EDDIE THE LEGEND

By

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Prologue

Eddie Fitzgerald doesn’t mind the Seattle weather in the least. They say the mark of a Pacific Northwest native is being prepared for all seasons on any given day. It’s a different story for Kristine Fitzgerald. Eddie’s Florida-born wife still cannot fathom traveling anywhere but a warm weather locale in January, much less having to pack long pants and a jacket.

On this particular late January morning, it is fifty degrees and raining. Eddie and

Kristine pull into the driveway at his father’s West Seattle residence. The family home rests at the top of the hill on a cul-de-sac on 41st Avenue Southwest, overlooking Seacrest Park. Eddie turns off the ignition on their rental car and notices his other half looking forlorn, eyes staring a hole into the iconic Puget Sound.

“Babe, it’s colder than this back in New York,” he says.

“Eddie, it’s not the temperature, it’s the rain,” Kristine replies. “Cold rain!”

“You know it rains nine months of the year here,” he remarks. “Liquid sunshine!”

“Yeah, and you know how I feel about this trip,” she retorts angrily. “We could

have just gone to Arizona next month to see your dad and come back here to see your

grandfather in the summer.”

“Kris, we can’t visit Dad in Arizona next month,” Eddie answers. “He’s working.

He’s helping the team get ready for the new season. And why bother going back and

forth twice when we can see both of them in one shot?”

“Well, don’t take so much time off then, Eddie. That way you’ll have enough days left to do both.”

Eddie gently raises his hands to eye level. “Alright! Okay, let’s not fight about it,” he says. “Tell you what. I’ll save my days this year and we’ll do that trip to Aruba you keep asking about.”

Kristine rolls her eyes and sighs in resignation. “Fine, but I’m holding you to it.”

Eddie and Kristine exit their rented black Corolla at just before ten in the morning.

He pops the trunk. In unison, Eddie pulls out his blue carry-on while Kristine retrieves hers in green. They slam the trunk down and start walking towards the front door. Eddie’s father, Bruce, has been watching them the whole time. As they get to the walkway, Bruce opens the door and greets them outside in the rain.

“It’s not snowing, Eddie,” he sarcastically remarks. “Can’t say that about half the

country right now.”

“Yeah, well it’s not seventy and sunny either,” Kristine replies while smiling politely.

“It’s seventy inside,” says Bruce as he reaches over to hug her and kiss her on the

cheek. Bruce then turns to Eddie and offers a warmer fatherly embrace.

“How ya doin’, son?,” he asks.

“Never better,” Eddie answers as Kristine walks past them for drier ground indoors.

“Hey, what happened back there?,” Bruce asks curiously. “You guys alright?”

Eddie immediately downplays the prior exchange with his wife. “Oh yeah, yeah.

Just talking about how I almost hit one into the sound from here.”

Bruce is not convinced but allows his son a pass for the time being. They walk inside to find Eddie’s grandfather, Jacob, exchanging small talk with Kristine.

“And that’s why- HEY! Edmund Fitzgerald! The legend lives on!,” exclaims Jacob.

“Hey Grandpa!,” Eddie replies as he gently hugs his grandfather.

“Hey, I was just telling your wife. They found a guy in Snohomish County who’s

got that coronavirus,” Jacob says as he points to the television tuned to CNN. “It’s gonna

happen here, Eddie. You gotta be careful.”

“Come on, Dad. Don’t scare the kids,” responds Bruce, dismissively. “It’s just one guy. Nothing’s gonna happen.”

Eddie and Kristine both look at each other and grin, instantly thankful that Bruce is still willing and able to care for the ninety-four-year-old Jacob. They both raise eyebrows at each other as an unspoken way of apologizing for their argument.

“So, Dad, how’s 2020 looking for the M’s?,” inquires Eddie. “Any surprises or is

it the same old shit?”

“Well, I’ll be surprised if they make the playoffs this year,” Bruce responds. “But

I guess it’s part of my job to help make it happen. C’mon over here. I have something new to show you.”

Bruce takes Eddie away to the den where he keeps his memorabilia from decades of baseball. He is the very definition of a baseball lifer, having played the game and scouted players. He is now a roving spring training instructor while assisting the Mariners General Manager for the rest of the year.

Jacob and Kristine stay behind and sit on the couch in front of the television.

“Always with the sports, those two,” she remarks.

“Yeah, they’re two peas in a pod,” Jacob says. “I…”

Jacob’s thought is delayed by a sudden loud, wet cough. He feverishly reaches for a handkerchief in his right front pants pocket.

“You okay, Grandpa?,” wonders Kristine.

Jacob takes a deep breath and reassures her. “Yeah, I have this cough now. I’m not sick. I’m just getting old… Where was I? What was I gonna say?”

“You were talking about Eddie and Bruce?,” Kristine inquires.

“Yeah, they’re like two peas in a pod, those two,” replies Jacob, who then reverts to watching CNN abruptly.

Meanwhile in Bruce’s den, Eddie looks around and sees the same furniture setup and the same photos and mementos on the walls.

“Dad, everything looks the same here,” he states.

Bruce looks over his shoulder to make sure no one is within ear shot. “Your grandfather is sick,” he replies softly yet matter-of-factly. “It’s lung cancer. He smoked for years before you were born. He’s ninety-four now and he’s just… he’s not going to make it much longer.”

Eddie slumps over and appears crushed. His eyes divert down the hallway where Jacob and Kristine are sitting contently.

“Huh… how is he taking it?,” Eddie asks.

“His mind is already gone,” Bruce answers. “It has nothing to do with the cancer,

but, when he starts to REALLY lose his marbles, it’s going to happen quickly… So, don’t make any plans for the next few months, okay?”

“Um…So, wait a minute. Who’s going to watch him when you’re down in Peoria?,” Eddie wonders.

“I’m not going this year,” Bruce says. “I’m taking a leave of absence from the

Mariners. I didn’t want to say it in front of him, or Kristine, until I told you first.”

Eddie becomes visibly shaken. Bruce places his right hand on his son’s left shoulder. “Look, shit happens,” Bruce says. “This one… At least we can prepare this time, not like your mother.”

“Yeah,” Eddie musters softly.

“You have Kristine,” Bruce concludes. “She’s tough as nails. We both know that.

You’re gonna be fine. Why don’t I go to Spud’s to bring back lunch for all of us? You go ahead and break the news to her. Stay with your Grandpa. Make sure he doesn’t do anything crazy.”

“Sure, Dad.”

Bruce walks Eddie out of the den and back down the hallway into the living room.

Kristine sits like a deer in headlights, still stewing about having to visit Seattle in January. Jacob sees Bruce and Eddie return and immediately offers a non-sequitur.

“The Year of the Cat,” he bellows. “That was the name of your other favorite song, Brucie. Imagine if you named him Cat Fitzgerald, like that Muslim singer.”

“Kris, what do you want from Spud’s?,” Bruce asks, ignoring his father’s non-sensical ramblings. Kristine is initially puzzled and still annoyed, but figures food may help the situation.

“Um, two-piece fish and chips for me. No, make it three. My body’s three hours

ahead and starving.”

“Same for me, Dad,” Eddie says.

Bruce grabs his wallet, keys and phone and unceremoniously departs. Kristine

gives Eddie an evil look.

“What is going on?,” she sternly asks him.

Eddie gets up from the couch again and looks down at his hungry, unsettled wife.

“I have to show you something in here,” he replies. “In the den. Please, honey!”

Eddie walks out on the unsuspecting Jacob. Kristine stands and powerwalks into the den. She stands in front of Eddie, stares at him with eyes wide open and places her hands on her hips in a most demanding fashion.

“Babe, I have some bad news,” Eddie timidly remarks. “We’re not going to Aruba this year.”

On February 29th, Bruce says his last goodbyes to his father, Jacob. By then, Jacob’s implication that COVID would become a worldwide pandemic was rapidly coming to fruition. Eddie and Kristine fly back to Seattle, under a worldwide cloud of uncertainty, for the wake and the funeral. They will return home to Long Island on March 5th. A week later, the world would stop. For most people, life would eventually return to normal. For Eddie, his grandfather’s passing was just the beginning of his swift and dramatic transformation.

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We Both Go Down Together

Bruce Fitzgerald’s childhood home in Euclid, Ohio rested a couple of blocks from Willow Park, where all the neighborhood kids played. The fence at the far end of the park signaled a home run. In 1957, Bruce hit more round-trippers through the windows alongside Willow Drive than the major league club did at the nearby municipal stadium.

Jacob Fitzgerald became inebriated one evening and thought his son needed a greater challenge with a larger field. He suggested that his ten-year-old son work on his glove skills, in a most peculiar locale.

“Brucie, let’s go out to the fence by the lake,” Jacob said. “I’ll go down a ways and hit some fly balls. See if you can jump up and snag them before they go over.”

With that, Jacob took Bruce down to the end of Lloyd Road alongside Lake Erie. Even then, Bruce knew that this was a bad idea. Never mind the fact that Bruce’s father was drunk. He knew at that young age that throwing objects into Lake Erie was environmentally prohibited. After a few half-hearted attempts to catch pop-ups, Jacob urged his son to try harder.

“Do it like you give a damn. C’mon, have some passion!... How about this? Every one you catch, I’ll let you hit into the water.”

Bruce slowly became comfortable with the idea and was about to test his lumber, until the neighbors threatened to call the cops. Hair-brained ideas aside, Jacob’s message about passion resonated with his son. He started developing into an all-around outfielder, much to Jacob’s delight.

“The two most exciting plays in baseball, son, are hitting a home run and robbing someone else of a home run,” Jacob explained.

Bruce grew to become six-foot two. His lanky figure was ideal for reaching over the left field wall at Euclid High School and snagging would-be dingers. It wasn’t long before word got around about the two-way threat on the diamond. In 1965, Bruce Fitzgerald was offered a full ride to the University of Virginia.

After a stellar four-year college career in which he posted a .373 average, the All-American left fielder was selected twelfth overall in the 1969 draft by his hometown Tribe. The team was struggling mightily and needed an attraction to draw fans.

Bruce Fitzgerald was not the franchise savior Cleveland had hoped for. However, he did have a fine career once he joined the major leagues in 1972. In his eight years with the team, Eddie’s dad averaged twenty-two homers and seventy-eight runs batted in. Along the way, Bruce lost his mother, Annie, to leukemia in 1976.

As 1980 approached, Eddie’s dad was slated to enter the final year of his contract. At age thirty-two, his speed and agility were starting to decline. He was now a third baseman, a three-time All-Star by virtue of his bat. Bruce felt he had a few good years left and was hoping to cash in as a pending free agent. Cleveland had other plans, however. Bruce made $150,000 that season. The team was unwilling to pay more than that for someone whom they felt wouldn’t live up to his next contract. Rather than lose him to free agency, Cleveland’s front office made the difficult decision to trade Euclid’s own Bruce Fitzgerald.

The Seattle Mariners saw a proven commodity in Bruce. They felt he still had much to offer on the field and could help mentor the younger players as well. Plus, like the warriors of the Cuyahoga some ten years prior, they saw a chance to draw some fans. Leaving Ohio was bittersweet for Eddie’s father, but it was also somewhat ironic. While he watched his hometown team on television as a child, he’d also watched the mariners from time to time on the lake.

When he wasn’t preventing baseballs from reaching the unforgiving waters of Lake Erie, young Bruce watched freighters pass through at all hours, day and night, on their way to and from port in Cleveland. Thus, he became enamored with ships and maritime history. Bruce’s main hobby during the off-season was building model ships. He had at least thirty in his den at home in Shaker Heights.

“Honey, why do you have so many model ships in here,” Bruce’s wife, Sharon, once asked.

“Because you won’t let me put them anywhere else,” Bruce retorted.

Without a parent or a sibling, still without a child, and now without a job in his hometown, Bruce felt an overwhelming sense of loss. Sharon helped him come around to the idea of a new beginning.

“Honey, you love the sea,” she said. “What better place than Seattle to start over…. I know we still have the house here. We can rent it out in the summertime and go back in the winter… We still have each other. We can do this.”

Bruce and Sharon spent one more Christmas in Cleveland with Sharon’s family. A few days later, they said goodbye to Ohio by christening their home one last time. Sharon Fitzgerald arrived in Seattle by car on New Year’s Eve, 1979. A month later, she unexpectedly vomited from what she initially thought was a stomach flu. When her morning sickness did not subside, she and Bruce found a doctor. Indeed, 1980 was about new beginnings. The new Seattle star was going to be a new dad.

Bruce was distracted for the first half of the following season. On June 16th, his average stood at a paltry .238 with only five homers. Darren Remus, the old-school skipper, now sixty-two and entering the twilight of his managerial days, called his star player into his office for a heart-to-heart talk.

“Brucie, you don’t seem like yourself out there lately,” Darren observed. “I mean, I know we’re not doing all that well here, but I saw you kill us year after year when I managed the Twins. What’s on your mind?”

“Skip, my head is all over the place right now,” Bruce admitted. “It’s been like that ever since my wife got pregnant, you know, before I even showed up. I can’t help but think about raising our baby.”

“Well, your wife is at home, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So, she can handle it.”

“It’s not that, Skip. I don’t want my baby to grow up with nobody else around… My dad’s back in Ohio. I’m out on the road six months out of the year. I mean, I wanted to wait until after I was done playing to try and have a kid. You know, it just happened.”

“Ahh, a little ‘Oopsie,” Darren joked.

“Yeah,” Bruce laughed.

Darren leaned back in his office chair and took a breath. He then took a long drag on his cigarette. “Well, I’ll tell you. I’ve got a real conflict of interest here,” he advised.

“How so?”

“Well, between you and me, Brucie, you were my choice. The boys in the front office wanted Guy Foley from Detroit to play third. They didn’t even want to trade for you. I told them you still had plenty of juice left and you played with a lot of heart. I told them you’d give us four good years and here we are and I can’t even get four good months.”

Bruce tilted his head back and rubbed his neck. “Wow, Skip.”

“They were worried about you leaving us after the season to get a big payday somewhere else,” Darren continued. “And it sounds like you don’t even want that.”

“Look, I’ll talk it over with my wife. I mean… I love playing ball.”

“You should talk to Jimmy Bothell,” Darren replied. “He’s got three kids and he ain’t even thirty yet… I know it’s been a rough transition, but you can handle it. Everybody does.”

Darren then cracked a smile and took another drag of his lung dart. “Think about it. You’ve got maybe four years left. You’re missing the worst years anyway. You’re missing the all-night crying, diaper-changing, teething years. You… haha! You’ve got it made, kid! By the time you hang ‘em up, your baby will be four or five years old and going to school during the week. You’ll be around to play with them after school and go to the amusement park and shit.”

Bruce laughed and took a long, deep breath.

“You like ships, right?,” Darren asked.

“Of course.”

“Well, think about it like this. This is the ‘SS Mariner.’ I’m the captain of the ship. You’re my first mate. One can’t do shit without the other. If I go down, you go down. If I get fired, you’re out of here and if you leave, I’m outta here. If the ship sinks, you and me, we both go down together…. So, let’s try to make it work, okay?”

The star third baseman slowly came around. “Okay, Skipper.”

Bruce Fitzgerald raised his average up to .262 and had tallied fifteen homers by the time September 7th arrived. That day, Sharon gave birth to Edmund Jacob Fitzgerald at 4:07 PM. Darren acquiesced and gave Bruce the night off.

Bruce’s resurgence convinced Seattle to offer him a new three-year contract worth a total of $2,000,000. Eddie’s father couldn’t refuse. It would provide the Fitzgeralds with a solid financial future at a time when salaries were just starting to creep up into the great beyond. Bruce’s production declined steadily from 1981 to 1983 as age finally caught up to him. The Twins offered him a paltry sum of $300,000 to be their designated hitter in 1984. However, Bruce knew it was time to come home for good and announced his retirement as an active player. Seattle quickly offered him a scouting position, which he gladly accepted.

When Bruce and Sharon moved to Seattle, there was only one neighborhood that suited them. The Northeast section of West Seattle offered both residential homes and amazing views of the downtown skyline. Father and son saw countless ferries and water taxis run back and forth from the docks to downtown Seattle over Elliot Bay from inside their home. Bruce often walked with young Eddie down from their hilltop home on 41st Avenue Southwest to Seacrest Park.

“Maybe someday, if I’m pissed drunk, you can hit some balls from way up there into the water,” Bruce chuckled.

Bruce quickly learned that baseball wasn’t Eddie’s first love. He didn’t have the patience for T-Ball in West Seattle. The constant drizzle in the early spring coupled with the howling, swirling winds off the water made young Eddie restless. In fact, everything seemed to make him restless. Bruce was taken aback, as he’d always been a calm child. At age six, Eddie was tested for attention deficit disorder. Bruce was even more stunned when Dr. Joseph Freeman handed his verdict to the retired slugger.

“Mr. Fitzgerald, he’s just a normal kid who likes to run around and exert energy,” said Dr. Freeman. “There’s no need for medication.”

“I guess I don’t know how to deal with this,” Bruce admitted. “I wasn’t around all the time until he was about four and I wasn’t like this.”

“Mr. Fitzgerald, welcome to the ‘80’s,” quipped Dr. Freeman. “All this modern technology… the Nintendo, computers, cable television… it’s over-stimulating our children these days. My advice is to let him exert himself, just as long as he’s not hurting anyone. Limit his sweets after dinner.”

At Sharon’s behest, Eddie’s father did not try to reign in their son.

“He’s better off just tiring himself out like Dr. Freeman said,” she reasoned. “If we did give him medication, he’d just be a zombie. He’d never eat. Maybe he wouldn’t do as well in school either. You know, his brain would work slower.”

As Eddie grew, his appetite grew larger and his gut followed suit. By the time he was twelve, he already stood five-foot eight and weighed close to two hundred pounds. He became a dominant defensive lineman for the West Seattle Wildcats Junior football team, despite his penchant for encroachment penalties.

Eddie Fitzgerald’s gridiron exploits didn’t impress linebacker and fellow Madison Middle School student Tommy Simpkins. One Friday afternoon, Tommy approached him in the cafeteria.

“I bet I can suplex you,” he said.

Like a typical pre-teen, Eddie laughed his ass off. “Oh yeah?,” he replied. “I’d like to see you try it.”

“You know I can suplex you. I’m the only one in this school bigger than you.”

Eddie slammed down his milk and uttered a cliché. “Oh yeah. Let’s do it during recess. Soccer field. If you can pick me up, I’ll ask out the ugliest girl in school to the dance.”

Both Eddie and Tommy gathered their friends for the big event. Eddie went off like a typical pro wrestler, talking smack and “cutting promos.”

“Tommy can’t handle me, brother!,” he said to nobody in particular. “I’m the biggest. I’m the baddest. He’s going down!”

The moment had arrived. Eddie, flanked by his posse, stood in the center spot and waited for Tommy Simpkins, all five-foot five, one hundred and sixty pounds of him. So what if Tommy exaggerated his size? He was just another challenge to turn away. Sure enough, Tommy came sauntering down with his friends, singing “Real American” and wearing his AWA Championship Belt.

“Hey, Simpkins, you’re wearing the wrong belt!,” Eddie bellowed. “AWA sucks and so do you!”

Once Tommy arrived at the center spot, Eddie gave him his choice of moves.

“So, which one do you wanna do, Simpkins? Vertical suplex? Back suplex? Gutwrench suplex?”

“Vertical suplex!,” announced Tommy.

Eddie offered his body and ducked his head. “Go ahead, loser!”

Tommy hooked Eddie’s head with his right arm, swung Eddie’s right arm over his head, grabbed his shorts with his left hand and lifted Eddie all of twelve inches off the ground on his first attempt. Tommy tried twice more but couldn’t get him even halfway up. Eddie stood there like a rock.

“Ha! I knew it. No one can pick me up!,” Eddie announced, arms raised in victory.

Tommy was mortified and walked off in a huff. Once recess was over and Eddie went to his English class, he saw Tommy in his corner seat with his head in his hands. News got around, as it always did, about how Tommy couldn’t pick up his larger nemesis. Eddie heard all the kids laughing to themselves. For all of Eddie’s macho bluster, he suddenly felt like he was in the wrong.

While Mr. Lewis reviewed the reading homework from the day before, Eddie kept looking back and to the left, over at Tommy. He kept seeing his head in his hands, face tilted towards the window away from the rest of the classroom.

Forty minutes later, the bell rang. Everyone got up to move onto their next class. Eddie got up quickly and moved towards Tommy.

“I bet you could suplex anybody else in this school,” he reasoned. “Nobody’s gonna remember this next week when Vicky Peterson spills milk on her crotch.”

Tommy’s head shot up. He tried unsuccessfully to stifle his laughter. “That’ll be some funny shit.”

“Where do you live?,” Eddie wondered.

“Um… Ferry,” Tommy answered.

“Hey, that’s real close to me. I’m on 41st.”

“Cool!”

Eddie offered an invite to his former wrestling nemesis. “Stop over if you want. We can play Steel Cage Challenge. Save our asses for the football field, you know?

Tommy took Eddie up on his offer the next day. They took their aggression out on each other via Nintendo. As Tommy’s Randy Savage attempted to beat Eddie’s Bret Hart onscreen, he questioned Bruce’s vast collection of model wooden vessels.

“So, where’d your dad get those ships?,” he wondered.

“I don’t know,” Eddie responded. “I think he bought them.”

“Yeah, no shit, but where?”

Eddie truly did not know but tried to make an educated guess. “Probably through the mail of something.”

“They look pretty expensive. What does he do?” Tommy asked.

“He’s a baseball coach,” said Eddie. “He used to play in the major leagues.”

Tommy was instantly amazed and momentarily relinquished his controller. “Wow, really? That’s cool.”

Eddie’s 16-bit version of Bret Hart then placed the Macho Man in his finishing move, The Sharpshooter.

“Gotcha!,” Eddie exclaimed. “But, yeah, he played for the Mariners and the Indians.”

“That’s pretty awesome,” Tommy replied. “My dad works at a bar. He’s pretty lame.”

“Yeah, that’s lame,” Eddie agrees. “Is he, like, the owner of the bar?”

“Yeah… It’s called Admirals,” Tommy confirmed. “But, yeah, he’s pretty lame. He’s like, never home. He just goes to the bar.”

“That sucks.”

“He has a collection of old beer bottles,” advised Tommy. “That’s what made me think of the ships. It’s like your dad paid a lot of money for his ships and my dad paid, like, two dollars for each beer bottle.”

Eddie and Tommy continue trying to beat each other onscreen. After a short break in the conversation, Eddie tries to build up his new ally.

“Does your dad have a lot of friends?,” he wondered.

“Um… Yeah. They all hang out at the bar,” Tommy replied.

“Maybe that’s why he likes it,” Eddie says. “Maybe he just likes to be with his friends. My dad has friends he works with, but when he’s putting his ships together, he doesn’t do it with his friends.”

“Yeah…”

Tommy stayed for dinner as Eddie’s parents ordered pizza for the four of them. The two new friends woke up the next day with sore thumbs from their excessive video gaming. Their pain was made even worse with an announcement from their homeroom monitor, math teacher Mrs. Rebecca Andrews.

“So, I’ve been asked to advise *all* of you that the soccer field is to be used for soccer practice only,” she noted. “The school received a complaint from one of the soccer moms that they witnessed some students wrestling on the field after school on Friday. There is to be no *wrestling* on school grounds.”

Eddie and Tommy both glanced in each other’s direction. Once they made eye contact, they quickly turned away towards Mrs. Andrews.

“Somebody could get seriously injured,” she advised. “The school does not want to be held responsible in case someone really does get hurt. So, no more wrestling, okay? That goes for ALL of you!”

Thankfully, as Eddie Fitzgerald grew, he and Tommy became content with simply watching pro wrestling. His portly physique was unbecoming of a mat superstar. In the fall of 1994, Eddie made the West Seattle high school football team as a defensive lineman, along with Tommy Simpkins. However, just two games into his freshman year at Westside, Eddie’s football career met an untimely end.

It was a home game against Ballard. In the second quarter, a routine three-point stance turned disastrous. Eddie Fitzgerald’s right knee gave way on the soft, rain-soaked grass when the ball was snapped. As he was falling, Ballard’s right tackle Steven Petersen locked up with Eddie, who attempted to regain his balance. The torque on his right knee was enough to cause a torn anterior cruciate ligament.

Surgery was the only option, but the doctors waited two weeks for the swelling to subside. Eddie was fat and dejected. Watching his best friend Tommy play only made him more depressed. One Monday night, Eddie was slumped over on his bed watching the superstars of wrestling do their thing. Bruce stepped in and offered some fatherly advice from a place that he knew well.

“Eddie, they do these kinds of surgeries all the time in baseball and football,” he advised. “You know, towards the end of my career, guys started lifting more weights to get stronger, but the body can’t always hold all that muscle. It’s especially hard on the knee. These guys on TV… they’re gonna have real problems when they get old. They have surgeries all the time. They’re always in the gym. Hell, some of them…. They’re probably using drugs to look that good and that’s bad news.”

Eddie peered down at his busted right wheel. “So, I can’t do football or wrestling. I don’t wanna do anything else, Dad.”

Bruce thought for a minute. “Well, you can try baseball again… or you can learn to fix cars or work at Spud’s. Hell, you could be a bartender like that Sam Malone on *Cheers*. If I didn’t have my job in scouting, I’d think about opening up a sports bar myself.”

Eddie ignored his father’s tangent as well as the irony of his previous conversation with Tommy. He pondered his options and gave him the one answer he knew Bruce wanted to hear. “Okay, I’ll try baseball again.”

“Great, son,” Bruce replied with a smile. “So, let’s focus on getting your knee fixed first. It’s gonna be about a month of doing nothing after the surgery. Then, you start rehab. It’s gonna be about six months at *least* before you’re completely back to normal.”

Eddie’s expression darkened, his eyes diving further into the TV. “So, I can’t do baseball for Westside this year.”

Bruce paused and reassured his son. “It’s gonna be fine. It’s gonna be surgery on October 14th. By the time you’re ready to do baseball, it’ll be April. We’ll work on your game as soon as you’re ready. You’ll have more than a year to do it before going out for the team as a sophomore… I have an idea.”

By the time mid-December came, Eddie’s right knee was in a soft cast. Bruce had spent the majority of his first two post-surgery months converting the Fitzgeralds’ garage into a makeshift batting cage. He bought an insane amount of gymnastics tumbling mats to line the inside of it. Eddie was skeptical given his physical condition.

“But Dad, I can’t step into the pitch. My knee…”

“We’re not gonna step into anything, son. You’re gonna stand right there and not move your legs an inch. All you have to do, until you can move your knee again, is hit the ball. Just stand there and hit it. Hand-eye coordination. That’s what we’re doing.”

Sure enough, for the next four months, Eddie spent three days a week at rehab and another three days a week standing like a statue hitting tennis balls from a pitching machine at 45 miles-per-hour. After one month, without Eddie’s knowledge, Bruce changed the setting on the pitching machine to throw curveballs. Eddie swung and missed three times and became perplexed.

“Dad, what the hell? The machine’s broken.”

Bruce could only smile and feign ignorance. “What’s the matter, son?”

“It’s throwing curveballs.”

“Well, looks like you’re gonna have to hit Uncle Charlie, son.”

“But Dad…” Eddie stopped and realized Bruce’s master plan. He shook his head and grinned at his father’s deviousness. It was time to hit curveballs on one leg.

One month later, Bruce changed the setting back to 45 mile-per-hour straight balls and received a similar response from his overmatched son. Once again, Eddie adjusted after a few attempts. A few weeks later, Bruce got a bigger, faster machine so his son could work his way up to becoming a high-school level hitter. Bruce still insisted that Eddie not move his knee, though it was healing properly through physical rehabilitation. Eddie grew increasingly impatient with this edict.

“Dad, when am I going to start moving my knee and stepping into the ball?”

“You’re not,” Bruce deadpanned.

“Why not?”

Bruce leaned against the padded back wall of the garage and folded his arms.

“Do you know the number one problem with young hitters?... Bad mechanics. Too many moving parts, Eddie. Kids develop bad habits watching these guys stride into the ball. They think you generate more power from a leg kick. That’s a mistake. All you need to do to generate power is rock back and hit the ball square.”

Bruce then walked over to Eddie to demonstrate all the different ways a hitter’s swing could go wrong.

“It’s so hard to keep your balance, to keep your hands up, keep your shoulders square, keep your hips from flying open, stepping into the bucket… What you’re doing is all you need to do. You’ve got the hand-eye coordination now. Don’t stride. Keep everything simple. The less you move around in the box, the less chance you have of developing bad habits and the better chance you have of hitting the ball just right.”

Eddie initially struggled with trying to keep things simple.

“Just keep at it, son,” Bruce encouraged him. “Sometimes the easiest thing to do is the hardest thing to execute.”

By the time April came, Eddie Fitzgerald had developed enough muscle memory that he effectively mimicked his father’s old stance. He was now crushing fastballs clocked at 85 miles-per-hour along with curveballs mixed in. The prodigal son was a no-stride machine and was ready to go outside to take fielding practice. Bruce initially downplayed the need for fielding prowess.

“If you can hit, son, they’ll find a spot for you, no matter what,” he said. “I lost my job at third base to Jamie Allen, but I could still hit, so they stuck me at DH… until I couldn’t hit anymore.”

“But what if there’s no DH, like in the National League,” Eddie asked.

“Well… okay, we’ll work on fielding a little bit.”

Since it was now the heart of the local baseball season, Bruce kept a schedule so he’d know when the high school and little league fields were available. Taking grounders did not come naturally to Eddie, especially with him still recuperating from knee surgery. Considering Eddie’s build, his father felt the easiest position to get acclimated to would be first base.

“There’s more to it that this, but here’s step one” Bruce began. “Think of it like this, son. That same stance you have at the plate? Take it onto the field. You’ve got the upside down ‘V’. That’s how you step when the throw comes to you. Step into the V, arm extended towards the infielder who’s playing the ball. Then, see the ball and catch it. Just like that.”

All in all, Eddie would become a revelation on the diamond, thanks in part to his natural ability and his father’s creative thinking. In March of 1996, he made the team and became the starting first baseman as a sophomore. What made it even sweeter for him was that Tommy was also keeping busy with his spring hobby. The Westside Wildcats’ star linebacker moonlighted as a catcher, a six-foot-two, two-hundred-and-thirty-pound force of nature. The requisite protective gear made Tommy Simpkins look even more intimidating. Runners who dared to round third and head for home were the ones who needed protection. They may as well have tried to run over Road Warrior Animal adorned in his signature spiked shoulder pads. It took only one failed collision with Simpkins for the word to get around. *Don’t fuck with that guy*.

The duo of Fitzgerald and Simpkins made West Seattle High a formidable opponent in their three years together. Unfortunately, the team’s pitching was never on par with the offense. Eddie shined as a right-handed power-hitter when he wasn’t losing his focus in the batter’s box. His upside-down “V” stance often dissolved into an “I” or an “L.” One day, Bruce offered a sarcastic suggestion to Eddie.

“Try singing.”

Eddie looked at his father dismissively. “Yeah, sing what?”

Bruce belly laughed and offered a solution. “How about Gordon Lightfoot? It’s nice and relaxing. Hey, sing your namesake, *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*, because if you don’t figure it out, you’re gonna get wrecked.”

Eddie was desperate for an answer, but not that desperate to sing that particular song, even to himself. One day he stepped into the batter’s box. The opposing pitcher was taking his sweet time getting into his windup. Eddie felt himself beginning to twitch, so with great hesitation, he started singing his father’s favorite artist.

*“The legend lives on, from the Chippewa on down, of the big lake they call 'Gitche Gumee.”*

When the ball got to him, Eddie swung and lined a base hit to left. The next time up was the same thing. Eddie started singing that old familiar tune. Sure enough, Eddie Fitzgerald found the sweet spot and drove a two-run double into the gap in left-center.

The slugger from West Seattle was a product of the ‘90’s Grunge Movement. However, athletes are superstitious creatures by nature, whether it’s wearing the same unwashed socks every day or eating chicken at the exact same time every night before a game. Eddie went to the local music store and bought a CD of Canadian singer-songwriter’s greatest hits. Granted, it was the simple act of singing that got him to relax his mind at the plate. His father’s crazy, sardonic advice worked. Once again, Eddie started hitting with consistency.

Bruce’s son averaged twenty home runs in his three seasons as a starter. Unfortunately, the Fitzgeralds’ unorthodox tactics did not fool the scouts who came to see both Eddie and Tommy. The reviews were in. Tommy was a major prospect in both football and baseball. Eddie was a fringe player who was statuesque at first and tended to lose focus at the plate. In early 1998, high school senior Tommy Simpkins received a football scholarship to play at UW and was drafted in the ninth round by the Padres.

Eddie Fitzgerald’s baseball future was murky. Sharon and Bruce knew that getting drafted was a longshot at best. Given Eddie’s desire and ability to hit, there was still that chance. The three of them decided the best course of action was for Eddie to apply to a two-year junior college and hone his skills. In two years’ time, everyone would have a better idea of where Eddie Fitzgerald stood with regards to baseball.

“Maybe UW will offer you a scholarship to play after your sophomore year,” Bruce advised. “Maybe you’ll even get drafted higher.”

This was music to Eddie’s ears.

“Or maybe you’ll work at Spud’s for the rest of your life…”

“Dad, I’m not working at Spud’s!,” Eddie barked.

“Why not? Ann works at Spud’s. You’ll be two peas in a pod.”

“I mean, I’m not working at Spud’s after high school, Dad,” said Eddie. “Ann thinks I should get into journalism with her. You know, since I already write reviews for the school paper...”

“That’s a great idea, son,” Sharon chimed in. “Start listening to the woman nice and early. It’ll save yourself a lot of problems when you get older.”

A counterpoint to Eddie’s pursuit of excellence on the diamond was his first love, Wildcats football cheerleader and wannabe editor-in-chief, Ann Stuart. For his sixteenth birthday two years prior, Bruce and Sharon bought Eddie the final missing piece that every teenage boy needs to charm the ladies, a 1994 Chevy Blazer.

“Nice! And it’s forest green too,” Eddie pointed out.

“Only 26,000 miles, and it’s all yours once you pass your driver’s test,” Bruce replied.

A month later, Eddie did just that. He now had an intermediate license. According to Washington state law, for the first six months, a newly licensed driver under eighteen may not carry any passengers under the age of twenty who are not members of one’s immediate family. This, of course, was completely ignored by Eddie and reluctantly glossed over by Bruce and Sharon.

“Tommy doesn’t have a car,” declared Eddie. “How are we going to get to and from the arena for the show on Friday night?”

The “we” in question were Eddie, Tommy, Tommy’s sister, Carrie and Carrie’s new friend, Ann. Bruce and Sharon were not options. They had prior commitment in the form of an Arizona vacation.

“Well, there’s the water taxi,” offered Bruce.

“Last taxi is at 10:45…”

The two parents looked at each other and briefly paused.

“Well, if Tommy’s parents are available, maybe they can…”

Sharon saw her son’s face darken with each word her husband uttered. She knew what Eddie wanted to hear.

“Go ahead… But be *careful*!”

As Eddie bounced off to his room, Sharon reassured Bruce.

“He’s a good driver. He probably wants to be with that girl, too.”

Eddie wasn’t actually thinking about the girl before the night of the Soundgarden show. He’d seen her at the football games. He just wasn’t looking hard enough. With her jet-black hair, green eyes, wide smile and curves that more than fit her five-foot six frame, Eddie would soon discover what he’d been missing.

Ann had recently broken up with her boyfriend, so she was fair game. As Eddie pulled up to Tommy’s house, Ann’s eyes grew wide. They started towards the car when Ann whispered to Carrie.

“Hey, it’s the singer!”

Tommy laughed. It seems Eddie’s reputation as a singing swinger on the diamond had preceded him.

“Hey, what’s so funny?,” Eddie barked. He then smiled and joked, “You know you’re not allowed in here unless you’re twenty years old!”

“Well, *I’M* twenty years old tonight,” declared Carrie, who was all of eighteen.

“Yeah, I’m twenty years old, too,” Tommy said as the ladies piled into Eddie’s back seat.

“Me too,” said Ann, “So, you’re the guy who sings at the plate when he’s playing baseball…”

Eddie tried to hide his embarrassment. “Oh, that? Yeah, it’s just something to help me concentrate…. I don’t do it that much.”

“Well, you should,” Ann professed. “You have a great voice.”

“C’mon!”

“No, my ex-boyfriend catches for Cleveland,” Ann continued. “He told me once ‘That Eddie Fitzgerald can actually sing.”

“Cool. Hey, my dad played for Cleveland,” Eddie responded.

“Cleveland High?”

“Uh, no. Cleveland Indians. Chief Wahoo. The Tribe!”

“Oh, wow!”

Eddie added, “And the Mariners.”

“The Mariners?!?,” Ann and Carrie yelped in stereo.

“Yeah. He was an All-Star and everything…”

“I might remember him,” Ann said. “What was his name?”

“What WAS his name?,” Eddie slyly replied. “Haha!... Well, he’s not dead yet, so his name IS Bruce Fitzgerald.”

“BRUCE!,” shouted Ann. “He’s the guy who hit my mom with a foul ball in the upper deck in the Kingdome.”

“What?”

“No wait…” Ann paused. “No, that was another guy. I thought it was Bruce something.”

“Oh!”

Ann and Eddie carried on their conversation all the way to KeyArena. When Eddie sang along with the band, she could hardly tell the difference. When Ann informed him that she worked on the *Wildcat Weekly* newsletterand needed a music columnist, Eddie initially balked at the offer.

“I’m not sure. I mean, I know how to speak and write in English and all, but I’ve read those reviews in the magazines and they just throw words at you without actually telling you if it’s good or not.”

“Well, you don’t have to do that,” Ann replied. “Just pretend like you’re writing an essay, you know, with a thesis and ways to support your thesis. Besides, you’re not writing for, like, other writers and journalists. You’re writing for people like us.”

Eddie dropped off Ann first at the end of the night. When she exited the vehicle, he offered an unorthodox parting shot.

“Bochte.”

“What?,” she quizzically asked.

“That’s the guy who hit your mom with the foul ball.”

“YES! Bruce Bochte!”

“Yeah, I’m sure he didn’t mean it though… Hey, see you at school!”

“Alright!”

When Carrie and Tommy were dropped off, Eddie’s best friend just had to know if he’d scored a number.

“Well, you know, I’ll see her at school,” Eddie remarked. “When I go down to the school paper, we’ll talk. I mean, I have to see her, right? I don’t really want to write for the school paper, but she seems nice…”

“Yeah. Well, you could just email her the article,” Tommy retorted, smiling and waiting for an admission of Eddie’s true intentions.

“Yeah, but… well… it’ll give us a chance to talk, you know…. alone…”

Tommy laughed and playfully slapped his buddy’s shoulders. Eddie had discovered that he and Ann had common interests in music and sports. Ann surely was attracted to Eddie – his short, brown hair that flopped ever-so-slightly to each side, his million-dollar grin and his imposing stature. For Eddie, the fact that his quirks were appealing to her was reason enough. Her physical features were a bonus. Before long, Ann and Eddie became “Ann and Eddie.”

Eddie became a regular music maven by virtue of his album and concert reviews. He got a job at Spud’s and logged enough hours during the week to support his concert-going “research” with Ann. He drew the line at trying to get into The Crocodile and other nightclubs that were strictly for those aged 21 and over.

To everyone’s surprise, the Marlins took a flier on Eddie Fitzgerald in round forty-eight of the 1998 draft. The Marlins were known for being a less-than-stable organization that frequently turned over its roster. Bruce felt that constant change wasn’t the best thing for his frenetic son. He urged him to go straight to junior college. Sharon demanded it.

The prospect of losing Eddie to professional baseball scared Ann as well, for different reasons. She was accepted into UW’s Journalism program and had hoped Eddie would continue writing.

“Honey, I love you and I know getting drafted is a big deal,” Ann whispered to the fry cook from her register, two days after the draft. “But, you’re so good at writing. I hope you can stay here, go to junior college and still write.”

Eddie answered. “I know, Babe… I can still play ball and write for the college newsletter and stuff.”

“Yeah... It’s just nice to have something cool to fall back on, you know, just in case,” Ann reasoned.

“And I get to see you and Tommy at UW, right Ann? And I’m still around my mom and dad. Life’s good either way.”

Life was good for Eddie for the time being. Ann couldn’t shake the fear that he might still someday choose the uncertainty of a baseball career over the stability of his relationship with her. Their graduation ceremony was Thursday night, June 12th. Eddie invited Ann over for dinner two days prior to make it official.

“Mom, Dad, Babe… I’m not going to be a Marlin, “Eddie stated. “I’m going to be a Dolphin.”

The formerly rotund six-foot draft pick had thinned out since his football days. He now weighed in at 220. The Dolphins Eddie spoke of represented Shoreline Community College. Ann was ecstatic, as she now had two more years to convince Eddie to give up on baseball.

The next two years were glorious. Tommy Simpkins found his way onto the field towards the end of his freshman season and cracked the starting lineup as a sophomore. Ann Stuart maintained a 3.7 GPA, kept working part-time with her love and made a surprising career move.

“I’ve been taking communications classes as part of my major,” she confided. “Everyone thinks I’d be a natural on-air reporter. Anyway, Professor Wilson has a friend who works as a meteorologist for KOMO, and…”

Ann suddenly burst with excitement. “I got an internship with KOMO!”

Eddie excitedly hugged Ann. “That’s awesome! Hey, we could be a power couple.”

“I KNOW! Me as a TV reporter, you as a music journalist.”

“Yeah…. Music journalist.”

Eddie Fitzgerald kept writing concert reviews, if only to appease his girlfriend. He kept singing at the plate and racked up twenty homers in his freshman year at SCC to match his .330 batting average. He started singing on the field, too, but no one on the Dolphins cared so long as he was dominating the competition. He followed up his stellar first year with a twenty-four-homer campaign in which he hit .362. Scouts took notice but were still wary of his defense and the overall level of competition he faced. The Brewers took the chance. In June of 2000, they chose Eddie in the eighth round. Like his father years before, Eddie’s new team needed all the help they could get.

Eddie sat in his living room with his proud papa when the call came. He was over the moon, until he came to a painful realization.

“Dad, I’m going to leave home for the first time ever… And I can’t be with Ann anymore.”

Bruce was hardly the heartfelt type, but he did his damnedest to figure out his son’s thinking and motivation.

“And why is that?,” he asked. “I mean, your mom and I did it? All those years of me on the road.”

Eddie stared into space and realized his own truth. “We’re two separate people living two separate lives. She’s got her thing and I have mine. You and Mom… She didn’t have her own career, Dad. I can see it now. She’s gonna be on KOMO. I’m gonna be on the road. There’s no time for … us.”

“Okay, son,” Bruce answered. “Tell me this. What are you most passionate about? What keeps you up at night? Is it Ann? Is it music? Baseball?

“Well, Dad, I like music,” Eddie replied. “I love just getting up and going to see, like, Modest Mouse at the Paramount. It’s a good time. Then I wake up the next day and get back on the field, get in the cage…”

“So, you’re a baseball player,” Bruce countered.

“Yeah, I…. I am. I just got fucking drafted by the Brewers!”

“Yeah you did! Do you remember when the Marlins drafted you two years ago and you were all ‘*Yeah, that’s great. That’s cool… I guess*.’ And now you’re all ‘*Fuck Yeah, I got drafted*!”

“Yeah! Yeah!” Eddie exclaimed. “And now it means something because I worked hard and I busted my ass and I ruled and now I’ve got the recognition for all my hard work.”

“This was the goal all along, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah!”

“And what about Ann?,” asked Bruce.

Eddie paused and tried to find the answer to his father’s curveball.

“Uh, I mean, she’s great and I love her…”

“But?...”

“But… she’s really gung-ho about this TV thing,” responded Eddie. “We haven’t seen much of each other. You know, she’s doing her thing and I’m…”

Eddie didn’t have to finish his sentence and Bruce knew it.

“Dad, I have to go… I’ll be back.”

Eddie couldn’t do it at Spud’s. This was too personal. He texted Ann.

“*Babe, can you please meet me at Seacrest Park?”*

The answer came two minutes later. *“Sure. Be there in about 45 min.”*

It was Tuesday evening, June 8th, 2000. Eddie sat on a bench to the left of the Seacrest Dock overlooking the Seattle skyline. It was rush hour on Elliot Bay, but there were no cars on the horizon. Water taxis were slowly coming into view, bringing people home from work every half-hour. Ann would be one of them. The Spirit of Kingston departed at 4:15pm and dwarfed the Space Needle and every other landmark in the distance as it drew closer to home. Eddie trembled inside. It was the right decision in his mind and the hardest to carry out.

Ann disembarked and immediately saw Eddie. They both smiled. They hugged. They both knew.

“Hi Eddie!”

“Hi Babe.”

Silence filled the air for a few seconds as Ann sat down to the singing swinger’s right. A car whizzed by behind Ann and Eddie. A few more seconds passed.

“My Dad used to tell me I’d hit balls into the sound from the top of the hill,” said Eddie as he chuckled nervously.

Ann smiled and started to form words. They wouldn’t come on her first try. Her eyes began to well.

“That would be a huge hit,” she awkwardly replied.

“Yeah…” Eddie paused. “So, it’s ironic, isn’t it? The Brewers started right here in Seattle. The Pilots… The city sued baseball. You know, without the Brewers, there wouldn’t be-”

“You’ll be great,” Ann interrupted. “You… it’s what you wanted all along.”

“Ann, I don’t…” Eddie began to say what he didn’t really mean. Deep down, he did want it this way. He just didn’t want to ruin the memories.

“You’re going to do fine,” declared Eddie. “It’s like you said. You’re a natural…”

Eddie couldn’t play it cool any longer. “Look, I know it sucks. I suck. I love you! It’s just…”

“It’s okay, Eddie,” Ann reassured him, holding back tears. “We both knew it was going to happen someday, one way or another. I’ve been diving into my schoolwork, my internship. I mean, I really love this gig… I knew. I knew for a while. I guess I was just trying to hide from it, you know… hoping it would go away.”

Eddie smiled at the lady he still loved dearly, just not enough to give up his dreams.

“Remember that night we had to close and we had that snowstorm?,” Eddie asked her. “That song came on the radio.”

“Yeah!”

Eddie briefly serenaded his soon-to-be former beau. “*At times, I just don’t know… how you could be anything but beautiful…I think that I was made for you…*”

“*And you were made for me*!,” they sang in stereo.

Ann sighed and fought back tears. “You’re a beautiful fucking singer. Maybe after you’re done playing, you can do weddings or something.”

They laughed, uninhibited, free from the fear of loss. Eddie finished his thought.

“Well, maybe this is the end of something, but it’s the beginning of something, you know, for both of us. There’s this… path to greatness. There’s yours and there’s mine and even though it’s not big enough for the both of us… we’ll always have each other.”

Ann’s left hand touched Eddie’s cheek. “Yes.”

She then got up to leave. Eddie rose from his seat as well.

“I’m still here for a while, you know,” Eddie reminded her. “They want me to go to Arizona after the season, but that’s not until October.”

Ann’s expression shifted. Her eyes grew weary. Her face told Eddie everything he needed to know. They had prolonged the inevitable long enough. Eddie, realizing it was truly over, embraced her and gave her a goodbye kiss.

“It’s not goodbye, you know” Ann imparted. “It’s ‘see you later.’ That’s what my dad always says.”

Eddie’s face vacillated between a smile and a laugh.

“See you later then.”

Eddie slowly crossed Harbor Avenue Southwest and unconsciously sang the rest of their song. He now knew first-hand what his father once told him. Sometimes the easiest of decisions to make are the hardest to execute. Eddie was a man now, ready for life’s next curveball.

2

Heaven Sent­

Brandi Woods doesn’t need to wake up before ten during the week. She does not need her phone alarm to get her going. Her four-year-old cat, Raina, does that for her daily, like clockwork, at six in the morning. After all, it’s feeding time.

“Hi, baby girl!,” Brandi slurs. “Yep, I’m coming.”

It’s the Wednesday before Labor Day, 2022. Brandi stumbles out of bed, walks down the hallway into the kitchen, grabs a can of Fancy Feast Tender Beef pate, pours it into an empty bowl on the counter and places it on the floor in front of the sink.

“Eat it up, pretty girl.”

Brandi’s five-foot six frame doesn’t touch the hanging chandelier in the kitchen. However, she feels eight-feet tall on this day as she walks back down the hall. She grabs her iPhone 12 and checks her social media notifications for ten minutes. Then, another ten minutes. Raina trots down the hallway after scarfing down her breakfast. Into the guest bedroom she goes. The Siamese ragdoll does her business in the litter box, then runs into Brandi’s bedroom to gloat about her accomplishment.

“Good girl! You’re so pretty.”

Brandi lays in bed and goes down the rabbit hole. She runs the gambit of all of her accounts. Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, then Facebook. Finally, she gets up for real at ten thirty, clicks on YouTube, casts the album *California Nights* by Best Coast onto her Samsung smart TV and jumps into the shower with the door open. It’s a longer shower than usual for the slender forty-six-year-old. She must wash her long blonde hair and be on her game tonight. The water shuts off, which is Raina’s cue to run to the doorway and greet her master once again. Brandi starts toweling off and does a half-hearted strip tease, shaking her proportioned tits and ass for her cat’s amusement. Raina is not amused.

“Still got it, baby girl!,” she exclaims. “You are heaven sent! You know that? Today is a good day. We’re meeting someone new at the bar tonight.”

Summer is still holding on with a vengeance in Bethpage, New York. It’s seventy-five degrees at eleven-thirty in the morning. Brandi rushes out of her home on South Herman Avenue. It’s the next to last house on an abbreviated dead-end block. Her neighbor across the street is the Seaford-Oyster Bay Expressway, with its consistent hustle and bustle of cars whizzing by. It doesn’t faze Brandi. She grew up in North Bellmore with neighbors to her left and right and the Southern State Parkway in the distance outside her front door. She hurriedly gets into her red 2018 Nissan Rogue, turns the ignition, and blasts the air conditioning. Brandi Woods will not tolerate the humidity ruining a good hair day. Not today. Not when she’s wearing her favorite Def Leppard t-shirt and good skinny jeans, with the black boots that boost her height up to five-foot-eight. In her mind, today is a good *everything* day.

Brandi pulls up to O’Fallon’s on the corner of Stewart Avenue and Benkert Street at eleven forty. The parking lot for the Bethpage Long Island Rail Road station sits directly across the street. Twenty years of cars and trains act as white noise for Brandi these days. However, on this typical Wednesday, it will be quiet for a few more hours inside this typical Irish drinking establishment. She parks on the private lot on Benkert, gets out of the car, walks around the corner and opens the bar.

Julio leaves no stone unturned when he closes the night before. It’s a blessing for Brandi. It took twenty years and eight evening bartenders to find someone who cared what the morning and afternoon shift had to deal with. Date any newly opened wine bottles. Set all glasses up to air dry. Rinse inside all the taps. Wipe down taps and spouts. Cover spouts with rubber protectors to keep flies out. Rinse all the drains thoroughly. Wash drain covers. Mop down behind the bar. Recycle outdated menus. Take out the trash and recycling and rinse containers if needed. Brandi doesn’t even need to double-check any of these items on the to-do list. Julio has her covered. He even set up the register for her.

She turns on the satellite radio. First Wave is playing R.E.M.’s “Pretty Persuasion” for an audience of one. She lifts the flapper gate to pass through, lowers it behind her and checks her Twitter account from behind the bar. No new messages there, but Brandi has since received a text message:

*Looking forward to seeing you later! Should be there around 5:30*

Brandi loves it, literally and figuratively.

*Awesome! I’ll see you then!*

Before the pandemic, Brandi’s Wednesday night routine involved bowling with her friends. For years, she and a select few bowlers shared a common love for the New York Mets. Even when the world returned to some form of normalcy, the captain of the Amazin’ Day Drinkers struggled to find the desire to return to Farmingdale Lanes. The same was true of her close friends and teammates, some of which comprised of The Dark Knights. They realized that they enjoyed each other’s company, tipping back a few and cheering on their orange and blue. Bowling was secondary. Even if they had decided to go back, they would all have to go elsewhere. Farmingdale Lanes became another victim of COVID, another small business that went without revenue for months before closing for good.

Almost immediately, a new mid-week tradition was born for the Amazin’ Day Drinkers and The Dark Knights. Gone were the days of the Wednesday Night Mixed league. For the past year, Brandi and her friends have been meeting for dinner at O’Fallon’s, with the occasional mixed drink instead.

Now she waits behind the counter for a one-time floating substitute in her bowling league that she barely had the pleasure of knowing before time stopped. Some of the seniors from the VFW stop in for lunch after their monthly meeting concludes at noon. After that, a few local firefighters stop in to shoot the breeze and have a few shots of Jack. Two elderly ladies come in at five minutes to two for burgers and Espresso Martinis. Brandi greets them all and serves them accordingly. Still, she waits with anticipation for five-thirty to come, and with it, a new friend to experience the tribal rites of the new Wednesday Night.

When the Brewers drafted Eddie, he couldn’t wait to start his new adventure in the Arizona Fall League. They were hopeful that he would hone his skills against more suitable minor league competition for a couple of months. Bruce helped Eddie hire an agent, Brock Heyman of HER Sports Management. Brock’s father, Vince, was Bruce’s old agent and the company’s co-founder. They discussed a possible timeline for Eddie’s ascension through the minor league ranks. Eddie signed his minor league contract for $50,000 annual compensation. However, tragedy struck shortly afterwards.

On the morning of July 10, 2000, Sharon Fitzgerald stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom. Her head pounded like never before. She had begun suffering debilitating headaches and figured she was developing migraines as she got older. She tried to call Bruce for help, but her voice was silent. Her right side started to numb. Horrified, she stumbled towards the shower in a panic.

Bruce and Eddie woke up to the sound of a loud boom. When Bruce got to his wife, she had fallen face-first and hit her head on the tile in the shower.

“EDDIE!!,” Bruce cried out. “Call an ambulance. NOW!”

Eddie made up the stairs to the master bathroom moments later.

“HOLY FUCK!!,” he yelled.

“Call them, goddamn it!! NOW!!” begged Bruce.

Eddie stood there and froze. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

“CALL THEM!,” Bruce demanded.

Eddie finally snapped into action. “Oh FUCK, FUCK, YES!!”

Eddie ran downstairs to call the ambulance while Bruce tried in vain to wrap Sharon’s head in a towel and stop the bleeding. She was unconscious and already gone. The autopsy revealed that Sharon Fitzgerald suffered a brain aneurysm that awakened her and that the fall caused blunt force trauma.

Bruce remained calm in the days and weeks that followed. He had to. His son was the wreck that was Edmund Fitzgerald. Eddie stopped writing. He stopped attending shows in and around Seattle. He was numb.

“I should have just called,” Eddie opined. “I just stood there. Why?”

His father rationalized and tried to comfort his distraught son. “She was probably dead before she even hit the tile. You didn’t do anything wrong… It’s just one of those things.”

The Brewers reached out to their new signee to express their condolences. However, Eddie was depressed and not interested in any league-sponsored grief counseling. As summer turned to fall, he barely kept in contact with the team’s front office. Ann Stuart, now a full-time production assistant for KOMO, even took time out from her busy schedule to text Eddie. He didn’t reply. The Brewers saw Eddie as a headcase and made a difficult choice. They could not wait until he even arrived for his first minor league training camp to trade him. Brock Heyman called Eddie on the day before Thanksgiving in 2000 to give him the news.

“Eddie, I have a question for you,” Brock said.

“Um, okay…”

“Do you like Iowa in April?”

“Um… I’ve never been to Iowa.”

“Well, I hear it’s Heaven, like the movie says,” Brock replied. “And you are heaven sent, my friend.”

Eddie, still indifferent to everything, remained puzzled. “What are you talking about?”

“Milwaukee traded you to Montreal,” Brock finally revealed. “You and Joel Channing are going to Les Expos for Domingo Castro. They needed a proven major league bat. So, they got the kid from Cuba. The Expos wanted another prospect to go with Channing and they settled on you.”

Professional athletes often get traded. Most of the time, it’s strictly a business decision. However, the first time a player gets traded is typically the hardest to reconcile.

“I know this is your first trade. It doesn’t mean they don’t want you anymore. Quite the opposite. People think highly enough of you to trade for you,” Brock advised.

“So, I’m going from Wisconsin to Iowa, basically,” Eddie confirmed.

“That’s right.”

Eddie paused. “Okay, cool.”

Brock was caught off-guard. “Yeah?... Well, you’re still reporting to Florida for minor league camp. Then, it’s off to Clinton, Iowa. Class A Lumberkings.”

Bruce walked over to his son and asked him to tell Brock he’d call him right back. Eddie complied and hung up the phone.

“Okay, son. You didn’t come this far just to come this far,” declared Bruce. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. It’s over. It’s history. Like Grunge.”

Eddie laughed half-heartedly.

Bruce concluded his pep talk. “Get back in shape and get your ass to Iowa. Don’t worry about me. I’m fine, Eddie. Get to fucking Iowa, or else you’ll be working at fucking Target.”

Eddie and Bruce embraced. They both had the good, ugly cry they needed. Ten minutes later, Eddie called his agent back. This time, he was more upbeat.

“Hey, they play baseball in the summertime, right Brock?”

Brock was bewildered. “Junior, if you don’t know the answer to that, you have bigger problems than getting traded to the fucking Expos!”

“Hahahaha!! No snow, pal!, replied Eddie. “Not like you in Philly.”

Brock realized he was dealing with the real Eddie now and responded in kind. “Son, I don’t give a rat’s ass about snow!,” he retorted. “You know what? I hope it

fucking snows in April so your Seattle rainy ass can finally see what happens when water freezes.”

“Hahaha! Well, it snows here too, Mr. Heyman.”

Winter came to the Montreal Expos after the 1994 Major League Baseball strike that cancelled the season. Almost immediately, the organization began purging salaries and cutting costs to counter the mass exodus of fans that once flocked to the infamous Olympic Stadium. Nobody knew what the future would bring to the franchise. Eddie believed that one way or another, Montreal would not be his final destination.

Roger Dean Stadium in Jupiter, Florida was his next stop in February of 2001. The Expos shared facilities with the more prestigious Cardinals. The motley crew of minor talent Montreal possessed was indicative of the rough times of the past several years. The cash-strapped Expos could not secure the best prospects, nor could they keep them long-term. What they had in their minor league system in 2001 was promising closer Joel Channing, a double-play combo of Collin Funk and Chris Malloy, starting pitcher and 2000 first round pick Kurt Olsen and not much else.

The Expos soon realized they had a rusty first baseman in Eddie, who never shined against any pitching above junior college level. It would take all of Bruce’s teachings, plus weeks of repetitious baseball activities to get him back to where he was. Nine months of no live pitching was not easy to overcome. Eddie Fitzgerald led the Class A Midwest League in strikeouts in 2001. He also hit .253 with 14 home runs, but 9 of those came in the second half of the season.

Montreal thought well enough of Eddie’s progress to promote him to their Advanced Class A affiliate in Brevard County, Florida. He would start the 2002 season 3,130 miles from his hometown. The Manatees slugger rebounded slightly with a .275 average and 23 round-trippers through the first four months of the season. Then, on August 6th, a fluke injury sidelined Eddie. Joel Channing, promoted two weeks earlier, forgot to cover first base on a routine grounder. Eddie shifted to his right to field the ball and went to flip it to Channing. The reliever was late getting over to the bag, so Eddie tried to hustle over to tag first. When he bolted suddenly, his surgically repaired right knee popped again.

“Ahhhh fuck, Chann!,” Eddie bellowed.

“What happened?,” Joel asked.

“It’s my ACL again….”

Eddie writhed in pain as Channing called for the trainer. They both helped him off the field at Space Coast Stadium. It would be the last time he would set foot on that particular field. A second surgery was inevitable. His season was over.

The Expos waited until December 1st to make the move. Eddie Fitzgerald was part of a five-player deal with the Mets. He would report to Port St. Lucie on February 14th, 2003. However, his right knee was not responding as quickly as it did the first time. Eddie was still not ready for full baseball activities. Rather than report to the Mets’ Double A affiliate in Binghamton, they kept him in Florida for extended rehab.

Bruce’s son was starting to become discouraged with his lack of progress. On March 20th, he received a surprise phone call just after his leg curls.

“Eddie Fitz!,” a familiar voice called out.

Eddie perked up for what seemed like the first time in weeks.

“Tommy?!?”

“Yo! Guess what?”

Eddie couldn’t form any guesses. “What, you Husky fuck?”

“Miami’s bringing me in for a workout tomorrow.”

Linebacker Tommy Simpkins had parlayed his four-year college football career at the University of Washington into a short two-year stint with the Detroit Lions. Now, he was readying for a second opportunity with the Dolphins.

“No shit!,” Eddie excitedly replied.

“Hey… You ever been to Milligan’s?,” Tommy asked.

“No?”

“You know where it is?”

“Yeah, that’s the place on the water in Sewall’s Point,” Eddie replied.

“See you there in an hour, pal. My treat.”

“Hey, it’s gonna take me forty-fi-“

The call was dropped. Tommy’s phone reception died at that moment. Eddie left the Mets spring training facility on the extreme west end of Port St. Lucie and began the trek across town during rush hour during its busy season, down Route 1 to A1A and over to the Sewall’s Point peninsula that blanketed Stuart, Florida.

Like most coastal Florida food and drink establishments, Milligan’s had a Margaritaville-esque, tiki bar feel to it. Though it was ripe with outdoor seating, Tommy opted to wait inside at the bar in the round. The views of Jensen Beach Inlet were plentiful. Speedboats whizzed by with regularity. At five-fifteen in the evening, Eddie arrived, limping ever so slightly, and found his old friend.

“Hey, stranger,” Eddie announced.

Tommy’s face slowly formed a smile. He got up to meet his West Seattle teammate and embraced him.

“Yeah, I figured after this, we can knock a few into the water and get arrested,” Tommy joked.

“Ahhhh hahaha! Shit, you remember that story? Fuck, man!”

“How’s the wheel?,” asked Tommy.

“Yeah, it’s… it’s getting there. It sucks. I’m gonna be stuck here for a while.”

Julian the bartender approached them for their drink orders.

“Ahh, Coors Light?,” Eddie requested.

Tommy raised his hand. “Piss water. Sam seasonal?”

Julian replied. “Summer ale. All year round.”

“That works…”

Eddie continued his tale of woe. “So, yeah, I had surgery number two in September. They said six months so that should take me to Opening Day. But… it’s just not happening. I don’t have the range of motion. I can’t field properly. It just… sucks!”

“I hear ya, man,” said Tommy. “Just keep plugging away, but… maybe start thinking about something else, just in case.”

“Something else?,” Eddie replied. “I don’t know anything else.”

Tommy took a deep breath and smiled. “There’s always something. We’re just not looking for it. Am I optimistic about Miami? Sure, but I’ll tell you. I’ve had to start thinking about Plan B.”

A puzzled Eddie replied with an attempt at humor. “The morning after pill? Don’t you need a prescription for that?”

Tommy nearly spit out his sip of beer from laughter. “No, asshole! Something else!”

“Hey, you of all people, Mister Professional Athlete, talking about life after football,” said Eddie. “You with Detroit. That’s not something?”

“It is, but you know, we’re talking about the top .001 percent,” Tommy advised. “Football players, baseball players. These are the elite. I’m not saying I’m not good enough, but let’s be real, Eddie. I got cut by the Lions. If I can’t make it there, where can I make it?”

Tommy’s subtle message went unnoticed by his old friend.

“Hey, man, you gotta do what you gotta do,” Eddie replied. “How about Canada?”

“How about a head coaching job at West Seattle High?”

“What?”

“Old coach Conrad is retiring,” Tommy advised. “They reached out to me when I got cut by Detroit. They said, ‘The job is yours if you want it.’ I said, let me give this one more chance.”

Eddie raised his bottle. “Well, here’s to one more chance.”

Their bottles clinked together. “Maybe this is your last chance too,” Tommy wondered.

The song at the bar suddenly changed from to a less raucous, more soulful tune. Eddie was amused and conveniently avoided the topic.

“Boy, that is the most random Hall & Oates song I’ve ever heard at a bar,” he retorted.

“What’s that?,” Tommy asked.

“[Alone](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tJP7Morckk) Too Long.”

At that moment, two young ladies approached Eddie and Tommy. They’ve seen this a few times before; it’s old hat for the would-be professional athletes. A proportioned blonde and a larger redhead whispered to themselves, trying to confirm if the two young men were who they thought they were. The young blonde spoke first.

“Hi… Uh, Tommy, right? Tommy Simpkins?”

Tommy instinctively reached for a pen. “Yes I am.”

The blonde was taken aback. “Oh, I don’t have anything for you to sign. I just wanted to say hi. I’m... Jenni from Dearborn, Michigan. I saw you play for the Lions.”

Tommy replied. “Ahhh, my apologies. It’s nice to meet you, Jenni.”

The redhead waved hello. Her eyes were fixated on Eddie. “Hi. Hi. I’m Kristine.”

“Hi, I’m Eddie… So, you’re both in town visiting from Michigan?”

Kristine replied, “Oh, not me. No, I’m from here. I live in St. Lucie.”

“Ahh, well I’m kinda stuck here in St. Lucie,” Eddie answered.

“Ohh!,” Kristine said. “Well, this isn’t really a bad place to be stuck in. Nice weather? Nice people?”

“Yeah… nice people…”

Kristine hesitated, then followed up. “Um, is it okay if I… uh, we... get stuck with you for a while?”

A smile slowly formed on Eddie’s face. “Sure thing, Miss!”

Tommy and Eddie were no strangers to one-night stands that are almost a prerequisite for all pro athletes. They had both enjoyed their fair share of them. There was one condition. No photos. That was a hard and fast rule for both West Seattle alums. Jenni sat herself to Tommy’s left and Kristine sat on Eddie’s right.

“No pics ladies,” Tommy warned. “That phone camera comes out, the night is done. Game over!”

Jenni slumped a little bit at her bar stool. She reluctantly agreed. Kristine was fine with this edict but offered an alternative.

“Can I take a photo with you next time, Eddie?,” she asked.

Eddie fumbled over his response. “Um... yeah. Is there gonna be a next time? I mean, we haven’t even begun the first time?”

Kristine flicked her long reddish-brown hair slightly and shifted her five-foot eight build upright. Eddie tried not to notice her ample breasts, but this was a calculated move. Her head tilted towards Eddie, her hazel eyes gleaming in the setting sun reflecting through the glass panes surrounding the room.

“Then let’s begin again. I’m Kristine. I’m an assistant branch manager at Seacrest Bank. And you are Eddie. And why exactly are you stuck here on the Treasure Coast?”

Eddie took a large sip of his Summer Ale. “I’m a ballplayer for the Binghamton Mets. I’m recovering from ACL surgery and I’m stuck here until I’m all healed ready to play again.”

Tommy saw that this was not shaping up to be just another one-night experience. He took a large sip of beer and got up from his stool.

“Jenni, would you like to take a walk outside? Maybe see the waves and the water up close?,” he asked.

“Sure!,” she responded with a huge grin.

Tommy leaned over to his friend and patted his left shoulder. “Send me a text later, pal!”

Eddie knew Tommy and Jenni were not returning to the bar. He also believed that he would soon leave Florida for upstate New York, at least until September.

“You know, I’m not really here for a good time, and I’m not here for a long time either," he advised. “Are you sure about that second date?”

“So, one thing we deal with in our industry is investing,” Kristine replied. “Not me personally, but you put in a little bit and leave it alone. Over time, you may get a bigger return.”

“Uh-huh…”

“So, I’m investing in a nice-looking young man who hasn’t made any crass remarks yet, hasn’t looked the other way, doesn’t care if I have a few extra pounds on me-"

"Hey, I have no problem with that,” Eddie remarked. “I was a big kid in high school.”

“See? You’re a nice guy who just so happens to play baseball. I didn’t know that when I sat down here. And you have to go to Binghamton soon. Well, I’m putting in my time. I’m *investing* in you. And maybe when the season’s over, you’ll come back here.”

Eddie offered Kristine a sly grin, then unleashed a barrage of questions.

“And what if I don’t? What if I go back to Seattle and visit my dad for the winter? What if I go to Norfolk next year for Triple A? What if they call me up to the Big Apple? What if I never see you again? I mean, this little routine you have here… It’s nice and all, but I don’t think you’ve thought this through.”

Kristine smiled, leaned in and whispered in Eddie’s ear. “Well, then I can say that I had dinner with the world-famous Eddie Whatever-Your-Last-Name-Is and then I went on a second date with him, got my picture taken with him and did whatever else we’re gonna do while you’re STUCK here. It’ll be a great story to tell my friends, maybe my future kids.”

Eddie paused and was astounded at her resolve. He had no more defenses and started getting his guard down.

“I’m not a great story, Kristine. I’m just a minor league ballplayer with a dead mother. I’m *The Wreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald*. That’s my name, Eddie Fitzgerald…. And you’re drinking piss.”

She took a sip of her Coors Light. “Kristine Bader. I’m sorry about your mom. And I like this piss.”

Eddie and Kristine shared a proper first kiss to end the night. They had three more dates before the end of April, all of which ended in Kristine’s one-bedroom apartment. They took several photos of each other, one of which included her parents. When Eddie was medically cleared to return to the diamond, he was reassigned to Binghamton, just as he had promised her.

After two weeks, it was apparent that his mobility was no longer adequate for playing first base every day. He began to platoon with a traditional, left-handed first baseman destined for future success. Masato Nakamura, born in Kyoto, Japan, migrated to the United States at age four. Like Eddie, he grew up in the Greater Seattle area, in Mountlake Terrace, Washington. His massive six-foot three, two hundred forty-five-pound build garnered him the nickname “Yaju,” which was Japanese for “beast.” Unlike Eddie, Yaju bypassed college altogether and was drafted by the Mets a year earlier in the first round.

Ironically, it was Eddie himself that alerted the Mets general manager, Kenny Cornette, of Yaju’s potential two years prior. Cornette was the assistant GM for Montreal when he recalled an innocuous conversation with his first baseman during spring training.

“I played against this guy in high school,” Eddie advised, while stretching. “Fucking tank named Nakamura. Played for Mountlake Terrace… I watched him, you know, he was our biggest problem. No weaknesses in his swing. Just saw the ball coming out of the pitcher’s glove, man. He knew. Fastball, curveball… Whatever you threw, whatever the count, quick bat. Pulverized the ball. Just killed us. You should put him on your radar.”

Cornette remembered that conversation on the morning of July 1st when he flew up to Binghamton to give Eddie his options.

“Hey, Fitz. So, it’s becoming apparent that we need to go with Yaju,” he surmised. “We’re going to give him all the reps and get him ready for New York. How that relates to you… Well, I don’t want to beat around the bush. The numbers don’t lie. .243, six homers. It’s fine if you’re a Doug Mientkiewicz and you can field your position, but it’s clear that’s not your thing either.”

Eddie rubbed his face with both hands, expecting his death sentence.

“You’re cutting me?,” he quietly asked.

“Well, as a player, yes, but we have something else in mind for you…”

“What’s that?”

Cornette took a breath before giving Eddie his offer.

“You’re a good eye for talent. You know what to look for, what a players’ strengths are, what his weaknesses are. You have a good eye for the mechanics. Maybe some of that comes from your father.”

Eddie chimed in. “Yeah, my dad reconstructed my stance when I hurt my knee the first time.”

“And that’s all fine and good,” Cornette added. “And you’ve been able to get this far. But, it’s gotten you only this far. The point is, we want you to consider staying on with the organization as a scout.”

Eddie pondered his new opportunity. His eyes widened even more when Kenny offered additional details.

“We have two regions where we need fresh blood. Midwest and Florida.”

“Florida?!?,” Eddie inquired with fervor.

“Yeah, I figured that might be an option for you, with you know… friends down there,” Cornette replied with a smile.

“I can do Florida!”

“Great, I’ll set you up. You can shadow Gil Booker for the rest of the year. Get a lay of the land. By the end of the year, you’ll be on your own.”

Cornette reached into his left pants pocket for a business card.

“Here’s Paul Hill’s contact info. He’s our lead scout. You’ll be reporting to him starting on the 7th. He’s expecting your call.”

With that, Eddie and Kenny shook hands. Eddie proceeded to clean out his locker and shed his playing days, but not before offering an inquisitive parting shot.

“Expecting my call?”

Kenny smiled and answered. “Yeah, well, it was either that or you go work at fucking Target.”

Eddie Fitzgerald called Kristine Bader an hour later from Greater Binghamton Airport to tell her the good news.

“Hey Kris, guess what?,” he began.

“Hey babe. Um… what?”

“I got a real job. And I get to come to your parents’ for Fourth of July.”

Kristine was obviously taken aback. “Sooo, what happened to your current job?”

“I retired.”

“Retired, babe?,” Kristine retorted. “At twenty-two?”

“Okay, they told me they were cutting me, but they’re keeping me as a scout.”

“That’s… great! But are you going to move to New York?”

Eddie smiled and offered Kristine the best news possible.

“Actually, I’ll be working out of Florida. Port St. Lucie.”

Kristine burst with excitement. “Oh my God, Eddie! Does that mean...?”

“I’m coming home, babe! I mean, I still have to travel around the state. It’s a huge market. They need somebody to just cover Florida. But yeah, Kris. I’m coming home!”

A feeling of relief and delight swept over Kristine.

“Do you remember that first night when I said I was investing in you?,” she asked.

“Uh, yeah… But were you investing in me as a ballplayer or as a minor league scout?,” Eddie wondered.

Kristine’s voice filled with determination. “I invested in a man who I fell in love with at first sight, a man that I prayed would come back to me. And you are.”

The gate agent for United Airlines called for pre-boarding on Eddie’s connecting flight to Philadelphia. From there, he would fly to Palm Beach International Airport.

“I have to go, babe,” Eddie advised. “I love you!”

Kristine beamed. “I love you too... Safe flight. I’ll tell Dad you’re coming.”

Eddie got up and stood by Gate 5. He would call his father, Bruce, from Philadelphia. He would call his best friend, West Seattle High School Head Coach Tommy Simpkins, from Florida. It was almost time. 1,284 miles and 36,000 feet to go before the heavens would send Eddie Fitzgerald home.

3

Head Over Heels

It is five-fifteen in the afternoon. Business is starting to pick up at O’Fallon’s. Brandi entertains a couple more local firefighters who unsuccessfully try to pick her up. It’s service with a smile at all times, but still business as usual. She has a moment of downtime to go into the storage room.

She feigns getting a case of Corona Light and instead checks her group chat. It’s been mostly quiet for the past few hours with the majority of the six members at work.

*3:09pm @rubisoho143: I have something to help Darin out of his slump!*

*3:14pm @tsgrinder: That shit didn’t work in Bull Durham. It did the opposite*

*3:15pm @rubisoho143: Shit, fuck Timmy. He can’t get any worse. WTF!*

*3:49pm @deebeback: I’ll be down at OF tonight, traffic permitting*

*4:01pm @tsgrinder: You’re on OF?!? Link please.*

*4:03pm @deebeback reacted “laughing face” to “You’re on OF?!? Link please”*

Five minutes later, Brandi emerges without a case of beer. Her head suddenly perks up at the sound of the outside door opening. The two-foot gap in between the outer and inner doors is enough to reveal who is arriving. A tall, robust, curly-haired man enters her vision. He wears a classic Mets blue pinstripe jersey over a blue t-shirt, worn blue jeans and tattered sneakers. It’s not the man Brandi is expecting, but it is a welcome presence, nonetheless.

“TIMMY!,” she cries out.

Tim Schultz is a Long Island lifer and friend of Brandi’s since high school. They’ve been each other’s rock for the better part of twenty-five years. Gone are the days

when Tim and Brandi bonded over late 80’s and early 90’s hair bands. When they weren’t making fun at Mr. Schieda’s mullet in Sequential Math I and II class, they were

sharing the front page of the Mepham Pirates school newsletter. Brandi was a star

point guard on the hardwood while Tim was a fleet-footed, slick-fielding third baseman.

The two cover athletes bid farewell to Mepham High School in the summer of 1994. Whereas Brandi went off to the University of New Hampshire for college, Tim tried his hand at communications at Nassau Community College. He started working weekends at the AMC Theaters in Levittown. At the behest of one of his disgruntled colleagues, Tim took a civil service exam for a position as a Water Plant Operator Trainee for the Town of Hempstead. Six months later, he was called to fill the position.

Tim’s parents thought he was aiming too low at the time. They feared for the long-term success of their only child. However, at a starting annual salary of $35,000, plus benefits, Tim dropped out of Nassau and didn’t look back. Years of dedication have paid off. These days, Tim Schultz is Water Plant Supervisor with hundreds of hours of vacation time and the tenure to warrant Wednesdays off in addition to weekends. The divorcee also has no student debt, a house he inherited from his since-departed mother and father and nine years to go until he can retire to Florida.

Tim saunters in like he has so many times before, appearing calm and unfazed with life. This time, he carries a recyclable Target shopping bag and pulls up to a chair in the far corner of the bar.

“Well, here I am again, in this smoky place,” he states, ironically.

“With your Brandi eyes!,” Brandi replies, referencing a long-standing inside joke.

“They may be swimming in something in about an hour,” he replies.

“Yeah? What’cha having?”

“You got that Blue Moon Belgian White?,” Tim asks.

“Sure do.”

Brandi walks away, reaches into a cooler ten feet away and obliges.

“So, what’s in the bag?,” she asks.

“The souls of the misguided who still think a two-headed DH is the answer,” Tim answers, to a belly laugh from Brandi. “I thought of a good Halloween costume and I just happened upon these.”

He pulls out a pair of green textured rubber gloves, pulls them out of the packaging and proceeds to wear the right glove. “Remember Who Framed Roger Rabbit?,” Tim poses.

“Do I remember it?,” Brandi replies. “Is the grass greener on the other side?”

“Only if you water it this time of year,” he responds.

Meanwhile, a Black 2020 Chevy Blazer pulls into the parking lot on Benkert Street, on the north side of the train station. The male driver, a broad-shouldered, six-foot tall teddy bear with a slight gut, short brown hair and a five o’clock shadow sits and pauses. He takes a few deep breaths and contemplates his next move.

Eddie Fitzgerald has arrived from work in a white and grey pattern short-sleeved button shirt with black pants and black sneakers. A week shy of age forty-two, his eyes no longer exude youthful ignorance. They don’t reflect much confidence. Eddie is solemn. His delusions of baseball grandeur are a distant memory. His post-playing career scouting future talent is also in the rear view. He and his wife never spawned a child in their sixteen years of marriage. Eddie is in that all-too-familiar midlife territory. He is middle-aged and single, back to square one.

It's two minutes after five-thirty. Eddie gathers up the courage to exit his vehicle, walk the length of the faded blacktop parking lot and onto the brick sidewalk. He passes the back of O’Fallon’s where Jimmy the cook is vaping some California Honey. Eddie looks up at a blue awning which wraps around the outside of the building on both the Benkert and Stewart Avenue sides. He opens a black wooden door with two eye-level panes of stained glass.

Tim and Brandi hear the outside door open. He looks over with a curious smile. The inside door opens to reveal the newest member of the clique in the flesh. Brandi runs to the far end of the bar and feverishly slams the lift gate up.

“EDDIE!!,” she screams with utter excitement.

She runs towards him, arms outstretched. Eddie’s pensive demeanor is instantly uplifted as he catches Brandi in a vigorous embrace.

“Hey, Brandi! Wow!,” he says.

“I’m so happy you came,” she declares.

Tim, now wearing both green rubber gloves, is quick with the obvious one-liner.

“That’s what she said.”

Eddie shakes his head and slowly struts towards Tim at the corner of the bar.

“Did you forget your Palmolive?,” Eddie wonders.

Tim grins with delight and raises his eyebrows. “They’re not kid gloves, Mr. Valiant, but this is how we handle things here at O’Fallon’s.”

Eddie proceeds to shake his gloved hand. “Eddie. Eddie Fitzgerald.”

“Tim. Tim Schultz. Pleasure.”

“TIMMY!,” yells Brandi as she makes her way back behind the bar, eyes fixated on the newbie. Eddie settles on the empty stool directly parallel to the entrance, leaving an empty chair between himself and Tim in the corner.

“It’s nice to meet you, Eddie Fitzgerald,” she confirms. “Finally! I’m so glad you’re here. I mean, I know it’s been rough for you the past couple of years since…”

“Yeah…” Eddie answers with lesser resolve.

“I’m just, you know… I’m glad that you’re ready to come out,” Brandi advises.

Tim finishes his first beer and retorts. “You came out? Shit, I missed it in the chat. But I want you to know we’re all about inclusion here.”

Eddie laughs and shakes his head.

“Unless, of course, you’re from Atlanta,” Tim finishes. “Then, fuck you!.. How about another Belgian White?”

“Sure thing,” Brandi turns to Eddie. “How about you?”

“Uh… Coors Light?”

“Piss water coming up,” Brandi replies as she slides over to the cooler.

Eddie looks around to take in the classic brown wooden furniture and décor. Three concrete pillars encased in matching wood paneling act as vertical support beams throughout the floor. Three high rise tables rest against the stained windows that overlook Benkert Street. The 5:35 to Ronkonkoma grinds to a halt at the station.

“So, a couple more people wanted to come and meet you tonight,” says Brandi.

“Yeah? Like who?”, Eddie asks as he takes his first sip.

“Uh, Britt’s coming and so is Dan-“

“Is Amanda Harden coming?,” Tim interrupts.

“NO!” states Brandi, emphatically.

“Uh-oh, who is this Amanda Harden?,” Eddie wonders.

“Nobody…” Brandi turns to Tim. “Nobody.”

Tim finishes his first sip of his second beer. “She’s the unicorn. You hear about the myth, the legend, but nobody’s actually seen her. Nobody, that is, except for me.”

Before Tim can expound on this mystery vixen, the inside door opens. A pear-shaped middle-aged lady slowly walks through and proceeds to the empty chair in between him and Eddie. She possesses long, braided black hair, prescription glasses, black dress pants and a maroon blouse that rests over ample breasts. Brandi’s mouth opens wide with pleasure to greet her.

“Britt!”

“Hey Bran…,” she begins, then peers down at Tim, still wearing his gloves. “What, you’re gonna do dishes tonight, Tim? You’re that broke?”

Tim and Britt exchange their usual courtesy hug and kiss on the cheek. Britt then turns to Eddie. Her face pops with joy.

“Ahhh, Eddie, right?.. Britt Peters!”

“That’s right,” Eddie confirms as he offers his hand.

Britt immediately dismisses the handshake. “Aw, bring it in”, she demands. “We’re all family here.”

Eddie and Britt hug it out. She squeezes him for good measure to make him feel welcome, having been alerted by Brandi beforehand that he was nervous.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Eddie!”

Before Brittany Peters became the typical hot wife and cool mom to two teenagers, Brittany Avery was the subject of quiet whispers in her formative years. As recently as 1993, some North Shore High School classmates identified her as the girl with the black father. Britt tried to kill her detractors with kindness and eventually won over some of her peers. Even then, friends of the Vikings cheerleader called her “Caramel B,” or “CB” for short. Before long, Britt accepted the name as a term of endearment. Because of her upbringing and outgoing nature, all faculty members went above and beyond to assuage Britt. This led to the inevitable rumors of her achieving a passing grade in Chemistry class by doing oral favors for Mr. Tripp.

In 1997, Britt graduated from the State University of New York at Farmingdale with a bachelor’s degree in business management. A year later, she met Dr. Alan Peters, a young chiropractor five years her senior, just starting his career as an associate with Merrick Wellness. Now married twenty-two years, Alan owns Levittown Chiropractic and Wellness. Britt is a Branch Manager for Seacrest Bank in Plainview. In the age of increasing social acceptance, their eighteen-year-old daughter, Andrea, does not understand the struggles her mother had growing up because of her mixed heritage. For that matter, she does not grasp what most present-day people endure at her age. The same can be said of her brother, fifteen-year-old Anthony.

Britt and Alan are not hurting for money. That’s not to suggest they haven’t had their share of issues along the way. A year into the marriage, Britt found several suggestive texts on Alan’s phone. He was obviously flirting with an old high school flame. Alan swore up and down he had not seen her since he graduated, and it hadn’t progressed beyond words. Britt left him for three months. Alan apologized profusely once a week until she finally gave him a second chance. They’ve been together ever since.

Now living in Jericho, New York, the Peters family owns Mets season tickets, which they use on most weekends throughout the summer. They give away the weekday games to either his staff or her friends.

Brandi is a longtime patient of Alan’s. She and Britt met twelve years ago at one of his seminars. They quickly became inseparable. Brandi no longer needs to ask what Britt’s weapon of choice is for the evening.

“Ahh, Merlot!,” Britt exclaims. “Oh, how I’ve missed you!”

“Wine, huh?,” chirps Eddie.

“Oh my God! This is not just *wine*,” explains Britt. “This is 2014 Merlot from Osprey’s Dominion.” She kisses the tips of her fingers. “The best!”

“Yeah, this is… piss water from about… five minutes ago,” Eddie replies, which brings laughter to the group.

“We’ll get you up to speed, hun,” Britt advises. “Soon, you’ll be drinking with the best, hahaha! I couldn’t drink this at the bowling alley. They would have laughed me out of there so quick!”

Tim has since removed his gloves during their brief exchange and placed them back into his Target bag. He passes his Blue Moon over to Eddie.

“Go ahead, dude. Drink up,” he offers. “All the cool kids are doing it, maaaaann!”

Brandi tilts her head in faux disapproval towards Tim.

“Timmy, Timmy, Timmy! What did I tell you about scaring off the customers?,” she says, while turning her head slightly towards Eddie, giving him a wink and a smile.

“I’ll write it a hundred times on the sign outside,” Tim replies. “Thou shalt not encourage people to drink BEER at a BAR.”

Brandi walks down to the far end of the countertop to tend to an older gentleman who has walked in.

“So, if I recall, it was you three with another guy?,” Eddie asks.

“You mean bowling?,” Britt replies. “Because all that threesome shit is just rumor and innuendo. Haha! Yes, the three of us with my husband. The Amazin’ Day Drinkers.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to alarm you, but I think she’s sweet on you,” Tim says to Eddie, while pointing to an unsuspecting Brandi.

“Oh, stop Tim,” Britt shoots back. “She’s just our Bran.”

Britt then turns to Eddie. “Besides, she doesn’t have a thing for beards like I do.”

“Oh, really!,” he replies while taking a sip of his own drink. He offers a light-hearted response and deliberately looks Britt up and down in a joking manner. “So, my SUV is small, but the seats fold down.”

Britt cackles and touches Eddie’s left shoulder. “I’m married, hun… But I like the way you think. I think you’re gonna make it with us.”

“Oh, so I *am* gonna make it with you? Cool,” Eddie replies. He tilts his head, eyes and mouth opening wider. “Sooo, you’re saying there’s a chance!”

Britt explodes with laughter, both palms slamming against the countertop.

“I can’t! I’m gonna pee my pants.”

“Now Britt!,” Tim chimes in. “We don’t want a repeat of last week. Did you wear your pullups today?”

“I’ll show you a pullup!,” she retorts. “I’ve taken down bigger men than you.”

The laughter dies down for a few seconds. The three of them take sips of their respective drinks. They all simultaneously get the same chat notification on their phones:

*5:59pm @deebeback: Bethpage I am inside you*

Britt excitedly replies, “Oh cool, she’s coming!”

Eddie turns to Britt. “So, are there any unwritten bar rules, like nobody sits in Norm’s favorite seat, or shit like that?”

“Um… No, I don’t think so,” Britt answers. “Oh! Don’t ever mention the band U2 in my presence. I fucking hate them. That’s not written, but everybody knows that one. And now you know too.”

“What did U2 ever do to you?,” Eddie wonders. “I mean, I don’t know if I can stop myself from playing ‘I Will Follow’ on the jukebox.”

“First of all, we don’t have a jukebox,” Britt explains. “That’s satellite radio. I scream whenever a fucking U2 song comes on. Brandi leaves it on this channel just to piss me off.”

Tim looks at Eddie and draws circles with his left hand over his left temple, playfully pantomiming his assertion that Britt is crazy.

“I had an old boyfriend from college who loved them,” she continues. “Used to drive me crazy! He cheated on me, so just goes to show you that anyone who loves U2 is a piece of shit like Bono. You ever see that *South Park* episode?”

“Yes!,” confirms Eddie while laughing. “Bono is the biggest shit.”

“YASSS!!,” Britt exclaims. “And if you love U2, you’re a piece of shit, too.”

Britt laughs at her obvious judgmental missive. The song “Head Over Heels” by Tears For Fears starts playing on the First Wave station. She points to the sky.

“This!... This is my jam right here,” Britt says. “I saw them in June with Garbage at the beach. Man, they’ve still got it. I’m tellin’ ya!... I have to take a leak.”

Britt gets up and walks towards the back of the bar, waving to her bestie on the way to the bathroom. Tim slides over to Eddie to ask about his background.

“So, you played minor league ball?,” Tim asks.

“Yup. I got as far as Double A with the Mets.”

“Wow. That’s pretty cool. I just played in high school, but the amount of talent it takes to even get THAT far. That’s something.”

“Thanks,” Eddie replies. “Yeah, the problem was I hurt my knee. Couldn’t field, could barely hit. I wasn’t going anywhere. They called me in and asked if I wanted to try being a scout.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I did that for a while. It just, you know… didn’t work out in the long run. My wife wanted to try and have kids. Even being a scout meant a lot of traveling. Just driving around Florida. A lot of time away, you know.”

“Right! Gotta stay close to home and be a dad,” Tim offers.

“Well, that didn’t work out either,” responds Eddie. “She couldn’t have kids. It really tore her up for a while.”

“So, you’re married?”

“Was,” Eddie says.

“Ahhh, okay, so you *were* in Florida then? That’s my endgame. So, how’d you end up here?”

“Kris. That was her name… She got a job offer. She was a Regional Manager for Seacrest Bank.”

“Ahh,” answers Tim. “Britt works for Seacrest Bank.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yup. Branch Manager in, uh, Plainview.”

“Oh, that’s cool! Yeah, no, Kris worked in the corporate office in Melville.”

“Ahh!,” replies Tim.

“So yeah, they were kind of a regional bank and they wanted to expand,” Eddie explains. “Like all up the coast. This was back in... 2018? They said they’re opening a few branches on Long Island. They asked her to take a Regional Manager position here.”

“Man, why would you move here from Florida, though?”

“Money,” Eddie reveals. “The green stuff. They offered her double what she was making down there. She’s like ‘I’ve got nothing keeping me here. Parents are gone. Might as well do it. We can always go back when I’m ready to retire.’ So, we did it.”

“Got it. So, what do you do now?,” Tim inquires.

“I, uh, I’m an Account Executive in Oceanside,” Eddie says. “Palmer Cook Associates.”

“What’s that?”

“An insurance broker. You know, property and casualty. I do commercial lines, like apartment buildings, restaurants… places like...”

Eddie’s mind suddenly goes blank as an arresting lady slowly swings open the inner door. She casts a wide, curvaceous presence, coupled with an even wider smile and alluring eyes behind glasses. Her hair, brown with sparking amber, is kept in a ponytail. She is adorned in business casual attire, a loose periwinkle pattern blouse that just barely covers her underarms, resting over dark blue jeans.

Her entrance happens in slow motion in his head, just like in every cliched romantic comedy. Even Roland Orzabal’s voice slows down and deepens to a baritone as the second chorus hits.

“Hey everybody!,” she bellows with her booming, yet high pitched voice, as she powerwalks towards the bar.

“DANI!”, Tim, Brandi and Britt reply in unison.

*“Fuck!,”* Eddie thinks to himself. He tries in vain to convince his brain to be cool. *Don’t do anything stupid!* Eddie’s new object of affection turns towards him. *Don’t!*

“Hi! I’m Dani,” she says as she extends her right hand.

“Haaahaa. Hi. Ahh… I mean, hi. Eddie Fitzgerald,” he blurts out while gingerly shaking her hand.

Eddie cannot shake this feeling, the rapid heartbeat, the butterflies, the shortness of breath. He never felt this for the former Kristine Bader. The love he felt for Kristine Fitzgerald, strong as it was for sixteen years of marriage, was never this intoxicating. In his mind, this is “Kristine 2.0,” acting as the perfect foil. Dani’s wide smile meets him head on. Eddie’s heart isn’t listening to his brain. It never stood a chance. Eddie himself is head over heels.

With a name like Danielle Backman, one would think she was destined to become a Mets fan at birth. Alas, Danielle Marie Hayes was born on October 9, 1980. By all accounts, she was a perfectly amiable baby. A year later, Dani’s parents gave her a sister named Belinda. When she was old enough to walk and talk, the younger sibling frequently lashed out in many unique ways to get noticed. Belinda would have accidents, even though she was potty trained. She would make their sleeping cat, Mojo, dance to Strawberry Shortcake cartoons. Belinda routinely did somersaults off the couch and scared her mother, Martha, half to death. The younger Hayes daughter quickly got a reputation around her hometown of Selden, New York for being just a little bit extra.

As a result, Dani became an introverted afterthought. While her volatile sister garnered and demanded all of the attention, Dani seemed perfectly content with listening to her parents’ records and singing in her room. One day, Gary and Martha Hayes thought they heard their daughter listening to the radio in her bedroom. When the music stopped, they perceived a familiar voice speaking in between songs. At first, they thought it was a young female disc jockey. After several seconds, they realized that the DJ in question was their own five-year-old daughter delivering a basic yet astounding segue.

“*That was Pat Benatar with ‘We Belong.’ I’m Dani Hayes. You could win free money on the Z Morning Zoo tomorrow at 7:20 with Scott Shannon. Here is Bryan Adams… on Z100!”*

Gary rushed over to the bedroom door and almost opened the door to check on Dani. Instead, his hand hovered over the doorknob. He thought better of it and turned to Martha, slowly cracking a smile.

“She’s a natural, dear,” he announced. “She’s amazing!”

One Sunday afternoon in June of 1986, Gary took Dani to Shea Stadium to see Ron Darling oppose Rick Sutcliffe. At first, the communications savant just sat and watched, taking in the atmosphere and marveling at the distinct colors that made up each level of seating. She perked up when she saw the fire and passion from the likes of Keith Hernandez and Gary Carter. Her mood brightened even more when her father brought her ice cream in a miniature helmet. Then, Gary came up with another idea.

“You hear that guy announcing the players when they come to bat?” Gary asked his oldest daughter, her mouth suddenly caked in rainbow sprinkles. “That’s Jack Franchetti. You think you can do that?”

“Yeah.”

Sure enough, halfway through the game, Dani began mimicking the public address announcer.

*“Now batting… Number four, centerfielder… Lenny Dykstra…”*

*“Now batting… Number six, second baseman… Wally Backman!”*

During the at-bat, Dani swayed back and forth in her seat, repeating to herself “Backman… Wally Backman… second baseman… Wally Backman!” She put extra emphasis on the B every time.

Then came The Wave. At first, Dani watched it from afar as it came from the left field corner. Her eyes grew bigger as it approached daddy and daughter perched ten rows up from third base in the orange-clad field level.

“Here it comes!,” Gary light-heartedly warned. “Get ready!”

Dani did not know how to react when her father rose from his seat and extended his arms to the sky. When it came back around a second time, she was ready.

“Here it comes, Daddy!,” Dani gleefully announced.

She jumped from her seat and reached for the sky. Dani beamed and turned towards Gary, jumping up and down, arms outstretched for the rest of the day. She was hooked on baseball from that moment on.

As the years progressed, Dani became the voice of the morning announcements, first at Selden Middle School, then at Newfield High School. **Along the way, Dani also discovered boys. Unfortunately, only one took notice**. As a high school senior, she briefly dated Eric Schwager and gave him her virginity. Things quickly fizzled afterwards. Believing she was simply used for cheap thrills, Dani retreated to the sanctity of her friends, her radio voice and her Mets.

One day, Dani received a solicitation in the mail from Central Michigan University. Although she had plenty of local colleges to choose from, Dani decided to pursue her secondary education away from home in the Upper Midwest.

“Madonna’s from Michigan,” reasoned Dani. “So is Casey Kasem. Plus, after college, I can look for jobs in Detroit. Detroit Rock City. Rap City. I just… it just feels right to me.”

Thus, Dani was off to CMU to pursue her bachelor’s degree in Communication. She quickly became a fixture at the student-run alternative rock station, WMHW, otherwise known as “Mountain 91.5.” However, after two years, love started getting in the way of her radio dreams.

Kevin Backman, CMU’s All-American strong safety, was unrelated to the former Met. However, he was the big man on campus and was treated accordingly. There were rumblings amongst his Mid-American Conference opponents that Kevin dabbled in marijuana and found ways to beat NCAA testing. Rumors swirled of his hard partying during the summer months. None of this mattered to the good people of Mount Pleasant, Michigan. What did matter was his torn patellar tendon in his 2001 senior season. It happened on October 13th against Ohio. Pro football aspirations were placed on hold for the projected sixth rounder. Surgery was imminent for Kevin with physical therapy to follow.

Snow fell a week later, as did Dani the next morning. The gales of November came early. A stray patch of ice outside of Trout Hall rendered her airborne. Dani instinctively tried to break her fall with her left hand. It was her wrist that broke instead. In fact, it shattered on impact. University doctors treated her and gave her a prognosis of eight weeks. After that, she, too, needed to attend physical therapy.

Central Michigan’s Doctoral Program in Physical Therapy was prestigious. On November 23, 2001, Dani took full advantage of her university’s facilities once her cast was removed. The junior Chippewa entered a building she had not previously discovered and walked to the sign-in desk with tunnel vision and her usual confidence.

“Hi. I’m Danielle Hayes!”

A student staffer named Mick checked her in. Unbeknownst to Dani, a ripped, proportioned senior was listening in and checking her out while doing his leg curls.

“Alyssa will be with you in a few,” Mick said. “Just sit tight.”

The senior strong safety sauntered over to Dani, trying to hide his limp. His eyes gleamed and targeted her. Like an unsuspecting receiver about to be speared by a defender, Dani never saw it coming.

“What are you in for?,” he mused.

She turned around to find a six-foot curly-haired Adonis gazing down at her. For the first time ever, a man took Dani’s breath away. The Communication major was nearly at a loss for words.

“I… um… I broke my wrist?”

“Are you sure?,” he asked.

“Um… yeah! I fell on the ice last month.”

“That’s too bad,” he replied. “But you’re good at breaking things, you know. You broke my heart.”

A confused Dani tilted her head towards him.

“Yeah, you gave that young lady your name before you told me,” he elaborated. “I mean, she probably has your number too, and I don’t. So, do I have to ask you again?”

Her confusion slowly morphed into a smile. She slowly formed and delivered the most basic of words.

“Hi. I’m Dani.”

“I’m Kevin. It’s nice to meet you!” Kevin reached out, sweat glistening from his grey workout shirt. He gently shook her right hand, while slipping her his number on a piece of index card.

“I’m glad to see that one still works,” Kevin joked, as he slowly walked past the desk and towards the exit. “I’ll see you around, Dani… Hayes…”

Alyssa, the resident physical trainer, walked out just as Mount Pleasant’s favorite son left the building.

“How’s our favorite Chippewa?,” she asked, waking Dani from her swoon.

“Huh? Me?”

“No, your boyfriend,” Alyssa laughed.

“Oh, him?” Dani made a failed attempt to downplay the interaction. “Yeah, he’s… kinda cute.”

“That’s Kevin Backman.”

“Who?”

Alyssa looked at Dani with bewilderment. “Do you follow football?”

“Yeah. Sure! I mean, I watch it,” Dani replied.

“That’s Kevin Backman,” reiterated Alyssa. “He’s our best defensive player. He’s pretty sweet on you, too.”

Kevin’s GQ-caliber smile and piercing blue eyes were still fresh in Dani’s mind.

“You better bag him while you can. He’s going to the pros,” Alyssa advised. “You’ll be set.”

Dani would heed her advice. She did indeed bag Kevin, but not before he suffered a physical relapse while training for the Senior Bowl. Soon afterwards, she found a peculiar bottle of pills on Kevin’s nightstand.

“Babe, it’s just to help me recover in time for the draft,” he reasoned.

Dani stayed supportive, even when she found Kevin smoking weed to forget his sorrows the following May.

“Honey, a knee is tricky. Sometimes it takes months, not weeks,” she assured him. “Listen, I have a friend back home. Her brother went up to Canada to play football. I’ll call her. He’s in Winnipeg now. I’ll get you a tryout. Just… you can’t do this stuff. I mean, I’m cool with it, really! But they have drug testing.”

Kevin slowly looked up at his significant other through the haze in his eyes.

“I love you… I’ll stop…”

One year later, the Hayes family flew in from Long Island to attend Dani’s graduation, minus Belinda who was away at college. Once focused on pursuing a radio career in and around Detroit, Dani now resigned herself to seeking public relations work in and around Mount Pleasant, while her man bided his time. He took a job at Blackstone’s Bar & Grill while he contemplated one last attempt at a football career. His tryout with the Blue Bombers did not pan out. Kevin still dabbled in smoking pot and taking the occasional painkiller for his chronic knee injury.

He secured a table at Blackstone’s for Dani’s graduation party. It was a small gathering, just the parents. Before dessert, Kevin asked for a toast.

“Excuse me!... I just need a moment,” Kevin said. He then looked towards Dani and caressed her left wrist. She winced slightly.

“Oooh, I’m so sorry, babe!,” he apologized. “I remember that first day we met. You had the bum wrist. I still have my bum knee. So… I hope you don’t mind. I don’t know how many times I can get down on it, so let’s make this time count.”

Dani was blinded by the moment. Her mouth became agape with joy as Kevin pulled out a $400 ring from his pocket and gently kneeled in front of her.

“Remember what I said that day?,” Kevin inquired. “Do I have to ask you again?”

Dani blurted out the answer. “YES!”

Kevin was unsure. “Yes, I have to ask again?”

“NO!! I mean, yes, I’ll marry you!”

The requisite applause and hugs followed the big moment. Kevin kissed his fiancé and pulled her in close.

“I couldn’t do this without you…”

It was June 7, 2003. Dani had settled in as a Human Resources Assistant at Central Michigan University. Kevin was firmly entrenched as a bartender at Blackstone’s. It was a small, intimate affair, not the extravagant wedding that most people from Long Island are accustomed to.

Dani and Kevin opened the dance floor with their song. The new Mrs. Backman stared deeply into her husband’s eyes. She slow danced with him, tunnel vision and all. People in attendance marvel to this day how she gazed at him so earnestly, so in love. All Dani really thought at that moment was ‘Oh my God, what have I done with my life?’ It was the strangest dichotomy to their tender, acoustic love song, “Beautiful” by Gordon Lightfoot.

Back at O’Fallon’s, present-day Dani knew all about her father’s favorite musician, having listened to him constantly growing up.

“So, that’s Eddie Fitzgerald, as in Edmund Fitzgerald? Like, The Wreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald?,” Dani ponders.

Eddie beams. “That’s right, I’m The Wreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald. The legend lives on –“

“From the Chippewa on down, of the big lake they called**Gitche Gumee,**” Dani blurts out. “Yup, that’s me. I’m a Chippewa!”

“No shit! You’re Native American?”

“No, no, that’s our school mascot,” she corrects him. “I went to Central Michigan University.”

“Oh! Cool… You don’t sound like you’re from the Midwest though,” Eddie notices.

“Well, I’m not. I’m from here,” Dani reasons. “Trust me, the whole Michigan thing seems like a dream to me now.”

Eddie’s face perks up. “I know that song, too.”

“Ha, yeah.”

“It took me four days to hitchhike from Saginaw,” Eddie jokes.

“Yup!... That’s how it goes.”

Dani seems unamused. Eddie’s face slowly descends from a smile to a resting face. His feeble attempts to be cute are having no effect on her.

“So, you used to be in the bowling league?,” Eddie wonders.

“Yeah, I’ve been with these fine people for a few years now,” she says. “I bowled with Lisa, Sue and Sue’s ex-boyfriend, Todd. The Dark Knights.”

“Ohh, okay,” replies Eddie. “Yeah, I remember seeing them a few times... but I don’t think I saw you.”

“Ohh? What team were you on?”

“I was a sub,” he confirms. “I came in three years ago.”

Dani ponders Eddie’s response, then raises her hand and realizes why his presence eluded her.

“Ohhhh, now I know why we never met,” she says. “I was injured in 2019. I sprained my wrist.”

“Ohhh! Gotcha,” says Eddie.

“Yeah, I came back in January. I guess you weren’t there?”

“January?,” Eddie inquires. “No, I had family issues in… late January? Yeah, right up until March when everything stopped.”

“Ahhh!,” Dani acknowledges. A brief silence follows between the two.

“You know, I saw this Tiktok video,” Eddie says. “There’s a girl in an Adirondack chair. The voiceover says ‘Please rise for the Midwest National Anthem.’ And then it plays the jingle from Menards.”

Dani genuinely laughs and sings the jingle. “Save big money at Menards!”

“Yes!” Eddie replies, pleased at his breakthrough.

Brandi strides over to Dani and Eddie with some new information.

“Hey, I just talked to Britt. Alan’s getting us all tickets to the Mets-Cubs game on the 14th.”

“NICE!,” Dani replies.

“Yeah!,” Brandi agrees. “Outfield section 140, right next to the apple. We have eight. You, me, Britt, Alan, Timmy, Sue, Lisa…”

Brandi then turns to Eddie. “You in?”

Eddie’s eyes briefly dart back and forth between Brandi and Dani. He then explodes with delight. “Sure! Count me in.”

“Excellent,” Brandi confirms. “So, it’s two weeks from today. Good stuff! Right, Timmy?”

Timmy has since finished his second beer. “You know, Eddie, the way they’ve been hitting, they could use you.”

Eddie laughs as Tim sarcastically asks, “You got any more hits in that old body?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve got more hits than Rod Carew. Okay, maybe his mother, but still... Nah, I’m just a fan now, like you guys. And ladies.”

Two more ladies explode through the inner door of O’Fallon’s. The first one to appear is a young blonde, a straight-haired, brown-eyed toned spitfire of average height and above average muscle. She was dressed in a tight grey tank top, black yoga pants and sneakers. Directly behind her was a short older woman with reddish brown hair in a blue Touch Mets shirt and light blue jeans. The latter is not waiting for the requisite greetings from their friends to tell everyone about a horrifying man they encountered at the gym.

“OH MY GOD!,” she exclaims. “You will not believe what we saw!”

“It was disgusting!” the blonde replies.

“Ladies, relax,” Britt retorts. “It’s just Eddie!”

Everyone laughs in unison. Eddie excuses himself from Dani’s side to meet the two beleaguered females. Sue Rubino is a month into her new stint as a certified personal trainer at Crash Fitness in East Meadow. She was recently let go from the same position at LA Fitness. The reason for her termination is unknown to all except Sue. Lisa Fanelli is a Service Receptionist at Autoworld Kia across the street. Coincidentally, they both live in Hicksville. Thus, they carpool to and from work and to O’Fallon’s on Wednesdays. On this particular day, Sue had a training session to remember for all the wrong reasons.

“I’m telling you… Hi Eddie. Sue, nice to meet you,” the blonde replies. “Guys, it was gross!”

“Eddie! I’ve seen you,” the older woman says in a thick Brooklyn accent. “I’m Lisa. You were a sub in our bowling league, right?

“Yup. I joined you guys in the fall of 2019,” he confirms. “And then, a few months later, all that shit happened.”

“Oh yeah, thank God that’s over,” Lisa says. “Well, welcome to our crazy group.”

Sue barges in holding a shot glass, already seeming tipsy.

“Yeah, I’ve seen you before at the bowling alley,” she advises as she consumes her shot of Tito’s. “And I’ve seen your picture online, unlike Tim who has some weird ass monkey as his Twitter pic.”

Tim responds, “His name is Virgil. He’s a chimp and you wouldn’t understand.”

“So, what happened that was so bizarre?,” Brandi curiously asks.

Lisa responds, “So, I walk in and Sue’s finishing up with this huge musclehead. He’s doing a cool down on the elliptical. I mean, he’s jacked.”

“He’s like ‘I don’t feel so good,” Sue adds. “And we did everything we needed to do. The battle ropes, agility training, leg curls. He’s pounding through it.”

“Like I wanna pound that ass!,” Britt jokes.

Sue becomes wide-eyed and rushes over to hug Britt. “I love you so much!”

“Awww,” Lisa replies. “But, yeah, Sue’s like ‘Okay, let’s slow down your heart rate. Go slower on the machine. Just a few more minutes.’ Now, he’s breathing heavy the whole time I’ve been there.”

“Then, it just came out,” Sue says. “Vomited all over the console!”

The entire crew yells and screams in horror.

“It was revolting,” Sue advises. “Got it all over my outfit. Luckily, I had a change of clothes. Believe it or not, this happened to me once before.”

“That was your own puke after a night of shots at Farmingdale,” Tim retorts.

Brandi excuses herself to answer the O’Fallon’s landline. Eddie starts to walk back towards Dani, only to find she has moved over to Britt to partake in girl talk and wine. Eddie turns to find Tim, but Tim is now preoccupied with Lisa and Sue. They are listening to Lisa’s tales of woe with her husband and eight-year-old son. Almost inaudible over the sounds of chatter and the satellite radio is Brandi’s end of a surprisingly long conversation with a mystery caller. Her voice darkens and grows deeper with each sentence. Eddie can barely make out what she’s saying halfway through.

*“Yes, I know… I am NOT going to talk about personal matters, especially here. But yes, I don’t want to lose this place… I’ll think about it… Yeah, give me a couple of weeks and we’ll talk…. Fine!”*

Brandi hangs up, takes a deep breath and composes herself. She is unaware that anyone caught wind of this exchange. She slowly walks back towards her friends. Eddie intercepts her and asks the obvious question.

“Everything alright?”

Brandi’s neutral facial expressions recoil. Her eyes widen. Her smile returns, fake as it may have been at that moment.

“Of course, Eddie! I’m glad you’re here. We’re going to have fun. Two weeks! Let’s Go Mets!”

Being the newbie, Eddie can only accept her answer and confirm her sentiment.

“Let’s Go Mets!”

4

Giant Steps

Eddie is up early on a Tuesday morning, thanks to Bogie and Bacall. The brother and sister American shorthair tandem are nocturnal, as are most felines. It’s become a regular routine for all involved. Eddie goes to bed at eleven the night before. The black and white felines wake him at two in the morning because they’re bored and want treats. They poke him and rub on him two hours later until Eddie feeds them breakfast. He attempts to go back to sleep, but Bogie can’t help but attack his smaller sibling, his energy having been replenished. Bacall’s cries for help usually get Eddie out of bed for good by six. He used to have Kristine to alternate as middle-of-the-night caretaker and referee. The four-year-old cats have long since given up looking for her. The job now falls solely on him.

On this Tuesday morning, the 13th of September, Eddie looks through his closet of Mets regalia. Hidden behind the typical Jacob deGrom home and away tops are some of his old jerseys. Eddie flips through his minor league collection – Clinton Lumberkings, Brevard County Manatees, Binghamton Mets – all customized with his old number forty. It’s the same number his father wore throughout his playing career. Replicas of Bruce Fitzgerald’s old jerseys representing Cleveland and Seattle remain hidden and untouched. Bacall lays in the bedroom doorway, eyes wide open, head darting around waiting nervously for Bogie to strike once again.

“I think I’ll be a B-Met again tomorrow night,” Eddie announces to her.

Eddie reaches for his Pixel 6a. The display turns on automatically and the usual Twitter chat notifications from late last night come alive:

*11:59pm @deebeback: Can’t fall asleep. GF is yelling at him again. WTF is wrong with these guys?*

*12:04am @tsgrinder: Now I’m up. Fuck you Dani… and fuck these Mets too*

*12:05am @deebeback: I would if it would help them*

*12:09am @brandifinegrl: Can’t believe the Cubs handed them their asses.*

*2:39am @lisametfam: Danny’s sick. Probably heard they lost to the Cubs*

*5:07am @rubisoho143: Awww, hope Danny boy feels better. And fuck the Mets*

*5:37am @brittlgm: I took my edible at 9:30 last night. Not soon enough!! LOL*

Eddie dutifully adds a “thumbs up” to Dani’s offer for conjugal support and adds his own missive.

*5:58am @eddiefitz80: Hope Danny’s okay. 6% chance I come out of retirement if they don’t get their shit together*

Eddie fires up *The Crane Wife* by The Decemberists on his phone and continues his morning sweep of social media. In between his shower and getting dressed for work, Dani, Brandi, Tim, Britt, Sue and Lisa have all offered their acceptance of Eddie’s announcement via “fireball” emoji.

The morning rush of cars is audible on Horseshoe Lane in Levittown, via Hempstead Turnpike and Wantagh State Parkway in the distance. Eddie sets up his living room TV for sleep mode. It is an ill-fated attempt to distract his cats long enough for him to leave without seeing their sad eyes. Alas, he says goodbye to his fur babies and walks out the front door. Feelings of sorrow wash over Bogie and Bacall. Their human father may as well be gone for a thousand years, which is roughly how long it takes for him to get to work. It has been the same commute for Eddie since he and Kristine bought their house in May of 2018. Wantagh State Parkway southbound to the Southern State Parkway westbound, to Peninsula Boulevard. Then, it’s down North Centre Avenue. However, once he reaches the intersection to Sunrise Highway, Eddie needs to take an unexpected detour.

Police have blockaded the area surrounding Bob’s Bedroom Emporium. A few hours earlier, a wayward semi-truck lost control and crashed into the corner structure, causing a massive fire. Eddie is diverted eastbound towards Ocean Avenue, along with everyone else. This adds an extra five minutes to his usual forty-minute drive.

Eddie arrives at his destination, Palmer Cook Associates, on Atlantic Avenue at eight-forty-five. He barely has enough time to park, walk next door to Cold Cut City and order that famed Long Island tradition, a bacon, egg and cheese on an everything bagel. Eddie is relieved when his order is ready in four minutes. Harmeet, the owner, is even happier to see him after a week away.

“Hello, Eddie!,” he bellows as he rings up his sandwich and a Kiwi strawberry vitamin water. “Weekly egg sandwich.”

“Yep, you know it,” Eddie replies as he reaches for his debit card.

“No gummy today?,” asks Harmeet.

Eddie chuckles as he glances at the large glass case full of CBD-infused products and smoking paraphernalia.

“Ahh, no… Um, still good on that.”

Eddie completes his transaction and walks back to the office. He breathes easier knowing he has five minutes to spare. Eddie enters the building and strides past the office fish tank just outside Chief Executive Officer Robert Cook’s office, then down the second row of cubicles. His desk is against the back wall. Trees block his view of the Mill River Inlet behind the building. He logs on and opens his inbox to the usual array of emails. The Hartford forwards a list of documents generated the night before through their EBC. Kismet Construction needs a certificate of insurance. Amtrust submits their own list of policy transactions. Agency Nation sends a spam notification that bypasses the junk mail filters.

Then, there’s the missive received from the PCA Sunshine Club.

*Congratulations on your four-year anniversary at Palmer Cook!*

Commercial lines manager Diane Young watches as, one by one, the cavalcade of colleagues meander in after nine o’clock. She has become indifferent to tardiness. It’s hard enough to find employees willing to work, much less arrive on time. Besides, she has her own book of business to tend to with two middle market accounts up for renewal in the next ten days. They require assistance from an excess and surplus lines wholesaler due to open claims with payments exceeding seventy-five thousand dollars made to the claimants. No standard carrier will even offer a quote.

For his part, Eddie’s indifference is barely noticeable. He goes through the motions with the best of them, forwarding the certificate request to his new assistant, Gina, and checking off two policies on his expiration report that have renewed with an eight percent increase.

Diane calls Eddie into her office at nine-thirty for a brief discussion about his annual review. The fifty-year-old single mother is feverishly multi-tasking, speaking to Palmer Cook’s main producer, Steven Frankel, while typing an email to a disgruntled flower shop owner. She doesn’t believe in wearing makeup and she typically doesn’t believe in small talk. Diane has just finished handling both tasks when Eddie approaches her doorway.

“Hey!,” she reacts. “Come on in!”

Eddie casually walks into what is essentially a supersized cubicle with four walls, closes the door and sits in front of her desk with hands folded.

“So… Four years,” Diane says. “Two as an assistant, two as an AE.”

“Yep.”

“Bet you didn’t think you’d last four days, huh?,” she remarks.

Eddie can only shrug and reply in the affirmative. “It’s… it’s work.”

“It’s work!,” Diane replies. “Yeah, I have no complaints. You do what you need to do. Robert’s happy with you. Steven’s happy with you.”

“Steven’s happy?,” Eddie wonders.

Diane sways and revises her statement. “Weeelll, you know. Producers are never *happy,* per se, but you get along with him. You do what he asks, even if it’s unreasonable. Like, I don’t expect you to remarket anything that comes in less than ten percent higher.”

“Yeah, he’s… he’s coming around on that,” Eddie responds. “You know, in the beginning, he was afraid we were gonna lose everyone.”

“Right,” Diane confirms. “And we had to tell him ‘look, everything’s going up across the board.’ You know, materials, cost of construction. More and more slip and falls from people. Maybe they did, maybe they didn’t…”

“Yeah, trying to squeeze a buck or two,” Eddie says. “Bad apples spoiling it for the whole bunch.”

“Your license coming up for renewal?,” she asks.

“Just renewed. My birthday was last week.”

“Oh, that’s right. Duh,” Diane replies. “Because, you know, New York has the new guidelines now.”

“Yup.”

“You can’t just do the fifteen-hour class anymore,” she advises. “Now, you need three hours on flood, another class on ethics, the law…”

“Yup, I renewed it a few months ago,” Eddie says. “Before that whole thing went into effect.”

“Oh, okay, good!,” Diane answers. She takes a breath and crosses her arms before delivering her final point. “So, with Jane leaving, I’m moving some of her accounts around, trying to keep everyone’s book about the same. Um… I’m splitting it between you, Candace and Melissa, and I… talked to Robert and we’re gonna bump you to seventy-five.”

Eddie graciously nods his head in approval. “Thank you.”

“You’re at what, sixty now?”

“Sixty-five,” Eddie corrects her.

“Oh, right. We moved you to sixty when we promoted you to AE,” she realizes. “So, it’s seventy-five now and that’ll be as of your next pay period.”

“Thank you very much!”

Diane glares at her burgeoning list of unread emails. “Um, any questions?”

Eddie does not hesitate to answer. “No, I’m – I’m good, but if I think of anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Great!,” Diane replies, smiling politely.

Eddie walks back to his desk. As grateful as he is for the positive review and salary increase, his mind is not on his work. For that matter, his mind has been elsewhere for the better part of three months. A change in marital status overshadowed his promotion two years ago. He didn’t have the proper mindset to decide what he truly wanted. He simply needed some stability at a time when there was much uncertainty. Four years have passed since Kristine wanted Eddie to pursue a job with her new boss’ cousin, Robert Cook. Now that the dust has settled, he possesses the mental capacity to reevaluate his life. New friends, new outlook, new goals, same employment.

Fortunately, Eddie also has a therapist to help him sort it out. After work, he drives north through the crowded streets of Oceanside up Long Beach Road. He takes a left at the fork onto Lincoln Avenue. He meets another intersection at North Village Avenue, ripe with more rush hour traffic. The congestion is now even worse with police diverting drivers around the former Bob’s Bedroom Emporium. He crosses over Sunrise Highway, past the dark vacant building that used to be El Mariachi, under the LIRR overpass and finally takes a right onto Hempstead Avenue.

The first parking lot on the left leads to an office building forgotten by time. Its grey hallways, once deemed futuristic by 1970’s standards, are now drab and dull. A long, wheelchair-accessible ramp leads to a left turn, followed by another fork. This time, Eddie walks towards the right and through the first door on the left. Room 140A is occupied by Dr. Cynthia Steiner, Psychologist. It’s almost time for Eddie’s weekly five-thirty appointment.

Dr. Steiner is now twenty-three years removed from graduating from Yale University. She moved from her home base in Stratford, Connecticut to Long Island five

years prior. For a learned professional like the former Cynthia Finnerty, finding love on the internet was unlikely. Finding it through TikTok was even more outlandish, yet she managed to do so. Renowned orthopedic surgeon Dr. Lawrence Steiner caught her eye and won her heart. These days, both doctors live in Garden City and work alternating days of the week to accommodate raising their two-year-old son, Kellen.

Today, Eddie begins week eighty-two of therapy. The waiting room has not changed a bit since week one. Walls coated in sandstone paint. Basic IKEA chairs and end tables. Magazines from 2020. A small lavatory in a six-by-three space, barely large enough to hold a toilet and sink. A generic artist rendering of a boardwalk and pier overlooking the ocean, sun setting over the horizon, firmly hung on the wall. A far door in the corner diagonal to the entrance.

Eddie waits in the chair closest to the entrance and checks his phone. No new activity to speak of since Brandi posted an Instagram photo of an angry Raina wearing a Mets mini helmet one hour ago. Two minutes later, the far door opens. Like a rush of blood to the head, a six-foot amazon with ruby red lips appears in the doorway. Her long black hair barely covers her left eye. She’s wearing a tight white dress shirt and black dress pants. To a typical male and a fair number of women, she would be the quintessential Bo Derek “10.” Every single body part is perfect. To Eddie, however, she is simply a welcome presence every week.

“Hi Cindy!,” he says as he shuffles his phone into his right pants pocket.

“Eddie, come on in,” she replies in her typical deep, sultry voice.

Cindy has treated everyone from the chronically unemployed to regular nine-to-fivers to famous actors and rock stars. They have all at one point or another needed marital counseling or have endured some form of trauma, leading to anxiety and depression. Eddie follows her into her office no bigger than her waiting room. A full bookshelf stands to the left, desk to the far right, a window to the outside directly in front and a black leather couch rests on Eddie’s immediate right.

Cindy sits in her chair in her customary position with legs crossed, head tilted slightly to the left, brandishing her awkward yet pleasing smile. Eddie sits in the middle of the couch, hands over his knees. He is routinely enamored with the two pictures on her desk. One is a family portrait from last year, taken on the Jones Beach boardwalk. The other is a group photo of the 2001 Connecticut Hurricanes Drum & Bugle Corps in which Cindy brandishes a trumpet.

“I still can’t believe that’s you,” Eddie remarks, referring to the group photo. “I know, I say that all the time.”

“Yep, that’s me,” she replies. “Seems like a lifetime ago. I haven’t played with them in about five years, but, you know, doing some gigs here on Long Island with the band during the summer, I’ve been able to find other ways to practice my hobby.”

“Nice.”

“How about you, Eddie?,” Cindy asks. “Last time you were here, we talked about you getting out and trying new things, meeting some people from your old bowling league.”

“Yes, the bowling people!,” he replies with a laugh.

Cindy laughs with him. “How’s that going?”

“It’s great. Brandi, you know, she’s a good friend. We’re all going to the Mets game tomorrow.”

“Oh, fun!!,” Cindy replies.

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it. I even went into my closet and found the old number forty. You know, my Binghamton Mets jersey. I mean, I feel weird wearing it. I’ll probably just go with the deGrom jersey. Be like everybody else.”

“Do you want to be like everybody else?,” she asks.

“Um… yeah, kinda. I’ve been kind of a hermit ever since, you know… Kris…”

“We spoke about your new friends last week,” Cindy continues. “It sounds like they are all unique in their own way. Each one has their own lives, their individual journeys, and yet they come together to celebrate what they all have in common.”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe being different isn’t so bad,” she surmises. “That Hurcs picture that you love so much? Maybe thirty-five, forty people in it. I promise you, all of us had our own stories to tell, our own life experiences. Yet, we came together to do what we loved. Eddie, I don’t think you’ll find another psychologist in that photo.”

Cindy turns to face the photo in question. “Just looking at it now, I see… a lawyer, a taxidermist, a bakery owner and an insurance broker. People from all walks of life, all unique individuals…”

Eddie tries to take in what his therapist is suggesting. “Yeah…”

“Just be you,” she says. “How many people do you know today, do you see in everyday life, who even played for the Binghamton minor league baseball team?”

“Hmmm… Just me.”

“Just you, and that’s fine. It’s part of you. We’ve talked about this in the past. *Your* past, Eddie. Embrace it. No one else has it.”

Eddie sits silently and reflects on Cindy’s words. A good thirty seconds pass before he reverts to his original point.

“It’s great to see everyone,” he says. “Tim, Britt, Dani…”

Eddie slowly smiles and spaces out. “Dani… She’s…”

Cindy uncrosses her legs and crosses them again, head now tilting towards the right. “Tell me about Dani,” she implores.

“Oh! She’s…. Wow, she’s… ”

Eddie’s face slowly forms a wide smile, not even pretending to hide his true feelings. Cindy already knows the answer but coaxes him to reveal it all on his own.

“Somebody you recently met?,” she questions.

“I’ve never felt that way for anyone, Cindy” Eddie replies. “I mean, it took a little bit of time for me to feel that way for Kris. And Ann, before that, I mean, we liked each other and it was obvious. We just knew it, but I’ve never had that instantaneous feeling. You know, all those silly cliches. Love at first sight. She took my breath away. That really happened the moment Dani walked into O’Fallon’s.”

“That is a wonderful feeling,” Cindy says. “So, she’s one of the Bowling Mets Twitter People?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think she likes you?”

“I… I’m not sure,” Eddie answers. “I mean, we just met a couple of weeks ago. She seemed nice. She seemed friendly. We talked a little. I didn’t get that feeling that she was as into me as I was. Like, time didn’t stand still for her like it did for me.”

“Is she married or spoken for?,” Cindy wonders.

“Uh, shit, I don’t know. She wasn’t wearing a ring,” Eddie retorts, laughingly.

“Well, that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. I know people who don’t wear rings because their fingers swell, especially in the summer.”

“Yeah, that makes sense…”

Cindy, the licensed professional, offers the most basic advice.

“Talk to her. Find out if she has a husband or boyfriend, or maybe a girlfriend. If so, at least you’ll know. If not, just talk to her. Get to know her. Maybe ask her if she wants to meet for dinner sometime… Not at O’Fallon’s. Someplace else.”

Eddie appears pensive and unsure. He starts to rock back and forth slowly. His confidence fades with each second as he contemplates Cindy’s guidance.

“I haven’t asked out anyone since high school,” he reveals. “With Ann, it was easy. And Kris, well, she basically asked me out. You know, I… I know it sounds crazy, but I’m forty-two years old and I don’t know how to even ask out a girl a… excuse me, a *lady* anymore.”

“You seem down on yourself,” Cindy notices. “Just take a deep breath. Think about what you’re gonna say and just say it. Confidence is the most important thing a man or woman can have in any situation.”

Eddie starts taking deep breaths as she instructed.

“Not here,” she says, smiling and holding back laughter. “There. The next time you see her. Just remember, we are all unique and wonderful people in this world. You are no more and no less than anyone else… We’ve talked about this before. You are not what happens to you. Think about the positives. You’re Eddie Fitzgerald. You have a steady job, a house, a car… Two cats that adore you. Friends that have accepted you. You’re smart, you’re loyal. You’ve taken some giant steps in these past two years. You’ve got a lot going for you.”

Time is up soon afterwards. In a most welcome development, all eight attendees can leave early for the game the following day. Eddie, Dani, Britt, Sue and Lisa successfully put in for a half day at work. Tim and Alan could come and go as they please. Brandi leaving early was not an issue either, as Eddie would soon discover. By way of their usual chat, they settle on meeting at O’Fallon’s and leaving for Citi Field at four in the afternoon to beat the traffic. Alan will drive himself along with Britt, Brandi and Tim. Eddie volunteers to drive himself with Dani, Lisa and Sue.

Brandi texts Eddie the old-fashioned way on the morning of Wednesday the 14th.

*Hey! Just wondering if you had time to stop by early. Just wanna shoot the breeze*.

Eddie shrugs at the unconventional request but replies in the affirmative. He goes home at twelve-thirty, puts on his old jersey one more time, feeds his cats and leaves for the bar at three. Soon afterwards, the former minor league first baseman enters to a welcoming smile and arms outstretched.

“Hey! Eddie!,” Brandi says as she runs to the end of the bar, shoves the counter flap up and runs over to hug him.

“Hey! Settle down. The boss could be watching,” he answers with a return smile.

“Yeah, well I would need eyes in front of my head for that.”

“Say what?”

Brandi confirms, “I’m the boss.”

Eddie is taken aback. “Oh! Well, shit. I had no idea. So, all this is yours?”

Brandi stretches her arms wide in the middle of the empty space with no current patrons.

“All this is mine!”

“That’s fucking cool,” Eddie responds as he bellies up to the corner stool with his back to the entrance. “So, I know we don’t really talk much about our day jobs and whatnot, but you must have some real business acumen.”

Brandi walks back to behind the bar facing Eddie. The usual assortment of alcoholic beverages act as her live wallpaper. She shrugs with palms open to the sky.

“Well, I kinda inherited this,” she advises. “I had no idea what I wanted to do when I got out of school. I wasn’t exactly a future business leader of America. I was just a tomboy. Played sports. I wasn’t really the ‘It Girl’, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“But I was pretty attractive back then, if I may say so,” Brandi continues.

“Sure, I mean, you’re still…” Eddie hesitates to finish his thought, not wanting Brandi to get the wrong idea about his intentions. He deadpans, “You’re still a catch.”

“Thanks, Eddie!,” she replies with an even wider smile. “Some boys thought I was a catch in high school. But they’d all make those typical lewd comments, just because, you know… they’re boys.”

“Yes, unfortunately, we are, or used to be boys,” Eddie confirms. “Sometimes even when we get older, I can’t speak for myself, but some boys don’t become men. They just become fat, old boys.”

“Haha!,” Brandi laughs. “Well, did you ever say to a girl named Woods ‘Hey, can I go through your woods with a machete?”

Eddie laughs, right hand slamming down on the wood countertop.

“Yeah, real classy high school shit,” Brandi says. “Hey, can I get you a drink?”

“Sure, Angry Orchard.”

“Coming right up…”

Brandi shuffles over to grab his beer and yells in Eddie’s direction.

“Tell you what, people were actually nicer to me when I was stripping.”

Eddie picks his head up. “Stripping? You?”

Brandi stops dead in her tracks, mouth agape. “Oh shit. I can’t believe I just said that.” She proceeds to bring Eddie his beer and looks around to confirm no one else is listening. She leans in.

“Don’t repeat this, okay?,” she says. “It’s not something I go around telling people. I needed help paying for tuition at UNH, so I worked at a strip club up in New Hampshire during college. Amanda Harden was my stage name.

“Ohhhh, so *you’re* Amanda Harden!,” Eddie confirms.

“Yeah, because, you know, I was always looking for a man to harden.”

“Riiight!”

“Or if some dude asked me ‘Are you Amanda Harden?,’ I’d reply with ‘I know you are,” Brandi advises.

“Yup. Got it,” Eddie replies.

“After I graduated, I came back to Long Island,” continues Brandi. “Did some odd jobs. Did the adult modeling thing as Amanda for a little while.”

“Adult modeling, huh?”

“Yeah, you know, people have leg fetishes, domination fetishes, stuff like that. You charge them a few hundred bucks a session. Did that for about four months.”

“Shit, so you kinda led a double life back then,” Eddie replies.

“It got old. I mean, it got old real quick,” Brandi advises. “You meet the real scum of the earth, and it just turned me off completely to that whole thing. … So, here I am, like twenty-three years old. No job, no real direction, no real desire to do anything. I did NOT want to go back to working the clubs, especially here where I’d run into people I knew from high school. My uncle suggested I get a temp job, said it might lead to something long term.”

“Right.”

“So, I tried working in a call center for Chase in Jericho,” advises Brandi. “This was around Spring of ’99. Two months later, they announced they were shutting down the Jericho headquarters and moving everything to Arizona.”

“Aww shit.”

“Yeah, so apparently, they needed temps over there to hold down the fort because people started leaving left and right,” Brandi informs. “Some got a year’s worth of severance because they couldn’t up and move to Arizona. I stayed there until the end of the year. My uncle said, ‘Why don’t you come here and work a few nights?’. ‘Cause I was still living at home. Work here, see if you can put together a resume for Mepham High School. Maybe they need an assistant coach for basketball. It’s something you love. So that was my plan.”

“Hmmm, so, how did you save enough money-,” Eddie asks. “Oh wait, I’m sorry, you said you inherited O’Fallon’s?”

“My uncle died a few months later. Dropped dead of a heart attack,” Brandi says.

“Oh, no, I’m sorry!”

“Thanks… Yeah, he left me the bar.”

“Wow!”

“Yeah, I’m twenty-four years old and I own O’Fallon’s,” Brandi reveals. “Crazy shit!... And that’s how it all happened, and that’s been my life, basically, for the last, what, twenty years?”

Eddie takes a large sip of his beer. “That’s some story. You know, I really feel bad. All this time, how long have we known each other, between the league and you finding me on social media?”

“Hmmm, about three years?,” she says.

“All that time, I never asked about your origin story, so to speak,” he replies. “You know all my shit.”

“That’s okay, Eddie!,” Brandi reassures. “You needed to get everything off your chest. You went through a tough time. The universe gives back what you give out, right?”

Eddie nods affirmatively. “Any husband or boyfriend?”

“Not currently,” she answers. “I’ve had boyfriends. One of them gave me my daughter, Alannah. She’s… actually she’s twenty now.”

“Wow. So… you had her right after your uncle died?”

“Mmm hmmm. Got wasted here one night, like, a month after he died. Some loser took me home. Bada-bing. Nine months later...”

“Bada-boom,” Eddie retorts. “So, you asked me to come down here early. Did you need me for anything?”

Brandi places her arms on the countertop, palms downward at an angle. She smiles brightly, eyes gleaming in the daylight.

“Just wanted some company,” she says. “It gets boring here sometimes during the day. Most people are at work, ya know.”

Britt swings open the inside door to break up the one-on-one chit-chat. She is wearing a Mets t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. Alan follows behind her wearing a blue Mets polo shirt, navy khakis and sneakers.

“Awww shit, it’s Britt Peters,” Brandi announces sarcastically. “Sorry, Eddie, no afternoon delight.”

Eddie spits out his beer, darts his head left and right and laughs. “The FUCK, Brandi?!?”

After the requisite hug and hello from Britt, Eddie turns to her other half. Alan’s short white hair and Willem Dafoe-like wrinkles around his cheeks make an immediate impression on him, though Eddie respectfully downplays it.

“Alan? Eddie. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. Beautiful day for a ballgame,” Alan replies.

“Yeah. Hey, I’m from Florida. This is still my kinda weather.”

“Ahh yes, I heard you used to play ball,” Alan replies while observing Eddie’s jersey. His facial features become even more exaggerated as he holds up his hands.

“The Binghamton Mets! You went deep into the vault for that one, huh.”

Eddie takes a sip of beer and tilts his head. “Gotta embrace your past, right?”

Tim then saunters in wearing the same David Wright jersey and outfit that he wore two weeks ago. He waves to everyone in his usual cool, calm fashion.

“Timmy!,” Brandi beams.

“Well, here I am again,” he announces.

Eddie nods, then notices everyone’s eyes fixated, staring a hole through Tim. Five seconds pass. Tim slowly smiles in appreciation of everyone’s anticipation.

“Say the line, Bart!,” Britt gleefully requests.

Tim fakes exasperation, then proceeds in a monotone voice. “In this smoky place.”

“WITH YOUR BRANDI EYES!,” Britt, Brandi and Alan exclaim simultaneously.

Eddie, still new to the fold, now realizes he missed the inside joke. “Ahh! I’ll get on that next time. Where is that from, anyway?”

“It’s an obscure Billy Joel song,” Tim advises as he leans against the countertop in his familiar corner spot. “C'etait Toi. You Were the One. A while back, we closed down the bar. It was a Saturday. Actually, it was Dani’s birthday last year.”

“Oh my God!,” Britt recalls. “I was *so* hungover the next morning.”

“Yeah, so Dani brought in some of the Devil’s lettuce,” Tim continues. “It was after hours. Technically, it was Sunday morning, but she wanted a smoke with all of us before we left. So, we lit it and passed it around.”

Brandi chimes in. “I kept joking with Tim. ‘THERE’S A NO SMOKING ORDINANCE!’ PUT THAT SHIT OUT!”

“We’re turning back the clock, bartender!,” Tim remembers. “It’s 1980, the year of her birth! Bars are smoky! Deal!”

The whole crew laughs along at the retelling of the story.

“So, the next time I came in, I announced my arrival with the opening line from the song,” Tim says. “Here I am again, in this smoky place, with my Brandi eyes.”

“We just lost it!” Britt says in between belly laughs. “So, yeah, that’s the story of the famous Timmy entrance.”

“And ironically, that song was released in 1980, the year of her birth,” Tim concludes.

No sooner did they reveal the origin of Tim’s opening salvo did the proprietor of the Devil’s lettuce burst into the bar in explosive fashion, wearing her namesake’s jersey. Naturally, Eddie’s expression becomes even more uplifted.

“Dani!,” they all cry out in unison.

Dani goes down the receiving line accordingly. Tim, Britt, Alan, then Eddie.

“Hey Eddie! Nice to see you again,” Dani announces with a smile.

“It’s great to see you, too,” Eddie replies, eyes squarely on hers.

Dani quickly recoils to meet Brandi, who has come out from behind the bar for the requisite hug and kiss. Eddie figures maybe he and Dani will have time to talk in the car on the way to the game. Alas, Sue and Lisa arrive soon afterwards. They have clearly been pre-gaming via Tito’s vodka and monopolize the conversation for the duration of the car ride to Citi Field.

The Amazin’ Day Drinkers and The Dark Knights navigate through the Jackie Robinson rotunda, up the main escalators and walk to the left around half of the concourse towards the outfield. They stop at the bathrooms along the way and arrive at Section 140 in center field. Before they can make their way down to their respective seats, Brandi looks off in the distance to her left. It’s one hour until the first pitch, scheduled for 7:10. The crowds are beginning to file in, yet Brandi is fixated on someone approaching fast from the opposite end of the concourse, across Shea Bridge.

Coming into view is an older, svelte man with short, jet-black hair in a full black suit, black trench coat, red tie and shit-eating grin the size of Flushing. Brandi’s face turns ever whiter the closer he gets to the group. Britt and Tim now see him. Their collective demeanor also darkens considerably.

“Shit, did you know he was coming?,” Britt asks.

“Fuuuuuck!,” Tim retorts.

The man comes to a dramatic halt before the eight friends. “Hey! Great night for a ballgame,” he says.

“Hey Don,” Dani and Sue reply simultaneously, solely out of respect.

Don turns to Eddie and extends his hand, cartoonish smile affixed. “Hey, you must be Eddie. Heard so much about you. Hi! Don Aaronson.”

Eddie cautiously and gently shakes his hand, not taking his eyes off him. “Don...”

“You sitting out here with us tonight, big boy?,” Lisa asks, unafraid.

“Me? Nahhhh. I’m in the Hyundai Club. I just heard you guys were comin’ and had to say hello.”

Don purposely reaches around Eddie, who is standing next to Dani. He extends his hand to the owner of O’Fallon’s.

“Brandi, pleasure’s all mine. As always.”

“Don,” she replies and nods tentatively.

“Well, I guess I’m off for the time being,” Don says. “Enjoy! See you all later.”

With that, Don turns right around and walks backwards from the exact way he came. The collective circle of friends quietly exhale and proceed down the stairs to their seats in Row D. Britt and Alan lead, then Brandi and Tim, then Lisa and Sue. Eddie walks directly behind Dani and asks her the inevitable question.

“Okay, who the fuck was that asshole?”

“Don?,” Dani confirms. “He’s some big shot for Drummond Air.”

“Drummond Air? Never heard of them,” Eddie responds.

“They’re a small-time freight airliner,” replies Dani. “Works out of LaGuardia. Huge Mets fan, which goes to show not all Mets are cool like-“

Suddenly, Dani’s right foot slips off the step. She tries to regain her balance but starts sliding down. Eddie springs into action, grabbing her left wrist with his left hand.

“OOOOWWWW!!,” Dani yells in horror as she doubles over.

“WHOA!!,” Eddie exclaims as he immediately shifts his left hand underneath her left elbow. He simultaneously reaches down and pulls her up by her right armpit with his right hand.

“Holy crap! Are you okay?!?,” he worriedly asks.

Dani looks frightened. She stares off into space, her left wrist throbbing from the pain. “Yeah. I’m… fine. Oww,” she replies half-heartedly. She is vaguely aware of her current surroundings, but her mind begins vividly replaying a painful flashback from August 24, 2013.

It was just before noon when Julie Bianca received a phone call at work. She saw the 989 area code, followed by the 774 prefix. She figured it was just another fundraising request from her alma mater, Central Michigan University. Julie had responded to their calls every six months like clockwork. This time, she was ready to read some unsuspecting intern the riot act.

“Bianca Law, Julie speaking,” she angrily answered.

“Um, Julie? It’s Dani…”

“Dani! Oh Jesus, hi! Sorry, I thought you were someone else,” Julie replied.

“That’s okay. Listen, I’m calling you from here because I don’t want Kevin seeing my call history on my cell.”

“Ohhh, kayyy? Things are that bad, huh?,” Julie inquired.

“He’s… he’s bad. I can’t really talk about it here. Can you please meet me at Blackstone’s after work?,” asks Dani.

“Yeah, no worries. I have a new client meeting at three. We should be done by then.”

“Great! Hey, thank you so much!,” Dani replies.

“Before you go, I hate to ask, but you’re not in any danger, are you?,” Julie asks nervously.

“Um…. Not, um…we’ll talk about it later. I swear! I gotta go!”

Dani’s old friend and college roommate had parlayed her Law and Economics undergraduate degree into graduate study at the University of Michigan Law School. Now four years removed from passing the bar exam, Julie was exactly where she knew she would be all along – working at her father’s law firm.

Dani was careful about what she said during company time using company phones. As a Human Resources Generalist, it was now second nature for her to be diplomatic and hold her tongue at work. It was also second nature for her to hold her tongue at home. The loud atmosphere was perfect for her. The decibels provided by the speakers pumping out Stevie Ray Vaughan’s “Tightrope” was a bonus. Dani could speak freely without anyone overhearing her. She was already waiting at a high-top table in the corner when Julie arrived two minutes before five.

“Hey girl!,” Julie announced. “You sure this is a safe place?”

“What?!?”

“Are you sure we’re safe here?,” Julie repeated in a raised voice.

“He’ll never come here again,” reassured Dani. “Not after the way he left.”

“Oh, that’s right!”

“Besides, he goes to Donnie’s now,” Dani advised. “That’s where all the college jocks go. He thinks all their shit will rub off on him, make him feel like a big shot.”

“Ugh!,” Julie bemoaned. “How much did he rip off that night, anyway?”

“Two hundred and forty bucks.”

“Goddamn.”

“Yeah, just for oxy,” Dani confirmed. “He’s gotten way worse, hun. He’s drunk all the time. Never stops. Pilled up. Between all that and the weed, I mean, he’s totally out of control.”

“Fuck!,” Julie replied with a sad look of disappointment. “What the fuck happened to him, girl? He had everything. He just…”

“I know,” an exasperated Dani said. “Total downward spiral, Julie. I’ve done everything for him. I tried to get him just… anything, a custodial job at CMU. I told him ‘You can’t do that shit for just two weeks. Get it out of your system just long enough to pass the test. Drink all you want, just don’t do weed. After that, smoke it til’ your heart’s content’ And he doesn’t listen to me. He fucks up everywhere he goes, Julie. We’re a month behind on the rent. We should be owning a fucking house with my salary. He just needs to do *something*, and he doesn’t. I just… I can’t justify his behavior anymore.”

Julie looked Dani dead in the eyes and asked the ultimate question.

“Are you ready?”

Stan walked over to take the ladies’ drink orders.

“Um, two Guinness black?,” Julie requested.

“Coming up,” he replied and swiftly walked off.

Dani looked over left to right to make sure no one else was within earshot.

“I’m ready. It’s time. It’s over,” stated Dani.

Julie nodded. “Do you have a place to stay after it’s done?

“I talked with Jim Falcone in the music department,” Dani replied. “His son’s going to Ann Arbor this semester. They have a room for me.”

Julie tilted her head and stared a hole through her college roommate.

“It’s fine,” reasoned Dani. “He knows. We talk all the time. He wouldn’t tell anyone.”

From Dani’s left appeared Stan. He placed two Guinness Black Lagers on the high-top table and appeared to mouth ‘Here you go’.

Julie picked up her glass and raised it. “Well, it’s a dark beer, but there’s a light at the end of your tunnel, my friend!”

“Yeah, that’s another thing,” Dani replied. “He’s not even interested in my tunnel anymore.”

Julie nearly spills her beer. “I don’t know whether to laugh or cry at that one.”

“Same!”

Dani smiled and clinked her glass with Julie’s. They both took a large first sip.

“I’ll redo the paperwork tomorrow morning,” Julie advised. “I still have the original draft from six months ago, before you told me to call off the dogs. Where’s Kevin going to be tomorrow afternoon?”

“At home, on his ass, probably drunk by noon,” said Dani. “He’s not going anywhere tomorrow. I assure you.”

“Works for me. I’ll have Brian stop by and do his thing.”

“The UPS trick?,” Dani asked. “He signs for it and bada-bing?”

“Sounds like he’ll be too fucked up to know any better,” Julie confirmed.

Julie and Dani shared a half-hearted laugh and finished their beers. Dani had no plans to even hint at her being done with Kevin Backman. She was to wait until he was either asleep or passed out from any number of substances. Then, she would pack a large suitcase with clothes and important papers and check into a nearby hotel. At least, that was the plan.

Dani pulled up to their rented home on the corner of Cherry and Pine. It was still daylight outside but the house was dark. Kevin routinely pulled the shades down so no one would see him partake in copious amounts of marijuana, painkillers and alcohol. Even still, his reputation preceded him. Gone were the days when he got by based on his exploits on the gridiron. It didn’t take a Chippewa undergraduate to put two and two together. Carlos pulled into the driveway twice a week in the morning. He handed Kevin a brown bag. Even when there was no exchange of money, the neighbors figured they exchanged funds via PayPal or some other means.

Dani started walking up the stoop and paused before she opened the front door. She had to act naturally. She took another deep breath and took one more giant step, literally and figuratively. Dani slowly walked in and closed the door behind her. Her first vision was Kevin staring at her from across the living room, slumped over, unshaven, eyes surprisingly cold and focused. She tried to play it cool.

“Hey Kev!,” she said with a half-hearted smile.

“Where are you going, Dani… Backman?,” he asked.

“Um, nowhere hun. I just got home,” she replied, assuming he was too far under the influence to realize whether she was coming or going.

“Are you surrrre?,” he inquired slyly.

“Um, yeah. I’m home,” Dani said nervously, trying in vain to hold it together. Of all days to sound more lucid than normal, this could not be one of them.

“The Mets are on TV tonight. Playing the Tigers. I’m watching the game at home,” she rationalized.

Kevin suddenly rose from the couch, eyes still burning a hole through his wife. He took two steps forward towards Dani.

“I guess they’re not the only ones playing,” he remarked.

Dani feigned an angry response, hoping he would back down. “What are you talking about?”

“I talked to Carlos,” he replied, walking with purpose closer to Dani. “He talked to Bret. Bret’s going away to school. He said his dad talked to *you* about a room for rent?”

Dani’s face turned white with fear. She tried to move into the next room, but Kevin leaped and pinned her against the front door.

“Where are you going, Dani?,” he asked furiously.

“Kevin, that’s… not true. I’m not going anyw-“

Kevin grabbed her left wrist and squeezed with all his might with his right hand.

“OWWW!!!,” Dani screamed.

Kevin was livid. He asked her once again. “WHERE ARE YOU GOING, HUH? WHERE ARE YOU GOING?!?”

“OWWWWW, STOP!! OWWWW, PLEASE STOPPPP!!!,” she begged.

The pain was excruciating. Kevin was suddenly the Devil incarnate, veins exploding in his face, rage flowing like no one had ever seen. The shades were down. No one could see what was happening. He cocked his left fist and readied to deliver an unspeakable blow. Dani was horrified.

“NOOOOO!!! OWWWWW!!!”

Kevin offered her one last chance to answer.

“WHERE… ARE… YOU… GOING?!?”

“NOWHERE!!!,” Dani screeched.

Kevin immediately released her wrist. Dani doubled over in pain, collapsing on the floor against the front door. She curled up in a ball and wailed like never before. Kevin slowly snapped back into a calm state.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he softly replied. “You’re going nowhere.”

Dani held her newly sprained left wrist. She contemplated getting up and going to the fridge for an ice pack. She stayed seated on the floor fearing she would trigger Kevin to hurt her even worse if she even moved. Thankfully, Kevin turned around and slowly walked into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Dani stayed glued to the floor for ten minutes. There was no Mets game on TV that night for Kevin’s wife. There was only fear flowing through her and tears flowing from her.

Dani did not sleep that night. The next morning, she called Julie from work to call off the divorce. Dani lied to her friend, reassuring her that all was well, that Kevin pledged his love for her and that they would attend counseling. Julie was crushed. The night before, Dani was confident and assertive, sure she was ready to move on. Kevin had successfully broken Dani’s spirit. Almost five years would pass before Dani regained her inner strength just enough to carry out her original plan.

At present-day Citi Field, it’s the top of the fourth inning. The Mets have shown no signs of breaking their six-run deficit against the North Siders. Eddie Fitzgerald keeps apologizing for unintentionally injuring Wally’s namesake.

“I’m so sorry, Dani! I didn’t know you hurt your wrist.”

“Stop. It’s fine,” Dani shoots back. “You didn’t know. I broke my wrist in college. I slipped and fell on the ice. It’s… it’s been a problem ever since.”

After a few awkward seconds, Eddie tries to make small talk.

“So, when was your first game?”

“Oh, ’86,” Dani responds. “That magical season. Yeah, my dad took me. It was a Sunday afternoon against these Cubs. My dad knew I wanted to be on the radio.”

“Ahhh, no shit,” Eddie replies. “I can totally see that. You have the voice for it.”

“Yeah, thanks! That didn’t really work out for me, but he wanted me to mimic the public address announcer and I started doing that.”

“That’s cool,” Eddie says.

“And I know it’s forbidden these days, but I just *loved* how they did The Wave back then,” Dani advises.

Eddie immediately shoots her a dirty look. “Oh, that’s terrible! Blasphemous! I take it back. Not cool!”

“I know!,” Dani replies. “I was young and stupid.”

“Hey, that’s alright,” Eddie reassures her. “You know, The Wave was invented at UW. It started as a football thing... You know what’s really not cool? I used to stand in the batter’s box and sing.”

“Noooo!,” says Dani, incredulously.

“For real,” replies Eddie. “I used to do it to help me calm down and focus more on the pitcher.”

Dani turns her head towards Eddie in disbelief.

“I know. Young and stupid, too,” Eddie says. “Hey, I’m going to get a beer. I’ll get you one too. It’s the least I can do for… you know.”

He gets up from his seat, but Dani gently taps him before he goes.

“Hey, can you do me a favor?”

“Yeah. Sure!”

“Don’t apologize,” she says as she leans in and smiles at him. “Don’t say sorry so much. You have nothing to be sorry about… and thank you for the beer, Eddie.”

He beams back at her, gently taps her on the left shoulder and proceeds to the concession stand behind Section 143. While waiting in line, Eddie sees the dapper arch enemy of the clique striding towards him.

“Hey Eddie. Nice game, huh?,” Don sarcastically asks. “Peterson can’t handle the pressure of the pennant race, I tell ya.”

“Hey… A little far from the Hyundai Club, huh?,” Eddie replies.

“I had to get some healthy food,” says Don. “This is the only area that lets me keep my figure. Gotta look good for the Caymans, ya know?”

Don’s laugh and grin combination makes Eddie uncomfortable. “Yeah, good luck with that,” Eddie responds.

“I saw your eyes diverted a little,” Don says. “Checkin’ out Princess Plus?”

‘Excuse me?!?”

“Hey, just tellin’ ya, man to man, she’s spoken for.” Don advises. “Don’t get too deep into her.”

Eddie’s discomfort quickly turns to disdain. He looks the dapper Don squarely in the eyes. “Yeah, listen buddy. Appreciate the advice and all, but I don’t see a ring on her finger. Okay?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Don replies. “The ring’s still on *his* finger,” He then points gently towards Eddie. “Take it easy!”

“Hey! Whose finger?!?”

Don turns and walks back toward the Hyundai Club. He raises his right hand while walking away. Eddie is perplexed. The outcome of the game is now inconsequential. Eddie now knows firsthand and echoes the same opinion that everyone else seems to have towards Don Aaronson.

“What a fucking asshole.”

5

Stumbling Through The Dark

In his younger days, Eddie was notorious for muting his phone at night before bed. Anyone that called him knew better, including his father. It was long established that Bruce Fitzgerald would not call his son after ten o’clock at night, eastern time. Eventually, Eddie relaxed that edict. With Eddie’s grandparents now deceased, Sharon long gone and Kristine no longer in the picture, both Bruce and Eddie needed family. They needed each other, though they would not admit it. For two years, Eddie has been trying to convince Bruce to retire from his position as the Mariners’ Senior Advisor to the General Manager. Bruce has rebuffed his son every time.

Eddie’s receives an unexpected, unmuted call on the morning of Dani’s forty-second birthday. He rolls over to pick up his phone and launches Bogie off the bed in the process. He swipes up.

“Dad?,” he slurs.

“Son. I know it’s early. I thought you might be up. I just have to tell you something,” Bruce advises.

“Yeah, you know it’s only six-thirty here,” Eddie says. “It’s three-thirty in the morning, Dad!”

“Is it? Oh damn,” Bruce replies. “I’m sorry, son. I forgot about the time difference.”

“It’s dark out, Dad. I mean, where you are.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, Eddie. I just wanted to tell you that it’s time.”

Eddie sits up in his bed. Bogie looks at him unaware of why he was punted from his position. Bacall is eating dry food from her bowl on the floor.

“Wait, you mean you’re done?,” Eddie asks.

“Yeah, it’s time,” Bruce answers as he coughs violently into the phone. “I’m, excuse me. I’m seventy-five. I have to enjoy the days I have left and… well, you’re all the family I have left now.”

Eddie swallows hard to keep his emotions in check, so as not to cry on the phone with his old man.

“You know, I have the guest room here in New York,” he says. “You think maybe you could consider selling the house out there and come here?”

Bruce pauses and tries not to break down himself.

“Yeah, I’m thinking it’s time to do that,” he replies. “I haven’t really done much with my life. Just baseball. Playing ball, scouting ballplayers, advising my bosses about ballplayers…”

Bruce coughs again, which worries Eddie.

“Hey, you getting sick?,” Eddie wonders.

“Nahhh, just allergies,” Bruce says. “Air is getting thick again. Rainy season. Anyway, I haven’t seen the world. I’ve traveled, but only for baseball. I haven’t done anything just to do it.”

“Listen, I have off tomorrow for Columbus Day,” Eddie says. “I’ll fly out tonight on a red eye, see you. We’ll talk. We’ll work everything out. I’ll call out Tuesday and fly back then. Just… get some more sleep, okay?”

“Okay, sounds good.”

“I’ll call you tonight,” states Eddie. “We’re going out for dinner, some friends and I. I’ll call you when I’m at the gate.”

“Okay, son. Catch you later. Say hi to your friends.”

Eddie almost tells his father that his friends don’t know him personally. Instead, he ends the call properly.

“Love you, Dad.”

“Love you, son.”

The old bowling crew planned to take Dani out anywhere she wanted. She chose Sasa in Farmingdale for Japanese hibachi. Eddie books his flight for the next day via Alaska Airlines. Eddie texts his father at noon New York time to correct himself.

*No red eyes. Flying out tomorrow at 7am, Alaska Air. Arrives 10:22. I’ll email you the itinerary.*

Eddie tries to relax, knowing he doesn’t have to eat and run, especially on Dani’s big day. However, he can’t shake the feeling that something is amiss. Eddie messages the group chat:

*12:04pm @eddiefitz80: Guys/ ladies, My Dad called me super early this morning. He’s retiring. Very unexpected. I’m flying out to SEA tomorrow to meet up with him. Something else is up, I know it.*

Eddie tries to calmly reassure himself that all is well, not to make something out of nothing. He receives several responses:

*12:09pm @brandifinegrl: I wouldn’t read much into it. It’s the end of the season. He probably realizes he misses you and wants to be closer to you.*

*12:12pm @brittlgm: Agreed!*

*12:14pm @tsgrinder: It rains nine months of the year in Seattle*

*12:15pm @brittlgm: I KNOW!! LOL*

*12:19pm @deebeback: I’m with Brandi. He misses you & it’s time to hang em up*

*12:22pm @eddiefitz80: Thanks everyone, and I almost forgot – Dani, Happy birthday!!*

Everyone responds by also wishing Dani a pre-dinner happy birthday, to which she thanks everyone and offers a heart emoji. Eddie showers and watches the usual football on an autumn Sunday. By five o’clock in the afternoon, he’s ready to roll. Grey short-sleeve button shirt, dark blue jeans and sneakers, light brown hair freshly cut, light brown beard nicely trimmed. Just no answer from Bruce regarding Eddie’s new itinerary.

Dinner goes off without a hitch. A volcano made of onion slices erupts on the hibachi. Sue catches sake with her mouth. Gifts are exchanged. Happiness and laughter ensue. Dani and Eddie share a few laughs and a few friendly exchanges. The inner circle is right at home in a different eating and drinking environment. Just before the check comes, Eddie receives a text from Bruce:

*Got your email. Looking forward to seeing you.*

Eddie should be relieved, but he wonders why it took his father half a day to answer. Brandi reassures him by saying he probably napped during the day, not having slept the night before. Eddie tries not to let it bother him any longer. Brandi offers to check on Bogie and Bacall for the day. For the moment, he and his friends have another reason to be up in arms. The Mets have been embarrassed by the Padres in Game Three of their Wildcard Series. The Amazins’ are unceremoniously eliminated from the postseason.

*No matter,* Eddie thinks to himself. He got the answer he wanted. He also assumed that his father would be meeting him at Sea-Tac the next morning. Eddie flight arrives and pulls into Gate C2 on Concourse C at ten-twenty local time. He texts his father to confirm that he’s arrived and that he’ll be outside the arrival gate momentarily. Five minutes pass with no response. Five more minutes pass, then another five. No response from Bruce. Eddie calls him, to no avail.

Eddie is in a panicked state. He texts and calls Bruce once more and receives no answer. At eleven o’clock, Eddie’s sixth sense kicks in. He knows something happened to his father, though he knows not what. He just knows his father is home alone. He orders an Uber from the airport. The twenty-minute ride from Sea-Tac to West Seattle feels like an eternity. Fortunately, Eddie still has his old house key, which he packed in his carry-on.

Vishal finally arrives in West Seattle and turns onto 41st Avenue Southwest. He pulls up to the old, familiar childhood home, at the top of the hill overlooking the iconic Puget Sound. Just as Eddie fears, his father’s 2017 CRV is parked in the driveway.

“Dude, stop,” Eddie painfully yells. “Stop, please!”

Vishal, by duty, does not stop until he reaches the house end of the cul-de-sac. He’s already been paid through the app, so Eddie grabs his bags immediately and runs to the front door. The door is locked. Eddie fumbles for the key, hoping against hope that Bruce had some kind of senior moment and simply forgot to pick him up at the airport. He finds the key and bursts through the doorway.

“DAD!... DAD!”

No response. Eddie runs through the living room and the kitchen. No reply. He races up the stairs to the master bedroom. He stops at the top step and suddenly flashes back to that awful day when his mother collapsed and died in the upstairs bathroom. The vision of his father laying over her, blood gushing endlessly almost paralyzes Eddie. He was barely an adult then. Now, he can’t be any more of an adult. Thus, he pushes forward. He wills himself into the bedroom.

“Dad??... DAD???”

Eddie’s jaw drops. There is no blood flowing out of his father’s body. There is no blood flowing at all in Bruce Fitzgerald. He is lying on his back on the floor at the foot of the bed. Eddie calls 9-1-1. Ten minutes later, the paramedics arrive. Bruce follows the ambulance to Ballard Medical Center. However, his arrival is simply a formality. At three minutes after twelve, Dr. Janis Lynne makes the call. The man who lived for baseball has officially suffered a heart attack and died for it.

Though he already knows in his heart Bruce was gone before he arrived, Eddie is beyond devastated. He retreats to the bathroom. He doesn’t want anyone to see him sob like a baby. When he does re-emerge, he walks over to Dr. Lynne. He cannot even fathom the next steps. Eddie is now the oldest remaining Fitzgerald. At forty-two, he’s the only one left in his bloodline.

“What do I do now?,” Eddie asks, simply.

“We can wash him here and keep him in the mortuary until you make the arrangements,” Dr. Lynne advises. “You’ll have to sign some forms here for a funeral director to collect him. You can have him moved to the funeral home or, if you wish, you may take him home so other family members can say their last goodbyes.”

“He wanted to be cremated,” Eddie solemnly says. “I know he did a will not too long ago. And um, there are no more family members. Just the Mariners... and me.”

“Once the funeral home comes to take him, they’ll set everything up with you,” Dr. Lynne replies.

Eddie calls Ballard Funeral Home shortly afterwards. He doesn’t even know how he’s able to function at this moment. It all seems like an out-of-body experience. Somehow, he has coherently spoken with the funeral home. They will arrive before five o’clock. His next call is to Brodie Edwards, General Manager of the Mariners. Again, he breaks the news coherently. Brodie quietly weeps. He expresses his deepest condolences and promises Eddie will be taken care of by the organization.

He drives back to the house and hesitates before opening the front door. *Please*, he thinks to himself. *Please let this be some crazy dream. Please let my father be here when I open the door*. Eddie opens the door to silence. He walks around the entirety of the house. Living room, kitchen, den, bathroom, up the stairs. Master bedroom, bathroom, Bruce’s memorabilia room, Eddie’s old room-turned-guest bedroom. Then, out to the deck, Seattle skyline in the distance. 2,850 square feet covered, but no Bruce.

Eddie walks back inside and hovers over the living room sofa. He wants to collapse on it, but almost feels as if he doesn’t belong there, like he’s an intruder in someone else’s home. Finally, he sits down and slumps over. The afternoon ferries are running in earnest from Seacrest Park to Pier 50 and back again. Eddie just sits and reflects on everything his father taught him about baseball and how he tried to apply those lessons to life. With still no one around, Eddie cries all over again.

Eddie receives a phone call shortly afterwards from Ballard Funeral Home. They have retrieved Bruce from the hospital. The wake is scheduled for Friday, October 14th. Brodie calls five minutes later. Because of the current playoff schedule, should the current Mariners play all possible games in the division round and advance to the League Championship Series, their next off day will not be until Tuesday, October 18th. Thus, a memorial service is scheduled for that day. Through all the chaos, Eddie remembers one basic problem with the scheduling of the memorial.

“I have a job,” he advises. “I have to go back home eventually.”

“Eddie, we’ll take care of you,” replies Brodie. “I’m guessing you have this week for bereavement. Don’t worry about your job in New York. Take the extra time. We’ll talk to them if we have to… Your father… he was special. He deserves this.”

Eddie agrees and thanks Brodie. Suddenly, it dawns on him that he hasn’t been in contact with his friends all day long. Eddie texts Tommy Simpkins, though he doesn’t expect a response since the Wildcats are in the midst of their football season. To Eddie’s surprise, Tommy quickly responds with shock and sadness. The two high school best friends agree to meet again tomorrow. While he is texting Tommy, a message comes in from Brandi:

*Hey Eddie! Haven’t heard from you all day. Haven’t seen you in chat. No tweets either. Everything okay with your dad?*

Eddie then settles his breathing and delivers the unfortunate reply:

*Hey Brandi. I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but my father’s dead. Had a heart attack sometime between last night and this morning. Found him on the floor in the bedroom. Been the worst day. I’m so numb. Staying here until at least the 19th to take care of everything. I can’t believe it*

The replies from his friends come fast and furiously via text. Sue, Lisa, Tim and Britt all expressed their condolences, love and support. Brandi offers the following:

*OMG Eddie, my dear friend! I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am for your loss. I know you’ve been through this before. It doesn’t get any easier losing a parent. We are all here for you. Always! Much love!! XO*

Finally, Eddie receives a text from Dani:

*Eddie, I am so incredibly gutted to hear of your father’s passing! We are all here for you, especially yours truly. My deepest condolences to you at this time!*

The sole remaining Fitzgerald receives several more texts from the Mariners front office, coaches, players and former players. Eddie replies and thanks everyone but doesn’t even know where to start. He must meet with Ballard Funeral Home the next day to sort out all the details, bring paperwork and one of Bruce’s suits. Through it all, he almost forgets to eat. He orders a sesame chicken combination plate out of sheer necessity, though he’s not able to finish it. He almost forgets to text his manager at Palmer Cook. He does so at almost midnight eastern time. Though he turns off his phone notifications, sleep is not going to happen on this night. Eddie is truly at a loss.

The following day is bittersweet. Brandi waits until nine in the morning Seattle time to text Eddie.

*Hey. We need an address to send flowers. We’re not taking no for an answer. Love you, Eddie!*

Eddie sends Brandi his love and the address to Ballard Funeral Home. Brodie and the Mariners are covering all funeral expenses, for which Eddie is thankful. After plans are finalized for Bruce’s wake, Eddie takes the bus over to Budget in the SoDo section of Seattle. He has hastily secured a Corolla for the week. From there, he heads over to West Seattle High School. Eddie parks his car accordingly but can’t resist walking over to the Hiawatha Playfield across the street.

As Eddie walks closer to the familiar home dugout, he sees a familiar face waiting for him. That familiar face, aged as it might be, smiles as Eddie draws closer, having traded his catcher’s gear for a navy polo shirt, having swapped his shoulder pads for a visor.

“Thought I might find you here, Fitz,” Tommy bellows.

“They all ran away,” Eddie replies, walking closer. “They heard you were blocking the plate and didn’t want to lose a tooth.”

Eddie and Tommy meet just behind the dugout. Their embrace is more than a ‘great to see you again.’ This means so much more to both of them.

“I expected to see you in your office working on some play calling schemes for this weekend,” Eddie remarks.

“Well, buddy, I expected you might come here,” says Tommy.

Eddie begins to quietly sob on Tommy’s shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, Eddie!,” Tommy says.

Eddie slowly pulls away and shakes his head, in an ill-fated attempt to shake the tears away.

“He did all this for me, man,” he replies, pointing at the field. “All the lessons, the training. When I hurt my knee… Everything I did, I owe to him.”

Tommy slowly hugs his friend and hesitates to respond. He nods multiple times.

“That’s … that’s what fathers do, man,” answers Tommy. “They get you ready for the world and then off you go. I know this hurts. I can only imagine. But, my wife is very spiritual, you know, and she says ‘God has a plan.’ And you know, God wouldn’t take him away from you if you still needed him. I know that doesn’t make too much sense right now, but you’ll understand someday.”

“Tommy, what boy doesn’t need his father?,” Eddie asks.

“You’re totally right. No boy should be without his father. But I don’t see a boy. I see a grown-ass man… It sucks. It’s gonna suck, but we’re all here for you, Eddie. I go on Facebook sometimes and I see the comments that your New York friends leave on your page. They love you and they’re there for you. Just like I am.”

Eddie momentarily shrugs off his tears. “I saw something on Twitter. A few people actually have the nerve to say he died because of the booster. I mean, where do these people get off? That’s a human being, not to mention my father.”

“They don’t know shit from shoe polish, Eddie,” Tommy advises. “No one does.”

“He was supposed to retire and come back to New York with me,” says Eddie.

Tommy shrugs his shoulders and delivers a half grin on the right side of his face.

“Well, that wasn’t His plan.”

“Listen. I love you, man,” Eddie deadpans. “But, I don’t wanna hear this stuff about God’s plan. What about my plans?”

“I love you, too, Eddie,” Tommy reminds him. “Okay, I promise, no more stuff about the man upstairs.”

“His plan was to make me a wreck,” Eddie retorts. “That’s why I’m Edmund Fitzgerald.”

Tommy tries in vain to reason with his emotional childhood friend. “Hey, I know your head is all over the place, but I can’t think of one damn thing that you’ve wrecked. Some things are just meant to be what they are, when they are, how they are.”

Tommy places his right hand on Eddie’s left shoulder.

“Are you still thinking baseball? You know, what might have been?”

“No, no… I mean, sometimes” Eddie admits. “We’re only human, right? I’m not bitter. I mean, shit, it’s too late for me now anyway.”

Eddie actually musters a soft chuckle, then continues.

“When that Nakamura made the cover of *MLB The Show*, I figured I made the right choice to quit… It’s too bad you never got him rounding third.”

Eddie and Tommy both pause, then let loose a hearty, simultaneous belly laugh.

“Fuck, Tommy” Eddie says. “My father is barely out of the fire and I’m laughing at the possibility of violence…. OH! Hey, stop over the old house when you get a chance. I know you used to love all those model ships he had.”

Tommy politely shrugs and declines.

“Just take one, man,” Eddie offers.

“You take ‘em all,” says Tommy, who smiles and offers one last embrace along with some parting words.

“He taught you more than baseball. He taught you how to live, how to love. You’ve done all that… Besides, no one will remember this when Vicky Peterson spills milk on her crotch.”

The two former West Seattle Wildcats burst out laughing in the face of tragedy.

“See you Friday,” reminds Tommy. “You got this. The legend lives on.”

Eddie returns to the old Fitzgerald home at four in the afternoon. He once again slumps onto the couch and stares into space. He finally feels the need to turn on the TV for background noise. What else but MLB Network would be the last channel Bruce watched in his living room. No more than fifteen seconds later, “Breaking News” appears at the bottom of the screen. Suddenly, everything becomes all too real again for Eddie.

*Mariners announce 3-Time All-Star OF/3B Bruce Fitzgerald has died at 75. Fitzgerald was selected 12th overall in 1969 MLB Draft. He played for Cleveland from 1972-79 and Seattle from 1980-83. He later became a Mariners scout and was most recently Special Assistant to Mariners’ General Manager Brodie Edwards.*

Eddie breaks down all over again for ten minutes. Friday afternoon at Ballard Funeral Home couldn’t come fast enough for him. Before then, Brodie’s Executive Assistant, Erin Pearsall, calls and pledges to oversee the sale of Bruce’s house when Eddie is ready to proceed. Brodie texts to check in, as does Dani, Brandi, Britt and Tim.

For the next couple of days, Eddie explores every inch of his father’s house. He pays particular attention to the framed photos in his memorabilia room. It is lined with still photos of Bruce in his Cleveland days with both Andre Thornton and Buddy Bell. His Mariners tenure is marked by pictures of Bruce with Gaylord Perry and Richie Zisk. Eddie becomes choked up when he sees eight-by-ten photos of himself in all his minor league uniforms.

The day comes. Eddie arrives at one-forty-five and finds several Mariners players already waiting to pay their respects. The remains of Bruce Fitzgerald rest in an urn on a platform at the far end of the room, alongside a framed 1981 headshot photo of the man himself, smiling brightly.

When two o’clock comes, a sea of humanity arrives for Bruce, which both pleases and overwhelms Eddie. Tommy Simpkins walks in. His number one priority is his friend. From there, one by one, it is a veritable “Who’s Who” in Seattle baseball lore. First is Brodie, followed by current M’s stars. Julio, Cal, Robbie, Luis, Andres. Then, past dignitaries. Randy, Edgar, Jay, even Junior from out of town. Then, Eddie’s jaw drops as several more out-of-town friends appear to pay their respects.

“Britt?!? Timmy?!?... Oh my God, you… you flew here?!?”

Eddie wraps his arms around his friends in sheer amazement.

“Eddie, you’re family to us,” Britt says. “We had to come.”

“I’m just surprised it’s not raining in October,” Tim replies, which gets a much-needed laugh from Eddie.

Brandi and Dani arrive together immediately afterwards, tears flowing freely down both of their cheeks. Eddie rushes over to hug Brandi, then Dani.

“We’re so sorry, Eddie!,” Dani says.

“I… I’m speechless. I can’t believe you came.”

Brandi begins to ask, “Is it appropriate if I say-“

“That’s what she said?,” Eddie replies. “Yes! I need this. Oh my God, I’m so happy you’re here!”

“You haven’t been chatting with us,” Dani responds. “We all talked and figured you needed us.” Brandi nods affirmatively.

Britt and Brandi walk over to a photo collage in the corner, where Tommy is standing. He’s looking intently at an old photo of the high school pals in their Wildcat baseball gear, flanked by Bruce.

“That’s you on the left?,” Britt asks.

“Yup!,” answers Eddie. “Hey, Tommy, this is Britt and Brandi… And Dani and Tim. Everyone, Tommy!”

“Ahhh the Facebook people,” Tommy says.

“Heh!,” Brandi replies. “Actually, the Twitter people, or Mets people, old bowling people. Either way, yes, we’re *those* people.”

“The New York people,” Tommy confirms.

“Yeah!”

“Oh, wait a minute!,” Eddie speaks. “Brandi, if you’re here, who’s feeding my cats?”

“Sue’s doing it. She and Lisa couldn’t make it. They really wanted to.”

Eddie suddenly becomes captivated by the arrival of one more blast from the past. Standing in the doorway at the far end of the white room is another aged and familiar face. Her dark brown hair used to be jet-black. Her green eyes are now visible behind black rimless glasses not usually seen on air. Her grey pants suit blends in with the crowd, though her presence is well-known. A few front office employees whisper to themselves. Being a regular on KOMO 4 News, she is used to the quiet chatter. She and Eddie slowly walk towards each other, almost hypnotically.

“Ann… I…”

“I’m so sorry, Eddie…”

Ann and Eddie embrace for the first time in twenty-two years. Dani and Brandi both eye her with tremendous curiosity.

“Ann, thank you so much for coming!”

“I asked for this assignment,” she advises. “I’m doing a two-minute spot for the six o’clock. I just had to pay my respects to him and… and to you, Eddie!”

“That’s wonderful!,” Eddie exclaims. “So, you’re still at KOMO?”

Ann walks over to sit down in a chair in the back row of the room. Eddie dutifully follows her over.

“I went to KING 5 for a few years, about six years ago,” Ann replies. “It wasn’t the same vibe. I missed my friends, the relationships I’d made. There was some other stuff, too. Plus, everyone said they missed me on KOMO 4. I went back there as soon as my contract was up.”

“Wow!...”

“I spied on your Facebook page,” Ann says as she chuckles. “I hope you don’t mind. I couldn’t see everything, but it says you live in Levittown, New York? How did you end up there?”

“My wife got a job in New York,” answers Eddie. “I just moved with her a few years back.”

“Oh, cool! So, which one is your wife?,” Ann wonders, looking in the general direction of the so-called New York People.

“Um, well, she’s not here anymore,” Eddie replies. “Actually, she might be here. I just don’t know it yet. Who knows?”

Ann and Eddie share a light-hearted laugh.

“I mean, over there,” clarifies Eddie as he points over towards the end of the room. “Not… you know...”

“Yes!”

“You married?,” he asks.

“For about twelve years now,” says Ann. “He’s a chiropractor.”

“Ahhh. I know a good chiropractor back home.”

“Well, I should hope you do. It really helps.”

“So, you’re not Ann Stuart anymore,” Eddie assumes. “You’re Ann…something else now.”

“I’m still Ann Stuart,” she responds. “That’s my professional name, though my license says Ann Hastings.”

“Ahhh…”

Silence fills the immediate space between Eddie and Ann. He struggles to continue small talk. The emotions of losing his father overwhelm Eddie once more.

“You knew him. He taught me everything,” he confesses. “Not just baseball. I mean in life. And I feel like I barely got to know him all these years. I graduated high school, I went to Shoreline and then I went all over the country chasing a dream. Then, I met Kris in Florida. We lived there, then moved to New York. Low and behold, here I am, forty-two years old. I never really got to know my father.”

“He loved you, Eddie,” Ann reasons. “I’m sure he did. And you came back for him. You’re here for him.”

“It’s silly, but I found a stack of CDs in his den,” says Eddie. “I’m looking at them. Sheryl Crow, Tom Petty, The Jayhawks. Of course, Gordon Lightfoot.”

“Of course!,” Ann says he she laughs. “We all remember the singing swinger.”

“Goddamn it, Ann,” he jokingly retorts. “I’ve been trying to forget about that… I hardly ever talked to him about music. I’ve never even heard of the Jayhawks. I heard this one song called ‘Stumbling Through The Dark.’ It made me all emotional, you know. Isn’t that just a microcosm of life?”

“Absolutely,” Ann responds. “We think we have it all figured out, but we’re just making it up as we go. Stumbling through the dark. I thought my life was just another cut and paste. You find your dream job, find the right guy, get married, have kids, go on vacation to the San Juan Islands every year. Well, I found the guy, got married. Kids? Well, we tried IVF three times. Turns out I can’t have them.”

“Awww damn!”

“We had to pivot,” Ann continues. “We adopted Shawn. He’s thirteen now. And work? Well, let’s just say the grass isn’t always greener. My husband was in a car accident six years ago. Broke his collarbone, took him five months to feel normal again. Life isn’t all that you see on TV or social media. You only see the good. Shit happens… Oh, we did go to San Juan Island last month. We found this gift shop and it had a sign in it that said ‘It’s not the years left in your life. It’s the life left in your years.’… Soooo, maybe that’s your dad’s last lesson?”

Eddie stares at the urn that holds the remains of his father. He grins at him, then slowly turns his head towards his ex-girlfriend.

“Maybe it is…”

Dani, Brandi, Britt and Tim start walking towards Eddie and Ann, along with Tommy. The latter instantly recognizes his friend’s old flame.

“Ahhh, we’re reconnecting!,” Tommy beams. “Ann Stuart. Long time, no see. How’ve you been?”

“Doing great,” she replies. “I just had to be here for an old friend.”

“Yup. Just catching up with old friends,” says Eddie with a side eye towards his Ann. “Everyone, Ann. Ann, everyone.”

They all shake hands and exchange pleasantries. Ann reaches down and throws her handbag over her shoulder.

“I have to go do my thing,” she says. “Eddie, I’m so sorry!”

Eddie and Ann hug gently. “Thanks so much for coming!,” he answers.

In their minds, they had hugged another twenty years’ worth. They weren’t sure if or when they’d ever see each other again. However, Eddie did not want to make his new friends feel awkward, especially since he had no such unrequited feelings.

Ann makes her exit. As Eddie slowly turns back towards his friends, Brandi meets him with her left arm wrapping around him. Dani reaches in and wraps her right arm around Eddie. Britt, Tim and Tommy all join in for an impromptu group hug. Their love would help carry Eddie through the rest of the day.

The inner circle is at an impasse regarding dinner that night. Unable to decide on burgers or sushi, they find a place equipped for both in Katsu. Before their toast for Bruce, Eddie tweets the following, two minutes apart:

*@eddiefitz80: Maturity Achievement Unlocked. Speaking with favorite ex solely as friends with no feelings of bitterness or longing*

*@eddiefitz80*: *Also*, *I have the best friends on both coasts.*

Eddie lifts his glass and rises from his chair:

“Everyone… to my father,” he announces. “The man who built the legend! To Bruce!”

Everyone responds “To Bruce.” Eddie looks over at his friends and sees Brandi with a special gleam in her eye. He nods affirmatively at her. He looks over to Dani and nods. She smiles and returns the favor. There is one more showing that evening from seven to nine, plus the memorial on Tuesday. The Seattle rain, which had held out since Eddie’s arrival, would announce its presence after dinner and last for the remainder of his stay. Alas, Bruce could raise a son, but he could not curb the liquid sunshine.

6

Pour Some Sugar On Me

Every year, Kristine would beg her husband to find another costume. She would ask him to wear anything but regular clothes or one of his old baseball uniforms. Her co-worker friend, Tanya, always invited the Fitzgeralds to her annual Halloween party. After a few years, it was awkward seeing the old number forty next to a cultural icon.

“If you have to be a ballplayer, can’t you at least be Joe DiMaggio to my Marilyn Monroe?,” Kristine once asked.

Eddie acquiesced in 2019. He bought the forbidden Yankee pinstripes and Joltin’ Joe’s number five to go with Kristine’s classic white Marilyn dress. After Halloween, he sold the entire uniform on eBay for a cool $75.

That was the last year Eddie bothered to assume an alter ego on or around October 31st. Some three years later, he returns from Seattle and finds an emailed invitation from Brandi. She is hosting a Halloween Party at her Bethpage home at 7PM on Saturday, October 29th. Eddie agonizes for a couple of days over what to wear. On the one hand, he could branch out and find another outfit, like his former wife insisted. On the other hand, no one in his new friends’ group has ever seen him in full uniform.

He texts Tim for his honest opinion. Tim’s responds:

*Remember the first day we met? The Judge Doom gloves. Remember what I said to you?*

Eddie ponders this for a good ten seconds, then remembers the exact words, which he relays back to Tim:

*They’re not kid gloves, Mr. Valiant!*

Tim answers a minute later: *BINGO!*

Eddie frantically searches the internet on his phone for something suitable, literally and figuratively. He finds some random online retailers who promise to deliver within seven days. Mens Tuxedo USA has a Mens 3 Button Peak Lapel Bold Pinstripe Gangster Suit in Brown for $149. Tenth Street has a Scala Felt Derby, The Godfather, in Chocolate for $63. Amazon has Dockers for $49.99. Kohl’s has a white shirt and brown design tie in-store. When the big day arrives, Eddie Valiant is reborn in the guise of Eddie Fitzgerald.

Parking is not an issue at Brandi’s. A dirt area rests across the street, with a chain link fence separating South Herman Avenue from the woods on the side of the Seaford-Oyster Bay Expressway. Eddie arrives at five minutes after seven. The driveway is already full, so he is relegated to dirt parking. Eddie valiantly steps out of his vehicle, flask in hand. His white shirt even has the famous ink stain on the front pocket.

He walks up the wood deck and stairs by the front entrance. The front door is open for arriving guests. Eddie enters to the sounds of the requisite Halloween-themed music. “Monster Mash” is playing on the TV mounted on the wall as he walks to the left and into the living room. A lady named Tracey, adorned in white catering attire, is lighting a few sternos. Britt and Alan are present as Sonny and Cher. Sue and Lisa are doing their best Hans and Franz, complete with light grey sweats, fake giant muscles and hair pinned under their wigs. Tim is there in full Judge Doom regalia.

“There he is!,” Tim announces from across the room. “Remember ME Eddie!?!?”

“Haha, shit!,” he replies. “I forgot my singing sword.”

“Eddie Valiant!,” Britt remarks, barely able to bust out laughing. “Holy shit. That is good! You got the whole thing… The ink stain!”

Tim walks slowly towards Eddie, stone-faced, cane in hand – as only the real Judge Doom would. The visual of the five-foot eleven Tim doing a faux faceoff with the six-foot Eddie cracks everyone up.

“It’s too late to save your *toon* friends, Mr. Valiant,” Tim deadpans. “They’ve all been DIPPED!”

Tim points dramatically at the punch bowl, causing Eddie to now break down with laughter. Sue shuffles over and offers some assistance, albeit in a terrible German accent.

“We can help you lift the ladle!,” she remarks while flexing.

After the usual hugs and kisses from all, along with the congratulations for everyone’s costume efforts, Eddie realizes the host is not present and accounted for.

“Hey, where’s Brandi?,” he asks. “It’s been a few minutes. She can’t be stuck in the bathroom.”

“Well, with women, you never know,” Tim replies. “But, she said she had to take care of something upstairs.”

“Ah. So what’s her costume?,” Eddie wonders.

“She was a witch,” Lisa says. “Nothing fancy, but she usually does something a little more… you know, extra?”

The screen door swings open. The faces of all who are present become agape with joy, especially Eddie’s. In walks that famously wide female figure. This time, she’s wearing a red sequined dress in a size 3X, with a complimentary bright red wig over her natural brown hair. Completing the ensemble are sequined red heels, ruby lipstick and purple velvet gloves that go up to her elbows. Eddie Fitzgerald’s face ironically mirrors Eddie Valiant’s the first time his character saw Jessica Rabbit.

“Hey everybody!,” she announces, in her best sultry Kathleen Turner voice.

“DANI! MY GOD!,” Lisa exclaims. “You fucking nailed it!”

Dani walks in and eyes Eddie in total amazement and delight.

“Well, hello Mr. Valiant!,” she says. “And you even got the ink stain on the shirt! That is next level! I’m impressed.”

Eddie and Dani softly embrace. He kisses her on the cheek.

“Color me impressed as well!,” he responds, then swiftly turns to Tim.

“You!... You knew!”

“Perhaps,” Tim replies, voice still monotone and committed to his character.

“You know more than you let on, big man!,” Eddie remarks.

Dani goes to greet everyone else accordingly. As she goes towards the punch bowl to fix herself a drink, she can’t help but turn back towards Eddie and smile. This goes unnoticed as he is attempting to get his explanation from Tim. The Halloween music suddenly cuts out.

“Do you know the story of the chimp in my profile pic?” Tim asks Eddie, now in his regular voice.

“No.”

“Have you ever seen-“

Tim is interrupted by the lights abruptly dimming in the house, in a spooky turn of events. The party guests naturally get excited at this dark and mysterious development.

“That’s odd,” states Tim. “So, do you know-“

Suddenly, a familiar voice takes over the party with a familiar opening refrain.

*Love is like a bomb!!* It echoes and reverberates throughout the room. A riveting guitar solo follows. The drums kick in.

“What the…”, says Britt.

“There’s something very familiar about- NOOO!!,” exclaims Tim, who appears to immediately realize what is happening. Everyone marvels as the intro continues and builds to a crescendo. It is a vaguely familiar remix of a classic Def Leppard tune, straight from the MTV vault.

“No. Fucking. WAY!,” barks Tim.

As the intro ends, the lights suddenly come back up to reveal Brandi standing at the bottom of the stairs looking seductively. Her choice of costume is more suited for Gossip than a Halloween party. It is a black studded, sheer fishnet bodystocking with thigh-highs underneath a black and white ruffled short skirt.

“AMANDA IS BACK!!,” bellows Tim.

Brandi is, indeed, Amanda Harden again. The group erupts with excitement. Brandi struts towards her friends, arms outreached, hips swiveling in time with the distinctive guitar riff for “Pour Some Sugar On Me.” She playfully gyrates in front of Britt and Alan, then Lisa, then Sue. Tim waits with bated breath for his turn.

“Come on baby!,” he states as Brandi side eyes him.

Brandi completes greeting the collection of ladies with some playful hip action for Dani. They both enjoy a good chuckle and nuzzle each other with Eskimo kisses.

“Very nice!,” Brandi says. “Don’t tell Roger about us playing Pattycake, okay?”

“Yes, Ma’am!,” Dani answers, grinning ear to ear.

Brandi finally placates Tim by selecting him next. He places her arms on top of his shoulders and moves her hips seductively. She dips down suggestively and slowly rises back up. Both are elated for the experience.

“You finally got your wish,” Brandi advises, “Was it everything you thought it would be?”

“A hundred times better!,” he replies.

Alan is next. His personal experience is less enthusiastic, presumably out of respect for Britt. Finally, Brandi gets to Eddie. She pulls out a chair from the dining room table, places it to Eddie’s right, faces him and moves him from his standing position to a seated one with her right leg. Brandi appears to be enjoying the moment, going above and beyond simply dressing up for Halloween.

“Dabbling in watercolors, Eddie?,” she asks him, in reference to the film, which earns an awkward chuckle.

She then hovers over him and proceeds to lap dance. To a normal crowd, this would seem out of place. To a group of friends who live for making sexual wisecracks, this feels right at home. Brandi repeats her dance she just gave Tim. This time, she is more spirited. Eddie appears to enjoy the moment, though he is visibly trying to show some restraint. Dani looks over at the two of them, curious about Eddie’s reactions. Britt and Tim notice a hint of discomfort in Dani’s eyes.

Brandi closes out Eddie’s private dance by removing his hat, placing it on her head, extending her arms and playfully shoving back in his face in an homage to the film. The end chorus booms out over the Bluetooth speaker.

Brandi struts over to the TV stand in front of the front window and faces her friends with sheer delight.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome!,” she declares. Applause and catcalls fill the air.

“I hope you all enjoyed the long awaited and anticipated return, for one night only, of Amanda Harden,” she continues. “I know *some* of you did. As in years past, my friend Tracey is here from Sand Wedge Deli helping us out. Thank you, Tracey! Dinner will be ready momentarily.”

Brandi retreats upstairs, presumably to adorn her witch costume once again. Eddie gets up and looks everywhere for Dani, who is nowhere to be seen. He notices some movement outside on the back porch. However, when he starts walking towards the screen door at the back of the house, Tim intercepts him.

“I did NOT see that one coming,” Tim candidly advises. “You have a nice little conundrum, my friend. She kept swearing up and down. ‘You’ll never see Amanda Harden again.’ Twenty years later? Something must have brought that out of her… or should I say someone?”

Eddie is perplexed. He acknowledges Tim’s intuition but is preoccupied with looking for Dani.

“I gotta find her, pal,” he replies.

“Yeah, I noticed. Go check.”

Eddie excuses himself and walks through the screen door. Tim looks back and picks up his cup of Halloween punch. Lisa walks over to Tim with a concerned look on her face as well.

“This could get interesting,” Tim says.

Eddie steps onto the back porch, looks right and finds Dani and Britt in mid-conversation, sitting on a red picnic bench. They both look solemn and unnerved. They’ve started passing Dani’s lit hash pipe back and forth, looking to take the edge off.

“New territory for me, Hun!,” Britt says to Dani. “I’ve never seen her- HEY EDDIE!”

Britt and Dani’s expressions suddenly change. They now appear upbeat, hoping against hope that Eddie did not catch them in deep, serious conversation. Dani adjusts her red wig, which was beginning to shift to the left.

“Hey ladies!,” Eddie responds. “Party’s out here now?”

Dani struggles to maintain her happy face “Yeah! You want in?,” she asks.

“Sure, hit me!,” Eddie says as he sits down on the bench next to them.

Britt hands him the pipe full of Slurricane and a lighter. “I think this is your first time hittin’ the weed with us.”

Eddie shrugs. “Yeah, I guess it is.” He turns the lighter down towards the bowl end of the pipe, flicks it and inhales profoundly. As he exhales a few seconds later, he feels unsteady for a split second.

“Whoa, fuck, that is good shit!,” he exclaims.

“Yeah, that’s from my guy,” Britt says. “If you like it, I’ll text you his contact info. Cool dude.”

Eddie regains his composure and passes the pipe back to Britt. Dani starts to feel a slight buzz but smiles at him curiously. Her eyes are completely fixed on him.

“How’d you like your lap dance, Eddie?,” she wonders.

He almost rolls his eyes but steadies himself and grins. He looks directly at Dani.

“To be honest…,” Eddie replies, then looks left and right to make sure no one else is listening in. He begins to laugh. “I’ve had better.”

Britt and Dani burst out laughing and howl at Eddie’s admission.

“I mean, I like that sort of thing, don’t get me wrong,” Eddie continues. “But, it was too… intense. You know? Paint by numbers. I need a little more emotion from my ladies. More heart.”

Britt nearly falls off the bench. She holds up her left hand to keep her balance.

“I gotta tell you,” she says. “I’ve only heard the urban legend. I’ve never seen it up close and in your face like that.”

“It was good. Really,” Eddie clarifies. “It just…”

Dani beams intently. Eddie looks at her and notices her sense of relief.

“It wasn’t for me,” he concludes.

Brandi, now back to wearing her Margaret Hamilton tribute costume, suddenly throws open the screen door to the porch.

“Hey gang,” she says, spritely. “Working up an appetite?”

“Absolutely, Hun!,” Britt replies, smiling intently.

“Save some for me, alright?,” Brandi requests. “And save some for later. Dinner’s nice and hot!”

The three stoned friends slowly rise from their red bench positions. Eddie motions to Dani as if to say ‘Ladies first.’ Dani nods and proceeds inside. Eddie looks back and peers into Britt’s eyes. Britt tries to downplay it momentarily, then decides to acknowledge Eddie’s awareness of Dani’s discomfort with Brandi’s performance. She tilts her head, frowns ever so slightly and nods affirmatively.

“I know. We’ll talk later,” she advises before proceeding inside before him.

Dinner is a nice, generic spread of chicken francese, penne a la vodka and sausage with peppers, along with a massive garden salad. Coke, Sprite, Diet Coke, Bottled Water are the non-alcoholic beverages of choice. Along with the special punch, Coors Light, Heineken, and Sam Adams Oktoberfest bottles are present. Brandi also has a personal stash of Jack Daniels and Fireball Cinnamon, the latter of which the female Hans and Frans have already sampled. Sue and Lisa then cozy up to Eddie on the line for food and offer their condolences in person.

“Hey, I know we’ve spoken in the chat and by text,” Lisa says. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry we couldn’t make it to Seattle and I’m *so* sorry about your dad!”

Eddie warmly reaches over and wraps his arm around Lisa, then Sue, before reaching for some chicken francese.

“Thank you,” he genuinely replies. “You know I appreciate it. I appreciate all of you!”

“Any news with the house?,” Sue asks.

“Uh, we have a buyer already, believe it or not,” he responds.

Britt and Dani overhear this and are overjoyed.

“Wow, that’s awesome, Eddie!,” Britt chimes in. “What did they offer?”

“One point four. No inspection. All cash.”

“WHAT?!?,” Britt, Dani, Sue and Lisa burst out simultaneously.

“The Mariners GM, Brodie? He’s overseeing everything. His assistant called me Thursday. Brodie talked to Julio. He’s been staying at this condo complex two blocks away. He wants the house.”

“That’s so cool!,” Dani says.

“And Julio is?,” Sue wonders.

“The centerfielder,” Eddie clarifies. “Not Julio from the bar, obviously.”

“Oh, *that* Julio! That’s awesome,” Lisa remarks.

“Yeah, obviously,” Sue says. “That would be one hell of a commute!”

After finishing dinner, Eddie saunters over to Tim for a continuation of their previous conversation. Tim has already finished and is seated on a chair next to the couch, checking his social media notifications.

“You never got to tell me how you knew Dani was Jessica Rabbit,” Eddie remarks. “We all played it close to the vest in the chat, but somehow you knew.”

“Eddie, you know that profile picture I have of Virgil?” Tim inquires.

“Yeah.”

“You know what that’s from?”

“Um… no,” Eddie responds.

“There’s a little-known movie from the ‘80’s called *Project X*,” Tim says. “It stars Matthew Broderick and Helen Hunt. It’s pretty controversial, which is why you almost never see it mentioned or shown on television. Matthew Broderick plays an Air Force pilot who is assigned to this special government initiative. They’re teaching chimps to fly planes. I know, it sounds pretty far-fetched, but this is back when the Cold War was still hot and heavy.”

“Right?”

“So, the idea is they teach chimps to fly with a bunch of flight simulators. Then, they bring them into this one main flight chamber where they give them lethal doses of nuclear radiation. I hope I’m not spoiling it for you.”

“No, no. I’m just not following you,” replies Eddie.

“Okay, so they’re killing off these chimpanzees to try and figure out how much radiation a human fighter pilot can sustain in the event of a nuclear war between the U.S. and the Russians. But there’s this *one* chimp that knows what’s really going on. His name is Virgil, but he only knows how to communicate through sign language.”

“Wait a minute!,” Eddie states. He can’t help but laugh at the absurdity of Tim’s apparent explanation. “The government is killing chimps and there’s one who speaks, but *only* in sign language?”

“Yeah, Helen Hunt’s character taught Virgil sign language,” Tim continues. “Then, the government lies to her and says they’re transferring Virgil to a zoo in Houston. He goes instead to this Air Force base in Florida where Matthew Broderick’s character is training them to fly. The government is keeping him in the dark about the project and Virgil tries to tell him what they’re actually doing… but he only knows how to communicate in sign language.”

“Okay, so that’s all pretty interesting, but how does that make you Virgil?,” Eddie asks Tim. “Do you know sign language, too?”

Tim looks in all directions, then motions for Eddie to walk with him towards the front door closet, away from the rest of the group. Once they have moved away accordingly, Tim fills him in.

“No, I don’t know sign language,” Tim replies. “But I know you have the hots for a certain lady in red.”

Eddie’s face becomes ashen. “It’s that obvious?”

“Eddie, I saw it on your face the first day you two met,” advises Tim. “She stopped you in mid-sentence, man. It’s fucking obvious… And you know what else? She’s got it for you, too.”

Tim’s reveal almost jumps Eddie right out of his seat. He becomes ecstatic for a brief moment. Then, fear and uncertainty overcome him.

“Shit, I haven’t even approached anyone like that since Kris…,” Eddie admits.

“Well, I wouldn’t do it here, not tonight, with everyone here,” Tim replies.

Eddie agrees. “Oh, yeah. Of course.”

“Besides, she won’t remember her birthday if she keeps downing that Fireball,” Tim points out. Dani is, indeed, across the room, consuming her second glass with Britt keeping a close eye on her.

“Hey, not for nothing, Tim, but that whole rigmarole about the chimp movie…,” Eddie ponders. “Why couldn’t you just pull me aside and say that last part?”

Tim shrugs his shoulders and pats Eddie’s right arm. “I’m a movie buff. I figured why not give you the back… Oh, fuck it, man. I overheard Dani and Britt talking on the plane. I wanted to pretend I was telling you something really profound.”

Eddie tries in vain to play it cool. All he can do at that moment is grin and shake his head, while patting Tim’s shoulder in appreciation. As is customary for Brandi’s annual Halloween get-together, dinner and dessert are followed by a showing of the film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show.* In previous years, this went off precisely at midnight. However, by popular demand, the aging crowd now starts the movie arbitrarily after dessert, well before twelve.

Naturally, Brandi has all the requisite audience participation items. Rice, water pistols, newspapers, flashlights, rubber gloves, noisemakers, toilet paper, toast, party hats and playing cards. However, by the end of the film, Lisa, Sue and Brandi are smashed. Both Britt and Dani have passed out from the combination of weed and booze. The latter’s red wig has now shifted forward over her eyes. Tracey has long since left for the evening. Only the men remain semi-coherent.

It’s now ten minutes to eleven. Tim and Eddie slowly get back on their feet. Alan bids all goodnight and helps the inebriated Britt out the door, but not before she offers some parting words.

“I got YOU, babe!,” she advises.

“Yes, you do,” Alan responds.

Tim and Eddie each say goodnight to Cher. With Lisa and Sue accepting Brandi’s offer to stay the night in the guest bedroom, the men agree to help Dani out the door.

“I can take her home,” Eddie advises. “We’ll figure out how to get her back here tomorrow.”

Tim acquiesces and replies, “I think Brandi said she was going pumpkin picking tomorrow with her old high school friend.”

“That’s fine,” Eddie responds and jingles Dani’s keys. “We’ll just pull up and drive off tomorrow.”

Tim leans in and reminds Eddie of their conversation from earlier that night. “Remember, not tonight. Not like this.”

“Dude, I ain’t that arrogant young ballplayer anymore,” Eddie reassures him in earnest. “I would never, even in my day. I got this.”

Dani struggles to stay upright. Eddie reaches around her left side and places her left arm over his head. Dani looks back at him through glazed eyes and sees her knight in shining armor. They start walking towards the front door together. She laughs heartily and thinks she is being funnier than she truly is.

“Eddie, I’m not really a toon,” she remarks. “I’m shitfaced like one though.”

“That’s okay. I’ve got you.”

“You’ve got me?,” Dani slurs as she places her hand on his chest in slow motion. “Who’s got you?”

Eddie laughs warmly and replies, “Wrong movie.” He looks back at Tim, who nods in acknowledgment of Dani’s thinly veiled pickup line.

Brandi barely lifts her head but lifts her red solo cup instead high in the air. Tim hovers over her, offering to help her upstairs to bed.

“Eddie!!,” she yells. “Did you like my DANCE?”

He looks back towards Brandi’s general direction as he reaches the doorway with Dani, who is increasingly becoming dead weight.

“I was deeply moved,” he sarcastically replies.

As Eddie leaves with Dani, Tim crouches down and begins to help Brandi upstairs. The hostess and former Amanda Harden staggers towards the handrail at the bottom of the stairs. She pauses and slowly looks back at Tim.

“You gonna make it?,” Tim asks. “You need the bathroom?”

Brandi smiles hugely and wags her finger at the front door, now closed behind Eddie and Dani.

“I deeply moved him,” she says, laughing in slow motion while misinterpreting Eddie’s parting words. She slaps the top of the handrail. “I still got it, Tim.”

Tim downplays Brandi’s remark and deadpans, “You always had it.”

Eddie walks Dani down the front deck and across the street to his car. Dani is murmuring something the whole time. However, the sound of cars speeding by on the expressway muffle her slurred speech. He helps her into the front passenger seat and walks around the front of the vehicle. He notices her speaking the whole time and is still unable to make out what she is saying. Eddie opens the driver’s side door and slides in. He now hears Dani in mid-conversation, having shed her temporary hair entirely.

“- a way better dancer in college! Hey, I feel like Andre the Giant sitting next to you. This seat is way high. Haha, not as high as I was…”

As Eddie turns the ignition and plugs in his phone to activate Android Auto, he dutifully replies to her.

“You were the last one in that seat. Maybe you accidentally hit the adjustment lever.”

Dani laughs enthusiastically and slaps her knees. “The adjustment lever!”

“So, where am I going?,” Eddie asks as he does a three-point turn and starts driving back towards the main road, Stewart Avenue.

“You’re taking me home, Eddie!,” she responds.

“No shit. What’s the address?”

Eddie reaches the intersection at Adams Gate and Stewart Avenue. Unsure if he needs to turn right or left, he looks over at his passenger. She finally blurts out an address.

“290 Thomas Avenue, Bethpage,” a weary Dani replies.

Eddie turns right onto Stewart and proceeds to drive the five minutes to Dani’s rented house. He hears faint snoring in the passenger seat. Eddie is relieved that he doesn’t have to endure an awkward conversation with his inebriated crush. At ten after eleven, Eddie arrives at Dani’s house. She slowly stirs and leans in to hug him. She is only half-awake and suddenly realizes she’s still buckled.

“Ohhh?”

“I’ll help you out,” Eddie says. He gets out and walks around to assist Dani. She has already unbuckled but appears unsteady. As they start walking to Dani’s front door, she turns her head to him.

“Eddie… when I asked ‘Who’s got you?,” I didn’t mean ‘who’s helping you walk to the car.”

At first, Eddie dismisses her remark thinking she’s too intoxicated to know what she’s truly saying. “I know.”

As they reach her front door, arm in arm, Dani clarifies her statement and places her right pointer finger on his chest.

“I meant ‘Who’s got you?’ like ‘who’s GOT you?... I know what happened to your wife, and it’s a *damn shame*.”

He smiles on the outside. His heart is racing on the inside, though he knows she is off-limits in her current state. Eddie places his left hand on her right upper arm.

“We’ll talk tomorrow, okay?” he sincerely says. “I’ll text you. We’ll go back for your car.”

Dani fumbles with her house key but opens the front door.

“Yes, we will, Edmund… Eddie Fitzgerald,” she replies with a newfound gleam in her eyes. “The legend lives… on…”

Eddie and Dani hug and grin at each other. She stumbles into the foyer and closes the door behind her. Eddie sighs and walks back to his car pokerfaced. He starts his Blazer and drives off. As he reaches the intersection of Thomas and Stewart Avenue, he slams the steering wheel in excitement and mouths “YEAH!”. For the first time in decades, he feels that special kind of euphoria. Under the influence as she may be, the woman he has real feelings for has real feelings for him. In Eddie’s mind, it’s not a matter of if it will happen, but when.

7

If I Had A Gun

The last thing Brandi needs the morning after her Halloween party is the sound of her Leaps & Bounds ringtone. Naturally, that’s exactly what makes her stir and awaken at eighty-thirty.

A weary Brandi mumbles, “The fuck… who’s calling…”

Tim took the liberty of removing her shoes and placing them on the side of her bed. Otherwise still fully clothed from the night before and nestled underneath her comforter, she opens her eyes and feels the vibration of her phone tucked inside her bra. She pulls it out and slowly recognizes the name on her caller ID.

“Alannah!”

Brandi immediately springs into action and answers. “Heeeyyy Alannah!”

The voice on the other line sounds equally muffled and off-kilter. “MOM!... Are you hungover?”

“No, baby,” she lies. “Just sleeping in. What’s up?”

“I’m in PAIN!,” she cries.

“Oh, baby, is it your tooth again?,” Brandi asks worriedly.

“YES!”

“Okay, did you call Dad?”

Alannah whimpers briefly before responding. “He… He’s in Pittsburgh for a meeting. He said it’s really important.”

Disgust washes over Brandi’s face. It’s a situation she’s found herself in numerous times before.

“Of course. If it’s not about him, it’s not important,” she concludes. “Okay, I have Dr. Hollander’s emergency number. I’ll call him. I know he’ll squeeze you in tomorrow. We’ll pull the tooth, just like we talked about in August, honey. He said if it flares up again, it’s gotta go.”

“Yeah…” Alannah responds.

“I’m getting dressed,” says Brandi. “I’ll be there in two hours. Just text your father and tell him what’s happening.”

“Okay…”

There is no pumpkin picking in Brandi’s immediate future. She finds her shoes and a dirty pair of jeans in her hamper. She runs into the upstairs bathroom, wets her hair, brushes it back and ties it with purpose. She proceeds downstairs, grabs her keys and throws on a black jacket. Brandi then goes into her phone, finds her group chat and posts an update.

*8:42am @brandifinegrl: Hey friends! Thank you all for coming last night. Gotta run up to New Paltz to get my daughter. She just called. Not feeling well. Dani, sorry I won’t be here when you come back for your car.*

Brandi opens her front door to the less-than-usual hustle and bustle of the

Seaford-Oyster Bay Expressway. To her shock and horror, Dani’s silver 2020 Hyundai Kona is nowhere in sight.

“FUCK!,” she screams out loud. Brandi’s heart races. As she reaches into her pocket for her phone to call Dani, she gets a notification.

*8:43am @deebeback: I couldn’t sleep past 6. Ubered to your house and just got back home with the car. Didn’t wanna wake you or Eddie.*

Brandi breathes a sigh of relief and responds to the group chat:

*8:43am @brandifinegrl: JFC I thought someone jacked it. Thank God!*

*8:44am @tsgrinder: I just jacked it*

Everyone in the group responds with a laughing face emoji at Tim’s comment,

obviously not referencing Dani’s vehicle. By this point, Brandi has stopped reading everyone’s follow-up comments and reactions. She ignores all roadway speed restrictions and races upstate to Minnewaska Hall on the campus of State University of New York at New Paltz in two hours flat.

A fearful, slender, short-haired brunette is already waiting outside dressed in grey sweatpants, a Best Coast t-shirt underneath an unbuttoned black and red flannel with black boots. She’s holding a duffel bag packed with two days’ worth of clothes when her mother pulls up to the front door of her residence hall. Alannah Woods, the junior majoring in Digital Media and Production, sheepishly walks up to the car. The right side of her face throbbing intermittently, she throws her bag into the back and gets in the front passenger seat.

Brandi reaches over and hugs her twenty-year old daughter tightly.

“It’s gonna be fine, sweetie!,” she reassures her. “It’s just a tooth. We all have it done at some point.”

“I know,” Alannah replies. “It’s like, cracked. I’m just… nervous, I guess. And you, I know you can’t afford it.”

“Hun, this is why we have health insurance,” Brandi replies. “And even still, *your father* is going to help pay for whatever it doesn’t cover!”

Alannah slowly calms down as the two drive away. As they reach the on ramp to southbound Route 87 back towards New York City, Brandi re-opens the conversation.

“Remember to call the school counselor,” she advises. “Tell her you won’t be there Tuesday.”

“I know. I will,” Alannah responds.

“You don’t have any tests tomorrow or Tuesday, right?”

“No, Mom.”

“Okay, just asking,” answers Brandi, face slowly morphing into a sly smile. “When did you take my t-shirt?”

“Um… two months ago, like three months ago?,” Alannah replies while laughing.

“You ever see them?,” Brandi asks.

“No, OWW!,” replies Alannah, now feeling intermittent pain on the right side of her mouth. “They haven’t been around here since the pandemic,” replies Alannah.

“I know! I keep waiting for them to get back out there,” says Brandi. “Last time I saw them, they opened for Paramore at Radio City, I think, five years ago?”

“Yeah.”

Brandi glances over for half a second. “Next time they come around, we’ll go. Sound good, baby girl?”

Alannah tries to hide her wide grin unsuccessfully. “Sure!”

“Favorite song?,” asks Brandi.

Alannah thinks for a couple of seconds. “Um… In My Eyes.”

“Same, girl!,” Brandi replies. “I love Heaven Sent, too. That whole album is amazing!”

As they get over the Throggs Neck Bridge and hit the home stretch via the Cross Island Parkway, Alannah sees her mother’s phone buzzing with Twitter notifications.

“Can I answer Tim?,” she asks.

“Um, is it on Twitter or a text?”

“Twitter.”

Brandi pauses. “I’ll do it when I get home. What does it say?”

“He’s going to jury duty tomorrow.”

“Oh, damn!”

Alannah laughs and slumps over. “He’s going to show up to the federal courthouse in full costume and try and get dismissed.”

Brandi laughs heartily. “Too funny!... I have Advil at home. Did you take any?”

“Yeah, I took some before you got to school,” her daughter says.

The GPS advises Brandi to avoid both the Long Island Expressway and Northern State Parkways due to various accidents and construction. They’ll be home eight minutes faster by going down to the Southern State Parkway to travel eastbound. Brandi hits the touch screen to confirm the new route. Alannah whimpers softly.

“You texted your dad?”

Alannah’s face becomes long and ashen. “I thought you were gonna text him.”

“Nooooo! I told you to text him, hun.”

“Ohhh.”

“You know how it is,” Brandi responds. “The less he and I communicate, the better off it is… for everyone involved.”

“Yeah,” Alannah mumbles.

As they exit the Cross Island and fork left to go east via the Southern State, Brandi becomes oddly nostalgic.

“I remember when you lost your first tooth,” she recalls. “When does the time go? You were four years old, in bed and you accidentally pushed it out. You were so scared! You tried to hide it under your pillow-”

“MOM! This curve makes me nervous!,” Alannah advises, referring to the infamous off-ramp and blind curve that have claimed many a driver and their respective vehicles.

“Remember, your face had dry blood on it the next morning and I was like ‘What the hell-“

“I know! I remember the story!,” Alannah snaps back. “You told it a million times.”

“I know that curve makes you nervous,” Brandi retorts. “I was trying to get your mind off it. You think I don’t remember the accident? Breaking your collarbone? I was there. You know my heart sank when I saw that car. It was shredded... You were so lucky that day, hun.”

Alannah sinks into her seat, still in pain and startled at her mother’s seemingly dismissive words. Brandi calms down and reassures her daughter.

“Honey, when you’re ready to start driving again, this will be old hat. I promise you… When you’re ready.”

Brandi spends the rest of her Sunday at home with her shaken daughter. They help clean up from the party the night before. Brandi gives her friends the update through the chat. Dr. Simon Hollander calls back before noon to inform them to come in first thing the next morning at eight-thirty for the extraction. At three-thirty, Tim texts Brandi.

*Doing a Chipotle run later. I know that’s her favorite. Permission to deliver dinner for three?*

Brandi replies in the affirmative, which pleases Alannah. Tim arrives some two

hours later with two steak bowls and a chicken burrito. The two Woods ladies are watching *Below Deck* on the living room TV. To lighten the mood, Brandi feigns displeasure upon his arrival.

“Oh, here’s the guy who’s withholding information!” Brandi exclaims.

“What are you doing?,” Tim retorts and proceeds with his standard sarcasm. “I didn’t come to see YOU! I came to see the BEST snack bar worker in the history of Farmingdale Lanes!”

Alannah beams at his presence. She leaps up from her end of the couch, runs to Tim and hugs him vigorously.

“It’s gonna be fine,” Tim says. “We all go through this.”

“Yeah, that’s what my mom said.”

“So, what did her asshole, er, I mean her father say?,” Tim asks Brandi as he walks over to the dining room with their dinner.

“He said send me the bill when it comes,” replies Brandi with disdain. “Right, hun? Real winner... If I had a gun, I swear…”

“The leopard never changes his spots,” Tim confirms as he pulls up a chair at the head of the table. “Always been about him. No heart. Just ‘here’s the money you need, now go fuck yourself.”

Brandi nods. “Yup! A far cry from guys like you and Eddie.”

Alannah reaches into Tim’s bag to grab her burrito. “Who’s Eddie?,” she asks.

“Oh yeah, you haven’t met Eddie,” Brandi realizes as she tilts her head and slowly stares off into the distance, smiling ear to ear. “He’s good people. He used to play minor league ball.”

“Ohhhh, Eddie! That’s the guy you were talking about a while back,” Alannah responds while seated on her spot on the couch, mouth full of burrito. “You had a huge crush on h-”

“Alright! Alright!,” Brandi interrupts, embarrassed at her being outed. “Don’t listen to her, Tim. I… I liked him when I first saw him at bowling. Since I befriended him and met him in person, it’s more of a… friendship, you know?”

Tim has started eating his steak bowl and can hardly keep a straight face.

“So, you liked him before you were friends. Now, you’re friends and you don’t like him?,” he derisively asks.

“No, Timmy, that’s not what I meant,” Brandi responds. “You know how you kinda fantasize about people before you know them? Then, you meet that person and you grow to respect them as friends?”

“No. No I don’t,” Tim deadpans.

Brandi holds up her left hand and hesitates. However, she is at a loss for words and tries to change the subject.

“I read something that Captain Lee hurt his back and had to leave the ship,” she notes. “I think they’ll bring in Sandy to replace him.”

“Mom said she was gonna shave down there when she found out Eddie was coming to the bar,” Alannah continues.

“I’m gonna break your other wisdom tooth, Missy!,” Brandi retorts in typical mom fashion before getting up to go to the fridge for a bottle of water.

“Drink?,” she asks Tim.

He turns his head away from the kitchen so Brandi cannot see him doubled over. He and Alannah simultaneously burst out in laughter before she grabs her cheek in pain once again.

“Okay, fine,” Brandi concedes. “Get it out of your system.”

“Don’t worry, Tim,” Alannah softly replies, “You’re still my favorite.”

“THANK YOU ALANNAH!,” he replies deliberately while regaining his composure. “Personally, I can attest two things. One, after last night’s performance, her true feelings are no longer a secret.”

“What performance?,” Alannah inquires. Brandi clearly mouths the word ‘NO’ to Tim, lest he reveal her sordid alter ego to her daughter.

“Not important,” Tim advises as he reaches over to grab a bottle of water from Brandi. “Let’s just say your mom got a little tipsy. Besides, she’s barking up the wrong tree. Eddie is very much interested in Dani and the feeling is very much mutual.”

“I think Dani just had a *bit* too much to drink last night,” replies Brandi, attempting to downplay it and convince herself otherwise. “She was falling out of that dress, too.”

Tim turns to Alannah, arms crossed. “Missy, would you like some peanut butter to go with that…” He then playfully turns back towards Brandi. “…JELLY?”

Brandi’s grin does not fool her longtime friend or her daughter. Her eyes exhibit defeat and confusion. The *Below Deck* cast speaks in the background. The sound of chewing dominates the dining room table. Otherwise, the silence is deafening for a good twenty seconds, before Alannah moans softly and, yet again, grabs her right cheek.

“Don’t forget to chew on the other side,” Tim reminds her. “Not just now, for about a week. Soft foods, too.”

“Yes, DAD!,” Alannah sarcastically replies.

“Dr. Hollander will write it all down for you, hun,” Brandi stoically advises. “It’s gonna be a lot of ramen and Kraft mac and cheese for the next few days.”

The rest of the dinner proceeds without incident. Tim and Brandi gather up the dirty, used cups and containers from the night before and walk them into the kitchen towards the garbage. After disposing of all the trash, Tim attempts to break the ice by talking about their central common interest.

“So, I think deGrom is leaving,” he announces.

”God, I hope not!,” she answers. “I have a funny feeling about him though. Like, he’s only in it for the money. I mean, if he truly wanted to stay a Met, why would he opt out in the first place?”

“Scherzer,” says Tim. “Plain and simple. Max got paid. Jake wants Max Money, literally and figuratively. They brought him in on a massive deal. Jake got his deal before the money started creeping up… And he’s jealous.”

Brandi nods affirmatively. “Jealousy… it’s a bitch.”

Tim smiles at the irony of the mere mention of the word. Brandi softens and acquiesces to finish their previous conversation.

“It’s none of my business either way,” she contends. “It’s just… I mean, don’t repeat this, but if they decide to… do you think he’s ready?”

“Two years,” Tim replies. “Seems like enough time. It’s obvious, Brandi. They both want this. You’ll get yours, B-Dubs. Don’t give up. Let them have theirs.”

“Yeah,” Brandi says as she sneers and hugs Tim. “Thanks for dinner!”

“I can make myself free Tuesday or Wednesday to drive her back,” he offers. “That is, of course, if I don’t have to sit on a fucking jury.”

“No, I got it, but thank you!,” Brandi replies. She looks through the doorway at her daughter. That rare feeling of wistfulness wafts over her once again.

“God, she’s so big,” she remarks. “When did that happen? Are we old?”

Tim laughs sincerely. “Yup. I’m fifty pounds heavier than I was in high school. Got some white filling in the sides of my head where the brown used to be. These last two years especially, Bran. Time waits for no one... We’re old.”

The man who is known for providing much-needed levity for everyone around him proceeds to speak of realism and nostalgia.

“These ballplayers making obscene salaries,” Tim proceeds. “You ever wish you

could do it again? Maybe apply yourself a little more on the basketball court?”

Brandi laughs, crosses her arms and watches Alannah from afar. “Guys like Giannis making, what, half a mil per game? I remember not too long ago we were up in arms when Gerrit Cole got a million dollars per start. Now, guys blow past that and here we are. Me pouring drinks for a living trying to put her through college. I told her out of state was not an option. Had to be a SUNY school.”

“She was so full of life before the accident,” Tim recalls as he looks over his right shoulder at Alannah fixated on the TV, struggling with her throbbing, abscessed wisdom tooth. “She used to talk about using New Paltz as a steppingstone for NYU, used to go out with her friends. Now she’s just content with… coasting?”

“Yeah! That’s exactly it,” Brandi realizes. “It was the pandemic that fucked her up, too. The accident just made it worse.”

“Pandemic fucked up everybody and everything,” says Tim. “Except the town, of course. Mask up and business as usual for me. You remember driving into the water department down on Prospect with sandwiches. That long table. You sit down there, I sit down here.”

“Yeah. Crazy!”

“But I love what I do,” he continues. “I was never good enough to play third base for anyone above and beyond Mepham, even if I wanted to cash in like these fuckers. I never wanted to go to college. I’ve done what I love from day one.”

Brandi smiles and nods, covering her mouth with her right hand.

“You love the bar,” Tim adds. “And you and I both know you do more than pour drinks. You kept that place in business through the dark times.”

“Well, Tim, don’t tell the others, but I may not have O’Fallon’s very much longer,” she states.

Tim darts his head back and stares a hole through his friend.

“The fuck?!?”

“COVID burned all my savings,” advises Brandi. “College for her put me in debt. Even going halfsies has put me in a big-time hole… Don made me an offer for the bar.”

“NO!,” exclaims Tim. “Absolutely not! Do not give that piece of shit anything.”

“I have no choice,” Brandi replies. Her mouth quivers as she tries to hold back tears. “It’ll put her through school and I’ll be comfortable for a while, a long while.”

Tim shakes his head and places his left hand on her right elbow.

“You gotta do what you gotta do,” he replies. “But don’t give in to him. Find someone else if you have to sell it.”

“Yeah… I’ll try,” Brandi says as she wraps her arms around Tim and kisses him on his right cheek. “Thanks for coming!”

Tim walks over to Alannah, gives his well wishes and says his goodbyes. From the

kitchen, Brandi can see them hug earnestly. She can audibly hear him say without a hint

of his usual sarcasm ‘I love you’ and her reply ‘I love you too.’ A sense of warmth rushes

over her. While Tim has brought joy to his friends through wit and laughter, his act of

kindness re-confirms that he’s always been the father figure that Alannah needs.

That night, Brandi posted an update in the chat. The inner circle all

respond appropriately.

*7:01pm @lisametfam: Of course it had to be on Halloween! LOL Hope she feels*

*better soon!*

*7:02pm @deebeback: Oh Lord! I hope it’s not too painful. Send her my love!*

*7:04pm @brittlgm: Tell her I have some gummies that are ten times better than*

*the painkillers they prescribe lol*

*7:05pm @eddiefitz80: That sucks! Hope she’s alright. Maybe stock up on ice*

*cream*

*7:07pm @tsgrinder: If the doc asks ‘Can I pull you?’, run. Run far and fast.*

Naturally, Tim keeps up appearances by cracking jokes about the situation. One

person conspicuously absent from the comments, however, is Sue Rubino. Her

whereabouts would be known the following morning. Brandi and Alannah arrive at

Progressive Oral Surgery in Garden City at eight forty-five. Dr. Hollander calls them into the room even before the receptionist enters the office. As she’s walking in with her

daughter, Brandi finds a message from Lisa:

*8:52am @lisametfam: Guys & ladies. Terrible news- Sue was in a car accident last night. Drunk driver t-boned her on the driver side. She’s at Plainview hospital. Left knee shattered. ACL reconstruction Surgery tomorrow!*

Brandi’s heart sinks at reading the news, but Alannah is priority at that moment. She walks her into the room where Dr. Hollander does the deed after a good amount of local anesthesia. Brandi does her best to shut off her brain to the shock and horror of Sue’s predicament. She gets her daughter to the pharmacy to fill her script for Augmentin and, ultimately, back home to rest.

After a quick trip to Stop N’ Shop for multiple boxes of Kraft dinner and ice

cream, Brandi finally has a moment to process the tragic events of Sue’s car accident.

According to Lisa’s subsequent messages, Sue went to a Sunday noon mass at St. Bernard’s Roman Catholic Church after she left Brandi’s house. After mass, she started driving home and proceeded towards the green light at the intersection of Spindle Road and Jerusalem Avenue. A wayward Ford F-150 blew the red light and collided with Sue’s Ford EcoSport.

After lunch, Brandi messages everyone and suggests a group visit at the hospital in lieu of the usual Wednesday meetup at O’Fallon’s. All parties agree, except for Tim who is unresponsive. It is just after five in the afternoon when Lisa sends a group text with Sue’s number omitted.

*Guys/ladies, I think we should all pitch in for flowers. They probably won’t let us*

*walk in with them, but we can have them delivered to her house. They’ll probably*

*keep her until Friday or Saturday*.

Three minutes later, Tim finally chimes in with a response to the text.

*Today is a day that will live in infamy. I was chosen for federal jury duty. I start*

*next Monday. It could go for three weeks! Fuck me! PS- I will absolutely*

*contribute for flowers*.

The remaining members of the inner circle agree to the flowers and a Wednesday meeting time of 6pm. On Tuesday evening, Lisa reports that ACL reconstruction surgery

went well and Sue is still a little sedated from the painkillers. Coming from Oceanside during the afternoon rush hour, Eddie is the last to arrive. The rest of the crew are sitting in the waiting area, adorned in the required surgical masks, when he rushes in.

“I had to park on the side street,” says Eddie.

“Yeah, parking isn’t the best,” responds Dani.

The group of six merge into the elevator en route to Room 311. When the doors

close, Lisa advises everyone on the grim reality of the situation.

“This is going to fuck her up for a while.” Lisa says. “Nevermind the physical

rehab. Sue doesn’t have insurance. This is going to run her close to fifty grand!”

“Holy shit!,” exclaims Dani. “That much?!?”

“Yeah, when you factor in the surgery, the hospital stay, the anesthesia, the skin

graft,” Lisa replies. “And then, the physical therapy? She’s fucked.”

“This may sound tacky, but you think we should do a GoFundMe?,” asks Eddie.

“I was just thinking that, Eddie,” says Lisa.

“If you want, I can do a write-up for it,” Britt advises. “We did a GoFundMe for Alan’s cousin many years ago.”

The doors open and everyone exits. Lisa leads the way down the hall past the nurses’ station, followed by Brandi, Britt and Tim. Eddie and Dani walk just behind Tim, eyes darting back and forth waiting to start a conversation about anything.

“How’ve you been?,” Dani asks Eddie.

“Good,” he confirms. “Just busy, you know? A lot of accounts coming up for

renewal this month. My producer’s a little anxious to remarket things that we can’t remarket.”

“Ahh yes,” replies Dani. “Sounds like the perils of corporate America. I spoke with a cardholder this morning. Older lady. She was pissed because she couldn’t use her old card anymore. She lost it and we put a freeze on the account.”

Eddie chuckles. “Yeah, I never asked you what you actually do.”

“Oh. Same!,” responds Dani.

“I work in insurance,” Eddie says. “I’m an Account Executive for Palmer Cook,

small brokerage. I handle commercial lines and workers comp-”

“Guys! Here it is,” Lisa bellows, referring to Sue’s quarters.

Room 311 was equipped with just one bed. The patient has a nice view of the expressway in the distance. A whiteboard sign unnecessarily states *Today is Wednesday, November 2nd, 2022. The weather is 66 and Cloudy.* The mounted TV shows CNN and the usual, tired political banter. The entire group enters to see Sue Rubino in a less-than-enthusiastic state. Her blonde hair is unkempt and split on both sides. Her eyes appear weary and defeated. Though she is happy to see everyone, her smile is forced.

“Oh my God, you brought everyone?!?,” Sue exclaims. “Hiii!”

“I asked them to take me to the hottest patient here,” Britt jokes. “They told me

Room 311.”

“Please, girl,” Sue softly replies as Britt reaches over for a gentle hug. “I’m the

most tattered thirty-eight-year-old in the world.”

“Oh, hun, I’ve seen worse,” Britt responds. “Remember the week I had to wipe my mom’s ass after her knee replacement? No comparison.”

One by one, everyone takes turns leaning in to hug Sue. Eddie’s body suddenly

becomes hunched. The memory of his father’s last visit to Ballard Medical Center is still fresh in his mind. That coupled with Lisa’s t-shirt that reads “I was there when the world changed” sends Eddie’s mind down a path to his past. He vividly remembers every time he said goodbye to a loved one in a similar environment. He recalls where he was when his own world changed. When his turn comes to hug Sue, he snaps back and puts on his best game face.

“I’ve had a few knee surgeries myself,” Eddie says. “I’m so sorry. This is above and beyond. Just… don’t try to do too much too soon. That’s how I messed it up the

second time.”

The conversation drones on. Tim fails to disappoint with such comments as “We

can rebuild you. We have the technology.” Eddie starts peering out the window. In his

mind, the highway in the distance is Puget Sound. He is standing in his old backyard on a

hill remembering Bruce Fitzgerald. Dani looks over from the corner of the room and

notices Eddie deep in thought. Before she can make a move towards him, Brandi reaches over and grabs his right shoulder.

“See anything you like out there?,” she asks.

Eddie snaps back to reality once again. “Oh, um, yeah. You know, I’ve been in

these places before… Nice view.”

Brandi smirks as she sees right through his response. “It’s alright. We’re here.”

Eddie smiles and gives her a one-armed hug with his right arm. He looks over at

Dani who is not selling any discomfort whatsoever. Her eyes grow big as she raises her eyebrows playfully. Eddie slowly puts his arm down as the rest of the group recap the

events that took place a few days earlier. Sue confirms Lisa’s story about the drunk driver plowing into her car. Her physical pain is muffled by the intravenous medicine, but her eyes start darting back and forth. One by one, Sue’s friends silently theorize that the

combination of the surgery, the traumatic events from the accident and the amount of

people visiting at once are taking their toll.

After a half hour of visitation, everyone says their goodbyes to Sue for the time being. As they walk back towards the elevator, just like before, Brandi and Tim are several feet ahead of Eddie and Dani. The thought of being in a hospital again triggers

Eddie in another fashion. He sees the object of his affection, that wide and beautiful

presence, the one that desires him in return walking beside him. He thinks to himself *Don’t waste another moment.*

As they all walk out of the elevator, make their way towards the hospital exit and

bid each other adieu, Eddie leans into Dani.

“Hey, I’ll walk you.”

Dani is pleasantly surprised at the offer but deems it unnecessary. They start walking outside down the covered handicapped-accessible ramp.

“That’s sweet,” she surmises. “But, um, I’m good though.”

“Actually… I wanted to ask you something,” Eddie replies.

“Ohhh, um, yeah, what is it?”

They reach the edge of the parking lot. Though he believes he will get the answer

he wants, Eddie takes a long, deep breath to prepare himself, just in case. He delivers his

inquiry with stone-faced precision.

“Are you busy Friday night?”

Dani’s heart almost melts on the asphalt. Her heart quivers on the inside. On the

outside, she plays it cool and delivers a regrettable response.

“Ohhhh, I… I would love to, but I have plans with my sister,” says Dani. “Her

family’s driving down from Amenia for the weekend. Let me, um… Let me text you Sunday. Maybe we can do something next week.”

“Yeah! Absolutely!,” Eddie replies, no longer with any pretense of being smooth.

“I mean…,” Dani continues. “Yeah, if you’re not busy, maybe one night next week… There’s a place over by me. B.K. Sweeney’s?”

“Yeah, that’s perfect!,” he answers, knowing full well any place would be perfect.

“We could meet up after work. I’ll text you Sunday night?”

“Sure! Sounds good,” Dani says.

As fate would have it, next week would not happen until almost Thanksgiving. By Saturday night, Eddie starts feeling under the weather. Twenty-four hours later, Eddie has a full-blown sinus infection. He texts Dani the news and says he’ll circle back when he’s feeling better. Two days later, Eddie takes a sick day, visits urgent care and gets another grim diagnosis, which he immediately texts to the group:

*Guys/Ladies – 99% of precincts reporting. I have COVID*

Naturally, the inner circle responds with love and support. Dani sends a personal message to the stricken Mr. Fitzgerald.

*Eddie, I’m so sorry to hear! I had it when it first started. So not cool. I hope you feel better soon!*

Eddie’s fever lasts three days. His sense of taste and smell return by the following

Sunday. His wet cough lingers for another week. Finally, he is back to full strength and

not a moment too soon. On Wednesday the 23rd, he texts Dani:

*Hey, I’m ready to rejoin the living. I saw Brandi, Tim, Britt and Alan are going to Billy Joel tonight. Would you like to do that rain check for BK Sweeneys?*

Dani is elated to see that Eddie is willing and able to finally meet her. She responds accordingly:

*I’m actually in the mood for those steak tidbits. The usual OF tonight?*

Eddie jokingly replies*. Sorry, I don’t have an OF, but I’ll see you at the bar.*

The date is confirmed. Eddie is still working from home, so he arrives fifteen minutes prior to his usual five-thirty. Because this is not just another dinner with

friends, he wears a black George Long Sleeve Thermal Henley shirt with jeans underneath his black Champion bomber jacket. The parking lot on Benkert is still packed with rogue train commuters who do not care about private parking restrictions. Fortunately, Eddie finds one remaining spot. He walks down the block to the corner entrance. Eddie wonders what he’ll say when Dani arrives. Something cute, something suggestive, something normal. He figures he has plenty of time to think of the right opening line.

Eddie opens the outer door, then the inside door. Staring right at his wondering

eyes is the object of his affections. She is sipping on a Heineken two barstools away from

the corner, wearing a royal blue Maxi Chiffon Clip Dot Pleated dress underneath a navy Brushed Ponte trench coat. Her brown hair is down and straight on both sides.

“The legend lives on!,” Dani bellows.

“Ahhh, yeah,” Eddie reactively replies. “There you are! Kinda early.”

Eddie walks over to hug her. Dani gets up and meets him halfway to complete the

embrace.

“I took the day off,” Dani declares. “Besides, you’re about three weeks late.”

Eddie laughs. “Oh, it’s like that!”

“Seriously, I’m so glad you’re out,” she says. “I know a lot of people get their asses kicked by COVID. I know I did.”

Eddie stares back at her matter-of-factly. “Don’t I know it… It’s all good though.

I’ve always been a quick healer and time stops for no one.”

He pauses for a second to hear an unfamiliar genre of music playing on the satellite radio. Eddie raises his right pointer finger in the air and raises his

eyebrows at Dani.

“I wanted something different,” she says. “I asked Julio to put on Spectrum.”

“Gotcha,” Eddie responds. He sits on the stool to Dani’s left and remembers the

basic rule of trying to win over a lady’s affections.

“You look beautiful!,” Eddie states, arms folded while staring directly into Dani’s eyes and smiling.

“Thank you!,” she dutifully replies, gazing right back at him. Dani briefly starts to swoon, then snaps back into casual conversation.

“Hey, you know that GoFundMe we set up for Sue?,” she continues.

“Yeah?”

“Somebody donated fifty grand!” Dani proceeds to spell out every syllable with her hands. “Fifty thousand dollars! That’s insane!”

Eddie jerks his head back and tilts it to the left. “Wow, that’s really something.

Does it say who?”

“No, it’s anonymous,” answers Dani.

Julio walks over to greet Eddie and offers a fist bump.

“Hey, Julio… Um, Angry Orchard?,” Eddie requests.

“You got it, boss,” Julio replies softly before sauntering away.

“Yeah, that’s crazy,” Eddie says to Dani while lifting his left pointer finger. “I

mean, we all said a hundred, right? Maybe it was that Don Aaronson guy.”

“Please!,” Dani exclaims. “Don Aaronson wouldn’t donate FIVE bucks unless he

was getting something out of it.”

Julio returns with Eddie’s beer. “Thanks,” Eddie says. “Um… steak tidbits?”

“You know it!,” replies Dani.

“Two please,” requests Eddie as he takes his first sip. Julio nods and walks away to check on an older couple sitting at a corner high top table.

“So, I’m glad Tim’s case got settled,” remarks Dani.

“Yeah, thank God,” replies Eddie. “He went back on Monday.”

Eddie takes a huge sip of his beer. “Mmmm… that reminds me. You never told me what you do.”

Dani grins and nods accordingly. “No, I didn’t, did I?” She takes a large sip of

Heineken. “I’m a Chargeback Supervisor.”

“Ahh!”

“Just celebrated my four-year anniversary,” she points out. “Two raises in four years, but I got the Seacrest Bank t-shirt to wear out-“

“Whoa whoa whoa!!,” Eddie interrupts. “Seacrest Bank?”

Dani replies, “Yeah. I work at the headquarters in the Huntington Quad.”

Eddie’s face begins to light up as if the morning London fog had instantly lifted. “My wife worked in the Quad… Did you know Kristine Fitzgerald?,” he

asks with complete certainty.

Dani nods slowly and affirmatively. “I did.”

“Were you close with her?,” Eddie inquires. “I mean, I know you weren’t, like,

super close outside of the office. Otherwise, I would’ve seen you somewhere.”

Dani places her bottle down on the bar, tilts her head and smirks. “Actually, you did see me somewhere… or at least, I saw you.”

Eddie’s face slowly retreats into bewilderment. He starts to form words, but Dani beats him to the punch.

“Do you remember that first night we met, when I was a little off?,” she asks. “Like, I wasn't really engaging you at first.”

“Yeah?... You didn’t laugh at my Michigan joke.”

“I saw you and was like 'God damnit, I know him from somewhere. Not from bowling. I can't put my finger on it. Where have I seen him before?' And then I had a little déjà vu moment that night at the Mets game. You came back with a beer for me. It was freaky. I’m like ‘Fuck, I know I’ve seen him somewhere before we met here.’ It was that Friday after the game. I was at work and I overheard someone talking about Kristine. Suddenly, the lightbulb went off.”

Eddie keeps sipping his beer but is now wildly curious. “Okayyy. So, where did you see me before we met here?”

“You know the corporate event they do every year?" she asks him. “The summer party?”

“Yeah, at the, uh…” Eddie snaps his fingers. “Beach Club in Bayville!”

Dani pauses, blushes slightly, then collects herself and proceeds to clarify.

“I saw you standing alone for what seemed like an hour. Probably only about a minute in real time, you know? I just saw you and thought 'he's so hot, what if I just went over...' I can't believe I'm saying this, but I started walking over to you to introduce myself, thinking what's the worst that can happen?”

Eddie’s face cannot hide the sheer euphoria at Dani’s revelation.

“I… I’m sorry. Er, I mean, I’m not sorry. I just don’t remember you coming over to talk to me,” he says.

“Well, I didn’t. Your wife swooped in with a couple of cocktails. I stopped dead in my tracks. I’m like, ‘Oh shit, he’s married.’ My soul was totally crushed!'

Eddie stutters as he replies, “Wow. I’m… I’m… uh…”

“Yeah, I know,” Dani says. “I mean, I figured you were some big-wig hot shot management guy and who am I? But, you know what they say. You miss one hundred percent of the shots you don’t take.”

“Well, first of all, I’m flattered,” Eddie replies, his voice softer and calmer, almost soothing. “And who are you? You’re… you’re a real catch. I mean… really you are… guys should be lining up down the block.”

Dani’s smile now mirrors Eddie’s, as she realizes that Eddie is equally attracted to her. She slowly sips her apple martini, not taking her eyes off him. Eddie sips his Angry Orchard, eyes equally fixated on her.

“So, yeah, we all heard about Kristine at work,” she continues. “I guess it was the following March? She was out and then, what was it, a month later?”

“April 2nd, 2020,” Eddie advises. "Yeah... I'll never forget that day.”

“I'm so sorry, Eddie. She was a wonderful woman,” Dani says.

“She was,” Eddie deadpans.

Dani takes one last large gulp and finishes her drink. “How old was she?”

Eddie sighs and softly answers. “Forty-two. Actually, forty-one. She almost made forty-two… Fucking COVID.”

Dani’s eyes begin to well. Her heart starts racing. She feels those same sparks that Eddie felt the night they first met. Dani is torn between wanting to comfort Eddie and just wanting him. Before she can decide if she wants to do either or both, he seeks clarification regarding her husband.

“So, I understand there still may kinda sorta be a man in your life-“

“I have no man in my life,” Dani assertively replies. “We’re done.”

“You’re done,” Eddie repeats. “When did you know that you too were totally done?”

“Probably even before we were married,” she assertively replies. “I knew for years. *Years!* Probably since the beginning when Kevin started abusing painkillers for his knee. He just lost his desire to do… anything really. He could have been a special athlete, like…”

“Like me?,” Eddie sarcastically responds.

“Eddie! Forget sports. You are ten times the MAN he was,” Dani replies. “I mean, you came to terms with it. You did something with your life. Kevin? He never got over it and he just… It was a long downward spiral between the drugs and the other stuff. You know about the time before that where I almost left him and he snapped. There are tons of incidents like that I can’t even get into. It took... It took me until four years ago to finally have the courage and the ability to leave him.”

Eddie solemnly empathizes. “Wow! I… I didn’t know…”

“It’s fine,” Dani replies. “So, yeah, August 6th, 2018, he came home from a four-day bender. We were living in this illegal apartment and we got a notice from the town. Apparently, someone ratted us out and they stuck a notice on the door for us and the other tenants upstairs to vacate in 30 days.”

“Oh fuck!”

“Yeah. Probably tired of his bullshit, and who could blame them. And I showed it to Kevin. The fucking bastard tore it up, didn’t say a word. He tore it up, shoved me aside, staggered to the bedroom and shut the door. Yeah! His wife of fifteen years, the one who stayed with him long after everyone told me what a loser he was. The one who stayed with him after he fucking *assaulted* me and would have knocked my lights out if I didn’t stay. He shoved me aside, and I guess it’s a metaphor, you know? He shoved our *marriage* aside.”

Eddie’s heart weeps for Dani at that moment. His eyes show more than a hint of desire. Her resolve grows as she recalls carrying out her exit strategy. Before he can respond, Dani finishes her story.

“He passed out. I grabbed a suitcase, threw some clothes in it, got my birth certificate, my laptop, called an Uber and went to Lansing airport. Called my parents back in Selden and told them I was finally coming home. Then, I turned my phone off, slept in the terminal, flew to O’Hare the next morning in case he woke up and thought I’d gone to Detroit. Flew home from O’Hare.”

Eddie is speechless. He slowly musters the courage within himself to reach out to her. Just as he is about to hold her hand, Dani speaks.

“And you know what else? He won’t pay for a divorce. Uncontested in Michigan only runs you about $2,500, if that. He doesn’t even accept that we’re through. He’s in a constant state of denial. Not like you, Eddie. You knew when it was time to call it a day. Kevin’s never been able to overcome adversity, unlike you, Eddie. He wasn’t even a shadow of the man I fell in love with. Not like…”

Eddie perks up and waits for Dani to finish her thought. He wonders ‘*Is she really going to say it?’*

“Not like?,” he says.

Dani pauses. She and Eddie both realize she has revealed her true feelings. The sight of a woman melting before him is nothing new. This time, it is Eddie who is melting before his admirer.

“If I literally fell backwards, he wouldn’t catch me,” Dani says.

“You fell backwards at Citi Field and I caught you,” Eddie replies. “I just

grabbed the wrong body part.”

Dani breaks down in laughter. “Hahahaha!! Yeah. Well, next time, grab me by the waist instead.”

“Careful!,” he exclaims, sarcastically. “That’s how these things start in those Hallmark Christmas movies.”

Dani laughs heartily and smiles at Eddie. Their eyes expose more than friendly intentions for each other.

“You know I’m talking about,” Eddie gleefully explains. “Female workaholic reluctantly goes on Christmas vacation with her family in some snowy small town, meets an old high school classmate working at a retail shop. They have awkward exchanges at first, but then he slowly but surely wears her down until they fall in love with each other. Kinda like…”

Dani does her best to hide a wry smile, waiting for Eddie to now finish his thought. Eddie hesitates, then takes his last sip of Angry Orchard.

Julio re-appears with dinner, thus halting Eddie and Dani’s in-depth conversation. In between bites, they make small talk about the music playing in the bar.

“Okay, Eddie,” Dani says. “Favorite artist?”

Eddie puts down his knife and fork. “Currently or all-time?”

“Both.”

“Okay,” he remarks. “Current, The Hold Steady. All-time, Pearl Jam.”

“Ahhh, how fitting,” she responds. “The Seattle man loves Pearl Jam.”

“Of course!... And you?”

“Hmmm,” Dani thinks for a moment. “Current, Best Coast. All-time, Billy.”

“Of course!,” Eddie retorts. “The Long Island girl loves the piano man.”

“Hell yeah!”

Eddie takes another bite of his steak tidbits. “I used to sing all the time.”

“Yeah, I remember you told me you used to sing at the plate,” Dani responds, unable to control her laughter. “Weirdo… just kidding!”

Eddie nods. “So, how come you didn’t go with them?”

“They didn’t ask,” Dani says. “I guess they couldn’t get more than four tickets.”

“Doesn’t bother you?,” Eddie asks.

“You know, my sister turned me on to this book called *The Four Agreements,”* shereplies. “One thing I’m starting to learn and practice is don’t take anything personally… I think that’s the most important one of all. Besides, I’ve seen him about eight times. Saw Billy back in June. It’s all good.”

“I’ve seen Pearl Jam about five times,” replies Eddie. “Okay, favorite movie.”

“Um… Good Will Hunting,” Dani says.

Eddie deadpans. “It’s not your fault.”

She laughs and rolls her eyes. “Yup, heard that one a few times, too.”

“Mine is Field of Dreams,” he answers.

“Mmmm, the only movie a man is allowed to cry watching,” Dani remarks. “According to the bro code, that is.”

Eddie and Dani continue discussing life in general. The drinks keep coming. Time flies. Before they know it, the clock strikes eight. Julio saunters back down to the left corner of the bar.

“I’ll take the check,” Eddie says to Julio, who dutifully walks back to the register to close out both tabs. “Top ten dinner?”

Dani doesn’t even try to hide her smile as she answers. “Top ten? Show some hubris, Edmund Fitzgerald! Top two.”

Eddie’s smile breaks her down even more. “Top two? C’mon, Danielle Backman! Who’s better than me?”

Her emotions overflowing, she gets up from her stool, puts her coat on, gently places her left hand over Eddie’s right hand and whispers “Exactly.”

Eddie is over the moon, but curious about Dani’s impending exit. “The witching hour, already,” he inquires.

“Yeah, I forgot I had to stop at King Kullen. I promised I’d make a pie and I need butter. Better hit it before they close.”

Eddie offers one last chance to win Dani’s heart through the power of laughter.

“I’ve found that when I add butter, it changes everything.”

Dani slams her right hand on the bar and giggles. Julio returns with the check.

Eddie offers sweet yet generic parting words. “Happy Thanksgiving!”

They both get up from their bar stools and hug. It’s a tighter, longer embrace than the last time they said goodbye. Dani gently touches Eddie’s left cheek and contemplates her next move. Suddenly, she kisses his right cheek, disengages and backs away.

“Happy Thanksgiving!,” she says as she powerwalks out the door.

Eddie starts to slump over, then gradually regains his composure. He finishes his beer and cashes out via his JetBlue Mastercard. Without her recognizable tenor, it is now eerily quiet at O’Fallon’s on a night before a major holiday. Spectrum plays “If I Had A Gun” by Noel Gallagher’s High Flying Birds for an audience of two, but not for long. Eddie puts his black jacket on, pushes both vacant stools in and bids goodnight to Julio.

He slowly walks out both doors feeling mixed emotions. Eddie doesn’t quite understand what pulled Dani away. He feels it was something more pressing than King Kullen. He is proud of himself in one respect. For once, his heart did not lead him to ruin. He didn’t blow it. He didn’t say or do anything to foil his chances at the woman he is falling for, the woman he knows is falling for him. He proceeds to walk around the corner towards his car. The lights from the Bethpage LIRR station provide just enough illumination to show the way, but not enough to initially reveal a shadowy figure waiting for him by his front driver’s side door.

The 8:30 express train to Ronkonkoma whizzes past Eddie as he approaches his Chevy Blazer. As Eddie’s feet meet blacktop, the presence that awaits him becomes unmistakable. It is that same silhouette that stopped him mid-sentence on that first night at O’Fallon’s. Pear-shaped curves appear before his wondering eyes, brown hair flapping in the breeze, Dani’s face, normally blushed, looks fainter in the gales of November. Her head is tilted down towards her shoes. Eddie moves towards Dani and tries to hold it together once more.

“Did your battery die?,” he muses.

Dani’s face darts upwards. Unable to hold off any longer, her eyes tell all.

“I’m falling again,” she says. “Catch m-“

Eddie’s kiss cannot wait another second to respond. Their arms cannot wrap around each other fast enough. The light from the platform pales in comparison to the sparks that fly.

Eddie pulls back slightly to look at Dani in amazement. She looks at him almost in horror, misunderstanding his brief captivity. Dani starts to form a sentence.

“Nevermind!,” Eddie recoils. “We’ll talk later.”

They both know later is not simply when they arrive at Eddie’s house. Later is much later, after they have successfully consummated their true feelings for each other.

“My place,” Eddie says.

Eddie’s place is devoid of other human interactions. Bogie and Bacall are sitting in the bay window when their human dad arrives. They quickly back away when Dani’s car pulls into the driveway alongside his. This time, there is no initial greeting with treats for the two American shorthairs. Eddie leaves the door open for Dani, whose maiden presence in the foyer makes the cats scatter upstairs.

“Been a while since someone followed me home for this,” Eddie remarks as he reaches around Dani’s neck with both hands and kisses her firmly yet sweetly.

“Yeah. Mister Superstar Athlete,” Dani jokes.

They both throw their coats over the kitchen table, giddy like teenagers, moving swiftly and stealthily, almost like they are trying to avoid waking up their parents. Dani shuffles down the hallway towards the bathroom. Eddie corrals her from behind, spins her around and kisses her again. He tries to reach around her to find a zipper to undo. She gently lifts her head.

“I’ll do it,” she says. “Be right out.”

Eddie runs upstairs to use the second bathroom, then sprints downstairs, tosses his long sleeve and t-shirt onto the master bedroom floor. He grins mightily as he removes his jeans, then climbs into bed. He peers through the doorway and waits. Ten seconds later, Dani opens the bathroom door and reemerges, dress and shoes in hand. The sight of her in a royal blue **bra** and matching sheer mesh cheeky panties walking into the bedroom is more than enough to make Eddie emerge as well.

“Here?,” Dani asks, pointing to his ottoman at the bottom corner of the bed.

Eddie nods as he jumps up and walks around the bed to meet her. This time, Dani’s kiss stops him in his tracks momentarily. Eddie shifts his head downward to kiss the left side of her neck. Dani’s breathing becomes heavier and louder. Her body, mind and soul quiver at this unfamiliar feeling of elation and satisfaction.

“OHHHH!,” she exhales.

Eddie reaches around Dani to unhook her bra from the back.

“I got this one,” he softly says as he relieves her of her Cacique balconette in record time. His left hand caresses her right breast and hard nipple while his mouth follows suit on her left breast. Eddie places his right hand in Dani’s mid back to keep her upright. Her knees visibly weakening and her body shaking from pleasure, Eddie quickly recognizes this. He amazes her by crouching down, reaching around her upper thighs and lifting her up.

“Holy!... WOW!,” she exclaims.

He lays her down gently on the right side of his king-sized bed and hovers over her. Eddie presses down gingerly on his red-headed admirer and kisses her. Before his tongue can wander down the length of her body, Dani surprises Eddie by flipping him on his back. His eyes grow nearly as large and wide as his manhood. Dani shimmies his boxers off as he reaches into his nightstand for a Trojan Double Ecstasy. Dani reaches down to remove her panties as he quickly unwraps his rubber and places it on him accordingly.

As Dani works herself into her desired cowgirl position, they both come to an incredible realization. Between the build-up in their previous engagements, the time elapsed since their last sexual encounters and the liberation of the moment, they won’t last much longer until they both climax. As they both move in synch, Eddie and Dani nod to each other, an unspoken acknowledgement that they are both about to finish sooner than anticipated.

Eddie places his hands over Dani’s thighs. She starts to rub his nipples, but the apex of her orgasm stops her in her tracks. Eddie pushes his head back against his pillow and starts his own vaguely familiar shuddering explosion. Dani collapses onto Eddie, who wraps his arms around her momentarily before she shifts over to the empty side of the bed. Their heavy breathing slows, their faces fixed in a seeming permanent smile. All they can muster is one word each to summarize.

“Fuck!,” exhales Eddie.

“Wow!,” Dani immediately replies.

There is no need for questions, no need for verbal communication. No anxiety exists within these four walls on Horseshoe Lane at this core moment in time. Dani is staying the night. Their bodies may be considered middle-aged by society’s standards, but their hearts are young and free and beating chest to chest. Eddie and Dani wrap their arms around each other. As they slowly drift into sleep, their bodies say everything without uttering a word. *I am so in love with you!*

8

Black Friday

There is no such thing as a holiday for Bogie and Bacall. They have no concept of sleeping in. All they can gather on this Thanksgiving morning is that there is a strange presence in bed with their beloved Eddie, who finally begins to stir just before five in the morning. He rolls over and quietly gets up to pee. He tries in vain to avoid waking Dani, only to find his cats sitting on the floor near the bottom of the bed, staring in confusion. Bacall meows to verbalize and confirm as much.

“Shhhhh!,” Eddie responds as he walks into the bathroom to relieve himself. He then goes into the kitchen for the usual morning feedings. The cats devour their Fancy Feast turkey as Eddie saunters back into the bedroom. Unbeknownst to him, Dani is wide awake, waiting for his return.

“Hi!... You’re up early,” Eddie recognizes, his smile slowly awakening as well.

“I’ve been up since four,” she replies, surprisingly giddy for someone short on sleep. “I got up to pee and they were just staring at me, like ‘Who the fuck are you?’ I didn’t want to wake you though.”

Eddie rolls back into bed, leans over and gives his love a ‘good morning’ kiss, just as he once did almost every day for sixteen years.

“Mmmm, haven’t done that in a while,” he points out.

“Haven’t done what?”

“Wake up and kiss someone.”

“Ohhhhhh!!,” says Dani as she turns towards Eddie and chuckles. “Same.”

Eddie raises his eyebrows suggestively, which peaks Dani’s curiosity. “What’s going on inside that head of yours, Mr. Fitzgerald?”

“You know what else I haven’t done in a while?,” he queries.

“What?”

Eddie rolls onto her, delivers another passionate morning kiss and proceeds to caress her naked chest with both hands. Dani is more than ready for round two. This time, however, Eddie shifts downward. His tongue slowly massages the right side of her neck. Hands fall to Dani’s sides as his tongue glides down the front of her right breast. Dani is paralyzed by her desire and his skill, only able to muster “Oh, Eddie!”

He continues sliding his body down, arching his back, hands down her thighs as his feet shoot the comforter onto the floor. Eddie’s tongue meets and greets Dani’s navel. His hands reach underneath her underwear and swiftly remove them with Dani’s assistance. It’s no longer a surprise what’s coming next and whom. Never has Dani felt so vulnerable, so loved, so at home. Eddie’s tongue finds that warm, shaven sweet haven. Dani’s body nearly explodes upon impact.

“Holy fuck!!,” she shouts.

Eddie’s movements are persistent and relentless. Much to Dani’s surprise, it takes a mere fourteen seconds before she is truly ready to burst. Eddie will not cease. It has taken him so long to find a woman who wants him and his oral powers. He won’t let up. Her body violently shaking, trembling with pleasure, all she can do to stop him before she passes out is tap on his head three times.

Finally, Eddie slowly releases himself from her tunnel of love. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, eyes peering up at her body, Eddie is delighted beyond his wildest dreams. Dani’s body delivers three aftershocks before rendering her motionless. He quickly retreats to the bathroom to rinse with Listerine out of respect before re-appearing alongside her in bed.

Dani’s mouth agape, her head spinning for what feels like hours, she ultimately slows her breathing. She softly responds to her mate without even moving an inch.

“Eddie… Holy Fuck!... Wow!... Can I please have some water?”

He slowly rises from bed once again and can barely hold his laughter. He walks into the kitchen past his even-more-perplexed cats and fetches a bottle of water. He bounces back into bed and delivers Dani her water. She is now able to lean over towards him again and kisses him with gusto.

“Thank you!,” she says while grabbing the bottle from his hands.

“And I had morning wood before all that,” he replies.

Dani hesitates then laughs before taking a large gulp of Poland Spring.

“Oh really?,” she wryly replies. “Well, one good turn deserves another.”

Meanwhile, back on South Herman Avenue, Brandi sluggishly awakens after her night on the town. On this special holiday morning, she feels the urge to caress herself. However, there is no one else present to offer the kind of pleasure she seeks. She reaches into her nightstand and pulls out her rechargeable Hitachi wand. She turns it on and hears that all-too-familiar purr. Brandi then reaches for her phone and finds the right photo on Instagram at which to gaze wantonly. She guides her vibrator like she has done so many times before. Three minutes later, she achieves her desired outcome. Unbeknownst to Eddie, he has effectively satisfied two women at once before breakfast.

Moments later, the real Eddie is drained, literally and figuratively. Like his sexual partner, his face tells the story, for he is equally stunned and elated at Dani’s oral abilities. After gathering himself once again, Eddie re-engages in conversation.

“I have butter,” he says.

Dani is confused by this apparent non-sequitur. “Um… I think we’re both a little drained right now? Uh, maybe next time?”

“Oh!,” Eddie laughs. “No, I didn’t mean it like that. You said you needed butter to make a pie for tonight.”

“OHHH!!,” Dani responds, now cackling at her misinterpretation. “No, I actually don’t need it. I… I was scared. I just had to go. I… I didn’t want to do anything right there in the bar.”

Eddie leans over and echoes her sentiment. “OH! Yeah, I know. I really didn’t have a plan, like, I wasn’t going to kiss you right then and there… But when I saw you there by my car… I mean, I just knew.”

“Well, yeah, I kinda said it,” Dani retorts sweetly as she takes another sip. “I mean, before…”

“Before I took the words out of your mouth?,” he answers sarcastically.

Dani nods and sighs. “You sure did.” As she reaches over to take her last big gulp, Eddie deadpans.

“Top two date!”

Dani nearly spits out the rest of her water. “Top TWO?!?,” she wonders. “Now seriously, who’s better than me?”

Eddie casually smiles, reaches over and places his right hand on her left cheek before replying.

“Exactly.”

Dani’s heart melts at the obvious callback. She wraps herself around Eddie. They rub each other’s backs.

“So, are there any rules about this sort of thing,” he wonders.

“Rules?,” asks Dani.

“Yeah, like, people in our little group dating other people within the group?” Eddie clarifies.

Dani sneers and shrugs delightfully. “Well, not that I’m aware of, but if there are, who’s going to tell me who I can date and who I can’t? We’re all adults here, right?”

Eddie grins and nods accordingly. “So… we’re dating, then,” he says.

Dani leans in and tenderly kisses him before inquiring. “Do you have plans for later?”

“Actually, no.”

“Well, I’m gonna take a shower, then call my mother,” she replies. “And tell her I’m bringing my boyfriend over for Thanksgiving.”

The Hayes family greet Eddie warmly and gleefully accept his presence. Brandi invites Tim over for dinner, which also pleases Alannah. The Peters family spend the holiday with Alan’s family. Everyone in the inner circle wishes each other a happy Turkey Day. Before Eddie leaves the Hayes home in Selden, he asks Dani one key question regarding their friends.

“Do you think they knew this was coming? I mean, I know Tim saw this thing happening. Pretty sure Brandi did, too.”

“Oh yeah, everyone knew it. They saw it coming a mile away!,” she responds.

“When should we spill the beans?,” Eddie asks.

“Uh, how about-“ Dani starts to reply before an incoming call interrupts her train of thought.

“Is that one of us?,” Eddie inquires.

Dani hesitates, then replies with a smile, “Ahh, no. It’s from Central Michigan. They’re always calling for donations. Um… let’s tell them next Wednesday. Same bat time, same bat channel.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he answers before kissing her goodnight. He starts to walk towards his car. The feeling of teenage euphoria overcomes the forty-two-year-old widower, but he doesn’t want to be guilty of overkill. Thus, he continues on his way, beaming and waving. Dani leans in the doorway, the feeling of teenage euphoria overpowering her as well. Her heart is full and happy as her boyfriend gets in his car and drives home.

Black Friday comes. Brandi Woods decides to stake her claim as dinner hostess for the evening. She sends out a message via the Twitter chat:

*10:09am @brandifinegrl: Hey FRIENDS! We’re still using this silly app, right? Tesla Boy didn’t drive us away? Anybody up for an impromptu dinner meetup tonight at OF? The usual time. First drink is on me.*

Eddie, Dani, Britt and Lisa all confirm their attendance. Tim asks if he needs to subscribe, drawing the usual laughs. Eddie ponders his next move. His heart hasn’t raced like this since his days with Ann Stuart at West Seattle High School. He texts Dani:

*Hey Dani. I didn’t want to overdo it last night. Truth is I’m still over the moon… Do you want to tell them tonight?*

Dani’s heart sings, but her head is still conflicted from the previous night’s unexpected, long-distance communication. She responds:

*Hey Eddie! I’m right there with you. I have no words, except… Yes! Tonight! They’ll be so excited for us. See you there!*

Eddie arrives at five. As he gets out of his car and his feet hit the brick sidewalk, he sees Tim approaching on foot from behind.

“Hey buddy,” Eddie says as they shake hands. “How was your Thanksgiving?”

“Same as everyone else’s,” Tim replies. “Eating turkey, watching football, eating everything else. How about you?”

“Oh, um… I actually went to Dani’s parents’ house,” he says, wishing he didn’t just immediately name-drop his new girlfriend. “I had nowhere to go and she kinda offered, so...”

Tim gazes at him briefly. “Really?”

Eddie can only shrug his shoulders and try to change the subject. “How was Billy?”

“Billy was good,” says Tim. “Billy was Billy. Same show I saw five years ago.”

“Yeah…”

“It’s like… It’s gotten to the point where seeing Billy Joel is an experience more than anything,” Tim continues. “Kinda like seeing Buffett. It’s the same old shit every time, but it still gives you all the warm fuzzies, you know?”

“I hear you, man!,” answers Eddie. “Dani said he’s her favorite.”

“Right!,” Tim responds as they approach the door to the bar. He starts to open it, then stops and slowly turns to Eddie behind him. Eddie just stands there tight-lipped. He and Tim enter to find Brandi waiting in her usual spot behind the counter and Lisa sitting in Britt’s usual spot in the left corner.

“Hey FRIENDS!,” Brandi exclaims.

“Here I am again!,” Tim declares, commencing his usual greeting. He then has a sudden epiphany. “In this smoky, you MOTHERFUCKER!”

Tim spins and faces Eddie, eyebrows raised, waiting for him to confess.

“What’s going on, guys?,” Brandi asks with concern.

“OH! I told Tim I ate all the mashed potatoes,” Eddie replies nervously.

Brandi slams her left hand down on the countertop and feigns anger. “Goddamn it,

Eddie. Why did you have to eat all the mashed potatoes?,” says Brandi, sarcastically. “Okay, first one’s on me. Whatcha havin’?”

“Angry Orchard?,” says Eddie.

“Same,” Tim answers.

Both men walk over to greet and hug Lisa. Brandi wanders down to the other side of the bar. As Tim and Eddie sit in their customary spots, Eddie leans in and whispers an acknowledgment to Tim.

“I’m waiting until she gets here to tell everyone.”

“I have ears, too,” retorts Lisa. “What’s the scoop?”

“I love you, Lisa,” Eddie confirms. “You’ll find out soon enough. I promise.”

Eddie then pops his head up and remembers something trivial he’s been meaning to ask Lisa.

“Hey, silly question. Where *were* you when the world changed?”

“Huh?,” Lisa replies.

“You have a shirt that says that on it?,” Eddie answers. “Where were you… Oh, no, sorry, it was *I* was there when the world changed.”

“OHHH!,” she says. “Yes! It’s the shirt I got from Nashville. I went there… 2019 I guess? Right before, well…”

“The world changed?,” Eddie retorts.

“Pretty ironic, isn’t it?,” says Lisa.

Brandi reappears with Eddie and Tim’s drinks. “I don’t know, Timmy. I don’t see ‘Smoky Motherfucker’ catching on. I think you should stick to the original... So, when are our boys gonna do something?”

“Well, I’d hate to say it, but the word on the street is Jake’s not coming back,” answers Tim.

“Yeah, I get that same sense,” Eddie chimes in. “Guys like Max gut it out, even if it’s to the detriment of the team. Jake, not so much.”

“And you know somebody’s gonna give him that money,” Lisa says. “It’s gonna be some downtrodden organization who needs to sell tickets with a big-name attraction. Look at Johnny Hockey. He could’ve gone anywhere but he chose Columbus.”

“Uh, Lisa, this is a METS bar,” replies Tim, jokingly. “We don’t talk about hockey here. Besides, how does all this affect the Yankees?”

The outside door swings open. In steps the grand and voluptuous presence of Eddie’s newfound beau wearing a green Torrid dress, her brown hair tied back.

“DANI!,” everyone yells out in unison.

“Hey everybody!,” she replies as she slowly eyes Eddie and smiles brightly. They reach for each other, deliver a warm embrace, then pause.

“Oh, fuck it,” Dani whispers to him, then proceeds to kiss him in front of everyone.

“Ohhhhh!,” Lisa exclaims. “Something’s going on here!”

“You dirty dog,” Tim wryly replies, not letting on that he figured it out just moments before.

“Yeah, we, uh…” Eddie begins, then struggles to find the words.

“We kinda started dating,” Dani concludes.  
 Eddie looks up at Brandi, whose wide grin tells a different story than her sad eyes.

“That’s… awesome,” Brandi says while nodding. “I’m so happy for you!... So, what are you having, I mean besides… well…” Brandi reaches out with both hands to pantomime a thrusting motion.

Everyone cracks up with laughter. “Aww, come on, maybe they haven’t gotten to that yet…” Lisa says. “Oh, who am I kidding?”

“Yeah yeah, it’s… well…” Eddie replies, left arm wrapped around Dani’s low back. Dani nods in approval of Eddie’s confirmation. “Uh, we’ve kinda covered that.”

“Oh, I have an idea!,” Tim says. “Let’s play a prank on Britt.”

“Ohhh?!?,” replies Brandi.

“Yeah, don’t tell her right away that Eddie and Dani are now dating,” he says, then points to the new couple. “You two start fondling each other and making out at the bar. We’ll all just pretend it’s totally normal until she finally snaps and says something.”

“I love it!,” responds Dani.

“YES!,” Lisa says.

“Let’s do it!,” Eddie replies.

“You guys are too much,” Brandi says, still forlorn on the inside but willing to play along for the sake of a good laugh.

“Okay, who finished their Christmas shopping?,” Lisa asks.

The four of them pause for a good three seconds, unaware that Lisa was being sarcastic. When she starts to crack a smile, they all break into laughter. When the hilarity dies down, Eddie asks about someone conspicuous by her absence.

“Hey, anybody heard from Sue? How’s she doing?”

Before anyone can answer, the silhouette of Britt appears in the doorway.

“Okay, places everyone!,” Tim advises.

Eddie and Dani gladly begin to fondle each other. Lisa drinks her Coors Light while checking Twitter. Brandi pretends to wipe down the countertop. Tim conspicuously watches the TV on the far wall.

Britt enters the bar without her usual strut and flair. She walks towards Brandi with the excitement of a funeral march. She is stone-faced, hair tied back instead of down and radiant. Brandi clears her throat purposely to try to stop Eddie and Dani from acting out the gag. Eddie is about to go in for a deep, wet kiss. Dani gets wind of Brandi’s clues and places her hand over Eddie’s mouth.

Britt snaps out of her funk and briefly flashes a smile. “So, you two finally got together, huh?,” she asks, sounding genuinely happy.

“I guess you heard the word on the street,” Eddie replies.

Britt reaches in and hugs Eddie, then Dani. “I had a feeling about you two.”

Lisa, Tim and Brandi look on with concern and bewilderment at Britt’s uncharacteristic behavior.

“Hey, girl,” Brandi says. “You feeling okay?”

Britt looks up, smile still briefly intact. Her eyes begin to well. Suddenly, her caramel facade dissolves into a red face of absolute terror. Everyone else looks on with horror. Everyone begins to converge on their stricken friend.

“ALAN!!,” Britt exclaims. “I… I found these texts…”

Everyone backs away slightly. Britt starts breathing heavy, body heaving like a toddler trying to catch their breath before unleashing a tearful frenzy.

“He was in the shower this morning…,” she continues, voice high-pitched and cracking. “And his phone started going off. I saw the number. It was Lauren the receptionist. It’s not uncommon. She’s… she’s texted him before… I don’t know what made me look. I just… I just did it… Screenshotted it…”

Britt takes out her phone, finds the photo she sent to herself on Alan’s phone and holds it up for everyone to see. It is Lauren the receptionist, blonde-haired, smirking, completely naked, arms folded, shrugging her shoulders to push her bare breasts together.

Everyone rightfully gasps and wants to comfort Britt but waits for the inevitable meltdown. Brandi covers her mouth with her right hand.

“Oh my God!,” she exclaims.

Britt’s mood turns from pure sorrow to genuine anger. “God. God’s not gonna help him! He made his bed. Motherfucker had the audacity to say he wasn’t expecting it. Wasn’t expecting it. You think I was born yesterday?!? Total fucking bullshit!!”

“Oh my God, Britt!,” Dani replies.

Britt slams her right hand down on the bar in rage. “I can have anyone I want!... ANYONE!!... ANYONE!!”

Her anger turns once again to inconsolable sadness, as Britt’s tearful meltdown commences in front of them. She screams and slams both hands down. Eddie, Dani, Tim and Lisa now all close in and hold her in solidarity. Brandi rushes out from behind the bar to meet them as well. Britt’s wailing can be heard down the block at The Yoga Shack.

The rest of the evening is a somber one, for obvious reasons. The group of five is rightfully caring and supportive, trying to distract the shaken Britt with the usual sports banter and by discussing the irrelevance of the World Cup. Britt’s wallet is not welcomed and not needed on this night. As the gutted Mrs. Peters prepares to leave, Lisa, the mother of one, asks about the reactions of Britt’s children.

“Andrea and Ant, they were home when this all happened?”

“Yes,” Britt sighs. “They heard everything. She’s upset but she understands. I mean, she’s older. She went to have dinner at her friends’ house. Ant was really in a bad way. I went up to talk to him. He was blown away but he gets it now. He’s also eating at a friend’s house tonight.”

“And you said Alan went away for the weekend?,” Lisa asks.

“Oh yeah! I told him to get the fuck out. We were gonna put up all the Christmas stuff. Obviously, that’s not happening.”

Britt shakes her head in disgust, replaying the entire incident from start to finish. A concerned Brandi chimes in. “What do you want to do?”

Britt lifts her head stoically, trying to reaffirm her own strength. “We need to have a talk,” she says. “A real talk when I’m not pissed off as holy Hell. He’s… he’s coming home Sunday. He texted me. I didn’t answer. I’ll just say ‘Fine’ when I get home.”

Brandi reaches across the bar with both arms and places them on her best friend’s head above her ears, a symbol of her ever-loving support.

“Keep us posted, please,” Eddie insists.

“Yes, we love you!,” Dani adds.

One last group hug sends Britt on her way home with the strength to carry on for the time being. The remaining four patrons follow her out shortly afterwards. Once everyone is gone, Brandi returns to her place in front of her wall of alcohol. She hesitantly places a phone call that she’s been dreading for months. Jimmy the cook wanders in to clean up the bar area and overhears one side of an awkward conversation.

“*Hi… Yeah, I’ll do it… January 1st… Yeah, bring your broker. We’ll get it done…* *You tell anyone else and the deal’s off… Of course, you do… I’m not getting into that with you. I’ll just get the paperwork ready… Fine. Bye.”*

Home is an awkward place to be for Britt Peters and her two teenagers on Sunday afternoon. Andrea slowly wanders downstairs shortly before four-thirty. An empty bottle of Merlot rests next to Britt on the couch, adorned in grey sweatpants and a blue Mets sweatshirt. The Rams-Chiefs football game washes over her on the TV. Her silence is uncharacteristic. Britt casually glances over to her eldest and feigns a smile.

“Mom… um, what are you gonna do?,” Andrea worriedly inquires.

Britt grits her teeth and chooses her words carefully.

“Honey, I know you will understand and accept whatever the outcome,” she advises. “It’s Anthony that concerns me.”

“And I don’t concern you?,” Andrea flippantly asks.

“No, Andrea, and don’t make this about YOU!... I will do what’s best for everyone. You, me, Anthony and your fucking father.”

Alan arrives home shortly before seven. It is unseasonably mild on Long Island, so Britt grabs two Adirondack chairs and places them on the back porch. When he walks in the door, Britt immediately makes eye contact.

“Back porch. Now!,” she demands.

Alan does not offer a rebuttal, for he understands the gravity of the situation. He quickly follows his wife of twenty-two years outside to the back porch. He finds Britt sitting on the left chair with her back to him, symbolically. He sighs to himself and walks around to sit next to her, visibly shaking. After a ten second pause, he begins to speak.

“Can we please have a conversatio-“

“No!,” Britt interrupts.

Another few seconds pass before Alan tries to resume talking.

“Look, I know what it must seem like-“

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Britt announces. “Because if you can recall that far back, this is not the first time we’ve had an issue with *texts*… I’m going to ask the questions and you’re going to answer them.”

“Okay, Britt…”

She arches her head up towards the sky briefly and begins her interrogation.

“Are you sleeping with her?”

“No, Britt. That’s what I was tr-“

“HAVE YOU… Have you done anything sexual with her?”

Alan sighs and looks towards Britt. “No, honey. Can I just-“

“I’M NOT FINISHED!,” she exclaims. Several more seconds of silence follow before Britt resumes.

“Have you made any sexual advances to her? For that matter, have you said anything, done anything even remotely inappropriate to anyone else – not counting that old high school friend of yours?”

Alan, visibly uncomfortable, adjusts himself to lean towards his wife.

“Britt, I called her on Friday to fire her. I called Dr. Keith to tell him and do you know what he told me?... He said Lauren sent him an inappropriate text on Wednesday. Not a picture, just asked him out and made lewd comments. He said he was waiting until tomorrow to tell me in person because he thought it warranted a face-to-face.”

Britt does not move, nor does she react, so Alan continues his explanation.

“See, we were lax in our background check and that’s on me. I’ll take the heat for that. You know, it’s so hard to find someone to come in at the right salary who wants to work, so we didn’t do our due diligence on Lauren. We found out she was arrested for… well, sex with a minor. I mean, obviously I’m not a minor, but she apparently has issues.”

“Okay, fine Alan, but you didn’t answer my first question,” reminds Britt.

“Sweetie, I haven’t done anything like that, you know, since… you know,” Alan replies, voice now cracking. “I wouldn’t do that to you, especially now after all this time. I mean, we have a family. We have everything we need here.”

Alan folds his arms and arches his back. “In six years, Ant’s out of college and we can go down to South Carolina to be near your mom or Florida to be near my parents. At this point, do you really think I would jeopardize all that? And for what? I mean, let’s be honest. Worse comes to worse, I can just rub one out and be done with it.”

Britt slowly turns her head to look at Alan with the slightest bit of disdain for asking such a question under the circumstances.

“Okay, I get it,” Alan states. “And, I know under the circumstances, it looked bad, but I didn’t ask for that photo, nor did I make any comment to even remotely suggest… Britt, I love you!”

Britt slowly takes a deep breath, eyes closed, as if she were in yoga class. Slowly, she opens her eyes. Her rage slowly dissipating, she stares a hole through Alan. She gradually arches her mouth to a neutral, resting position.

“Okay… Okay…,” she says, less menacingly. She gets up from her chair and turns to walk back inside, but not before delivering a stern warning. “But that’s strike two.”

Alan folds into an upright position, collapses his arms over his knees and exhales. Though peace has not quite been achieved, war has been avoided. Meanwhile, Dani is readying for the work week after the long weekend. The sounds of the downstairs tenant’s girlfriend drunkenly yelling at her boyfriend do not concern her. She receives a text from Eddie which brightens the moment.

*Always thinking of you! Love, Me. XO*

Her brief moment of elation is interrupted by another text. It is from the same number that called her on Thanksgiving night. She glances at her phone, inhales and nervously exhales. A feeling of sheer panic sets in. Dani is gripped with fear.

“No!.” she says out loud to no one. “No, God! No. No!”

9

Make You Better

It has been forever and a day since Lisa has driven eastbound on the Southern State Parkway during rush hour traffic. Growing up in Sheepshead Bay in the mid-1980’s, Lisa’s main form of transportation was the Q train until she was of legal drinking age. She missed the heyday of CBGB’s punk rock scene by a few years. Instead, she would pretend to care about her studies at Fordham University at Lincoln Center during the week. Lisa spent the majority of her Sunday afternoons down at Hilly’s famed venue getting drunk and listening to matinee performances by Bad Brains, the Misfits and Murphy’s Law.

Her all-time favorite show was the Beastie Boys, which occurred almost forty years to the present day. That was the evening Lisa LoCurto met Vince Fanelli, a recording engineer at Attic Records. Vince, a Wantagh native, got his dream job a couple of years previous to that night. Lisa and Vince lived together in sin for nearly a decade before finally agreeing to marry in June of 1994. Twenty years passed. During that time, Vince left the record label and opened his own studio in Hicksville. They bought a house five minutes from the train station. They routinely commuted to Manhattan on the weekends to see the latest hot bands. By 2014, the Fanellis were resigned to the fact that she couldn’t have children. The following year, Lisa unexpectedly got pregnant. Her doctor deemed Daniel a miracle baby. He was born the night Lucas Duda errantly threw home to allow the tying run to score in Game 2 of the World Series.

When Daniel was six months old, Lisa took a part-time job as a weekend receptionist at Robert Chevrolet and worked her way up from there. After the pandemic, Vince turned his recording studio into a music school for kids. Lisa started her new job at Autoworld Kia. All the while, Lisa hardly ever drove eastbound. Lisa hardly ever needed to go to Suffolk County.

On the first day after the holiday weekend, Lisa must drive a long way out of her comfort zone. She almost misses the exit for the Sagtikos Parkway. She can barely distinguish between the Northern State and Long Island Expressway exits. By the time she reaches the Pond Road exit, she may as well be on Mars.

Lake Ronkonkoma looks like every east bumfuck town Lisa has ever seen. Her idea of a vacation was always fun in the sun. The leaves on the ground surrounding Lake Shore Road are brown and faded. On the outside, the Phoenix House looks like a premiere wedding reception hall during the summer. It is just after ten in the morning when Lisa finds a spot near the main entrance. She exits her vehicle, hair curled and frizzy from the cool, drizzly weather. She pulls her green cardigan over her grey Mets shirt. The residential building is large and overwhelming.

Lisa checks her phone once more to make sure she is abiding by the rules. Get the visit approved by the patient’s therapist beforehand with a written release of information. Check. Stay in designated visitor areas. Check. Smoke only in designated areas. Not applicable. Never bring drugs or alcohol. Lisa smirks at the obvious nature of the latter but confirms as much in her head. She walks up the enclosed porch and opens the front door. Kimberly is sitting at a check-in desk in the round near the center of the atrium.

“Good morning!,” Kimberly says.

“Hi!... Sue Rubino?”

“Yep, she’s expecting you,” Kimberly replies to Lisa. “Go right past this room and to the right. That’s the visiting room.”

“Thank you!”

The visiting room is freshly sanitized, white and dull with round tables spread throughout a two thousand square foot area. Lisa peers around the corner, sees Sue sitting at a table and walks faster through the doorway.

“Hey, tight-ass!,” Lisa remarks sarcastically. “How dare you make me drive all the way to fucking Ronkonkoma.”

Sue is without makeup in a black Oneonta sweatshirt with classic block lettering and grey sweatpants. Her brown eyes are baggy and her hair tied back. Other than being tired, she is delighted to see her best friend. She gets up from her chair and hugs her gently. Except for a security guard named Marcus standing in the corner, they are alone.

“So, you told them I was your sister, huh?,” Lisa says.

Sue responds without hesitation. “Lisa, you pretty much are my sister.”

“Nice age difference,” Lisa retorts. “You know, you look like Sandra Bullock in that movie with that leg brace on, in a place like this. And by the way, we have one of these rehabs in Brooklyn, but no, I had to come all the way here.”

“I had to,” Sue nervously replies.

“You had to come here?”

“No, I wanted to come here,” replies Sue. “It’s out of the way. It’s peaceful. They have a workout facility. I can’t let this body go to shit.”

Lisa shakes her head and smirks. “Yeah. Speaking of your body and what you put in it, you’re finally giving up the ghost, huh?,” she says.

“It was time,” answers Sue with defeat in her eyes. “I mean, you know. I was out of control. I… I don’t like to talk about my personal stuff with the rest of the crew. I don’t need anyone judging me, but my dad dying from COVID. My mother… well, it’s just me now, and you know, I’ll drink a normal amount when I’m with them and then afterwards, go home and-”

“Yup, I know,” Lisa interrupts. “I’ve been there. I was three years into the marriage and Vince told me ‘You’ve got a problem.’ I was lucky. I was able to gradually cut back and beat it. Who knows, maybe that was the reason why it took me so long to get Danny. Either way, Sue, I get it.”

“You didn’t tell anyone, right? That I was here?”

“Come on, hun!,” responds Lisa while planting her hand down on the table. “You said just between you and me… They asked about you the other day.”

“Oh. What did you tell them?,” asks Sue.

“I didn’t get a chance to lie about it. Britt walked in absolutely livid. She found a naked photo on Alan’s phone, from his receptionist. Totally lost it.”

“Holy shit!,” Sue says. “What is she gonna do?”

“I don’t know. We’ll wait and see, I guess.”

A large window behind them reveals the sun peeking through the clouds.

“You think anyone suspects the accident was me and not him?,” Sue wonders.

“Why would they?,” Lisa inquires. “You asked me not to tell. I respect your wishes.”

Silence fills the air for a few seconds. Erin Colton’s voice fades in on the TV mounted in the corner.

“News 12,” Sue remarks. “All day, every day. I didn’t think we’re supposed to talk about the outside world, but here it is, all day, every day,”

“Honey, you’re not crazy,” Lisa retorts while laughing. “You’re an alcoholic. There’s… there’s no men in white coats here.”

Sue folds her arms and gazes at Lisa. “So, what do I do when I get out and I want to have dinner at the bar? If I ask for a Diet Coke, people will think I’m pregnant.”

“So what? It’s none of their business,” Lisa assertively replies. “You don’t have to drink beer or liquor at a bar. Your friends love you.”

“Thank you!”

Lisa laughs heartily. “And that anonymous gifter loves you too.”

“Yeah, that’s crazy,” Sue replies. “Who do you think it was?”

“No clue, tight-ass. But you thank your lucky stars you got that 50K or else you wouldn’t be here right now.”

“You know, I did work with that MMA guy,” Sue points out.

“Anything’s possible, my dear.”

They chat for a little while longer. Lisa vows to burn her Jacob deGrom jersey if he leaves the Mets. Sue relays a promise to take Daniel to Laser Bounce. Once the hour is up, Marcus slowly walks over. Lisa eyes him through her peripheral vision.

“I know,” she says. “I’m leaving.”

“Hey, you…,” Sue starts to speak. “You can tell the group where I am. I just… I hope they don’t think less of me.”

“Honey, if I know them, they’ll all be proud that you did this,” Lisa reassures.

Sue stays seated and content as Lisa leaves The Phoenix House. She contemplates how to break the news to her friends and decides she will do so at the usual Wednesday meetup.

Eddie has something else to contemplate before then. His cats are fed and he is awake and showered, ready for just another Tuesday. He puts on his Maroon V-Neck sweater over a grey Mets t-shirt, black khakis and black sneakers. As he makes his way into the kitchen to fix a sandwich for lunch, Eddie is stricken by a startling realization. He is late in decorating the house for Christmas.

By all rights, he doesn’t have to go into the attic room in his Levitt house. Holiday decorations can wait. Something just draws him upstairs. He opens the door to the unfinished room to the right of the stairs. Everything is exactly the way he left it the year before. All the Christmas decorations are lined up perfectly on the left side of the chimney brick. He walks the length of the attic to confirm as much.

As Eddie walks back to go downstairs, a black SentrySafe fire-resistant lock box catches his eye. It is resting in plain sight on a fixed metal shelf next to the door. Eddie has been in and out of the attic multiple times over the years. He is perplexed, for he has never noticed this mysterious black box before. Even more baffling is the fact that Eddie doesn’t have a key for it.

He goes into his den office and finds a letter opener. It doesn’t budge. He then notices a small pinhole under the keyhole. He finds a nail in his toolbox in the garage. After a couple of tries, the box opens. He flips the lid and is bewildered by its contents. He sees two five-by-seven photos lying on top of what appear to be old blue envelopes. The top picture is from January 2020. It is Eddie and Kristine Fitzgerald, with Bruce and Jacob Fitzgerald, taken in Seattle. The second is from March 2018 featuring Eddie and Kristine with Dwight Gooden from Mets spring training in Port St. Lucie. Eddie flips between the two prints, then looks long and hard at the 2020 family picture. His eyes then delve further into the box. A mass card catches his eye. *Kristine Amanda Fitzgerald. April 5, 1978 – April 2, 2020.*

Eddie wasn’t used to the sound of heavy breathing from Kristine. Not in the bedroom. Not at the theme parks. Certainly not on her Peloton, a Christmas gift from Eddie just three months prior. Over the years, she had gradually shed her excess weight at Planet Fitness. She had devoted herself to meal prep and fruit smoothies. Gone were the days of the curvy goddess winning people over with her wit and wisdom. Kristine Fitzgerald had become the picture of health and stamina. However, just seven days removed from returning from Eddie’s grandfather’s funeral, she emerged from the sun porch uncharacteristically out of breath.

Eddie jumped up from his couch position. “Are you alright, honey?”

“I don’t get it,” Kristine struggled to say. “I can’t finish.”

Eddie looked back at her, puzzled and unsure what to do. “Do you need some water?”

Her breathing was slowly normalizing. “No, Eddie. I need some fucking air.”

His voice now stuttered with anxiety. “Are… are you sick?”

Kristine vehemently shook her head ‘no’ and motioned with her right arm. “No fever. Not sick.”

Eddie looked on with worry and surprise as Kristine staggered into the bedroom to lay down. He resigned himself to the fact that it was already eight o’clock at night. Kristine routinely went to bed at nine. She also routinely finished her post-dinner workout. Then, the coughing started. Eddie channel-flipped for a while to try to distract himself. Kristine’s hacking slowly subsided and she fell into a deep sleep. He settled on a replay of the Twins-Rays game on MLB Network. A few minutes later, Eddie decided to check on his new Twitter account.

His bio read “*Former minor leaguer turned cat dad. The legend lives on. #LGM.”* That was sufficient for the moment. A week into his foray into the blue bird app, he already had 405 followers. Most of them were Mets fans. Some were old teammates. Some were old classmates from West Seattle, including Tommy Simpkins.

Eddie received two notifications. *Brandi Woods followed you…* *Brandi Woods liked your tweet: “Palm Beaches can have the amenities. I’ll take the berm. Still the best seat in the house. #LGM”.* Naturally,Eddie followed her back. He had previously thought nothing of following fellow Mets fans. To him, they were just like-minded souls in a soulless medium. Eddie did know of Brandi, Britt, Tim and Dani from the bowling league. He had seen them at Farmingdale Lanes, though he never had the pleasure of teaming up with them. He figured he would personally introduce himself the next time he came to the alley. He scrolled through his timeline and down the rabbit hole before shifting his focus back to the TV and, subsequently, the back of his eyelids.

At three in the morning, Eddie was awakened from his slumber on the couch by the sound of coughing in the bedroom. He runs in and finds his wife slumped over on the edge of the bed.

Eddie states the obvious. “Babe, I think you’re sick. Shit, I think you have it.”

In between coughing, Kristine rebuked his claim. “Not it. Just bronchitis.”

“I’m getting the thermometer,” Eddie announced. “If it’s 103 or higher, we’re going to the ER.”

“Hunter, don’t be ridiculous,” she groggily replied.

Eddie started towards the bathroom medicine cabinet, then stopped in his tracks.

“What did you call me?,” he asked.

“Babe, just get the thermometer,” she requested.

Eddie raced back to the bathroom, fearing Kristine was confused from fever. He returned and handed her the thermometer. She placed it in her mouth. Eddie noticed her eyes were glazed. A minute later, the verdict was in. 103.3.

“I’m calling the ambulance,” Eddie responded. “Fuck!”

Kristine staggered to her feet, before falling backwards into the bed immediately.

“Just get me some Advil,” she replied. Eddie was not listening. He was already on the phone. Twenty minutes later, the fire department arrived.

Kristine sauntered out of the bedroom appearing inebriated, face sunken in. “Where’s the fire? And where’s my Advil?”

Eddie opened the door for the masked EMS personnel. “She’s in the bedroom and she’s hallucinating. I think she’s dehydrated.” He had paid close attention to the news in recent weeks. Eddie refrained from saying the magic words, afraid those enlisted to help would leave from fear of catching the virus.

After a few minutes of Kristine attempting to resist the clutching and grabbing of the two young men, her strength left her. The ambulance driver entered the Fitzgerald house with a stretcher. Eddie sat back bewildered. The images of the EMS team strapping the woman he loves to a rolling bed brought him flashbacks of his mother’s death. Never did he imagine he would see this again. As they rolled her out of the house, Kristine offered one last request in her stupor.

“Call Eddie.”

Eddie followed the ambulance to Plainview Hospital. He was stunned by the crowded waiting area and taken aback by the frantic employees. The words ‘respiratory and anesthesia’ were repeated over the loudspeaker multiple times. Eddie sat in a corner, mask over face, head slumped over in his hands. All he could do at that moment was wait and hope and speak to his recently departed grandfather.

“Jacob, you were right,” he murmured to himself. “God, don’t... just don’t.”

At a time when the global pandemic seemed more powerful than God himself, the grim news came an hour later. Kristine had tested positive. Eddie was called back to triage for a request from Emma which until recent times had seemed unfathomable.

“Sir, you need to go home and quarantine.”

“What?,” Eddie wondered.

“You’ve been exposed to the coronavirus,” Emma declared. “You cannot be here at this time.”

“My wife is in there,” Eddie replied.

“I understand, but you’ve been exposed.”

Emma repeated herself to Eddie, who heard her demands but hoped against hope it wasn’t possible.

“How do I know if she’s okay?,” Eddie asked frantically.

“Call the hospital for updates,” Emma responded. Eddie paused and paced for a few seconds, trying to process what was deemed the new normal.

“Sir, you can’t be here!,” Emma bellowed.

Eddie looked squarely at her and struggled to think of a poignant parting shot. Finally, close to tears, he made one last request before leaving. He pointed at the forbidden door that was the emergency room.

“That’s my wife. Make her better.”

Hours after Kristine was brought in to fight off an unspeakably strong enemy, Palmer Cook announced that all employees would work remotely until further notice. This was a positive for Eddie, who only needed to use one personal day. From here on out, his days were ripe with fear of the unknown. He called daily for two weeks. Kristine’s oxygen levels were slowly falling. Seventy-four the first day. Seventy-one the next. Sixty-six the day after. Her fever slowly fell but never fully broke.

After two weeks, the doctors on call informed Eddie about extracorporeal membrane oxygenation. When he could not comprehend their suggestion, they described it in layman’s terms as dialysis for the lungs. Eddie simply could not process any of what the hospital staffers were saying. All he cared about was visiting his wife. Two weeks felt like two months. Much to his dismay, Eddie was told in no uncertain terms, *you cannot see her*.

On March 27th, Kristine’s oxygen level fell to fifty-one. Eddie drove to Plainview Hospital with Kristine’s iPad and charger. Once there, he again met Emma. The image of her face protected by a shield fashioned from a welder’s mask disarmed Eddie. He let his guard down and meekly asked “Can you bring this to her?”

Eddie tried to video chat with her three times before she finally answered at sunset. At first, the camera panned outward towards Kristine’s surroundings. The hospital had converted hallways into makeshift COVID wards. Sheets of thick plastic were hung from the ceiling. Abruptly, the camera panned at Kristine. She immediately frightened her husband with her appearance, staring blankly at him, tubes seemingly sticking out every which way. The lens tilted upwards with Kristine’s face barely on the screen. Eddie became the meme of a shocked face frozen in time.

“Oh my… Kristine!,” Eddie finally exhaled. “You’re there….”

At that moment, Eddie could not contain his emotions. He broke down and started bawling. Only the sound of a muffled voice squeaking his name made him cease.

“Eddie!!... Eddie!!,” Kristine murmured. “I’ll be fine… Listen to me… Please!”

Her voice broke up his meltdown. He sucked it up and looked at his iPad screen.

“I love you, Eddie!,” she echoed. “I’m sorry.”

“Babe, you don’t have to be sorry,” he replied.

“Yes. Yes, I do… I didn’t tell you what I did…I… ”

Kristine’s energy quickly began to falter. Rather than explain herself, she instead gave her husband a few last requests.

“Go to Aruba when this is over.”

“Kris, I’m not going without you,” responded Eddie. “I made you a promise.”

Her voice laboring, she started breathing even heavier. “Take care… of yourself… and the kit… tens…”

“Babe, you’re gonna get through this,” Eddie insisted. “You’re stronger than this.”

Kristine’s breathing became more and more labor intensive. Suddenly, the call ended. Eddie angrily popped up from his chair.

“No!... Dammit!,” he exclaimed. Eddie paced around the room and almost called back. He then came to the most painful of realizations. This was his last goodbye. He slumped over on the couch. Bogie walked over to him and gazed upwards at his human father. Bacall followed suit. It was as if they already knew what was to come. They had stopped looking for their mother and now solely looked to Eddie for love and care. The virus that was stronger than God was now stronger than Kristine Fitzgerald.

Eddie tried to call her back the next day, to no avail. That night, Plainview doctors called Eddie to inform him that Kristine had slipped into a coma. It was time to make final arrangements. That night, wrought with sorrow and guilt, Eddie took to all his social media accounts and gave a bleak update:

*This is almost unfathomable, but three weeks ago my completely healthy wife Kristine got COVID. This disease is no laughing matter. They told me today it’s time to say goodbye. She’s almost gone!*

Five days later, it was over. The whirlwind of chaos and uncertainty had stopped. The stark, steep decline of Kristine had ended. In a mere four weeks, she went from being full of piss and vinegar, yet supporting her husband as he helped his father say goodbye to his grandfather, to being the next one eulogized.

Eddie never received the body. Still unsure of the staying power of the virus, he requested cremation. Eddie struggled to remember the last time he even touched Kristine or kissed her. He suddenly realized something even more horrifying. Eddie had one last chance to say ‘I love you’, but didn’t. He was so consumed by his anxiety that he missed his opportunity. It never occurred to him until it was too late.

Bruce flew in from Seattle to assist with the wake and funeral. Throngs of people came and paid their respects. All Eddie could do for the most part was stare at the urn that was his wife of sixteen years, pondering what she was trying to atone for at the end, wondering how it all went awry so quickly.

Present-day Eddie holds the lock box and looks up at a metal cabinet in the garage. He opens the right side and finds the urn. Medium deep sea in color in honor of Kristine’s Florida birthplace, same inscription as the mass card. Eddie smiles and silently says hello to her.

“I missed my last chance to say those three little words,” Eddie says out loud. “Maybe I should tell her today… Hey, you’re okay with all this, right?”

Eddie smiles and laughs at an obvious conclusion. “Right. It’s not like I’m cheating on you.”

He goes to close the box and place it inside the cabinet with her, until he yields to his curiosity. What about the royal blue envelopes resting underneath those old photos? Eddie has never seen these envelopes before today. They are not marked or addressed in any way. He opens the first one, which contains a letter of five-by-seven size on the same color paper with the same thick texture. The letter is written in perfect cursive, almost as if the text was typed out and printed on it. However, the ink is written by hand.

*February 14, 2020*

*Dear Kristine,*

*Happy Valentine’s Day! I understand your frustrations. Believe me, I’m close to telling my wife as well. Surely, it would solve a lot of our problems. I’m proud of you and everything that you’ve accomplished. I know you feel like you moved to NY for nothing. I promise, someday we’ll be together. Someday soon, whether it’s here or back home in FL. It will be worth it. Until then, I’m thinking of you. Always always.*

*Love, Hunter*

Eddie is suitably shocked and dismayed. He rubs his eyes and shakes his head,

thinking it must be a dream. No, it must be a nightmare. He reads it again, but the words are the same. He frantically reaches for the next envelope and opens it. The contents of the letter are similar and dated January 14, 2020. There are four more underneath it, each dated one month previous to the last. All of them are to Kristine, from a mystery man named Hunter.

Eddie once again reads the most recent letter from Valentine’s Day, 2020. More and more, his body fills with rage. He looks up at the urn, then back at the letter, then back at the remains of his wife, as if to say ‘*How dare you!*’ All day long, Eddie is consumed by the knowledge that his wife cheated on him towards the end of their marriage. He wonders what he could have done differently.

Before he can stew on the past any longer, the woman of the present texts him.

*Hey babe! Are you free for dinner tonight?*

Eddie responds accordingly. *Hi honey*. *I have therapy in RVC until 6:30. Can we meet in the middle somewhere?*

Dani replies five minutes later. *Meet you in Levittown? I know this great Italian place. Domenico’s 7pm?*

Eddie smiles at Dani suggesting a restaurant in his own hometown. Impromptu dinner plans are made. Eddie has the good fortune of not only having a therapist to talk to, but also the woman he loves, the woman he truly believes would never stray from their relationship. However, as Eddie would discover later that day at Dr. Steiner’s office, discovering the reasons behind infidelity are nearly impossible when one party is no longer able to tell their side of the story.

“Cindy, I’ve tried to go back to when we moved to New York,” Eddie reasons. “I moved with her. I left my job, got another job. I started my life over for her. I was always willing and able to give in our relationship. I was always willing to be sexual. If anything, it was Kris who would deny me. You know, ‘I’m not in the mood’, ‘Got my period,’, ‘I don’t feel well’… I mean, sure, we disagreed about things, like visiting my family back in Seattle. I can’t for the life of me think of a reason, a time or a place when it totally went off the rails.”

“And we may never find out,” Cindy responds. “This is a painfully difficult day, a painful realization for you. Obviously, we can’t get her side. The only thing to do for now is focus on the future. If you discover a problem in future relationships, we can explore that and work on it and maybe prevent something like this from occurring ever again.”

Eddie takes a breath, then unveils another perplexing piece of the puzzle.

"My mother came to me in a dream about a month after Kris died,” he reveals. “I didn't understand it then, but I do now. She appeared before me and said 'Eddie, if I could change anything, I would have left him. There is no consequence without action.’ Now that I know what Kris did... It makes perfect sense.”

“That must have been pretty unnerving for you,” Cindy responds.

“I just wish I knew who this Hunter was,” he says. “I mean, how can I take action without knowing who to take action against?”

“You can’t,” she states. “All you can do now is process what happened. Carry that with you going forward. Your actions should be towards Dani and geared for the future, not rooted in the past… Any form of revenge won’t change what happened.”

"My father had affairs,” Eddie says. ‘He was a ballplayer. It kinda went with the territory… Did I ever mention that?”

“I don’t think you did,” Cindy responds. “When we first started seeing each other, we were working out the grieving process and how to cope... So, your father was unfaithful on the road when he played baseball?”

“Yup!”

“And when and how did you discover this?”

“Mom told me when I was about sixteen or seventeen,” he answers. “It was when I started dating Ann. She pulled me aside one day, because I was gonna be the next big superstar. She told me ‘Don’t follow in your dad’s footsteps away from the game’…. She knew he cheated. It was one of those unspoken things that ballplayers did back in the day, you know?”

“Ahhh! How did you feel about that when she told you?,” she inquires.

“I was pretty broken up about it at first. Mom later told me not to hold it against him. Dad apparently did it later in his career, but he stopped fooling around after she got pregnant with me. That was towards, like, the very end… But my dad confessed to me after Mom died. I told him it was okay because Mom was okay with it.”

Dr. Steiner follows up with the obvious question. “Were YOU okay with it?”

Eddie sits and contemplates his answer for a few seconds. “No… No, I wasn’t. When I was growing up trying to make it in baseball, he told me about being disciplined at the plate. Pitch selection, things like that. So, it was okay to be disciplined at baseball, but not in your marriage?”

Cindy looks on, leans her head against her arm and tries to hide a smile.

“He was a good man in many ways, but not at fidelity,” Eddie concludes.

“What about his relationships after your mother passed?”

Eddie replies, “He never really had anything long-term. Maybe nine months here and there… I mean, he told me later on he felt shame. He was ashamed for cheating on the road. Carried it the rest of his life, especially after Mom died."

Cindy places her arms at her sides. “So, you’ve always pictured your father as the face of discipline. But he had sex outside of marriage for, say a few years when he played baseball, and he wasn’t able to maintain a relationship for very long after your mother passed.”

Eddie nods, unsure where Dr. Steiner is going with her summation.

“And you, if I recall, *you* had trouble being disciplined ON the field but always showed loyalty to your wife after the fact.”

“Yeah?”

“Interesting dichotomy, there,” Cindy reveals. “I wonder, Eddie, are you happy with your work that you do currently?”

Eddie looks back at Cindy befuddled.

“I don’t understand what one has to do with the other,” he responds.

“You are faithful and you hold the line in your personal life, Eddie. How do you feel about your job?”

Eddie pauses, blinks a few times while trying to understand Cindy’s reason for asking the question. He then resigns and answers her.

“I’m not happy at my job, to be honest,” he reveals. “But I don’t know what that has to do with this.”

“Most people generally look for something outside the marriage when they are unhappy with something IN the marriage,” Cindy counters. “Your father, was he *always* happy playing ball?”

“Well… he wasn’t happy leaving Cleveland and he wasn’t happy when he got older and couldn’t play anymore,” he answers.

“So, he was unhappy and couldn’t be home with your mother,” Cindy comments. “Sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

Eddie starts to get up and make a counterpoint, then stops to feel the clouds lifting in his head.

“To your recollection, was your wife unhappy at her job?,” she wonders.

“Well, she was stressed out half the time,” Eddie replies. “Regional Manager of a major bank. She had a lot riding on her shoulders. You know, she worked late most of the time. I dare say she was the breadwinner.”

“But was she happy?”

Eddie places his hand over his chin and plays with his chin stubble.

“She did it for the money. It was rough… No, she wasn’t happy, but I was home. I was there for her. She never wanted to do anything more exotic than come home, eat dinner and go to bed.”

“Did you offer anything more than coming home, having dinner and going to sleep?,” Cindy asks.

“She never said she was unhappy,” Eddie retorts. “I’m not a mind reader, Cindy! Besides, what she did was wrong.”

“I’m not suggesting being unfaithful is acceptable behavior,” Cindy responds. “But again, it’s not easy trying to decipher why she might have been unhappy without her to offer some insight.”

Eddie sits silently for a few seconds, nervously playing with his short facial hair. “I… We should have gone to Aruba… She wanted that,” Eddie concedes.

Cindy fixes her short shirt and checks the time on her phone, which is set on ‘silent mode’.

“Perhaps that’s something to explore further next week.”

Eddie is torn and distracted, still trying to understand his deceased wife’s motives. He makes the half-hour drive during Tuesday rush hour to Domenico’s and pulls into the strip center parking lot. The long-time Italian restaurant is in the corner tucked away, flanked by a row of stores and businesses on both sides. Eddie walks in. There’s a take-out pizzeria section with stools across from the display cases and brick ovens. Beyond that is a nicely kept sit-down dining area which extends to the far left. Eddie greets the restaurant host and advises her that he’s waiting for someone. Calm, easy breathing follows. He decides it’s not worth it for the problems of yesterday to affect his dinner with his current girlfriend.

Dani texts him that she’s running a few minutes late. Eddie takes out his phone and checks his notifications. With no Mets off-season activity to speak of, Tim has opted to chime in with a joke.

*5:09pm @tsgrinder: Remember, kids. The stork is the bird that brings the baby, but a swallow's the one that prevents it.*

*5:11pm @deebeback: LMAO!*

*5:15pm @brandifinegrl: Timmy! I am sick of your shit!*

*5:19pm @brittlgm: I just spit up my drink, you fucker!*

*5:21pm @tsgrinder reacted “laughing face” to “@brittlgm: I just spit up my drink, you fucker!”*

Dani enters adorned in her famous blue coat and winning smile. She meets Eddie with the typical hug and a measured public display of affection. The host walks them back to their table in the corner opposite the kitchen.

“So, you’ve been here before,” Eddie assumes.

Dani affirms. “I have. I came here a couple of times with a guy I dated very briefly. About two years ago.”

An awkward silence follows. Dani unzips her coat nervously and notices Eddie is a little distracted.

“What’s wrong, babe?,” she inquires.

Seated to her right, he places his left hand on her dominant hand.

“You know me already. I like that.”

“It’s written all over your face, hun,” she replies.

Eddie picks up his phone and shows Dani a photo of the infamous Valentine’s Day letter from Hunter to Kristine.

“Found a box in the attic,” he confirms. “About three or four letters addressed to her right before she died… I’m not telling anyone else right now. I need time to process this myself.”

Dani zooms in on the photo and reads the letter. Her face grows with shock and sadness with each passing second. She places her left hand over her mouth and gasps.

“Oh my God, Eddie!,” Dani whispers. “Oh, honey, that’s terrible!”

She firmly places her hands on both of his cheeks. “Look at me,” she requests. “I would NEVER do that to you! Never!”

She follows up her affirmation with a passionate kiss and a clear statement.

“Eddie, I’m not that person. I was with my ex for seventeen years. All the shit he did. I never did that to him. That’s not me.”

“I believe you,” Eddie responds. “And I would never do that to you. I’m the real thing, Dani. This is all real.”

“I know!,” Dani says, eyes fixated on him, heart full of joy.

After requesting a half order of garlic bread and two penne Bolognese dinners, she finds the courage to give Eddie some news of her own.

“So, Eddie, I actually have to tell you something,” she begins. “I don’t want to go into this thing with any unnecessary baggage and... I don’t want to withhold anything from you, especially after seeing that awful letter.”

Eddie fearfully looks at Dani. “You’re not breaking up with me, are you?”

“NO!,” Dani retorts. “Jesus, God, no! I’m… no, absolutely not!”

“Good! Because you’re supposed to do that after dinner,” he jokingly replies.

“Eddie, I am SO not breaking up with you. I have to tell you something because I want to do this for real. Real real.”

Dani takes a deep breath and summons the fortitude to stop stalling and tell Eddie in earnest. “Um, so, remember Thanksgiving when I got that strange call? I thought it was my old college, but then I realized it’s Thanksgiving and they wouldn’t call on a holiday. So, that number texted me the next day…”

“Yeah?...”

“So, it was Kevin,” Dani declares. “He… well, the long and short of it is he says he’s re-evaluating his life and he still wants me to be a part of it. So, I’m going back to Michigan next week to settle things, once and for all.”

Confusion wafts over Eddie’s face as the waiter brings out their garlic bread.

“Are you okay, hun?,” Dani wonders.

Eddie shifts his focus back to Dani and shrugs. “Yeah, I’m just… I mean, my girlfriend who’s not breaking up with me is going to visit her ex in Michigan, who’s not even technically her ex.”

Dani tilts her head and raises her eyebrows. She reassures Eddie that he’s part of her future and part of her solution.

“I’m not going back to him, Eddie. I promise you, and I’m not going to visit him. I’m just going to meet with him and tell him it’s over. I feel like I owe him that much.”

“No, you don’t,” Eddie asserts. “I mean, it’s been, what, four years now? If he doesn’t get it by now… and you said it yourself. He fucking assaulted you. What’s he gonna do now if you’re there in person?”

“I know and you’re probably right,” she advises as she adjusts her hair tie. “I just feel like, if I’m going to open new doors, I need to properly close the old ones. Yes, he was messed up and he fucked up beyond anything… but I didn’t leave him the right way. He wrote me this huge, long thing and I feel like I have to go back and end it with dignity. I’m going to tell him that it’s over and I’m filing for a divorce.”

“I’ll go with you,” Eddie instinctively responds.

“No!,” Dani says. “This is my fight. I texted my old friend, Julie, from Michigan. She’s a lawyer. I’m gonna ask him to meet me at this local sports bar. She said she’s gonna be there… she said it’s long overdue, first of all. She’s gonna be there with her brother and a couple of guys, sitting somewhere else inconspicuous. If he tries anything, they’ll step in.”

Eddie doesn’t know how else to react, except to reach in and wrap his loving arms around Dani. She kisses him gently on his left cheek. After a long pause, she places her bare hands over Eddie’s stubbly face on both sides.

“I’m doing this because I’m in love with you,” she confirms.

Eddie beams and chuckles like a teenager at Dani’s revelation. “You sure know how to deliver bad news.”

Dani laughs and responds. “It’s not bad news. If me being in love with you is bad news, babe, you need more therapy.”

Eddie laughs loudly and proudly with her. “So, when are you going?”

“Um, flying out this Friday,” Dani confirms. “I already texted my boss and said I had a family emergency. I have plenty of time. I was going to save it, but I can use a week off now.”

“I’m here if you need anything,” Eddie says. “I’m serious. I’ll fly there and kick his ass.”

“Thank you! My knight in shining armor. Yeah, that won’t be necessary.”

Eddie and Dani finish their dinner. Of course, Eddie pays for it. They both pass on dessert from Dortoni’s next door. Instead, Eddie accompanies his lady to her car and gives her a goodbye kiss. He stares at Dani with laser focus and delivers the parting shot of her dreams.

“Hey… I’m in love with you, too.”

Dani’s chest now lighter having told Eddie what was weighing her down, her heart now sings ecstatically. Her smile speaks a thousand words. She closes her car door, ensuring she does not ruin the moment. Eddie walks to his car and gets in. Before he turns the ignition, he notices a faint glimmer of red almost beyond the peripheral vision in his right eye.

Eddie turns his head and notices a few strands of bright red hair sticking out of the side pocket next to the passenger seat. He reaches over and pulls out the wig that Dani wore for the Halloween party. Eddie smiles initially, but his face slowly descends into sadness. He tries his therapeutic slow breathing technique and offers one slightly audible appeal to the Gods above.

“Please bring this one home.”

10

The Heart Of The Matter

In his heyday, Bruce Fitzgerald was hardly someone you could intimidate on or off the field. Towards the end of his playing days, his thick six-foot-two frame was still a presence that commanded respect. Bruce never actually engaged in any bench-clearing brawls until the very end of his career. On August 13, 1983, the Mariners and Angels engaged in a wild scene in Anaheim, California. Early in the game, M’s pitcher Bryan Clark threw behind Rod Carew. The Hall of Famer charged the mound and chaos ensued. Players from both sides had to be separated no less than three times that day. All the while, Bruce played peacemaker, finding Angels players and wrestling them to the ground to save themselves, until they had lost all of their vitriol.

Some ten years later, twelve-year-old Eddie watched on television as a similar incident took place in Baltimore one Sunday afternoon. Future Hall of Fame pitcher Mike Mussina threw at Mariners catcher Bill Haselman, in retaliation for M’s hurler Chris Bosio hitting two Orioles. A massive fight broke out. Many punches were thrown. Eddie couldn’t contain his enthusiasm.

“Dad, this is awesome!,” he exclaimed. “It’s like a hockey game. Everybody’s fighting!”

Bruce stoically watched, then advised his son. “I never wanted to beat anybody up on the field. When this stuff happened, I always tried to hold people back.”

Eddie looked back at his father baffled at his response. “Aww, c’mon Dad. This is great. Look at this!”

“I only got into one fight, about fifteen years ago,” Bruce advised.

“Oh yeah?,” a wired Eddie replied. “What happened?”

“It was back in Cleveland,” says Bruce. “I guess it was ’78? This guy on Milwaukee, his name was Carl Clayton. Real big mouth. It was after the game. We beat ‘em, like, 9-4. We hear some commotion outside our locker room. So, Carl must have been all high on something. He’s running around, going off for no reason like ‘Y’all are cheaters. I’m gonna screw you, I’m gonna screw all your wives and your girlfriends. I’m gonna give them babies.”

Eddie could not contain his laughter. “Oh damn! That’s so messed up!”

“I mean, he’s just completely out of his mind from the drugs,” said Bruce. And he didn’t say the word screw, you know? He said the other word. So, I open the clubhouse door to go set this guy straight.”

“Uh-oh!”

Bruce leaned forward. His face became sterner as he continued his story.

“He looks right at me and says ‘Hey Bruce. I’m gonna screw your wife!’

“Ohhh, sh... damn!,” Eddie replied. “I mean, damn!”

“Of course, he didn’t say screw,” Bruce explained. “He said the F word and I just lost it. I went after this guy. Kicked his ass six ways from Sunday.”

“Yeah, Dad!!,” said Eddie.

“Yeah. Got suspended ten games,” advised Bruce. “Didn’t get paid ten games… But that was the only time I really hauled off and hit a guy. You don’t say that shit… mmm, that stuff about someone’s wife. You don’t do that.”

Eddie groggily stirs and awakens from his dream flashback at almost 7AM on the first Friday of December. He needed his gummies to knock him out just before one in the morning. The uncertainty in his mind, the anxiety, all the potential, outlandish outcomes for Dani in Michigan overwhelmed Eddie. All this weighs heavily on him still. However, it is of no concern to Bogie and Bacall. As usual, all they know is that he is late in feeding them.

Incoming messages flood Eddie’s phone while he’s in the shower. Before long, he reappears in the bedroom, much to his cats’ delight. Instinctively, Eddie reaches for his phone while buck naked.

*7:15am @brandifinegrl: Friends! Romans! Mets fans! Come one and all to the Amazin’ Holiday Party, Saturday Dec 17, 7pm Casa Woods. Fuck it, it’s a Christmas Party. Sorry Not Sorry, Timmy!*

*7:18am @brittlgm: Oooh, you son of a bitch, I’m in!*

*7:19am @eddiefitz80: All the way in.*

*7:22am @tsgrinder: Careful Eddie. I hear they just need the first four inches to get off. But what do I know? I’m just a lonely Jew on Christmas.*

*7:23am @lisametfam: LOL Tim. I’ll be there and I think I can convince a certain missing person to come too.*

*7:25am @deebeback: Awesome. I’ll definitely be there. Eddie dear, save some inches for me!*

One body part of immediate concern is Eddie’s neck. He surmises that he fell asleep in an awkward position. As fate would have it, Dr. Alan Peters is available on short notice. Eddie regretfully fakes illness, calls out of work and calls for a chiropractic appointment. He arrives for his 2:45 new patient exam at Levittown Chiropractic and Wellness five minutes early. The prototype of cool composure, Eddie walks up to the new receptionist, Jennifer, and checks in. The building is a converted residence, refurbished eight years earlier, across the street from Abbey Lane Elementary School. Where a kitchen once stood is now the front desk and filing cabinet. The living room is now the waiting area. Bedrooms now contain adjusting tables, with each room having a theme. Alan’s themes are the Mets, The Who, the New York Giants and golf.

Eddie sits and waits, the right side of his neck still noticeably sore and tight.

“Eddie?,” says Jennifer. “You can go into Room Two.”

He thanks Alan’s receptionist and walks down the hall. Eddie surveys Room Two. Hanging from the walls are a setlist from UBS Arena, a signed Quadrophenia poster, a framed and signed copy of the “Won’t Get Fooled Again” single on vinyl and an iconic still photo of Roger Daltrey spinning his microphone, Moon the Loon pounding the drums, Entwistle pleasantly grinning and Pete Townshend split-legged in mid-air.

Eddie sits down on the adjustment table with his legs crossed. Before long, another grinning presence walks in. Eddie forms his own smile.

“Well, Eddie,” Alan says. “What an unexpected surprise.”

Eddie nods as Alan extends his hand for a proper greeting, which Eddie obliges.

“Won’t get fooled again,” Eddie says. “Great song.”

“So, what’s going on?,” Alan wonders. “Are you the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald?”

“Heh. I’ve heard that one a few times,” Eddie rebuts. “No, not all of me. Just my neck over here.”

Alan looks down and nods, eyebrows raised. “Alrighty, well, for today, since it’s your first time here, I’ll have to do a comprehensive exam,” he replies. “Nothing too taxing, just testing your range of motion. As far as the neck goes, we can do some stim and heat and then, lastly, do a light correction.”

After the requisite round of tests and the aforementioned heat and electrical stimulation, Alan asks Eddie to lay face down on the table, which contains a headrest to keep his body perfectly aligned. Alan runs his hands down the middle of Eddie’s back to get a sense of his spinal alignment, then places his left hand on his right shoulder blade.

“Here comes that light adjustment,” Alan advises, then encourages him to relax. “Just deep breath in… and ouuutttt!”

Alan then places his right hand above Eddie’s right ear and jerks his patient’s head to the left. A series of loud, audible cracks follow.

“UHHHHH!!,” Eddie belts out. “That’s … oooh! That’s… so much better. That wasn’t a light adjustment.”

Alan grins and shrugs his shoulders. “I had to bend the truth a little. You needed it. Now, totally honest here, I’m just going to apply some Biofreeze.”

Eddie’s new chiropractor applies the menthol-infused gel to his affected area.

“Now, you may want to reapply this later on or just use an ice pack,” Alan says.

“Ice today, heat tomorrow,” Eddie replies as he sits up on the table. “I remember the routine from my playing days.”

“Well, you’re ahead of the game, no pun intended,” says Alan. “Give the office a call later this week. We’re here on Saturday mornings, too. If you need it, come on back.”

Eddie heartily shakes Alan’s hand. “Thank you so much!”

“Tell my wife I said hi, okay?,” Alan replies. He then reaches behind him, opens the door and glides into the hallway.

“My receptionist will check you out up front. Have a nice day, Eddie.”

Eddie walks back down the hall and revisits Jennifer at the front desk.

“Hi. How’d it go?,” she asks.

“Fine. Better than I was when I arrived,” Eddie says. His eyes then focus on a familiar-looking royal blue notepad next to Jennifer.

“Is that five by seven?,” Eddie wonders.

“I… think so?,” she answers.

Eddie’s mood darkens considerably. “Where’d you get that?”

Jennifer is taken aback but replies, “Um, Dr. Alan got it at Staples, I think?”

Eddie then relaxes. He concludes that the size, color and texture of the letters representing his wife’s infidelity are available at a chain store. Thus, they are widely accessible to anyone.

“Thanks! So, Dr. Alan said I should call later in the week.”

“Okay, sounds good,” Jennifer says. “So, that’s forty for today.”

Eddie pays his co-pay and leaves in a better place, mentally and physically. Meanwhile, Brandi is torn in both respects, not to mention financially defeated. After the lunch rush comes the mid-afternoon lull, the perfect time to talk business. Thus, dapper Don Aaronson walks in with his real estate broker friend, Peter Siegel, hoping to strike a deal. Even though their presence was foretold, Brandi’s heart sinks as the moment of truth has arrived. The two men approach the bar like sharks after fresh meat. No customers are present.

“Brandi! I found my blue suit to match the awning,” Don says jubilantly. “Peter, Brandi, vice versa?”

“Hi gentlemen,” Brandi quietly begins. “I have it all here… and I’ve changed my mind.” Her voice thickens. “Not happening.”

“Come on, Brandi,” Don reasons. “You know no one else will pay as much for this place. You’ve got an eighty-year-old building that hasn’t been updated in over ten years. Insurance premiums are skyrocketing. Same with food costs. You gotta keep prices somewhat stable to keep customers coming. Salaries go up. Everything’s cutting into your bottom line. This isn’t my first rodeo, you know. You’re a hundred and fifty grand in the hole.”

“Yeah, and I don’t have to give in to you, of all people,” Brandi retorts.

“And what are you going to do with the rest of your life? Who’s going to keep you on as a worker?,” Don asks.

“That’s none of your concern,” Brandi replies with anger building.

“And who’s handing Alannah a job out of college on a silver platter?”

Brandi has reached her limit. She has had enough of Don’s patronization and slams her hand down on the bar, so loud that it made both men flinch.

“OH, GO FUCK YOURSELF, DON!,” Brandi explodes. “You’re not doing this for our daughter’s sake. You just wanna hang something over her head and mine! Over my dead body! You’ve done nothing for her as a father, except pay her goddamn bills. You’re too wrapped up in your own shit. You never change!?”

Brandi’s fire and intensity stuns both Don and Peter. She stares a hole right through the man that took advantage of her all those years ago.

“You think I can’t find someone to buy this place?,” she asks with passion.

Peter takes a few steps backwards from the bar. Don’s demeanor is now considerably more diplomatic, his voice now as soft as Brandi’s was at the beginning of their conversation.

“Brandi, who’s going to put in the money to renovate, to make all the necessary updates?,” Don asks.

The struggling bartender and owner of O’Fallon’s flippantly slaps her hips with both hands. “If they have the money to buy it, they have the money to invest in it.”

Don slowly motions to Peter and nods his head towards the door. They both start to exit the premises. Don turns around, cautious and defeated.

“I’ll take her to see the Jones Beach light show when she gets home from school,” he says.

Brandi looks down briefly as if to carefully measure her response. “Fine.”

She waits a few seconds after they leave to finally exhale. Brandi looks down, looks around the empty room and sneers, proud of herself for exercising some of her demons. Brandi places her hands on her hips feeling more confident in herself even though her problems are not yet behind her.

That night, Dani arrives back in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, having flown from JFK to Detroit and driven the remaining two hours. Her Toyota Corolla rental car pulls into Julie Bianca’s driveway in darkness. Julie walks outside to meet her, adorned in her pink robe and slippers, blonde haired tied back. Dani parks, gets out of her car and is immediately greeted by her longtime friend with a forceful embrace.

“I thought you’d never come back here,” Julie says.

“I know!,” Dani confirms. “I never thought I’d have to. Honestly, I hate to say it, but I thought he’d be dead by now.”

“God doesn’t take the bad ones, now does he?” Julie replies.

Dani shakes her head and tries unsuccessfully to hide her grin. She opens the back seat and reaches in to retrieve her suitcase.

“This guy means that much to you,” Julie states. “I mean, let’s be honest. You’ve had four years to do this. Now, you meet Eddie and fall hopelessly in love and, suddenly, you’re ready to get rid of that bastard for good?”

Dani pulls out her black jumbo Arendale rolling upright spinner and exhales from the effort. She looks at Julie and answers with complete certainty.

“Julie, he’s the one. No doubt about it. I know it’s been four years. It’s not just me falling for him. It’s me having the courage to go back and shut the door. Eddie has given me that strength.”

Dani’s fellow Chippewa can only try unsuccessfully to hold back a grin.

“Then, let’s finish what we started ten years ago,” Julie responds.

The two college friends walk inside. Julie shows Dani to her room, a fine recreation of a bedroom suite at a Margaritaville resort. Bright white walls and bed frame. Aqua blue end tables. 56-inch TV mounted above the opposite wall. A massive painting of blue water surrounding an empty pier, sun setting in the distance. Dani walks inside and bounces her suitcase at the foot of the bed. Julie follows behind and leans in the doorway, arms crossed.

“You know, I never married because of my job,” Julie reveals. “Every day, I see couples who have their shit together who can’t make it work. Then, there’s people who don’t have their shit together. And then, there’s Kevin. I couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“Well, I’m not jumping the gun or anything,” Dani replies. “It’s like I told Eddie. I have to close this book before I start another one.”

Julie blows Dani a kiss and closes the door behind her. Dani looks around, taking in the ambiance of the room. She pulls her phone out of her pocket and texts Eddie:

*Hey! I’m here in Mount Pleasant. I have some bad news though.*

Eddie has been icing his neck, which is noticeably better. He leans forward and

sees the message. His heart starts to race.

*What happened?*

Dani then delivers the news that both she and Eddie have been dreading.

*Jake’s going to Texas.*

Eddie breathes a sigh of relief, then proceeds to slam the former Mets superstar

pitcher, as only a scorned fan of the orange and blue can.

*Well, good riddance! He was hurt most of the last few years. Didn’t want the ball. Only wanted the money. Onwards and upwards. Get Verlander.*

Dani smiles and replies in kind.

*That’s my boy! I miss seeing him pitch. Hope he’s still got it. But yeah deGrom can suck it… I’m going to bed soon. Love you! XO*

Dani then scrolls down to re-read the lengthy text she received from Kevin on

Thanksgiving night, just as she began her new book of love.

*Hi Dani. It’s Kevin. I changed my number a while back. Figured you may have blocked me since you never returned any of my old texts or calls four years ago.*

*So this is long overdue, probably the understatement of a lifetime, but I had to tell you one more time that I still love you. I love you. I didn’t say those three little words enough. I didn’t act like I did. I’m asking if we can try once more to move forward. You probably still think of me as a degenerate drug addict and alcoholic. I don’t blame you if you do. For what it’s worth, I gave it all up two years ago.*

*I started selling life insurance. Stuck with it for almost a year before going back to CMU. They gave me a shot as a DB Coach. I never did make it but maybe my calling in life is to help others make it. I got an apartment, a legal one in a real complex. I’m a late bloomer in life. I heard that song by Don Henley, The Heart of The Matter. I said to myself ‘This is me right now.’ I’m learning to live without you, but I miss you sometimes. All these things I thought I figured out, I’m learning again. I’m finally ready, ready for the good and the bad. If the bad includes you without me, believe it or not, I’m ready to accept it. We’ll get the D word, no hard feelings. I just need to hear it from you.*

*And once more, for what it’s worth, I love you Dani. Happy Thanksgiving.*

By reading Kevin’s text once again from start to finish, Dani devolves from feeling at peace to feeling uneasy. Her face slowly morphs into a livid state. She can’t fathom his true motives. Nonetheless, they are irrelevant. Symbolically, Dani begins replaying her entire relationship with Kevin. She feels nothing but shame and disgust for not realizing her true worth from the beginning. Regardless of Kevin’s intentions, his text opens old wounds. Before she goes even further down that familiar rabbit hole in her mind, Eddie texts her and snaps her back to reality:

*Hey Dani! Glad you’re safe. Keep me posted. I’m here for you, always always. Love you too!*

Her eyes growing weary and tired, Eddie’s response only reaffirms that Dani is here to finally put the demons of the past to bed. Before she readies for bed, she sends out a tweet:

*@deebeback: Sometimes you need to take one step back to take five steps forward. Also, fuck deGrom.*

For his part, Eddie is truly worried about Dani’s well-being. While he understands her need for closure, he still can’t help but think she is just setting herself up for disaster. No tweet, no reassurance can stop him from thinking the worst is about to happen.

It is eight in the morning on the first Saturday in December. Sue Rubino has been awake for three hours. Her bags are packed and her bed is made. It’s her last day at The Phoenix House. Sue has her sponsor’s contact information for the outside world. She is committed to weekly meetings starting this coming Tuesday. She is determined to stay away from the devil’s water and every other alcoholic beverage. What she never let on to her friends, not even to Lisa, was that she was suffering from another addiction.

Today, for the first time since her knee surgery, she logs into Twitter. She sighs and reminds herself that the purpose of this exercise is to inform her friends. Nothing more and nothing less. Sue looks in the bathroom mirror and hardly recognizes the person who walked through those doors twenty-eight days ago. The woman who used to drink an entire bottle of Tito’s after dinner is gone. The woman who liked and replied to each of every one of her friend’s tweets while completely hammered no longer exists.

Sue bypasses the twenty-eight new notifications yet recognizes the irony of that being the same number of days in rehab. She goes right to the Amazin’ Day Drinkers group chat that Brandi started when the pandemic shut down the bowling league. Sue recognizes the irony in that name as well and sends the following missive to her friends:

*8:09am @rubisoho143: Hello friends! It’s been quite a while. I know Lisa told you of my whereabouts recently. First and foremost, I still love all of you and I’m so sorry for not communicating. In addition to having an addiction to booze, I also felt like I had an addiction to social media. So, I stopped logging on for a while. I hope you understand. It was one of those things where one vice fed into the other… My days gargling Listerine to hide my breath at the gym are over. Couldn’t fool LA Fitness. Yeah, they caught on & I was fired. BTW, Crash has been very understanding. I heard from Chris Olsen. I’m welcomed back whenever I’m ready. My days feverishly tweeting are also done. I will try my best to do that part in moderation. I was always looking for validation in my life. I hope you can accept me drinking Diet Coke at O’Fallon’s from now on… I have some things to do “on the outside” this week, but I’ll see you all at Brandi’s on Saturday. Hate will get you every time, so always love. XO*

Naturally, the response to Sue’s message was unanimously supportive.

*@brittlgm 8:12am: OMG Sue! I’m so happy you’re doing well. Please don’t apologize. I really had no idea you were going through such a hard time with this. You are always loved and always welcome!*

*@lisametfam 8:13am: XOXO Love you so much girl! I’ll be there soon to bring you back to the outside world.*

*@brandifinegrl 8:14am: All the love in the world to you, Sue! Like Britt, I had no idea you had issues. Don’t feel obligated to tweet. We all have each other’s numbers. So looking forward to seeing you again!*

*@eddiefitz80 8:17am: I’m so happy you’re on the rebound. Looking forward to seeing you Saturday!*

*@deebeback 8:18am: Seconded, everything they said, girl! Love love love you Sue! I’m just happy you’re doing better.*

Perhaps the most touching and surprising response was from Tim. The man who is

well known for delivering nothing but laughs and consistent one-liners offered the most poignant line, without actually saying a word.

*Tim* *Schultz changed the name of the group to ‘Amazin’ Friends’*

Sue Rubino cried when her mother left home at age fourteen. She cried when her father succumbed to a virus more powerful than God. She’s cried multiple times since then while under the influence. For the first time she can remember, Sue cries tears of joy. It catches Marcus off guard as he’s walking past her room with the door open.

“Hey, Missy,” he says. “You alright in there?”

Sue wipes her unmade face and perks up. “Yeah. Everything’s fine. I’m… I’m going home!”

“Congratulations!,” Marcus spiritedly replies. “Hope to never see you again! HAHA!!”

Sue laughs at the obvious light-hearted comment as Marcus continues on his way. In just a few short hours, she will be on the outside yet again.

11

Change The Sheets

Dani wakes up to a most uncomfortable sensation. Her periods have been especially heavy for the past few months. Her primary doctor advised her it was because of her increasing weight. Dani brushed aside his reasoning, believing they tell everyone they are overweight in an attempt to scare them straight. Dani opens her eyes, looks down and immediately becomes disgusted with herself.

“UUGGGGHHH!!,” she exclaims as she jumps off her guest bed. She looks back and confirms that she has, indeed, bled through her pad. Dani grabs a new one from her suitcase along with her own washcloth from home and uses the guest bathroom. As she flushes the toilet and cleans herself up, she hears Julie knocking on her door.

“Wait!,” Dani requests. “Don’t come in. I bled through!”

Julie barges in and looks down on the bed, unfazed by her old friend’s declaration of blood.

“Hun, it’s fine,” she declares. “You know how many times I’ve done this?”

Julie starts to gather the soiled sheets from the guest bed, only to stop when she hears Dani on the toilet. At first, it’s a faint breathing noise. However, the panting intensifies and is followed by sobbing. Julie starts to worry. She rushes into the bathroom and finds Dani looking straight ahead, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Dani! Oh my God, honey! It’s just a little blood,” Julie reasons as she places a comforting hand on Dani’s left shoulder.

“The blood!...” Dani replies, voice quivering. “It’s here… It happened here. Kevin…”

Julie looks down thoroughly confused. She wraps her arms around Dani, still firmly seated on the toilet. “It’s gonna be okay!”

“I never told you,” Dani says, eyes ready to cry another round. “I’m sorry, Julie. I never told you!... I never told anyone!”

A look of sadness only adds to Dani’s meltdown as she proceeds to tell Julie about the events that began on Valentine’s Day of 2014.

The incident from the previous August was still fresh in her mind. Dani had tried to escape once with disastrously violent results. Since that day, Kevin kept trying to convince her that bringing a child into the world was the best way for their relationship to flourish. She denied him every time. It was one thing for her to be stuck in an untenable situation. Dani would not, under any circumstances, subject a baby to their dysfunction.

The Backmans had no plans that night, or the entire weekend for that matter. Kevin thought he had the perfect solution. He was exceptionally sweet to her as she left for work on a Friday. Dani had long established the fact that he was simply a roommate with no ambition, a drug problem and a penchant for violence. She was a prisoner, guilty of falling for the illusion of a real man.

“I have a surprise for you when you get home,” Kevin declared.

Dani did her best not to acknowledge him. She kept brushing her teeth in the bathroom mirror. Kevin stood in the doorway and persisted.

“I haven’t forgotten what today is,” he said. “You’re gonna like what I have for you, Dani.”

She spit out her toothpaste and shot back with ferocity.

“If you’re fucking naked when I get home, I swear to God, I will-“

“No, no no!,” Kevin replied. “It’s an actual gift that we can use this weekend… I mean, we can use that, *too*.”

Dani rolled her eyes and exited the bathroom in revulsion. She grabbed her purse, keys and phone. She barely muttered “bye” to her husband, who vowed she would be happy with his gift.

“You’re gonna love it, babe!,” he yelled as she stomped out of the house.

Sure enough, five-thirty came with Dani returning from work. She walked in to see Kevin on the couch playing *NCAA Football 14* on PlayStation 3. He was still in his pajamas, unshaven, having not showered. She was undaunted, for this had become the norm.

“Wendy’s didn’t need you today?,” Dani flippantly remarked as she threw her purse onto the couch.

“Nahhh. I didn’t need THEM!,” Kevin responded. “I was busy.”

“Yeah?”

Kevin paused his game, carefully placed his controller down on the couch and reached for an envelope. He walked over to Dani and presented it to her.

“There’s no card that can say what this says,” offered Kevin.

Dani sat down, still unsure of his intentions. She had no expectations when she opened the envelope. There was no card inside. There was no declaration of love. However, its contents took her completely by surprise.

“Billy Joel?!?... Wait, this is tomorrow?,” she asked.

“I told you you’d like it,” Kevin answered with a heightened sense of accomplishment. Dani tried and failed to hide her smile. She finally acquiesced and hugged her husband.

“Thank you Kevin!”

Kevin reached in and kissed his wife gently. “Happy Valentine’s Day!”

Dani snapped her head back and couldn’t resist asking the question. “Okay, Kev. How did you get these?”

Kevin placed his hands in his pockets and cheerily revealed his ways. “Carlos had a guy. He did me a huge solid.”

Dani’s face quickly returns to a neutral resting position. The name Carlos has long resulted in her reacting with disdain. “Well, tell him I said thank you,” she said.

Floor seats for a Billy Joel concert at the Palace at Auburn Hills was a huge upgrade from the nothing she was anticipating. The Backmans made the two-hour drive to the show. Kevin was showered, clean-shaven and surprisingly pleasant. Dani was leery but chose not to poke the proverbial bear. Midway through the show, he reached into his winter coat for a surprise on a smaller scale.

“Skittles?,” he asked her.

Dani was giddy, slightly buzzed and hungry. Through the faded arena lights, she grabbed the bag and tossed back a few at a time. Then a few more. By the time Long Island’s favorite son played his encore, Dani was surprisingly limp and dizzy. She grabbed Kevin’s arm and leaned in, legs wobbly and equilibrium surprisingly altered.

“I never get this drunk,” she announced. “I gotta drink more. I’m losing my tolerance.”

Dani’s world started turning upside down. The bright white arena lights came up after the show. They appeared to be every color of the rainbow to her. Dani’s recollection of the events that followed are sketchy at best. Visions of the rest of the evening flashed in bits and pieces. Kevin helped her out of the arena. Kevin buckled her into the passenger seat. Dani regained her bearings briefly to feel him driving northbound on I-75 well over the speed limit. The combination of velocity and the stars above made Dani exclaim “WOOOWW!!” It was an unexpected high.

Dani was helped back into their house in Mount Pleasant. From there, she had a massively strange dream. The only part she vividly recalled was being a bull rider in the ocean and being wrapped in Charmin.

A sudden jolt awakened Dani several hours later. Being a side sleeper, she was surprised to find herself completely flat on her back. Dani started to sit up in bed but was overcome with pain in her abdomen. The excruciating agony proceeded almost in slow motion, shooting downward. Her mouth widened. Her initial reaction was to hold it in, out of a sliver of respect for her husband. Dani then realized that Kevin was not in bed with her. Thus, she let out a horrifying scream. The pain was almost unbearable. Dani barely rolled out of bed and collapsed on the floor next to it. She pulled herself up, whimpering and immediately aware. The slight blood stain on the sheets was academic. Dani didn’t remember a single moment of her being violated. She just knew.

Dani rushed into the bathroom unsure of whether to pee, puke or throw herself into the shower. She did all of the above, crying profusely then collapsing in the corner with the hot water running. All the while, she couldn’t fathom what made her so inebriated the night before.

After what felt like an hour-long cleansing that didn’t come close to adequately purging the stains within, Dani emerged from the shower. She brushed her hair and couldn’t even consider looking in the mirror. At that moment, she hated herself with a passion, even more so than her degenerate husband.

Kevin was nowhere to be found. Dani ripped open her dresser drawer, feverishly put on a t-shirt and jeans, grabbed her purse, phone and keys and ran out the door. It was seven-thirty on a Sunday morning. There was no twenty-four-hour pharmacy anywhere near Mount Pleasant. She didn’t care. She had to drive far and wide, anywhere her beat up 2008 Kia Sportage would take her. There was no Plan A, only a Plan B.

Dani stopped in Bay City. The physical pain inside her was now intermittent. The same could not be said for the emotional damage. For no rhyme or reason, she decided she was safe in Bay City. Walgreens would not open until ten, so Dani had two hours to kill. A Tim Horton’s sausage, egg and cheese biscuit went down too easy and too quickly. A second biscuit with a small coffee made her nauseous. An elderly couple briefly caught her eye and appeared befuddled by her presence, alone on a Sunday morning looking like fresh Hell. Dani didn’t care. They didn’t know. Nobody knew.

Her phone was safely nestled in her purse. She didn’t care about the latest buzz on social media. Regardless, her phone buzzed shortly before nine-thirty. Dani reached into her purse for it, only to find her empty Skittles wrapper from the previous night. Dani saw that familiar font but was perplexed by its mostly white packaging. She looked more closely at it. The word ‘Zombie’ stuck out like a sore thumb, as did the marijuana leaf. The bottom corner of the empty wrapper told an even greater tale. *400 MG THC PER PACK. 50 MG THC PER PIECE*.

Anger, shock and dismay swiftly followed as Dani came to an unbelievable realization. She assumed this was a regular package of candy, laced primarily with sugar. She had consumed all of it, every last piece. Dani started to bury the anger. The more she thought about what he had done to her, the more she began to wonder if this was indeed her fate – to be confined to a life unfulfilled and compromised. Regardless, as she sat and waited for ten o’clock to come, she knew one undisputed truth. Deceit and violation would not win out. Dani Backman would never allow Kevin to father her child.

The sun was almost blinding, despite the bitterly cold Michigan morning. Dani left her impromptu breakfast meeting with her empty soul and drove down the road to Rite Aid. She checked her phone before she got out of the car. Her warden had indeed texted her.

*I brought back breakfast for when you come back from church*

Not a mention of his deception. Not a half-hearted apology. Dani was not surprised. It was par for the course in her mind. The automatic doors opened and proved to her that God had a twisted sense of humor. The muffled speakers greeted her to the tune of Kathleen Edwards’ “Change The Sheets.”

Rosa glared at this hot mess of a woman from behind the register. Her curiosity grew with each step Dani’s unkempt hair and stone-cold expression made towards her, until they were finally face to face.

“Rough night out, hun?,” Rosa sarcastically asked.

“The morning after?,” Dani requested.

“Yes, Ma’am! The morning after is always hard,” Rosa replied, not understanding her inquiry.

Dani took an impatient breath but otherwise kept what remained of her composure. “The morning after pill? Plan B? Do you have it?,” she asked.

Rosa copped her hand to her mouth. “Ohh dear! Yes, it’s right here… Will that be all, dear?”

“Actually… two please,” Dani answered. “For the next time.”

Back in present-day Julie’s guest bathroom, the two former Chippewa roommates find themselves wrapped in each other’s arms. Both are now seated on the floor against the bathtub crying profusely.

“Oh Dani. He should be fucking murdered in cold blood,” Julie announces. “We have to tell the cops. No, fucking kill him, then tell the cops.”

“No, Julie! He’ll kill me first. I know it!,” Dani replies, horrified. “I just… I thought if I came here to face him, it would help my fear. You know, stare down your enemy and he’ll fold? But all I can think of is the pain he put me through. I can’t…. I can’t, Julie!!”

“Dani, I know this is hard, but we have to file a report,” Julie insists. “Someone like that? Who knows how many other women he’s done this to since you left him.”

“NO! Please, Julie. He’ll know it’s me!,” Dani says. “I just… I just want this to be over.”

“Hun, listen to me,” Julie implores. “Imagine for a moment there are five other women out there with the same story. They’re all thinking the same thing. ‘I can’t be the one to tell on him. He’ll skin me alive.’ Imagine if they’re all waiting for someone else to be first before they come out of the woodwork.”

Julie places both hands on Dani’s shoulders and looks her squarely in the eyes. “Be first.”

Dani’s tears of fear will not cease. She collapses onto Julie’s heart. Julie becomes even more stricken with anger and resentment towards Kevin.

“I’ll tell Lana I’m taking the day,” Julie continues. “We’ll file the report today, get a restraining order. I know Brian will serve him-“

“JULIE!!,” Dani exclaims. “Please! Please!... The stress of even getting a legal separation from him is almost too much to bear for me. I tried to forget what he did…. Please!”

Dani’s longtime friend reluctantly concedes and lets Dani handle things one step at a time. “Okay, let’s get the divorce papers served,” Julie concludes. “Once that’s done, you need to find a counselor back in New York. Talk about it. Maybe talking it through will give you the clarity you need.”

Dani’s sobbing and sniffling lessens, but her grip does not. She brushes Julie’s hair back with her hands and musters a smile.

“Thank you!”

Dani slowly gets up off the tile floor and turns toward her friend as she exits the bathroom. “It’s a good thing I still live here.”

“Hell yeah, babe!,” Julie retorts while following Dani back into the guest bedroom.

“I knew he’d never have the wherewithal or the desire to come to New York if I filed there,” Dani says as she fishes through her purse for her wallet. “I appreciate you letting me change my address.”

Julie peers down as Dani takes out her current Michigan driver’s license, which was issued on her birthday in 2019 and expires in 2023.

“Still good, babe,” Julie remarks. “Still beautiful. You still file non-resident taxes in New York?”

Dani confirms. “Yup, but after this is over, I’m a full-on Long Islander again.”

“So, you took the whole week, right?,” Julie wonders. “What do you want to do?”

Dani ponders Julie’s question for a second. “I always felt safe in Bay City. The riverwalk? Birthplace of Madonna?”

“Sure.”

“We can figure out the rest as we go,” Dani announces.

Julie does take the day off. She and Dani go to family court to initiate the long overdue filing for divorce. Later that evening, back in Dani’s once and future official home, Brandi is in her customary place behind the bar at O’Fallon’s. She is greeted by Eddie at his usual time of five-thirty, albeit on an unusual night.

“Eddie!... is it Wednesday already?”

“Nooo,” he replies while sauntering up to his customary corner stool. “I just wanted to stop in tonight. I have business to take care of on Wednesday, so I figured what the hell. Let’s see how the host with the most is.”

“The host with the most?,” Brandi remarks. “That depends on what the most is. I mean, I have the most beer. The most charm. I wish I had the most tits and ass.”

“So, you got the most beer, huh?,” Eddie replies. “How about the most Angry Orchard?”

“Yup, we have that. Coming right up, my friend,” Brandi states as she walks over to the cooler.

“I had most abs as a kid,” Eddie jokes.

“Oh yeah? You were ripped, huh?,” Brandi suggestively remarks.

“No, MOST abs,” he corrects her.

Brandi almost drops Eddie’s beer and cackles. “Oh Jesus!”

“Yeah, I was the fat kid growing up,” he says. “Thinned out a little in my teens and twenties. Kept most of the weight off until I got older. Now? Ehh, I’ve got a few more abs than I used to.”

Brandi returns with Coors Light and a smile. “You. Look. Dashing.”

Eddie nods approvingly as Brandi changes the subject. “So, what kind of business do you have to take care of on Wednesday?”

“Closing for my dad’s house,” Eddie says.

“Ohhhh! That’s great!”

“Yeah. Brodie wants me in on a zoom call with everyone,” Eddie reveals. “After that, I figured I’d check in on Dani. See how everything’s going.”

Brandi straightens up and grins with delight. “Ahhh, our beloved Dani. She really deserves you. She adores you too.”

Finally, Brandi’s inquisitiveness gets the better of her. “You know, I’m just curious. Why Dani?”

Eddie furrows his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Of all the people in the world, why did you choose her?,” Brandi wonders. “I mean, I’m lucky if I find someone who isn’t a drunken degenerate.”

Brandi stops short of asking what she really wants to ask. *Why not me?* She does not want to appear petty and jealous after all the goodwill that she’s built with Eddie.

“Occupational hazard, huh?,” he remarks as he takes a large sip. “Well...”

Eddie takes a breath and lifts his head to look her in the eyes before responding.

“I love her, Brandi. I knew she was The One the moment I laid eyes on her.”

“So, you’re one of those guys?,” Brandi asks. “Love at first sight and all that malarkey? I mean, you might be physically attracted to someone instantly, but to love someone before you even know them?”

“Yes,” Eddie states. “Yes, I do believe in that. I can’t explain it. No one can. It just… happens. You love who you love.”

“Okay, yeah, but what is it about Dani that makes her *The One* for you?,” Brandi inquires.

“Um… she has a soft spot for romance. She’s beautiful, intelligent, vibrant, funny… She’s everything… And you know what? She’s everything I’ve never had in a woman.”

Brandi is perplexed. “You’ve never had that? You never had that before, Eddie? All those years in the minor leagues. All those years with Kristine? You never had that, not even in the beginning?”

Eddie forgoes the obvious comeback regarding his deceased wife’s infidelity. He’s not ready to address that with the rest of his friends.

“For all the years I knew Kristine, she was never one to be, uh… romantic,” he explains. “She was never a girl who had a soft spot for things like love and flowers, cuddling, you know… I mean, maybe in the beginning when we first met. NO! Even when we first met, she was not the soft and sweet romantic type to say ‘I love you! I’m so happy to be with you! Together forever, to the moon and back.’ All that shit. She actually chose me! She met me at a bar in Florida and she didn’t really give a shit if she got my number or didn’t. She didn’t care if we ever saw each other again. When I stopped playing ball, she was happy that I was coming home to have a relationship with her, but she never had that real soft spot. She never craved, you know, the dinners by candlelight, the long walks on the beach…”

“Well, not all women want that,” Brandi responds.

“True. Very true,” replies Eddie. “But my point is I found someone who wants that, who appreciates all that, all that I have to offer.”

Eddie sips his beer and continues his thesis.

“You know what else, Brandi? I’ve never chased a girl before, not until now. I don’t even think I had that with Ann, as a matter of fact. Everyone I’ve ever known has chased ME, because I was a young athlete in my twenties and whatnot. People tracked me down and wanted a one-night sex affair. I love sex as much as the next guy, but I’ve had sex. I like sex. I want *love*. I want to be the giver of love…”

Brandi appears baffled as Eddie pauses to take another sip of his beer.

“Dani understands what it’s like to be romanced,” continues Eddie. “I sense that, after all she’s been through with Kevin. She’s never had the right man – and please don’t repeat that. I mean no disrespect when I say that. She’s comforting. Kristine was never… and I loved her very much, don’t get me wrong, but she HATED when I bought her flowers! Hated it! She’d say things like ‘You could’ve used that money to pay the mortgage. You didn’t have to waste it on me, and I can’t even bring them home because the cats will eat them.’ Dani represents everything I want in a woman and I dare say I represent everything she wants in a man... or at least I hope I do.”

Eddie takes yet another sip and slams his bottle down with more fervor. “So, that’s why her and not anyone else.”

In a moment of judgmental mishap, Brandi dismisses Eddie’s detailed reasoning. “I gotta tell you, that… seems a little too ‘old-school thinking’ for today’s

women,” states Brandi. “What’s wrong with a woman chasing a man the same way a man chases a woman?”

“Nothing at all. I get that,” clarifies Eddie. “I’m saying it’s different when you choose someone first and they choose you back. I’m tired of being the hunted. It’s not that I’m archaic… Boy meets girl, Boy likes girl, girl likes boy, boy romances girl, girl falls in love with boy, boy falls in love with girl. All my life it’s been ‘Girl wants boy, girl chases boy, boy likes girl so boy accepts girl. They don’t write rom-coms like that.”

Brandi appears more perturbed with Eddie’s explanation. “So, you *accepted* Kristine for all those years? Fifteen, sixteen years of marriage and you just accepted

her?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying!,” Eddie answers. “You know, you’re putting words in my mouth. I don’t get it. And what’s with the interrogation, anyway?”

“I think you’re rationalizing,” Brandi replies. “Maybe deep down you wanted things to be that way. Maybe you wanted a woman who was strong and decisive.”

Eddie becomes angry with Brandi’s theory. “It had nothing to do with being strong and decisive, Brandi! I fucking love Dani! I am in love with her. Okay? I. AM. IN. LOVE. WITH. DANI!… What is it that you have against her anyway?”

“Nothing, Eddie, I just-“

“You!...”

Eddie points ever so slightly at Brandi. His face suddenly becomes ripe with lucidity, like the proverbial lightbulb had just turned on.

“You have a thing for me!,” he reasons. “All this time, *you’ve* been the one pursuing me. That’s why you asked me to come down here in the first place, isn’t it?”

“No, no, Eddie-“

“I see it now,” Eddie retorts, as he stands up from his stool and starts pacing. “You’ve always been VEERRRY accommodating to me, haven’t you? The little smiles, the side eyes. And you dancing for me at the Halloween party. Was that all part of your master plan to get me riled up for you?”

“Eddie, come on now…”

“You don’t really have anything against Dani, do you? You just don’t want me to be with her because you want to be in like Flint…”

Eddie becomes more enraged and defined, much to Brandi’s chagrin. She is close to tears as he continues tearing into her.

“I opened up to you after Kris died. Were you trying to play on my emotions that whole time, just to get me to be with you? Is THAT what you are? You chase fucking widowers, you sick fuck?”

“NO! IT WASN’T LIKE THAT!!,” Brandi screams.

“Like Hell it wasn’t.”

Eddie walks swiftly towards the exit, lifting his right hand as if to say ‘Good riddance.’

“Eddie, stop! I’m sorry! PLEASE!,” Brandi begs. “I DON’T KNOW HOW TO GET A MAN LIKE YOU!!”

Eddie is past the inner door and inches from the front door. He stops and touches the handle with his right hand, contemplating Brandi’s last words. Is it the parting shot of a wicked scoundrel or an honest confession from an emotional, stressed friend? Was this all just an unfortunate misunderstanding resulting from a stream-of-consciousness rant gone perilously astray? Eddie contemplates what he leaves behind if he walks out the front door of O’Fallon’s and what he has left if he continues. He slowly turns around towards Brandi and replies.

“Excuse me?”

“Eddie, please. It wasn’t like that in the beginning,” Brandi reasons. “I swear to God. I was genuinely sorry for your loss and I could tell you needed a friend.”

Eddie slowly walks back into the bar and approaches the countertop. He is devoid of emotion, simply content to listen for the time being.

“I was happy to be your friend,” says Brandi, embarrassed at her being outed. “And then somewhere along the line, I kinda developed a… a thing.”

“A thing?,” Eddie asks with the hint of a smile.

“I’ve had shitty luck with men my whole life. High school, nobody wanted me because I was a tomboy, and college... well, you know about college. And then Alannah’s father, that bastard. Well, you know him.”

“No, I don’t,” Eddie says.

“Um, yeah, you do,” answers Brandi. “Don?”

Eddie is blown away. “DON?!? That piece of sh… I mean, that-“

“No, he’s a total piece of shit,” she replies. “And yeah, he’s the one who dragged me home that night and knocked me up. I mean, listen, he does pay child support. I’ll give him that, but he doesn’t give a rat’s ass about me. You know, he’s been trying to buy this place.”

“This place?”

“Yeah, so I’ve been having a rough go financially,” admits Brandi. “COVID put me in a huge hole and I haven’t been able to climb out of it. Don’s been trying to convince me to sell to him, just so he can prove what a fucking hero he is and what a loser I am. You know, it’s bad enough he’s Daddy Warbucks and I’m not, but if I sell to him, he wins.”

Eddie tries to reassure her. “Well, life isn’t all about money. I mean, whatever this was. Whatever just happened here, let’s just forget all that for a sec. Okay?... For what it’s worth, I think you’re more of a winner than he is.”

“It means I couldn’t support my kid,” she clarifies. “Excuse me, our kid. It just means he’s better than me at something else. At everything else.”

“Well, he’s not better than you at everything,” says Eddie. “In fact, he’s not better than you at a lot of things. I don’t know the guy from Adam, but I’m sure his friends are all assholes.”

A sense of guilt fills Brandi all over again. Her face looks somber and defeated.

“Eddie, I’m so sorry,” she says. “Every day I come in here and I see the bottom of the barrel bellying up to the bar. You and Tim, Britt, Dani, Lisa, Sue notwithstanding. I’m talking everyone else. All they want to do is get blitzed and get their rocks off. That becomes my frame of reference. I don’t know what to do with a guy like you, or Tim.”

“You do what you’re doing right now, Brandi,” Eddie advises. “You talk to them. You open up. Be honest. I mean, it’s not always gonna work out, but don’t take it personally if it doesn’t.”

Brandi nods and fights back tears. “Yeah...”

“You know what? I’ll take another Coors Light,” Eddie requests, as he sits once again. Brandi shifts over to the mini fridge.

“I read this book called *The Four Agreements*.,” Eddie says. “One of the agreements is don’t take anything personally.”

Brandi returns with his beer and a counterpoint.

“You know, I read that?,” she says. “I have a hard time with the part where you don’t take anything personally. Just because it’s not personal to them doesn’t mean it’s not personal to you.”

“People see things through their own sense of reality,” Eddie reasons. “It doesn’t make them wrong… Well, my wife was wrong by cheating on me.”

“I think it opens you up to being taken advantage of,” she answers before realizing what he just revealed. “You – WHAT?!?”

“Yup! I wasn’t going to say anything, but last week I found a box with love letters written to her by some guy. It was right before the pandemic.”

“Fuck, shit, cock and balls!,” exclaims Brandi. “I’m so sorry, Eddie! That’s just wrong. I can’t believe it!”

“Well, there’s nothing I can do now,” he reasons. “Unless you come across some guy in here named Hunter.”

Brandi reaches out to Eddie and touches his right forearm. “I’m sorry!”

“Anyway, you were saying people take advantage of you?,” he says. “That’s a reflection of them, not you. Who they are and what they do has nothing to do with you.”

Eddie lifts his head as he comes to a major realization.

“Hey!... Kris didn’t cheat on me because of anything *I* did… SHE was the problem. I’ve been trying to figure it out and you know what? It doesn’t even matter anymore.”

Eddie is about to sip his next beer when he has another moment of clarity. “Yeah… Hey, what does Tim have to do with this anyway?”

“What?,” she asks quizzically.

“You said you don’t know what to do with a guy like me, or a guy like Tim?,” he confirms... “You don’t have a crush on-“

“Noooo, no no, Eddie.”

“Yeah! Yeah, you do,” he answers with a smile. “You’ve known him since high

school and you never made the move.”

Brandi tries to deflect and dismiss his claim. “Calm down, Sherlock, we’re just friends for a long time.”

“Look at me,” he says. “Give me those Brandi eyes! All these years you couldn’t find *any* other decent men? What are we talking, twenty, twenty-five years? Nobody was worthy of your affections that whole time? Come on!!”

Eddie begins to sneer and wag his finger playfully. “You’re holding out for him, aren’t you?”

Brandi gazes downward and shakes her head, trying to convince herself that her friend is wrong.

“Tim was married up until five years ago,” she explains.

“So, he was taken,” says Eddie. “Okay, there was nobody else out there? Forget about the bar. Bowling league, dating apps, the supermarket – all these years, nobody caught your eye?”

Brandi shrugs her shoulders and has no answer for him.

“I bet you were hoping I’d fall for you, just so you could get over Tim!,” Eddie states. “HEY! The Halloween dance! HE’S the one who’s always making wisecracks about Amanda. You did it to me hoping it would do something for *HIM*!”

Brandi breaks down. “Okay, fine! I like Tim. Jesus!... Yeah, okay, fine. I’ve always liked him.”

“You should pay me for these therapy sessions, you know. Hell, sell *me* the bar instead of that dapper dick.”

Brandi laughs it off. “Haha! Yeah, that’s right…”

Eddie encourages Brandi to pursue her longtime friend.

“And you know, maybe Tim has been holding out for you these past five years, too. Maybe it’s a conversation you two should have. You know, just in case.”

Another sip precedes a famous quote recently uttered by Eddie’s new girlfriend. “What is it Gretzky said? You miss one hundred percent of the shots you don’t take?”

“Well, I’m 0 for 1 today,” Brandi replies with a sarcastic grin.

“One in ten, my friend! I think that’s the ratio for dating. Nine baddies for every good one.”

Brandi briefly appears stumped then casually corrects him. “I don’t think that’s what one-in-ten means.”

“Well, either way, take the shot,” Eddie says. “What’s the worst that can happen?... You’ve still got me.”

Brandi breathes a sigh of relief knowing that she has just released the proverbial bag of rocks she’s been carrying over her shoulder for too long. For Eddie, he is on his way to letting go of his own weight. He is putting the pieces in place for the life he desires. Fate has turned to fortune.

Eddie Fitzgerald arrives at work the next morning and finds an email from Robert Cook. The CEO has a client meeting at nine and will be in the office at eleven. Diane has chosen to take the day off. Thus, it is Robert whom Eddie goes to see at eleven-fifteen.

“Eddie, how’s it going?” he asks.

“Um… fine, I guess. Do you have a minute?”

Robert crosses his left leg in preparation. He knows the look on Eddie’s face all too well. It is the look of resignation.

“Uh-oh, not you too?”

Eddie sighs and takes a seat in front of Robert’s desk. His eyes do not hide the inevitable announcement. “Actually… huh. Yeah, me too.”

Robert is immediately gutted. His instinct is to place his left hand over his head in disillusion. However, he changes course mid-stream and places his left hand across his cheek instead.

“Oh, Eddie… So, where are you going?”

“I’m actually not going to another broker,” Eddie advises. He straightens his body and folds his hands together. “I’ve decided to become my own boss in another line of work.”

The Palmer Cook CEO is taken aback by his revelation. He uncrosses his left leg and crosses his right.

“So, it’s not about salary… When did you decide this?”

“I’ve been mulling it over for a while, now,” Eddie replies. “I’ll be straight. It’s never been my passion. I thought maybe I could get into it the more I did it, but… things have changed in my life these past two years. I realize now that I have the ability to do anything I want to do… I say this with all due respect. It’s not insurance.”

Robert is shellshocked at Eddie’s candor and disclosure. He recovers and understands Eddie is not someone he can convince to remain with the company.

“Well… normally, if someone of your stature is leaving, we just let them go right away. That’s standard procedure. But since you’re not going to one of our competitors, we can let you stay the two weeks.”

Eddie leans forward with some hesitation, which quickly turns to resolve. “I appreciate that, Sir. I really do… but today is my last day. I have plans.”

The CEO tries unsuccessfully to hide his disappointment. “Well, I’ll call Barry to turn off your sign-on and your access.”

Robert then stands and extends his right hand in appreciation. “Thank you for your service. I wish you well in your future endeavors.”

They respectfully shake hands, after which Eddie departs to gather his personal belongings for good. He devotedly texts Dani the news that night. She is rightfully supportive. Eddie assures her that he has a clear vision for his future, though he wants it to be a surprise for when she returns home. Besides, Dani has other things on her mind. On Thursday the 8th, process server Brian Fielding is ready and able to show Kevin Backman who’s boss.

Dani’s divorce filing becomes official. She and Julie sign off on all the paperwork. For Dani, it has become a strange odyssey. Her suppressed memories and unpredictable emotions have made it impossible for her to follow through with her original plan. Now, by order of Julie Bianca, it is in Brian’s hands. The longtime process server and friend of Julie’s is briefed on Kevin’s history of violence. He is no stranger to physical altercations in his line of work. The forty-one-year-old has relied on his training in American Kenpo on three occasions over the years.

Finding out the secondary assistant’s whereabouts is not hard. Kevin has a 10am meeting with other coaches at the Chippewa Champions Center to discuss possible in-state recruits for the fall. Prior to that, Kevin engages in his daily ninety-minute workout. It’s leg day. Though sunglasses hide his identity, there are no questions asked when a stout five-foot ten spark plug approaches the performance center entrance. He is wearing maroon CMU sweatpants and a baseball cap with a school-issued windbreaker.

*Remember, act like you belong here and you know where you’re going*. That has been rule number one since day one. Brian walks with purpose through the workout area and down the hall. Kevin’s physique has hardly changed much since his playing days. Drugs and alcohol played a key part in keeping him skinny into his forties. Since Dani’s departure, he has re-dedicated himself to regaining his lost muscle tone.

Film room A: Negative. He keeps walking. Film Room B: Negative. Onwards. Brian approached a small office with a nameplate that reads *Secondary Coach Mike Ribustello*. He looks inside the one hundred square foot space. An unshaven, brown curly-haired older man is reviewing the prior season’s playbook. Sweat lingers from his just-finished workout. Paydirt.

Brian enters to confirm what they both already know. “Kevin Backman, right?”

“Yeah?,” Kevin replies with a puzzled look.

“Got those test results back, just in time for the big game,” Brian responds.

Kevin laughs dismissively, believing he’s being pranked by one of his players. “Yeah, we’re on our way to a National Championship Game, friend.”

“Nice! Good luck against Georgia,” Brian retorts as he places the manila folder in Kevin’s right hand. “Oh, sorry, my mistake. These are legal documents. Congratulations! You’ve been served.”

Kevin’s heart starts racing. His face as white as the Chippewas’ away jersey, he tries to recoil and act tough in the face of fear. Kevin rises from his desk chair.

“You’ve got some balls coming down here with this shit,” he remarks. “You know I could take you, right? And I know the guy who runs this place.”

Kevin points up towards the corner of the ceiling where a black dome resides.

“He could lose the video on those cameras real easy,” he states.

Brian takes his phone out of his pocket and points it towards Kevin, whose demeanor suddenly softens.

“Yeah, but can he lose this Facebook Live?,” he asks. “Say hi, Kevin Backman.”

Kevin proceeds to sit back down silently and stare at the corner wall. Brian has successfully outsmarted his subject.

“Not my first rodeo, cowboy,” Brian remarks. “Besides, you touch me and it’s felony assault. Pretty sure you don’t want… Hey, good luck in that bowl game. Oh, that’s right, you didn’t make it.”

With that parting shot, Brian takes his leave from Kevin’s temporary office. He makes sure to walk sideways out the door, smartphone still focused on his primary target. Brian walks back down the hall, turning back every few seconds to confirm no one is approaching him from behind. Brian returns to his vehicle unscathed and calls Julie to declare ‘Mission Accomplished.’

Dani and Julie are both ecstatic and have reason to exhale. In warmer times, they would be enjoying their celebratory luncheon in Bay City while overlooking the Saginaw River. As it stands, they are content to enjoy their meal indoors at the Real Seafood Company.

“You have to come to New York to meet everyone,” Dani requests midway through consuming her seafood alfredo. “Especially Eddie.”

“Of course, babe,” Julie replies. “Hey, full disclosure. I stalked his social media profiles. He’s quite the catch. You bagged a good one.”

Dani beams and raises her second glass of Bellini. “To bagging the good one.”

The toast is interrupted by a text received on Dani’s phone. She looks down at the table where her phone shows a number that’s not in her contacts.

“Hmmm, it’s a 989 number,” Dani says. She picks up the phone and swipes on the notification. Dani’s demeanor quickly changes. Her face becomes ashen, her shoulders slump and her breathing becomes increasingly measured.

“What’s wrong?,” Julie wonders. When Dani looks up, her friend sees a woman once again on the verge of tears. Dani flashes the screen at Julie, who promptly rips the phone from her hand and gazes at the message.

*You didn’t even have the balls to see me face to face. Big mistake!*

“I… It has to be him!,” Dani whimpers. “It… it’s not his number, but it has to be.”

“Oh God, Dani!,” Julie says. “Now, we have to get that restraining order, at least.”

Dani wholeheartedly agrees and the second round of paperwork is filed that afternoon. When she gets back to Julie’s house, she calls Eddie needing to hear from the man who truly loves her. Eddie sees the number and immediately springs into action.

“Hey, babe!”

“Hey, Eddie.”

“What’s wrong, honey?”

After a brief pause, Dani replies with a general statement.

“Everything, baby… Things didn’t go as I’d hoped. I filed for divorce. He… he sent a nasty text message. It was from another number, but I know it was him.”

Eddie’s demeanor morphs into rage for Dani’s estranged husband.

“I’m coming there. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“No, baby,” she answers. “I’m coming home tomorrow. There’s nothing else to do here.”

“I’m worried about you,” he confesses. “I want to be there in case he tries anything.”

“Well, I got a restraining order today,” Dani advises. “Besides, there’s nothing he can do to me that he hasn’t already done.”

“What do you mean by that?,” Eddie wonders.

“Well… I never told you this,” Dani replies, once again on the verge of tears. “In fact, I never told anyone until the other day…”

She decides now is the time to come clean to Eddie about her rape.

Ever since his unsavory exit from Blackstone’s, Kevin Backman has made Donnie’s Tavern his go-to hangout. In his younger days, Kevin wanted to feel like he was still the big man on campus. Every now and again, the younger student-athletes would feel honored to be in the presence of Chippewa royalty. As the years wore on, however, his reputation as a drug-addicted has-been overshadowed his former exploits on the field.

Kevin has finished his scouting and film studies for the week. Like the woman whose youth he manipulated and stole, visiting friends at a bar has become a weekly ritual. Unlike Dani, Kevin has only one friend left to rely on. He meanders in to find a restaurant surprisingly booming on a Friday afternoon. With booths lined up against the wall, tables placed together in the center of the floor and a bar area tucked away against the nearby wall on the right, Donnie’s is the place to be. In recent times, Kevin is content to find a bar stool in the corner and be as inconspicuous as possible.

Dori is middle-aged and blonde. Her skin is weathered beyond her years. The hard partying has taken its toll on her. Dressed in all black, she is still playing with the remote trying to change the main projection screen from the usual talking heads on the Michigan Sports Network to the ongoing World Cup.

“Ahh, nobody cares about soccer here,” Kevin jokes as he walks up to the bar. The young masses carrying flags representing the countries of their ancestors say otherwise.

Dori looks back at him with bewilderment. “Get your eyes checked, Mister!”

Kevin places a small brown bag on the edge of the countertop close to her.

“You left it at my place the other day,” he advises.

Dori grins at Kevin and chuckles. “You could have left it there. Like I wasn’t coming over after my shift, like every other Friday night.”

“Well, what if you didn’t?,” Kevin cluelessly replies.

Dori immediately shoots back. “You think I can’t get it from someone else?”

Kevin ponders her response and shrugs it off. “I’m gonna hit the head. Coors Light and a burger medium?”

Dori finally finds the right channel to the applause of the CMU masses.

“You got it, Kev,” she answers.

Kevin struts across the length of the restaurant and down the hallway on the opposite side to the men’s room. The increased volume from the televisions and patrons drowns out the sound of a mysterious customer fast approaching from behind. As Kevin opens the restroom door and tries to lock it behind him, the unknown stalker shoves the door open, pushing the beleaguered Chippewa backwards.

“Hey, asshole!,” Kevin shouts. “Watch it!”

The mystery man, dressed in a black trench coat and sunglasses forces his way into the small restroom. He vigorously slams the door shut behind him and locks it.

“Hey, fuck face! There’s only room for one in here,” Kevin chides.

The unwanted individual reaches his ball cap and sunglasses and tosses them onto the sink.

“Looks to me like there’s room for two,” he assertively replies.

Kevin’s eyes look up, then back and forth quickly and nervously. He backs up against the opposite subway-tiled wall and backs down from the six-foot brown-haired man.

“Hey, listen, Slugger. I’m not that kind of guy,” Kevin condescendingly says.

Kevin’s opposition calmly stands his ground.

“If you’re looking for cameras, you’re not gonna find them here,” he says. “Privacy laws, which is good because you and I need to have a private conversation. And it’s not Slugger… It’s Eddie.”

Eddie’s eyes pierce through Kevin like a hot knife through butter. Kevin desperately attempts trash talk to intimidate him.

“You want a conversation?,” Kevin replies. He sharply points at Eddie. “Let me tell you something. I will fuck you up, fat boy!”

“Fat boy? That hurts, man,” Eddie sarcastically replies. “Not as much as getting fucked against your will, I’m sure, but it hurts.”

Kevin’s face becomes whiter than the walls that surround him.

“So, here’s a topic of discussion,” Eddie continues. “Statute of limitations. It doesn’t expire when it comes to criminal activities. There’s a LOT of people who came before you who did bad things, who claim to have changed their ways and guess what? They still ended up in court, then jail. Maybe if they’re real famous, they end up on the news. Sometimes it takes years. Sometimes, even decades, but everybody eventually comes to Jesus.”

Kevin laughs under his breath and shakes his head in disbelief.

Eddie clenches his fists. “You remember that comedian who put roofies in the girls’ drinks and played a real nice guy on TV? Then, later on he finally got his just due? I think it was Crosby… something? I don’t know. He had a cartoon, right? With a bunch of kids?”

Kevin becomes upset and slams the bathroom stall door twice to try and alert anyone on the outside. The riveting play between Brazil and Croatia causes Kevin’s actions to fall on deaf ears.

“Look, you fuck. I don’t know where you get off, but I’m not Bill-“

Eddie takes another step towards Kevin and resumes his death stare, silencing him once again. Eddie then speaks in a soft yet threatening voice.

“You listen to me right now, you piece of shit….”

Kevin cocks his right hand and throws a wild haymaker. Eddie raises his left arm to block the punch, then immediately unleashes a right uppercut with the force of seventeen years of pain and anguish behind it. The blow jars his assailant and knocks him backwards against the bathroom wall. The dazed and defeated Kevin collapses on the floor underneath the sink.

Eddie’s eyes still full of rage, he stares down at the fiend that devoured Dani’s innocence.

“I guess this conversation’s over,” he surmises. “But let’s not end this without being honest with each other.”

Still seething yet calm, the conquering hero slowly walks over and leans in towards the fallen Kevin, who is unable to defend himself. Their faces are now less than a foot apart from each other.

“We were never meant to be legends on the field,” Eddie advises. “It’s a shame though. You never figured out how to be a legend of a man… like me.”

Eddie clicks his mouth and winks. He walks back towards the bathroom door. His hand hovering over the lock, Eddie suddenly has an epiphany and turns back one last time towards Kevin.

“You don’t even know whose honor I’m defending, do you?,” Eddie says.

Eddie then unlocks the door, pulls it open and leaves without fanfare. Kevin lay on the floor, hurt, shocked and dismayed that no one came to his defense. His face then slowly dissolves into resignation knowing he just received his comeuppance.

Eddie walks with purpose back down the hall and through the entire length of the restaurant. No one flinches, not even Dori. Everyone is fixated on the do-or-die quarterfinal match from Qatar. Eddie beams with sheer delight as he leaves without incident. As he reaches his rental car, an overwhelming sense of accomplishment wafts over him. Eddie gets in his 2022 Kona and does two animated fist pumps before turning the ignition and leaving the scene of the crime.

Dani is planning to fly back to New York the next day. Julie is back at her office for a meeting she could not postpone. Once the meeting is finished, she texts Dani.

*Girl, you need to come to the office. There’s one last form to sign. URGENT!*

Dani becomes gripped with fear. She asks Julie if she could bring the form back home with her. When Julie flatly texts her back “*No, you need to come here to the office, now!*,” she becomes confused and annoyed.

Dani reluctantly leaves and drives across town to 45 South Mission Street. Her heart now beating out of her chest knowing that Kevin had threatened her, she pulls into the parking lot scared. She surveys the 2022 Kona parked in front of the building and starts to tremble. However, when the driver exits the vehicle, Dani’s face explodes with incredulous joy.

Eddie ambles out, hands in pockets, smiling as wide as Saginaw Bay. Dani cannot believe her eyes or contain herself. She throws open her car door and leaps from her driver’s seat.

“I heard this town has some good Italian food,” Eddie remarks.

Like a child on Christmas morning, she runs towards him. Eddie walks towards her and meets her with open arms. Dani envelops him and holds him tighter than a

drum. She screams into his shoulder, making Eddie laugh out loud.

“EDDIE! My God, you!,” exclaims Dani.

“Me!”

Dani embraces his face with both hands and lands a huge, passionate kiss. Eddie slowly reaches around her to corral her, like the cowboy rescuing the lady in distress. When Eddie releases his lips from hers, Dani can only smile and giddily speak.

“How? I mean… AHHHH!!!”

“My father used to tell me ‘Son, we stick together. If we win, we win together. If we go down, we go down together,” Eddie advises. “I never figured out where he got it from, but that was his thing.”

“After all this, you’re only thinking about going down?,” Dani jokes.

Eddie laughs emphatically. “You know, I want to go everywhere with you. But, uh, yeah! We can do that, too!”

Suddenly, Dani realizes that Eddie is not at work. “Hey, you gave notice, right?”

“Yeah, I gave notice and they let me leave with two weeks’ severance,” Eddie replies. “No hard feelings. That’s what they do in the insurance world, so that we can’t poach any clients.”

“But, you’re not going back to insurance,” she responds.

“No. I’m not. I have another idea. We’ll talk about it.”

“You know… I remember that going down thing. You’ve got serious potential there, Eddie Fitzgerald,” Dani says.

“Oh! Ohhh-hooo! You!,” Eddie retorts. “You just gotta get your mind out of the gutter, young lady. Besides, that’s *not* my new career path.”

Dani cackles. “I thought you knew. I’m just a cock-gobbling thundercunt.”

“Well, whatever you are, you’ve got all of me all to yourself!,” Eddie says.

“Hey, speaking of giving your all, that thing we talked about?,” wonders Dani. “The broadcasting program at LIU Post?… I think I wanna give it a go.”

“Yes! Hey, absolutely. Go for it!,” encourages Eddie. “It’s what you always wanted, right?”

“I won’t see you as much after the winter break,” she warns.

“Babe, we have the rest of our lives to see each other,” Eddie replies.

Dani smiles warmly at her man. They both walk inside and meet Julie, who is waiting with warm hugs for both of them.

“This knight in shining armor googled my office and just showed up,” Julie says. “I had to get you down here.”

“So, there’s no form?,” Dani confirms.

“Nope, you’re free to go,” Julie replies.

Flanked by her true love, the brand-new divorcee contemplates one final act.

“Actually…,” she answers. “I have one more thing to do.”

“What’s that?,” wonders Julie.

Dani looks back at Eddie, mind and body at ease. She then turns back at Julie with determination and resolve and utters her final goal before returning home.

“Be first!”

12

Same Old Lang Syne

It is Saturday the 17th, the day of Brandi’s annual holiday party. Tim Schultz has plenty of reason to celebrate. He has just finalized plans for his annual pilgrimage to spring training in Florida. The Mets have signed all-time great Justin Verlander to essentially replace Jacob deGrom in their starting rotation. The last time Tim saw the former Tiger and Astro pitch was at Citi Field during the 2013 MLB All-Star Game. Tim wanders up to the attic in his house. Somewhere in a storage bin resides that year’s All-Star Game program. Verlander was a member of the visiting American League team. He thinks *Wouldn’t it be nice if he were to sign his photo on page 143?*

Tim knows the exact bin to pull out and finds his keepsake. As he’s about to close the bin, he sees his Mepham High School Class of ’94 yearbook resting on top. Tim does not typically dwell on the past in his personal life. However, something makes him flip through the pages of his old yearbook and stroll down memory lane.

He keeps in contact with a few of his old classmates through Facebook. Joanie Austin. Owen Davies. Shawn Nash. Of course, next to last alphabetically is Brandi Woods. No aqua net hair, no flashy necklace with her first name engraved on it, just straight hair parted in the middle with black eyeliner. Bleeding onto Ken Zander’s photo is Brandi’s message via Sharpie:

*Dear Tim! The funniest person I know and the most fun. So many great lunches at Phil’s. So many late nights watching HBO movies. New adventures await us. I couldn’t have done it without you. Love all ways, Brandi*

Tim had forgotten those words. He struggles to remember the significance behind “*Love all ways*.” He flashes back to one particular night. October 23rd, 1993.

The fog was so thick that the headlights on his 1980 Datsun 510 looked like two lightsabers ready to battle any other vehicles on the road. Nonetheless, Tim arrived at his destination on Pershing Avenue shortly before eight. Cars sped by on the Southern State Parkway in the distance. Tim exited his vehicle looking the part - faded Mets cap, Spin Doctors concert t-shirt and ripped powder blue jeans - carrying a large cheese pizza. Karen and Don Woods were out for the evening. Thus, Brandi and Tim were alone. Brandi opened the door for him, full of joy and life.

“Hey pizza man!,” she bellowed.

“Miss Woods! Here’s your very own…,” Tim replied as he entered the doorway. He dramatically opened the box.

“Cheese Pizza!”

“Yay!,” Brandi exclaimed, arms raised in excitement.

Tim walked through the dining room and placed the pizza box down on the kitchen table. A warm embrace followed.

“So, *Singles* tonight?,” asked Tim.

“Yeah!,” she quickly answered. “Oh, speaking of singles, I saw Jack today. I told him I just wanna be friends.”

Tim lifted his head and deliberately placed his hands on his hips. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Brandi answered. “So, I sent my commitment letter to New Hampshire. I said it would just be a waste of time for both of us. We’ve got, what, nine more months and then I leave? I don’t wanna be like Janine Conti. You know, got a scholarship to play for Maryland. Didn’t see her boyfriend. Shit like that happens all the time. People go off to college and everything changes.”

Tim acknowledged his friend’s words. He tried to keep a straight face but, deep down, he felt deflated. He had waited for two years for his chance to be more than friends. Now that Brandi was available, it appeared she was taking herself off the market.

“So, you’re not gonna date anyone?,” he asked as a matter of clarification.

Brandi dismissively responded. “Nope. Why bother? I have my whole life ahead of me, bud.”

Tim and Brandi moved into the den and sat next to each other on the couch. The film was about to start. Tim zoned out briefly, then suddenly recoiled.

“Oh, shit,” Tim remarked. “I forgot. Congratulations!”

“Huh?,” Brandi said, then suddenly smiled. “Oh, yeah! Yeah, thank you!”

Tim glanced over to the end table to his left. He noticed a birthday card for Brandi’s mother. The photo on the front cover was a bouquet of pink roses. Tim picked up the card and flipped it open. It was a blank canvas, but written on the inside was a heartfelt message from Brandi to Karen.

*I can only hope to someday be the woman you are. Happy birthday, Mom! Love all ways, Brandi*

Tim turned to Brandi with a quizzical look on his face.

“Did you misspell always?,” he asked her.

Brandi affirmed otherwise. “It’s our thing. Love all ways. It means we love each other every which way possible, no matter what… Wherever I go, her love is with me, and vice versa. Our love is ever present in our lives.”

Present-day Tim nods and acknowledges the past. He takes a few moments to reflect on years gone by. He remembers saying goodbye to Don with Brandi twenty years prior, then Karen three years later. He fast-forwards through his marriage to Debbie that ultimately ended with her departure. Tim recalls the words she echoed when the divorce became final. *Life isn’t all fun and games*. *You give all of yourself to your friends, but you were never here living in the moment with me*. *It’s like you were always looking for something else*. He places the yearbook back in the bin and walks back downstairs. He contemplates his next move carefully.

The devil on his right shoulder plays out a scenario. While Brandi might be getting ready for her party later that evening, he can’t let another day go by without taking at least one shot on goal.

Ever the consummate planner, Brandi has returned from the store with everything she needs. Chips, hors d’oeuvres, plates, cups, plastic silverware, soda, beer, wine – it’s all there. Once again, she has enlisted Tracey from Sand Wedge Deli to provide serving assistance as well as chicken parmigiana, sausage and peppers, chicken with broccoli and penne a la vodka. With five hours to go, she is doing a sweep of all her social media accounts when she receives an unexpected text.

*Party planning committee has arrived*

Confused, Brandi gets up from her couch to open the front door. She finds Tim standing in her doorway, wearing the same t-shirt and jeans he wore on that fateful October night thirty years ago. At first, she doesn’t understand its significance.

“Hey! Um… You’re a little early and is this a 90’s party?,” she remarks.

“Hey… actually I’m a little late,” replies Tim. “By about thirty years.”

Naturally, Brandi invites Tim inside to watch anything but *Below Deck* on demand. The table is already set, minus the food.

“I’m glad you came to help out, but really, I’m good,” Brandi says.

Tim saunters over to the dining room table, grabs a chair at the head and turns it around to straddle it. Brandi’s confusion does not wane.

“Couch?,” she offers.

“So, I don’t usually like to dig up old stuff,” Tim says. “Sometimes, I feel like that weird Sopranos episode, you know? Remember when. It’s the lowest form of conversation?”

“Yeah?”

“And I think you know me well enough by now,” Tim continues. “I use humor to deflect. I was actually looking for something else today when I found our old yearbook.”

Tim struggles to beat around the bush. He tries another way to get from Point A to Point B.

“I don’t wanna get weird, but do you ever wonder what might have been?,” he asks her. “I mean, back then?”

Normally, Brandi might be put off by Tim’s line of questioning. However, much to her own surprise, she slowly melts into her middle couch cushion and smiles.

“You mean?...” Brandi inquires while pointing to Tim, then herself.

He nods assertively. She sighs and starts to tremble unexpectedly.

“It’s funny you should ask,” Brandi answers. “I actually hadn’t thought about it for some time until recently.”

Brandi hesitates to keep going. Her breathing becomes heavier. Tim gets up from his chair and sits on the couch to her left, attempting to put her at ease.

“It’s on me,” Tim offers. “College happened, then you saw XYZ. Then, I got married. I threw myself into my work. Got divorced. It’s been what, five years now? Somehow, we became the ones that got away, even though we never really had… THAT in the first place.”

Brandi laughs light-heartedly. She is unsure whether her emotions are the result of thirty years of failures with the wrong men or thirty years of unfulfilled expectations from the right man.

“I must be out of my fucking mind even thinking about it,” she says.

Tim raises his right hand, then gently places it over Brandi’s left hand.

“Was I out of my head or was I out of my mind?,” he replies, echoing a popular ‘90s song lyric. “Brandi, how could I have ever been so blind?”

They have been the best of friends for the better part of three decades. A half second passes for each year they’ve known each other. For the first time in their coexistence, the next move does not come naturally to either of them.

Her hand still caressed by Tim’s, Brandi delivers a suggestion. “On three?”

Tim grins ear to ear and lightly chuckles as a defense mechanism. They look at each other as if to say *I can’t believe we’re about to do this.*

“One,” he says.

“Two,” she says.

Tim jumps the gun and lands a kiss on Brandi. Years of wonder dissolve through their lips. Anxiety turns to easy pleasure. They both slowly pull back to take stock of their feelings.

“Yeah,” they both agree simultaneously.

Tim points to the upstairs staircase. Brandi jumps out of her seat and powerwalks up the stairs. Tim gleefully follows. Only Raina would be witness to the liberation that commenced. Thirty minutes of unexpected pleasure followed by thirty minutes of spooning and laughing about old classmates they haven’t seen in years.

Alas, common sense prevails. The real Tim agrees with the angel on his left shoulder. Despite his active imagination, there is no actual scenario that plays out with the two old friends suddenly discovering their mutual feelings of passion. There will be no kissing on three, no sexy time, no Eddie and Dani moment. Tim resets and sends a carefully crafted missive to the group.

*3:33 pm @tsgrinder: If I hear any Justin Bieber Christmas songs, I flip the fucking table like Teresa the housewife. Ho ho ho!*

Everyone replies with a “laughing face” emoji. He will arrive at the normal time. Three and a half hours to go.

The rules for the holiday gift exchange are the same as always. Everyone brings a wrapped present valued at approximately twenty-five dollars. No gift cards. Everyone draws a number. The first person unwraps a gift. The next person can steal the first gift or open another wrapped present. If your gift gets stolen, you can steal someone else’s or open another wrapped gift and so on. Only three steals per turn. The game is over when everyone has opened a present. In past years, it was simple. Most people go to the liquor store to buy a bottle of Tito’s or Jack or whatever the hot item is at the time. Usually, Alan will provide an adult card game like *Hashtag It*. This year, everyone has agreed to a 'No Alcohol’ edict, out of respect for Sue.

Meanwhile, former Account Executive Eddie Fitzgerald is shopping at Walmart. He’s looking for the right mug and cocoa gift set to go with his twenty dollars’ worth of lottery scratch offs when he receives a text.

*Hey old friend! I passed by the house this morning. There was a moving truck there! I’m surprised, I figured whoever bought it would wait until after Christmas to move in. Young couple with a little girl. Happy ending for everyone.*

Eddie can only smile and bite his lip to hold back tears. He responds.

*That’s great Tommy! It’s been a year for sure. You’re the only part of my past that’s left. I gotta come visit you after the holidays. Hopefully with Dani. I know she won’t complain about the rain. It’s not snowy Michigan LOL.*

As he checks out and returns to his car, Tommy Simpkins replies.

*LOL Can’t wait to see both of you!*

Eddie drives home to feed Bogie and Bacall and change his shirt. He opts for his maroon V-neck sweater over a black t-shirt and jeans. At six-forty-five, he collects his phone, wallet and keys, much to his cats’ dismay. Just as he’s done for the past few months since he’s been more socially active, he sets up his living room TV for “sleep mode” to go off in thirty minutes. It’s a futile attempt to distract his feline companions. However, just as Eddie leaves his house for the party, the two American shorthairs are the first to hear of some interesting developments via ESPNEWS:

*…College Bowl week continues later tonight as BYU and SMU square off in the New Mexico Bowl. One team that is without a bowl game this year is the 4-8 Chippewas of Central Michigan. Now, it appears they will be without their maligned secondary assistant. Kevin Backman was arrested late this morning near his home in Mount Pleasant. Police found three bottles of unprescribed Vicodin and an unregistered handgun in his possession. He was released from custody on bond a short time ago. This comes on the heels of sexual misconduct charges levied against the coach by five different women, including his estranged wife, Danielle Backman. Central Michigan’s athletic department has not yet issued a statement or comment.*

Brandi’s lawn is complete with inflatable likenesses of Santa Claus, Frosty the Snowman and Grogu. Colored lights are hung from the gutter with more lights wrapping around the front deck railing. Her front door is open with a glass storm door shut. Her living room and dining room area have the same setup as two months prior. TV is affixed to festive music via The Holly Channel. The bar is well stocked as always. Chips are served. Tracey is present and firing up the sternos on tables at the back of the house to keep dinner warm.

The real Tim Schultz is the first to arrive. Coincidentally, he is also wearing a maroon V-neck and jeans. He dramatically announces his presence through the storm door.

“Grogu is NOT a holiday character! I am OFFENDED!,” he jokingly bellows.

Brandi’s face brightens as she sees him from across the room. She struts towards the entrance.

“I do not condone this celebratory bullshit,” Tim mockingly continues. “Where is the menorah?”

“It’s inside,” Brandi responds as she opens the door to greet him. “It’s on the dining room table.”

Brandi and Tim embrace, slightly more assertively than usual, as he enters.

“We all get to celebrate eight crazy nights,” Brandi says.

“You didn’t light any candles yet, did you?” Tim wonders, then immediately sees the unlit menorah. “Okay, good!”

Brandi gives him a dismissive look. “How stupid do you think I am?”

“Believe it or not, I dated someone in my twenties,” he states. “You were still up at UNH. She invited me over to her house. I walk in. Mind you, it’s not even Hanukkah yet. The whole thing is lit. Every candle. She’s like ‘I wanted to make you feel at home.”

“Oh my God!,” Brandi exclaims as she laughs vociferously.

Tim walks over to the corner of the dining room and finds an empty end table. He reaches into a Target bag to pull out a medium-sized wrapped gift.

“Is this fine over here?” he asks her.

“I don’t think so, Tim.”

Tim looks back at Brandi confused. Brandi lets out a massive laugh.

“I’ve always wanted to do that,” she says. “Do you realize we’ve known each other thirty fucking years and I have never said that phrase with a straight face until this very moment?”

Tim collapses with sheer amazement and delight. “I have no words. I’ve taught you well!” He continues placing the gift on the end table. Brandi points to it.

“No booze, right?”

“That’s what we agreed on,” he responds. Tim then notices Brandi’s demeanor change. She has become fidgety and starts rubbing her fingers together. He whispers to her. “You alright? You seem nervous.”

“OH! Yeah.”

“About Sue?,” Tim asks.

Brandi exhales as he has inadvertently found an excuse for her behavior.

“Yeah. You know, the drinking.”

“It’s cool,” he says. “Nobody’s offended by it. Maybe it’s better this way.”

The door swings open to signal the presence of Britt and Alan. He carries a Christmas Tree Shops bag with two gifts. She brings a bottle of Fireball separately.

“Heeyyyy! Merry Christmas, a bit early,” Britt says.

Tim spins around and feigns displeasure. “Put that back!,” he yells at Britt.

“It’s not a gift,” she cheekily replies as she walks over to hug Tim and Brandi. “This is just to restock after I consume.”

“Hun, we’re plenty stocked,” Brandi responds.

“Oh, you won’t be after tonight,” Britt answers and laughs heartily.

Alan walks over to offer handshakes to all. Tim obliges and points to the corner end table.

“Actually, I’ll take it,” Tim says. A confused look encompasses him.

“Did you write this in Hebrew?” he remarks. “Wrab Bug?”

Britt cackles as she opens a bottle of Merlot. “It’s supposed to say ‘Grab Bag.’ That’s Alan and his chicken scratch.”

“Oh my God! Alan’s doctor handwriting,” Brandi chimes in.

Alan places a hand on Britt’s right shoulder and grins. “This woman made me take that calligraphy class when I first started practicing. Still, nobody understands what I’m writing, but at least it looks nice.”

Once again, the glass door swings open as Eddie and Dani enter together.

“HEYYY! There they are!,” Britt exclaims while raising her glass.

“Hey everybody!,” Dani replies, smiling ear to ear.

Eddie and Dani offer hugs and handshakes to the receiving line.

“Did you hitchhike from Saginaw?” Tim jokes.

“Yeah, actually they have this newfangled technology,” remarks Eddie. “It’s called an airplane. I hear chimps can fly it.”

Tim brings Eddie in close for a manly hug. As Brandi offers beverages to all who have just arrived, Tim pulls Eddie aside. He glances back at the others who are preoccupied.

“Hey, thanks for the intel,” Tim whispers to him. “I’m working on it.”

“Hey, look. You helped me out, big time,” replies Eddie. “I’m just returning the favor. Bros, right?”

Tim pulls Eddie in for a half hug, half elbow smash. “Bros. Hey, nice sweater by the way.”

“Oh, shit!,” Eddie says. “HEY! Ladies! Alan… Didn’t y’all get the memo?”

Everyone turns towards Tim and Eddie and marvel at their matching tops.

“See, I told you, Alan,” Britt sarcastically says to her husband, who is wearing a green button shirt. “Why can’t you be more like them?”

The last of the guests, Sue and Lisa, swing open the door to signal their entrance.

“SUE!,” everyone cries out in unison.

“She’s back!!,” Brandi shouts. “WHOOP!!”

A refreshed Sue Rubino looks around the room, mouth agape. She is home with her friends again. She tries to hold back tears as she says hello to everyone.

“I missed you all!,” she declares. One by one, she gives everyone a huge ‘Welcome back’ hug in the receiving line. Britt tries to shuffle her wine glass away when it’s her turn to greet Sue.

“Oh, please! It’s fine,” Sue kindly says. “Britt, I know you! I don’t expect you to be dry for my sake.”

Britt is overwhelmed by her kindness. Tim finds Brandi and whispers to her, “See? All good.”

Dinner is ready to be served soon afterwards. Eddie makes it a point to get behind Sue in line to fill up his plate.

“Hey!,” Eddie starts. “It’s great to see you again. How are you doing?”

Sue turns to Eddie. Her face comes to life. A genuine spark ignites her eyes. Her limp is becoming less noticeable.

“Hey Eddie! I’m doing great,” she advises. “My knee’s coming around. Doing my PT. Thank God for that GoFundMe.”

“That was something, wasn’t it?,” he remarks.

“Yeah, and, of course, there’s the other stuff.”

Eddie acknowledges her accordingly while reaching for the chicken parmigiana. “Well, yeah. That’s… mostly what I meant to ask you.”

“Yeah!!...,” Sue says. “It’s not easy, but it’s… easier than I thought it would be? I know that sounds strange. I mean, I thought…”

She begins to speak lower, not out of fear but out of respect for her friends.

“I thought I would have fallen off the wagon by now.”

“Mmmm,” Eddie answers. “Well, my father went through something like this when I was little. He had issues coming to grips with him not being a ballplayer anymore and being a dad. One thing I remember him telling me is that it’s never over. Like, you’re never *done* with it. You do well for a while, then you have a bad day. Then, you do well for another long while.”

“Right! Right!,” Sue remarks.

“I’m not saying that to discourage you,” Eddie advises. “Actually, the opposite. I think you’re a hell of a person to even acknowledge everything the way you did. What I’m saying is you got this!”

Sue gently places her hand on Eddie’s left shoulder and whispers “Thank you!”

Eddie tries to sum up. “And, not that I should speak for everyone else, because I’m still the new guy-“

“Oh please,” Sue interrupts. “You’re one of us now, Eddie!”

Eddie pauses to let Sue’s confirmation sink in. His body language suddenly becomes relaxed. He forgets his intended final thesis statement and nods feverishly.

“Yeah…,” he softly replies. “Thank you!”

He sits down at the dinner table next to Dani and overhears the end portion of a conversation between Britt and Tim.

“…So, you never went down on the Chemistry teacher,” confirms Tim.

“NO!,” Britt replies, emphatically. “I went for extra help two days a week for a month. All of the sudden, it became ‘Oh, she’s a black whore.’ People have active imaginations, especially young people with dirty minds.”

“We were all young people with dirty minds,” says Tim.

“Well, yeah,” responds Britt. “Now, we’re old people with dirty minds. HAHA!”

Dinner and the gift exchange proceeds as planned. Lisa and Sue both acquire Mets hoodies. Alan garners a new Mets tumbler and keychain. Britt secures a twenty-eight-ounce bag of Starbucks Pike Place Roast. Tim walks away with the cocoa mug set and handful of scratch offs, which he agrees to split with Brandi. The host secured another copy of *Hashtag It*. Dani receives some erotic reading material – paperback copies of *Disintegration* and *The Fall of the Midnight Scorpions*, both written by Thea Landen. By default, Eddie is gifted a new cat bed and a thirty-ounce container of Friskies Beachside Crunch cat treats.

Brandi graciously helps Tracey clean up the table to prepare dessert. As Eddie passes through the kitchen to the bathroom, Dani sees an opportunity to intercept him on the way back. She saunters over to the entryway with an ulterior motive. As Eddie is about to walk through, she pokes her around the wall to surprise him.

“Hey!,” she cooly says. “Look up.”

Eddie jumps back a step. “Hey!,” His eyes tilt upwards to reveal the mistletoe hanging in the entryway.

“I’ve never had the right man kiss me on Christmas before,” Dani reveals. “Do you believe that?”

In a moment reminiscent of their first embrace, Eddie barely lets the words escape Dani’s mouth. He **delivers a most passionate kiss to her.**

**“How about now?,” he inquires with conviction.**

**Dani is nearly breathless. At that moment, she longs to be back at Eddie’s house reenacting their first night of passion. All she can do is gaze up at her man and reply with her eyes. *I love you!***

**“Give ‘em the heater, Ricky!,” Britt yells out, having seen their exchange.**

**Eddie and Dani both share a laugh with their friends. Once the table is cleared, Brandi nervously wrangles her friends and party guests. She is fidgety but takes a deep breath and carries on.**

**“Friends!,” she calls. “Before the grab bag, I have… I have an announcement.”**

**Everyone suddenly stops their respective conversations and actively gives their host their undivided attention. Brandi walks over to her position at the head of the table towards the back wall. Tim is seated to her left with Lisa and Sue to his left. Eddie and Dani are standing to her right with Britt and Alan at the opposite end of the table towards the living room area.**

**“Some of you know this already,” Brandi states. “I know I’ve talked about this to most of you at one point or another, but I want to tell all of you… actually, it’s good news. I’m officially selling O’Fallon’s.”**

**A couple of barely audible “ohh’s” are heard. Brandi then smirks and delivers the positive side.**

**“The good part is that the new owner is here!,” she reveals. She reaches out towards Eddie. A slew of louder “ahh’s” fill the room.**

**“Yup, it’s true,” Eddie announces as he grabs his glass of ginger ale and looks towards Dani. “You already know… I start my new job on Monday.”**

**The Amazin’ Friends spontaneously burst with joy, handshakes and heartfelt congratulations for Eddie the Legend.**

**“Eddie, I didn’t think you had the money to buy the bar,” Lisa remarks. “Is this from the sale of your dad’s house?”**

**“Yeah, I don’t like talking about money,” he replies sheepishly. “The truth is I’ve had the resources to do this for quite a while. My father had a nice chunk saved up from his years with the M’s. I’m an only child. My parents were only children. I’m the last of the Fitzgeralds. Even without the sale of my dad’s house, I could have done this. It was just a matter of me figuring out what I wanted to do.”**

**Eddie looks around at the room full of his friends, supporters and loved ones. He raises his cup to signal an impromptu announcement.**

**“I was lost until I met all of you,” he admits. “And it’s people like you that make me want this. I never thought three years ago that I would be where I am now. I have all of you to thank for it. You have all enriched my life so much.”**

**Everyone takes a turn offering Eddie their love and personal support. As Brandi disappears to the kitchen to bring out the coffee and dessert with Tracey, a buzzed Britt is the last to personally approach the newly revealed owner of O’Fallon’s.**

**“Eddie, I’m so happy for you,” she says. “Just think of the strides you’ve made in your personal and professional life, where you were, like you said, three years ago.”**

**“Thank you,” he replies. “It’s a little bittersweet now, looking back at the past. It’s about the future for me.”**

**“Ohhhh,” Britt replies with a look of confusion.**

**“Yeah. I didn’t know it yet, but my wife didn’t want me anymore. Now, I-”**

**“What?!?,” interrupts Britt.**

**Eddie places his hands on his head. “Oh shit! That’s right, I never told you. I didn’t mention this in the group chat. Didn’t think it was appropriate.”**

**He takes his phone out of his pocket and finds the photo of the last letter his wife received before her death. Eddie zooms in on the letter and shows Britt.**

**“I found a bunch of letters in a box in the attic,” says Eddie. “Apparently, she was seeing a guy named Hunter. Whoever he is.”**

**Britt silently speed reads the letter. She carefully examines the photo, zooming in and out. Her face suddenly transforms from one of bewilderment and dissolves into dark rage. It was the same look that overcame her that fateful night of her O’Fallon’s meltdown a few weeks prior.**

**“Britt?,” Eddie worriedly says.**

She carefully yet forcefully holds the phone to Eddie’s chest. As he grabs it from her, she slowly turns to her husband. Alan is watching TV ten feet away, unaware of the conversation. She approaches him, visibly shaking. Eddie does not understand Britt’s reaction. He turns to Dani, who can only place a hand over her face and watch the impending implosion.

“You mother FUCKER!!,” Britt explodes. As he turns towards her, Britt unleashes a hard right hand to Alan’s left temple.

Dr. Peters collapses on top of the coffee table. Eddie, Dani and Tim rush over to corral a livid Britt. Brandi reenters the room with coffee and is shocked at the sudden turn of events.

“What the fuck?!?,” Brandi shouts.

“I knew it, you piece of shit!,” Britt yells at Alan. “I KNEW you were lying to me. I can’t believe I fell for it.”

“Britt, what’s going on?,” Eddie yells.

She violently turns to Eddie and points to Alan with disdain.

“That’s Hunter!,” she announces. “That’s the name he used when we used to roleplay.”

A hush falls over the stunned group. An angry Britt proceeds to elaborate.

“We used to do this thing when we were young,” she continues. “Go to a restaurant or a bar somewhere else, pretend we were two strangers picking each other up, then go home and have sex. I was Tori. He was Hunter.”

Alan begins to stir and rise from the flattened coffee table.

“That’s bullshit,” he mumbles.

“The next day, I’d get a letter at work, hand delivered on that same fucking blue stationery,” Britt says to the room. “Written just like that. That’s your calligraphy handwriting, you sack of shit!”

“I don’t have to dignify this,” Alan dismissively retorts.

“Oh, you don’t have to,” Britt yells. “You’re guilty as fuck!”

Eddie now approaches Alan full of piss and vinegar. Alan stumbles to his feet only to find himself on the floor again, courtesy of another right cross. Alan lays there momentarily, a victim of his own sins. Eddie breathes in, contemplates what to say to the man who stole his wife’s heart. Instead, he just stands there, his actions having already spoken.

Alan struggles to regain his footing yet again. Everyone remains motionless, equally shocked at Britt’s revelation and appalled at Alan’s immorality.

“That’s assault,” Alan meekly answers. “Both of you.”

“I didn’t see any assault,” Britt angrily shoots back.

“You all saw it,” a dizzy Alan replies.

“I didn’t see any assault,” Eddie deadpans. “Looks to me like you had one too many and fell onto the coffee table.”

After a brief pause, Dani grins and concurs with Eddie. “Yep, that’s what I saw.”

Lisa and Sue look at each other and nod. “Yup, coffee table,” Lisa says.

“Coffee table,” says Tim.

Alan desperately looks up at Brandi, to no avail.

“Hey, shit happens,” Brandi derisively responds, hands on hips. “Don’t worry. I won’t make you replace it.”

“Where’s Tracey?,” Alan asks.

“Bathroom,” Brandi deadpans.

With no other recourse, a defeated Alan Peters stumbles towards the front door. He leaves Brandi’s house to stone silence. Britt turns to Brandi, who tearfully answers her best friend’s question before she can even ask.

“Of course, you can stay here.”

Britt musters a half-hearted smile. Like they did that fateful night at the bar, her friends close in on her once more to offer their love and support with a group hug.

“I’m not even mad about it anymore,” she admits. “I just knew, deep down… I just knew. I’m so stupid.”

Everyone assures Britt that she was right and not blind to Alan. After a long respite, Tim steps back, lifts his head and breaks the silence.

“The question I have, and I’m sure you all do as well, is how does all this affect the Yankees?”

Everyone tries in vain to keep a straight face. However, nobody can contain themselves. The entire circle of friends bursts out laughing in the face of tragedy. Eddie turns around to see Dani face to face. They are content with the knowledge that no matter how serious the situation, they have their friends and each other to lean on. They embrace warmly, foreheads pressed together in solidarity.

“I love you!,” says Dani.

“I love YOU!,” Eddie replies. “These are our people.”

“They most certainly are,” Dani responds. She kisses Eddie as a form of confirmation.

The most anticlimactic serving of coffee and dessert follows. Despite the music playing in the living room at that moment, it is not, nor shall it ever be the same old lang syne ever again.

Brandi Woods finds herself in unfamiliar yet welcome territory. She pulls up to O’Fallon’s in her red 2018 Nissan Rogue, just as she has a million times before. She will not tolerate the cold rain ruining her good hair day. Not today. Not when she’s wearing her favorite Def Leppard t-shirt and good skinny jeans. Not when she’s wearing her favorite black boots that boost her height up to five-foot-eight. Today is a good *everything* day. However, unlike most Wednesdays, she is just entering the bar as the day is ending.

Brandi bypasses Julio and Jimmy the cook vaping some California Honey just outside the back of the building. She turns the corner and bursts through those two familiar doors to find Eddie right at home behind his bar, hands placed firmly on the countertop. She turns right and finds two independent contractors putting the finishing touches on a new NGX Infinity jukebox.

“Oh, we’re fancy now?,” Brandi remarks.

“Hell yeah,” Eddie replies. “Now we can have DJ Wars with our friends.”

Brandi can only marvel and shrug her shoulders. “I bet that cost you a dirty penny,” she says as she walks up to Eddie.

“I bet that feels different, huh?,” he answers.

“Huh?”

“Being on the other side for a change,” Eddie replies. “Don’t get too used to it though. I gave you the week off to refresh. What are you doing here?”

Brandi smirks and raises her eyebrows. She leans her elbows down on the patron side of the bar.

“Well, as fate would have it, I have a date tonight.”

Eddie is taken aback. “A date?!? A date?!?,” he inquires.

“A date,” Brandi states. “You might know him. Tall, good looking? And he’s large?”

“Large?,” Eddie replies, smiling ear to ear.

“He’s large!,” she repeats while laughing. She quickly settles down.

“Always quick with a joke,” Brandi confirms. “My daughter loves him, so, you know. That’s one hurdle I won’t have to clear.”

Eddie keeps smiling and cleans a drinking glass with a new clean rag.

“Sounds like a helluva guy. Of all the places you could have gone, you chose this… smoky place.”

Brandi chuckles and looks around. “Well, you know Eddie Fitzgerald, it’s not so much the place as it is the company. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Can’t argue with that,” Eddie answers. “After all, I met my girlfriend here.”

“That old O’Fallon’s magic,” Brandi retorts. “Maybe there’s some left for me after all.”

“How’s Britt?,” Eddie wonders.

“Good!,” Brandi excitedly declares. “She and the kids are going down to South Carolina for Christmas.”

“That’s awesome! I have an old teammate down there…”

At that moment, Dani slowly swings open the inner door. Eddie looks up and beams, just like he did the first time he saw that wide, curvaceous presence, coupled with her even wider smile and alluring eyes. Her hair, brown with sparkling amber, is kept in a ponytail, adorned in that same periwinkle pattern blouse and dark blue jeans she wore on that hot August night. She barges in and powerwalks towards the bar.

“I’d like to see the manager, please!,” she jokes.

“Awww, sorry, no manager here,” Eddie responds. “Just a merry band of miscreants.”

Eddie walks down to the end of the bar, flips the lift gate up and greets his new favorite customer with a kiss. Brandi waits her turn and reaches in with a sincere hug for her friend, Dani.

“Great to see you!,” Brandi remarks.

The jukebox installers have finished their work and bid farewell to Eddie. Julio wanders back inside from the rear of the building.

“Well, that’s our cue,” says Eddie.

“You’re out of here?,” Brandi wonders.

“Yup. I mean, I see this place all day long,” Eddie sarcastically says. “Why would I want to eat here?”

Brandi laughs. “The steak tidbits are good,” she says.

“So is Domenico’s,” Dani responds.

Eddie reaches in to hug Brandi. “Say hi to the big man,” he requests.

“I will, Eddie,” she earnestly replies as her phone buzzes. Brandi looks down at her phone on the counter.

“Oooh, he texted… He’s running late. Yeah, by about thirty years.”

The three friends exchange one last laugh for the evening. As Eddie and Dani turn to leave, she leans in to give an important update.

“The passport came today.”

“Awesome!,” says Eddie. “So, we can book it for April?”

“Yes, Sir!... I’m excited. Never been to Aruba.”

Brandi looks on with a calm resolve as Eddie and Dani exit. She watches them as through the window as they turn the corner towards their respective vehicles, then turns to Julio and beams. For the first time since college, she is on the other side of the bar.

“Coors Light, please?,” she requests.

Julio nods and shuffles over to get her beer. Those Brandi eyes gaze around the room with a sense of accomplishment, taking in the establishment she cultivated for two decades. She rises from her stool and walks over to the brand-new jukebox. Brandi looks at the vast song choices and thinks for a moment. She then comes to the realization that only one song will suffice for the music box’s first ever play. She swipes her card and makes her selection.

The satellite radio fades abruptly, making way for that familiar explosive intro by Joe Elliott and company, straight from the MTV vault. The guitar solo takes over the one thousand square foot area, sending chills down Brandi’s spine. The drums slowly kick in. The state-of-the-art sound system booms the classic rock staple. Brandi’s body cannot remain still. Her hips shake, her arms flail and her head spins. Her heart full of life, Brandi shuffles and twists her way across the floor. The spirit of Amanda lives. Indeed, love is like a bomb.

She wonders if tonight will be her night. Perhaps that old O’Fallon's magic will finally work in her favor, just as it did for its newfound owner and his newfound love. Tim Schultz will arrive shortly. Maybe he will appear in time to see the unexpected return of Amanda Harden. Tim will surely enter with his usual greeting and a one-liner to cheer her up, as he always does. Until then, Brandi Woods waits, hopes and dances away to pass the time, just as she has done for so many years.

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