

Grace: Suburban Philadelphia

Grace, her hairdo taped in place from the night before, paused in her daily putter of the house, dust cloth in hand; the grand piano wasn't where it should be. Grace ran her cloth over a bookshelf stuffed with music as she muddled through her memory. Gregory had left the piano to their daughter Lily with the stipulation that she take it to a real home, not an apartment. Lily moved it to Vermont when she got married, what, fifteen years ago? Grace picked up a tattered yellow book with a greenish-black design. Inside, Gregory had printed his name in strong lines and Lily hers in girlish script. I'll take this book to Lily for her birthday, Grace thought. And Lily's little Clare. It's her birthday too. She's what, 8? I'll get a dress from that lovely shop off Rittenhouse Square.

Grace crossed the front hall, unbolted the heavy wooden door and pushed the screen door open. The newspaper was on the door mat, exactly where she had instructed the paper boy to put it. She breathed in chilled spring air tinged with the sweet sharpness of azalea and rhododendron as she browsed the headlines. Americans torturing prisoners in that unpronounceable place. The U.S. falling behind in science. A banner headline urging her to turn to a list of soldiers killed in Iraq. A sidebar listed obituaries. A section she read every day, but still was offended that the newspaper used death to lure the reader. One name sounded familiar. Best to wait until she was seated with her tea before confronting the loss of an acquaintance. She tucked it under her arm and turned back into the house.

The door to Gregory's study was ajar. Instead of pulling it closed as she had hundreds of times before, she pushed it open. The room was a study in ordered chaos just as Gregory had left it. Books were crowded two and three deep on floor to ceiling shelves. A row of picture frames held photos of their children in birth order: Ruth, Wally, Carol, and Lily, each at about ten years

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old. Wally gazed out from a wide white ruffle and red cassock, the same outfit for each of the four years he had spent at choir school. A fifth frame tucked behind the others was empty.

On top of a pile of miscellaneous bills and other papers lay a manila folder with “Kidney Cell Carcinoma: Research” penned in Gregory’s precise printing. Inside, she knew, were medical journal articles he had clipped and letters from experts, their edges yellowed with age. No cure, not even a treatment. Not even now, twenty or more years later. A tilting stack of books at the back of the desk jammed against the venetian blinds so that jagged slices of light warmed his pipe stand that still held two pipes, releasing the sweet musty odor of old cherry scented tobacco. Grace’s throat tightened. She needed tea. She pulled the door shut, but it creaked open again.

In the kitchen, Grace put the paper on the counter and reached for one of her English china cups. She felt the emptiness of the house lift and glanced over her shoulder. Gregory sat at the table as matter-of-factly as he had for forty-five years. The cup shattered on the floor.

“Too bad,” he said. “That was a nice set of cups.”

Maybe if I start over, thought Grace. A wave of panic rose in her. Was this it? Was she losing her mind? She took a deep breath and reasoned, ‘Haven’t I seen him around every corner for over a decade? Reached out in the night to empty air where he once snored beside me?’ Grace glanced back. He was still there.

“Sorry. I don’t seem to be in control of my schedule,” he said.

“You’ve been gone twenty years.”

“More like twenty-five but who’s counting? Nice to know we’re slipping together. As far as who or what I was – labels we wear, like clothes.”

“Speaking of clothes,” Grace gestured at his tatty khaki slacks and blue oxford cloth shirt, the cuffs worn through to the white lining. It had always infuriated her, the way he’d pick clothes

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out of the Goodwill bags before she could get them out of the house. Now he was doing the same thing for all eternity. She fought the urge to push down his hair, which stood up in wild wiry patterns, the hair that had fallen out in clumps from chemotherapy returned to life.

The kettle shriek startled her. She pulled out another cup, placed a tea bag in it from the flowered canister and poured in steaming water. She weighed the idea of inviting Gregory to have tea. He shook his head no. She placed the cup on a matching saucer and sat across from him. Silence settled between them as she sipped and searched for something to say. How do you start a conversation with someone who has been gone so long?

“The same as we always did,” he said, seeming to read her mind. “Issues with the house. Funny articles in the paper.” He nodded at the newspaper. “And the *de rigueur* check on the kids. Though I know more than you these days.” He jiggled in that self-satisfied way he’d always had. “They are up to some interesting things, our grown up children. Even Wally.”

Their children. The sweet face of their first child flickered, filling Grace with a dull ache.

“Grant,” he said. “You’re probably the only person still alive who knew about him.”

Grace pressed her hand to her forehead, but couldn’t erase the weightlessness of her first child as she held him one last time. “Mother Randall ...”

“Was from a different era, taken with appearances. Grace, we loved him for the few days we had him. He’s happy, even if it’s as if he never existed. Happier than our grown-up children.”

Grace’s lost child weighed her down with grief. Her worries about her other children’s adult angst felt trivial by comparison. She opened her eyes. He still sat across from her, but seemed less substantial than before. “Today is ...”

“The anniversary of my death.” Grace leaned forward to grasp his hand but couldn’t quite reach him, as if the space around them was expanding. His face took on the studied look he wore

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when he was about to start a lecture. “It’s strange, embodying a theory. Energy is constant.” He broke out in the satisfied smile she had seen so many times before and started to dissolve into the light. “I’ll check in from time to time,” he said just before his grin disappeared.

She got the broom and swept up the tea cup evidence. Women had been locked away for less. It was all in her head. Like the voices she heard, echoes of the soldiers she had nursed. If she didn’t answer, she wasn’t crazy, that’s what Gregory said. Gregory said a lot of things. He would refute the possibility of ghosts. ‘You can’t prove ghosts exist, ergo, no ghosts.’

Gregory’s was a concrete world where stories of the paranormal were mere flights of fancy. Like the Madonna painting whose eyes followed their daughter Carol around that Mexican chapel, sparking her fascination with those Mary stories. Or Lily, who used to hear footsteps in the attic – skeletons she’d called them. Gregory always had an explanation: the angle of light, the creak of a floorboard torqued with decades of settling into heavy clay soil. She rinsed the tea cup and put it in the cupboard, adjusting the stacks to return the china symmetry and her equilibrium. The idea of having Gregory back in her life after so long lightened more than frightened her. But if her children knew ... She would keep Gregory her secret, because if she left this house, he’d really be dead.

Grace was in the dining room, not sure how she got there. Instead of a dust cloth, she was clutching one of her tea cups. She had put it away, hadn’t she? Replaced the order, pressed the cabinet closed as she pressed her mind closed on Gregory’s return. But for those brief moments with him, she hadn’t felt the routine loneliness.

Grace went to the kitchen calendar that Ruth, her oldest, had hung by the back door. She picked up the pencil that dangled next to it from a string and made an X through Tuesday. This

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was meant to help her keep track of time. Instead, she felt like one of those prisoners who scratch marks into the wall to keep track of how long they've been shut away.

Next to the calendar and the phone was a list of names and numbers written large, pasted to the wall. She dialed the first number and Ruth's chirpy voice said she couldn't come to the phone, please leave a message. She ran through the other numbers, just to hear her children's voices as they politely told her they weren't available. Carol, a university professor in Vermont, also a deacon at the Cathedral. Lily, also in Vermont, had a job in something she called social work, and a daughter, Clare. Wally, her son, worked long hours and left home life to his wife, Chrissie. She dialed, expecting a message, but a woman picked up the phone.

"Hello?" The voice was heavily accented, not Chrissie. "Randall resident." Each R rolled down the line. "May I ask who it is who is calling?"

Grace almost hung up, but the sound of a living person kept her on the line. "This is Wally's mother." She used her most businesslike tone, realizing this was the housekeeper.

"No, he at work. Mrs. Randall also she is out. May I take a message from you?"

"Just tell him I called. Nothing urgent." She replaced the receiver, her hand lingering on the beige plastic. She jumped as it jangled. Could she will a phone to ring? She picked it up, suspecting the worst. "Hello?" her voice almost a whisper.

"Mom? Saw you called," said Ruth. "What's up? I'm getting ready for my Monday yoga class, then off to a meeting and grocery shopping. Need anything? I can drop over this afternoon." Grace looked at the calendar. Monday yoga. Grace had marked off Tuesday.

"Nothing important. A bottle of milk and a loaf of bread." Grace had no idea how much milk or bread she had, but needed an imperative for Ruth to visit. "I'll make a bread pudding." There was a pause on the line, Ruth jotting the items on her list.

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“Some chocolate chips,” Grace cut in. “And cream. To make it a bit more special.”

Her daughter sighed into the phone. “I’ll see you about noon.”

Wally: New York City

Forty stories below Wally, two pools of water glistened in the sunlight, set in the center of a manicured memorial garden where once two towers had reached into the sky. In moments, not only had the towers become mountains of debris, so had the lives of thousands of families. He’d been lucky, escaping minutes before this plate glass window in front of him exploded inward as the first tower fell. That day, Wally met up with his friend Brad on the sidewalk below, gaping as a dark shape fell from the sky and hit the pavement not 100 yards away. The shape was a young man, his tie splayed across his face in an almost playful way, blood darkening the pavement around him.

Wally had survived. It was only now that he was beginning to understand how that day had changed him. Maybe it was a new sense of that old feeling he’d had ever since his father, Gregory, had died. That Gregory was not truly gone, but at his side, as he had been most times throughout his childhood. Giving him strength.

Wally swirled his glass of single malt, so that the liquor created legs against the crystal. He knew he was different from Brad because in spite of the tragedy of that day, he had worked through it, numbing himself with long hours. For Brad, it wasn’t the fire or the explosions or the falling buildings that had crushed him. He had been crushed by guilt. He had survived, but not lived. Brad had said he felt he should have died, along with so many of their friends, like Tony, who had arranged a meeting that morning at the Top of the World to introduce Brad to a potential client. Brad had been late, arriving on the sidewalk just as the first plane sliced into the

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tower. Brad blamed himself, as if leaving home ten minutes earlier could have stopped time.

There was a tap on his door and Wally's boss poked his head in, holding the door closed against him like a shield. "Don't you answer your phone?"

"Need something?" Wally asked.

"Thought we'd catch a few minutes."

Wally checked his watch. "Brad's service starts in 30 minutes and it's up on 53rd."

His boss drummed his fingers on the mahogany door. "You'll be back what, two-ish? Come up to my office." He winked and pointed a finger at Wally in a pistol shot salute. "And you should watch the booze this time of day. It's old school."

"Sure." Wally drained his drink. His boss stood in his doorway, as if checking on him. "Want to ride down with me?"

"Not going. Don't think it would send, ah, the right message." His boss closed the door.

"St. Thomas. 53rd and Fifth," Wally said to the cab driver. As they sped through the labyrinth of the lower East side and up the Henry Hudson, Wally remembered how, after 9/11, Brad had gone to so many funerals, sent checks to widows, as if he were trying to buy away his guilt. The worst was Tony's funeral. The three of them, Wally, Brad and Tony, had once been the brash new generation, riding the market crest to a life of fancy houses, country clubs and fast cars. The American dream. In the flash of a plane hitting a sky scraper, their dream had disintegrated. Then Brad parked his Mercedes, engine still running, and closed his garage door.

The cab pulled up in front of the stone edifice of the church and Wally stepped out into the brilliant sunshine and frantic pace of Fifth Avenue. The stairs rose steeply to tall church doors. As Wally started up, one of the big doors swung open and a familiar face poked out.

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“Wallace! So good to see you, though I do wish it were under better circumstances.” The rector, a man in his early sixties, only a few years older than Wally, wore a long black cassock with 33 intricately carved buttons. One button, Wally remembered from choir school, for each year of Christ’s life.

Wally gave him a hearty handshake, looked him in the eye and smiled. Just as a similar rector in a similar long black cassock had taught him and Brad as choir boys at the renowned institution. “I guess I should get to church more often.” Forty years later, St. Thomas Church had adjusted traditions in tiny increments as if giving the world a chance to weigh the magnitude of each revolution before taking the next step. Just last fall’s newsletter had reported on the first woman priest being ordained there.

Wally had spent middle school in a magical world of music. He and Brad had sung in one of the world’s most noted boys’ choirs, recorded with world-famous opera divas. After his first trip to the Met, his father asked what the opera was about and Wally reported in dead pan, “Death and adultery.” His father choked with laughter but his mother had tilted her head in that way she had when she felt she was missing a joke. It had felt odd being away from home at ten, his old friends left behind in a little league world, but heady in so many ways. He’d spent his first week in the city counting how many limosines he’d see each day.

Wally stepped into the twilight of the narthex, greeted by the familiar scent of incense, wax and old wood. He accepted a program from one of the ushers, ageless men and women in formal black attire, several of whom he had signed on as clients in his early days as a broker. He headed down the long aisle, past the back forty or so rows that held tourists curious to see the famous church in action. Wall Street colleagues, a few loyal clients, and the usual coterie of parishioners filled the first quarter of the sanctuary. He searched from side to side and found his

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wife Chrissie ten rows back on the decani side, where they always sat on Christmas Eve. Piper, Wally's youngest, sat with her head on Chrissie's shoulder. Piper had ridden the bus down from Wellesley to come to support Brad's daughter, one of her oldest friends. Wally gave Chrissie a quick peck on the cheek as he slid in beside her. He brushed blond curls, so much like his mother's, off Piper's forehead and wondered how he had missed the moment when his baby had become a woman. Piper squeezed his hand. Wally had married Chrissie straight out of undergrad with their first son arriving before Wally had even finished his MBA. The other three children had followed in quick succession, with Piper an after-thought. Wally's four older children said they had no time for much beyond clients and deadlines, not marriage and children, or following in their parent's footsteps, let alone funerals for old family friends.

They stood as Brad's family filed in. Brad's oldest son, a tall, lanky replica of his father, placed a small covered jar, painted like a Grecian urn, on a low table covered with a pure white linen cloth. The table sat at the center of the transept, the cross formed by the aisles below the choir. The verger led the family to seats in the first two rows, the young mothers guiding Brad's grandchildren into place.

The choirboys' voices soared. Wally sang the decani part in his head, remembered Brad, head boy in the cantori section, directly across from him. The boys that stood in their places today had that same earnest look but came from worlds away. The choir was sprinkled with faces of all colors, unlike his class four decades before, where height, hair color, and in his case lack of wealth, had been their only diversity.

Wally felt a pang of grief and memory of another funeral over twenty years before. His father's. Not here, a different church. A simpler service, more fitting for a pragmatic man.

The short procession of priest and deacon came forward with the Gospel raised and the

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familiar words stung home. “In my father’s house are many rooms.” The lyrical idea of a father’s protection combined with the more concrete, growing worry about his mother and the house with many rooms where she now lived alone.

The music of the Navy hymn, a nod to Brad’s brief stint in the military, lulled Wally back to the curious look on his boss’s face and a deep unease settled in his stomach, that feeling he got whenever he was convinced he’d failed. A feeling that had almost always been followed not by disaster but reward. But not this time. After 9/11, the firm had become a troop of nomads looking for a home along with much of the rest of the trading world. Wally hung on, his analytical abilities and MBA giving him an edge that Brad didn’t have.

Brad had been one of those bright young back-slappers who excelled straight out of undergrad, using the same charm he had as captain of the soccer team to get clients. But charm didn’t work in this revised world. Brad’s business virtually dissolved and he’d been cut free to float in a climate where he no longer fit. Wally had slipped Brad a thousand here and there, claiming it was his share of one commission or another. Neither Chrissie or Brad’s wife knew about the money or the conversations where Brad had said he felt like he was in prison, that he no longer had control.

Wally couldn’t tell Chrissie because he knew exactly how Brad felt. Trapped. Waiting for the façade of your life to collapse like the towers. Wally found a consultant – not a therapist, the man quickly pointed out – whose advice was, “Think bullish. Don’t aim, just throw the ball.” Which only made Wally feel like he was playing a game, not living.

The recessionary hymn boomed through the church, the strains of “Come labor on,” a hymn he had sung so many times in this same church, the boys’ voices soaring into the descant in the last verse to the words, “servant well done.” The same hymn that had been sung at the

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beginning and ending of each school year at the Choir School since its founding almost a century before. Words that brought tears to choir mother's eyes, and to his. He blinked to hide the moisture and gave Chrissie a quick peck on the cheek. "Don't wait dinner. I might be late. Boss wants to talk." He slipped out, shaking hands all the way to the door.

On the return cab trip to the office, Wally weighed his options. I get fired. I get another hack job on Wall Street. But what did the coach say? Take the offensive. Even if I don't want to play the game, I won't end up like Brad. I won't let them fire me. I'll quit. Quit and get a job teaching, maybe somewhere like the University of Vermont or Dartmouth. I should write a book. Live in Vermont near my sisters, Lily and Carol, have a real life. The kids are more or less all grown. We've got enough put away to smooth the transition, especially if we sell the Connecticut house. That's what I should have done twenty years ago, translate my so-called Wall Street career into a comfortable academic life without the pressure and all the freedom. What Dad told me to do, not what mother had dismissed.

"How could you give all that up?" his mother had said. All what, he'd thought? The pressure to conform, to be conspicuously wealthy? But would Chrissie buy into it? He drummed his fingers as the taxi's meter clicked the blocks away. He would ask his sister, Carol, who could give her priestly as well as sisterly advice on his situation. And academic, since she taught at the University of Vermont.

Back in his office, he sent Carol an email asking her opinion on the multiple fronts. Then he opened a new tab to feed his growing curiosity. He Googled UVM and Dartmouth. Both had tenure track positions open in their business schools. Maybe he could teach. He'd need to write a book first, he supposed, but he had the real life credentials. As he was about to open another browser window, his phone rang.

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“Mr. Randall?” said his secretary. “The boss has been asking for you.”

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“Wally, come on in, have a drink.” His boss chunked ice into two tumblers, pouring scotch without waiting for an answer. “How was the service? Music must have been great. You used to sing there, right? And Brad?”

Wally accepted the drink and twirled the amber liquid so that the ice cubes danced in his glass, suppressing laughter at his boss’s insincerity.

“Just thought we should check in, been awhile, you know?” His boss leaned back.

Wally looked past his boss’s shoulder through the tall window, to where Manhattan stretched down to the East River, dotted with white sails. Beyond the horizon, he knew, were highways that headed north. Away. “It’s been a tough year,” Wally said as he took a sip and put his glass down on the edge of the glass-topped desk.

“Don’t want to beat around the bush,” his boss said. Wally braced for the punch. “I need a mind like yours up here.” The man sucked down his scotch. “Put you in charge of strategic work, number crunching.”

Wally choked on the sip of scotch he had just taken, covering it with a small cough.

“You thought I was going to can you.” His boss smiled into the bottom of his glass as he drained the last of his scotch.

“Just surprised, coming after ...” Wally waved his hand, “... all that happened with Brad.”

“Only a weak man takes the easy way out.”

Wally slammed his hand down and his glass hopped, splashing on the desk. “You have a hell of a nerve talking like that, today of all days. Who the hell do you think you are? What

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makes you think I'd want to be your toady, make you look good for the next 10, 15 years?" The fury burned through him. Fury not only at the man's callous behavior, but at his own years of doing what was expected instead of what he now knew he had truly wanted all along.

"Hey, hey, hey, take it easy." His boss pushed at the air in front of him as if he could shove Wally's anger back in a box. "Just wanted to see where you stood. Guess you don't want what I have to offer." He leaned forward. "You quitting?"

This is what the bastard really wants, Wally realized. He's too weak to fire me. That's his plan, make me mad enough to quit. "Quitting? No. Got an offer for you." His mind was a blizzard of ideas. A thought clicked into place. Wally had stayed at the firm because of his boss' boss. Near ninety and still one of the sharpest minds on the Street, and not at all pleased with how his own son, this man in front of Wally, had turned out.

"I do the numbers, like you said, but from the road. Spend time in the Boston office, some in DC to keep my ear on the buzz from the Feds. I'll keep my old office, or maybe set up one on the road. Give the fancy space to some other hot shot." As each piece of the idea clicked into place, Wally felt a surge of strength far greater than any he'd ever felt.

The other man's arm jerked up as if he was about to speak before he finally answered. "Always one goddamn step ahead. Hell, you should probably be in this chair, but you had the wrong daddy." He gave Wally one of his oily smiles.

Wally's mind revved, and he imagined himself and his father, their unruly curls flying in the wind, as they sped into the future in some amazing sports car, the engine roaring, Gregory tilting his head as if to say, follow your heart. Damn me and my logic. "I'll check the lay of the land," Wally said. "Be in the field, probably most of next month. Report back on my Blackberry." His boss looked baffled. "Guess I'll need a new title. How about," he paused,

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“Executive Vice President for ... Securities Research and Analysis?”

His boss’s face contorted as if Wally had punched him. “Got to check with the old man. I suppose you want a raise, too?”

“Sounds like you know my wife.” Wally saluted his goodbye as he headed out the door.

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Grace knelt on the green cushion in her backyard, steadying herself with the bright green handles as she eased her stiff knees down. The kneeler was a wonderful invention, and she thanked her daughter Carol for the gift. Without it, gardening would be almost impossible and the sidewalks would soon be overgrown with weeds and grass between the bricks. Weeding was one of the simple chores she had always enjoyed because it let her mind wander undisturbed. Especially when she was upset. Wally had called that morning to tell her Brad, his gawky blond friend throughout choir school, had died. She knew he was a grown man, as old as Wally, but she would always see him in her mind as a twelve-year-old boy. Brad and Wally, always laughing, and in New York City. Mugging for the camera on top of the wall around the fountain at the Hilton. Clattering through the stone walled clerestory. They loved the short cuts through the city between buildings, skirting the construction sites as more and more glass-clad towers rose so high they seemed to block the sun. On rainy days, they would cut through one of the newest atria that ran between two streets. The center of the atria rose into a domed indoor courtyard and the boys would run full speed and jump, to land flat footed in the middle, a loud clap from their adolescent clown feet ringing as it bounced off the high ceiling. A blackout happened in their last year at the Choir School, an unprecedented event that lasted what seemed like days.

“Remember how worried we were?”

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The weeding knife clattered out of her hand. Gregory leaned against the back porch railing, his arms folded.

“It was all over the news, at least the local news, the Great Northeast Blackout of 1965. New York stations went dark. They reported looting, trains stuck in stations,” he said.

“We couldn’t get through on the phone and you called the train station but no trains were running into New York and the turnpike was clogged because the traffic through the tunnels was stopped.” Grace did not voice the memory of that irrational dread that would fill her until she was almost paralyzed. Gregory had always gotten her through those times.

“When we finally got through, Wally said it had been the greatest adventure ever.”

“Marshmallows toasted over a roaring fire in the hall, games of tag in the dark, and spooky stories, it was all a lark to him.” Her relief from his phone call was still palpable.

“The headmaster led them in camp songs, using flashlights to read the words.”

“Wally was a prefect that year and he had to console the little boys. Brad never got to be a prefect. I wonder why?” Grace started to weed again, jabbing at the bricks and contemplating the difference she had felt between the two even as boys. A feeling that Brad was somehow incomplete. “Everything was changing so fast then. Especially the city. All those new buildings. Isn’t that why the lights went out?”

“It was a simple part failure.” Gregory gazed into the distance with his lecture look. The blackout had fascinated engineers like Gregory for weeks. Grace needed to change the subject.

“It must have been like New York City on our honeymoon. Though the lights didn’t go out inside, only outside because of the Nazis. The blackout blinds turned the whole town dark.”

“Spent a month’s pay on a weekend at the Plaza. But it was worth every penny.”

“I loved strolling in the park, even if the wind cut through that silly coat I had. We almost

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went skating, but I was afraid,” she said. “The ice ...” Again paralyzing dread gripped her.

“You never did like anything to do with water,” he said. Grace blinked the dread away.

“Remember those chandeliers?” she said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite so wonderful, the way the light dazzled off the crystal.” It was a story they had loved to tell each other over and over. The happiness that came before.

“We danced the night away. That was a great band,” he said.

“I swore I saw George Cohan at that front table.”

“He was with Caruso of all people. They waved to us, remember?”

“Because of your uniform. Those dress whites. You looked smashing.”

“Funny how a bit of white cotton can have such an effect.”

“You didn’t see many guys in whites during the war, at least not at St. Elizabeth’s.”

“You never talked much about those days or your work.”

Grace closed her eyes, willing the men in her head to stop yelling, willing away the smell of gunpowder she associated with their terror, even though she had never set foot on a battlefield. “There was a war on, and we took in the battle fatigue cases. They needed us.” She took a deep breath. “Though your mother never saw it that way. To her, nursing was dirty work, not something for a lady.”

“Sorry you gave up on med school? Though I can only imagine mother on that topic!”

Grace remembered the talk in matron’s office, the offer to fund her way through medical school, how she would make a great doctor, and the way it had thrilled her to her toes. How proud she knew her mother would be. “It would never have worked. We were in love and they were going to ship you out and married women couldn’t be doctors. Bad enough I was an unladylike nurse. I was also from a podunk town in Iowa where we measured success by the

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height of our corn. Just a pretty face and nice pair of legs.”

“Still the best I’ve ever seen.”

Grace blushed. “I made sure every one of our children went somewhere in life, didn’t I? Except maybe Lily.”

“Lily has done just fine. She chose her life, that’s the difference. She didn’t go down the path we shoveled for her.”

Gregory gazed into the sunshine of the backyard. “Remember the next morning at the hotel? Our first breakfast as husband and wife?”

“Those croissants were so flaky. Amazing, with butter so short with all the rationing. Then I packed our case and we headed downstairs.”

“The place was in an uproar. The bellhop even saluted me. Took us awhile to find out what was up.”

“The paper boy burst in waving a headline about sixteen feet high about Pearl Harbor and everybody had radios blaring with people screaming and crying so you felt like you were there. What if they had sent you to Hawaii? You could have been one of my patients.” Grace began to sweat as more of the horrific memories she’d absorbed from dozens of men flooded her.

“Do you still flinch when you hear sirens?” Gregory asked. Grace gazed into the sky.

“I never saw any battle. They needed me on the East Coast,” he continued, “to teach all the new tricks, sonar, radar. Joke was, the only way I’d get a Purple Heart was if I got a paper cut. Lots of new things came out of that war. Hell of a way to spur invention. Laid the groundwork for all the gizmos today and those insanely tall buildings.”

“Wally was so proud to have an office across from those towers.” Grace pushed the men’s cries to the back of her mind, replacing them with a more modern catastrophe, 9-11. The

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sights and sounds had flooded her from every angle, newspaper, television, radio, even the repeated calls from her children checking in on her. That was something people did that day. Call the people closest to them for reassurance. Even if they had been nowhere near Manhattan, or on an airplane, or in Washington. “It was all you heard or saw on TV, those towers falling, over and over and over again. I held my breath that whole day until Wally called to tell me everyone was all right. What is it about all those buildings? Everything new, tear down the old, make things bigger and brighter.” Grace gouged out a weed and put it in her bucket. “Will they appreciate all my treasures – the table, my dresser, the china – or throw them away because they’re old fashioned? Replace them with something ‘better’?” When she was gone, this house, her life, would also go. A faint memory relived in old photos shelved in old albums. Something to entertain the children on a rainy day.

She looked up. “Was I wrong? When Wally said he wouldn’t go back to Choir School, that he was homesick? He’d said something about being bullied by the older boys. Was it cruel of me to insist he follow through with such a great honor? Have I always forced my children to do things I would have wanted for myself rather than what they wanted?” She feared that all she would be remembered for were her shortcomings.

Gregory shook his head. “You can’t second guess yourself. We worked hard to give each of them every opportunity. Wally knows now what an important role St. Thomas played in his life even if, as a child, he rebelled against it.”

It had been an August day. An almost eleven-year-old Wally, at the end of a summer at home, his trunk packed for the return trip to Manhattan and Choir School.

“I miss my friends. I miss you. I miss Dad. I even miss my sisters.” Wally had kicked at a tuft of grass. “And I hate the neckties and that stupid rain coat like some old man.”

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“Wally, think about what an opportunity you have. It’s not something your friends could do. It’s what makes you special and it will make a far bigger difference for you than spending your adolescence in suburban Philadelphia.” Grace didn’t know what to say about some of the ridiculous uniform rules, like the child size trench coat and slouch hat, indeed like something an old man would wear. She had simply accepted the impossibly long list of expensive clothing demands and dutifully sewn name tags into everything, even his socks and underwear.

“Dad did. He’s lived here his whole life and still does. It’s worked for him.”

Grace searched for something to say to this. Was she forcing him to go back? Was it for him or for her? The prestige? She shook her head. “Wally dear, we love you wherever you are. It’s just that this is such an amazing opportunity. And you love New York, you’ve said so. All those tall buildings and limousines, the famous people. Didn’t you say you’ll be making a record with an opera star? And a concert at Carnegie Hall? There aren’t many ten-year-olds, let alone 90-year-olds, who have ever done even one of the things you will do in your four years there. And isn’t the school better?” She knew he’d been bored at the public school, ready to move on in science and math and English, but forced to spin in place waiting for his classmates to catch up.

The boy shrugged. “Yeah. The school thing. The other stuff is interesting, I guess.” He looked up at her, still not even as tall as she was. “I guess it might mean something someday, but right now, I miss being home and I miss my friends. It’s hard to make friends there. I get teased a lot. Like when I accidentally farted in practice and the Choirmaster moved me to the end of the line. The other guys make fun of me because I have second hand clothes and bigger feet than anyone else there. And that Dad teaches at a college, that he’s not some big executive or mega-millionaire. Everyone is so ... different.”

She knew what he meant. Wally was there on a partial scholarship due to Gregory’s

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academic career. When they visited, Gregory's well-worn tweeds were a sharp contrast to other father's custom made suits and impeccable silk ties. Her suits from Wanamaker's, smart as she thought them in Philadelphia, fell flat against the understated elegance of the mothers from Manhattan penthouses and Westchester mansions who had maids to iron their linen sheaths. Sending Wally to Choir School even with financial help was a stretch on the household budget, but one she felt was worth it. "Give it at least through Christmas. One year isn't enough time to settle in."

Wally gazed up into the beech tree, then nodded. "Until Christmas."

Grace stared down at the trowel in her hand and then squinted upwards, looking for Gregory, wanting to share her memory with him. But Gregory was gone.

"Mrs. Randall? Are you OK?" The nice young woman from next door, the one with the boys who helped Grace with the lawn, leaned over the fence like she was about to vault it. "You were talking like someone was there. I just wanted to see if everything is all right."

Grace waved away a gnat. "Talking to myself again, I guess." She pushed up on the handles of the kneeler. Her feet were all pins and needles and she couldn't tell where they were. Her hand slipped off the handle and the kneeler tipped as she fell sideways onto the brick walkway. The neighbor was at her side, her hands in Grace's armpits.

"Can you stand up?" she asked. "Does anything hurt? Did you break anything?"

Grace weaved back and forth a bit, her eyes clouded in the bright sunlight so she could barely see her neighbor. "Too much sun, I think." The woman helped her into the kitchen and got her a glass of water. "Thank you dear. I'll just lie down for a while."

Wally: Connecticut

Wally pulled the Audi to the curb and lowered the window. The heat and humidity of late May carried the scent of cut grass and the first roses. His driveway lay before him, curving past the well-tended flower beds and shrubs in a wide arc past the front of the house, one of those pillared stone edifices with the edges roughed up to make it look old. It wasn't even real stone. The builders had molded a compound into rough-cut boulders and cemented them together over a wooden frame. Sunlight slanted through slender oaks that would take another fifty years to reach the stature shown in the developer's sketch.

It wasn't only the house that felt like a façade. It was the hand-tailored suits, precisely knotted silk ties and custom-made shirts. Saturday morning golf at the right club. The elegant embossed cards. He wanted something real, something solid. More than this failed attempt at recreating his childhood home. What would happen, he thought, if I go north to find a life in academia, maybe live in the woods. Be a modern Thoreau. What would Dad have said? Wally eased into the the empty bay in the three-car garage.

The garage was filled with well-ordered cast-offs. Along the back wall, discarded bicycles that would never again be used hung from ceiling hooks. Custom-designed shelves and brackets displayed golf clubs (three sets, his, Chrissie's, the set that Piper used once); tennis rackets (he lost count after six, one for each day of the week, each type of court, each generation of technology); a bag of half-deflated soccer balls, and the shoes to go with each sport. The other two bays held Chrissie's Mercedes and the sporty red number they had bought Piper for her seventeenth birthday. The overhead door crunched shut and Wally thought how Brad had sealed off his garage from the house to protect his family and fallen asleep to the hum of his engine. Wally got out of his car, the door clicking shut, and entered his house through the breezeway. He

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stopped on the threshold, breathing the familiar scents of antique rugs, floor polish, leather chairs, and a whiff of roses.

“Mister Randall.” The maid wore jeans and a low-cut top that molded to her body. Her black and white uniform dangled from a hanger in her hand. “Time for me to go. Mrs. Randall, she outside, by pool. She don’t look so happy.” She gestured out the window. “She don’t want nothing to eat, just sit in the sun. A letter come, she seem upset.” She hung the uniform in the closet, tucked her sensible black work shoes into a shoe bag and pulled out a pair of high-heeled sandals he thought he remembered his daughter tossing into the trash. “Raoul, he come soon, see you manana. No. To-morrrow.” She rolled the r’s. “Have to hurry.” Each word came out slowly as she concentrated. “I have ... my English... class tonight. Bye!” She gave a small finger wave and left.

A car pulled up. Wally had expected one of those part rust, part parts cars that rumble with a throaty, raw animal sound. Instead, she opened the door of a late model sporty sedan. The driver, a dark-skinned clean shaven man in a suit and tie leaned over as she slid inside and gave her a kiss.

Through one of the back bay windows, he saw Chrissie on a chaise lounge by the pool. Her sunglasses hid her eyes and a broad-rim hat shaded her face. The rest of her body was protected only by the scraps of bikini she would never wear in public. Chrissie was a well-toned chameleon, conforming her wardrobe and demeanor to the occasion. But unlike the pseudo stone of the house, he knew that inside she had solid underpinnings governed by a mind as sharp as any he had ever known.

Wally walked to the wet bar and pulled out the martini shaker. He filled it with ice, splashed in cranberry juice, a healthy dose of vodka and tilt of Cointreau. He dropped an orange

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zest into a slim-stemmed glass and filled a heavy, squat glass with ice and three fingers of single malt. He carried the tray with the shaker and glasses to the pool, pushed aside the white envelope on the wicker table and strained pale pink liquid into the martini glass. “Shaken, not stirred.” He handed the drink to Chrissie and eased into a chair, taking a long pull on his whiskey, the sharp, sweet, smokiness easing away his day.

His eyes traveled across his wife. Her breasts filled the bikini top but the skin was pliable and wrinkled in her cleavage when she leaned forward. Only the merest fold of skin around her belly button told the tale of the five babies that had once kicked her almost flat stomach. He reached out to touch her but she brushed his hand away, tapped her fingers against the rim of her glass as if reading it in Braille, and slid them down to pick it up by the stem. Her gaze never left a point fixed somewhere above the tops of the trees. “You’re home early.”

“It was too nice to stay cooped up, besides, Brad –”

“Yeah. The bastard.” She pushed up her sunglasses and turned toward him, her gaze sharp and cutting. “Do you know his damn insurance company won’t pay? Couldn’t he at least have thought of that?” She drained the glass. “I said to Sheila, get the lawyer to look everything over, there must be a mistake. Know what she said?”

The hard edges of her eyes blurred with tears. “She said she didn’t even know if she could afford to pay for a fucking lawyer, that she had to sell everything to pay off all the debts for all of that,” she spit out, “stuff he had to have.” She took a breath. “At least that damn Ferrari will make a dent in the mortgage. She’s selling the Mercedes, the murder weapon she says, as soon as the police release it.”

Wally strained the remainder of the drink into her glass. The Ferrari. Jesus, what a car. The engine rumbling with power, the seats so low you felt like you were almost sitting on the

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pavement, and the speed. God, the speed as the needle wobbled on 100, feeling the controlled force as you took that curve.

“She said they will have to move, go live with one of their sons, or somewhere down south where the real estate is cheaper. But the worst,” she sipped her drink, “was that she looked like she felt sorry for me.” She fixed her gaze on him. “Are we going to end up like that?”

“No way. In fact, I’m thinking about a long weekend, go up to Vermont, look around, what’s your favorite golf course, Stowe? Sugarbush?” She’d love it there, he thought, the air would be clear and fresh, none of the sweaty stink of the city. “Thought we could get away, play a little golf, take the sibs out for a nice dinner, check out the market.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You want to invest in vacation property all of a sudden?”

“A place to live, at least part of the year. Somewhere peaceful, away from the city.” He could see it, his new life. Mountains rose in the background, there were always mountains in the background, and out the window of his university office, golden leaves would swirl in the fall and in the winter there would be snow, pure and white and thick, and a fireplace in his office, flames crackling off a maple log, and he’d wear a tweed jacket with those leather patches on the elbows, like his father.

The chair’s plastic straps sighed forward as she sat up. “What the hell are you talking about? Did you get fired? Couldn’t that prick wait until Brad’s ashes settled in his urn?”

“No, no, no.” He reached out to touch her cheek and she pulled away. “In fact, I got a raise. New job. Make my own rules, that sort of thing. We could downsize. The kids are gone, get a condo here, and one of those great old Vermont farmhouses, like the ones you always see, with a red barn and rooms that ramble on forever.” What was this façade of a house worth? Two, three mil?

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She fell back, as if he had slapped her. “Not today.”

He smoothed her thigh and the muscles tightened.

“By the way, things can get worse.” She handed him the envelope.

The return address read “Office of the Dean, Wellesley College.” The letter wasted no time getting to the point. Piper was out, at least for a semester, more likely a whole year, until her grades improved, but improved somewhere else. She had failed three courses her second semester, including Calculus. At Easter she had said school was boring, the same thing as high school. She had only passed Comparative Religion and Chorus. “So now what?”

“You’re the one with all the answers.” She drained the second martini. “I say, she gets a job, pays rent, or at least for her cell phone, that bill is ridiculous, or her car insurance. Oh, and she got her tongue pierced.”

“Her tongue? How do you know?”

“If you looked at her long enough, you’d see it flash silver every time she opens her mouth. I don’t know who will hire her, other than some hippy-dippy clothing store.”

“Mom? Dad, you’re home too.” Piper walked barefoot across the patio dangling her heels in one hand. She had an easy, open smile and Wally hoped she hadn’t heard the last bit.

“Thought I’d go out with a few friends, everyone’s home from school. I’ve got to change.” She gestured at the short black linen sleeveless shift she had worn to the funeral.

“Sit down.” Wally’s voice sounded harsh, even to him. Piper settled into a chair and looked at the envelope.

“Boy, they don’t waste any time,” she said. “I hate it there, you know. All those prissy girls with perfect lives. No substance. Only controlled substance.” She laughed at her little joke.

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“Controlled substance?” Chrissie asked. “Are you on drugs? Is that what’s happened?” She grabbed for her daughter’s arm.

Piper pulled away. “I’m the only one in my dorm not hyped up on Ritalin or doped down on anti-depressants. Nothing more than a little weed, some beer, a few drinks here or there, nothing I haven’t been doing since middle school.” She gave her parents a calculated look.

“Marijuana? That’s all we need, the narcotics squad in the middle of the night.” Chrissie reached again for Piper’s arm.

“You can stop checking for needle tracks. Like I’d shoot anything up and if I did, it sure as hell wouldn’t be on my arm. The chic thing these days is to do it between your toes.”

Chrissie lunged for Piper’s foot.

“Only thing you’ll find is a perfect pedicure. I stopped at the spa on the way home. Like the color?” Chrissie dropped her daughter’s foot as if it were on fire, mumbling something that sounded to Wally like ‘you little bitch.’

“Heard that, Mom. You worry too much. Besides, drugs are stupid, especially when you can get high meditating.”

“Young lady, your job search starts tomorrow. Curfew is midnight,” Wally’s voice pounded in his ears. Meditating? Something caught at him in the middle of their drama.

“Midnight? You nuts? In case you haven’t noticed, though how could you after a two martini sun bath, Mom, or your Scotch lifeline, Dad. I’m an adult. You can’t tell me what to do.” The clicking of the silver ball on her tongue provided a counterpoint.

“As long as I pay the bills, I call the shots,” Wally said. But even as he said the words, he knew he was playing a role.

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“Fine. I’ll move out.” She stood too quickly and stumbled. Chrissie reached out to steady her and slid off her chair. Piper tripped on the cement and they both fell backwards, Chrissie rolling across her daughter and into the pool. Piper sat up and dangled her feet in the water, leaning her hands in the pool’s gutters to peer down at her mother.

“Shit!” Chrissie’s expletive exploded with a surge of water as she surfaced. She pushed back her hair, treading water as she looked at her sunglasses at the bottom of the pool. Her dive was a pale otter movement, quick and pointed. With one dolphin kick she torpedoed back to the surface with her sunglasses. Piper boosted her out. “Thanks,” Chrissie said to her daughter. “And no, you’re not moving out. Wally, say you’re sorry.” Chrissie put her sunglasses back in place, grabbed a towel from her chair and wrapped it around her waist.

Piper pushed up from the pool deck and stood beside her mother, arms crossed, her dress dark from poolside puddles. Piper and Chrissie looked like twins from different decades. Perhaps it was something in Piper’s posture, the defiant tilt of her head, that threw him into a moment years before when he had stood before his parents.

It was mid-August, in his parent’s garden and a different family drama. He had played the part of a shy, be-spectacled ten-year old, due to return for his second year at Choir School, tall and awkward on the soccer field, trammled from a year of choral hazing by the older boys, and homesick. He wouldn’t go back, he had said, it was too hard, he missed home, his friends, even his sisters, couldn’t he go back to his old school. The roles had been reversed, though, with his mother the angry one, his father ceding to her. ‘Of course you’re homesick, that’s natural, but you have all summer to be with your friends and in September, you’ll go back to New York, how could you pass up such a marvelous opportunity, such an education doesn’t come without hard work, and you will thank us some day,’ his mother had ranted. The same scene was repeated nine

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years later, poised to start his sophomore year in college and giddy with possibilities. Math was too easy, business classes – the expected major – were boring. Why not major in English, he had said, maybe languages, do junior year abroad, but before he could finish, his mother quashed his dream. ‘What are you thinking, the opportunities you’ll pass up in the business world, it would be a crime to waste your talent,’ and again his father stood mute.

“Piper,” he said. “Let’s give this some time. We worry, that’s why I said midnight. If you’re going to be out late, give us a call, or tell us ahead of time, grant us that consideration. We’ll take some time together this summer, go to Vermont. We’ll look at schools up there if Wellesley isn’t filling the bill.” He glanced back and forth between the two women. Neither one moved. “Give us a preview of your ideas. You did well in religion? And you said something about meditation?”

Piper’s body softened and both women sat down.

“Religion is fascinating. I really got into Buddhism, and started going to a meditation group.” She leaned into her subject. “Dad, you should try it, it really helps you relax. Mom, you, too. I heard there’s a Buddhist Center in Rye, with Kadampa Buddhism, from Tibet. A friend is going to introduce me to someone from there tonight. They run a store and vegan restaurant down on the pike where I could be a cashier or a waitress.”

They stared at their daughter. “Rye? Waitress?” said Chrissie.

“Buddhism?” said Wally.

“I met this guy at school and he took me to a temple in Boston a couple of times, then I started going on my own. I feel so peaceful afterwards. For a half hour each day I can make the world slow down. I block everything out and only think about my mantra. That’s a word that’s special to you, though most people just use OM or something. And Aunt Carol said she’s been to

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classes in Burlington, something called Christian meditation. Pretty much the same except for a different mantra. Maranatha or something.” Piper retrieved the orange zest from her mother’s martini glass. “What’s all this about Vermont?” She nibbled at the rind. “You two going on a real vacation? Not just a hyped-up business trip?”

“Your father has some wacko idea about a quaint farmhouse in the sticks. He wants to sell this place. What do you think?” Chrissie arched an eyebrow.

Piper gestured with the rind as if painting a picture for them. “The golden leaves in the fall, crisp air. Mom, you in the latest by Orvis or one of those other catalogs, and Dad, you could learn to fly fish. They even have golf up there.” She popped the last fragment of rind into her mouth and wiped her hands on her dress. “Didn’t you tell us you always wanted a horse when you were growing up, Mom? You could have a barn and a horse. Somewhere out by Aunt Lily and Uncle Sam, on the lake maybe. We could have a sail boat, learn to kayak, I hear that’s big. I could transfer someplace up there.” She looked at her parents. “When do we go?”

“You, young lady, are first getting into dry clothes and second, looking for a job.” Chrissie tapped her daughter’s damp knee. “I’ll be right behind you, at least in the dry clothing department.” The two women rose in unison and Wally saw it again, the two reflected in each other. “Wally, be a dear and change into something suitable for the club. I’m too tired to make dinner.” Chrissie tightened the towel around her waist. “It’s veal night and I know how you like their picatta.” The door clicked shut behind her and Wally felt as if the Ferrari had stalled. He tapped his breast pocket. The crackle of airplane tickets to Burlington weren’t enough to pull him back on his highway.