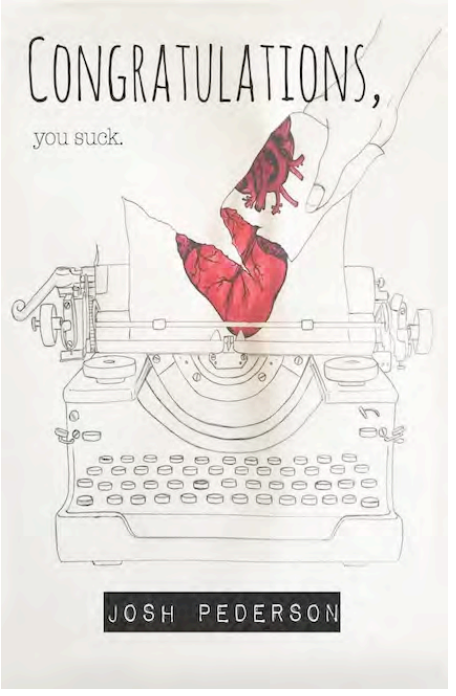

Author Grey Keating is sliding down the backside of his twenties. He once wrote a best-selling book that didn't exactly flatter his hometown. Between that and his ex-girlfriend (a professional blogger) writing a book about how much he and their romance sucked, he's forced to face his past, the future and the tragedies of being human.

Congratulations, You Suck

By Josh Pederson

CONGRATULATIONS,

you suck.

JOSH PEDERSON

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Praise for Josh Pederson's Work
VENDETTA DARK

"A fascinating tale of corruption, greed, secret societies, and intriguing characters. The story is fast paced and kept me turning the pages to find out what happens next. I hope there will be a sequel. I would love to hear more about the characters in a second book."

-Heather Rivera, author of *Twice Again*

"This book has a uniquely unbelievable premise, yet it seems authentic because the author has done enough research to describe accurate facts whether they are scientific, philosophical, or literary. It is a thought-provoking story with a sense of humor and a running commentary on the foibles of human nature."

-Lillian Nader, author of *Theep and Thorpe Adventures in Space*

"I couldn't put it down. Well-written and interesting storyline makes this a good first novel by the author . . . can't wait to read his next book."

-Instagram Book Critic Ali Gillis (@owlie_reads)

"Great book with an involved storyline. This book is full of surprises with a can't-put-it-down kind of spell that only the best books have. Josh Pederson is a first time author, but he writes like a best-selling author.

-Gerald Glassford, editor/host at the *Pop Culture Cosmos*

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Well, here we are . . . book number two is finished and out in the world (or almost, depending on when you're reading this). It's been five years since *Vendetta Dark* was released, and I have no doubt that any momentum or hype that I had after that release has now simmered and faded like my enthusiasm for writing. I'm just kidding . . . well, kind of. I know in the front of Vendetta Dark, I talked about how writing that book was the most difficult thing I've ever done. Looking back, I think I was wrong. Writing *this* book is the most difficult thing I've ever done. Writing a book, or doing anything creative in 2019 is like covering yourself in paper cuts and swimming in the ocean. The chances of getting through it unscathed are unpredictable. After all, this is the age of relevance, and if something is offensive, there are likes to be had and comments to be answered as irrelevant and easily offended sharks propel themselves further into the void that is social media.

This book has suffered a great deal. Even as I read it for the last time, I was finding things I wanted to change or remove. It'll never be perfect because it's a victim of moments in my life where I didn't want to upset people, or be too vulnerable, but I still wanted to be honest. Because of this, I feel like it sort of lost its identity somewhere in the middle. I've spent four years working for churches, and religious organizations, and each time the administrators or pastors of the church or organization found out I was writing a book, they would do their best to stifle my imagination out of fear that what I wrote would embarrass them in some way. In fact, I stopped writing for several months because I couldn't risk it, and I was terrified of the repercussions.

While the narrative in the story is cohesive, a lot of it is representative of the journey I've been on for most of my adult life, the growth I've experienced, and the heartbreak that has held tyranny over my emotions for as long as I can remember. This is a story born of heartbreak and held together by a search for answers. How can people just stop loving each other? Why do people suck? Why do we let our scars define us?

While the story itself is a work of fiction, within these pages you'll find my hurt, my sorrow, my anger, and my sarcasm at the absurdity of it all. I started this book before *Vendetta Dark*, and now, it's finally finished. What a journey it's been.

To end this little monologue, let me just say to anybody expecting this to be a religious offering, it is not. It's not a Christian book, but it does ask spiritual questions. It certainly isn't gratuitously obscene, but it is genuine, the characters are flawed, and I hope relatable. Even now I'm afraid of upsetting people, but this entire story (whether it makes money or not) is something that I felt compelled to put on paper. So who cares if it upsets people? I didn't write this for them.

Of course, I say all of this, knowing full well I'll probably have another panic or anxiety attack (which I've been having a lot of lately) before this goes out into the world. For now, I'm going to shut up so you can read the book.

I hope you enjoy.

- Josh Pederson

Prologue

I used to believe I could do anything. That was back when the world was big, and life was simple, back when my parents and teachers would say that I could do anything I set my mind to.

Liars.

When I was five, I wanted to be a dinosaur. I would pull my elbows up into my sleeves, roar, and then stomp around my living room, chasing cars. Little did I know, twenty years later I would be the furthest thing from a dinosaur. I wouldn't even be able to feed myself without a microwave or a drive-thru. Eventually, we all figure out life's greatest secret: it sucks. Once we get past that, we can move on.

First, though, let's get back to the part about when the world was big, and life was simple.

Every tree was a sentinel, every house a fortress, and every yard a vast land full of untold adventure. Passing the time was just a matter of turning inward and losing myself to the realms of my imagination.

"Your mind is like a plant," my grandmother would say. "If you don't nurture and care for it, it'll wither away."

She would smile and wrap her arms around my five-year-old self as we sat on a blanket in her backyard, beneath the shade of her cherry blossoms. The birds would chirp, the wind would blow, the bees would sting you if you got too close, but all was right with the world, or at least the parts of it I understood and knew existed.

Then again, maybe it's just the memory.

It's hard to tell, these days. As the sun cast a warm glow on the lush green lawn, causing the plants to turn vivid shades of green, everything felt so alive, so vibrant, like I'd walked into another world untouched by man, the wilds of some

reality other than mine. Her backyard was like the closet door that led to Narnia. The only modern convenience to be found was the book in my grandmother's hand.

"Oxen and wain-ropes would not bring me back again to that accursed island; and the worst dreams that ever I have are when I hear the surf booming about its coasts or start upright in bed with the sharp voice of Captain Flint still ringing in my ears: Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!" she would say in her best pirate voice, closing the cover, yet again, on a worn-out copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island.*

I would give anything to go back to those days, if only just for a moment or two, to remember a time when I was full of life and finding happiness was as simple as breathing.

My grandmother taught me how to read and write, raising me on classic authors, poets, and playwrights. While most kids my age were reading *Goosebumps* and *Harry Potter* novels (both of which I loved), I was also exploring collected volumes of Poe, Kipling, and Doyle, to name a few. In school, I never understood why the other kids hated to read so much. To me, books were everything, which is why the gift my grandmother gave me on my thirteenth birthday had such a profound impact on me.

My grandfather died when I was three. Besides the photographs and the beer he snuck into my sippy cup as an infant, I don't have many memories of him. As hard as I try to remember even the smallest detail of what he was like, all I can muster is the man I see in the photographs. My grandmother would always talk about how much he loved me and how he would say I was going to grow up to do great things, and I don't doubt her, but when I look at it now, I realize he was just one more person I've disappointed.

Turning thirteen is both a gift and a curse. It's the end of childhood and the beginning of something new—life's next

"great" adventure. People don't tell you about the things they can't prepare you for. You can practice catching a baseball, so it doesn't hit you in the face. You can practice swimming, so you don't drown. You can even practice poisoning yourself in the hopes of building up immunity, but you can't practice puberty. You can't prepare yourself for the awkwardness of adolescence, the growth spurts, embarrassing voice cracks, and the awakening of a sex drive that motivates every interaction you have from that point forward. It's exciting, scary, and tragic all at the same time, which is why on my thirteenth birthday, my grandmother gave me a novel titled, *My Teenage Schism.*

The cover was dull and faded, and the image on the cover was flaked and peeling. I could tell it had been read several times before. It had the distinct bend of a book that had seen a lot of mileage. However, I didn't realize the significance of it until I saw the name of the author: my grandfather, Earnest Keating.

For the next two weeks, I became engulfed in that book, coming to know each character more intimately than any real person in my life. It was not only an escape, it was a refuge and a guide through some of the most difficult years of my life, as it taught me how to live, laugh, love, and endure all the pain that comes with it.

I had no idea at the time, but that book would shape a significant part of my life. Call it inspiration. Call it pride. Call it an excuse.

Call it a tragedy.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "The tragedy in a man's life is what dies inside of him while he lives."

The real tragedy is not knowing how to bring it back. At the end of it all, our deeds are like wilted roses, leaving nothing but holes and a question of what to fill them with.

Part One

The Numb Idiot's Guide to Mourning Your Loved Ones

"We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accept it. I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course, it is different when the thing happens to oneself, and not to others, and in reality, not imagination."

- C.S. Lewis

Chapter 1

Nothing can prepare you for seeing your grandmother in a casket. Though I suppose the same could be said about any loved one who passes from this world to the next. This is, above and beyond anything else, the most important thing to remember when attending a funeral. I thought I could do it, but I was wrong. As it turns out, you can spend an entire lifetime watching horror movies and people hurting themselves on the Internet, but when you're standing above the corpse of somebody who helped raise you and loved you unconditionally, it's impossible to shrug it off like one of those "shit happens" moments you experience while avalanching through your twenties.

Her hands are cold.

I hold her fingers in mine, foolishly hoping they'll move, that this is all a bad dream and when I wake up, she'll be in her room down the hall, humming old Sinatra tunes while cutting out coupons she'll never use. I squeeze her hand tighter, hoping she'll return the force like she did when we would cross the street on our way to the park, or when she would take me to the pretzel place in the mall — the one she loved despite a high probability of food poisoning.

I want to cry.

I feel the sting behind my eyes, the beginnings of a tear. I swear it breaks the surface, a captive on the run in stormy weather, but as it reaches the place where my cheeks fall into thin patches of stubble, it recedes into the warm gloss of my eyes. I don't know why, but my inability to cry sometimes concerns me. It concerns me so much that I've spent late hours at night Googling dry tear ducts and what diseases it might be a symptom of. According to Web MD, "When you have Sjogren's Syndrome, your eyes, mouth, and other parts

of your body get dried out, often affecting saliva and tear ducts." I don't have that. I think I'm just incapable of feeling things. I'm like The Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz,* except I'm okay with not having a heart, because hearts can be broken, and I've given up trying to tape mine back together.

"I'm sorry for your loss," a soft voice says. I look up into the unassuming eyes of my mother's childhood friend. I don't remember much about her, except her name is Elizabeth Jones and she has fiery red hair that's now turning a majestic shade of silver. For a woman in her fifties, her skin looks surprisingly young. If Buffalo Bill were a real serial killer, he'd probably trap her in his basement and send her baskets of lotion.

"Thank you," I tell her because that's what you're supposed to say when people apologize about your loved ones being dead.

She invades my personal space, pulling me into a hug, pressing her body tightly against mine. Along with her skin, her breasts don't feel like those of a woman in her fifties. Neither do they feel natural. They're large and firm and a miracle of modern medicine. Her breath smells like peppermint gum, and she's cradling my head with her right hand, forcing me to look down the front of the low-cut dress she's wearing. To some, I suppose smothering by breast wouldn't be a bad way to go, and I feel weird for not being into it, but everybody in the church is staring, and my uncle is giving me a thumb's up. He's making motor boating motions with his face.

I can't breathe.

"If you need anything at all," she whispers into my ear, "You know where to find me. I'm really good at comforting people."

She says "comfort" seductively.

She is a predator and I am an injured gazelle.

"Thank you," I tell her again.

She runs her hand down the front of my chest as she releases me and slowly turns away. I feel like one of those animals that gets wrangled by a hunter in camouflage and then tagged for research. The scent of her perfume clings to my skin.

Uncle Jeff smiles at her as he approaches the coffin. He seems disappointed when she walks past him without even a wink, yet he turns to watch her backside with the subtlety of a teenager at a wet t-shirt contest. His brother is her next victim. She pulls Uncle Lennox into the same predatory embrace, the only difference being he seems to enjoy it because he's forty-two, divorced, and his cologne smells like desperation.

"If she offers you a cup of coffee, don't drink it," Uncle Jeff says.

"I'm not sure if I should feel flattered or violated," I tell him.

"Violation can be a form of flattery."

"I guess, in a weird stalker sort of way. I'll have to tell Ms. Jones what I tell all the lonely, divorced women who hit on me."

"And what's that?"

"I'm not a piece of meat."

I've never actually told that to anybody.

"Well, not a very well-cooked piece of meat," Uncle Jeff says, pulling a flask out of his pocket, "If you were, you wouldn't need a little marinade to get you through the morning."

I take the flask from his hands. It's metallic and has a busty woman on the front, straddling an American flag. I take a drink, immediately coughing as the liquid hits my throat. It

has a delicious apple cinnamon flavor with a bitter aftertaste that goes to war with my cough reflexes.

"God bless America," I say. "What's in this? Gasoline?"

"It's my latest batch of Apple Pie Moonshine," he says, taking the flask back. "It's 150 proof."

"You're going to kill somebody."

"Then I guess it's a good thing we're going the cemetery after this." He pats me on the back and then takes a drink before going back to Aunt Lisa and their two kids, who are seated in the third row and staring intensely at their phones.

Uncle Jeff is the kind of relative you're always excited to see at family reunions. As a consultant at a pharmaceutical company, he's all business and pleasantries from nine to five, but the moment his Tesla Roadster stops in the driveway of his craftsman style house in the now-bustling Davis suburb, he becomes a mad scientist of booze and bad ideas. They have a strict no smoking policy in their house because there's an entire distillery beneath the floorboards. On my Aunt's fortieth birthday, her kids decided it would be funny to put forty candles on her cake. That year she got the kitchen renovation she'd always wanted.

I look around the room. There are boxes of tissue at the end of each aisle, and Gaither Band gospel songs fill the tiny auditorium with what sounds like the soundtrack to *Little House on the Prairie.* Most of the people seated in the aisles look like the last vestiges of a dying generation. A short woman with pearls around her neck blows her nose with the ferocity of a tuba in a wind tunnel.

I give my grandmother one last look as if this is just another one of those naps she liked to take in the afternoon. She'll wake up and ask me if I'm hungry, and I'll be adamant that I'm not, but she'll cook something anyway, and I'll turn the scale off when I get home because I don't need that kind

of negativity. I look down at her hands, knowing they'll never play the piano again, or turn the pages of the books she used to read to me, or tend to the garden she loved so much. They'll just lay there across her midsection until they decay, and all that's left of her is dust and bones and the brightly colored blouse my aunt gave the guy who runs the funeral home. It was the one outfit when asked if she would ever wear it, she would respond, "over my dead body." If she's looking down on this, I hope she appreciates the irony.

Sunlight hits the colored mosaic windows, bringing all the chapel's reflective surfaces to life in glimmering shades of lacquered pine and polished brass. The vaulted ceiling stretches skyward, locking into two pointed beams that join in the center. Beneath them are twelve rows of pews, which slowly fill with people dressed in varying shades of black; family, neighbors, strangers, friends, several people who I'm pretty sure never even met my grandma, but felt the need to stop by for some free muffins and coffee being served in the foyer. After all, nothing says "my condolences" like a bargain breakfast spread.

Including my mother, my grandma had four kids, and they're all here. This is the first time they've all been in the same place since our last family campout seventeen years ago. Along with my cousins and their children—and even some of them have children—I haven't seen most of these people in so long they might as well be strangers.

The room is full of sorrow, but it's also full of unresolved issues, none of which I want any part. It's like being in the audience of a Shakespearean tragedy. We know what's going on between the characters and who is plotting against whom, but until the play reaches its climax, we sit down and wait for the inevitable calamity.

I don't want to talk to anybody. I want to spin in my own orbit of secluded numbness, afloat among the cosmos in a comfortable blanket of isolation, and that's not an introvert thing as much as it is a last-ditch effort to avoid questions and sympathies. There's a reason grief is the only human emotion that hasn't evolved in the thousands of years we've been around; it's because it's perfect just the way it is. And I don't want to share my grief with any of these people.

There's a brief moment in between this thought and my mother approaching, where I consider fleeing out the side door and into the street. Every nerve in my body is telling me to run, telling me that I need to be anywhere but here. I can feel a pulling sensation rise from my stomach to my throat, followed by an inability to decide if I should find the nearest trashcan or wait it out and see what happens.

It's indecisiveness that keeps me in place and well within the grasp of my mother's arm, as she wraps it through mine and pulls me back toward the coffin. Once again, I'm staring at the lifeless body of my grandmother. For a moment, I think she's smiling, but then I realize it's just the angle, and if she were smiling it would be over the fact that none of us could be bothered even to call her when she was alive, but now that she's dead we've all become overly emotional.

Well, most of us.

I think of that moment in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* when Ron finds out that Fred is dead. I try to summon the fierce sorrow I felt as a kid. I even tell myself that not to cry would be an insult to my grandmother's memory.

Still nothing.

"She looks peaceful," Mom says, resting her head on my shoulder. She's crying. I can feel her tears soaking into the shoulder of my dark collared shirt. I look down, not seeing

peace as much as I see a face with more make-up on it than she'd ever wear or even brag about owning. I don't know why they bother with the theatrics in open caskets. If the fact that we're all here for a funeral doesn't prepare us for her being dead, I doubt heavy coats of make-up would do anything to soften the blow. I put my arm around my mom, not sure if it's because I'm trying to comfort her or if it's more of a reaction to ease my discomfort with other people's emotions. *She looks dead,* I think to myself. I never understood why when we're mourning the loss of a loved one, we label the absence of life as peace. Death is inevitable; peace isn't.

"Yeah," I tell my mom, kissing the top of her head. "I'm sure she's up there somewhere kicking back with a beer in her hand, getting ready to watch the circus we've made of her passing."

"Why is she wearing this hideous blouse?" Mom asks. "She would never wear something like this."

"That would be your sister's doing," I tell her.

"Which one?" she asks, looking around.

"Who do you think?"

She rolls her eyes and mutters, "Jill."

Every family has that one person who only shows up to things when it makes them look good, or they want something out of it. Aunt Jill fills both of those criteria. Mom called her six times to tell her that Grandma was dead. It wasn't until she mentioned an inheritance in the voicemail that she finally called back.

Mom's tears go from controlled spurts to geysers. I need to do something with my hands. I pat her head like a dog's. She's probably not crying over the blouse, not exactly, but it's one more thing in a large box of cobwebs and skeletons she's had to sort through with her siblings this week.

"Mom," my older brother says, prying us apart with his over-muscular crowbar of an arm. He's pretending to be sympathetic. He's always been good at pretending, and fake tears are a specialty of his. I know this because when we were growing up, and he wanted attention, he could turn the tears on and off like a top-of-the-line sprinkler system. He would get a cut while we played hockey and then go running to Mom and Dad, making it seem like I'm a serial killer out for blood.

"How are you doing?" he asks Mom, practically shoving me aside.

"I'm okay," Mom lies.

I grab a box of tissues and hand it to her. She dabs the tears on her face and the runs in her make-up.

"It's okay," my brother says. "She's in a better place. She's with Grandpa now."

He skips the buildup of clichéd things to say at funerals and goes right for the top of the list. His fiancée, Heather, is standing behind him, dabbing at her dry cheeks with a handkerchief she pulled from her purse. She's wearing a large brimmed hat and sunglasses indoors. She's also wearing white.

"Mrs. Keating," she says. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Janet was such a nice woman. She made the best casseroles."

"I suppose there are worst things you could be remembered for," I tell nobody in particular.

"What did you say?" my brother asks, turning to me.

Grant has always been bigger than I am in both height and girth. When we were kids, Grant used to try to subdue me by sitting on my chest or wrapping my limbs in a knot, while he suffocated me. We never actually wanted to kill each other back then, but I wonder what would happen if we were to get into it now.

"Grey, this is a funeral," Heather says. "As much as you like to think that every day is about you, it isn't."

"Says the woman who shows up to a funeral in a white dress."

"You can't talk to her like that," Grant tells me.

"Like what?" I ask.

"Like a sarcastic dick," he says.

"But I am a sarcastic dick."

If *The Art of War* were written by an angsty millennial, it would open with, "Always self-deprecate in front of your enemies. They can't insult you if you insult yourself."

"Well . . ."

He looks at Heather. She nods, waiting for the fatal insult she assumes Grant has ready to fire.

"This isn't about you," Grant says.

"You're right," I tell them, "It's not about me. Clearly, it's about you . . . or both of you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Grant asks.

"I think you know exactly what it means."

"Babe," Heather asks, "do you know what he means?"

Grant opens his mouth to say something then closes it. "No, what do you mean?"

"You're getting married less than ten days after we bury our grandma."

"Really?" Grant asks. "Like I planned our grandma dying?"

"That's enough," Dad says, appearing out of thin air and stepping between us. "There's a time and place for that, but it isn't here. And to be fair, your brother had his wedding planned for months before this happened."

He's right, and I know it, but like every petty argument I've ever had with my brother, there will be no concession, only a pathetic attempt at the last word.

This is how it's always been in our house. My dad is the peacekeeper in the family. We're like the townsfolk in an old Western, and he's like Clint Eastwood, riding in on his trusty steed, ready to vanquish foes with his six-shooters and a steely look. More often than not he has to save us from ourselves. When I was growing up, he used to say, "I'll give you a lot of slack in life, but I'll also let you choke yourself with it." There are plenty of metaphorical markings on my neck, but thanks to him, I'm still breathing.

Grant brushes my shoulder as he walks by, like a bully on a playground, and Heather rolls her eyes above her pointed nose.

"You're not supposed to wear white after Labor Day," I don't know why I say that. It always makes people laugh in movies, but in the moment, it sounds sad and unnecessary.

According to the Internet, wearing white after Labor Day was a rule made up by snobby rich women after the Civil War. They created "rules" for "respectable" behavior. The reasoning is irrational, and I imagine this is why Vin Diesel has spent an entire franchise rebelling against the aristocracy. Who knew that looking like you're perpetually on your way to the yacht club could start a revolution?

My youngest sister, Paislee, is standing behind my parents, wearing a black dress and sneakers. If you looked inside her closet, you would assume she attends many funerals. She's hesitant to look into the casket. She paces back and forth, each step full of heart-felt reverence for the woman who used to bounce her on her knee and sing nursery rhymes she learned while growing up in Oklahoma. Paislee's eyes are red and puffy, but behind the bright blue is something I can't explain, a profound thought waiting to break free, a song that falls on deaf ears. She's trying hard not to cry, but the battle is lost because a lone tear breaks through

as she tries to blink it away. It runs down her porcelain cheek, causing her eye shadow to bleed just slightly. I look around, hoping that somebody is going to comfort her.

She's alone.

We make eye contact, like two people standing on opposites sides of a battlefield, knowing they're in conflict, but not sure why. I want to hold her close and tell her everything is going to be okay, but it isn't, and I haven't been a big brother to her in a long time.

She despises me for it.

There are eleven years between Paislee and me, and an even bigger one between her and our older brother and sister. Mom was forty-five when she gave birth to Paislee. If you wanted to get technical, you could say Paislee was an accident. People like to think nature is the best birth control, but we tend to forget that nature is unpredictable and the idea of women not being able to have children after their thirties is more of an assumption than anything else. Mom thought she was going through menopause. I can still see the look on her face when she found out the real cause of her hot flashes and mood swings.

I don't exactly remember what happened between Paislee and me. By the time she started elementary school, Grant and my older sister, Alice, had already moved out of the house. I was in high school when she was in the first grade. As much as I tried to be the caring older brother, I guess I was too caught up in my own life to realize she needed me. While Mom and Dad were enjoying the extravagance of their early retirement, the job of loving and nurturing Paislee was left in the hands of my grandma, who had already raised four kids of her own.

One of my grandma's neighbors walks by, nodding, but not engaging in conversation. I can't remember his name, but

when I was a kid, my grandma used to set up a lawn chair in her garage and watch the sunset. It was the one time of day when it was cool enough to be outside. I would ride my bicycle up and down the crumbling street that is Placer Place Drive, and I would always see him sitting on his front porch with a cigarette in one hand and a bucket at his feet to spit his chewing Tabaco in. He would wave as I went by, not in a creepy way, but in a way that one human waves to another back before we all started assuming everybody else was a pervert. It always amazes me how many people can exist on the fringe of our lives without us ever knowing a thing about them except for a name or a moment in which they broke free of our peripherals.

My older sister, Alice, waves to me from four rows back. She pushes her husband and two kids over so that I can sit next to them. Her husband, Richard, is on his phone while their four-year-old twins, Jackson and Taylor, play some game with exploding kittens on their iPads. Normally, I would say something sarcastic about quality parenting, but even my sarcasm has grown tired of being sarcastic today.

"Hey, brother," she says, giving me a weird sideways hug as I sit down beside her.

"Hey," I answer.

"I've been trying to call you," she says, hoping for a livelier response. "Do you not check your messages?"

I prefer not to.

After Grant started dating Heather, Alice and I bonded over our mutual disdain for her. We'd never been that close growing up. We were practically enemies, but after we found some common ground, we finally built the relationship Mom always wanted us to have. She calls me once a week and leaves me messages about her and the kids. I never answer them, but I appreciate that she hasn't given up on me. The last

one she left was regarding Richard and the difficulties they were having with their marriage. She said she really needed somebody to talk to. I feel bad about never calling her back, but I wasn't sure what to say. I'm the last person who should be consoling anybody.

"Yeah, I was going to call you back," I say. "I've been sort of busy."

The lie sounds cruel and insincere.

"Is Mom okay?" she asks, changing the subject.

Alice looks tired.

"That depends on your definition of okay," I tell her.

"I mean, is she acting crazy . . . er than usual? Like is she acting normal?"

It's always been hard to read our mother. She goes through emotional fads. When she's been seeing her therapist regularly, she tends to be overly emotional, but when she's not seeing her therapist regularly, which is often the case, she couldn't care less about anybody but herself and the guy that stocks the wine at the grocery store. Today is different, though. She doesn't seem to know what she should be feeling. My grandpa died when I was young. Grandma was her last parent.

I don't envy what that must feel like, to know that the one who brought you into this world is now gone from it. When I was a kid, I took comfort in knowing that no matter how bad my day was, or what kind of trouble I got into, my parents would always be there to protect me . . . sort of like a safety net. Her safety net is gone.

She's now anchorless.

"In our family, the standard for normal is very low," I tell Alice.

"I mean, is she sad?"

"It would be inhuman of her not to be."

Alice nods. She's biting her lower lip. She wants to ask me something. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine."

"It's okay not to be," she says, putting her hand on mine.

"Fine, not fine," I shrug her off. "These days, there isn't really much of a difference. And why does it matter?"

"Are things getting bad again?"

"It's hard to say," I tell her. "I forget what things were like when they were good."

The truth is, lately I've been feeling like I'm dying, not in the physical sense, but like my heart is turning into machinery and life is becoming robotic. I guess I no longer know what I want, because all I can think about these days, is everything I've lost and everything I keep losing.

As I try to smolder the thought, the pastor makes his way to the podium only to reignite it on the funeral pyres of my memory.

Chapter 2

Whenever I try to remember that time when things got bad, my brain does summersaults and instantly thinks of things that don't matter, like what my uncle's browsing history looks like or the contents of my brother's refrigerator (everything probably gluten-free). There are little people inside me that run around in my head, frantically trying to cover up the past to keep the citizens of my brain happy and docile. Meanwhile, in the real world, everybody sees fit to remind me of the bad times. And like that drunk story your friends like to tell, everybody agrees on the severity of the memory, and I have to convince myself that bad things don't just happen to me, and they certainly don't happen all at once.

They just happen.

And now there's a dark place in my life I'm always running away from. It's like this massive black hole that sucks all the joy and excitement out of me, and everyone else in my life is like Boba Fett, tangled up in the tentacles of my Sarlacc.

I guess you would call that depression, but I wonder, is it still considered depression when you have a reason to be depressed? Maybe on a subconscious level, I'm just painfully aware of all the things I can never get back.

"Watch your step," Uncle Jeff says.

My grandma's casket is a lot heavier than I thought it would be. This might be because there are eight of us carrying it. Uncle Jeff and Uncle Lennox are at the back, while my brother and I stand in front of them and our cousins are in front of us. When people die, casket transportation is always an afterthought. One of my cousins is a lot shorter than everybody else. His arms are shaking like a waiter about to drop a tray of drinks on somebody. We're walking down

the sidewalk outside of the church. If his arm gives out, my grandmother's corpse is going to become Instagram famous thanks to the hipster coffee shop across the street.

Nobody mentioned anything to me about being a pallbearer until Alice stabbed me in the chest with the flower that's pinned to my lapel. It takes a few tries, but we finally get the casket into the back of the hearse.

"Why do you think they put pillows in caskets?" Uncle Jeff asks.

"For the same reason they put makeup on dead people at funerals," I tell him. "Small comforts go a long way with grieving families."

"I want to be buried in my birthday suit," he replies. "I want to leave this world just as naked and uncomfortable as the day I came into it. Or better yet, send me out on a funeral pyre, just like the Jedi in *Star Wars*."

"We live in California," I tell him. "I'm sure several laws prohibit putting corpses on big piles of wood."

"You know your grandma wanted to be cremated?"

"Why didn't you do it?"

"Well, you know how she got near the end," he says. "It was hard to trust anything she said."

Near the end of her life, her mind wasn't exactly present all the time. Her eyes would be open, and she'd be looking directly at you, but she wasn't always there. Her ability to form coherent thoughts and put them into sentences gradually decayed until all that was left was a shell of the woman she used to be, the one who taught me how to read, who opened my eyes to the wonders of poets like Robert Frost and Sylvia Plath and writers like William Faulkner and Mary Shelly. She nurtured my imagination and encouraged me to take the things that were in my mind and let them out. Then, one day, she stopped being able to do that, not just for me, but for

herself. The things that were in her mind remained unsaid and unprocessed. I guess you could say she'd been dying long before she actually died.

Her doctors diagnosed her with dementia on the day before I graduated from college. I remember them describing it like this: her mind is a map of New York City. There are many ways for her thoughts and memories to get where they need to go, but with so much to see and do along the way, they don't always get there when they're supposed to, and sometimes they don't get there at all. I've never been to New York City, but I've seen it destroyed by aliens in *Independence Day.*

It's hard to watch the people you love go through things that you're powerless to do anything about. Life is like a moody teenager. It's going to do what it wants, whether you want it to or not, and in the end, you still must face the consequences. Nothing can prepare you for it. You just learn to deal with it.

I think back to the last time I talked to her.

# # #

She wanted so badly to impress Heather's parents during Grant's engagement party. She walked out of her closet in a loose-fitting floral dress. It wasn't exactly the right weather for something like that. However, with the link of daisies wrapped around her head, and her gray hair hanging loosely over her shoulders, I saw a pale reflection of who she used to be, the woman who instilled in me a sense of purpose, who wanted nothing more than to see me happy.

I let her down.

"There are few things in life as important as a woman's appearance," she said. "And that's especially true for a woman of my age."

I smiled at her from the plastic covered couches that filled the small living room in her apartment. Life in the assisted living community wasn't exactly spacious. How she managed to fit most of her furniture through the small front door was a mystery even to the people who worked there.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, feeling the hair on my arm being removed as I shifted in my seat. "You don't look a day past thirty."

She shook her head, laughing under her breath.

"There are compliments," she said, "and then there's cruelty. Fiction will only get you so far."

"So does writing it."

"Maybe if you put a little more effort into it, you wouldn't feel that way," she said, waving her finger at me.

I could always count on her to call me out on things. The honesty was refreshing. I got up and wandered around her living room. For as many times as I'd been there, it seemed like there was always something I'd missed, some new trinket or treasure to be discovered. The furniture was lined up against the walls in an "L" shape, a brown leather couch, covered in plastic, against one wall and a matching, reclining chair against the other. There were cracks in the cushions from the years of use. My grandpa used to sit in the recliner, while he read the newspaper every morning, with a pipe in his mouth and a cup of coffee on the table beside him. Photographs and murals lined the walls, tiny brushstrokes initialing the corners, painted by my grandma in the long, splendid hours of the summer.

There was a glass cabinet on the far wall, filled with things she collected on road trips she took with my grandpa in the earlier days of their marriage. The lower shelves were made up of Native American Kachina dolls they bought while exploring the Midwest, and there were seashells on the

middle shelves she collected during their travels up the East Coast. When I was a kid, she would always tell me stories about her adventures a few years before my aunt was born. My grandpa was a journalist, and my grandma worked part-time as a nurse. They saved up money during their engagement, and instead of going on a honeymoon, they went on a long trip from one side of the country to the other and back again, before settling down and living the family life.

The upper shelves of the glass cabinet showcased things that belonged to my grandpa. Antique glasses and binoculars, pictures of various moments from his life, trophies from his childhood, and amid all of this was a copy of his book, with a framed review from the Daily Democrat, *the town's local newspaper*.

"A real insight into the heads of today's youth, and a gentle reminder that we're all kids at heart," it read.

# # #

I opened the book to a familiar passage. Of the nearly 300 pages that made up My Teenage Schism, *there was one chapter that I had memorized. In this chapter, Charlie, the protagonist was caught in the middle of a love triangle. On one side was Susan, a girl he's had a crush on since kindergarten. On the other side was Rachel, the new girl, whom he'd just met at the beginning of the school year. One night, at a party, he was seated on a couch next to Susan. At this point, he had already made up his mind that he was going to give up his pursuit of Susan and go after Rachel, whom he had decided he genuinely cared for. However, at this party, Susan was very drunk and admitted she's always had feelings for Charlie, but she never acted on them because of her social standing. Apparently, in their social circles, she was a member of the upper class and Charlie was a peasant.*

She got close, closer than ever before. She touched Charlie's hand, and it felt electric. She moved in closer, and at this moment, Charlie knew she was going to kiss him. He felt guilty, but this was everything he'd ever wanted. He could smell her perfume and see her lips closing in. His heart was racing. A wave of static rolled up his arms. This was what he's always dreamed of. Then, right before their lips touch, he saw Rachel in the kitchen.

She didn't notice him.

Not yet.

At that moment, his conscience overpowered his hormones, and suddenly, he decided he didn't want this. He didn't want to kiss Susan. He didn't love her. He couldn't even remember why he ever thought he did. He turned his head at the last minute, like a car dodging a deer on a poorly lit mountain road. And as he did this, he heard a sound that he'd never forget, a cough, followed by liquid projection. He felt a different kind of warmth than the kind he imagined he'd be feeling that night. It was wet and smelled like fruit and vodka.

Susan had just thrown up all over him.

Everybody laughed. Charlie looked up and saw Rachel staring directly at him. He calmly got up and walked through the crowd of people in the kitchen.

"Hi," he said to Rachel.

"Hey," she said back.

Charlie walked outside, suppressing his shame, and guilt, and the burden of a missed opportunity to tell Rachel how he felt. At that moment, none of that mattered to him. All he could think about was how lucky he was that he didn't kiss Susan. Had he not seen Rachel and turned his head at the last minute, she would have thrown up in his mouth. And while

the night hadn't quite turned out the way he hoped, he suddenly didn't feel so unlucky.

# # #

It reminded me that it could always be worse, but even under the best of circumstances, life could be pretty damn tragic.

I closed the book, but not before seeing something on top of the cabinet that looked out of place. I pulled it down and laughed. My grandma always had an affinity for sweet things. She loved them so much that she started to show signs of diabetes at the age of forty. Diabetes and an inability to remember things don't exactly make good bedfellows. If she couldn't remember how much sugar she had, she could easily put herself into a coma.

Not that it matters now.

Grandma emerged once more from the closet, wearing a dark dress with white flowers on it. As clumsy as she sometimes was mentally, there was something elegant about her. She used to tell me stories about how she was descended from Welsh royalty, and that our family had the blood of kings and queens flowing through our veins.

At that moment, I was convinced.

"Your Highness," I told her, bowing my head.

She blushed slightly, before catching sight of the book in my hand.

"He would be proud to see the man you've become," she said.

I wish that were true.

We all have sides of ourselves that we don't show others, things we do behind closed doors, things we think behind sad and angry eyes. In our minds we are murderers, perverts, executioners, politicians, and maniacs. Sleep is the stranger

at our doorstep and fatigue the devil in the kitchen. Irrationality is the meat on which we chew and morality the green substance we push to the sides of our plate.

Because of this, I fear I'll never even be half the man that he was. I'll be lucky if I even live up to a small fraction of what he thought I'd be. I never knew the man, but a part of me mourns the individual he hoped I'd become.

"Grandpa's book makes it sound like your generation was a little crazy," I told her.

"Oh, we knew how to have a good time," she said. "Teenagers have been getting into trouble long before you millennials came along. Don't believe that perfect Leave it to Beaver *horseshit they show on the television."*

"Anybody ever tell you that you talk like a sailor?" I asked.

"I knew a few sailors before your grandfather came along . . ."

"Let me stop you right there by saying . . . gross."

"Circle of life, sweetheart. How do you think you got here?"

"I like to think I was delivered during the night by a stork named Sam. He would hum songs by the Eagles as he flew me over the Pacific Ocean and onto my parent's Woodland doorstep."

She smiled and patted me on the cheek as she used to when I was little. "It's nice to see your imagination is still active."

"And it's nice to never see or think about my conception."

"One day you'll appreciate these things a bit . . ."

She paused, her mind trailing off in the middle of her sentence.

Her eyes went blank.

I lost her.

"Grey, it's good to see you, sweetie," she said after her mind clears the temporary fog. Her voice is soft and filled with sadness. She noticed the look in my eyes, like the last lingering note of a forgotten symphony. "I'm sorry. What was I saying?"

"That you're excited about the party tonight," I lied to her.

She nodded her head as if she could see through the deception.

"We're going to be late," she said.

She remembered to lock the door as she was leaving, but not to close it. She remembered how to drive, but not that she no longer had a license. Her key ring jingled in her hand, her fingers not noticing that the key to her Mercury Sable was no longer attached.

I didn't tell her anything.

What would be the point?

"I can drive," she said. "I don't' want you to have to waste your gas bringing me back here."

"It's okay, Grandma," I told her. "I would still have to come back here to pick up my car. Plus, it's on my way home."

"I may be old, but I'm not helpless," she said, with a hint of frustration in her voice. "At least let me give you some gas money."

She forced the money into my hand.

I nodded, not really needing it, but doing whatever I could to make her feel like she was still in control of her life. I wanted to cry, but like so many other times I've tried, the tears dried before ever plunging down my cheek.

Chapter 3

When my grandparents moved to Woodland back in the ‘80s, the small farm town had a population of around 30,000 people. Today it’s double that. And as the town is consumed by urban housing and corporate shopping centers, it seems like the local cemetery is the only family-run operation that isn’t in danger of going out of business. I suppose as long as people keep dying, there will be a market for burial plots.

Except for the summer heat, it’s a nice day, if that can be said of the day you bury your grandma. There’s a slight breeze whistling through the wheat fields encircling the cemetery in radial gusts of warm summer air. It’s not strong, but it brings the landscape to life in a song of the season. In the distance, rolling hills and hand-worked farmland mark the last remaining vestiges of what the town used to be and why I was always happy to live here. There’s something about knowing where a place begins and ends that brings me comfort.

Back before life happened and my siblings all started to hate each other, my mom and dad used to load us all up into their blue Ford Aero-Star and take us on an eight-hour drive down to San Diego to go to Sea World and the Wild Animal Kingdom. This was before the movie *Blackfish* was made and whiney college kids protested everything they read about in the news. I remember us driving through Southern California, switching from one freeway to the next. Every area we drove through seemed to merge. There was no way to tell where one place ended, and the next place started. It was like an endless city, held together by freeways and overpasses.

It made me grateful I grew up in a place that sounded like something out of a country song. It was predictable, but it taught me an appreciation for the simpler things, and I

wouldn't have traded it for the world. I always imagined I would grow up and raise a family here, but so far only one of those things has come to pass. And though I'm grown, I don't feel any closer to that second goal than I did as a child, and every day time likes to remind me of this the same way bullies like to remind ants that they can't survive the heat of a magnifying glass beneath the sun.

The movies always make funerals look like extravagant, well-lit exercises in family bonding that lead to one of three conclusions: vengeance, closure, or self-discovery. It's 102 degrees outside, and all I've discovered is that coffins are much heavier when you have to carry them up a hill. My cousin is still struggling to hold his weight. If he trips, grandma is going to fly out and land in my aunt's lap. As much as I loved *A Weekend at Bernie's,* I don't think I can handle the spectacle of my grandma in the front row at her own funeral. We manage to get her onto the hoist that will eventually lower her into the ground, but not without eliciting a loud "thunk" that causes everybody seated beneath the canopy to look up in horror.

"I guess there are worse noises that could have come from that," Uncle Jeff says, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Like what?" I wonder.

"Like the sound of Mom screaming, 'Let me out of this thing,'" Uncle Lennox adds.

"Wouldn't be the first time somebody in our family buried their spouse alive," Uncle Jeff says.

He's trying to coax me into a story that may or may not be true.

# # #

The summer of '96 was one of the hottest summers Woodland had ever seen. I was eight years old at the time

and about as gullible as Little Red Riding Hood. My grandma and grandpa were lucky enough to move into their housing track before it was a housing track. Back then it was just a house on a street with a few other houses in the middle of some land that was in the process of being developed. They lived at the end of a cul-de-sac with a backyard the size of three backyards. Seeing its potential, my grandpa put in a pool, and every summer since I'd learned how to swim, I was in that pool just about every day.

Uncle Jeff and Aunt Lisa had come up from Southern California with their daughter, Alison, who was five. I don't remember what the occasion was. I think it was my grandma's sixtieth birthday, or whatever age it is that people start throwing congratulatory parties for living to ages they didn't think they'd make it to.

"You're such a great swimmer," Grandma said, sitting at the edge of the pool with her feet in the water.

I swam back and forth, practicing my backstroke and underwater flips like Jeff Rouse in the Olympic games I'd been watching on television all week. Like every kid who learned how to do something new, I was confident that with enough practice I could become a professional and maybe one day win an Olympic medal.

"Just look out for the ditch monster," Uncle Jeff said.

I came up for air just long enough to hear him. I stopped in the middle of the pool, floating there cautiously.

"What ditch monster?" I asked.

"Jeff, sweetie, don't do that," Grandma said. "He's going to believe you."

"And he should," Uncle Jeff said, lowering himself into the pool. The water floated around his gut like it was a mini-muffin dipped in a glass of blue milk. "If only poor Jimmy

Ray would have believed me. We wouldn't have had to fish his arm out of the drain."

"What do you mean?" I cautiously wonder, absolutely terrified and fascinated at the same time. "What happened to Jimmy Ray?"

"You see," Uncle Jeff began, "before this street had houses on it, it used to be a swamp, and in this swamp was a creature."

"What kind of creature?" I needed to know.

"A big ugly creature with razor sharp teeth, a head covered in tentacles, and webbed hands so it could swim fast in murky waters. You see, up until the construction company that built all of these houses purchased the land, he lived in peace, only eating the occasional child or cat that happened to be wandering around his home. Then, one day, the bulldozers came, and it didn't matter how fast he swam or where he hid. There wasn't any outrunning those deadly machines. They leveled the swamp and filled the water with dirt."

"What happened to the creature?" I asked, cursing myself for indulging the mystery.

"Some say the creature was buried alive in the swamp he loved so much. Others say he managed to swim through one of the sewer grates that emptied into the swamp."

"What do you think?"

"I think he survived, or at least, I do now, especially after what happened to Jimmy Ray."

"Jeff, really, you're going to give him nightmares," Grandma said.

"No, tell me what happened!" I practically yelled.

I was already committed. I needed to know.

Grandma shook her head and walked to the other side of the pool, where Aunt Lisa was talking to my mom.

"When I was a kid, I had a friend named Jimmy Ray," my Uncle elaborated. "We were best friends, inseparable you might say. Once, on a hot summer day, not quite unlike this one, Jimmy Ray and I decided to take a swim in this very pool. I was inside changing, but it was so hot outside that Jimmy Ray decided he didn't want to wait for me. So he got in. I had just barely pulled my swim trunks up around my waist when I heard a blood-curdling scream. It was like the sound a crab makes when you boil it alive, but it was much worse!"

"Was it Jimmy Ray?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"It sure was," Uncle Jeff said. "When I came outside, Jimmy Ray was floating face down in the pool with a trail of blood coming out of the place where his left arm used to be. When the detectives got there, and the divers finished their work, they found his fingernail in the drain. It turns out something inside the drain had tried to pull him through, and it tore his arm off in the attempt."

"And it was the swamp monster?" My heart was beating so fast I was afraid it was not going to stay in my chest.

"That's what I think," Uncle Jeff said, nodding. "Because I'd hate to think about what other terrible creature it might be."

He smiled, and then floated off to the other side of the pool, knowing I believed every word he just said, and feeling satisfied that I played into his web of deceit. I floated there a moment, suddenly aware of the distance between the bottom of the pool and my feet. Frantically, I swam as fast as I could for the shallow end, scared to death that something was going to come out of the drain and pull me down. I was about halfway there when I felt something wrap around my ankle and yank me under.

I tried to scream but ended up swallowing a mouthful of water. With my eyes closed, I kicked frantically, feeling the monster's grip tighten and twist, like an alligator when it tries to break the neck of its prey. I was running out of time and air. Finally, in one last frantic attempt to escape, I kicked my foot back as hard as I could, hoping to push the monster away while I hopefully made it to the shallow side of the pool where the steps were.

The bottom of my foot touched what felt like fabric covering two sets of mandibles. The monster's grip slackened and let go. I swam away as fast as I possibly could, climbed the steps, and nearly jumped into my mom's lap, crying my eyes out about how I'd almost been killed by the monster.

That's when I heard it.

On the other side of the pool, Uncle Jeff was screaming in pain.

"My balls," he cried out. "I think they're broken."

"They better not be," Aunt Lisa yelled, trying to pull him out of the pool with the help of my grandma. "I want more children."

As it turned out, my Uncle Jeff's story was actually a mixture of the Jack Arnold film, Creature from the Black Lagoon *and* IT *by Stephen King. As for the monster that grabbed my ankle, it was my Uncle Jeff, who I kicked in the balls really hard trying to escape.*

I always felt bad about that, but the guilt lessened after he and Aunt Lisa had another kid.

# # #

The small canopy they'd placed over the burial site covers only a small fraction of the people who are here. My brother's fiancée is sitting in the middle of the front row with a loose brimmed hat on her head. She looks like the crème filling in a

dysfunctional Oreo. Seated to each side of her are my aunts and uncles, and in the rows behind them are my cousins and their kids. My grandma's neighbors and friends are filling the leftover seats. The remaining "mourners" are standing in the sun outside of the canopy's shade. My dad and I are among them.

"Are you okay?" my dad asks.

If I had a nickel for every time I'm asked that question, I would probably have a small fortune and a house on a private island in the Bahamas. I don't begrudge him for asking, but it's been such a long time since the two of us have had an actual conversation. I'm not quite sure how to respond.

"Can you define okay?" I ask.

His jaw moves slightly to the right when he thinks, just like mine. The inside of my dad's head is like a supercomputer. When it turns on, the world becomes a dial-up signal, trying relentlessly to survive the onslaught of high-speed Internet that is his thought process. His brain is an encyclopedia, full of things that he finds fascinating but will make others leave the room or fall asleep if accessed during conversation.

"Are you coping with all of this okay?" he asks, still thinking as he talks.

"I can't cry," I whisper as if it's the world's best-kept secret. I turn to him, yanking open the flaps of skin above and beneath my eyebrows. "Look, not a single tear."

Dad examines it closely. It wouldn't surprise me if among his other PhDs he has one in ophthalmology and moonlights as an eye doctor because he examines it with interest and precision.

"I don't know if it's because I'm not sad, or if I'm incapable of feeling things, and both possibilities scare me."

"Come on," Dad says to me, putting his hand on my shoulder. "Let's go for a walk."

The pastor starts to talk.

"We're not here today to commit a body to the earth," he says. "We're here to commit, a sister, a daughter, a mother, a grandmother, and a friend into the arms of the Lord."

There was a time in Woodland, when everybody was religious, or pretended to be. Every Sunday the pews would be filled at Calvary Church down on Tucker Street, and I was dragged to Sunday school along with my brothers and sister. They made us sing kid songs and listen to watered down Bible verses that occasionally entailed watching a video series featuring a man in a giant blue Bible costume named Psalty. Even today, I have a deep hatred of that giant talking Bible. Not because I hate religion, but because the entire video series takes place in a forest, and no matter how much it rained, Psalty's pages never got soggy. It made me question if he was even real. If they wanted me to believe God was legitimate, having a giant Bible that's seemingly immune to the rain is pretty tough logic for a six-year-old mind to comprehend.

That's not to say I don't believe in God now. I do believe he's out there somewhere; I just don't believe he's as interested in me as they said He was. Nor do I believe he's following my life like the administrator of a holy Facebook group.

"What's on your mind," Dad asks, as we walk out of earshot of the burial site.

"I don't know," I tell him, weighing the pros and cons of starting this conversation. "Or, I do know, but I'm not sure how to put it into words."

It's difficult for me to express myself when I talk. My mind doesn't always work in unison with my mouth, and

before I can stop myself, I've already thought too far ahead of what I'm saying, and I freeze up like a small robot vacuum caught between the legs of a chair, frantically bouncing around until its batteries give up. Things become incoherent, and then I stop trying to say them at all.

"Try one sentence at a time," Dad says.

Back when the world was big, and my legs were short, my dad used to walk me to the park at the end of College Street. There are plenty of parks in Woodland, but this particular park had a train in its playground.

I would wait by the front door each day for my dad to get home from work, like a puppy whose entire world consisted of the people walking through the front door.

"You want to go to the park, do you?" Dad would always ask as if he was going to torture me by not taking me.

That was back before I understood what sarcasm was, so I waited for him to smile, which usually indicated he was joking. At four years old one event or refusal could make or break my day.

As we walked along the street where colonial houses lined sidewalks shaded by maple trees, I would always look down at my dad's feet, wondering how they got that big and what it would feel like to walk in his shoes, both literally and metaphorically—not that I understood what that meant at the time. I would think about the way they might flop around and fly off when I kicked things. But most of all, I would think of all the places my dad's feet had taken him in his thirty-six years of life, and how my feet had hardly gone anywhere except the park and a few other places. Then I would think of all the places I'd like to go, and it would fill me with wonder and excitement.

But like I said, this was back when the world was big.

As I look down at our feet now, all I feel is a startling lack of self-achievement and a fear that I'm going to live and die less than five miles away from the place where I was born.

"Okay," I nod, trying to organize and pace myself. "Lately, it feels like there's been so much on my mind that I can't sort through any of it long enough to focus on any specific thing. It's all sounds and motion. Then Grandma died, and it's like somebody poured all of that into a blender and turned it on, shredding both my thought process and frayed sanity into a colorless milkshake to be consumed by anybody with arms. I keep trying to be sad, but I can't muster the feeling or even remember what that feeling is like. It feels like I'm not alive in my own life. I'm just existing."

I take a few deep breaths.

"Just because you can't cry, that doesn't mean you're not sad," Dad says. "There's no rule saying that you can't have one without the other."

"I don't know what I'm feeling," I tell him. "I owe Grandma a lot. She was a huge part of my life. I feel like this lack of emotion is an insult to her memory. And I feel even worse because when things got bad, I could hardly be bothered to spend any time with her. And I know that, if the proverbial shoe were on the other foot, she wouldn't have abandoned me the way I abandoned her."

Across the stone covered lawn, there are a couple of people in blue jumpsuits watching my grandma's burial from beneath the shadow of a tractor. One of them is leaning against the seat, while the other one holds a shovel over his shoulders.

I know them.

"You can't blame yourself for any of that," Dad says. "And I'm sure she wouldn't blame you for it, either."

I consider this a moment.

"How do you know that?" I ask.

"Your grandma wasn't exactly herself near the end," Dad says. "She would forget the names of everybody in the room, but she never forgot yours. You two had a special bond."

"During the service, everybody had stories to tell about her," I say, "stories about what a godly woman she was, stories about what a caring neighbor she'd been, stories about how supportive she was. While I knew she had some of those traits, it still felt like they all knew versions of her that I didn't. It felt like I didn't know her at all. I don't know if I would call that a special bond."

"People like to speak fondly of the dead," Dad says. "When somebody dies, it's easier to say good things about them than it is to point out all their faults because to say that they had faults, would be to admit that they're human, and funerals are supposed to immortalize the dead in our hearts and minds, not humanize them. I suppose it's all part of the mourning process."

"Somebody needs to write a guidebook for mourning."

"There you go. Maybe that's an idea for your next book."

That's assuming there would be a next book. There wasn't supposed to be a first one. Every time I write, I upset somebody.

"Life is full of collateral damage*,"* I think out loud.

"Your grandma used to say that," Dad says, recognizing the phrase.

"Yeah," I tell him, facing our family. "She did."

We stand there a moment, taking in the sun, coming to terms with the sweltering heat. I think about my grandma and all of the things I never said to her, and all of the things I'll never say to her again. I wonder if it's guilt that's driving this quest for feeling or maybe I'm scared.

I don't know who I am anymore, or what I'm supposed to do with my life. My grandma meant so much to so many people. What sort of legacy will I leave behind?

# # #

A mechanical hiss brings the hoist to life, as it slowly lowers my grandma's coffin into the ground. Settled inside a rectangular cement alcove beneath, is my grandpa's coffin. I try to remember what he looked like, but I can't. All I can conjure in my mind is an image of dust and bones with pieces of shriveled skin slowly peeling in the clothes they buried him in.

"Grey," Mom says, pointing at the flower pinned to the lapel on my jacket.

I watch my uncle drop his on the casket as it's lowered into the ground. I remove the pin and place it gently on the smooth, walnut lid. There's a sting in my eyes and a loss of breath that accompanies the touch, but it quickly fades as everybody watches me, as if they're expecting me to do or say something. I lift my head to the menagerie of eyes, wondering what it must be like to be dead, wondering what their faces would look like if it were me in the casket.

Most of all . . .

I wonder why it is I feel the way I do and how to make it stop.

Lower and lower she goes, down into the earth. All come from dust, and to dust, they return.

A thousand memories flash before my eyes in a matter of seconds. Me bouncing on her knee, bedtime stories, trips to the toy store, summer evenings watching the sunset from her driveway, spring days in the soft lawn of her backyard, trips to the local theater, everything spun in its reel from start to finish, one after another like clusters of falling stars

plummeting into an overflowing pool. I try to blink them away until it finally stops, on one memory in particular.

# # #

We were seated next to the kitchen in Woodland's only Italian restaurant. The clatter of silverware and the sound of patrons talking gave the upscale dining establishment a lively, yet, romantic atmosphere. I usually preferred to avoid places that cost over a hundred dollars to eat at, but my grandma insisted on taking Amber and me to a nice place for dinner, and she chose this one.

"I'm going to ask her to marry me," I told her.

Grandma's dark brown eyes were gleaming far brighter than I'd ever seen them. She tried to speak but seemed caught between trying to say something and holding back her excitement.

"When?" she asked.

"Tomorrow night," I told her, pulling the ring from my pocket. "I'm going to take her to watch the sunset from the cornfields off Road 97. I got a picnic basket and a bottle of wine. I know it's not the most exciting proposal, but I figured the best way to let her know that I would like to spend the rest of my life with her is to take her someplace as beautiful as she is and just say it."

"That rock is huge," she said, putting her glasses on for a better look. "How much did you pay for this?"

"Enough," I told her, smirking. "What good is money if you can't spend it on the ones you love?"

Our waiter walked by to refill our glasses and then looked at the empty seat beside me and asked, "Would she like some more also?"

I nodded, "Thank you."

When the waiter disappeared into the flow of bodies moving about the restaurant, Grandma put her hand on my wrist and smiled.

"Your grandpa would be proud of you," she said. "Do you want to know how he asked me to marry him?"

"Yeah," I told her, feeling an odd sense of glee.

"He took me out in the middle of a lake, looked into my eyes and said, 'Life is too short to feel so much and have nothing to show for it. Janet, you've put my heart through the wringer. Will you marry me?'"

The gleam in her eyes turned into something else like she'd wandered off into another world that only she could see.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she said, quickly returning to the present time. "Now, you should put that away before she comes back and sees it."

# # #

The hoist makes a startling sound as it grinds to halt, causing the casket to not-so-gently shift in the hole. It's the same kind of noise that you hear when you pack something into a box without anything to keep it from sliding around inside.

"And now, will you all join me in prayer," the pastor says to the horrified looks of my family. "Dear Lord, . . ."

In the background, the two cemetery workers from before are looking at me. One of them waves. It's funny how in such a small town, even the closest of friends can drift so far apart.

# # #

The gravediggers' names are Jeremy Burham and Gabe Wassik. Everybody has the one thing they did in high school

that people remember for the rest of their lives. For Jeremy and Gabe, it was the day the vice principal, Ms. Croyer, walked in on them smoking weed in the boys' bathroom. Unfortunately for her, she underestimated their ability to cause trouble. Jeremy tossed some smoke bombs into the air in a desperate attempt to escape. If they worked for David Blaine, then they would work for him . . . or so he thought. The only problem was, he lit three of them. One of them landed in Gabe's backpack, which coincidentally also contained some M-80s he had traded Michael Platley for in exchange for two adult magazines he'd stolen from his dad's sock drawer. Long story short, he thought he could extinguish the fuses by throwing his backpack into the toilet. He blew up two stalls, covering Ms. Croyer in feces in the process.

"Well look who it is," Jeremy says, as I walk up the hill toward the tractor. "You don't call; you don't text; you don't write."

"At least not anymore," Gabe says.

Jeremy nods, "Doesn't even write anymore."

"We thought you were dead," Gabe says.

"No, that's Gary," Jeremy corrects him, "Gary Sterling."

"Oh, that's right," Gabe agrees.

"Gary?" I ask, barely able to recall what he looked like. I remember that he always wore Star Wars shirts and would try to coax people into long, drawn-out debates about how it wasn't stormtroopers that killed Luke Skywalker's aunt and uncle in *A New Hope.* He insisted it was Boba Fett because stormtroopers don't have blasters that can melt skin off the bone, and Darth Vader specifically tells Boba Fett, "no disintegrations" during *The Empire Strikes Back.* I never argued with him, because it's plausible. Then again, maybe it's all Obi-Wan's fault for choosing the worst planet to hide Luke on as a baby. "What happened?"

"You know those firework booths that our high school used to make people run if their kids were on sports teams?" Jeremy asks.

"Yeah, the ones that always pop up on the week before the Fourth of July?" I ask.

"Yeah, those ones," Jeremy says. "Well, Gary's old lady kicked him out of his house one night, so he decided to sleep in the firework booth. But, you see, Gary was somewhat of a stress smoker. At some point in the night, he lit up a cigarette, and a couple of minutes later the booth exploded into a giant shower of multicolored sparks and fountains."

"It was beautiful," Gabe says.

Jeremy elbows him. "Have some respect, man."

"Yeah, it was tragic," Gabe says. "But, for real, it was also sort of awesome."

"It kind of was," Jeremy agrees.

"Seems like everything exciting in this town revolves around a lack of firework safety," I tell them.

"Not everything," Jeremy says. "Sometimes they revolve around people writing books."

"Amen to that," I tell him.

I never wanted to be a writer, at least not consciously. Going to school and studying subjects like English or journalism is like majoring in unemployment. So naturally, anybody whose ambitions involve writing must either be a masochist or desire to live with their parents for the rest of their lives.

Statistics show that each year anywhere from 600,000 to 1,000,000 books are published in the United States alone. On average, they sell less than 250 copies each. If you break that up into genres and consider the severe lack of marketing that comes with small and self-publishers, you'll find that the market is somewhat oversaturated with books that might be

read by less than ten people. That being said, the chances of being the next Dan Brown or Stephen King are very slim. Or you could get lucky and become one of those soccer moms who make millions from writing novels about a school for witchcraft or reclusive men who get turned on by women in bondage because they have daddy issues.

Again, the chances are slim.

The thing about writing is that it's a lot like photography. Anybody can buy a nice camera and take pictures of things they think look artistic. It takes real talent, though, to find the right composition, angles, the proper amount of light to let in, and let's not forget about the editing. For writing it's all about the story and the words used to tell them. It doesn't take talent to write a bunch of words on a blank piece of paper, but it does take talent to reach people on an emotional level that makes them want to keep turning the pages, and this is where most "writers" fall short. It's a pursuit of passion and not profit. Words forced onto a page for the sake of a paycheck are usually a waste of time. Words that are put onto paper because there's an overwhelming need to put them there . . . that's something that's worth reading.

I guess I got lucky.

I started writing *Yolo County* when I was sixteen. It took me five years to finish.

It centers on a character named Nathan, who, with his two friends, are trying to safely navigate high school, growing up, and living in a small town. With their senior year just beginning and hormones drowning out all common sense, they decide that this is the year they're going to do things differently. Together, they embark on a journey from being losers to leaving a mark on their high school that people won't soon forget. The only problem is, one night, on the way

home from a party, Trevor, the most rambunctious of the group, decides he's sober enough to drive everybody home.

In typical young adult novel style, he doesn't make it.

Trevor dies when he crashes into a semi-truck, and Nate and Sam are seriously injured, but they live. In the aftermath of all of this, Nathan begins to question who he is, which eventually takes him on a journey of self-discovery and healing, all while dealing with problems between him and Sam, and learning about love from a girl with a dark past.

It's a typical coming-of-age novel, and I guess it was inspired by my grandpa's book. But it was never supposed to be anything more than an experiment. I wanted to see if I could write something like he could. It was never supposed to leave my desk drawer. Why it sold as well as it did, I'll never know. But like all creative endeavors, it filled my life with collateral damage. Everybody I know wanted to find themselves in the characters. While some of them were a bit easier to spot than others, most of it was wishful thinking on their part.

Still, it's hard to walk less than a mile in this town without running into somebody who hates me. People love to gossip but put that gossip into a book, and all of a sudden, you start getting compared to Hitler.

"What have you guys been up to?" I ask, quickly changing the subject. "Gabe, are you still running your dad's tuxedo shop?"

Gabe Wassick is almost two hundred pounds lighter than he was in high school, while Jeremy is still the spitting image of his former self. Back then, people always saw Gabe as Jeremy's fat sidekick. Now, he looks like he should have a sidekick of his own. He still has a baby face, but his new physique makes him look like he's fresh off an American Eagle assembly line.

"Yeah, actually," he says. "I'm the owner now. My dad retired last year."

"Then why are you out here digging graves? If you don't mind me asking."

"Mostly to keep Jeremy from getting fired. This is his third job this year."

"I'm a victim of circumstances," Jeremy says.

"You're a victim of laziness," Gabe shoots back.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Jeremy chimes in, pushing Gabe with his shoulder. "Grey, we're going to a party tonight at Tobe Fisher's house."

"Did he go to school with us?" I ask.

"Nah," Gabe says. "He went to Woodland High School, not Pioneer."

The great rivalry.

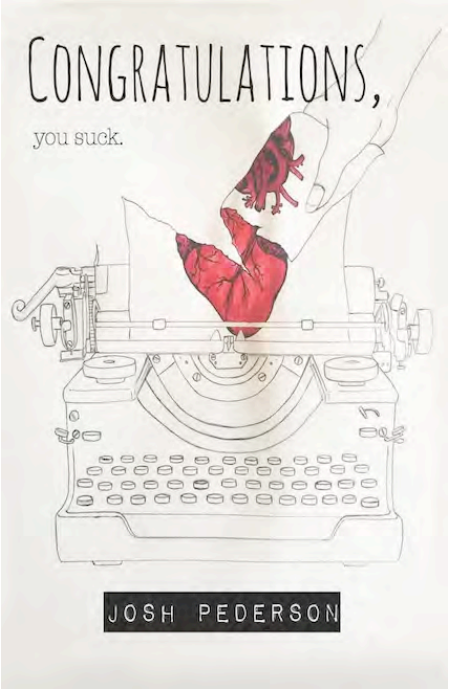
"Anyway, you should come with," Jeremy tells me, swinging open the door to the tractor. "Come be social for a change. Not like we haven't seen you in over five years."

"Yeah," Gabe agrees. "You should totally come with. We're going right after we bury your grandma."

He says it as if she didn't mean anything, as if this is just another part of the day for them.

And it was.

"Okay."



Author Grey Keating is sliding down the backside of his twenties. He once wrote a best-selling book that didn't exactly flatter his hometown. Between that and his ex-girlfriend (a professional blogger) writing a book about how much he and their romance sucked, he's forced to face his past, the future and the tragedies of being human.

Congratulations, You Suck

By Josh Pederson