

Mark Williams

The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone.

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811--1896)

An early September morning

She could hear the music play in her dreams. The repetitive sound of two notes on the keyboard repeating like rain drops hitting crystal. Hanna had a reoccurring dream of a little girl. It was herself as a child. She could see herself in the dream, like she was watching a movie. The girl was always young in her dreams, especially the ones she had recently. In this one, she was about three, Hanna guessed, but probably closer to four, but definitely not older than four. The girl always wore the same thing. She had on a dark dress with small white designs on it and a dark-colored ribbon for a bow. She thought the designs were little white berries. The grass was tall and the light breeze stirred it around as it did to her shoulder length long hair. The sun was full with an occasional cloud blocking the sun.

The dreams were almost always the same. There was some variation in sequencing and sometimes she started the dream at different points. She was sure she had other dreams but none that she really cared to remember, with the exception of the occasional dream of going out for a Dairy Queen Blizzard with Tony Bennett.

"Mother, you made me dream about Tony Bennett," she said about four months prior to when the dreams had started. The two of them had watched a re-run of an old John Denver special with Bennett and Olivia Newton-John. Her mother loved Tony Bennett.

She always made her daughter report any new contacts with the man. "Okay, so what was he wearing this time?" Mother would ask. Tony was always wearing the same thing, a slate gray turtleneck with a darker sports coat. He ate his Blizzard with a straw after making sure to get her a spoon and three napkins. "Oh Tony," Hanna would say to him. "You are so sweet to me." She could see herself saying it. She was on a date—at the Dairy Queen—with Tony Bennett.

"Did you drizzle on your chin again dear?" Mother asked. He wrapped the cup with two of the napkins and gave her the third because she always drizzled some on her chin. He always thought that was cute, her drizzling. She had thought that Tony being in her dreams was an offshoot of the divorce. He started showing up about the same time and she really couldn't figure out why him. After all, her mother loved him, not her. He was significantly older than she was but then again, she thought, she was significantly old. At least she felt that way sometimes.

"Why Bennett? Why can't it be Harry Connick Jr.?" she would ask her mother. Even though he had a great voice, she always thought that Harry Connick Jr's voice was much, much better. She tried to always, when she did dream of the Dairy Queen, weave Harry into it. The closest she got was one time Harry Bellefonte showed up working behind the counter. After that, she gave up and just dealt with the dreams at hand.

Her dream of herself as a little girl took place in tall grass. She saw herself pause and look up into the sky, as if looking for the sun. It was bright on the little girl's face. The girl in Hanna's dream was back to something away from the vision of the dream. Hanna

couldn't see what the child was looking at but she was definitely looking at something that made her smile. She felt herself wanting to look. She couldn't see any farther than where the girl looked, as if she was trying to turn her own, young head. Hanna's younger self wore a content smile; sometimes breaking into a giggle as she walked toward whatever it was she was looking at. As always, just before the dream ends, the little girl smiles and then she stops in her walk. She sees something. The smile spills over into a laugh that only children that young can have, as if she's getting tickled; but she was alone, at least Hanna thought she was alone. As always, the little girl of three, or maybe it was four, but definitely not older than four, began to walk again. This is where Hanna always woke up.

Hanna Jarger was a forty-one year-old, recently divorced, only child, elementary school teacher, now living back with her sick, sixty-two year-old mother, who also was a school teacher. They found themselves now teaching at the same school. She was back in her childhood home, with the exception of the short time she went with her mother while she taught on the Indian reservation, sleeping back in her childhood bedroom, maybe even on her childhood mattress. She was divorced from her husband and her mother, who was getting older, was now ill—still working also as a teacher. She was having a re-occurrence of the cancer that started several years earlier in her left breast and then begun to travel.

Hanna's move home a few months before was not necessarily as a respite from her life, although that played into it, but truly to be with her mother. For most of her life, it had just been the two of them. One of the benefits of her move was the peace that it brought. She had spent the last two years struggling with the divorce, the illness, and basic life in general. Now that her mother did not appear to be getting better, it was time to move. It seemed right. She took a position as a teacher at the same school her mother had been teaching at over the last forty years. It was the same school she went to as a child, literally steps from her front door.

First, her eyes opened and focused on one sliver of light that was leaking through the string weave in the Roman shades next to her bed. The dreams always seemed to end just as her alarm went off. The country radio station had "Tim and Willy in the Morning" waking her up with the 5:30 traffic report. "There's back up again on the east bound 10. With delays that stack...." It was the same report, different day. The report was no longer an issue for her. She smiled as they recited the accidents and obstructions on the same road she use to travel. She was home, the home of her youth. It brought a row of mixed feelings to her, anxiety as to her mother and her future but also warmth of peace.

She lay there for a moment, taking inventory of how good the bed felt and how much she hated waking up. The cool pillow under her head and the two she cradled with her arms and between her curled up legs made her feel like she was wrapped in a cloud. She felt sore and realized it was from the fact her body hadn't moved in hours.

"God, I love my bed," she said into her pillow. Her memory foam mattress and the cool twelve hundred thread count sheets she bought through Overstock.com just before she moved in were her new lovers. It was the best \$99 she had spent and every night it called her by name. She thought for a moment about bedding being her lover and if that was socially wrong. That's what a guy might think. "Yep, that's wrong," she said out loud. "I can't be dating my bed." But, maybe it was her friend she thought as she laid there, cuddling her pillow. It couldn't be her best friend. That was still her mother now that she herself was

grown. She rolled on her back. She thought for a moment longer. A friend would do what this mattress does. It listened to her thoughts at night, held her while she cried herself to sleep; laughed at her while she tried to name her new cow slippers her mother gave to her as a welcome home present as they rested next to the bed. Her friend took care of her during those hours when she couldn't take care of herself. At least a third of her life she would share with this friend. It was wonderful. It gave her rest and she enjoyed its company. Her dear friend didn't eat, need unguarded or unwelcome comments on its figure or political beliefs. In many ways, and at this point in her life, it was even better than having a romantic liaison. She thought that there were no misinterpreted meanings generated by a night of passionate, physical, rolling and tumbling and then of getting up early and leaving under the fog of "Sure I love you. Sure I want to spend the day with you. I'm just running home for a minute—honest. Make some coffee and I'll be right back," she said almost in an audible tone. Words that played in her mind from a memory of a different time. Her friend accepted her the way she was and gave to her what she needed—rest.

The radio was just loud enough to break her sleep. "Again, we are down to one lane on the east bound I-10 so you might want to think about alternative routes to the central city," the voice on the radio said. Traffic to her was an issue at the last school where she taught fifth grade. Listening to the traffic was a habit she would keep for a while, she thought. She at least could smirk a little at all the other poor slobs who had to deal with it.

Since she moved in with her mother, she could walk to work. She was back in her old room. Her mother had painted it and redecorated it but there were still some pictures and knick-knacks from her youth that could be found around the room.

She rolled from her back to her side again, still looking at the sunlight through the curtain. As the traffic report rolled into Tim or Willy, one of them began to talk, which she knew would lead to more music. Her green eyes lazily scanned the room. They landed on nothing in particular and merely rolled from one inanimate thing to the next; each of them, triggering a memory in her mind. Strange memories came back as she let them.

There was the bed she slept in and probably on the same mattress; she couldn't remember at that particular moment if her mother, Gwen, had purchased a new mattress for her or not. She needed to remember to ask her. She did have her memory foam friend, which was really all that was important. It caused her to sigh.

Her eyes fell on a Madame Alexander doll on top of her dresser. She remembered having doll parties underneath her bed with her Barbies, Madame Alexander, and another doll with a great big head. That doll was her favorite. She lay in bed thinking about where she got it and what the doll's name was. After a minute, she figured it didn't have one. She liked it more than the other two because that doll was more real to her. She remembered hanging Barbie and Madame upside down by their feet from the slats under the bed and Huge Head doll would pretend to play tetherball with the other two. Her eyes came across the old bottle of Kieran perfume on her dresser that her mother let her borrow her junior year for the prom; she had never given it back. She had to move it to put the nineteen-inch Sony television she brought when she moved back in. Finally, her eyes stopped at the nightstand. On it was an old, faded, black and gray picture of her father, her mother, and her. Her father was holding her. She could make out her mother and recognized herself but her father's face was heavily shaded and darkened by time. The image of herself in her

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dream was the same as in the photo. She figured that was probably the reason she was so familiar with the little girl. She had her picture in her room. She was about four and her father was in his Marine utilities. She reached up and pulled it to her. Lying on her back, she stuffed one of her pillows under her head and propped the picture on her stomach. With her finger, she traced the outline of each of them in the photo.

"It's five forty-five and time for a quick check on the traffic," she heard Tim or Willy say; she could never tell them apart. It was time to get up.

"Mother," Hanna called from her bed to her mother who was somewhere down the hall.

"Yes, dear?" The muffled voice of her mother came back. She must be in the bathroom, Hanna thought.

"Tony Bennett was in my bedroom last night--"again." There was a smile on her face.

"That's wonderful honey. You should have woken me up. Any luck with Harry Connick? We could have double dated."

Hanna laughed. "No, mom, that's weird. A mother-daughter date is not in our future--"ever."

"So, Connick?"

"No, just Belafonte—again."

"He's too old for you too. Why are you dating all my guys?"

Hanna's smile was large as she again yelled down the hall, carrying on the conversation instead of getting up and walking down to where her mother was. Her bed was too comfortable to get up. "It's because I'm so much younger and better looking."

She rolled her legs off the side of the bed, let out a sigh as she reached to shut off the clock radio and slid her feet into the new cow slippers. She looked at them as she sat on the edge of the bed, holding one leg out straight with her feet pointed to the ceiling as well as the cow's face, then the other leg. She sighed again. She noticed that her legs needed shaving. Once a week probably wasn't enough, she thought.

"Oh well, who's going to see them?" Her new friend, the memory foam, didn't seem to mind. She toyed about names for the slippers. One could be Elsie after the famous cow on milk cartons and one could be Nadine, but she quickly voted that name out. She was saving it to name one of her future children and the idea of naming her child now after a left footed slipper really took the beauty out of it in her mind. Of course, the thought that she was ever going to have children was, by each day, fading from her thoughts. She sat on the edge and pondered her slippers again. "God, if I name these slippers, do I have to name the mattress as well?" she said, as she turned the left slipper with the toes on her left foot. She concluded that was taking this issue way too far.

She had thought that she was actually starting to lose her desire to have children. She could see marrying someone with children, older children, and non-diapered children. Children she could carry on an adult conversation with. Some time when the two of them could sit on the veranda of their fictional estate, the child sipping some fresh lemonade and she, a Mint Julep. "So, Fauntleroy, I see what you mean when you say that Lord Tennyson was erroneous in his transcription of the piece. But, if he was alive today, would he really be a Chicago Cubs fan? I think not, Fauntleroy—I think not." She smiled. "Where the hell did I come up with 'Fauntleroy'," she said to herself.

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She liked that idea. She stood up, reached over, pulled open the Roman shades, and allowed her childhood room to be bathed with the morning sun. She slid into her large, white, bathrobe, found the tissue she left in the pocket from the night before, wiped her nose one more time, and then tossed it in the wastepaper basket on her way out the door, first to the bathroom.

The 1949 Womack home was built in the era following the war; it was the traditional wire cut brick home, three-bedroom, one bath, and one car garage. Over the years, everyone in the neighborhood had added a second bathroom and converted the garage into another room, usually a den. She had lived within its walls until she finished college at the University of Arizona with her degree in Education. Most of her life growing up, it was just the two of them, Hanna, and her mother, Gwen. Gwen lived in the house since her and her husband, Elias, bought it in the mid-sixties, just before he went to Vietnam.

Hanna could barely remember her father. Most of the memories she had were found in the now dark and faded pictures her mother had around the house in photo albums and the one on her nightstand. Gwen said Elias died in Vietnam on a warm spring day in 1969. Every day in Vietnam was warm. Hanna was five. Her father was a young Marine gunnery sergeant in charge of a platoon in the Mekong Delta. She had heard the story many times of how he lived and how he died. She didn't like hearing those stories anymore.

Hanna moved back home after her six-year marriage to Bobby Jarger ended. She stayed for awhile but then the issue with her mother became more than she could handle at the traveling distance she was plugging away at. That was the reason she gave to others. In her heart, she was seriously wounded by the betrayal of her husband.

"I'm fine mother, really," she told her mother shortly after the smoke settled on the formal divorce.

"I don't have time to dwell on pain. Really, I'm fine. I have school; I have you dealing with your stuff. I think I really am fine. I'm over him." She felt she couldn't tell her mother anything else. She said it enough times, she almost believed it. There were two weeks after the final divorce decree that she would come home, crawl into bed and replay her life. Then, after a few minutes had passed, she crawled out of bed, took two of her pillows, curled up in the corner of her room, and cried.

She had accidentally opened an envelope addressed to him from the Insurance Liaison Department at United Health Care. The tragic effects of the divorce were made even worse by a miscarriage just three weeks before she found this envelope. A baby they hadn't planned but caused her to feel joy and she thought Bobby felt it too. It wasn't the envelope that rocked her but what she found in it. Thinking it was a statement on a recent doctor's visit, she was a little more than surprised to find a letter on scented, eggshell white paper addressed to "My Lover." It went on to thank Bobby, in graphic detail, for all he did for her the night he was supposed to be at a supplier's meeting in north Scottsdale. "I loved the way you touched me that night. I'll never forget it. I had to write to you. I know it's a risk but I can't help myself. When I think of you I..." It was signed "Keli" with an "i."

At first Bobby tried to deny what Hanna was incoherently ranting about. "You got this all wrong. I have no idea who this woman is."

He said it was a wrong address or a wrong "Bobby." Then his defense moved to someone trying to frame him, "Those guys at work, gee, what kidders!" he actually said to

her. Finally, he admitted his guilt when Hanna told him she had called United and asked to talk to Keli with an “i”. Hanna hadn’t really called, but lying seemed to work. He buckled.

“I did-did spend time with her. It was a fluke thing. We met and...” He then proceeded to tell her he hadn’t loved his wife, who stood in front of him with her arms crossed, for a while.

“How long is ‘awhile’ Bobby? How long is it? A day? Week? How about a year? How long is ‘awhile’ Bobby? We’ve only been married six years.”

“But we dated for a few years before that.”

“Oh, crap,” she said.

“A while,” he said.

“I know. You said that. How long is that?”

When he told her “About a year after we got married.” She, in turn, buckled.

She went down the check list of things she might have done or should have done differently. They all seemed to orbit the physical. What did this woman look like? She imagined Bobby and this woman having sex like they use to have when they were dating, everywhere in every way with a couple of exceptions. Her mind played with its own insecurities. God, maybe she should have done those exceptions, not limiting him, giving all of herself to him. When she first found out about Keli, she blamed herself. Images and ideas were coming so fast that her mind spasmed. She couldn’t focus on any one thing, just the images of Bobby, and this woman doing things, naughty, freeing, loving, things. She walked around the house looking for something that put every thing in its place; that made everything all right again.

While he went out to the hardware store, she searched his desk, checked his e-mail on his laptop, and searched his trash file as well as the ‘sent’ folder. His password was the same as their ATM password, which also doubled as their every other thing password. There was nothing in the e-mail folder. It was empty. She went to the trash can in the computer.

There was an e-mail from ‘Keli’, with an ‘I’, apparently from work. It was less than a week old. He never was good at taking out the trash. He must have assumed that she trusted him so much that she would never check his computer, she thought. They were romantic, erotic, daily letters back and forth, some explicit, some mundane. Hanna’s face began to flush. Her hands were cold and wet from sweat. She couldn’t read them but she couldn’t stop reading them.

“Oh, Bobby, you were so...” she read it as if she was addicted. She hated it and couldn’t stop it at the same time. She clicked from one to the next, reading, and scanning each for words of intimacy from the man the two women now apparently shared. There was mail with pictures attached. Hanna took a breath and opened it. Her palms were shaking; her heart was pounding in her throat. She didn’t want to look but she had to. She clicked on the first one. It opened.

Numerous people standing next to what looked like a waterfall, maybe Niagara. She turned it over— “Niagara 2004.” She was right.

There were ten pictures in all and there was one dark haired woman throughout. Crap, she was young, with a nice body and—young. Hanna scrolled through each. They appeared to be travel photographs, pretty harmless. Then she opened the ninth picture and

there they were. Taken from the side, Keli with an “I” appeared to be holding the camera out to the side and Bobby’s head lay on her naked chest. They were in a bed somewhere and both were smiling. She felt faint, angry, nauseated, and unable to focus. She stood up and walked around the room, then reversed direction. She looked down at the screen and their faces, smiling, exhausted. They must have just finished. She stood next to the desk and reached down and closed the screen. It went back to the original letter and she clicked on the tenth one. It took a few seconds and Hanna held her breath. There, in living color, was her husband lying on his back in bed, looking up into the camera lens. From the position of the camera, the photographer must have been straddling him. He was naked from the waist up with the tops of someone’s knees beside him. Her knees, Hanna suspected. His hair was tossed and touching the headboard. Hanna stopped. She pointed to the screen.

“That’s our headboard. They’re having sex in our bed,” she whispered. That was their headboard, bought as a wedding gift to each other. That was her husband in her bed with another woman straddling him, taking his picture. Her husband was having sex in the only bed she and her husband had ever had. That piece of furniture, with their scent on it, was just a few feet away.

The image shoved her as if some unseen force pushed her back. The image sat on the screen of the computer, staring at her. She didn’t know how long she had sat there, three minutes, three hours. But when she pulled herself back to the desk, she loaded the printer with color photo paper and printed the two pictures. After about a dozen of each and having to change the color printer cartridge midway between print eight and nine, she began to tape them up all around the room and throughout the house. She had saved one, the one with him lying on his back looking up. She went to the garage and got a hammer and a huge nail. She took the picture into the bedroom and pushed the nail through it, directly between the eyes. Then, she hammered the nail into the headboard-hard. She missed and swung harder, hitting the nail or missing it. Large hammer marks left holes in the wood. The picture became imbedded as the hammer missed the nail, hit the picture and then forced it into the wood. There must have been forty impact marks by the time she stopped. A light sweat had started on her forehead as she knelt on the bed. Her breathing was labored. Her arms finally folded to her side and she looked at her work. Then, without taking her eyes off the picture, she slid her ring from her left hand and slid it over the nail head.

She pulled the sheets off as she left the room. She went into the closet and pulled out his clothes, emptied his dresser drawer. Anything that reminded her of him went on the sheet. In the end she had filled the two sheets with his crap, including his Ty Cobb, Willie Mays, and Don Drysdale baseball cards that he kept in clear glass containers. He loved those cards. He loved baseball. He loved all sports, including bowling, watching it avidly. She played a tape back in her mind of a time he had actually hushed her when she came in the room. Hushed her! She opened the sheets and searched through the clothes until she found Ty Cobb and took it into the kitchen. She opened the plastic shield and removed the card from the container. Bobby had left the original plastic wrap on it to give it extra protection as well as value if he ever wanted to sell it. She carefully cut the seal and slid the card out and cut Ty Cobb into fifty-seven pieces, taped him back together and placed him back into the plastic wrapping, sliding him carefully back into the clear plastic housing. She then took Ty, Willie, and Don and placed them back on the shelf where the pictures lived. She finished

by dragging the sheets to the edge of the driveway. A flash came into her mind. An image she remembered, when she told Bobby she had miscarried. She remembered his face, the look on it. He was relieved. There was a look of absolute relief. It made sense now. It was then she came back into the house, sat on the couch, and burst into a sob. She thought she was done with the hard crying until she found herself in the corner of her room, curled up, hugging her pillow, and audibly sobbing.

After the divorce was final, she lived for a while in the town home the two of them had bought. She first made sure most of the items of furniture that played a role in the vision she had between her husband and that woman were removed from the house. Her salary as a teacher at Estrella Elementary wasn't a lot but it was enough. She sat on the patio listening to the wind chimes. The ones he said he bought her at a convention in San Francisco. She wondered if that woman helped him pick them out. She pulled them down and threw them in the trash.

The days following her discovery were filled with changes between anger, hate, fear, relief, and even envy. She envied the romance she knew he felt with the new woman. It was new. After nine years, the newness of their life had worn off and they were just "doing life." The things she found so cute when they were dating now caused her to roll her eyes at him and question his reasoning. She knew he saw it. But she was sure it was the same for him. If he stayed with this woman, she knew it would happen to him again. It tired her to think of it. With all the fear of the unknown; the finances; the responsibility for the house; the car payment, and who was going to get it; along with their collection of Fiesta ware—with all those things, she thought that there was a chunk of her that was relieved that it was over. She had sensed something since even before they were married. She stuffed it and told herself it was the wind or something like the wind. But she knew it was something. Now she was certain.

There were other dreams she had. Dreams that, with the passage of time, became less frequent, but dreams that still could wake her at night or stay with her for the rest of the day; dreams that were more of a movie of past events.

She still replayed the last time she and her husband were intimate with each other in her mind. "Why? Why do I do this," she said to herself. They had gone to a beautiful dinner at an upscale restaurant in Scottsdale for their anniversary. One of those places with candles on the table, linen tablecloths and napkins. Few places in Phoenix had a dress code let alone one that required a sports coat or jacket. He had planned it. She looked beautiful in her dress and he wore one of two suits he owned. They held hands across the table, drank too much wine, and danced slowly on the open dance floor. They went home and spent the night in each other's arms, laughing and holding each other as young lovers would, not a married couple after so many years. She remembered it well. The next day, when she woke, his side of the bed was empty. He left a note saying he had to go to a meeting a meeting at United Health Care—on a Saturday morning.

The dream had faded with time. She could relive it with her morning coffee or ice cream after dinner. It was right there. Still, after months had passed and other events had entered her life to distract her, with her mother and the job change, she could still twist her stomach in knots thinking about her husband being with another woman. It was not her face he saw, but the other woman, the younger, prettier woman. She heard her say to

herself. "Never again. I will never feel pain like that again."

They never talked about why things moved in the direction they did. She never found out the answers to all the questions, the why, how, when. She wanted to hate him, but couldn't. Her stomach knotted just thinking about it. "Never again."

Looking back, she did love times at the town house before the discovery and collapse of her marriage. It was only a two-bedroom but it was a large, two bedroom with a fireplace and a two-car garage. The best part was the back patio. It was completely shaded from noon on by a large set of trees in the common area just outside their back gate. They had set up a small fountain and she would go back there on the weekends and set up her easel and paint with water colors or just read. She could hear the water hitting the small pool in the fountain in the complex's common area and the wind would move the limbs of the fifty-foot ash gently over her head, as if the old girl were trying to fan a breeze down on her. At night, when Bobby was away at a conference or working late, she would play some Jim Brickman and open the windows and let the music come out to her on the patio where she sat, curled up in an old padded wicker chair that she found at a yard sale two houses over, sipping on a glass of Stelzner Merlot and reading a trashy novel in the light from the kitchen. It was a quiet, comforting place to her. Now it was gone.

A little over a year later, she sold her place and moved in with her mother. She had always been close to her Gwen, but time with Bobby had tested their relationship. Gwen had seen the things that Hanna didn't discover until it was too late.

"Hanna, there's something about him I just don't—," Gwen would always catch herself. They would have discussions and Gwen inevitably would bring up her concerns. Hanna waved off her mother at first, but as the years passed she would get angry and accuse her mother of trying to control her relationship with her husband. Bobby would sense Gwen's wariness and fan the flame of discontent with Hanna. It stained their relationship. Instead of talking to her mother every day, she would skip days to try to punish her. It was Bobby's idea and one that Hanna followed because she knew that her mother could not be right about the man that she thought she knew so well. But when the marriage imploded, it was Gwen who was the first one Hanna called. Since the divorce, Gwen had never told her daughter she'd seen it coming. In the time since the divorce, they had re-galvanized their friendship and care for each other. There was a day, an early morning, Hanna woke up to no pain. She didn't have anger either. She was healing. The scars were crusting over and life was life again instead of feeling like she had a dark suffocating blanket pulled over her head. She was breathing again. This began to work the relationship not only into a bond of a mother and daughter loving each other, but it also was preparing them for times to come. Gwen was getting old. She was extremely ill. Everyone knew the cards on the table.

Hanna moved home after her mother called and said the doctors had found a lump in her breast and it wasn't benign. The surgery and reconstruction changed Gwen. First--"fear. It caused fear to melt into resolution and resolution into hope. It worked on both the women. Gwen had moments of severe depression but also tremendous hope and an almost "squirrelish" happiness Hanna called it when her mother was on a high moment.

"You're a squirrel mother. One moment, you're on the ground and the next minute you're somewhere in the tree tops."

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"It could be worse dear," her mother said. "I could be doing a swan dive off of a high bridge."

"This is Arizona, mother. We don't have any high bridges here, just bridges that are high enough to permanently put you in a wheel chair and eating out of a tube."

"Maybe that would help me lose a few pounds."

"Yeah, Mom, that's not an over-reaction. It wouldn't do anything for your weight but it would definitely affect your height." That, brought a smile to Gwen's face.

Hanna, in the beginning, saw this as another ton of bricks falling on her since her divorce. She didn't hold it against her mother; at least she didn't think so. She did, however, get depressed herself. She wallowed at home, sometimes walking from room to room in the empty townhouse before it was sold. She found temporary solace in staying up late and eating Ben and Jerry's Karmel Sutra, which she always thought was an oxymoron for her life at that time. Even though her mother allowed herself to show her emotional state to her daughter, Hanna didn't feel the same freedom. She needed to be strong for her.

In the early rounds, Hanna took her mother to chemotherapy once a week. Gwen walked into the clinic with smiles for everyone. She moved a little slowly and all her hair fell out. Still, she had enough strength and good nature to wish people well. Hanna, on the other hand, didn't. Her face was flat and her shoulders slumped. After they went into the treatment room and Gwen got settled into the chair she looked at her daughter. The dress was long with an olive green background and some kind of fruit on it. She wore a darker green sweater. Gwen thought it resembled one her mother had worn. When the nurse left she turned to her daughter, "What's going on with you?"

"What do you mean?" Hanna said with a sigh.

"I mean look at yourself. You look like crap."

"Why thank you mother, thank you very much." Hanna raised her head off the high-backed chair to look at her mother. "I've had a few things on my mind."

"Yep, you have, but the way you look isn't one of them," Gwen said as she put her head back to rest it. She closed her eyes and continued. "Look, I know you've had it tough recently. I won't take that away from you. But you've got to get up. You've got to get back into the life around you or you will miss the whole show."

"Mother, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Look at the way you dress."

"What's wrong with the way I dress?"

Now both women had their heads resting on the backs of their perspective chairs.

"You don't care about life. The fire in the furnace is gone."

"Hanna, you look like a dork," Gwen said raising her head off the chair and looking at her daughter.

"A dork?"

"A large whale dork, yes." Gwen was resting her head on the chair but was still exchanging looks with her daughter. "Look, it's not just your looks. You have lost that fire that used to fill you. You look sick. I can't remember ever seeing your hair like that. When was the last time you washed it? Honey, this isn't you. It's not just the clothes."

"It sure does sound like it."

"No, they're just the symptom. You've seemed to have given up on who you are."

Mark Williams

Don't give Bobby that power. He was a piece of something you want to scrape off the bottom of your shoe, baby. I'm looking at a daughter who won awards for her teaching."

"Mother, that was a long time ago."

"Not that long ago." Gwen paused for a moment. "Four years. The point is, you have value; you have worth. Your identity isn't wrapped in him but in your own mind."

Hanna rolled her head to face her mother. "That's part of the problem; I'm having trouble knowing who I am. You're married, welded to someone for years and you can't help but become a part of them and they a part of you. I hate him for what he did and I have to tell you—."

"You still love him, too," her mother interrupted.

Hanna smiled at her mother and nodded her head. "Yeah, the bastard. There's still a part of me that does."

The nurse came in and checked the I.V. then left before Gwen spoke again. "You've got to learn to love yourself again. I believe that in the destruction of every relationship there is blame to be had on both sides, whatever it is, gambling, adultery, alcoholism, there is some that both sides have to own. Now, don't get me wrong, one side usually wins the prize for being the biggest dork," Gwen said with a smile. "I like that word. Maybe that will be the word for the week with my kids—"

"You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Mother, it means a whale's penis."

"I know."

"You can't give that word to a classroom of fourth graders."

"It's scientific—part of biology—I can't understand,"

"Mother, focus."

"Right, the point is we can beat ourselves up about anything. I'm sure there was something I did to contribute to this cancer. I didn't eat something that I should have or I ate something that I shouldn't have, I don't know. Maybe I could have checked myself more often. But I do know that I have to move on and forgive myself. You have got to move on or you will grow into a bitter, miserable woman." She put her head back and closed her eyes. "You'll love again. You'll stick your neck out again. You can't crawl in your shell and stay there for the rest of your life. It's too pretty of a day."

Hanna paused. "You really think this dress makes me look like a dork?"

"A Blue whale, grandmother dork, yes," Gwen said with a smile. "Other whales would point their fins at you and ask the name of the thrift store where you purchased that dress."

"I never told you I got this at a thrift store. How did you know I—"

"Dork."

Hanna laughed. Gwen laughed. The nurse came in and asked what the two were laughing at. "She looks like a whale's dork," Gwen laughed and pointed with her thumb at Hanna, who was laughing.

It took time. There were good days and bad for both women. Hanna had to work at opening her eyes to life again. She just had to look a little harder at the world around her to see it. Simple things caused her to laugh out loud and sometimes cry. The girls in the

franchised lemonade and corndog shop at the mall's food court always made her smile. She never could remember the name of the place but they always had to wear a yellow, blue, and red outfit with a matching pope hat, right out of the sixties. She thought how bad it would have to get for her to work at a store where you had to wear a pope hat like that. The National Anthem still made her cry. The poor on the street, especially the occasional mother with a child, made her sad. She missed dancing. She missed singing and watched *American Idol* while she slopped the occasional nail polish on her toes. Her emotions, although deeply buried and protected with emotional sandbags, were coming alive again. She went for walks and then jogging, and then back to walking; she bought some new clothes not on sale. She washed her hair. She seemed better every day. Fear, however, was still very real.

Hanna attended to her mother's needs during and after the surgery. The treatment was almost as bad as they'd heard about. Hanna continued to go with her mother as often as she could to the treatments and check-ups. The driving distance was tiresome. Eventually, the peace of the townhouse was replaced with the convenience of being closer to Gwen.

She was also lonely. Even though Bobby was gone and Hanna truly was content now with that outcome, she missed the company. Fortunately, the back yard of the family home had its own habitat that Hanna found to be as peaceful as that of the townhouse.

As she scuffed down the hall trying to wake up to the day, she could hear Gwen now in the shower in the master. Hanna had the run of the hall bathroom. That's the one she always used, even as a child, except when she would come in and watch her father shave in the morning. The fear of getting hurt, after a while, was not a controlling factor on a daily basis. It was hidden behind high walls—"Never again." But living back at home did have its own comfort. She found herself calmer. Every room had memories of happy times.

She stood in the hall for a moment and placed her hand on the bathroom door. Her mind was filled with an image. She would climb up on the clothes hamper and sit with her knees pulled up to her chin and her arms tucked around them to help keep her warm in the chill of the winter mornings. She'd watch as her father would repeat the same steps every day; lather up the warmed wash cloth, scrub his face to all four corners including inside the ears, rinse the wash cloth, squeeze it out, and hang it on the towel rack to dry. He'd then get out his Gillette safety razor. If it was Monday, it would get a new blade, set it on the sink while he, with three fingers only, put on the Gillette Foamy. Starting with the side burns, just in front of the left ear—no—it was the right ear, she sat on his left, and he would take the first stroke with the blade, rinse, and repeat.

She remembered it as if it were yesterday. She would hear her mother in the kitchen scrambling some eggs and when she had seen enough of the Dad Show, she would wander into the kitchen, hop up onto the counter by pulling out the bread drawer, second from the bottom, and use it as a step ladder to get her onto the counter. Gwen still kept the family bread in the same drawer.

Hanna walked into the kitchen. Her mother had made a pot of coffee, as she did every morning, even when she was living alone. Hanna was happy to see her mother finally get rid of the old percolator. If the thing hadn't finally worn out it would still be on the counter making its millionth pot of dark Folgers. Her mother left the coffee pot plugged in, waiting for her to get up and have a cup.

Mark Williams

The coffee maker wasn't replaced with any fancy thing. It was a standard drip coffee maker with no timer, no chrome, and basic white. When Hanna asked her why not get something fancier, Gwen smiled and looked at her and said "Your father would like this one." She sighed and poured herself a cup after putting in the 2% milk and the non-sugar sweetener. Wandering back to her room, she heard her mother humming.

It must be leg shaving day, Hanna thought as she sipped. She remembered her mother showering and putting her leg up on the edge of the bathtub to shave. It was one of the only times she ever heard her mother hum. Humming was saved for gardening and leg shaving. She remembered when she was doing chemo, her mother didn't hum. She didn't have any hair. She'll go through that again with this next predicted round of drugs.

The house was nice but the water pressure was for the late forties and if one person showered no one else could, or even flush the toilet for that matter. And if someone flushed the toilet while one was showering, look out. Someone was going to get scalded and the other was going to get yelled at. Hanna knocked on the door to the bedroom. "Hey Mom, hurry up, I still need to shower."

"Okay, I'm almost done. How are you feeling today?"

"Fine," Hanna called back to her. "Hurry." Hanna walked back to her room holding her cup with two hands. She glanced at the doorjamb and saw, written in pencil, small hash marks with dates written next to them. They were hers. Over the early years her father would place her back to the doorframe and mark off her growth. After about age four there was a space of time and then about halfway up the doorframe the hash marks started again but this time it was in a different handwriting.

By the time Hanna got out of the shower and dried off, her mother had already left. All her life she remembers her mother leaving early, sometimes even before the sun broke the horizon, and in the winter time it was still dark when Gwen went to work at the school. It wasn't the travel. The house was half a block from the school. Down a quiet street of homes that at one time were mirror images of each other to keep the cost down for World War II veterans. But now they had grown into homes that at first glance, appeared unique, almost custom.

Hanna finished dressing after pouring herself a second cup. She returned to the kitchen, popped an English muffin in the toaster, and glanced at the newspaper her mother left on the table. Gwen didn't read the paper much. She said it was too full of sadness and "gluttony," one of her mother's favorite words for the kids to learn every year.

Gwen had lists of favorite words. She would take them to school and make her sixth graders use them in sentences and study them for tests. Words like "trepidation" and "asphyxiate," were a couple of her favorites. Since Hanna had requested transferring over to Borman Elementary, she had seen her share of Gwen's students take their new found power in the words that were shared with them and heard used around school. None of the teachers on campus ever asked the children where they learned to use a word with four syllables. They all knew.

She sighed at the headlines, something about Washington being in the red, and another headline talking about a group of illegal's found in the desert, barely alive. She went deeper in the paper to the sports page, 'Diamondbacks lose the third of three with San Francisco,' "God, Mom was right. It's all bad," she said stuffing the last of the muffin in her

mouth and turning to rinse out the coffee cup before putting it in the dishwasher.

She grabbed her backpack and carried it in her hand to the front porch. After locking the door behind her, she turned towards the walkway before she slung the bag over her right shoulder as she stepped off the porch. She took in a deep breath as she stepped out and down the path.

Some days, her past and future looked blurred to her; as if all the weight of all the things in the past had blended with all the things in the future. None of it, not a drop of it, looked promising or even hopeful. Since the divorce, she appeared to have recovered. "I'm all better," she would say to people at school, sometimes even her mother. "I'm in a really good spot now. I wasn't before but he's got his issues and they have nothing to do with me. He'll do it again to someone else. I'm just glad I got out when I did. No, really, I don't think I've felt this good in years," she heard herself say in a tape recording that played almost automatically in her brain. She remembered when she first said it. She thought it was a good way to end the inquisition. Now, as the days and months slid by, the lie she told was now the lie she convinced herself to believe.

All of her problems and fears and dreams and nightmares; all of them, were stuffed into a bag and hung on her shoulder and for the rest of her life she would walk these same steps she had walked so many times before. She had thought those steps were a thing of an overall pleasant past but now they rose up to haunt her. Now, on some days, they pounded their way into her; reminding her of the failure that she was. They gnawed at her and drew her complete focus. She could not see left into Mrs. Hammon's front yard and the last blooms of the beautiful Palo Verde tree or right into Vi Nygen's yard who lived two doors down and the new fat stone Buddha statue that reminded him of the one in his village when he lived in South Vietnam.

She could only see the sidewalk, which would always lead to the life she felt destined to live because of her life's failures. She could not see, nor could she fathom, the change in her life that was about to roll over her like a huge breaker that wallops you off your feet from behind while you are turned staring at something on the shore. She had no dream left that was able to lighten the bag that now cut into her shoulder with the weight of its contents. She couldn't see it. But it was coming. If she could only look up for a moment, she could see the rains on the horizon, the cleansing, fresh, dampening rain. It would make her smile. It would make her cry tears of joy; if she could only look up.