The Other Side of Marin: A Novella

by

Jacqueline Keating

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Scholar)

Presented April 7, 2017
Commencement June 2017
AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jacqueline Keating for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English on April 7, 2017. Title: The Other Side of Marin: A Novella

Abstract approved: ________________________________________________________________

Steven Kunert

The Other Side of Marin investigates how the lack of communication between family members can lead to potentially devastating consequences. The novella, set in the 1970s in Northern California, is told from the points of view of Lucy, a middle-aged mother of four, and her teenaged son, who for his own reasons has slipped into a state of delinquency. My purpose for writing this novella was to write a story of realistic fiction with scenes and dialogue that seemed as natural and unforced as possible while still engaging the reader, and to challenge myself to translate raw human emotions like grief, anger, and despair as clearly as possible onto the page without directly stating them as such. Creating tension at many points throughout the plot and between several characters was also at the forefront of my creative decisions.

Key Words: Creative, Writing, Fiction, English, Novella
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APPROVED:

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Steven Kunert, Mentor, representing the School of Writing, Literature, and Film

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Keith Scribner, Committee Member, representing the School of Writing, Literature, and Film

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Rob Drummond, Committee Member, representing the School of Writing, Literature, and Film

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Toni Doolen, Dean, Oregon State University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

________________________
Jacqueline Keating, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank

my mentor, Steven Kunert, for his ceaseless patience while reading over countless segments and drafts, and for his wonderful insight, guidance, and encouragement,

Keith Scribner and Rob Drummond, for taking the time to read over the project and for providing their helpful and much appreciated instruction and advice,

And my parents, for their constant support and love.

Thank you.
DEDICATION:

To Sally

Who makes cookie dough with no intention of baking it,

Who went skydiving in her 50s and hang-gliding in her 70s

And who had the knack of turning time-outs into parties:

I love you grandma.
“Your anger and damage and grief are the way to the truth. We don’t have much truth to express unless we have gone into those rooms and closets and woods and abysses that we were told not go into. When we have gone in and looked around for a long while, just breathing and finally taking it in – then we will be able to speak in our own voice and to stay in the present moment. And that moment is home.”

—Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*
The business cards showed a small drawing of the San Jorge Valley Church, which looked much more serene in thin black ink than it did in reality; the tiny, slightly run down building that sat in what was essentially our new backyard looked like a church one might find in a Hitchcock film. Next to the drawing, in little capital letters, read “The Reverend John Warren.” The business cards were one of the only things on my husband’s small desk in our bedroom. We’d unpacked earlier this year, and our things were mostly in order. I wasn’t entirely sad that we’d made the move from Inglewood. Southern California was too big for me, and the smoggy air had settled like a dirty blanket into my lungs and pores and made me feel like I was suffocating beneath it without a way to escape.

I put the cards back down on his desk and moved into our kitchen, which was flooded by sunlight, courtesy of the skylight overhead. I was sitting at the big round kitchen table writing a letter to my mother when my three girls, Karen, Lisa and Susan, burst through the front door in a flourish of limbs and hats and cold Northern California air. Their winter coats, which they wore even while in the house because of our lack of heat, hid their skinny arms, but not their sunken grey eyes, which were painted with the same hunger as mine. Today however, their eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Can you believe she did that?” asked my twelve-year-old, Lisa.
“Yes, actually,” Karen, fourteen, replied in a half-whisper. “Her family was cold and starving.”

“We’re all cold and starving,” said Susan, the youngest. “That doesn’t mean we get to steal.” At ten, she was still trying to figure out what she believed, and often switched sides in arguments between her sisters just for fun. Susan looked radiant with excitement, and was talking in her quick-paced, loud voice.

“She got what she deserved,” Lisa seriously with a bloated sense of justice.

“Slow down, girls,” I said, putting down my pen and interrupting their heated dialogue. “Who stole? What happened today?”

The older girls stopped, and I could see on their faces that they were furiously deciding what exactly to tell me. But Susan had no qualms, and said eagerly, “Jane Stanley is the one who’s been stealing people’s stuff!”

I remembered the girls telling me weeks earlier that someone had been sneaking into cubbies and stealing already-meager lunches and threadbare winter coats. It had prompted me to sew my daughters’ names on the back of their jackets and have the girls wear them during class, despite that the classrooms, in stark contrast to our house, were overheated with ancient radiators. The thief was only in the K-8 school, so it was really my two younger girls who were at risk, but we couldn’t afford to buy new coats this winter any more than we could have last winter, and I wasn’t taking any chances.

“So did a teacher talk to her about why stealing is wrong?” I asked.

“No, no one snitched on her to the teacher, but she got beat bloody by—”
“—some older boys,” Karen jumped in, interrupting Susan and giving her a stern look. “She passed out. It was horrible.”

“Well, what was she expecting?” asked Lisa incredulously. “We’re Valley kids. We’re supposed to stick together, not steal from each other.”

It hadn’t taken Lisa long to adopt the deep sense of camaraderie that ran through the blood of each resident of San Jorge. If we were all poor and dirty and cold and so, so hungry, we were at least going to be those things together.

“Lisa!” I scolded. “Haven’t you learned anything at Sunday School? It’s never okay to hurt someone. And for an older boy to beat a younger girl—I can’t imagine.”

Just then John walked through the door with a loaf of stale bread from the bakery in the nearby town of San Anselmo. The bread, which we always bought in the “MUST GO” section of the bakery, was consistently dry and hard, but the price was right. All the eyes in the room, including, I confess, mine, followed the movement of that bread as it swung in the plastic bag in John’s hands.

“What, not even a ‘hi dad?’” asked John. We woke from the trance then, and the girls erupted into a chorus of hellos.

I took the opportunity to hand off the parenting lesson to John. He always had a lecture for the girls that would ultimately make them feel worse than a paddle or grounding could. I assumed my best scolding mother voice, and said, “John, thank goodness you’re here. The girls have been discussing some violence that went on in the schoolyard today, and I think you and they should have a talk about it.”

John glanced around the room, ignoring me. “Where’s Andy,” he said, placing the bread heavily on the table, as though all the strength had seeped out of him and
into that stale loaf. It wasn’t a question, but rather a statement of defeat. The girls knew this, and didn’t bother answering him. Our seventeen-year-old son was supposed to be home each day with the girls after school. He and Karen went to the same small high school down the road, and since the K-8 where Lisa and Susan were enrolled got dismissed an hour before the high school, the younger girls were to walk to the high school a mile away to wait for their older brother and sister. This plan always went smoothly, if one excludes the fact that Andy was never part of it. He would bolt from class before he was officially dismissed, so that he could escape from the prying eyes of his three sisters, or, more often, not show up to school at all.

This behavior from Andy confounded John and me to no end. Sure, he’d been upset to move from Inglewood and leave behind his friends there, but so had the girls, and they’d each adjusted to the move well enough. Andy, however, had become withdrawn, disruptive, even vicious since we’d moved away, and we hadn’t seen the happy-go-lucky, thoughtful, cheerful side of our son in almost a year.

His mouth had become so foul he could make a sailor blush, and once or twice I could swear I could smell a hint of weed on him. It was a tall order to make him show up to church with the rest of us—lately he’d been sneaking out in the early hours of Sunday morning, before even John was up, in order to disappear before the service, if he had deigned to come home that night at all.

“We’ll discuss Andy later,” I said, roping John back into the present. “Right now, I’d like you to please have a talk with the girls.” He nodded, and on a whim I added, “And what—no ‘hi wife?’”
He smiled, his gaunt face breaking out into a childlike grin. I loved that smile. He crossed the small kitchen, pulled my face up to his and gave me a smooch. “Hello, Lucy,” he whispered to me. Then he pulled back and said, “Better?”

“Better.” I glanced at Susan, who was watching us defiantly. “Now let’s have a little chat.”

There was no misinterpreting my tone, and John knew right away what to do. He placed the bread on the table and walked into our living room, settling himself on the cracked, stripped leather couch. The oldest two followed without comment, their shoulders drooped in resignation. But Susan stood straight, her mouth in a determined line and her eyes ablaze. She looked for a moment like a warrior queen about to head into battle rather than a food-deprived ten-year-old in a too-tight dirty coat.

The girls stood before their father quietly. Despite that his slender 6’4 frame was sitting, he looked a fearsome figure to them. He had keen blue eyes, a straight nose sandwiched by high cheekbones, and a crew cut which he’d maintained ever since he’d served in the Vietnam war. In fact, if someone were to look at him as he was, without his robe or clerical collar, probably the last profession they would guess he practiced was that of a pastor.

I stood behind the couch, a hand on his shoulder, ready to support him in his sermon to the kids.

“Alright now. I take it there was a fight,” John said. “Tell me about it.”

Susan jumped in before anyone else. “Why are we gonna get lectured? It’s not like we were the one’s beating anyone up!” she said, a hand on her hip. She was too feisty for her own good.
John gave her a cold stare which she returned. “Are you done interrupting me, Susan? I haven’t accused you of fighting. I just want to hear what happened.”

Susan didn’t break the stare, but removed her hand from her hip and said nothing.

The girls unraveled the same story they had told me about Jane Stanley, a slip of an eighth grader who had been stealing quite successfully for weeks, hiding clothing, food and other treasures behind her cubby until she could find time to transfer the items back to her home. The girls were more forgiving in their comments of Jane in front of their father than they had been to me. Still, John gave the girls a stern sermon on forgiveness and had them state the Lord’s prayer, the girls meandered back toward the kitchen.

John leapt off the couch and beat them to the table, swiping the loaf of bread and grabbing the keys to the dying Chrysler Newport my parents had given us out of pity. “Come on,” he said to the girls, their mouths agape as if the bread could levitate into their open faces if they wanted it badly enough.

“Where are we going? I’m hungry!” moaned Susan, devastated that her lesson was apparently not over.

“Do we have to come?” asked Karen. “I want to finish my book.” Books were her excuse to get out of everything—she knew full well that John and I found it hard to say no to a kid whose simple wish it is to quietly engage in a novel. Still, John wasn’t falling for it in this particular instance.

“C’mon, kids. We’re going to do God’s work.” They groaned, but gave no further objections. As much as they felt that their free time was often robbed by both
their biological and Heavenly fathers, often John’s errands to pray over a dying man or to volunteer at a children’s hospital proved interesting to the kids despite themselves. I grabbed my handbag and plopped into the car, ignoring the hunger in my stomach and the cold that bit at me through the threadbare fabric of my peacoat—as a pastor’s wife in a small community, I was expected to be at my husband’s side no matter what task he was attending to.

As the car sputtered along, however, the kids started noticing that we weren’t headed for the highway that would take us toward San Anselmo, San Rafael, or San Francisco, some of the places John occasionally volunteered. Rather we were headed deeper into the rural desolation of the San Jorge Valley. There was a chorus of sighs and a consequent puff of air visible in the cold as the kids resigned themselves to the fact that this evening’s work would probably be helping to clean up someone’s mobile home or to console a local family whose dog had died.

“John, who is it we’re seeing today?” I asked, eyeing the bread on the bench between us and quickly looking away.

“The Stanleys,” he answered. “Jane’s obviously getting a lot of hatred from the other kids, so we’re going to be nice to her today.”

“But—” began Susan.

“Mark 11:25,” intercepted John. “Read it to me. There should be a Bible back there somewhere.”

Susan sighed and rifled around for a minute before mumbling, “ugh, it’s a King James.”

“Read it, Susan.”
“Okay, geez.” She cleared her throat, and said theatrically, “But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.”

“I think Jesus said it with less sass, but nicely read,” said John.

I knew vaguely of the Stanleys. Occasionally a Stanley child would show up to church at the end of the service and snag whatever snacks or baked goods were provided at coffee hour, but they certainly weren’t regulars in the pews, so I hadn’t met them formerly. I knew that Mrs. Stanley had died a few years prior in a home-birth of the seventh child, and had heard that Mr. Stanley had spiraled into alcoholism as a result.

Soon enough we pulled into a dirt driveway littered with broken bottles and discarded trash. A rusty child-sized bicycle leaned against a scraggly tree, and three bedraggled, barefoot children all under the age of ten were staring at our car as John carefully maneuvered it around the debris. I rubbed my hands together and exhaled hot breath into them to loosen the red, frigid joints as I watched the children in the passenger side mirror grow smaller. One was wearing nothing save a too-big pair of overalls. “They must be freezing,” I said quietly to John as I watched. None broke their stares.

At the end of the driveway was a small house with cracked siding and a roof that looked in sore need of repair. John stopped the car and we all piled out, huddling on the front porch.
John took the three porch steps in one leap and handed me the loaf of bread to present to the Stanleys. He was about to knock on the door when it swung open, surprising a cat that was snoozing on the porch.

Mr. Stanley stood in the doorway, one hand on the doorframe, the other wrapped around a half-empty beer bottle. He was tall and skinny save the bulge of a beer belly that protruded from his stained tank top. A greasy mullet fell over his shoulders, and a handlebar mustache inched its way across his pocked face.

John stuck out a hand. “Hey there. You must be Frank. I’m John Warren, and this is my wife Lucy, and my daughters, Karen, Lisa and Susan. I heard about what happened to your little girl today, and—”

John stopped as Frank lifted the beer bottle above his head and smashed it on the porch inches from my husband’s feet. I let out a squeak and the girls gasped. John blinked, shocked.

“Oh, you heard, did you? From your own motherfucker of a son, I ‘spect? Well here’s what I heard. I heard Janey sobbing, and I seen tears flowin’ outta her one good eye, the one that wasn’t all swelled up, and the blood and the bruises all over ‘er, and you know what? The next time I see that boy ‘a yers, I’m gonna tear the hide off ‘im, you understand? I woulda gone to the cops, ‘cept I have some respect for you, reverend, and I didn’t wanna put you through that.”

I couldn’t breathe. The man was surely mistaken. I knew my son.

“Excuse me, Frank,” John said, his voice rising in anger, “I don’t know who you heard this from, but Andy would never hurt someone that way. Especially a girl. I sorry for what happened to Jane, but—”
“Jane told me he did it. You callin’ her a liar?”

I glanced over at my daughters. Lisa and Susan were looking at the ground. Karen looked as bewildered as I probably did.

“No, I’m not calling Jane a liar, Frank,” John said in his soothing alter-voice.

“Well either she’s lying or your son-of-a-bitch kid is.”


“He said he’d hurt us if we told,” Karen said, tears welling in her eyes. “He made us look at Janey, and she was on the ground, all bloody, and he said that if we snitched, she’d look like Grace Kelly compared to what we’d look like.” She took a gasping breath, and continued, “oh dad, he scares me, he really does.”

John and I stared blankly at our daughter, uncomprehending.

“Good enough for ya?” asked Frank, swaying slightly. “Look, rev. I know you’re a good man. That kid a yers don’t speak for you. I get that. But I want you to know,” he said, stepping out onto the porch and and leaning close to John, “that boy’s gonna speak for what he’s done. He’s gonna pay.” Then he leaned back and looked over at me. “That’s for me?” he asked. I nodded, and handed the loaf over mutely.

He looked it over and grunted. “Huh. We get our bread at the same section of the store, missus. Is this day-old, or two?”

“It’s all we had at home to bring, since we came last-minute,” I choked out. I’m so sorry,” and I began to cry, despite my desperate attempts not to. Two tears burned trails down my frozen face, and I wiped them away hastily.

“It’ll do,” he said, as though he believed I was apologizing for the poor quality of the bread we’d brought rather than the fact our son had attacked his child. It was as
much thanks as we were going to get, and I nodded and started back down the porch, prompting my family to do the same. John turned back, and said, “Listen, if there’s anything I can do, please let me or my wife know. I know I can’t make it up to you but I’d sure like to do something.”

“Just find that kid, rev,” he responded. Then he looked past us and yelled, “DavieSusieBucky inside, now!” The three kids who we’d passed earlier started racing down the drive, bony limbs pumping. I got back into the car and started shaking. We had to do something about Andy. But we’d tried everything, save sending him to disciplinary school, which we’d never be able to afford. Nothing seemed to change him—to persuade him to be kind or merciful or selfless. In the rearview mirror, I could see Frank Stanley silhouetted by the softly fading wintry light, still on the porch with the loaf of bread in his hand, and a smaller figure standing behind him. Jane.

John and the girls got into the car and we started home, a thick silence smothering us. Suddenly John lurched the car to the side of the road, turned off the engine, and slammed his fist onto the dashboard. “You knew!” he shouted. “You knew, and you didn’t think to tell me!” I was filled with the righteous anger of the falsely-accused, and was ready to give him a piece of my mind when I caught myself and realized he was shouting not at me but at the girls huddled in the back seat.

He turned to face them. “How could you? How could you defend him like that? How could you let me,” he asked, his voice filled with fury, “walk up to Jane’s father’s house with a...a loaf of bread, thinking I was helping out a stranger whose
kid had been hurt, when *you knew* Andy was the thug who did it? Dammit!” He hit the side of his seat.

The girls said nothing, letting his anger subside.

John covered his face with his hands for a moment, and then turned to me, his anger replaced with grief. “We can’t have our daughters afraid of our son,” he said. “I don’t know what to do Lucy. I’ve been praying, but I just don’t know what else to do.”

I didn’t mention that our son scared me, too.

Instead I rubbed his back, wishing that we could be a normal family again, wishing that Andy was his old self, the self we hadn’t seen in almost a year. “You’ve done what you can, John,” I said. “Lord knows, you’ve tried everything.” He didn’t respond, but turned the engine on again and crept the car back out onto the road toward home.

I was relieved that Andy wasn’t at home when we arrived, and then felt guilty for feeling relieved. But I didn’t have the energy for one of the door-slamming screaming contests that so frequently arose when I did almost anything, like ask him a question or give him a chore. Tonight was going to be one of our quiet dinners, when we could sit around our table and act like a family out of a Rockwell painting. An all-American, picket-fence and apple pie family. Except for the fact that we had an absent son and almost no food.

I looked in our little pantry and was faced with what I already knew was there: two cans of refried beans, two cans of green beans, and a can of peaches, a box of
spaghetti, and a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese. The fridge held nothing more bountiful than a carton of milk and some leftover condiments. Nothing that would have cost us more than five or so cents a-piece.

There were always the meal scraps, too, from Mrs. Frasier.

Victoria Frasier and her son Carl were the only wealthy people in the San Jorge Valley. She was about my age and a widow of four years. Her husband had been a descendant of some oil tycoon back in Texas, apparently, and now his huge fortune belonged entirely to Victoria and Carl. She also owned her late husband’s golf course that was nestled between the lumpy golden hills and boasted a thickly vegetated forest of redwoods. Of the tiny population of people in Marin who didn’t live in San Jorge but who knew that it existed, almost all of them were golfers—they raved about the quiet solitude of San Jorge and announced how much they loved getting away from all the hustle and bustle of the city, though they never ventured into the actual township. I guess they didn’t want to have to look poverty in its sunken eyes.

Mrs. Frasier didn’t live on the valley floor with the rest of us simple folk, but instead lived in a huge, glass-encased house on one of the hills overlooking the course with her son Carl, who was Andy’s age. I know Carl hung out with Andy fairly frequently, which made think Carl was a bad influence, but he’d only ever been pleasant to me, though I didn’t know him well.

Mrs. Frasier rarely came down into the town of San Jorge except to go to church. She had liked John immediately, and said her prayers for a “non-faggy pastor” had finally been answered. Apparently she had had strong suspicions that the
previous pastor had been gay, and that he had left to accept a position at the Point Reyes Presbyterian church before she could out him. I’d met the man a couple of times, and my guess was that he was straight as an arrow, and left the church because he was tired of dealing with Victoria. The woman was all smiles and politeness, but she seemed like the type of person who would make darn sure you regretted crossing her.

In fact, I knew first-hand the type of woman she was. Victoria was a master at the art of making me feel bad about myself while simultaneously appearing to be the nicest lady in the world. She often came by our home carrying “meal scraps.” These were items that her cook had made too much of, and she liked to bring them over as an excuse to park her expensively-dressed derriere in my kitchen.

We couldn’t afford dignity. I always graciously accepted her meal scraps and often had to heat them up in the oven while she was still in my kitchen because she had stayed over from noon til dinnertime. I always offered her a helping of her own leftovers; she often accepted. And the meals were always delicious and gourmet—items I could look at in the grocery store and laugh at the prices while loading day-old bread and dented canned goods to my cart. Steak, shrimp, salmon—Victoria brought it all. Sometimes there wasn’t much, but more often there was a bountiful meal for five or six, and I couldn’t imagine that her cook had actually made that much for one petite woman on accident. It was on those days I praised God for sending us Victoria Frasier.

Tonight I pondered serving some leftover meal scraps from the freezer to my family, but decided to save them for later and make the pasta instead. I was boiling
water on the stove when the front door opened with a bang and Andy’s tall, lanky frame appeared in the doorway.

I caught his eyes and quickly looked away. All I could see at that moment was the thirteen-year-old girl whose blood had been shed because my son had brutally drawn it from her.

He glowered at me. “What are you guys having for dinner?” he asked through the gum he was smacking.

I ignored him and continued stirring the water with our old wooden spoon. “I asked you a question,” he said loudly, challenging me.

I whirled around and glared at him. “How dare you walk into my kitchen and talk to me this way, especially after what you’ve done,” I said, shaking with fury.

He was unaffected and continued to question me. “Pasta?” he asked. “You guys are always having pasta. Might as well have the same thing every day as long as it costs ten cents, right? Seriously, how do you live like this?” He shook his head as if in pity, but his tone reflected the rage that welled within him. I noticed that he looked much better fed than us.

I was watching him, frantically calculating the scene like a general wondering which tactic to take in a battle. Should I try to hug him, or should I address the insults he kept hurling at John and me?

“At least we didn’t beat up a girl,” said Karen boldly, appearing from the adjoining living room.

“Stay out of this,” snarled Andy, reaching his full height. It occurred to me that he might be on some sort of substance.
Karen ignored him. “I mean, really, did you think you’d look cool? Mr. Tough Man, beating up some younger girl? You’re pathetic.”

Before she could say more Andy crossed the kitchen, reached out for my daughter, picked her up by the shoulders, and slammed her against the wall. She and I both screamed. Where was John? He’d said he was off to get firewood.

The muscles in Andy’s arms bulged under his turtleneck, as Karen tried to kick her skinny legs out at her brother.

Andy, who had pinned her against the wall high enough so that they were face-to-face, demanded an apology.

Karen, who was usually so quiet, hiding in the shadows as if hoping to become one, was overcome by either intense bravery or terror. I’m not sure which one caused her to utter the harsh laugh that escaped her lips. As she cackled directly into her brother’s face, I saw, as if in slow motion, a single droplet of saliva land on his cheek.

Andy roared in disgust and took one hand off of Karen’s shoulder in order to wipe the spit off his face. The other hand, unable to grip the slippery nylon surface of her coat, also fell off her shoulder, and she fell to the ground. As she was getting up, Andy kicked his Converse sneaker squarely into her ribs. She screamed and clutched her side. Horror ran across his face for a moment, and he hesitated, as though he had forgotten why he was standing there in our kitchen.

Coming to my senses, I grabbed the wooden spoon, still dripping with boiling pasta water, and slapped him across the back of his neck with it. “Get out!” I half-screamed, half-sobbed.
He cursed and turned his attention from Karen to me. Looming over me, he hissed, “You shouldn’t have done that.” I faced him, the spoon in front of me like a sword. He reached out, grabbed it from me, and threw it away from him. It landed on our wood floor with a thwack near where Karen was still balled up, tears running down the side of her face.

He smirked. “What’s plan B?” he asked. I didn’t have one. I was banking on the fact that he’d never been violent toward me, but now having seen what he’d done to Karen, I wasn’t sure what to do. Just then John slammed in the front door. He surveyed the scene in front of him, eyes widening. “What happened?” he exclaimed.

Andy took a step back from me and looked his father dead-on. “Where’ve you been, dad? Chillin’ with Jesus?” He put his hands in the pockets of his bell-bottoms and smirked.

“He kicked her,” I said, my voice shaking as much as my finger which pointed to Karen on the floor. “He kicked her.” My knees felt weak. I gripped the kitchen counter tight, like I would the reins on a spooked horse.

“Is that true?” asked John, his voice low and cold.

“So what if it is?” asked Andy.

John walked to Andy and looked him in the face. They looked remarkably similar. Same glossy hair, same straight nose and blue eyes, both 6’4. But Andy looked like he weighed about 30 pounds more. Where John was thin and bony, Andy was muscular.

“Get out of my house.”

Andy said nothing.
“Get the hell out of my house!” John screamed. “Get out!”

“That’s not what Jesus would say,” said Andy in mocking tones.

There was a sneeze from the living room. We looked up. Lisa and Susan had been watching the scene unfold, their eyes bulging.

John fumed like a Spanish fighting bull. “Okay, let’s all calm down here,” I said helplessly.

My advice wasn’t heeded. “It’s about time you start picking on people your own size,” he hissed.

Andy looked his father up and down. “Is that an invitation?”

John snapped. He drew back his fist, ready to strike. I watched with horror—John had never, ever been violent toward the kids or me, and it’s just as well—Andy deftly moved out of the way of his father and threw his own punch, which landed with a crack on John’s nose. A stream of blood poured out of each of John’s nostrils.

John yelled and held his face.

Shock passed over Andy’s face, but it was gone as quickly as it had appeared. I watched my son turn on his heel without a word and saunter into the night, leaving nothing but the sound of the front door slamming behind him.

The kitchen was silent except for Karen’s sniffling. I fell on my knees at her side. “Karen, honey, let me see,” I said desperately, trying to wrench her arms from their place on her lower ribcage.

She shook her head. “You didn’t help me. Why didn’t you help me?” she said between sobs. The water in the pot on the stove hissed as it overflowed onto the
burner ring. Lisa and Susan still stood in the entrance of the living room, not knowing what to do and determining to stay out of the drama.

“Honey, I’m so sorry, I did what I could—”

“That’s a lie,” she said, cutting me off.

“Don’t call your mother a liar,” John said, his words muffled by his own hands, which were still covering his nose. Blood was starting to seep through his fingers.

I rubbed Karen’s back and said nothing. A sickness twisted in my stomach, because she was right. It was a lie. I hadn’t acted until Andy had actually started beating Karen. I hadn’t done anything because I had been petrified with fear. I started to cry, which added to my self-loathing.

“I think he broke my nose,” John mumbled.

I quickly regained control of myself and went to attend to John.

“Do you want to see a doctor?” I asked, though I knew what the answer would be. There wasn’t a doctor in San Jorge, since none of the residents would be able to afford the cost of a visit. We would have to drive into San Rafael.

“I’ll just set it myself,” he mumbled through his own blood. I handed him a precious paper towel, something we rarely used because of the expense. He dampened it at the sink and tenderly, began to wipe the blood from his nostrils.

His nose was indeed broken. The bridge, which had previously been a distinct, straight line, was now crooked, bending to the right of his face as if pulled by a magnetic force.
“Oh, honey, are you sure?” I asked once more. He waved me away, and as we all watched in horror, he gripped a chair with his right hand, took a deep breath, and pulled his nose back into place as best he could. He let out a roar of pain as tears started making their way down his face to mix with fresh blood.

When he could speak again a few minutes later, his voice was still stuffy, and two large bruises were starting to form under his eyes.

“Girls, go do your homework,” he said. They were still staring unblinkingly at the scene before them. Karen had sat up to watch; I took this as an opportunity to check her ribcage; luckily Karen was too absorbed in what had happened to remember she was angry with me. The fact that she was breathing fine meant that most likely nothing was broken, and there didn’t appear to be any bruises yet. I’d check on her again the next day.

John’s request befuddled the girls, as they usually did their homework at the kitchen table after dinner. Susan explained this to John, which prompted me to remember the water that had been on the stove. It had boiled down to nearly nothing, and the pot was beginning to steam like Vesuvius.

I grabbed the pan and took it to the sink, where I began to fill it with more water.

“Can I talk to you privately please, Lucy,” he said in his new muffled voice.

I nodded and asked Karen to take care of the pasta. We walked to the back of our small house, where our bedroom was. John closed the door, sat heavily in his desk chair and said, “I’m going to kill him.”

“Don’t say that. You don’t mean that,” I said, sitting on our double bed.
He sighed. “No.” Then he looked at me, a different type of pain in his eyes than the physical pain that had lingered there moments before. “You said earlier that I’d tried everything with Andy. But I hadn’t tried hitting some sense into him.” He lightly ran a finger over the bridge of his nose, which was still slightly crooked. “Good lot that idea did.”

I held a hand out, and he came and sat on the bed with me. I nestled into him, and he stroked my hair. “I wish God would let me know what I’m supposed to do. I’ve tried talking to him. I’ve asked him so many times why he’s so unhappy here, but he won’t give me the time of day.”

“I know. He’s the same with me,” I said. John and I had already tried looking for a job back in the LA area, but John had been pushed out of our Inglewood church by a new, fresh-faced hippie who loudly denounced the military. John’s military past had made him seem a Pharisee to the congregation. “How could you preach loving your neighbor, you baby-killer!” one outraged woman had yelled in his face. I had tried calmly explaining to the board members that John had in fact never killed a child, that the few people he had killed still haunted him at night, that they were the reason he’d put himself through the seminary, but it didn’t matter. The minds of many of the congregation had been made up, and other churches in Los Angles still seemed to hold the same views. John had accepted the position for a non-denominational church in a “quaint” community in the Bay Area, and we still hadn’t been able to find a church down south that would allow us to relocate.

We hadn’t been rich in Inglewood, of course—we were still living on a pastor’s salary and whatever extra cash I could make as a substitute teacher—but it
hadn’t been anything close to the poverty we faced in San Jorge. Sometimes I was
angry at how little I could provide my four children. Most of the time, I learned to
live with it.

“He’s mad that we don’t have money,” I said. “He was making fun of the fact
that we were eating pasta because it was cheap.”

“No one here has any money,” said John. “He’s no different from anyone
else.”

“No, but we had more a year ago,” I offered. “Maybe he’s just not used to the
strain.”

“What, he’s so ‘mad’ that he’d take it out on some other poor kid? On his own
sister?” John had a point. He didn’t even mention his own puffy nose. I wished hard
that I could figure out what demons were haunting our son.

Lucy
2017

I think that maybe every parent has a moment, or several moments, that they
wish desperately they could do over. Perhaps in a moment of carelessness they
insulted their daughter, or ignored their son on a day that was incredibly important to
him, or hurt them in some other way. Children are so impressionable. Something I
may have said and forgotten could still be lodged in the brain of one of my children, a
scab that their memories keep picking at and opening afresh every now and then. I
won’t ever know, of course, because my daughters would never tell me. To this day they handle me like the most fragile butterfly whose wings could be torn with the slightest touch, as if one negative word will shatter me into shards impossible to repair. But sometimes I could really just use the truth from them.

Because I so wish I had done more.

Had I known, had I pressed Andy to tell me what was happening, had I stalked him like a cat, seen where he went to fill his days in San Jorge and what he went through, maybe none of it would have happened to him.

But I didn’t press Andy. I never followed him.

Now I want my remaining three children to tell me everything Andy might have ever said to them about his life in San Jorge. I’ve asked them before, of course.

“Please,” I might say to Karen. “Did he ever let you into his heart, even for a moment?” “Did he ever tell you something he couldn’t tell me?” I’ll beg Lisa.

“Susan, did he ever reveal his anguish? Surely he turned to you once.” But all I ever get are pats on the shoulder, or a down-turned glance, or a sympathetic “Let’s not do this today.”

I’m sure they knew something, all those years ago. But they know that if they told me, the tapestry of their stories would weave a tale of a mother who could have done more and didn’t. So they hide the pieces in the dark. They refuse to let me see the picture.
February 1974

Andy

I wait in the cold, making fists with my hands and opening them again in an attempt to get some blood to circulate through my purple fingers. Carl said he’d pick me up at three; it’s now half past and there’s not a sign of him. I kick a rock with my shoe and watch it bounce across the pavement and hit the bumper of a rusty low-rider that’s parked outside the 7/11.

I shove my hands deep into the pockets of my torn jeans. I’m wearing a crappy, stained white tee shirt and the beat up sneaks I’ve had for forever, from before I met Carl at the golf club in San Jorge. I’d tried to get a job from the old hag who owned the place. Carl’s mom, I mean. Now Carl takes care of me as long as I hold up my end of the bargain. Whatever bargain he’s concocted on any particular day. The only predictability of his bargains are that they’re incredibly shitty. Christ, I wish he’d have let me have some kind of a jacket. I’ve been letting Carl pull all his crazy stupid shit so that I wouldn’t have to dress the part of the pastor’s kid anymore. Yet here I am begging outside a gas station in San Francisco looking like a straight up homeless dude.

Eventually Carl’s orange 1973 Corvette squeals into the lot. He cranks down the driver’s side window to wave at me, a smirk on his Clark Kent face. I frown. Everyone thinks he’s so great. He may be good-looking and rich but that’s where his decent qualities end.
I don’t wave back, but instead bend down and get the bucket I’ve been using all day to beg with. It’s a heavy-duty 5-gallon bucket I swiped from a hardware store. I picked the 5-gallon one so that the money spreads evenly along the bottom and it looks to passerby that I’ve earned almost nothing. In fact, I estimate I’ve raked in a decent sum. I’ve been doing this for a few months, and I’ve gotten pretty good at guessing how much money I’ve earned that day. My earnings are good in the winter. I guess people are still high on the Christmas spirit, or maybe they just have more sympathy when it’s colder.

I put the bucket in the Corvette and squeeze myself into the passenger seat.

“Good load today?” he asks as he tosses me my nice jacket. One of the jackets paid for by his side of the bargains.

“I’m thinking one fifty,” I say.

“So fifty for you,” he says.

“I know,” I say irritably. He always reminds me that I’m only to have a cut of the earnings each day. “I’ll get two-thirds,” he’d concluded when he’d come up with the plan on how I’d spend my days. “My two-thirds will pay for your rent.”

He drives quickly through the heavy San Francisco fog, which descended months ago on the city with the insidious intent to stifle its inhabitants, probably. Carl always drove like the devil himself was behind him, which was probably true. Still, my stomach constricts in fear, partly for my own safety and partly for the safety of the pedestrians who might be stupid enough to jaywalk in the fog.
“Jesus, slow down,” I say with annoyance in my voice to hide the anxiety.

“We can’t see anything.”

He laughs, thankfully slowing down but only because it’s a hill, and croons,

“What, you goin’ sissy on me?”

“God dammit, Carl. Just slow down.”

He ignores me and the car accelerates again. Luckily San Francisco is a small city, geographically speaking. We cross the Golden Gate soon enough, leaving the metropolis and its roller coaster hills and horror movie landscape behind and heading for the Frasier’s hillside mansion.

I stew, thinking about how awful the boy in the driver’s seat is. How he uses poor kids’ misery and desperation to fuel his own amusement. Still, I’m earning a lot begging, and doing the rest of Carl’s crazy shit. I only have to stick around a bit longer. I’ve saved up a big sum. Then I’ll come get my sisters out of poverty. Already I’ve divided up the money I’ve earned from Carl into four even parcels, one each for me and my sisters. I’ll give the money to them when I finally graduate from high school and leave Marin. I want to go to New York or back to L.A. I think I could be a pretty good actor—I’ve been honing my skills pulling off Carl’s crap. Like when I stormed into my parents’ house and hurt everyone.

“Make it look real or you’re not getting a cent,” Carl had said. “I want them to fear you.” Then he’d paused. “I want somebody to bleed.” Of course I’d said no at first. I wasn’t going to physically harm one of my own family members. But then he’d offered me five grand. Five grand to scare my family, to disrupt whatever happy-go-lucky Brady Bunch mentality he thought my family possessed and to spill a
little blood in the process. I don’t think even my parents had ever seen that kind of money in cash. Carl would be watching through the kitchen window a little ways away with a set of binoculars to make sure I was doing his bidding. Of course I’d chosen my dad to be the bleeder. He was the one who could take it the best. But I hadn’t meant to break his nose. I just wanted to hit him just hard enough for a few drops of blood, that’s all. Carl hadn’t told me how much blood he wanted to see.

Dad had thrown me for a bit of a loop when he’d tried to hit first. He’d never tried to hit me before. I haven’t been home since that incident; it’s been three weeks. See, if I’m being honest, when I got going, part of me wasn’t just acting when I confronted my family. Part of what I did was because I was genuinely pissed off. And that scares me.

I turn to Carl. “You’re a shitty individual, you know that, right?” I say to him. He’s used to these kinds of remarks. “Hey, you’re still here, pal,” he says easily, keeping his eyes on the road.

When we get to his mom’s mansion I head to Carl’s closet, which is now my bedroom and not much smaller than my room at home. Mrs. Fraiser isn’t around. If she isn’t having a drink at the club, she’s probably talking my mom’s ear off in our kitchen. I’ve sworn her to secrecy about the fact I’ve been living in her house, and since she simply loves drama, especially, for some reason, when it centers around my mom, she’s agreed to keep my parents guessing as to my whereabouts.

I think she’s jealous of my mom. My mom is hands down the most beautiful woman in the Valley. Someone once said she looks like Elizabeth Taylor, and I think she could have been a movie star if she’d wanted to. My mom is also the nicest
woman in the Valley, and on top of that she’s got my dad, and my sisters. Mrs. Frasier has a lot to be jealous of.

At least I know there’s no danger of my mom coming to visit the house and find me here—Mrs. Frasier has never invited her over, and even when my mom has visited with a pie—a generous gift, since we never have that kind of thing at home—she’s always had to chat with Mrs. Frasier at the doorstep. She’s never been invited into the hag’s home. Mrs. Frasier probably thinks that my mom would simply love to have a glimpse inside the stupid house with its enormous windows and extensive wood paneling. She doesn’t know my mom couldn’t care about material things. If she did, why would we be in San Jorge at all?

I change out of my begging clothes and into sweatpants and a pullover, although the Frasier house is blessedly heated to keep the chill of the fog outside, where it’s supposed to be. When I come back, Carl is at the kitchen counter counting the money carefully, totally engrossed in his project like a father looking dotingly at his child. I rifle through the fridge for a snack, take out a cold leftover meatloaf, and stick it in their new microwave oven. I love that microwave oven; it’s the first I’ve ever seen. When I get rich I’ll make sure each of my sisters has one.

“You were pretty close,” Carl says from the counter as I wait for my food to heat up. “One hundred seventy and thirty two cents.”

“Rad,” I say as he begins to divvy the money. He doesn’t need it—he gets a two-hundred-dollar allowance from his mom each week—but he says I need to learn to pay rent, and I find it hard to argue with him. I get to live in a house bigger than
anything most of the people in San Jorge have ever seen the inside of—if I have to
beg and suffer wounds in my pride, that’s fine. Pride can heal.

Carl leaves the coins from his portion on the counter. He hates coins. I scoop
my pile into the brown paper bag I’ve been keeping my savings in since I’ve been
living here full-time. I know the amount of cash that’s in there to the penny, and
though it’s never been tampered with, I don’t trust Carl not to mess with me. I write
the new number on the side of the bag—5,231.43—and walk the bag to my little
corner of the closet. I’ve got another 573 dollars hidden in a loose brick in the wall of
my room at home. Or what used to be home.

If acting doesn’t work out, I can put myself through community college at the
very least. I’m not doing great at school, but I’ll pass. A few of the teachers will pass
me out of fear of having to teach the me again, and a few will pass me out of
sympathy for my parents. Everyone loves the mild pastor and his pretty wife. Either
way, I’m getting the hell out of here and making it for myself and for my sisters.
They haven’t asked for the lot they’ve been given any more than I have. They’re just
better at dealing with it, I guess.

Lucy
February 1974

It had been three weeks since I’d seen Andy. His teachers said he
hadn’t been in school that whole time either. It just wasn’t like him—he’d been
slacking in school since our move to San Jorge, certainly, but it wasn’t like him to
ditch for days on end, let alone weeks. I was asking around, and had even made
announcements the last two Sundays to the congregation, pleading that they could
keep an eye out for my son. It made my cheeks burn each time. I knew they must be
thinking that I was irresponsible, and they were probably soaking it up like a warm
summer sun. *Finally, the goodie-goodie preacher’s wife falling from her heavenly
pedestal. She can’t even keep track of her miscreant kid.* As I pleaded at the altar, my
arms shaking, I was pretty sure I saw the hint of a smirk on the face of Victoria
Frasier, but if I did it passed like a flash of lightning.

I had gone up to the Frasier house to see if Carl had heard any word from
Andy, but he had stepped out onto the porch, closed the door, and in worried tones
said that he hadn’t see him for weeks, and hoped he came back soon.

I called the local sheriff, David Perle, to list my son as a missing person, and
maybe get the word out to the neighboring towns’ police departments, and he said
he’d get right on it, which meant that he would do absolutely nothing. Sheriff Perle
was an incredibly lazy man, and he loved his job because he never had to work. He
had an understanding with the folks of the San Jorge Valley: he would turn a blind
eye to their domestic disputes, alcoholism and marijuana plants, and they would
ignore the fact that he was truly the most useless waste of taxpayer dollars who ever
existed.

“David,” I pleaded, “he’s been missing three weeks now. There’s gotta be
something you can do. I’m begging you—please take this seriously.”
“Look, Missus,” Sheriff Perle said in an infuriatingly condescending tone, “Kids are disappearing all the time nowadays, goin’ off to be hippies and ‘find themselves,’ or whatever. Your son will come back when he wants to, healthy and happy, alright? So relax a little.”

As if David Perle knows Andy better than I do, I thought, furious, but another voice in my head whispered, do you really know my son at all?

I was a nervous wreck as the third week with an absent son came to a close. It was Saturday night and John was in our room, going over his sermon for the following morning. The girls were finishing up their homework at the kitchen table when I heard soft and urgent knock at the door. I wasn’t surprised—people came to see John at all hours; sometimes they weren’t even from the Valley at all, but were hippies just passing through who had heard of a friendly pastor down the road: a woman whose husband had hit her, a boy who needed a place to stay the night, a drug-addled nomad who had suddenly had a calling to Jesus and also needed some gas money.

I was surprised, however, to see little Jane Stanley standing at the door by herself. “Jane,” I said, pausing a moment. The scratching of Karen, Susan and Lisa’s pencils ceased mid-math-problems when they heard me say Jane’s name.

“You didn’t walk here by yourself, did you? It’s awfully cold,” I said, though I noticed she was wearing what looked like a new, good-quality coat.

“Thanks, Mrs. Warren,” the girl said quietly. “I didn’t walk, actually. I drove.”
I looked past her, deeper into the night, and sure enough, I could see the outline of a small clunky sedan parked at the farthest end of our driveway.

“Well,” said Susan, suddenly deciding to speak up from the kitchen and do so with the heirs of a noblewoman, “that is against the law. So I guess we can add driving to the list of things you do that are against the law.”

“Susan,” I snapped, “to your room. Now.”

Susan already looked like she had regretted what she’d said, but I wished she would think before she spoke. I knew Jane had learned to drive so that her constantly-drunk father could be in the passenger seat rather than behind the wheel.

I turned back to Jane, who was looking at the floor. “Actually,” she said, not looking up, “I want to apologize for what my dad said about Andy. He was really mean, and you guys didn’t deserve to hear those things.”

“Oh, honey,” I said, pulling the girl into a hug, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry that Andy hurt you.” And then the stress of the past weeks, and my guilt for not knowing my son better, not even knowing where on earth he was or if he was even alive, and the guilt that I couldn’t do more for this child or her siblings or my own skinny children crashed down on me all at once like a burning building and a sob caught in my throat. Jane started crying too, and we stood in our kitchen, shedding full-bodied tears of raw hardship. Karen and Lisa were still frozen at the kitchen table, as if they were actors in a play that had just gone off-script.

It was Jane who ended the episode, looking up and tearing herself away from me as John walked into the room. She wiped her face with her hands, composed
herself, and announced to all of us, “Andy’s not bad. He’s a good person. He really is. Actually, I was wondering if I could speak to him.”

“We haven’t seen Andy in quite some time,” I said, sniffling.

I could tell John was rather bewildered to find the victim of our son’s violent attack was here in our kitchen at eight in the evening, actively seeking out and praising her attacker as if he were a knight who had saved her from a fire-breathing dragon. But John simply said, “Well thank you, Jane, that’s a nice thing to say. About Andy, I mean.” He paused, then asked, “Can I ask what he’s done to warrant your comments?”

Strangely, the girl seemed to become nervous at that point. She had the same sort of shifty look that Susan got when she knew she’d said something insensitive.

“He helps out. Keeps an eye out for me and my brothers.” Without skipping a beat, she added, “I’ve actually got to go. My dad will be mad if he finds out I’ve taken the car. Sorry for coming over so late. Have a good night.”

With that, she was out the door, the darkness swallowing her up like it had swallowed up my son three weeks ago. I heard the car sputter to life, and she wasted no time in escaping our driveway.
Andy
March 1974

Carl is downright sadistic. I mean, he always was, I guess. Like back in January, when he caught that Stanley girl stealing and offered me 300 dollars to beat the shit out of her. “She’s a thief,” he’d whispered gleefully in my ear. “Just give her a few whacks and the dough is yours.” After I’d done it, when the cheering school yard crowd had dispersed, I’d quietly apologized and handed her the three $100 bills Carl had slipped me. “I’m sorry, Jane,” I’d said, helping her up. I’d hesitated, and then decided to tell her. “Carl paid me to do it.” I’d told her I’d come into a bit of money, and I’d asked her to let me know if there was anything else I could do for her in the future. I had gone over to check on her a few times, and was pleased to see that she’d bought herself and her siblings some warm-looking clothes and new sneakers. She said her dad had gotten suspicious, but she had told him that some rich lady had donated a bunch of stuff to the school, and he’d dropped the subject. I just hope she’s able to keep the money hidden—her piece-of-shit dad could probably drink it all in a day.

I’m in Carl’s closet, stewing, and more than a little creeped out, to be honest. I’ve downright hated Carl since the Jane incident and the dad incident, but it wasn’t until earlier today that I realized I can’t have anything more to do with this nutjob. I think today I got a glimpse into the twisted recesses of Carl’s psyche, and I don’t care to ever see it again.
We were hanging out in Golden Gate park after I’d had a fairly unsuccessful day of begging—I think maybe the good people of San Francisco are on to me. We were passing a joint back and forth and people-watching. Or at least I was. Carl was watching a kid, maybe two years old, playing with some dandelions in the grass. Dandelions are resilient, I’ll give them that. I can’t think of anything else that thrives so well in the cold March fog.

Carl turned to me, with the glint in his eyes that made me want to take flight or burrow into a hole. “Hey Andy,” he said. “How about your next challenge?”

“I don’t know,” I said unevenly. “I’ve just about had it with your damn challenges.”

“How does the number eight thousand sound?” he asked enticingly.

I let out a long whistle. “Shit, Carl,” I said. “How does your mom let you have access to that kind of money? I mean I know you’re disgusting-rich, but damn.” I shook my head.

Carl laughed. “You know my mom doesn’t give a rat’s ass what I do,” he said. Which is true. I think she gives him whatever he asks for because deep down, she feels threatened by him. The Frasiers are probably a psychologist’s dream. So many weird layers to unravel.

I sighed. “What do you want me to do?” I asked reluctantly.

Carl gazed intently at the child who had strayed a bit far from his mother, who seemed to be deep in conversation with an acquaintance.

“Take it,” he said.

“What?” I asked, thinking I’d misheard.
“Take it,” he repeated.

“What, the kid? Kidnap that kid? Are you out of your mind? What would you do with him?”

Carl mused. “I don’t know yet. Probably just take him for a spin around the city. But the offer might expire soon. That broad probably won’t let him out of her sights for long.”

This was the first time I’d been dead afraid of Carl. He wasn’t just a bully, he was a stone-cold psycho, and I didn’t want anything to do with him.

“Look, you freak,” I sputtered, “I’m done.”

He laughed, but his face betrayed anger. “You’re not done,” he said.

“I’m done. I’ll pack up my stuff tonight. Kidnapping? Are you serious? That’s no joke. Dear God,” I said. I got up, took a handful of bills from my begging bucket, and started walking away from him.

“Look at you, all high and mighty,” Carl said, following me. “The preacher’s kid and his high morals. You’re not better than me,” he hissed. “Scrounging around for money like the white trash you are.”

I just kept walking until he cussed me out and stopped following me. I walked out of the park and hitched a ride with some dude who said he was heading out of the city as far as San Anselmo, which was close enough, but during the ride my knee was bouncing up and down with nervousness. Carl was probably taking the money I had stashed, burning my belongings, tearing up my clothes. I wondered whether I would have anything left by the time I got back, or whether I’d gone through all this hell for nothing. When we got to San Anselmo, the old guy pulled over and left me on a curb
downtown. I thanked him with a dollar and, hunching my shoulders against the cold, I prepared for the six-mile walk home. I must have been quite a sight. I still had my begging clothes on, and I was already starting to shiver in the fading light. The dude I’d hitchhiked from must have taken pity on me, because he turned around, rolled his window down and said, “Awe hell, jump in kid. I’ll take you to San Jorge.”

I thanked him profusely and had him drop me off at the very bottom of the hill to the Frasier mansion—I didn’t want the guy to think I was a rich-kid asshole pretending to be poor just for kicks. Although I guess that’s sort of what I am now.

When I reached the mansion, I braced myself for the worst. I rang the doorbell and waited at the door, hardly breathing, hoping with all my heart that Carl would let me in so I could get my things.

To my immense relief, he opened the door wide, and with a grin, said cheerfully, “Andrew, my man! Come on in!” I did as I was told and said hello to his mother, who was watching some show about helicopter pilots, and joined Carl in the dining room where he was engaged in a large meal of roasted chicken, asparagus, and mashed potatoes.

A place was set, and he bid me to sit down. I obeyed warily. This was an entirely different Carl than the one I’d dealt with just a couple of hours before. I studied him carefully as the Frasiers’ cook loaded my plate with food. As far as I could tell, all previous traces of anger were gone, replaced with joviality and good grace. He was chatty, laughing about something someone had said the other day at school that he wished I’d been there for. I ate my meal silently. Finally Carl put his silverware down and looked me hard in the eyes.
“Andy, look,” he said, “I’m sorry I got carried away today. It was a joke. Do whatever you want, man. I just hope we can stay friends.”

I nodded, and he added, “Just, for the love of God, stop being such a wet towel. I can’t stand the moping.”

“Alright man,” I replied. Then I added, “Thanks,” because it felt like Carl was expecting something more.

“You still want to move out?” he asked.

“Yeah dude, I think so,” I said. “But thanks for letting me crash here this whole time. I really appreciate it.”

He nodded, mumbled “No worries,” and refocused his attention on his dinner.

So here I am in Carl’s closet, packing up my belongings. I feel that sense of comfort one gets when an unpleasant chapter is finally closed. Carl didn’t mess up my room—everything is in its place, and now I just have to evacuate the Frasier house and see if my parents will have me back. For the first time in months, I feel something resembling happiness. Maybe I can get a better life for me and my sisters. Maybe my dad will forgive me for causing so much trouble in his life. And maybe Carl and I can remain casual acquaintances, if not friends. In a few months the school year will be up and I won’t ever have to see him again. We can be civil to each other until June. I’m certain of it.

I finish packing and head out, thanking Carl and his mother again for letting me stay so long. Mrs. Frasier seems more disappointed than Carl does that I’m leaving, probably because it means the end of a lot of family drama for the Warrens.
Carl shuts the heavy oaken door behind me slowly, and something compels me to glance backward at him. I so wish I hadn’t. His face, if only for a fraction of a second, is murky with rage, as if some horrible twisted monster lurks beneath the surface of his skin. But then his face is gone behind the solid slam of the door, and I feel good. The sound of that door closing is the very symbol of my new life. One without poverty and guilt and the bone-cold Marin fog. So I set off down the hill with a big duffel filled with my new things and loaded up with cash.

I feel like Maria in that stupid Sound of Music movie my sisters love, when she’s about to go to that rich dude’s house and watch the bratty children. Confidence, I think, remembering the name of the song my sisters like to sing. I shake the thought from my head, embarrassed, but excited, excited to see Susan and Lisa and Karen, and praying silently God, please forgive me, and please let them forgive me. It’s not a good prayer, not poetic and thoughtful like the ones my dad says at his pulpit, but I haven’t prayed in a long time. Hopefully God—and my dad—will cut me some slack.

It’s around 7 p.m. when I finally make it to my family’s house. I am far enough away that I am still submerged in darkness. I want to reveal myself on my own terms, and I won’t be able to do that as well if they see me first. But I can view my family through the kitchen window, and my heart constricts as I see the beautiful scene laid out before me like a freaking Christmas card. My mom is radiant, washing dishes in her worn gingham apron that she made in her high-school home-ec class. I imagine she’s humming a Nat King Cole or Frank Sinatra song, but I can’t hear from this distance. My three sisters are seated around our huge, round kitchen table, diligently doing their homework, and my father is sitting with them, probably
hunched over his bible. My mom loves that our kitchen table is a circle because that way there’s no head of the table—everyone is spaced evenly apart, because “every Warren is equally important.” I wonder if that’s still true.

I watch Lisa, as she’s the only one facing the window. Her brow is furrowed in concentration and I feel a lump in my throat. I’m sure she’ll get the answer soon. She’s so smart. All of them are.

Suddenly I back away from the house, and then turn on my heel and run up a nearby hill, hot tears burning trails down my frozen cheeks, and I begin to cry harder. I’m furious with myself for crying, and also for letting myself ruin what I’d had. Because six months ago I was a part of that very scene, laughing with my dad, whose dry sense of humor could knock you over with guffaws, or teasing one of my sisters until mom chided me. Now it seems there’s not space for me anymore. They’re not broken because I’ve been gone. In fact, they look peaceful, more resilient than ever. And I threw it all away, because I thought that money would make me happier than they could. The shame claws at my insides like a wild animal, and I drop my duffel with all of my fancy clothes. It lands on the cold ground with a thud. I sit beside it, stooped over like an old man, on the slope overlooking the house about a hundred yards away. It feels like a hundred miles.

I don’t know how long I sit there, crying like the baby I am. I think I understand now why Carl is so jealous of my dirt-poor family. It’s because they’re happy, and he never will be. And he knows it. I wipe my face with my sleeve. I sound
like a freaking fable, like that *Christmas Carol* story. It sounds so obvious, but sitting here in the dark, by myself, I know I’ve messed up, and badly.

I decide that I can’t go back. Not yet. I can’t disrupt my family again, not after I hurt my dad and Karen, and threatened my mom. However, I decide to sneak into the house, and maybe see if I can hush up one of my sisters long enough to give them some—most—of the money. Lord knows I’m sick of that evil paper.

I wait until all the lights are off in the house, huffing hot breath into my stiff, cold hands. Man, I should have bought some gloves. I’m warm otherwise, thanks to the expensive, thick coat I’m wearing, courtesy of Frasier cash. I guess money isn’t all bad.

When I’ve waited long enough that I’m fairly certain that the house is settled down and on the verge of sleep, I head back down the slope, my duffel strapped across my body and slapping uncomfortably against my hip. I rustle around on my hands and knees at the front door of the house. I know my mom keeps a key buried in the dirt here somewhere, and I scratch at the earth with the urgency of a dog chasing a mole he’ll never catch. Finally I feel cold metal against my fingers and grasp the key victoriously. I scrape off the moist dirt onto my bell-bottom jeans as best I can and quietly enter the house, painstakingly opening the front door inch by inch to ensure as much silence as possible.

My parents’ room is at the back of the house, which is rad because my mom is a light sleeper, and I don’t want her to wake up. I don’t want to have to face her right now. My room is the first one down the long hallway, and I pass it, and then stop as the thought hits me: perhaps it’s not my room anymore. I’ve been gone for weeks,
and Karen, Susan and Lisa all share a room—Susan and Lisa in bunk beds, Karen on a mattress on the floor of the walk-in closet. Surely they’d thought about taking my room over, if they haven’t done it already. I feel like a stranger in the house as I creep around, trying not to wake the occupants. I take a few more steps down the hallway and tiptoe into my room. I sigh, relieved, overjoyed even, to see that not much in my room has changed. Not that there would have been much to change. My room is decorated scarcely to show my indifference for such things. My Led Zeppelin poster still hangs over my bed, and my lava lamp sits on my nightstand, though it hasn’t been used in some time. When I’d first raised the money to buy it, dad had told me privately that we couldn’t spare electricity for decorations. One thing I notice is that I’d left my room those weeks ago with clothes all over the floor; now, they’re piled neatly in the hamper.

I move on to the girls’ room. As my eyes adjust to the dark, I can make out the dark lumps that are the sleeping forms of my sisters, carefully tucked in their beds like in that poem “Twas the Night Before Christmas,” or whatever. “Little sugar plums danced in their heads.” Is that the line?

I can see the two forms of the girls in the bunk bed, that is. Karen’s closet door is shut, which I assume means she’s asleep on her mattress on the floor. Someday, Karen will have a real bed. Something nice, expensive...maybe a waterbed.

Susan sleeps in the bottom bunk, which is good news for me, since she’s the one I’d prefer to wake and her being on the bottom will make it easier for me. Of my three sisters I’m closest to Susan. I admire her spunk—she doesn’t take shit from anyone. I wish I had that trait.
I need to ensure that she’ll be quiet though, so I clap a hand over her mouth. Her eyes spring open, filled with terror, and she makes a muffled sound.

“Quiet, quiet!” I say in a harsh whisper. “It’s me. Susan, Susan, it’s me.” I wait for her to register that it’s just her big brother and for the fear to dissipate. But something’s wrong. She can tell it’s me by now, but the fear isn’t gone, and she’s breathing rapidly through the nose and begins to scratch at the arm that’s holding her mouth. She’s afraid of me. Susan is afraid of me. This knowledge stings more than the scratches Susan is leaving on my arm.

“Ow! Christ, Susan, I have money for you, that’s all,” I hiss, batting her hands away with my free hand. She calms down, apparently deciding that I haven’t appeared here in the night to murder her. Pain squeezes at my heart. I should have known she’d be afraid. The last time she’d seen me I’d been threatening family members. But still, I’d been thinking, hoping, that somehow she’d know it wasn’t me who had done that. Not really me.

I hold a finger to my lips and slowly release my hand from Susan’ face. She glares at me, and then gets right to business. “Well, let’s see it then,” she whispers in her sassiest tone.

I can’t help myself. I begin to snicker, and have to bite my closed fist to keep from making a sound.

“What is funny?” Susan whispers, but there in the semi-darkness I see the flash of a white, bucktoothed smile.

And then, from above, I heard another whisper, this one incredulous: “Andy?”
I freeze. Dammit. I look up. Her face is hanging over the edge of the top bunk, her eyes bulging. “What are you doing here?” She asks.


Those three words hit me like stones to the gut. I run my hands over my face.

“Oh God,” I respond. “Oh God, I’m so sorry.” The girls look at me gravely, and I pull myself together, unzip my duffel, and pull out the paper bag with my savings in it. My sins.

I reach in and pull out the stack of bills, which I’ve tied together in a large rubber band. Both Susan and Lisa’s jaws drop, simultaneously and comically, as if they’re in a sitcom. I feel a touch of pride, and a sense of justification. This is what I’ve done this for. I’ve messed up my family, but I’ve done it to give them a better life.

“How much?” whispers Susan breathlessly.

“5,231 dollars,” I reply. Susan gives a low whistle. Lisa continues gaping.

“Now, I want you to use this only in emergencies, do you hear me?” I murmur. “I’m serious. I want you to buy coats and shoes and food when you need that stuff, but nothing frivolous, okay? It’s for college. Use it to buy needs, not wants. Wants come later.” I pause. “I promise.”

“Where did you get this?” Lisa whispers, finally able to speak. “Are you selling drugs?”
I contemplate telling her that yes, I sell drugs—it’d be easier to explain than the truth—that I’m a bully-for-hire, a lackey to a psycho. But instead, I decide that the less they know, the better for everyone. Better for me.

“Look, I’m not a drug dealer, but I can’t tell you more than that. Just promise me you guys will be reasonable with this till I come back.”

To my delight, both Susan and Lisa actually look crestfallen to learn I am leaving. “I wish you’d tell us what’s going on,” Lisa says earnestly. “Why can’t you just stay?”

“I just…” I trail off. I can’t bring myself to say to my younger sisters that I don’t feel like I belong, that I don’t think they could ever quite look at me the same, that I’m deeply, deeply ashamed.

Before I can think of an answer, the three of us are startled by the light that’s filtering from beneath the closet door. “Shit,” I say, just as the door opens and Karen stands there, the light creating a halo behind her seething face. She looks like a fallen angel sent to drag me to the depths of hell. Her fists are clenched, and her face is morphed into a picture of rage, pain, and the same tragic glimmer of fear I’d seen on Susan’s face when I’d clamped a hand over her mouth.

I raise my hands in a motion of surrender. “Karen, I’m sorry,” I say, but she’s not listening to me. She gives me a glare that makes my heart break again, takes a deep breath, and yells, “Mom!” as she runs down the hallway for my parents’ bedroom.

“Hide the money,” I say to Susan and Lisa, and run out of the room. I have to get out of the house, have to get out before my mom and dad get up. I can’t bear to
see dad’s crooked nose and his eyes, filled with the righteous anger of God. I can’t see my mother, who will cry, and ask why I did it, where I’ve been, because I know I’d break. I’d tell her everything. And then I’d be steeped in shame; I would sink into it like quicksand. It would eat me alive.

I’m too late. As I head out of the girls’ room and down the hallway, the light from my parents’ room chases me down, exposes me. And I hear my mother’s voice—half-panicked, half-hopeful. “Andy, Andy, don’t leave, come back, come back right now!” I haven’t heard that voice for so long, I didn’t know how much I missed it, and how much power it has over me. I pivot, and my mom is standing three feet from me, Karen right behind her.

She is in her favorite pajama set, the one with cherries all over it that my dad had bought her for her birthday years ago. Her hair is up in curlers, and she has a hand over her mouth, perhaps in disbelief. Maybe in joy? And just as I predicted, her face crumples like a house of cards in a breeze, and I go to her. “Mom,” I say, my voice breaking, “I’m so sorry.” Behind her, Karen stares hard at me. And behind Karen, the tall figure of my father emerges. “Son,” he says softly, “come on, we need to talk.”
March 1974

Lucy

It’d been three days since Andy’s return, and God had been listening to the urgency of my prayers. Because it was not the angry, bitter, violent Andy we’d come to know and fear, but the soft, affectionate, protective Andy of the past who’d arrived that night.

I’d found him in the hallway, about to take off again, but instead he stayed. He stayed, and he wept, and he apologized. He apologized for hurting everyone, especially John. He said he’d understand if we’d never forgive him. Lord, but he doesn’t realize—all I’d wanted was to have him back.

He and John had a long talk, and they seemed almost on their old friendly terms when they came out. John said that Andy wouldn’t say yet what had made him so angry those months, but that he’s moved on, and that he’d never go back. John and I were satisfied with that for the time being. We had our son back, and that was all that mattered. Susan and Lisa welcomed him back readily as well. Susan had climbed all over him, and he’d given her a piggyback ride all over the house. It had been close to one in the morning when we’d realized that it was Sunday, a school night. I’d rushed everyone back to bed even though I couldn’t sleep myself. In the morning, to my immense relief, Andy had been dressed and ready to walk to school with the girls, as if he’d been there always, as if the nightmare of the past months had been a nightmare we’d all finally awakened from. I noticed briefly that Andy was dressed in rather nice clothes, but joy overcame curiosity and I didn’t think any more about it.
Happiness can be delicate. Karen was the only one who was suspicious. She was the only one of all of us who still treaded lightly around Andy, as if he were a bomb that may or may not be inert. Andy seemed to be trying—he brought home a gorgeous bouquet for her (again, with what money I did not know) and wrote an apology letter so sincere it made me cry. I wondered where he was getting all his new things, and he told me he had been working odd jobs in the city in the weeks he was gone. So Andy tried buying back Karen’s love, and she gave a little. She stopped actively glaring at him and throwing cutting remarks at him. But she wouldn’t laugh at his jokes like she used to, and she would turn from springtime to winter when he entered a room. She was being cautious.

On the third day after his arrival, the girls showed up home after school without Andy. “Where’s your brother?” I asked them, trying to remain calm.

“He cut class today. Could be anywhere,” Karen said without emotion. Susan and Lisa were silent.

“Well, he’s just out with his friends. He’ll be home for dinner,” I said with false cheerfulness. My panic was showing through my voice like blood seeping through a bandage. My words were off kilter, too high pitched.

Andy wasn’t home for dinner.
March 1974

Andy

I’m in the small clearing of some giant oak and redwood trees on the Stanley property, standing in front of a decrepit barn wondering how on earth I’m supposed to get myself and my sleeping bag, blankets and supplies up into the loft, and I’m happier than I’ve been in a long time. Everything is great at home. Though the self-disgust nags at me every time I see my father’s face, it’s not from lack of forgiveness on his part. He greeted me as though I were the prodigal son. Karen has been a bit cold toward me still, but I don’t blame her, and I think she’s thawing out slowly. All is as it should be. So when Carl approached me earlier today with a new challenge, I was floored, but civil. He deserves civility, since that’s what I’ve been treated with recently, both by him and my own family.

“Carl, I haven’t changed my mind. I’m done with the challenges,” I’d told him with finality. “I just made up with everyone from the last challenge, okay? I broke my old man’s nose, for Christ’s sake.”

“Dude, just hear me out,” Carl protested. “Look, it’s nothing wild. There’s just this old abandoned barn on this property, alright? Just and old creepy barn. If you sleep in it the whole night, you get an easy two-thousand, okay? How does that sound, huh? Just a dare.”

I chewed my bottom lip. Two thousand dollars for a night in a barn? Was he serious? Man, someday I want to be made of money like that.

“What’s the catch?” I asked, wary. “Who has to get hurt?”

I sighed. I had refused any more challenges from Carl because Carl’s challenges had been getting more psycho. But I was the idiot if I didn’t choose to sleep in a dumb barn for two grand.

“Aw, what the hell,” I said finally. “But Carl”—I looked him dead in the eye—“this is the last one. Hand to God. After this one, I’m done.”

“I promise you, it’ll be the last one,” Carl had said with a shine of glee in his eyes. “After this one, you can skip on down to your little church mouse family and never look back.”

I ducked out of school early so Karen wouldn’t prod me about where I was going—she’s been keeping an even more watchful eye on me lately—and hopped into Carl’s ‘Vette to hang with him until nightfall. He drove me to the property where the abandoned barn is. It’s near the neighborhood where the Stanleys live, and secluded, surrounded by the monstrous redwood trees Marin is famous for. It’s been overgrown by foliage, and the wood seems dank and termite-eaten.

“Okay, easy enough,” I said to Carl when he dropped me off.

“Whoa there, not so fast,” he said. You’re not just sleeping in the barn. That’s too easy. You’re sleeping in the loft.”

“Dammit Carl. You said no catch.”

“This isn’t a catch, Andy! The loft is part of the barn. You’re still sleeping in the barn.”
He seemed to be getting flustered—his voice rose in...what? Anger?
Nervousness?

“Dude, chill,” I said. “I’ll still do it.” I looked up at the barn’s loft. “It’s just higher up. How am I supposed to get up there?”

“Figure it out! It’s part of the challenge,” he replied.

We spent the few hours of daylight we had left eating pizza Carl had bought, peeling the bark off some of the sequoias, and talking about the girls in our class. We actually just seemed like two normal dudes. Carl doesn’t always show his insanity. It likes to play peek-a-boo.

The sun set a brilliant red.

“Damn,” I said in a half-whisper. “Check out that sunset.”

He laughed. “Don’t get all fruity on me, man,” he’d replied. He stood up and stretched. “Okay, man, it was nice knowing you,” he said easily.

“What, you think I’m going to die trying to get in there?” I asked, gesturing toward the barn. “Piece of cake. Just be here to pick me up tomorrow, will ya?”

“Sure thing. Dawn,” he’d said, and with that he was gone.

So here I am, trying to puzzle my way up into the rickety structure. It’s a sort of dutch-style barn, but longer than I’ve usually seen them. I bundle my blankets on my shoulders and start to climb up the side of the barn. When I’m close enough to the little loft window, I try throwing the blankets inside. It takes a couple of tries, because they’re heavy, but eventually they’re in. I think about going back down for my backpack, which I’d dropped a little ways from the barn door, but decide against it. In the backpack are my weathered textbooks and a copy of The Exorcist, but there’s no
sense in spooking myself further. Despite the creepiness of the inside of the loft, I’m kind of grateful it’s dark inside—I don’t want to know what kind of critters are going to be sleeping here with me tonight.

The floor of the loft seems surprisingly stable. I settle myself in for the night, and try to sleep, but I’m caught up in thoughts about my future. I gave the money to my sisters, thinking I’d be gone again for a while. I may have to take some of that back to make sure there’s enough to get me and my sisters through college, but I’m not too worried about it. They’ll all get scholarships, and for my education, there’s still my $573 behind the loose brick in my bedroom wall. It’s all going to work out. I’m going to have a future, and it’s going to include my family. I stare at the pinprick lights made by the stars through the holes of the barn ceiling, and smell the distinct, wonderful smell of the redwoods. Maybe, I think as I drift off to sleep, *maybe I can come to think of Marin County as home.*

Lucy
March 1974

The phone was ringing in the kitchen, and I groaned and threw my arms over my head. Next to me in bed, I could hear John stirring to answer it. It was probably someone high on drugs, hoping the local pastor could exorcise him. “What time is it?” I asked John sleepily.

“Go back to sleep,” he whispered, and padded down the hallway.
I could hear John’s voice in the kitchen. It sounded urgent. In a moment he was back, rifling around in our closet for his shoes. “Brace yourself,” he told me, which meant he was about to turn on the light. I closed my eyes tight, but the light above our bed permeated my eyelids and seemed to sear deep into my corneas anyway. I slowly opened one eye and peered at the clock.

“Dear Lord, John, it’s 3 a.m. Can’t you tell them to wait until at least 6?”

“It’s the volunteer firefighters. Apparently there’s a barn on fire near the Stanley property. They need everyone they can get to stop it from spreading.”

I sat up, awake now. “Have they called in help from San Anselmo?” I asked.

“I’m assuming they have, but by the time they put on all their gear and make it over here who knows how bad it’ll be,” he replied.

I looked at my husband, dressing himself clumsily in the cold of the very early morning, and desperately did not want him to fight fire. For once, just one time, I wanted him to not think about others, but to think about himself. Think about me. I bit my bottom lip.

“Be careful,” I said as he left.

I tried to go back to sleep, but couldn’t. “Please Lord,” I prayed. “Please let him be safe.” Eventually I drifted off, and dreamed of flames.

When I awoke again, it was 6, the alarm clock shrieking at me like a crying infant.

I fumbled around to turn it off, and then tried to roust John, before realizing with a jolt that he wasn’t in bed. A quick search of the house and the empty driveway confirmed what I’d already suspected: John hadn’t come home from firefighting.
I hurriedly got the girls ready for school.

“Where’s dad?” asked Karen, looking at the empty chair usually occupied by her quiet father in the mornings.

“He’s with the volunteer firefighters,” I said, trying hard to combat the shrill nervousness in my voice.

“Cool!” said Susan, her mouth full of stale discount cereal. I scolded her gently and hurriedly sent the girls on their way. For a few hours after they left, I paced around the house, cleaning and recleaning the windows, dusting the sparse, dustless furniture.

John came home around noon, and my face lit up with a thousand suns.

“Thank God you’re safe...” I said, but fell silent as I saw his face clearly. He obviously was not reflecting my enthusiasm; in fact, I didn’t think I’d ever seen him look so grave.

“John? What’s wrong honey?” I asked. “Are the Stanleys alright?”

He walked to the couch the way a statue might walk and sat down heavily. His head drooped onto his chest as though it had suddenly turned to stone. “The Stanleys are fine,” he said in a hoarse voice I didn’t recognize.

“John, you’re scaring me,” I said. Then a thought struck me like a derailed train. My heart clogging my throat, I gasped, “Is it Andy? Has something happened to Andy?”

John put his head in his hands and uttered a low sound I’d never, ever heard from him: a single sob. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets for a few seconds that felt like hours. I couldn’t take it.
“Dammit John,” I screeched, “tell me what’s going on!”

He looked up at me with bloodshot eyes.

“The barn was already completely lit up when I got there,” he said hoarsely. “It was old and the wood must have been really dry. Anyway, when we finally were able to put the fire out…” he gulped loudly. “There was a body. Unrecognizable. Charred…” He tapered off.

I put a hand to my mouth, then tried to compose myself. “But Andy’s fine,” I said. “It’s not Andy. You don’t know whose body it was. Andy’s fine.”

John looked down at the ground, shaking his head. “His backpack was outside the barn. It was pretty burned, but the books—” He made a strangled noise, like one of the half-feral valley dogs who’d had the worst of a fight. “They were Andy’s, Lucy,” he said. “He wrote his name in them.”

Lucy

2017

I still get the nightmares sometimes. Andy engulfed in flame, his hands reaching out to me, his face twisted in pain and horror. Sometimes I try to run to him but am rooted at the spot, unable to move or speak until Andy and the barn disappear behind a curtain of fire. Sometimes I cry out to him, and try to reach out for something to hold on to, a hand, an arm, but the heat is too much and I’m forced back. And each time, he shouts to me, “Mom, Mom, Mom” in an endless painful loop
so engrained in my subconscious that it might as well be tattooed on the folds of my brain. Each time is torture, because I share his pain, and because I’m ashamed that I knew my son hardly at all. My boy died before I had the chance to meet the man he was becoming.

Lucy

April 1974

I hadn’t slept more than two hours at a time since Andy’s death. Some sort of dental specialist had identified his teeth to make a certain match to the body in the barn, and his backpack had been seized as evidence. But when some firemen came and told me that the barn was a crime scene, that the fire that had started in the barn was arson, a spark inside me—the same one that had gotten me through the hardships of watching my daughters go to bed hungry, or hearing that John had given half his meager salary back to the church in his stupid commitment to help the poor when the poor was us, or wondering with dread where my son had been all those weeks—well, it went out quietly and suddenly.

From that point on, I was too tired to make dinner, too tired even to talk to John or the girls. I wandered the halls like a zombie, touching the walls my son had touched. I muttered to myself, and sometimes the bullet of guilt that would rip through my heart was almost more electric than the knife of grief. Because aren’t the successes and tragedies of a child reflected like a mirror onto his mother? If Andy had
died in a fire, shouldn’t I have known where he was and been there, dragging him to safety? Shouldn’t he have been at the kitchen table under my watchful gaze, rather than in a rickety barn in the first place? I was dragged further into my guilt as though by an undertow as I began to think of new ways in which I had utterly failed my most important responsibility. Had I worked full time and made more money, had I paid more attention to him at critical moments, had we not moved to the Valley in the first place, would Andy still be laughing and breathing and dreaming? I hadn’t been able to nurture my son to adulthood, and I carried that fact like a block of ice in my belly, a yolk on my back.

The morning we’d learned our son had died, John and I had had to go to Valley High School to pick up Karen, and then go to the San Jorge K-8 to get Lisa and Susan. There is no right way to tell your living children that their brother has died. The whole thing is so totally wrong. John and I stared at them while they looked nervously at our tear-stained, grave faces as we searched for the words that would change their lives. Susan was crying before we even spoke.

Valley High held a memorial service the next day and then gave the student body the rest of the day off. There were no Warrens present. None of us were up to watching teachers who’d disliked or feared Andy gushing about him, nor hear kids who were not his friends clamoring over each other to express how chummy they were with our son. We didn’t want to hear the excited whispers of conspiracy theories, nor the whoops as children rushed home, thanking the dead boy for a free afternoon. We stayed home and cradled our grief and each other.
The memorial service was an equally bleak affair. What was left of Andy was still in the morgue as “evidence” so we had a service without him in our little church. John had done a remarkable job keeping calm while he presided over the service, though there were a few times that he seemed to be going through the motions, but I could tell through his blue eyes turned gray that he was far away from the San Jorge Valley Church.

After the service, I bypassed all the doting old biddies without a glance and went straight into John’s arms. He hugged me quickly, silent, and then started past me in a mechanical way, greeting people who showered him with condolences. I stared blindly into the crowd, and noticed Mrs. Frasier and her son.

Victoria was wearing an elegant black dress, a long black coat, and black gloves: someone out of a Hepburn movie. Dark cat-eye sunglasses were perched on her narrow face, despite the fact that she was indoors, and it was raining outside. Carl was behind her in an expensive-looking suit, his steely gaze burning into my tired one. There was a moment that something stirred and unsettled me, but the feeling left as Victoria swooped in and wrapped me in a careful hug.

“Oh darling,” she cooed, “I am so sorry to hear what happened to poor Andrew. If something were to happen to my Carl, well, I don’t know how I’d be able to bear it.”

I mumbled something in response, but I wasn’t paying much attention to her, because across the church I spotted someone much more interesting.

Jane Stanley, flagged by two younger siblings, was placing a card and an enormous, gorgeous bouquet of flowers onto the table full of condolence notes
someone had set up on the right side of the sanctuary. The bouquet stood out proudly from the rest; exotic lilies with petals spread like wings were crowded by delicate pink carnations, alluring two-toned roses, and long strands of green belles of Ireland.

I stared at the bouquet for a moment, and then glanced into the weepy blue eyes of the girl. Her two younger brothers were wearing little suits (Stanleys in suits?) and Jane was adorned in a sleek navy-blue dress. She mouthed the words “I’m sorry,” and then, grabbing each brother by the hand, was out the door and into the rainy street.

I was consumed with rage. For a moment, I couldn't see. I stood in the aisle of the church, rows of pews on either side of me, and swarms of gossipy old women delighted with the pastor's son's dreadful fall from grace ("what a story!") were stuffed in between the rows like bees in a honeycomb. I wanted to die.

I wrenched myself free of Victoria's long, manicured fingers, barely hearing her "Lucy, darling, what's wrong?" and marched to the table. I picked up the card---the only one in existence, as far as I was concerned---and tore savagely into the envelope. The front of the card was simple, depicting a white dove on even whiter card stock. It was creamy and soft. "With deepest sympathy for your loss" was written in loopy calligraphic text on the inside. Underneath, Jane had penned, "Dearest Warrens, I am so terribly sorry for what happened to Andy. He was one of the kindest people I've ever met. I hope he's found peace, and that someday you can too. Love, the Stanleys."

I'd had my suspicions, but the card confirmed it. This was no average sympathy card. This was a confession. I hadn't forgotten Frank Stanley's angry, drunken threat against my son. I could still hear Frank’s vicious, slurred words. “He’s
going to pay." The thick card I was crumpling in my shaking hands was proof that 
Frank had gotten drunk, found Andy somehow, and delivered on his threat.

Absorbed completely in my despair, I threw the card back on the table and 
hoisted the vase with the Stanley bouquet into my arms, ran out of the sanctuary, 
down the stairs of the church, and into the parking lot. Sobbing, I threw the vase hard 
onto the graveded ground where it shattered, shards of ceramic pointing up 
dangerously among too-fragrant lilies and roses. I sank on my knees into the mud, 
and looked into the sky, squinting through the rain, trying hard to see God. When the 
rain hurt my eyes too much, I let my head roll back onto my chest. The gravel pressed 
hard into my kneecaps. I didn't care. Eventually I was vaguely aware of a hand on my 
shoulder.

"Please, Lucy. Please get up." I blinked a few times, and glanced in the 
direction of the voice. John was leaning in, harshly whispering in my left ear. His hot 
breath was a stark contrast to the frigid rain, and I jerked away. John was trying to 
stand me up like a rag doll, his strong hands trying to lift me from my armpits. It was 
only when I heard Karen cry "Momma" that I realized I had to get up. I had to face 
tomorrow, and the next day and the day after that—not only to get justice for Andy, 
but also so that I could try to throw together an answer to every "Momma" that my 
daughters might throw at me.

When I'd shown John the card, he'd said that it wasn't proof of anything—that it read just like the rest of the plethora of cards that were piled in Andy's room, and that I was simply hysterical with grief. So I decided to go to Sheriff Perle by myself.
Something had to be done. I dialed his office number, which rang ten times before his secretary picked up.

"Hi, this is Lucy Warren for Sheriff Perle, please," I said, trying not to let my irritation seep through the avocado-green telephone.

"The preacher's wife, right? He'll be right with you," she said, not waiting for an answer. An agonizing minute passed before David picked up the receiver.

"Mrs. Warren," he said.

"Listen, David," I started, because pleasantries would have driven me crazy, "I know you said Andy's...passing..." I gulped, closed my eyes for two beats, then continued, "I know you said you have no leads. But I've got the proof you've been looking for. I can prove it was Frank Stanley."

There was silence on the other line, and then David heaved a long, slow sigh—the kind of sigh that said, "Don't bother me with your crazy theories." It was the same sigh John had used the past few times this week—had it really only been one week without my son?—I'd tried to convince him that Frank Stanley had murdered our child. So before Sheriff Perle was even finished with his sigh, I began to cry, which just made me angrier.

"Look, Mrs. Warren—"

"You're not going to help." I cut him off with the stinging venom of truth.

"All I was going to say is you can go ahead and tell me what you've got, but unless it's a confession, I don't think I'll be able to arrest Frank, that's all."

I sniffled, hanging tight to this thread of hope.
"It is a confession, sort of," I said, faltering. Why did I think David Perle was going to listen to me when my own husband had dismissed me without a thought? I pushed on. "It's a letter from Jane Stanley, who, you remember, my son, um, roughed up a while back, so she would have no reason to feel badly for...for him. But she left this expensive bouquet and this letter saying how sorry she was, and she even said 'I'm sorry,' and"—I could feel myself babbling, but I couldn't stop—"and it's obvious she just feels bad about what her dad did." I took a breath, waiting for what was coming. There was a long pause.

“So what you’re telling me is that Frank’s daughter left a sympathy note at your son’s funeral... and that’s how you know Frank’s guilty.” I said nothing, and then, through the somewhat static-y sound, I heard a chuckle. The sheriff was laughing at me. I hung up the receiver with a bang that made Karen gasp and Lisa flinch.

I turned to them, apologetic. “I’m sorry you two, I didn’t know…” I trailed off, put a hand over my mouth, and ran out the door.

If we were a fragmented family when Andy was in our lives, we were barely a family at all when he wasn’t. John was at the church from dawn until dusk. I didn’t go very often. Susan locked herself in Andy’s room and drew. Sometimes she drew Andy, or the things in his room, or something that would remind her of him. She was no prodigy, but sometimes I was surprised at how well she was able to capture Andy’s dimples or his mischievous smile. Karen went out a lot. I insisted she be home before dark, which she almost always was, but she was rarely in a corner of her
room, reading, like she used to so faithfully be. One night she came home with a nose
ring—the kind that pierces both nostrils like a bull. Once, long ago, I’d have cared. I
said nothing.

Lisa was the only one with whom I still regularly spoke. Sometimes, she’d be
looking into space while I made ramen for us which neither of us would eat, and
she’d say something spontaneous, like “Do you remember when we all used to go
volunteer at the church garage sale” or “Remember that time we went camping at
Samuel P. Taylor and pretended we were tourists?” as if the memory of our
wholeness could repair us, at least for a moment, instead of shattering us even further.
“Yes, I remember,” I’d say, and we’d fall silent again.

Lucy
May 1974

Six weeks had passed as painstakingly as a funeral procession since Andy’s
murder. It was 9 a.m., a Sunday, and John was getting ready for the 10 o’clock
service. He shaved his face meticulously in the mirror while I watched, my eyes
peering just enough from out of our pile of quilts so I could watch him. He caught my
eye in the mirror and I looked away.

“Lucy,” he said, gearing up for battle.

“No,” I said, stopping him before he could get started.

“It’s been five Sundays. The congregation is worried about you.”
“Good. Let them wonder. They’d die without something to talk about,” I said with finality.

John splashed water on his face and patted it dry. He put the antique razor he’d been using since the war carefully back in its case. He was going to give it to Andy at some point, but he hadn’t been sure when. He hadn’t been willing to part with the old thing. Now he’d never have to.

“Please come with me today, Lucy,” he pushed.

“I’m done talking about this,” I said, and rolled over.

He left quietly with Lisa a half hour later. I was left only with the noise of Karen’s hideous record player churning out some radio hit that made her cry every time she heard it. “We had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun…” I covered my head with a pillow.

At ten, when I heard the church bell ringing jubilantly, as if one of its few youth members hadn’t died, I got up and dressed in blue jeans and a tank top. I banged the girls’ door as I passed it, silently begging Karen to turn the thing off. She turned the sound up, and the wretched lyrics, mingled with her sobs, chased me out of the house.

I got in the driver’s seat of our ancient car and leaned my head against the steering wheel. I took a deep breath and reached under the seat for the gun I’d borrowed from a neighbor the week before. He was by all means a shady character, likely a low-level drug dealer, but he was ready to do a favor—no questions asked—for the “poor pastor’s woman.” I turned the engine and yanked the car into reverse,
squealing out of the driveway. I wondered if the congregation could hear. I pointed the car in the direction of the Stanleys’ house.

As I neared my destination, my stomach felt as though someone had tube-fed me concrete, and my skin felt clammy and unseasonably cold. I gulped what little saliva was still in my mouth, causing me to cough harshly. I parked the car on the gravel road and shoved the gun in my purse. I took a deep breath, trying to remember the speech I’d memorized all week—the one I was going to make before I shot him—but my mind was blank. I stepped out of the car, hugging my purse to my hip. I’d just have to see how the scene played out. To my dismay, the house was empty. It also looked much, much better than it had before. There was a brand new roof, and there were no broken beer bottles and other trash to be seen. In fact, there wasn’t any sign that an alcoholic lived on the premises. Brilliant red roses lined the driveway, and young daffodils were making their way through the soil. *I must have the wrong address,* I thought, but I could tell I was in the right place—this was where Frank Stanley has threatened my son. I sat down on the porch, which looked like it had been newly swept, and decided that if I couldn’t find Frank Stanley, he could come find me.

I waited there like a lost orphan for nearly an hour before I decided to give up. I was perhaps a little relieved to be going home without confrontation. I could always go back, after all. I knew where Stanley lived, and I wasn’t afraid of him. When I got back home, John and Lisa were sitting at the kitchen table together.

"Home already?" I asked, putting the car keys back on their hook and taking off my scarf.
"It's 11:30," said John. "Where have you been?"

"Out and about," I replied, turning on the kettle.

"Anyway," said Lisa to John, "I think it's great what the Stanleys are doing for the church. Talk about a turnaround."

I blanched. "What did you say?" I asked Lisa hoarsely.

Lisa looked up at me with a hint of resentment. "If you'd get out of bed and go to church for once, you'd know that all the Stanleys have been coming to church since..."

"Since he murdered Andy." I finished the sentence for her.

She groaned. "Mr. Stanley did not kill Andy," Lisa said, not looking at me.

"Then tell me why, after my son's death, he is suddenly sober and in the pews like Jesus' blessed lamb after years of drunkenness?" I asked, seething. There was a beat of silence, and then the scream of the kettle.

I turned and retrieved the keys from the hook once more.

John stood from the table. "Lucy, honey, where are you going?" I didn't answer and he gripped my arm.

"Let go of me, John," I hissed.

"Stay here. The girls need you. Let's try to be a family again," he pleaded.

"Let go of me, now."

He obeyed, but said, "Let me come with you. Wherever you're going. Let me come."

I ignored him and ran back out to the car, revving the engine for good measure. I was going to ruin Frank Stanley, and there was no way John was getting in
my way. At the very least, I wanted Frank to know that I was watching him, and that
at some point—some point soon—I’d get my revenge.

I watched John watch me from the kitchen window, and then looked away as
I backed out of the driveway and onto the street. When I got back to the Stanley
residence, Frank was sitting in a rocker on the front porch, reading a newspaper. Two
boys were on a freshly-constructed see-saw. The rest of the children were probably in
the house. As I got out of the car and hustled up the driveway, Frank Stanley looked
up from his paper and into my face.

I’d played out a thousand different scenarios in my head of how this would go
down. I’d imagined screaming at him, pulling his hair, punching wildly at his
scrawny form. Shooting him.

But I wasn't prepared for Frank Stanley to see me with what looked like
sincere empathy on his face, put down the newspaper he held, and say "Good
afternoon, Mrs. Warren. I can't tell you how sorry I am about your boy."

I stood like a statue, knees locked, momentarily speechless with loathing.
How dare this murderer pretend, and pretend so well, so shamelessly, that he wasn't
the cause of the infinite recesses of my grief?

He went on, apparently unaware of the hatred that clung to my heart like sap.
"Janey told me what your son did for us, and I wish I had time to thank him before his
passing. But I just want to say that if there's anything I can do for you and yours,
anything at all, it'd be a pleasure. And I'm so sorry to have missed his memorial
service. If I could have been there I would've, but I've got a new job now, over at the
school—I'm only the custodian, but there's no shame in hard work..."
I listened, utterly confused, to this speech. What had Andy done for the Stanleys except beat up Janey and then go apologize weeks later at my command when he came home? How could he have turned Frank Stanley around so completely?

I remembered suddenly that Jane had come over and told us that Andy had helped her out, but she hadn’t told us how, exactly.

“I, um...how did Andy help you?” I stuttered.

"He paid for our new roof and for clothes for the kids,” said Frank. "I was so ashamed that some kid was doing for my family what I should have been doing that I sobered up, but I was too proud to thank him. I'm so sorry I didn't get the chance."

I felt my throat constrict with the stinging sensation of forthcoming tears. How had Andy made all this money? And why had he kept this charitable side of himself from us for most of his time in San Jorge? John and I hadn't been able to draw from Andy why he’d been so miserable, why he'd become a delinquent or why he'd decided to come home, only to leave again. But the worst mystery, the one that tore at the edges of my dreams so that I hadn’t had a decent sleep in more than a month, was who had hated him so much they let him die in flames. I'd been so sure it was Frank Stanley that I hadn't opened my mind to other possibilities, but my certainty that Frank had done this was starting to shatter. He’d thrown a pebble in my tranquil pool of utter confidence, and thus thrown me thoroughly off-kilter.

“So, Mrs. Warren,” I heard Frank say, “what can I do for ya?”

Unable to answer, I wobbled in front of the porch. “I’m not feeling myself today,” I said weakly, and began to fall. Frank jumped down the steps and caught my
arm, holding me upright. I began to sob uncontrollably on the front of his church suit—one that Andy’s money had apparently paid for. He patted my back lightly and mumbled “there, there.” I cried for my son, for his life cut short, for the little boy he'd been, helping me brush his sisters' hair and set the table for dinner. I cried because of the hate I harbored, because of the hole in my heart and in my family. I cried selfishly, because of what a failure of a mother I'd been. For each reason, there was another pat on the back from Frank Stanley. I felt a small form around one of my legs; one of the Stanleys, a boy of about four, had wrapped his small arm about my calf. The thumb of his free hand was in his mouth. He was looking up at me with big brown eyes, and he reminded me distinctly of Andy at that age. I took a few shuddering breaths, snorted, and stood.

“Sorry,” I said, not able to meet Frank’s gaze.

“It’s okay,” he replied. “I mean, it’s okay that you’re not okay. When Carol died, I fell apart. As you well know,” he added. He shoved his hands in his pockets, and sighed. “It’s not going to get better. The hole won’t fill back in, but you’ll get to a point where you’ll be able to live a semi-normal life with it. I wish I could be of more help,” he apologized.

“No. Thank you. I’d better be going,” I said, and headed back to the car. I got in the driver’s seat and let the engine roar to life. “Hey,” he yelled after me. “Was there something you needed?” I pretended not to hear and drove the car back onto the road.

I’d only gone a few yards when I saw Jane Stanley in the rearview mirror, running barefoot in the dust that the Chrysler was kicking up. I slowed and pulled
over, waiting for her to catch up to me. I cranked the window down as the girl breathlessly approached.

“Mrs. Warren,” she gasped, “thanks for waiting for me.” She paused, then went on, “I just...I can’t be sure, and please, please don’t tell anyone I said this, but I think I know...I think maybe I know who set the fire.”

I stared at her pale freckled face and big blue eyes, not sure I heard her correctly.

“Listen,” she said, bending over to lean her forearms on the ridge of my open window, “every time it seems like Andy was being mean, or a bully, he was just trying to do the right thing. You know Carl Frasier?”

“Yes...” I replied, feeling a little sick, though I didn’t know why.

“Well, he was always real mean to Andy. He’s mean to everyone, but Andy kinda got the worst of it because—”

“You think Carl Frasier burned my son?”

Fear crossed Jane’s face. “Yes, but please, please don’t tell anyone you heard it from me. He really scares me.”

“So you’re saying Carl’s not a bully, he’s a murderer.”

"I mean, I don't have any proof. I just know that Carl likes seeing other people suffer. I just wouldn't put it past him."

I looked at Jane a long moment. "Is there anything else?"

She stood up and backed away from the car, chewing the inside of her lip.

"No, that's it," she said.

"How much money did Andy give you?" I asked.
She didn't reply.

"Twenty dollars? forty?" I asked.

"Three hundred," she mumbled.

"Excuse me?"

She looked up at me then, and I couldn’t make out what she was feeling—despair? Defiance? “Three hundred,” she repeated.

I gaped. "He gave you three hundred dollars? Because he beat you up? Where'd he get that kind of money? What was he doing?" The questions flew out of me rapid-fire like bats from a cave.

"All I know," she said, "is that he was in some sort of deal with Carl—Carl and money. I—I’m sorry. I wish I knew more."

I didn't want to hear any more. I cranked the window back up and left her standing there on the side of the street as I stepped on the gas.

I didn't sleep at all that night. John rarely slept either, but we pretended to be asleep so that we wouldn't have to talk about our mutual nightmare. I hadn't told John what Jane had told me. I was still processing it. Andy had given Jane, a fourteen-year-old girl he barely knew and had attacked for no other reason than she'd stolen coats for her family, three hundred dollars. Or he’d attacked her because Carl paid him to? There were parts to this story I was missing. Had there been a love affair between Andy and Jane? Had she perhaps cheated on him and thrown him into a rage? I felt a migraine coming on. Nothing made sense. I still couldn't figure out why my sweet boy had lashed out against a skinny girl and his own family. He wouldn’t have done
that for money—not even a sum that could clothe and provide a new roof for the Stanleys.

And Carl did bother me. Something about him when he looked at me made my skin crawl. Victoria Frasier had just given a sizable donation to the church in memoriam of Andy. Surely not out of guilt? Victoria was shallow and sometimes callous, but she’d have enough decency to go to the police if she knew her son had killed mine. I rolled over. I wasn’t going to go to Sheriff Perle this time unless I had solid evidence. I wouldn’t be laughed at again.

The whole mess was still scratching at my brain with its bony claws the next morning, so when I went to wake Susan—who had taken to sleeping in Andy’s room, though she’d left everything pretty much the way it was—I asked her point blank.

“Susan honey, I know you and Andy were close...did he ever tell you about having a job of some sort? One where he made a lot of money?

Susan looked was suddenly wide awake. She looked nervous; she knew something.

"Well," she said, clearly uncomfortable. "He did give us some money one time. But he wouldn't tell us where he got it."

"How much money, hun?"

"A lot," Susan said, beginning to babble nervously. "He wanted us to save it, for when we went to college. That’s why I didn’t give it to you. I would have told you, but he told us not to tell. It’s for college."

“But how much?”
Susan fidgeted. “Five thousand.”

“Five thousand?” That was about what John made in a year. Susan began to cry. “I don’t know where he got it, but please don’t take it away. He was just trying to take care of us.”

I comforted her, and told her that I would take it and put it away in the bank for when she went to school. She was satisfied with the deal when I promised that the money wouldn’t be used for anything else. “Hey mom,” she said, as I was about to leave the room, “since that money is for us to go to college, you and dad can have this.” She moved to the other side of the room and removed a brick from the wall. In the hole was a wad of bills.

“Oh, honey,” I said.

“I think Andy was saving it for himself,” she said. We used to play a game with this brick. He’d hide notes in there for me to find.” She paused. “I think he’d want you to have it.”

I told John later that day what I’d found. “I don’t know what he got himself into, but it only makes sense that the money is connected to his murder,” I said. He leaned back in his chair.

“We can’t keep the cash,” he said. “We don’t know where it came from. We have to donate it.”

“That’s not what I’m going to discuss right now, and besides, I promised Susan I wouldn’t touch it.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.”
“We shouldn’t have moved here,” I fired back. “We should have stayed in Inglewood.” Something inside me snapped, and sharp words rushed from me, pummeling John like hail. “The lack of money is what killed him, John. We were starving, and he was trying to help us. He was trying to provide, because we couldn’t.” I took a few rasping breaths. “We are keeping the goddamned money.”

John was silent. I gazed into his wounded, tired eyes and immediately felt regret claw at my chest. It wasn’t his fault that the church in L.A. had spurned him, and I didn’t blame him for Andy’s death. I didn’t know who to blame. Still, I couldn’t find the words to voice this, and retreated from the bedroom to the kitchen.

Victoria had been in our kitchen more and more frequently since Andy’s death. She brought an endless supply of meal scraps, half-wilted flowers that “still had some life left in them,” and would sit in our kitchen for hours until I’d finally have to say something.

“Sorry to kick you out, Victoria,” I’d say, opening the door, “but John has a big sermon to prepare for,” or “Sorry Victoria, but I’ve really got to help Lisa on her homework.” Then she’d stand in the doorway for a while, still chatting in what almost seemed a falsely cheerful voice, until I’d have to finally just say goodnight and close the door.

About a week after I stowed Andy’s money in the bank, I was awakened by Susan frantically tapping on my forehead.

“Susan, what—” Before I could finish my thought, I heard what sounded like the shrieks of a hell-escaped demon.
"What on earth?" I said breathlessly.

"It's Mrs. Frasier," said Susan, glassy eyes wide with fright.

"Go back to bed honey. Dad and I will see what's going on."

As Susan padded back down the hallway, I shook John's shoulder. "You awake?" I asked as another shriek swirled outside the house.

"Mmmhmm" he mumbled, getting up. "Damn," he said. "What time is it?"

"Looks like 2:30," I replied. "Susan says it's Mrs. Frasier," I added. "She must have seen her out Andy’s bedroom window."

"Hmm. That would be a first."

This wasn't all too uncommon an experience for us—whenever citizens of San Jorge were high on God only knows what substance, or drunk out of their minds, or just plain crazies, disgruntled neighbors or onlookers would send the disorderly individual to the pastor's house. One drifter had stopped by once in the middle of the night swinging a raccoon carcass by the tail, and Bill Clayton, a man who left San Jorge not long after the incident, had arrived at our home one afternoon screaming that he was going to barbecue our dog. We didn't have a dog.

John and I tiptoed out the front door and into the night. I swung a flashlight around, looking for what Susan had seen. Slowly I scanned the driveway to no avail. A scream led us around the back of the house—or rather John led me, as I held tightly onto his left hand behind him. I grimaced as the beam of the flashlight found Victoria Frasier tangled up in my rosebushes, sobbing, cursing, and screeching.

John was instantly there to carefully remove her from the sharp barbed sprigs. Multiple scratches, some alarmingly deep, were etched into her pale skin that stood
out even in the dark. I held the flashlight where John told me to point it so that he could make sure no thorns were left lodged in her skin. Then we took her into the kitchen to bandage her up.

I put a glass of tap water in front of her—I didn't want to make tea, lest the screaming kettle disturb the kids any more than the screaming drunk woman already had. Victoria's cursing and wailing had evolved into a mix of sobs and wet sorrys.

"Shh, Victoria," I pleaded. It's okay, it's no big deal, we'll get you all patched up. Just please don't wake the girls."

She took a deep breath, which I thought was her attempt to begin to calm down, but instead she sobbed again loudly on the exhale.

"I'm so soorrryyy" she moaned at an unseemly decibel.

"As I said," I replied, losing my patience, "it's okay. John will drive you home and—"

"No," she interrupted, "I'm sorry about Andy."

I stared at her hard, feeling familiar hated descending on me like a fog. “It’s a tragedy,” I said, measuring her.

"Yes it is," she cried. "If I'd just kept a tighter leash on Carl, then maybe none of this would've happened." She slumped over in her chair at an awkward angle and hiccuped. John, who had been wrapping a length of gauze around Victoria's exposed calf, froze, the ball of gauze dropping from his hand and rolling a few inches across the kitchen floor. The smell of booze rolled off Victoria's breath. I stared into her drunken, ruddy face.
"Victoria," I said, as John watched the scene unfold, his muscles taut, "Are you saying that your son had something to do with my son's death?"

The tone of her voice must have signaled a warning even to her drastically impaired brain, because instead of answering me she said in a voice the most quiet since she'd awoken us, "I think I'd best be getting back."

"Like hell you are," a voice behind me said. I turned and realized that Karen, Lisa and Susan all stood behind me, their eyes locked on Victoria.

Karen spoke up again. "You're going to tell us everything you know, right now."

Victoria looked at us with wild eyes.

"He told me what he did," she slurred. "He told me and he was proud of it." She glanced around the room. "Do you have any idea what it's like to be afraid of your own son?"

I remembered when Andy had stormed in and threatened me, hurt his sister, broken John's nose. I looked over at John. He didn't meet my gaze.

"Call Sheriff Perle," John muttered. "We've finally got something."

I quickly ran to the phone and dialed the numbers. The phone rang for what seemed like forever when I remembered that it was now close to three in the morning—there was no way David was in his office. I ruffled through my address book, hoping I had his home phone number.

Meanwhile Victoria had begun to screech again. "Do NOT call Perle!" she cried, lashing out at John's chest as he tried to subdue her. “Carl's my son! He’s my son!”
"Victoria, why exactly did you come here and tell us all this if you didn't think there'd be consequences for Carl?" Karen asked, walking across the room and leaning into Victoria's tear-stained face. Karen was thin and sinewy, and she loved reading and knitting and pressing flowers. But right then, if I'd been Victoria, I think I'd have been terrified.

"I don't know. I don't know," Victoria muttered.

I was finally able to find David Perle's home number in my book, and quickly rotated the dial on the phone. I tapped a foot impatiently, caterpillars metamorphosing into butterflies which flapped their wings uncertainly in the pit of my stomach. I counted ten rings, after which I heard the tired and angry voice on the other line grumble, "who is this? It better be a goddamned emergency."

"I'm sorry to wake you, Sheriff Perle," I said as sweetly as I could under the circumstances, which wasn't very sweetly at all, "but I've got Victoria Frasier over here claiming that her son Carl killed my Andy. Could you come over, please?"

"Dear sweet Jesus, Mrs. Warren." I could hear him sigh his infuriating, signature sigh. "I guess I'll come over and see what the fuss is all about, but there's probably no chance that I'll be able to make any arrests."

This was enough for me, at least for the time being, so I thanked him and hung up the receiver.

"So, Victoria," I said, turning to ice as I confronted her, "why exactly has it taken you so long to come forward?"
"Listen," she replied in a panicked tone, "I was afraid he'd kill me. The look in his eyes—I'm surprised he didn't kill me on the spot."

John still hadn't said anything, but had stood up and walked to the opposite end of the room where he stood, trembling, his hands on his face.

"Well he's not your problem anymore," said Lisa, whose face was void of tears and full of a dark hatred that startled me. I wondered distantly if this is what my face looked like, and wondered why God had let this happen to us—why he'd let the dark ink of wrath and heartbreak swirl like foul oil in the crystal waters of our Eden.

"He's going to rot in jail," Susan agreed, fists clenched white at her sides.

It seemed an eternity before David Perle showed up at our door, and he ambled into the kitchen without knocking, dressed in a white sweat-stained tank top and plaid bell-bottomed pajama pants. We must have looked a ridiculous tableau—faces bleary with a lack of sleep and an abundance of confused, heartsick emotion, the wealthiest woman in the valley draped over a chair, the Sheriff in his pajamas.

He looked around and drawled, "This better be good."

Karen pointed a bony finger at Victoria. "She says Carl told her that he killed Andy!"

Sheriff Perle looked at Victoria. "This true Mrs. Frasier?"

"Yes—no—I'm not sure," she stuttered. We all stared.

"What?" said Lisa.
"Well, yes. Yes," Victoria decided, apparently figuring that the cat was a little too far out of the bag at this point.

Perle sighed, as if this enormous lead was an inconvenience. "Well, alright then. He at home, Mrs. Frasier?"

She nodded miserably.

"Okay. I'll go round him up for questioning in the morning."

"Wait, the fucker's not under arrest?" It was the first time I'd ever heard John swear like that, and the first time he'd spoken since we dug Victoria out of the rosebushes.

"Unfortunately, no. We've got no witnesses, no video evidence, no nothing. Unless he confesses on video at the station, there aren't any charges that'll stick."

"This can't be happening," I breathed, and collapsed against the kitchen counter, sliding down until I was sitting on the floor. I barely noticed the cabinet pulls that pressed into my spine.

“He can’t get away with this.”

“Now, Mrs. Warren, I didn’t say he was getting away with anything,” the Sheriff explained. “We just don’t know for sure yet if he’s actually done anything.”

“If he didn’t do anything why would he say he did?” seethed Lisa.

David Perle yawned. “Listen,” he said, “I understand the situation. Maybe the boy was just tryin’ to sound cool or startle his mother. I’ll be talkin’ to the boy in the morning, but for now I’m going to get a few hours of shut-eye. I suggest you all do
the same.” With that, he left out the front door and let it shut behind him with a mild bang.

“Victoria,” I said, not looking at her, “you can go ahead and show yourself out.”

She looked uncomfortable. “Could I maybe get a ride? I’m a li’l drunk.”

“Please just leave my house,” I said again, tears blurring my vision.

“Come on, Mrs. Frasier,” John said, exhausted. “I’ll give you a ride.”

“John,” I exclaimed, standing up, “that woman just told us her son killed Andy. Do not let her in our car.”

John turned, and he looked like he’d aged ten years in the last hour. “Lucy,” he said, “she has to get home.” He took Victoria by the arm and led her out the door, grabbing the keys to the car on the way out.

I slammed the door behind him and told the girls to go to bed even though I knew there was no way any of us was getting any sleep for the rest of the morning.

It took everything I had to wait for seven a.m. to roll around so that I could call David Perle. I was ensured by his secretary that he was out at the Frasier residence to bring in Carl for questioning. By noon, I called again. Sleep had finally conquered the girls around six in the morning, so I’d let them go ahead and skip school. John was sitting at the kitchen table with me. I hadn’t spoken to him since he’d come home from delivering Victoria Frasier safely to her son instead of to the
fiery gates of hell where they both belonged, but in my excitement I forgot my anger.

“Carl’s still being questioned,” I said to John.

He looked morosely into his cup of cold, untouched black coffee. “Don’t get your hopes up,” he said quietly.

My anger flared again. “Why are you such a downer?” I asked him. “Do you even care? It seems like you don’t even care.”

“Oh course I care,” he retorted. “But Perle said there was not enough evidence to convict unless the boy confesses, and I don’t think he’s going to do it.”

A wooden block of nervousness sat in my throat and made its way into my stomach. “Of course he’ll do it. He confessed to his mom.”

“He gloated to his mom,” said John. “There’s a difference.”

At two, I got a call from the Sheriff’s office. “Hi Mrs. Warren,” the chipper girl said. “Just wanted to let you know that he’s released Carl Frasier.”

I hung up the phone.

Lucy

2017

I haven’t been to the other side of Marin since we moved away, but I imagine it’s the same. Jane Stanley wrote me a few letters over the years, and sometimes I’ve
responded to them. She managed to get a degree from UC Davis, full ride. She’s a mother of four children. She says she sometimes visits San Jorge, but she doesn’t write about any goings-on there, because she knows I don’t care.

My own girls were each able to go to school with Andy’s money. Karen is a librarian in Novato, Lisa is a writer and mother of two in Mendocino, and Susan is a prosecutor in New York.

John and I lived quietly after leaving San Jorge. He found an opening at a church in Yreka until he had a fatal heart attack in 1989. That’s when I moved in with Karen, and I’ve lived with her since. We both needed someone.

Victoria Frasier spiraled into alcoholism and eventually threw herself off the Bay Bridge.

David Perle was forced into retirement when the county ran an investigation on him, and found that he was often taking bribes from the people of San Jorge.

And Carl.

He graduated that June in 1974, and the high school left a chair empty where Andy would have sat. Meanwhile Andy’s killer took hold of his diploma, a grin on his face, while he shook hands with the principal. Carl went to school at Michigan State, where he majored in business. During his senior year, he got drunk and into a bar fight with another young man. Apparently Carl beat the young man up so badly that parts of his brain were outside his skull. There were enough witnesses in that case that Carl got 70 years. But he still has something the rest of San Jorge, the side of Marin he so disdained, doesn’t have: money. When his mother ended her life, he was
the sole recipient of her millions. He got a fancy lawyer from San Francisco, and he’s getting out this year.

I will be at the prison gates waiting for him.