



# **THE STORYTELLER'S PUBLICATION**

**A MONTHLY COLLECTION OF POETRY & SHORT STORIES**

## **CONNECTING ACROSS THE DIVIDE**

### **FEATURED AUTHORS**

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## A Note from the Editor

Thank you for reading our first ever issue of The Storyteller's Publication! Each successive issue will be published on the first Wednesday of each month.

The Storyteller's Publication exists to connect and expand our minds and hearts through diverse stories and contrasting perspectives, revealing the greater tapestry of which we are a part. Each month is assigned a different theme. The theme of this first issue is "Connecting Across the Divide".

This first issue is being published during a time of global pandemic due to the spread of a novel coronavirus and its disease, COVID-19. Nations across the globe have quarantined both the sick and the healthy, and hundreds of millions of people are being required to stay in their homes.

It is easy, during this time, for us to get caught up in consuming the creativity of others. We live in an era that has widespread access to the internet, and dozens of streaming entertainment services have libraries of hundreds of thousands of titles and millions of hours of media. There are many other ways to consume media in addition to this.

But consuming alone is sure death to the artist. That is, unless they choose to set aside time to continue honing their craft. The purpose of this first issue is to break that cycle of consumption, and to invigorate the creative spirit in the storyteller. It has been started as a way to challenge writers to write and write well by providing them with a framework to encourage and embolden them.

This first issue contains the works of both men and women, and one of us, a poet named Eleonora Cenzone, hails from Italy. She wrote her poem in lockdown simultaneously with the American writers.

The theme of this first issue was selected because our world, especially in the West, is more and more divided. Forces from within and without our nations have put wedges between the left and the right, the old and young, men and women, and even parents and children. There is also a widening divide between ideologies and the people for which they are supposed to take account. This issue encouraged our writers to explore how we might find common ground across what divides us from others, and even from our very selves.

I sincerely hope the diverse perspectives you encounter here will expand you and challenge you to connect across the divides in your life. You are sure to find some that bring you comfort, but you will probably find others that do the opposite. Please take this rare opportunity to see inside yourself and ask yourself why.

I must confess to a secret secondary motive. I also hope that at least one of these writings will tell you, even if it is just in a whisper, that you are not alone.



Patrick A. Snitchler  
Editor & Author

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# Across the ocean

by

Eleonora Cenzone

Between galaxies and black holes  
forces push us close  
to one another,  
in brief moments of greeting,  
between these orbits' meeting.

Tangents between two worlds,  
atmospheres pour out  
and in exchange of subjects, bend.

Our thoughts colliding  
in our minds are shining,  
worlds changing,  
matter rearranging.

This show of astral forces  
can either be a frightening disaster  
or a space full of wonderful colours,  
it can crush a rising aster  
or turn couples into lovers.

Life may be whispered,  
imagined, not lived,  
it can be projected onto a white wall,  
it can be pictured on a closed door.

Voice may wander in limbo  
betwixt unspoken thoughts  
n' contradictions,  
cloaked in the shadow of sealed lips.

But what's inside  
and hides  
can only vibrate,  
and what materializes

in front of eyes  
in skies can ride,  
it can hover in the air.

Sometimes it takes some courage,  
sometimes it's not a choice.

Life can only happen,  
one never knows  
in which ravines it will hide  
nor when it will fall from the sky.

The heart can only beat,  
in your eyes reflected,  
it lit up a sudden flare  
while undetected.

It's difficult  
to accept what can't be controlled,  
what comes loudly marching  
on feelings' rhythm, bold.

It's difficult  
to live what's indisputably easy,  
what comes natural as breathing,  
what can't be studied or learned,  
what makes the insides rot  
if not unearthed.

It's difficult  
to discern affection from love  
of which it is only a fraction,  
until clarity comes  
when the heart bursts in  
claiming what it wants.

I chose to open life's door  
finding you,  
finding me.

But life's not careful  
when bursting in,  
does not mind imperfection.

For how many storms  
may rise,  
for how many quakes  
may shake the earth,  
for how many nights  
may hide the sun,  
for how many broken thoughts  
may make sudden noise,  
I found one thing.

I found  
a quiet, bold, dense place  
made of indefinable things  
full of untouchable feels  
that lays beneath the layer of thoughts.

Thousands of miles and closed doors  
cannot stop  
what can't be touched,  
what connected through a sight  
and opened what life hatched.

## A Note from the Poet, Eleonora Cenzone

*Across the ocean* is a poem composed by rearranging various pieces of poems I wrote in the past months. They all talked about life, how I perceive it and the will to live it.

They've been inspired by the encounter with one person, someone that made me feel what I did not expect to feel. Embracing life as I always wanted to do, even though hindered by endless fears and insecurities, never felt so close. Opening up to another, feeling vulnerable, feeling the imperfections of being human, echoed in the silence and distance of this lockdown. I realized that to speak about life, and life only, was not enough for me, because life is made by what is lived. I put my words down once again, speaking for what my life is and has been, for how my feelings feel, for the connection I found, regarding this present distance, within me and with another.

Words can travel fast, they can reach ears and hearts, they don't need touch, they push us close to one another when there's nothing else that can. Words can connect us across the divide, carrying pieces of ourselves with them.

## Dear Dying Arms

by

Collin Daniel Snitchler

Sirens sweet, quick and far  
Drew me to Neptune's cavern hold  
Wrapped around my tired neck,  
Slender fingers pale and cold,  
Warm intentions felt slow and soft  
within arms' barren length,  
Oaths of heart and memories  
Stretched me o'er to outward reaching.

"Self is bare, within our grasp  
Eat it up  
Give it up  
Or share and share and share"

I heard of one who broke in two  
Starved with need and given dirt  
"I'll fix you," I say, "and make you whole"  
Yet my tired neck and selfish heart,  
Led me divide her further apart  
Will she never know it's only her she needed?

"Self is bare, within our grasp  
Eat it up  
Give it up  
Or share and share and share"

I found myself, not long after  
Blinded by back of Narcissus' mirror,  
Which held my head as one peered deeply  
To see only herself and the one behind her  
Why do we have to break a heart,  
To see what we truly need?

"Self is bare, within our grasp  
Eat it up  
Give it up  
Or share and share and share"



Each turn of head, I faced another,  
One by one their voices held,  
"Here's to you, all thou needst,  
Taketh my words and give me thine,  
Let's give all yet not so much.  
*Nostos algos* for him who wants,  
Yet ever remains here not.  
Will piercing shame always hold thy touch?"

"Self is bare, within our grasp  
Eat it up  
Give it up  
Or share and share and share"

I began to hum but held my tongue,  
for fear of forever lifted my head,  
The past is never here.  
Pushed by memories, I launched into  
Oceans vast and storms unbreaking,  
I am lost but whole, my self unlocked,  
My neck is free, my ears are blocked.  
Mine not theirs and theirs not mine, I sing,

"Self is bare, for none to grasp,  
Eat it not,  
Hold it not,  
Enjoy it while it's here"

## A Note from the Poet, Collin Daniel Snitchler

I recently met someone who has become more important to me and I realized that I needed to change the way I approached memories and the present moment in order to fully connect with them. *Dear Dying Arms* is about my history and how my thoughts of who I should be, who I've been, and who I want to be have often held me back from connecting with my own self and others here, right now, in the present moment. It's about leaving behind that critical voice and resignation to being stuck in thoughts of the past and future.

For most of my life, I've tried to live the life that I should live, all the while failing to live up to those very "shoulds". This chosen approach to life has led me to go down career paths I'm not sincerely interested in (and arguably not capable of doing) and try to build unrealistic and unhealthy connections with people. All because I thought I "should".

At some point in my life and during this process, I stopped listening to my gut, my own body, my own mind. A career path has been forsaken, relationships have suffered, and now I have decided to listen to myself more.

It's difficult as I have so long disconnected myself from my own body and wants and desires that I have a hard time recognizing what I hear across my conflicting thoughts and emotions. These conflicts are inevitable when you hear a hundred different people telling you things that you "should" do - there's no way they can all align.

I decided to make the difficult trek across the divide between my sense of who I should be and its associated memories of past failures on one side and my desires, dreams, wants, and even my own body's needs.

# Quarantine

by  
Courtney M. Coleman

This is a story— SCRATCH THAT.  
 In the beginning?...Hm...Once upon a— no.  
 How does one express their inner monologue without being incredibly cliché?  
 Ah! I've got it:  
 Fuck.  
 Yes, that's good.

I guess that's not very explanatory.  
 Apologies.  
 I feel "blah." Is that better?  
 I feel angry, calm, tired, wired, up in arms but down to earth.  
 Too many thoughts keep swirling round and round like a broken carousel about to spin  
 Into space.

We've all been floating aimlessly,  
 our tethers cut by a microscopic terror.  
 It doesn't even know what it's doing.  
 And neither do I.  
 Let's be real,  
 neither do you.

Forty days in the same room,  
 In the same house (give or take).  
 Forty days of carpal tunnel wrists scraping back and forth on the edge  
 of a drafting desk designed for art— designed for creation.  
 Forty days of creating nothing but piles of trash and nail polish stains.  
 I've painted my nails nearly every shade of red.

Forty days...that's Biblical isn't it?  
 According to some lady on Facebook I follow for what reason?  
 Forty days of her endless social media rants.  
 What a holy affair.  
 My own prayers are ever evolving:  
 Save us, guide us, please allow someone else's Doordash to end up on my porch.

Forty days and Noah's Ark found land.  
But I'd be grateful for a flood at this point.  
A flood of inspiration,  
A flood of cash,  
A flood of hugs and kisses from  
anyone.

It's horrible, you know.  
Maybe you're reading this ten years into the future, next to some history book  
regurgitating a dramatic narrative of the most unwanted surprise of the 21st century.  
Or maybe the human race is so avoidant by 2030 that all history books are actually  
a collection of memes, and we will all laugh at the memories  
(the kind of laughter that masks secret tears).

That's how we will commemorate:  
memes. Laugh-tears. Drinks (the numbing kind).  
Can we just get tipsy? And be silly and ridiculous?  
Laugh at nothing, but also everything?  
Because to face it, to *really* face it,  
I don't think any of us know how to yet.

And the worst part is...  
We don't even know what the worst part is.  
The deaths?  
Or, the fact that we started it?  
Forty days in time-out, with our faces shoved into a corner,  
while Mother Nature is airing out the laundry.

I've never felt this human.  
I feel grounded on this Earth for the first time in a long time.  
To be human is to be small.  
To be human is to acknowledge we have no control at all.  
And as we float farther and farther into darkness, we realize,  
We will never know the Universe, and we never have.

Maybe it's for the best.  
When the world comes back online,  
that we adjust to new norms:  
masks, distancing, intention, humility,

*gratitude.*

That would be nice.

Maybe a four letter expletive will morph into a four letter statement of defiance:

Hope.

Or maybe a four letter verb will have new meaning:

Love.

Now, how does one end rambling thoughts without being incredibly disappointing?

Ah, I've got it:

## A Note from the Poet, Courtney M. Coleman

I really did feel cliché about writing a poem centered around the pandemic of 2020, and it's not what I originally intended. At first I swore I would finally finish the short story I'd been tweaking for years. I convinced myself that this was the time for accomplishing dreams! A time for productivity! And at first I was engaged, scribbling words and notes onto every page in a burst of inspiration.

Then the next day came, and the writer's block settled in. (At least that's what I called it at first). But really, I didn't want to get lost in some story of made up characters from an era long gone. I wanted to be present, I *needed* to be present. While most of my loved ones were miles away, the great divide I felt had little to do with literal distance or my community. Rather, it was myself I felt distant from. Something in me was floating away with each day of isolation.

I was tired of the virtual world. Tired of faces I couldn't touch. Saddened by the fact that weeks and months were passing and yet not a memory was created. The world that shaped my identity and sense of purpose was put on pause. I didn't feel like a creator, or a storyteller. I just felt like stone, sitting and waiting for erosion. So, as much as I wanted to create some beautiful, elaborate short story, I couldn't.

Instead I wrote a poem that took me three sessions to write. I didn't want it to be forced. It had to be raw, in the moment, and true to the experience I had and I'm sure others were having. To me this poem is an expression of sorrow and of fear, with a touch of humorous mania and hints of hope. That expression helped me process this crazy season of life and bridge the divide between what I wanted to *be* and what I needed to *do*. It isn't the piece I planned for, but it is the piece I needed.

The poem stays open-ended. There's still more to process, more to reflect on, and that's ok. We don't always have the answers, or the solution. We don't always know where the story is going, but it will end. Eventually.

# Joey Is in the Next Room Waiting

A Short Story

by

Patrick A. Snitchler

## The Incident at the Softball Game

The cheering crowd had never been louder to Sally Carter. She had been to softball games before to write for the school paper, but tonight seemed like someone had turned up the volume. She pushed her wavy, shoulder length, auburn hair over her ears hoping to dampen the noise but it did not work. She was wearing black leather boots, jeans, and a green blouse with her leather jacket. She liked that jacket because it was edgy, but feminine and just a little sexy, and she knew it. Tonight, her clothes felt like they doubled in weight, as if filled with sand.

It was a chilly, humid night in early April in Hattaford Falls, Michigan. The Hattaford Falls High School softball team was playing Grand Rapids. Sal was coming up with a headline for the article she would write later that night. *Victorious Crusaders Dominate Grand Rapids Cubs in Regional Quarterfinals.* "That's too many words," thought Sal. Her friend Tim, the editor of the school newspaper, was always better at headlines. She was better at writing the article itself and the photography.

She put her camera up to her eye and snapped a few action shots of a Crusader at bat. The batter struck out. That was three outs. The runners left the bases and the teams switched places on the field.

She sat down and reached into her small leather purse to switch batteries in the camera. She thought she might have overdone it on the leather. When she thought of reformulating that headline, she felt like she was carrying a hundred pounds on her shoulders and the words seemed to slip out of her mind. Maybe she had taken too long a nap that afternoon. "That's it," she thought. She was just off because of the nap. She could feel her ear drums beating inside her head.

She walked around the fence to the outfield to give a variety of photos to Tim.

A voice rang from behind with a thick Michigan accent, "Oh Sally! I didn't know yuh came to the games!" Sal turned around. Only older people called her Sally, everyone else called her Sal. There sat Mrs. Provine in all her glory with her deep-fried blonde hair, Botox-injected smile, leopard print pants, and a zipper-striped leather jacket. Sal had not seen her in the bleachers. "What are yuh doin' here, honey?"

"Getting some photos for the school paper," she said holding up her camera. "I have to write the article tonight."

"Oh of course yuh are. Yer so good. I'm sure it'll be a great article. Yer a regular Walter Cronkite!"

"Oh, uh, thanks. I don't know if Walter Cronkite was a writer..."

Mrs. Provine jerked away from Sal and back to the field. "Woohoo! Go Becca!"

Mrs. Provine, whose first name was Janet, was the wife of Mitchell Provine, the head of the Provine Banking empire. She was also the mother of Becca Provine, the captain of the softball team. Becca disliked Sal, though she was nice to her face. Sal's father was Bill Carter, a Republican state senator who made the national news more than once for his strong anti-abortion stance. Due to the senator's prominence, no girl ever dared hate Sal to her face. But Sal heard Becca talking while she was in the bathroom.

Apparently, Sal was fat, though she had never weighed more than average. Apparently, Sal was arrogant, though what she wanted most was to fit in. Apparently, no boy would ask her out because she was too stuck up and never put out, but Tim from the school newspaper wanted to bang her for sure. That got a few snickers from Becca's underlings because he was so weird and religious and stuff, right? She hated them for the way they talked about Tim. They had not bothered to get to know him in two years since he moved there, how would they know a thing about him? Becca's clique always forgot to check under the stalls for feet.

With every step towards the outfield, she felt heavier. She turned back and the bleachers looked miles away. Then everything started growing dark. Sal reached up to her face and could feel her temples beating against her skin. She shook her head. She had been having dizzy spells lately, but she could always shake them off and this one was lasting longer than usual. She shook her head again. The world kept growing darker and her body heavier and the field and lights and crowd started sinking into a tunnel. She knew she couldn't stay standing and deliberately sank to her knees in the grass. It was wet from last night's rain and she could feel it soaking her jeans. Then she sank her whole body into the grass and cradled her head into her elbow. Her face slipped off her elbow into the muddy grass. She couldn't move.

"Help," whispered. "Help." Her voice echoed in the darkness and then the echo died.

What happened next seemed like it took place in a thick fog. A girl started yelling for help. Then a flashlight shone on her face and her eyelids were pried open.

"Hey. Can you tell me your name? She's vomited. Can you help me put her on her side? Hey can you tell me your name? Is your name Sally Carter?"

"Yesss," she was able to eke out.

"Stay with me, Sally. What year are you in school?"

"Jun...junior."

"When's your birthday?"

"Oct...to...ber..."



She lost consciousness and remembered nothing more from that night. Not the ambulance, nor the hospital, nor the shock of the doctor and nurse at how enlarged her lymph nodes were.

### **The Test Results**

Tim Bolin was skinny with dark, curly hair and green eyes. He was about six feet tall and still grew an inch every year. He carried a satchel with a leather strap and usually dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt. He was the editor-in-chief of the school paper, and he didn't like sports and dreaded having to write about them, but that was what they asked him to write about mostly: sports or theatre or music.

Theatre was alright and the kids who were in it were entertaining. Unfortunately, he dated a theatre girl named Kylie. The story of Kylie is long and complex. To understand what broke them up, you must know that in Tim's family, the words "Democrat" and "sex-before-marriage" (it was spoken in a way that it might as well have been its own word) were always spoken with derision: a slowly shaking head, downward cast eyes, and an occasional "tsk tsk tsk". Kylie could not vote yet, but she identified as a Democrat, and she also wanted to have sex-before-marriage. She was everything that could have brought shame to Tim.

He had no more interest in politics than he did in sports but, of course, he wanted to have sex too. It's just that every time he and Kylie would make out, he could hear his mother scolding him like she did when he was younger, "*Naughty!*". He broke up with her after three months and she spread rumors about him. The only one that got back to him was that she had made fun of his manhood. She had never seen his manhood, but now he dreaded going into the building.

He did not care for writing about the school music program either. His sister, Rachel, was a freshman and played the clarinet. They mostly stayed out of each other's way. They were fine at home, but they never wanted to be seen as the weird pastor's kids who were too close. Tim and Rachel Bolin's father was Craig Bolin, the pastor of Lake Falls Church, one of the largest churches in the state.

Tim and Sal were the same age and were instant friends after his family moved to town. Sal was the first person to accept him, as she was often excluded herself. They became a two-person clique, with a few other friends in their orbit.

Tim had texted Sal a little since the incident. She managed to finish her article and submit the photos, but responded sporadically. She said she was tired and was waiting on tests to come back. The doctors did not want her at school until they knew what it was, but it was probably nothing to worry about.

She was lying. He knew she was worried and was projecting it onto him. He had been without her for almost a week. He could write good headlines and closers, but he was no good at the rest, especially photos. He needed her.

Tim sat down to write about a track meet. He felt his phone in his jeans' pocket start buzzing. It was a call from his dad. He ignored it and slipped his phone into his flannel shirt pocket thinking he was just wondering when he was coming home. "*I'll be home sooner than him,*" he thought, and looked back at his screen.

Then he got a text, also from his dad. That was weird. His dad never texted. He slipped his phone inside his flannel pocket again just to get the headline out of the way.

*Track Meet Tears into Records.* Punchy, alliterative, to the point. He loved it. Now, where to begin? He forgot about the text and started writing. He knew it was garbage but as long as he had something down he could edit it later, which was his real strength.

Then he got another text. His dad again. He opened it. The first text read, "Tim. You need to call me. I want you to hear this from me first." The second, "Sal's test results came back."

He called him.

"Son," Craig said in an airy yet confident voice. He knew his dad was serious when his voice rode on his breath like that. That meant he was feeling something very strongly. He had heard it many times, especially when one of his congregants had died.

"Dad?"

"Son, I just wanted you to know that Bill Carter called me. He said that Sal's test results came back and they spoke with the doctors today." Craig was being redundant because he was unsure of how to form the next words. Tim squeezed his eyelids over his green eyes, concentrating. He felt like something had just gripped his heart. "She has leukemia."

All feeling dropped into his stomach. He tried to think of questions he should ask, but his mind was blank. He knew he was supposed to ask something. His mind couldn't form a thought and he just stared at the whiteboard across the room and listened to his computer hum. Finally he was able to get something out.

"How?" he asked.

That was all he could get out. But Craig knew what his son was trying to ask.

"The doctors say that it's a type that most people come back from. People of her age rarely get it, but they say her odds might be even better because of that. They don't know for sure. They gave her a timeline to begin some treatment in the next few weeks. They said that she has a fifty percent chance of remission in the next twelve months. So that's good news."

"Wait. Wait. What about the other fifty percent?" Tim said. This was one thing about his father, he was always looking at the bright side and not seeing reality for what it was.

"There's just a lot that can happen, Tim. The other fifty percent of patients have other outcomes. Some, it takes years to get rid of the cancer. Are you okay? I'm heading home here in a bit. Want me to pick you up?"

Tim put the phone down for a moment. He hated that his father had to tell him and that Sal could not tell him herself. Yet he loved his father for telling him all the same.

He just wanted her to be with him so he could watch her and hear her voice as she said it. He knew she would put on a strong face and say, "It is what it is." Then he would just put an arm around her and she would cry a little into his shoulder and then go on for hours about what she really thought and how she was afraid for her parents in case she did die but she was not afraid. She would say something like, "A good writer can never fear death."

He knew he would get her to start laughing at some stupid pun (she loved puns) and they would get kicked out of the media center by the janitor and walk to the pharmacy to get some ice cream. Then she would sneak into her house and grab a small amount of alcohol from her dad's minibar and they would drink just enough on her porch to get a little warm. Then they would stay up past midnight, talking. All would be well. They would get through it like they had gotten through so much else— together.

"No. I'll walk. Thanks, Dad."

"I love you, son."

"I love you too, Dad. Thanks for um, you know, thanks."

"You're welcome. Come home soon though, ok?"

"Ok."

They hung up. Tim had not consciously done so, but he realized he had walked all the way over to the whiteboard across the room. He leaned his back against it and thought of what he could do next. When is it appropriate to text her? What could he say?

He thought of something he could do to cheer her up. Sal loved childrens' books, and he had written and illustrated one for her birthday last October. It was called *Joey the Misfit Kangaroo*. They laughed at how obvious the name Joey was. He remembered that she made a joke about how he could illustrate like Bill Watterson, but his photos looked like they were taken by a chimpanzee discovering a camera for the first time. Sal was blunt, but never with lack of care in her heart. He would not say he loved that aspect of her character, but he did have all the feelings that were indicative of that word.

He thought he would make another book for her. Joey would have to face something more serious in this one. Something adult, something real, not just jerks at school or being a misfit. Joey would have to face death.

## The Bible Study

Jennifer's house was full of people talking excitedly because Sal was supposed to be coming to the Bible study that night. None of the sixteen kids had seen her since before the softball game, not even Tim.

Tim was nervous. He had spent the last three days writing and illustrating. In the new book, Joey got sick and the kangaroo community was brought together through his illness. Eventually he got better and all the characters had a feast.

Tim heard the front door open and jumped to his feet. He thought back later and thought his feet might have actually left the ground. It was just Mike, though, the youth pastor's son. No sign of Sal yet.

"Well guys, maybe we should start?" said Jennifer. Everyone quieted and the stragglers found places to sit in the living room. "Okay, so obviously we have Sal coming back with us tonight." Everyone clapped. "She's not here yet but when she gets here, we all know Sal and she's not going to pretend like there's nothing going on. So we're going to lay hands on her and pray before we all leave. And um, yeah. So tonight, Mike has prepared the study and we're going to keep going on with the book of Acts."

Tim got a text from Sal.

*Hey! Sry b there in 5. Ran into a friend n cudnt get away lol*

Tim responded.

*lol ok! Excited 2 c u*

"Dangit," he thought. "Shouldn't have put that last bit in. Should I have said lol? She said lol. I'm fine. Right? Yeah."

There was no awkwardness at all when Sal finally made it. Jennifer was really good at handling tough social situations and making them seem totally normal. Her father had come out as gay a few years back and now lived with his husband in Chicago. Her mother worked two jobs to cover the legal bills after he took her to court for full custody of Jennifer and her seven-year-old brother. Jennifer knew what it was like to feel out of place, and she knew how to make sure nobody felt like that around her.

Sal acted completely normal. It was stage two chronic lymphocytic leukemia. Old people usually get it so there was some uncertainty about her chances, though they expected remission in twelve months, as Tim's father had said. Some people had it for years before any major treatment was necessary, but given her age, they would

begin treatment soon. There were hardly any questions, just affirming, warm responses. It was relieving the way she said it. The whole thing was quite normal, as if they were listening to someone talk about a mildly sick cat. It was just cancer. Plain old, every day, totally survivable, not-scary-whatsoever teenage cancer.

Sal did not even acknowledge Tim when she came in. Tim would smile at her when they would make eye contact, but it was almost as if she was looking past him. This happened three times. He counted.

Then Jennifer asked everyone to gather around Sal and lay hands on her and they would pray. As he approached her, his stomach tightened. He imagined placing his hand on her upper back, but she was wearing a loose dress hung on her shoulders with an open back. *"Top of the head, then? What's the least weird way to lay hands on her?"* He arrived last and the only place open on her body was her left shoulder. He laid his hand. The feeling of her skin sent a shock into his body. The group began to pray.

Sal put her hand on top of Tim's. She recognized his touch. She could feel her face turn red. To even things out, she did the same with Jennifer's hand on the other side.

No healing happened that night. After the first test results came back weeks later, a voice in Tim's mind said, *"It's because you don't have enough faith."* This voice was often in his mind when his prayers did not work. A congregant had said it to him once after his grandmother had died. It was cutting to a young pastor's son.

His father, however, could always sense when he was thinking it and would say, "Tim, stop beating yourself up. Only God knows what His purpose is and you're not God. We just trust Him and follow His voice. The results are up to Him."

### **A New Children's Book**

Sal, Tim, and Mike were the last to leave after Jennifer started sending signals for them to go. Tim quickly said to Sal, "Hey that article was pretty great. Loved the pictures." He did this because it was something they shared in common but not with Mike, hoping Mike would get bored of the conversation and let them be. It did not work, and the three of them walked together as Mike asked about the article.

From Jennifer's house, there was a fifteen-minute walk to the high school. They had to walk twenty minutes around it to get to Main Street in Old Town, where Tim and Sal lived. Mike lived past Old Town in a new neighborhood. It was cold and dry and peacefully silent. The stars were out in the thousands, and the earthy smell of an early spring bloom was just starting to pierce the grimy, fusty wetness of late winter.

Mike shifted the conversation to what it was like publishing the school paper. When they got to the school, he asked what they wanted to do after they graduated. Tim wanted to be an illustrator or an editor. Sal wanted to be a writer. She could be a

journalist if she wanted, but she really wanted to write fiction. Nothing much else made sense, but as long as she was writing, she was happy. Mike was only a sophomore so he had less of an idea, but probably a fireman.

They approached Sal's house first. It was a Victorian-era home with a wrap around porch. Mike said goodnight and went his separate way. Before Sal headed into her home, Tim pulled his new book out of his backpack.

"Hey, um, I made something for you." Sal blushed, though Tim could not see it. Then she saw what it was and gasped and almost broke down in tears but held them back.

She flipped through the pages. There were only six pages on three sheets, but she studied them hard as she continued letting out little blurts, "Oh, Tim. Oh, thank you!"

"Do you like it?" he asked. She nodded, leapt towards him, and hugged him. She was about four inches shorter than him and stood up on her toes and he felt her delicate shoulder blades widen within her skin as she did. He thought she would let go soon, but she kept holding on. He felt her heart beating against his. Finally she disengaged and his neck was wet from her tears. He held her waist.

"I'm probably going to go inside," she said. She knew he wanted to stay up on her porch. "My parents are kind of protective right now and I've already been out longer than I told them I would be." He nodded. He was still holding her waist. "I'll see you when? Sunday?" It was a Wednesday night.

"Yeah I guess. Sunday. Right." Tim could not hide his disappointment. He stared into her eyes, lost in their rich brown color that reminded him of an old oak tree that was in front of his childhood home in Minneapolis. There was something of a question in her expression. He could feel her knees shaking a little and her head swayed. His heart felt like it would tear through his chest. "Yeah. I'll see you Sunday." He removed his hands from her waist, said goodnight, and started walking home.

She wished he had stayed. She wanted him to hold tighter and pull him into her embrace again. She felt like a piece of her was surgically removed as he walked out of sight. But she thought that if the disease did not go into remission, it would be bad enough to watch her parents suffer with her. How could she drag someone else through what she had to face? She put her hand to her chest and felt her rapid heartbeat, and took a long, deep breath. Then she went inside.

### **That Little Sound**

The next Wednesday night was abnormally warm for April in Michigan. The humidity was mild because it had not rained since before the incident at the softball game. The crickets were singing in chorus and the fireflies were out zig-zagging in beeps of green light.

Mike was feeling ill that night and missed Bible study. This gave Tim and Sal a chance to walk alone. They had spent most evenings of the last week together on her porch, but it was never enough time.

Sal had to explain it again because there were some missing people last week. They prayed over her again. Sal was tired of talking about cancer. She began to hate that word and would take any opportunity to undermine its significance.

As Tim and Sal walked, they talked about how nobody would have any idea how to handle it at school. Sal was supposed to return next week and promised to make Becca Provine feel guilty, at least once, for being insensitive. All she would have to say is, "I have cancer," and put on a sad face, and everyone would take sides against Becca. That was her only "evil plan", as she called it. While everyone would have to be politically correct, the two of them could talk about almost anything. They were honest, fully themselves, not afraid of offense.

When they made it to the high school, Tim asked, "Should we go through or around?"

Through meant technically trespassing, first by the tennis courts then across the football field and parking lot. Around meant an extra twenty minutes to Old Town where they both lived. Sal lived within sight of Main Street. Tim lived a five-minute walk further.

"Through," she responded. "I'm not in a rush, but I want to get on campus without people so I can get used to the juju before next week." They both laughed.

He had been carrying his backpack and he tossed it through a tall slit in the fence and ducked through. Then he held open the fence so she could come through. As she did, he peaked but quickly turned his head so she would not see him seeing her breasts. She noticed, but it was only a peak. Boys had been staring at her chest since she was twelve. She had developed first in her class, and though she was not much larger than average, that gave her inevitable, and mostly unwanted, attention earlier than most. She did not understand why boys liked what she called "sacks of fat". Really, she liked them too, but she was tired of boys staring. Tim was the only one who seemed to know how lesser-than it made her feel when boys would look at her chest instead of her eyes when she had something important to say. She thought deeply about her opinions and had a lot of important things to say.

Her first and only kiss was in middle school with a guy on the football team. He stopped texting her back afterwards. A week later, she overheard him saying that he thought she was weird, then he bragged, "But those tits, though." They all laughed. She cried for a week.

She appreciated the effort Tim put in and kind of liked it when he peaked. He never made her feel lesser-than. He made her feel a lot of things, but never lesser-than.

"You're funny," she said as she stood upright. "Thanks." His mind froze as about three thoughts jammed into it at once.

By the time they made it to the football field, they had been silent for several minutes.

"I noticed you seem to have a lot of energy tonight," Tim commented.

"Yeah. I think it mostly has to do with how much sleep I've been getting? I sleep like ten to twelve hours a night now. But it's up and down, you know. They prescribed me a bunch of pills a couple of days ago. Sleeping pills, birth control, some immune system things, you name it. I have no idea if that's part of it."

"I remembered you being so tired before all this and I thought, when I saw you for the first time last week, that if you were more tired than that, you would be a zombie or something."

"A *Zombie? Really, Tim?*" he thought.

"Oh no. Not yet. The hunger for brains and human flesh happens during chemo. Or does it?" She raised an eyebrow at him.

"I'm sorry but I would definitely end you if you turn into a zombie. I have zero sympathy for the undead."

"How dare you! I have cancer!" They both paused. "You'll make it quick though, right?" she added with a wink.

"Oh sure. I'll probably whack your head off with a shovel or if I could find a gun..."

She interrupted him with her best zombie impression and started chasing him. He yelled and mimed a shotgun and with a *chik-chik-pshhh!* she fell into the grass. Tim laughed. When she did not get up, he stopped laughing. There was no sound but the crickets.

"Okay, Sal, that's enough, joke's over. Sal?"

No sound came from her and he could not tell if she was breathing. He bolted to her, kneeled, and felt her ribs. She was breathing but seemed unconscious.

"Hey! Sal? Look at me! Sal?!" His voice seemed to come from his chest. He turned her over and as he did, she let out a zombie *hiss* and took a swipe at his face and howled with laughter.

"NO!" He yelled and dropped her back in the grass. "You do not get to do that to me!"

"Oh shut up. It's my cancer, I can do with it what I want."

Tim did not want to laugh, but he could not help it. He helped her up.

The laughter subsided and they dropped into silence again. It was broken as they got near the bleachers on the other end of the field.

"This is a totally strange question, but what's your favorite sound?" Sal asked.



"Hmmm. I guess I like music, you know? Like soft rock, or punk rock when I'm mad. You know what I like."

"No, not like that. I mean from like the natural world or just the environment that you're in. Not something that someone makes."

"Oh. Um...I think I like the sound of a lawnmower. You know, not up close, but in the distance. It's kind of peaceful. Every Saturday morning, my neighbor mows his lawn and it's a peaceful way to start the weekend." He looked at her and she was looking directly at him but he could not read her expression. "Or whatever," he qualified.

"That's a good one. I like that."

"How about you?"

She paused and looked at the flagpole just past the bleachers. The janitor forgot to take down the flag, and a breeze had picked up and it was dancing a little.

"I like that little sound," she said quietly.

"The flag? That's patriotic of you. *America, America! God shed his grace on thee!*" he sang loudly and badly.

"No! Shut up!" She put her hand over his mouth. "Not the flag, but that little ring, like a bell, you hear that? That sound that the metal hook makes on the rope when it hits the flagpole in a breeze."

He did not hear it at first, but after a time, there it was.

*Thing-thing, thing-thing.*

He had never noticed it before. He had been on the earth seventeen years and heard plenty of flags in the wind, but he never noticed that little sound. Now it was all he could hear.

"Yeah. That is kind of nice," commented Tim distantly.

"Notice how it sounds like it's echoing, even though there's nothing to echo off of? We're in this empty field with plenty of other sounds, the crickets and us talking, and here's this noise that's so small but once you hear it, it pierces through everything. It's almost like God speaking to us, you know? We're always so focused on the big things, like politics, the economy, the fire of God coming down in our megachurches, or even the roaring crowds at the football games on this field. Maybe God is kind of like this noise. What if when we spend all our time focused on the glory of the big things, we're drowning Him out? Maybe to really hear Him, we need to listen for something small. Something simple. Something that's always there if we can just stop for a moment and listen."

So they listened for a moment.

*Thing-thing, thing-thing.*

Tim broke the silence with, "What kind of pills did you say they had you on?"

"Really?! That was a good moment we were having, Timothy Bolin!" She pushed his chest. He had a muscular chest, she thought.

"Gets you back for your dead Zombie stunt back there, jerk!" He laughed and she smiled irrepressibly but turned it into a joke at his expense.

"You should have seen yourself, you were all, 'Sal! Oh Sal! Don't die on me. What would I ever do without you?'" She pretended to be a *femme fatale* from an old black and white movie she had seen.

"Yeah, I mean. But what *would* I do without you, you know?" He said and she smiled and looked down at the grass. "Like the paper wouldn't be the same. You're a good writer."

She frowned.

"A good writer?" She asked intensely.

"Yeah. No, I mean, a great writer!" That did not change the expression on her face.

"You were worried about me because I'm a great writer." She said slowly with perfect diction.

"Yeah. I mean you're...you're...a great photographer also!"

"Oh."

"And you're a good friend, too."

"Oh. Yeah. Cool." She started walking.

"Wait!" She kept walking. "Wait, Sal!" She turned on her heels.

"I'm a great writer, I'm a great photographer, and I'm a good friend and that's all I am to you, right?"

"I...don't...know."

"Well that's fine then. Cool, you know? This writer-slash-photographer-slash-friend is tired and is going to go to bed." She turned and kept walking, holding back tears.

"Sally, stop!" She obeyed but she would not face him. He turned her by the waist and held her there. She hated that he knew that was where she liked to be held.

"Sal." That was all he could get out for a moment. She folded her arms and looked away and tears welled in her eyes. One dropped down her cheek. Tim had dreamed of this moment for a long time. So many chances like this had gone by, but he could never get the words out. He could write all day but he could never get the words out when it counted. This was his chance. If this is what ended a two-year friendship, then so be it. It would be the truth, at least.

"Sally," he started over again, using her full name to make it more formal. His voice came out angry. He did not mean it to be that way, but that was just the way it was. "You are the most beautiful girl and the most beautiful soul I have ever known. I have enjoyed every single second of every minute of every hour of every day of every

week of every month of the last two years that I have known you. I think about you all the time. I can't stop thinking about you. I miss you the second we leave each other. I dream of what I'm going to say when we see each other next. Every time I see something cool or think of something profound or laugh at something I think, 'I have to tell Sal about this.' You're the only reason I've survived at this school and I...I love you."

Her brown eyes darted between his green eyes, left then right then left. These were the words she had heard so many times when she went to sleep at night, the words for which she had longed.

Then her thoughts from last week came flooding back to her. How could she drag someone else into this? She would have to break his heart. It would be better for him. She would have to tell him a lie.

"I love you too," she said as her eyes landed in lock with his. "*Nooo! Sally Carter, that's the truth! You were supposed to lie!*" she chastised herself.

Then they did what they had both dreamed of for so long. He pulled her onto his body and they kissed deeply. They did not stop for who knows how long. She broke his kiss and kissed his neck and he kissed her ear and then they were twisted around each other and onto each other and on the grass.

When they realized how long they had stopped in the field, they gathered themselves and started walking to her house, holding hands. Finally, the one thing they could never talk about was in front of them and they could truly say anything now.

One last kiss before she went inside turned into two. Two turned into another fifteen minutes. But she had to go, so they only kissed once more before another five minutes of laughing and kissing and holding. Then she went inside and he walked to his home.

Tim slept well that night. Sal did not sleep at all.

### **Becca Provine's Party**

The night of Becca Provine's party was about a week before Sal began treatment. Tim's parents were gone at a yearly couples' retreat on the upper peninsula, the wooded and wild region northwest of the mitten-shaped part of Michigan. Becca Provine's parents were somewhere. Becca could not remember where and her brothers just did not care. Ever. Becca was the oldest, then there were two boys, all three about one year apart.

Normally, people like Sal and Tim would not have been invited. Upon the diagnosis, Becca looked back at all the years of trash-talk on Sal with regret. This invitation was her atonement.

Sal invited Tim and she whipped up an alibi in Jennifer who often used Sal as an alibi herself when she stayed the night at her boyfriend's house.

Sal knew that it was a pity invite, but she also knew that Becca's parties were legendary, and she wanted the experience before she graduated. In fact, with her mortality borne before her, Sal had made a long list of things she wanted to experience. She needed a deadline (she chuckled to herself when she thought of that word), and because she did not know if or when she might be dead, graduation was the next big milestone.

The Provine family owned a banking empire that stretched from Michigan through the Midwest into Texas. The family's first bank was founded right there in Hattaford Falls.

Their house was blasphemous. It was an Italian style monstrosity, complete with ten bedrooms, twelve bathrooms, six fireplaces, three staircases, two kitchens, two living rooms, a home theater, a billiard room, a dining hall complete with a long medieval-style table, a twelve-car garage, a guest house, a pool house, a one and a half times size Olympic pool, and two jacuzzies; hence the legendary parties.

In every public space that night, there was a bar setup with at least five kinds of alcohol. Sal and Tim knew that Mr. and Mrs. Provine probably bought most of it themselves. They were known to be present at some of these parties, handing teenagers drinks as they entered. They took what they called the "Dutch Approach" to parenthood, which they interpreted to mean, "If you can't stop them, join them." It should have been their family motto.

Mr. Provine spent most days at the poolside after his Irish coffee in the morning and before his six-drink evening minimum. He rarely visited his headquarters, unless he was screwing someone new on the side or just needed to make his monthly appearance. He had other people running his banking empire.

Tim drove Sal in his mom's old Chevy Suburban. This was a new experience for them. The only parties they had ever gone to were birthday parties of friends, and those were always organized by parents who decidedly did not follow the Provines' Dutch Approach. They had drunk very little in their lives, just the small amounts of whiskey or cognac or whatever else Sal could borrow from her father's liquor cabinet without him catching it. Tim's parents did not drink. The couple treated it almost like a scientist treats an experiment. They developed a hypothesis of the night, who would be there, what being intoxicated would feel like and make them do, or who would pass out first. They promised to compare notes throughout the night.

As they went through the entryway, they felt the nervous excitement one does on a first plane flight. About an hour into the party and two beers after takeoff, Tim lost feeling in his lips and could not talk straight. Sal could not drink due to the

medication, but the doctors never said anything about smoking a little weed, right? That's how the crowned prince of potheads, Jackson Postrallo, tempted her anyways.

In reality, it took no convincing. She had actually researched the chemical interactions two days prior and sought him out deliberately. Jackson pulled out a small joint, lit it, and handed it to her. She put it to her lips and inhaled deeply. The instant the smoke touched the back of her throat, Sal coughed so violently she thought she might prolapse her windpipe through her mouth. Jackson made a joke about her looking like a stoner version of that scene from *The Exorcist*. Then he handed it to her again and walked her through it, step-by-step: inhale just a little, hold, exhale slowly, oh okay cough a bit (that's okay), now drink some water, here you go. She took one more hit and did not cough at all the third time, just like a pro, or so said Jackson. Her head felt heavy and she could not stop giggling and saying the words "woah" and "bubble", which is indeed a funny word if you think about it.

Sal and Tim met back up and reckoned that the party had been a success. Sal recalled the spiritual experience she had walking away from the pool and into the woods back behind it staring at the waning gibbous moon that was out. Tim said she made up the word gibbous. She proclaimed it was a real word and they would look it up later. It is a real word.

For the next two hours, they went from group to group starting conversations. Tim took a couple of shots but his buzz started wearing off so he went in search of a new drink. He accepted a mixed drink from a redheaded girl he did not know. She flirted with him then whispered to him to meet her upstairs because he had what she was looking for. He misheard and said he did not know he was supposed to bring anything. She giggled and told him he was funny and that he should meet her in the second door on the right up the big staircase. He leaned over and told Paul, Becca's youngest brother, that the redhead was looking for something in the room and she could use help. Paul, seeing the interaction, rolled his eyes and went upstairs.

It was almost 3 A.M. when Tim and Sal found a group of people playing strip poker. The party had raged early and started to thin out. Strip poker proved to be too much poker and too little stripping because the girls demanded that they did not have to take their clothes off in pairs (shoes and socks came off one at a time). It devolved into an argument over which hand beat which when Sal spoke up.

"I think you guys are just arguing so you don't have to be naked in front of each other because you're a bunch of cowards!"

The challenge would have landed better if she had used an expletive at the end, but she got the point across.

Jake was Becca's boyfriend. All he had on was a shirt and underwear. He muttered the word, "Aight," and took them off. All the guys got uncomfortable and

pestered him to re-clothe himself but he shushed them. Then he looked directly at Sal and said, "I took mine off, but you still got yours on. Who's the coward now?"

"Um...just a sec," intervened Becca. She got up and called Sal over to her and they whispered for a moment. "Screw it. You know what? You only live once!" she exclaimed and stripped her remaining sock off and then her bra. Tim stood beside Jackson and watched as people started cheering and taking their clothes off and circling pieces above their heads. Then a herd of them ran outside, mostly guys, but a few girls too. A few were naked, most were in their underwear.

Jackson stated, "I didn't sign up to party at a nudist colony. I'm gonna split." Then he turned and left. It was just Tim and Sal in the living room.

"So are you gonna?" asked Tim.

"Hell no!" she laughed. "Expose myself in front of a bunch of people I have spent the last three years trying to hide from? You have to earn this peepshow. Plus, I have other things on the list."

Tim had not seen the list.

She grabbed his hand and led him up the large staircase. They turned right and opened the second door but closed it after they heard pleased noises within. They tried the third door and it was the master suite. Tim said her name, then pressed her against the wall and kissed her. Then she said that Becca and Jake would almost certainly use the master bedroom, so they left, closing the door, turned down a short hallway, and entered into an office. Mrs. Provine had intended to use it as her headquarters for a cosmetics business she started, but that failed and now the room was unused. Against the wall at one end was a dust caked computer desk with an old computer on it, inset into the wall ahead of them were double doors that led out onto a balcony over the driveway, and at the other end was a large T.V. Centered in the room was a soft leather couch. The moon was brilliant that night and set the room ablaze in white light.

Tim and Sal fumbled onto the couch and kissed for a while. They had done this almost every night since they started. Things got more intense than before and lines were crossed that had not been crossed. Hands grasped and grabbed and caressed, then tugged at and reached under clothes. Then the clothes peeled away until they were only half dressed and she was on top of him.

"Have I earned the peepshow?" He asked tantalizingly.

"More than earned it."

"More than?"

"Much, much more than." She giggled.

"I like the sound of that." He began kissing her body.

"Tim?"

"Yeah?" He responded distractedly.

"Tim." She grabbed his face and pulled it towards her.

"Yeah."

"I want to do everything I can before..." she trailed off.

"Before what?" She didn't answer. "Before what, Sal?" He asked tenderly.

"Before I have to start treatment. Because I don't know what I'll be like after that. I want to do everything I can now."

"Everything?" he repeated.

"Yeah," she said and smiled. "Yeah..." she whispered directly into his ear.

Tim did not smile though. He was expecting his mother's voice to scold him with a "Naughty!". He waited for it, but there was no scolding. There was only him and Sal, and there would only ever be him and Sal, he thought.

She was so beautiful. He thought about how he had never known the fullness of the word's meaning. How had he lasted so long without dying of exhaustion holding those words back? Now that was all he could say to her, especially when they were so close. She was everything he ever wanted. She was perfect. Now, she was his.

"But shouldn't we be using..." Tim trailed off.

"What?"

"Protection?"

"We are. I'm on birth control. Don't kill the moment."

"Sal. Let's give each other everything," he said. They did.

### **The First Round of Treatment**

A lot changed over the next month. Sal and Tim both got the same hair cut together: short on the sides and a few inches long on top. Tim's straight, dark hair and Sal's wavy, auburn hair mixed together on the floor and she took a picture and posted it on Instagram with the caption, "We do everything together," and a black heart emoji. That was as close as they got to a relationship announcement and it sent a stir through the junior class. School ended a couple weeks later, coinciding with the end of the second week of chemotherapy. That was when Sal started getting tired and sick. She would suddenly excuse herself from Tim about twice a day and he would hear the noises sometimes coming from the restroom.

When she was awake, Sal was invariably herself—willful, tangential, witty, affable, and creative. Tim would walk her home from school and they would spend the whole day there.

The portion of the day she spent awake began to shrink. The first week, she started getting tired around ten at night. The second week, around nine. The third, after school ended, about eight thirty.

After school was out, she and Tim started working on more children's books. With her influence, *The Adventures of Joey* became more complex and real, yet

funnier and more enjoyable at the same time. He reckoned that it would have taken him months to come up with what she did in only a manner of seconds.

He had a one-track mind, but hers was like a tree. A single idea would start growing and sprouting two ideas which sprout two or three of their own until the story had grown into a massive, true-to-life, solid, organic thing. With her help, the world that Joey inhabited exploded with characters and side stories.

Amongst her contributions to Joey's story, this was probably her most important one. She liked the idea of a character getting sick, but she felt like it should not have been Joey himself. She comforted Tim by saying that what he had already done was fine for a one-off issue. But if they wanted some dramatic tension long-term, it would have to be another character.

"People don't relate to people who face the idea of their own death everyday," she said. "They don't need to, though. They need to just love them."

With that, Joey's mother got sick and Joey was always searching for the Golden Kakadu Plum, an enchanted fruit that would cure any illness.

As for her life at home, Sal's father was often away to the senate or in his reelection offices. Sal called him The Senator playfully, but everyone in Hattaford Falls called him that out of respect. Bill Carter was a genteel man. Years of a quick metabolism had trained him to eat poorly, and he had grown a belly in recent years. He rarely wore anything but a suit, and had rough brown hair salted with white. His mind was filled with endless stories which he told in a deep, punctuated, expressive voice. Even his most vicious political rivals melted when he would tell them. They were filled with drama and humor and always circled around an aphorism. He was a legend.

Sal's mother was named Emily, but he always called her Mrs. Carter. She was much drier in personality than her husband, but she was dignified and spoke with a warm, mellow, dyspeptic voice. She had straight red hair that had gotten lighter over the years. She had grown up in India, the daughter of a missionary and spoke five languages fluently. She was shaped very similarly to Sal with the same brown eyes, and the two were indistinguishable in Mrs. Carter's high school yearbook pictures. Though she only had a bachelors degree, she had authored most of an authoritative textbook on an ancient reconstructed language called Proto-Indo-European. They had a large library in the home, and three-quarters of the books belonged to Mrs. Carter, which is really something considering that she married a lawyer.

Mrs. Carter had one obvious fault though: she was uncontrollably defensive of Senator Carter and his beliefs. If she sensed that someone was undermining him or one of his policies, she would strike at them like a viper. Usually it took the form of verbal attacks, but on one occasion it got physical. There was an infamous picture of her in the local newspaper where she broke a plastic jug of milk over a protestor's



head. She spent three days in jail for that and Senator Carter joked that the jail had never been less safe.

Mrs. Carter had a nervous disposition when she was between projects, which she was then, and constantly baked cookies, made sandwiches, and checked up on them. Sal and Tim never got much of a chance to be alone except when Mrs. Carter would go to the store. Then they would run up to her room and make like wild animals. It was the first summer of love in their lives.

### **I Need You**

About a month into treatment, Sal went in for a consultation with her oncologist. Tim received a text from Sal.

*Hey. I need you. Urgent.*

They agreed to meet at a small park near her house.

The sun was setting when Tim arrived. Large clouds feathered above, stained purple against the orange dusk. Tim had been at the church setting up for a children's program with his father and his father drove him to the park.

Sal was sitting at a table near a little swing set and sandbox. When Tim approached her, she got up weakly and just asked him to sit. She was shaking. Her skin was white and almost translucent like rice paper. Her face was swollen, her eyes were puffy and red with dark circles under them. He had never seen her like this.

"Tim. I don't even know where to begin," she said. Her voice was hoarse and tired. "I...I...I..." She drifted off. "I'm sorry, Tim, I'm so sorry!"

She started violently weeping and shaking. Her shoulders dropped and separated and her rib cage expanded and she looked quite literally like she was falling apart. Tim swept around the table and swung his arms around her and kissed her hair.

"Hey. You're going to be alright. You're going to be fine. There's nothing we can't say, remember? There's nothing you can't tell me."

She grabbed his head and adjusted him so they could see each other clearly. She looked like someone he did not know, like a foreign being had taken over her body. Her face was swollen and she had cried her makeup off. She repeated the word "okay" over and over until she gathered herself enough to say what she needed to say.

"Tim. I went to the doctors today and," she took a deep, shaky breath, "the treatment is probably helping. It'll be awhile before we see progress. Tim, they found something else in my blood test." She drew another breath. "I'm pregnant."

Those words made Tim feel like someone ripped his spine out of his back. In an instant, he realized two things. First, Sal was so vulnerable, that everything he did, even unintentionally, was going to go straight to her core. He also realized that to love her in this moment meant that he was not allowed to feel anything for himself. He had to deny his own shock, he had to deny his own physical reaction, he had to deny anything that was not love. Whatever she said next, whatever she was going through, it was going to be perfectly normal and they were going to get through it together, like always.

He hugged her so she could not see him gather himself to perform his duty. He comforted her and held her and kissed her. He told her everything he thought would make her feel that there was no wrong or right, just them. When he could tell that she was a little more centered, he asked her what she had gone through that day. These were her words.

"When we arrived, my doctor sat my mom and I down in her office and just went over the blood tests and told us everything about the treatment. Then she said that she would like to speak to me alone and asked my mom to wait outside. My mom got kind of pissed but she eventually complied.

"Then the doctor said what they had found in the blood test. They had to get another sample from me, I forgot to tell you that the other day, because she thought there was a mistake because, obviously, I lied about being sexually active on my form. So they ran that other test which is why they're so sure. They said it made sense of why I got so sick and tired so early. Usually people don't go down that far that quickly. I asked what we were going to do and she," she choked a little and took a deep breath, "she basically said that we either have to stop the treatment until the pregnancy is carried to term, or," she choked again and took a few deep breaths, "okay, okay, okay. Or we have to terminate the pregnancy."

Tim had never heard that assortment of words, "terminate the pregnancy." It took him a moment, in the shock of it all, to see that she was talking about abortion. Abortion was a concept that was unthinkable for them personally.

They had seen the Christian movies and they knew real people did this. They knew they would have to treat those people with love. Love the sinner, hate the sin. They just never thought they would be *those* sinners. They had never been taught to accept love for themselves, only to show love to other people.

Tim wanted to ask what they were going to do, but he did not know which word to choose: "we" or "you".

"Okay. What else did the doctor say?" He finally asked.

"I said that I would carry my baby to term because I had such a high chance of survival with this type of cancer. I made this decision a long time ago, Tim. No matter

what, I was going to take care of any child that was mine and I was not going to put them in harm's way. I don't care what happens. That's what I promised myself."

"And what did she say?"

At this, Sal took one very long, deep breath and put her hand onto Tim's.

"She said that the estimate they gave me was the *best-case scenario*," she almost cried, but took a deep breath and forced herself to continue, "and that was only if we continued the treatment as planned. Without treatment, it would spread and I would probably die. I asked how long. She said, 'Six to nine months.'

"I told her she was wrong because of the other estimate. She just said, 'There is no easy way to say this, but that's just not the reality that we have in front of us.'

"Apparently, so few teenagers get this disease that they had no idea how to run the numbers. Then she just hands me this pamphlet about...about my options. They want to dismember a living human inside me that was under my care, who I'm supposed to love and protect, who God gave to me to watch over.

"She said, 'Nobody can make this decision but you.' So I stood up and I..."

"It's okay."

"No! It's not okay! I tore that pamphlet up into tiny pieces in front of the doctor and threw it into her garbage can and looked at her while I did it and I said, 'I will never. Do you hear me, you murderous bitch?! I will never!'"

"That was very strong of you. You said what you wanted to say and that was hard."

"No actually, it was pretty easy. What I said to my mom, that was the hard part. My mom somehow put the pieces together. She always figures things out, it's insane. Maybe she knew when we were, you know, whatever in my bedroom? I don't know. But we just walked out in silence and every time I tried to talk, she just kept saying, 'No,' and, 'How could you?' That was all. She wouldn't even look at me. Her own daughter is going through hell and then *this*?! It was like this wasn't even something that was happening. Like I was being excommunicated from her life. Like I was some stranger she could just drop off at a bus station and forget all about. Like I was nobody."

She started crying again but now her eyes were dry. Then she regained her composure enough to tell the rest of the story.

"She wouldn't talk in the car for all twenty miles barely. I just told her everything the doctor told me anyways. I don't know if she actually heard it. Then I got her to say two things other than 'No.' She said, 'Wasn't your disease bad enough, Sal? Wasn't it hard enough to have teenage cancer without bringing teenage pregnancy into our lives?' And then she said something that I literally could not believe, Tim. I still can't believe that my mother would ever say such a disgusting, totally self-centered thing. I mean, how could she even have this thought at all, let alone say it out loud?"

"What did she say, Sal?" Asked Tim gently.

"She looks over in my direction, not at me but just kind of like this," Sal said and demonstrated at Tim, looking just off his shoulder, "she said, 'How could you do this to me and your father?!'"

Sal was in a rage. Her eyes were bloodshot and she was heaving.

"When we got to the house, she started slamming the cabinets open and tossing the groceries we had picked up before into them, acting like a child.

"So I shook her shoulders and said, 'Emily! How dare you! How *DARE* you.' The way I said that made her look at me for the first time. 'Your only child is going through hell and all you can think about is your husband's career and your precious reputation? You are the worst mother that your daughter could have ever asked for. You are the worst woman to treat another woman like this. You are the worst Christian and Jesus is ashamed of you. I hope you burn in hell, you sociopath. And by the way, this child in her stomach is *her* choice. Sorry to break it to you, but when she was having sex with her boyfriend in her room when you were at the grocery store, and whether she chooses to keep *it*,' I said 'it' to cut her real deep, 'has nothing to do with you!' And I just slammed the front door and that's when I came here.

"I put her in her place, Tim. God, I don't know if home can ever be the same. I just want to go home and have it be normal but now I can't because of what I said. God! I just told her what I thought would force her to look at me like I was a human being!"

She started crying again, but she was tired now and it came slowly and dryly.

Sal's doctor, Dr. Elizabeth Sanchez, made one crucial mistake. It was not just Sal's decision. In the state of Michigan, a parent has to sign off on an abortion. Elizabeth was not supposed to hand her that pamphlet. Normally an obstetrician would have been there with her to discuss options, but the one on staff knew who Bill Carter was and made up a pretense to leave early that day. He handed Elizabeth a box of the pamphlets and asked her to do it. Elizabeth got off a forty-eight hour shift that night, went home to her husband, and cried herself to sleep. She and her husband had tried to conceive for two years, she was almost forty, and had just had the second of two miscarriages a few weeks prior. When she came in for her next shift, she slammed the box of pamphlets down on the other doctor's desk, and told him never again to make her do his dirty work. Elizabeth was never able to get pregnant. The Sanchez family adopted twins the following year.

Emily Carter called Bill that evening, and her voice was hoarse and slow. Bill listened to her patiently and told her that everything would work out. He told her not to beat herself up, that she had made a mistake, yes, but Sal had a mother for which most kids could only pray. They would make up and everything would be okay. He

reminded her that they believed that every life was precious and that this child was a gift. He drove home immediately.

It took Emily Carter until the end of her life to leave that day behind her. She would relive it, over and over, parsing through every word, every sight, every step. She was constantly reminded of the love she failed to show her daughter that day, the love she knew she had in her but did not know how to bring it to the new reality into which she was thrust. For the first two years afterwards, she would look at a corner of the ceiling of her bedroom every night and quietly beg God to let her relive it so she could do it right this time. She heard only silence.

Tim and Sal relocated to the grass and he held her. The evening changed from orange to blue to black, and the sodium lights powered on in the park.

He still did not know how to ask what their next steps were as the reverberation of those events subsided. Tim told her she could stay the night at his place, that his parents would understand better than her mom. She knew that it was true, but even in the hardest moment of her life so far, she would directly face her problems.

Before they left, she told him what she planned to do, now that she was facing death in either option.

TO BE CONTINUED...

## A Note from the Author, Patrick A. Snitchler

*Joey Is in the Next Room Waiting* seems at the outset to be a teenage tragic-romance set in small-town Midwest America. However, it is really a drama set on the divide between ideology and people, or the big things and all the small things that make them up.

I was raised in the fabric of the American Religious Right. Where I stand on these issues now, I will leave for a later time. The main threads of my early life were the nuclear family, church programs, and the concept of purity. I was shielded from seeing the cross-threads there were in this fabric. There were families a few houses from mine who were broken apart by drug abuse and violence. Even parents who just had lax views on drinking were a world away from my upbringing. I knew some of these things existed, but rarely saw them outside of TV or movies. Substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and abortion were things that “other people” experienced, not me. Leaving high school, and that small world, was an education. I saw for the first time the whole fabric of this little corner of the world.

This story is essentially about what we do when our concept of “how things ought to be” crashes into the reality of the way things actually are. It is about mistakes, hard choices, and finding humanity amidst all the noise of politics and ideology.

When I, myself, broke the rules to which I had ascribed, I believed God would not forgive me. So I developed a mask, and slowly the mask affixed itself to me. I hid whole swaths of my life, even from myself. It’s a common tale that usually ends with the moral, “Drop the mask and be a better person.” But the ending rarely reveals what dropping the mask does to our identity, and how hard it is to find hope when you have believed that you are really irredeemable. In my case, I carried a sense of ugliness and hopelessness through some of the best years of my life because the story I told myself never gave hope to those who broke the rules.

It has been a long time since I left that mindset. But this story is my testament to that divide between ideology and the facts of humanity; between the big things and the small things that make them up.

If I have done my job, we will see each of these characters in ourselves. Then we must decide what to do with ourselves afterwards. Humanity can be ugly, contradictory, selfish, and profane; but it can also be beautiful, true, good, artful, and yes, even godly. Sometimes we are all those things in the same breath.

I believe that we *are* the divide between what is and what ought to be. This story is my attempt to connect across it.