Recession

She laid awake listening to the rustling of clothes and scrape of drawers as her youngest son unpacked his bag down the hall. She revisited the moments of her life where reality didn’t meet her expectations. The bike she received at Christmas when she was nine that was somehow duller and smaller. The first night she went all the way with David only to wonder what all the fuss was about. When they got married and after the festivities and genuine happiness she was left with the impression that it was only one day in a sea of days that could in no way be what she wanted. When their first son was born seven months later, and she only then twenty-two, all she felt was trapped and divorced from the tiny life that depended on her entirely. She learned to expect less, and now in her 50s she felt that she had moderated her expectations to their minimum. She felt she didn’t want any more than she deserved and she whispered that to herself as she lay on her back in her slip. She couldn’t help but think, repeatedly, that those disappointments were just preparation for the disappointment that she had experienced at dinner. She had been so careful about her expectations since she was married, but, having seen the other families in their community, whose children had flown far from their nests, she thought it wasn’t just expectation but inevitability. One day she would sit at her place at the table and laugh with her whole heart as her children came back and faced their parents as equals with wives and families, careers and purpose.

James’ nose rattled. Why did he have to be so cold to him? It’s not like the economy was Aaron’s fault. He sent out resumes and applications frantically after the restaurant closed. If James was eighteen years old now he wouldn’t have found a job in the mailroom like he had and come to where he was. Aaron applied to every mailroom in that city, the ones that still exist anyway. He told him that at dinner. James harrumphed and scraped his plate, “History,” he muttered under his breath. Mark chuckled and looked at everyone individually. She asked Mark if there wasn’t something he could do for his little brother. He said that they were cutting the clerical staff at his firm as fast as they could. There wasn’t anything someone with a history degree could do there anyway; the only people who held onto their jobs had studied useful subjects like accounting or finance. He said “useful” so purposefully she almost cried. Aaron didn’t even blink. James harrumphed again, gazing at his potatoes. She remembered her face tightening, the pull before another wrinkle appears. Forks scraped and everyone, except Linda, began to eat more hastily. She asked Mark how work was. He was working on a merger between two of the biggest banks in the country, sorting their assets and liabilities. There were twenty people on his team, and they stayed at the office well into the night. Sometimes he was there 70 or 80 hours a week. He smiled strangely. They had just about untangled one of the bank’s debt liabilities and were preparing a report for a senior partner that week. She observed that there wasn’t much time to meet a nice girl with that schedule. Oh, I meet my share, he winked. James looked up; plenty of time left to settle down. She asked Aaron whatever happened to Julia. He said they drifted. They finished their dinner and Aaron excused himself. He went to the basement and the three of them went to the living room. They spoke for an hour but the conversation wasn’t of much interest to any of them. Mark went downstairs before he left. She wanted to go and give him a hug and cry as he unpacked his bag. She couldn’t come up with a reason to cry, she just felt heavy. She felt silly and went to bed.

Three days later a restaurant in the area called Aaron for an interview.

In blue oxford shirt and black slacks Aaron introduced himself to the hostess, “I’m here to see Brian.”

She looked up from the floor plan. A blonde kid-sister type, probably a senior. With even her job he could possibly. “I’ll get him.” She smiled and turned.

Brian came and ushered him to a nearby booth with a brief handshake. “So a server huh? You worked in Philly, I see. What brings you back to Quakertown?”

“Well, the restaurant I worked at closed down a couple months ago, and I was getting tired of the city anyway. It’s so expensive and it’s getting more and more dangerous. I came home. I liked growing up in Quakertown a lot. I worked at the Chili’s in high school, and we had a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, I used to go in there quite a bit when I was a bartender here. I probably even saw you.” They chuckled weakly. “Here at the California Brewsteakhouse we take service very seriously. It’s not like Chili’s.” He smiled. Aaron smiled in response. It was exactly like Chili’s. “Our standards are very high. So what was,” he looked over his application, “Bistro 22 like.”

“Well, it was a small restaurant. About twenty tables. We ran Aloha on the computers. Mainly Italian food, really good stuff. Fantastic puttanesca. We had a really bad summer when the economy sort of tanked, and the owners decided to close up. We had a great wine list, mainly Italian wines, not many beers, but I’ve always been a beer enthusiast. I’ve been to most of the brewpubs in Philadelphia and I feel that describing beer is really a strong suit of mine.” Brian’s eyes began to float. “Umm, so yeah. Steak too, my family has always loved meat.” He gave a half chuckle, Brian didn’t notice.

“Yeah, this is a bit different than a small restaurant. We’ve got 50 orders in the window at any given time. We do about fifteen grand in revenue a night.” He seemed to be looking at the hostess. “Well it’s good that you have experience. I see you went to West Chester. History, wow. Favorite historical person?”

Aaron hesitated, “Ben Franklin?”

“Yeah, hometown boy. Definitely.” Brian slouched back with his arms spread wide on the table. A hug? “Well, do you have any questions for me?”

“Ummm, sure. Yeah, how many beers do you brew here?” He could have found that out by glancing at the table tent.

He nodded toward a room with six floor to ceiling vats. “We brew three beers, an amber, a pilsner, and an IPA and we have three rotating seasonal taps. Right now they’re the Oktoberfest, Pumkpin ale, and a Belgian Triple that we haven’t been able to get rid of since the spring. Our brewer has been brewing for 20 years, he makes really amazing stuff.” Another great job. How to get from here to there?

“The Belgian Triple must be hard considering everyone has to drive here.” He smiled.

“Yeah. Anything else?”

“When can I start?” It was worth a shot.

“Actually,” Brian looked down. He looked back up; he didn’t feel too bad, “I’m just meeting people today. Putting names to faces you know.” Aaron nodded. “I hired someone for the open position yesterday, but if they don’t work out or if we need someone else I’ve got your info.” A smile like you’re being done a favor. Like the bank approved your loan or your professor changed your grade.

He stood up. The gas alone. They shook hands again and he smiled weakly. I mean, the gas alone was a total waste. Not that it’s his gas, but he didn’t know it wasn’t his gas. Good lucks all around. The blonde at the hostess stand, wiping exes off the laminated floor plan with a dirty rag, head hung blankly. Another guy comes in, worse shirt and khaki’s with a binder over his crotch in both hands. Asks for Brian as the door swings.

A couple facebook messages came. OMG you’re home! Friday night in the Quake, come out bro. We should get together sometime, it’s been too long. During and after college he had rarely come home. It was a place he wanted to leave behind like an empty bottle. Moving was jarring, and, for reasons he was unable to fully rationalize, humiliating. He wanted to avoid all social situations that weren’t strictly compulsory. But he was unused to true boredom and needed diversion. He paced his room at night and the basement in the evenings. He took out *John Adams* from the library and finished it in three days. He felt he should keep up what he had learned in college. He stopped pacing one night and responded. “Much too long. Let’s make sometime this Friday at the bar next to the bowling alley. We always wanted to go in there but we couldn’t. Now’s our chance.” It felt impulsive, take charge. She agreed.

He thought about her the next few days. Amy. They dated sophomore (junior?) year. Briefly. High school kind of dating. They’d call each other’s houses and talk for hours, who knows what about. They made out at football games and dances. Maybe he got to second base once. Nice pair? He strains his memory like a hamstring and remembers his hand up a polo shirt. Soft, warm, her quick heartbeat. Nice, he thinks, definitely nice. It’s not like her current appearance is any surprise. He’s seen her facebook evolve. Ten imperceptibly gained pounds, cheeks filling out to adulthood, hair straightened then curled then banged and streaked now natural. Why’d it end? Nothing left to chat about? Father didn’t like the idea of a boyfriend? He can’t remember but supposes that the interest was simply lost.

She picked him up. He had lived without cars for so long that being picked up was especially anachronistic. He felt familiarly out of place, and this sense of unreality destroyed his nervousness. He felt like he was taking a tour of someone else’s life for the second time. Their conversation started easily and became general. They told each other what they already knew. She’s studying accounting at the community college. It’s taking a long time because she works full time for her family’s business. Plumbing. It’s going well. Business is brisk and her classes only tell her what she’s already learned through experience. When she asks him questions he doesn’t elaborate. No, it wasn’t particularly exciting living in Philadelphia or studying history. He doesn’t know how long he’ll be back. He’ll open up after a beer or two.

They pulled up to the bowling alley. She was flattered he remembered, surprised she did too. They must have had only mentioned it once or twice while they were midnight bowling with friends, wondering what it was like down the hall with the doorman at the end of it. The music was loud. He checked their IDs and they slid into a high table near the bar against the wall with two 4 foot stools. To order at the bar or wait for a server? He convinced her to wait and the server appeared after a couple minutes. He’d barely had a drink since he’d been back, he explained as he swallowed two Lagers. She nursed a margarita. The conversation warmed.

“Have you seen anyone else since you’ve been back?”

“You’re the first. I got a few messages, but I’ve been avoiding them. I kind of want to get back to Philadelphia.”

“But you just got here. Your mom must be so glad you’re back”

He soured. “I don’t think either of them are particularly happy about it. They look at me like, I don’t know. Like the same way I feel. Like something went wrong.”

“Oh, lots of people are coming back. Even Mike Donaldson came back from Yale. He wants to start a bike shop downtown. Like everyone’s going to start riding bikes in Quakertown.” She laughed but he looked morosely at the bartender. Pretty for her mid thirties. She put in quickly, “You mean they’re not happy with you home? What would they do in that big house without anyone else? They can’t fill it. I mean, what are they doing now? Staring at each other?”

He shrugged. “I guess they were fine before I came back. I don’t know. I can’t really know how they are when I’m not there because I’m not there. Parents are a riddle. They know everything about you and even if they wanted to tell you about themselves you wouldn’t understand it. It’s like having kids makes you two dimensional. Not that you’re really two dimensional, it’s just that there are always going to be these people that see you that way. You know what I mean?”

She finished her margarita and the waitress came to clear the glasses for another round. “I can’t have any more than that because I’m driving. I’m always driving.” He was still expectant, she was surprised. “I, yeah, they’re kind of two dimensional. Like, I know they want to save up for a beach house in Asbury Park that they can retire in, but is that really. I don’t know, is that really something to want out of life.”

“Exactly. Exactly. I don’t really know what I want, but I know it’s something more, you know, abstract than that.” He looked past her, paused, and took a long swallow. “Maybe they do want something more we just don’t know it because we can’t.”

“I want kids anyway. I don’t care about being two dimensional. I just want kids. I can’t imagine getting old and not having anyone there, it’d be terrible.” She sipped. “Do you want kids?”

“No.” She looked disappointed, but she tried not to. “I don’t know. Probably. I probably want kids, but I feel so much like a kid right now I just can’t think about it.”

Two more drinks for him and none for her and he was pretty tight. She caught him up on the gossip and he recounted the Napoleonic Wars mostly accurately. They left because they didn’t know what else to do. Driving back to his house, they passed the elementary school he had gone to but she hadn’t. He suggested they stop and hop on the swings. She smiled. They were happy they found a way to prolong it.

He stood on the swing and almost fell off. She laughed. He smiled. He was a drunk tourist. So he dove in. “Are you seeing anyone? Dated anyone since high school?”

“No, not for a while. But, why ask, you’ve seen facebook?”

“Yeah, it’s like I know the answers to all the easy questions. How was dating Pat McCormick?”

She toed the sand, “You know, he was a really nice guy.”

Almost solemnly, “He really was wasn’t he? What ended it?”

“You should know.”

“I don’t actually, I’m not friends with him on facebook.”

“Oh, yeah, he moved to Seattle. When we were together he was going to ITT Tech. It’s where he got a job.” He hesitated and she jumped up onto the swing next to him. “Your turn.”

“Yeah, right. Well I was with Sara until a couple months ago. We met at the restaurant.”

“What was she like?”

He sat down on the swing. His mouth was dry. “She was intense. No. Not like Rasputin or anything. Like if she had a job to do she wasn’t screwing around. Driven, maybe. Focused. She was from Wisconsin. She said funny things like ‘bubbler’ for water fountain, and when she got drunk she’d say ‘Oh, Yah’, like the Swedish chef or something. Yeah, she’s studying to be a nurse, or I guess she’s a resident now or whatever.”

He stared at his thumbs. She looked sad. She was almost mad at him. “Why’d you come back anyway?”

He looked up at her. He didn’t hesitate. There was no hint of rancor. “Because she left me and I’m flat broke.” A minute passed, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. She sat down on the swing. They were occupied. “You know, I couldn’t see it before because this town’s small so everyone is somewhat significant and you know them at the Fourth of July fair, so I thought I’d just study what I wanted, not that Mark’s really doing any better in whatever the hell he does anyway, because I’m important because I’m me and everything will be fine because I’m too important for it not to be. And then I’m in Philly and there are plenty of people who are obviously not important to anyone just everywhere. It’s terrifying, and now I feel like I’m making decisions not because I’ve got this one and only important life but because I’m terrified that I’m not important and it’s not going to work out and all be fine and it seems like the more scared I am of that the closer I get to it.”

She didn’t know why she really loved hearing him say those things. “You always were too smart for your own good.”

He made a decision. He stood up and paced. “Why did we break up?”

“I don’t know. You stopped calling me I think.”

“Did you want me to?”

“No, I wanted you to call me.”

He stepped over to her and kissed her deeply and presently.

“One and only life right.”

He woke up suddenly. He was naked. A clock across the room read 5:15. He lifted himself out of bed; she hadn’t stirred. Carefully, he fumbled for his clothes and put them on. The main house was across a U-shaped gravel driveway with several cars and trucks. He half-remembered everything. He closed the door noiselessly and stepped gingerly across the gravel. The lights were off. The sun had just come up and it was chilly. The road curved along the side of a large hill and below was Quakertown. It looked nice. The word winsome came into his head. He hated that he liked it but he did. He started down the road holding up his right hand to block the sun from his face. How far home? Two miles, maybe three.

As he walked he was besieged by waves of guilt and inexplicable joy. He would frown deeply sunk in thought, a few paces later he would smile at the sun and begin laughing. He caught himself muttering and made an effort to stop only to pick up again several paces on. At first he was self-conscious, then less so. He chuckled at his own image, a maniac walking on the side of the road, stopping and muttering by the guard rail at 6 am on a Saturday.

He stopped at a diner and sat at the counter. He drank four cups of coffee and ate a western omelet. He had been here before, a couple times maybe. After football games, walking around the track, the social circuit. With her? He shook his head like an etch-a-sketch. When he got home the house was empty; he breathed a sigh of relief. In his room he sent off resumes for jobs in Philadelphia.

No one asked him about that night. Over the next week the atmosphere of the house grew warmer. What was left unsaid was like a radiator. It let them each hope that what they wanted was still possible. Dinners were less of a chore. Conversations covered the scraping of utensils at the table. Questions were met with sentences rather than words. His mother smiled more. Aaron could feel his father’s resentment of him, his food that he ate, his roof he slept under, diminishing. He spent an evening in the living room with them, watching network TV, having abbreviated conversations during commercial breaks.

On Wednesday a temp agency called him. Data entry, one week, minimum wage, starts Monday. He was elated and embarrassed. The highs and lows wore him out. The word stoic had been occurring to him; it seemed like the word for his father. He thought it meant emotionless and silent, but he wasn’t certain. He looked it up. It sounded interesting and not much like his father. He got a book on Seneca from the library. It was dense but thin and he liked it. Next he borrowed Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*. Parts of it were boring, parts were like a revelation. He thought about how to suppress his emotional reactions.

On Saturday Mark came to dinner again. Aaron was in a much better mood. He was psyching himself up for the necessary monotony he would soon engage in. Conversations started fitfully.

Mark turned to him. “Done anything lately but mope around here?”

Aaron didn’t mind. “Sure. I’ve been reading quite a bit and applying for jobs.”

“Yeah, but I mean have you done anything real. You know, besides applying for jobs you won’t get or sitting around reading.”

His mother put in, “Mark! Aaron’s having a tough enough time as it is. And anyway, he’s starting a temp job Monday.”

“A temp job! Well why didn’t you say so? What are you going to be doing?”

“Data entry”

“What like taking a piece of paper and putting the numbers into a spreadsheet? Sounds fun.”

“A bit like what you do, right?”

Mark snorted. “Yeah, not really. So how’s your knowledge of World War Two going to help you fill in the spreadsheets.”

“It’s not. I don’t really expect any specific historical knowledge to help me in any job.”

His father growled. “Then why didn’t you study something else for chrissakes?”

Aaron replied calmly. “I don’t want to sound like a broken record, but if I had been born when you were and followed this path I could have walked right into a classroom at the high school. Now I can’t even be a sub without a license. Anyway, I was told to follow my passion. I had never been out of school. I just kind of thought everything would work out. It seemed like it did for everyone else. Why not for me? I’m only 24, maybe it still will.”

Mark responded. “Sounds like excuses. The firm just hired half your graduating class in accounting, finance, business, economics. If you had done that you’d be in much better shape. I mean how long are you going to keep living here?” His father grunted agreement.

“He can live here as long as he likes.” His mother put in. “I like having him here.” She turned to James. “And if you like having me happy, you’ll learn to like it too.”

“You know, I’m not only applying for jobs around here. I’ve been sending resume’s all over the country. I’ve sent out about a hundred and fifty this week.” They were surprised. He turned to Mark. “I didn’t want to study economics and I don’t want your job. I know it pays well and I know that I’m only doing some temp work next week but I’d rather do what I’m not interested in for a week rather than a career.” He turned to his parents. “I’m really grateful for everything you’ve done for me. Thank you. I know that being able to come here is a huge advantage, a privilege. Other people have it much worse because they don’t have this roof, this food, this internet connection to help them get back on their feet. I wouldn’t know how to even try without you.”

“You’re welcome, son.” His mother said.

“Yeah, you’re doing your best.” His father said.

Mark looked unhappy. Aaron said, “You know, Mark, I’m starting to accept where I am. I can’t change the past. I’m just trying to do my best with what I have.”

“I know little brother, I know.”

They sat in the living room talking for some time before Mark left. Aaron watched TV with his parents feeling very young. When he was younger he wanted to be older, each year couldn’t come quickly enough. Now he felt like a teenager and enjoyed it. His parents went to bed and he read. He checked his email, facebook, craigslist, several times each. He paced the basement. His relief was interrupted by pangs of guilt. Yes, he had accepted his situation. He was back home. Indefinitely. He would continue to apply for jobs in the city, but he wasn’t counting on them. If he got one he’d be elated, but he wasn’t counting on it. Would he? Why did he still want to get out? Wanting things to be different isn’t acceptance. What is acceptance? Hoping for what’s real and possible. He liked that. He thought Marcus Aurelius would too. He can’t put it all on a maybe. No expectations, no let down.

But then he wasn’t a tourist. What he did here mattered. If only he could get away. No, he knew if he accepted it he had to deal with it head on. There’s no wishing it away, it’s your life. Nothing changes the past, be brave about it.

He picked up the phone and called her.