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BEFORE YOUR EYES

By
Zachary Garrett Hardin
B.S., University of Louisville, 2011

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2013

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A Thesis Approved on

April 23, 2013

By the following Thesis Committee:

Prof. Brian Leung
Thesis Director

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Dr. James Chisholm

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ABSTRACT

BEFORE YOUR EYES

Zack Hardin

April 23, 2013

This thesis acts as an entrance into the dialogue on the nature of love in human life.

Literature by its very existence comments on the human condition and should consciously attempt to contribute to the discussion of what it means to be human, what it means to be us. Love is a part of who we are, an often misunderstood, manipulated, critiqued, disdained, and praised aspect of the human condition. Centuries of thinking have yet to explain the genesis of the idea, to conclusively explain or disprove the ideas of justice, hope, love, despite the mountains of scholarship contributed to just those proposed ends. This work is in no way an attempt to propose any universal answers, but for Josh, this one man, this one character, in this one present moment of trauma, this Lacanian interaction with the 'Real', I attempt to show what love is to him.

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...he remembered blinding light screeching metal flipping tilting the entire world flowing chaotically around him he remembered remembered he remembered her...

... “Not my fucking problem Josh,” Rachel said. She was shoving folders in Susan’s backpack from where they had been left scattered across the dining room table, the results of a failed homework session the night before. “Seriously? You tried to make reservations the morning of? I mean,” she looked at him, then down at the backpack, then again at him, swiping absently at loose strands of hair as she did so. “How fucking insensitive can you be?”

“It’s a Tuesday for Christ’s sake Rachel,” Josh finished adjusting his tie and moved on to the process of rolling up his sleeves with the practiced rote of rhythm. “How was I supposed to know there was something going on at the convention center and it would be full?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if you had gotten the reservation when I told you about it,” Rachel finished packing the backpack and zipped it up. “Susan!” She moved to the fridge and started getting lunch stuff together.

Josh watched her, her practiced motions, her rigid automation, her not yet fixed hair in a haphazard ponytail contrasting sharply to her pressed, professional clothes. *Bullshit*, he thought. “You don’t have to tell me what and when to get you something for

your own birthday.” Cheese and lunchmeat were released onto the counter as the full power of her glare came to rest on him. “Apparently I do Josh, if I don’t want to wind up at Applebee’s again.”

And back to packing lunch. Just like that. The barb and the switch, conversation over, last word achieved. *Bullshit*, he fished his shoulder satchel out from between the table and the wall. “You know Daddy wishes you had a real briefcase. It’d look so much more professional.”

I really don’t give a flying fuck.

“What’s wrong with this?” He patted the worn leather satchel.

“Makes you look like a college kid. You’re thirty, Josh.”

So are you. He did not say that thought, not even an approximation of that that.

“We should have done your birthday last week,” Josh said instead, running a hand through his hair until the part settled where he liked it.

“We did family stuff all week,” Rachel said without looking up.

We are family, Josh left for work...

*...where was she she would be worried there was tightness in his chest across his chest
burning along his face and down his spine his fingers were numb...*

...the girl in the tight tee shirt raised her hand, shooting it into the air like an Olympic runner jumping forward at the sound of a gun, smoke curling around the professor’s question as it hung in the air, barely formed, barely articulated. Josh’s hand was a moment behind hers. Dr. Hill motioned towards her, indicating the floor was hers

with just that little touch of self-awareness that kept him from being stereotypical douche professor most of the time. Most of the time.

“He stays for her,” the girl in the tight shirt said, lowering her hand back to her desk. Her backpack was green, not I-want-to-fit-in pink and not I-really-don’t-want-to-fit-in-and-want-you-to-know-it black. Just green. Forest green. Maybe she hiked. She was not wearing hiking boots though. She had those cute little slipper things girls wore, except hers were plain black and white checkerboard without the sequins or bows or any of that other shit.

“What do you mean?” The professor, standing down below all three hundred of them on the auditorium floor, pushed his glasses back up their perpetual slide down the sheer Roman peak that was his nose as he walked to look up into the section where the girl sat. Josh lowered his own hand. The lecture hall smelled bad anyway, like stale books and mold. He hadn’t really wanted to respond.

“Well, he wants to go to get to safety, right? I mean he just killed Tybalt like ten hours ago and everybody’s looking for him, but he came to her. He spent the night with her instead of getting out of town. And now he says,” she referenced the page of *Romeo and Juliet* open before her. “ ‘I have more care to stay than will to go.’ He knows he has to go to get to safety, but he wants to stay with her even more than it’s an act of love.”

“Yeah but,” Josh put his hand up in the air again and Dr. Hill acknowledged him, though he did not move from his position in front of the girl’s section. “He wants to go at first. She convinces him to stay and then she convinces him to go.” Dr. Hill smiled. Good. That meant he was on the right track. Josh continued. “It’s like where you offer to

skip something, a class, a game, something for a girl. You don't really want to, but you offer. And they're supposed to say thanks but no thanks and then it's all okay. Like, if either person doesn't play the game, then it would piss the other person off even though the eventual outcome is exactly the same." A few people snickered at his word choice but he continued through to the end, feeling almost out of breath at the end. He glanced at the girl in the tee shirt. She was watching him. He glanced down at his notes, though the page held little but a couple lines and Rachel's name scribbled in the margins no less than a dozen times.

"So," Dr. Hill smiled and moved now to the center of the floor, gesturing with his hands as he spoke, his exaggerated motions evidence of his excitement, as if they were drawing near a very precious treasure. "Is Romeo, here, in this scene, acting out of love? Is this an act of love?" He moved to his lectern and flipped pages rapidly.

"Let me be ta'en, let me be put to death;
I am content, so thou wilt have it so.
I'll say yon grey is not the morning's eye,
'Tis but the pale reflex of Cynthia's brow;
Nor that is not the lark, whose notes do beat
The vaulty heaven so high above our heads.
I have more care to stay than will to go:
Come, death, and welcome! Juliet wills it so.
How is't, my soul? let's talk; it is not day."

He pushed his spectacles back up on his nose as he finished reading and looked up to meet the collective gaze of the class. “Is this love?”

“No,” the tee shirt girl said as she raised her hand again. Dr. Hill, however, nodded to Josh, who had also put his hand in the air.

“Yes,” Josh looked sidelong at the girl. Why had she said no? She kept her hand in the air, obviously and impatiently waiting for him to finish so that she could speak her mind. Why had she said no? Why would it not be an act of love? “You can let her go first.” He pointed at the girl.

“Alright, Juliet,” Dr. Hill indicated her. “Why do you say no...”

...college why college so long ago Juliet had she seen had she known he could smell gasoline god it hurt it fucking hurt if he could reach his phone he twisted in the seatbelt and screamed...

...“Love is...” he muttered the words to himself as he tapped the pen against the page as if its mere interaction with the white surface would evoke a creative synthesis resulting in the poem’s completion. “Love is...”

He glanced at the computer and moved the mouse around, restoring the screen to its previous state, the horribly rendered digital dancing baby that he had once found amusing replaced by lines and lines of figures and calculations he had yet to parse through. He glanced at the clock in the bottom corner of the screen: 11:15. Where had the day gone? He had time to finish this. It was not due until tomorrow. He turned his attention back to the card.

“Love is hope,” he muttered, the pen still hovering over the page. That was a laugh. Hope for what? People loved pizza. People loved their dogs. What the fuck was it hope for? Love was something ethereal, something special, something cherished. Sure thing. Scribble that down. Write for Hallmark. Get rich quick. Something like that.

“Love is endurance,” he barked a laugh. She would not take that the right way, that was for damn sure.

“Love is tender, love is kind,” he scribbled it out before he had the first word. “Biblical bullshit.” Love could be course and rough and mean. Love could be unforgiving. Uncompromising. Love could be absolute. What was the quote about that? Anything absolute was by its very nature terrifying? Love is terrifying. Sure.

“Love...like...tenderness...affection...” He stopped and tapped along the page with the pen. *Love is the sky on a warm spring night.* He scribbled it out. She would definitely not like that one. A warm spring night. He could almost feel the grass, see the stars. *Love is real.*

“Working hard?” He looked up as Juliet popped into the office and sat down across from him.

“Yeah, you could say that,” he gestured at the page. “I’m composing.” He laughed. Before he could stop her, she snatched the page across to her side of the desk and looked at what he had.

“Love is real?”

“Yeah,” he reached across and took it back. “It’s just a beginning.”

“Well, Mr. Writer’s Block, let’s go. Lunchtime.”

“Don’t you have copies to make or something?” Josh turned back to his computer, then back to the paper. He opened his top desk drawer and slid it in.

“Randolph’s gone for the day. I’m officially floating until five,” Juliet laughed. “Best job anyone ever got me.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome,” Josh ran a hand through his hair and looked around his office, finally spotting his coat hanging on the rack in the corner. “Ok, let’s go,” ...

...ok let's go he whispered as he came to again blinking away the tears of pain new wetness was spreading across his back he felt dizzy hanging upside down why that day why did he have to relive it where was she Juliet Rachel they would come for him...

...he was almost drunk. He could feel it even as he sat there, weaving back and forth in his seat, his hand clumsy as it reached for the red plastic cup which he was sure had been fuller than it was just a second ago. He drained the remnants and stood, holding against the table for balance that it did not yield. Erik moved out of his way, steadying him with a hand on his shoulder as he did so. Josh patted the hand in thanks and moved on, finally reaching the wall and holding to it like a blind man feeling his way home, the bright light at the end of the tunnel revealing itself to be a garishly white tiled, painted, and lit kitchen, its counter, also white tile, covered in a wide assortment of beverages, from hard to soft and back again, intermingled in an immodest indicator of usage. Josh headed for the Sprite.

Once he had reached it and unscrewed the lid, losing it somewhere amid the mountain range of bottles two liters, he realized that he had forgotten his cup. He looked

around for it, nearly snow blind in the bright room. He shaded his eyes. There were more plastic cups on the table against the other wall. Smiling, he made his way towards them.

“Damn.” He stopped at the laugh from the opening through which he had entered the kitchen, but then he stumbled and took the last step towards the table, steadying himself on the back of a chair. “What are you doing with the Sprite?” He looked up at the girl as she came into the room, walking only slightly more unsteadily than he was. She was wearing tight khaki shorts and a tank top that only considered the idea of reaching the waistband before deciding against it. Lots of skin. There was lots of skin. He smiled.

“Hey.” She took the Sprite from his hand and poured it into a cup. He frowned and spoke again. “Hey.” Still, it seemed all in good fun. She was laughing. Smile still in place? Check.

“Yeah, I heard you sailor,” she laughed again. It sounded light and fey, refreshing like the bubbles in the Sprite she was pouring for him as she filled a second cup and handed it to him.

“Thanks,” he took a drink. He was right. Her laughter was like the bubbles.

“Gonna mix that with anything?” She asked the question as she turned towards the counter, putting a hand on Josh’s arm to steady herself. He looked down at the contact.

“Of course,” he followed her, making a point to touch the small of her back as he came to stand next to her. He reached for the vodka at the same time she did. They both laughed and then, as well as he was able, he poured for both of them. She mixed hers stronger than he had mixed his own, so he added some more to his. “I’m Josh.”

“Rachel,” she said, laughing and sipping. “Who do you know here?”

“I went to school with Dale,” Dale owned the house. Well, his parents owned the house. College freshmen did not own shit. He laughed at his own inner monologue.

“Cool. Cassie had him in class last semester,” Rachel said, continuing to drink liberally. Josh matched her sip for sip. His stomach was starting to churn uncomfortably.

“Who’s Cassie?”

“My roommate. We cheered together in high school.”

“Oh,” Josh took another drink. The cup was empty. That was surprising. He looked down into the whiteness of the empty space, eyeing the drops clinging to edges.

“Oh my god! I love this song!” Josh looked up more at the exclamation than at the sound that was beginning to boom from the other room. Why Dale’s parents had a stereo like that, Josh had never been able to figure out. They were just about the most boring Midwestern parents in the world, second perhaps to his own. “We should dance!” She took his hand to pull him into the other room. Glancing down at the shorts again, and at the skin exposed as the tank top bobbed and danced around the top of them, he followed with a smile...

...how long had it been minutes since the wreck years since the smile oh god it hurt a growing tense pain fire the fumes were stronger wait was that somebody somebody outside the car...

...he waited for Juliet after class. He stood with one foot against the wall, one on the ground, the quintessential casual pose, or perhaps the quintessential trying to look casual pose when someone actually felt very awkward. He was not sure. To look less

awkward he texted Rachel a couple times even though she was in class for another half hour. Stupid long business classes. They were never free at the same times of day. So he wound up doing most of his in-between class activities alone, like eating lunch. She would eat with all her girlfriends that were in the same classes as her. Next semester their schedules would work out better.

And there she was. Tee shirt girl.

“Hey,” Josh said as she walked past. She turned towards him.

“Oh hey.” She smiled at him and stopped, waving at the girl she had been walking with, who moved on down the hallway.

“I just wanted to tell you I thought that was really interesting in there, what you said about *Romeo and Juliet*. I’d never thought about it like that,” Josh could feel the warmth in his cheeks. He covered it with a smile.

“Oh well thanks,” the girl smiled and blushed a little herself. She had dimples, pronounced dimples, accenting the blush perfectly. “I’m Juliet.”

“Josh,” he held out his hand and they both laughed at the formality as they shook.

“Where are you headed to?” Juliet asked. They fell in step walking down the hallway, not quite the last of the students to exit the auditorium, but towards the back of the pack.

“I don’t have another class until one. I usually get lunch,” Josh said. “Read for class,” spoken with a laugh. “Start brainstorming for this Shakespeare paper.”

“Well,” Juliet shrugged. “I’m done for the day. Do you want any company?”

“Sure,” Josh said...

...how long had it been minutes since the wreck years since the smile oh god it hurt a growing tense pain fire the fumes were stronger wait was that somebody somebody outside the car...

... “So what’s blocking the old creative juices?” Juliet reached halfway across the table and pantomimed knocking on his skull. Josh smiled around a forkful of salad. Rachel had made a comment about his gut the other day. He sure as hell was not going to give her that wound to rub salt in. He had even gone running the other morning, around the block, and then rewarded himself with a doughnut on the way to work. But still, it was a start.

“I don’t know,” Josh chewed pseudo-thoughtfully. Was that how he would have written the thought? Was it even possible, for him to chew thoughtfully? Or that to fake the act of chewing thoughtfully was to hide the fact that he did not wish to speak on the matter? Probably that. He looked across at her. Definitely that.

“Come on, what? Bored, angry, upset, another girl?” Juliet flashed her laughing eyes at him the way she had always been able to do. “ ‘Love is...’ ” she parodied in her best reading Shakespeare voice. “That’s easy.”

“Then what is it?” Josh regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth. He almost snatched at them, as if he could reach them before they reached her ears.

“Power structure, honey,” Juliet said with a laugh. It was a throaty, real laugh. There was something absolutely authentic about it. “It’s the way we hold each other down through guilt and responsibility relations. English common law said that,”

“I know,” Josh interjected with a weary wrist flick. “Umm, ‘when a man and woman are married they become one entity and that is the husband.’”

“Right, the woman ceases to exist legally. It’s...”

“Power structure,” Josh finished. He continued to eat his salad as Juliet glared at him. He had stolen her big finale.

“Right,” she returned to her own meal, a plate of fried chicken strips, fries, and barbeque sauce. Josh eyed the chicken as it was picked up, dipped in the sauce, bitten, and laid back on the plate. What the hell was wrong with Applebee’s anyway? It was delicious. Even his salad was good. He rooted around until he speared a piece of grilled chicken and mandarin orange in the same forkful.

“So,” she pointed at him with a piece of chicken. “Seriously, spill, what tale of marital drama do we have today?”

“Nothing.” Another bite, eyes down toward his food. She always could read him. Like a book. Like Shakespeare. He laughed softly to himself.

“Bull,” Juliet said, her tone serious now. “What happened?”

Josh shrugged. “Nothing. She just got pissed this morning is all,” another shrug. “I forgot to make reservations for her birthday and now the place is full.”

“Isn’t her birthday last week?”

“We had family Christmas stuff going on, and family birthday stuff, and,”

“Family stuff,” she finished for him around a mouthful of chicken and sauce.

He stirred around in his salad, looking for anything besides greens to spear.

“Right.”

“Ok, we get reservations to a different restaurant, and finish the damned card!”

“I know I know,” Josh laughed a little. It sounded forced even to him. “I don’t want to.”

“What? Fine, don’t do dinner, go,”

“No, Juliet,” Josh sat back in his seat, rubbing at his face. A waiter came by and refilled his tea. He watched Juliet through the actions. Her brows were bunched, her forehead creased. The Juliet worried face. “I’m just tired of walking on eggshells all the time.” Now that she had pulled the morning from him, wresting the memory from his fumbling, clutching hands, the rest spilled forth relentlessly, a surge, a wave. Sitting forward again, he took a drink.

“Well,” she seemed to reach a decision and sat forward, extending her hand across the table. He took it. “You’re my best friend.”

“You’re mine.” Josh looked down at their linked hands. Was there some symbol for that, that used linked multi-colored hands? The United Way?

“I just want you to be happy,”...

...the words echoed reverberated spoke to him for him ‘sir’ ‘sir I’m calling 911 sir’ his voice was unsettled panicked Josh could hear it ‘yes’ he croaked find Juliet bring her here his phone started to ring...

...Josh held his black hat in his hands, feeling along the right angles, teasing the points with a thumb or a forefinger, watching, waiting, his black gown swishing around him as he rocked back and forth from heel to toe, toe to heel. Where was she? He had looked for Rachel in the stands. Had she gotten good pictures? Had she seen it? Had she

liked it? He smiled a smile, decided it was silly, lost it, regained it, straightened his face into the image of the new graduate, the new adult.

“There’s the graduate!” His father’s voice boomed out over the din of the lobby, of the churning graduates and their families. He spotted his father, all six foot two of him, towering over the majority of the room, definitely of Josh, though he was not a hulking person, no football player’s build. He was in every way the businessman. He seemed somehow less than his frame. He had played baseball in college, but no one would know it to look at him anymore. The glasses, perhaps the glasses threw people off. Josh gave a half-hearted wave as his father made his way the rest of the way over and buried his son in a full hug, clenching him tight to his chest. He laughed slapped Josh on the back, momentarily staggering him. “How about it! Welcome to the real world!”

“What were you thinking up there?!” His mother’s shrill voice sounded like bees lagging a second behind his father’s embrace.

“What mom?” Her glare could melt ice; he was pretty sure he had seen it happen once. Now it was turned on him, ratcheted all of the way up. Displeasure could never be as well personified. He found the grin threatening to spread across his face again. He scanned the crowd past them. No Rachel yet. No Juliet either.

“That was foolish, stupid,” she made some inarticulate sound somewhere between and grunt and a growl, “goddamned inconsiderate. We didn’t drive here to see you make a fool of yourself in front of everybody today.”

“Let it go. He’s young. He’s allowed to act like it a couple times in his life,” his father said as he wrapped Josh in a one-armed man hug. Josh smiled wider as he stepped away from his father.

Juliet caught him in a tackle that would have been the envy of the entire varsity defensive line, almost sending them both to the ground. She hugged him tight and kissed his cheek, her breath hot and close. He could feel her laughter with her lips against his cheek. He found himself laughing as well, despite the stern look he saw coming from the maternal field of vision behind Juliet.

“Is this the lucky girl?” His father stepped forward and hugged her too. She glanced at Josh and then stepped into the embrace.

“No,”

“I’m Juliet. We’re just friends from class.” She tossed her hat a short distance in the air and caught it. “Class of 2011!” She turned towards Josh. “Oh my God Josh?! What did she say? What did she say?!”

“I don’t know,” Josh said, still smiling so hard his lips hurt. “I haven’t found her yet.” Then he saw her through the crowd, and she saw him. He ran for her...

...the man found it 'Rachel' he said the name the only name Josh could feel himself tense his hands move the wetness spread his own response surprised him let me down let me go let me run to her...

... The curtains fluttered in the late spring air, the ceiling fan’s lazy spin barely moving air not yet dead with summer’s weight. The petty slogans in the home décor section of Wal-Mart claimed it was the season to feel alive, to take chances, to laugh and

love and live. Despite the source, the cheesiest line, the most cliché token sentiment of all, spoken at precisely the right moment, could be magic if it fit right. Josh nodded along with his thoughts. Today was a magic day.

She laid on the bed, her bare feet propped up against the wall, her blonde hair trailing down over comforter and sham, mattress and box springs, never having a chance to reach the floor, yet seemingly falling in its beautiful layered locks forever and ever nonetheless. Her hands, fingernails painted, already chipped, lay in turquoise tipped calm across her stomach. Her eyes, blue, so deeply, regally blue today, in this light, were fastened on him. It was not a choice that he was utterly theirs.

“Do you ever think about the future?” Her words, their pleasant lilt, their cadence, danced like the bitterest, sweetest music through the air, filling the space around them. The future? Always, never. What was an imagined future but an altered present? Can anyone think of the future?

“Yes,” the word was small as he spoke it, insignificant. It had none of Rachel’s presence, none of her life. Bearing none of her buoyant confidence, weighed down with chains of doubts and fears, it sunk, fading even as his lips and tongue and throat gave it life. “Yes,” he said again, stronger. “I think about it.”

“What do you think about?” Such simple words, yet they reverberated like stinging echoes of private thoughts. He thought about a lot of things, a lot of the time. He thought a lot about her, a lot of the time. That was an unfair thought, selfishly hoarded, not spoken. He looked at her, at her liquid eyes, reserves of ocean, glittering with sunlight.

“I think about a lot of things.” He sat forward in the chair and it creaked accordingly. A passing car from outside broke the tense spring silence, but then faded quickly. Time seemed stopped, languid, yet, like the spring itself, was fertile, full of possibility.

Her laughter filled the room much faster than even her words. That could be a literary work, to capture the feeling of spring. But how? How could he describe a feeling in a moment without stretching it to forever? If the future was just the present rewritten, then maybe somewhere out there she was still laughing forever. That was how spring felt, immediate, eternal. Reverberating, startling the floating pollen and the nesting birds.

“Ok, but like what,” still as she was, feet on the wall, head towards the floor, she reached back and tried to swat his leg. Her questing fingertips were at least a foot away. Josh smiled but did not scoot closer. She smelled like spring, but not the fake kind girls bought in the store in January. She smelled like freshness and breeze and blooms. Maybe it was her shampoo. Maybe it was just her.

“Like I think about where I’ll be in five years, ten years,” Rachel’s eyes caught his, drew him in again, “What my special moments will be.”

“Special moments?” He reached out and tossed her hand back onto her stomach from where it hung limp-wristed in the empty air. Her skin was soft and cool. She intertwined her fingers on her stomach again, a line of turquoise jewels capping her digits, her smile a line of flawed perfection grinning out at him past dark pink lips.

“Yeah, like,” in one fluid motion she flipped over, hair swirling, ankles crossing, elbows tucking back under her, her eyes somehow never losing his. “You know that

cheesy old saying: 'Life isn't the number of breaths you take. It's the moments that take your breath away.' ” In her voice, it was not cheesy. It was aching deep.

“What will your breathless moments be?” Josh asked the question over the fluttering in his chest. He loved this girl. It was too soon to tell her. She would laugh. He would deserve it.

Instead, he waited on her answer. Her answers were some deep, forbidden part of her that was just now, even a year later, being revealed to him. They were brand new. This was a part of Rachel that was all hers, but she was choosing to share it with him. He reached out his hand again, open, and she reached out hers and took it. There hung there together, suspended.

“I don't know, silly,” she laughed again. “That's why they're fun to think about. Kisses on the beach, anniversaries.” She shrugged. “They could be anything. Graduation might be one.” Graduation. Another year. He smiled at her. That was an idea.

“I don't know what mine will be,” Josh said, chewing the inside of his lip. She seemed okay with that and they sat in silence for a while, no words to break the silence, to shatter it. She let go off his hand to switch position on the bed again.

“Come here,” she said finally, having settled herself longways on the bed. She held a hand out to him. He got out of the chair and went to her. “Let's make one.”

Around them the spring was bursting with new possibilities...

... answer it! Answer the phone! But the man was talking to 911 now stating the time and place of the accident his own phone continued to ring Rachel she would be worried she

would be...what had he done...

The older man took a draw on his cigarette. He didn't smoke before. He used to smell like aftershave and home, a solid, gentle strength. Now he smelled like smoke and new cologne. The safety was gone, if it was ever there. Somehow, washed out with it, as if in the deluge of change the world was washed clean, gone too was the mask of father. This was a man before him; his name was Dave. Dave looked worn, yet somehow alive. There was fire in him when he spoke.

“What happened to Juliet?” Dave asked, taking a last draw and flicking the nub of filter and spent ash away into the night. They were sitting on the back stoop of the small rental house. The yard was the size their kitchen used to be, the kitchen where Dave would never read the paper again, where Josh would never sit and talk to his parents again. Where was his father? Only Dave was left. He wore shorts and a white tee shirt. He fished out another cigarette and lit it.

“Juliet? I guess she's fine,” Josh shrugged. He rubbed at a raised nail head on the porch step with his shoe.

“I thought that was going somewhere,” Dave said. “After graduation.” His cigarette was half gone, as if he was trying to make up for all those lost years of clean living. Josh felt the familiar flare in his stomach, matched only by a stirring of a smile at the memory of that day. Had it just been a year ago?

“That's what you remember from graduation? Seriously?,” the young man said. “She has a boyfriend, and I'm engaged to Rachel. Remember?”

“Ah yeah. Sorry. When do I get to meet her again?” Dave asked. “I haven’t seen her since…” He trailed off. *Since the divorce* hung in the air, unspoken, screamed, both. Josh looked at the remains of his father. Fucking pathetic.

“I don’t know, Dad,” Josh said, suddenly weary, the anger fleeing as fast as it had come. The word ‘dad’ felt forced and foreign leaving his lips.

“I could bring Cindy,” Dave said with a laugh, reaching over to slap the young man’s back. “Make it a double date.” Cindy? Could Dave have picked a more stereotypical name for the rebound girlfriend of a middle-aged divorced man? Probably not. Maybe Candy.

“Haha,” the young man said without enthusiasm. Was that really a suggestion?

“Or not,” Dave said, shrugging. He flicked the cigarette, still burning almost an inch behind the butt, out into the yard. He did not immediately light another. “Don’t get too attached to her.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Josh glared sideways across the porch, the embers of annoyance rekindling the flames of anger in his stomach.

“Have you talked to your mother?” Dave asked instead of answering. The young man looked down at the nail, resuming poking at it with the toe of his shoe.

“Josh?” There was a strain in Dave’s voice, an unhinged need. It was scarier than the smoking and the rental house and all the other indicators of a fatherhood shed and lost.

“Yeah,” the young man said. “I talked to her yesterday.” Silence. “She was fine.”

“Is she still with that son of a bitch?” Robert. The son of a bitch’s name was Robert. He had tousled Josh’s hair and said to call him Bobby. Not exactly stepdad of the year, but Dave did not have the right to say a word, not a goddamned word, on the subject.

“Yeah,” Josh said. How did others project such finality into such simple pronouncements, while he could not?

“Great,” Dave reached in his pocket for the pack and pulled it out empty. He stared down at it and tossed it out into the yard with the other refuse. He pulled his phone out of his pocket next, checking it. “Julia,” he said with a slight smile and started texting a reply.

The young man put a hand against his stomach as if that could control its churning.

“You have to find something,” Dave said, replacing the phone in his pocket. “Josh, you listening?” The young man looked up from the deck board and stared at Dave.

“You have to find something good, something true,” Dave spoke with a sudden gravity, the voice of at least the businessman he was if not the father he had been. Would that man ever return? “Find something worth everything, and give it everything.” Other voices from lazy spring days seemed to float in, speaking in excited, naïve tones of breathless moments. Give it everything.

“Is that what you’re doing?” The words spilled forth from the young man’s lips without pausing in his mind...

...who had he let down...

...“You can be damn sure I’m trying,” Dave said, that tone entering his voice again. His phone vibrated loudly and he pulled it out, checked it, and put it up to his ear. “Hey Kathy. Yeah, last night was great,” he held a finger up to the young man, who stared at it. The young man stared at his father’s finger. He stood and walked back into the house, through the house, and out to the curb where his car was parked. He was halfway home before he started to cry...

...if only they were here the people that crowded his thoughts if only he could speak to them ‘They’re on their way’ the man was saying ‘I don’t want to move you’ Josh could only nod ‘call her’ his voice was a whisper...

... But he was sitting in the restaurant with Juliet, their hands still together, their eyes still locked on each other. They were still just as brilliant, just as caring despite the lines around that had not been there once upon a spring day. Maybe because of them. Maybe time had dulled the sharp lines of her beauty, made her face more compassionate...

...but that wasn’t Juliet it was Rachel Rachel’s eyes Rachel’s compassion how many lonely years seeking them to regain them that look that held him frozen in spring sunlight...

...and they were compassionate now as she stared at him.

“What do you want to do?” Her words came from far away. What did he want to do? About what? His mind was hazy. He smiled at her, a weary, worn smile, a smile he had seen too many times on his father’s face. When had he become his father? When had he realized he hated his father?

“There’s nothing to do,” Josh broke their grip and returned to his food. Juliet kept her empty hands on the table for a handful of moments before doing the same. He stared at them as he forced himself to chew food he had no stomach for. What did he want to do? He remembered spring days and summer nights. It was starting to snow outside the floor to ceiling windows that seemed to ring the restaurant. What did he want?

“There’s always something to do Josh,” Juliet’s tone was stern, motherly. That was new too. Had it come with the lines? She had grown up sometime over the last several years. They all had, but somehow he had missed noticing it, missed it or avoided it, one of the two.

“What?” Josh looked around them. They were alone in this section; the only other lunch patrons were at the bar. “Are you asking me to leave my wife?”

“No!” Juliet quieted her tone immediately after the exclamation, leaning forward. “I’m not asking you to do anything. I’m asking you what you want to do.” She stabbed a finger towards the center of his chest. “You’re the mopey-ass one, not me.” *You’re the one that chose her, not me.* Did those words hang in the air, or was he imagining them?

“Ok, I’m sorry. It was just a fight.” He took another bite of food. “I’m fine.”

“But you still can’t finish your card.”

“I’m fine,” Josh went back to eating as if he was excited about it. He forced down painful swallow after painful swallow, past the lump in his throat, past the growing

elephant pressing against the unspoken corners of his mind. He let his fork fall on his plate with a clatter. “I did all of this for her! The suit, the house, the job. I wanted a family with her, I want a family with her, but everything else I did for that dream, to make that dream possible. And, I mean,” he looked around. “I used to go home for lunch, every day I could, cause I couldn’t wait to see her and talk to her. I couldn’t wait to talk to her on the phone. She would call me just to say she missed me. We don’t do that anymore. I don’t even, like, think to do stuff like that anymore. I’m just,” Bored. Holy shit, he had been about to say bored. And stressed, and exhausted. He had taken an hour to write the other night. He had not written a word.

“It’s not you anymore,” Juliet said quietly.

“What is me? A moon-eyed little college boy saying ‘I’m going to be a writer when I grow up?’ That’s a crock of shit.” Josh sat back in his chair.

“I loved your writing,” Juliet said, still quiet, her lips barely more than forming the words.

“Well, the publishers didn’t,” Josh scratched irritably at his cheek, his eyes on the floor beside the table. The waitress came by and filled Juliet’s water.

“Do you want to know what I really think?” Juliet said finally, her volume somewhere around normal, her tone defensive.

“Sure.”

“You’ve vanished into Rachel’s life. Into her image of a perfect life, into her image of the perfect husband.” Juliet reached out her hand again and Josh stared at it. Finally he took it. Her thumb traced a circle around his knuckle. “I miss old Josh.”

“I am old Josh,” he said, hearing the limpness in his own voice.

“No, you’re suburban husband corporate business Josh. And you’re father Josh, which you and Susan together is just adorable, but you’re not all the other things I used to love about you,” Juliet moved her hand so that they lined up palm to palm, then with gentle pressure against his fingers she slipped hers between them until they were interlaced. He stared down at the union.

“I’m just tired,” he looked up at her, meeting her eyes, seeing a hundred versions of them, years of them, but never with more earnestness than they held now.

“You’ve been tired for years,” she smiled, as if amused to catch him in a bullshit excuse, just like she always did, just like she always had. He smiled back, a small, shy smile that tugged nervously at the corners of his mouth.

“Well, yeah,” Josh shrugged. “It’s just a bad day. And I do need to take more time for myself. I’ve been absent-minded. I,” he shrugged, “this morning was my fault.” Juliet frowned at him and withdrew her hand, leaving his limply on the table. He waited, then withdrew it.

“Ok then.”

“Are you mad?” Josh smiled up at the waitress as she dropped the bill off facedown where their hands had just been. She smiled back and then was gone. He would have to give her a good tip.

“No,” Juliet laughed. “I’m not mad. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine,” Josh grabbed the check. “We’ll go out to dinner tonight and it’ll all be okay. Maybe we’ll talk about it, take a break, a vacation.” He pulled his wallet out and tossed his debit card on the table. “Have you take care of all my shit for a week, keep my office dusted.”

“You ass,” Juliet laughed. Josh shrugged in an agreeable way.

“What was that Shakespeare line we argued about? Not the *Romeo and Juliet* one. ‘I must admit I am,’”

“‘a plain dealing villain.’” Juliet finished the line. “*Much Ado About Nothing*. My favorite play.”

“I liked *Romeo and Juliet*,” Josh laughed as Juliet feigned a gagging motion.

“Melodrama, whiny-ass melodrama,” Juliet drew out the words. “‘Love is’...not that shit.” They both laughed...

...the laughter faded into grunts of pain ‘I’m right here sir’ ‘What’s your name?’ ‘What’s your name?’ Call her back was all the blood rushing to his head he was dizzy blood was

dripping down to the top bottom of the car 'Tom I'll call you Tom. Who's Rachel?' his words were pierced by a scream...

...Josh was smiling as he turned the key in the lock. He had been smiling the entire way home. He could feel it. His face hurt. The key caught in the lock, like it always did, and Josh pulled up on the handle and heard it click. Already loosening his tie, his suit jacket going over the back of a chair, he moved into the main room of the apartment.

“Rachel!” He undid the top button but left the dress shirt tucked in; he tightened the tie back up so that he looked noticeably casual but still attractively dressy. That was the goal anyway, if posters of male models at the mall were any indication, not that he had any desire to look like the douchebags posing in the windows of Abercrombie and Hollister. But Rachel liked those type of guys, and he could indulge every now and then, especially on really good days. “Rachel!”

“Ok! Ok!” Rachel popped out of the bedroom, her hair up in a ponytail, her grey sweatpants, with ‘PINK’ written in white down one leg, clinging to her form. She had a pencil behind one ear and her reading glasses on, though she quickly took them off because she refused to believe how sexy she looked in them. Josh smiled at her, the pained muscles in his cheeks stretching even harder. Her face lit up at that smile. He laughed as he watched the realization spread. Then she was across the room and in his arms, her arms locked around his neck, her legs around his waist. With one hand he steadied himself on the table, his other moving beneath her to hold her up. She rained kisses down on his face and he laughed and kissed her back.

“You got it! You got it!” She continued to kiss him, her mouth finding its way to his, their lips joining, their mouths opening. “You got it,” she continued to repeat every time they broke apart.

“Yeah,” he replied breathlessly. “I,” more kisses, “got,” still more, a long wet one that made him very aware of her pressed against him, “the corner office,” he finished in a rush. She sat her down as she unwrapped her legs. Her kisses became softer, trailing across her cheeks and his nose, across the stubble on his chin she was always telling him to shave. With gentle pressure from her hand on the back of his head, he leaned his head down and she kissed his forehead and pressed her cheek against him.

“I’m so happy,” she whispered. “What did Daddy say?”

“He talked a lot about my qualifications,” Josh shrugged, finally stepping back from the embrace. He reached out a hand to stroke her cheek. “ ‘I want to make clear that there is no nepotism involved here.’ ” He said it in his best impression of her father, a lifelong businessman that sounded like a retired drill sergeant, the type of entrepreneur he imagined would have called Carnegie and Rockefeller a couple liberal pussies with no killer instinct. The guy scared the shit out of him, but he had given him the job. He had given him the job. He pulled Rachel close and hugged her, kissing the top of her head as she nuzzled his neck.

“When do you start?” Rachel asked.

“After I graduate, so like two months or so,” Josh shrugged. “I don’t know the exact date, but that week after graduation sometime.”

“My businessman with his MBA,” Rachel said in her talking-to-a-baby voice. They laughed.

“Goes real well with the English degree.”

“Ha,” Rachel kissed him. “I told you that thing was worthless.”

“It’s not worthless,” Josh shrugged. “It got me in the MBA program.”

“Yeah, I know,” she smiled up at him. “Hey honey, I have a little homework left to do but then I want to take us out somewhere really special to dinner okay.”

“Finish your homework,” Josh said as they broke the embrace. “And then get dressed. We have reservations.” He smiled.

“Oh my god! Did you know you were getting it? The job? How did you,”

“I plan ahead baby,” Josh sidestepped her playful swat. “I wanted to be prepared. And,” he held two fingers up like the man from an infomercial ‘wait there’s more!’ “I thought maybe we might want to start browsing houses tonight.”

“Oh my god honey!” Rachel was in his arms again, squeezing him, kissing him. For a moment he could not breathe. “it’s starting! Our life is finally starting.”

Josh swallowed past the lump in his throat....

...Juliet fell to her knees outside the car 'Josh! Josh!' her hands were inside the car on his face his torn skin only through her touch could he feel how he was torn 'I just saw it oh my god I can't believe...'

...that whore Juliet,” Rachel glared across the table at him. He took a bite of his cereal and stared back.

“She’s not a whore,” Josh said mildly, turning the cereal box so that he could read the cartoon on the back. Kids’ cereals were so much better than adult cereals. His Cheerios had shit about heart disease on the back of it. This one had Tony the Tiger getting kids energized about playing soccer. Susan reached out for the box and Josh slid it across to her. She turned it to the back and began to study it as if she could read it too. Josh smiled.

“You know what I mean,” Rachel said. Josh barely caught the glared daggers out of the corner of his eye. “With your all’s history, I really don’t understand why you expected me to be okay with this.”

“I didn’t expect you to be okay with this,” Josh said around another bite of frosted flakes. “But she needed a job and I’m wasn’t going to let her go crawling back to her piece of,” he glanced at Susan who looked up at him from her intent ‘reading’, “her piece of work parents.”

“In your office,” Rachel said, her voice frigid. “Working with you.”

“She doesn’t work with me,” Josh took another bite. “She works down the hall.”

Actually she was a floating secretary, which meant she ran errands and did assorted tasks for the entire floor because budget constraints prohibited individual secretaries anymore, but that was an unnecessary clarification. Josh kept eating.

“How are you completely unconcerned about this? About my feelings in the matter? Do you not even take those into consideration?” Rachel got up and dumped the remains of her toast in the trash can, then took her plate to the sink. Josh reached over and prodded Susan’s bowl. She resumed eating.

“Ready for school?” He laughed she nodded her head. At least the ‘don’t talk with your mouth open’ lesson had stuck.

“Yeah,” she said happily after she swallowed.

“Good,” Josh said with a laugh. “When you get my age you’ll miss school.”

“Josh,” he looked back at Rachel when she said his name.

“Look, honey,” Josh fished out the last few soggy frosted flakes and stood up with his bowl. “I get it. I thought about it. I considered your position. I just didn’t have an alternative. She’s been,” he gestured with the bowl of sugary milk, “fragile, since her and Anthony broke up.”

“And you just had to swoop in and be her protector,”

“Now that’s not fair,” Josh poured the milk down the sink. “You done baby girl?”

He looked at Susan.

“Yeah,” she held up a finished bowl for his inspection. Rachel moved past him to go get it.

“You have to get ready for school now, dear,” Rachel said, taking the bowl. “We have to leave soon.” Susan hopped out of her chair and sped off towards her room.

Rachel watched her go before wheeling around on Josh. “How is it not fair? That’s what you do after every one of these dramatic breakups of hers. She calls you crying and you talk to her for hours. You get her a damned job at your work,” Rachel shook her head. She looked at Josh, her eyes glistening. “Do you see why it upsets me?” Josh moved over and took his wife in his arms. She molded against him, her face wet against his neck.

“I know baby. I see it,” he kissed the top of her head. He was going to be late for work. “I just don’t know what else to do. She won’t be there long. You know how she is.”

“Like a few months?”

“Yeah, this is totally temporary,” Josh ran his hands through her hair. She had gone to the ‘mom’ cut now. There were no more luxurious waterfalls of blonde to run his hands through. “Like, way before your birthday for sure.”

“That’s three months from now.”

“Yeah I know,” he smiled down at her. “I already know what we’re doing too.” She stepped from him, wiping at her eyes. Even from behind her moving hands he could see the beginnings of a smile.

“What?”

“You know that new place you wanted to try? The sushi-Japanesey place on Main?”

Her eyes lit up and she kissed him. He kissed her back.

“You should get reservations early,” she said through her smile. “It’s been so busy. Oh my god! I can’t believe you remembered I wanted to go there. It’s so sweet,” she kissed him again and again. He took her in his arms once more.

“For you honey. For the big three oh,” he laughed she slapped his chest, laughing as well as she did so.

“Don’t remind me of that part,” she stepped away, wiping at her eyes a last time. “Just stick to the romantic dinner.”

“Yes ma’am,” Josh leaned back against the counter. “Don’t worry about Juliet. Seriously. Total non-issue. I don’t even see her during the day.”

“Ok honey,” Rachel smiled at him. “I’m going to go hurry her along.” She was already on the other side of the kitchen, ready to head down to Susan’s room. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”...

...sirens in the distance pierced by his phone again ringing ringing let it be her he was fading getting dizzier her touch was harder to feel he felt cold ‘Rachel’ Juliet had answered she was crying ‘he’s been in a wreck’ you tried to tell me was all he could think...

... “How’s the masterwork coming?” Juliet’s voice through the phone. Of course. Who else would call him just to chat at one in the morning? Josh leaned back in his chair and stretched.

“It’s good. I’m almost done.”

“You’ve got nothing,” her voice, judgmental, knowing. Josh laughed.

“Not a fucking thing, but I have a few more days,” he idly moved the mouse around, making the pointer on the computer screen swirl.

“Two days Josh. Damn I feel like your interventionist for procrastinators anonymous.” She did not sound that upset about that. Josh pushed back from the desk and stood up.

“Please. You know I’ll do fine.” Josh peeked through the blinds down onto the street. Somebody was just getting home and was walking into their apartment building with an armload of fast food.

“Yeah, I know that. You’ll breeze through while I’m struggling with this stupid love story that won’t go anywhere,” Juliet sighed into the phone. “This is a horrible idea.”

“What is?” There was silence. Josh tracked a car as it made its way into the complex. “Come on. Vent to me. We’re pillars of support remember?”

“Ok,” Juliet said slowly. He could picture her sitting in the dark, lit by only the computer screen, scrolling through her piece with her tongue out and lips pursed, somehow simultaneously. She did not stick her tongue out exaggeratedly, just the tip out of the corner of her mouth. She probably did not even know that she did it. “Like you remember the main girl?”

“Yeah,” Josh left the window and walked into the living room. Its dark emptiness was somehow cool and comforting. He could hear Rachel’s breathing from the bedroom. She was technically ‘sleeping over’ but it was the third night in a row and the sixth out of the last eight, and it seemed like all of her clothes and makeup and shit was here anyway.

He had mentioned her just moving in one time. Apparently her father did not like that idea too much. He was some type of big business guy. Owned a big company downtown. Insurance or some boring shit. “Redhead. A whore.”

“Shut up,” Juliet paused again, still scrolling. He was sure he could hear the wheel on the mouse turn. “But that’s the problem.”

“Dr. Brangers likes whores. You heard Jonathan’s story,” Josh laughed. “You’ll get an A plus some discolorations.”

“You’re sick Josh. But that’s my problem. She sounds like a whore. She doesn’t sound like she’s in love at all.”

“Cause she fucks both guys? And has the whatever the hell it was with the girl? She’s searching for love Jules,” Josh shrugged. He sat down on the edge of the couch, then stood. He walked into the kitchen. “It happens.”

“Yeah but what about the rule, you know, for fiction, the virgin rule?”

“That’s for horror movies,” Josh opened the back door and stepped out on the deck. The air was a perfect October cool. The stars shone like sequins in velvet, glittering in candlelight. He closed the door behind him. From here the interstate was a ribbon of light in the distance, its noises conquered by space. The world was at peace. “So unless you start killing off your characters, she’s fine. Have her show remorse, regret stuff. You don’t want to glorify it.”

“I don’t,” Juliet quipped in quickly.

“Ok good. Then you’re fine. It’s the twenty-first century. Nobody expects a chaste courtship anymore. Nobody expects it to be uncomplicated.”

“Bullshit. Everybody expects that,” Juliet laughed as she said it though.

“Have you ever seen *Pleasantville*?” Josh asked instead of answering the statement.

“No, the Tobey Mcguire one? Why?”

“No reason. It would take too long to explain,” Josh leaned against the railing. There was just a touch of breeze. One could reach out and touch the night, take it, mold it with gentle hands, dive into it, experience it. He breathed in. “But I gotta get back to work.”

“Don’t you have a girl to be falling asleep against anyway?” The tone, not quite flirting, but he did not know quite what. Every time she mentioned Rachel.

“Yeah, she’s in there. Where’s Doug?”

“He’s gone,” Juliet laughed. “Long gone as of two days ago. But go cuddle your girlfriend! I’ll see you in class.”

“Night Jule.”

“Good night.”...

... ‘she’s coming Josh she’s on her way I’m right here I’m not leaving you’ ... ‘Josh wake up’ ... ‘Sir! Sir! We need you to wake up sir’...

... The first thing he became aware of was a pounding headache, hammers, full large hammers, swinging madly, incessantly against the inside of his skull. His stomach churned angrily, a restless sea ready to unleash itself. He kept his eyes closed tightly as he lay there, waiting for the room he could not yet see to stop spinning.

Where was he? Not at home. The sheets felt wrong. No, he had been at the party. God, he must have drunk his weight in alcohol. He had never felt this bad before. His mouth was dry, his lips chapped. His skin felt hot. It was the covers, lots of covers, but he did not move to extricate himself. Moving would mean puking; of that fact he was completely sure. He had been drinking. He remembered frequent trips to the kitchen, refilling his cup. Just the thought of the counter lined with drinks almost made him gag. He swallowed the sudden increase of saliva in his mouth. He remembered other things, scattered images, a girl.

And then she stirred against him. He jumped, his entire body, led by his stomach, protesting the sudden movement. His eyes snapped open and the room spun viciously. His mind spun with it. His arm was under the pillow her head was on, her back turned to him; they had been spooning. She was naked. He was naked. Who was she? The girl. He remembered the girl. They had met in the kitchen and then they had danced. Damn she

had danced. She, she knew what to do. Then they had talked, drunkenly. She was a freshman. Her name. her name. What the fuck was her name?!

She stirred again, and then rolled over, as if she had finally felt his absence against her back. She turned to face him, her eyes blurry with sleep, her face serene. Nuzzling up against his side, she hooked a leg over his, laying her hand on his chest. She was warm. Golden hair was everywhere, spread out in a halo around and behind her, individual strands broken free to lay in the hollows of her shoulder or at her throat, just long enough trail down onto the swell of her breast. What was the protocol for this? Oh god, what if he was her first? No, no he was not her first. Hopefully.

“Good morning,” she whispered, her lips against his skin. The hand on his chest moved, tracing little circles with light touches. His arm came as if of its own volition out from under the pillow to wrap around her back. It was not even fair that somebody could exist with skin that soft and warm.

“Good morning,” he whispered back through cracked lips and dry throat. He must sound horrible. She was probably rethinking her decisions right now, getting ready to tell the story to her girlfriends with the new and improved prologue, ‘I was so drunk; I don’t know why I picked him.’ If it was even possible, she snuggled tighter against him.

“I told you not to mix lights and darks,” she said, her voice still soft and full of sleep.

“I know,” he did remember that much, sort of. Or he was making the memory up, filling in blank spaces based on latter data. Who knew.

“Multiple times,” words followed by more snuggles. She kissed where her mouth rested on his upper chest. He shivered as it tickled. Gurgling unhappily, his stomach threatened again, and he swallowed the attempt. He needed to get up, get coffee, tomato juice, orange juice, anything. Definitely coffee. Starbucks.

“I need breakfast,” he raised his free hand to his head, kneading his forehead and temples. It definitely did not help.

“Let’s go,” the girl said without moving. Her hand had come to rest on his stomach, just under the lip of the covers.

“I, uh,” was that procedure? To take the one night stand girl to breakfast before saying their goodbyes? Maybe. But maybe that meant it was more than a one night stand. He looked down at her. She was pretty enough. Enough the way the sheet clung to her accentuated her curves. Maybe seeing if he could get another night or two out of the deal would not be the worst thing that could happen. “Yeah, we can get breakfast.” Rachel. Her name was Rachel. Such a pretty name. He found himself whispering it as he turned his head towards her. She met him halfway for a kiss that lingered...

...the air was cold he was cold everything hands were on him Juliet had been forced to step back the man who had called in the accident lingered Josh felt them lift him as the

*seatbelt was cut where was Rachel had she really called her was she coming if she was
here...*

...He woke her with kisses. Rachel groaned at first and rolled over but he followed her, kissing her exposed skin, her face, her neck, her arm. He laughed as she swatted at him because he could see her smile from under her arm.

“Damn Josh,” she said finally, her eyes still closed.

“It’s your birthday eve!” He sat Susan in front of her, “and we have company.”

“You can’t have her in bed,” but Rachel was pulling her daughter close and kissing her, straightening her Santa emblazoned pajamas. “She’s only one.”

“I know.” Josh kissed her again. This time she turned her head and kissed him back. Susan gurgled happily as she ran her hand through his stubble. “But I wanted the whole family to be together on its first Christmas.”

“Our family,” Rachel said as they kissed. “I love you.”

“I love you too. And I made coffee.”

“You are a keeper,” Rachel sat up, putting Susan in her lap, a position from which she immediately started to try to crawl away. Josh picked her up.

“I know.” ...

...the wetness immediately spread as his body left the seat the car the womb there was grinding and cutting 'Pressure!' but the words were fading becoming harder to grasp his eyes found Rachel, no, Juliet, and he felt the burn of tears...I failed you both...

... Another graduation, so different from the first. Josh stood in the same spot, looking at a different, yet homogeneously familiar crowd, with somehow familiar yet different parents. Mom and Bobby stood together, his hands possessively around her like they always were, his glasses crooked, pretentious. He had given her her hug, Bobby his handshake. Now they were just standing there, made more uncomfortable by his father, Dave, standing several feet on the other side of Josh, his hands in his jean pockets, his shirt already coming untucked. The man never dressed up anymore. That was as good as it got. Was that too small a thing to hate someone for? Rachel had been sitting with her parents. He scanned the crowd for her.

“No surprises this time,” his mother spoke without laughter in her voice. The other times he had heard that today it had been a joke. From her it only sounded like she was relieved. He needed to call her more. They never talked enough. He needed to make the time. He was just so busy.

“Where’s the wife?” Dave, Dad, finally asked, looking into the crowd as if he would pick her out first.

“She’s coming.” They closed on the house next week, hopefully. There would be more paperwork to do. Bruce, Rachel’s father, had let him take a week’s vacation for

those two events, the assumed celebrations accompanying graduation and home ownership. Josh looked at his father. Why had he not brought one of his bimbos? Was he growing tired of them?

“Hey, Josh,” Bobby touched his arm. Why did he always touch people? It was not integral to talking. It really was not. “We’re going to meet you all at the restaurant. Congrats son.”

Go fucking die Bobby. “Ok, sounds good. Bye Mom,” he hugged his mother again and shook Bobby’s hand. Bobby nodded to Dave, who nodded back. Then they were lost in the crowd.

“What’s eating you?” His father asked the question as soon as they were gone, his ambivalent blankness switching to a look of worry. Flannel. Seriously, the man had worn a suit to the last graduation. Two years later and he had jeans and a flannel shirt. Was that a fucking food stain?

“Nothing,” Josh kept scanning the crowd. She was taking her time. Like usual. Everything became some involved procedure. It took them half an hour to get ready to run out for fast food. High maintenance girl. At least she was not wearing flannel.

“Bull, son.” Dave walked back into the proximity zone that had been taboo until his mother left.

Josh shrugged. Nothing to discuss. “It’s just a lot all at once.” Then why was he talking? “Good stuff, but just a lot. I didn’t think it would all happen by the time I was twenty four.”

“I was married when I was twenty two as well you know.” His father still stood with his hands in his pockets. “Had a job, a house, the whole thing. Still have the job.” *Am I becoming my father?* Josh pushed the thought away. He and Rachel were happy, mostly. That was enough difference for now.

“But now you don’t have all of those things.” Josh chewed at his tongue. Why was he saying this shit? Why? “You have options.”

“So do you. You’re choosing all of this,” Dave crossed his arms, matching Josh’s gaze out into the crowd, neither looking at the other one. “You can be pressured, cajoled, tempted, whatever you want to call it, but never think you didn’t choose your path.” Profound words for a man who fought his own divorce and lost.

“I know,” another shrug. His shoulders would be sore tomorrow with all the exercise they were getting today. Where was Rachel? Maybe she could shake this mood. “It just feels all mapped out. No options.”

“Do you remember what I said to you on the deck last fall?” Dave scratched at the stubble on his cheek with an index finger.

“Yeah, you said to follow my dreams or something,” something empty, something cliché, “to give everything in pursuit of my dreams. Like you.”

“What?” Dave whipped around. He barked a harsh laugh. “Not like me. Not like me at all.”

“That’s what you said,” Josh stopped at the look in his father’s face. He dropped his eyes to the ground, picking out patterns in the floor tiles.

“I said to find something worth everything and to give it everything,” his father’s voice was low, angry. When was the last time he had heard his father angry? Weary, worn, tired, frustrated, but never alive enough to be angry, the embers never stirred to flame.

“I didn’t give it everything. I lost myself in regrets and frustrations, in petty bullshit,” the voice changed, went from angry to soft. Josh peaked back up, and then looked back down. Somehow sorrow was more intimidating than anger. “I lost my way. I wasn’t saying be like me. I was saying whatever you do, never be like me.” Josh looked up to apologize, to hug his dad, to do something, but the man was already walking off into the crowd, his shoulders slumped...

*...not everything not everything I failed I lost my way judge me save me love me he
wanted to scream needed to scream if he could only see her he felt the needle enter his
arm...*

...Josh stared at the black computer screen, at the blank card, watching him as they taunted him with their emptiness. Lunch sat heavy in his stomach, his thoughts heavy in his mind. He pulled a piece of paper out of his drawer.

“Love is a summer night

Love is stars close and bright

You are there. You shine too.

I feel I can when I’m with you.”

He crumpled it up and threw it away before he even finished writing the last line. Pathetic. Fake. Love was hands clasped in solidarity, in unity. But it was not her hands he was thinking of. He glanced at the clock in the corner of the screen. It was already five. Quitting time. A whole day down the drain, nothing accomplished, just more to do the next day. There was always more to do the next day. He pulled his satchel over and started loading his stuff up, tossing the empty card in the top. He would finish it at the restaurant, whichever one they wound up going to. He had not even made any calls around town. Hopefully they would not all be booked. She would kill him, and he would deserve it.

“Hey, Josh,” and there she was, Juliet, her blue eyes peeling the layers off of his soul one at a time. He stared up at her. Her words from lunch came back to him, reverberating in his ears. Who was he? Who the fuck was he anymore? He ran a hand across the top of the leather satchel, the wedding band catching on the stitching.

“Yeah,” he flipped the top over and fastened the buckles. He stood, reaching his hand to maneuver his computer into ‘sleep’ mode as he did so.

“Can you give me a ride home?”

“Where’s your car?” Josh walked to the door, and her, and flipped the lights off. She moved aside and he closed the office door.

“It’s in the shop again. Ashley gave me a ride this morning,” Juliet nudged the satchel with her knee. “So official.”

“Yeah,” Josh chuckled a short mirthless chuckle. “Something like that. No problem. I can give you a ride home.”

“Did you finish it?” Juliet asked as they fell into step walking down the hallway.

“The card?” Josh waved into a couple of the offices as he walked, salutations towards the few other employees he could stand.

“No your autobiography,” Juliet kicked at the back of his knee. “Yeah the card.”

“No, still working on it,” another door, another wave. God, he hated this job. Maybe he would take her advice. Maybe he would start writing again. It was a short walk to the elevator, and then the rattling ride down to the garage level. Juliet rode in silence, standing where their arms touched. Josh slowly rubbed at his temples. He checked his phone. Text from Rachel.

So am I getting a sitter or not?

I don't – he erased the words and slipped the phone back into his pocket without replying. He would be home soon anyway. She could be pissed at him in person. It seemed to give her more enjoyment.

“I wasn't trying to be an ass at lunch,” Juliet was saying as they walked to his car.

“I know.” Why did he feel so numb, yet so, so, something else? Something exciting.

“Ok, I don't want you to think I would try to mess anything up. I like Rachel.”

“You do? You never talked to her all that much,” Josh clicked the button until the trunk popped. He tossed his briefcase in and slammed it shut.

“You never had me around that much,” Juliet immediately leaned her seat back as she got in the car, putting her arms behind her head. Josh clicked the radio off as he turned on the car.

“It didn’t seem appropriate,” Josh looked over his shoulder as he backed out, then slammed on the brakes as someone jetted past.

“Shit Josh!”

“Not my fault. Put your seatbelt on,” Josh heard himself practically growl the words through his suddenly gritted teeth as he continued to back up, slower this time.

“Fine, fine,” Josh heard her buckle up. Good. “And what do you mean it didn’t seem appropriate?”

“I mean she was always suspicious about you. Thought there was stuff going on between us,” Josh shrugged, put the car in drive, and adjusted the heat. His fingers were already getting cold.

“What did she think I was going to do? You were happy,” Juliet spoke as she stared out the window, her fingers playing with her hair. “It didn’t matter what I wanted.”

“What do you mean?” Josh indicated, waited, and pulled out onto the street.

“Oh come on Josh,” Juliet looked at him and he pretended he did not notice, merely kept staring out the windshield, straight ahead. It was snowing a little, a few dry, cold January flurries. “You can’t say you never thought about us, if we would work out.”

“Of course I thought about it Jules,” Josh did not, would not, meet her eyes. He kept driving. Shit. His skin was tingling. The something else, the strange alive feeling he

had had since lunch was all through him now. His stomach was tight, as if two hands were kneading it. Of course he thought about it. They had been friends for years. Anyone would have thought about it. He would have been weird not to. Right?

“Well, what did you think about?” She was turned towards him in the seat now, her feet curled under her, her eyes, though they might have been softer than they once had, still had enough intensity to bore through him.

“I don’t know. Us, I guess. What it would be like.”

“What would it be like?” She reached out, touched his leg, no different than she had a thousand times before. Why did it feel like fire? Why did it go all through him?

“I have no idea Jule.” She did not live that far away from work. Ten more minutes, depending on the lights. Did that make him happy or sad? He had to find a place for dinner, somewhere nice, somewhere classy.

“Do you remember that one day we were in my room, back in college?” Her hand was back on his leg. Her face was not that far from his. “We talked about what made us happy. About breathless moments.” Of course he remembered. How could he ever forget? ...

...but that wasn't her that was Rachel what had she said...

....“Yeah, sorta. It was Spring,” beautiful Spring. Lazy Spring. What had happened to those days? What had happened to youth?

“Yeah,” he could hear the smile in her voice, and the sadness. “You’re my moment Josh. My breathless moment. You’ve always been there for me.” ...

...Rachel’s voice not hers two conversations one with bells and rings one with guilt and excitement intertwined all he needed to hear all he had ever wanted to hear but that was not an excuse...

...All he could feel was her hand on his leg. “You’re the best person I know.”

...but it was Juliet’s voice not Rachel’s never Rachel’s I lost my way I lost you his chest burned his throat his eyes all else was numb...

“You know how much I care about you,” Josh began. How did this happen? What was happening?

“I hate seeing you unhappy,” Juliet continued. “But every day for months I come into that office, and,” her voice cracked. He could hear her tears, in her voice, feel them in the way she gripped his leg. “And you’re not you anymore. You’re not Josh, not my Josh. Not the one I used to stare at the stars with.” He had no idea when was the last time he stared at the stars.

“I’ve been busy,” he spoke past the lump in his own throat. “I have a lot of responsibilities.” And she did not. He almost said it. It scared him, how close his mouth was to forming the words.

“I know, but you have one to yourself too.”

“I know.”

“What if you had a new start, a new chance,” her hand left his leg, moved to his arm. His hands were shaking on the steering wheel as he stopped at the light, waiting for it to turn back to green, praying for the cars in front of him to hurry up, praying for them to never move. “With me? Just a chance to be yourself every now and then.”

“I,” Josh swallowed hard. He looked at her, met her eyes, “I,” she kissed him...

...the pain was different worse though there was no blood he could barely feel the paramedic's hands working furiously on him staunching the flow dimly he heard the crunch of gravel under tire...

... Josh looked up when Rachel entered the kitchen, hair pulled back and sweatpants on, gorgeous. He smiled at her and set his pen down. Her wedding ring glinted in the morning light.

“Josh,” he started up at her tone, around the table, around the island in the middle of the floor, and then he was holding her. “Stay home today.”

“Baby,” he kissed her forehead. Her cheeks were wet. He brushed frantically at her tears. “What’s wrong baby. I’ll stay home. What’s wrong?”

“We have to talk,” her voice was so soft, the tears coming faster.

“Baby,” he kissed her forehead. “What is it?”

“You,” her voice a merest whisper, her stomach leaping and twisting in his gut, his heartbeat thundering in his ears, he hung and scrambled for purchase on her every word. “You’re a father.”

“Honey, I,” it caught him like a fist, like a wave. “Oh god!” And he was kissing her, and she was kissing him and “I love you” and “Are you sure” and “I love you too.” He was crying, though he could not tell the difference between his tears and hers.

“Ours?” He finally choked the words out. She nodded against his face.

Of course theirs.

Theirs. Oh god. He felt weak. Good weak, bad weak. Weak.

“I’m going to be a father.” Another nod. More kisses...

*...and she was there her voice he heard her voice he moved cried out in pain a new wash
of blood of self he was held down his eyes could only find Juliet...*

...and her lips were warm. He kissed her back, and her hand was in his hair. How many years had he wanted to do this? Her mouth tasted like he had always known it would...

*...why why where was she he had to explain had to save himself I’m sorry the only words
that mattered...*

... “I didn’t give it everything. I lost myself in regrets and frustrations, in petty bullshit,” the voice changed, went from angry to soft. Josh peaked back up, and then looked back down. Somehow sorrow was more intimidating than anger. “I lost my way. I wasn’t saying be like me. I was saying whatever you do, never be like me.” Josh looked up to apologize, to hug his dad, to do something, but the man was already walking off into the crowd, his shoulders slumped...

...never be like me an echo a damning echo overcoming his present I’m sorry Dad sorry Rachel so many wasted chances he needed one more moment he begged the heavens without answer...

...Rachel put her hand on the front door, palm down, fingers spread. She turned around and smiled at Josh.

“This one is it. This is our home.” She kissed him as he pulled her close from behind.

“Ok then,” he put his arm around her waist and swept his other up under the back of her thighs and picked her up. She laughed, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him. “Let’s go home. And quick, before I drop you.” He leaned in to kiss her again...

...and she was there there glancing at Juliet then on her knees by him tears on her cheeks ‘Josh Josh ohmygod Josh’...

...and he broke away. Juliet looked up at him, her eyes clear, bright, alive.

“Come in,” Juliet whispered.

“I,” Rachel. What about Rachel? It was amazing how wooden that thought sounded. His entire body felt alive in a way it had not in a long time. Juliet kissed him again. He kissed her back. His heart was hammering in his chest. “Rachel,” was all he could finally get out.

“I’m not asking you to marry me Josh,” she smiled, her lips against his, damp with his saliva. “Not today.”

“What then?”

“Come in. Be with me.” She drew back and looked up at him. “If it’s not what you thought then she never has to know.” She watched him, stared at him, stared through him. He felt sick. But not uncertain. He leaned in to kiss her again...

...I’m sorry I’m sorry but that didn’t matter had never mattered fingers on him in him working quickly desperately he was so cold so cold all over except for the burning in his chest his throat I’m sorry Juliet I’m sorry Susan ‘Rachel’ his voice was weak she pushed through leaned in grasped his hand the only words that mattered ‘I love you’.

Curriculum Vitae
BEFORE YOUR EYES

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Education:

University of Louisville, Louisville KY
College of Arts and Sciences
Masters of English – Creative Writing Focus
January 2011-May 2013 (Anticipated Graduation Date)
Current GPA: 3.83
Thesis Title: Juliet (Creative Thesis)
Thesis Director: Brian Leung, Ph.D.
Advisor: Karen Kopelson, Ph.D.

University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
College of Education and Human Development
Bachelors of Science in Middle/Secondary Social Studies Education
August 2009-May 2011
Undergraduate GPA: 3.50
Advisor: Shelley Thomas, Ph.D.

Elizabethtown Community College, Elizabethtown, KY
January 2009-May 2009

Jefferson Community and Technical College, Louisville, KY
August 2006-December 2008

Teaching Experience:

Student Teaching- Bullitt Central High School
January 2011-April 2011
Mentor Teacher: Bryan Bates, MA
Subject: Freshmen US Government

- Designed lesson plans, projects, and assessments, centering around Discovery Learning strategies and Project Based Assessment techniques
- Handled all grading and posting of grades on Infinite Campus System
- Carried out all instruction for four hour and fifteen minutes classes daily
- Attended faculty meetings as well as other duties

Substitute-Bullitt County Public Schools

April 2011-Present

Supervisor: Nicole Harvey, secretary; Christy Coulter, principal; Debbie Atherton, principal

Long Term Substitute- Bullitt Central High School

April 2011-May 2011

Supervisor: Christy Coulter, Principal

Subject: Sophomore English

- Handled all grading and posting of grades to Infinite Campus System
- Carried out all in-class instruction and after school remediation for four hour and fifteen minute classes daily
- Administered all assessments including final exam, including both project-based assessments such as written portfolio pieces and On Demand Writing, as well as varied structure assessments including multiple questioning methods

Long Term Substitute: Bullitt East High School

April 2012-May 2012

Supervisor: Debbie Atherton

Subject: Geometry

- Handled all lesson planning and preparation of materials for two Geometry classes and one remedial Math Lab
- Responsible for all grading, posting of grades, and reporting of grades including end of year posting of grades to Infinite Campus System
- Carried out all in-class instruction, before and after school remediation, and other associated instructional duties including collaboration with resource teacher
 - o Developed Project Based Instructional Methods, Discovery Learning strategies, as well as lecture, work with a variety of textual resources, as well as practice oriented individual and group work.
- Administered all assessments including End of Course Assessment in accordance with district, school, and department policy

Awards:

ETS Certificate of Excellence for Social Studies Content Test

Volunteer Work:

SOUL (Student Outreach Uniting Louisville)
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
September 2012- Present

SPAVA (Society for the Prevention of Aggressiveness and Violence among Adolescents)
Jefferson County Public Schools, Louisville, KY
September 2012- Present

Professional Development:

Louisville Writing Project Conference
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
September 8, 2012

References Available Upon Request