

AN AMERICAN DREAM

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An American Dream

A Novel

by

Luke Scholl

Fall 2017

APPROVED BY THE INTERIM DEAN OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

Sharon Barrios, Ph.D.

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Rob G. Davidson, Ph.D., Chair

Jeanne E. Clark, Ph.D.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Publication Rights	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Abstract	v
CHAPTER	
I. Critical Introduction	1
Development and Influences	2
My Work	12
Literary Marketplace	20
II. An American Dream	23
Chapter 1	24
Chapter 2	38
Chapter 3	45
Chapter 4	51
Chapter 5	67
Works Cited	85

ABSTRACT

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An American Dream is made up the first five chapters of a work of fiction that will ultimately become a novel. An American Dream is a novel about John and Matt, two young men who have been friends most their lives, and how this friendship comes to an end. I wrote An American Dream with every other chapter being a flashback to Matt and John's childhood. I did this because I wanted my reader's to witness how their friendship began alongside how it ends. In my Critical Introduction, I discuss the authors who have influenced me and my writing, as well as many details about my craft and the choices I made in writing An American Dream.

CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Development and Influences

For as long as I can remember, I have been prone to telling stories. My story telling habit has always seemed to stem from compulsion as much as it has from desire. While it is difficult to pinpoint a time when I began to love telling stories, I do recall when I first realized that I loved it. In the fifth grade we were given a creative writing assignment, the details of which I don't recall. I wound up writing an eleven-year-old's attempt at an Indiana Jones parody. The story was extremely well received by my classmates. I don't recall the grade I received on the assignment, only the laughs. This is when I first realized that telling stories and making people laugh were things I had a talent for. While, in retrospect, my Indiana Jones parody was crudely written and the humor was, of course, very juvenile, it still marked as my first "success" as a writer. While this is my earliest memory of my developing proclivity for writing, it wasn't until several years later that I began to think of it as something I would actively pursue.

My late teen years were a rather hard period of my life. It was during this time that a teacher of mine introduced me to the novel *Cat's Cradle*, by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. I immediately fell in love with Vonnegut's style of prose. The novel is so bleak, yet so funny; it really spoke to me. Vonnegut's use of irony and his ability to envision a world that is at the same time both tragic and hilarious amazed me. Up until this point I had only been exposed to a handful of the standard K-12 approved novels. Most of the novels

I had read at this point seemed to have little or nothing that I could relate to my own experiences or worldview. It wasn't until I was exposed to Vonnegut's work that I felt that I was reading about the world I experienced on a daily basis, a world that is insane and destructive and full of people who are equally insane and destructive. After reading *Cat's Cradle* I sought out the rest of Vonnegut's writing and read almost all of his novels (I lost my copy of *Jailbird* before I could finish it) and several of his nonfiction essays and memoirs. It was the experience of reading Kurt Vonnegut's oeuvre that made me realize that I too wanted to be a writer.

My writing is greatly influenced by Vonnegut's acerbic sense of humor and dark outlook. I think it is more than fair to say that my writing always contains at least a touch of humor. In both Vonnegut's fiction and my own, the use of humor is a response to a chaotic world. In the worlds of our fiction things just happen because they happen, and our response to life's chaos is to point out its ironies and hypocrisies and to laugh at them. Like in Vonnegut's fiction, the humor in "An American Dream" is used as a counterweight to the more melodramatic aspects of the story. In a story featuring such plot points as a hospitalized mother, and absentee father, and the dissolution of a childhood friendship I make sure to point out the humor and irony that accompanies these more serious issues.

The humor in "An American Dream" is apparent early on during the main character's description of a hospital waiting room, "The chairs were all a maroon plane dotted with dark, green and blue shapes . . . They reminded him of those educational

videos from elementary school that always seemed to be stuck in 1989” (Scholl 19), the occupants of the room, “The big guy with the beard and the flannel shirt was in some sort of lumberjacking or paper towel accident” (Scholl 20), and the tone of the narration. As this scene demonstrates, the characters in “An American Dream” also use humor as a sort of counterweight. John in particular often uses humor as a defense mechanism or a distraction from more serious events taking place. I rarely enjoy fiction that takes itself too seriously and that is totally devoid of levity. I also don’t find these types of stories very believable; I find no matter how dark a moment in life may be, there is always a little something to laugh about.

As much as I enjoy Vonnegut’s “science fiction,” I find that his novels that lack any sort of science fiction—like the novel, *Bluebeard*—have best stood the test of time. Within chapter five there is also scene directly inspired by Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*, in which Molly recalls the first time she entered Matt’s bedroom to discover a mural he had been painting:

It took Molly a moment to register what she was seeing, a half-finished mural painted directly on the wall of Matt’s room. So far, it seemed to be a painting of a creek bed, covered in round smooth rocks. There was a small stream of bright blue water that disappeared here and there behind the rocks in the foreground. Trees stood on the horizon, up above the sunken, mostly dry creek bed. Half-way down the wall, the mural stopped but Molly could make out outlines and sketches for what was coming next. She could make out the figures of two people, and what she thought was going to become a dog. The whole thing was done in a style verging on

post-impressionist, though she resisted the urge to make Van Gogh comparisons.

(Scholl 62)

This scene was inspired by one of the final scenes in Kurt Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*, where the protagonist reveals a painting of his experiences during World War II (Vonnegut 282). While I don't use the mural image in the exact same way as Vonnegut, in both instances these paintings are meant to reveal a certain depth in their respective painters. In Vonnegut's novel, the painting reveals that the protagonist, Rabo Karabekian, can actually paint (which is somewhat in question throughout the novel), and that beneath his cold exterior is a wounded man still struggling with everything he experienced during war (Vonnegut 282). In the fifth chapter of "An American Dream" the scene with Matt's mural primarily provides the reader with insight into the nature of Molly's quizzical interest in Matt. Molly prides herself on being able to identify and categorize people and the fact that Matt seems to defy categorization keeps her fascinated. Unlike in Vonnegut's novel where the reveal of the painting acts as the climactic scene, the painting in my story is presented with little context. A later chapter include the scene depicted in Matt's mural, which turns out to be one of his fondest memories of his friendship with John. In this way, Matt's mural shows that his cool and often times cold exterior is, to some extent, a facade. It shows that Matt is not entirely without sentiment and that he values his friendship with John as much as John does. Like in Vonnegut's novel, the painting is also used to show a certain level of intimacy and trust between characters. In both "An American Dream," and *Bluebeard*, the paintings are hidden away in private spaces; they are visual manifestations of their painters'

feelings. And, in both cases, the painters open up this space to another character with all that that implies about their level of intimacy.

My work has also been heavily inspired and influenced by the modern novelists of the twentieth century. The turn made at the beginning of the twentieth century toward new and exciting methods of storytelling is, in my eyes, the greatest shift in literary history. Without this move away from the Victorian era's optimism and aristocratic subject matter and toward nonlinear and experimental storytelling with a dark worldview, my own writing would have no place in the literary landscape. Ezra Pound's simple but powerful motto, "make it new," is always on my mind when I write fiction. I always try to do "something new" in my writing. I would never go so far as to say I am ever doing something that's never been done before, but I am always trying to do something I've never done before.

After first reading Sherwood Anderson's, *Winesburg, Ohio* I fell in love with the idea of creating a fictional town to place my stories in. The same year I read *Winesburg, Ohio* I wrote a short story titled "Welcome to Welton," set in a fictional town named Welton, which I have continued to use as a setting for most of my fiction, including "An American Dream." I have always disliked using too many real-world locations in my writing, particularly due to the fact that my stories usually take place in smaller towns rather than larger cities. I've found that setting a story in a real-world small town, like my hometown of Davis, causes a few issues for my readers. The most common issue is that the majority of my readers will be unfamiliar with Davis, so I feel like I am already writing something they don't care about, a town they never even knew existed.

For readers who are familiar with Davis, using the town's real name can't help but conjure up any preconceived notions of what Davis represents and attitudes they may have toward the town. I prefer using a fictional town because then I feel I have more license to be fictional with the town, I am able to make the town what I want and fit it to the story. Lastly, I also enjoy the idea that all of the characters in my writing inhabit a similar space. I like the idea that John from "An American Dream" might run into Martin, the main character from my story "Welcome to Welton."

I don't think I could talk about my modernist influences without mentioning Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway's early short story collection, *In Our Time*, stands out as a personal influence. The manner in which Hemingway captures an astounding amount of significance and meaning with sparse and straightforward language amazes me and inspires me to try for the same. In Hemingway's short story "Big Two-Hearted River," he is able to reflect the troubled emotional state of Nick Adams in the imagery of the natural world. While the story is about Nick Adams attempting to mentally and emotionally recuperate after World War I, Hemingway omits any direct reference to this and instead shows it through imagery and Nick's reactions. Early in the story Nick Adams observes trout in the river:

As the shadow of the king fisher moved up the stream, a big trout shot upstream in a long anle, only his shadow marking the nagle, then lost his shadow as he came through the surface of the water, caught the sun, and the, as he went back into the stream under the surface, his shadow seemed to float down the stream with the

current, unresisting, to his post under the bridge, where he tightened, facing up into the current. (Hemingway 178)

This image is reminiscent of Nick's experiences during war and elicits an emotional response from Nick, "Nick's heart tightened as the trout moved. He felt all the old feeling again" (Hemingway 178). This is one of the few times in the story where Hemingway explicitly mentions Nick's emotional state; otherwise, the story is told entirely through images. Through the images of the trout, the river, and the swamp, "In the swamp the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches; in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic" (Hemingway 198), he shows the reader Nick's internal struggle and strife through the scenery around him. It is this ability of Hemingway's to reveal a character's inner world through the description of the outer world that I strive for in my own work.

In "An American Dream," I frequently use the description of setting and scenery to reflect the anxieties and concerns of my characters. John's description of the hospital waiting room that I discussed earlier clearly illustrates his anxiety as he criticizes everything in the room and concludes that it is a "sickening mess" (Scholl 20). In the same chapter the Welton hospital is described:

The hospital had been trying to build a new wing for years, but construction had been stalled time and again for an assortment of reasons, usually budgetary. The result was a seemingly permanent construction site next door to the only hospital in town. It had gotten to the point that people in Welton had started to associate the

incessant racket of construction noises with injury and illness . . . He started singling out the sounds of individual pieces of equipment: the biting rhythm of a jackhammer the sharp whine of a circular saw. He looked for what was different since the last time he was here, for what progress, if any, had been made. He couldn't really tell. (Scholl 21)

This description, like those earlier in the chapter, conveys a sense of John's anxiety, and it also reflects the story's themes of progress. For John, the lack of progress on the hospital is symbolic of the lack of progress Welton, his own life, and the two are connected. In this way, the image of the construction site acts a symbol of John's internal conflict between his desire to move forward in life and his sense of obligation to and nostalgia for the past. I also use symbolic imagery in the second chapter, in the form of the Sign Tree. At the beginning of the story I quickly establish a connection between the tree and John and Matt's friendship, "The boys would meet underneath the Sign Tree every day . . . They thought of the Sign Tree as the halfway point between their houses" (Scholl 31).

In regard to the craft of fiction writing, my work is influenced by the essays of Charles Baxter and Flannery O'Connor. I find that the critical and, at times, even cynical eye with which Charles Baxter examines the current state of literature in his book on craft, *Burning Down the House*, and in particular, his essay, "Against Epiphanies," illuminates and articulates many of my own opinions about literary conventions. In his essay, "Against Epiphanies," Baxter discusses the apparent flaws in the literary convention that is the epiphany. As Baxter states, "Everywhere there is a glut of

epiphanies. Radiance rules. But some of the insights have seemed disturbingly untrustworthy” (47). The epiphany or sudden realization has become trite and clichéd due, not only to overuse, but also due simply to the fact that it fails to accurately represent the world. This is somewhat ironic in that realist authors so often use epiphany. Sudden insight is not a common occurrence, but literary convention would seem to suggest otherwise; as Baxter states, “Suddenly, it seems, everyone is having insights” (60). In my own work I have often felt a pressure handed down through literary convention to manufacture some sort of insight for my protagonist to have about his/her life or situation, more often than not, to the detriment of my story.

In “An American Dream,” I have avoided this overused trope, and have actually written characters who themselves seem to be unable or ill equipped to have epiphanic moments. The characters in “An American Dream” all fail to fully comprehend their own situation in one way or another. The most prominent case of this comes in the form John’s inability to fully understand his mixed feelings about moving away from Matt. While this confusion is central to the story, John does not have a moment of insight that suddenly clears up these issues; instead, he slowly comes to terms with his feelings as the story progresses. Even Molly, who seems to provide John with some amount of insight in the first chapter of the story, begins to doubt her advice by chapter five.

Flannery O’Connor’s book on craft, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, has been very influential on my writing on a number of levels. In her essay, “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” O’Connor stresses the importance of sensory detail in fiction; she states, “The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer

begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions” (O’Connor 67). I often start a new piece of fiction by first having “some abstract notion” (O’Connor 68) that I am trying to explore in my work. Therefore, I often return to O’Connor’s essays to remind myself to first ground my story and my characters with sensory details. O’Connor’s essays on writer’s and rationality, particularly in her essay, “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” have also heavily influenced me. In this essay O’Connor states, “The country that the writer is concerned with in the most objective way is, of course, the region that most immediately surrounds him, or simply the country, with its body of manners, that he knows well enough to employ” (O’Connor 28). The character’s in “An American Dream” are amalgams of the kind of people I see regularly in my little corner of the world. I have lived my entire life in northern California, and my writing reflects this in subject matter, setting, and in my character’s attitudes and dialogue.

Beyond other authors, my writing has been influenced by a number of individuals in my life. My older sister Emily Scholl has been the largest moral, ethical, and political influence in my life. She has influenced my writing simply due to how much she has influenced my general outlook on life and my political beliefs. My cousin and best friend, Michael Cavanaugh, is another personal influence of mine. We were born only three months apart and have been each other's biggest artistic supporters. Michael has also been a big influence on my sense of humor, which always shows up in my writing. It is because of Michael that so much of my writing has to do with friendship. He

even serves as part of the inspiration for Matt Tucker, one of the main characters in “An American Dream.”

My experience of growing up in Davis, California has had a significant impact on my writing. Davis is a college town mostly populated with somewhat affluent upper-middle class citizens, yet I grew up there as part of a family that is best described as working poor. I grew up moving from one rented house to another. In Davis, while my family was struggling to survive, I was surrounded by people who owned their homes and vacationed in Hawaii every summer. This experience has ingrained in me a preoccupation with class and privilege that comes through in “An American Dream.”

I am also an avid consumer of pop culture, which has most definitely influenced my writing. It is rare that I write any piece of fiction that does not contain some reference to a song, a movie, or Homer Simpson. In “An American Dream” I make several references to songs by both popular and independent musicians. While these references mostly just work as details within the story, I would like to think that the occasional reader might understand or take the time to Google the reference, as they do pertain to theme of the novel.

My Work

My creative project is composed of the first five chapters of my novel, “An American Dream.” The novel is realist fiction, heavily focused on the intricacies of human relationships and heavily character based. “An American Dream” is the story of the friendship between two characters, Matt and John. My intention is to juxtapose the

story of the formation of these two characters' friendship and the total and irrevocable end to their friendship.

I'm trying to work with a few themes in this story including friendship, finality/death, and "the American dream." I discovered that the core conflict in the story rose out of John's desire to move forward with his life, but feeling that in doing so he would be abandoning his friend, Matt. For several years I have been fascinated by the ease with which people can exit one's life and never come back. Whether it be something tragic like death, or something innocuous like somebody moving away to a new city, I find it astonishing at times how easily we move on when someone that has been a regular part of our lives suddenly isn't anymore. This is what I am writing about in "An American Dream."

The friendship of these characters is not only meant to be the thematic focus of this story but it is also what drives the plot. "An American Dream" shows how these two characters became such close friends despite their differences, but how these very differences result in the dissolution of their friendship. It is my hope that I am able to draw their friendship in such a way that when it ends it feels both heartbreaking but also inevitable. To do this, I present the story in two parallel narratives. The first narrative is the story of how Matt and John's friendship comes to an end. The second narrative is about how John and Matt's friendship formed while they were children. These narratives are presented in alternating chapters.

The primary narrative of the story follows a series of events that will ultimately lead to the end of John and Matt's friendship, told in chronological order.

Though it is written in past-tense, it more or less acts as the present-day in the story. I depict this dissolution of friendship as realistically as possible, which is one of my greatest struggles with this story. I don't want Matt and John's friendship to end over a melodramatic blowout, but instead I want it to dissolve simply because the two characters are on diverging paths. While the present-day chapters will depict the end of Matt and John's friendship, the third will depict how it began. This section in each chapter will contain flashbacks to Matt and John as children. Unlike the present-day sections, the flashbacks will not be present in any particular chronological order, but will instead be presented in order to provide insight into the present-day story. Also unlike the present-day section, which only takes place over a few months, the flashbacks will span from the character's early childhood to their teenage years.

For The first chapter of "An American Dream" I had several goals in mind. First, I include each of the four most important characters: John, Matt, Laura and Molly. It was particularly important for me to include Molly, as she is mostly absent in the second, third and fourth chapters, yet is the perspective character in the fifth. Without Molly being more present earlier in the story I felt that the switch to her perspective in the fifth chapter might be to jarring for the reader. The final scene of the chapter features John and Molly having dinner together, and helps to establish not only Molly's character, but John's perception of her. In this scene it becomes quite apparent that John sees Molly as intelligent and calculating:

Molly remained silent for a moment, looking straight at John. It was that look she gave when she was thinking, not like she's staring at you, and not like she's staring

through you, but like she's staring at something between you. John always thought she looked like she was picturing a chess game she was playing in her mind, or like she was in the midst of invention. (Scholl 27)

As the story is primarily about the relationships between these characters, this scene helps to make the dynamic clear to the reader. I was also quite concerned about establishing early on that Molly has a certain fascination with Matt, but that this fascination is strictly platonic. I tried to make this clear with a humorous exchange of dialogue between John and Molly at the end of the chapter where John jokingly asks, "You're totally in love with him aren't you?" In the first draft of this chapter the exchange seemed to do the opposite of what I had intended but through revising the dialogue tags I was able to address this issue.

In the first chapter, I make it clear to the reader that John is in a rather agitated and anxious state. My goal in doing this was to make the stakes of the story clear to the reader early on. I make this apparent early on as I describe John's thoughts about a hospital waiting room:

John never liked waiting; let alone, waiting rooms . . . He flipped through every magazine that appeared the least bit interesting. He read the titles of the articles, but never continued beyond the first few sentences. He quickly glanced at the pictures of wildlife, celebrities, even a few pictures of celebrities with wildlife. He checked out a few cartoons and concluded that cartoonists were either good at drawing or funny, but never both. He wanted something to occupy his mind, but couldn't

commit to anything. *Newsweek*, *Time*, *People*, everything he came across seemed too serious, or just the opposite, too frivolous. (Scholl 18)

As the chapter continues it becomes clear that John's anxiety is actually coming from two sources: Matt's mother Laura being hospitalized, and an upcoming job interview. While both of these plot points seem like common or obvious sources of anxiety, they are complicated further by how they are both directly related to his relationship with Matt. For John, the job interview is representative of his future and good fortune while Laura is symbolic of his past and Matt's misfortune. John's anxiety comes from a place of guilt; he feels guilty trying to further himself and trying to move forward in life when his closest friend's life seems to be stuck in place if not slowly falling apart. This internal conflict of John's is the primary conflict in the story, so it is important that reader senses it as early as possible.

The second chapter is a short flashback to Matt and John's childhood, a kind of overview of the past, quickly covering a ten-year period with numerous jumps in time. The image of the "Sign Tree" (Scholl 30) is important, a symbol of slow decay and eventual death. The tree foreshadows the eventual demise of Matt and John's friendship.

The second chapter also helps to describe the nature of John's relationship to Matt's mother, Laura. It is in this chapter that the reader begins to see how John has had an unrealistically high opinion of Laura Tucker since childhood. I show this through a combination of images including Laura's extremely long hair, her manner of dress, and her home that a young John thinks of as a "castle" (Scholl 30). This combination of regal imagery is, however, juxtaposed with the reality of Laura Tucker's life as described by

the narrator, “Beside her hair, the way Laura dressed added to John’s overblown perception of the woman. Every morning she would be wearing another pressed and wrinkleless outfit that made her look too young to be Matt’s, or anyone’s mother . . . John almost always saw Laura at her best and most put together” (Scholl 31). This is not only meant to establish an aspect of John and Laura’s relationship but also to show an establishing theme in how John perceives those closest to him. While John’s perception of the other characters in the story are quite favorable, they place unrealistic and unfair expectations on the other characters, which results in further conflict.

The third chapter elaborates further on John and Matt’s diverging paths in life. The whole chapter is really centered around a simple question posed to John by Matt, “Would you rather live in the mountains or on the beach?” (Scholl 37). This question actually comes from a conversation I once had with my older sister. We decided that you could actually tell a lot about a person based on their choice. Through John and Matt’s conversation about this question I am trying to show that Matt sees a fundamental difference in his and John’s characters and paths in life that John simply doesn’t recognize. It is also my intention for the final scene in the novel to harken back to this question, where I will depict John on a beach after moving and starting his career thinking back to Matt and the question and hoping that Matt has found his mountain.

It was important to me that I show how the adult versions of John and Matt interact regularly. While their story is about their friendship dissolving, I wanted to include at least one chapter where I showed what their relationship and dynamic was like before everything begins to fall apart. My thought process here was simply that if my

reader is to understand how Matt and John's friendship is falling apart, then they must understand what it looks like intact.

The fourth chapter is another flashback to Matt and John's childhood. This chapter illuminates further aspects of John's relationship with Laura and Matt. A key moment in this chapter is John's childhood fantasy about what he imagines laser tag to be:

He pictured Matt and himself running through a gloomy swamp. Something was chasing them and whatever it was, it was too big to fight. They barreled through fog, ignoring thistles and thorny branches that scraped at them as they went. Things would jump out of the fog, terrible things, undeniably evil things with claws, teeth, tentacles; things that wanted to devour them. But the boys were quick with their laser guns, blasting away these monstrous predators with perfect accuracy. He pictured one particularly terrible creature about to attack Matt from behind until a perfect shot over his best friend's shoulder dispatched the beast, a favor that Matt would quickly return. Eventually, the boys found themselves at a dead end, a giant rock blocked their path, or the bog became too deep and treacherous to cross. At this point the boys turned their backs to this impassable barrier and awaited their pursuers. If they were to die they would do so together, like Butch and Sundance (a movie he had not yet seen), together and fighting. (Scholl 42-43)

This quote illustrates how John views his friendship with Matt. He sees Matt and himself as an inseparable duo; like "Butch and Sundance," John and Matt will stay together until the end. Yet, this quote also illustrates how John, even from an early age,

builds up unreasonable expectations. The reality of laser tag cannot hold up to John's fantasy. By combining John's laser tag fantasy with his feelings about he and Matt's friendship I am showing that the reality of his friendship will also fail to live up to his expectations.

As the chapter continues, John's steady disillusionment peaks when the trials of the day cause Laura Tucker to lash out at him. This moment is important for John because it is when Laura establishes a clear distinction between the sorts of things she shares with John. This act causes John to realize that he is not really part of what he had begun to think of as his pseudo-adopted family. This also helps to provide more insight into John's behavior while visiting Laura in chapter one; his suspicion that Laura is keeping the full severity of her injuries from him only serves to remind him that he isn't really a part of their family.

The fifth chapter returns to present day, but shifts to the perspective of Molly. It is important that the reader see things through Molly's point of view. Molly has a unique view of the story. She is witness to John and Matt's relationship but not part of it. This allows Molly to have more objective view on the events of the story than John. I also plan for future chapters to contain scenes between Matt and Molly where John is absent, and to describe these scenes while maintaining his perspective simply wouldn't work.

As the fifth chapter is the first to feature Molly's point of view, much of it is meant to reveal details about her character. Particularly important is the way in which Molly is actually depicted in contrast to John's perception of her. As stated in my

discussion of chapter one, John views Molly as both intelligent and calculating. In this chapter the reader is shown that John's perception of Molly is not always accurate. Throughout the chapter the reader sees how Molly's plans and assumptions often go awry. The chapter begins with Molly's routine already disrupted and with her already doubting the advice she gave John in the first chapter. This chapter also features the scene with Matt's mural that I discussed earlier, which shows the reader a case in which Molly is unable to accurately read someone, and why Molly has such a keen interest in Matt. Further in the chapter Molly meets Jen. At first, Molly makes numerous assumptions about Jen on a few simple first impressions. However, as Molly begins to actually speak with Jen and learn more about her, she discovers that many of her earlier assumptions were false. This different perspective on Molly serves to make her a more complex character, and to once again show how John has overblown and unrealistic expectations of others.

The fifth chapter also ends with an important plot point, a phone call Matt receives from his Uncle Frank. Frank is the brother of Matt's absentee father, and until the phone call Matt is totally unaware of Frank's existence. Though this does not come until the end of my story, it does give the reader a sense of where the story is going. As John continues to get closer to achieving his goals, Matt's life seems to keep crumbling around him.

Literary Marketplace

"An American Dream" is a story about a young man realizing that to move forward in life he might have to let go of his closest friend and the past. As such, I think

the novel would find an audience with people in their twenties. From my perspective it seems that older millennials are experiencing their twenties quite differently than the generations that came before them, and would appreciate literature that captures their experiences. Representations of millennials, particularly older millennials, in pop culture and fiction at this point have mostly been caricatures. They are usually depicted as being totally dependent on technology and without any emotional depth. In the realm of popular fiction, I believe my work might attract an audience not unlike that of the contemporary author Nick Hornby. My fiction, like much of his, focuses on young adults and their relationships with the occasional pop culture reference here and there. Where much of Hornby's more successful novels like *High Fidelity* and *About A Boy* seemed to strike a chord with generation x, I believe my own fiction will do the same for millennials.

As an emerging writer, I suspect "An American Dream" would most likely find a home with an independent publisher like Graywolf. Not only would such a publisher be more likely to be interested in my work, but I personally admire the aesthetic and philosophy of independent publishers. In particular, I appreciate how Graywolf seeks to publish "writers at all stages in their careers" (Graywolf), and their desire to promote "underrepresented and diverse" authors (Graywolf). In addition to publishing works by new and emerging writers, Graywolf has also published works by more established writers I admire like Charles Baxter and Martha Collins. I also appreciate Graywolf's attitude toward the art of literature as they describe it as "an accessible art form that allows for the kind of enduring, inclusive, and inexpensive exchange of ideas and emotions that fosters lasting empathy across the divides of geography, culture, and time"

(Graywolf). Also, as a nonprofit organization, I feel like Graywolf Press operates due to their love of literature, first and foremost. While I work on completing “An American Dream” I plan to be simultaneously working on shorter pieces of fiction and nonfiction that I will submit to different small presses and literary magazines.

CHAPTER II
AN AMERICAN DREAM

CHAPTER II

AN AMERICAN DREAM

Chapter 1

John had to go, and he was beginning to worry that he might have to leave Matt behind. He checked the cheap plastic clock hanging on the wall, then his phone to see if it had the right time. It had been about an hour since he left Matt with Laura, and he couldn't tell if that was a long time or not to be waiting. He concluded that it probably wasn't, but that didn't stop him from getting increasingly impatient and agitated. John never liked waiting; let alone, waiting rooms. He sent Molly a text, letting her know that he might be a few minutes late, but he didn't say why. He flipped through every magazine that appeared the least bit interesting. He read the titles of the articles, but never continued beyond the first few sentences. He quickly glanced at the pictures of wildlife, celebrities, even a few pictures of celebrities with wildlife. He checked out a few cartoons and concluded that cartoonists were either good at drawing or funny, but never both. He wanted something to occupy his mind, but couldn't commit to anything. *Newsweek*, *Time*, *People*, everything he came across seemed too serious, or just the opposite, too frivolous. He spent the most time trying to tell the difference between two drawings in a *Highlights*, which he half-hid behind crossed legs.

When he grew tired of pretending to read, John began to let his eyes creep around the room. There's something about these colors I don't like, he thought. The chairs were all a maroon plane dotted with dark, green and blue shapes. John found it

annoying how all the shapes were irregular, no perfect squares or right triangles, just oddly proportioned trapezoids and other shapes that he was pretty sure were nameless. They reminded him of those educational videos from elementary school that always seemed to be stuck in 1989. On top of that, the chairs felt like they were made of plastic masquerading as something softer.

The walls were equally disappointing. As John reached up and briefly ran his knuckles along the wall he found they were covered with a weird sort of fabric. It felt softer than the chairs, a fact that John found both confusing and unsettling. The walls were made up of interwoven strands of mauve and dark grey, which, John thought, made it look like dried blood. The whole room seemed a sickening mess.

Having found sufficient fault with the inanimate objects that surrounded him, John turned his scrutiny on the other people in the waiting room. He tried to guess why they were there, what were their stories. That guy in the blue tank-top, he thought, he's here because his frat bro is still getting his stomach pumped from last night. That old lady is actually only twenty-five; she aged fifty years over night! That, apparently, unattended boy with the light-up shoes just lives here; he sleeps in the vents. The big guy with the beard and the flannel shirt was in some sort of lumberjacking or paper towel accident. That one made John laugh a bit, which resulted in a number of perturbed eyes glancing his way.

The brief attention suddenly made John keenly aware of how he was dressed, and how he must look to everyone else. An A's cap, sunglasses and a coffee stained sweatshirt; at best he must look like some celebrity trying to avoid being recognized.

Matt was looking just as slovenly as him, John thought. He was wearing what he slept in, a pair of pajama shorts and a plain white T-shirt. His skin had that sallow look that came from a tan man not being in the sun enough. His black hair was ninety percent cowlick, like when they were kids. At least I don't look *that* bad, John thought, in a failed attempt to make himself feel better about his own appearance.

John usually took great care in how he presented himself to the rest of the world. "You never know, some stranger on the street might hold your fate in their hands someday," he once told Matt, "So, best not walk around looking like an asshole." John seemed to recall Matt replying with something about not believing in fate, and "Fuck that guy if he wants to screw me over because of the way I look." But, when Matt told him that Laura was in the hospital, John threw asshole to the wind. When Matt got the call, John was quick to grab his keys and offer him a ride. In the rush he had not only forgotten his appearance, but also his own plans to meet Molly later and tell her his big news.

No words were exchanged between them on the drive over, except practical discussions about the quickest route to the hospital and where they should park. There was construction going on around Welton Memorial that made even getting in the door a troublesome task. The hospital had been trying to build a new wing for years, but construction had been stalled time and again for an assortment of reasons, usually budgetary. The result was a seemingly permanent construction site next door to the only hospital in town. It had gotten to the point that people in Welton had started to associate the incessant racket of construction noises with injury and illness.

As soon as John stepped out of the car he was hit in the eye with a pointed beam of light reflecting off piece of sheet metal. “They’re never finishing that,” John said as he squinted and shaded his eyes.

“It would be kind of weird if they did,” Matt said.

John paused for brief moment and stared at the crisscross of cement and steel, his hand still shading his eyes. He started singling out the sounds of individual pieces of equipment: the biting rhythm of a jackhammer the sharp whine of a circular saw. He looked for what was different since the last time he was here, for what progress, if any, had been made. He couldn’t really tell.

As soon as John stepped through the sliding glass doors he felt invaded by the smell of the hospital. He felt chilled and weighted down by it to the point of shivering. That terrible antiseptic smell, he thought, it’s just trying too hard; it exists to distract you from whatever horrible thing it’s covering up. It’s like disease being murdered.

John felt the same way about the polka-dotted scrubs worn by the receptionist who directed them to room 428. He imagined there must have been some study done on what patterns and shapes make people handle bad news better.

When the elevator doors opened, John noticed that one of the fluorescent lights was out, which made the whole elevator seem in desperate need for maintenance. They had to go up to the 4th floor, and as soon as he hit the button John realized how slow the elevator moved. Something about standing still in the crawling elevator made John keenly aware of he and Matt’s silence. John knew he was supposed to say something—best friend’s mom in the hospital and all—but they so rarely talked about the

heavier aspects of life. But, he had to fill the silence with something, “This has got to be one of only, like, twenty elevators in town,” John said.

“Maybe. There’re two here, where are the other eighteen?” Matt asked as he crossed his arms and began to scratch at his shoulder in that way that made him look like sleeping vampire with an itch.

“Puttin’ me on the spot? Okay,” John mumbled for a moment as he turned his eyes to the ceiling and thought, “well, most, like a dozen or so, are on campus.”

Matt nodded. “Right.”

“I know there’s one in that big building downtown with the shoe store,” John said, with an unsure grin.

Matt breathed a chuckle through his nose. “Okay, shoe store building.”

“I think there’s at least one in the radio station,” John continued.

“Not sure if we can count that.”

“What about the mall? Does the mall have elevators?”

“No. Wait, is that a joke?” Matt asked, as he shot his friend a scrunched and incredulous look. “The mall doesn’t even have a second floor.”

“Oh yeah, shit.” Matt chuckled and covered his face in mock-shame.

“Buzz,” Matt said as the elevator doors opened, “your time’s up.”

As they walked down the fluorescent hall John tried to keep his eyes facing forward. The hall was lined with doors; it felt like an obstacle course, John thought. Every ten feet or so there was another door; behind which, people were sick or broken or dying. Every closed door issued a quiet sigh of relief and every open one a wince and

chill. Here comes another, he thought, as he approached each threshold. What was he so worried about? Was he going to be the only person to hear someone's heart monitor start going crazy? Were they going to run all out of doctors and force him to perform surgery on somebody? "He needs a kidney and you're the only match," he thought. John knew whatever was bothering him so much was stupid and irrational, not that that helped at all.

Matt didn't seem to share John's hospital induced anxiety. He looked normal, like himself. Sure, the grimace and the scrunched brow gave away that he was less than content, but that was about it. He reminded John of those people who have to care for sick and dying family members for years. Those people who say, "We knew it was coming, so we were ready for it," or "you know, to be honest, it was a bit of a relief." John found it odd considering that Matt's mother had always been one of the most lively and upbeat people he'd ever known. He couldn't remember her ever being seriously sick or injured before.

Room 428 was the second to last room on the right. The door was closed and John began to reach for the handle before realizing that Matt should probably go in first. Laura had the room to herself, though there was a second bed in the room. John let out an audible sigh of relief when it realized it was currently unoccupied.

In a tone of motherly mock-surprise, Laura greeted Matt and John with a heavily medicated, "Hey, guys." Right away the boys noticed the bottom half of her leg, bruised and swollen protruding from her hospital gown. John thought it looked like a rubber playground ball that had been kicked too many times and had formed stretched and swollen rubber tumors.

“Hi Mom,” Matt said as he walked over to his mother, then gave her a quick and awkward hospital bed hug.

John couldn't help but avert his eyes a bit as mother and son embraced. “Hi Laura,” he said with a small polite wave once the hug was over.

“Oh, John, come over here and give me a hug,” Laura said sounding jokingly exasperated as she motioned for John to come over.

John complied immediately. He didn't mind hugging Laura, he just preferred to wait for invitation to do so.

“I'm so glad to see you boys,” Laura said, as she let go of John. “Thanks for dressing up too.”

John chuckled. “Yeah, sorry. We rushed out pretty fast.”

“So what happened, mom?” Matt asked.

“Oh, some guy coming off the freeway tried to get in front of me and I didn't see him in time.”

“Are you okay?” John asked before Matt could.

“Yeah, I'm fine, but I guess I'm going to need surgery.”

Matt's eyes squinted with suddenly raised concern. “For what?” he asked.

“My leg.” Laura made a slight gesture to her inflated and discolored leg.

Laura began to go into a detailed explanation of her need for surgery, most of which was lost on John. Her explanation was full of “don't worries” and “it'll be fines,” as Laura repeatedly assured Matt and John that there was nothing to worry about.

With each, “don’t worry,” John would flinch. With every, “it’ll be fine,” he would clench his jaw and briefly squint his left eye. He didn’t like seeing Laura like this. He didn’t like that she was bullshitting them. As Laura spoke, John began fantasising about finding the other driver. He imagined him as a sort of cartoon trucker. He pictured him in an orange and white hat, jeans and a greasy white tank top that allowed his perpetually sweaty beer belly to stick out. He wanted to find the guy and kick his ass, not that he had ever kicked anyone’s ass before.

Once Laura started talking about forms she needed Matt to sign, John decided to interject, “I think I’ll leave this stuff to you two. I’ll be downstairs in the waiting room, Matt.”

“Thank you so much for coming John,” Laura said, the medication making her sound more effusive than usual.

“Of course,” John replied with a half-forced smile as he went out to the waiting room to pretend to read magazines and scrutinize strangers.

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When Matt finally emerged from the elevators he greeted his friend with rolling eyes and a shaking head, “Sorry man, there was actually a lot of paperwork.”

John climbed out of the waiting room chair. “It’s fine,” he said with a dismissive wave, “I’m sorry about all this shit.” John hummed out a grunt that meant

“I’m sorry for this too,” then said, “I am going to have to just drop you off at home though.”

“Okay,” Matt replied in a tone that meant that no explanation was needed.

John explained anyway as they started for the exit, “I’ve got a thing with Molly.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“Yeah, not a big deal. Not anything you need to worry about.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Matt replied with a nasally exhaled laugh, “but okay. So, you going over there lookin’ like that?” He said pointing at the same reflections John had criticized earlier.

“Don’t start. Besides, Molly’s seen me lookin’ way worse than this.”

They didn’t talk about Laura on the drive home. They talked about simple, regular things. They talked about their best plays in recent bouts of gaming. They talked about baseball, which both were only mildly interested in at best. They talked about music they hadn’t listened to in years but had recently rediscovered. It was just one more variation on the same conversation they had been having for the last twenty years, and when John dropped Matt off at their house and watched him walk through the door, he couldn’t help but wonder for a moment if the last few hours even really happened.

Despite all of his earlier concern John was only a few minutes late to Molly’s apartment. John had expected her to start giving him a hard time about it as soon as she opened the door, but she didn’t. John always prepared for the worst with Molly, though

she had never given him any reason to believe he should. She had once confronted him about it in front of Matt who said, “Hey, this way, you always exceed his expectations.”

After the cold sterility of the hospital John was delighted to be in Molly’s apartment. Like the hospital, it was quite clean, but it lacked the feeling of obfuscated tragedy given off by the hospital. John liked how Molly’s place was clean, but never too clean; she never tried to hide the fact that someone lived there. She left her work on the coffee table, a few dishes in the sink, and piles of clothes had concealed her bedroom floor since five minutes after she moved in.

During dinner, John told Molly the big news: he had heard back about the phone interview. He told her they wanted him to come interview in person in a few weeks.

“That’s great,” said Molly. “No pressure or anything, but the commute is really starting to kill me.”

“I know.”

“Sorry,” Molly apologized. “It’s not about me, it’s about you and your big job. A month from now people could be calling you Mr. Davis, or even sir.”

“Yeah. It’s weird,” John said, “being a ‘candidate’ for a ‘position.’”

“Why’s that?” Molly asked. “How so?”

The left side of John’s face scrunched, “I’m not sure, a lot of stuff.” He took a bite of his food and continued once his mouth was only half-full, “I guess I’ve just never been that guy before.”

“What did Matt say when you told him?” Molly asked.

John let out a groan sigh hybrid, “I didn’t.”

Molly’s fork hit her plate with a clank. “Why not?”

“Well,” John paused and looked away for a moment as he swallowed his food, “his mom’s in the hospital. She was in a car accident.”

“Oh my god, is she okay?” Molly’s eyebrows raised with shock for a moment before furrowing as she asked, “And why didn’t you tell me that earlier?”

“I’m sorry, she’s okay. I don’t know . . .” John paused and thought for a moment, “I guess the opposite reason I didn’t tell Matt about the interview.”

“Because your mom wasn’t in a car accident?” Molly asked mockingly. “What does that mean?”

John began to poke at his food. “I guess I didn’t want to spoil our good time with bad news or his bad time with good news,” he explained with a shrug of his shoulders.

Molly remained silent for a moment, looking straight at John. It was that look she gave when she was thinking, not like she’s staring at you, and not like she’s staring through you, but like she’s staring at something between you. John always thought she looked like she was picturing a chess game she was playing in her mind, or like she was in the midst of invention. “Don’t do that,” she finally said.

“Don’t do that?” John shot back, rather amused by the amount of thought Molly put into her three-word response. “All right, I won’t.”

“I mean, come on,” Molly said as she leaned in over the table, “It’s not that complicated, you’re not that complicated.”

“I love you too.”

Molly sighed before continuing, “You feel guilty that something good happened to you while something bad happened to him. It’s simple, you’re simple.” She was grinning at this point. “But really, it’s great news and you shouldn’t feel bad about it. You should be celebrating,” she said as she reached across the table and started shaking John’s shoulder like he was a pouting eight year old.

John replied with only a grimace.

“I’m not kidding. We should do something,” Molly said. “Nothing big or anything. Just dinner.”

“A dinner?” John smiled as he gave Molly a sly look. “Is this about meeting Jen?”

Having been found out, Molly began to laugh. “No, it’s about your big news. But, yeah, maybe a little.”

“Seriously, what’s your deal with that?”

“No deal, I just want to see what she’s like,” Molly explained. “I want to meet the woman Matt calls his *girlfriend*.”

“He doesn’t call her his girlfriend,” John said smugly.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. You mean that it’s not really about her, it’s about him.”

“It’s about both of them,” Molly corrected John emphatically.

“You’re totally in love with him aren’t you?” John said with a thick coat of sarcasm.

“Yup,” Molly mockingly confessed, “that’s it. I’ve just been using you to get to him this whole time.”

With a look of faux suspicion on his face, John poked his fork in Molly’s direction. “I thought so.”

That night John had trouble falling asleep. Molly was talking in her sleep again, which didn’t help, but the real issue was that he wouldn’t stop thinking about Laura and Matt. He kept thinking about Laura in the hospital, and Matt at home, lying in *his* bed, thinking about Laura in the hospital. Unable to sleep he binge watched the whole Matt and John series. He watched them meet on accident. He watched the thousand times they walked to school together. He remembered the three times they were actually mad at each other for more than twenty-four hours. Each shared birthday, each laugh, each nudge and sideways glance. Once he had watched every episode, and his mind tried to drift away, into the future, to a new job, a new city, the rest of his life, he refused to let it and instead pressed “play from beginning.” “It’s supposed to be more important than all of that,” he whispered to himself.

John’s muttering seemed to stir Molly. She rolled over and gurgled out, “Don’t do that,” as she laid her head on his chest, poking him in the chin with the top of her head.

John was about to say something when she continued, “those are *my* shoes.” He smiled and stared down at her. All he could see were the waves of her dirty-blonde hair that looked caked mud in the dark. He tried to picture her face, one piece at a time,

snapping them all together. Soon, Matt was out of John's mind as he tried to remember the color of Molly's eyes before he fell asleep.

Chapter 2

Five days a week, from September to May, from elementary to high school, Matt and John met underneath the same oak tree. It was a gigantic old oak that the rest of Welton seemed to have sprung up around; a huge oak whose bark had been scraped and scarred by stones, keys and pocket knives; an ancient tree that told every passerby whose dogs were lost, whose bands would be playing on Saturday, and who had couches to sell. They called it the Sign Tree.

The boys would meet underneath the Sign Tree every day on their way to North Welton Elementary. They thought of the Sign Tree as the halfway point between their houses, although Matt only lived a few blocks away and John a quarter-mile. They also thought of the tree as a way point on the way to school, even though Matt's house was actually closer to North Welton Elementary than the Sign Tree. In fact, the boys would pass by Matt's house everyday traveling from the tree to school. "Hi, Mom," "Hi, Matt's mom!" The boys would shout as they waved to Laura Tucker standing on her porch as they passed.

Shortly after the boys began their tradition of meeting at the Sign Tree, a second tradition, John spending every afternoon after school at the Tucker house, began. Unlike Matt who was an only child, John had six siblings. It was easy to fade into the background when you were surrounded by so many brothers and sisters. At the Tucker's it was just the three of them, John, Matt, and Laura.

The Tucker house was more or less a two-bedroom brown stucco box, wholly unremarkable, but for one corner of the box which stuck out like the smallest castle tower ever built. It seemed the house's architect had a penchant for irony, how funny it would be for such a small home to have this quietly audacious turret. Or perhaps, it was some sort of passive cruelty, built into the house as a reminder of its antithesis, the very thing it wasn't and would never be, a castle.

“Have a nice day at school, boys,” Laura would reply with a smile from the porch of her not a castle as they passed each day. Laura was not a tall woman, but she seemed a towering figure to John. Perhaps it was her hair that disguised how little a woman Laura really was, a dark brown almost black braid that fell all the way down to her feet. Even at seven-years-old John realized how long it must have taken for her hair to get to that length, that Laura's otherworldly braided hair had been growing even longer than he had.

Beside her hair, the way Laura dressed added to John's overblown perception of the woman. Every morning she would be wearing another pressed and wrinkleless outfit that made her look too young to be Matt's, or anyone's mother. John's own mother spent the first half of every day in the same old stained and dingy bathrobe his father bought for her while she was still pregnant with him. Unlike his own mother, John almost always saw Laura at her best and most put together.

What John didn't realize was that Laura made a special effort to be standing on the porch as they passed each day. Or, that her immaculate clothing was simply what she wore to work, the day shift at a local dive bar, Charlie's Pub. Or, that her standing on

the porch more often than not resulted in her being late for work. Or, that every time she walked into Charlie's Pub five minutes late because she was too busy being a good mother, resulted in long rants about responsibility and obligation from the bar's owner Sheldon, the man that would be Charlie.

With a flurry of childish waves the boys would hurry off to school. North Welton Elementary was one of four K-6 schools in town. The other three were predictably named South, East, and West Welton Elementary. The student bodies of each school were typified by the neighborhoods in which they resided. West Welton was the oldest part of town and was inhabited by the families who had been there for generations. When the citizens of Welton spoke of West Welton, they called it, "West Welton," as if it were a separate entity, a town within a town. The whole section of town seemed self-contained, like it would continue to exist as it had always existed, and change and intrusion were not only unwelcome but impossible. South Welton was home to the university and student population and was widely considered to be the fun part of town. It contained the movie theater, the bowling alley, and the closest thing Welton had to a mall. North Welton was home to the wealthiest citizens, lawyers and doctors that lived in Welton but commuted to the city. The poorest of Welton's citizens lived on the East side of town, though most people in Welton would never say this openly. It was almost as if the wealthier citizens of Welton felt that if they acknowledged the income disparity between Eastern part of town and the rest of the Welton, they might have to do something about it. Though both John and Matt attended North Welton Elementary, Matt lived

directly on the border between North and East Welton—as far as the school district was concerned—and had more in common with the inhabitants of the latter.

Matt and John's morning ritual continued unchanged for six years. It wasn't until they finished elementary school and moved on to junior high that their tradition had to be ever so slightly altered. There were two junior highs in Welton, Walden Junior High on the east side of town and Hawthorne Middle School on the west. It wasn't until the last month of sixth-grade that Matt and John realized that they wouldn't be going to the same junior high. John pleaded with his parents to get him transferred to Walden with Matt, but was told that there was nothing they could do. For three years, which John would later refer to as the Dark Ages, the two boys were separated. They would still meet under the Sign Tree every day before school, but now they came equipped with bicycles, which they rode off in opposite directions. On his many rides to Hawthorne, John would often think of the future when he and Matt would be reunited and Welton Senior High, the town's one and only high school, which everyone called Wash. "Only three years of this shit," he would say to himself with a mischievous giggle; he had only recently realized that he couldn't get in trouble for swearing if there was nobody around to hear it.

By the time Matt and John were reunited at Wash, the Sign Tree had started to show signs of wear and tear. There were fewer leaves every year, and many of the remaining leaves were a festering yellowish brown. After heavy rainstorms John and Matt would find an unsettling amount of branches littering its roots. In one spot a long piece of its bark had been stripped away, and surrounding the tree's exposed flesh was what John and Matt later found was a fungus; John thought it looked like soap scum.

Reunited, John and Matt tried to fall back into their former ritual. For months, John insisted that they walk by Matt's house so they could wave to Laura, before he accepted that she had stopped waiting for them to walk by three years earlier. By Junior year at Wash, their the Sign Tree tradition was reduced to Matt waiting under the tree to be picked up by John in the used car his parents got him for his sixteenth birthday.

Near the end of their senior year at Wash, the same month as Matt's eighteenth birthday, Laura Tucker's landlord decided to sell the not-a-castle. John's parents owned their home, leaving John wholly unfamiliar with the landlord/tenant dynamic. Whenever he heard somebody talking about their landlord he almost always pictured a short man, fat with wealth, wearing a monocle and a top hat; basically, he pictured the Penguin. It seemed villainous to John, to evict a queen from her castle.

John was quick to offer his help with the move. He wasn't the only volunteer, two of Laura's larger male coworkers also showed up. They were a pair of bartenders, overdosed on testosterone, who really seemed to like to throw their ample weight around. While John and Matt lifted boxes and dragged furniture to the U-Haul, the bar bros had long manly discussions about the most efficient ways of packing the objects into the truck.

"Why did those guys even come?" John asked, as he and Matt stared at each other over the overstuffed couch they were carrying.

"As much as I hate to say this out loud, I think they're both kinda into my mom."

"Ew, gross." John said making a scrunched and disgusted face.

“Thanks dude,” Matt replied sarcastically.

“Not your mom, them.” After a pregnant pause, John took a deep breath.

“Hey, I’m really sorry about all this, man. It’s gotta be rough having to leave your house.”

“Thanks, but I really don’t want to talk about it,” Matt replied in flat tone.

“All right,” John said, breaking eye contact with Matt. He usually took Matt’s words at face value. He says so little, John thought, that he must mean what little he does say. So, he changed the subject, “Maybe we should start our own moving company.”

“Oh, what, Big Boy Moving Squad?”

“No, that’s our band!”

“We move we groove?”

John would often joke about Matt being an unfeeling robot, though he knew this was far from the truth. It was the music and movies and such Matt enjoyed that gave him away. He didn’t talk about his feelings, he watched them, listened to them. The night of the big move he played “Moving,” by Jeffrey Lewis five times. John didn’t say anything about it.

With the move died the Sign Tree tradition, and a week later, so did the tree. The Welton officials who made such decisions said the tree was diseased, and cut it down. One day in a fit of nostalgia John decided to drive by the tree only to find a pile of sawdust where the tree once stood. John was shocked, less about the Sign Tree’s demise than the fact that he had missed it; it happened without him noticing. After pulling a quick U-turn John pulled his car over next to the Sign Tree’s form home. Roots and all,

he thought as he stared at the tan powder that was the tree's stump. I would have liked to count the rings.

Chapter 3

When John told Matt about Molly's dinner plan he responded simply, "I don't wanna do that." After much cajoling and various invocations of past favors he had done for Matt, John was able to get him to agree to the dinner. After all the fuss getting him to agree to the dinner, John opted to remain silent about the job interview. It's too much to lay on him right now, he kept telling himself. He couldn't help but feel like he was letting Molly down, or was it that he knew she was usually right about these things.

Matt spent most of the day of what he had dubbed, The Dreaded Double Date, watching TV in his old yellow chair, which age and overuse had turned a tarnished gold. John spent the day zipping around the house in a nervous cleaning frenzy. For hours John ran around the house, visibly vibrating. He had started with all the usual stuff, taking out the trash, vacuuming, dishes, but he soon moved on to tasks that seemed to Matt wholly unnecessary. He dusted shelves above any person's vantage, he cleaned under furniture that had been sitting in the same place since they moved in, and with soap and water he cleaned ashtrays that in a few short hours would once again be the receptacle of spent cigarettes. As John, fueled by anxiety, paced around the house, Matt sat in his chair, the same as always. Matt simply watched John's anxious pattering with a blank questioning stare, like that of a dog curious about what its master is holding in their closed fist. John always hated that look.

By the time John began dusting the album sleeves they had pinned to the walls like posters Matt asked, “John, can you please stop this? You’re like a mosquito that keeps buzzing by my ear. You’re driving me nuts. Will you just calm down?”

John’s only response was a cutting look shot at Matt before retreating to the kitchen.

After a few seconds Matt began to ask, “Would you rather . . .”

“Don’t,” John interrupted as he returned from his short stint in the kitchen.

Pretending he hadn’t heard his friend, Matt repeated, “Would you rather . . .”

“Matt, I can’t play this game with you right now,” John said, standing indecisively between the couch and the kitchen. His mind was elsewhere, some point roughly two hours in the future, when he, Matt, and their respective girlfriends would all be sitting around the same dinner table for the first time. Despite all their joking when Molly first suggested the dinner, John had actually been looking forward to it; that is, until it began to draw near. He wasn’t sure why, but as the day and then hour approached he grew more and more anxious. Maybe it was the potential for clashing personalities, or maybe it was the feeling that he was going to have to be “on” all night, or maybe it was just the idea of celebrating over something as mundane as a job interview.

Matt persisted and repeated “Would you rather . . .”

The third time Matt started his question, John’s mind jumped to the elevator ride in the hospital, the time they helped Laura move, breakups, deaths. John expelled a cartoonishly exaggerated sigh before falling onto their thrift store couch with a plop of equally exaggerated cartoonishness. “Fine, would I rather, what?” he acquiesced.

“Would you rather live in the mountains or on the beach?” Matt asked.

John immediately shot an exasperated look at Matt. “That’s a pretty boring would you rather. I feel like there’s a trick here,” he added jokingly.

“No, it’s not. I just think it’s a telling question,” Matt replied, the left side of his lip slightly raised in a self-assured smirk.

“How so?” John said, brushing lint from his shirt with the back of his hand. “I don’t think I’ve ever been asked a ‘would you rather’ scenario that didn’t involve something disgusting or horrific.”

It was Matt’s turn to be exasperated as he explained, “I’m not trying to play some gamified version of would you rather, I’m just asking you a question.”

“Why do I have to pick?” John asked, in a clear attempt to break Matt’s game.

Matt leaned back in his chair so that the front legs came off the ground.

“Because that’s what I’m asking you.”

“Well, I could live in the mountains and on the coast. I’d live in the coastal ranges, that way I’ve got both. Ha, I win!” John shouted with an exuberant and exaggerated first pump.

“It’s not a game; you can’t win,” Matt explained before waiting silently for the response he wanted, which, given enough time, he knew would come.

“The beach,” John finally answered.

“Wrong answer,” Matt immediately replied with hearty laugh.

John joined in the laughter for a moment before yelling back, “Wrong answer? You asshole. How can there be a wrong answer to that question?”

“When there’s a right answer, mountains.” Matt said as he grinned and folded his hands under his chin.

“All right,” John quickly checked the time before continuing, “Why mountains?”

“Because you can get away in the mountains.”

“Get away? You can’t do that at the beach? People go to the beach to get away all the time.”

“No they don’t, people go to the beach to be seen,” Matt corrected John.

“What? I don’t even know what that’s supposed to mean?” John asked with an exaggerated shake of his head.

“People fall into two categories, those who want to live on the beach and those who want to live in the mountains.”

John sneered back, “That’s pretty reductive, man.”

“Of course it is, but I still think it holds up,” Matt said.

“So, then you’re saying we’re different types people, opposites or whatever?”

“I wouldn’t say opposites, but different for sure.”

John thought for a moment before continuing, “I always thought we were pretty similar people. We like all the same shit. I mean, how could we not be similar, we’ve been friends for, like, twenty years.”

“I think that kind of makes my point,” Matt responded, looking smug again. “Our similarities have to do with us being friends for so long. We aren’t naturally similar people.”

John let out a “Pfft” of disbelief. He really wasn’t buying all this shit Matt was throwing at him, and he didn’t care for it either. He felt like he and Matt’s entire history was being rewritten over a stupid game of Would You Rather. “How are we so different?” John asked.

“Because we want different things out of life.”

“Since when?” John shot back, his voice get high-pitched and shrill. “Where is this coming from? What do I want that you don’t?”

“To be seen,” and with that, Matt rose from his chair. Even the way he stood up had an air of self-assuredness and accomplishment, as if he had just opened John’s eyes to a world he never knew existed.

As Matt started to walk down the hall toward his room John shouted after him, “You know what? I don’t have time for this; I need to get shit ready.”

Though barely audible, John could make out Matt asking from down the hall, “What’s not ready?”

John shouted back across the length of the house, “Well, I wouldn’t say the house is really clean!”

As John stood in the kitchen trying to think of what to clean next, he could hear the muffled sounds of Matt responding, but couldn’t make out the words. He decided to clean the stovetop. He’d take out the burners and the drip pans, soak and scrub, get them looking like new. “Dirty stovetops are for boys,” he thought only half sardonically, “not men.” By the time he had the sink filled with water and suds and began removing the burners and drip pans from the stovetop he could hear Matt coming down

the hall. He was still speaking in the same, quiet, calm tone, but as he approached John was finally able to hear him clearly, “. . . as clean as it usually is.”

“What?” John asked as he dropped the first drip pan into the suds-filled sink, causing the water to rise slightly.

“The house is as clean as it usually is.” Matt’s voice was still coming from outside the kitchen.

John shouted back, “Exactly!” as he dropped a second drip pan into the sink which made a sort of clinking sound as it collided with the first. “You think, maybe, we should tidy up a bit?”

Matt’s head popped into view as he peered in at John around the kitchen doorframe. He had his toothbrush sticking out of his mouth, held in place by his molars biting down hard on the bristles. Without removing the toothbrush he asked, “We puttin’ on airs?”

“Cleaning the house before your girlfriends come over for dinner is putting on airs?” John asked as he dropped in drip pan number three and the soapy water rose again.

This time Matt took the toothbrush out of his mouth before speaking, “This is how it usually looks when they come over.”

“Yeah, well it’s not good enough anymore.” With this John dropped the fourth and final drip pan into the wash. This last addition pushed the sink beyond its carrying capacity. Water and white suds broke the levee and poured over the edge and onto the kitchen floor.

Chapter 4

For John, at eight-years-old, the phrase “laser tag” sounded like the greatest combination of words to ever exist. He first heard the phrase at school. During lunch, a group of boys, that John knew to be rich, at least by comparison, were going on about how much fun they had during Scott’s birthday at Lazer Zone (Scott was the ringleader of this particular boy huddle). John was sitting at a nearby, much less populated lunch table, only he and Matt. At first the neighboring boys were simply hooting and hollering about how much fun they had, but after a few minutes their laughter degraded into arguments and debates about who shot who, and who was the best. John knew better than to butt into the other boys’ conversation; there was a reason he and Matt weren’t sitting with them. So he eavesdropped as the other boys described, what sounded to John to be the ideal birthday party.

John’s mind held onto the phrase “laser tag” through the rest of the day and on into the next. He had never before heard two words that seemed to belong together better than “laser” and “tag.” To John, lasers were the stuff of dreams. The ideal, the pinnacle of boyness was him holding an elaborate, brightly colored and illogically shaped gun that fired bright green beams of light that obliterated his foes. It wasn’t about killing for John, but winning; there was something about blasting someone with a laser gun that seemed to mean he had irrefutably won. What he was winning, John could not say.

Despite the limited information he got from the lunchtime boys, John constructed a complete image of laser tag in his mind. He pictured Matt and himself

running through a gloomy swamp. Something was chasing them and whatever it was, it was too big to fight. They barreled through fog, ignoring thistles and thorny branches that scraped at them as they went. Things would jump out of the fog, terrible things, undeniably evil things with claws, teeth, tentacles; things that wanted to devour them. But the boys were quick with their laser guns, blasting away these monstrous predators with perfect accuracy. He pictured one particularly terrible creature about to attack Matt from behind until a perfect shot over his best friend's shoulder dispatched the beast, a favor that Matt would quickly return. Eventually, the boys found themselves at a dead end, a giant rock blocked their path, or the bog became too deep and treacherous to cross. At this point the boys turned their backs to this impassable barrier and awaited their pursuers. If they were to die they would do so together, like Butch and Sundance (a movie he had not yet seen), together and fighting. For months, John kept this fantasy to himself, knowing, in some way, that it was just that, a fantasy.

The following summer brought with it Matt's ninth birthday. Matt was one of those summer birthday kids who were always younger or older than everyone else in class (Matt was older). At North Welton Elementary, these kids were not looked on fondly by the other students. They forced the other kids to do math in order to figure out why they were older, and their summer birthdays meant that they didn't contribute to the pool of class birthdays that got them out of school work.

A few weeks before Matt's birthday the two boys were at his house enjoying the freedom summer provided. The boys were seated on the floor of the miniature castle-like turret, a small circular space that Laura left empty.

Surrounding John and Matt on the floor was a sea of Legos. John was constructing a castle, the one pictured on the box, the one the instructions walked you through building. Matt was constructing a castle of his own design, using pieces from various different sets that didn't quite match. His castle consisted of one over-sized tower that was almost as tall as Matt himself, and wobbled constantly on its inadequate foundation. As Matt began to top off his castle few decorative flags he suddenly announced very plainly, "So, my mom said she'll take us Lazer Zone for my birthday."

John immediately jumped to his feet in excitement, knocking over his perfectly constructed castle in the process. Immediately, his earlier laser tag fantasy came pouring out of his mouth. Up until this point John had kept his fantasy to himself; even at eight-years old John was keenly aware that his relatively new friend might be put off by the idea of him dreaming about them in some sort of conjoined fraternal demise. But with laser tag actually on the horizon the dam burst and as John relayed his childish dream, Matt just sat on the floor smiling until finally joining in, adding to the fantasy, building it up higher and higher.

John's excitement continued through the weeks leading up to Matt's birthday. He started to visit the Tucker residence every time he had the chance, just to be with someone who understood his vehement enthusiasm. At night, he fell asleep to visions of battles soon to be fought.

On the morning of Matt's birthday, John quickly got dressed and scarfed down a Pop-Tart in lieu of a real breakfast. He hastily wrapped his birthday gift to Matt with a dark red and green polka-dotted wrapping paper. John was never good at wrapping

gifts and wound up covering the thing in Scotch Tape. Within thirty minutes of waking up, John was sitting on the front steps of his house, his birthday gift to Matt sitting on his lap, waiting for his ride. To John, the wait seemed like an eternity.

Laura pulled up in her wood panel station wagon five minutes early. As soon as the car was in sight, John hopped to his feet and began fidget in place. He looked like a dog whose owner just picked up a leash, the anticipation making it impossible for John to stand still. The instant Laura's car came to a stop, John was climbing into the backseat. A little surprised by John's hasty entry, Laura chuckled before saying, "Hold on, let me just tell your mom we're here," and climbing out of the car. John couldn't help but feel a little frustrated that his fun would be delayed further. Once she was back in the car, Laura explained that Lazer Zone wasn't in Welton, it was a thirty-minute drive away in Utherton.

Utherton was always frequently visited by the residents of Welton. All the amenities and services that weren't available in Welton could be found in Utherton. Utherton had a mall and department stores. It had the chain restaurants that were mysteriously absent from the Welton streets. It had the big-box stores and car dealerships. It always seemed to John like Utherton existed, primarily at least, so that corporations had a place to set up franchises, and the fact that people would have homes there was an afterthought.

While Utherton may have always provided more services than Welton, it was always considered a far less desirable place to live. Compared to Welton, Utherton was ugly, if not downright hideous. Where Welton's streets were lined with trees, and every

few blocks there was another park; Utherton's streets were lined with corporate logos and pavement, and every few blocks there was another stripmall. Welton had a State College; Utherton, a Costco.

The car ride from Welton to Utherton was brutal for John. He had not realized that Lazer Zone wasn't in Welton, although this did explain why he had never heard of this paradise. The whole ride Laura played Paul Simon cassettes. Matt and Laura sang along with the songs together and their seeming lyrical accuracy made it clear to John that this was a regular practice in the Tucker car. Neither Laura or Matt were particularly talented singers—tone deafness had always been a Tucker family trait—but the exuberant joy they were clearly experiencing left John feeling excluded and wishing he could join in. It was during the card ride that John began to sense that something wasn't right or was missing. He couldn't tell exactly what it was; he thought it just might be all the waiting, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

John's nagging feeling just got worse as Laura pulled into the strip mall that housed Lazer Zone. It was called the Roadside Galleria and at least half of its name was quite accurate; the backs of the buildings were pressed right up against the freeway. The Roadside Galleria consisted of a parking lot and a series of conjoined businesses that formed a wholly depressing canvas of beige stucco.

The sign for Lazer Zone was shaped like a bright-green oversized "T," the words "Lazer" and "Zone" sharing the same "Z." Partially covered by the giant neon "T" were black stains on the stucco wall left from the sign of the storefront's previous inhabitants. From what John could make out, it seemed Lazer Zone used to be Gino's

Pizza. Lazer Zone was sandwiched between a nail salon and place that sold mattresses. John was beginning to suspect that his fantasy was not contained within that despondent edifice.

As the Tucker family station wagon came to a stop Laura shouted back over her shoulder “You boys excited?”

In the backseat John responded with a deflated, “Yay.”

Matt just said, “Thanks, Mom.”

As soon as Laura opened the door to Lazer Zone, John could hear the commotion coming from inside. It wasn't the sound of laser tag but the cacophony of another kid's birthday party already underway inside. The sound reminded John of the nature shows he'd watch on T.V. sometimes. He could almost picture an arctic shoreline covered in squawking seabirds, the high-pitched din of their chirps occasionally being interrupted by the guttural bark of a walrus or an elephant seal. As he stepped inside, John saw that the sound was coming from a group of a dozen boys that looked about his and Matt's age.

The inside of the Lazer Zone was a surprisingly large “L” shaped room. Most of the space was taken up by lacquered picnic tables pushed together to accommodate whole flocks of children like the one in the far corner of the room. Near the entrance there was a horseshoe shaped counter. It was the bar back in the days of Gino's Pizza, but now it acted as a concessions counter as well as Lazer Zone's front desk. Above the “Candy Bar,” as it was called by the Lazer Zone employees, was a chalkboard sign

describing in neon colors the prices for laser tag as well as the lame assortment of treats offered by the poorly stocked snackbar.

“Mr. Pibb?” Matt whispered to John.

“Gross,” John whispered back.

Behind the counter was a depressed looking teenage boy with red hair. He was wearing a nametag that read “Hi, I’m Derek, how can I help you?” The name “Derek” was written in a sparkling mixture of green and pink puff paint. Derek himself looked far less sparkling than his nametag. His hair was a greasy rat’s nest and his smock looked like it had never been washed. To John he looked like the enemy of fun, the opposite of everything Lazer Zone was supposed to represent.

“Hi, today’s my son’s birthday and he wanted to play laser tag with his friend,” Laura said to Derek as she approached the counter. “It’s half-off for birthday parties, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” Derek answered in a deflated and monotone voice, “but that’s really for parties.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like them,” Derek said as he pointed over to the table of arctic sounds. “You know, more than two kids.”

It was at this moment that John noticed something for the first time: he was the only friend at Matt’s birthday “party.” Where were all the other kids? Did Matt really not have any other friends? He knew Matt wasn’t the most popular kid in school, but with the exception of a handful of kids who seemed to hate everyone but themselves, Matt was

well-liked. On the playground, kids would try to get him to join in on their games and during PE he was always one of the first picked for kickball. So why was John the only kid at his birthday? Maybe Matt didn't want to be friends with those other kids. Maybe John was special, maybe he was the only one who made the cut. John thought that the lack of other kids might have been what he had felt was missing earlier, but decided that that wasn't it either.

“What if I play too? That's three people,” Laura said, still negotiating with Derek.

“Fine,” replied Derek, sounding exceedingly put out. “We'll call your name when it's your turn.”

Laura led the boys to the lacquered picnic table furthest from the one populated by the other birthday party. “Too loud,” she said gesturing to the other party as the boys found their seats.

“Yeah,” the two replied in unison.

“Well, it might be a little while till we get to play. Why don't you open your present, Matty?”

That was all the prompting Matt needed to leap halfway across the picnic table and grab the poorly wrapped polka-dot box from John. “Awesome!” Matt shouted as he pulled out an off-brand action figure. The toy was based on a cartoon show, both of which were knockoffs of Transformers. It was a robot that could transform into a werewolf, part of a collection of robots that could turn into classic movie monsters.

“Oh, who's that?” Laura asked.

“The Wolf Bot,” the boys replied, both sounding a bit vexed by Laura’s ignorance.

“Oh, neat,” Laura replied with a chuckle.

From his seat John could see the black double-doors that led to where he assumed the magic happened. The sight of the door made the anticipation all the more unbearable, until John finally had to ask, “When do we get to play?”

“Well, those boys were here first, so probably after them.”

John responded with a huff and impudent crossing of his arms.

After about twenty minutes of waiting, Laura and the boys heard a sudden spike of volume come from the other group of boys as the birthday cake was brought to the table. Laura rolled her eyes as she realized how much longer this was going to make the wait. “Wait here boys, I’m gonna go talk to the clerk.”

Matt and John watched curiously as Laura stepped up to the “Candy Bar.”

“What’s up?” Derek asked as Laura approached.

“I was wondering if it would be okay for me and my boys to go ahead of that other party,” she asked.

Derek replied in his dispassionate voice, “They were here first, ma’am.”

Laura’s brow furrowed a bit at the use of the word ma’am. “I know, but they just brought out the cake, and that boy hasn’t even opened his presents yet.”

“Nothin’ I can do, ma’am.”

Laura began tapping her fingers on the counter. “You could let us go first, that’s something you could do.”

With an exasperated sigh Derek reached behind the counter. He pulled up a small black microphone. “Tucker party,” he called into the Lazer Zone PA system which transformed Derek’s monotone voice into an ear piercingly loud yet totally unintelligible bass.

“You didn’t have to do that. I’m right here.”

“They make us, ma'am,” Derek replied with a muted chuckle that made his statement sound less than totally honest.

Laura turned to walk back to the boys to discover they had already come running over. They both seemed to be vibrating with excitement. As soon as Laura said, “Let’s go boys,” the two sprinted through the black double-doors leading to the “prep room.” Inside, they discovered a square, foul smelling room. It was the same smell Matt and John would encounter years later in the High School boys’ locker room, the smell of a room with no ventilation filled with fermenting sweat and BO. There were bulky white laser guns and what looked like wearable targets hanging from wooden pegs on near a door opposite the one they came in. The walls of the room were covered in instructional posters. A couple of the posters showed how to put on the targets and use the guns but most of them depicted what *not* to do.

As Laura entered the prep room, Derek’s voice came over the PA system again. He began reading off a long list of rules, “No food or drinks inside the arena. Please do not climb on the obstacles. No hitting. Do not throw the guns or vests. No running . . .”

“No running?” Laura asked out loud exactly what Matt and John were thinking.

After the long list of “don’ts” and buckling on their target vests, the Tucker party finally entered the Lazer Zone. The Zone itself was a large dark room filled with padded obstacles of various neon colors and geometric shapes. There was also some sort of techno music playing with the bass turned up way too loud. It certainly didn’t look like what John had imagined, except for the manufactured fog that filled the place.

After a few last words from Derek over the PA and what sounded like a halftime buzzer from a basketball game, the battle began. Laura and the boys all obeyed the long list of don’ts they were given, even if it did suck a little bit of the fun out of it. With no running or climbing allowed, and with only three people in their party their game of laser tag quickly became more a game of laser hide-and-go-seek. It took John a while to get over the fact that the Lazer Zone wasn’t really living up to his fantasy. Not only was it little more than a musty indoor playground, but with only three people he had no choice but to play against Matt. If that wasn’t enough, Matt was a natural; Laura and John never stood a chance. Not only was he a deadshot, but he was stealthy and clever. It took John being shot in the back three times to realize that he was just getting outclassed.

Despite all the letdowns, John eventually started enjoying himself; this is until their game was interrupted by the deafening halftime buzzer. The buzzer was followed by the distorted voice of Derek announcing that their time was up. Bright red lights surrounding the exit turned on as Derek spoke.

After Derek was finished the room fell silent for a moment before Laura yelled out, “Are you kidding me?” She quickly grabbed John and Matt and stormed out the exit. As soon as she stepped through the door her eyes were on Derek who was still standing at the Candy Bar shoving snackbar nachos into his mouth. “I paid for an hour; that couldn’t have been more than thirty minutes!” she shouted as she stepped up to the “Candy Bar.”

“The other party is ready to go,” replied Derek, his mouth full of half-chewed tortilla chips and processed cheese.

“So? I paid for an hour.”

“You asked to go first, ma’am. Now it’s their turn.” Derek said, still not having swallowed his food, “You should have waited.”

“Please don’t call me ‘ma’am,’” Laura said with a grimace. “I don’t think it matters if they want to go; I paid for an hour.”

“Like I said, it’s their turn ma’am.”

“Fine, we’ll go again after they’re done.”

“I’m going to have to charge you again for that ma’am,” Derek replied with the slightest tinge of a smirk on his face.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Laura yelled as her face began to flush with anger. “I’m not paying again!”

“Then you’re not playing again.”

“That’s it, I want my money back!”

“All twenty dollars of it?” Derek replied with snide chuckle.

“Yes, and fuck you, you little zit covered shit!”

As John watched Laura argue with Derek he couldn't help but be reminded of the time he went to the mechanic with his father. His father had taken in the family car to get it fixed only for it to break down again a week later. John came with him when he returned to the shop. When the mechanic told his father that they were going to charge him again to fix the same problem they had failed to fix the first time, he freaked out. His father let loose a torrent of epithets on the mechanic until he agreed to fix it for free, if only to end the tidal wave of abuse.

“Let's go boys,” Laura said as she grabbed her twenty-dollar bill from Derek and led the John and Matt back to the car. As excruciatingly long as John felt the ride to Lazer Zone was, the ride back to Welton seemed even longer. All the anticipation that had previously filled the car was now replaced with disappointment and rage. Laura didn't put on any music, and there wasn't any singing. The whole way back Laura just muttered to herself from behind the steering wheel. She censored out the swears as best she could but a stray “asshole” or two escaped her lips.

Before heading home, Laura stopped off at the Utherton McDonald's. Unlike the McDonalds' in Welton, the Utherton McDonald's had an extensive PlayPlace. The boys thought of the place as a treat, and Laura liked how cheap it was. As soon as they entered the restaurant the boys made a beeline for the PlayPlace as Laura stood in line to order. As soon as they hit the PlayPlace, John and Matt continued their game of laser tag now with imaginary lasers and finger guns. They were allowed to climb on the obstacles. They raced from one platform to another, barreled headfirst down slides, swung from

brightly colored pole to brightly colored pole. Soon, the boys began to forget about the Lazer Zone.

After a few minutes, Laura poked her head out and called the boys in to eat. As the boys got to the table they saw that Laura had got them each a Happy Meal and a shake. “I didn’t think the three of us would need a whole cake,” Laura said as she handed the boys their fast-food desert.

“I like ice cream more anyway, Mom,” said Matt.

“Thanks, bud,” she said.

“Me too,” John chimed in, his mouth already full of shake.

“Thanks, John.”

The boys finished their shakes before digging into their food. It wasn’t until Matt started tearing up the plastic wrapper around his Happy Meal toy that John realized his own toy seemed to be missing. “Hey, where’s mine?” John blurted out.

Laura slammed her forearms down as soon as John finished his sentence. She leaned forward almost to the point of laying her head between her arms. “I can’t,” she said in a tone that sounded both matter-of-fact and defeated. “I can’t do it. I’m not going up there and having another argument with another shit-eating teenager. I don’t care that you didn’t get your fucking Matchbox car, I don’t!” Laura threw her arms up at her shoulders. “I’m tired of trying. This is all I’ve got, and I know it’s not enough, but I can’t change that. I’m only one person, I’m all alone here! This is it, so fucking deal with it!” She shouted in a grand finale that turned a few heads in the McDonald’s.

Laura's outburst was a new thing for John. He had witnessed his own parents get in heated bouts of yelling with his older siblings, but he had never seen Laura at her breaking point. And that's what it felt like to him, like something in Laura had snapped or shattered. When his own parents screamed and yelled it was like a pressure valve had been released; Laura looked like she was dissolving. John felt like crying but something stopped him; it felt too late for that, like his moment to be a crying child had been skipped over, or maybe he knew it would only make things worse. It felt like his tears had frozen inside him. So, John just hung his head and tried not to look Laura in the face.

Though John's tears did not come, Laura's eyes began to well-up after a few seconds. "Oh, John, I'm so sorry," Laura said, "I shouldn't have just said all that."

"It's okay, Mom," Matt interrupted, sounding like this was all something he had seen before.

"Matty, it's not," Laura replied before turning back to John, "John I'm sorry. It's been a hard day and it's not your fault. I promise, I won't ever let that happen again. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," John responded in a slightly wounded voice, "I'm sorry too."

Laura kept her word, but it was too late; John's fantasy had been revealed to be just that. He knew she wasn't what he'd thought she was, a princess, a queen, or whatever. The defeat in her voice, he knew she was a person. From that point on, John could feel a distance, a buffer between he and Laura. She'd be all smiles all the time, but John knew they were only for his benefit, that they were hiding what he saw that day.

Occasionally, when John was around, he'd notice Laura take Matt aside for little conferences or whisper things in his ear. They were words for the Tucker family only.

Chapter 5

Molly gave herself thirty minutes to get ready. That's all it would take for her to shower, pick out her clothes, and put on what little makeup she usually wore. She had just gotten off work, quickly wolfed down some Chinese food she had picked up on the way home, and was now preparing to head back out again. John had picked this night because "it worked for everybody," which meant everybody but her.

While getting dressed, Molly couldn't help but keep thinking back to the night of Laura Tucker's accident. At the time, she had told John that all of his trepidations about getting together to celebrate his interview were unwarranted if not stupid, but she had since started to regret those words. It wasn't that she thought she was wrong, it was that she didn't like getting involved in their friendship. She wanted to be included in all of their reindeer games, but she didn't want to tell John how to be Matt's friend; after all, he had done fine on his own for nearly twenty years. She was beginning to worry that her bit of advice might have been influenced by her desire to make sure the dinner would happen. But no, Molly thought, it isn't just their friendship at stake, it's their future, her and John's. I've been treading water here for too long, she thought. Living in Welton, working as a personal assistant for a CPA because every job worth having in this little town was already taken. If John got the job they could finally move to somewhere with opportunities beyond what Welton had to offer. That was the closest we ever came to splitting up, Molly thought, when I finished school and he had a year left. He didn't ask me to wait, but he certainly didn't want me to leave. Molly's distracting thoughts caused

her usual tight and precise fifteen-minute routine of self preparation to go a few minutes long.

Molly had been trying to set up something like this dinner since she discovered Matt was dating someone. She had known both Matt and John for years now, and while she felt she knew plenty about John (maybe even too much), Matt still remained largely a mystery. The dinner seemed a good way to pry into Matt's life without seeming like prying. Molly wasn't usually so devious, but she had run out of ideas; Matt never answered any direct questions honestly, or at least not seriously. She figured that seeing how he acts around his girlfriend might give her some sort of insight.

Molly left for John's house exactly twenty minutes before she was supposed to arrive. She'd made the drive frequently enough to know the precise amount of time it would take to arrive five minutes early. She always arrived five minutes early, to everywhere. As she turned the key in the ignition with one hand she grabbed her travel case of CDs from the glove box. Unzipping the case as she backed out of her driveway she could immediately see that John had gotten into her music collection again; everything was out of order. Her precise arrangement of CD's first alphabetically by band, then chronologically by the album, had been disrupted again. "Can he just . . ." she said out loud before noticing a single burnt CD with the words "For Moll," written in sharpie was responsible for throwing off the rest of her musical arrangement. Still annoyed she thought out-loud to herself, "He's trying to be sweet," but kept to herself the second thought, "But it's probably all music he likes anyway."

The first song on the CD was this synthy pop song called “Hondo” by some group that Molly only ever remembered as Beta something. “I tell him I like a song one time and it shows up on every CD from then on,” she said in exasperation. She quickly skipped to the next song. The second track, “Send Me,” by Sam Cooke also failed to set Molly’s heart ablaze, “Everyone we know likes Sam Cooke. So obvious.” She skipped to track three and within two notes she was smiling. Track three was Dolly Parton’s “Jolene,” one of Molly’s favorite songs and one that John had once mentioned, he “never needed to hear again.” Molly turned up the volume as she turned onto 12th street.

She had been making good time; she managed to hit three green lights in a row, and began to think she might be more than five minutes early. Between her immanent success at being punctual and the song that she liked showing up out of nowhere, Molly was starting to feel a bit more optimistic about the night; that is, until she turned onto 12th street and got stuck behind the Volvo. The Volvo was probably once red or maybe maroon, but age and neglect had turned it a sort of dried blood color. The paint was also oxidized in several places, adding to the overall ugliness of the vehicle. She immediately knew the car and its driver were going to be a problem, not just because of the look of the car, but because it was drifting back and forth, almost to the point of entering the wrong lane.

She could see the driver through her rear windshield, silhouetted by the headlights of oncoming traffic. It looked like a thin woman with long, incredibly straight hair. She couldn’t help but think about how much time the woman must waste getting her hair that straight. Molly didn’t do anything with her hair, she just washed it and let it dry

into its naturally wavy state. Her train of thought was broken when suddenly the Volvo slammed on its brakes at a yellow light Molly was sure it would blast through. “Here we go,” Molly said out loud to herself. “She’s probably on her phone. Just watch, the light’s going to turn green and she’s just going to sit there.” Sure enough, when the light turned green the Volvo continued to idle for what Molly accurately estimated to be five whole seconds before it hiccupped into gear.

“I knew it,” she said to herself with a self-satisfied smirk. Molly always had a knack for figuring people out. She took pride in her ability to peg people, to get inside their heads and figure out what they were thinking. Family and friends would always tell her, “you’re projecting,” but ninety percent of the time she was right, and she felt her results spoke for themselves. Yet, then there was Matt.

“Maybe that’s what it is,” she thought to herself. “Maybe I just don’t like there being this annoying little outlier. Every time I think I have him pinned, he pulls something out that shatters all my theories.” At one point Molly had figured Matt for the spoiled only child of a couple of baby boomer yuppies, only to discover he grew up relatively poor, raised by a single mother who struggled to make ends meet. She was right about the only child thing.

After a few more blocks the incident repeated itself; the sudden stop, the idling, and the sudden acceleration of a person who just realized they’ve been sitting still at a green light. “Please turn, or at least get off your phone.” Neither of Molly’s pleas were heeded however, and the Volvo remained in front of her, making her late, at least by her standards. A few blocks from John’s house she shouted, “What, are you going to the

same place as me?” and after actually saying it out loud she realized, she was. “Oh god, that’s definitely Jen.”

They hadn’t met yet, but Molly had heard a bit about Jen from John. She had long straight black hair, and usually wore clothes that matched; John had described her as verging on Goth, which Molly took as an exaggeration. She could never picture Matt with a woman like that; too much fuss she thought. Though, if she were being honest, she really couldn’t picture Matt with any woman; it just never seemed right. He was too focused on himself to be in a relationship. But then again, people in general seemed to be too focused on him. On the rare occasions she and John could get Matt to go leave the house to a bar or some other social event that involved more than the three of them, it would take only minutes for him to become the center of attention, the axis of the whole night. He’d be boisterous, flinging out joke after joke, keeping everyone in stitches. Molly could remember at least three of these nights that led to one of her girlfriends asking about his relationship status. She always responded, “I have no idea.”

When no one else was around, Matt seemed sullen and perpetually unmotivated. He’d disappear into his room for hours, or leave the house without saying anything and return in the same fashion. Once Molly had bugged him about his mysterious bedroom activities, “What do you do in there all day? You just nerding out and playing video games until your wrists give out?”

“No, or at least not usually,” Matt responded.

“Then what is it?” Molly waited for a response then continued when she didn’t get one, “I’m not John; I’m not going to stop bugging you till you tell me.”

“All right,” Matt said as he stood up and gestured for Molly to follow him into his room, “come here.”

“Is that the last thing I’m going to hear?” she said jokingly as she followed him in.

It was her first time in his room. She remembered noticing how nothing in the room seemed to go together. On an overflowing bookshelf she spotted Faulkner and O’Connor sitting next to Vonnegut, Tolkien, and Douglas Adams. There was a picture of Matt as a child holding a tiny skateboard with his mother Laura laughing in the background next to black and white photo of a dark haired, dark skinned woman in overalls standing in front of a barn while grimacing at the camera. There were two of what appeared to be Native American rugs or some cheap knock-offs hanging by his bed, and next to them full color maps of what she gleaned to be from some video game world. “I’ve been doing this,” Matt said with a gesture to the one wall that didn’t have anything hanging on it.

It took Molly a moment to register what she was seeing, a half-finished mural painted directly on the wall of Matt’s room. So far, it seemed to be a painting of a creek bed, covered in round smooth rocks. There was a small stream of bright blue water that disappeared here and there behind the rocks in the foreground. Trees stood on the horizon, up above the sunken, mostly dry creek bed. Half-way down the wall, the mural stopped but Molly could make out outlines and sketches for what was coming next. She could make out the figures of two people, and what she thought was going to become a

dog. The whole thing was done in a style verging on post-impressionist, though she resisted the urge to make Van Gogh comparisons.

“I didn’t know you could paint,” Molly said as she gaped at the wall.

“I don’t, this is my first time,” Matt replied.

“Really?” she almost shouted as she spun around to see if Matt was bullshitting her.

“Yeah, really.”

“That’s pretty crazy, Matt. I mean it’s good, which is pretty crazy . . .”

“It’s okay,” Matt interjected.

“But, for your first attempt at painting to be this big and on your wall?”

“Pretty stupid, right?”

Molly chuckled, “Your landlord is gonna be pissed, but shit, it really is pretty great.” She was being generous.

As Molly tried to remember the rest of the conversation, she arrived outside John and Matt’s house. Jen and her Volvo grabbed the last available parking spot on their side of the street and Molly had to go to the end of the block, make a U-turn, and park on the other side. Okay, you can’t hate her right away, she thought as she got out of her car, she’s a bad driver, who cares? This whole thing was her idea after all; she couldn’t push for the dinner just to have made up her mind about Jen before it even began. Molly knew she was sometimes quick to judge people, quick to write them off.

As she walked across the street she peeked into the Volvo and saw that Jen was hastily doing her lipstick in rearview mirror. Bending at the waist and waving through the side window, Molly said, “Hey, you must be Jen.”

The woman in the car quaked at the sound of Molly’s voice and dropped her lipstick into her lap. She flipped the lipstick into her passenger seat then rolled down her manual windows and said, “Oh god, you scared me.”

“Hi, I’m Molly,” she said as she began to reach her arm in through the now open window.

Jen rebuffed Molly’s handshake with a, “One sec,” before opening her driver side door. She hastily climbed out of the decrepit Volvo and threw her arms out before enveloping Molly in an over animated hug. “I’m so happy to finally meet you!”

A fair amount of Jen’s hair immediately made it into Molly’s mouth, which she tried to spit out as quietly and discreetly as possible. With the hair out of her mouth Molly said, “Yeah, I’ve been looking forward to this” before making her move to back out of the hug. She quickly found out that she and Jen had very different ideas regarding appropriate hug length.

After finally letting Molly go, Jen leapt back into the Volvo. She started rummaging around the car, first under the driver’s seat, then the passenger’s, before moving onto the backseat.

“What are you looking for? Can I help you find something?” Molly asked.

“No, it’ll be fine,” Jen said as she retreated from the Volvo. “You ever throw your shit down somewhere, but never in the same place? You tell yourself you’re going to remember where you put it this time, but you just don’t.”

“Yeah,” Molly lied. “Anyway, we’re a little late, so I’m going to head in.”

“We are? Shit!” replied Jen as she lunged into her car and began rooting around for her phone. “Didn’t they say seven?” she asked after finally finding it.

“Yeah,” Molly replied, already beginning to slowly drift away from the Volvo and toward John’s house.

“It’s just seven now, so we’re fine.”

“Oh, good. Well, I’m still gonna head in. Feel free to finish doing your makeup. I’m just kind of a stickler for being on time.”

With a muted chuckle Jen replied, “Okay, be right in then,” before sitting back down in her driver’s seat to search for her now missing lipstick.

As Molly walked up the steps to John’s porch she immediately noticed the amount of effort John had put into get the house ready for the night. There were none of the usual empty beer cans strewn around the porch, the ashtray that was usually overflowing with butts had been emptied, and it even looked like the porch itself might have been swept. Molly had never realized the boys even owned a broom.

Molly announced herself with a, “Heeeey,” as she stepped through the front door.

“Don’t you knock?” Matt shouted in an exaggerated tone from his old mustard yellow chair, followed by a very calm and cordial, “Hi, M.”

Molly replied with a playful, “Hi, M,” of her own. “That chair,” she thought, “how long has he had that thing? It was probably a bright yellow originally, the mustard tinge is just from years of boy grime.” The cogs starting turning in her mind. “He holds onto things for a long time; he doesn't like change. But wait, what about the time he sold his entire comic book collection . . . Damn it.”

“Could you not yell at my girlfriend?” John said to Matt as he stepped in from the kitchen, interrupting Molly's theorizing. He then turned to Molly, greeting her with a smile, a “Hi,” and a kiss.

“Don't say girlfriend,” Matt said quietly to himself as the couple embraced.

“Yours is outside doing her makeup, by the way,” Molly said to Matt.

“Oh yeah?” Matt replied in a seemingly uninterested tone.

“Yeah.”

“What, did you two drive here together or something?” John asked jokingly, though the tone of his voice had a hint of nervousness to it.

“No I just ran into her, actually I got . . .” Molly paused mid-sentence and shot a quick glance at Matt then the front door behind her, “I'll tell you later.” Molly quickly looked around the living room and said, “Hey, the place looks clean,” which it did, at least for a house occupied by two twenty-something men. The coffee table was clear of the usual beer cans, half-empty glasses of water, unopened mail and the other random junk that usually made its home there. The carpet looked like it had been hastily vacuumed, yet it was clear that the boys had forgotten to dust the furniture first. The most

surprising bit of cleanliness is that kitchen floor seemed to not only have been swept but mopped. “They own a broom and a mop,” Molly thought to herself.

“Yeah, of course I cleaned up a bit. Matt helped.”

“No I didn't,” Matt amended from his seat on his chair.

John responded with only a leer, but Molly fired back with an, “I'm sure you didn't.”

Turning back toward the kitchen John announced, “Well dinner's almost ready.”

“Ooh, let me guess, burritos? Pasta? No wait, grilled cheese?” Molly teased as she followed him, her hands resting on his shoulders. She had smelled the food cooking as she entered the house, and it certainly smelled like something better than the boys' usual bachelor chow, but she never passed up an opportunity to take a poke or two at John's exceptional boyiness.

Looking back at Molly with a smile, John replied, “Hey, just because those are the only things I eat, doesn't mean those are the only things I know how to cook.”

“Ooh, now I'm excited . . . Frozen Pizza?”

John didn't respond this time. He simply walked over and opened the oven door.

Molly peered inside to see a casserole dish with cheese bubbling over the top, “What's that?”

“It's this thing Matt's mom used to make,” John replied.

“Matt's mom?” Molly confusedly asked.

“Yeah. It’s bread and cheese and tomatoes and basil. Garlic too, some other stuff,” John explained, sounding unsure of what it was he was made.

“So I was right when I guessed pizza?”

“Pretty much.”

It was about this time that Jen finally made her way inside. As soon as she was inside she went directly over to Matt, still sitting in his chair, and grabbed a seat on his lap and began whispering to him quietly. Molly found herself straining to try to hear what they were whispering about, or more specifically, what Matt was whispering. “What does Matt whisper to his girlfriend?” she found herself thinking, “Is she in on it? Does she get to know what he’s thinking?” All she could glean from it all was that Matt was a private person, possibly the only thing she could already say she knew about him.

The dinner was fine; the food was vegetarian. Like most vegetarian food, it left Molly wondering where the rest of her dinner was. While they ate, Molly and Jen traded the usual first meeting questions: where do you work, are you in school, how’d you two meet? Boring questions for sure, but Jen’s answers greatly exceeded Molly’s expectations. Jen explained that she tended bar at night—no surprise there—and during the day she was an aid at a special ed. school called Blue Door.

As Jen spoke, Molly began to formulate an explanation for Jen and Matt’s relationship. Oh, she’s surprising and unexpected, like him, she thought. But unlike Matt, Jen was forthcoming; every question Molly asked her she answered in elaborate detail. She would start by explaining how she and Matt met at the library—Molly had no idea Matt had ever even been in a library before—and end up miles away talking about a

friend of hers who studied abroad Chile. She would answer, “Yeah, I’m in school,” then proceed to explain her entire schooling history: how she had all A’s until middle school when she was sent to a different school than all her friends, and then how they didn’t want to be friends with her any more once they all wound up back together at the same high school. She went on to explain how she tested out of high school because of how depressing it all was, then took a year off before going to community college, completing her GE, and transferring to Welton. With each and every answer Molly found herself liking Jen better, felt her bad first impression fade.

Molly noticed, when the others spoke, Jen seemed to listen with her whole body. She would lean ever so slightly toward whoever was talking and fix a wide-eyed stare on them. At one point Molly found herself checking to see if Jen ever blinked. No matter what they were talking about Jen looked full of anticipation for what was next. Molly wondered if she was always like this, constantly excited to see life happen around her. She’s probably one of those people who says, “no regrets,” and “everything happens for a reason.” Molly found both these aphorisms reductionist and inaccurate, but she appreciated the sentiment. She’s sweet, Molly thought.

After dinner the two couples grew silent. It was as if without the food anchoring them all, giving them all a concrete reason to be there, they were all at a loss for words. As the silence stretched out Molly could feel the floor vibrate as John began to anxiously shake his leg. She began to watch John, and after a few more seconds of awkward silence she saw him begin to make that weird half-face wince. The face he

makes when he doesn't like his own thoughts. He still hasn't told him, she thought. Oh god, don't do it now, I don't want to be here for this.

John started off with a long drawn-out "So," as if to buy him one more second, "I've got an interview for this job down south."

Molly's eyes darted over to Matt; she really didn't know how he was going to react. He didn't seem to be reacting at all, it was if John had just told him that he stopped off for coffee on the way home, or stepped in gum, or some other bit of trivial non-news that didn't warrant a reaction. Molly didn't care for it. React, she thought, one way or another, negative or positive, just react; don't torture the poor guy.

"That's good, where at?" Jen asked while Matt still remained silent.

"This thing called the California Preservation Association," John said almost like a question.

"CPA," Molly added.

"I've never even heard of that before," Jen said.

"Yeah, it's a non-profit. They do a lot of stuff, seminars, tours, they help places get historical landmark status. You know, more or less what you would expect from the name. I'm just going to be starting off as some sort of office drone, but it could lead to something pretty interesting."

"Plus, we'll finally get out of Welton," Molly said with another sideways glance to Matt as she poked the beehive a bit. He still showed no reaction, he just sat and listened. John, on the other hand, twitched his face again.

Jen let out a wounded puppy type, “Aw” in response to Molly’s Welton remark. “Welton’s not that bad.”

“It’s fine, as long as it’s all you want,” Molly acquiesced, “but it’s not going anywhere and as long as we stay here, neither are we.”

“Makes sense,” Matt finally jumped in.

“It’s in a few weeks,” John explained. “Molly’s coming with me for moral support.”

“And to push you out of the car,” Molly added.

“Right,” John chuckled, “and that.”

“Good for you, man. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” John said.

That’s it, Molly thought. Frustrated and a bit disappointed that the boys’ exchange was so deflated, Molly decided to change the subject, “You guys wanna play a few hands?” Molly asked pulling a deck of cards out of the coffee table drawer.

“I don’t want to give Matt all my money,” John answered.

“Monopoly?” Jen suggested.

“I don’t want to give him all my fake money either.”

“God, then what, naysayer?” Molly asked as she gave John a poke in the ribs.

“Matt, ask them that question you asked me earlier.”

“Nah. You can ask them,” Matt replied.

With a sigh John said, “Fine. Would you rather . . .”

“Oh god,” Molly interjected.

“. . . Live on the beach or in the mountains?” John finished.

“Oh, that is not what I was expecting,” Molly thought for a moment before answering, “beach.”

Jen immediately concurred, “Beach.”

“Ha ha!” John exclaimed, leaping up from his seat on the couch, “I win!”

“You can’t win,” Matt said as glared at John.

“What?” asked Jen, “I don’t get it?”

“Oh, I said beach too, when he asked me earlier. He gave me a bunch of shit for it.”

“I didn’t give you a bunch of shit for it; I just said . . .” At that moment the first few notes of “Visions of Your Reality,” erupted from Matt’s pocket as his phone began to ring. Overly eager, Matt hopped up and announced, “Oh, well gotta take this,” as he pulled his phone from his pocket and stepped out onto the porch.

Once the door was closed and Matt was out of earshot Jen turned to Molly and John and asked, “What’s wrong with the beach?”

“It’s the choice the popular kids make,” John replied.

“I don’t get it,” Jen said.

“The popular kids want to live on the beach and the dark brooding outsiders want to live in the mountains,” John clarified a bit.

“Really, that’s it?” Molly asked, “There’s nothing more to it?”

John answered, “I’m sure Matt thinks there is, but it’s pretty much just that.”

After a few more minutes Matt came back inside with a bewildered look on his face, staring at his phone as if it held the answer to his heart's greatest questions.

"So what was that all about?" John asked.

"I really don't know," replied Matt.

Molly continued the inquisition with a, "Who was it?"

"Frank," Matt said bluntly.

Molly quickly turned to John and asked, "Who's Frank?" John's only response was to shrug his shoulders and make an unwitting face.

Matt answered instead, "My uncle, apparently."

Almost sounding hurt John said, "I didn't know your mom has a brother."

Matt replied simply, "She doesn't."

"I don't get it," Jen said as she looked around the room for some sort of explanation.

"Your dad?" John asked.

"Guess so," Matt replied. He went on to explain that this Frank guy said he had been going through some of his brother's things when he found a letter from a woman named Laura Tucker. Frank said the details of the letter weren't important, but it mentioned Matt. "He said he couldn't believe he was an uncle."

Molly remained silent as Matt explained the phone call. As much as she wanted to squeeze every drop of information out of Matt, even she avoided the subject of Matt's father. He wasn't around, Matt never really knew him, leave it be. She had grilled John about it a couple of times and came to the conclusion that Matt was probably better

off without his father around. She never shared this opinion with Matt. But, this was also a unique opportunity, this might be the missing piece, she thought. She had to plan her next move.

“I guess he lives in Gaston,” Matt continued.

Jen asked, “Where’s that?”

“Down near Bakersfield.”

Molly began to see pieces falling into place.

“Yikes,” John chimed in. “What did he want?”

“To meet me, I guess.”

Now, Molly thought, “John,” she interjected, “that’s kind of on the way to your interview. Matt you should come with us.”

Molly’s plan met mild resistance from Matt and John, but after some prolonged cajoling she was able to end their hemming and hawing. Matt still needed to go check in with Laura, but still, Molly’s move was a conditional success. In three weeks they would hit the road, John to his interview, Matt to his uncle, and Molly to make sure they’d survive the trip.

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