

LOVE, UNMISTAKABLY

Nathan Gower

They were a young couple, too young to be moving into a 2,500 square-foot house like Henry's. He saw their youth in their smooth elastic cheeks, in the way they clung to each other as they toured the house, in their mindless chatter and bouncy strides. It had taken Henry and his wife Karen ten years of scrimping to buy the house in 1984, and they had been grateful, awed even by their own hard-work and good fortune. This young couple seemed to skip blithely through life, gazing at each other, everything coming easy. But when all was said and done, when the papers were signed, Henry was happy to turn the keys over to them. He and Karen would move. He was resolute through the process, even when he watched as a box-truck pulled into his driveway, up to his two-car garage, even as he saw the young couple unloading a steady stream of overpriced décor, sleek, metal bed-frames, assorted TVs—one for nearly every room in the house.

He was only moving three houses down on the opposite side of the street. Their only child, Aimee, had just moved 200 miles away to attend Murray State, and they, being artists who taught seasonally, needed something to occupy the vast, intimidating amount of time between waking and sleeping. When Karen suggested the move, Henry had initially agreed that it would be good for them, nice to shake things up a bit. Their original plan was to find something a little smaller, an attempt at making the empty nest feel a little less empty. They did *look* at smaller houses, most of which made Henry feel confined. He'd gotten used to the breathing room in his house, and anything less, any sort of downgrade, would make him feel like he was losing a piece of his freedom. So their new house was 300 square feet larger than the old house, mostly due to the big bonus room over the garage. This room was most appealing to Henry, particularly because it had a large window on the east side of the house which made for easy viewing of his old house down the road. He could at least keep an eye on the young couple; make sure they didn't do anything stupid like paint the shutters. The shutters were a rich, dark green, a color that blended perfectly with the earthy hue of the brick. He and Karen had picked out that green, together, twenty years ago. She had stood at the base of the ladder, gripping the wood tightly with each inevitable tremble as he clambered onto the roof. He could still feel the weight of the paint can in his hand.

He almost wanted to see this young guy paint the shutters so he could pronounce him an idiot once and for all. Some kid who didn't know the value of anything. Just some kid.

Not that he and Karen were an old couple. Far from it. At fifty-three and fifty-one respectively, they considered themselves at their peak. Vigorous, healthy, strong. They had a good marriage. They loved each other, had regular sex, and didn't fight much at all. Henry knew that they had grown apart, as the saying goes, but they were both comfortable with that fact. It was a natural progression, an inevitability. Even if they could change it, what would be the point? Before they married, they had been content in their individuality. He was a musician, a bassoonist, who always knew he would conduct one day. She was an artist, a painter, who always knew she would never be rich, famous, or even appreciated. That's who they were. They were both right.

Karen sat in the middle of the living room staring at boxes. Boxes on top of boxes on top of boxes. Most of the boxes were stuffed to the point of eruption, the sides protruding like tumors, packaging tape clinging desperately to the bursting cardboard. She had insisted that they pack everything in boxes, tight and secure, even if they were moving, as Henry

had said more than once, *only three damn houses down the street*. It fell to her, then, to unpack those boxes.

They contained twenty years' worth of mismatched silverware, blankets, paint brushes. Aimee's first kindergarten work—illegible scrawl on a backdrop of splattered paint. The Never-Dull knife set, now dull, they had received as a wedding gift. Henry's collection of John Wayne movies from his brief but intense cowboy phase. Aimee's old Mickey Mouse sleeping bag that they used to unzip and use as a throw when watching TV. The egg dish they used for everything but eggs. Office supplies, pictures, and old memories. CDs and tapes. Baby toys, and Aimee's fourteen-year-old piano recital recording. Board-games, cans of tuna and chickpeas. Make-up, Henry's University of Louisville diploma. Their marriage certificate. Trinkets and gadgets, everyday shoes, dress shoes, worn-out shoes. Clothes that didn't fit, clothes that did fit, combs and brushes, toothbrushes, books. Karen's wedding dress, birthday cards. Things she'd forgotten they had, and things she wished she was able to forget.

The more she unpacked, the more she realized she needed to formulate some sort of organizational system. After all, this was her one chance to really see what she and Henry had accumulated over the years. Soon, when they were settled into the house, everything would be tucked quietly away into drawers and closets, perhaps never to be seen again.

She would make three piles:

1. A pile of things they would definitely keep
2. A pile of things they would trash or donate
3. A pile of Henry's things that he could go through later

Henry's pile was the easiest to accumulate because she didn't have to make any real decisions. Everything went in the pile: his clothes, his sheet music, his tools, his books, his movies—anything she didn't claim as her own.

"You won't believe what that jackass did," said Henry, walking in from the garage. She knew what he'd been doing. He told her he was organizing the bonus room, but there was nothing to organize. The only thing up there was an old, beat-up, mahogany desk and a CD changer stereo. He'd been watching the young couple. Something bothered her about this, but she couldn't figure out exactly what. It was innocent enough, she thought, but there was still something unsettling about knowing he was up there, *watching*. Since they moved in two days ago, Henry had done nothing but sit in the bonus room and watch from the window.

"I'm making a pile of your stuff," she said, motioning to the mound in the center of the room. "Will you have a chance to go through it tonight?"

"He tore down Aimee's tree house," he said, exasperated. She could tell he was going for shock value. He wanted her eyes to widen, her jaw to drop. He wanted her to curse and call the Pearsons up and tell them how stupid

they were. She could tell by the way he stood there, eyebrows raised, that he wanted some sort of response to validate his anger.

“Well, it’s their house now,” she said, tossing a button-up shirt into Henry’s pile. “They can tear down anything they want.”

From his new vantage point, Henry could see things about the old house he never could before. The backyard looked smaller now, almost like a patio blanketed with grass. It didn’t help matters that the young couple put up a chain-link fence. He always hated fences, the restriction of them. There was something liberating about looking into a fence-free backyard, the ground of his property rolling smoothly into that of his neighbors. He often imagined that he owned all the land he could see from his back door, and sometimes he would imagine he owned all the houses, too. Now, from up above his new garage, he could see even more land, and even more houses. He was living in this particular house, he told himself, by choice, but if he wanted to claim any of the other properties he could do so at any time. Karen didn’t know he fantasized about such things, and he was proud of that fact. His thoughts were the one place where no one else was allowed, a safe-haven from any and all intrusions.

He could see the majority of the old house, the brick sidewalk leading up to the front porch, the bay window on the west wall. Every once in a while

the young couple appeared in front of the bay window as they crossed from the formal living room into the kitchen. They ate dinner, he imagined, on their young-couple dining room table, a light wood, maybe maple, not like his own rich, deep oak table. Then they sat and watched TV in the living room, a documentary perhaps, before making love the way young couples do, shedding their clothing in a seething fury, gripping each other with animalistic vigor, thrusting each other from the living room into the hallway, his hands pressing firmly against the small of her back, lifting her into his arms, carrying her up the steps before sinking her deep into the mattress. The thought of the young couple making love in his house was both exhilarating and maddening. He knew, of course, their lovemaking habits were none of his concern. But still, he felt some justification in wanting to know what they did and how they did it. After all, he had built that house over twenty years ago, and to his knowledge, he and Karen were the only ones to have sex in it. Until now.

As much as he enjoyed watching the young couple and his old house from his window, the reality was that there was very little to be watched. To pass the time, he put on the overture of Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, listening closely to the subtlety of the bassoon. He was drawn to the bassoon at an early age because of its unique shape—tall, slender, sexy. But as he grew older, he fell in love with the way the sound hovered in the

background of the orchestra, hardly audible at times, a soft hum lingering just long enough to make its point. He loved the confidence of the bassoon, knowing that only a trained ear could distinguish its voice behind the boastful horns and strings. The bassoon is a purr among roars. When he played, he felt the texture of the sound dancing in waves through the air, softly, softly, until it died out gracefully in a quiet corner of his mind.

With the music echoing softly through his brain, he fell into a hard sleep, his head resting against the unyielding wood of the mahogany desk. Later, when he woke up in a panic, arms flailing towards the ceiling, he only vaguely remembered his dream of destroying the old house, setting fire to the roof, watching it collapse on itself with the young couple still inside.

In a way, it was almost beautiful, the pile of things collected by the same owner, otherwise unrelated. To anybody else it might look like a neglected mess, but to an artist it was a story of a life. Karen was surprised at how big the pile had actually gotten. As it grew, it began to take on a form of its own, almost like a misshapen pyramid, the foundation being Henry's heavier things, toolboxes, an old TV, worn-out instrument cases. In the middle was the soft inner-belly: old jackets and shirts and a few pairs of jeans. It was becoming more of an art project than a practical way to organize. She decided that whenever she added to the pile, she would toss the new object

mindlessly, letting it fall where it may, releasing the pile's artistic beauty. The Henry Pile, as she named it, grew as it saw fit. There were no boundaries, no rules.

Since they had yet to set up any clocks in the new house, time had become subjective. A few hours ago, she knew it was evening and she felt hungry, so it must have been around 6:00 pm. She looked through the sliding-glass door that led to the back porch and saw the top of the sun trying to disappear under the horizon. She hadn't seen Henry in hours. He'd probably fallen asleep in the bonus room again, slouched painfully over the desk, his arms hanging at his sides like dead weight.

If they were younger, she thought, Henry would come downstairs and sneak up behind her as she opened a box, wrapping his arms around her stomach, swiftly but carefully, his right hand resting across the tender spots of her breasts. He would rescue her from the pile, from the boxes, talk to her the way a man talks to the woman he loves, uncontrolled, hurried. They might make love, or they might just sit right where they were, holding each other close, talking with passion about all the things they would do in their new home.

She didn't blame Henry. She knew someone, something was to blame, but finding out who or what wouldn't change the problem. And was it really a *problem* anyway? It seemed to her more like the evolution of a normal

marriage: that every couple must someday face the fact that love only lasts so long. There seemed to be a finite amount of passion, an exhaustible supply rationed to you at the altar. The real choice was how you decided to spend your supply. She had loved Henry fiercely. In the early days of their marriage, before Aimee, she needed him, craved him, thirsted for him. She would never know for certain, but it always seemed to her that she loved more greedily than Henry. She remembered the trip Henry took just after their honeymoon, a brief tour with the Louisville Philharmonic. He had phoned every night, as promised.

“Do you miss me?” she asked, waiting earnestly, as if she really had doubts.

“Of course,” he said. She could hear the annoyance in his voice. But she knew he meant it anyway.

“Promise?” she asked. She couldn’t help herself.

“Baby, of course I miss you. Something wrong?”

“I just miss you, that’s all.”

“I know. I know. I miss you, too,” he said. “But can’t you miss me and still be happy at the same time?”

The thought had never occurred to her before. No, of course she couldn’t. Longing and happiness were incompatible. But she knew he wanted her to say yes, because he didn’t want the guilt of a lonely wife to

ruin his trip with the orchestra. She tried to make herself say it, yes, and at first, she thought she had.

“Can you?” she asked. She hoped, secretly, that he couldn’t either.

“I’m trying,” he said. He always knew the right thing to say.

It occurred to Henry, as they sat down to a leftover meal of baked chicken and green beans, he’d forgotten what day it was.

“We really need to get the clocks going,” he said. “What time is it?”

“I’m not really sure,” said Karen. “Dinner time, I know that.”

“It’s Wednesday, right?” Of course it was Wednesday, Henry thought. He couldn’t have lost track all together, could he?

“As far as I know, it is,” said Karen. “We moved in on Saturday, right?”

“Yeah. So it’s been four days?”

“Seems longer. Maybe five.”

“We really need to get some clocks going,” he said again.

Karen unwrapped layer upon layer of newspaper that enshrouded the painting she had made in a fever during the first weeks of her courtship with Henry—a woman twisting out of her skin, her soul flying blue across an orange-red sky. Henry had made her feel that way. When they moved into the old house twenty years ago, he had insisted on hanging the painting

above the bed. Whenever they had guests, he stood them in front of the painting and said, always with wonder, “Karen did that.” He hadn’t talked that way about her work in years.

She hung the painting above the bed now and knew immediately that it didn’t look quite right in the new house. But she left it there and went back to the pile. She could do no more without Henry’s help. Practically, she could reorganize the Henry Pile, make it a little easier for him to go through, but the reality was that a little work on his part could save her hours. Besides, she liked the pile, liked the way she felt when she looked at it, at least at first. When she looked at it for too long she felt depressed, even a little angry, and she wanted to call Aimee—her habit when she felt like she had nobody to talk to.

There were no overhead lights in the bonus room, and since Henry had yet to bring up a lamp, he sat in darkness, looking out the window, Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 4* playing softly on the stereo. He could see very little of the old house now. The back porch light was turned on, giving just enough light to show an empty backyard. The curtains were closed to the master bedroom, but he knew that’s where they were. They weren’t sleeping yet, of course. When you’re young, Henry knew, you don’t go to sleep right away like you do when you’re old. No, you sit up and talk and

listen. You might kiss, not because you're supposed to, but because it still feels right. You might make love, or you might not, but either way there's no guilt. And then, when it's way past the hour you should've already been asleep, you finally drift away, facing each other, never knowing that one day you would wish you had a larger bed so you could have more room of your own.

"Henry?" Karen called up the stairs. Her voice sounded more brittle than usual. "Henry, Aimee's on the phone. Want to talk to her?"

He walked down the stairs and into the kitchen, hobbling a little on his left foot which had been asleep, and took the phone from Karen.

"Well now, how did the big-time college girl make the time in her busy schedule to call up her lowly father?" He always teased her. It was their way.

"Well, I figure I have to keep in touch once in a while, or I won't be able to get money out of you anymore. And we can't have that," she said.

He could see her on the other end of the line, smiling, happy. She talked about her classes, how she loved Intro to Literature and was thinking seriously about majoring in English. Henry knew that there was no practical use for an English major, but he also knew that practicality was of little importance in considering a college degree. Besides, he and Karen had always been firm believers that "practical" was a relative term. If Aimee's ultimate goal was to be a thoughtful, well-rounded person with deep

insights and shallow pockets, then an English major was as practical as they come. The beauty of being young was that everything seemed completely reversible. He had learned, of course, that this was merely an illusion of youth, but explaining it to Aimee would be as pointless as telling a six-year-old boy that less than .001 percent of the population will ever *actually* become an astronaut. Aimee would learn the way everyone else learns: through her own failures.

“Oh, yeah,” Aimee said, “I want you to meet somebody.” She said it casually, the way she might say that her textbooks were getting really expensive.

“No problem,” Henry said. “I meet people every day. I’ve got you covered.”

“A guy I’ve met. Jackson. I know you’ll like him. And he’s in Murray’s orchestra.”

“Jackson, huh? Is his father named Jack?” It was all he could think to say.

“I’m bringing him home this weekend. Is that okay?”

Of course it wasn’t okay.

“You hear that, Karen?” said Henry, looking into the living room where Karen sat staring at an enormous pile of old crap. “Jack’s son is coming this weekend.” He stared at the pile, wondering what the hell she’d been doing these past few days.

“Who’s Jack?” Karen asked.

“Love you, Aimee,” Henry said. “Here, talk to your mother.” He handed Karen the phone as he slid past her, making his way to the staircase.

“So, who’s this Jackson?” Karen said.

Karen had mixed feelings about Aimee dating, serious or otherwise. The strange part wasn’t that she had met a boy, but that she had met so few of them along the way. Aimee was pretty enough, her father’s big, gray eyes, her grandmother’s thick lips. God only knows where she got her curls. Still, Karen worried about her when she was in high school, never really interested in guys. She’d played with the idea that maybe Aimee was a lesbian, and watched to see how intimate she was with her girlfriends. She couldn’t ever fully explain why, but part of her always wanted it to be true, wanted Aimee to fall in love with a woman. Not that love or life would be any easier. But if she were a lesbian, then at least the pressure to marry would be gone. Karen had always assumed it would be empowering to blame your inability to marry on the government. Then you wouldn’t have to answer for your desire to simply be your own person.

“It’s kind of serious, Mom,” said Aimee. Karen knew eighteen was too young for anything to be serious. But when Aimee would finally realize that fact, probably when she reached her mid-twenties, she wouldn’t be able to

see that twenty-something is still too young for seriousness. At 51, Karen was only beginning to realize herself that seriousness might be something to be avoided all together.

As she listened to Aimee talk—about school, about Jackson—Karen couldn't help but notice that the Henry Pile had taken on a kind of grotesque beauty that, in all probability, could never be duplicated. It cried out to be immortalized, to be kept exactly where it was, never to be disturbed by the dull activities of everyday life. Maybe the Henry pile would become the centerpiece of the house, the one characteristic that distinguishes this house from the rest. Perhaps she would order some sort of glass casing to be put around the pile, a protective barrier to keep the ordinary from the extraordinary. This art, this pile, she thought, must live on. Its beauty was a complex phenomenon, not at all aesthetically pleasing, but *real, raw* life. And wasn't that the essence of art?

What intrigued her most about the pile was that she could never be sure who the artist was. Maybe it was her, who sculpted everything together, who began the pile as a practical way to organize. Maybe it was Henry, the collector, the owner of the life that made the pile possible. Or was the artist bigger than a single life? Was it gravity, perhaps? Or was it the universe itself, churning, pushing, pulling, throwing all things apart before slamming them back together again, she and Henry being part of those things, held together

by forces unknown? She pictured herself and Henry sitting on opposite sides of the pile, the room spinning, faster and faster, both of them hopelessly gripping an object in the pile, holding on, crying, begging each other not to let go, their bodies flying outwards, their hands holding steady until, without warning, the gravity of the pile deepens, sucks them inward, holding them captive, her face contorted against Henry's chest, the room closing in on them, tighter, tighter, until the only thing she can do is cry silently, hoping that the gravity changes again before their bones crush each other.

"He's all I've ever wanted, Mom," said Aimee, her voice steady, resolute. "I don't know. I just feel happy when I'm with him. Complete. You know?"

At some point, long ago, she probably did know.

"Can't wait to meet him, honey," Karen lied.

Henry watched Aimee walk through the front door like she was used to it, like it was the same house she'd grown up in, dropping her bag at the door, kicking her shoes off in the general direction of the coat closet.

"We're home," she called out. Inside, Henry cringed.

"Thought you weren't coming until this weekend," Henry said, picking up his little girl. He felt her breasts, large, mature, press against his chest, and a jolt of embarrassment shot through his body.

“Uh, hello,” she said. “It’s Saturday.” Henry looked at Karen, as if to confirm the fact. She shrugged.

“Mom, Daddy, this is Jackson.” Henry had expected to see a boy—fragile, nervous, awkward. But what stood in front of him, at his daughter’s side, was a man. He was at least 6’4”, a full head above Henry, and his face was covered in a thick, well-groomed beard, the kind that Henry associated with college professors.

Jackson stuck a sure hand in Henry’s, a firm grasp, confident, a take-control handshake. In all his years of fatherhood, Henry had never expected to be intimidated by anyone Aimee brought home.

“I hear you’re a bassoonist,” said Jackson, an honest smile across his face. “I’m a violinist.”

Henry smiled, not because they were both musicians, but because he couldn’t help but picture this young man, tall frame, hands enormous, gripping the fragile violin, maintaining poise. It was a hilarious image, one he would come back to time and time again.

Over dinner, pot roast, Aimee talked. Henry learned Jackson was a senior at Murray State, looking forward to graduating in the spring before starting his master’s in music education the following fall. He wanted to teach, college mostly, but would settle for a private high school. “If it feels right,” Jackson added. His last name was Ray, which sounded to Henry like a

first name. He pictured Jackson's name on an official form, a medical document or something: Ray, Jackson. Much more natural in that order.

"You guys haven't gotten anything unpacked," said Aimee, looking around the kitchen, walls bare, a few half-full boxes open on the counter. "What have you two been doing around here?"

Henry looked at his wife, thinking about the pile of stuff in the living room. What *had* they been doing?

"Oh, Honey," said Karen, "you'd be surprised how long it takes to get settled in."

"I don't know," said Aimee, blowing her bangs out of her face like a little girl. "You just have to go through your stuff and put it away. Sounds simple enough to me."

"Well," Karen said, placing a careful hand on Henry's shoulder, "we have a lot of stuff to go through."

While she had put Henry and Jackson to work moving some extra furniture up to the bonus room, Karen was relieved to get a chance to talk to her daughter alone; the two of them curled up on the sofa to eat chocolate ice cream with chocolate syrup. She sat in silence for a while, listening to Aimee talk about how different it was to be away from home, out on her own, an official adult. She watched the child in Aimee surface, chattering

with wild abandonment as she scooped in the ice cream, bite after enormous bite. Karen knew, of course, that Aimee really was an adult, grown up in her own way. She was at the stage where adulthood held irresistible mysteries, freedoms beyond anything she had ever experienced. She lived in that momentary world where nothing was planned out, where possibilities were endless, where risk and adventure were always nearby. Karen tried to think back to the last time she had experienced anything that could really be called *new*. Or the last time she was able to stay awake for an entire night, romanticizing about a kiss, or a held hand.

“So, what do you think about him?” asked Aimee, softly. “About Jackson. Honestly.” But *honestly* was such a relative term. The fact was, Karen hadn’t really thought a lot about Jackson, hadn’t really formed an opinion. But to tell Aimee this, *honestly*, would make her daughter feel as if she didn’t care, as if she wasn’t interested in her life. So Karen had to project, to think about how she would probably feel about Jackson if she were actually ready to give him the time it took to form an opinion. It would be an honest thought, but certainly not given altogether *honestly*.

“Well, he seems okay enough to me,” Karen started, “but I guess it really all depends on how you feel about him.” She surprised herself with the honesty of her answer. “If he’s right for you,” she said, “then he’s right for me.” The problem, Karen thought, was that there was no way, at eighteen,

for Aimee to know if he was right for her. Maybe there was no way for anyone to know. Ever.

Aimee sat in silence for the first time the entire evening. Karen could feel something building, a strange sort of tension she was not at all prepared for. She could always tell when something was bubbling just under the surface in her daughter. It was a mother's gift.

"Mom," said Aimee, setting her ice cream aside, sitting more upright, more like an adult. "We've slept together." She said it calmly, not like a confession, but a mere fact. Karen was surprised, not that her daughter was having sex, but that she actually *told* her that she was having sex.

"I'm not pregnant or anything," she said, looking Karen in the eye, confidently. "I just wanted to tell you. So you can trust me. So you know I'm not hiding anything from you. So you can know what I'm doing. So you know I've thought it out, and I'm being careful." She crossed her legs, leaning back on the sofa like an adult chatting with her girlfriend. "So you know I'm serious about him," she said.

For a brief instant, Karen wanted to ask her what it was like, how she felt the first time. She wanted to know how he held her, if he was concerned with her comfort. She wanted to ask if they talked during it, or if they moved in silence, letting their bodies dictate their actions. She wanted to ask Aimee if she had orgasmed. *Did it feel like love?* She wanted to ask. She would never

really ask, of course, for the sake of sparing her daughter, or perhaps herself, the embarrassment. Karen moved closer to Aimee, wrapping her arms around her daughter's body, pulling her into her lap. She brushed the hair from Aimee's eyes.

"I trust you, Honey," Karen said. "Just be careful, okay?" On some level, Karen knew she wasn't talking about the sex.

Henry had decided, after the old couch had been brought up and set against the north wall, that no more furniture would be moved into the bonus room. With the desk, the bookshelf, the sitting chair, and now the couch, the room was enjoying its optimal balance of comfort and practicality. Any less, and the room would be wasted space. Any more, and it would be confining.

"So you want to teach, huh?" Henry said, trying to make small talk. There was an awkward tension in the air, resting lightly on his skin like dew. He glanced out the window down the street. The lights were off in the old house.

"That's the plan," said Jackson, pulling the neck of his t-shirt up to his forehead, blotting streams of sweat. "But teaching jobs seem pretty hard to come by these days, even if you're fully qualified."

“And what, exactly, qualifies you to teach?” said Henry, sitting down hard on the couch, watching Jackson’s face churn. For some deep-seated reason he couldn’t fully comprehend, Henry felt a sudden disgust for Jackson, for his ambitions. Not because the boy wanted to teach, but because he seemed to feel it was his right.

“Well, I mean,” Jackson said, “eventually I’ll have the degree I need, a terminal degree.” He sounded exasperated. Look who’s intimidated now, Henry thought. The truth was, Henry didn’t know if he just wanted to scare him, or if he really had something to say.

“Let me save you a lot of trouble, Jackson,” said Henry, motioning for the young man to sit down beside him. He suddenly felt ten years older, like a grandfather. “This life, as far as I can tell, is about ten percent knowledge, ninety percent experience.” Henry gave a little smile, friendly on the surface. “Sounds to me like you’re well on your way to knocking out the ten percent.” Jackson smiled a little in return, visibly embarrassed. Henry could sense the malice in his own actions. It was unintentional, but it was present nonetheless. “You’re going to fail, Jackson,” he said, feeling unwanted emotion well-up deep in his insides. “You’re going to fail, over and over and over. And eventually, if you’re lucky, you’ll learn from those failures, tiny little portions at a time, barely noticeable.” He looked away, peering out the window into the world outside. “And when you do get there, to a teaching

position or wherever the hell it is you feel like you need to go, many years from now, when you're not even sure if you still want it, it will be nothing, absolutely nothing, like you expected it to be. And it'll be a hell of a lot harder than you ever imagined." He lowered his voice, looking back at Jackson, the young man's face contorted. "That's the other ninety percent." Jackson nodded his head in nervous agreement, confidence broken. "I want you to get there, Jackson, for Aimee's sake, if for nothing else. She seems to be pretty smitten about you. Just realize that nothing is as easy as it seems," he said. "And the ideal, *of anything*, doesn't exist."

"Yeah," Jackson said, smiling at the mention of Aimee's name. "Now that you mention it, I kind of wanted to talk to you about that. About her, I mean." He paused, turning toward Henry. The tension in the room flared back up, biting at Henry's flesh. "About me and her."

Somewhere in the back of his mind, hidden in a quiet, long forgotten fold of memory, Henry recalled the conversation he had with Karen's father before he proposed; how excited he had felt, how zealous and ready, never heeding his future father-in-law's warnings about the inevitable pitfalls of marriage. The ideal, Henry thought, looking out the window at the house down the street, doesn't exist.

Karen didn't like the idea from the start, thought it was strange how Henry kept pressing Aimee on the issue. Aimee didn't seem all that interested in seeing the old house, but Henry was adamant. As the four of them approached the front door, Aimee's hand in Jackson's, Henry's hands in his pockets, Karen wished she hadn't agreed to come.

What happened that day, Henry thought, was inevitable. But it wasn't until he reached the front door, searching for the key that was no longer on his keychain, that Henry realized the absurdity of the situation. What the hell was he *hoping* to find? It was easy enough to convince Aimee that she needed to say goodbye to the old house, to her bedroom, the bedroom that had been a part of her for the eighteen years of her short existence, now severed from her like the mole she used to have on her left cheek. He knew that playing on his daughter's sentimental nature to gain access to the house was wrong, at least on some level. Perhaps he was a fraud of a father. He preferred to think of himself as resourceful.

He knocked—on his own goddamn door.

He felt Karen place a gentle hand on his left shoulder. He watched Jackson (who didn't give a shit about seeing the house, Henry could tell) whisper something in his daughter's ear and then kiss her cheek in the same motion.

He knocked again.

“I don’t think they’re home, Daddy,” said Aimee. The thought hadn’t occurred to Henry. What if they weren’t home? This was his chance. He had an excuse.

“Maybe next time?” Karen said. “When Aimee’s home again.”

Henry looked at Jackson’s hand placed firmly on his daughter’s waist. It was then that he knew she would never *really* be home again. It was now or never. They would see the house today, one way or another.

He knocked again. He hoped, secretly, that there would be no response. When there wasn’t, he knew what he had to do.

“Wait here a minute,” Henry said, stepping off the porch and making his way down the side of his house.

“What are you doing?” asked Karen. “Honey?”

“Just wait.” He turned the corner, admiring the shrubs he’d planted along the east side of the house. He thought briefly about ripping them out of the ground and replanting them at the new house, but rejected the idea, not on moral grounds, but because there were more important things to do at the moment. If he knew this young guy as well as he suspected, Henry was quite certain that he had not fixed (and had probably not even noticed) the broken lock on the ground-level basement window at the back of the house. He stooped down, whistling Vivaldi’s *Bassoon Concerto in E minor*, and

lifted the window easily, its hinges crying loudly, a familiar sound, so much so that he felt what he was doing couldn't be wrong. He had opened this window for the past twenty years—what harm could come from it now? Besides, he knew his intentions were honest enough. He didn't want to steal anything (as if this young couple had anything that could possibly be an object of envy). He just wanted to visit the house and see what they'd screwed up.

No sooner did his feet hit the concrete of the basement floor than the overhead basement light came on. Suddenly, what he was doing didn't seem quite so innocent.

"Mr. Connolly?" The voice came from up the staircase, out of sight. Henry thought about trying to make a quick escape, squeezing back through the window and dashing to his own back yard. But since the young man called his name, he seemed to be caught already.

"Henry?" This time it was Karen's voice from the top of the stairs. What the hell was she trying to do? Henry stayed quiet, sorting out his options. "Henry, Shelly came to the door as soon as you left. What are you doing, Honey?" It appeared he was out of options. Playing dumb wouldn't work at this point. He was caught, and he had to make the most of it.

"Karen? Honey, is that you?" he said, walking briskly towards the staircase.

“Henry, what’s going on?”

“Are you all right? Are the Pearsons all right? Where’s Aimee?”

“We’re right here, Dad,” said Aimee as she stepped around the young woman in the doorway.

“Oh, thank God!” said Henry, gripping his chest. Everything okay... Shelly, is it?”

“Everything’s just fine,” said the young woman, looking confused and a little frightened. “Is everything okay with you?”

“Well, I went around the house to see if anybody was in the backyard, and then I heard it—BANG! Coming from the basement, like somebody fell. Or there was a burglar or something.” Henry sighed, long and dramatically, and started making his way up the stairs. “Luckily, the basement window came right open.”

“Did it?” the young man asked, arm nervously around his wife’s waist.

“I’m just glad everyone’s okay,” said Henry.

Karen knew her husband’s flaws well—flaws that she’d grown accustomed to and even accepted over the past twenty-six years—but this was the first time she had ever felt ashamed to be married to him. She wanted to apologize to the Pearsons, to grab Aimee by the arm and leave Henry in the basement of their old house to wallow in his own self-pity. She

had told herself that the change in Henry was normal, that moving out of the house would do some good for a relationship that had seen very little good in recent memory. But it was becoming clear that moving had only made matters worse. Marriages change, relationships evolve—she knew this and accepted it freely. But theirs seemed to be dissolving into something unrecognizable, some sort of indefinable relationship where convenience and routine were the only contributing factors. She wasn't naive enough to believe that she and Henry could regain what Aimee and Jackson had, but she wasn't jaded enough to believe that marriage was this bad by design. She thought about running to the new house and taking Aimee's old softball bat to the Henry Pile, of breaking things just to see them break—if only to get a goddamn reaction out of Henry. But the Pearsons, in all their innocence and hope to be welcomed into the neighborhood, played dumb, accepting Henry's bogus story and even inviting them all to stay for dinner.

“It won't be a feast,” said Shelly Pearson, flipping her auburn hair off her shoulder the way only a confident, young woman can. “Just lasagna and garden salad. But we'd be happy to have you.”

“Absolutely,” said Jon Pearson after a quick, sharp glance at his wife. “We can't eat a whole lasagna by ourselves.” Karen knew Henry would never take them up on the offer, of course, especially since he'd broken into their house and made an ass of them all. She could tell by his posture that he

was uncomfortable, that he was ready to forget the whole thing. When he began checking his watch and shaking his head, Karen felt something bursting inside of her, bubbling up like carbonation, until suddenly, without warning, “We’d love to stay,” she said. Karen looked in her husband’s narrowed eyes. This was no softball bat, but she was feeling better just the same.

He had expected to be surprised, even a bit disgusted at what he would find in the house. Would the walls be painted? he had wondered. Would they have replaced the worn carpet in the living room? What he hadn’t expected, what he was unprepared to find, was that the house was exactly how they left it. Just different furniture. It was how he had hoped he would find it, of course, but now that he *actually* saw it, he wasn’t so sure. It seemed unnatural that this young couple could blend in so easily with the house where he dwelled for twenty years; the house he and Karen had dreamed of when they were living in a one-bedroom apartment across town. The house Aimee grew up in. There was something disturbing about how the young couple’s mix-matched furniture—blue and tan checkered couch, black, leather loveseat, brown, oak end tables—reminded him of his and Karen’s mutt furniture when they were new homeowners. It had taken them years to make everything in their house uniform, neat, orderly. But there was

something beautiful about the contrasting furniture, exciting and unexpected like keenly placed dissonance in a musical composition.

When the young couple admitted (with a great deal of embarrassment) that their small dining room table wasn't large enough for the six of them, Karen volunteered that Henry would be happy to sit at the breakfast bar. Henry knew what Karen was doing. She thought she was being clever, that she was duping him, punishing him for getting them into this mess. But the reality was, if he had to stay, he would rather be up at the breakfast bar—away from the rest of them—anyway. The breakfast bar was part of the house, solid, firm, still *his* in his mind. The thought of eating in *his* dining room at *their* table was less appealing.

“Jon,” the young woman said, “why don't you keep Mr. Connolly company up at the bar.” She looked at Aimee and smiled. “Four is about all this little table will hold anyway.” Henry saw the smile the young man gave his wife—agreeable but reluctant—and knew right away that theirs would be a quiet dinner. Henry saw his daughter whisper into Jackson's ear.

“Well, why don't we make it even then,” said Jackson, walking over to the breakfast bar. “I can't be the only male at the table. Just doesn't feel right.” Jackson smiled. Henry wanted to return the gesture and made a genuine effort to do so, but he just couldn't do it.

Over dinner, Jackson and the young man talked. Henry listened, nodding now and again, or chiming in with an occasional “uh, huh.” He could see the ladies in the adjacent room, smiling, at ease. He was amazed at how much Aimee looked like her mother, but even more amazed at how much youth Karen still had in her. Her hair, still thick, was streaked with traces of gray, but you would never guess she was fifty-one. There was something about her—maybe the honesty in her smile—that still intimidated Henry after twenty-six years. He tried to think back to when Karen was Aimee’s age, before the house, before the apartment, when they were still in the courting stage. Intellectually, he knew how he had felt about her back then—how he had craved her. But he couldn’t *feel* it anymore. It was normal, of course, the way things had changed, but that didn’t console him any more than it consoled him to know that it was *normal* for Aimee to want to marry.

Henry got up and started making his way into the hallway.

“Henry, where are you going?” asked Karen, watching as he crossed in front of the dining room.

“Huh?” he said. Everyone was looking at him now.

“You going somewhere?”

“Bathroom. Is that *okay*?”

“Don’t you think you should ask our hosts if you may?”

The room was silent. Henry’s skin burned, his cheeks fully flushed.

“Sure you can,” said the young man, trying to break the tension. He pointed down the hallway. “Second door... you know where it is.”

“Yes,” said Henry softly, looking at Karen. “Yes. I know where it is.” He turned, walked the opposite direction, and went out the front door. He shut it tightly behind him, knowing it would be the last time he would ever do so.

That night, when Aimee and Jackson had gone off to sleep (in separate rooms, Henry insisted), Karen sat alone in the living room staring at the Henry Pile. The lights were off, and she could only see its form, bold and intrusive. There were no individual parts, just a disfigured whole with crevasses and jagged edges. She knew that no matter how angry she was, she could never really destroy the pile. Even now, in the dark, its beauty was undeniable, perplexing yet simple, vibrant yet lifeless. Henry would never go through the pile. She decided that she would dismantle it herself, throw out what was useless and salvage what she could. *Tomorrow*, she thought.

In their bedroom, she found Henry sprawled on the center of the bed, his mouth open wide, a rhythmic roaring bellowing from his insides. As she undressed, she tried to picture him as he was thirty years ago, before they were married, well before Aimee was born, before life had become an indecipherable road map. He had been thinner, of course, but not necessarily more handsome. He had aged nicely, his hair thick and speckled with gray,

his skin still relatively taut. She crawled into bed next to him, and as her emotions began to settle, as her head began to clear, she knew—as much as she ever had—that she loved him. It was a different love now, different from when they dated, different than when they had first gotten married, even different than a year ago, but it was love, unmistakably. If it wasn't love—this feeling she had right now for the man sleeping next to her, a man that she would otherwise despise—then she knew there was no such thing as love at all. They had a good marriage, she thought, as she tried to tell herself every night.

“Our little girl's in love, you know,” she said softly. She wasn't completely aware she had said it out loud until he opened his eyes. “She's going to marry that boy,” she said. “Jackson and Aimee. Aimee Ray.” She stuck out her tongue in feigned disgust. She watched her husband rub his eyes, waking up.

“I know,” Henry said, eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. “I talked to the boy last night.” He let out a sigh, slow and painful.

She turned, lying on her back, staring at the ceiling with her husband. She knew they were thinking the same thing, the thing that had gone unspoken between them like a secret pact for as long as she could remember. But nothing they could say—to Aimee, to Jackson, to each other—would change the inevitable. Their little girl was going to get

married. She would have failures. But Karen wasn't convinced as she once was, as she knew Henry still was, that Aimee would ever learn from those failures. Does anybody ever *really* learn? She closed her eyes and intertwined her fingers with Henry's. She felt the dry skin on his knuckles, the calluses on his palm. She moved her hand up his arm, feeling the coarse hairs on his forearm, the bulge of his bicep. In the dark, in the quiet of an unfamiliar house, she felt the body of the man lying next to her: awkward, unnatural, satisfying.

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