Far From the Tree

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Growing up, Tom Walters mastered the art of imagining himself somewhere else. Whether he was dancing a sinewy beauty across a stage with panache and confidence or fighting with the Allies in occupied France, his existence could instantaneously shift from reality to imagination in a bloom of glory. One second he was walking alone from school, the next he was an escaping slave on the dusty road to freedom.

At some point, college or his first real job perhaps, Tom’s honed ability began to distort. He didn’t exactly lose it, not technically speaking, because he still escaped. Indeed, he was the master of escape.

But no longer did he break away toward panoramic oil colors; now he ran only to charcoals, smeared and smudged into merely a semblance of another world. What mattered to adult Tom, alone as ever in his cubicle and safety-rated Volvo, was not what he ran, open arms, toward. Rather, he cared only that he got the hell away from this pathetic and predictable now.

His eyes followed the minute hand past five o’clock, past five past five o’clock, past the stack of outbox papers, out the grimy window to nothing. He chose not to muse on the lovers in the apartment building across the street, coming home to each other after a forever apart. Instead his eyes just glazed. Twenty minutes later, nearly half an hour after the end of his workday, Tom peeled himself from his ergonomic desk chair and walked to the last Volvo in the parking lot. Once inside and lullabied by the rhythm of the windshield wipers, he noticed the tiny flashing red light on his cell phone.

He pushed the voice message button only to be ambushed by the strained voices of Norm, his old college friend, “Tom! Tom the Bomb! Hey, we just wanted – guys, shut up, I can’t even hear myself – just wanted to remind you what night it is…” muffled
directions as the phone was obviously held mid-air to the gathered crowd, "...two, three, Man Monday!" they all shouted, mostly together and somewhat coherent. Then back to Norm, "Yeah, Tom, so anyway us dedicated men - "

"Bachelors," Tom interrupted.

" - are taking our fraternal place with all other dedicated men - "

"Bachelors."

" - to honor beer, football, and the end of a workday."

"Mostly beer."

Norm continued, "But of course you're too busy, with your wife and kid and white picket fence and all. Just remember we haven't forgotten ... dammit, I think it just beeped. Hey, if you get a chance, we'll be at Mike's tonight ... We miss you, Tom."

Immediately came the smooth voice of the cell phone seductress, "To delete this message, press seven. To save it in - "

Beep.

Next message. "Hey hon, it's me." Baby crying like hell in the background ... "Could you pick up some formula on the way home? I didn't realize we were low. Thanks, Sweetie. I owe you."

He pressed seven and moaned.

Tom cursed the February drizzle all the way from his car to the front step. Before the door was open, he could hear the screaming of his one year old. With his cold hand stinging on the even colder doorknob and fatigue dragging his eyelids lower, he considered the options. His wife didn't know he was there yet. He could stall. Traffic could have been bad. Maybe he had to stay late at work. The stinging spread into his
forearm. He opened the door to his wife, motionless, with screaming Lily in one arm and
the phone in her other. She was staring at the telephone, oblivious to her daughter’s
serious displeasure.

“Elaine?” Tom softly set down his briefcase and grocery bags.

“It was your mother.” Elaine didn’t take her eyes off the phone. “Your father went
down for a nap…”

“Elaine.” Deeper and more serious this time.

“She checked on him a few hours later.” Finally, he saw her eyes meet his. “Your
father died this afternoon, Tom.”

Lily screamed until she was sticky with hot moisture and gasping for breath. Tom
could not make himself react to her pain. The young boy inside Tom tried to run in every
direction at once, but was unable to escape to any destination but this instant cruelty.
Tom stared in the direction of Elaine’s eyes but never reached them.

Finally, a minute or an hour later, he couldn’t tell, Tom spoke. “I think you should
cool her off and put her to bed. I picked up the formula you wanted.” He fished through
the grocery bags.

“Tom, did you understand what I said? Your father is dead.”

“I heard you, Elaine, but our daughter is hungry. We can do something about
that.”

Her eyes widened. Moments earlier Elaine was wondering how in the world she
was going to tell her husband this news; now his response sent her reeling into silence.
She slowly made her way up the stairs with the baby.
Half an hour later Elaine came downstairs to find her husband eating cereal and watching football. His gaze was aimed but undetermined, focused only in the directional sense.

“Can I get you anything, Sweetie?” She sat down and put her arm around him.

“No, thanks. Is Lily asleep?”

“Yeah … Tom, are you sure you don’t need anything? Don’t you want to talk?” She turned to block out part of the television. “Don’t you think you should call your mother or something? Or at least talk to me?”

“Elaine, what’s the problem? I’m fine. I want to see how this game turns out.”

“Tom Walters! Your … dad … is dead. What in the world is going on with you? What could possibly be happening in your head right now, or in any game, that is more important than that?”

“Playoffs. Six minutes left, and it’s tied. My father will still be dead in six minutes. Please leave me alone.”

Elaine was too stupefied to respond. Then her mouth caught up with her mind, “How could you? That’s your dad, Tom. How could you say that about your dad? You might not have been close, but he always provided – ”

Tom clicked off the television in the middle of a game-changing field goal attempt and looked his wife square in the eyes. “He paid for birthday parties. He bought my first car – new, not used. He paid for my college education and all expenses. He did all the right things. I never liked him then, and I don’t plan on liking him now that he’s dead. I’ll go, if that’s what you’re worried about. I’ll go to the funeral. Because there’s really no choice. But I won’t pretend I knew him. I’ll never act like we had any
resemblance of a relationship. Lots of people die, Elaine, every day in fact. Population control. I knew him no better than any of them.”

“But he was your father, Tom.” She said it with such softness only she could muster that it actually made him pause.

“So I should go and thank him for my genetics? What, ‘Thanks, Dad, for my broad shoulders and square chin?’ Our common ground stops there, Elaine. You don’t get it. I ... don’t ... know this man. I never did.”

So that was that. He went upstairs to bed; Elaine followed slowly after.

Tom woke up early the day before the funeral. He was dressed and leaving the house when Elaine woke to the beeping of the coffee maker. She laid her head back down on her pillow after hearing the front door lock from the outside. Her husband was gone.

He sat through a green light on the way to Lafayetteville. Knowing full well the light had turned green, he decided he wanted to see it fall to yellow. That was all the motivation it took to sit. The long line of drivers behind him did not seem to share his interest in the patience of delayed gratification; they honked and yelled out icy windows.

“You have time to wait,” Tom whispered back to them without turning his neck, his gaze enthralled with the soft yellow dot hanging from the thin black line.

“What the hell are you doing? The light was green, moron!”

“Red ... any second red now ...”

Red light.

“Aw geez, Buddy! That’s just great! What a – “ the head retreated back into the car.
“One red light. He didn’t even have this much time to open up for me, to tell me about work or that house on the lake he cared so much about…”

Tom drove on as soon as the light rose to green again.

Lafayetteville was smaller than Tom remembered, as hometowns often tend to be. The high school was not nearly as glorious as the memories of baseball playoffs and adoring fans tried to make him believe. Broad Street came and went in a flash. Partly for old times’ sake, but mostly to avoid arriving at his mom’s house, Tom paid a visit to Jackson’s Diner on the corner of Broad and 2nd. The same rickety sign swung outside above the window, the colors a little more weathered now. Walking inside, Tom was greeted by the ringing little bells bouncing against the glass door. Everyone instinctively stopped to see who it was. Apparently judging him a newcomer, they all quickly returned to their business. Tom noticed the same dishes, same greasy smells, even the same individual creamers lined up in just the same old way. Jackson, the owner, was hunched over now and thinned, but no less intentional or quick on his feet.

“Egg sandwich on white, please. No mayo.” Tom took the corner seat at the long counter.

“Anything to drink, son?” asked Jackson.

“Coffee, please. Regular.”

Jackson glanced up from his notepad, his eyes looking over the glasses slipped down on his nose. “Tommy?”

Tom grinned. “That’s right. Hey, Jackson…wasn’t sure if you’d remember me.”
“Good lord! Not remember little Tommy Walters? In my diner for lunch every day for eighteen years? Get over here,” and Jackson hurried around the corner to demand a hug.

“That was a long time ago,” Tom said.

“Nah, doesn’t seem so long ago when you’re as old as I am. But look at you, all grown up. I hardly recognize you. Say, Tommy, I was so sorry to hear about your dad.”

“Thanks.”

“I was planning on stopping by later after I close the diner. He was such a hard worker, that man.” They both looked into the distance.

“He was,” Tom said, because it was utterly true. Silence dripped thick and tangible.

“Your lunch! Gracious, this talk is bound to run me out of a job.” Tom was grateful to see the old man busy himself again elsewhere.

Tom turned his back to the discomforting attention from the other customers. He pretended to be interested in the upside down newspaper, idle on the counter, long enough for them to lose interest in him. He casually observed the others in the diner.

Two women gossiped with furrowed brows over tomato sandwiches and soups. A bearded man sat alone with his half-eaten hamburger and fries pushed aside, replaced by the newspaper’s crossword puzzle front and center. The man’s face hovered only a few inches above the paper, his mouth chewing on possible five- and seven-letter words for other words, his whiskers intermittently twitching. First he would roll his pencil with his thumb and forefinger, then when the chewing suddenly stopped and whiskers subsided,
he would write the word in the air directly above the tiny empty boxes. Then, most often he would shake his head and continue chewing, twitching, and rolling.

After swigging the last of his coffee and counting out five bucks, Tom hurried out of the little diner. Walking to the car, he thought to himself, “Let’s see ... five-letter word for ‘dull’ ... six-letter word for ‘glad I got the hell out of this place when I did.’ Well, at least this won’t last too long. What could anyone possibly have to say about this man anyway? He woke up, went to work, had dinner, watched Johnny Carson, went to bed, did it all again the next day. He had the bills paid on time. Big deal, that was his job. I’ll just say ‘hey’ to mom, pay my respects, and call it a day.”

To Tom’s immediate surprise, the winding road up to his parent’s house was lined with cars. He parked at the bottom of the hill behind a rusty ’79 Chevy and made the long trek up to the house that he had not visited in years. He stood on the front porch for what seemed like endless minutes, wondering if he was supposed to ring, knock, or just walk on in. This was his parents’ house, after all, and he was their only child. He broke his arm falling off this very porch when he was just six. After convincing himself he alone of all people reserved the right to walk right in, he rang the doorbell.

No one answered.

He knocked solidly on the door. Still nothing. He softly opened the door and stepped inside. Had it not been for the surprisingly long line of cars outside, he would have expected to see his mourning mother practically alone, maybe with a few loyal church friends. He was shocked by the scene in front of him. Everyone in town, it seemed, had come for the free food. Practically tripping over a circle of kids playing on the floor, Tom moved toward the living room. He spotted his mom sitting in his dad’s old
worn-out leather chair. At least ten people were by her side, consoling and forcing smiles. The room was crammed from wall to wall, everyone holding plates of food and punch glasses filled with some bubbly concoction. The noise was almost too much, everyone talking over each other and cackling with laughter.

“What the hell?” Tom thought. “They’ll even go to a *funeral* for free food? Half these people probably didn’t even know dad.”

His mom’s face lit up as soon as she saw her son in the room. “Tommy!” she yelled, and they all stopped to look. She stood up. Tom felt a hundred set of eyes directed at him. His cheeks burned red.

“Mom!” he opened his arms and walked into her embrace. He seemed to have responded well enough, because the crowd returned to their previous conversations and booming laughter.

“I was afraid you weren’t going to come.” She looked up at her boy. He didn’t remember her being so small before. “Elaine called this morning and said you left around 7:30. What took you so long?”

“Traffic was bad. You know how it is, Mom, they’ll never finish working on that interstate. How are you? I mean ... how are you holding up?” He set her back down in the oversized chair.

“As best as I can, I suppose. It helps having everyone here, you know. Hearing all the great things about John.” She leaned in closer. “But I was really waiting on you.”

Tom felt a sensation he hadn’t known in years. He had forgotten that bum that sometimes creeps up the back of your throat, that heat that’s inexplicably linked to the corners of your eyes. “Oh ... I’m sorry, Mom. Traffic, it ...”
“It doesn’t matter, Tommy. There’s just something that I wanted to talk to you about –”

“Tommy Walters?” The voice was deep but reassuring. Tom looked over his shoulder.

“Andy? My God, how long has it been! How are you?”

“Probably look a little different than last time you saw me, huh?” Andy laughed and rubbed his protruding gut. “Can’t really slide into third with this thing.” They both laughed, Andy genuinely and Tom awkwardly. “I’m really sorry about your dad, Tommy. Such a shame.” He hung his head. “He’s the reason I got this fine job, ya know.”

“Really? No, I had no idea.” Tom looked back to his mom who dabbed the tears from under her eyes. “I … I thought you moved to North Carolina.”

“Well I was going to, until your Dad offered me this great management position at the factory so I didn’t have to leave town. So I stayed, met the love of my life, everything’s just come together for me. Well, except for my belt buckle.” He laughed so robustly that Tom couldn’t help but join in. “What about you? How are you and the wife doing in … where is it you live now, Tom?”

“Ohio. Near Cincinnati. Uhm, things are good, you know. Work, family, work. Just the same old stuff every day. Gotta pay the bills, right?”

“Bills. Right … hey, I’ll let you go. I know you need to catch up with a lot of people. Good to see you, Tommy.”

“You too, Andy, really good to see you. I’m glad –” But Andy had already been absorbed into the crowd.

“Mom,” Tom knelt beside her chair, “you never told me Andy worked for Dad.”
“You never asked, hon. Tell me, how are Elaine and the baby doing? We never get to see you all anymore.” The plurality of the subject struck Tom and his mother at the same time. She was no longer an entity with her husband.

Tom tried to rescue what was left of the moment, “They’re good. They’re doing just fine. Lily’s getting bigger every day. So … that’s good.” Tom felt perspiration in the crease of his neck. “This food looks delicious, Mom. You must have had a lot of –”

“Is that my little Tommy?” The squeal stung Tom’s ears. It came from the kitchen, from none other than Edna, his parents’ neighbor who did everything from babysit to nurse Tom for eighteen years. He stood up to be enveloped in a flour and sugar embrace. “We haven’t seen you in years, hon. What have you been doin’ up there in Indiana?”

“Ohio, actually. Working mostly. I work a lot.”

“Haven’t you got yourself a girlfriend, Tommy? You know I always told you you needed a girlfriend. Every man needs a woman. It’s good for him. What you need –”

“Actually, Edna, I’m married. I’ve been married for two years now. We’ve got a little girl named Lily.”

“Lily! Awh, and I bet she is a little flower, isn’t she? Well, you’ll have to bring her down here soon so we can feed her proper and take lots of pictures. Speaking of food, mister, doesn’t that wife of yours own a fryin’ pan? You look thin as ever, look like somebody let the air out of you.” She opened up his suit coat.

He quickly straightened it. “I’m fine, Edna, I’m fine, but thanks. We eat just fine back home.”
“Well, we see what we can do about that. Say, did Karen tell you about our fantastic idea of movin’ in together?”

Tom shot his mom an inquisitive glare. “She hasn’t mentioned it.”

“He just got here, Edna,” his mom interjected. “I hadn’t had a chance yet. Nothing’s for certain, son.”

“Us two ladies are gonna move in together, Tommy! No point in two maids with two mortgages, huh? I’ll cook, she’ll clean, it’ll be great. Your folks have just been too good to me. Now that John’s gone, I can’t let this one,” she rubbed Karen’s arm, “spend her days alone in this big house. Now it’s my turn to pay your dad back for all the help he gave me in-”

“Jackson!” Karen interrupted, effectively shutting up Edna.

Jackson, from the diner, had just walked in the front door. Apparently he was a crowd favorite, everyone gravitated toward him with arms opened and glasses raised.

“Karen, that hill’s gonna be the death of me one of these days.” He handed over a stack of foil-covered plates. “I can hardly catch my breath.”

“Come on in the kitchen, Jackson. Set yourself down in here,” and Tom watched silently as a handful of people, Karen and Edna included, ushered him out of the front hall. The billow of chatter returned, louder than ever. Tom sank into the unknown – unknown people, unknown relationships, an unknown past. He submerged into his dad’s bulging leather chair, so overwhelmed with confusion that he couldn’t make himself think of another place to run to.
“Did I even come to the right place?” Tom thought. “I remember the shells of these people, but Dad ... I had no idea.” He walked out to the back porch and dialed his wife on his cell phone. Ringing. “Come on, pick up, pick up.”

“Hi, this is Elaine. Sorry I missed you, but if you’ll -”

Tom hung up. He leaned over the banister, breathing into cupped hands and pulling his coat tighter. He saw himself, the lonely little boy, playing alone in the woods behind the house. He saw the boy talking out loud, always playing both parts. He heard his dad’s car coming up the hill at 6:15 sharp. He saw the little boy run from the sound of it, wishing to never be found. Always running away from the reality that his Father had forgotten him, holding on to the hope that maybe he had just been too busy all those years.

The cell phone ring startled Tom back into reality. It was Elaine. “Hello? Elaine?”

“Hey Sweetie! Sorry I missed you. Lily was just getting up from a nap, and-”

“Elaine, what was my father like? I mean, your experience with him, what was it like?”

“Tom, are you ok?”

“I’m fine. Just ... what was he like?”

“I wish I knew, Hon, but you never wanted us to visit. He was amiable at our wedding, helpful and friendly and everything you would expect I guess. You always told me he wasn’t really worth our time, Sweetie. I never pressed it because I just assumed you two never got along. According to you he kind of sounded like a selfish jerk.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say.”

“Tom, what’s going on? Has something happened with your mom? Is she ok?”
“Mom’s fine.” He looked hard into the woods, thinking. “It’s just that all these people, Elaine ... they all have some story, something that my dad did for them. Things I never knew about. I feel like they’re talking about somebody else. That whole time I was right here in this house, but they’re talking about somebody I never knew. You remember Andy?”

“Andy ... high school Andy that played baseball with you? Yeah, I met him at the wedding.”

“Yeah, well he was going to move to North Carolina to get a job, but Dad gave him one at the factory, a nice one, so he wouldn’t have to move away from Lafayetteville. He’s really happy now, married and everything.”

“Oh, that was nice of him.”

“But it’s not just that, Elaine, everybody’s got a story to tell. Edna, the lady that practically raised me, Dad must’ve really done something for her. She keeps talking about repaying him and taking care of mom and everything. I don’t know, something’s going on there. And then this Jackson guy, he closed the diner early, like the only restaurant in this town, just to come visit mom today - ”

“Maybe your dad changed in his older age. Maybe after you moved out and went to college he loosened up or something. I don’t know, Honey.”

“Or maybe he was always like this. Maybe I was the one doing all the avoiding.”

“People die every day, Tom. Population control, remember?”

“Population control, right. Look, I’ll call you back later, ok?”

“Ok. I love you, Tom.”
“You too. Bye.” He hung up, replaying the little boy running away from the sound of his dad’s car over and over in his mind. The skeleton-like outline of the tall, groaning trees stood in front of the falling sun by the time Tom’s mom walked out onto the porch. She wrapped a blanket around his shoulders.

“It’s too cold to be out here, Tommy. You should come inside.”

“I’m sorry we don’t visit much, Mom.” He didn’t look at her.

She straightened his tousled hair then leaned on the banister beside him. “Almost everyone’s left. You missed quite a party in there. You’ve got to stay for a week now just to help me eat all that food.” He wasn’t biting.

“Who was that man?”

“Which man? You mean Jackson? I guess he does look a lot older to you now. I haven’t noticed much, we see him … I see him almost every day.” She replied.

“Not Jackson. Who was that man that everyone was talking about?”

She didn’t reply, just pulled her coat tighter and walked inside. Tom thought he’d made her mad, had opened a too-fresh wound. He kicked himself for not being stronger. Funerals were all about pretending, pretending everything is just fine and all the memories are sunlit. Now was no time to crumble into a pile of emotional weakness. He walked back inside the house only to meet her walking toward him, a set of keys in her hand.

“We need to talk, Tommy.”

They sat down at the kitchen table, surrounded by stacks of Tupperware and garbage bags full of paper plates and plastic cups.
"I’m sorry about what I said out there, Mom. I shouldn’t have upset you like that. This is no time –"

"Shh. It’s ok.” She rubbed the keys between her thumb and forefinger. Tom stared quizzically at them. “I don’t really know how to start this. Tom, your father loved you very much.”

“Mom,” Tom leaned his head back in exasperation.

“No, now, listen to me. He did. Your father loved you very much. He may not have showed you the way you would have wanted him to…”

“Or at all. How did he ever show me he loved me?”

“When did you ever go hungry? Or need anything? All the way through college you had clothes and a car and -”

“Things! Those are all things, Mom. That’s not love, that’s money. Who was he? How was I supposed to know that man that everyone was telling me about tonight? He never showed himself to me.”

“You never looked, Tom.” Karen’s forcefulness took her son by surprise. “You never asked him questions, never pursued him.”

“But I was the kid. That wasn’t my job. He should have pursued me.”

“He could never catch you. You were always running away; even when you were in the same room with us you were so far away. He thought he could use the baseball camps and the car and the college as a means of getting to you.”

“But when could I have possibly fit into his schedule? All he ever did was work, Mom. You know that, he was never home.”
“He had to in order to afford this home and all the things we did. Look,” she set the keys down and held onto his hands across the table, “I’m not saying his was a perfect strategy. I’m not even saying it was a good strategy. I’m just saying he had good intentions. It gave him joy to provide for his little family, to be able to help out as many people in the community as he could. Maybe it was all just stuff, but it really touched some people. You heard Andy and Edna this afternoon, they understood the message behind the things he did.”

“Oh, so ‘shame on you, Tom, for acting like a jackass all these years towards your father. It’s your fault you were alienated. It’s your fault he died without ever having a relationship with you.’ Is that the point?”

“Of course not.” She sighed so deeply that Tom immediately felt selfish for saying it.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just didn’t expect what I saw today. All these people that had encountered Dad in some extraordinarily positive way, and ... I didn’t even know the man. He was my dad, but I seemed to be the only one in the room who didn’t have a story to tell. It’s like he lived this whole parallel life to what I observed growing up. Seeing all these people, listening to them all, made me jealous. I wanted to live in that other life that everyone was talking about.”

“So maybe you were the isolated one and not him?” She cocked her head and leaned forward as if to emphasize “maybe?” so as not to scare off her son.

“We can’t both be right, can we? He and I, I mean. Either I’m wrong or he’s wrong. Either he really was a workaholic without the capacity to develop relationally, or I completely missed out on his attempts to connect with me. Or maybe he wasn’t
developed at all in his private life, but pretended to be in his public life. Either way he was a fraud.”

“Stop pitting yourself against him, Tom. Stop it. Why do you have to make him out to be the bad guy? He may not have been the best at relationships, but who is? You?”

By this time they were no longer holding hands. Tom’s elbows pressed into the tabletop, his left hand clenched over a fist. His mom was holding the keys again, in her lap now, softly outlining each one with her delicate fingers, cherishing.

“Look, Tom,” her voice was softer now, “all this was just to give you something. I’m sorry it amounted to this.”

“Give me something?”

“You know that lake house your father has been —,” she looked out the window. After gathering herself she continued, “had been working on for years?”

“Of course. How could I forget? He spent every weekend there for the longest time. Is it finished? Are you going to move?”

She looked down at the keys in her fragile hands. “Well, it’s not quite finished. He … ran out of time, but it was all for you.” The metal clinked on the wooden table. Tom couldn’t peel his eyes off the lifestyle on a ring sitting inches away from his grasp. This meant weekends on the lake, a privileged life for Lily, a relaxation he and Elaine had never known.

“I had no idea, Mom. I thought you two would retire there. I guess now —”

“No. It had always been yours. From conception it was intended for you. He wanted you to have it. He worked so hard to finish it, before …,” she trailed off. “He wanted to see his grandchildren enjoy it. Hours of sweat and worry and work and
sacrifice. Right there.” She nodded at the keys. “For you. It’s incomplete, but it’s for you.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Maybe he wasn’t so terrible after all.” She slowly stood up and walked over to her son. She swept his hair off his forehead and gave him a kiss. “Funeral is tomorrow at eleven. The guest bedroom is ready for you.” With visible pain, she straightened her back and walked out of the room, rubbing the back of her neck. She stopped at the end of the kitchen, “I love you, Son,” then started up the stairs.

Had she turned around she would have seen a little boy indeed. Afraid to touch the keys, wallowing in embarrassment and shame, Tom didn’t even bother to wipe the warm tears off his burning cheeks. They rolled to the tip of his chin, to fall steady and resolutely onto his dress shirt.

That night the bright light coming from downstairs at the Walters house lasted late into the night. That light didn’t go off, in fact, until long after every neighbor was sleeping steadily in their own warm beds. The man in that room with the light on was immobile to such a degree that a casual witness might have assumed he was the one the funeral was for.

In the morning, Karen put on her long black dress and wool coat. She looked at herself in the mirror for seven silent minutes, forcing herself to come to grips for the day. *You’ll see him soon,* she kept telling herself. *You’ll see him soon.* When she got downstairs, she found a note on the kitchen table where the precious keys had been the night before.
It read, “Mom, I hope you slept well last night. I went out for some breakfast. I’ll see you at the funeral home at 11:00. I love you, Tommy.”

Karen looked at the clock; it was 8:30. Little did she know her son had not gone to breakfast, had not even seriously considered it when he was writing that note. Instead, he was out of the house before 8:00 that morning, perusing the funeral grounds, fondling two sets of the lake house keys in his shallow pockets. The hem of his dress pants was wet with dew; his feet were numb but restless, his hands cold but sweaty.

As soon as the funeral director drove up, Tom met him at the front door. “Hi,” he stuck his hand out, “I’m Tom Walters. Uhm, John’s … my dad’s, funeral is today.”

“Tommy! Yes, of course. Oh, you probably don’t remember me, do you? I’m Nathan Stewart. I did your grandmother’s funeral.” He firmly shook Tom’s hand. “Nah, you were little, I’m sure you wouldn’t have remembered me. Gosh, you sure have grown up.” He unlocked the door. “You do know, Tommy, the receiving of friends won’t start now for over an hour. Do you have some place - ”

“No, I … I know, it doesn’t start until 11:00. I was just wondering, do you think I might be able to have some time alone with him, with my dad, before everybody else gets here?”

“Well, sure, I don’t know why not. Come on in here.” They walked inside. Nathan turned on the lights, breaking the sunrise silence with a kind of electric hum. Tom felt suddenly ill at ease. It smelled like dusty year-old potpourri, like everyone was supposed to pretend they had no idea dead people were in these rooms.

“If you don’t mind, you can sit here in the waiting room until I get his room ready. It shouldn’t take too long.”
“Of course. That’s fine. Thanks, Mr. Stewart.”

“Please, just Nathan.”

“Nathan. Thanks.” Tom sat on the uncomfortably stiff chair, still not taking his left hand off the now-clammy keys in his pocket. He looked around the room, taking in the discomforting mix of sterility and antiquity. He heard Nathan in the other room and wondered what he was doing. Putting makeup on his father? Dressing him? Polishing the casket? Tom closed his eyes, breathed slowly and soothingly.

It was his first married Christmas with Elaine, just the two of them in their humble apartment. Their two-foot-tall tree stood gloriously on the table under the living room window. They had opened all their presents except for one each. She picked up the one marked “Open me last.” It was the bracelet he had saved up for for months now. He watched with delight as she carefully shook the box next to her ear.

“Hey! You know the rules, no shaking!”

She giggled with joy, and had only done it to get his reprimand. “Can I open it now, Tom?”

“Yeah, go ahead.” His grin grew even wider. “I hope you like it.”

She opened the little box to find a simple strand of pearls. Her eyes grew until the bright white sparkled with the blinking reflection from the tree lights. “Pearls? Real pearls, Tom?”

“Do you like it?”

“Are you kidding me? It’s gorgeous. It’s too much. This must have cost -”

“Ah, that doesn’t matter. I wanted you to have it. Let’s see it on, eh?” He clasped the single strand around her delicate, snow white wrists.
“Oh, Tom…” She leaned in to give him a long kiss.

“Maybe next year you’ll get the necklace to match, hmm?”

“As long as you’re here, I don’t care what I get, Sweetie.” She kissed him again, a kiss that would thaw the coldest of hearts.

She suddenly pulled back, “Oh! I almost forgot. Your last gift!” She reached across the pile of crumpled wrapping paper to pick up a box identical to the one she just opened. It read, “Very last present. No cheating, Tom!”

He read the warning and laughed. “Awh, Honey, you shouldn’t have. You know pearls just don’t look right on me.”

She punched his arm. He shook the small, elongated box next to his ear.

“No! Diamonds! Elaine, you really shouldn’t have.”

“Stop it, Tom! Just open it up.”

“Alright, alright, Sourpuss.” He unwrapped the box and took off the lid.

It was a pregnancy test. Used, with a single blue stripe. Tom swallowed hard. He couldn’t look at her, couldn’t take his eyes off that stripe. She finally shook him hard enough to get him to look at her, mouth gaping.

“Well?” She smiled. “Don’t you know what that is?”

“A baby,” he managed.

“Well,” she laughed, “not quite, but that’s the idea.”

“We’re having a baby.” He looked from her, to the pregnancy test, back to her.

“We’re having a baby!” He put his hands on her stomach and kissed it over and over again.

She smiled and put her hand over his, “We’re having a baby, Baby!”

22
The funeral director’s low voice burst the warmth that Tom had fallen so wholly into. “I said your father’s ready, Tom.”

“Oh, thank you. Thank you.” Tom stood up, tightening the grip on the keys in his pocket.

“If you’ll just follow me, Tommy.” He led Tom into the last and biggest room in the hall. At the end was the open casket. Tom had not been able to imagine himself actually getting to this point. “I’ll be in the office if you need anything, Tommy. The flowers turned out nicely, don’t you think?”

“Yes, yes, very nice,” Tom said. By the time he willed himself to turn his head, Nathan was gone and the door closed.

Tom slid his back down the wall opposite the casket. The tears came again. “I’m just gonna stay over here for awhile, if that’s ok with you.” The only answer was that oscillating electric hum of the fluorescent lights overhead. “Mom told me about the lake house. I had no idea that’s what you were up to all those years.” Tom wiped his runny nose on a handkerchief. The bulge in his throat burned to crawl out. “I would have liked to have gotten to work on it with you,” he choked it out. “Did you ever think of that? Did you ever think maybe you should have included me in some of your projects? That maybe I would have liked that? To be with you, to be with my dad?”

Electric humming.

“Of course you didn’t. You didn’t care that you were the only one I got, that I was the only one you got. It’s like you didn’t even consider what you were throwing away every day. Every day of your damn life. You wanna know why I ran into the woods every time I heard your car in the evening? Why I never asked you anything personal? I was
scared as hell that you would turn out as bad as, or God forbid worse than, you seemed — work-obsessed and task-oriented at the ultimate expense of your family’s livelihood. So I never got to know you. So what? It was better than the alternative, right?”

Humming.

“Better than finding out your dad really is a selfish loser, huh?”

Humming.

“Dammit, it’s my fault!” Tom cried. He slumped over onto his side, letting the tears come.

“Dad, why do you have to be dead right now?” He whispered, not bothering to pick his wet face up off the sterile linoleum floor. “Now I can’t talk to you about anything. I have a daughter. I don’t know if you knew that. Her name is Lily Elaine. I thought it sounded dumb; there were too many ‘l’s,’ but Elaine wanted the baby to be her namesake or something like that. I told her it still sounded dumb. But I’ll never tell Lily that, of course. She’s really cute, Dad. You’d like her. She can just barely sit up now. She’s a real good baby, except when she cries, which isn’t all that often. But when she does cry, oh God! She could raise the ... it’s really loud, I mean. Anyway, Mom looks good ... Ok, you’re right, no she doesn’t. I don’t know how long she’ll last, to tell you the truth. All the life’s gone out of her eyes. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost Elaine. She’s amazing Dad. Elaine, that is. I wish you knew her. I mean, I wish we had visited more often. I’m sorry about that. She always wanted to, but ... I always talked her out of it or had some stupid excuse not to come.”
Tom pushed himself up into a sitting position again. He wiped the perspiration and tears off his face with his handkerchief. He finally took the keys out of his pocket and fiddled with them in his lap.

“I’m sorry I hated you for 26 years. I’m sorry you won’t get to be a part of this … this me forgiving you part. This me forgiving myself part. Everybody in town loves you, Dad … I had no idea. Of course. Thanks, by the way, for taking care of Andy like that.

That was nice…” He wiped the keys with his handkerchief. “Hey, Dad, about this lake house.” He rubbed each key harder than the last. “I wouldn’t feel right just taking it. I mean, this is too big of a thing to just give somebody. Especially somebody you didn’t know.” He put one set of keys back into his pocket. “Thank you, and everything. I mean, thanks so much for thinking of me and everything, but … a house? I wouldn’t feel right living in it … unless it was our project. So I’m going to finish this one for us. I’ll pick up right where you left off; don’t worry about anything. After the way I dodged you my whole life, well … here’s to new beginnings,” he held the keys up in the air toward the casket.

The walk down the aisle toward the casket was the shortest thirty feet in Tom’s life. He wanted to be able to walk forever, he would walk for years if he had to, if it meant not ever having to see his dad’s face in that opened casket. All too quickly, however, even though he took tiny, shuffling steps the whole way, Tom stood over his stiff father, lying still and quiet and utterly empty before him.

“Hey, Dad,” he whispered. He forced his trembling hand to lay on top of his father’s. It was the first and last time, as far as Tom could remember, that they had held hands. He made himself look at the sunken face. “I’m gonna give you these, because I
think you and mom should have them. Think of it as our place, our project.” The smile only triggered the stinging in the corner of his eyes again. “Anyway, I’ve been meaning to tell you something…” Tom opened the little drawer in the lid of the casket. As he recognized his dad’s old carving knife and wedding band that hadn’t fit his swollen fingers for years, the sound of Nathan’s voice filled the distant background, “Walters funeral? Yes, it’s the last door on your right. If you folks need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“You son loves you,” and he pushed the little drawer closed, now full with the spare keys to the lake house. The sound it made was the soft release of a tiny puff of air, like a timely and content last breath, let loose after years of being held against its will.
Michael,

Here is the revised copy with line edits as you suggested along with the final page of paperwork (I left only the stuff I didn’t know or couldn’t write in – I know you hate this stuff). I made sure to correct the point of view problems strewn throughout and to show rather than tell. Your email seemed pretty disappointed (I hope I wasn’t reading into it too much). I hope you don’t feel like I was just doing this for the grade or just wanted to do enough to get by. If I didn’t care about academic excellence, I wouldn’t bother with the honors program. I spent weeks working on this story, and I hope it shows even if just a little bit. I do tend toward sentimentalism, but not because I was rushing or trying to do a crap job. That’s just a flaw I have in my writing.

I want to really thank you for guiding me on this story. If you don’t mind, I was going to keep the novel until I finished it (I’m about 1/3 done now). I’ll send you an email when I return it to your box at school, to be sure you get it back. I read both of the short stories you photocopied for me. You have been so helpful, and your published examples have added a lot of insight.

I’m looking forward to your Advanced Fiction Writing class in the spring. I’ve heard great stuff about it.

Thanks again for all your help and advice,

Jennifer