Writing Character-Based Short Stories: looking for god in the clouds

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looking for god in the clouds

by

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Thesis Advisor: Professor Philip F. Deaver
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“On my honor, I have not given, nor received, nor witnessed any unauthorized assistance on this work.”

Robert Burrows                                                                 April 15, 2013
On the other side of town there’s a coffee shop sitting on the corner of Ocean and Park that boasts the best coffee in town. Tanner knew that the coffee was terrible, but at least it was better than the painting that hung in the. The owners of the cafe claimed it was influenced by Claude Monet, with swirls and splotches of cheap acrylic paint slathered onto an undeserving canvas in the rough semblance of a woman on a flowery hillock. Tanner thought Monet would have been outraged to have inspired a painting so utterly horrible it could hardly be called art. It had been there as long as Tanner had been working there, but nobody had ever taken it down. He supposed that people had forgotten about it; they saw it so often that it blended in with the splotches of peeling paint on the walls. Then he would see a look of disgust on a customer’s face and he knew they’d discovered the painting and its abject horror anew. Or they had let their coffee go cold.

His musings distracted him from the appearance of a young woman who had just been swept in by the strong, salty sea breeze. “Excuse me!” she said with enough volume to turn the heads of the nearest patrons. They looked up from their laptops covered in stickers and their kitschy mod podge journals to present her with the purest look of indifference they could muster.

Tanner turned his head and looked her over before smirking. It was a look he had practiced to perfection, equal parts acknowledgement and scorn. The regulars loved it. “Can I help you?”
“Can I get a cappuccino? Please?”

He looked her in the eye for too long, channeling a barista he met who seemed to think he was too important to be serving coffee. “Yeah. Yeah, you can get a cappuccino.”

“Okay. How much do I owe you?” She didn’t resemble the average customer that sauntered in off the street after riding their vintage bike along the boardwalk. She was too well groomed, a silver cross resting between her breasts, an odd trinity. Tanner amused himself with the thought of Jesus squished between them, smothered rather than crucified. Probably a preferable way to go. Then again, Jesus wasn’t much of a lady’s man.

“$4.50.”

“That’s a bit much for a cup of coffee, isn’t it.” She wasn’t wrong.

“Well, most coffee is a product of slave labor; so, we charge a little bit more to put food on the table of the Colombian farmers that grow our beans.”

“Oh, I guess that’s okay then.” Her hand jutted forward with no hesitation, holding the money like an offering plate. Her cross jiggled frantically, another good deed recorded by the heavenly host. He took the money, placing his hands together and bowing his head with what looked like reverence.

She turned away and her eyes wandered over every surface of the cafe until they reached the nook. It never took long to notice the painting. She tilted her head to the side, biting her lip. He put the finishing touches on her cappuccino, a unicorn head stenciled into the foam to match the tattoo peeking out from under his sleeve. “There you go.”

“What a painting...,” she said, slowly turning back towards him. “Where did it come from?”
“That thing? It’s been here for a long time. We would take it down, but the regulars kinda like it...you know, in an ironic way.”

“Yeah, I kinda like it too.” She stared at the painting and smiled. The painting took on a different quality when it was reflected in her eyes. He reached up to twirl his mustache as he stared into the depths of the painting. Maybe it wasn’t so bad. Maybe it was just poorly framed by the silver-gray clouds over-filling the windows on either side of it. The sky must have been slighted by some celestial being because it refused to break its stony visage and let a few rays of light shine through. Yes, that must be it. He shook his head, leaving the girl in her trance so he could lean against the wall and resume his vigil over the cafe.

She grabbed her coffee, shooting him a smile so big it had to hurt her in the process, and drifted toward the table beneath the painting. She took a seat and stared in equal parts out the window and up at her new Messiah.

“We always get the weird ones, don’t we?” A different voice joined Tanner, and he turned to see a familiar face propped up by elbows resting on the smooth surface of the counter. She was looking at the girl in the nook, head cocked to the side. “Did she actually like the painting?”

“I don’t know, Chey.” So many of their regulars said they liked the painting, but no one really did. The girl had seemed too naive to lie, though. “Maybe we’re just missing something.”

“I think it’s safe to say she’s the odd one here.” Chey smiled and turned toward Tanner.

“Did you need something?”
“What? We can’t just have a friendly chat between co-workers?”

“We’re not supposed to, but when has that ever stopped you?”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I’m not on the clock.”

“Yeah, but I am.” He wanted her to leave, but he didn’t want to say it. He had known Chey since high school and she had always been good to him. She helped him through all the shit with his parents, but he was a different person now and she still felt the same.

“What’s up with you?” She was perceptive.

“Nothing. I’m just pissed that Dex is late again. It’s already five.” Dex usually covered the evening shifts, but he was almost always late. Sometimes he didn’t even show.

“You don’t have time to cover for him. We’re supposed to meet Anna at that burger place up the road at five-thirty.”

“Since when?”

“Since I talked to her ten minutes ago and we made plans. Now come on.”

“I can’t just leave the place unattended. Go on ahead. I’ll meet you when he gets his sorry ass here to replace me.”

“Fine, but you can’t keep this up forever.” Chey left the counter and was out the door before he could respond.

“I don’t intend to.” Tanner scanned the cafe. Everything was normal, except for that girl in the nook who he thought kind of looked like the woman in the painting. He wondered if she would become a regular, drinking her coffee in silence. They both checked their watches and looked at the door every minute or so.
“Hey, it’s me again. Can I get a cappuccino?” Her voice brought Tanner to the counter before he had a chance to think about all the reasons he hated working in this shitty coffee shop. It was the girl who came in yesterday.

“Sure, sure. Can I get a name?”

“You didn’t ask me yesterday.”

“Must’ve forgotten.” He liked knowing the names of the regulars. They were the only reason he was still here.

“It’s Alexa.”

“Alright, Alexa. One cappuccino, coming right up.” He wrote her name on the cup and took her money. As he went through the motions of cappuccino making, he wondered why she had chosen this place. It wasn’t the kind of joint you stumble upon when you want a quick cup of coffee; there were Starbucks within a mile or two in every direction. She didn’t seem like the kind of person with friends who were regulars, either. “So, how did you find out about us?”

She was messing with her phone. “Hmm?”

“What brought you here?”

“Oh, I’d been meaning to stop by for a while. I finally found a reason to.”

It was 4:45 precisely when Tanner heard someone else being swept into the cafe.

“Jeremy!” Alexa spotted him as he came in.

“Hey, Alexa,” said Jeremy.
Tanner looked the newcomer over. This one was a guy, a pretty cute guy. He was too distracted by his bright eyes and the slight bulge of muscle lurking beneath his t-shirt to put on a persona. “Here’s your coffee.” He placed the cappuccino on the counter.

“Thanks.” She grabbed the cardboard cup and turned to the newcomer, Jeremy. “I’m glad you decided to show up this time.”

“Yeah, sorry about yesterday. Something came up.” It sounded like a lame excuse to Tanner, but Alexa’s smile told him she bought it.

“It’s no big deal. I’m just happy you’re here.” She turned toward the nook in the back. “I’m gonna go sit at the table in the back, the table under that nice painting in the nook.”

Jeremy looked back toward the nook and Tanner saw the look of disgust that flashed across his face for a second or two. “Sure, I’ll be there in a minute.” She smiled again, Tanner had lost count of how many times she had smiled, and scampered to the back of the cafe.

Tanner turned his full attention to Jeremy. “So, what can I do for you?”

“Why did she have to sit there?”

“What’s the problem?”

“That painting should be put out of its misery.” He scratched his head. The look on his face was one Tanner knew well. “But I guess I’ll have to get used to it.”

“Uh oh. That’s not a good sign.”

“What’s not a good sign?”
Tanner eyed him knowingly. “Changing for someone else is walking a tightrope.” The shock had worn off, but Tanner wasn’t sliding back into barista mode. He wasn’t usually so friendly with people he didn’t know, but there was something about Jeremy that warranted it.

Jeremy let out a small laugh. “Oh, it’s not like that. We’re just friends. She said there was this coffee place she wanted to try.”

“Sounds like a date to me.”

“Well, it’s definitely not a date.” Jeremy looked up and out of the skylight, glancing at the clouds as they drifted by, shifted by the constant breeze of a seaside town. For a few moments he was somewhere else, somewhere far away from the street corner coffee shop and its apathetic patrons. His lips, curled upward at both ends, drove Tanner crazy.

Alexa was waving Jeremy over now, flaunting an impossibly large smile. She was almost frantic. “Looks like I better head over.”

“Wait. You want anything before you go?”

“I’m not much of a coffee drinker.”

“That’s probably for the best. Our coffee is kinda shitty. But, hey! Ask me if you need anything.”

“All right...” He trailed off. “Sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“It’s Tanner. And you’re Jeremy?”

“Yeah. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too.” Tanner watched as Jeremy turned and made his way to the back of the cafe, his gaze lingering a bit too long at the slight shifting of hips and flexing of muscle.
“Trawling the waters again?” Chey was watching him from the other end of the counter. “You must be rusty, though. Didn’t look like he was all that interested.”

“Leave him alone, Chey. He can’t hit a home run every time. Besides, I don’t think they’re playing for the same team.” Another girl joined the first, one hand in her jacket pocket and the other casually slung around Chey’s shoulder.

“It’s too bad. He really does have a nice ass.” Chey gave him a sly look. “Had you flustered right when he walked in.”

“What are you doing here? You don’t work today.”

“I had to come and ruin your day.”

“You’re so considerate.”

“I do what I can.” The other girl snorted trying to stifle laughter. “What’s so funny, Anna?”

Anna’s face went blank and she brought it within kissing distance of Chey’s. She held it there, just long enough, before finally pecking her on the nose. “You’re just too cute.”

Tanner watched as Chey’s face shifted from peach to crimson and Anna banged her fist on the counter in a fit of laughter. The journals rustled closed and several beanied heads glared over toward the three of them at the counter and Tanner could only offer a slight hunching of the shoulders. It was out of his hands. They responded with a chorus of sighs and shoved their ear buds deeper, opening their journals to resume their frantic scribbling. Anna had begun to calm down and Chey was punching her repeatedly in the arm.

“What the fuck was that about, huh?!”
“What? Are you embarrassed?”

“You just caught me off guard...”

Tanner tuned them out and he turned his attention to Jeremy and the girl over in the nook. She was animated, chatting excitedly. He would nod every once and a while, but he was looking over her head and out the window at the bulbous masses of gray rolling in from the ocean.

“Tanner, did you hear what I said?” Chey was staring at him from across the counter, expecting an answer to a question he hadn’t heard.

“Sorry. What?”

“You get off at five-thirty, right?”

“What are you thinking?”

Anna cut in. “We wanna go hang out at the old amusement park on the pier. You game?”

“I thought you two weren’t allowed there anymore. Something about lewd and licentious behavior on the Ferris wheel.”

Anna shrugged. “My memory’s a little fuzzy. Besides, it isn’t fun unless you might get caught.”

Chey patted Anna on the back. “Spoken like a true exhibitionist.”

“Thank you very much.” Chey took a bow and they broke out into a fit of giggles. They really needed a hobby. Well, something other than coming up with new and exciting ways to embarrass him.
He crossed his arms. “As much fun as it sounds to aid you in your public acts of indecency, I think I’ll pass.”

Chey flopped down onto the counter. “Aw, come on! You could invite your last hook-up, Whats-His-Name, and have a little fun.”

“Tempting, but things didn’t work out so well with Luke.”

Anna chuckled. “I heard he became a born-again Christian. Guess you fucked the spirit of God right into him, huh?”

“Very funny.” Tanner let out a sigh. He turned his gaze to the back and was surprised to see Alexa and Jeremy walking toward him. “Leaving already?”

Alexa appeared to be flustered. “Unfortunately. An emergency came up at work and they need me to come in.”

Jeremy grinned at her. “It’s alright, Alexa. Now we’re even.”

“I guess. We’ll just have to try again after church tomorrow.” She hugged him and hurried toward the door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then.” After she was gone, Jeremy turned to the rest of them. “So, what are we talking about?” It was strange that he treated them with such familiarity, but his eyes the color of silver-gray clouds put Tanner at ease.

Tanner had never met anyone who made him feel that way. “Nothing, these two were just about to leave.” He wanted to get rid of Anna and Chey, so he said the first thing that came to mind.

Chey smiled at Tanner. “We were just talking about Tanner’s recent religious experience.”
“Huh. You didn’t strike me as the religious type.” Jeremy’s face had shifted to a look of slight curiosity.

Tanner cleared his throat. “Well, strictly speaking I’m not. I haven’t been for a long time.”

“A story for another time?” The way Jeremy said it, Tanner thought it sounded more like a demand than a question. If it had come from somebody else, it would’ve been creepy. People weren’t that friendly in Tanner’s experience, but it somehow seemed deeply personal coming from Jeremy. Almost intimate.

“Perhaps. What can I get you?” He watched Anna and Chey out of the corner of his eye and was glad Jeremy seemed to be oblivious to their taunting.

“Can I get some tea? Or is that just as bad as the coffee?”

“You’re in luck. The tea is exceedingly average.”

“Can’t ask for more than that. Give me whatever you think is best.”

“You’ve got it. If you’ll excuse me ladies, I have work to do.” He grabbed a tea bag from under the counter and set it to steep.

Chey walked over to the door and Anna stopped by the register. “It’s almost five. Come meet us at the boardwalk when Dex gets here, okay?”

“Maybe.” Chey and Anna waved their goodbyes and walked out the door. Tanner turned back to Jeremy. “I don’t know how much you overheard, but I’m sorry about them. I really need to get some new friends.”

“They aren’t so bad. I’ve dealt with worse.”
“Oh really? And where would you meet somebody worse than those two?” Tanner put a lid on the tea and slid it across the counter.

“I’d rather not talk about it.” Jeremy rubbed his arm; a slight, circular scar flushed pink against the surrounding skin.

“Is that the reason?” Tanner pointed to the scar.

Jeremy looked where Tanner pointed, comprehension dawning on his face. “It was the final straw.”

“That sucks. Believe me, I have issues with my parents too.”

“How did you know?”

“I just assumed. Cigar burns don’t usually happen by themselves.”

“I guess you’re right.” Jeremy shifted from foot to foot, either uncomfortable or indecisive. “This is kind of a deep conversation to be having with a stranger.”

Tanner’s cheeks flushed red. “Sorry, I guess I’m getting a little too personal. Forget I said anything.”

Jeremy smiled briefly. “No, it’s fine. I don’t mind talking about it.”

“You sure?” Tanner looked to him for some visual cue, and Jeremy responded with a nod. “Okay. So, how did you get the scar?”

“I told my parents I wasn’t sure if I believed in God anymore.” He sighed and crossed his arms. “They weren’t pleased.”

“So they burned you? Fucking religious nuts.” Tanner’s parents were the same way, though they never attacked him. Their reaction was much more devastating.
“My dad drank a lot, and he was violent when he got drunk. He was kind of an asshole.”

“Kind of? I don’t care who they are, if someone did that to me I’d call them a lot worse.” Tanner remembered the day he told his parents he was gay. He hadn’t been molested by a priest, or anything like that. As he got older, he started to realize that he liked boys instead of girls. He knew it was supposed to be wrong, but he didn’t care and he thought his parents wouldn’t either. Jesus had always said love your neighbor as yourself. How could he be so stupid? “What did you do?”

“I left. I haven’t spoken to them since.”

“So, they just left you alone?”

“Of course not, but I never told them where I was going.” He rubbed the back of his and looked out the window. “A part of me wants to believe that they really are sorry.”

“Jesus. At least they care enough about you to try and make up for it.”

Jeremy let out a blast of air that Tanner read as a cynical laugh. “They only thing they care about is serving the God in their heads.”

“Sounds like you’re bitter.”

“You think?”

“So, why are you hanging out with that bride-of-Christ chick if you don’t believe in God?”

“It’s hard to explain. Maybe I’m not completely bitter.” Jeremy looked at Tanner.

“What about you?”
“What do you mean?” Tanner knew what he meant, but he didn’t want the conversation to be about him.

“It’s only fair. I told you my issues, now tell me yours.” Jeremy leaned over the counter on his elbows and waited for a response.

“What do I have to?”

Jeremy nodded slightly. “Yes.”

“Shit. Alright.” Tanner was nervous. He was still nervous every time he told someone that he was gay. He knew how people reacted, and he usually fooled himself into thinking he didn’t care; but, he was afraid of how Jeremy would react. They had just met, but he cared deeply about what Jeremy thought of him. “I came out to them when I was 18. I thought they would understand.”

“Did they send you to one of those pray the gay away camps?” He was unfazed.

Tanner let out a sigh he didn’t realize he was holding in. “I wish that’s what they did.”

“I don’t understand.”

“After I told them, they pretended that I wasn’t there. They didn’t talk to me, they didn’t look at me. As far as they were concerned, I was dead.” After he finished speaking, it was like sound ceased to exist. There was no one around him. He couldn’t hear the sound of his own breathing, the rhythmic rising and falling of his chest. There was nothing.

“Yet, here you are.” Jeremy pulled him back into the coffee shop. Tanner could hear the scribbling of the other customers, he could see the false Monet sitting in the nook.

“Sorry, that was a bit dramatic.”

“Keep going.”
"I was so angry at them, at God. Then I met Chey, and she was angry too."

"So, you were angry together?"

"Yeah, we did all sorts of crazy shit when we were younger, but now I’m tired and she’s still the same old Chey."

"I don’t know what to say."

"I don’t expect you to. You don’t know me." Tanner’s arms were crossed and he was staring down at his feet. Chey was exactly what he needed after his parents disowned him. Together they had vandalized just about every type of public property they could think of. It was what he needed at the time, but he had changed. She was a constant reminder of his past, and he couldn’t deal with it anymore. It was time for him to move on, and if that meant leaving his friends behind, then he would do it.

"Maybe you’re still the same." Jeremy spoke up suddenly. "I mean, it seems like you might be the one that hasn’t changed."

"What?"

"You said you’re tired of being angry, but you’re still bitter."

Tanner had spent so long convincing himself he was over his disownment, he never considered he might be fooling himself. It took a complete stranger to show him that he was still the same kid who couldn’t understand why his parents acted like he didn’t exist. “Fuck.” He felt a few tears start to trickle down his face, so he turned away from Jeremy. He couldn’t describe how he was feeling. He was angry with himself for being so foolish, angry with his parents for loving an imaginary man in the sky more than they loved him, and so, so tired of feeling like he wasn’t good enough.
“Tanner?”

“Sorry, I don’t know what happened.”

“Don’t apologize.”

Tanner wiped his tears away with the corner of his apron and laughed a little. “This was the last thing I expected to happen today. I’m so stupid.”

“No. I understand, I’ve been there.”

“How do you deal with this? Cause I’ve clearly been doing it wrong.”

“I couldn’t tell you. Maybe we can figure it out together.”

“Are you asking me out?” Tanner’s eyes were still red, but he was smiling when he turned to face Jeremy. They both laughed. “How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Get me to open up like that. I haven’t talked to anybody about my past in years.”

“It tends to happen to me a lot. Maybe I came along at just the right time.” Jeremy looked down at the counter and saw the cup of tea sitting between them. “Oh. I just realized I never paid for this.”

“It’s on the house. Just promise me you’ll try the coffee someday.”

“Didn’t you say it was shitty?”

“It grows on you after a while.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” He went to take a sip of his tea which had gotten cold while they were talking. “You were right, exceedingly average.”
Dex came in from the back and Tanner was free to go. He grabbed his bag, wrapped a scarf around his neck and headed for the door, but was surprised to see Jeremy waiting for him.

“You going to meet your friends?” He must have overheard Anna as she was leaving.

“I’m not sure if I can be around those two right now.”

“They’re trying to help you, I think. Of course, you know them better than I do.”

“It’s hard to tell, but maybe you’re right.”

He put his hand on Tanner’s shoulder. “Either way, I’ll see you around.” Jeremy walked down the sidewalk, past Tanner, and toward the corner of Ocean and Park. As he rounded the corner, the clouds parted for a few brief moments and a beam of light shined down onto his face. Tanner watched as he walked out of sight before heading down Ocean toward the boardwalk.
the god in between us

This morning, the clouds were their usual shade of soul-crushing grey, the wind off the water left a layer of salt on everything it touched, and Dex was late for work. There was a word for people who were always late, and despite hearing it for most of his life Dex couldn’t remember what it was. He had a cellphone to his ear; one of his coworkers was on the other end of the line.

“This is the third time this week.” The person on the other end of the line tapped his foot on the floor loud enough to be audible.

“I know, I know. The meeting with my editor took longer than I thought.”

“You always have an excuse. How do you still have a job?”

“Because you don’t rat me out.” He paused for a few moments. “I appreciate it.”

“If you keep this up, I’m gonna have to say something. I can’t keep covering for you.”

“Don’t worry about it, I’m on my way.”

“You better be.”

“Bye.” Dex hung up the phone. He reached for the pack of cigarettes that was usually in his coat pocket. No such luck. “Right.” He sighed and leaned over the railing of the pier, staring at the breakers beneath him and wishing he’d waited another few weeks to give up smoking. He watched the waves come to a head and crash into a foamy, off-white spray. She was late, and he strained to hear the telltale sound of her feet on the boardwalk as she approached. Time passed slowly under the dingy clouds, and he felt like he waited for centuries until he finally heard the pitter patter of her feet on the ground behind him. He turned around to face her. “Do you have the cigarettes?”
“I thought you quit.” She wore a heavy pea coat and a wooly scarf, her face just barely visible above the puffy folds of fabric around her neck. Her hands were buried in the pockets of her coat and she was staring directly into his eyes. It made him squirm.

“Why are you wearing that? It isn’t that cold.”

“It’s cold enough.”

“I guess.” He shook himself, jumping up and down to try and get the edge off. She watched him shuffle for a few moments before she gave in.

“Fine, I brought them.”

“Toss them here.” She produced a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her coat. There it was, shining like a pile of gold coins illuminated in a dark room. She hesitated before lobbing the pack into his waiting hands.

“You were doing so well. Why the sudden change?” She was still looking at him. He could feel her eyes watching, though he couldn’t tell if they were judging him or full of pity. He didn’t like either option, so he chose to believe she was concerned. That was probably true.

He pulled a cigarette from the pack and nestled it between his lips. Pulling the lighter from his front left pocket, he lit the cigarette with a well-practiced flourish. It would’ve been impressive in the 50s, but she didn’t look too thrilled. He inhaled deeply, holding it in for as long as he could before exhaling. The waves crashed beneath them. “My editor is out of his mind. He read some bullshit industry article, told me I needed to rewrite half my book. Something about the death of first person. Fucking asshole.” He inhaled again.

She waited for him to exhale. “It’s not gonna be easy getting back off again.”
“Jesus, Lucy! I just need to relax a little. Did you hear what I said?”

“I did.”

“So what am I supposed to do? I have a deadline and my editor threw out half of my book.”

“Rewrite it, then. I’ve always thought first person was a little overdone.”

“Now you tell me.”

“What do you want me to say? That everything is gonna be fine?”

“It would be nice to hear.”

“You’re such an idiot.” She shook her head, walking up beside him. He leaned back against the railing, pulling another cigarette from the carton, smoke billowing up until it disappeared, blending in with the sky.

“I’m late for work.” He put his cigarette out on the railing and tossed the butt into the water.

“You shouldn’t do that.”

“I’m not late that often.”

“You’re a terrible liar, and that’s not what I meant.” She didn’t look at him. She kept looking out over the water.

“Geez, I thought I was on edge. What’s wrong with you?” He put his hand on her shoulder, rubbing up and down her back. She shrugged his hand off, turning to face him.

“I just wish you would grow up.” She turned from him and walked back down the pier, the creaking of old wood and the thunk of her heels on the boards echoing across the water as she went.
“What do you want from me, Lucy?” he called after her, hoping she would stay and
hoping she would keep walking at the same time. He wanted it to be like something out of a
movie, dramatic for no discernible reason. Or he wanted it to be realistic. He couldn’t decide.

She turned around and shot him a sad smile. “I want you to go to work.” He knew
there was more behind those words than she was letting on. She wanted him to do something
more with his life than work in a terrible coffee shop while writing a novel in his spare time
that would see average sales then be forgotten.

“I’ll get there eventually.” He put one hand in his pocket and walked up beside her.
“What else?” He brushed a few strands of hair out of her face and behind her ear.
“I need to get back to work.” She grabbed his hand and held it on her cheek.
“Thanks for indulging me.” He held up the pack of cigarettes before putting them
back in his pocket. “What would I do without you?”

She kissed him, a short meeting of the lips. “You’d probably starve.” She walked
down the boardwalk and away from him. She turned around for a moment and yelled, “Go to
work.” He stood and watched her until he couldn’t see her anymore before walking in the
other direction.

***

Come fly with me, let’s float down to Peru. In llama land there’s a one man band and
he’ll toot his flute for you. Come fly with me, let’s take off in the blue.
The melodic voice of Frank Sinatra floated from the beat up speakers throughout the coffee shop. The sound was a bit tinny, but you could never put a damper on Sinatra. There was something deeply soothing about well played brass. Dex knew his choice in music wasn’t the usual fare of the indie punk regulars, but he had control of the radio and they needed to broaden their horizons. Besides, Sinatra was hardly mainstream.

Dex wiped the counter down and looked out over the cafe; there was a handful of people scattered among the tables. A few sat by themselves, drinking coffee and reading beat up paperbacks, things like Faulkner and Fitzgerald. There was a couple sitting in the nook. She wore glasses with thin black frames and he had striking eyes the silver-gray color of clouds. They usually sat in that nook, with its painting that everyone else seemed to hate. Dex didn’t hate it. He didn’t love it, either. It was just a decoration to him, nothing worth thinking about despite what his coworkers said. If asked, he couldn’t even remember what it looked like.

*Stars shining bright above you. Night breezes seem to whisper “I love you.” Birds singing in the sycamore trees. Dream a little dream of me.*

“I was hoping I’d find you here.”

He wanted it to be Lucy, or some mysterious stranger, the Ingrid Bergman to his Humphrey Bogart. It wasn’t, but he could still dream it was so. “We don’t meet until tomorrow, Rick. What do you want?”

“Things have changed.” Rick was an editor working for the local branch of the big publishing house that would be printing Dex’s book when everything was said and done.
Their relationship was defined by forced politeness, tips of the hat and going on a first name basis.

“I don’t have time for this right now, I’m working.” He liked to give him a hard time every chance he got. It was his way of getting back at him for turning the publishing process into a nightmare. Rick was nice enough, but he took his job way too seriously.

Rick took a look around the cafe and noticed the scarcity of customers. “I can see you’re busy, but this can’t wait.”

“Alright, but I’m gonna need to be compensated for my time.”

“Knock it off. This is serious.” Usually, he played along for a little while longer.

“Fine. What is it?”

Rick avoided making eye contact and shuffled his feet a bit. “We have to move the deadline up by a month.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” Dex threw his rag down on the floor and steadied himself on the counter. It had to be a joke. “You get a sense of humor all of a sudden? That’s a pretty cruel joke to play.”

“I wish it was a joke. We don’t have time to fool around anymore.”

“Are you seriously gonna pull that shit after telling me to rewrite half my book? You have to be joking.”

“We’ve given you plenty of time. Besides, it’s not up to me. I’m just delivering a message from the higher ups.”

Dex wanted to tell Rick to go fuck himself. Three months was hardly enough time to fix his book, but now there was no way. “You can’t ask me to do this.”
“I wish I didn’t have to, but you’re gonna have to make it work.”

“How am I gonna do that, Rick? You mind telling me how that’s gonna happen when you keep giving me the shaft?”

“Christ, Dexter. Don’t make a scene.”

Dex looked past Rick at the faces of his customers. They were all staring towards him, concern vaguely suggested on their faces. He gave them an “everything’s fine” before turning back to Rick. “Fuck. I’m sorry, I just need a second.”

Rick sighed and leaned on the counter to speak in a voice only Dex could hear.

“Look. I know this isn’t easy, but we’ve invested a lot of resources in you. You need to get your shit together.”

“Dammit, don’t tell me what I already know”

Rick grabbed him by the collar and brought his face too close to Dex’s. “It sure as hell doesn’t look like you know.” Dex didn’t have a response, Rick had never broken out of his usual calm demeanor. “If this thing doesn’t ship, you’re gonna be held responsible for all the money and time we’ve wasted massaging your ego. If you know that, then I fucking hope you start acting like it.”

Dex grabbed Rick’s wrist and pulled his hand away with surprising force. “I’ve got it, now don’t touch me again.”

Lucy walked through the door holding a small paper box. Her mouth formed a little “o” and her eyebrows raised when she saw Rick standing at the counter. “I didn’t expect to see you here. How are you?”

“Just fine, Lucy. And you?”
“Things could be better, but that’s usually true.”

“I suppose.”

Lucy looked from Rick to Dex and noticed the sweat that was forming on his brow despite the cold air blowing through the front door that refused to stay shut. “Dex, what’s wrong?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” He pointed at Rick and turned away.

Lucy turned back to Rick. “What’s he talking about?”

“Well, we had to move the deadline up.” He saw her brow furrow. “Not my decision, I’ll have you know. Just relaying the message.”

“Well, you tell your bosses I might shoot the messenger if they don’t back off.” Dex didn’t have to see her to know she was furious. Her voice was heavy with a rage he wasn’t capable of. It would have been touching if he didn’t feel so sick.

“I wish it were that easy.” Rick shuffled his feet and checked his watch. “Look, I have somewhere to be, so I’ll let you figure things out. Dex, come to my office tomorrow, normal time.”

“Sure.” He was still turned away, arms crossed and looking at the ground.

Rick made his way past Lucy who refused to look him in the eye as he said goodbye. He walked out the door and disappeared around the corner.

Dex and Lucy stood at the counter not saying anything; a advertisement played over the speakers and the couple in the nook made light conversation. “Can you believe that?” He was addressing no one in particular, or maybe he was addressing God.

“Can you do it?” Lucy said, placing her box on the counter and unwrapping her scarf.
“I don’t know. Probably not.” It was like somebody had punched him in the stomach but he had forgotten how to feel pain. There was something there, but he couldn’t recognize it. He turned around to face her. “This was a bad idea from the start.”

“No it wasn’t.” She was lying. She was always lying to make things better. The publisher must have seen something in his writing, but he didn’t think it was there anymore. He disappointed himself, but he knew he could never disappoint Lucy. She reached up and smoothed the front of his shirt, fastening the top button which had come undone in Rick’s grip. “Maybe this’ll help.” She opened the box on the counter to reveal a pristine slice of cheesecake and then produced two pink plastic forks from her purse. He took one and they began to eat.

“He makes it sound so goddamn easy.” Dex carried on the conversation through mouthfuls of cheesecake. “He’s probably never written a book in his life.”

“You’re probably right, but it doesn’t matter.” She had always been practical, never skirting the issue.

“What do I do, Luce?”

“You get to work.”

“I was kinda hoping for something more than that.”

“Then don’t do the work and pay the consequences. It’s your choice.”

“I’m being serious. I thought that being an author was what I always wanted to do, but it turns out everything I write is garbage.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself.”
“No, I’m being realistic. You think I’m terrible too, don’t you? I’ve seen the way you look at me.”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Come on. You’ve never held back before.”

She dropped her fork on the counter and said something so softly that he couldn’t hear it over the sound of the radio. He watched her lips form words and tried to decipher them. It looked like she said “I don’t know,” but that couldn’t be true. She always knew.

“What did you just say?”

“Don’t make me say it again.” She looked at him, pleading for him to drop it.

“I need to hear it.”

“Dex.” Tears started forming in the corners of her eyes.

“Please.”

She sniffed, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. “I don’t know.”

He put his hand on her cheek and wiped the remaining tears off her face. She always had things figured out, so it was something for her to admit she didn’t. “Neither do I; but, that’s nothing new.” She smiled and laughed even though her eyes were red.

At that moment, he felt out of place surrounded by the coffee shop and its grungy inhabitants. The cafe felt distant, like he was already miles away and moving onward toward whatever was next. He wished he could leave everything behind, take Lucy and forget about his stupid dream of writing a book. He wanted to be reckless, but he wasn’t stupid. Whatever was waiting for him would have to wait a bit longer, at least until he figured out what to do next.
Dex hardly stopped writing over those few weeks, and he knew he was a mess when he handed the finished manuscript to Rick’s receptionist. She had been polite when he came in, not mentioning his smell or the wrinkles in his clothes. He dropped the manuscript on her desk and told her the rest was Rick’s fucking problem, pardon the language, before walking out of the office and resolving to never enter it again. Lucy waited in the car. He remembered opening the passenger side door and plopping into the seat, running his hands through his unwashed hair. That was six months ago.

He sat on a bench near the old amusement park, feeling the sun’s rays warming him and remembering. The book was finished in time and it had somehow passed unmolested through Rick’s editing process. It was mystery as to how he had managed it. Had he been on his own, he might’ve given up and faced the publishing company’s wrath. He didn’t look like he had any sort of shady connections, but he wouldn’t put it past Rick to have a hit squad come and harvest his organs to pay the bills. Life wouldn’t have been the same without both kidneys, so he was glad that Lucy had been there to keep him from going off the grid. He finished the book for her, and he made sure to note it in acknowledgements. It wouldn’t be enough to thank her, but it was a start.

He heard someone walking toward him on the boardwalk, the creaking of the old wood warning him that they were coming closer. His eyes were closed, but he knew it was
Lucy when someone sat down next to him. Without opening his eyes, he said, “Have any cigarettes?”

She laughed, “Not this time.”

“It’s just as well.” He smiled.

“So, what’s the big news you were so excited about on the phone?”

“I met with Rick about the book sales.”

“How did it go?”

“It’s selling. It’s not making any best sellers lists, but it’s doing well enough. The publisher wants me to write something else. Rick even said I might be able to crack the list next time if I work my ass off.”

“That’s awfully nice of him.”

“I thought so. It was almost touching.”

“You don’t sound very happy about it.”

“Should I be?”

“I would think so.”

Dex smiled. “I’m relieved. Happy might be pushing it.” He stood up and stretched before sitting back down again in a new position.

“So what are we going to do now?”

“I suppose I could start writing my next book. What do you think?” He looked at her out the corner of his eye.
“It’s not for me to decide.” She was looking out over the water instead of him. She usually stared him straight in the eye when she said something so pointed. “Is that what you want to do?”

“I swear. You talk like you’re my conscience.”

“So somebody has to.”

“Well, maybe it’s time I start listening to my own conscience.”

She laughed. “Are you sure you have one? Has it ever said anything to you?”

“It’s in here somewhere,” he pointed to his head. “If I start looking, I’m sure I’ll find it no time.”

“And what do you think it’ll tell you once you’ve found it?”

“It’ll probably sound exactly like you.” He looked down and realized that he was holding her hand. He must’ve grabbed it while they were talking, but he didn’t remember reaching out for it. She was also looking at their interlocked hands, and they met each other’s gaze as they looked up. “It would probably tell me to get my shit together and do something for myself for once.”

“You don’t need two of me telling you what to do.”

“You’re right. Maybe it is time I did something for myself.” She let go of his hand and he could see what looked like confusion in the lines on her forehead and the slight frown at the corners of her lips.

“You’re thinking about leaving.”
“What makes you say that?” He had never been good at hiding things from other people. After spending so much time with Lucy, he thought he might have learned how she did it, how she kept in the dark almost all of the time.

“Ah, I see. You thought you were being subtle.”

“I thought so. How long have you known?”

“Since I noticed you’d begun to change.” She stood up and went to lean over the railing. “It was when you got in the car after dropping off your manuscript.”

“I asked whose dumb idea it was for me to become a writer.”

“Then you looked at me and smiled and I told you it was your idea before you fell asleep against the window.”

Dex got up and stood beside her. “I never would have done it if you hadn’t been there with me.”

“But you don’t need me anymore. You haven’t for a while.”

He thought about the past few months and how much had changed for him. He quit working at the coffee shop and found a better job as a bartender at the local jazz club. It had been a long time since he had felt what he called happiness, but he needed to find something for himself. He couldn’t rely on Lucy to hold his hand forever.

“I can’t ask you to come with me. It wouldn’t be fair.” He looked her in the eyes and couldn’t tell if they reflected sadness or anger. He hoped that she would be angry, angry that he would leave her when things were finally going well for them. He felt that he deserved her anger more than he deserved anything else.
She reached forward and wrapped her arms around him and held him there for a long time before finally letting him go. “When the time comes, I won’t stop you. So, promise me you’ll stay with me until then.”

“That’s it?” His voice cracked with surprise.

“What were you expecting?”

“Something different.”

“You’re such an idiot.” She turned and walked away from him. She knew. She always knew.
Maya walked into the coffee shop just down the street from her studio, looking to order a double espresso. It was the only thing she could stand to order because everything else was terrible. It wasn’t the barista’s fault that the quality of the coffee was so poor. Tanner tried his best to make something drinkable out of the slag the cafe’s owners tried to pass off as coffee, and she appreciated it. If he could make something halfway decent out of that crap, then she would’ve loved to see what he could do with good coffee. She made her way up to the counter where Tanner was at his usual post, surveying the people in the cafe.

“I’ll have the usual, Tanner.”

“There you are, Maya. You’re a bit later than usual.”

“I was doing so well today. I thought I might make it through the whole afternoon before calling it quits.” Having spent several hours working on a particularly frustrating still-life, she needed her afternoon coffee and she needed to sketch. Sketching helped to clear her mind and get past whatever was blocking her about a piece. There was a table that she loved to sit at, nestled in a nook at the back of the cafe, underneath a painting that was hideous in all of the most inspiring ways. There was something about its failure to capture the spirit of the impressionist painters it sought to emulate that made her feel so much better about her own work.

“I’ll need to drop by the studio and take a look next chance I get.”

“You should! I haven’t had any visitors in a while.”
“You can count on it.” He went over to the espresso machine and worked whatever magic he could to have it make drinkable coffee. “By the way. There’s someone sitting at your table today.”

“That won’t do.”

“You’re usually back at your studio by now, so I didn’t think to let him know.”

“I’m gonna have to say something to him.”

“He’s a nice guy. Don’t be too rough with him.”

“It’s fine, I’ll be gentle.” She grabbed her double shot, putting the money on the counter, and made her way over to her table. A man, in his mid-twenties, was reading what appeared to be a cheesy self-help book. She spied catch phrases like, “Faith is its own reward” and “God’s got your back” on the book’s cover.

From the look on his face, Maya could tell that he wasn’t buying the feel-good mottos the book proffered as sage advice. Every so often, he would put his hand to his mouth and let out stifled laughter. When he pulled his hand away, the traces of a smile could still be seen in the lines around his mouth, faint little parenthesis. He was cute. She hadn’t expected that.

She set down her coffee, took the seat across from him, and said, “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.” He looked up from his book, and his smile faded.

“I’m sorry. Do I know you?”

“Probably not.”

“Oh.” He furrowed his brow and looked around the coffee shop, perhaps expecting to see someone behind a video camera or a group of people casting sidelong glances toward the table and laughing amongst themselves. He closed his book and clasped his hands together
on top of it, casting one last quizzical glance at Maya before looking out the window. What a
strange reaction, she thought. Most people would have left once their private bubble had
been invaded, but he had stayed. His pose was interesting, so Maya opened her sketchbook
and started to draw. She watched him stare at the sky as she transposed his image onto the
page. His shoulders were tense and the muscles in his neck strained as if they were trying to
escape his body. Then, the strain went away. His shoulders gradually relaxed and he moved
his hand underneath his chin, leaning toward the window.

“I’m Maya, by the way.”

“Sorry?” He had forgotten she was there, lost in the clouds passing by.

“My name. It’s Maya.”

“Oh. Nice to meet you, I guess.” Whatever he had been thinking about, it had given
her the chance to draw an incredible sketch.

“Here, let me show you something.” She turned the sketchbook around and shoved it
towards his clasped hands.

“You were drawing me? That’s a little bit creepy.”

“I couldn’t resist, the pose was too perfect.” He gave her an “oh really” look before
unclasping his hands and taking the sketchbook from her. He stared at it for a minute or two
in silence.

“You’re really talented. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“I should hope so. It’s what I do for a living.”

“Well, excuse me Ms. Professional Artist.”

“No offense taken.”
His lips curled slightly in a wry smile. “I wasn’t talking about your technical skill as an artist.”

It was her turn to smile. “What do you mean?”

“This drawing, it’s like you knew what I was thinking. It captures the moment almost perfectly.”

Her eyebrows jumped for a moment before nestling back into their resting position.

“Huh, I’ve never had anyone tell me that before. I just drew what I saw. Though, I would be lying if I said I wasn’t fascinated by it.”

“So, you find me fascinating?” He let out a chuckle.

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Believe me, I won’t.” He leaned back in his chair stretched his arms out above his head. “My name is Jeremy.”

“Nice to meet you.” What was she doing? She didn’t flirt with random strangers she met in a coffee shop. She didn’t flirt at all, but there she was.

“Hey, do you mind if I ask you something?”

“I guess not. Go ahead.”

“What made you decide to sit down at my table and start sketching me?”

She cocked her head slightly to the right. “Do you want the long answer or the short one?”

“Start with the long one. Something tells me it’ll be more interesting.”

“Well, it was the book in your hand and the smile on your face that made me sit down. You don’t usually see someone reading a self-help book and smiling about it.”
“True enough. But to just sit down and make yourself comfortable? That’s more than curiosity.”

“That’s where the short answer comes in.”

“And what would that be?”

“You were sitting at my table.” He laughed. There was something different resting between the parentheses this time. It read more like joy and less like amusement. He went on for a few seconds more before gathering himself.

“That tells me a lot about you.”

“Then it’s only fair that you tell me something about you.”

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“What were you thinking about while you were looking out the window?”

“Oh...I’m not so sure about that.”

“If you don’t want to tell me, I understand. Why would you tell a total stranger about something personal?”

“Actually, I think I’ll tell you. Something makes me think you’ll understand more than most people would.”

“Fire away.”

“After you sat down, I looked out the window and tried to pretend you weren’t there. I don’t really know how to deal with awkward situations, so I turtled up.”

“I did sort of force myself upon you, didn’t I?”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far.”
“Oh, I think I would.” She winked and could see the blood rushing to his cheeks. The cute ones were always shy, it’s part of what made them so cute.

He coughed. “How do I keep finding myself in these situations?”

“Does this happen to you often? I just thought you were cute.”

“That’s what Tanner said.” He pointed over at Tanner who was standing by the register and subtly waving back. He had been watching them.

Maya wondered if she was too late, if Tanner had gotten to him first. What was she thinking? She didn’t need a boyfriend. She didn’t want a boyfriend; at least, not since Seth.

“Anyway, I started looking out the window and thought about, well... I was thinking about God.”

“What about him?”

“Well, that’s not the response I expected.”

“You were expecting me to tell you God doesn’t exist? That this is all there is and you’re a fool for believing otherwise?”

“Yes, to be honest. Though, I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Keep going, then. Tell me what it is about God that you find so perplexing.”

“That’s the thing. I was thinking about if he’s real or not.”

“I could gather that much from the book sitting in front of you. There’s more to it than that.”

“I don’t know. It’s weird trying to explain it out loud. It’s just, when I look up in the sky I can’t help but look for God in the clouds.”

“Like, his face?”
“Sort of. It must sound really strange to you. I don’t even know if you believe in God.”

“I don’t know if that matters.”

“Well?”

“A fair amount, but not knowing something doesn’t preclude me from trying to understand it.” His brow furrowed again. “Take that painting for example.”

“What about it?”

“How do you feel about it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about art.” She shot him a blank stare. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Just tell me if you think it’s good or not.”

“Okay. I’d have to say that it’s a good painting.”

“Actually, it’s a shit painting.”

“Why did you ask me if you were going to tell me I’m wrong?”

“I’m making a point. Why do you think the painting is good?”

“I like the colors, or the pattern, or something like that. Why? What am I missing?”

“That’s my point. You said you don’t know anything about art, but your lack of knowledge didn’t keep you from trying to make sense of it.”

“Aha, I see what you mean.”

“So, tell me what has you searching for God in self-help books.”

“The book was Alexa’s idea.”

“Girlfriend?”
“What? No. We just met a few months ago at my new church.”

“She thinks you’re together, though?”

“Believe me, I’ve tried to tell her. She just won’t listen to me.”

“She thinks the book will help you secure your faith?”

“I want her to be right, but this book isn’t doing a very good job of convincing me.”

“So, that’s what you were thinking about when I was sketching you?”

“I guess it was just fresh in my mind. Alexa left a few minutes before you showed up.”

“Is this where you two normally sit?”

“It is. She’s the one who picked the spot. She really likes that painting. The only reason I agreed was because of the windows.”

“Wait, you didn’t actually like the painting?”

“No. I suppose I’ve gotten used to it, though. Now that I look at it again, I remember thinking Monet would roll in his grave if he could see it.”

“You lied to me. You do know something about art. And here I was thinking you had bad taste.”

“Alexa’s the one with bad taste.”

“Why do you spend so much time with her if you’re not together?”

“She’s nice. Besides, I don’t really know many other people here.”

“Well, if you ever need somebody to talk to about God, or clouds, or horrible paintings. You should give me a call.” She wrote her number down on a section of her
sketchbook, tore it out, and slid it to him. “My studio is just down the street, maybe I could show you around?”

“I might like that.” He smiled again, a sense of genuine happiness hanging between the parentheses. She looked down at the sketch she had drawn and saw that exact face mirrored on the page.

“I have one other thing to ask you.”

“Sure, Maya. Go ahead.”

“What else were you thinking about?”

“I thought I told you.”

“You told me part of it, but there’s one more thing that you’re not telling me.”

“You really are observant.”

“The way you were smiling when you looked at the clouds doesn’t mesh with your story. I want to know what made you smile like that.”

“Maybe some other time.”

“You’re just as fascinating as I hoped you be.”

“I don’t know about that, but I do know that I don’t know you well enough to go telling you all my secrets.” He stood up, grabbed his book, and put it under his arm. “At least, not yet.” He started walking away from the table.

“Fair enough. It was nice talking with you Jeremy.” He turned around.

“The pleasure was all mine.” She noticed the scrap of paper in the book under his arm and smiled. He turned back around and kept walking toward the door.
“I hope to hear from you soon.” He raised his hand and waved at her before he went out the door and out of sight. “What have I gotten myself into?”

She collapsed onto the table and marveled at how she had been completely taken in by him. Something about him made her forget the burden she had carried since high school. If she wasn’t in the middle of a cafe, she could’ve cried.

Tanner had been watching the whole time, so when he saw Maya slump over, he rushed over to the table. It was a good thing his replacement had gotten there when he did. “What happened?”

“Why didn’t you warn me about him?”

“There was nothing to warn you about. Why? What did you do?”

“I gave him my number. Offered to give him a tour of the studio.”

“That doesn’t seem like you.”

“I couldn’t help myself. He was so easy to talk to.” She propped herself up on her elbows and rubbed her temples. The position she found herself in was a strange one. On the one hand, she felt a real connection between herself and Jeremy and it felt good to connect avoiding it for so many years. On the other hand, there was a reason she hadn’t had a boyfriend for such a long time. Seth had made her feel the same way, but it ended tragically.

“Tell me what to do, Tanner.”

“Maybe it’s time to move on. Seth’s been dead for five years.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do if it happens again.”

“Nobody ever blamed you for his death. There was nothing you could’ve done.”
Seth was found dead in his bathtub; smooth cuts from a razor blade ran down the length of his arms. It was a surprise to everyone, especially his parents and his girlfriend who never knew anything was wrong. He didn’t leave a note, but Maya found a beautiful ring sitting on her dresser the day before Seth died. The ring was sealed in an envelop with nothing written on the outside, but when she cut the top open, she saw two words written on the inside where he knew she would find them. I’m sorry.

“I should’ve known something was wrong. I was closer to him than anyone!”

“Seth was an asshole for what he did. He’s keeping you from moving on.”

“What about the ring?”

“The ring doesn’t mean anything. If he really loved you, he would’ve given it to you himself instead of doing what he did.”

“Dammit, you’re right.” She tugged on the fastener of the silver necklace around her neck until it came loose. The ring Seth left for her was on the end of the chain. “I need to get rid of this.”

“Throw it into the ocean.”

“Why would I do something so cliché?”

“I don’t know. Toss it in the trash can. Sell it to a jeweler. Why does it matter?”

“It has to be something significant. I need the closure.”

“Then give it to his parents.”

“I haven’t seen them in years. They probably wouldn’t remember me.”

“It’s not just about you, Maya. It’ll mean more to them than it would for anyone else.”

She gripped the ring in her closed fist and nodded. “It’s decided then.”
Maya returned to her home town for the first time since she left for college. She hadn’t been able to go back before now. Too many painful memories. Seth’s mother opened the door when she knocked and she presented the ring to her. His mother took the ring from her open hand and held it up against the sky. Then something happened that Maya didn’t expect. Seth’s mother hugged her tightly, and thanked her for the ring. She said she had always liked Maya, and it was nice to have something that proved Seth had something good in his life. Tanner was right, the ring meant more to them than it would ever mean for her.

When she got home the next day, she went to her studio to finish that still-life that had bothered her so much a few days before. Right after she applied the last brush-stroke, her cell phone rang. It was a number she didn’t recognize, but she smiled when she answered. She would have to save the number in her phone as Jeremy’s.
No one visited the old boardwalk amusement park after it closed several months ago. No one remembered the sand-blasted, weather-worn benches that looked out over the ocean, or the dirty striped canvas of the food stands. Not even the delinquents from the local high school trespassed there, though no one knew if it was fear or reverence which kept them away.

Jeremy let out a sigh as he shifted his stiff limbs into a different position. He hadn’t moved from his bench for hours, a well-worn groove marking his preferred side of the bench. He rotated his shoulders and rubbed the small of his back. “Shit.” He leaned back, looking out over the water. He watched the mangled fragments of cloud being swept through the grey-orange sky by the hand of an invisible god. Growing up, he had played the game where you point out shapes in the clouds. It was supposed to foster your imagination and make the world a more magical place, but he wasn’t a kid anymore.

His phone rang. It was Alexa. He wanted to throw the phone out into the ocean, but he settled for putting it down and sliding it to the other side of the bench. Dread preceded their regular coffee dates at a cafe on Ocean and Park and he didn’t feel like seeing Alexa today. Apparently she didn’t get the message when he ignored her first two calls. The phone kept ringing, and ringing, and ringing. He threw his hands up saying “I give up” to the emptiness around him and answered the phone. Alexa’s disappointment was something he could deal with, but he would do anything to avoid another lecture on daydreaming and unfulfilled promises. He flipped the phone open and put it up to his ear. “Hey, Alexa.”
“Is that all you have to say? Where are you?” Alexa said on the other end of the line.

He rolled his eyes and pretended to be upset, though he knew she couldn’t see him. It was a subconscious reaction. “Ah hell, I...well I guess I forgot.”

“You forgot. Unbelievable. And how many times have I told you to watch your mouth?”

“Too many.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I was kidding, don’t worry about it.”

“Oh.” She hesitated.

“How long were you waiting there?” Jeremy knew how long she would’ve waited before calling and the thought made his face feel warm. He wanted to the keep the conversation about her so they wouldn’t have to talk about him.

“It doesn’t matter. Why didn’t you answer my calls? What are you doing?” She was far better than him when it came to deflection. Alexa was great. She tithed every Sunday, volunteered to help the homeless and did all the other things a model citizen is supposed to do. He admired her, and under different circumstances he could even love her. She was stable, dependable.

“I was meditating. I didn’t hear the phone ring at first.”

“Not this again. You were just ignoring my calls again, weren’t you? Don’t treat me like I’m stupid. You’ve been ignoring me more and more lately.”

“You’re exaggerating, I’ve just spaced and missed a few coffee dates.”
“Don’t you tell me I’m exaggerating!” Alexa never yelled, so this was a surprise. “Seriously, I don’t know what’s going on, but you need to quit staring at the sky like it owes you an explanation and talk to someone. Talk to me.”

He almost missed the last three words, only catching them because he knew they were coming. She said them softly, hushed by the pain of not understanding. “Look, Alexa. Now isn’t the best time for this. Can we talk later?” Silence. He waited for her to say anything. “Alexa, did you hear what I said?”

“Fine. Meet me tomorrow at the-”

“Same time, same place.”

A few seconds passed before she responded. “I don’t want you to feel like I’m attacking you. I’m concerned. You’ve been avoiding me. You haven’t been yourself. I talked to your parents and they’re just as con-.”

“You talked to my parents!?”

“Calm down and let me finish!”

“Why the hell did you bring my parents into this?”

“What else was I supposed to do? You won’t trust me enough to tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong! I’m just trying to work some shit out, and my parents have no business being involved. They proved that a long time ago.” He didn’t talk to his parents anymore; the final weeks of their life together still burned in the circular scar on his arm.

“I know that it’s hard to forgive them for what they did, but they still love you.”

“You can’t expect me to believe that.”
“I think they’ve proven they’re worthy of your forgiveness.”

“To who, Alexa? You?”

“Jeremy, I-.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“I love you.”

Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Jeremy hung up before she could say anything else. He knew she would cry. He wanted to get her back for making things impossible, for bringing his parents back into his life. The only reason he kept talking was to vent his anger with all of them. He wanted to send a message to God and everyone else that he was done pretending everything was fine. Yelling at Alexa felt cathartic, but she didn’t deserve it. He turned his phone off and placed it on the bench next to him.

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Maya heard a knock on her door at exactly a quarter to seven. Punctual as always, she thought. She got up from the cushy armchair she had been sketching in and went to look in the mirror, stretching her arms above her head as she walked. Her hair was done up in a bun and she wore glasses with small black frames to compliment her plaid pajama pants and old AC/DC t-shirt. There was a strand of hair that had come loose from the bun and hung on the left side of her forehead. She pulled another strand loose so it mirrored the one on the left before saying, “Perfect,” and smiling at her reflection. She walked over to the door, twisted the lock, and opened it up to find Jeremy leaning against the doorframe.
“You’re wearing my shirt.” He smiled when he noticed.

“Well, hello to you too.”

“Sorry. Hi. Can I come in?”

“Of course.” She opened her arms and hugged him, smelling the salt on his collar.

They separated. “Do you need a drink?”

“Something strong,” he said, making his way to the sofa.

“I had a feeling,” she said, grabbing a bottle of single malt scotch from the liquor cabinet and pouring two glasses. She handed him his drink and sat down on the other end of the couch, swinging her legs up to cover the distance between them. “So, what is it this time?”

He had already downed half the glass before he said, “It’s Alexa. She called my parents, the little bitch.” His knuckles went white around the glass.

“Don’t call her that.”

“She knew what they did and she called them anyway.”

“She tries to see the best in people. You can’t blame her.”

“It’s none of her fucking business but I can’t go a day without her calling me because she’s worried.”

“She cares about you.”

“That’s the problem. She only does what she thinks is right and doesn’t listen to me. Her convictions are suffocating.” He downed the other half of the scotch and placed the glass on the coffee table in front of him. She looked at him, with his hands interwoven underneath
his chin and leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. She moved to sit next to him and placed a hand on his back. “I know I’m not being fair to her, but she’s delusional.”

Maya looked him in the eyes. He looked back and she thought his eyes looked like they were filled with storm clouds. She bent forward and kissed him. It was a brief kiss, a flash of affection meant to calm and steady his nerves. “Hey, it’s gonna be alright.”

“I never should have told her.”

“Do you think they’ll actually follow up?”

“There’s a reason I didn’t tell them I was leaving. They’ve never given up easily.”

“Sounds like they put my parents to shame.”

“Did your father ever try to beat God into your heathen skull? Did the power of Christ compel him to burn you with expensive Cuban cigars?” He stood up and started pacing in front on the other side of the coffee table. “I was raised to believe that we’re all God’s children, that I should love everyone the same.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No. It’s fine.” He sat back down. “It’s just really difficult to leave your beliefs behind when you have people bent on pulling you back in.”

“Are you sure you want to leave it behind?”

“I think so...I don’t know.” He leaned his head back and slumped into the soft embrace of the couch cushions. “You and your questions.”

“I don’t want you to do something you might regret.”

“All I know is that I never want to put anyone through the same thing my parents put me through.”
“I think you’re too good of a person for that.”

“I’m not so sure. I haven’t been that great to Alexa.”

“She still thinks you’re dating? I thought you told her.”

“I tried, but she doesn’t want to hear it. She’s too sure of what she wants, and what she wants is to make me a success story. I’m a point of pride for her.”

She took a sip of her drink and said, “I won’t pretend to know anything about what she believes, but I remember reading that it isn’t an individual’s place to do the work of God.”

“We are merely to plant the seed and God will foster its growth. It’s a basic tenant, easily forgotten it seems. I can’t make sense of it anymore. I’ve spent too long looking for God in the clouds.”

“Weren’t there figures in the Bible known for doubting the divine?”

“Which one? You’re gonna have to be more specific.”

She punched him. “I’m thinking of one in particular, smart ass. Thomas, maybe?”

“That’s Doubting Thomas. After Christ rose from the grave, Thomas refused to believe it until he saw Jesus for himself. Jesus appeared to Thomas and let him touch the scars on his hands and feet.”

“I forget what Jesus said to him afterward.”

“He called Thomas out for believing only in the things he could see and touch. ‘Blessed are those who believe but do not see.’”

“So, you’re just like Thomas. You can’t believe in something you can’t see.”
“I know what I’ve seen, and if that’s the work of God then I don’t want to believe in him.” He crossed his arms and let out a sigh.

“Hey. I think doubt is a good thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“If Martin Luther had never doubted the tenants of the Catholic Church, then Protestantism wouldn’t exist.”

“You know a lot about religion for someone who doesn’t believe in God.”

“What can I say? My parents tried their best to convert me, but I made it clear that I just didn’t buy it.”

“I wish it had gone that smoothly for me.”

The ice in their drinks had begun to melt and drops of water slid down the side of the glasses to form rings on the table. Maya lifted her glass and moved the water around with her finger, drawing an intricate design that would disappear as quickly as she had created it. “I know it’s impossible to try and know God; he changes every time I try to imagine him. One day, someone might show me what he looks like, but I think I’m happy until then.”

“What would it take to convince you?”

She took another sip of her drink and furrowed her brow. She held a look of deep contemplation as she said, “I couldn’t say, but I think you’re a step in the right direction.” She saw the blood rushing to his face.

“I think I’m starting to feel the scotch.”

“There’s no reason to be embarrassed, Jer.” She put her glass down and took her glasses off before kissing him. It was a flash flood, and all he could do was follow her lead.
Alexa sat patiently at their usual table, the one underneath the painting that reminded her of mother. The woman in the painting wore a white sun dress with a red ribbon tied around her waist. Her face looked soft, obscured by the expressive quality of the brushstrokes, and the vague indication of a smile made her feel at home. Her mother had always told her to smile, especially when she felt like smiling the least. She thought about those words while waiting for Jeremy to show up so they could have their much needed talk. He was angry with her, and she should have expected that; but she knew it needed to be done for his sake. Direction was missing from his life, and he needed people around him who could serve as an example.

Her sweaty palms left imprints on the cardboard jacket of her coffee cup. Would he be honest with her? They could work through whatever doubts he was having together, but he needed to trust her. She took her phone out and saw a text from her friend, Mary. It read, “I’m praying for you, Alexa. Stay strong, and he’ll come around soon.”

She looked back up at the painting tried to smile, but she found it more difficult than usual. “It’s gonna be fine, Alexa. Just you wait and see.”

At exactly a quarter to 5, Jeremy walked through the door and talked to the barista with the funny unicorn tattoo. They shook hands and laughed in a way that told Alexa they had become good friends. That was typical for Jeremy, though. He had a charismatic quality that drew people to him and made them open up. She had noticed it the first time they met.
and it was what she loved about him the most. He could be so happy, but she had seen him
smile less over the past few months. So, when he sat down across from her, a rare smile on
his face, she was honestly surprised. “Hi, Jeremy,” she said, sharing in his enthusiasm. “It’s
nice to see you in a good mood.”

“I’ve had an epiphany.” She watched as he took a sip from his coffee, and she saw the
regret in his eyes. “Ugh...this coffee really is awful.”

“Why did you get coffee? You hate it.”

“I kept promising the barista I’d order a cup. Today felt like a good day to finally
make the change.”

“Really?”

“Maybe I’m being a bit romantic.”
She laughed. “That might be a first.” It was good to see him smiling again.

“Yeah. Sorry about yesterday, by the way.”

“It’s fine. You were right. I was overreacting.”

“You don’t have to make excuses for me. I haven’t treated you very well recently.”

“Well, thanks for apologizing.” This was a good sign. Maybe the clouds had finally
parted to reveal what he was looking for.

“I feel like you deserve that much, but it doesn’t excuse what you did.”

She knew they would have to face this, and she was ready to weather whatever he
needed to say. “I know you’re upset, and I’ll admit I might’ve gone too far.”
“Alexa, I told you what they did. That kind of thing doesn’t just go away after a few years, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive them. So, to have you go behind my back and try to get them involved, I can’t trust you after that.”

“I was concerned. You spent so much time in your head I was afraid I might lose you to your doubts. I did what I thought I had to.”

“I know. You’ve done more than enough, and that’s the problem.”

“I don’t understand.” She understood perfectly well.

“This is gonna be hard for you to hear.” He scratched his head and looked her in the eyes. “Whatever this is, whatever we have...I can’t do it anymore.”
“Alright, does anyone have something we can pray for over the coming weeks?” The weekly bible study had come to an end and Henry was wrapping the night up in the usual way. For many ministers, the taking of prayer requests seemed like ritual done for the sake of completion, but Alexa could tell that Henry really understood the significance.

Alexa slowly raised her hand and cleared her throat. He turned his head toward her with a humble smile framed by thick-rimmed glasses and underlined with a neat bow tie.

“Alexa, how can we pray for you?”

“Umm...” Alexa fumbled with her words. She had difficulty asking others for their help, but she was failing on her own and needed the support of her friends.

“That’s normal. When things weigh heavily on your heart, they can be hard to express in words.”

“Thank you, Henry.” He was right. She knew he was right. She just needed to get it out there.

He nodded his acknowledgement of her thanks. “Now, go ahead whenever you’re ready.”

Alexa took a look at all of the familiar faces around her, patient and waiting to hear what she had to say. Knowing that she was accepted made it that much easier. She took a deep breath.

“I have a friend who’s going through a difficult time right now and I don’t know what I can do to help him through it.”
“Is it something that you’re at liberty to share, or would you prefer to keep it private? Henry took a seat and adjusted his glasses before speaking. “Alright then. What is your friend going through that has you so concerned?”

“To put it plainly, he’s having some major doubts about his faith and I think he’s even thinking about giving it up entirely.”

“Ah, I understand. You want to know if there’s something you can do to help him find his faith again.”

“Exactly. It really hurts to see him struggle like he is.” A few tears began to flow down Alexa’s face as she thought about Jeremy. She wanted to help him rekindle his passion for God so badly, but she felt like everything she tried was doomed to fail.

The girl sitting next to Alexa laid a hand on her shoulder. “We know how you feel Alexa. When somebody close to you begins distancing themselves from God, it isn’t easy to cope with.”

“It’s so hard, Mary. Every time I try to help, he just withdraws a little further into himself. I don’t know what to do.” Alexa tried her best to hold back the tears and put on a strong face, but she was tired and out of options.

Henry’s eyes were closed and he was hunched over in his seat. He wore his usual look of deep contemplation and Alexa hoped he was thinking of a way she could help Jeremy. He opened his eyes when Alexa finished speaking. “I have some things that I can suggest to you, but I think they would be better said one on one. Walk with me to my office after we’ve finished up and I will help you in any way I can.”

“Thank you, Henry. I really appreciate it.”
“Don’t worry about it, helping you all on your walks with God is my passion. And on that note, I think what Alexa needs right now is some encouragement from us. I’m sure you can all recall a time where you felt helpless, a time when you felt you couldn’t do it on your own. I want you to think of that time and tell us how God helped you through it. Who would be willing to share?”

Mary spoke up first. “I remember when my parents were going through their divorce and I tried to do everything I could to keep them together. It felt like my life was being torn apart and everything I knew was being ripped away from me.”

“How did God help you in your time of need?” Henry looked at Mary while smiling reassuringly.

“I prayed that God would give me some solid ground to plant my feet on. I asked for an anchor to get me through the divorce and help me cope with the changes going on around me. That was when I met Alexa.”

Alexa nodded her head. “That’s right. You were a mess, so I couldn’t leave you by yourself.”

“Because you stuck with me, I was able to get through the worst part of my life and I thank God to this day that you’re still my anchor. Please, Alexa. Don’t think that you’re alone in this. We’re here for you, and God is here for you. He’ll be your strength when you need him most.”

“I couldn’t have said it any better myself, Mary.” Henry stood up and walked over to Alexa before pulling a chair up in front of her. He sat down and looked Alexa in the eye. “You have friends who have been through the same doubts and had the same fears as you
have. You’re afraid that your friend is losing his way and you can’t do anything about it. But you can do something about it. Put your faith in God.” This was met by an Amen from a few of the others. “We’re human, so we’re bound to fail on our own; but, God guides us and shows us the path of righteousness. Only he can help your friend see the light.”

“You’re right. I’ve been so focused on helping Jeremy by myself that I forgot to go to God.” Alexa wiped the last of the tears from her eyes and hugged Henry as hard as she could. “You are so wise, Henry. I don’t know what we would do without you. You too Mary. Maybe now you can be my anchor.” Alexa smiled and gave Mary a hug as well.

“I’d be happy to.”

Henry stood up and pulled his chair back to the other side of the room. “Alright, everyone. I’ll lead us in a closing prayer, and remember to keep Alexa and her friend, Jeremy, in your prayers.”

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Alexa sat in one of the slick leather armchairs situated in front of Henry’s desk. Anyone would have thought that this office belonged to one of the senior pastors, with its fancy furniture and opulent decor. But, that was Henry. He really was an old soul.

“So, his name is Jeremy?” Henry had taken a seat opposite Alexa and was leaning forward, elbows on the desk in front of him and fingers steepled.

“Yes. I’ve only known him for a year, but I can’t stand to see him slowly withdrawing from God.”
“The name sounds familiar. Did he come to church here?”

“He did. I brought him along and introduced him to our church. He seemed really enthusiastic about joining, but that didn’t last.”

“Well, if he’s the same age as you then I’m not too surprised that his faith is being challenged.”

“What do you mean?”

“During their college years and just after, many religious people go through serious periods of self-reflection. They question their upbringing and all of the things they believed for so long. If he’s only been out of college for a few years, then he’s most likely still going through that process of spiritual stagnation.”

“That’s probably it, but what can I do to help him find his faith again?”

“What have you tried so far?”

What hadn’t she tried? Alexa told him about her plan to bring him to church and surround him with people who could strengthen his faith. She talked about the books of theology she had bought for Jeremy and all of the late night phone calls where they talked about God and spirituality. None of it worked. She was getting desperate.

“It would seem it’s not for lack of effort that he hasn’t come around yet.”

“So what do you suggest for the girl who’s tried everything?”

“Am I correct in assuming his parents are Christians?”

“They are, but Jeremy told me he doesn’t have a good relationship with them.”

“Did he say why?”
“No, and I was surprised when he told me he hadn’t spoken with them in two years.”

She wasn’t being entirely truthful. Jeremy said they were abusive when he talked about his doubts, but she thought he was exaggerating. When he showed her the scar on his arm where his father had held a lit cigar to his skin, she was more convinced. Still, enough time had passed. Maybe now was the time for forgiveness, but Henry didn’t need to know.

“That’s not unusual. He probably wanted to get away from them so he can figure out what it is he believes. That requires distance.”

Alexa didn’t understand what he said, but she bowed to his experience. She couldn’t imagine separating herself from her parents if she was having doubts. They were people she trusted the most and she knew they would help her see how foolish she was being. Her parents were admirable in their faith, and when she was a child, she told herself she would be just like them when she was older. Hearing that Jeremy didn’t have the same relationship with his parents was heartbreaking. “I don’t know. Maybe I should try to talk to them.”

“I wouldn’t advise it. If he doesn’t want them involved in his life, then you should respect that.”

“Then how do I help him?”

Henry took his glasses off and set them down on the desk in front of him and leaned back in his chair. “It sounds like he still needs some room to breathe. I suggest you just give him time.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “So, you’re telling me to do nothing?”
“Alexa, you’ve done enough already. Don’t push too hard. There’s nothing we can do as Christians except sow the seeds. God is the only one who can make them grow, and nurture them to maturity.”

She didn’t feel like she had done enough. If she had done enough, then why was Jeremy still pulling away from her? Henry was well-versed in scripture, but he didn’t know anything about relationships. “Alright. I’ll give him some space.”

He could hear the disappointment in her voice. “If you’re that worried, maybe you could introduce him to me. I feel God calling me to reach out and help him with his struggles.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good. Then I’ll see you next Sunday.”

Alexa stood up from the armchair and walked to the door. As she grabbed the doorknob, Henry spoke.

“I know what you’re going through isn’t easy, but I know you. Promise me you won’t bring his parents into this.”

“I promise.” She turned the knob, pushed the door open and walked through. She closed the door behind her, her hand lingering on the knob for a few moments. She shook her head and began walking down the hallway. Henry meant well, but he didn’t really understand. When she got home, she would start looking for Jeremy’s parents. They would know what to do.

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“Alexa, you weren’t at church this week. Are you okay?”

“Alexa, you haven’t been returning my calls. I’m starting to get worried about you.”

“Alexa, it’s been a few weeks now. This isn’t like you. Call me back ASAP.”

“Alexa, it’s your mother. We haven’t heard from you in a while. Is everything alright? How’s Jeremy?”

“Alexa.”

Alexa was curled up in a cushy armchair, trying to ignore all the people who were worried about her. She was a failure. She didn’t deserve their love.

“Alexa.”

“Go away, I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Well that’s funny, considering you’re the one who came to talk to me.”

“What?” She looked up at the person speaking to her, trying to remember where she was. The memories of the past few weeks were a blur of concerned phone calls, knocks on her door, and countless messages on her voicemail. Her vision finally focused on Henry, sitting across from her at his desk.

“Alexa, are you feeling alright?” Henry looked at her.

“I was just thinking about something else. Sorry, why am I here?”

“You said you wanted to talk to me about something. It sounded urgent, so I came as quickly as I could. I guess the receptionist let you into my office.”

She remembered now. “Right. Sorry, I’ve been pretty out of it recently.”
“That’s what I’ve heard. I haven’t seen you at church and you haven’t been at bible study.”

“I don’t deserve to be there. I’m a failure.”

“What are you talking about? Of course you deserve to be there.”

“I screwed up, Henry. I’m not worthy of following Christ.”

“I’m confused. What happened since the last time we spoke?”

“Jeremy... our friend who was having doubts? What happened with Jeremy?”

“I made a mistake.”

“What kind of mistake? You didn’t sleep with him, did you?”

“What? No. I did something worse.”

“Just say it. What did you do?”

“I finally pushed him away.”

“Oh.” Henry looked relieved when she finally came out with it. Here she was having a crisis and he was relieved that she hadn’t slept with him.

“I’m really torn up about this and all you can say is ‘Oh’?”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I’m interested to know what happened.”

“I didn’t listen to you.”

“So, you did something hasty. You pushed a little too far?”

“I called his parents. He didn’t like it and I don’t think he’ll ever want to see me again.”

“I thought he just needed his space. I can understand him being upset, but going that far?”
Alexa, felt her face turning red. She avoided eye contact and figured out how to say what she hadn’t the last time she was here. “When I talked to you before, I wasn’t entirely honest. His parents got violent with him when he brought up his doubts. That’s why he hasn’t spoken to them.”

“Oh, Alexa.” He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes.

“I just thought if I could make everything right then Jeremy would see God at work in his life.”

“You’ve been so foolish.”

“I didn’t want to hear that from you.” She was on the verge of a breakdown, tears leaking out from behind the dam she built on the day things had ended between her and Jeremy.

“Maybe you can shed some light on this for me, but I don’t understand why you were so invested in him. Who was Jeremy to you?”

“He was a friend. What else would he be?” Alexa’s heart beat more quickly. Her palms sweat. She felt dizzy.

“He must have been a really close friend if you’re this torn up about him.”

“He was. We were close from the moment I met him about a year ago. You know, until-”

“Close is one way of putting it, I suppose.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“You’re getting defensive, Alexa. I’m not accusing you of anything, I just want you to be honest with me. I can’t help you if you’re not honest.”
“I...he’s...he’s just really important to me.”

“Stop lying to yourself.” Henry spoke in such a hushed voice that anyone listening would have missed it, but Alexa heard every syllable like breaking glass. She had successfully hidden the truth from everyone, herself included, but she couldn’t hide the truth from him. He was always so perceptive.

“I thought he might be the one.”

“Did he ever tell you he felt the same way?”

“He tried to tell me that he wasn’t interested, but I didn’t listen. God, I feel so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid, Alexa. You’re just confused. Somewhere along the way, your feelings for Jeremy were conflated with your passion for doing God’s will.”

“I was so sure I was doing the right thing. I kept thinking my parents would be so proud of me if I could bring a wayward soul back to the grace of God.”

“Your parents won’t think any less of you. You don’t have anything to be ashamed of.”

“I wish I could believe you.”

“You’re still not listening. I’m trying to pull you out of whatever pit of despair you’ve thrown yourself into.”

“I told you. I don’t deserve your sympathy.”

“Alexa. If the creator of the universe thought you were important enough to die for, than you are deserving of much more than my sympathy.” That shut her up. “God hasn’t turned his back on you, and neither will I.”

The tears couldn’t be held back anymore. “I’m sorry, I just need a minute.”
“Go on. Let it out.”

They sat there for a long time, her crying and him patiently waiting for her to finish. She cried for herself and how she thought she knew better than the God she had come to love and fear. She cried because her misguided zeal had pushed Jeremy further away from God then he was before she met him. She cried when she realized that despite all of her failures and faults, God still loved her enough to give her Henry. She could tell he really cared about her, and he had a lot to teach her about being a follower of Christ. Finally, she stopped crying.

“Sounds like you’ve been holding that in for a while.”

“You didn’t have to sit through it.”

“Yes. I did. It let me see God working in your heart.”

“I didn’t think I’d hear somebody saying that about me.”

“We all have the gods we invent. These images of god threaten to trick us into thinking they’re real, so they can easily obscure the true face of God.”

“It’s gonna take some time to recover from this.”

“You’re going through your own period of spiritual reflection. You’ll have to examine each and every thing you thought you knew about God and figure out where you stand.”

“Will you be there to help me?”

“I’ll be there every step of the way, if you want me to be.”

“Thank you, Henry.”
“I’m not the one you should be thanking.” Henry stood up from behind the desk and walked to the door. “It’s late. We can get started on this whenever you’re ready, but now you need to rest.”

Alexa stood up from her armchair and walked through the door that Henry held open for her. He turned off the lights in the office and locked it, yanking at the knob to make sure. When he turned around, she hugged him to convey everything she was feeling but couldn’t put into words. He settled his hands on her back and let her remaining tears soak into his bow tie.