

"A humorous and bittersweet tale that gets to the root of family dynamics and the mental health struggles that sometimes ensue."



*return
to
me*

A NOVEL BY
ERICKA CLAY

Return to Me

A Novel

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To all the mothers and daughters, and the God who loves them all.

"I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you."

Isaiah 44:22

The Great American Novel

Hellie

"It's not...bad."

"Oh, great. What a relief."

"Don't– don't do that, Hel. You know these things take time," Brent says, quietly reviewing all that he's observed about empathy and attempting to offer it in his glance.

"Ah, got it. I was thinking six years was enough, but there I go again, prancing around through fairy land..."

"Done with the dramatics?" Brent looks at me again, this time like he's done since we were kids. Well, actually, he was a kid, I was sixteen, faux-mothering a five-year-old who had somehow managed a crash course in street smarts between leaving the womb and entering kindergarten. I, on the other hand, have never had much need for mothering, which is a good thing since I had to practically raise Daisy, too.

Daisy. Something leaps in my heart like I've left the kettle burning on the stove or forgot to feed the dog (neither of which I actually own. Tea is disgusting, and I like dogs...but I would probably forget to feed one). But then my system settles down when I realize Daisy died months ago, and I don't have to rap on her front door until she finally wakes up or listen to her talk to me like we're two strangers waiting for a bus. I find a calm, a peace in that. But I also find something beneath those things that begins to boil.

"I imagine Fogerty would act a lot like you, you know...if he were humanoid." Brent takes a sip of his doctored "coffee" – a poor excuse for the beans that died for this concoction of cold cream and enough Splenda to

make a grown man weep. Fortunately, Brent is far from one of those, so he can't even taste the irony.

"Somehow, I take that as an honor and privilege, good sir," I say. Fogerty is Brent's dog, one of those animals that you forget isn't somehow biologically related to you and fully capable of giving you advice on your 401k. He's more cat than canine, slowly moving about Brent's studio apartment in a way that suggests he's the one who pays the rent, and it's only out of the goodness of his heart that my brother has shelter from the elements.

Brent would definitely never forget to feed Fogerty because he values his existence.

"And Fogerty would act nothing like me," I add. "He has more sense than to write a 'not entirely palatable' novel for nearly a decade of his life."

"I didn't call it 'not entirely palatable.' And no, no, he wouldn't." Brent is gazing off over my right shoulder, staring at what I assume is an unsuspecting person in one of the booths behind me. It's something I had to get on to him growing up. He's on the spectrum or ADHD (or both, maybe), but it wasn't exactly something that was overly diagnosed back in the day, and even if it were, we were never in the financial situation to come close to broaching the subject. Not to mention mentally capable of handling the logistics with Daisy pretending to steer our ship.

My heart leaps again and rattles against my ribs. I settle it down with slow sips of breath from some meditation video I found on YouTube. It typically works...until it doesn't.

"Shouldn't we be celebrating 'small wins' or something just as nonsensical nowadays?" Brent says. He gives me his version of a warm smile—one part maniacal, two parts strained and then goes back to studying whatever it is that's captured his attention behind my left shoulder.

You did good, Hellie, I imagine him saying to me. But it's stupid, I know, to expect anyone to change.

The Defective Bin

Daisy

There's nothing worse in this life than a woman.

It was my father's mantra that played like a warped record in my head whenever Helene was born. I didn't even like that name, Helene, but it was the name of the nurse they gave me, who was pretty terrible, but there's something about delivering a watermelon through the wrong end of you that zaps all imagination.

But with Brent? It was something different.

Beautiful, really.

I've always admired men. I mean, not my father (or Brent's father either for that matter), but I never looked at him like a representative of his gender. Carson was one of the outliers, the kind on the conveyor belt that the factory workers threw into the "defective" bin.

And he was the only parent I ever knew. If that's not typical, I don't know what is.

I wanted to be different for my children. I didn't want to be like the man who once tried to kill my bunny because it was looking at him the wrong way. I wanted to love them so fiercely, they'd never worry that one day, I'd just up and leave them like he left me.

Sixteen, alone in that shanty of a house.

I wanted them to know the warmth of another person who has all their faculties and doesn't blame the world for everything they lack.

I wanted Helene to know, it's not so bad being a girl, and one day, a woman.

I wanted, wanted, wanted.

But you can't change what you are.

Peeled Grapes

Hellie

Brent invites me to his apartment after coffee. I know it's part of his program, and I'm quietly proud of him for practicing the tools they're teaching him at the MLK. They offer group sessions at the Martin Luther King Community Center two blocks over from Brent's apartment, and he goes there regularly (for the stale coffee and day-old donuts, as he says). And I'm proud when he remembers to be courteous, but I don't say it out loud.

It's just not something we do.

"Hello there, Fogerty, my good man." Fogerty is perched up on "his chair," fully embracing his genetics and giving off incredibly fierce chihuahua-mix vibes. He's rotund and pointy-eared, and you'd think I was meeting the president himself with how he gives me a soft look of pity coupled with just a hint of arrogance.

"He's not himself today. I forgot to get the wet food."

"Well heaven forbid," I say, skirting around Fogerty's chair to the peasant's quarters on the couch. I've been here a handful of times since Brent moved in, mainly to carry up his crap from the first floor to the third when he was moving in and also that one time he panicked and jumped ship for a few days. I found it in my heart during that time to feed Fogerty, who you would think would still be grateful that I didn't let him starve, but alas, he has an incredibly short memory.

"So how are classes?" I ask. Brent is in his kitchen, a metallic, open-concept configuration that reminds me of an operating room. He takes out a container of individually portioned peeled grapes and forgets to offer me any. I'm thankfully relieved.

"Good. I have a friend. She's a girl." He mumbles the last part, stuffing grapes into his mouth to muffle the sound. This is where I have to do my nonchalant face so that I don't scare him into celibacy forever.

"Oh, that's neat," I say to one of the throw pillows I'm not allowed to touch. I just recently got promoted to peasant couch, and I don't want to wear out my welcome. I wait for him to say something, anything about this mystery woman who has an affinity for a man who eats peeled foods and keeps a dog with the subtle air of a war lord, but in true Brent fashion, he just chews and vacuously stares.

"And now...?"

"And now...?" Brent repeats, slowly moving his lips in a way that makes me feel like Annie Sullivan trying to break through to Helen.

"Remember what they taught you about reciprocation?"

"Oh," he says, putting down his half-eaten grape and wiping his hands with one-half sheet of paper towel. "And, might I ask, how have you been?"

"Other than the book, not too shabby. Pearl just got a new A/C unit." This has literally been the highlight of my week, my month – nay – my year. My elderly landlord/BFF forever just bought a state-of-the-art Fleischman's 2000 wall unit and has anchored that bad boy in the down-stairs living room window. That's all you need to know about Pearl – that she's the kind of person who could have kept that thing hidden in her own bedroom, but instead, made sure to share its glorious gusts with her single, middle-aged tenant who likes to pretend she hasn't watched every single episode of *The Golden Girls*.

I'd probably let her read my diary if I had one.

"And..." Brent pauses, studying a half-eaten grape harder than anyone probably ever has in all of history. "How is Pearl?" he manages to force out. I almost ask if he needs to sit down for a second.

"She's good," I lie. Things have gotten a little more complicated for Pearl. Her COPD is the worst it's been and her son, "The Insurance Agent," is off somewhere in the Bahamas while I make sure his poor mother doesn't cough up a lung. It's unfair, this life. Here this dude has the whole world in a woman like Pearl, and he treats her like he probably does waitstaff. And my own – Daisy – would have never shared her air conditioner, if she had even thought to buy one in the first place.

Brent has his concerned face on, and I know it's because my worry lines are boasting again. I do my best to smooth them out and smile.

"Well, this has been exceptional. Thank you for the invite." I've been here all of seven minutes, but that's seven minutes in dog years for Brent who looks like he's spontaneously combusting from the inside.

"Oh, yes. Yes, we should do this again," he says, extending his hand mechanically. I take it. It's a bit limp, but I can tell he's been forced to practice it at the MLK. Thank the gods for those beautiful souls who give up their Saturdays to teach my brother to be halfway human.

"See ya, Fogerty," I say. His little chihuahua head perks up but then he gives an annoyed sigh when he discovers it's just me again. I take leave of Brent's apartment complex, the insides as sterile as Brent's kitchen, thankful that I at least have my brother. And you know, I have Pearl too. *It could be worse*, I think, and then I do that thing where I start considering everything I could add to my life to make it more "robust": a goldfish, a knitting club, a boyfriend with the unflappable presence of my brother's dog...

And just like that I'm out on the sidewalk in the late morning light, getting the eerie feeling that somebody is staring at me. And somebody is. A cat.

Bottle Caps

Daisy

The first time I learned about women, I was three years old. My mother had been gone for about a year by then, but I don't remember registering that. I did register, however, sitting with my father in his recliner, he with a bottle of PBR in one hand and a postcard from her in the other, as I balanced my tiny body on the armrest.

"Dayton," he said and snorted, taking a strong sip from his bottle. I looked at the postcard. There was a big red building on it with cars parked under its sides like Mother Ginger lifting up her skirts, welcoming back her little Polichinelle children. Of course, at the time, I hadn't endured hours of torture with the Arkansas Civic Ballet and had no idea what Mother Ginger was, let alone the *Nutcracker*. And being three, I couldn't process that this motel was what my mother had left me for.

"She's cleaning up other people's shit, but soon enough, she's going to be the local weather girl. Look at you having a fancy mama like that." He was in a good mood because he was drinking and because he was making fun of her. And maybe because he was making fun of me also, but it hadn't become official yet. It wouldn't be until years later when I did stupid things like not grow breasts in time or drive into our garage door at fourteen, practicing for my driver's permit.

I thought about the woman on the other side of that card for so many years later. The day he split, he benevolently gave it to me as a gift, the backside down on the kitchen table so I could read her tangled writing. Did she look like me or me, her? Did she ever become a weather girl? What's so great about an invisible dream when you're given all the flesh and blood you could ever really want?

He snorted again, rested the motel postcard on my leg, and poured a small amount of beer into his bottle cap. "A toast," he said, lifting bottle and cap, one in each hand. I studied him as he did it, seeing something beneath the deadening happiness in his eyes, something that maybe could have told me who he used to be before I ever knew him, his own three-year-old version who had once been tiny and small and prone to the whims of all who claimed a part of his life.

"To Jackie, our own little hometown nobody. May she get where she's going or strike us all dead." He put the cap to my lips, and I sensed the beer like a cat at its bowl, its scent strange, and watched my father gulp down all the things just as invisible as Jackie's dream – his fears, regrets, an underlying sense of never being enough.

And I drank down mine too.

The Cat

Hellie

This was the missing link, the pies de resistance, the...the something else that means the absolute peak of (literary) perfection.

Zenith? I've always loved that word. Let's go with that.

"Hey there little Zenith," I gently called out so as not to scare the cat staring blankly back at me. It was generically Tabby and a little prone to licking its paws every time I engaged it, like my mere presence was dirtying it. This cat and Fogerty must hang out at the same bar.

"Finally," I said to myself and also to a random man I hadn't noticed watching me, a (supposedly) grown woman trying to coerce a cat into doing something worth writing about.

"Can I help you?" I asked, but I apparently couldn't because he decided to move on. When I turned back around, Zenith was already trotting his tiny Tabby behind down the sidewalk. I took mental notes: mild weather (not too hot nor too cold), a sufficient amount of passersby (meaning there weren't any...my favorite amount), and an entire storyline creeping up and out of the sidewalk cracks as I allowed Zenith to practically write my book for me.

I had hit a wall. I knew it. Brent knew it. I'm sure even that strange man on the sidewalk knew it. I mean I get writing the Great American Novel shouldn't be easy. But I've been writing this dang thing for six years now, and I'm only on chapter eleven. And for that reason, I have absolutely no shame in letting a stray cat take the reins for a while.

"So, where we heading, Zenith?" I cooed. We shuffled past a flower shop and a little boutique with cute clothes that would make me look like I

was trying too hard (whereas I prefer to look as if I'm not trying at all. Nailed it). I could see Fletcher's Funeral Home in the mere distance, and my writerly senses started tingling.

"A funeral home!" I said abruptly to a small Asian woman pushing a small dog in a stroller. She tsked at me and swiped her finger left and right, unknowingly ruining my favorite amount of passersby.

I ignored her, too enthralled with Zenith, who was leading me straight to literary gold. And as we got a little closer, I felt a little farther away from Daisy, and poor Pearl, and the fact that my brother's my best friend and the kind of person who never takes off his shoes (even to sleep), and all the other ways I could feel sorry for myself. But I don't have to because this cat is guiding me away from having to consider any of those things as I sink deeper into a reality I can control.

But then he stops short, turns to look at me again (and licks his paw for good measure) before strolling through the open doors of a place I was sure I'd never be caught dead in.

A church.

The Tunnel

Daisy

What I could never explain to Helene was that parents were humans too. I had learned this the hard way one evening when my father and I drove from Little Rock to Fayetteville to see his dying mother. I was sixteen and barely knew this woman existed, but for a few short days, Carson Garmin was released from the man who typically kept watch inside his body, and he became something much more worrisome than usual – a kitten.

I first noticed it on the way up in his Pinto, "The Lima Bean," I called it because of its garish green color. My head rested against the window, willing myself out of the car and back into the brutal haven of Madame Marie's overheated studio, where I should have been practicing jetes until my legs fell off.

Instead, I was cruising through the Bobby Hopper Tunnel with a man who was battling his past in the driver's seat. I made the mistake of looking over, the warm lights of the tunnel reflecting off glass and mirror, and my father's face that betrayed itself.

He was just another person. That was all. And something about that made me sick to my stomach.

I threw up on the side of the highway, holding back my own hair as the contents of my stomach made an appearance. It was moments like these that I missed Jacqueline, my mother, who was either a weather girl or dead by now. And that was another hard feeling too – how do you miss something you've never had?

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand as we settled back in, dazed and confused that he hadn't yelled at me or made some snide comment

about the car smelling like vomit. But he was too busy working out his own pain to even poke at mine.

The radio was a low hum, and my ears strained to hear "we had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun" because turning up the radio could have meant him falling apart. But that unnerved me too, suddenly not knowing which way my father would turn. Carson Garmin could be a Grade A asshole, but at least he was consistent.

But today? No telling.

Several refrains and waves of nausea later, we were at his mother's house. He told me to call her "Granny," which became a marble in my mouth, so I decided not to call her anything at all. And then there we were, standing on her front stoop and suspended in time because he kept shifting his feet, lifting his fist, but not having the nerve to knock.

It was a glimpse into my future with my daughter – she waiting and me never getting the nerve.

The Church

Hellie

Just when I thought Fogerty was the biggest jerk on the planet, I apparently have met his match. Zenith is a real gut puncher, walking in like he owns the place while I stand outside the church, meekly poking in my head like I'll burst into flames if I take a step forward.

I feel like a vampire waiting to be invited in.

"Hey there! Don't be shy." Somebody inside is reading my thoughts, and as I try to respond like a human being, my tongue knots and I instantly think of the last time I was in church. It was during Daisy's "come to Jesus" phase where she erroneously believed God or the universe would somehow miraculously heal her brain and turn her into Mother Teresa. I spent three consecutive Sundays in something called "Bible Time," listening to how I'd be sent to hell for wearing shorts.

It was resplendent.

Zenith sauntered his way back to my feet, roping himself around my legs and rudely pushing me forward. I tripped inside the tiny foyer and squeezed my eyes shut as to not watch my flesh spontaneously combust in front of this poor woman who was tricked into wearing horizontal blue and white stripes. I'm no fashion expert, but even I know this is a no-no.

"Oh, watch out for Magellan there. He tends to get a little handsy."

"You don't say." The limestone pavers are sturdy beneath my feet, and the church looks like how I expect a church to look – dark wood and an overarching sense of being better than me. I turn back to the door, but I'm caught by Stripes's hand that shoots out at me, waiting for a shake.

"Barbara Ann. I'm the secretary here," she says. I take it and have my hand thrusted up and down. I'm typically used to Brent's dead fish of a handshake and find myself absorbing the undulations through my stomach, my knees. I've never so badly wanted to bolt.

"I've been praying for you," she says. That's when I stare directly in her face. I was expecting someone older from my initial rough sketch, but looking closer, I see that Barbara Ann must be around my age. Her hair frames her chin, and a wave of fringe tickles her glasses. Her eyes are dark and earnest, and for a second, I believe her. This woman has been praying...for me.

"Excuse me?" I say, realizing I'm alone in a building tucked away from the street with someone who is most likely a lunatic because that would be my luck.

"Sorry. I'm usually not so forward, but I have several boxes I need to get upstairs and no one's here today. Millie is getting a root canal and Pastor Mike is visiting his grand nieces and nephews, so I'm stuck here trying to figure out how I'm going to get these boxes of hymnals and Bibles up the stairs."

I want to say, "Well, I don't envy you," as I walk back out into the non-judgmental sunlight, but something stops me. *There's a story here, Hellie*, it says, and I've never wanted to slap my inner voice harder. But I know it's right. And if I want this book to *be* something, then I suppose it has to *be about* something. So, I do something I rarely ever do. I swallow my pride and experience its chalky plummet down my intestines.

"Sure," I say, and even manage something roughly akin to a smile.

Granny

Daisy

When I met Granny, I didn't like her. First, she was a woman, which meant I couldn't trust her, and second, she was related to Carson. He had finally gotten the nerve to knock on her door, his old door to the home he had lived in as a boy. I did that thing again where I was imagining him young and vulnerable, regretting every inch of it until Granny swung open the door, nearly knocking me off the stoop.

"Time different in Little Rock?" she asked. She was dressed like a man in old corduroy slacks and work boots. The button-down she wore was old and faded, slightly yellowed against her wrinkled skin. She was much older than I had expected, something I imagined Carson would have mentioned, but then again, Carson didn't mention much that was either of interest or importance. Also, if she was supposed to be dying, she sure as heck wasn't acting like it.

"Well, let me look at her." She said it in a way that made me think there was someone else behind me, but she took me roughly by the elbow and into the house that smelled the same as her – musty with time. I had the insane thought to curtsy or pirouette, but both of those things made my feet wince. I had stayed long after practice at Madame Marie's the night before because I didn't want to go home and knew Carson wouldn't care either way, already delighting in his nightly routine of too many beers. I had practiced my part in the upcoming Spring recital until my right big toenail took leave. I had bandaged it the night before and then again that morning, basking in the pain that kept me in the moment and that moment alone. And I remember my mind's finger grazing against the edges of a deep-seated fear: I liked pain just a little too much.

"Well, I don't know about all the fuss. But I 'spose not bad," Granny said, lifting my arm and then dropping it, that same finger prodding against the pleasure of my fist finding my flesh.

"And there you are," she said to her son. Granny nodded at him, and he nodded back, Carson not knowing what to do with his hands. It was a hard thing to witness. It was like I was no longer the daughter of a bitter man, but the strange traveling companion of someone I was starting to suspect wasn't lawfully allowed to have a license. He looked so meek and small next to his mother, her literally wearing the pants, and she knew it too. There was a cat eating the canary smile on her face when her eyes weren't blank. It almost made me feel sorry for Carson.

Almost.

"Dinner's cold but might as well not waste it," she said, leading us into her dining room. We both were set on pause, waiting for the other to push "play." And in that moment, I felt my father's hand graze mine, and that's when I hit upon another fear: I couldn't place his touch as either pleasure or pain.

The Crawl Space

Hellie

"Upstairs" is barely a crawl space but somehow, Barbara Ann and I fit snugly enough. I try not to get the Beach Boys song by the same name stuck in my head, but it's too late. She waves her hand in front of my face as my brain starts rocking and a rolling.

"Earth to space cadet," she says, which I find weird, seeing she's the one in horizontal stripes.

"Sorry. So where do we put these?" I've only lugged up one box, but I'm already pretty miffed with Pastor Mike, who's out gallivanting somewhere instead of doing his own dirty work. Or is it squeaky clean work. seeing that we're in a church and all?

"Well, I think there's some room over behind the Christmas decorations." Barbara Ann gets to scooting around some boxes in a back corner while I try to pretend I didn't just see a spider on the sill of the only window in the room. It's round with stained glass and features a heart with something like barbed wire wrapped around it. Or maybe thorns. I imagine it has something to do with Jesus, again, seeing we're in a church, but I feel stupid asking. I'll Google it later.

"So, if I might be so bold, why were you following Magellan?"

I almost ask, "Who?" but then remember Zenith apparently has an alter ego.

"Who says I was following him? Maybe he was following me and cut me off."

"Nah, that's not it," she says, a tad too boldly for my taste. She's stopped rearranging boxes and is looking at me. No, wait, looking into me, which makes me miss the spider. At least it wasn't rude enough to stare.

"How do you know?"

"Because I can tell. You're not one of us."

"One of...?"

"You know, the church crowd. I don't say that accusatorily. It just seems like you have a sense of humor, so..." I feel like this is a pretty odd thing to say in God's house and whatnot, but I know what she means. Sister Rosie certainly wasn't joking about my journey to hell in jean shorts back in the day.

"Oh, well...thank you?" My initial reaction is to nod demurely and shuffle-ball-change my way back down the stairs, but the Great American Novel comes hurling across my mind's eye, and I know I have to sacrifice for my art, even if this means talking to people.

"So how long have you been doing...this?" I ask, Vanna White-ing my hand around the dusty, dank closet of an upstairs.

"Um, well, I've been a member of St. Jude's for seven years now. And it might just be my last." I'm taken aback a bit by her frankly saying so out loud. I pause as if waiting for God to strike us down in this suffocating space a cat tricked me into finding, but nothing happens. Something prompts me into Dr. Phil-mode, my go-to in uncomfortable situations.

"And how does that make you feel?" I say. She looks at me like I've grown another head, but I've got nothing else. I've never left a church. I've hardly ever really been to one (minus the Jean Shorts Fiasco of 1999), so I don't quite know how to respond to her pain.

Barbara Ann looks at me again, into me really, and says, "It makes me feel lost."

Now that? That I get.

The Tub

Daisy

In her tub, my feet looked like someone had taken a meat cleaver to them. The purple, red, and raw flesh was an obscene offense against the bright white ceramic. That's something I noticed about Granny's house. Everything sparkled and shined, and I gathered she washed the world around her like she did her own body, scrubbing her skin with soap and hot water up to the elbows.

I took a page from her book, scrubbing my feet and biting my lip. The pain became me. And I liked that feeling. It was so much more real than watching Carson wither under his mother's gaze or laughing at the fact that he still worked at the same garage he did seven years ago. I had always taken that as a point of pride. At least he could keep a job for all the bottles of PBR rattling in our trash, and so it was confusing and made me feel a little sick that I had even an ounce of pride for a man whose own mother couldn't stand him.

I scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed, wondering what Jacqueline's feet looked like. I imagine not like they'd been squeezed into tiny shoes and punished for existing. I wondered if her pinkie toes turned in slightly like mine did. I wondered if her arch was pronounced or if she was flat-footed and not made to dance.

Carson had never mentioned it – if my mother had ever danced growing up. And I didn't have the guts to ask him. Where had this come from, this intense need to twirl and jump and spring through the air to prove something to other people?

But what that was, I didn't have a clue.

Oh, Jacqueline, did you do it? Did you make weather girl? Or did you give up and get married again and have another little girl? Do you love her more than me? Do you even remember that I exist?

I thought all those things, scrubbing pain into my feet like a maniac, because honestly, I was having a hard time existing myself.

Pearl

Hellie

We ended up out of the crawl space and back onto the sidewalk. I kept straining my head towards the doors leading back to the sanctuary, trying to hint I wanted to take a sneak peak inside, but Barbara Ann was all business by then. She had shown her cards too early and now a stranger knew her heart.

I kind of envied her the feeling.

She thanked me and said I should come by again, but the offer felt deflated. I waved my hand at her and at Zenith/Magellan who was ambling around the frame of the opened double doors. I walked away, hating the feeling of somebody watching me walking (where do I put my hands?), but soon that feeling was replaced with one of loneliness. It stalked me all the way back to my apartment where I can now hear *The Golden Girls* leaking through the cracks in our door. Pearl.

"Hey there, stranger," she says. She's tucked up neatly in the couch in the old quilt her mother had made when she was a girl, and the thing smells like it too. But it's become one of those deeply offensive smells you soon just can't live without.

"Hey yourself," I say. I often feel like Pearl receives all the things I'd love to say to my brother, if, you know, if he could handle them.

"How's Mr. Brent? Becoming a regular lady's man?"

"In fact, he is. He has a girlfriend."

"You're kidding." Pearl pops up out of the comforter and wide-eyes me. She's met Brent a few times without him knowing it, always careful to keep her distance and pretending to be prodding fresh fruit at the bode-

ga or overly interested in the planted lilies over at Bear Park. I've been working up the courage for him to meet her outright, face-to-face. But I'm nervous about it. What if he goes all Brent on me and ends up hating someone I love?

Like with our mother, but in reverse.

"Nope. A regular girl human and everything. Except, of course, I haven't met her. I'm thinking of sneaking into one of his meetings just to confirm."

"That's probably the smart move," Pearl says. She gives me an amused smile, and I snuggle in next to her.

"How's our novel?" Pearl asks. It used to bring me a flutter of pleasure to share this book with her. In fact, it's the whole reason I live with Pearl. She had seen me at the diner a few years back when I started this whole bright idea of becoming a famous author. She asked me about the book I was writing (or at least the blinking cursor that indicated I was doing as much), and I told her all about my life plan of writing *The Great American Novel*. The next thing I know, she's telling me all about her life, how her husband, Floyd, passed away from pancreatic cancer, and how she had all this life insurance money and didn't know what to do with it.

She said she wanted to invest in me.

It felt dream-like, and horribly wrong. How could I take an old lady's money not knowing if this book would be any good? But things were strained with my mother, hardly better with my brother, and I had no friends and honestly, no future.

Pearl seemed like an angel in disguise. And now? I feel like I'm exploiting that angel.

"You hear from The Insurance Agent?" I change topics, and she knows it, but Pearl's a lady and doesn't press.

"He's busy right now. The whole brood's there so I'm sure he has his hands full." She means her worthless son has taken his whole family to the Bahamas, his wife's parents included. I'm sure he's justified this, not wanting his mother to have an "attack," whilst in the Caribbean, but I know deep down it's because he wouldn't want it to ruin his vacation.

"Don't be so hard on him, Hellie. He does his best," she says, although we both know that's not true, considering I'm watching my closest friend wade in crumpled-up tissues filled with her own mucus. But I know that's my cue to zip it. Pearl is a lot better at giving people the benefit of the doubt than I am.

Hence, me still getting to live with her.

"How have you been today? How are the ol' wind bags?" I say, nodding at the TV.

"Still managing. I've only had one pretty bad fit. Poor Senator Murphy. It troubled him something fierce." Pearl nods at her goldfish in his sea-themed under water lair. I doubt Senator Murphy knows what planet he's on let alone the state of Pearl's health, but I give it to her. She loves that thing.

"And Blanche has fallen in love again."

"That Blanche, she knows a good time when she sees one, apparently. Well, I'm in for the rest of the day, so no worries. If you need anything I'm here."

I wait for her to mildly nod in agreement, gently pinch my arm as she sometimes does to show her gratitude. But I can tell there's something solemn in her demeanor.

"What?" I ask.

She turns to me, her gold-framed glasses making her milky blue eyes look larger than life.

"Hellie, I appreciate how much you care for me. I do. I consider you a good friend. But don't you want to get out there? See the world? Meet someone?"

I answer blank-faced, trying not to show my irritation. But then she hits the final nail in the coffin.

"Don't you want to live?"

Oh, Pearl. Not you, too.

Breakfast

Daisy

"What you want?" Granny asked in the tiny spare bedroom she used as an office. I found it odd how I wasn't offered this room and instead got to pick between the musty couch in the "formal" living room or the one in the den. I chose den so I could watch the open-mouthed bass watching me as I fell uncommittedly into sleep. I woke several times, strangely not questioning where I was, which was probably due to the musty couch. It was a pretty anchoring force.

Carson was gifted his old room and was still sleeping. I imagine something like that to be rather disquieting, a glimpse into the past you were always trying to drink away. And not only a glimpse really, but a lived-in experience complete with dusty model trains and an old school project – a wooden plaque comparing all the similarities between Lincoln and Kennedy. But that's all I got to spy before he went to bed early and shut the door.

"Oh, I just...breakfast?" I didn't want breakfast. I wasn't hungry and didn't eat a lot anyways. Madame Marie wasn't a big fan of sustenance, poking us in our bellies during practice or snorting through her pig impressions if one of us even mentioned having eaten some time during the day.

"You got two hands."

"And you got a kitchen I've never been in before." I instinctively braced myself, waiting for the slap. It was odd, that feeling. For all of Carson's nastiness, he had never hit me, ever. But I think in a weird way that I never really wanted to question, I craved it.

Instead, she started to laugh.

"Well, look at the cajones on you girl." I relaxed a little and took note of what she was doing. She was balancing her checkbook with a gold pen, heavy and chunky-looking and something I imagine she had savored since the '20's.

"Juicy?" she asked, offering me a piece of Juicy Fruit chewing gum. The bright yellow was eye-stinging in her office with its muted colors and dusty air. I thanked her and got to chewing, watching the dust dance through the light leaking through the covered windows. Her office felt like living in a piece of time that no longer existed, and I liked that she had a room just for herself. It was like the physical form of living in my head.

"He hates you, you know." I'm not sure where that came from. Or maybe I did. Maybe it was that itch that needed to be scratched – to be hit and know how much I deserved it.

"Right back at him," she said, not missing a beat.

I stood next to her, the gum losing its flavor as she carried on, balancing the sum of what she was worth. And then I left without her even looking up, back to the musty couch.

She never did get me that breakfast.

Bad

Hellie

It was something my mom would say to me. How I wasn't living my life. "Isn't breathing enough?" I'd shoot back at her while she was in bed, head angled on her pillow. I found it quite ironic she cared so much for living when she was wasting away. And when she had her own chance at it, how easily she let it slip from her fingers.

"You'd think," she answered back once and giggled to herself. That was the place she'd never let me join her – her mind where she kept her inside jokes, and I'm sure a slew of data that forever positioned her against me. How could this woman who looked like death incarnate piss me off so much?

It wouldn't be until later when I was leaving her apartment and clumsily finding my way through my tears that I realized it was because she was illusive, untouchable, even to her own kid.

Once, she had told me she wished I'd bring Brent along so she could, and I quote, "have someone to talk to," which was a real gut-puncher. But even though he was her favorite (or the only one she actually liked in any capacity), he always had a sixth sense about him where he could tell who was "good" and who was "bad."

And guess which category Daisy belonged to?

I suppose to be fair, Brent also had a hard time with death, still does (I loathe the day Fogerty passes). He's pretty much allergic to any finality not of his own doing, which when you think about it, isn't too far off from the rest of us who crave control.

Sometimes, I wonder, is that what I want? Control? Did I want to control Daisy? Did I want to control the way she felt about me?

No. I just wanted her to love me. Because she wanted to.

So now, I'm doubling down on being pissed off (funny how memories can incite something like that), having left my apartment and Pearl the Traitor. That's not fair. Pearl only wants what's best for me (unlike my own mother did). And so, I've geared up. Rain jacket (because I never check the weather. Surprises are much more my style), a notebook and pen (keeping it old school), and the very writerly instinct to observe outside of my comfort zone.

I'm going to stalk Barbara Ann.

Roses

Daisy

Going home was worse than leaving it. It was like Carson was a man in a play who had forgotten his place. I expected him to yell, "Line!" at me any moment.

"Dance. What about that? You tell them you had to see your granny?"

"Yes," I said during the car ride back. He was just talking to talk. He didn't really care if they kicked me out, considering he wouldn't have to pay for the lessons anymore. That's what was always quizzically curious about Carson. What he lacked in general decency, he made up to for with his bank account.

He didn't even bother with the radio this time. Instead, he took a strong liking for staring straight ahead, probably processing what it was that had happened at his mother's. Leaving wasn't anything exceptional. She shook his hand hard and grunted at me with a nod. Told us to get home safe. She stood at attention near the rose bush at the front of her house and saluted us as we slowly backed out of her driveway. And as he looked behind the truck, slowly inching it out onto the main road, I watched her unceremoniously pluck one of the roses and crumple it in her hand.

Ouch, Carson. I get it now.

We made our way back to Little Rock, numbly passing through the Bobby Hopper tunnel and missing deer at breakneck speed. Nothing exceptional happened that night either, except for when we parked in our own driveway, and my hand, my stupid hand left my body, my mind, for just an instant and softly touched my father's.

And then I got out of the car before I could hear him cry.

Stalker

Hellie

Despite my affinity for stealth and muted color palettes (I own the same sweater in five different shades of gray), I have never been a stalker. I switch from a stealthy Pink Pather-esque prance to a more normal "I'm just a regular human being just like everyone else" type stroll, intentionally sighing through an invisible case of the Mondays as a hot dog vendor eyes me questionably.

It's Saturday, so I totes understand his confusion.

I head back to the church, expecting Barbara Ann and Zenith/Magellan to be waiting for me expectantly and with that slight air of fear that they'd never see me again. But no, they're not here. And the church doors are locked, which I figure is rude because if this truly is God's house, why is he shutting me out now?

Well, I don't suppose I can blame him. I was just carelessly sauntering about for a random hot dog vendor. That has to be some sort of spiritual no-no.

I think about back tracking but can't imagine walking back into my apartment and admitting to Pearl that I failed. That "living" just isn't for me. So instead, I decide to take a saunter/stroll in the opposite direction of the apartment, past St. Jude's and wander aimlessly until I either magically find Barbara Ann or am visually admonished by yet another hot dog vendor.

"Oh. You again. And so soon." It's a "truth is stranger than fiction" moment with me practically running into Barbara Ann who's planted firmly on the sidewalk in front of me. I stumble awkwardly against her and then

gain my composure in case Zenith/Magellan is around to judge me. But I suppose he's primarily a church cat.

“What are you doing here?” she continues because I’m too dumbfounded to acknowledge her first remark.

“I always come here,” I say, vaguely nodding at whatever store stands at my left. I pray it has nothing to do with lingerie.

“Oh, really? Me too.” When I finally get brave enough to glance over my shoulder, I see we’re standing in front of a plant shop. Slightly better than lingerie, but also kind of terrible because I can never keep anything alive, which makes sense, considering I’m having a hard time at this whole “living” thing myself.

“Great. So, I suppose we should go in. To go see and purchase some plants,” I say stiffly. She nods like this is a business deal (very classy of her really, seeing that I’m technically stalking her, and she should probably run far, far away) and opens the door for me.

I go through and pretend none of this is weird in the slightest.

Gone

Daisy

If someone would have told me they lived for sixteen whole years with their father and then he up and just left one day and they had no idea something like that was coming, I would have called them crazy.

It's funny, though, the things that seem crazy until they become your own.

The day we got back from Granny's was the day the timer was set. I just hadn't known it yet. Somewhere in Carson's broken-hearted, beer-adled brain, he had decided that even living in the same state as his mother was almost as bad as living in the same house. He apparently took his time about it though, seeing that he didn't just up and leave the next day. He waited a whole week.

I like to think maybe it was because he was struggling with himself over the decision. Maybe he didn't really want to leave me, and the guilt was getting at him, off and on.

Or maybe he was just a stickler for planning.

Regardless, my life went on and that was part of the problem. I spent too much time dancing, not eating, sometimes hitting the "fat" of my legs with the back of my hairbrush, attempting to punish them into thinness. If I had the sight I have now, I'd know how garishly thin I was, but I also know it wouldn't have mattered.

I didn't eat because deep down, I wanted to die.

"Hey, there watch it, tubby!" Carson would say and laugh because what else was he supposed to say to me? He'd get all cross when I ignored him, so I developed a smirk that made me feel as grim as I probably looked.

I go back a lot. I think about the night before he left, what that must have been like, but I can't really recall it. I don't think I had dance because I remember the cold warmth of my room, a lopsided balance between wanting to be there and not wanting to be anywhere.

But it didn't matter. In the morning, he was gone. He left my mother's postcard on the kitchen table and a note that said he was going to find her. He said he'd send money for gas and food (he had paid off the house by then), and I almost wanted to believe him. Like he would go find her and they'd be together and finally be happy.

And that was part of the problem too. That I didn't factor me into any part of their equation.

Plants

Hellie

We look at plants, and I pretend to know what each one is, even mumbling an entirely new species that sounds awfully close to the word "hamburger."

"What exactly is wrong with you?" Barbara flatly asks me. It's strange because it's the question I've asked myself all my life. Hearing it in somebody else's voice gives it a stronger edge I certainly don't care for.

"I could say the same about you," which I suppose I could with her blinding stripes and inability to read the room. The owner of this fine establishment seems to be studying us through the leaves of what I can only guess is a very large fern.

"I can't leave well enough alone. That's my problem." She takes up something short and cute (cacti of some variety?) in a tiny clay pot and lightly runs her fingers against the spines. "You know, I've been at the same church for years, and years, and years, and have always played the 'yes man,' even if I knew something was off. I'd pray about it, sure. But never do anything about it. So that's my problem. I just stay."

Oof. It's odd having something in common with someone who's last name I don't even know.

"Well, I suppose we have the same problem then. I find myself doing a lot of staying too. Not a whole lot of living."

Barbara Ann jerks at the thought, tilts her chin up to the ceiling. Her eyes slit; the fine golden brown of her irises take me aback as she says, "Jesus said to him, 'Get up, take up your bed, and walk.'"

"Um...."

Suddenly, she grabs a basket of what seems like a variety of plants (more ferns?) and asks me the one question I've been avoiding this century and the one before.

"Want to change that?"

Lonely

Daisy

I didn't tell anybody. I don't know how I justified that back then. I think I just honed in and focused up, allowing Madame Marie to punish me into forgetting that I was essentially an orphan and living on my own at sixteen.

Until of course I had to pay for a new season of lessons but didn't have enough cash. Carson did never send any money.

I could drive. Check. I could heat things on the stove with minimal damage. Check. I could remember to lock the doors at night and when someone came calling for Carson, usually one of his thirsty drinking buddies, I could mention he was out of town visiting his mom or on some emergency mechanic job out of state. It wasn't hard to fool someone who was less interested in Carson than he was his beer.

I did okay at school and flew under the radar. I had "friends," a girl who sat next to me in English named Patrice and another one, Claire who once attempted to mold David in all his glory during fourth period art class. They were somewhat funny, immensely tolerable, and were the type of company that made me seemingly fit in... somewhere.

When I got home, it was another story. The house was lonely. I thought about tracking down a stray dog one day, thinking maybe that was the answer to all my problems. People couldn't be trusted. Obviously. But what about some down and out mongrel who just needed somebody to love?

I tried not to think about the similarities.

Everything was fine for awhile. And I mean that. I'd take quiet walks on the weekends to pick up a few groceries, allowing the outside air to fresh-

en up the staleness inside of me. On these walks, I'd watch the bird make patterns in the sky or the way mothers loved their children at the park. I'd be in the world, but not of it, an extra appendage nobody knew what to do with.

And then one day. The phone rang. It was Granny.

"This Daisy?" was what she asked before I could say hello.

"Yes."

"Carson there?" Oh boy.

"No. Not right now."

"When will he be back?"

"That's a good question," I said, dangling it out like bait. I could feel her rooting around for something, paper crinkling.

"I found something," she said. "I'd like to show it to you."

"Okay, well, I'm not sure I'll be back in Fayetteville any time soon."

"Don't matter. I'm here. Pick me up at the Texaco near your house," she said, and hung up by way of goodbye.

Healing

Hellie

Barbara Ann buys the basket of plants. And then she tells me to meet her Monday evening at the MLK. I don't have the social skills to politely communicate that this is where my brother regularly learns how to be human, and I have no desire to be part of that process.

Instead, I say, "Um, yeah, 'kay," in an attempt at the English language, and then she leaves, briskly nodding as if we've accomplished something.

What that is, I have no clue.

I stop by the corner store before heading home and pick up a few of Pearl's favorites: tapioca pudding, canned smoked salmon, a canister of Folgers coffee, and saltine crackers. I picked up a frozen meal claiming to be enchiladas for me and one of those healthy sodas I tried once ironically and ended up forever needing in my life.

When I get home, I find Pearl asleep on the couch, *The Golden Girls* still marathoning right along. I turn off the TV and put the groceries away, pop the enchiladas in the microwave. I sit at the small desk in front of the window in the living room. I prop open my laptop to watch a little YouTube while I eat, but first, I make a pit stop.

I search "Jesus said, 'Take up your mat and walk,'" and scroll through a number of different articles that feel like they're explaining hieroglyphics. I finally get to one that reveals the passage this line (saying, verse?) is from and it talks about a man who's an invalid. It strikes me that Jesus asks him if he wants to be healed. Who wouldn't want to be? But then as I read on, the man's complaining that no one has put him in the water so he can be healed.

I can't say it's a lightening bolt moment considering I'm still in one piece, but there's something about that image that treads too closely to where I'm currently sitting. If I'm honest, I suppose I've been waiting, too, for somebody to fix "this," i.e. my life.

I think about my mother, how often she had been the hindrance to me taking that first step – any first step, really. But maybe I've been looking at it all wrong.

Maybe she never has been the hindrance. Maybe I am.

I swallow down the enchiladas with a gulp of Mango Mantra soda and look over at Pearl. I debate whether I should wake her up or let her rest a little more. I opt for the latter, grabbing another blanket and kissing her forehead as I tuck her in.

Do you want to be healed? I think as I look at my closest friend struggling to breathe in her sleep.

Yes, I say to myself. Very much so.

The Gremlin

Daisy

I picked her up in the Gremlin. It was a totaled piece of scrap metal Carson miraculously welded into something halfway drivable and left for me to test my luck. I would have been embarrassed to be seen in it at school, but I always got there early and parked off in a corner of the teacher's lot, skittering out onto the sidewalk and away from the thing like a spooked hamster.

That's what Granny reminded me of as I rolled into the Texaco. She looked out of her element standing next to the pay phone she must have called me from, grasping her pocketbook to her chest like some young ruffian was bound to steal it. I wouldn't know anyone who would try against a woman bound to smack you upside the head before thinking twice about it.

When she saw me, she took a second like she was really seeing me, remembering why she was there in the first place. She got into the passenger side of the car, and it was like walking inside her house again – the musty past meets the slightest hint of jasmine.

"How'd you get here?" I asked, braver than I would have been around her because I was in my own car, on my own turf.

"Bus." I found that to be almost as jarring as the fact that she was sitting right next to me. I couldn't fathom Granny on a bus, a woman who took an overt liking to soap and seemed generally suspicious of people of any kind.

"Let's just get right to the point of it, Daisy." She breathed out my name, a word foreign in her mouth, and reached for a folded piece of notebook paper in her pocketbook. She unfolded it, and I waited for her to read

it like a decree, but instead, she folded it back up and put it back from where it came.

"Your father's gone."

"I know that."

"No, like not living, Daisy. He left to leave for good."

"He left to go find my mother," I said. The Gremlin's wheel was becoming a part of me as I gripped it tighter and tighter.

"Your mother's dead, too, kid. She died a long time ago after she left. Drugs," she said, delivering a blow that didn't land as heavily as it should have. I had expected something like that, deep down. I had expected that all my hopes and "one days" were the protective covering outside my core. And each time I got the quiet opportunity to dance my feet into oblivion or whap my hairbrush against my legs, it was like excavating for that core – the real me.

I hunkered into my pain but still noticed hers. It etched through years of her face, and maybe I was wrong. Maybe she wasn't so old but really, just sad. *How can you hate your own child?* I wanted to ask her – a question I didn't even know that I'd be asking myself years later.

But I knew the answer. She didn't really hate him. She just hated herself.

"Now what?" I asked, the truth shouldering up against us.

"We wait," she said like it was something she was good at.

Communication

Hellie

It feels like a date, especially since there's too many "what ifs" involved.

What if I run into Brent?

What if I meet his girlfriend?

What if I don't like his girlfriend?

What if he asks me why I'm here?

Which he certainly will. He can't handle when anything's left unanswered.

I play incognito behind a small potted tree in the MLK's open foyer while waiting for Barbara Ann. People are slowly trickling in and clotting together while I linger like a lone blood cell near the plant life.

We're all here for the Communication is Key meetup, and I'm waiting for Brent to wander in any moment. And then he does.

"What's wrong with this plant? Why are you nursing it?" he asks after darting straight towards me like a homing device.

"I'm not nursing it," I say, attempting to inconspicuously remove my hand, which has been holding its small trunk for dear life.

"Oh, okay. Why are you here?"

"A friend invited me," I say. Brent draws his head around in an unintentionally comical circle, indicating there's absolutely no friend within miles of me. "Wait, there she is," I say, spotting Barbara Ann and her plant basket.

She scurries over when she sees me, simultaneously grabbing my hand and nodding at Brent and drags me over to the double doors that lead to the room where we'll learn how key communication is.

"Sorry, didn't mean to be rude. Just want you to meet Alice before the meeting begins."

"Who's Alice?" I say as she hands me the plant basket to fix her blouse, this time lightly polka-dotted. It's as bad as the stripes, but in a completely different way.

"My mentor."

I follow her over to the donut table, the one my brother must know very well, to find a small, older lady with dark gray curls pinned to her hair. When she turns around, I see she's wearing a t-shirt with The Clash plastered on it and black jeans with holes in the knees. It's like processing a walking dichotomy.

"Hey, Barbara Ann," she says. Her voice is smooth and settling, like one of those meditation channels on YouTube I watch on repeat.

"Alice!" Barbara Ann hugs her hard and then turns to me. "This is my friend, Hellie."

"Hello," I say and Alice warmly takes my hand as I juggle the basket. She looks at me, all of me, and even though I want it to be disconcerting, it's not. It feels right.

Barbara Ann relieves me of the plant basket, giving it to Alice.

"These are so great, thank you! I'm finishing up here, and we'll get started soon. Go grab yourselves a couple of chairs. So nice to meet you, Hellie."

What happens once the meeting begins is a slew of events that feel downright unearthly.

We (myself included) introduce ourselves (something I should have put on my "what if" list).

My brother keeps looking at me like I've sprouted seven heads.

Barbara Ann shares her church hurt, something Alice gently nods through, and I feel a slight pang at the notion of having someone who understands your heart.

I awkwardly pass the baton when it's my turn to "communicate."

And at the end of it, Alice gives us homework. It's a packet to take home that we're to read, answering the questions as we feel led.

On the front page are the words "Do you want to be healed?"

And yes, for the millionth time, yes.

The End

Daisy

What are all the things that happen in a life once the rug is ripped out from under you? They morph into something monstrous, ebbing and flowing – black ink threatening to blot you out.

Like Granny leaving three days later, us barely getting to know one another. She waited until I got the call from an out-of-state detective letting me know they'd found Carson's body in some motel in Dayton. I instantly pictured the one from my mother's post card, and morbidly thought how, in a way, they were together again.

Granny offered for me to come back to Fayetteville with her, but I told her I'd be fine. It was edging close to my seventeenth birthday, and then from there, I'd be eighteen and technically able to be on my own anyway.

A year later, a few days after my eighteenth, a nurse from hospice wrote me, telling me Granny had passed. It hurt even though I didn't know her well. But she was the only person left connected to my past, and she also made it a point for me to know she had gone.

A gift my own parents had never even left me.

I eventually found a boy after that, got pregnant, and the rest is history. Ha, not really because it still sits in my bones, in what remains of my gut – the rest of a life unlived.

I had Hellie, and then a year later, Brent, and I played the wife to a man who drank too much beer and fixed too many cars (talk about marrying your unfinished business), and then he went and died (car accident).

At least it wasn't his choice.

There on out, I was a single mother, and eventually, raising a teenaged daughter who hated me (which seemed unfair considering I never even had the chance to be a teenager who hated her mother), and I know she thinks I loathed her. That I preferred her brother over her, and that's not true or fair either.

Brent was just different. He needed more help.

There's something I read once that stopped me dead in my tracks when standing in line at the food pantry while the kids were in school. It was at a church, in their fellowship hall, and on the wall was what I supposed was a Bible verse. It said, "When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be healed?'"

I thought it a bit cheeky, maybe even rude. Here I was in a place, a slice of life where I couldn't do anything about my outcome, and this wall had the nerve to ask me if I wanted to be healed?

I never went back after that. I figured I'd rather we all starve.

But now? The question is heavy within me.

Hellie has fallen asleep. She's been at my bedside, jawing at me, as is her usual mode. I hate it when she does that. But I also commend her spark. Reminds me of Granny.

I grow tired, a weakness that I know is more than exhaustion. It's the bell tolling, slight and soft and almost beautiful in my ears. But I still lift my hand and gently place it on her head.

I'll miss her and Brent, and all the things I could have done or been if I would have had the guts to answer then.

But at least I can now.

Do you want to be healed?

Yes, Lord. Yes, I do.

The Truth

Hellie

We don't talk until the following Saturday when I send the customary text ten minutes before we're to meet at the diner.

It's the same ol' routine except it isn't. Even Brent knows it isn't.

"Your girlfriend wasn't there," I say, ripping off the band aid and a few stray hairs right along with it.

"Why were you?" he volleys back.

"I told you. A friend invited me. The one with basket of plants." I wait a beat until I can tell my answer satisfies him.

"Can I meet her some time?" I broach, attempting to put into practice what I've learned about communication and whatnot.

"Who?"

"Your friend...who's a girl."

He studies everything on the table like he's willing to become a part of it. "Sure," he says.

I imagine the heavens are exploding with rejoicing.

We eat, and I tell him I'm going to hang back and work on my book a bit. He looks relieved that I won't be impeding on him and Fogerty. But he does something odd. He shuffles over and offers me his arm. I realize he's indicating he'd like a hug, so I stand up and gently embrace him. Something melts away in me no matter how much I strive to hold on to it. And then it's just me holding my brother, loving him like it's not hard to do.

Once he's gone, I open up my laptop. I go to the file on my desktop that holds my "precious" novel but instead, I click open a fresh Word document.

I write like I'm pouring paint onto the page – all the things I've let blister over and fester through the years.

I'm deep at it, not even noticing when our regular waitress shows up to refill my coffee.

"The Great American Novel?" she asks.

"No," I say. "The truth."

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