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Orbit

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Orbit

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in *Writing and Linguistics*.

By
James Charles Devlin

Under the mentorship of *Jared Yates Sexton*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of my thesis is to create a series of connected short stories based around a dysfunctional family. It will take the first person point of view of a different family member each story and them going through the motions in one day. Each character will have a distinct voice to make the stories stand out. The stories will describe how they cope with their problems with in the family and in their everyday lives. Each character will be loosely related to a different Roman planet. The stories will focus around the father, mother, son, grandmother, and aunt. Each of the characters will be orbiting around the grandmother and they will all have their own problems to answer too. I researched a lot of Roland Barthes writing while creating this thesis to understand how texts are interpreted differently. In order for a reader to interpret a text, they cannot look into the writers inspirations or meanings. If readers do; it will blur the meaning they take away. I was also inspired by several novels in my different writing styles.

Thesis Mentor: _____

Dr. Professor Name

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Orbit

Son

They were having the same fight that woke me up every morning. My mother, my father, my aunt, my grandmother—they couldn't get along anymore. They never really could get along, even when we lived separately, but now we had to live together. The house seemed to be full of farm animals and not a family. Every morning you could hear them barking, crowing, bleating, and nickering. I felt trapped in the middle.

From the sound of it, they were fighting over something my grandmother said and how they should handle it. She thought her husband was out seeing other women. It's hard to imagine a ninety year old man gallivanting around with mistresses. What could a one-hundred year old man do with another woman? At least, if he were alive he would be one-hundred—probably older. It was a funny thing to think about, but I could never laugh. This was more serious than that. My mother and my aunt would get worked up arguing with her. She was their mother and she didn't like them telling her she was wrong. This was her house anyways; she was slumped like a beanbag in the center of the living room on her hospice bed while the family gravitated around her.

“Your husband's dead,” they would yell at her, “he's been dead for over twenty years.”

I don't know why they didn't just let her believe what she wanted to, it would be easier for everyone involved—there would be less stress that way. The woman has Alzheimer's disease, we all understand that, but they still argue with her like she has a solid grasp of her

opinions. As absurd as it sounds, the woman saw Chuck Norris run upstairs to rescue a baby from an armed robber yesterday night.

We don't have an upstairs.

The worst thing was being woken up so early by everyone's bickering. It was 8:05 when I checked the clock and I didn't have to go to work until 10:00. It was another morning I was up early but I couldn't just roll over and go back to sleep.

I thought I'd check my bank account. Thomas, my boss, should have deposited my payment for the last two weeks. I pulled out my laptop, checked my online bank statement, and saw that Thomas moved three hundred into my account, but I noticed money missing from my savings—my college funds. I was missing about a thousand dollars. I could feel my heart jam itself into my throat. Money was a scarce resource in this family and I came by it more frequently than everyone else. It always worried me that I could just end up in their financial situation— no jobs, no motivations.

I didn't want to be like them. I wanted to move out and go to a better college, maybe one out of state so I could be far away from all of this family. I felt like our problems were so big they had their own gravitational force. There was something keeping me here and there was something keeping this family together. It was like we orbited around the sun and we had no way to get out of our rotation around it. I felt like I would never have the money though. I was afraid I would end up stuck in this house like my aunt, she has never lived alone in her life. She was married once, but that didn't last long. She has lived with her mother for over sixty years. I couldn't imagine being stuck in such a motionless place for do long.

I started to stress just thinking about it. I caught my hand rubbing the opposite wrist; it was still stinging from the pigmy sized horizontal scabs hidden under all my bracelets. Most of the bracelets were just old, cheap dollar beach souvenirs but they served their purpose.

I got up from the bed in the guest room; it was over twenty years old and the frame was falling apart. I was sleeping at an angle. It was where I stayed since we moved in with my grandmother. I went through my morning routine: I listened angsty rock music—this time it was Linkin Park , brushed my teeth, and got dressed for my Friday shift at work; those were always the busiest days. Thomas would be working with me and I needed a raise—no pressure.

My uniform was resting on an old planet mobile my mom and aunt kept. They said it was theirs growing up and that I might use it for my kids one day. I thought it was a waste of space. But my family had problems with getting rid of clutter. I did like the vibrant way Earth was painted, but even the colors started to look worn, some of the paint chipped. Some of the planets were hardly hanging on anymore; there were tattered strings and broken sticks that hardly held them together to the cracked sun, greying in the center.

I put on my green and blue “Yogurt World” polo for my job and picked up my wrinkled work apron. I just carried it until I would clock into work because the apron was heavy and uncomfortable to wear with all of the buttons on it.

I went into the living room. I saw my family all around the room in their usual positions. My mother and aunt were yelling at each other about something grandma had said. That was the commotion usually woke me up in the morning. My father was just sitting on the couch and he looked somewhat upset. He probably had a headache from all of the arguing or maybe he didn't get his pain medication yet.

“I’m going to work now,” I said rushing to get out of the house picking up my large astronomy book by the door.

“Wait, Charles,” Donna, my mother, said, breaking away from all of the bickering. I could already tell she was gearing up for the same talk she always gives. “Drive safe to work, people out there are crazy. Work hard, don’t forget to smile and be nice. You better not lose that book, you spent a lot of money on that, and you need it for class, right? Love you.”

“Of course, mother,” I replied automatically, grabbing the keys to my blue Ford Explorer from off of cluttered table by the front door.

“Listen to your mother,” Jim, my father, said.

“Yes, sir,” I said, waiting to head out of the door. I thought about bringing up the thousand dollars that was missing. I thought about it but I knew better. It wouldn’t have been the first time they borrowed money from me without asking: a hundred here, two hundred there. I didn’t mind. But it was starting to affect my college fund, something I needed to pay back at some point. It stresses me out and that really started to tear into my sanity as well. Like, I knew I would get by somehow, our family always seemed to, but I wanted to do more than get by—that’s why I was even in college. It would just cause another fight and I did not want to go through that right now. I just wanted to get out of the house.

Besides, it was probably my fault anyways. My parents are the only ones who could get into my account. My best friend Stephen and his family advised against it, they’re not in financial turmoil, but I should have probably listened to them. But I thought that if I did that, the string holding this family together would snap.

“Don’t forget to have fun at work,” she replied.

I thought I heard grandma mumble something incoherent from the hospice bed in the center of the room but I couldn’t tell. No one else seemed to pay any mind.

I gave everyone a wave that looked more like I was stopping traffic and closed the door behind me. I looked down and noticed partially planted flowers Donna was trying to plant earlier; she left these pots and plants sitting around the front yard. Gardening was something she did to lose some of the stress she had. She’d never really keep up with it and the plants would either die or grow out of control, but she’d always get more with whatever money she had. Green really was her favorite color and maybe that would explain her affinity for plants. They grew on me though, that plants seemed to bring a sense of normalcy to the outside of the house.

The route I took to work today took about two minutes longer than usual— it seemed like there was more traffic or something. I thought it was nice to go a different way. It made me wonder if things would feel new and exciting at the job if I mixed up the route. I was beginning to get tired of living the same old life and getting into the same old routines.

More than anything, I liked to drive at my own pace. I was probably going ten over the speed limit until I hit all of that traffic by the mall. Hell, ten miles over is slow for me sometimes. My parents don’t like it when I speed, they think I’m going to get pulled over or something, but what say do they have anyway. My best-friend Stephen was the one who taught me how to drive; he was the only one who had the motivation to teach me. He taught me how to watch the road for any cops driving around.

The mall was already packed, but that was normal for a Friday. With an hour before my shift started, I went to my favorite bagel shop when they had bread there on clearance for a dime. It was something different every time too, some days I would get almost moldy sourdough bagels or maybe a stale éclair. Today, the clearance item was a French loaf of bread that had the moldy bits cut off.

“Don’t forget to include my mall discount,” I said to the attractive cashier with a smile as I puffed up my chest to put emphases on my uniform and pectorals. I was sure the girl had the hots for me. She was pretty enough: beautiful eyes, nice hair, kind of edgy. But they all were pretty enough.

“Your total is nine cents,” she said, typing the number into the cash register. “You saved one cent with your discount.” She grinned at me, like she was trying to hold something back.

“You know what Benjamin Franklin said,” I said, trying to keep the conversation going. “A penny saved is a penny earned.”

“So I’ve heard,” she said, moving her hand up to cover her mouth, trying hard to hide her grin—she was failing.

“Well, thanks.” I turned out and walked away toward the door. I felt like I needed a new approach to talking to that cashier. She gives all the signs of liking me but I can never think of how to seal the deal.

I walked into the courtyard and I sat down on a bench, opening my Astronomy book. I highlighted the parts I would need to know for our test on planets, like that part about all the Roman gods and goddess being the names for the planets. Except the planet Earth. In mythology,

the Romans based Earth on the goddess Terra Mater, the first goddess on Earth. The people who named the planets didn't name the earth after a Roman god because they did not consider the earth a planet. Earth was different. They didn't see it as one of the marvelous lights in the heavens—just the thing that supported life. People had their lives here and they were familiar with it—they took the planet for granted. I thought that sucked for Earth, I felt sorry for orbiting rock. Like Earth had feelings or something, and if it did, would it speak up about being wrong? I thought of the planet Earth that hung on the mobile, it was pretty out of shape—I guess it wasn't far off from the real thing.

Water from the fountain started to splash on to the pages of the book. I closed the book and looked up to see some kids running around while their parents watched them. One of the children fell and hurt their knee and immediately began wailing and rolling around on the ground. His parent, a taller man in a suit jacket, threw his coffee down and ran over to his son. He didn't seem to care about the water hitting him and soaking his jacket. The father just carried his son back to the bench to inspect the boy's knee.

I looked past the little kid and his dad to see an older woman doing some kind of lunges around the mall. She was always here doing her workout routine in the morning. She would just go around and around. Some people would sit and laugh at her; hell, I was even guilty of talking about how weird it seemed. It was weird though. She was stuck in this cycle around the mall; she doesn't change it up or even talk to anyone.

I glanced down at my phone and noticed I had work in another thirty minutes. I thought I could get there early to help set up. My boss, Thomas, said that I was one of his better employees. Thomas was a nice enough guy. He owned a real-estate company and he would tell

us that he was a millionaire and that running this Yogurt World was just a hobby for him. At least that's what he told me. That must be nice.

I punched in my login number to the digital register and put my Astronomy book somewhere I could study it later if I had a break. "Hey, Thomas," I said, grabbing my work hat and putting it on my mess of hair.

"Charles, you're here early," he said rubbing down one of the counters with a wet rag. He was very methodical about his cleaning. He liked everything in this stand to be spotless and he would make a habit to clean in circles. "I wanted to ask you something."

"What is it?" I said, putting on the apron with "Yogurt World" written across it with the buttons that had the names of the specialty flavors and witty sayings. One button said, "Try a peach yogurt to make your day PEACH-ier." Another said something like, "Yogurt world, try the best yogurt... In the world." I became a walking advertisement for this company. The buttons were idiotic.

I don't think they ever helped make a sale, but they definitely made the apron heavier.

"Feel free to say no," he said, leaning in to the spot he was trying to clean out of the counter. It made him look like a DJ. "What would you say to working my double shift today? You'd be closing."

This wasn't the first time Thomas has given me more hours. Regardless of what he said, I felt like I couldn't say no to him. I wanted to remain the best employee of Yogurt World. Of course, the extra money was nice too. I'd like to think I earned my twenty-five cent raises.

"Yeah, I don't mind"

“Really?” he said, talking off a button from his apron.

“Yeah, I can use the money,” I said. I knew we had the water, cable, and electric bills coming soon, and knowing my parents, they would need my help paying for their part. The extra time away from home would be nice too.

“That’s great,” he said and he put a new button onto my apron. “I’ll get going then. Your direct deposit slip is under the register so you can get it when close today, thank you for your hard work.”

The button read, “Yogurt World, you can *always* count on our service.” It was only a small button but it made the apron noticeably more cumbersome. It was a hassle working with so much weight on my shoulders.

Mother

I can tell you what gets me so heated with this family. It's not the fact that I do everything in this house: cook, clean, take care of my Ma, care for the dogs, and mow the lawn. I mean, if I didn't take care of my plants they would just wither and die. No, now don't get me wrong, I like to take care of everyone and everything. It makes me feel like I'm a good mother and wife and sister and daughter. No one.

I don't get a "thank you" or "hey, let me help you with that,"

Nothing.

Don't get me started on my sister, Noreen. She's also so quick to talk. She thinks because she's lived with my mother so much longer than us that she has some rights in this house that we don't.

She thinks she's so much closer to Ma than anyone else.

In fights, she always needs to get the last word and always needs to start a fight about something. It happens every morning. When she wakes up it's like waking up the devil she just steals the joy out of everyone. Just earlier today she woke up to our mother going on a rant about how my dad left her for some other woman. But I had the situation handled this time.

We were just calmly having coffee and I said, "Ma," I said, "think about it, how can your husband be with another woman?"

He has been dead for over twenty years you know. I even told her that too.

“Look,” I said, “Dad’s dead. He died before Charles was born. You were at his funeral, you helped bury him.”

“That bastard might as well be dead to me,” she’d say, the mouth on her. She got vulgar with old age.

I just try to keep my voice nice and calm; you can tell that it gets through to her. Someday she will start to tear up and cry as if she’s experiencing Dad’s death all over again. It’s a sad thing to watch really. It’s hard to think about Dad’s death. He was a good man. He never laid a hand on us and never got a temper. Hell, I remember I came home late once and he was sitting and waiting for me. He just gave me this look before he went inside, it would feel like he lectured me for hours. I felt like a disappointed him. That man would never cheat.

“Everyone I love is dead,” she’d say to me, “I’m the only one left. Even my husband is dead.” She’d cry in her hospice bed helpless to go back in time, hopeless to keeping up with her memory for long. It’s hard to watch someone cry. It’s hard watching your mother cry like that, you know?

The next morning she’ll just have to re-experience the deaths she’d forgotten all over again.

Anyway, Noreen would just yell at her. “Stop talking about dad like that,” she’d say just like that too, in that twisted, cackley voice. “Your husband died, you lunatic. He would never cheat on you, even with how crazy you are.”

Boy, she’s a real piece of work. She just sits alone on her stupid computer playing those Seek-and-Find games. She’ll play those until Charles gets home, because god forbid she’d move

that computer out of that guest room where that poor boy sleeps. She just has to be in everyone's way. When I'm in the kitchen, she has to be in the kitchen. When Charles is trying to sleep, she's on the computer.

And Noreen starts fights with everyone and then she acts like the victim. She'll pick fights with me, my husband, my son. It's really hard to take her side—she doesn't exactly make friends with us very well. For awhile, Charles wasn't even talking to her—he hated my sister.

Let me tell you, this one time she walking to the room complaining about the door, or his car—something like that. Anyways, he got so mad. He usually just gave her the silent treatment, which drove her crazy, I mean, she went insane just because he ignored her. This time though, he yelled.

He said, "Get the fuck over it," sure, he uses curse words a lot but he would never use them to insult people. "You're a fucking bitch," he said. "Nobody likes you and you never shut the fuck up."

It was hurtful. It was hard to watch. I love my sister, I really do, but sometimes it's just hard to stick up for her. She really doesn't know when to shut up. Noreen wouldn't stop trying to talk to him. He kept yelling, "Shut the fuck up, shut the fuck up you stupid bitch." I have never heard him get like that.

Eventually my husband Jim stepped in. He had the worst temper of them all, and he started yelling at her too until she just went to her room and cried. It isn't even the worst of it.

There was this one time Jim got into a fight with Noreen. This happens all the time, but this one sticks out in my mind. It was over something stupid, she said some underhanded

comment to him, and he retorted and it just went back and forth. Well finally, Jim stands up and gets in Noreen's face. I don't know what to do because I can't hold back my husband, I can't get in the middle of this. Charles was at work but it wouldn't make a difference if he was here, he was scared of his father after all the years of him yelling and breaking stuff. Charles is much stronger than his father but it doesn't make a difference, the intimidation is still there. Of course, my husband may have an awful temper and he breaks things and throw stuff, but he'd never hit someone. He's never hit me or Charles.

But there is a first time for everything.

They start yelling back and forth, "Sit down," she said, "You wouldn't dare touch me. You wouldn't dare." It's like she was trying to get him to do it. She was really pushing him over the line.

"Shut up," he said, his fists balled up. He was in her face. "Shut the fuck up for once in your Goddamned life."

"Or what?" She said. My sister never knows when to shut up.

Jim's hand grabbed her by the throat.

"Jim, Jim," I said, "stop that you can kill her." I didn't want to intervene, I've never seen him like this I didn't want to make it worse. It felt like it went on for five minutes in my mind but of course, it didn't.

Noreen just ran into her room crying, "You're crazy, you're a mad man."

I didn't know what to do for her, my sister can be a bother but I loved her—I was stuck in the middle.

I felt trapped in that house next to my mother.

Worst of all was, since I took care of everyone, they all expected me to take their side, and if I wasn't all on their side then I was against them completely. There was no chance I could be in the middle, play the neutral nation of Switzerland. I know I'm not one to pick the best of two evils. That's not to say that this family is evil, but I know the devils work when I see it. I light a candle to Saint Michael to protect this house. I'm Catholic and that's what a good Catholic does.

Charles, on the other hand, that boy is definitely going through a nasty phase or something. He keeps acting like he isn't the Catholic boy I raised. It's fine that he looks at other religions, so long as he remembers his roots.

I told him, "Charles, remember your roots." I said, "Remember how you were raised and how much God has helped us in our lives. He'll get us out of these dark times."

But no, he won't have it any of that talk and I blame myself for that. His father and I don't take the boy to church anymore. We simply don't have the time or the energy. I'm always taking care of Ma and the house and Jim's always doing something to pass the time. Actually, I don't think Jim likes going to church that much either.

One time, at this new church we were going to, Jim thought it would be a good idea to bring his music device, whatever those music device's names are. He thought it could pass off as his hearing aids. The man didn't need hearing aids, even with the loud crap music he listened too.

Anyway, he walks in and of course one of the nuns or assistant nuns, some woman stops him, she just places her hand lightly on his arm. She said, "Sir," her tone was innocent enough. "Sir, can you remove your earbuds? The mass is going to begin shortly."

My husband, he didn't like being touched.

He turned quickly around and yelled, "Get your fucking hands off of me." And he stormed out of the church and let the doors slam behind him.

Charles and I just found some seats and enjoyed the mass. At least I tried to; I couldn't help but worry about my husband. He always does stupid things when he's mad, stupid dangerous things.

Who would say something like that to a nun? Who would say something like that in a church, the most sacred house of God?

It would be my crazy husband of course.

I made sure to light a candle and pray for him before the mass started. Charles just rolled his eyes. I remember when he was younger he would be so fascinated in churches. I would explain things to him, like the candles.

"We light the candles not only to pray," I would tell him after mass, "but as smaller symbols of the Light of Christ. We pray for the intercession of saints who are also close friends with God up in Heaven."

To be honest I don't think Jim or Charles really liked the church we visited after our move from Florida. It was that it was that different, it just wasn't the same church. The church in Georgia lacked the memories and symbols.

It was in that Florida church Jim met me. It was right by this statue of the Virgin Mary. He asked me to one of the church dances and I said yes. We dated for over a year and every Sunday we would sit in those seats by that statue. Next, Jim proposed to me in that spot by the statue. Once we had Charles we kept sitting in those same seats. We had him baptized here, we sent him there to private school at the church, and he went to Sunday school. The priests and teachers always said he was the best behaved and that he had the potential to become a priest himself one day. I didn't want him to do that though. I knew that wouldn't make him happy. Besides, I wanted grandkids.

We had to leave that church in Florida because Jim lost his job. He got another one here in Georgia, but once we moved he started to get sick and his temper at work started to get worse. He was one of the best workers, but no one could handle him. They had to let him go and he's been unemployed ever since—it's been close to a year. The man hates it, he hates not being able to function normally. I mean, you can really see it festering in him.

But he's a sick man now and he's losing teeth. No one wants to hire a man who is missing many teeth in the front of his mouth. The man is getting weaker too both with age and with bad eating habits. All he eats is junk food that costs me an arm and a leg but he likes it so I get it for him. I mean, he can only eat so much. He has Crohn's so eating certain foods causes him a lot of pain. Hell, the man has many health issues going on and without insurance; it's hard to do anything about them. We have him on some medicine that is a free prototype drug to help handle the Crohn's, that's not a problem.

It is the pain medication is like a never-ending nightmare.

That man is in a lot of pain so the last doctor we took him too wants him to be on heavy painkillers like Oxycodone. I used to be a nurse; I know that man takes to many meds. But I feel bad for how much pain he is in but it's just so expensive to buy this stuff without insurance. We have to keep borrowing money from everybody. I have to ask so many people for money: my mom, Jim's mom, his brother, Charles. We had to borrow five hundred dollars from my mom and one thousand from Charles just the other day. I have to do it. God forbid Jim does it. He hasn't even called his mother to ask.

I took out a few student loans in Charles' name just to help us pay of some of the debt. He didn't like that very much. He always goes on about how our bad habits are going to ruin his career and his future. We'll pay him back soon enough anyways, right now we're just in a tough spot and need all the help we can get.

Jim doesn't like us having to use Charles's money but we have too. It's not like we have much of a choice in the matter. Jim needs his medication.

I have to try and control his intake and to do that I have to hide the pills in my sister's room, that's one place he usually won't go. But he'll find them eventually.

He always finds them.

He'll get desperate enough and he'll go into her room when we're not there and he'll take those pills. He finds the pills where ever I hide them: in Charles's room, in the couch cushions, even hidden in one of my stuffed animals hidden in a little pocket. What kind of a person does that?

It's not like I have many options on where to hide them in this cramped house. He can just watch me when I got to get him his pills.

Honestly, It's to a point where he can take all of those fucking pills and kill himself if that's what he wants.

The worst thing about him taking them is he doesn't just pop pills like a normal person. No, he goes in the bathroom and he shoots them up. I know he does it, I see those dirty needles he tries to hide on me. I'm not stupid. I was a nurse for over thirty years, just because I'm not one now doesn't mean I've forgotten anything. Doctors can't even draw blood from him with all of the callus and punctures he has from sticking himself.

But, do they try to stop him?

No.

Does the pain clinic see this and try to stop him?

No.

I've caught him shooting up before too. I usually leave him alone when he closes the bathroom door because the door doesn't lock—he slammed it one too many times. He would just get mad if I kept going in to check on him.

However, no matter how much I try, I can't trust what that man is doing behind that shut door.

Anyway this time he was in there for much longer than usual. I opened the door. "Jim," I said, "Jim?" I even knocked as I opened it.

He fumbled with some stuff on the table. “What do you want?” he said in this annoyed voice. He said it like I didn’t fucking know what he was doing in there. Like he didn’t know he was guilty. I could see the dirty needles out on the bathroom counter, his arm even had a tourniquet wrapped around it.

“You bastard. You’re shooting up again,” I said, “You keep promising me you won’t. I want you to throw those fucking needles away or get out of this house.” It was my mother’s house so I could say that. I love that man but I can only take so much. A person can only take so much stress.

“Okay,” he said, “okay, okay.” That was all he could say to me. I watched him throw the box of fucking needles away but I knew he’d get more and hid them somehow. That’s how addicts work.

His brother thinks we should just send him to one of those addiction centers. He says I should just throw the man out on his ass—send him to live with his mother again. But she doesn’t want him there. His wants me to just throw the pills down the drain but those are expensive. That would just be a waste of money. She’s also not here to deal with Jim’s temper, he’s face would get so red and his head would blow through the roof if that happened, let me tell you.

The man has serious anger issues. If I don’t give him the extra pills he wants, he’ll just throw things and have a tantrum until he gets them. You know, we can have nice things because he’ll just break them. He’s thrown remotes, plates, books, whatever, if you can name I’m sure he’s damaged it somehow.

I just know I need to get out of this house. I need to just go and take Charles with me and my garden. I can't go anywhere until my mom passes away. I need to take care of her until then but sometimes I just wish God would take her. That sounds bad, I know, but it's so hard watching her suffer—she just not the same person anymore. It's like I'm trapped in a house full of strangers.

Father

My name is James. That was my father's name and my grandfather's name and his father's name too. The name also belongs to my son but we decided to call him by his middle name to avoid confusion. Everyone calls me Jim though, it's my twist on the name.

The name passed through many generations of first-born males in this family—among other things.

One time, back in Florida, I picked up Charles from his kindergarten and we were driving to Target to pick up some Barq's Cream Soda. It was one of our father-son traditions after school some days. We would buy the glass bottles because we both agreed it had the crisper taste.

Charles was just a little kid back then; he had this funny little habit of sticking his tongue out in front of the car air conditioner to see how dry he could get it. He didn't talk to me much, not that I had much to say, but sometimes I'd pick him up and he'd ask why mommy didn't come. She was his favorite parent back in those days and it would make me a little hurt and upset to see that. He'd even cry when I picked him up.

This particular day we pulled into that Target parking lot and spotted a space. I turned on my blinker and started to turn in until this guy, this fucking guy, pulls through his space into mine. He almost hit my car trying to get the space before me. I slammed the car-horn on the truck, which sounded like the vehicle had lost its voice after yelling at a Metallica concert. To back up the weak horn I showed that asshole my middle finger.

It was clear he didn't like that. He looked like a prune of a man. He turned to his wife and started to yell at her, waving his hands like he was an actor on a stage. The wife was hunched over and flinching a lot at his gesticulating hands, she looked like a bruised banana. They were a regular family of fruits. The man started to point to me in my car. I felt the heat rising to my face and I could tell it was getting as red as my work-uniform.

I jerked my wheel and backed up into a spot not too far from his. I had some word I need to say to this asshole before we went inside.

"Daddy," Charles said in his faint little voice, "can we just get the sodas and go? We don't even need the sodas. We can just go. I don't want you to get angry, Daddy. Me and mommy don't like it when you get angry."

I ignored him. I swung the door to my car open and slammed it behind me as I stomped over to that guy's car. I could hear Charles's footsteps following me and I didn't like it.

I didn't want him follow my footsteps.

I would just give the man a piece of my mind, tell him to be more careful and then we can get our cream soda's and have a good rest of the day together. The man was getting out of his car when I got to him. He wife got out of her door too, she looked panicked.

"Please, Gerald," she said on the verge of tears. "Don't do this. Don't get angry. You know better than that, honey. You said you wouldn't get angry anymore." Her eyes got as wide as golf balls when she noticed me walking up with my son. Without the car blocking I could see her covered in black bruises. She moved herself between her husband and me. "Sir, this was a

misunderstanding,” she said. “We didn’t see you, I told him to move up so he would have to back out, he has—”

The prune of a man grabbed his wife hard by the arms and forcibly moved her out of the way. “Let us men settle this,” he said to her. That made me so mad the way he treated his wife. No woman deserves the treatment he was giving her.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” I said to him. “You apologize to your wife and then to me.” I knew my face was red and I could feel my fist clench. I haven’t been in a fight since I was in the Marines but I knew I could knock out this old man if I had to.

“Excuse me?” he said. “Who are you to talk? Look at your son. Who makes a little kid like that watch this kind of shit?”

I looked over at Charles. He was over with the man’s wife and they both had that scared look on their faces. It was as if they were watching a horror movie they have already seen and they were getting ready for the big jump scare they saw coming. I knew he was right; Charles didn’t need to see this. I didn’t want him to have my temper.

I did not want him to be like me.

“You shouldn’t do that to your wife,” I said, and I started to relax my fist. “That’s all I’m saying. It’s not right to do that. She cares about you, clearly.”

“It’s my business to do what I want with my wife,” he said with a smirk growing on his face. “God says that wives must submit to their husbands because the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church.”

“The Bible says a lot of things you don’t follow,” I said pointing to his wife. “Like husbands should love their wives. Love your neighbor as yourself includes wives.”

“I do love her,” he said. “Nothin’ I do changes that.”

“Tough love,” I said, turning to his wife. “I’m sorry you have to put up with this ignorant jack-ass.” I took some steps back and reach my hand out toward Charles, he came and grabbed it.

“Yeah, get out of my face,” he said and laughed.

It really took all the strength I could muster not to hit him in front of his wife and my son. I had to quickly weigh the pros and cons. Pro: the man will get what is coming to him. Con: my son will witness his father’s violence. I didn’t want him to see my irrational anger, that’s not something a kid needs to see. He has seen enough of that. I would know, it mess a kid up to watch their father act in such a way.

Charles and I left that Target without cream sodas.

These thoughts came into my mind while I was in the bathroom. I was looking at myself in the mirror and I saw cans of root beer in the corner by the closet. Normal people don’t have root beer cans in their bathroom. Most people can keep them in the kitchen and still have room to walk.

But we are not normal people.

Hell, it wasn’t my bathroom, it was my Mother-in-Law’s. She was in her hospice bed in the living room so my wife and I moved into her master bedroom. No, it can’t be my bathroom

because we got evicted from our house earlier that year. The thought of it made my stomach do barrel rolls.

I lost my job so we lost our house. I've been applying everywhere but my twenty-five years of experience in fixing driver's license printers and my service record in the Marines meant nothing without a Bachelor's degree. Hell, who would hire a sick man with a temper problem? It's not even cost efficient.

I pulled out my prescription of Oxycodone and looked at three white pills. They were smaller than a dime, but they had the ability to control people's lives. At this point of my life, I never thought I would need something this badly to feel comfortable. I was destroying my life and it was causing me to break apart what I love. I took those tiny pills that made live livable and crushed them up.

I broke them apart into small pieces and started to grind them.

I looked down at the cracks in the tile on the bathroom floor. This house was in need of a lot of repair. I felt like it was my job to do it, but finding the motivation was so hard recently. This sickness didn't make it any easier. I could feel the guilt set in every so often, I should be the one to provide for my family, but I couldn't. The pain medication did do the job of alleviating my thoughts along with my pain.

Donna wouldn't be happy, I know. She would probably threaten to kick me out or tell the doctor again—empty threats. If she told the doctor, she knew he would cut me off and she'd have to live with me moaning in pain. If she tried to kick me out I would just have to put my mother through this, my wife wouldn't do that to her. Donna knows my mom had enough problems with my dad when he was alive.

I crushed the pills more as I thought about my father.

Man, was he a real piece of work. The old man would always get on to me over the littlest of things. My hair, he hated the length of my damn hair. He would always say it was too long.

“Cut your hair you look like a girl,” That’s the kind of shit he’d say. “I’m tired of people thinking my son is a girl. Cut your hair. You’re a man now.” He would say I was a man at the age of fifteen. He had me join the football team and everything— to make me more of the son he expected. Then he forced me to work at the movie theatre, I could at least enjoy that but a kid shouldn’t have to work that young if he doesn’t have too. I had other responsibilities like school, my art, and the Glee club. I liked reading comic books. All I ever got out of football was a dislocated shoulder. It was that trip to the hospital that my dad made me cut my hair. That dim nurse almost mistook me for a girl, as if my hair was ever *that* long. In my father’s eyes, that was the last straw. He would never have his son mistaken for a girl again.

I can just see him rolling over in his grave if he could see my hair at this length—an unkempt mess down to my shoulders.

My father died when I was eighteen—right after I cut my hair and went into the Marines. I joined as if I had something to prove. At least, I did when it came to my father but that asshole died before I could prove myself to him. Not to mention, I was leaving my mom alone to take care of my younger brother, he was eight at the time. He never had to join any football teams or work any teenager jobs. I wanted to be there for my mother but she told me to stay in the Marines and follow through with what I was doing—she said she was proud. She almost sounded better off without him around. See, I wasn’t the only one the man harassed, my mom also got a

lot of shit. My dad would have a temper and that man could hold a grudge, it was best to get out of his way when he had those moods. Mom was too stubborn though and in the end, she would always vent to me. She attributed the anger to his Irish heritage. She said his father was a drinker and he would often get into these moods. According to mom, depression and mood swings ran in the blood of Irishmen.

She blamed his bloodline.

I blamed his father.

I knew my wife went to Charles about all of our problems. She knew I didn't want her to involve him, I knew it stressed him more than he showed. That boy has had enough stress with work and school. We never wanted him to get involved with our problems. Like with the eviction. He was the last to know about it, he had to worry about graduating high school and not his good-for-nothing father losing his job and the house. We had to borrow his money just to pay the bills while we were here.

All that was left of the Oxycodone was unrecognizable dust. I added a few drops of sterilized eye solution into it and waited for it to dissolve. Donna said it wasn't good to shoot the solution into my body but I didn't really care at this point.

I almost never saw him anymore. He was working two jobs and going to college full-time. When he wasn't in one of those places he was with his best friend, Stephen, and his parents. Stephen's parents were a better influence on him anyways; they had a nice house and nice six figure jobs. They took him on vacations we could never afford for him. He deserved that kind of treatment for how hard he worked to make a name for himself. It would just get so mad

when he would compare their success to too us. Like we weren't trying. Like he knew so much more than us because he was also being raised in that household.

I was driving Donna, and Charles home from a movie. This was sometime before we lost the house. Charles said, "You know what would help us right now? If we saved more money. Only like ten percent of what we make, if we started to save that now just think about it."

I was gripping the steering wheel as hard as I could not to get mad. I knew he didn't know any better. He knew we were struggling but he didn't know how bad it was, he didn't know about me about to lose my job. We were having some jobs cut at work and I knew I had the biggest temper dealing with the idiots we worked with. Donna and I didn't tell him these things because I kid shouldn't have to worry about it.

"We don't have enough money to save, dear," Donna said to him. "We have to spend all that money on bills and food. We have the cable, phones, internet, water, gas, electric, house, and car insurance. There are a lot of things we need to spend money on."

"But just hear me out," He sounded like he was some financial counselor, the kid had just begun his job at some Yogurt Shop in the mall and he already thought he was the life guru. "If we cut out unnecessary spending on things we didn't needed like cable and the phone bill—"

"We need the phones," Donna interjected.

"Do we really need a house phone if we all have cell phones?" he said, "I mean, who uses a house phone—"

"Noreen uses the house phone," my wife interrupted again raising her voice this time. It didn't take much for that to happen. "I've tried to talk to her, she won't listen."

“House phones are pointless,” He said, “Anyway, if we didn’t buy so much food—”

“I have to buy for four people in this house and that’s it,” his mother said over him, she was getting more upset. I could feel myself pushing harder on the gas and driving more recklessly than before.

“Then why do we have so much food going to waste?” he said. I noticed my wife’s lips purse up. This is what she does when she is mad and doesn’t want to talk, I’ve seen that face enough to know. “If you spent less on the junk food we didn’t need and only brought what we would use we’d have more money,” he said. “And also think about cutting back on buying just stuff—our house is full of clutter and stuff we don’t need. You keep buying other people’s junk from the Goodwill and we have no space for it. We keep spending money we don’t have—”

I jerked the car into a parking and floored it to the back. I was red hot with anger and I had enough at this point. It went silent, maybe the tension in the car was loud enough to do the talking for everyone.

“You can drive *him* home,” I said. I knew I would regret it but I let that impulsive anger overcome me.

It was the way I remember seeing my father handle situations.

I slammed the door and started to walk in the direction of home. It was hot and I remember not feeling that well. Anger always made me see red—red like the color of mars, the god of war himself. The cars were zooming past me and air eventually blew the anger out only leaving more regret. Donna came back for me on the side of the road; she told me how resentful our son was.

I told her I never wanted him to be like me.

The needle full of the liquid and it was ready to go. I tied a shoelace around my arm and prepared the needle to be stuck it into my arm, I was numb to the feeling of the injection. The callus on my arm made it hard for the needle to puncture the skin but eventually

I watched the solution drain into my bloodstream.

That was the last of the pills I had and I needed to find more soon. I needed more because the pain never left. It never left. The pain was always aching me somewhere. The pills only worked for so long. Donna didn't understand.

But how could she?

If she understood she wouldn't hide the pills on me. I moved a lot of the boxes on her side of the room. The cluttered was all over the place; it surprised me that we could find anything at all. Boxes were everywhere from our big move. The worst of it was trying to integrate all of all stuff with *theirs*. Noreen and my mother-in-law had about as much stuff as Donna, Charles, and I. We do have a lot of stuff for three people, but they're only two people. The three women don't know how to get rid of their things—this junk. I swear, it must be some habit they picked up from their mother. You know, was around during the depression, she was raised to save everything she had because she might not have the funds to buy another. It's that mentality that creates hoarders. Hoarders. Pack rats. Fire hazards. Every last one of them.

I found a small photograph at the bottom of one of the boxes. It was an old Polaroid picture from about 1999 of Charles wearing my work clothes from my old job. The clothes were far too big as he was probably five or six in this picture. How time flies, things really were

different back then. He had this goofy smile with his wavy hair down to his shoulders. I felt my heart float up to my throat when I looked what he was holding in the picture. It was a little sign that said, "I want to grow up to be just like you, Dad." That really hit me where it counts. I could feel the tears swelling in my eyes when I put the picture back into the bottom of the box. I left to find my pills elsewhere. I wondered if Charles still wanted to be like me. I sure hope that he didn't but maybe he can learn from what I say and not what I do.

I was starting to suspect my wife put them in her sister's room thinking I would look in there. I think was getting desperate enough to look.

Aunt

I was having a dream before my mom's ridiculous moaning and groaning woke me up in the morning. Even though I was just sleeping all night I still felt tired. My head was propped up on my Tempur-Pedic pillow facing the TV that was on from last night. The pillow helped my neck.

I had a bad neck.

I was used to being woken up every morning to some of the usual sounds. It could be any handful of sounds: my mother's moans of pain; Donna yelling at someone or something; Jim slamming something, usually a door; or Charles's screaming music being played as loud as possible. It was usually a mix of those sounds like a child banging random keys on a key board.

I just laid there and watched the TV. It was on an infomercial about a cremating yourself into a diamond when you died, I watched as the man on the screen showed off different styles of rings. He would put them on the hand of his woman cohost.

Then the woman would exclaim, "wow, and it's only three easy payments of one thousand dollars."

The phone number would then come up on the screen and at the bottom it would say: prices may vary. Then they would do it again. I thought about calling the number on the screen to talk to them about the rings. I wondered what kind of diamond my ashes would be.

But I didn't call.

I felt lousy and didn't want to get up yet. It was only 7:35 but I couldn't get back to sleep. I still felt stiff from the night's rest. I watched the infomercial cycle happen about the three times before I heard Donna yelling again.

“What are you mumbling about, mom?” I heard her say in the living room.

I decided to get up and investigate.

“What are you yelling about?”

“Mom’s mumbling again,” she said. “I’m tired of it, she sounds like a crazy person. She keeps talking about daddy and how he’s leaving her.”

“Mom,” I said. “Dad’s dead. He has been dead for over twenty years.”

“Stop yelling at me,” my mother said back, it sounded weird because she had no teeth.

“No one is yelling at you,” Donna said, I could hear Donna yelling from the other room, but I knew I wasn’t yelling at her. I respected my mother more than that.

Mom just mumbled more under her breath.

“It is 8:00 in the morning,” Jim said, slamming his bedroom door. “Why don’t you just leave her alone and let everyone else sleep in this God damned house.”

I doubted anyone was still asleep at this point. Soon enough Charles’s music started to play loudly out of his room. It sounded like a mess of noises. I couldn’t understand how he could listen to that crap so loudly.

“Noreen, just go to sleep,” Donna said to me like she was my boss or something. “We don’t need you out here as well.”

“You don’t tell me what to do,” I said. “You’re not my mother.”

“You don’t listen to her either,” Jim said. “Who *do* you respect in this house?”

They always attacked me like that. I just went to my room and shut the door; I preferred to be alone anyways. Even though I loved my sister, we didn't always get along. She didn't know what it was like being alone—she had a husband who stayed with her and she had a son.

What do I have?

A dog. A computer. A phone. A room.

But they can't even let me have that. No sir. I am crazy because I would rather stay in my room than let myself get put down by them. Donna thinks I don't do enough in the house, but it was my house before it was hers. I had to do everything before they got here. I was the one taking care of mom, I cleaned, I cooked—before, we didn't need much. When they got here, that all changed.

They invaded *my* space,

Donna started doing everything, which sounds nice. It's not. She holds it over my head all the time, but she leaves nothing for me to do around the house.

Jim started to having his temper tantrums like a little kid. Jim is a mad man. A drug addict. If he doesn't get that fix he will be in a bad mood all day. You can't even talk to that man because he's crazy. He almost physically assaulted me before. All I did was walk by the TV to get something for my dog. You tell me, does that make a me the bad guy? It is not as if I can control how fast I walk, I'm not that young anymore. Charles would yell at me as well, just like his father.

And they wonder why I stay in my room all of the time. They think it's weird that I don't do anything with anyone. They find it strange that I like to be alone. I can hear them talking from my room. I can hear what they think. But it's not unusual.

I am not unusual.

My routine is what my life is. Waking up to my mother moaning. Making a cup of coffee in the morning. Warming it up three times until I decide to drink it. Watching the oldies on the TV and playing my Seek-and-Find games on my computer. Eating alone in my room. Doing the dishes. And then going back to my room to watch more TV until I fall asleep.

Of course, I would call my family in New York once a week, but it was other stuff I did in my life that felt unusual. Sometimes that unusual felt good to me, but most of the time it was just—*unusual*. But why should anyone think I was unusual? They need to look at themselves first.

Donna does the same chores every day. She cooks every day. She tries to hide all the junk she refuses to throw away every day. She makes herself crazy in this house but that is her usual. She goes to the store every so often and she will go out to pay the bills—but that's it. She even watches the same dozen movies over and over again as if that doesn't get old. Boy, is she one to talk about me.

Jim is the same way, except he doesn't do anything. He locks himself in his room all day shooting up his pain medication, and then he passes out. Sure, he will try to apply for jobs, but who would want to hire a sick man with a drug addiction— Nobody.

Charles, bless his heart, he is the only one who tries to get out of the house. But he is always at work or school or with his friend Stephen. He is trying to better himself, and he has gotten a lot better.

He used to be just like his father with his temper and his grudges. I remember Charles didn't talk to me for several months before. It didn't usually bother me much, but that didn't mean it didn't feel like torture sometimes. I can remember being in the same room as him trying to say something to him, thinking he would let down his guard and talk to me, but he wouldn't. He would just get up and leave. I remember crying about it. It all ended one day when I was watching TV, I was startled by a knock on my door. It was Charles, and he apologized and he hugged me.

I forgave him—It made me realize how much the unusual aspects of your day can make a difference.

I had to call the computer guy about a problem I was having with my computer. I couldn't figure out how to delete something on there. I knew that Charles or Jim could fix, Donna could have probably fixed it too, but I just wanted to call the computer guy. I was paying extra for the help service line, I figured I would use it.

“Hello, this call maybe monitored for quality assurance,” he said on the other line, “how may I provide excellent customer service for you today?”

“Why do they do with the monitored calls?” I asked, this new question came to mind and I wanted to ask it before I forgot later in the call.

“It’s for a few reasons,” he answered. “Supervisory monitoring is essential to make sure the people in my position are answering your questions politely and to the best of our abilities. In order to ensure the communication between a customer and employee, a certain percentage of calls must be monitored. So all of our calls are subject to quality control. It is also makes a good tool for training new folks.”

“Interesting.”

“So, how may I help you today?” he asked.

I had actually forgotten what my question was. I was looking at my computer but whatever it was didn’t seem to bother me anymore.

“Are you still there?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, “I just forgot my question. But did you know you can now cremate people into diamonds?”

“No, ma’am, I did not. But...”

“I just found out today myself.” I said. “I don’t know if I would want someone to do that to me. I don’t think I would want to walk around with someone on my finger. You know?”

“I understand,” he said. “But I need to handle other calls. If you have any more questions about your device, please call back. If you could take a quick five minute survey of this call on our website that would be great.”

“Of course,” I said, “Thank you so much. Buh-bye.” I hung up the phone and just starred at my computer. I decided to take that survey. It took me about thirty minutes to complete though.

I took my joy where I could. I think people make life too hectic and it drives them crazy. I didn't need much, I just liked the peace I got from having a routine. I didn't think I asked for too much. I just wish more people in this house would understand me, that's not too much to ask. The sooner I can get back to the quite of my routine the better. I look forward to that coming.

Grandmother

They think I'm crazy. They just tell me to deal with the pain. They don't have to go through what I am going through. This pain is crippling. People would think they are crazy if they had to experience this.

It's hard to sleep through the night being in so much pain, I can't stand it. Sometimes I can't help but moan about the pain I am in. They don't have pain that feels like your insides are rotting. My teeth and my gums feel like they're rotting too. My body feels like it is being turned inside out. Of course, the doctors can't help me, the medication can't help me, and God hasn't been helping me. I just don't have that much going for me anymore and no one understands that.

They would be crazy if their husband left them for some other women.

Healthy women. Beautiful women. The kind of women that you see on TV now in days with the hips and the breasts.

They don't believe me though. They tell me he's dead all the time. They tell me to stop talking about because he's dead. But he's my husband. I can talk about him any way I want too.

I know I'm not crazy, and I know he's not dead—I still see him.

Sometimes. He comes in and he'll talk to me, he will tell me he loves me and that he misses me. But I'll just ask him why he left in the first place—he doesn't have to leave.

Donna just says it is the TV I hear but I don't think that is right. I don't even watch the TV that much. I don't even open my eyes when it's on the damn television is so bright. They blame everything on the how much the TV is on—we would be better off without it.

Last night in particular that they all laughed at me. It was late at night and somebody broke in. They ran into the house holding a baby— I think he had a gun too— he ignored me and turned running upstairs. A bearded officer holding a gun followed him. I started to yell for help.

Of course, Donna ran out, red in the face, and started to yell at me. “What the hell are you yelling for?” she said.

“The man came in. The man with the baby.” I said, I was still out of breath and my heart was racing.

“What are you talking about? There is nobody here.” she said, she turned on the lights and looked around.

“The man ran up stairs. The bearded officer followed him.”

“Are you crazy woman?” she said, she always called me crazy. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack? There is no man in the house. There is nobody here.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said. “How do you know everything. They went upstairs.”

“We don’t have an upstairs,” Donna said. “You’re losing your mind.

“Then where did they go, huh?” I said. I know what I saw. Donna’s voice was starting to give me a real headache though—she was always so loud.

“We don’t have an upstairs so they surely didn’t go there.” She started to laugh with her words now, as if this was a joke. “Did this officer have a red beard? Maybe even a cowboy hat and a big shiny badge?”

I think he did actually.

“You have a hyper active imagination with all the TV that is on. You were hallucinating. It wasn’t real. You were think of an episode of Walker Texas Ranger, you watch a lot of that on the TV out here, we have been leaving that on for you.”

That man did look like that Chuck Norris. I guess she was right. But that didn’t feel like an hallucination, it didn’t even feel like a dream.

“You’re crazy, mom.” She said, “go to sleep.”

They think I am crazy. But I know what happens, I know what I see. I know my husband is still out there. It’s as clear as day— I know I still see him.

But they think I’m crazy— they do. I hear them talking about me. They act like they don’t leave me in this hospice bed in the middle of the living room. I can hear them.

Muttering.

Conspiring.

They talk about how it would better if I were to just die. Well maybe they’re right—but that is no way to talk to your mother. I would smack them if I could move.

I’m afraid they are going to kill me in my sleep one day. I couldn’t do much about it if they did. It scares me to think about that.

At least I know Jim cares—he would care if something happened to me. He thanks me for being around. He says that I help with his pain. I see him taking his pain medication, but I think he takes mine too sometimes. I don’t mind though, I don’t need them.

Not even the pain medication can take away what I am feeling.

But then Donna yells at him. She is always yelling about everything. She is so high strung. I feel bad for Jim having to put up with her yelling and her cursing.

I would wash her mouths out with soup if I could. Especially that Donna, with the mouth on her. She curses like a sailor. If her father were here she wouldn't speak like that. That good for nothing man just left without saying anything.

He has to be alive, I still see him come around sometimes.

The worst thing about getting older is it feels like my brain is rotting. I'm losing feelings and I can't remember things—not like I used to. Everyone tells me that I keep forgetting things too.

They say my husband died on -----, but how can that be? I still see him all of the time. I cannot remember his funeral. I cannot remember the death of my brother. They even said that my sister died last week. They said she was ----- years old. But I remember her being so young last time I saw her.

Everyone is dying around me.

I can still feel the tears that roll down my face. I remember the death of my husband. I remember that Charles never got to meet him. I remember I felt,

Then why do I still see him?

“What are you mumbling about?” Donna said yelling at me. “Stop talking about dad like that. He was a good man.”

“Don’t talk to me like that,” I said, my daughter had no respect for me; her mother, I know we raised her better than that.

“What are you yelling about?” I could hear Noreen say as she walked in.

“Mom’s mumbling again,” Donna said. “I’m tired of it; she sounds like a crazy person. She keeps talking about daddy and how he’s leaving her.”

I wasn’t mumbling, I don’t know how she could hear me.

“Mom,” Noreen said. “Dad’s dead. He has been dead for over twenty years.”

She was on Donna’s side again, it wasn’t fair. They were always against me— it would drive me crazy.

“Stop yelling at me,” I said. Talking hurt. I was in so much pain and my throat was almost always dry. It hurt so much. It hurt too much to talk.

“No one is yelling at you,” Donna said. She was wrong. Everyone has been yelling all morning. Everyone is always yelling in this house.

And all of the yelling hurts.

The End

Mom woke me up this morning, but it wasn't with her yelling. It was just a gentle nudge. "Charles," she said. "It's your grandmother."

"What about her?" I said. I was thinking she was rambling on about something crazy or maybe she tried to get out of the bed and she fell. I would probably be able to help my mother in any of those situations.

"Honey, your grandmother passed away."

I got out of bed and rushed to change my shirt. I just pulled one of the shirts off the mobile and the planets all fell to the floor. I took a second and watched the sun, worn out and faded yellow, hit the ground with the other planets rolling away. They were no longer tethered together.

I went into the living room. My mom and my aunt were talking to each other, it sounded like they were sharing memories about their childhood—they weren't yelling. Dad was sitting on the couch but he didn't seem to be in pain. He was on the phone with someone, probably whoever you were supposed to call when someone died. I was glad my family was together, I felt overwhelmed about trying to think about how I could help. For once, I felt like I couldn't do much.

I walked over to the hospice bed and looked at my grandmother. She didn't look like she was dead, she didn't look any different than when she would be asleep. I thought back to the countless times I came home and saw her sleeping in her bed. I would stop and stare for a while, waiting for her chest to rise—eventually it always did. I waited this time watching for her chest

to rise, but nothing happened. She had definitely passed away, but nobody was sad. That wasn't a bad thing at all, everyone was too busy moving on our own—making changes I hoped would stay.

In this moment, I felt together with everyone in this room. We were all full of our differences that divided us but we were together here. We waited together in the room for a few long moments. It had been awhile since we were all in a room together in peace—no one arguing, no one yelling, and no one moving.

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