't really seen each other since... since I left in January. It'll have to be perfect, and I know it will be. I've been coming up with some date ideas, but the main thing will be the journal. God, months of waiting for this moment, and it's just another week away... I'm more than a little excited.

-February 10th 2016

Let it be known that on this day, Michael Halloway apologized TWICE to me, Jeff Halloway. The first apology was for not leaving enough peanut butter in the pantry when I went to make a sandwich. The second apology was for (and I quote) "Being kind of a jerk." Let it be further known that I, Jeff Halloway, responded to the second response by flipping him the bird, which resulted in...nothing. No yelling, no ridicule, no violent outbursts. Not even a passive aggressive crack about my weight. He took that middle finger to the face and did nothing. If it wasn't already incredibly obvious, let it also be known that I had the biggest shit-eating grin on my face when I walked away. He had it coming.

from Cassie of all people that you were crashing at his apartment and you apparently ran away from home?

Just one thing after another, you kept blowing me off or not telling me what the fuck is going on, and meanwhile, you were becoming less and less patient or pleasant with me. We barely saw each other on dates. I didn't even know your Mom left OVER A YEAR AGO. By February, I was about ready to call it quits, but then I get a call from you saying you want to talk about stuff. Ok, fine. Better late than never, I guess. We wait for two weeks until Valentine's Day, and that felt completely arbitrary, but fine. Grand romantic gestures. We meet up and you seem like you're in a good mood, and we start strolling in the woods. Except as soon as I try to talk about what's been going on lately, you start getting nasty with me, like I'm the bad guy. Suddenly you whip out this journal and tell me I have to read this whole thing in front of you, and that it's your "deepest, most personal confessional." It took me over an hour to read this thing, and the entire time I'm freaking the fuck out because there are terrible things in here Jeff! You're describing actual abuse and trauma that happened to you, stuff I had absolutely no knowledge of, even when it was happening to you. It was generally horrifying and I felt sick. Can you imagine how worried I felt? How bad this made me feel, knowing you were in such a bad state and I wasn't able to help?

-February 13th 2016

Tomorrow's the big day, I can tell. My stomach is settled. I still feel something, there's a little unease sure, but I think that's Ok. The timing's got to be right, there's no other time like tomorrow. I know it.

An hour goes by and I finish reading your journal. Ok, fine. Obviously my first instinct is to process everything I've just read. Here's the part, the reason I'm writing this to you at all. You drop all of this on me and expect me to understand it all and to be ok with you telling me lies every single day of our relationship, and then you tell me that I owe YOU an apology for not supporting you through all this. First of all, you said your journal was your way to apologize to me, so which is it? And secondly, and this is the important; how can I possibly have helped you when all you did was lie and hold back from me???

Jeff, I'm not going to abandon you. I still care about you and I'll be there if you need help or have someone you want to talk to about your life, or if you need support for when you seek help, and I really think you should seek real, professional help. But I can't be in a relationship with someone who thinks they can hide and lie about their entire life, and then think that I owe THEM an apology for not being there for them. I was there Jeff, but you actively tuned me out of your life, just so I wouldn't be mad about an accident that didn't even happen. You're not to blame for your abusers and you're not to blame for what you had to go through. I don't even think you're totally for blame for how you handled all of this. But I can't pretend like I'm ok with what our relationship became. If you're too afraid of making me mad to tell me anything, to let me in, to the point where you take it out on me instead? Then this has to stop here.

I hope one day, you'll let me be there for you when you're on your road to recovery.

Goodbye Jeff, I loved you.

Teresa Gómez